

THE REUNION
OF LOVED
ONES

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LOVED ONES

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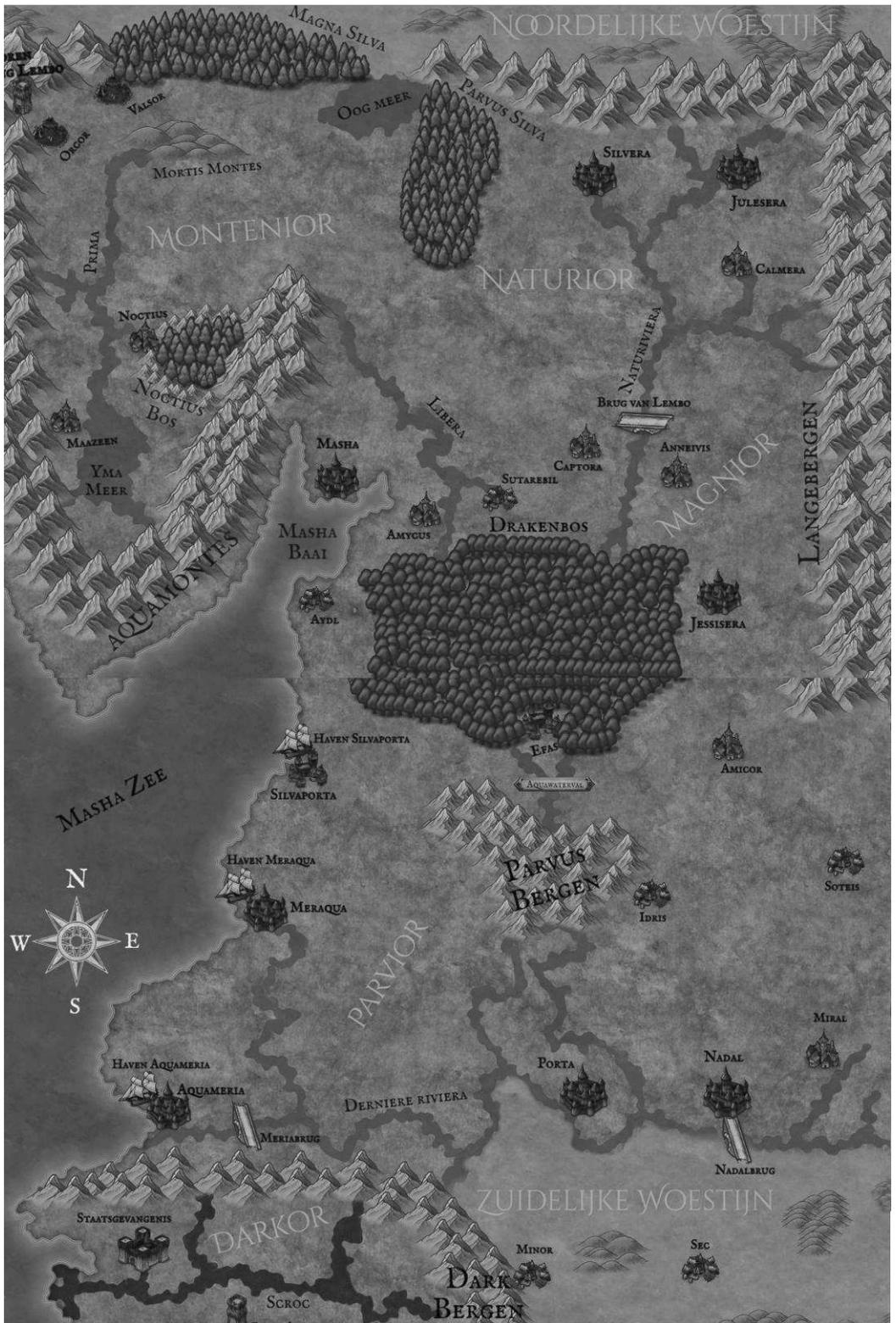


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*This one is for Shannen
who, thanks to her role as eldest sister,
has given life to Dana Liwel.*

PROLOGUE

They killed my father!

A young prince of eighty seasons old sat brooding on the throne of his late father in his hidden refuge in the north of the Eastern Realm. Grimly, the prince gazed over the desolate landscape that had recently surrounded him, thinking about the death of the man who had made him the strong person he was now. It had been only a week since his father—a great king who had ruled the Eastern Realm justly for years—had joined the war against the rebellious port city of Porta after years of avoiding participation.

The prince loved his father dearly and placed him on an unshakable pedestal, but even he had to admit that joining the battle for Porta had been madness. His father had known of his impending doom; after all, it had been predicted years ago. However, his father had lost his rationality after the destruction of his tower, and no matter how much the prince had begged him to abandon his plan, the king had not listened to his son and had mounted his dragon in a fury that consumed everything. And that was exactly what those witches had hoped for—a moment of weakness. A moment that showed his father was merely a man who sometimes made mistakes and was sometimes guided by emotions.

The battle for Porta had been raging for a long time without his father's five armies being able to turn the tide in his favour, so those armies wouldn't have destroyed those blasted witches. His father had grown tired of that incompetence and had decided to give his men the extra motivation by fighting alongside them, especially since his strongest servant, the Shadow, had already failed to impress him by destroying those witches. So, it was up to the King himself. His father, soaring through the skies on his dragon Fortior and blessed with his magical powers, would crush the rebellion of Porta and simultaneously teach those worthless witches a lesson.

Unfortunately, the battle had unfolded differently than both King Lembo and Prince Arko had expected. To Arko's great bewilderment and fury, his father had not survived the battle. He was murdered by the same three witches who had destroyed his father's tower. A trio of witches from the unknown farming village of Sutarebil. Arko had met the three sisters himself once, when they were on their way to Porta, and they had outsmarted him then. He had hoped his father would not make the same mistake, but sadly, he too had fallen prey to the devilry of those three girls. It was unfair that such a powerful man had been felled by such insignificant, petty little witches.

Many people still called Arko's father a tyrant, even after his cruel death. However, Arko could only see him as a brave and just man with divine powers. He made difficult decisions with ease and did not fear dealing with his opponents with a firm hand. Torture, the rebels called his methods. How small-minded and unreliable people were!

For years, the Eastern Realm had supported his father, and when he took power, they abandoned him one by one, afraid of the changes he was capable of bringing. Arko, however, had supported him until his death and had never abandoned him. For the crown prince, there was no doubt that his father had always been right. Every choice the king had made was justified and carefully considered, always

carrying the well-being of the entire Eastern Realm with it. Arko's mother had taught him this as a toddler, and when Arko was old enough to form his own judgment, he had maintained this belief. His father had been a great man, and every ruler should take him as an example!

Arko had been raised in a suburb of the port city Aquameria. He was brought up by his mother, who had taught him the dark arts for as long as he could remember. His mother was not a witch herself, but despite this, she had taught him, through extensive book knowledge, how to use his gifts and what to use them for. His powers and his life were to be dedicated to his father. However, his mother died in a violent uprising in Aquameria when he was only sixty seasons old. He remained in his parental home with his servants, spending his time practicing magic, hunting, and helping his stepmother, who had become the city's ruler after the uprising.

During his education, his mother had forced him already to seek out Lembo's lawful wife and her daughter. With Lembo's wife, he had built a good relationship, and after the death of his weak, biological mother, Arko had increasingly seen her as a second mother—especially since she had supported and comforted him after his own mother's murder. She, too, shared his opinion that Lembo was a great king, and as the city ruler of Aquameria, she wielded considerable power in the city. A power she did not fear using when it suited her. No, the city ruler of Aquameria was an exceptional woman, who even now had not forgotten him and supported him in everything as if he were her own son.

The daughter of the city ruler, however, was of a completely different nature. Arko's stepsister was a true disgrace, refusing to use her gifts for the greater good. And this despicable crown princess was supposed to have succeeded his father after his death, simply because she had the luck of being born from the right womb. Arko was glad that Agnes was swiftly arrested by her own father and thrown into his dungeons after her open refusal. She was a disgrace to the king, and that stain had to be swiftly removed from his royal mantle. Agnes had been imprisoned for years, and Arko had hoped she would rot away behind bars.

Yet, his sister had shown a certain resilience and had escaped with the help of that despicable trio. Fortunately, Agnes had died soon after, while on her way to the Portan rebels to openly join their side. Arko had never seen Agnes again since she was arrested for treason, and now that she was dead, he never had to. And so, the throne remained empty after his father's brutal death.

One day—and that day would come sooner than anyone had ever imagined—he would become king himself, and then he would follow his father's example and continue his rule. According to the laws of the Eastern Realm, he should have already been made king after his father's death, but there was a small problem: he was still a bastard. And since his father was always too busy with affairs of state, he had never had the chance to officially acknowledge his son and present him to the people as the next in line to the throne. Therefore, the laws of succession did not apply to him, and he could only watch helplessly as the Eastern Realm destroyed itself from within without the strong hand of a ruler to lead it. However, he would soon change that. He owed that to his father.

Arko had rarely seen his father during the eighty seasons he had wandered the seven lands of the Eastern Realm, as Lembo mostly resided in Darkor, where he ruled and assembled his armies. Although he had missed a father figure, he knew that Lembo's absence served the greater goal. To be a good ruler, he could not have been distracted by trivial matters like family. The Realm's interests came first, and Arko respected that. If Lembo had had the chance, he surely would have visited

more often. The man certainly saw him as his son, even though he was a bastard. He had probably even cared more for him than for his acknowledged daughter, who had turned her back on him.

Arko had realised immediately after Lembo's death that the rule of the Eastern Realm now belonged to him. He could not and would not govern his new Realm from Aquameria, as the city lacked the resources he needed to reclaim his father's position. Darkor was not an option; since the witches' arrival, it had become a barren no man's land. The only place left to him was Lembo's second hidden stronghold in the north. He had gone searching and had succeeded—he had found the tower.

Now, he would build his new armies and take back the Eastern Realm. Soon... Very soon now...

I. HOMESICK

It was a warm autumn day, and Dana Liwel stood by a spur of the Libera River, a narrow river that flowed from the Aquamontes in Montenor to the lakes in the Dragons' Wood, passing by their village, Sutarebil. The riverbed was surrounded by a vast grassy plain stretching all the way to the city of Captora in the north. In this serene spot, a quarter of an hour's walk from the first farms marking the village's border, Dana disturbed none of the villagers during their daily rural activities. That was precisely why she had chosen this quiet place for her classes. Around her stood a group of Sutarebil's youth, all watching her with eager anticipation.

Dana had—just as she had said two seasons ago at her mother's and stepfather's wedding—organised combat classes for the youth of Sutarebil. In the war for Porta and on her adventurous quest to Darkor, Dana had discovered like no other how important it was to be able to defend oneself. Danger lurked in the smallest corners, and although there was no longer a tyrannical king in power, threats still loomed. People had to learn how to protect themselves and their loved ones.

Unfortunately, only a handful of students had attended her classes because many were not allowed by their parents. Dana understood all too well why, as magic was feared in Sutarebil. It was unnatural and inexplicable, and the villagers preferred to be rid of it. They had tolerated Amelia Liwel and her three daughters for years only because they knew the four witches had no ill intent. However, this had changed. Just before the three sisters left Sutarebil to search for their father, Lana had poisoned the village butcher after he had threatened their family with death. No one had been able to prove that the youngest Liwel had actually done it, but the rumour that the butcher had threatened them spread like wildfire, and so his inexplicable death was immediately attributed to the witches' family. This rumour was, of course, further fuelled by the widow and her vengeful daughter, who were anything but pleased when the three girls returned to the village.

Dana could not say she mourned the fact that the butcher had disappeared from their lives, as he was a bad man. He was nothing more than a traitor and an exploiter. He had harmed not only Dana's family but also other Sutarebilians on multiple occasions. The only reason he had never been thrown into Amycus's dungeons was that everyone feared the sources of Arxon Ridel—sources rumoured to be in direct contact with the late King Lembo. No, the fact that butcher Ridel was gone was not a bad thing for Sutarebil.

Dana only wished that Lana had found another way to drive the butcher away without resorting to death because now everyone in Sutarebil believed they were the criminals instead of Arxon Ridel. That was why the unpleasant notion prevailed that the three witches were dangerous and that avoiding them was better than engaging with them.

No one knew what they had accomplished in Porta about a year ago, but the three sisters had been wise enough not to tell anyone. The villagers would not have believed them anyway and would have only thought they were boasting or worse—had gone mad. Despite the circulating stories that three young witches had defeated the tyrant Lembo, the Sutarebilians preferred to bury their heads in the sand. The general opinion remained: see nothing, say nothing, and nothing will happen. The widespread indifference to the world had kept Sutarebil hidden from King Lembo

all those years, allowing the villagers to live in relative peace. If they now admitted that the three heroines of Porta were among them, they would become visible to the world for the first time. And the unknown—that was what the villagers feared. The unknown would only bring danger...

Besides their fear of the unknown, many Sutarebilians also clung to the old belief that women should not fight. Women belonged at home, caring for the children and the household, and if they had to work, it should be women's work. Work in a sewing workshop, where Dana had worked for years, was deemed acceptable. Swords, however, were only fit for men's hands, which was why many did not take Dana's ambition to teach combat manoeuvres seriously.

The young ones who did attend her combat classes did so with conviction. They had come secretly without their parents noticing, or they had managed to persuade them with great difficulty. Dana was secretly proud that some Sutarebilians had given her the benefit of the doubt and were interested in what she had to say.

Dana's class consisted of young Sutarebilians of different ages. There were two boys and girls aged ten, three boys aged twelve, four boys and girls aged sixteen, and five boys and girls aged nineteen. The youngest of Dana's students fought for fun and were sometimes a bit too reckless, but Dana reminded them that their combat classes were too serious for fooling around. They all listened to her. The older students, however, were highly serious about the classes, and Dana quickly realised they had a strong motivation to learn the art of combat.

