

Consorting
With Dragons



Sera
Trevor

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Love's Landscapes

An M/M Romance series

CONSORTING WITH DRAGONS

By Sera Trevor

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love's Landscapes* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

What Is Love's Landscapes?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love's Landscapes*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

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CONSORTING WITH DRAGONS

By Sera Trevor

Photo Description

A portrait of a beautiful young man with shoulder-length red hair and intense amber eyes. He wears a cloak with long spikes on the shoulders. Behind him is a silhouette of a red dragon.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

It has been nearly 300 years since the last Lord of Drae chose a male consort... so what am I doing here at the capital, dressed in clothes finer than anything I have ever seen, and undergoing three months of (incredibly boring) testing by the Lord's minions?

Well, to be honest, it is all my father's fault. Or my father's lack of ability to win at anything, ever. Not at life, not in love, and most certainly not at the gambling tables. While I can do nothing about his life, nor his love, he seems to think I can do an awful lot about his gambling debts. Mainly, he can sell (er... marry) me off to the highest bidder and happily go on sinking my mother's land, title, and general good name into the ground he buried her in.

Trouble is, I'm not really worth all that much to anyone carrying a purse, let alone wanting a husband. But if I was unique, if I had done something very few could ever claim to have accomplished (or, realistically, tried to accomplish)... well then, maybe I'd be worth something. To someone. Somewhere. Or, at least my father hopes. Personally, three months free of my father sounds like a rather nice vacation. Three months of good food, free clothes, fine surroundings, and one flirty guard. Yes, that sounds just lovely.

It has been nearly 300 years since the last Lord of Drae chose a male consort... and neither fire nor fate is going to change that any time soon. Or so I thought...

(um... not a lot of restrictions on this. I only require a dragon or two, a flirty bodyguard, and some type of HEA or HFN. Also, if you can make it funny, I will love you forever.)

Sincerely,

Carrissa

Story Info

Genre: fantasy

Tags: humor, age gap, non-explicit, royalty, magic users, soul mates

Word Count: 41,465

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CONSORTING WITH DRAGONS

By Sera Trevor

Chapter One

Jasen sensed the dragons before he saw them.

He couldn't have explained it if someone had asked him. One moment, he was dozing in the carriage, not quite able to fall asleep due to his father's monstrous snoring, and then suddenly there was a *warmth* in his chest. It radiated outward with each beat of his heart, until his whole body was filled with it. The feeling pulled him to the window. When he looked out, there they were—dragons. Or not there, exactly—they were off in the distance, flying over the city of Draethenper, their silhouettes dark and enormous. There were two of them, moving in a slow, unearthly dance, weaving in and out of each other's paths with a grace that should be impossible for creatures of their size. The sun was low in the sky, melting into oranges and reds as warm as the feeling in his chest.

Jasen was moved in a way he had never been before. For some unfathomable reason, he decided to try to share the moment with his father. "Dad," he said, nudging him. "Dad, wake up!"

The man continued to snore. After poking him a few more times, Jasen finally resorted to giving him a hard slap on his enormous stomach. He let out a loud snort as his eyes shot open. "Wha-what?" he slurred. "What is it?"

"Come look," Jasen said, gesturing out the window.

Slowly, his father complied. It took a few moments, but a grin tugged at his lips at last. Jasen smiled, too, pleased to share a nice moment with his father for once, but then his father said, "A-ha! We're nearly at Draethenper, then! Excellent timing—we're almost out of wine!"

Jasen sighed. He should have known better than to try. "I meant the dragons," he said. "And we've only been on the road for two hours—how can you be out of wine already?"

"Well, a lot of it has spilled, hasn't it?" he said, a touch defensively. "It's damn difficult to pour wine with all this jostling and bumping."

"You're drinking it directly out of the bottle."

"Of course I am *now*. I've learned my lesson, haven't I? Now, where did that damn thing run off to?" He patted around until he found the bottle he'd

been working on before he'd nodded off. "Ah, here it is!" He took a swig, then offered it to Jasen.

Jasen looked at the last swallow in the bottle, no doubt made up of his father's spittle as much as wine. "No, thank you."

His father shrugged and finished it off. He smacked his lips. "How much longer before we're there, do you think?"

"I don't know. An hour or so. If it's any longer, I'm sure you could lick the floor—that ought to sate your thirst, at least for a little while."

His father put a hand over his heart and rolled his eyes to the heavens. "Ah! You wound me, son! Can you blame me for being nervous, sending my only child out into the world, all on his own?"

Jasen scowled. "This was your idea."

"You didn't exactly collapse in despair when I suggested it." He clapped Jasen on the arm. "Cheer up, son! This will be good for you."

"Oh yes, my best issues are at the front of your mind, I'm sure. The fact that you'll make a fortune auctioning me off is just a pleasant afterthought, right?"

"Oh, come off it. You want this, too. And just think—you'll no longer have all those girls bothering you, trying to get you to marry."

"I suspect they bothered you more than they bothered me, what with how their fathers kept trying to get a marriage price out of you. A bit deluded of them, I thought. Especially since you gambled away the manor Mother meant for me."

"I'm going to win it back," his father sniffed. "It's true, my luck has slumped in recent days—"

"More like years," Jasen mumbled.

"These things come in cycles, my boy! The wheel will turn."

There was little sense in arguing about it with him, so Jasen said nothing. He ran a hand through his long, red hair, then rubbed his face, trying to banish his weariness. They were on the last part of a journey that had taken two weeks; their home in the back province of the kingdom of Grumhul was as rural a place as one could imagine. They had left their horses and more rustic carts at the last inn; his father had insisted on renting a fancy carriage for their grand entrance into the city. Not that anyone was going to see them; his father had

gotten so distracted by a game of cards that they left two hours later than they were supposed to.

They were journeying to Draethenper, the city at the heart of the Draelands, which was itself the largest kingdom of the Allied Realms. Each year, dozens of eligible noble young women and, less frequently, young men were invited to Court to try to find a husband. Over a grueling three months, they would be poked, prodded, and polished to make them as attractive as possible to potential suitors, who would arrive in the last month to begin their search for either a bride or a lord consort, as the eligible young men were known. A grand ball was held at the end, where all engagements were announced (and marriage prices negotiated with the fathers of the brides- and lord-consorts-to-be).

And now, Jasen would be among them. It wasn't a thought he relished. He'd tried to keep his interest in men a secret, but the illusion rapidly dissolved one day when his father caught him on his knees in front of Hans, a stable boy. After that, all of his many other exploits came to light. To his surprise, his father was delighted at the discovery. While not as common as a marriage between a man and a woman, men did sometimes marry other men. The reason Jasen had dreaded his father's discovery was that a first-born son was discouraged from forming such a marriage, since they were expected to continue the family line. There was also the matter of the low birth and sheer volume of his chosen partners. But the surprise at his father's acceptance vanished when he suggested that Jasen present himself at Court as a potential lord consort, which explained everything. He meant to sell him to the highest bidder.

Well, that wasn't completely fair. His father was right that Jasen hadn't put up much of a fight; he could have refused, if he wished. For men who preferred other men, there was always the choice of either taking a lord consort or becoming one. However, thanks to his father, Jasen had no money or land. After his mother had died when he was twelve, his education had trickled off to next to nothing, leaving him unqualified for pursuing any of the professions deemed suitable for men from noble families. Neither did he possess any magical abilities; almost no one in Grumhul did. His one advantage was his striking good looks: he had long, red hair of an unusually vivid hue, brilliant amber eyes, lithe limbs, and fine facial features with lips whose natural resting state was an exceptionally sexy pout. He desperately wanted out of Grumhul, and with beauty as his only advantageous trait, Court was his best bet.

They rode in silence for a little while longer. Jasen kept his eyes trained on the dragons, who remained soaring above the city until the light began to fade. They flew off then; Jasen wondered where they had gone. Dragons were their own creatures, not under the control of men. They could go anywhere—anywhere at all. Jasen wondered what that was like.

“The sun’s almost set,” Jasen observed. “We’ll be lucky to get into the city at all at this rate.”

His father waved his hand. “It will be fine, I’m sure. Are you eager to get there?”

“I’m eager to get out of this carriage.”

“Oh, come now! Surely you’re at least a tad excited?”

“Not really.”

“Ah, you’re nervous. You shouldn’t be. You’d be a fine catch for any suitor—I suspect you’ll have your pick of them!” He stroked his beard. “I think you should try for an older man. Much older, in fact—someone who is up to his ears in gold and dying for someone to spend it on. And just think—if you find one old enough, you probably won’t even have to bed him that often!”

Jasen groaned and put his hands over his face. “I don’t want to talk about this with you.”

“What? I’m just being practical.” He stroked his beard some more. “Even if you find someone too old for frequent sexual congress, you might still want to emphasize your—ah, *experience* in bedroom matters. I imagine that would be very exciting to a man looking for some fun in his twilight years. You could describe your exploits to him—send him to his grave a happy man!”

“Please stop talking,” Jasen mumbled from behind his hands.

His father, apparently, did not hear him, for he continued on. “I know that traditionally, the Court promotes purity, but believe me when I say that there are plenty of men who have little interest in such things. Why, the very first day I met your mother, we—”

“*Dad!*” Jasen shouted, removing his hands from his face. “I have no desire to hear about whatever you and my mother got up to, and I also have no desire to talk about any of the rest of it, either!”

His father held up his hands. “Sorry, sorry,” he said.

Jasen got to enjoy five whole minutes of silence until his father started up again. "If an old man doesn't appeal to you, you could always set your sights a little higher." He waggled his eyebrows.

"I have no idea what you're on about."

"The king, my boy—the king!"

Jasen stared at him. "The *king*? You're mad!"

"Am I? He's still a virile young man—thirty years of age at the most. And it's been two years since the queen's death. He must find a spouse."

He was right. King Rilvor held two titles—not only King of the Draelands, but also the Lord of Drae, the human who was linked most closely to the dragons, and who by virtue of that fact was the supreme leader of all ten of the Allied Realms. All human magic depended on that link. While all of the royal family shared in this connection, it was the Lord (or the Lady, when there was a queen) who bore the brunt of it. It was a position of incredible power, but also incredible strain. He needed a partner to help ease his burden. If the Lord of the Drae grew too weak, humans would lose their powers. It had already started to happen; those who were dragon-blessed with magical abilities reported a weakening of their powers. Pressure was mounting for him to remarry, and in all likelihood, he would find his future spouse in this season's Court.

Even so, the possibility that the king might choose *him* was laughable. "Yes, the *queen* is dead," Jasen said. "And she was a woman."

"So? There are many men who enjoy the favors of both men and women. And I've heard rumors."

"The Lord of the Drae always marries a woman. He has to produce heirs."

"He has four children already, and siblings with children of their own. There will be someone to take his place when the time comes. And it's not unknown for a Lord of the Drae to have a lord consort instead of a queen. There was King Athert."

"That was three hundred years ago, and it hasn't happened since!" Jasen said. "And even if he did have an interest in men, do you honestly think the king would choose a man of the lowest level of nobility from the most backward of the back kingdoms to be his lord consort?"

"Don't sell yourself short, son!"

“This has nothing to do with selling myself short and everything to do with having a firm grasp on reality! The Lord of Drae hasn’t had a male consort in three hundred years, and neither fire nor fate is going to change *that* any time soon! Now kindly *drop the subject.*”

His father shrugged. “All right, son, as you say.” And then he added, under his breath, “But stranger things have happened, is all I’m saying.” They lapsed into silence after that.

It took even longer to get into the city than Jasen had anticipated. His father had decided not to hire a driver for their expensive rented carriage in order to save money. He figured that their footmen, Rodrad and Garyild, could handle it well enough, but he had been wrong. Garyild was partially blind and Rodrad’s hands were arthritic, so they settled on a system in which Garyild held the reins and Rodrad shouted directions. It was amazing that they’d made it as far as they had already without an accident, but their luck eventually ran out; they ran straight into a mud-filled ditch. It took all four of them to free the carriage from the deep mud patch, and by the time they were done, they were all filthy from head to toe. They also discovered a wheel had been knocked out of place and had to be repaired. And since it was dark and none of them possessed magical ability, they had to do the whole thing by lantern light.

Miraculously, they figured it out, by which time it was two and a half hours after sunset. Then, after the carriage was repaired but before they got back on the road, Jasen and his father got into a shouting argument that had begun with Jasen insisting that he should take over the driving, which his father forbade on account that it would make them look unsophisticated. From there, Jasen demanded to know why his father had chosen their two oldest servants to accompany them. After some hemming and hawing, his father confessed that he didn’t trust Jasen not to “lose control” of himself with the younger servants, which Jasen felt was *ridiculous* and *insulting* and... well, also somewhat true, because he actually had slept with quite a few of them—it wasn’t his fault that there was nothing else to do in their backward hellhole of a province, and besides, he thought his father was thrilled that he was such a big slut. And then his father roared at him that Grumhul was the home of the best people in the world—so what if they weren’t fancy, they had *heart* and he should be proud of his heritage. Jasen countered by pointing out that if his father was so proud of their heritage, why had he insisted on the fancy carriage in the first place... And so on, for another half an hour.

All told, it was well past ten in the evening by the time they arrived at the city gates. The guards almost didn't let them through; no one was supposed to be admitted after dark. His father blustered and threatened, throwing around his title of the Baron of Hogas in the kingdom of Grumhul, as if that were somehow impressive. Incredibly, it worked, and soon their fancy carriage, now covered with mud, was on its way to Strengsend, the grand palace of Draethenper. The palace itself was actually only one part of Strengsend; there were dozens of different structures, gardens, and several acres of land known as a draemir, a sacred site set aside for any dragons that happened by.

The scene from the city gates played out again at the palace gates, but they made it through there, too. Going through the palace gates was like stepping into a dream. Even though it was night, the whole place was lit by dragon lights—glowing globes that were enchanted by the dragon-blessed to provide light. He'd always imagined them to be something like torches, but the light they provided was a much softer, almost unearthly glow. The grounds were beautifully manicured—strange but beautiful trees, each of a unique shape, lined the main road, along with neat rows of the most beautiful flowers Jasen had ever seen. He could only imagine what it all must look like in the light of day. In the distance, he could see the magnificent palace. And he knew that beyond the palace, out of sight and up against the Ashfell Mountains, was the draemir. Jasen wondered if the dragons he saw earlier were there now.

The palace was actually four large structures, which were known as the wings. The consorts were housed in the East Wing. His father would spend the night in the West, where the families and suitors were housed. He would only be there for the night, however; the next day, he would make his way back out of the city to stay with a cousin of his for the three months until the suitors and families were received once again.

Once the carriage had stopped, Jasen made to get out, but his father put a hand on his arm. "Wait," he said. "I'd like to have a word with you, before we say good-bye."

Jasen resumed his seat and crossed his arms. "Well?"

His father sucked in a breath, then let it out in a long puff. He looked at his feet, then the ceiling, and then, quite forlornly, at the empty wine bottle. Jasen rolled his eyes and made to get up again, but at last, his father spoke. "I know I haven't been the best of fathers, especially after your mother passed, but—well, I did the best I could. Maybe it wasn't good enough, but there you have it. You're my son, and I want you to be happy."

At that, Jasen let out an incredulous scoff. "Oh, of course. And if I could be *happy* as well as netting you a fortune, so much the better. Am I right?"

"And what's wrong with wanting that?" his father said. "We need the money."

"*You* need the money. I bet the day you found me sucking Hans's cock was the best day of your life, because that meant you could sell me to fill your coffers. You pissed away Mother's fortune, and now you're using the next generation to do it again."

He expected his father to start in with excuses, but he said nothing, merely looking down at his hands folded in his lap. "You're so much like your mother," he murmured. "She was always right about me, too."

"Oh, masterfully done," Jasen sneered. "Self-deprecating, with a mention of Mother to boot." Jasen fastened his cloak; he'd cleaned the mud off of his face and hands as best he could, but his clothing was still a mess. He hoped that his cloak would hide the worst of it. "Just so we understand each other—if I do manage to marry some rich old goat, you are not getting a single copper beyond the marriage price, no matter how much you blubber."

"Of course, son," he said, his shoulders still slumped. Just when Jasen began to feel a twinge of regret, his father continued. "I won't impinge on your generosity. Find a husband, and be happy. Don't spend even a single moment thinking of your poor old father, all alone in an old rotting castle, perhaps going hungry—starving, even..."

Jasen bundled up the ends of his cloak, shoved it against his face, and screamed. After a few moments, he removed the cloak and took a few deep breaths. "You know, you almost had me there for a moment."

His father peeped upwards. "A little too much?"

"Just promise me you won't gamble away the marriage price before I even find someone."

"I swear on your mother's grave."

"Swear on that wine bottle," Jasen said. "I'd believe you then."

Jasen swung open the door to make a dramatic exit—only to have it slam into Rodrad, who had been struggling to get Jasen's trunk from the top of the carriage. The trunk went sailing after him.

“Rodrad!” Jasen said, scrambling from the carriage. The man was laid out on the ground, moaning; Garyild was beside him. The trunk had burst open; all of his things were scattered everywhere. “Are you all right?” He turned to Garyild. “Did the trunk hit him?”

“No, m’lord,” Garyild said. He paused. “At least, I don’t think so.”

Rodrad struggled to sit up. “No, m’lord, it didn’t hit me. Just had the breath knocked out of me—I’ll be fine.”

“Are you certain?”

“Yes, m’lord. Just need a little help getting up—”

Jasen went to his side, and together, he and Garyild helped him to his feet.

“Everything all right out there?” his father shouted out of the window.

“Why don’t you get your fat ass out here and see for yourself!” Jasen shouted back.

—and then he noticed that the doors of the hall had opened. A handsome young man in uniform stood staring at them. “Can I help you?” he asked.

Jasen tried to respond, but he felt as if he were choking on something. It was probably humiliation, if he had to take a guess.

While he tried to compose himself, his father burst forth from the carriage. “I am Draul, Baron of Hogas of the kingdom of Grumhul,” he said. He sounded not the least bit embarrassed. “And this is my son, Lord Jasen. He’s here for Court.”

Remarkably, the man did not laugh or sneer at them. “Of course, my lord,” he said with a bow. “We have been expecting Lord Jasen.” He paused. “Although we didn’t quite expect him at this time of night.”

“We had carriage trouble, didn’t we?” his father bellowed.

“Yes,” said the man, looking over at the carriage and their filthy clothing. “I can see that.”

“Then why are you so surprised we’re late?” His father thrust his chest out and leveled his best haughty stare at the guard. “Well? Aren’t you going to have someone see my son to his room?”

“Yes, my lord. I’ll see Lord Jasen to his room myself. I imagine you and your servants will want to retire yourselves, now that you’ve seen Lord Jasen here. Don’t worry about the trunk,” he said to Garyild and Rodrad when he saw

them trying their best (and failing) to clean up the mess. "We can take care of it. In fact, why don't I send someone up to show you the way to the West Wing? I know the grounds can be confusing."

"Grand, grand," his father said. He turned to Jasen. "Well, good night. I can come by in the morning to say good-bye."

"That won't be necessary," Jasen said, keeping his tone as neutral as he could.

His father's face fell. "No, I suppose it won't. Good-bye, son."

Jasen turned his back and made his way up the steps, where the man waited for him. He crooked his arm; Jasen was puzzled for a moment before he realized that he was meant to take it. He had an urge to look back, but managed to suppress it. He and the man stepped inside, the door closing itself behind them.

When they entered the hall, they immediately walked up a small staircase covered in pristine red carpet, which became considerably less pristine as Jasen tramped across it. At the top of those stairs was a room with two enormous pillars on either side of the room supporting a high ceiling, and... more stairs. A lot more stairs. There were two enormous staircases, one to the right and one to the left, that curved around in a grand arch, leading to a large, ornate door. It seemed to Jasen that two staircases were excessive, given that they led to the same place.

There was a hallway running through the center of the stairs; chairs were situated here and there in front of the doors. Why? Did they assume a visitor might need to rest before summoning the energy to walk into the next room? Given all the hiking that was necessary to get around the place, maybe he wasn't too far off.

"Welcome to the East Wing," the man said. "I am Larely, by the way. I am the junior officer in charge of security."

"Pleasure to meet you," Jasen mumbled, keeping his gaze on his dirty boots.

"Are you injured?" Larely asked.

Jasen looked up at him, confused. "No. Why would you think that?"

"You were obviously thrown from your carriage," he said.

"Oh—no, I wasn't. I had to get out to help when we got stuck in the mud."

The guard looked at him in surprise. "You helped?"

“Of course I did. We weren't about to get out of there otherwise, were we?”

“I suppose not,” the guard said, smiling. “But most of the nobles I've met would rather sit in a carriage all night than get dirty.”

“I suppose that's easier to do here in the Draelands, but in Grumhul, we don't have magic. Things don't get done with a snap of the finger; we have to rely on each other to—” Jasen stopped abruptly when he realized that he sounded *exactly* like his father. “Besides,” he continued in a cooler tone, “maybe I like getting dirty.”

Larely burst out laughing. “I hadn't considered that a possibility.” He gestured to one of the chairs. “Please, have a seat. If you will excuse me for a moment, I need to see that your father and your things are taken care of. Won't take me but a moment.”

Jasen was going to protest, given the state of his clothing, but the guard obviously knew and had offered him a seat anyway. Jasen did as he asked. Larely disappeared behind one of the doors.

Jasen fidgeted in the chair. Not that it was uncomfortable. Actually, it was a bit too comfortable. The furniture in his own home tended towards the hard and wooden side. The creak of the opening door startled Jasen out of his thoughts. Larely had meant it when he said he'd be quick, it seemed. “All settled,” he said. “I'll show you to your room now.”

“You're a guard, aren't you?” Jasen asked.

“Of a sort.”

“The sort who shows people to their rooms and arranges for carriages?” Jasen asked. “It isn't generally what guards in our country do.”

Larely laughed. “Nor in ours, but I'm a special case. The truth is that there is very little to protect you from, so I like to keep myself busy. Otherwise, I might end up like Captain Ingo.”

“The senior officer of security?”

“Yes. He's a hopeless drunk. Not that I blame him; it can get a bit boring here. I joined the guard because I was hoping that it would be less tedious than working at my father's vineyard, but that sadly doesn't seem to be the case.” He gave him a sly look. “Although there is the occasional moment of excitement. I *am* called upon to rescue consorts sometimes.”

Jasen eyed him skeptically. “From what?”

“From themselves,” he said with a wink. He offered his arm again. Jasen took it. It was strange to be led around this way, but he supposed it was all part of the decision he’d made to come here. He was a consort-in-waiting—creatures who were apparently very delicate and requiring of special care. They walked back to the staircases, ascending up the one on the right. As soon as they walked through the large door at the top, the hall split three ways—a path to the right, one to the left, and one straight ahead. They took the path straight ahead, passing dozens of doors spaced closely together. They passed them all by and went up yet another flight of stairs.

Jasen considered himself fit, but even he was a little winded by the time they reached the top. At long last, Larely stopped in front of a door; a small placard with his name hung on it. “Here we are,” he said, opening the door. “I’ve arranged a bath for you, and your things should be sent up shortly. If you should need anything else, ring the bell.”

“Thank you.”

“Orientation is at three,” Larely continued. “A valet will be up in the morning to help you dress.” He paused for a moment. “And if you ever need anything the servants can’t provide, just ask for me.”

“That’s too kind,” Jasen said.

“Not at all,” Larely said. “Nothing would please me more than for you to keep me busy.”

It was a testament to how out of his element Jasen was that he hadn’t picked up on the flirtation until just then. “I’m sure I’ll think of something for you to do,” Jasen said, flirting almost by reflex.

Larely held his gaze for a moment, a sly grin on his face. “Good night, my lord,” he said with a small bow and a more formal intonation, but the sly grin didn’t waver.

Once he was gone, Jasen went into his room and shut the door. The room was not quite as small as Jasen had expected. It was lavishly decorated in reds and golds. There was a bed on his left, and a dressing screen and full-length mirror on his right. In the center was a small table and two chairs.

He investigated behind the dressing screen; there was a bright copper tub there, with bottles of soaps and oils laid out on a table beside it. There was a rack with a dressing gown and a few fresh towels. As he approached it, steaming hot water began to fill the tub. He jumped back, startled, but regained

his composure. It wasn't as if he'd *never* seen magic before; it just had never been quite this casual. Jasen had forgotten what even servants in the Draelands could be capable of.

Jasen removed his clothing as the tub filled. Once it was finished, he eased into the water. It was heavenly; a full, hot bath was a rare treat. He reached for one of the bottles and dumped some of its contents into the water. A sweet floral smell filled the air. He washed himself, including his hair, then lay back and enjoyed the warmth. When he was finished, he dried himself and put on the dressing gown.

There was a knock on the door. It was a servant who had Jasen's trunk floating behind him. Jasen tried not to stare as the servant directed his trunk into the room, then collected the tub with another movement of his fingers. He wondered if the servant was dragon-blessed, or if the items themselves had been put under enchantment.

When the servant was gone, he retrieved a night shirt from his trunk. After he slipped it on, he climbed into bed. He should have been tired enough to fall asleep right away, but his thoughts kept him awake for some time. He had been so sure he was ready to leave everything about Grumhul behind, but now that he was here at the palace, he missed it. Already he felt out of place. That was probably only going to get worse. He shut his eyes and tried not to think about it. Instead, he thought about the dragons, remembering their smooth, intricate dance in the sky. Gradually he relaxed, and soon he was asleep.

Chapter Two

Jasen woke up just before the sun rose. He'd always been an early riser, and being in an unfamiliar environment made his sleep uneasy. Since there was no point in lying in bed, he pulled on his dressing gown and got up. He discovered a few sweet biscuits in a jar on his bedside table, so he grabbed a few and sat down at the small table by the window. It might have been tiresome climbing all those stairs, but the view from this high was spectacular. He was facing east, so he got to watch the sun slowly illuminate the palace grounds. His attention was especially drawn to the famous Bedrose Gardens, known throughout the realm for their fantastic array of exotic flowers, breathtaking fountains, and gallery of topiary wonders. He would very much like to see it, so he decided to get dressed and go for a walk. The gardens were not far from the East Wing, and he didn't imagine they'd send breakfast up for another two hours. Surely he'd be able to slip out and slip back in again without anyone noticing.

It didn't make much sense to get dressed up in finery just for a walk, especially if he wanted to go exploring. He selected a tunic and long trousers from his trunk—the sort he wore when he went for hikes in the swamps of Grumhul. He tied his hair back, pulled on some boots, and then he was off.

He walked down the stairs as quietly as he could. He figured there had to be some way for the servants to get around, and after some searching, he discovered a partially hidden staircase that led down to the kitchen. The kitchen was already bustling—no doubt it took a lot of work to get the whole hall fed. A few servants looked at him in surprise, but he quickly escaped through a door which lead outside.

Jasen started off toward the gardens, but on his way, he felt a strange pull. That warm feeling he'd had in his chest when he'd first seen the dragons bloomed inside him again, and almost before he knew it, he found himself heading towards the palace instead, and when he reached the palace, he kept going—up a trail and straight into the draemir.

It did not occur to him to question this decision, or even consider it strange, but neither was he in a trance. He made his way past the palace, up a path which led towards the base of Ashfell Mountain. It was a bit of a hike—a good three-quarters of an hour passed before he finally stopped walking as he reached a clearing. Just beyond him was a forest, and beyond that, the mountain. A brook ran by; he bent down and took a long drink. As the cold,

sweet water hit his stomach, he suddenly realized how strange it was for him to be here. Why had he climbed all this way?

He was actually starting to get a little disturbed about the whole situation when suddenly, he saw something come towards him from the forest. There was a vibration in the ground that matched a rumble in his heart. He gasped as the fire in his chest bloomed again, much stronger than before. As the feeling washed over him, the enormous figure stepped out of the trees. A dragon, its scales shining as red and bright as rubies in the morning sun.

Jasen had known, of course, that dragons were large creatures, but now that he was standing near one, he realized that he had not truly appreciated what that meant. Never in his life had he felt so small, but at the same time, he felt as if his world had expanded a hundredfold. His life and everything he knew to be true was called into question in a joyous way. Every doubt, every petty fear, every care of his life grew as small to him as he must seem to this dragon. It was wonderful. It was terrible. He would never be the same.

The dragon approached him slowly. He lowered his massive head until Jasen found himself looking into one enormous eye that was the same amber color as his own. At once, they knew each other's names.

Tasenred. That's what the dragon was called.

Jasen reached out one hand and touched the dragon's snout. A jolt went through him; every nerve in his body sang. The dragon blinked, then folded his legs underneath him and laid down on the ground with an earth-shaking thud. Jasen let out a startled laugh. "Are you tired?" he asked the dragon. The dragon blinked at him again. Jasen sank down as well, putting his arms around the dragon's neck, his face up against the smooth, warm scales. It felt like the most natural thing in the world to do. "Me too," he said. "It's taken me so long to get here..."

Jasen turned over and leaned against *Tasenred's* neck, closing his eyes and soaking in the sunlight that grew stronger with each moment. Some time passed, but Jasen couldn't be sure how much. He was disturbed from his rest when the dragon lifted his head, turning his attention to something. Jasen sat up and looked as well.

There was a tall man at the edge of the clearing. His black hair hung loose to his shoulders, and his face was covered with a neatly trimmed black beard. He wore a red tunic and breeches. Over these he wore a *Drae's* cloak, which was a ceremonial garment often worn by *draeids*. It had dragon's teeth on the

shoulders and was clasped with a bright red jewel known as a dragon's tear, and lined with dragon scales. The elements of the cloak were gifts from dragons, as dragons shed their teeth and scales often. He was a draeid, then. Draeids and draeidesses lived in monasteries and nunneries among the people, but they also ventured into the draemirs often for personal meditation and communion with the dragons.

Jasen had no idea what to say; fortunately, the man spoke first. "I've never seen him take to someone so quickly." He had a slight accent—something eastern, but Jasen was too ill-traveled to place it exactly.

Jasen continued to sit there stupidly for a moment, realizing that he should probably say something. "Am I in trouble?" was what he came up with.

A small smile passed over the man's lips. "If Tassenred wants to meet you, who am I to tell him no?" He came and sat beside Jasen. Tassenred let out a rumble that sounded pleased; he lay his head down again. Jasen examined the man more closely now that he was near. He had an aquiline nose and sharp cheek bones, giving his face a certain harshness, but his eyes were the same friendly blue of the sky on a clear summer day. Jasen couldn't quite guess his age; he seemed not too old, but there were a few streaks of gray in his hair.

"If someone had told me a week ago I'd be consorting with dragons, I would have laughed at them," Jasen said. "I'd never even seen a dragon until yesterday."

The man cocked his head. "You mean up close?"

"I mean at all. We don't see dragons very often where I'm from."

"Ah, I see. And what brings you to the Draelands?"

"I'm here for Court. What?" he said at the surprised look that came across the man's face. "Why do you look so shocked? Am I that shabby-looking?"

"Not at all," he said. "It merely surprises me that you are here without an escort. Lady Isalei is strict about her charges."

"Who is Lady Isalei?"

The man gave him a further look of confusion. "She is the keeper of all the aspiring consorts. Surely you met her when you arrived?"

"I was late," Jasen mumbled. "I suppose that means I *am* in trouble, after all."

The man waved his hand. "Do not let it concern you."

“Oh, I won’t,” Jasen said. “Being in trouble rarely concerns me.”

“I am glad to hear it,” the man said, laughing. “What’s your name?”

“Jasen,” he said. “Of Grumhul,” he added quickly under his breath.

“Grumhul?” the man said, unfortunately catching that last bit. “You *are* far from home.”

“And thank the gods for that,” he muttered.

“You don’t like it? I find it to be very beautiful.”

“You’ve been?” Jasen said, surprised.

“Not for many years,” he said. “But I do fly over it from time to time.”

“What, on a dragon?” Jasen said. “Really? You do that?”

The man smiled. “Yes.”

Jasen put his hand on Tasered, feeling the slow rise and fall of his breath and the smoothness of his scales. He imagined climbing onto his back and soaring across the realms, seeing everything so small beneath him as they went anywhere, everywhere... “I wish I could become a draeid.”

“And why couldn’t you? You have already passed the first test of the priesthood—a dragon has called you. And you are not yet married.”

Jasen sighed. “There’s one major problem.”

“What is that?”

“I could never take a vow of celibacy.”

The man laughed long and hard. “I admire your commitment to principal. There are many draeids who do not take that vow seriously.”

Like you? Jasen almost asked, because Jasen thought he detected a hint of flirtation in his voice—which wasn’t entirely unwelcome, to be honest, but the last thing he wanted to do was be caught compromising the morals of a draeid on his second day here. He just smiled instead.

Jasen settled back against the dragon and shut his eyes, enjoying the rise and fall of the dragon’s breath. He could swear he felt his heart beat in sync with that breath, but that really would be insane. It had been ages since anything felt this *right*. He briefly wondered if maybe he was being called to be a draeid, but he quashed that thought almost as quickly as he had it. He’d make a terrible priest.

“We should get you back,” the man said after a few moments. “They are probably looking for you.”

Jasen was about to protest when Tassenred did it for him, letting out a long, low grumble.

“Apologies, Tassenred,” the man murmured to the dragon. “Duty calls, for all of us.”

The dragon let out a snort, then began to move. Jasen and the man both got to their feet. Tassenred turned his head to Jasen once more, blinking his amber eyes. Jasen put a hand on his snout for one last touch. And then the dragon was moving—when something as large as a dragon moved, it was always an event. Jasen nearly stumbled as he moved out of the way; the man helped steady him. Tassenred only spread his wings when he was well clear of them; a moment later, he was in flight. The wind whipped into Jasen’s eyes, causing them to tear up. At least, he blamed the wind.

“It is always hard to see them go,” the man said.

Jasen gave his eyes a quick swipe, feeling a bit embarrassed. “All right,” he said with a sigh. “Let’s go find out exactly how much shit I’ve gotten myself into.”

They began their hike back down the same path Jasen had come up earlier. The sun had climbed higher in the sky—it was probably around nine o’clock.

“Are you cold?” the man asked.

“No,” Jasen said. “I’m quite enjoying the weather, actually.”