Dana once asked Zafya, a girl of 76 seasons whom she liked, why she was so determined to attend Dana's classes. Zafya, with her thick, dark brown hair, had told her that a legion of King Lembo had passed through Sutarebil four seasons ago. Dana quickly did the math and then bit her lower lip guiltily—this must have happened just after the triplets left Sutarebil in search of their father. The violent Orcs had plundered homes and set barns filled with stored food on fire. The villagers had been intimidated without anyone being able or daring to resist.

This feeling of powerlessness had frightened Zafya for weeks after the Orcs had left, so much so that she had started teaching herself some combat moves in her garden before Dana returned and announced that she wanted to give official combat classes. Now that she could officially train, Zafya did not let the opportunity pass. Fortunately, her parents were one of the few families who immediately approved because they did not believe in malicious gossip and still respected the Liwel family. Amelia's potions had saved Zafya's father from death due to his weak heart multiple times, and for that, the Axiols were grateful.

Dana rolled her shoulders to loosen her muscles and demonstrated a few combat moves with her sword, which she had bought in Aquameria and named Altax. She then explained the movements step by step to her students once more. The youth practiced with wooden swords, as this was safer and because Dana did not have enough real swords for her students. As far as she knew, no one in the village—except for herself and her two sisters—owned a real sword. Sutarebil produced crops, not soldiers. The guards probably had weapons, but among the villagers, Dana could not name a single villager with a true weapon.

Dana lovingly ran her fingers along her blade. The sword was crafted by an elven hand, due to which it was characterised by its lightness. It was an elven tradition to name your sword, as it made the blade more personal to the swordsman. Dana's friend Maria had named Dana's blade Altax, which meant 'eldest' in the Portan language. Although Dana had slain many Orcs with this sword, Altax bore not a single scratch on its red blade. It still gleamed as brightly as the day she had taken

it from the Aquamerian forge.

She quickly refocused on her classes when the younger students impatiently shuffled their feet. She had them repeat the combat movement she had demonstrated. They opened their bodies at a 45-degree angle, placing their left foot forward like a man's stance. When necessary, Dana adjusted their feet so their weight was evenly distributed. They then turned their hips towards their sparring partner. Dana had taught her class that there were eight different attack angles, and they were now practicing the third one—diagonally downward to the left. She walked between the descending practice swords and demonstrated again if anything was lacking in their movements. Most students took her word as truth and corrected their mistakes immediately.

However, when she corrected a girl of her own age, she received a defiant response. The girl had raven-black hair that curled around her neck as she moved. An olive-toned face glared at her with fierce blue, aggressive eyes, and Dana sighed. It was Sheila Ridel, the butcher's daughter. Young Sheila pressed her lips into thin slits as if holding back more comments for her teacher. Her nostrils flared, making her look like an enraged bull ready to charge. Her small, powerful hands clenched the hilt of her practice sword tightly, and Dana hoped she would never feel those fingers around her neck.

"Liwel," Sheila said curtly. Her voice was deep and husky, a voice Dana would recognise anywhere, "don't act like you know better than me."

"I believe I'm the one teaching here. But please, if you have comments, feel free to share. I am certainly not all-knowing."

"No, you're just skilled in deceitful practices, aren't you, witch?"

"I wouldn't know what you're referring to. The art of sword fighting has little to do with our magical abilities. Even in the world of magic, I am not all-knowing. There is still much to learn."

"At least you learned early how to use your powers to kill."

"I won't even dignify that with a response."

"Is it getting too hot under your feet?"

A few students looked up curiously, closely following the confrontation between the two girls. Dana took a step back, signalling that the conversation was over. "I will not allow you to speak to me like that in my class, Ridel. What you say about me in your free time is of little concern to me. But here, you do what you came for. If that doesn't suit you, there's the door."

She half-expected a retort, but the butcher's daughter merely scoffed and watched her spitefully as she continued walking past the duelling groups. Sheila had always been mean to them, but after Lana had killed her father, she loathed them with every fibre of her being. That was why Dana had been so surprised when Sheila had been one of the first to sign up for her combat classes. She still suspected there was a catch.

She just couldn't understand why Sheila would want classes from someone she believed to be her father's murderer. Dana suspected the butcher's daughter was up to something and decided to keep an eye on her. If Chelsaya had ordered her daughter to spy, she would find nothing here. And if Sheila's goal was to disrupt the classes and take Dana's dream away as revenge for her father, Dana would put an end to it before she could succeed.

After an hour, Dana ended today's class and instructed her students to practise the movements they had learned that day. When everyone had left, she put away the wooden training swords they had used. Her students thanked her as they

passed, and Dana smiled broadly. She was proud of herself. Every time she finished a class, she was left with a sense of fulfilment, and that pleased her. It felt good to share her experience with people who could benefit from it.

Suddenly, she realised someone was still standing behind her. Dana didn't trust it and turned around. Sheila was looking at her with sly, cat-like eyes and pulled a dagger from her leather knee-boots. Her gaze became more intense, almost eager. Dana grabbed a training sword and held it at the ready, eyeing her warily. "What's the matter, Ridel? Did you want to ask me something about the homework?"

"You'd do well to look behind you," she said, her voice dangerously purring, gripping her dagger tighter. "I'm here to save you from a painful death."

"And get stabbed in the back by you instead? Just because you're attending my classes doesn't mean I trust you, Ridel." She tightened her grip on the sword.

"I don't need your trust, Liwel. I just want to do you a favour. Now turn around and see what I mean."

"Drop dead."

"You certainly will. If you don't turn around quickly."

Dana growled, torn. The butcher's daughter seemed to be staring at something behind Dana, but was it just an act? Would she plunge that sharp dagger into her neck the moment she turned her back? "I'm not turning around," she said, emphasising each word. "Not until you're back in your house and I know you can't harm me."

"Just turn around, woman! I won't complain if you end up as a steak, but since I'll be the last person seen with you, I might just end up facing the villagers' wrath. And you, of all people, know that's not nothing."

Dana still hesitated, but there was something commanding in Sheila's tone that pushed her over the edge. If she had really wanted to kill her, she would have done so by now. So she spun around, training sword extended in front of her, ready for whatever danger lay behind.

She nearly laughed when she saw it was only Prudentus, her black dragon. He was proudly licking his claws clean, and Dana could still see bits of meat clinging to them. He had likely just returned from a successful hunt and wanted to share his victory with her. After all, she was his Dragon Tamer, his Chosen One, and they shared almost everything.

Well... almost everything...

The past few weeks had been so busy that she had barely had time to visit her most loyal friend. She noticed how much he had grown since she last saw him. Shame crept over her as she realised she couldn't even remember the exact day she had last seen him. Had it been a week or more like a month? She had left him to his own devices for too long. She ignored her growing guilt—other concerns demanded her attention.

Sheila absolutely could not know that this dragon belonged to her, and she and her sisters had made that choice deliberately after their quest. They had feared how the villagers would react. What if they tried to drive the dragons away out of fear that they might cause harm? To prevent that, they had left the dragons in the Dragons' Wood and visited them periodically. At first, they went every day to see their friends, but as their dreams consumed more of their time, their visits grew fewer and farther between. Again, guilt flared within her, but she suppressed it—Sheila mustn't grow suspicious. If Sheila knew the truth, the entire village would know soon enough as well. She was already looking for a reason to destroy the triplets as revenge for her father's death. What better way to go after Dana than by

attacking Prudentus?

With a heavy heart, Dana instinctively picked up Altax and swung it menacingly at Prudentus.

'Well, what do you think you're doing?' Prudentus asked through his thoughts, the way they always communicated. He stopped licking his claws and looked at her, offended.

'Sheila mustn't know you're mine. Why do you think you have to sleep in the forest?'

'Because there's no space at your house?'

'Haha, very funny. Now go! I'll visit tonight.'

'Well, I really expected you to be happy to see me. You haven't visited in days. Have you forgotten me, my Chosen One?'

'Of course not. I've just been busy.'

'I can see that,' Prudentus snorted before taking off. Dana felt his disappointment cut through her consciousness like a knife. She stood there, dejected, watching him leave with sorrowful eyes. She had let down her best friend. And for what? She suddenly couldn't think of a valid reason. They had been through so much together, yet she had treated him worse than a dog.

Suddenly, Sheila shoved her roughly to the ground. Enraged, she pinned Dana down and pressed the dagger to her throat. 'Why did you do that, Liwel?' she snarled.

Dana growled and tried to shove Sheila off. Though they were the same height, Sheila was far heavier due to her muscular build. When pushing her away failed, she snapped back, 'What I did? If I hadn't been there, we'd both be roasted by now, just like you so eloquently pointed out! In case you didn't notice, that was a dragon! He would've devoured us for his next meal!'

"I can take care of myself, Liwel! I don't need anyone for that. Least of all a Liwel!"

"Of course you can. Well, tell me: What would you have done with that dragon if I hadn't been there?"

"Capture it and tame it, obviously! Unlike my naive fellow villagers, I know dragons exist."

"Well, bravo! A true expert!" Dana snapped sarcastically. "What you might have forgotten is that a dragon can only be tamed by the Chosen One, you idiot! You can't just catch and train one like you would pick up a stray dog off the street."

"And what exactly is a 'Chosen One'?"

"Every dragon can only be tamed by a single person: the Chosen One. A dragon can sense when their Chosen One is near. However, it's also possible that they will never find him or her."

"And if they do? How do dragons recognise their Chosen Ones?"

"As I said: a dragon doesn't see it, they feel it."

"Oh really?" Sheila frowned suspiciously. "And how is it that you, a simple farm girl, know so much about dragons?"

"I read. I suggest you try it sometime—especially books on combat."

"Are you saying I don't fight well? Am I not worthy of being included in the great Dana Liwel's combat classes?" Sheila snapped, pressing the dagger even harder against Dana's neck. "As far as I can see, you're the one lying on the ground without a weapon."

"That's absolutely true," Dana admitted, freezing Sheila in place, "but you didn't know that you should never threaten a witch."

Dana wrenched the dagger from Sheila's frozen hands and then unfroze her.

With a smirk, she pressed the dagger against Sheila's abdomen and said triumphantly, "You forgot that a witch is never unarmed as long as she has her gifts. Now the tables have turned. Get up!"

Sheila clenched her teeth in fury and humiliation but still stood. She smoothed down her dress and pushed her curls from her face. Dana rose as well, brushing the sand from her clothes. Then she tucked Sheila's dagger into her boot and, seeing the younger Ridel glaring at her, said, "At least this way, I know no harm will come from it."

"You think you're so clever, don't you, Liwel?" Sheila scoffed. "Just you wait! I'll get you and your sisters eventually. My revenge will be sweet."

"And who are you bringing along for that? Your daddy?"

"Shut your mouth about him, or you'll regret it!"

"I'm trembling, Ridel," Dana said flatly.

Sheila gave a wicked grin. "You should know, Liwel, that you're not invincible. Not even now that you've defeated King Lembo."

Dana's mouth dropped in shock, while Sheila smirked at having caught her off guard. How did Sheila know they had taken down the tyrant in the battle for Porta? They had told no one about their quest. No one in Sutarebil should have known that they had travelled to Darkor, raided the prisons, and fought in Porta. No one should have known that they had killed Lembo.

They had only shared their entire adventure with their stepfather, Dalagh, and their mother. How could Sheila Ridel, of all people, have learned their secret? Had she and her mother eavesdropped on them when they returned? Or was something more sinister at play? The butcher had built up an extensive network of contacts as an informant. Had these connections now passed to his widow and daughter? Were they in direct contact with, say, Lembo's bastard son, whom the Liwels hadn't heard from since the battle?

A deep unease settled in Dana's gut. They had been too focused on chasing their dreams. They had spent too long ignoring Prince Arko and the threat he still posed. Dana thought back to that terrifying moment in the caves when she had feared she would be too late—when Arko had nearly beheaded Lana. He had come so close to killing her without much effort. He was dangerous, and without his father, perhaps even more so. She needed to bring this problem to her sisters before their ignorance led to another disaster.

"How..?" Dana managed to say. "What are you talking about?"

"Don't lie to me. Mother and I know that you brought Lembo to his end. It was Ivana who delivered the final blow, wasn't it?"

There was no point in denying it any longer, not when Sheila was so clearly informed. "But how..?"

"You didn't expect that, did you? That we'd know all about your so-called heroics in the South?" Sheila taunted. "Fools!"

"How could you know when we haven't told anyone?"

"Secrets don't always stay hidden. They have a way of travelling fast," Sheila said cryptically. She turned to run but then hesitated, adding mockingly, "We have eyes and ears everywhere, Liwel. Never forget that."

Dana's heart skipped a beat. Sheila had just confirmed Dana's worst fear—the Ridels' network was still alive. She didn't hesitate; she lunged forward, grabbing Sheila roughly by the arm as she caught up with her. "I want an answer, Ridel! Who told you?" She shook Sheila forcefully.

Sheila laughed derisively. "If only you knew."

"I swear, if you don't start talking, I'll curse you so badly you won't be able to sit for a week!"

"And I promise you, Liwel, that if you don't take your filthy hands off me this instant, I'll be the one cursing you!"

"You? Curse me? With what powers?" Dana asked mockingly, raising an eyebrow before bursting into laughter. "As far as I know, there isn't another witch in our village."

Sheila took advantage of Dana's moment of amusement, shoving her away in frustration. For a second, it looked as though she wanted to slap her, but instead, she spat on the ground at Dana's feet with a look of utter contempt before storming off, muttering furiously to herself.

"A curse? I'd love to see that!" Dana chuckled to herself. What a strange girl Sheila was! Even a child would know that you needed magical abilities to cast a curse. And Dana couldn't believe for a second that Sheila Ridel, the butcher's daughter, possessed even a shred of magical power. Otherwise, they would have noticed long ago...



A quarter of an hour later, Dana entered the house where she and her sisters had lived since childhood. The former farmhouse stood just outside Sutarebil, near another spur of the Libera. It was a small clay house with four bedrooms, a kitchen, a dining room, and a living room. The roof was thatched, which had initially worried the triplets, as Lana possessed the gift of fire. When she had not yet learned to control her powers, everyone had feared a fire breaking out, but fortunately, no such disaster had ever occurred. In the backyard stood a large wooden barn, which the three sisters used for brewing potions.

Dana slumped into a chair at the kitchen table and poured herself a glass of milk. She knew that her mother was still working at the sewing workshop of her new husband, Dalagh. Dana had worked there previously to help support their living expenses. However, Lana and Ivana had refused to work and had instead spent most of their time hunting in the Dragons' Wood to contribute in their own way. When Dana had discovered that their mother was secretly in a relationship with Dalagh, she had immediately quit her job as well. At first, Dana had been unable to accept that her mother was having an affair with her employer while still uncertain if her real husband would ever return from Darkor's prisons. Dana had clung to the hope that their father would come home, but she soon realised that this would never happen. Their real father had been captured and had died in King Lembo's dungeons.

Dana sighed sorrowfully. The death of her father still pained her. They had wanted to rescue him and bring him home. That had been the very reason the triplets had set out on their journey. They had spent months training their powers and wit their swords, and once they were strong enough, they had left in secret. However, their departure from Sutarebil had not been as quiet as they had hoped. On the very first day of their journey, they realised that the smallest of the king's five armies was trailing them, which ultimately led to Dana and Ivana being captured after a battle with the Orcs. Lana had managed to evade their grasp by leaping from the Aqua Waterfalls—a fall that would have killed any ordinary person. But miraculously, Lana had survived.

After being separated from her sisters, Lana had encountered her dragon

Icarus, in the Dragons' Wood, who had sworn to help her find them. Soon after, the two had met Kennon Bikior and his dragon, Shira, who had, in truth, been searching for the three Liwel sisters. Kennon had then asked Lana to fight in the Battle of Porta in exchange for his help in rescuing Dana and Ivana from Lembo's clutches. And so it had come to pass.

They had saved Dana and Ivana from certain death, travelled to the state prisons, and then fought in the war for Porta. Dana smiled as she recalled how overjoyed she had been when the years-long struggle had finally ended in Porta's favour. They had avenged their father and all of Lembo's victims. They had freed Porta from years of war. They had saved the Eastern Realm from doom.

Dana sighed wistfully and rested her chin on her intertwined fingers. It felt like an eternity since they had returned to Sutarebil. At the time, she had been relieved to be safely home again, to be able to tell her mother about all the adventures they had experienced. But now, with each passing day, she longed more and more for the friends she had made on their journey, the ones she had regrettably had to leave behind in Porta. After their quest, Sutarebil felt small and suffocating.

Above all, Dana missed her partner, Adon. He was Kennon's eldest brother, whom they had freed from Lembo's prisons. Though Dana had initially found the eldest Bikior insufferable, she had eventually fallen for the Portan soldier. As Lana had once put it: 'Love lies close to hate.' Leaving her beloved behind in Porta had been the hardest thing Dana had ever done. The feeling of having lost a part of her heart had never faded. But Adon had been unable to accompany her back to Sutarebil—he had wanted to help rebuild the city he had already been forced to miss during his years of imprisonment.

Of course, Dana had kept in regular contact with Adon through lengthy letters exchanged back and forth. Now that Lembo's threat had been eliminated, more and more couriers dared to travel again, allowing Dana and Adon to write to each other frequently, for which Dana praised the gods. Without any contact between them, she might have already flown back to Porta to find him. Still, letters were not the same as seeing him in real life; they could never bring the same satisfaction as being physically near him. Dana could hardly wait for the moment when she would be able to hold him again, to hear his voice, to see him with her own eyes.

"I'm only seventy-seven seasons old," Dana muttered to herself. "I don't want to settle down just yet. I want to travel and see the world. I keep talking about making my dream come true, but am I even working towards it? Or is my dream something else entirely? Someone else, perhaps?"

"Who are you talking to?" came a mocking voice from the doorway.

Dana turned around to see her youngest sister, Lana, approaching with a frown. In the past, they had been like fire and water, their fierce arguments not uncommon. But after a few heartfelt conversations and their journey together, they had grown closer, and nothing could come between them anymore.

"I was talking to myself. I miss travelling," Dana admitted as she began preparing the evening meal so that they could eat as soon as their mother and Dalagh returned home. Worrying about things that weren't there wouldn't do her any good. Lana stepped beside her and started helping to chop the vegetables.

"I miss it too," Lana admitted, "but I'm also glad we have a stable place now and no longer have to constantly flee from impending danger."

"No, that was the downside of our quest. But I mean I miss discovering new places. I miss the exhilarating flights on the backs of our dragons. I miss the freedom of the open road."

“Look at it from the bright side: at least we now have time to make our dreams come true.”

“Yeah, I suppose.” If this really is my dream, she added in thought. A vivid image of Adon flashed in her mind—a teasing grin on his face, dressed in a fancy new suit, kneeling before her presenting a ring... “Speaking of fulfilling dreams, how’s your book coming along?”

At their mother’s wedding, Lana had promised to write a book about their quest. It had already been evident that Dana’s youngest sister had a vivid imagination, but at first, she had lacked the courage to take up the pen, as such a profession was not deemed suitable for women. However, after everything they had been through, Lana had changed her mind. She wanted to tell the world what they—three farm girls from Sutarebil—had accomplished. She wanted to show people, especially women, that they could break taboos. And with Lana’s captivating storytelling, she was bound to succeed.

“It’s going well,” Lana replied. “I’m at the part where I meet Kennon.”

“Then you’ve made quite some progress, haven’t you?”

“Yes, fairly. Have you seen Ivana today?”

“No,” Dana said, shrugging. “She’s probably at her studio again.” Dana only now realised that she had neglected not only Prudentus but also her sisters. Despite living in the same house, she had barely seen them outside of dinnertime in recent weeks. And sometimes, not even then, especially if Ivana had lost track of time while painting. Her words came out more bitterly than she had intended, so she quickly added with a smile, “I should check in on her sometime. If she’s as talented in painting as you are in writing, she could become a rich woman.”

When the three sisters had returned home from their journey and unpacked their bags, they had each found a pouch of money. Apparently, they had received it from the former city lady of Porta, Lady Masha, as a token of gratitude for their heroic deeds in the harbour city. It was a considerable sum, and Ivana had used it to purchase a small space that she now used as a painting studio.

“Yes, probably,” Lana sighed. “I just hope she comes home soon. I’m still not used to not having you both around me all the time on a weekday. It’s different, doing things alone. I like it, but I miss our time together too.”

Dana winked, realising that Lana missed their adventures just as much as she did. Unintentionally, Lana had put into words exactly how Dana felt as well. However, she kept her own feelings to herself, not wanting to seem ungrateful for the opportunities they had been given. Instead, she took out her frustration on a piece of beef that stubbornly refused to be sliced into neat strips.

2. BUSTED

Ivana frowned and studied her painting carefully. It looked fairly good, she thought, but it still needed a finishing touch. The colours already blended smoothly into each other, but something was still missing. The city on her canvas didn't yet truly resemble the city of Porta as she remembered it. The feeling of being in awe, overwhelmed by the city's beauty, was still absent. The sense of warmth the city always evoked in her when she thought back on it, even though they had first encountered Porta in the midst of a years-long siege. But above all, the feeling of coming home; that still had to be captured in the painting.

Moreover, she still had to paint one of the most important people who made Porta feel like her new home: Danion Bikior, her pillar of support, her best friend, and her partner. Almost from day one, Ivana had fallen for this young man. She had been in love before, but her feelings for Danion were different. They were more intimate, stronger, and most importantly, reciprocated.

Even before they had reached Aquameria, Danion had asked her to be his girlfriend, and she had agreed immediately. She missed him terribly and feared the moment she would have to paint him in her work. She was afraid she wouldn't remember him properly after their time apart. What if she could only manage a weak imitation of him on the canvas? Danion didn't deserve that. He had to be painted at least as perfectly as he was. She had no idea yet how she was going to accomplish that, but she loved a challenge. She could do this.

How she intended to achieve it was a problem for the next day, however. It was already after sunset, and once again, Ivana had lost track of time. She had spent the whole day immersed in her painting and had forgotten everyday necessities such as food and drink. By now, she was quite hungry and hoped that a warm meal would be waiting for her at home.

She took off her apron and packed up her belongings. She put everything away neatly and let her hair down again. It was already twilight outside when Ivana left her studio. She locked up and hurried home. That was the only downside of her studio: it was on the north side of the village, while their house was on the south side. Sutarebil wasn't that big, but when it got dark, the journey home seemed to take forever.

Ivana walked through the streets, humming. The goddess of inspiration, Zariel, had swept through her today, and she had almost crafted an entire painting in just one day. She had painted Aquameria in detail: the dragon plateau, the enormous city wall with the small harbour on the west side, and the inn where they had stayed. It was mostly a still life, but there was one figure in the painting. Their friend Agnes was depicted soaring above the city on her dragon, Kira, claiming the city as their rightful own. That was how Ivana remembered Agnes, who had passed away a little over a year ago. She saw her as a powerful princess who had deserved to rule if only she had been given the chance. Her painting expressed that wish, and she was sure Lana would love it when she saw Ivana's work.

She realised that painting had been immediately therapeutic, and she hadn't been able to prevent herself from crying a few times while portraying Agnes and her loyal companion, Kira. She had vividly recalled how Dana and she had always looked at Agnes with a cool gaze, despite the young princess not deserving it.

Granted, Agnes had made reckless decisions that had put them in danger multiple times. In the end, though, that didn't matter. Agnes had sacrificed herself and her dragon to save the three sisters. That was what a heroine did. Agnes had only shown them that making mistakes was human. Ivana had never been able to tell the young witch how much she regretted her behaviour. The only thing she could do now was to remember Agnes in whatever way she could.

Ivana was startled out of her thoughts when she suddenly heard two women's voices from the next narrow alley. The argument escalated, and the women began shouting angrily at each other. At first, Ivana wanted to keep walking—she had learned not to stick her nose into other people's business—but when she heard Dana's name mentioned, she stopped and hesitantly looked into the alley where the argument was coming from.

To her shock, she saw that it was Sheila Ridel and her mother. And if Sheila was talking about Dana, then something must have happened during Dana's class.

For a moment, Ivana considered running home to check if her sister was all right, but she also had a feeling that something important was about to be discussed. Something that might explain why Sheila was participating in Dana's combat classes. So, Ivana remained standing at the corner, listening. Almost as if sensing they were being overheard, Sheila and Chelsaya suddenly lowered their voices into a venomous hiss and continued their discussion in hushed tones. Ivana cursed under her breath and muttered an invisibility spell. Once it was complete, she sneaked into the alley until she could hear the Ridel women clearly.

"Why not?" hissed Chelsaya, giving her daughter a sharp slap on the head. "She is just as guilty of your father's death. You could have taken her easily! No one would have cared. And if anyone had accused you, we would have sent our Lord after them. He would have silenced them for good."

"I didn't want to, all right? We hate the witches because they killed Dad! Why would we kill them? Then we'd be just as bad as they are!"

Chelsaya struck her daughter across the face with brutal cruelty and wagged a warning finger. "They killed your father for no reason! We have a reason: revenge! Don't ever let me hear you compare us to those vipers again!"

"Sorry, Mother," Sheila murmured, rubbing her cheek. "I just thought it would be better to make them suffer longer. To take away everything they hold dear. Death is too final."

Chelsaya pursed her lips thoughtfully and then nodded briefly in agreement. "You have a point, daughter. But never again make me think you're going soft, understood? Those wretches will find their grave eventually, and you owe it to your father to contribute to that."

A muscle in Sheila's jaw twitched, but she nodded once and said, "Yes, Mother."

"By the way, if you had cursed Dana the right way, she wouldn't have died. At least, not if you had used the right curse. I assume by now you are skilled enough to know which curses would have been sufficient."

"You're right. A curse would have put Dana Liwel in her place. I'll try again tomorrow. She always stays behind after class to tidy up."

"Which spell do you plan to use on her?"

The question sounded like a test, and Sheila replied emotionlessly, "A spell that will hurt so much she'll wish she had never been born. I won't stop until I see nearly all the strength drain from her body, Mother."

"That's what I like to hear, Sheila." Chelsaya lovingly stroked her daughter's cheek. "Remember: revenge will be sweet. Never forget why you're doing this."

Ivana had heard enough and crept away. Her mind started working at lightning speed. Sheila wanted to curse Dana? Since when were there two more witches living in Sutarebil? It was bad news that their fellow villagers possessed dark magic, especially since those particular people hated them. How had they never noticed this before? They had lived in Sutarebil for so long, and the Ridels had never shown any sign of magical talent.

Ivana soon realised that they could have learned magic after the triplets had started their quest. But who would have taught them? There were no mages nearby. Arxon Liwel had been in contact with the former king Lembo, but Lembo had been too busy with the three sisters to teach these two insignificant women the dark arts. So who remained?

Ivana nearly slapped herself in the head. Lembo had a bastard son! Prince Arko was still alive! He had never taken part in the war in Porta. Had he taught these two women the dark arts? He had already shown Lana and Dana that he was a powerful enemy who couldn't be underestimated. He wasn't as important as Lembo and could have been easily sent by his father to train two women who shared an enemy with him. It all seemed far-fetched, but she had seen stranger things. She resolved to find out what Arko was up to as soon as she got home.

Because Ivana was lost in thought, she walked straight into a rubbish bin and fell to the ground with a thud. She remained motionless, hoping she hadn't been heard. When Sheila and Chelsaya stopped talking, Ivana even held her breath.

Chelsaya turned towards the spot where she lay, a nasty grin playing around her lips as she said, "Sheila, dear, give a little demonstration of what you can do. It seems someone is eager to see our skills."