“But perhaps you would like to borrow my cloak, all the same.”

“Why?”

The man cleared his throat. “Ah, you are a bit underdressed for a lord consort.”

Jasen looked down at his tunic. “Am I supposed to get into full dress every time I want to take a walk? That doesn’t seem sensible.”

“I’m afraid we are preoccupied with ceremony in the Draelands, to our detriment. For a lord consort, to be seen in nothing but a tunic might be considered a bit...” He searched for the right word, “provocative.”

“Oh,” Jasen said, feeling his face color a little. He didn’t want to seem as if it bothered him too much, so he added, “I’m not usually provocative by accident.”

The man raised an eyebrow. "You are sometimes provocative on purpose, then?"

Jasen gave him a sly grin in response. The man laughed. Their eyes met for a moment.

Jasen accepted the cloak. "Thank you," he said, breaking eye contact. He *really* didn't need to be flirting with a priest, but as usual, he couldn't seem to help himself. As he put the cloak over his shoulders, he felt a pulse of heat surge through him. He inhaled sharply.

"You felt something?" the man asked, surprised.

"Yes," he said. "Something warm..."

The man gave him a long, considering look. "That is very interesting," he said finally. "Not everyone can feel it. Are you dragon-blessed?"

"No," Jasen said. Throughout the realms, people often brought their children to the draeids in hopes they might be dragon-blessed and gain a magical talent. However, Grumhul was a land of swamps; they had no place to make a suitable draemir. Grumhulians were of course welcome to bring their children to the draemirs of neighboring kingdoms, as Grumhul was a member of the Allied Realms. However, the general consensus among Grumhulians was that if the dragons weren't interested in visiting them, then they weren't interested in visiting the dragons, magic be damned.

"Even the dragon-blessed don't always feel the power in a Drae's cloak," the man continued. "It usually takes someone of enormous power to connect to it."

Jasen looked down at the cloak. He touched the jewel clasp lightly and felt another pulse of heat. "Oh," he said stupidly, because he couldn't think of what to say. Power? *Him*? "Should I take it off?"

The man shook his head. "No," he said with a smile. "It suits you."

They continued their hike. As they moved, the power Jasen had felt initially began to fade. He had so many questions about what it all meant, but he wasn't sure how to articulate them even to himself. "Will he be back?" Jasen asked after a little while. "Tasenred, I mean."

The man cocked his head. "He always comes back."

"I mean, before I have to leave in three months."

"And why are you so sure you will be leaving?" the man asked.

Jasen snorted. "Oh yes, I'm sure the king will meet me, fall madly in love, and beg for me to be his consort. Then I'll spend the rest of my days splitting my time between frolicking about the draemir and lounging in the palace, eating strawberries."

"Stranger things have happened," the man said.

"Funny," Jasen muttered. "That's exactly what my father said."

"You disagree?"

"I'm sure *stranger* things have happened, but that doesn't make my likelihood of marrying a king any greater, does it? And frankly, I'm not sure I find the thought very appealing."

"Oh? I doubt your cohorts would share that opinion," the man said. "Especially this year," he added under his breath.

"They can have him."

They walked in silence for a little longer. "Has—" the man started to say. He broke off to clear his throat. "Has the king offended you in some manner?"

"What?"

"You said you found him unappealing."

"Oh, no!" Jasen said, suddenly aware of what that must have sounded like, especially to a draeid. The king was also Lord of the Drae, after all, and therefore the head of the priesthood. "He's a wonderful ruler—I am his loyal and faithful subject, naturally!"

The man waved his hand. "Yes, yes, but you still would not marry him."

"Well, no. I mean—I'm sure he's a very nice person."

"Perhaps you think he is ugly."

"I wouldn't know," he said. "I've only seen him once, from a distance. He came to Grumhul on his tour of the realms when he was crowned." Jasen remembered it only vaguely; he'd been only eight years old. He recalled thinking the king looked much too young—he was still a gawky teenager at the time, and he didn't seem very regal. In fact, he seemed terrified. "Besides," Jasen continued, "that was a long time ago; I'm sure he looks different now."

"Then frolicking in the draemir and eating strawberries does not appeal to you."

"Of course it appeals to me," Jasen said, giving his companion a puzzled look.

"Then why don't you want to marry him?"

"Well, it's an awful lot of responsibility, isn't it? I'm not sure I'm up for it."

"Why?"

"I grew up in Grumhul. The journey here has been the most I've ever seen of the world. I have no education to speak of, no manners, no experience in anything other than—" He was about to say *in bed*, but stopped himself. "—well, let's just say no experience in anything important. I can't even dress myself properly, apparently."

"I do not think any of those things would matter to the king."

"Well, the issue is not whether or not *I* would want to marry *him*, is it?" Jasen said. He liked the man, but he was starting to feel as if he were having a conversation with his father. "The question is whether *he* would want to marry *me*, and I doubt that very much. There hasn't been a male consort to the Lord of the Drae in over three hundred years. No, I won't marry a king. I probably won't even marry a lord; I'm not sure anyone would want me."

"That is not true. Anyone with eyes would desire you. Anyone with a heart would want to make you his. And anyone who would dismiss you because you do not conform to meaningless manners and rituals is a fool."

Jasen blinked, feeling almost dizzy at the sudden turn in the conversation. Certainly, there had been a few flirtatious moments between the two of them, but that last line had been surprisingly intense. He wasn't sure how to respond. By that point, they had reached the palace grounds again. While Jasen was trying to think of some reply, he heard a shout. He saw several guards coming their way, moving at a swift pace. One of them was Larely. The man leading them was an older man with a bulbous red nose.

"That's him," he heard Larely tell the older man.

When the guards reached them, they all bowed deeply. "Your Majesty," the older man said.

There was a split second when Jasen wondered why this man was calling him "your majesty" before the truth clicked. He looked at his companion, his mouth dropping open in shock.

The king made a motion for them to rise.

"I see Your Majesty has found our stray!" the older man said with forced joviality, but he looked a little frenzied. "I assure you, we are not in the business of losing consorts. I personally see to the safety of all of the lord consorts and ladies under my protection!"

The king waved his hand. "The fault lies with no one, Captain Ingo," the king said. "The dragon called to Lord Jasen. I am certain Lady Isalei will understand."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

The king turned to Jasen. "And now I must return to my duties, and you to yours. I have enjoyed our conversation."

Jasen stammered unintelligibly for a few moments, hoping he'd think of something to say, but his mind remained stubbornly blank. He began to fumble with the clasp of the cloak. "Your cloak—you'll want it back—"

The king took one of Jasen's fumbling hands in his own and kissed it. "Keep it," he said. "You may return it when I see you again."

"Yes, Your Majesty," Jasen said.

A touch of sadness came into the king's eyes at that. He gave Jasen a slight bow, nodded to the captain, and then he was gone.

Once the king had retreated, Captain Ingo turned his gaze to Jasen. All joviality had left his face. "I see *my lord* has not been informed of the rules," he said nastily. "You are not to leave the building without an escort. Ever. Do you realize how bad I would look if something were to happen to any of you?"

Jasen was about to ask him what he thought could possibly happen to anyone on a simple walk around the grounds of a well-guarded palace in a realm that hadn't seen war in over a century, but decided he should perhaps not escalate the situation. "I'm sorry, I didn't realize," he said instead.

The captain humphed. "Well, Lady Isalei will straighten you out soon enough." He turned to Larely. "See him back to the East Wing, and make sure he stays there. I have other business to attend to."

"Yes, sir."

They set out their separate ways. When the captain was out of ear shot, Larely turned to him and grinned. "Well, you certainly don't waste any time, do you?"

"It isn't like that!" Jasen said. "I thought he was a priest!" As soon as the words were out of his mouth, Jasen slapped a hand to his forehead. That didn't sound any better.

Larely laughed. "Might I ask why you are wearing the king's cloak?"

"I forgot mine," he mumbled.

Larely looked at him more closely. "Are you wearing anything under there?"

"A tunic and trousers, same as I wear when I'm at home," Jasen said defensively. "No one told me that I had to be dressed up for a simple walk!"

"Especially when you planned to get dirty."

"And what is *that* supposed to mean?"

Larely gestured to his trousers, which were smudged with dirt. "Your clothes."

Jasen's face colored. "Oh."

Larely laughed again. "Some advice—you don't have to wash behind your ears, but you ought to stay clean where people can see you." They were now upon the East Wing, but before they got any closer, Larely pulled Jasen to the side of the road, behind a tree. "Speaking of which, you should probably take that cloak off."

"Why?"

"If your, ah, competitors see you walk up in the king's cloak—well, we might as well paint a target on your back."

"...Target?"

"Oh, yes. It's a vicious crop this year, seeing as the king's up for grabs. Most of the lord consorts and ladies would give their left buttock to have a private audience with the king; if they catch on that you've already managed it, no telling what might happen."

Jasen hadn't even considered that. Numbly, he fumbled with the clasp. He felt a pang of loss as the cloak slipped from his shoulders, but he managed to hand it to Larely.

Larely undid his own cloak and handed it to Jasen. "Here you are, you can wear mine. But next time you leave your room, make sure you're fully dressed!"

Instead of taking the cloak, Jasen leaned up against the tree. He dug the heels of his hands into his eyes and took a few deep breaths.

He felt a gentle touch on his shoulder. "Here, now," Larely said, his teasing tone gone. "Are you all right?"

Jasen removed his hands. "I'm fine," he said, and tried to mean it. There were too many contradictory emotions running through him. The elation he'd felt with Tassenred had rapidly faded, leaving only embarrassment over his mistakes and confusion as to what his encounter with both the dragon and the king had meant.

"I might have overstated the danger a bit," Larely said. "They are just young lords and ladies, not throat-cutting assassins. No need to be frightened."

"I'm not frightened of them," he said. "I'm frightened of my own amazing capacity to make a complete fool of myself." Jasen gave his temples a vigorous rub. "How did I not know he was the king? He must think I'm an idiot."

Larely snorted. "With the way he was looking at you, I don't think 'idiot' was what was going through his head."

"That's almost worse," Jasen said with a groan. He liked the man well enough, but his kingly station was more than Jasen thought he could handle.

Larely gave him a puzzled look, but didn't press him. "Let's get you inside." He offered the cloak to Jasen again; this time he put it on. Larely draped the king's cloak over one arm and offered the other to Jasen. Jasen took one last deep breath before taking his arm. He forced a smile he didn't feel; he would walk into the East Wing as if he belonged there. No more mistakes from here on out. He would be proper. He would be well-behaved. And hopefully, the rest would work itself out.

Chapter Three

Jasen and Larely entered the East Wing through the servants' entrance, wherein Larely spirited him up to his room as discreetly as he could manage. He discovered that someone had gone through his trunk and hung up all of his clothing. Jasen realized it was probably the work of the valet that Larely had mentioned would be sent to him, but there was no sign of the man.

A short time after he'd returned to his room, a young woman arrived with a tray of tea. There were biscuits, fresh fruit, two kinds of cheeses, and slices of thick, flavorful bread—all of it of much higher quality than even the finest dinners at Grumhul. As he ate, he gradually relaxed. There was so much going through his head, but he did his best to mute it.

It was still several hours from orientation, so Jasen decided to take a nap. He was awoken after about an hour by a knock on the door. The valet had returned. He was a young, serious man by the name of Dennack. He had brought some additional clothes with him.

“What are those?” Jasen asked once he was in the room.

“I had taken the liberty of going through your wardrobe when you were away. It appears my lord was missing a few vital articles of dress. I had heard there was an accident with your trunk. Perhaps they were lost?”

Jasen had gone through his trunk earlier and hadn't noticed anything missing. He looked at some of the items Dennack had brought with him, which included a jacket, shirt and breeches. “I know I have those items,” he said. “They're hanging up in the closet!”

“Ah yes,” Dennack said. He looked a little embarrassed. “I thought my lord might want to sample a few items that were a little more... modern.”

And now Jasen felt embarrassed as well. He knew Grumhul tended to be a bit behind the times where fashion was concerned, but hadn't realized it was quite that bad. “Right,” he muttered. “Well, let's get on with it, then.”

Jasen began to strip out of his tunic and trousers while Dennack arranged a few things. He was not used to being dressed. He technically had a valet at home, but the man was next to useless. Besides, Grumhulians rarely stood on ceremony and tended to dress simply.

Once he was down to his smalls, Dennack approached him with something that took Jasen a moment to identify. "Is that a corset?"

"Yes, my lord."

"And I'm supposed to wear it," Jasen said. It was a stupid thing to say, but he was having a hard time wrapping his mind around the idea. Only women wore corsets in Grumhul.

"Yes, my lord." Dennack slipped it around him. Jasen allowed it—what else could he do? "My lord might want to hold onto something," Dennack said as he gathered the laces.

Jasen took a hold of the bed post as Dennack began to pull. After one overly enthusiastic tug, Jasen yelped. "Stop!" he wheezed. "I can hardly breathe!"

"My apologies, my lord."

"Loosen this immediately."

Dennack loosened the garment a little, and then a little more at Jasen's insistence. Next came the stockings, which were made of very fine silk. After that was the shirt, which had more lace at the sleeves than Jasen had ever seen. It was patently ridiculous, but Jasen bore it as best he could. A beautifully embroidered waistcoat followed.

It was when they got to the breeches that they ran into trouble. As soon as they started to put them on, it became clear to Jasen that Dennack had not brought the proper size.

"I assure my lord that they are the correct size," Dennack protested. "I measured my lord's other clothing and had our dragon-blessed tailor make the adjustments—"

"Well, he made a mistake," Jasen snapped. "Obviously."

"If my lord will lie down on the bed, it will make it easier."

"I will do no such thing. I can barely move as it is! I'll wear my own breeches."

Dennack looked over at Jasen's clothing in dismay. "As my lord wishes," he said. "But then the other clothing will not match."

"Then I will just wear all of my things," Jasen said. He didn't care how unfashionable they were; until he could get things to fit properly, he wasn't going to subject himself to torture.

He undressed as Dennack got his perfectly serviceable suit from the closet, which was made of a very nice brown velvet that was only a little worn in places that no one could see, really. When he was dressed, Dennack presented him with the most ridiculous pair of shoes Jasen had ever seen. They were impossibly high. “How am I supposed to walk in these?” Jasen asked.

“It takes some practice,” Dennack said. “Please, my lord.”

Jasen was going to refuse them, but Dennack looked so miserable that he put them on. By the time all of this was finished, three o'clock had arrived. Dennack lead Jasen down all of the complicated stairs to the first floor. A crowd of young lords and ladies were entering through the giant doors under the staircase. Dennack gave Jasen a bow, and abandoned him to his fate.

Jasen followed the crowd past a long hallway; at the end were two larger doors which opened into a modest, but elegant, ballroom. Servants circulated amongst them with trays of treats, but there was no place to sit down. At the back of the room was a platform that held the only furniture in the room—several fine chairs, on which sat several distinguished looking older ladies.

As Jasen's gaze left the platform and went back around to his compatriots, he immediately regretted his choice to ignore Dennack's fashion advice. Everyone was dressed in the highest of fashion, particularly the women. He'd never seen such elaborate dresses or hairstyles. The women wore dresses with skirts padded to a wide width around them, which made their waists look impossibly small. Rich fabrics flowed down over their backs, around their hips—everywhere, really. The hairstyles of the women were something to behold—tight, cascading curls for some, ridiculously tall hairstyles on others. Some wore wigs, while others seemed to have their natural hair, but it was all elaborately done.

As for the men, they wore fitted frockcoats that pinched in at their slim waists, then flared outward into a full skirt. They had fussy lace cuffs and lace at their throats. Their breeches were, indeed, as tight as the ones Dennack had tried to persuade him to wear. Bows were tied at the knees of some. The men's hair was somewhat more subdued, although there were still wigs and curls here and there. Their shoes were heeled, some even higher than his own.

Absolutely none of them wore anything remotely in the style of Jasen's own clothing. It appeared that he wasn't the only one to notice how sorely he stood out. People were sneaking looks at him out of the corner of their eyes. Everyone seemed to have hand fans, which they would open as Jasen passed by

in order to hide their faces and murmur to each other. He heard a few snickers. He tried to tell himself he didn't care, but it wasn't working very well. He wished he had a fan for himself so that he could hide his face at least.

He was trying to duck away from a particularly mean-looking crowd when he stepped wrong and stumbled. He would have fallen to the ground, but instead he crashed into someone. A strong, feminine arm caught him and helped him regain his balance.

"I am so sorry!" he stammered. He looked up, expecting to see a sneering face, but the look on the lady's face was more amused than anything else.

"No trouble," she said. "I'm sturdy."

And she was. She was very tall for a lady—much taller than Jasen. She didn't hunch over the way some tall women did, as if apologizing for their height. Instead, she stood with her shoulders thrust proudly back. She had a strong jaw and dark hair that was done up in a style so elaborate that he wasn't sure how the whole thing was possible. Her dark eyes sparkled with good humor.

"Thank you," he said.

"These shoes take a bit of getting used to," she said. "I was so terrible at walking in them as a girl that my governess didn't let me take them off at all, even for bed, for two whole months."

"Why do they insist on them?"

"I think it's because it makes it harder for you to run away if an amorous lord sets his sights on you. It doesn't work, though—I can run faster in these things than most lords can run at all."