Ivana felt a wave of danger wash over her. The two women weren't supposed to see her, but Chelsaya's beady eyes lingered suspiciously on the exact spot where she was hiding. Ivana was almost certain that Chelsaya could see through her invisibility spell. The hateful triumph in her eyes said it all. She had to get out of there before these women decided to punish her for eavesdropping.

Just as she was about to slip away, she suddenly became visible again, and immediately after, she realised she couldn't move. A sharp kick landed in her side, and she collapsed onto her back, her motionless arms frozen in midair. She looked like a grotesque statue pushed off its pedestal. Horror-stricken, she glanced sideways at the triumphant faces of mother and daughter Ridel.

"Well, well! Speak of the devil! If it isn't one of the Liwels!" Chelsaya wrapped an arm around her daughter's neck.

"Eavesdropping on us, you silly goose?" Sheila mocked, giving Ivana another kick, this time against her arm. Ivana felt the bone snap under the force, and she wanted to scream in pain, but no sound escaped her lips. Her muscles refused to obey, and she recognised this paralysis spell from the time they had been captured by King Lembo's soldiers and the Shadow.

"Did you really think we wouldn't see you just because you turned yourself invisible? We've learned how to see through such tricks, darling," Chelsaya sneered. Sheila let out a cruel laugh as her mother continued, "Go ahead and cast the invisibility spell again. Her sisters don't have the same abilities as we do. They'll never find her if we leave her here. Let's see if anyone notices her before she freezes to death!"

Panic gripped Ivana, and she tried to struggle, but nothing worked. She saw her arms and face disappear once again. Sheila shoved her roughly against the wall and walked away. Ivana could see nothing but the grey stones she was pressed against.

She couldn't utter a word to counter the spell. She couldn't make a sound to alert any passers-by to her predicament. Ivana had no choice but to accept that she wouldn't be escaping this situation anytime soon.



Lana sighed and crossed her legs. It was already three hours past sunset, and Ivana still hadn't returned home. This was unlike her. Although she could lose track of time while working on a painting, Ivana had never missed dinner before. They often joked that her hungry stomach was an inbuilt alarm clock, always ensuring she made it home in time.

Her mother and Dalagh had come home from work earlier but quickly left again to search for Ivana after Dana and Lana voiced their concerns. Lana had insisted on joining them, but their mother had said that someone needed to stay home in case Ivana returned. Dana had decided to stay with her.

They sat at the kitchen table while Lana tried to reach Ivana through their thoughts. This was one of the triplets' gifts—they could communicate telepathically with each other, as well as with animals and their dragons. Lana managed to connect with Ivana, but her sister was too distressed to make any sense. It became immediately clear that Ivana was no longer in her studio; her panic was far too intense for that. The only thing Lana could decipher was that Ivana was lying invisible somewhere in an alley, but how this had happened and which alley it was, she couldn't gather from Ivana's panicked mind. And since Sutarebil was made up of multiple alleyways, that information wasn't much help.

If Ivana was truly invisible, their mother and Dalagh would have to stumble over her by sheer luck to find her. Either that or they would have to comb through each alley inch by inch with their hands. There was no way they would find Ivana in time before the cold of the night became too much for her.

Lana knew there was only one being who could find Ivana without much trouble—her dragon, Audacus. He would be able to smell his Dragon Tamer from a mile away. However, Lana couldn't communicate with other dragons, nor could she go to the Dragons' Wood to find Audacus. In Sutarebil, youths were not allowed to wander the village after sunset without an adult, and adulthood wasn't granted until they were a hundred seasons old.

And so, Lana remained at home, tapping her nails impatiently against the table. Dana shot her an irritated glance but didn't dare to say anything. Lana tried not to let her growing fear consume her. It was freezing outside, with winter fast approaching. If their mother and stepfather weren't quick enough, the cold would be too much for Ivana. Hugging her arms around herself, Lana lowered her gaze, praying. *Hold on, Iva!*

She stayed like that until the front door suddenly flew open. Lana jumped to her feet, hopeful, while Dana whipped her head around so fast that a loud crack echoed through the room, making her wince in pain. Lana let out a disappointed sigh when she saw only their mother and stepfather enter. Their mother looked pale with worry, on the verge of tears.

"Nothing?" Lana asked, though the question was redundant, leaning against the table. Dalagh shook his head grimly and guided his wife to a chair. Dana buried her head in her arms, trembling almost imperceptibly with worry.

Lana observed her family in silence before making a decision. "This has gone on

long enough. Ivana is out there somewhere, growing colder with every passing minute! We can call on Audacus. He'll smell Ivana from a mile away."

"But what if someone sees Audacus?" Dalagh frowned. "I thought you wanted to avoid that at all costs."

"It can't be helped. I won't sit here waiting for Ivana to either return on her own or be found too late," Lana declared, pulling her travel cloak around her. "If everyone finds out we have dragons, then so be it. That's a problem for later. Right now, the priority is getting Ivana back in time."

Dana was already following Lana's lead when their mother interjected, "No, no. Only one of you may go, and that one goes with Dalagh."

"No," Dana said firmly. "The two of us must go. The dragons know our scent. They don't know Dalagh, and that could lead to accidents. Dalagh should stay here."

"Dana," their mother warned, but Lana stepped in.

"We have to go, Mother. Dana is right—the dragons know us. They probably aren't too happy with us after we left them alone for so long. If there's one thing I know, it's that dragons are proud creatures. It's better if we go alone."

Dana flinched ever so slightly. She had told Lana about the disaster with Prudentus, and Lana gave her a sympathetic look. Dragons didn't take rejection lightly. Dana's actions earlier that day would surely have consequences. Hopefully, they wouldn't refuse to help their Tamers in a moment of crisis. Lana couldn't blame them if they did though.

"But you're still minors," their mother protested. "If someone sees you—"

"Mum, this is about your daughter," Lana said, exasperated, trying not to roll her eyes. "Can't you make an exception just this once? I'd rather get grounded for sneaking out than lose Ivana."

Dalagh nodded at his wife, and she relented with a sigh. "Fine then. Put your cloaks on in case you run into anyone."

"If that happens, we'll just make ourselves invisible," Lana muttered as she dashed out the door, Dana right behind her.

They saddled two of the five horses Dalagh had given their mother as a wedding gift and rode swiftly towards the Dragons' Wood. Upon reaching it, they left their horses at the usual clearing and veered off the main path towards the cave where they had hidden their dragons from enemy eyes. The last time Lana had been here was the day she had left Icarus behind. Back then, the area had been full of grass, bushes, and trees, with fresh scents filling the air.

Now, it was different. The trees had either been trampled or knocked over. The grass had almost entirely disappeared, and what remained was either flattened or scorched black, as were the surrounding bushes within half a mile. The clearing looked desolate, reeking of decay. The ground was littered with animal bones, some still attached to tendons. Lana closed her eyes, trying to push the image away. Though she knew Icarus would never harm her, she couldn't deny that violence seemed to be in the nature of dragons. She only hoped he wouldn't turn it against her now. She had earned whatever was coming though for neglecting her best friend.

Nervously, she reached out to Icarus. At first, there was no response, but then she heard her dragon's voice in her mind. *"Well, well, little hatchling! Nice of you to finally remember I exist!"*

Lana heard the sarcasm in his tone and replied apologetically, *"Yes, it's been far too long since we last spoke. Many suns have set since I was last here, and that is entirely my fault. It's a cliché and incredibly selfish, but I've been really busy."*

"That's exactly what Ivana told Audacus, and Dana told Prudentus. But what good does that do us? No matter your reasons, the fact remains—you abandoned us. We feel forgotten, worthless. We even considered leaving Sutarebil behind for good!"

"Icarus!" Lana gasped at his honesty. "You can't do that! You're still my friend!" It was only now that Lana truly realised what they had done and how serious the situation had become. They would have to work hard to mend their bond with the dragons.

"That may be true, but you can't just discard us after everything we've been through. I left the Guardian-of-my-heart behind to follow you, and you repay me by hiding me away as if I'm something shameful—a bad memory you want to forget now that you're picking up your normal life again. You call us friends? Friends aren't treated like this!"

Lana lowered her gaze, ashamed. *"You're absolutely right, Icarus. From now on, I'll come more often. I swear it on my late father. I know I was wrong, and I've hurt you. I'm truly sorry, Icarus. I'm so, so sorry."*

"I really hope you've realised your mistakes." But Lana could hear that Icarus already sounded less bitter. *"I won't tolerate such a long period of absence again, newbie. That's my promise to you."*

"I've learned my lesson. I know my words are just words, but I will show you through my actions. I will regain your trust. You are my best and dearest friend, Icarus. Nothing is more important than restoring my bond with you."

"Alright, alright. No need to start kissing my ass, rookie." Still, Lana could hear that Icarus already sounded much less irritated, and she sighed in relief. Rubbing her cold hands together for warmth, she said, *"Will you please come here now? Where are you, anyway?"*

"I'm hunting."

Lana looked in disgust at the animal carcasses around her and asked, *"Haven't you eaten enough already?"*

"No, dragons eat a lot to maintain their strength. Anyway, is it urgent that I come now, or can I finish my hunt first?"

"No, it's literally a situation of life and death. Something's wrong with Ivana. She didn't come home after working in her studio. We searched for her and tried to contact her through our thoughts, but she's in a panic, and we couldn't figure out exactly where she is. So bring Audacus with you when you come. He's the only one who can find Ivana. We desperately need his help."

"Alright, I'm on my way. Are you at our sleeping place?"

"You call this a sleeping place? It looks like a graveyard, just without the graves."

"Very funny, rookie. So I see you still managed to find our sleeping spot?" The sarcasm was back, and Lana knew that if Icarus were already here, she would have stuck her tongue out at him. Now, she only growled. She heard Icarus laughter in her mind before he asked, *"Can you stand between the trees a bit? I don't have much room to land. I'm almost there."*

Lana quickly pulled Dana by the arm into the trees and, in the moonlight filtering through the leaves, saw her sister looking sadly at the ground. *"What's wrong, sis?"* Lana asked, trying to catch Dana's gaze. But she turned around and took a few steps deeper into the forest. With her back to Lana, she said bitterly, *"I'm a selfish person."*

"Why would you say that?" Lana asked, taken aback. She knew her sister – just like Ivana – better than anyone, and she knew that Dana was anything but selfish. Dana would sooner give her own life to save others than think of herself.

Lana quickly realised that Dana was talking about Prudentus, and indeed, Dana answered, "I abandoned Prudentus, my best friend in this world. And why? Because I only thought about my dream of becoming a teacher."

"Ivana and I did the same, didn't we? And considering our past, it makes sense. We learned a lot from our journey, but we also had to sacrifice so much. We're allowed to follow our dreams while we still can. I'm not saying it was right to neglect the dragons, but they can't blame us for wanting to make our dreams come true and return to a normal life."

"I want so badly to explain it to Prudentus, but he refuses to come here. He's still angry about that incident with Sheila. To him, it felt like confirmation that I will continue choosing over him, when in reality, I did it mainly to protect him from the Riddels."

Lana bit her lower lip. She had expected this. Prudentus was much more stubborn than his brothers. He was quite a bit younger and could be incredibly obstinate when something didn't sit well with him. "Give him a direct order," Lana suggested cautiously. "He can't ignore that. And once we're on our way, have a proper talk with him. He can't keep shutting you out. You're still his Dragon Tamer, no matter what you've said or done."

Dana nodded, and Lana could see from her angry frown that Prudentus had put up a mental barrier so that Dana couldn't reach him. She was having to use all her mental strength just to break through it and speak to him at all.

Lana's attention was drawn when a massive shadow passed overhead. Icarus circled a few times before landing with a thunderous crash, trampling two trees as if they were mere flowers. Lana was stunned when she saw that the dragon landing before her was much larger than she had expected. It took her a moment to realise that it was indeed Icarus. She recognised him not by his size, but by the dragon saddle they had received in Porta.

"Icarus?" Lana asked just to be sure, stepping towards her dragon. Icarus, his eyes as large as cartwheels, gave her a wink to confirm his identity before crouching down helpfully. He chuckled lazily at the sight of Lana's shock.

"You're so... so big!" Lana exclaimed in disbelief, struggling to climb onto his back. She had to get used to his new height.

"That's what happens," he said proudly. "After their first year of life, dragons enter their growth period. Hopefully, I'm not scaring you with my impressive stature, am I?"

"Well... a little."

Icarus laughed so hard that it felt like a small earthquake, and Lana had to grab onto his spines quickly to avoid slipping off his back. Dana, however, had no such support and ended up tumbling into a blackberry bush from the vibrations. Lana couldn't hide her grin when she saw her sister lying there, and she patted Icarus neck in satisfaction.

"Just like old times, isn't it, mate?" Lana said. "Now that I'm back on your back, I suddenly long for our journeys through the skies."

"That's right. I'd love to go on another long journey."

"We definitely should. I suspect we'll have a long journey ahead of us soon anyway. I'm nearly finished with my book, and once it's done, I'll need to find a printing house in a city. I think Amycus will be my first choice."

"And, of course, I'll accompany you on this journey so I can stretch my wings again. Besides, I'd be more than happy to show my teeth at difficult printers so they don't even think about rejecting my Tamer's work. Just hurry up with your writing though, because I have to insist you read it to me first."

"Read it to you? You're not a child."

"No, but I need to approve what's in it, don't I? A large part of the story will be about me, after all. And since dragons can't read, you'll have to do it for me. How did you even learn to read? From what I understand, it's not very common for people from smaller villages and towns."

"I learned from my mother," Lana said proudly. "But enough chatting. Where's Prudentus?"

"No idea, rookie. Wasn't he angry at Dana? That's what he said earlier tonight. Then he flew off in a sulk, and I haven't seen him since. As far as I know, he flew away never to return. Prudentus is stubborn. He won't come tonight."

"Not even if Dana gives him a direct order?"

"Maybe, maybe not. He should, technically. But with Prudentus, you never know. My brother-of-a-different-blood has a strong mind."

Icarus had barely finished speaking when another enormous dragon, maybe only ten inches smaller than Icarus, circled above the clearing. He growled threateningly, and Icarus took to the sky.

"Why are you doing that?" Lana asked, gripping onto Icarus wings with the backs of her knees in the usual way. It felt strange now, as his wings seemed to be further apart due to his increased size. Lana cursed herself. If she hadn't neglected him so much, flying wouldn't be a problem. She would have known exactly how to position herself for a comfortable ride.

"Prudentus said he didn't have enough space to land."

"So Dana managed to reach him?" Lana sighed in relief. *"Is he coming with us to help?"*

Lana looked down and saw a dark figure crash noisily onto the ground. Even in the falling night, Prudentus was clearly visible, his black scales as dark as onyx, complete with the shimmering flecks often found in the stone. Dana's dragon stood sulkily once he had landed. Lana understood that Prudentus didn't agree with the direct order and was making his displeasure known in this way, making it as difficult as possible for Dana to take off.

Dana had barely climbed into the saddle before Prudentus shot into the air again, making Lana's heart stop for a moment as she feared her sister would fall off. But Dana grabbed the reins just in time, hovered dangerously above the ground for a moment, then swung herself elegantly into the saddle. Once he was level with Icarus, about a hundred feet above the ground, Prudentus finally stopped moving, and Dana seized the opportunity to settle in properly and fasten her leg straps.

"You really need to have a talk with him," Lana said, watching as Dana, panting, secured the straps around her feet, *"or one day, he's going to be the death of you."*

Prudentus let out a deep growl.

"I know. I'll do my best to repair what I destroyed with my own hands. But first, we have to find Iva."

"That won't be a problem with Audacus around," Lana said, glancing at Ivana's blue dragon, who had joined them and was already speeding towards Sutarebil. *"I just hope we can actually help Ivana once we find her. She probably was in a panic for a reason."*

As Dana stared silently ahead, Lana realised that this was her greatest worry too. *"With the dragons with us, we'll manage. Soon, Iva will just be sitting by the fire again, warming herself up."*

The way Dana said it made Lana realise she was saying it more to reassure herself. And Lana wasn't sure Dana truly believed her own words.

3. BLACK MAGIC

Ivana was freezing and shivering. She still lay in the same petrified position in which Sheila and Chelsaya had tossed her. She could feel her broken forearm throbbing and aching, but there was nothing she could do about it. She stared at the grey wall, trying to recall a counterspell she could cast wordlessly. But her mind was empty. She had never felt so powerless before. When King Lembo had kidnapped her and Dana, he had suppressed their powers, yet even then, Ivana had been able to defend herself better than she could now. Panic coursed through her veins like poison.

She was terrified. Afraid that her family wouldn't find her in time. Afraid that the cold would be too much for her. Afraid that this was how she would die. The tears of fear rolling down her cheeks seemed to freeze onto her skin. Ivana's fingers had already turned stiff and numb. Her body couldn't stop trembling—the only movement it could manage. The icy air flowing into her lungs felt like shards of ice, making even breathing a torment. Every now and then, the cold wind brushed against her face as if to soothe her, but it only unsettled her further. It felt as if death itself was reaching out, beckoning her to the afterlife. But she wasn't ready to go. There was still so much she wanted to accomplish.

Danion... She hadn't been able to see or speak to him again. If she were to die today, all she would have left of him was his last letter—read so many times that the parchment had lost its creases and become smooth—and the stone he had given her in Darkor when he asked her to be his. The gods couldn't be so cruel as to make that the only thing she could take with her into the afterlife, could they? Couldn't she see him once more? Hear his warm voice? Laugh at his jokes? Feel safe in his strong embrace? Was she truly not allowed to create new memories with the man to whom she had given her heart?

Her only remaining hope was that her sisters would find her in time, and she clung to this tiny glimmer of hope with all her strength. Her triplet sisters were resourceful girls. They would surely find a way to help her. Together with their mother, their three brilliant minds would come up with a counterspell for the Ridels' paralysis curse. The question remained: would they find her in time?

Panic seized her once more. She wanted to scream and cry out, but the only sound she could produce was a faint growl. And even that was drowned out by the shouting and music coming from the tavern beside her. The ground trembled beneath the weight of many feet dancing to the music, as if mocking her helplessness.

She had to admit that she had never been in such a dire situation on her own before. At least one of her sisters had always been with her. Now, she was already freezing, and the night wasn't even at its coldest yet. That meant it would only get worse. She wouldn't be able to get out of this on her own. Surely her sisters knew that? Surely they wouldn't wait until morning in the hope that daylight would bring more success?

Since her imprisonment, Ivana had been no stranger to panic attacks, but Danion's support and wise words had kept them at bay. Now, however, panic returned like a long-lost friend, making breathing even harder than it already was due to the cold. Black spots began to dance at the edges of her vision, and she felt

the urge to weep. If only she could lose consciousness, then at least her panicked mind wouldn't be running in overdrive.

Suddenly, Ivana was yanked from her thoughts by a loud thud behind her. She couldn't see anything and feared it was a new threat, yet at the same time, she desperately hoped it was her salvation. Careful footsteps echoed through the alleyway. If only she could move, just enough for someone to trip over her and notice her presence! Ivana tried with all her might to shift even slightly, but her body was as heavy as stone, and she couldn't gain even a millimetre. Nowhere near enough to cause someone to stumble over her body. Even her own mother, a witch herself, had walked right past her earlier. Whoever was in the alley now—what could they possibly do for her?

With a pang in her heart, Ivana recalled that moment from a few hours ago. She had heard her mother's worried voice, followed by Dalagh's deeper tone. Dalagh had wanted to keep walking, but Amelia had sensed something in the alley. For a brief moment, Ivana had hoped that her mother's instincts would lead to her rescue. Her mother had been mere inches away from touching her. Ivana had tried to make a sound, to move, to get her mother's attention. But Amelia had simply shrugged and walked on with her new husband into the next alley.

This time, however, Ivana was mistaken. Suddenly, she felt a hot, wet snout press against her neck. A moment later, a wave of warm breath washed over her body, and Ivana shuddered with pleasure—finally, warmth. A deafening roar followed, and to Ivana's immense relief, she heard Dana's voice: "Iva, we're here. Everything's going to be okay now. I'm leaving Audacus with you. Lana and I are heading straight home to find a counterspell for that paralysis curse."

"*Check Sheila first,*" Ivana said, her thoughts and her telepathic link with her sisters finally reconnecting. "*She and her mother did this. No one else can make me move again.*" She tried to convey her relief to her sisters, along with her gratitude for their determination.

"We're on it," said Lana, muttering the counterspell to lift her invisibility. Ivana nearly wept with joy when she saw her olive-toned skin again. At that moment, it hardly mattered how quickly her sisters found the counterspell for her paralysis. She had been found. She was no longer alone.

Audacus curled up beside Ivana like a loyal hound, nudging her with his snout so she faced him. A surge of happiness washed over her as she gazed at her dragon once more. Without him, she would still be lying here hopelessly, staring at a dull wall instead of into his deep, dark eyes, where the moonlight reflected off his azure scales. Under the moon's diffused glow, his shimmering blue scales sparkled like a starry night sky.

"*Audi...*" Ivana breathed, pouring all her gratitude and sorrow into that single word. Audacus let out a deep, rumbling purr and nuzzled her face affectionately.

She studied him as closely as her frozen eyes allowed. In the weeks they had been apart, he had grown immensely. His ice-blue scales were now as large as sheets of parchment. Audacus spread his wings, draping them over her like a protective tent, enveloping her in warmth. As he moved, iridescent colours flickered across his scales, reminding her of the mystical green starlight sometimes seen in the southern reaches of the Eastern Realm. His body had grown to colossal proportions, stretching across the entire alley, his wingspan embracing the sky itself. His neck arched like a tower spire, and his head, crowned with curling blue horns, exuded a regal presence. Though his tail was curled so tightly that she could only see half of it, it must have easily been the length of a fully grown pine tree.

Ivana wanted to place her hand on his flank, just to feel that familiar sense of security, but she knew she had to wait until she could move again. She let out a frustrated growl, and Audacus immediately lifted his head from his front paws. Only when he realised that Ivana was the source of the sound did he lower it again, this time resting it on Ivana's chest.

Now that she was calmer, communicating through her thoughts became easier, and she said, *"Audi, I'm so glad you're here."*

"I'm glad I found you."

"That you still came for me, despite how much I've neglected you."

There was a brief silence as a shadow passed over Audacus's eyes, but then he said kindly, *"I am not as resentful as my brothers. All is forgotten and forgiven."*

"No, Audi. You have every right to be angry. I didn't treat you well."

"I won't deny that, but I think you've already received your karma. I see no reason to hold onto resentment. I'm just happy that we're reunited, Iva, my Chosen One."

"The feeling is entirely mutual. I've missed you so much, mate. I won't ever let it get this bad again. I promise."

"I'll gladly remind you of that," he purred contentedly, exhaling another warm breath over her chilled body. The warmth made Ivana suddenly aware again of the sharp, throbbing pain in her arm.

"Audacus, could you look at my arm? It hurts terribly. I think it's broken—Sheila probably fractured it when she kicked me."

Audacus bared his teeth and growled—a sound like hundreds of heavy boulders tumbling down a hillside. *"If I ever get my claws on those two, they'll regret it!"* he snarled. *"No one harms my Chosen One without facing the consequences!"*

"It was my own fault. My curiosity got the better of me. I shouldn't have eavesdropped on them."

"Are you defending those inhumane wretches?" Audacus asked indignantly, before letting a pearl-white tear fall onto Ivana's injured arm.

Dragon tears were incredibly precious, possessing the ability to heal wounds, cure diseases, and accelerate the body's natural recovery. Alchemists and scientists in Julesera had spent years studying the magical properties of dragon tears, theorising that these miraculous drops could even promote rejuvenation and slow the ageing process when consumed.

As Audacus's tear seeped into her skin, Ivana's arm healed instantly. She felt her bone shift back into place with a sharp click, and the pain gradually faded away until it was barely noticeable.

"I'm not protecting the Ridels," Ivana said defensively. *"But I did invite danger upon myself."*

"I won't say it was wise to go in there – unprotected and alone - but they had no right to treat you like that."

"Still, my reason for doing it paid off. I learned a great deal about the Ridels and the wicked schemes they are plotting."

"Well, since we have the time, tell me everything. Perhaps then I'll have even more reason to roast them like pigs on a spit."

Ivana chuckled at his battle-ready attitude, then forced the unpleasant and lonely memories of the last few hours from her mind. She carefully recalled everything she had learned about the Ridel family and their sinister plans before relaying it all to Audacus, all the while restlessly awaiting her sisters' plan to free her from her paralysed state.

Yet, strangely enough, Ivana didn't believe for a moment that the Ridels would

willingly surrender the counterspell without a fight when Dana and Lana arrived at their doorstep.



Dana and Lana crept around the Ridels' house. The lights were already out, and they suspected that the two women had gone to bed. Dana clenched her fists in anger. They had done this to Ivana and had simply gone to sleep as if they hadn't just left someone to die alone in a freezing alley. Dana ground her teeth. She would make sure those two had some very interesting dreams tonight.

She pulled a dagger from her boot and climbed into an old beech tree, its branches brushing against the side of the house. Lana followed her lead, hoisting herself up onto a sturdy limb. Dana didn't wait long for her sister and continued her ascent. When she reached a thick branch that rested against an open window, she wrapped her legs around it and tested the surface with her hands to ensure it could hold their weight. Once she was certain, she shuffled forward on her backside. As the branch grew thinner, Dana slid off it, hanging by her hands and feet.

She had to stifle a laugh as she realised she must look like a sloth. Taking a deep breath, she moved one hand in front of the other, carefully inching towards the window. Occasionally, she paused to catch her breath or to check on Lana, who was following her lead.

At last, Dana reached the open window and, with some difficulty, pushed it further open with her feet. She peered inside and saw that it was a bedroom, though she wasn't sure whose. Cautiously, she swung herself through the window and landed as softly as possible on the wooden floor, though a faint *thud* was still audible.

The person in the bed grumbled, and Dana froze in place, holding her breath. With her eyes squeezed shut, she sent a quick, silent prayer to the gods, hoping the sleeper wouldn't wake.

Fortunately, the Ridel in the bed did not stir beyond rolling onto their side and continuing to sleep undisturbed. Dana exhaled quietly. She had made it. She gestured for Lana to follow and crept further into the room, which turned out to belong to Sheila.

The chamber exuded a dark and mystical aura, thick with the scent of herbs and enchantments. The walls were draped in heavy, deep-purple curtains that blocked out the light, plunging the room into a perpetual twilight. Along the edges of the space, an eerie glow flickered from strangely coloured candles, casting ominous shadows over the worn, antique furniture.

Dangerous, falling asleep with candles burning, Dana thought disapprovingly. For a moment, she felt the urge to knock one over in revenge for Ivana. But she quickly scolded herself—she wouldn't stoop to the Ridels' level by killing someone in cold blood.

A grand, antique bed with intricate carvings stood at the centre of the room, covered in a mysterious pattern of black and silver sheets. Above it hung a canopy of tattered velvet, its edges lined with feathers from nocturnal birds. Along the walls, small tables overflowed with ancient spell books, cracked skulls, candles shaped like black cats, and glass jars filled with ingredients that ordinary people wouldn't recognise. A wooden shelf held an assortment of bottles and vials containing mysterious liquids, elixirs, and powders that shimmered in the dim

candlelight.

At the side of the room stood an altar, the heart of dark rituals. Runes and symbols were still drawn on the floor in chalk. On the altar lay objects of black magic—bat wings, dragon teeth, and powerful gemstones infused with dark energy.