"That's terrible," Jasen said. "About making it so you can't run."

"Welcome to courtly fashion."

"I wouldn't welcome me quite yet," he mumbled, gazing down at his own clothes.

She laughed. "You're Lord Jasen, aren't you?"

"Er, yes," Jasen said. "My reputation precedes me, I take it."

"Oh yes. Your entrance last night was all the talk at breakfast—as was your absence from the dining hall."

Jasen rubbed his neck. "Ah. I was hoping that would escape notice."

“Nothing escapes notice around here,” she said. “Speaking of which—is it true that you fell into a trance, ran naked into the draemir and fell into a swoon in front of a dragon, and then the King had to carry you back draped in his Drae’s cloak?”

“I wasn’t naked!” Jasen protested. “And I didn’t swoon!”

The lady let out a long, delighted gasp. “So it *is* true!”

Jasen was saved from having to answer by the blast of a trumpet. Everyone fell silent at once. After a brief fanfare, a very small old woman in simple but elegant clothes mounted the platform, walking in front of the seated ladies until she was front and center. Her mouth was a firm, thin line, and her dark gaze was as sharp as a dagger.

“Presenting the Lady Isalei!” the trumpet blower announced.

Everyone applauded enthusiastically. Once the applause had died down, the lady began to speak. “My lords and ladies,” she said in a deep, clear voice, “I am happy once again to greet you, and trust you have settled in.”

There was a murmur of *Yes, my lady* from the crowd.

“I am pleased to hear it,” she said. Her mouth did something—widened a little, turned up at the corners. Jasen thought it might be a smile. “You all come from the finest families in the Allied Realms. You have received the best training at the most prestigious schools. And truly, you are a fine-looking lot. Young. Beautiful. Fashionable.”

There was a pause. Her mouth snapped back to its previous shape. “Well, I am here to tell you that none of that is good enough. You may have been the jewels of your little realms and provinces, but this is Strengsend—the most spectacular palace the world has ever seen, and you are all as temporary and unimportant as a single daisy in the Bedrose Gardens. It is true that you are new blooms, but blooms fade—more quickly than any of you realize.

“And so, we have very little time to shape you into something less flimsy than a flower. The suitors arrive in two months. They are expecting to be charmed, dazzled, impressed. And they are looking for more than a pretty face. A pretty face they could get at any of the finer brothels. No. You are to be wives and lord consorts. Those are positions of great responsibility, and I expect each and every one of you to take this matter very, very seriously. The entire course of your life is to be determined in these next few months. I will

not be easy on you, but in the end, you will thank me. No matter how polished you think you are, I promise you, you still need work.”

“Some of us more than others,” Jasen heard from someone nearby. It came from a pretty blonde girl at the center of that mean-looking crowd he’d been avoiding. Their eyes were all turned to Jasen. There was a smattering of laughter.

“Princess Polina,” Lady Isalei said. “How nice to see you again. This is your third year with us, yes?”

The blonde girl flushed and covered her face with her fan.

“When I ask a question, I expect an answer,” Lady Isalei said.

“Yes, my lady,” she squeaked.

“Hmmm. Even the loveliest flower won’t carry on for *four* seasons. Something to think on before you make disparaging remarks about others.”

“Yes, my lady,” she said. As soon as Lady Isalei turned her attention away, Princess Polina shot Jasen a venomous glare, as if the scolding she received had somehow been his fault.

“We will now begin our assessments of your strengths and deficiencies.” She gestured to the ladies behind her. “This is my council of ladies, each of whom is accomplished in her own right. They are here out of the goodness of their own hearts in order to help you achieve what they have achieved. You will not disrespect them by telling them lies. Answer our questions honestly so that we can do our best to get you into the best position possible. The potential for failure is great—but the rewards of success are even greater. Once you have been evaluated, you may take your leave.”

With that, all of the ladies stood and filed off the platform. Behind each of them floated a scroll and a quill.

“Lady Isalei likes to make herself seem more terrible than she really is,” his companion said. Jasen jumped at her voice. She laughed, but not unkindly. “You see? She’s in your head already. Relax. It’s not as dire as she makes it out. She acts like the lords who come here looking for marriage are some god-like beings with lofty standards. Actually, most of them are looking for a pretty face and a father-in-law with deep pockets.”

“Why all of this, then?”

“Because no one wants to admit that picking out a bride and picking out a whore are basically the same thing.”

Jasen, as a Grumhulian, was not easily scandalized, but even he was shocked at her bluntness. “What’s your name?” he asked her.

“I’m—”

“Lady Risyda,” finished a stern voice from behind them. They whipped around to see Lady Isalei looking up at them, her paper and quill floating behind her.

Lady Risyda curtsied. “Yes, my lady,” she said. If she was nervous that her last statement had been overheard, she didn’t show it. “It’s a pleasure to see you again.”

“You know I detest lies,” she said, but there was the smallest hint of a smile at the corner of her lips. “I assume you still possess the many faults you exhibited at Court last year?”

“Oh yes,” she said cheerfully. “In abundance.”

Lady Isalei humphed. “Have you worked on expanding your magical talents?”

Lady Risyda nodded. A look of concentration came over her face. She thumped herself three times in the chest, then opened her mouth. A small puff of smoke in the shape of a heart emerged from her lips.

“Clever,” Lady Isalei said dryly. “I’m sure that will command the respect of your servants once you are head of a lord’s household.”

“I can make it in the shape of a riding crop,” she said. “Or maybe a dismissal with no references, although that might be a little abstract.”

Lady Isalei sighed. The quill began to scrape on the page. “Your dress and bearing seem much improved this year. And how is your archery?”

“Splendid. I won first prize at the Lady’s Archery Tournament last summer.”

“Good, good,” Lady Isalei said. “Your languages?”

Risyda made a long, incomprehensible reply that was to Lady Isalei’s satisfaction. “And what about your licentious habits and poor attitude?” she continued.

“I’ve kept up with those as well, my lady.”

"I know you think you're very clever, and it's true you can be amusing. That's a fine quality to have. But if you are not careful this year, you are going to amuse yourself into a very grim situation. This is your third year. You must make a match, or resign yourself for spinsterhood in your father's home. Which is it to be?"

Lady Risyda didn't answer right away. "I could always become a draeideess?"

Lady Isalei snorted. She tapped her chin in thought. "Lord Angunto of Adonver will be here this year," she said. "He's a fourth son, but doted upon by his very wealthy father. He's good-looking and athletic, and very sweet-natured. He's also a bit dim, unfortunately, but then what are consorts for if not to add support where their husbands are weakest? I will arrange for a meeting."

"Thank you, my lady."

Lady Isalei gave her a curt nod, and then turned her terrifying attention to Jasen. "And you must be Lord Jasen," she said.

Jasen bowed. "Yes, my lady," he said, hoping he didn't sound too stilted.

"Of Grumhul." She said it as if she had the same opinion of his homeland that Jasen had.

"Yes, my lady," he mumbled.

"That means you were educated at Rodkiner Academy, yes? That's the nearest, I think."

"Ah, no."

"Verar, then."

"No, my lady," Jasen said. "I was educated at home." Which was partially true. He'd had tutors until he was twelve. Then his mother had died, and his father found better things to spend his money on.

The lady pinched the bridge of her nose. "I see," she said. She looked him up and down. "Hair, face and figure are good, although a complete new wardrobe is needed," she muttered to the floating quill, which scratched away on the parchment floating beside it. "Have you any special talents?" she said, addressing Jasen again.

"Talents?"

"Perhaps you possess some magical ability."

“No.”

“Athletic skills?”

“I’m good at mudball,” Jasen said.

It took a moment for the lady to absorb that information. “Mudball is not quite what I had in mind,” she said. “I mean something of a more sophisticated activity, such as riding, archery, or fencing.”

“Oh. Then no, not really.”

“Perhaps you are well-read and can converse on many interesting subjects.”

“No.” With every no, Jasen’s voice got smaller and smaller.

“Musical aptitude? Painting? Dance, perhaps?”

Jasen shook his head to each one.

Lady Isalei shut her eyes for a moment and took a deep breath. “And how, then, did you make your way to us?”

“Someone lost a bet.” Which was true. His father, in a rare instance of good luck, had beat one of the royal recruiters in a game of cards. The man had no money left, so he’d given him a place for Jasen at Court.

“A bet,” the lady echoed. The quill quivered beside her expectantly. “Make sure his breeches are extra tight,” she told it. The quill obediently scratched that down. “That will do for a start,” she said to Jasen. “I would like to meet with you privately later on. You have a lot of catching up to do. I would also like to discuss some... rumors I’ve heard.”

Jasen felt a lump in his stomach. “Yes, my lady.”

She nodded to both Risyda and Jasen. Jasen stared miserably at his horrible shoes. He was startled out of his self-pity when Risyda whacked him with her fan. “Bow,” she said out of the corner of her mouth as she curtsied. Jasen did so with such force that he nearly toppled over; Risyda thrust a hand out and steadied him. When Jasen looked up, he saw Lady Isalei’s lips turn up ever so slightly. “Good afternoon to you both,” she said.

Jasen thought the torment was over, but Lady Isalei had not walked three steps when she was confronted with the blonde princess from earlier. “My lady,” she said, curtsying. “I must apologize to you for my unseemly outburst. I don’t know what came over me... the heat of the room, perhaps. It’s making me dizzy—I am not myself!”

"Of course, Princess," Lady Isalei said coolly. "Perhaps you should apologize to Lord Jasen."

"Oh, yes, of course," she said. She curtsied in his direction. "My deepest apologies, my lord."

"Ah—thank you." Jasen hoped that was the right thing to say.

Lady Isalei nodded. "I'm sure I will hear no more of trouble between you—any of you," she said with a pointed look as Risyda.

"Yes, my lady," they all said in unison. The Lady Isalei nodded again and left.

Jasen looked back over at the princess. He couldn't figure out why she was baring her teeth at him; then he realized it was probably meant to be a smile. "Silly me," she said. "We aren't even properly acquainted. I am Polina, Princess of the realm of Igtasnia."

"Fifth Princess," Risyda said. "That is the proper address for your people, right, Polly? Because you have four older sisters. Older, successfully situated sisters."

Even more of Polina's teeth became visible. "Yes, Lady Risyda, you are correct."

"Polly and I studied at Enoqua Academy together," Risyda continued.

"Yes, we are old friends," Polina said to Jasen. "And I *so* hope that you and I can be friends as well!"

"Of course."

"Well! So pleased we could have this little chat, but I must be off."

"Always a pleasure, Polly!" Risyda said. "Don't trip on your gown on your way across the room, like you did last year!"

The Princess opened her fan with such force that it sounded like the crack of a whip, then sauntered off across the room.

"I love winding her up," Risyda said with a grin. "No one spins quite as spectacularly as the Princess if you do it just right." Before Jasen could respond to that, she took him by the arm. "And now that we've been evaluated, we are free to go, so you're coming up to my room."

"I... that is to say," Jasen stammered. "I'm very flattered, but I don't think—"

She whacked him with her fan. "Not in *that* way. I need to hear every single detail of what happened this morning, and you are going to tell me."

Jasen wanted to protest, but he realized that it was probably futile. She was remarkably strong. Besides, he could not wait to get away from the crowd, and he didn't relish sitting in his room alone. And so he allowed himself to be whisked away.

They made their way up the winding stairs to Risyda's room, which was quite a bit larger than Jasen's own. In addition to the small table with two chairs that Jasen had in his room, there was also a lounging sofa.

The first thing Risyda did was sit down on the sofa and kick off her shoes. Jasen followed suit, taking one of the chairs.

She let out a long sigh and wiggled her toes. "The one nice thing about those blasted shoes are that they feel so good to take off."

Jasen made a sound of agreement and rubbed his foot. He was pretty sure he had a blister.

"Now if only I could undo my hair. And my corset. Not 'til the end of the day, sadly." She sighed. "Oh well." She gave Jasen a mischievous look that he was already growing accustomed to. "I do have something that will ease our discomfort a little."

She went over to her bed, got onto her knees, and pulled out a box from underneath it. She brought it back to the sofa and opened it. Inside was something that looked like a bottle, along with some long tubes. She screwed the tubes onto the bottle and set it on the floor.

"What is that?" Jasen asked.

"A hookah," she said. She pulled out a small pouch. "And this is kara weed. Have you ever tried it?"

"I've never even heard of it."

"You really are a rube, aren't you?" she said.

Jasen didn't take offense. After all, he was.

"You're going to love it," she said, packing the contents of the purse into the contraption. She concentrated for a moment; a burst of flame sprang out of her finger and lit the weed. She sucked one of the tubes, inhaling the smoke.

She lay back on the sofa as she exhaled the smoke through her nose. “Mmmm. Now that is much better.” She offered one of the tubes to Jasen. “Your turn.”

Jasen took the tube. “Could we get in trouble for this?”

“Don’t tell me the man who sneaked out of his room to go frolicking with dragons is worried about a little kara weed.”

“You have a point,” Jasen said. He sucked in some of the smoke, then fell into a coughing spasm.

Risyda got up and patted him on the back until it was over. “I probably should have given you a little more instruction. Here, like this...”

A few puffs later, Jasen got a handle on it. He felt wonderful all over. He’d never cared for wine or spirits, which always left him dizzy and sick. This, however, was just a comfortable buzzing feeling. He found himself sliding down to the floor.

“Well? How do you like it?”

“I feel like I’m covered in bees,” Jasen said. “Nice bees. Bees that feel good.”

Risyda laughed. “See? I told you.” She inhaled another puff, then let it out in a few perfect rings. “All right,” she said after another hazy few moments. “Let’s get the getting-to-know-you bits over with. This is me: rich merchant father, I’m the youngest daughter, we don’t like each other, et cetera. He has been training me my whole life to fetch a good marriage price. I can’t decide whether I want to marry so I can escape him or screw him out of the gold he so desperately wants. Now you go.”

“Um, all right. Dead mother, drunk and gambling addicted father. Same sort of deal with the marriage.”

She beamed. “I just *knew* we would have a lot in common.” She rested her chin on her hand. “Now, to more interesting matters. Just what exactly happened this morning with you and the king?”

Jasen only hesitated for a moment before the whole thing came spilling out. He knew he should be more cautious over who he trusted, but the kara weed made him feel so relaxed and he desperately needed to sort through what happened. When he was finished, Risyda contemplated everything he’d said for a few long moments, puffing thoughtfully on the pipe. “You’re going to marry the king,” she finally said.

Jasen groaned and fell back on the ground, one arm flung over his face. "I don't want to marry a king!"

"Why not?"

"I don't know anything about... well, anything! And to be the consort to the Lord of the Drae? To have the entire fate of the magic of the Allied Realms resting on whether or not I'm properly supportive? That's a nightmare, not a dream come true."

"I hadn't thought about it that way," she said. "But what can you do? He's already decided he wants you."

"You don't know that. You *can't* know that."

She waved her hand. "Of course I can. I have spent my whole life training to catch a husband. I know the signs."

Jasen sat up and took a few morose puffs until he felt a little better. "What am I going to do?"

"You're going to have to make yourself utterly repulsive. Fortunately, I'm an expert on that as well."

Jasen frowned. "I don't want to be repulsive to him."

"Oh, no," she said. "Don't tell me you like him?" Jasen just gave her a miserable look. She took a few more contemplative puffs. "Well. This is all deliciously complicated."

Their conversation was interrupted by a knock of a strange rhythm on the door. Jasen sat straight up, the pleasant buzzing feeling rapidly fading in sudden panic. "Quick! Get that thing back in the box—"

Risyda waved her hand as she stood up. "Don't worry, it's fine," she said. She weaved her way to the door and opened it a crack. "Hello!" she said cheerfully.

"Fucking hell, Risyda, I can smell you all the way down the hallway!" said a familiar voice. "I know you can control it, so why aren't you?" The door opened a little more, revealing Larely.

"Sorry, sorry," Risyda said. She waved her hand; the smoke swirled into a ball in the middle of the room. Another wave and it disappeared with a small *pop*. "Better?"

"Yes, but it isn't even dark yet. Can't you wait until everyone's asleep at the very least?"

“You worry too much. Everyone’s still at orientation.”

“Just the same, you could really get into...” He trailed off when he finally saw Jasen. “Oh no,” he said. “The two of you are friends now?” He put a hand over his face and groaned. “My life is about to get exponentially more difficult, isn’t it?”

Risyda batted her eyelashes. “Do you want to come in?”

Larely looked over his shoulder, then slipped in the door, shutting it behind him. “Just for a moment.”

Larely crossed his arms and looked down at Jasen. “Haven’t you already been in enough trouble today?”

“Don’t let him lecture you about trouble,” Risyda said. “He is a very naughty guard.”

This struck Jasen as the height of hilarity; he tried and failed to suppress a surge of unmanly giggles. Risyda joined him.

“Oh, shut up, both of you,” Larely said, but it was good-natured. He grabbed one of the hoses and took a quick puff.

“Keep it to—” he started, but had to stop as a coughing fit overcame him. That made Jasen laugh harder. “Keep it to night from now on,” he finished after he got a hold of himself.

Risyda saluted. “Aye-aye, captain.”