There was no longer any doubt: Sheila was undeniably a witch. A witch with dark powers.

Lana landed softly beside her and took in the sinister room with a wary glance. Quietly, Dana moved to the bedroom door and locked it. However, she couldn't prevent the iron key from scraping faintly in the lock, and Lana flinched by the window.

That small sound was enough. Someone gasped in the darkness, and Dana stiffened as Sheila bolted upright in bed. Luckily, the witch's back was to her, though she could see Lana. Lana remained half in the room, one foot still on the windowsill, ready to jump back onto the branch if needed.

Sheila's eyes widened in shock at the sight of her enemy halfway into her chamber. But the shock quickly turned to fury.

Dana could well imagine what Sheila's next move would be. Silently, she crept up behind her. And before Sheila could scream, Dana seized her and pressed the dagger to her throat.

"One word, and you'll never speak again, Ridel," Dana hissed in her ear. "Am I clear?"

Sheila scoffed. "As if you have the stomach to kill, Liwel. Don't your kind prefer more devious methods? Poison in drinks, perhaps?"

Dana tightened her grip. "I don't condone murder, but after what you did to Ivana, I have no boundaries left. Don't test me tonight."

Sheila gave a reluctant nod as Lana, now reassured, slipped fully into the room. She wrinkled her nose in disgust as she passed Sheila's dark altar, flipping through some books on black magic in search of a counter-spell for Ivana's condition.

"Good, now that we understand each other—get up. You're coming with us."

"Where are we going?" Sheila asked loudly.

"Keep your voice down or say nothing at all. If you betray us—"

"Yes, yes, I get it!" Sheila spat back venomously. "I'm not a fool! If I betray you, you'll gut me like a fish. Your brutality knows no bounds, Liwel."

She swung her legs out of bed and swiftly, though silently, pulled her clothes on over her nightgown. Her expression was tense, yet there wasn't a trace of fear in her sharp gaze as she laced up her heavy boots.

"Where are we going, Liwel?"

"You're going to set things right," was all Dana said as she walked towards the door. Lana took Sheila from her, pressing her dagger against the witch's neck. Dana crept into the hallway, scanning her surroundings. Everything seemed quiet, but to be sure, she checked every room until she found Chelsaya's bedroom. She cast a binding spell on the door, ensuring it would hold before returning to Sheila's room to fetch Lana.

"The coast is clear," she told her, then added for Sheila, "I don't know what your black magic is capable of, but if you attempt any kind of communication, we'll know. And the consequences will be severe."

Sheila rolled her eyes but nodded again, grumbling something about "I tremble in fear." With a slight air of obedience, she walked out of her bedroom when Lana shoved her forward. Dana led the way, descending the wooden staircase when Sheila suddenly remarked, "The second-to-last step creaks."

Dana turned, eyeing her suspiciously.

"She's lying," Lana said in response to Dana's look. "It's probably the third or the last step that actually creaks."

"No, strangely enough, I believe her," Dana replied. "She was right this afternoon too when that dragon suddenly appeared behind me."

Dana's meaningful look made Lana realise she was talking about Prudentus. But Sheila also caught on. She gasped and exclaimed, "You knew that dragon? So it's true—you fought in Porta from the back of a dragon! Was that black beast yours?"

"May I remind you that we're the ones asking the questions here?"

"And we don't have time for idle chit-chat," Lana added irritably, shoving Sheila forward, causing her to stumble towards Dana.

Sheila quickly regained her balance and demanded, "Is it true or not?" The sisters refused to answer. Lana simply grabbed Sheila by the back of her cloak and pushed her down the stairs.

"Answer me!" Sheila snarled. Then, out of nowhere, she leaned backwards against Lana, sending them both crashing against the stair railing.

Seizing the opportunity, Sheila kicked Dana hard with both feet, sending her tumbling down the rest of the stairs. Dana landed with a brutal thud on her back, and a sharp pain shot from her tailbone up to her neck. Tears welled up in her eyes as the pain fully registered. She didn't even attempt to get up—she was certain she couldn't, not with the searing pain and the dizziness clouding her mind.

When she opened her eyes again, she saw Lana and Sheila grappling on the stairs. Lana had lost her balance when Sheila had shoved Dana, and now the two were locked in a struggle for dominance. Lana landed a hard punch with her right hand, but Sheila drove her heel into Lana's foot. A sharp cry of pain burst from Lana's lips, echoing through the silent house.

Her cry cut off midway as she realised where they were.

"Oh no," Dana groaned. She desperately hoped it wasn't too late—that Sheila's mother had somehow slept through the commotion. But that hope vanished instantly when she heard Chelsaya hammering against her still-locked door, her deep voice booming with furious curses.

Dana first cast a fearful glance at the door, then back at Lana, who had managed to subdue Sheila again.

"Don't just stand there!" Dana shouted in panic. "Get out of here! Make sure Ivana returns to normal! I'll hold Chelsaya off!"

She hauled herself up using the banister, squeezing her eyes shut against the overwhelming pain in her lower back. But she forced herself into a defensive stance as Lana wrenched open the front door and dragged Sheila outside.

Dana's gaze remained fixed on Chelsaya's bedroom door, which, miraculously, had yet to break under the assault. Maybe her binding spell would hold a little while longer...

But just as Dana made the decision to flee after Lana, a deafening boom shook the house, and the front door slammed shut before her with an ominous crash.

Instinctively, Dana spun around.

At the top of the stairs stood Sheila's mother, her expression a mix of fury and twisted triumph.

"Foolish little witch," she sneered, her voice dripping with satisfaction. "Now, at last, I can take my revenge on the rest of your family!"

A jet-black death spell shot from her outstretched palm, hurtling towards Dana. She could do nothing but stare in shock as she realised—Chelsaya was also a master

of the dark arts...

4. HOUSE RIDEL

Within a quarter of an hour, Lana and Sheila reached the alley where Ivana lay. When Sheila recognised it, her face hardened, and she suddenly stopped, as if she literally wanted to dig her heels into the ground. Lana, who had not expected this resistance, collided with her at full speed, and her dagger grazed Sheila's neck. Sheila screamed and quickly pressed her hand against the cut to stop the bleeding. Although this was not Lana's intention at all, she felt no pity. This young woman had left Ivana here to freeze to death. Lana, as the one responsible for Sheila's father's death, understood where Sheila's hatred came from, but her sisters had nothing to do with the death of Arxon Ridel. Dana had even advised Lana against poisoning the butcher, but Lana had gone through with her plan anyway. That was why Sheila had to hold her accountable—no one else.

The cut Lana had made on Sheila's slender neck seemed deeper than she had initially thought. Blood seeped through Sheila's fingers and flowed over her forearm like lava from a volcano—calm but determined. It appeared that Lana had accidentally hit an important artery, which could potentially be life-threatening. But what should she do? Sheila did not currently pose a mortal threat to them, which meant Lana could not allow her to die. She only took someone's life in battle. However, Sheila was a terrible person and had more than enough sins of her own. Perhaps this was a sign from the gods that she needed to be put in her place. Was Lana willing to darken her soul even further by leaving the butcher's daughter to her fate? Would that not make her even worse than the Ridels?

This last thought took precedence, but still, Lana wanted to get the most out of the situation—something that might have caused problems under different circumstances. This situation, however, presented certain opportunities, ones that Sheila might now be more inclined to accept. That was why she said, "Sheila, I can heal your wound with ease. I promise I will help you if you tell me how to make my sister move again. What can I do about it?"

"Go to hell!" Sheila snarled as she sank to her knees. The little colour she had in her face drained further as she lost more blood. Lana knelt beside her and stared at her intently. Reluctantly, she called upon Icarus and said, "As you rightly suspected, my sisters and I are Dragon Tamers. Our dragons are circling nearby and can be here at my command. With the tears of our companions, you will be as good as new. I ask you for only a small favour, Sheila: undo the spell on Iva."

"I mean it, Liwel! I refuse to help any of you. You deserve everything that's coming to you. You should have died in the battle for Porta!"

Lana froze. How did Sheila know about Porta? It seemed that Sheila had not only learned the dark arts but was also far more informed about their activities than Lana had feared. How had this girl obtained her information?

Lana slowly began to grow irritated, but she knew the butcher's daughter was trying to provoke her. However, she could play that game too. That was why she kept Icarus at bay when he landed. Icarus eyes held a questioning look as he caught the metallic scent of blood, but she firmly shook her head. She would turn this situation to her advantage and emerge victorious.

Sheila saw how Icarus reacted to Lana, and her mouth fell open. "So, you really are Dragon Tamers," she muttered, unable to hide a touch of wonder in her voice.

"Yes, this is Icarus. He is mine." Lana looked proudly at her mighty dragon, who calmly pulled off a few of his dead scales. "Icarus is ready to help you as soon as I give the command."

"Then help me! You're the one who wounded me! Fix it now!"

"Tell me first how I can help Ivana," she insisted stubbornly. She could only hope that Sheila would give in soon, for judging by her face, she did not have long before she lost consciousness.

"HELP ME NOW! I'M BLEEDING TO DEATH!"

"Tell me why I should care."

"Aren't you girls supposed to be practitioners of white magic? Good witches who protect humanity? Do you want to let another innocent person die?"

"Neither you nor your father was innocent. My conscience is clear. Besides, I have grown accustomed to killing since the war in Porta—something you strangely seem to know about despite our best efforts to keep our successes on the battlefield hidden."

"You're a monster, Liwel!"

"And you have the audacity to say that?" Lana remarked sarcastically, leaning smugly against the grey, weathered wall. She crossed her arms and pressed one foot against the wall. "You left my sister alone in a deserted alley on a freezing night. Tell me: would you have come back for her before she froze to death? I don't think so. You left her here to die."

"If you let me die, my mother will avenge me. I hope she's already working on it." She laughed viciously. "After all, Dana isn't here yet."

Lana bit her lip. Sheila had a point. Time was running out. Not only was Ivana in danger, but Dana possibly even more so if the furious Chelsaya Ridel was involved. "Those who seek revenge will ultimately draw the short straw. Just look at your father."

Sheila cursed Lana vehemently, but now it was Lana's turn to laugh. She was so close. She could feel it. Sheila was on the verge of breaking. Icarus snorted loudly, and Lana saw in his gaze that he disapproved of her stubbornness. She quickly reassured him with a mental image of what she planned, and Icarus lay down again, satisfied. Lana was honoured that he always trusted her and never worried about her plans, even though they sometimes carried risks.

Lana pushed herself away from the wall and knelt beside Ivana. She gently traced her fingertip over Ivana's hand and felt how cold it still was, despite Audacus' constant warm breaths over her body. Lana removed the leather gloves she wore when riding Icarus and slipped them onto Ivana's hands. "Just hold on a little longer, Iva," she whispered softly. "It won't be long now, and everything will be over."

Audacus looked at Lana with concern, and she extended her hand. He lowered his head to her hand, allowing her to stroke him. Then he rested his head between his paws again, and Lana sat silently between Sheila and Ivana.

Sheila panted lightly and occasionally squeezed her eyes shut in pain. "Are you just going to sit there, Liwel?"

"You know what I want."

"You won't get it!"

"Then I'll just sit here. Ivana has more time than you do."

"But maybe Dana doesn't."

Lana closed her eyes and tried to pass the time by reaching out to Dana, growing more and more worried that she still hadn't joined them. That could only mean bad news. Dana, however, did not respond to her telepathic contact. This alarmed Lana

even more, for Chelsaya would never let Dana go without a fight. She sighed and stood up. "I'm going to Dana," she said to Icarus loudly, ensuring that Sheila would hear as well. Her words had the desired effect.

"What?" Sheila asked, and now the panic in her voice was unmistakable. "What about me?"

"I told you my conditions, and if you won't accept them, the consequences are yours to bear. But don't worry—you won't die alone. Icarus will give you a royal funeral."

Lana flashed Icarus a meaningful grin and walked out of the alley, but before she even turned the corner, Sheila screamed, "Fine, fine! You win, Liwel. *Finito est!*"

Lana turned around and then heard Ivana groan softly. She smiled triumphantly—her little plan had worked. Grinning from ear to ear, she returned to the alley, where Icarus was already leaning over Sheila—who had fainted from the adrenaline rush of the last few seconds and blood loss—to heal her. Ivana was shivering against Audacus, who blew warm air over her through his nostrils while she frantically rubbed her hands together to get her blood circulation going again.

When she saw Lana, she stood up and embraced her. "Thank you," she said softly, her voice hoarse and trembling slightly. "If you hadn't been there... I don't even want to think about it! Only you two could persuade Mum and Dalagh to let you out after curfew. You fetched Audi and found me. I can never thank you enough."

Lana could only laugh—she was so happy to hear her sister speak again! She rubbed Ivana's back and refused to let go, afraid that she would turn to stone once more. She smelled the scent of turpentine and paint in Ivana's hair, and Lana felt the tension drain from her body. Ivana was safe. She might catch a nasty cold from this ordeal, but at least she was alive.

"We need to help Dana, Iva," she said tensely. "I had to leave her at the Ridel house. She's still with Chelsaya, who didn't seem too pleased about the abduction of her daughter."

"You left her with Chelsaya?!" Ivana asked incredulously. "Didn't you understand anything from the visions I sent you? She and Sheila are dangerous! They're learning the dark arts from someone powerful, and I have no idea who it is! At first, I didn't believe they could do it, but my frozen body is proof that they can—and that they're already quite skilled at it!"

"All the more reason to act now," Lana said decisively, stiffly climbing onto Icarus, whose withers now felt like a true climb for her. However, the dragon voluntarily lowered himself, allowing her to use his forelegs as steps to mount more quickly. Ivana was already seated on Audacus and raised her eyebrows at Sheila.

"What do we do with her?" she asked. "We can't just leave her here—she'll freeze to death."

Lana smirked and said, "Move her with your gift to the rubbish bins. That's where old trash belongs, if you ask me."

"Lana, we can't do that."

"Hey, listen. We're not making her invisible, and she can move, so either she'll be found or she'll get up herself in a moment."

"And we just need her out of the way while we rescue Dana from Chelsaya's clutches," Ivana reasoned.

Lana nodded and watched with satisfaction as her sister did as she asked. She then commanded Icarus to take flight, determined to bring her other sister back. They had already been incredibly lucky tonight—saving Dana wasn't too much to

ask for, right? Surely, they would rescue Dana from Chelsaya's grip, alive and well.



Dana dashed through the living room and dove behind a large wooden cabinet. A deafening explosion followed, blasting the cabinet apart and propelling her backwards with tremendous force. She spun through the air but did not lose consciousness. In mid-air, she flipped and landed gracefully on her feet, rolling swiftly to the left to avoid a paralysing beam.

As she landed further away, it was her turn to attack. She formed a ball of ice and hurled it at Chelsaya. The butcher's widow conjured a shield of fire around herself, causing the ice to shatter into sizzling fragments. With a sweeping motion, she sent the fiery shield surging forward like a tidal wave.

Dana sprinted in a circular motion, creating a tornado of water and ice around her. The raging fire crashed into her swirling barrier and was extinguished by the sheer force of the water. Panting, Dana held her ground before shooting a shattering spell at Chelsaya. The woman barely managed to duck behind the sofa in time, causing the spell to obliterate the plant pot where she had stood just moments before. Dana saw Chelsaya's hand slip out from behind the couch, releasing a sinister-looking yellow beam in her direction.

Without a second thought, Dana leapt over the dining table, flipping it onto its side as a makeshift shield. The yellow beam struck the wall behind her, leaving deep gouges in the plaster as though a sword had mercilessly slashed through it. She growled in frustration and, from her cover, fired a spell at Chelsaya—a silencing curse that would render her incapable of launching magical attacks.

The spell hit its mark. For a brief moment, Chelsaya's mouth opened and closed soundlessly like a fish out of water. But she recovered swiftly. Her face contorted with fury as she unleashed three wordless spells simultaneously. Dana ducked behind the overturned table just as the spells struck with explosive force, pinning her between the table and the wall. Quickly, she kicked the table away and rolled to safety before the next spell could reach her.

Keep moving, she reminded herself. *A moving target is harder to hit*. She sprinted across the room, deflecting three magical beams with a shield of water. However, the next spell grazed her knee, sending a searing pain through her leg as if it were being consumed by flames. She stumbled, falling into a heap on the floor. Gritting her teeth, she pushed herself up just in time to block another spell. Dana retaliated with an enchantment that would bind Chelsaya's legs together as if shackled by invisible chains.

In the brief respite, Dana glanced down at her injury. She quickly tore a piece of her cloak and wrapped it around her knee before struggling to her feet. Had the situation not been so dire, she might have laughed at the sight of Chelsaya hopping toward her with her feet bound together.

The air crackled with energy as their duel reignited. Sparks and flashes of light danced across the walls. The room pulsed with the power of their magic. Chelsaya raised her hand, summoning a blinding red glow. The air trembled with an ominous rumble as fiery, laser-like beams shot from her fingers, weaving through the room in a hypnotic display.

Dana lifted her hand, summoning a blue energy field for protection. Instantly, the atmosphere shifted—the room filled with an icy chill as her magic illuminated

the space with an intense blue glow. Her beams of frost streaked through the air like frozen fireworks. The clashing spells painted the battle in a symphony of light, a mesmerising spectacle of colour and destruction.

The fight reached its peak, their magical assaults raging like an untamed storm. The walls trembled under the force of their battle. Dana let out a fierce cry and hurled a spinning wheel of ice at Chelsaya. The widow barely managed to leap out of the way, narrowly avoiding being trapped in a cage of water and frost.

For a moment, Dana had time to think—to formulate her next move. But before she could devise a plan, Chelsaya materialised right behind her. Dana turned, but it was too late. A red beam struck her square in the chest, locking her in place.

At first, Dana felt... nothing. It was as though her mind had been wiped blank, her thoughts erased. Then, suddenly, agony erupted through her body. It consumed her senses, drowned out all other emotions, all logic. The pain was everywhere. It surged through her veins like fire, spreading to every nerve, every muscle, every inch of her being.

She couldn't think—she could only feel. And what she felt was unbearable. Tears streamed down her face, mingling with the blood from a cut on her forehead. She screamed, but her cry was lost beneath the deafening hum of the torture spell.

The ground rushed toward her. Her body convulsed, muscles seizing under the relentless assault. She could no longer control her movements. The pain was all-encompassing. She wanted to die—anything to make it stop. It felt as if blades were carving into her skin, as if her organs were dissolving in acid, as if her skull was swelling to the point of bursting.

She didn't know how long she endured it. Seconds? Minutes? Hours? Days? Time lost all meaning. But as suddenly as the pain had come, it vanished.

Exhausted, she collapsed onto the cold wooden floor. Even when the last echoes of suffering left her body, she couldn't stop screaming. She trembled violently, but she blamed it on the shock.

Finally, as her mind cleared, she lifted her head—desperate to know what had stopped Chelsaya's torment.

To her immense relief, she saw Prudentus' head looming through the shattered wall of the house. His black eyes burned with fury, and his thunderous roar sent shivers through the air. Despite the devastation he had caused, he was too large to fit inside entirely. Only his head and neck breached the wreckage, yet it was enough. Chelsaya lay sprawled amidst the ruins of a massive bookcase, blood pooling around her motionless form. Fiery embers still flickered between Prudentus' sharp teeth.

Summoning what little strength she had left, Dana grasped the edge of a leather chair and hoisted herself up. Her legs trembled too violently to support her, so she collapsed into the seat. She gazed at Prudentus with a mix of awe and trepidation. His scales were coated in debris, his body slick with sweat. She realised, with a pang of guilt, that he must have felt some of her torment—and that alone had been enough to set him into motion.

Prudentus lowered his head, fixing a single, weary eye on her. He blinked slowly, reassuringly. Dana let out a shaky breath, pulled herself to her feet, and hobbled towards him. She didn't have the words to express how much she regretted abandoning him. No matter how much effort it took, she forced herself closer, watching for any sign that he would retreat.

But he didn't. He stayed perfectly still, his gaze never leaving her. And when she was close enough, he gently scooped her up with his powerful paws and placed

her tenderly onto his back.

Dana wrapped her arms around his neck and broke into uncontrollable sobs. *"I'm so sorry, Pru. I was being selfish. I only thought about my combat classes, my dream, and how to make it a reality. I thought you'd be happy having time alone. But I should have known it would grow lonely. From now on, I'll spend more time with you. I promise."*

"Your words move me," Prudentus murmured. *"But this is perhaps not the time. You were just tortured."*

"Now is exactly the time for apologies," Dana insisted. *"Once again, you came to my rescue. But where was I when you needed me? I abandoned you."*

"I was deeply disappointed," Prudentus admitted.

"I know. I'm disappointed in myself too."

"It was not just your neglect," he said thoughtfully. *"But when you pushed me away today, it felt like rejection. It brought back painful memories."*

Flashes of Prudentus' past flickered through Dana's mind—a young farm boy feeding him as a hatchling, playing with him in secret, teaching him to fly. Then, storm clouds. An angry mob with pitchforks. The boy looking him in the eyes and saying, *I don't know you.* Prudentus running for his life.

Then, a new image—of a great black dragon, eerily similar to Prudentus in every way but the cruelty in his gaze. No matter how hard Prudentus tried, the black dragon never accepted him.

"Pru," Dana exclaimed, her voice thick with emotion. She couldn't find any more words, but Prudentus remained silent too. They had only ever spoken about her life, but her dragon had never shared anything about his childhood. Only now did Dana realise how negligent she had been in more ways than one.

Prudentus rubbed his head against her leg, letting a few tears fall onto her wounded knee. *"It's alright, Dana. I don't like talking about it."*

"No, but I am your Chosen One! I should have asked you about it. Your past is a part of who you are. I should have made more of an effort to get to know my dragon. I'm deeply ashamed."

"That is not necessary."

"This is unacceptable. I would love to learn more about you, my friend."

"Soon," Prudentus promised.

"Now I understand even more why you were so angry."

"I had planned to make you suffer for your neglect a little longer, but when I felt your pain, I realised how petty I was being. People make mistakes, and I knew that when I chose you as my Chosen One. What matters is that a person learns from their mistakes—then it's not so bad to make them."

"I have learned."

"Yes, I can feel that. That's why it's my turn to act like a mature dragon again and not a stubborn mule."

Dana managed a watery smile. *"I love you, Pru. Forgive me for not showing it enough lately."*

"I love you too, Dana Liwel. Will you forgive my tantrums?"

"There's nothing to forgive." Dana pressed a firm kiss on his cheek as he arched his neck. *"It's been an eternity since we last flew. I want to feel that thrill again when we soar through the skies. That is, if you've truly forgiven me."*

Prudentus hesitated for a moment, but soon a mischievous glint appeared in his eyes—the one Dana loved so much—and he said, *"I forgive you, on the condition that we take flight right now. Then I can be one hundred percent certain you'll keep*

your promise."

Dana frowned. *"Actually, Mother and Dalagh told me to go straight home, but I suppose I can make an exception. After all, you deserve a reward for the good deed of finding Ivana. I just want to check on my sisters first, and then I'll go with you—wherever your wings take us."*

"You don't need to go back. Ivana is arriving now."

Dana quickly turned in her saddle and saw two dragons approaching against the pitch-black sky, each carrying a rider. A broad grin spread across her face when she noticed Sheila was missing from the group. Her sisters must have ditched her somewhere—how wonderfully clever they were! But her smile widened even further when she spotted Ivana, who was waving cheerfully.

Icarus and Audacus landed gracefully in turn, and Lana asked, "Are you alright, Dana?" Her sisters also looked pale, and Lana absentmindedly rubbed at her chest. They must have felt her torment as well.

"I'm doing better now, thanks to a mighty rescue mission by Prudentus. I think that if he hadn't been there, my time would have been up." Dana shuddered as she recalled the unbearable pain she had endured. She had been so close to complete surrender... Shaking her head to dismiss the dark memory, she asked with a hint of a grin, "You two seem to be alright as well?"

"Yeah, though my body feels like it's been crushed under a dragon." Icarus rumbled with laughter at Lana's joke. "By the way, Sheila eventually decided to help us—after a lot of drama."

"And how did that happen? I doubt she said, 'Because you're so kind, I've decided to help you.' Or did she?"

"I accidentally grazed her throat with my dagger. I think I nearly let her bleed to death. I offered to heal her, but only if she helped Ivana. At first, she stubbornly refused, but when I threatened to leave and go help you instead, she finally spoke the counter-spell."

"And where is she now?"

"Who?" Lana asked innocently, glancing at Ivana, who grinned.

"Sheila," Dana said, placing her hands on her hips.

A flush of embarrassment crept up Lana's cheeks as she evasively answered, "Where she belongs."

Ivana burst into laughter, and Dana frowned. "And what does that mean exactly?"

"She's lying next to a rubbish bin by the inn."

"You two are such troublemakers, aren't you? I had a feeling you'd be up to mischief," Dana chuckled. "At least she's still visible to the world and can slink home with her tail between her legs once she regains consciousness."

Dana wiped a bit of blood from her forehead and hesitated before saying, "But all jokes aside, I have a favour to ask. I'd like to take a flight with Prudentus to rebuild our bond, and..."

"We're coming with you," Lana interjected without hesitation. "I have a debt to settle with Icarus."

"What about you, Iva? Are you in the mood for this after all that you've been through?"

"I'm coming too," Ivana said firmly. "Maybe it'll help me put this terrible experience behind me. Besides, if we all go, Mother hopefully won't notice that we were away longer than was strictly necessary."

"That's a good point," Dana admitted, turning to Prudentus. *"Do you mind if my*

sisters join us?"

"Not at all, as long as you fly with me."

"Absolutely. Shall we go, then?"

Dana felt Prudentus' hind leg muscles tense before he pushed off with powerful force. She let out an exhilarated scream as they shot into the darkness. As they climbed higher, Dana watched Sutarebil shrink beneath them, the houses becoming no larger than her fingertips. Once at altitude, Prudentus levelled out. Before long, Sutarebil was behind them, and they flew northward over the endless grassy plain nestled between the foothills of the Libera. Below them, the land lay still, the grass swaying only when caught by a breeze. Not a single soul was in sight, and soon Dana allowed her guard to drop.

Sensing her calmness, Prudentus decided to entertain her. He performed her favourite manoeuvres, making her shriek with excitement. He plunged into a spiralling dive, executed a somersault, and performed a free fall. For the latter, he shot skyward until Dana shivered from the cold before plummeting straight down like a spear. Only two feet from the ground did he turn, resuming a straight course.

Once Dana had recovered from the adrenaline rush, she hesitated before asking, *"Would you be willing to tell me about your childhood now?"*

Prudentus snorted. *"It's not a pleasant story for a joyful reunion between friends."*

"But a reunion is the perfect time to share memories, isn't it? Please, Pru. What you showed me made me realise how little I know about you. Share it with me so that I may know you even better."

There was such a long silence that Dana thought Prudentus had shut her out, but then he rumbled deep in his throat and muttered, *"Alright then. But I don't want to hear any complaints afterwards, alright? It's not a story with a happy ending."*

"I understand. But this is something we need to do." She placed a comforting hand on his neck. *"This should have happened a long time ago."*

"Well then, settle into your saddle and listen to my tale."

5. BETRAYAL

The sound of something breaking. A thin streak of light, branching into hundreds of other streaks. Prudentus wanted to reach that bright world. Here, it was dark and stuffy. It was time to create space. He laboriously rolled over, so that his snout touched the streak of light. The tip of his nose found purchase in the crack, and with a growl, he managed to widen it. A loud crack, and the roof fell away from his head. He squeaked excitedly and pushed his head into the brightness above him.