“I mean it,” Larely said. “You could get sent home.”

“We’ll be good, I promise,” Jasen said.

Larely scoffed. “Oh I doubt that very much, but try not to get caught.”

“Keep clean where they can see me,” Jasen said, echoing Larely’s earlier words. “Got it.”

“At your service, as always,” Larely said with an overly lavish bow. He winked at Risyda, which was interesting. Jasen had thought that Larely had been flirting with him earlier, but maybe he’d misjudged the situation. The two of them seemed awfully close.

“I should go,” Jasen said. “I actually don’t want to go back to Grumhul just yet.” He fumbled for his shoes. It took him a few moments to get his balance when he stood.

Risyda helped steady him. "Are you sure you can get to your room all right?"

"m fine," Jasen muttered. And he was, mostly.

But when he left her room, he almost immediately lost his sense of direction. He ended up going down when he should have gone up, and left when he should have gone right, and after wandering around for a little while, he realized he was hopelessly lost. The pleasant buzzing feeling had transformed into a raging headache.

He found a staircase and managed to get back up to the second floor, but only after nearly breaking his neck falling down. The thought of having to go up yet another set of stairs was too daunting to consider. He was just considering trying to make his way back to Risyda's room, possibly on his hands and knees, when he turned a corner and ran straight into Larely. Jasen stumbled and would have fallen, but Larely caught him. "Steady now," he said, helping him regain his footing.

"I hate these shoes," Jasen said passionately. "And all these fucking stairs. Why are there so many? And these halls. And all these doors that look alike."

"You're lost, aren't you?"

"A little."

"Then I'll show you back," Larely said, linking his arm with Jasen's. This time, Jasen was grateful for the support.

They reached Jasen's room. "Here you are. Again." Larely grinned at him. "This is the third time in twenty-four hours I've shown you to your room. Do you think it will stick this time?"

"I would say yes, but I really can't be sure."

Larely laughed. "That's fine. I don't mind rescuing you."

"*Rescuing* me?" Jasen scoffed. "Well, I wouldn't quite put it like that."

"Whatever you say, my lord," Larely said with an ironic little bow.

Jasen considered him queasily, trying to decide if he was flirting or not. His mind was much too muddled to make sense of anything at the moment, so he muttered his thanks and stepped through the door. Once inside, he took off his shoes and lay down face first on his bed. He rolled over eventually and rubbed his face vigorously. A thousand thoughts swirled in his head. He had thought that he wanted to be away from Grumhul and his father more than anything

else, but this was turning out to be far more complicated than he had anticipated. Was becoming a lord consort somewhere outside of Grumhul what he really wanted? Was it something he was even capable of doing?

Eventually, he got up and splashed his face with some water, trying to banish the last of the kara weed's effects. He would be expected to dine in the dining hall tonight. The thought of facing all of the lords and ladies again made him queasy, but at least he had Risyda now. He decided to try to put aside his larger doubts and just make it through the evening intact. He could worry about the rest of it tomorrow.

Chapter Four

Early the next morning, Jasen was awoken by a knock on the door. Though he was an early riser, even he hadn't gotten out of bed yet; the sun was barely up. Groggily, Jasen pulled on his dressing gown and answered the door. An impeccably dressed servant stood before him. He was an older man, with large cheeks and bulging eyes that made Jasen think of a toad.

He gave Jasen a small bow. "Good morning, my lord. I am Rotheld, and I shall be your valet for the remainder of your stay."

"What happened to Dennack?"

"Lady Isalei determined he was not up for the challenge."

"Oh," Jasen said faintly.

The man stepped inside, brushing past Jasen. He snapped his fingers; a whole rack of clothing followed him. "Would my lord like to begin dressing for his morning appointments now?"

"Now?" Jasen said. "But the sun is barely up!"

Rotheld took a deep breath and let it out through puffed cheeks. "To dress properly takes time, my lord."

There was something about Rotheld that told Jasen arguing with him would be futile. "Of course," Jasen mumbled meekly.

They started with a shave, which was actually rather relaxing. When they were finished, Rotheld searched through the rack of clothing, occasionally looking at Jasen as if he were an interesting problem to solve, then back to the clothes again. He at last selected a deep emerald green suit. "Is my lord finished?"

Unfortunately, he was. He went behind the dressing screen to change out of his night shirt and into his smalls. When he was finished, he went back to Rotheld, who was holding the dreaded corset. "Is that really necessary?" he asked.

"A trim waist, a straight back, and strong shoulders are the ideal form of masculine beauty," Rotheld said firmly.

Jasen wanted to point out that his waist was already very trim, but realized that it was probably futile. He subjected himself to the lacing; fortunately, Rotheld was gentler than Dennack had been. It was still uncomfortable.

Next, Rotheld helped him into a white shirt. "I like this," Jasen said once he had it on. "Much less lace on the cuffs than what Dennack tried on me yesterday."

"My lord has a natural beauty," Rotheld said. "I think items of a more subdued style would be appropriate."

The stockings went on next, and then, the breeches. It took ten full minutes to squeeze him into them. While Rotheld was lacing them up in the back, Jasen had a thought. "How am I supposed to relieve myself in these?"

"With assistance," Rotheld said.

The waist coat and jacket were easy compared to the rest. Rotheld added a cravat of lace around his neck. Rotheld then bade him to take a seat. He got out a brush from a kit he'd brought with him and ran it through Jasen's hair. Jasen was nervous about what he was planning to do with it, given the elaborate styles he'd seen yesterday, but after some thought, Rotheld merely tied it at the base of his neck with a simple ribbon.

Last were the hated shoes. He helped him up and steadied him when he wobbled. "We shall practice your walk later," Rotheld said.

"We shall?" Jasen asked with a sinking heart.

"We shall," Rotheld repeated firmly. He gave Jasen a gentle push towards the mirror. "Go see yourself," he said, his tone somewhat softer.

Jasen teetered over to the mirror and was stunned by what he saw. Gone was the unkempt boy from Grumhul; in his place stood a polished, beautiful young lord consort. He could barely believe it was him. For a moment, he didn't feel like an impostor.

Rotheld stepped behind him. "Is my lord satisfied?"

"Yes," Jasen said.

He handed him a fan, which fastened around his wrist. "Then it is time for your meeting with Lady Isalei."

"What, already?" His stomach did a flip. He took one last look at himself, trying to glean some confidence from the handsome young lord in the mirror. He wasn't sure if it worked.

They walked down to the main floor, where they went under the stairs and down the hall, stopping at the last door on the right. Rotheld led him inside, bowed, and then took his leave. The room was a small parlor, very warm and

cozy. There were refreshments set out for two. Jasen wasn't sure what he had been expecting, but this wasn't it. He felt like he was there to catch up with a doting aunt rather than endure an interrogation.

The lady herself, however, wasn't there, but she arrived shortly after. Jasen rose when she entered. "My lady," he said, bowing.

"Good morning, Lord Jasen," she said with a nod. "I trust you slept well?"

"Yes, my lady."

They both took their seats. Jasen dredged up some ancient memories of etiquette and poured out the tea, as was expected of the younger person in a private setting. "So you do have some manners," she said. "I'm certainly glad to see it."

"Yes, my lady." He was too nauseated to drink himself, so he fiddled with his fan under the table.

She took a sip of tea. "If you grip that fan any tighter, it's going to break."

Jasen hastily released the fan. "Yes, my lady."

She waved a hand. "Let's dispense with the *yes-my-lady's* for the time being. You needn't be so nervous. I'm here to help you. You are not the first young lord consort who was rough around the edges. Tell me the education you do have, and we'll work from there."

"I had tutors in reading and religion, as well as court manners," he said. She raised an eyebrow. "Until I was twelve," he finished. "My mother died, and my father was somewhat lax in continuing my education."

"I see," she said. "And you've had nothing since then?"

He shook his head.

She sighed. "Well, it's a challenge, but I've worked with rougher. Let's have a spot to eat before we continue, shall we?"

Jasen thought he was too nauseated to eat, but he discovered that a few biscuits and a cup of tea helped settle him.

"Now, then," the lady said when they were finished. "I am going to ask you a few questions, and you must answer me with complete honesty. If you are not honest with me, I will have you removed from the Court and back on a cart to Grumhul before you have time to blink. Am I understood?"

The lump in Jasen's throat felt too great to speak, so he simply nodded.

“Were you really called by a dragon yesterday morning?”

“Yes, my lady. I had decided to take a walk in the gardens, but before I knew it, I found myself in the draemir. Tassenred was waiting for me.”

“And then you met the king.”

“Yes, my lady.” He paused, and then the rest came tumbling out. “But I didn’t know who he was at first, truly! I would have never spoken so carelessly to him if I had known. And it really isn’t uncommon for men of noble birth to dress simply in Grumhul—I didn’t know I’d be considered half-naked!”

The lady blinked at him in an expression Jasen couldn’t quite pinpoint. She sat back in her chair and was silent for a moment. “Well, Lord Jasen,” she finally said. “You are either the most naive consort I’ve ever seen, or the cleverest. The king has already requested to see you.”

“Oh.”

“*Oh?*” Lady Isalei said. “You have netted the largest, most sought after prize of the entire Court with barely any effort, and that’s all you have to say?”

Jasen felt a surge of irritation at that word—*prize*. As if all of this were just a game, and none of them were people. “It wasn’t ‘barely’ any effort,” Jasen said. “It was *no* effort at all. I didn’t set out to seduce the king. I went for a walk. I had a conversation with someone I met. That’s all.”

“I see,” she said. “Am I to take it that the king’s attention is not welcome?”

Jasen didn’t know what to say. He felt like he was being asked to make a decision that would affect the rest of his life, and he simply wasn’t prepared for that. He was clasping at the fan again, gripping it so tightly his hand hurt. “I did not say that,” he finally said.

The lady considered him for another moment. “I was going to impress upon you that the role of lord consort to the king is not one to be taken lightly, but it seems to me that is something you don’t need to be told.”

He looked up at her miserably. “No, my lady.”

She sighed. “There is so much that rests on the shoulders of the lord consort to the king. It is not only his desires that matter. The fact that you are male is going to concern many people. The fact that you have no experience in courtly politics will concern even more. But if a dragon did call you, as you say, and the king feels so strongly already, we must do our best to make you fit the role.

Our first priority will be to improve your etiquette. The rest of the lords and ladies have had years of training; their time here in the next two months is meant only to polish their skills. You, however, are going to have to have more extensive instruction. I will arrange for you to meet with private tutors. Once your manners meet my approval, I will arrange for you to meet with the king.”

“Yes, my lady.”

Lady Isalei rose. Jasen got to his feet as well, grateful that the interview was almost over. “You are a curious person, Lord Jasen,” the lady said. “I feel I may have misjudged you.”

“I don’t think so, my lady,” Jasen muttered.

“You may go refresh yourself now. Your first lesson starts in one hour. You will be meeting with Lady Toran, who will instruct you in the finer points of courtly manners. Rotheld will escort you to her.”

Jasen bowed. “Thank you, my lady.”

Jasen left the room. Rotheld was waiting for him. His stomach was churning; he felt nearly faint. This wasn’t at all what he had bargained for. He found himself wishing fiercely for the swamps of Grumhul, where he was well-liked, and there were no rules, no one to impress, and where nothing of great importance ever happened. He now realized that he had escaped one prison only to find himself ensnared in a different sort of cage, one that was worse because it was unfamiliar.

The next two weeks passed by in a blur. There was not a single moment of Jasen’s day that was not structured. He awoke at dawn to begin the long process of dressing and grooming, after which he met with Lady Toran for two hours to drill him on his etiquette. He had a brief break before music lessons, which he attended with several other lords and ladies. He’d never picked up a musical instrument in his life, and couldn’t begin to guess why this was a skill deemed important. After that was a quick luncheon, and then dance lessons, followed by diction, discourse and literature. He was equally inept at all of them.

Dinner afforded him a longer break, but it was not exactly a restful experience. Word of the king’s interest in him had spread like wildfire, and just as Larely had predicted, it made him exceedingly unpopular. Princess Polina

seemed especially put out. Jasen wasn't sure how to handle it all. He wasn't used to being disliked. He wasn't used to having to impress.

After dinner, he received more private tutoring, and then rounded off the night with their "leisure" time, which was not actually leisure because they were expected to lounge around with the other lords and ladies and practice their conversation, or read aloud to one another from classic works of drama and poetry, or work on their needlepoint, or practice their dance, or any of the other dozen little ways in which proper lords and ladies were supposed to amuse themselves and their suitors.

Finally, at nine in the evening, he was permitted to retire. Only he didn't, most nights. He waited for Rotheld to leave him, and then he would sneak to Risyda's room. Sometimes it was just the two of them, but occasionally, Larely would join them. Larely was an invaluable coconspirator; he always made sure Jasen got back to his room undetected (not that there was much security other than Larely himself).

He wasn't used to this much activity. In Grumhul, days passed by lazily with very little happening. Here, every moment was bustling, as if there couldn't possibly be enough hours in the day to get everything done. The fact that it was all so senseless and shallow made the urgent nature of it surreal. If Jasen had even a minute to think about it, he might have rebelled, but there was no time to stop and consider anything. Perhaps that was the point.

In spite of all of the demands on his attention, he still found his mind wandering back to the king and the dragon. The king, who wanted to see him. Tassenred, who had called to him. Jasen often had a difficult time understanding what he was doing at Court, but when he remembered them, he felt like maybe he shouldn't give it up. *They* thought he belonged there.

But as the days wore on, and the king didn't send for him, Jasen began to wonder if he was right in that assessment. Perhaps the king had heard about his horrible incompetence and changed his mind. Jasen tried to tell himself it shouldn't matter. They had only spoken for a short time, and what he had told Risyda about not wanting to be lord consort to the king was true. But there was a difference between not wanting to be the king's consort, and not wanting the man himself. Jasen was no stranger to sex, but the brief time they had shared had been *different* in a way that made him both uncomfortable and elated. He wanted to speak to him again, at least once.

It was in the third week that Jasen finally snapped out of the shock of it all. He could even pinpoint the exact moment that it happened. It was during their

evening socializing period. He and Risyda were in the Swan Parlor pretending to read. Across the room were Princess Polina and a few of her cohorts, who were sitting by the window. Jasen tried not to listen to them, but the inanity of their chatter was too annoying to ignore.

“I had another prophetic dream last night,” Polina was saying.

Lord Banither, one of Polina's most ardent toadies, gasped. “Another one, Princess? You must tell us what it is!”

“I am lying in a field,” she said. “The sky darkens suddenly—there is something passing above me...”

“A dragon?” squeaked Lady Lalan, another of her friends.

“Yes,” Polina said dramatically. “It was the same dragon that gave me the gift of prophecy when I was but a child. She lowered her noble head and looked into my eyes, and then suddenly I felt something on my brow—something heavy—but I couldn't see what it was...”

“A crown!” Banither said.

Polina fluttered her fan. “Oh, do you really think so?”

Risyda let out a snort of laughter. Polina glared over in their direction.

“It looks like it will rain tonight,” Polina said loudly. “I certainly don't care for this unseasonably cold weather! Although I imagine it must be a comfort for you, Lord Jasen, as I hear it rains often in Grumhul. Tell me—is it true that your people bring their livestock into their homes when it rains?”

“Only when there might be mudslides,” he mumbled.

Polina and her friends tittered.

“Why do you think that's so unusual, Polly?” Risyda said. “Don't you keep animals in your homes, too?”

“Animals in *our* castle? How ridiculous! Lady Risyda, dear, I'm worried about your mental faculties.”

“You were just regaling us earlier with stories of all your precious little doggies. You know, those fluffy little things that are always yapping and nipping at people's ankles. It's so cute the way they think they're threatening.”

“That's different,” she snapped.

“Even useless animals are still animals,” Risyda said.

Polina's fan started waving so quickly it was a blur. Risyda and Jasen shared a secret grin.

Silence descended upon the room. Polina's friends tentatively began to chatter again, but the foul mood of their leader made their talk strained. Eventually, Polina stood up and yawned dramatically. "Dear me, I am tired this evening. Perhaps I should retire early. After all, I want to look my best for my audience with the king tomorrow."

Jasen whipped his head up. He felt his mouth hanging open, so he shut it with a snap. Polina gave him a sly look out of the corner of her eye, but continued to address her friends. "They say that I am the exact image of the late queen..."

It was at that exact moment that Jasen stopped caring. He put his book down on a chair and left, heading back to his own room. For once he was glad of all the stairs; he imagined each stair was Polina's face. He was halfway up the first flight of stairs when Risyda caught up with him.

"You shouldn't let her bother you," she said. "The king makes sure to call on at least one consort from every kingdom, and Polina's the highest ranking from hers. It isn't as if he asked to see her specifically."

"I don't care."

"Right," Risyda said. "That's why your face is bright red and you're stomping up these stairs."

"Lady Isalei said he wanted to see me, and yet Polina of all people is meeting him before I do. Why?"

Risyda bit her lip. "You don't know that he hasn't asked for you again. Lady Isalei probably just wants you to make the best impression possible."

"Or maybe she's decided I'll never be suitable enough to see him." He turned away from her. "Or perhaps he's changed his mind," he said quietly. He resumed his march up the stairs.

Risyda followed him. "I thought you didn't want to be his consort."