He blinked, momentarily dazed, briefly afraid that he had gone blind. However, his nose was already sensing the new world. He smelled flesh and blood. He smelled a creamy liquid. He smelled a sharp, disgusting scent that made him shudder. Then, slowly, he also began to hear things. Heavy shuffling of nervous animals, bellowing loudly. The rustling of material beneath these animals. The frantic breathing of someone sitting close to him.

He squeaked in fear and flung himself backward out of instinct. He landed against something crisp that broke under his weight and rolled away, causing him to somersault backward. Off balance, he scrambled to his feet, testing his four little legs and tail. They were still covered in slime but otherwise obeyed him and moved as they should. However, his wings were still stuck to his back, and he feared pulling them loose too abruptly. They looked fragile, as if one wrong move would tear the membrane. If there was danger, he would have to run. He tested his legs again and almost lost his balance, but his tail kept him steady.

His eyes finally started relaying information again, and he took in his surroundings. He stood in a large square space with smaller brown compartments and a golden roof. In the smaller compartments stood enormous beasts with black and white coats, sad-looking eyes, and sharp horns. They made a racket when they noticed him. He sank onto his haunches and growled a warning. White liquid dripped from the bellies of the beasts, smelling creamy and making his hunger stir. Hesitantly, he approached, and the strange beasts jumped aside, as if afraid he would eat them. He licked his lips greedily; the beasts themselves actually smelled quite appealing indeed. But as he got closer to the white liquid, the foul, sharp stench grew stronger, and he saw something brown lying beneath the swishing tails of the creatures. He shuddered, gagged, and leaped away from the beasts.

Then, he noticed another being close to him. This creature stood on two legs and lacked a tail. Its glossy fur was covered by a second layer of fabric and leather, and with one of its naked forepaws, it scratched its cheek in confusion. What kind of animal could walk on only its hind legs? Prudentus shrank back, not recognising the creature and feeling threatened. He bared his upper lip in warning.

The two-legged being now raised both its forepaws in the air in fear and said, "Easy now, little one. I won't hurt you."

The being still towered over him, but Prudentus knew that if he could eat, his body would soon outgrow this two-legged creature. Hopefully, he would live that long. Right now, this absurd being could easily overpower him, especially since he still couldn't move his wings.

The two-legger, however, took a step towards the bellowing beasts and asked, "Are you hungry, little one?"

"Yes, but I'm not going near those stinking beasts again."

The two-legged creature didn't seem to hear him and crouched down, keeping his gaze fixed on Prudentus. As if he knew precisely that Prudentus was the danger here, not the noisy, speckled creatures beside him. Admittedly, this upright being had some understanding. He cupped his hands together and held them under the dripping belly of one of the speckled beasts. When his hands were full of the white liquid, he hesitantly offered it to him.

Prudentus eyed him warily, but his stomach growled loudly. Hesitantly, he took a couple of steps forward and dipped his tongue into the creamy substance. He kept his gaze locked on the two-legger as he steadily drank every last drop. It wasn't bad, but he was still hungry. He nudged the two-legger's hand with his snout, ordering him to get more. The being bent again under the dripping stomachs of the speckled creatures and offered him another handful of white liquid. This time, Prudentus eagerly slurped it up. He burped once but had to admit that he needed something more than just liquid. He needed something substantial.

He growled at the speckled animals, and the two-legger fell backward in fright. He scrambled back until he bumped into the massive legs of the speckled creatures. Prudentus took a moment to size up the animals. They looked sluggish, but they were certainly on high alert now. This wouldn't be an easy meal. Besides, he doubted his legs were ready for a hunt. No, he would have to settle for something smaller.

He lifted his snout into the air and sniffed his surroundings. He smelled fear-sweat and, for now, turned his back on the two-legger. If the creature feared him, it wouldn't attack. Prudentus moved away and caught the scent of his own body and the crisp shell that still lay broken open. He passed the remains and then detected a new scent. Meat. Blood. Just a mouthful, but enough.

He crouched low, found his balance, and pounced between two sacks filled with a golden substance. A grey blur darted through the gold, but Prudentus pinned its long tail with a paw. The little creature squeaked, and Prudentus delivered a stunning blow to its head with his free forepaw, rendering it motionless. There was barely any meat on the scrawny body, but for now, it would do.

Prudentus devoured his prey quickly, the flesh satisfying his hunger far better than the creamy liquid. When he finished, he picked the bones from between his teeth and looked up in irritation as the two-legger remarked, "So I guess I don't need to get a cat anymore." Prudentus had momentarily forgotten him but now watched him intently again.

The two-legged creature had the audacity to sit across from him, and Prudentus growled a warning. "This far and no further."

Again, the creature didn't seem to hear him and continued, much less nervously, "I'll make sure you get meat."

"I can take care of myself just fine."

"I never thought I'd find a dragon," the strange creature murmured. "I thought I had found a beautiful diamond to sell once the traders arrived in the city. Never in my wildest dreams..." He sighed and ran his forepaw through his soot-black fur that only covered the top of his head. What kind of strange creature was this?

"What are you?" Prudentus asked curiously.

The being ignored him again, and Prudentus began to suspect that it wasn't just its appearance that was odd—it communicated differently as well. That didn't make the situation any easier, as it meant he wasn't with his family. Not with his mother, who had hatched him. Not with his brothers and sisters to play with. Not with his father, who would teach him to fly and hunt. This strange creature was no family. He was probably the reason Prudentus wasn't with them.

Prudentus jumped up and snarled at him. The young man immediately stood on his hind legs again and backed away. "Easy now, little one. You're safe here."

"Safe? Safe?! I'm alone, and there's not a dragon in sight to guide me!" He let out a long, plaintive squeak, and the two-legger hushed him, saying, "Please be quiet. If anyone finds you, we'll both be in trouble."

Prudentus begrudgingly silenced his whining and tilted his head expectantly. "You got me into this situation! Fix it!"

The two-legger glanced nervously at the doorway, but when no one appeared, he exhaled in relief. "I really didn't know you were a dragon, but your egg was lying all alone on a mountainside, and I thought it was a gemstone. Now I understand it was a dragon's egg, but shouldn't an egg be hatched in a nest?"

He had a point. What had happened? If the two-legger was telling the truth, then his siblings hadn't been with him, nor his mother. Had he fallen from the nest? Were his mother and father searching for their lost child?

Prudentus hesitantly ran to the doorway and started whining again. To his great surprise, the two-legged being wrapped its front limbs around him and tackled him to the ground. The human was strong, but Prudentus' jaws were stronger. He bit into the tip of the front limb, which strangely branched into five elongated pieces of flesh. The human groaned and rolled off him, clutching his bleeding chunk of flesh against his chest.

"Please," he begged. "I mean you no harm, but stop making such a racket. I want to help you. I want to bring you back to your family, but if other people find you, they will kill you. King Lembo has decreed that all dragons must be handed over to him—dead or alive. The people here have nothing, and they would even sell their own grandmother if it meant getting a reward."

Prudentus sniffed the sincerity and desperation from the human, who had called himself a man, and he lowered his hind legs. He watched him expectantly. The man took a deep breath and continued, "My name is Jurden. I am the son of Farmer Pasham. We are currently on our cattle farm in Calmera, but I found you in the Long Mountains."

That meant nothing to Prudentus, but if that was where he had to go, then so be it. Hopefully, his wings would serve him well, as walking was going to be quite the challenge. The young farmer, named Jurden, jumped up and positioned himself in the doorway with an apologetic look in his eyes. Prudentus sensed trouble and let out a warning growl, crouching defensively.

"You can't just leave," said the farmer hastily.

"Wanna bet?"

"I meant what I said. I want to help you. I want to bring you back to your family. But you have to understand that Calmera..." He searched for the right words, glancing at the ground in embarrassment. "My city is terrified of King Lembo."

"Who?"

"You've probably never heard of him, but he is a terrible man." The fear of this King Lembo was clear in his scent, and Jurden glanced around nervously like a hunted animal. "King Lembo has been in power for many years now, and he rules his kingdom with an iron fist. We are constantly watched by his spies. No one trusts each other, and families even betray their own kin. All for a bit of extra money to keep their own families alive."

Unconsciously, the two-legged man clenched his fists, a grim frown forming between his green eyes. "And dragons? Dragons are both sacred to him and a thorn in his side. If anyone saw you, Lembo would be here in no time. First, to claim you. And if

you refused his offer, he would kill you without hesitation."

Prudentus shuddered but then roared defiantly. "Let him come. Maybe there's more meat on that human than on that mouse from earlier."

This time, Jurden understood his intent and gave a weak smile. "No, even for you, the king is too great a challenge, especially since rumours say he already has a fully grown dragon in his possession."

"Such faith in me."

"Anyway, I want to help you escape from here because keeping you here is already a huge risk. I didn't report you the moment I realised what you were, which means I'm already guilty and looking at years of imprisonment if they catch me. So yes, this request is also partly selfish." He gave a crooked smile.

Prudentus rolled his eyes but then crouched down in a waiting posture. "What do you propose?"

Jurden saw the shift in Prudentus' stance and sighed in relief. "I propose that I keep you here for now and feed you so that you can regain your strength." Prudentus pulled a sour face, and the farmer chuckled. "Don't worry. I'll do some research in town about your kind so I can come up with a decent meal for you."

"I am a dragon! Not a house cat! I can hunt for myself!"

Jurden noticed his indignation and said, "I'm sorry, but I can't let you hunt. That's too big a risk. If people find you... I already feel guilty for taking you. I could never forgive myself if such a magnificent creature was slaughtered like a stray dog because of me."

"Fine, but woe betide you if you don't keep your word. You are made of flesh, and so are these cows." Prudentus crouched down, indicating his reluctant surrender.

"Hide well. Even my father must not see you."

Prudentus rolled his eyes again but then leapt lightly into the crackling, golden material stacked in bales against the stable wall. He only poked his head out to keep an eye on Jurden. The farmer's son nodded approvingly and said, "I'll go gather more information about dragons. If I'm the one returning, I'll whistle for you." He pursed his lips and let out a sharp sound. Prudentus whined plaintively, and Jurden laughed.

"Sorry, of course, you have much better hearing than us humans. I won't do it too loudly or for too long, okay?" He walked to the door and pushed it open with much creaking and groaning. He glanced over his shoulder and said, "Remember: don't let anyone see you." And then he was gone, leaving Prudentus utterly alone apart from the dozens of cows, who were still restless from his presence. He curled up in his hiding spot and wished his mother was with him.



The following days passed in much the same way. Jurden kept his word and visited Prudentus every morning and evening to bring him food. The farmer's son brought him squirrels, hares, and ducks, and occasionally even a fresh piece of meat from the butcher. Moreover, with every visit, he had a new story to tell.

He soon told Prudentus more about the dragon clan he likely descended from: the Black Frost Dragon. These dragons resided in the vast mountain ranges of the Eastern Realm and were known for their fiery, untamed nature. Unlike most other dragon species, the Black Frost Dragons did not take part in the search for the Chosen One. Most Frost Dragons believed that dragons were too grand and noble to become the slaves of a two-legged creature. Dragons were meant to be free, bound only to

themselves and their clan.

When the farmer's son left, the idea of having just one person—a friend through thick and thin—who would always be by his side, appealed to Prudentus. The long hours and endless minutes that Jurden spent working stretched on unbearably, and Prudentus grew immensely bored. After a week, he had already discovered and devoured every mouse nest in the barn, and since he was strictly forbidden from touching the cows, there was little else to do. Occasionally, he amused himself by sneaking up behind the sturdy beasts and snapping his jaws shut menacingly. However, he always had to hide quickly, as the burly farmer would rush in immediately to check why his livestock was in an uproar. These were but fleeting moments of joy. The rest of the time, boredom was his constant companion, a dull routine broken only by the visits of the farmer's son.

One evening, however, Jurden returned and, after gazing at Prudentus for a long while, cautiously placed his warm hand on the dragon's snout. By now, Prudentus trusted the young man well enough, but it was strange that the farmer's son suddenly sought physical contact. Jurden stood there for several minutes, his hand resting firmly, as if he was waiting for something. When it took too long, Prudentus grew irritated, shook his head, and the young farmer fell back onto a bale of straw with a disappointed sigh.

"Sorry," he said with a watery smile. "I heard today that a Chosen One is marked the first time they touch their destined dragon. I couldn't help myself."

"If you were my Chosen One, we would have known by now. Though I must admit, I regret that you're not. You're a decent two-legger." Prudentus laid his head on Jurden's lap, and the farmer absentmindedly scratched between the scales of his brow ridges.

"You're growing fast," Jurden suddenly said. "I can't keep you hidden here any longer. I've been thinking about it for weeks, and I believe I should take you to a quiet spot by the riverbank. There's plenty of food there, so you'll be able to survive, and I can teach you how to fly. Then, the next step will be the Long Mountains. Tomorrow, after work, I'll borrow the neighbour's wagon and take you to the Naturiviera riverbank."

Prudentus sprang up, leaping joyfully and knocking into Jurden, sending him tumbling to the ground. The two-legger only laughed and said, "Just one more day, mate, and then you'll be one step closer to your family."



The farmer's son kept his word. On the evening of the following day, he drove a large covered wagon with a white canvas into the stable. He nimbly jumped down from the driver's seat and said hastily, "Quick, get in."

Prudentus wrinkled his nose in disgust. The wagon reeked of manure. He took a step back. Jurden shook his head vigorously. "Get in. We'll never get another chance like this. My father is at the tavern with Farmer Madret from next door."

The fear in the farmer's son's eyes convinced Prudentus, and after taking a deep breath, he stepped into the stinking wagon. He curled up obediently, wrapping his tail around himself, and Jurden threw a musty blanket over him. "It's only for a little while, mate. We'll be at your new home soon."

Prudentus snorted irritably but reminded himself that the two-legger only wanted to help him. So, he tucked his snout between his front paws and tried to sleep while