Jasen stopped abruptly. "I don't!" he snapped. "And I don't want to be here. I will never be any good at this. I might as well give up now. I'm going to arrange for a carriage tomorrow to go to my uncle's. My father can think of some other way to pay off his debts. Maybe he'd like to come here and win himself a rich husband!"

Risyda put a hand on his shoulder. “You aren’t here just for him, any more than I’m here for my father. Even if you don’t end up marrying, the Court is a good place to be. It gets you out. It teaches you things. It’s all rubbish, but it’s rubbish you need to know if you ever plan to get out of Grumhul.” She smiled. “And besides, I’m not going to let you abandon me here. Come on. Let’s go back to my room.”

Jasen let her lead him back to her room. She pulled out her hookah and let Jasen take a big puff. Some of his tension left. He lay on his back on the floor and stared at the smoke that swirled around them. The thing he liked best about kara weed was that it made anything other than the moment he was in seem unimportant. Risyda took her own puff and then spread out on the sofa, laying with her head hanging backwards off the edge.

They smoked for a while. Eventually, Jasen asked, “Is she really dragon-blessed with premonition?”

Risyda snorted. “Of course not. Premonition is the one dragon blessing that a person can claim without any proof. Most people who claim to have it are frauds.”

Jasen watched Risyda puff different shapes of smoke out of her mouth for another few hazy moments. “What does it feel like to be dragon-blessed?”

“Do you mean in general or when it happened?”

“Both.”

Risyda took a few moments to answer. “I don’t know how to describe it,” she said at last. “I was awfully young at the time—only six years old. The draeids took me to the draemir along with a few other children. We prayed for a while, but it didn’t seem like any dragons were going to come. We were about to leave when she came—a white dragon with purple wings. I felt a warmth like nothing else—it seemed to come from inside me. The draeids brought us up to the dragon and we all touched her. I felt a spark.”

“And then you had your powers?”

“Not at first. It was a few weeks before they manifested. I set the tablecloth on fire at dinner one night. That was quite a disaster.” Risyda rolled over and gave him a searching look. “Why are you asking? Did something like that happen to you?”

“I don’t know,” Jasen said. “Maybe. But I haven’t noticed anything unusual. And don’t you have to be a child to be blessed?”

Risyda shrugged. "I'm not an expert by any means, although there is a difference between being blessed by a dragon and being called by one. The experiences feel similar, but they mean different things. Being dragon-blessed means you're given an ability. Being dragon-called means that a dragon is requesting your service."

"Have you ever met anyone who was called?"

She hesitated for a moment. "I was, once."

"You were?"

"Yes, when I was fifteen. I woke up one morning, and before I knew what was happening, I grabbed my horse and rode straight to the nearest draemir. It was the same dragon that blessed me." She looked down at her hands, seeming uncomfortable for once. "I've never told anyone that before."

"Why not?"

"I didn't want to be a draeidess. An austere life of self-sacrifice isn't something that I find very appealing." She lay back on the sofa again, staring at the ceiling as she puffed some more. "Then again, becoming a wife doesn't seem appealing to me, either."

They smoked gloomily for a while until there was a familiar knock on the door.

"Thank the heavens," Risyda said. "Maybe Larely can cheer us up."

Risyda opened the door to let him in. He was carrying a small bag.

"Well, you two look glum," Larely said. "Is the torturous existence of a noble wearing on you?"

"You have no idea," Risyda said. "What's in the bag?"

Larely pulled out a bottle. "Colderberry wine," he said.

"Oh, I could kiss you!" Risyda said. And then she did—a wet, sloppy smack on the cheek. Larely blushed a little. Jasen supposed that answered the question of whether or not Larely was flirting with *him*. He felt relieved. Had he been in Grumhul, he probably would have tried to jump into bed with him already, but the whole business with the king and his lessons and the dragon had left him too upside down for trysts.

They passed the bottle around as they chatted. Larely and Risyda seemed to not have any troubles, but after a couple of swigs, Jasen began to feel sick. He never could hold his liquor. "I'm going to bed," he said, struggling to his feet.

“Are you all right?” Larely asked. “I can help you back to your room.”

Jasen waved him off. “No, I’m fine,” he said. “You two have fun.”

“Wait,” Risyda said. She went to her bedside table and pulled out a small pouch. “Take this in the morning. I had it made by a dragon-blessed healer. It banishes wine-induced illness.”

“Why don’t I just take it right now?”

“Because I’m having a premonition,” she said dramatically. She shut her eyes and put her fingers to her temple. “Yes, it’s becoming clearer... I’m seeing you, tomorrow, desperately ill. Your valet will witness your illness and declare you unfit to go to lessons. So ill, in fact, that you must not be disturbed for the entire day. But maybe not too ill to sneak out for a while.”

Jasen grinned. “My lady, your gift is truly awe-inspiring. I think you may be right.”

Chapter Five

The next morning, Jasen felt as ill as he'd imagined he would. He warned Rotheld, who insisted that getting up and walking around would make him feel better. He soon changed his opinion when he tried to tie Jasen into his corset. On the first pull, Jasen was colorfully sick all over the floor. After having to clean that up, Rotheld retreated without further protest, nodding in agreement when Jasen said he didn't think he'd be up for lessons, or for taking any luncheon, either.

Once he was gone, Jasen mixed up the powder Risyda had given to him in a glass of water and drank it. He felt better almost immediately. He took out his forbidden tunic and trousers and got changed. He knew his flaming red hair made him too recognizable, so he added a knitted cap that laborers often wore; this wasn't the first time he had thought of escape, and so had asked Larely to smuggle him one earlier. Once he thought everyone was up and out for breakfast, he made his way down the stairs and out the servant's door, and just like that, he was free.

The day was bright and beautiful in the way it often is after a good rain. He breathed in the cool, sweet air. As much as he loathed to admit it, Polina was right about one thing—it did remind him of home. He walked about aimlessly for a little while, not sure of what to do. Part of him wanted to go to the draemir, but he felt it was too chancy—he didn't want to draw attention to himself. Besides, he knew there were no dragons there today; somehow, he was sure if there were, he'd be able to feel them.

He decided to go for a walk in the Bedrose Gardens. While the lords and ladies were often allowed to take strolls in the gardens, there were many areas they weren't allowed to explore for fear of getting their fine clothes dirty. Back in Grumhul, Jasen spent a lot of his time outdoors, going wherever he pleased; no one was ever too fussed about getting dirty, because mud was an inescapable fact of life in Grumhul.

He left the path, climbing through bushes and trees to get to the gardens off the normal trails. He marveled at all the beautifully chaotic wildflowers as he watched birds glide between trees, singing songs that Jasen had never heard before. He even found the orchards, which had trees bearing several kinds of colorful fruit. He grabbed a few for a snack before heading off to explore some more.

Eventually, he made it back to the more populated area of the gardens. He heard young voices calling to one another. Curious, he followed the sounds until he came upon a field, where twenty or so well-dressed children were playing a game. All of them except for one. A girl who looked to be about eight years old sat on the edge of the field near a pile of rackets and balls. She had hair so blonde it was nearly white and large blue eyes, currently wet with tears.

Jasen approached her. "What's the matter?" he asked.

She gave him a wary look. "They won't let me play," she said. "They say I'm too little."

Jasen looked over at the other children, who were batting a tiny ball back and forth over a net with delicate-looking rackets. "It doesn't look much fun to me, anyway," Jasen said.

"I wanted to play catch-a-ball, but they say that it's a game for babies."

"I'll play with you," Jasen said.

She wiped her nose with the back of her arm. "Really?"

"Really."

The girl got to her feet and picked up a medium-sized leather ball.

"So how do you play?"

"You don't know how to play catch-a-ball?" she asked, her earlier wariness returning.

"I'm, um, not from around here," he said, which was true enough.

That seemed to satisfy her. "Well, all right. You throw this ball to each other, but you back up a little every time so it gets harder. Whoever misses a catch or doesn't throw the ball far enough loses."

That didn't sound like a much more interesting game than the racket one, but Jasen didn't say so. The girl tossed the ball to him, which he easily caught. It was a little lighter than the balls they used in Grumhul to play mudball, but about the same size. He dropped it on the ground, rolled it into the crook between his foot and ankle, and then popped it into the air, catching it on his back between his shoulders.

The little girl's mouth dropped open in astonishment. "That was amazing!"

Jasen grinned. "Thanks," he said as he let the ball roll off his shoulder.

“Do it again.”

So he did. After that, he juggled the ball between his knees before sending it sailing up into the air again. He bounced the ball off his head before catching it in his hand. The girl applauded; he took a bow.

“Can you teach me how to do that?” she asked.

“Well, unfortunately it takes a bit of practice. But I can show you the basics of mudball, if you want.”

“Mudball?” she said, screwing up her nose. “What a terrible name for a game.”

“Names can be deceiving,” he said.

“And what’s your name, then?”

Jasen hesitated. “It’s Jay.” He hoped she wouldn’t ask where he was from; he’d like to make sure it didn’t get back to anyone that he’d been here.

“That’s a very good name,” she decided. “My name is Erada, and I’m eight years old.”

The name sounded vaguely familiar, but he couldn’t quite place it. “It’s nice to meet you,” Jasen said. “Come on—let’s go to that end of the field there.”

Jasen began to teach her basic volleys and kicks; fortunately, her shoes and her dress were much more sensible than the usual courtly clothing. She was a quick study, and soon they had a good volley going back and forth. She tired of it eventually and asked him to start doing tricks again. He was happy to oblige her. Back in Grumhul, he used to play mudball every day, but had abandoned it during the last year or so. He hadn’t realized how much he had missed it.

After a little while, Jasen became aware that all of the other children had stopped their game and had crossed the field to watch him. He did an exceptionally tricky kick. They all ooh’d appreciatively.

“What are you playing?” asked one tall, serious-faced boy of twelve. He resembled Erada, so Jasen guessed that he was her brother.

“It’s called *mudball*,” Erada said loftily.

“Can we play?” asked a dark-haired girl.

“What do you think?” Jasen asked Erada. “Should we teach them?”

Erada gave it some serious thought. “All right, I suppose so,” she said.

Jasen marked out two goals and explained the game (which wasn't that complicated—it involved kicking the ball into the other player's goal), and after briefly teaching them a few moves, they began to play. It was awkward and slow-going at first, but the children caught on with surprising quickness. Soon they were laughing and running along the field. Jasen forgot about his worries and lost himself in the game. After some time, they all stopped to rest. Jasen learned a few of their names—the serious boy was called Ados and was indeed Erada's brother. They thankfully didn't express a lot of curiosity as to Jasen's identity.

“Why is it called mudball?” Ados asked as they all got up to resume their game.

“Well, where I'm from, there's a lot of mud. Usually, we coat the ball in mud to make it more difficult to kick, and then the field's usually muddy, which also makes things slippery.”

“That sounds like fun!” Erada said.

Jasen grinned. “It is.”

Ados looked thoughtful. He raised his hands, and suddenly water began to gather in the air. He made a gesture, and it all came crashing down on the field. He picked up the ball and rolled it in the newly created mud. “There,” he said, his face deadpan. “Now it's mudball.”

Jasen couldn't help but laugh. They all rushed out again, getting themselves thoroughly muddy as they played. The children shrieked with joy as they slipped in the mess. Jasen hoped they wouldn't get into too much trouble for messing up their clothes, but what kind of monsters would deny children the joy of getting well and truly dirty once in a while?

The game soon devolved into a mud fight. They were having so much fun that none of them noticed they were being watched. Erada had just pounced on Jasen and was smearing mud onto his face when Jasen heard a throat being cleared. There, standing beside them was an older woman who looked as if she was about to explode with outrage—and the king. Jasen froze.

Erada followed Jasen's gaze. “Hello, Papa!” she said.

“Papa?” Jasen echoed faintly.

“Children!” the woman said. “I am extremely disappointed in you! Is this the way proper young lords and ladies behave? Stop this foolish nonsense at once and line up!”

The children did as they were told. “Aren’t you ashamed?” the woman continued. “Just look at you! Look at the state you’re in! What could have possessed you? Who is responsible for this?”

The children all looked over to Jasen, who remained sitting in the mud. He had hoped the woman and the king would remain distracted enough that he could sneak away, but that now seemed unlikely. He stood up and kept his head down.

“And who are you, young man?” the woman said.

Before he could answer, the king said, “Lord Jasen? Is that you?”

Jasen wished that he could sink into the mud and disappear, but since that wasn’t an option, he gave him a little bow. “Yes, Your Majesty.”

“What are you doing here?” the king asked.

“...playing mudball?”

The king began to laugh. The sour-looking woman glanced back and forth between the two of them, an uncertain look on her face. The king looked to his daughter. “Did you all get plenty of exercise?”

“Oh yes, Papa, and we had so much fun, too!”

The king turned his attention back to the woman. “Well, Madame Certia, it seems your new program is a success, yes?”

“I suppose so, Your Majesty,” she said. “But how are they to return to their lessons in such a state?”

“Perhaps lessons can be put off for one afternoon,” the king said. He turned to the children. “Although you children should be more mindful of your play in the future.”

The children bowed and curtsied while murmuring their agreement, but they were all exchanging excited looks. The reward of canceled lessons didn’t seem like a good motivator for behaving better in the future, but Jasen wasn’t about to protest.

“Yes, Your Majesty,” Madame Certia mumbled. She clapped her hands. “Straighten up, children!” she said. “You may not have lessons this afternoon, but you will still conduct yourselves with proper decorum! Follow me—straight line, if you please!”

The children began to follow Madame Certia off the field, which left Jasen standing alone in the muddy field. The king bowed slightly to him and offered his arm.

"I'm going to get you all muddy," Jasen said.

The King smiled. "I do not mind."

They followed Madame Certia and the children off of the field and down the main path. Jasen held the king's arm stiffly at first, not sure exactly how he should be acting. He didn't even dare look at the king, keeping his gaze fixed instead on the ground.

"And how did you manage to escape Lady Isalei today?" the king asked eventually.

Jasen sneaked a look at his face. He was smiling at him, his kind blue eyes dancing with amusement. Jasen couldn't help but smile back. "Oh, I'm very ill today," he said. "Too ill to get out of bed, in fact."

"I am sorry to hear it."

Jasen had a sobering thought. "Someone will probably spot me if we walk along the main path."

"That is most likely so," he said. "Perhaps we should not enter by the main path." He stopped. "Wait here for a moment."

The king went ahead, catching up with Madame Certia. While he spoke to her, Erada peeked at him from the line and waved, a big grin on her face. He waved back. A few moments later, the king returned to Jasen's side. "Now then," he said, offering his arm again. "Which path shall we take?"

They ended up winding back around towards the orchards. "I was supposed to be more refined the next time I saw you," Jasen said as they walked.

"I am glad to find you unchanged."

Jasen almost didn't continue, but it wasn't as if he had much to lose. "I was thinking that you didn't want to see me."

The king stopped. "Why would you think that?"

"It's been three weeks since we first met, and I hadn't heard anything."

"Surely Lady Isalei told you I wanted to meet with you again."

"She did, once, but then said nothing after that," Jasen said. He paused before continuing. "And then I heard you were meeting with others..."

The king took a deep breath through his nose and let it out slowly. "Lady Isalei," he began, "is a very wise woman, in many ways. I rely on her advice for the finer points of courtly manners, and none are more knowledgeable than she in matters concerning marriage matches. However, she and I are having a... disagreement at the moment. As a compromise, I agreed to entertain other guests before you, for appearance's sake. There is much that is delicate about this situation, as I am sure you understand. But that was with the understanding that I would see you again once I had fulfilled what she considers my political obligations." The king took his hand. "She was to tell you of my strong and deep desire to meet with you again. It seems she did not properly convey that sentiment."

Jasen hadn't been fully aware of the tension he'd carried in his heart until the moment when it was released. He felt so light that he might float away. "No," he said with a small smile. "She didn't."

The king smiled back, and then tucked Jasen's hand back into his arm. They resumed their walk, taking their time as they strolled through the trees. "Was my meeting with other lords and ladies what prompted your, ah, 'illness?'" the king asked.

"Maybe a little," Jasen admitted. "It's also been a bit of a shock being here. Things in Grumhul are much different."

"I remember," the king said. "I have only visited once, when I took a tour of all the Allied Realms when I was crowned king. I enjoyed my stay there more than any other. I am very fond of your Queen Urga, but she is also restless in the Draelands, especially during Court."

"My mother and Queen Urga were good friends," Jasen said. "I have a hard time imagining her here, too. Especially in the middle of hog-breeding season."

The king laughed. "Yes, she always said she preferred the hogs of Grumhul to the ones of Court, which did not seem very fair, but she is a plain-spoken woman. I admire that in her."

"Really?"

"Why does that surprise you?"

"Well, I didn't think that anything Grumhulian was much admired outside of Grumhul."

"Perhaps by some," the king said. "But I am not among them. I wish there was more of Grumhul in the Draelands."

Jasen nudged him with his shoulder. "I could always teach you how to play mudball."

The king laughed. "I am a bit too old for mudball, I think."

"You're never too old for mudball. Even my dad plays sometimes. Besides, you aren't that old, are you? Maybe ten years older than I am?"

The king was silent for a moment. "How old are you?"

"Twenty."

"I had been a king for three years by your age," he said. "I was a husband the next year, and a father the year after that. I was a widower at twenty-eight." His gaze was now fixed off in the distance. "I feel older than my years."

"I'm sorry," Jasen said.

The king patted his hand and turned back to him, his expression light again. "Do not apologize. I could use the reminder that I am not an old man."

"Glad I could help."

They continued on for a while. "I have not visited these orchards in some time," the king said. "I must confess I don't remember which path leads out."

"Oh, I came in from that direction," Jasen said, pointing to the right.

The king squinted. "Where is the path?"

"There isn't one." Jasen took the king's hand and pulled him towards the bushes. "Come on—it's not that difficult a walk, and there's a wonderful view."

They worked their way through the brush to the wildflowers. Jasen took a moment to breathe and to feel the sun on his face and the fresh air all around him. The enjoyment only lasted a few moments; he would be back at his lessons soon, bound up in the suffocation of it all again.

"Is there something wrong?" the king asked.

"No," Jasen said, and then, "Well, yes. I'm not relishing going back."

"Why is that?"

"I'm not used to being so... monitored. They make you feel like a child. And there's so much that I'm expected to do, and I can't make sense of any of it. There are so many rules."

"And you do not do well with rules."

“I’m not used to having them! Or at least, the ones in Grumhul make sense: don’t go off in the swamp alone. Avoid spitting directly in people’s faces, even if you don’t like them. Try not to drag your sleeve in your soup. All sensible. But here, there’s a thousand things you must do, and each and every one of those tiny things holds equal weight, even though there isn’t any reason behind it that anyone can explain to me. And then there’s the uncomfortable clothing, and history and politics and music and dance and it’s all foreign to me, and the others laugh at me and I don’t know how to deal with it—any of it! I *don’t!*” He realized, with mortification, that his voice had become loud and high, and he was not so much breathing as panting.

The king considered him. “Perhaps we should sit down for a moment.”

They sat down on a grassy slope. Jasen had calmed himself by that point, but now he was overcome with embarrassment. He rested his elbows on his knees and held his head in his hands. “And now I feel like an idiot. You just finished telling me about the enormous pressures you’ve been under since you were three years younger than I am, and here I am complaining about having to learn the waltz and how to make boring conversation. I’m sorry.”

“Yes, but my responsibilities were always meaningful to me,” the king said. “It must be maddening to feel so much weight over what you see no value in. Perhaps it would be easier for you to think of it in this way. The Allied Realms are allied, but not identical. Learning courtly manners eases tensions between cultures, because everyone knows the same rules.”

Jasen blinked. “I hadn’t thought of it that way.”

“It is a problem I have contemplated for many years,” the king said with a smile.

Their eyes met for a moment. Jasen looked away, tucking a strand of hair behind his ear. “I don’t know what I should call you,” Jasen said. “Your Majesty?”

“Perhaps in the company of others,” he said. “But it would sadden me greatly if you called me that in private. My family simply calls me Rilvor. I would like for you to call me that as well.”

“All right, Rilvor,” he said.

They gazed into each other’s eyes for a moment. It was at this point with other men that he might initiate a kiss (or more), but so much about this situation was beyond him. It wasn’t only the king’s status. He was also older

than Jasen was used to, and his interest was much deeper than a simple roll in the hay. None of his previous sexual partners had ever looked at him with a gaze quite like that. He might as well have been a blushing virgin with the way it made his heart flutter.

Jasen stood up. "We should get back. They might start to miss me."

Rilvor stood as well. "You should not concern yourself too much with Lady Isalei's displeasure. I can always speak with her."

"I would rather you didn't," Jasen said. "Our first meeting in the draemir made me a combination of a laughing stock and someone to be envied. It would be easier on me if no one found out about this." Jasen slapped a hand to his forehead. "Except, of course, Madame Certia and the children already know. *Damn.*"

"Madame Certia will say nothing," he said. "And sadly, there are many nobles who barely speak to their children." He paused. "I had not considered the problems I might be causing for you. I apologize."

"Why would you? It isn't your fault." He thought about it for a moment. "I think a more formal meeting between us would alleviate some of the resentment. It would seem less like I'm using stunts to get your attention."

"That I will most happily arrange."

They eventually made their way out of the gardens, where the king bade him a quick good-bye, lest they attract too much attention. Jasen timed his return to the East Wing to coincide with the time most of the other consorts would be in lessons; he was able to slip back up to his room without anyone noticing. He bundled up his dirty clothes and shoved them under his bed, then changed back into his night shirt. He rang the servant's bell to request a bath.

As he waited for the bath, part of him felt dizzy with giddiness, but another part of him sunk even further into despair. He had almost managed to convince himself that he was indifferent to the king's affections, but the more he talked to him, the more he became aware that wasn't true. He liked him. He more than liked him. He *wanted* him in a way that he'd never felt before. Attraction was one thing—he was accustomed to that. But this wasn't a gossamer-thin strand of physical desire that broke apart the moment that desire was satisfied. There was more to it. It elated him. He wanted to explore it more.

But why, oh why, did Rilvor have to be the king?

To Jasen's relief, his adventure in the garden seemed to escape notice, and the next day life continued as usual. The next afternoon was archery practice, which was an activity Jasen actually enjoyed. The tutor had them work in pairs. Since Risyda was an expert and Jasen was good enough to not require much instruction, the tutor left them to themselves.

"So how was your day off?" Risyda asked as they settled at their target.

Jasen didn't know how much he wanted to say when others could overhear. "Interesting," he decided on.

"That's a mysterious answer."

"Later," Jasen promised.

Polina and Banither approached, choosing the target beside them. They began to speak a little more loudly than was strictly necessary.

"Oh Princess, will you tell me all the details of your visit with the king again?" Banither said. His eyes flickered over to Jasen and Risyda.

Polina giggled. "I've already told you a hundred times, it seems! Surely it must bore you."

"Oh no! It is too thrilling! I hang upon your every word!"

"All right, then!" She began to drone on about how she met with him yesterday morning and about the immediate connection they had felt. On and on she went as they all practiced their shots. Jasen tried to keep a straight face, but when Polina got to the part where her meeting with the king had supposedly gone on well into the afternoon, he couldn't help but laugh a little.

"What?" Risyda said.

Jasen looked over to the Princess to make sure she was still prattling on. "She's lying," he said. "There's no way she could have seen him in the afternoon."

"How can you be so sure?"

Jasen dropped his voice. "Because I was with him," he said, unable to keep a grin off of his face.

Risyda let out a delighted laugh. Polina stopped talking and looked over at them, eyes narrowed. Risyda waved to her. "Good morning, Polly!" she said.

"Good morning, Lady Risyda," she replied after a moment's hesitation. She looked back and forth between Jasen and Risyda's cheerful expressions. "I was just telling Lord Banither about my meeting with the king yesterday."

“We heard you,” Risyda said.

“Oh.”

“Well?” Risyda said. “Aren’t you going to finish your story? I am *dying* to know exactly how many times he called you beautiful.”

“I was done with my story,” she sniffed. She notched an arrow and shot. It barely hit the target.

“Missing the mark, as usual,” Risyda said.

Polina’s face flushed. She grabbed another arrow, notched it, and concentrated. This time, she hit a bull’s-eye. She looked back to Risyda in triumph, her face still red. “There. What do you think about *that*?”

“I think that you should try to shoot straight more often,” Risyda said. “You might actually accomplish something.”

“Like what? Becoming the Ladies’ Archery Champion, like you?” Polina spat. “What a small, stupid goal. And what a stupid sport this is.” She threw her bow on the ground, gathered her skirts, and stormed off. Banither scrambled behind her.

“Why do you two hate each other so much?” Jasen asked when she was gone.

Risyda shrugged. “I don’t hate her. We used to be friends when we were children,” she said. “Then one year, she decided I wasn’t her friend anymore. She said I didn’t take our mission to find a husband seriously enough. I mean, she was right; it was probably better that she ended the friendship when she did.” Risyda notched an arrow and shot; it went wide. “That was a terrible shot,” she said. “I suppose you can’t win them all.”

For a moment, she seemed incredibly sad. Jasen wasn’t sure what to say, but then Risyda was back to herself again, giving him a sly smile. “So! I don’t think I can settle for *later*. Tell me everything.”

Jasen looked around. Now that Polina and Banither had left, they had a cushion of a target on each side of them. He didn’t think anyone would overhear, as long as he kept his voice low. “Well, it all started with a game of mudball...”

After archery, Risyda left for her language lessons while Jasen went to practice dance. The weather had returned to its normal warmth for this time

of year, and going straight from the archery to dance left Jasen feeling overheated and short of breath. His damnable corset was only making things worse. He was allowed a short break before luncheon. He headed out for a secluded, shaded spot he'd previously found behind the East Wing. He went there whenever he had a moment to grab a few moments of solitude.

On his way there, he ran into Larely. "Oh, thank heavens," Jasen said when he spotted him. "I need you."

"You need me?" Larely echoed. "For what?"

Jasen grabbed his arm and pulled him behind a tree. He took a quick look around to make sure no one else was there, then shed his jacket and turned around, bracing himself against the tree. "Undo my breeches," he said.

Larely sputtered. "What?"

"Quickly, before someone sees us!"

It took a moment, but Jasen soon felt Larely's hands on him, undoing the laces. Once he had them open, Jasen shimmied the breeches around his hips. "Now unlace my corset—not all the way, because I'm not going to have time to take it completely off. Just loosen the laces a little."

There was another moment of hesitation, but Larely complied. Jasen took a long, deep breath of relief. He turned around. "Thank you, I feel much—"

But he didn't have the chance to finish that sentence, because Larely's lips were suddenly pressed against his own. He put his hands on Larely's chest and pushed him away. "What are you doing?!"

Larely looked as confused as Jasen felt. "I was kissing you?"

"*Why?*"

Larely's face was already flushed, but it grew an even deeper shade of red. "You said you needed me, and then you pulled me back here and asked me to undress you!"

"I didn't mean it like that!"

"Well, what was I supposed to think?"

Jasen had to admit that Larely's reading of the situation was not unreasonable. "But... I thought that you and Risyda were... intimate."

Larely furrowed his brow. "Why would you think that?"

"She kissed you the other night."

“What, when I brought the wine? She was just teasing me—you know how she is!”

“Why did you blush?”

“I blush at everything—I have very fair skin! And you would, too, if Risyda kissed you—it’s embarrassing, like being kissed by your sister. She knows I like men.” Larely rubbed the back of his neck. “And I thought I made that clear to you as well.”

“I thought that you were just a naturally flirtatious person,” Jasen said. “I wasn’t sure it was directed at me in particular.”

“Well, now you know,” Larely said shortly. “I take it that this means you aren’t interested.”

Jasen shook his head. “If things were different, maybe. But—there’s the king...”

“I thought you said that you didn’t want to marry the king.”

“It’s complicated,” Jasen mumbled.

“Not that complicated,” Larely said. “Of course you would marry a king if you got the chance. That’s why you’re here, isn’t it? It was very stupid of me to think that someone like you would stoop so low.”

Jasen wanted to protest that nothing could be further from the truth, given his past escapades, but decided that wouldn’t be very helpful in this situation. “I’m sorry.”

“There is nothing to be sorry about, *my lord*,” Larely said with a bow. “I won’t bother you any further.” He turned and began to leave.

“Wait!”

Larely turned back. There was a tiny bit of hope in his eyes, which made Jasen feel even worse. He turned around. “I need your help getting dressed again,” he said apologetically.

Larely stalked over to him and did up his corset and breeches again. When he was finished, Jasen turned around. “Larely, I—”

“Don’t,” Larely said. “Just—don’t.” He turned and left for good.

Jasen slid down to the ground and put his hands over his face. He felt like screaming. Every time things started to look up, something happened to remind

him of his propensity for making messes. How was he going to explain this to Risyda? And poor Larely. He gave his face a vigorous rub. It was probably time for him to go inside; the last thing he needed today was to make more trouble.

Chapter Six

Jasen didn't say anything to Risyda about what happened with Larely; in fact, he avoided her entirely that night, claiming a headache. The next morning, Lady Isalei called him to her parlor to extend an official invitation for an audience with the king, to be held the next day. It might have been Jasen's imagination, but it seemed that she looked at him with a certain scrutiny, as if she knew that something had happened but had no way to prove it.

Although he didn't say anything to anyone, the news of his meeting with the king had already spread. Polina made especially sour faces at him during dinner and loudly explained to her cohorts how much she admired the king's dedication to fairness, seeing as he made time for even people from "the lesser realms."

Polina's nastiness and the situation with Larely put a damper on his excitement at seeing Rilvor again, but fortunately one of those situations resolved itself that night. Larely approached him as he was about to retire for the evening. Risyda had already gone upstairs. "Hello," he said. He seemed sheepish.

"Hello," Jasen said back.

"I'm an ass," Larely said. "A great big giant ass, and I'm sorry for yesterday."

"You don't have to apologize."

"Of course I do. I said some very unfair things." He paused. "I hear you're off to see the king tomorrow."

"Yes."

"Is it what you want?"

"Yes," Jasen said. "It really is."

"Then I'm glad for you." He handed him a bottle. "Here—an apology gift from me. It's Yarlian wine—a very fine vintage from my father's vineyard."

Jasen accepted the bottle. "Thank you," he said. "Why don't you come up to Risyda's and have a glass with us?"

"Not tonight," Larely said. "Some other time, maybe."

“Oh. All right, then.”

Larely smiled at him, although it was a little strained. “Good night, then.”

“Good night.”

Jasen headed up to Risyda's, the wine bottle feeling heavy in his hand. He couldn't help but feel he'd lost a friend. Maybe that would change later. He decided against telling Risyda. They had a lot of other things to discuss, after all. His stomach did a little flip just thinking about what was in store tomorrow. Would an official visit be different from their meetings before? Would he make an ass of himself? Tomorrow seemed both too far away and too soon.

Jasen awoke early the next morning to prepare. A breakfast was sent up to him, but he was too nervous to eat. Even the unflappable Rotheld seemed fussy rather than efficiently meticulous, which Jasen thought was rather sweet. They selected an outfit together. Since it was a morning appointment, they decided simpler was best. The outfit they settled on was a deep blue, with only a little lace trimming and a modestly flared frock coat. They argued over the shoes; Jasen won and wore a pair with only a slightly raised heel.

Finally, a valet arrived to escort Jasen to the king's private apartments. He hadn't been in the palace proper yet. When they stepped into the front hall, it was all Jasen could do not to gape. The high ceiling was covered with the most beautiful murals Jasen had ever seen. They depicted the Drae, which were the central figures of their religion—the beings that were half-human, half-dragon, who had both the magical abilities of dragons and the reason of men. They were too powerful and too reckless, however, and the gods split them apart into separate creatures, and it had been that way ever since. The stories had always seemed distant to Jasen, particularly since there were no dragons in Grumhul, but the murals were so clear and so lovely that he felt the truth of it for the first time.

They wound their way up some stairs and through some halls until at last they reached the king's apartments. The receiving room was dazzling to behold. There was gold everywhere, etched into the walls in swirling patterns and gilding the frames of the paintings that were hung everywhere. Even the furniture seemed more like works of art than things to be sat upon. Jasen wasn't sure he could even find the courage to speak in such a place—even the rugs seemed better than him. Fortunately, the valet led him past that room and into another, less formal area.

To Jasen's surprise, he saw not only the king, but his children as well—Ados and Erada, and also his two youngest daughters: one a sweet-looking girl of five with blonde curls, and the other about two years old, who was the only child who shared her father's dark hair. Rilvor was tickling the littlest girl, who was howling with delight. All five of them looked up as Jasen was shown into the room.

Erada beamed and ran up to him. "Hello, Jay!" she said, but then stopped. "I mean, Lord Jasen." She curtsied.

"It's nice to see you again," Jasen said. He looked over at Ados. "Both of you."

Rilvor picked up the youngest and took the other girl by the hand. "I wanted you to meet my other daughters. This is Denas," he said, indicating the five-year-old. "Denas, say hello to Lord Jasen."

Denas hid behind her father's legs, but managed a very soft, "Hello."

Jasen bowed deeply. "I am pleased to make your acquaintance, My Princess," Jasen said with great seriousness. When she peeked out at him, he stuck his tongue out at her. She giggled.

"And this is Ayera," he said, holding the little one closer to Jasen.

"Hello to you, too," he said. She cooed at him, then slapped him in the face and squealed.

"Believe it or not, that means she likes you," Rilvor said.

"We're going to see a puppet show!" Erada said.

Jasen looked to Rilvor. "Are we?"

"It is not a traditional audience between a consort and the king," Rilvor said. "But I thought perhaps you would not mind."

Jasen grinned. "I can't think of anything I'd rather do."

Soon afterward, the puppet players arrived. Erada insisted on sitting next to Jasen the entire time. She fell into fits every time the puppets did something funny, rocking back and forth with laughter and pulling on Jasen's sleeve to make sure he got the joke. Ados was more dignified, but even he started laughing towards the end. There was a nurse present to help with the little ones, who naturally paid less attention to the entertainment, but Rilvor tended to his younger children as much as the nurse did. It resulted in a lot of interruptions, but Jasen didn't mind.

Afterward, Rilvor sent the children off with their nurse, and he and Jasen had a private luncheon. By that time, all of Jasen's nervousness at playing the perfect consort had vanished, and he was actually able to enjoy Rilvor's company. They didn't talk about anything in particular, but it was very pleasant. Their time together was over much too quickly, but it would not be proper for him to stay much longer.

However, the king only waited a day before extending another invitation. He took Jasen riding, which was a relief since Jasen was permitted to dress in slightly more comfortable clothing. Best of all, he could leave his accursed heels behind. Jasen wasn't a very good horseman—the terrain in Grumhul was either too rocky or too swampy for riding. But the grounds of Strengsend were smooth and easy to ride. They even ventured up to the draemir, although no dragons were there.

They saw each other again a few days later, and then again after that. After two weeks of it, no one could ignore the king's obvious favor. Jasen was prepared to be made even more of a pariah, but instead, something strange began to happen. First, the snickering and the whispering disappeared. After that, he was occasionally greeted by some of the others outside of lessons. People began to try to sit near him during dinner; one night, a minor fight broke out when Lady Treburess of Nodini slipped into the chair beside him right as Lord Radvor of Lyeril was about to take it himself. The only person who seemed determined to continue to ostracize him was Princess Polina, but as more people flocked to Jasen, her own circle began to dwindle.

Jasen was baffled, but Risyda didn't find it strange at all. "It's clear that you're the king's favorite now," Risyda explained as they played cards one evening in the back of the Swan Parlor. "Before, it was at least somewhat plausible that someone else might catch the king's eye, but there's no contest now. Most of the others figure that their strategy should now be to get in good with you before your engagement is official."

"That's so cynical."

Risyda shrugged. "They have their own matches to make. Only the most deluded really thought they had a chance with the king. Speaking of which..."

Jasen followed her gaze to the door, where Polina and Lord Banither had entered. They settled in chairs by the fire. Polina had a bit of needlework, and Banither had a book.

"I had a dream last night," Polina announced. No one paid her any mind, but she kept on as if she had her usual rapt audience. "I sprouted wings and flew

through the air. Beside me was a demonic figure—his red hair like fire. He was covered in mud and was dressed in rags—extremely unfashionable rags, at that. Then an elegant angel with a noble crown flew between us. The horrid little goblin made a grab for him, but he was so clumsy that he fell to the earth. The angel took my hand, and we gracefully flew away. What do you think it could mean?”

“I’m sure I don’t know,” mumbled Lord Banither, who did not look up from his book.

“Well it must mean something,” Polina snapped.

Lord Banither looked up at last—only to look right past her to Risyda and Jasen. “Lord Jasen!” he said, standing up. He strode over to the two of them. “I did not see you there! My apologies—you must think me so rude for not greeting you! And good evening to you, too, my lady,” he said, bowing to Risyda.

Risyda batted her eyelashes. “Always a pleasure to see you, my lord,” she said with exaggerated sweetness.

If he noticed any sarcasm, he didn’t show it. “Cards!” he exclaimed. “How amusing! What game are you playing?”

“Omiss,” Jasen said.

“Ah! A game I enjoy. It allows for three players, does it not?”

“It does,” Risyda said. “But it is ever so much more amusing with four.” She raised her voice. “Why don’t you come and play with us, Polina?”

“Cards are a plague on polite society,” Polina said with a scowl. “They lead to gambling and moral degeneration!”

Risyda shrugged. “Suit yourself.” She turned back to Lord Banither. “Why don’t you join us?”

They dealt Lord Banither in and played a few hands; Jasen won them all.

“Ah, Lord Jasen! You have beaten us again!” Banither said. “Truly, you have great talent at this game!”

“That’s strange,” Risyda said. “I believe that you have something of a reputation as a master player yourself, and Jasen only learned two months ago.”

Banither waved his hand. “What is experience when faced with raw talent?”

Risyda rolled her eyes and dealt the cards again.

"I was just reading the most interesting book about Grumhul," Banither said to Jasen. "How charming it sounds—such a wild, untamed landscape!"

"It's mostly swamps," Jasen said.

"Yes, and that's the charm! So much in my own realm is manicured and tamed, the land perverted from its original natural state. Are you familiar with the works of Denrodo?"

"I'm afraid not."

"He is a most interesting natural philosopher. I will have to lend you some of his works."

"Thanks," Jasen said.

They played for a little while. "I heard that you and the king took in a most amusing play the other day," Banither said in a forced causal voice.

"It was a puppet show for his children," Jasen said.

"Ah," Banither said.

The conversation lulled, so Banither tried again. "The king has a cousin—Tinaris, I believe his name is. Does he ever speak of him?"

"No."

"Well, I hear he is coming to Court in search of a consort," Banither said. "And I also hear that he has a keen interest in natural philosophy. Perhaps you might mention that it is an interest I share?"

Risyda hid her face behind her cards to hide her snickering. Jasen gave her a kick under the table. "Certainly," he said.

"Splendid!" Banither spread out his cards. "Oh dear, what a hopeless hand! I am afraid I have lost again." He yawned dramatically. "I am so tired—that must be why I'm playing so poorly. I suppose I should turn in for the evening."

"So nice playing with you," Risyda said, still all sweetness. "And you too, Polina!"

Polina gave her a suspicious look. "I didn't play."

"Oh, you played," Risyda said. "You just didn't play Omiss." She stood up. "Perhaps we should turn in, too, Lord Jasen."

"Perhaps we should."

Polina didn't budge from her chair as the three of them passed. Banither managed a muttered "good night" to her, but nothing more. She kept her gaze fixed on her needlework, but Jasen noticed a tremor in her hand. Her face was carefully blank, although Jasen could have sworn her eyes looked wet.

"So what game were you playing with her?" Jasen asked Risyda once they were on the stairs.

"Oh, just a game of 'How Do You Like Us Now.' We won, just so you know."

Jasen couldn't share in Risyda's glee. "I feel sorry for her."

"I invited her to join us," Risyda said, a little defensively.

"So you could make fun of her up close?"

"I would have been nice to her!" At Jasen's look, she added. "Really. She was my friend once. I wouldn't mind it if she was again, if she would let go of all that bitterness. There aren't any hard feelings on *my* part."

"You don't act like it."

Risyda opened her mouth to protest, and then shut it again. "You may have a point," she allowed.

They reached her room. "Will you be visiting tonight?"

"No, I don't think so. I'm exhausted."

"All right then. I'll see you tomorrow."

Jasen returned to his room and found Rotheld waiting for him. Rotheld performed their nightly rituals of undressing and light grooming. He poured Jasen his usual cup of herbal tea, and then left. Jasen drank the tea and breathed in deeply; he felt himself relax as the stresses of the day left him. After he was finished, he climbed into bed.

He had just managed to drift off to sleep when an urgent banging on his door startled him into wakefulness. He managed to drag himself out of bed and pull on a robe before staggering over to answer the door. To his surprise, he saw Polina standing there, wearing only her dressing gown. She looked very small without her shoes and her usual elaborate hair. She was swaying a little.

"Princess," Jasen said. "Is there something wrong?"

"Yes," she spat. "You. You're wrong. Everything about you is wrong!"

As soon as she spoke, Jasen smelled a bit of alcohol on her breath. "I think maybe you should go back to bed," Jasen said as gently as he could.

"No! I have things to say to you! Do you know how long I have trained for Court? *Do you?*"

Jasen shook his head.

"I have been in refinement school since I was eight years old. Eight! And I have worked hard. I know all the rules. I know all the dances. I can play the flute as beautifully as a bird's song. My needlepoint is without peer. I am well-read, able to converse on any subject. I work hard to make myself lovely to look at. My sense of fashion is impeccable." She blinked her eyes rapidly. "None of that comes easily to me. I spend every moment of every day *working* for this. And then you come in here and do everything wrong, but somehow, everything falls straight into your lap. How is that fair?" She wiped one eye with the heel of her hand.

Jasen reached out to touch her arm. "Don't cry."

She jerked away from him. "But you haven't won yet," she sneered. "Oh no, you have *not*. Everyone knows that when the queen was alive, the king had his boys on the side. But all they were to him were pretty little distractions, good enough to warm his bed and keep him amused, but not good enough to bear a crown and share his burden. And that's all you are. A pretty little distraction. The king will grow bored with your innocent country boy act, and then he'll come to his senses and realize that he needs someone who is his equal. And that certainly isn't you!" She gave him a triumphant look, and with that, she marched away.

Or at least she tried to, but then she tripped and fell flat on her face. Jasen got to his knees beside her. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine! Get away from me!" But she started to sniffle.

"I'm not trying to beat you," Jasen said. "None of this is a game. You have to stop thinking of it like that."

She laughed through her tears. "If you think that, then you really are a simpleton." She dried her eyes on her sleeve and got to her feet, waving away Jasen's attempt to help her. She staggered off down the hallway.

Jasen went back to his room and shut the door. His relaxation from earlier had vanished. What had she meant about the king and his "boys?" Not that he was one to talk, given his own sordid past, but it seemed incongruous with the

man he knew. He got back into bed, but he couldn't fall back asleep. Was Polina right? No, she couldn't be. He could *feel* their connection. But no matter how hard he tried to banish the thought from his mind, it kept nagging at him. He lay awake for a long time before finally falling into a fitful slumber.

Jasen arrived at Rilvor's apartments the next morning, dressed for another session of horseback riding, as he had been instructed. Three of the children and their nurse were there, as they often were when he and Rilvor met in the morning. Little Ayera and Rilvor himself were missing.

Jasen gave the girls each a hug and exchanged a handshake with Ados. He thought back to Polina's claim about Rilvor's "distractions." Surely if he felt that way about Jasen, he wouldn't have made him so involved with his children?

Erada tugged at his hand. "Papa has a surprise for you!" she said. "You're going to—"

"Erada!" Ados interrupted. "It won't be a surprise if you tell him!"

"Oh, right," she said. "You're going to have so much fun, though! I wish I could go too—Papa said maybe next time!"

Rilvor emerged from one of the back rooms with Ayera in his arms. "Good morning," he said to Jasen. He had this way of looking at Jasen even during the most mundane pleasantries that always made Jasen feel a little heated.

"Good morning," he said back.

Rilvor handing Ayera off to the nurse, who also took Denas by the hand. "I will see you all for dinner," he said to the children. "Pay attention to your lessons—I will be asking you about them."

"Yes, Papa," Ados and Erada said in unison.

After the children had gone, Rilvor picked up a large basket.

"Is that my surprise?" Jasen asked.

"Part of it." He offered his free arm to Jasen, who took it.

"Where are we going?"

"As Ados said, telling would spoil the surprise, wouldn't it?"

They made their way out of the palace. To Jasen's annoyance, Polina's words were still echoing in his head. He pushed them out as forcefully as he

could manage; he wasn't about to let her ruin his day. They headed not for the gardens, but for the draemir instead. All at once, he felt a familiar heat pulse through him. "We aren't going to ride horses, are we?" Jasen said.

"Ah!" Rilvor replied in mock despair. "You have ruined your own surprise!"

Jasen forgot his doubts for the moment, giving himself over to the excitement of seeing Tassenred again. As they entered the draemir, he looked up and saw the silhouettes of two dragons speeding toward them, growing larger and larger. The dragons lit down in the field in front of them; the ground shook with their weight. One was Tassenred. The other was a silver dragon, longer but with finer features.

Rilvor approached the silver dragon. "This is Woriam," he said. "Tassenred's mate." The dragon lowered her head to nudge Rilvor affectionately.

Jasen put his hand on her. She had blue eyes, like Rilvor. "You're beautiful," he said to the dragon.

He heard a loud snort from directly behind him. He jumped and whirled around, laughing in surprise as he was confronted with Tassenred's large face. He put his arms around his neck. "And I am so glad to see you," he said.

He turned back to Rilvor, whose eyes were sparkling. "Shall we?" Rilvor said.

Both of the dragons lay their bodies on the ground. Jasen found it a little difficult getting onto the dragon's back, but once he was there, he knew precisely where to sit and how to hold himself. As soon as he was settled, Tassenred began to move, first at a lumber, and then more and more quickly, until at last, they were in the air. Jasen belatedly realized that in his eagerness to get on the dragon, he hadn't asked Rilvor where they were going or if he was supposed to do anything to steer. Of course, it didn't seem likely that anyone could steer a dragon, and he decided he would simply trust that Tassenred and Rilvor knew what they were doing.

He watched as the ground became smaller and smaller. The view from the air was breathtaking; he'd never imagined land could look like that. They soared away from the city, over the lands. The higher they got, the smaller things seemed, until Jasen felt as if he were a giant, or a god. Rilvor and Woriam kept pace beside them. Even though he couldn't see him very well, Jasen felt a *connection* with Rilvor that was strong and strange and full of a joy he didn't know was possible to feel.

Eventually, they flew back towards the Ashfell Mountains, but instead of landing in the draemir, they continued to the mountain, up the side and down to a valley in between the mountains, where they landed. Jasen looked around in wonder at the beauty of the place. The flowers were so numerous and varied that he felt as if he'd stepped into a rainbow. A brook eased its way across the ground. He had thought the draemir and the gardens were beautiful, but this was even more spectacular. It was like an entirely different world.

He slid off of Tassenred's back and saw Rilvor dismounting as well. As soon as they had deposited their passengers, the dragons took off again, dancing around each other in the sky just as Jasen had seen them do on his arrival to the city.

Jasen was speechless for a little while, soaking up the beauty around him. When he did speak again, he said, "I do hope they plan to come back for us." Which was a rather uninspired thing to say, but he didn't think any words he said could do justice to what he truly was feeling.

"They will," Rilvor said. "They simply wanted some privacy for a moment."

Jasen looked at Rilvor. "Can you tell what they're thinking?"

"In a way, yes," he said. "But it's a bit more complicated than that. Dragons don't think the same way we do—they communicate in pictures and emotions, mostly. Dragons' minds are all linked to each other. I am party to that link. They do occasionally use human words, for our convenience. Tassenred and Worja are their 'human' names."

Rilvor still had the basket in his hands from earlier. He set it down and pulled out a blanket, spreading it over the ground. Next, he began to take out a variety of scrumptious-looking foods: breads and cheese, fine pastries and fruit, carved meats and pickled vegetables. There was also a bottle of wine and two wooden chalices.

Jasen sat down on the blanket. Rilvor offered him some bright red fruit. "Strawberries," he said. "As you requested."

It took him a moment to remember their first conversation. "Oh!" he said with a laugh. "I did say I wanted to lounge around eating strawberries, didn't I? But the truth is I've never actually had one. They don't grow in Grumhul. I just always imagined it was something luxurious people would eat." He took the strawberry and put it in his mouth.

“What do you think?”

“Sweet,” he said. “But still a little tart. I like it.”

Rilvor poured Jasen a glass of wine. They began to eat. When Jasen was finished, he lay out on the blanket with a happy sigh, staring up at the clear blue sky. “This is wonderful,” Jasen said. “Better than wonderful. It’s worth every moment of elocution lessons.” He considered it for a moment. “Well, maybe not *every* moment.”

Rilvor laughed. He stretched out beside Jasen, and Jasen suddenly became aware of his body, just inches from his own. He turned over on his side and met Rilvor’s gaze. “This doesn’t feel like an approved audience-with-the-king sort of activity.”

“You are correct. Someone recently taught me that rules should occasionally be broken.”

Jason smiled. “That’s probably the first time I’ve ever taught anyone anything.”

“How are your lessons going?”

“All right, I suppose,” Jasen said. “Although I feel like I’ll never learn it all.”

“No one does,” Rilvor said. “I feel as though I am still learning myself.”

Jasen groaned. “If you still haven’t learned it all and you’ve been at it since childhood, then there’s no hope for me!”

“True, I was trained in courtly manners as a child,” he said. “But I did not live in Strengsend until I became king.”

“Really? Where did you live, then?”

“In Rakon, with my mother’s family.”

“Why?”

“I wish I could be certain,” he said. He paused for a long moment. “I think she might have been dragon-blessed with prophecy and sensed there would be tragedy for us at Strengsend. As I’m sure you know, my parents and older brother and sister died of the plague, which is how I came to the throne. I think she might have known it would happen, but she couldn’t keep my father from the Draelands. She kept my brother and sister away as long as she could as

well. It always hurt me—I thought she did not want us. But after she died, I began to wonder..." He trailed off.

"I'm sorry," Jasen said.

Rilvor came back from his reverie. "It was a long time ago," he said with a reassuring smile. "But to my original point. I was not completely prepared for life at Court in the Draelands. Not that my education had been lacking, but there were still many small things I did not understand. And of course I was hit with the full brunt of the powers of the Lord of the Drae. I could not hold it on my own, so I had to get married almost at once to a woman I barely knew."

"Can you hold on to it now?"

"For the moment, yes," he said. "Although that will change."

Jasen sat up. "You have to be married this year," he said. "Don't you."

"Yes. I cannot put it off longer." Rilvor sat up as well. "Why does that trouble you?"

"I didn't say it did."

"You did not have to say it."

Jasen didn't feel like talking about it, but Rilvor kept looking at him in expectation. "The Lord of the Drae hasn't had a male consort in over three hundred years," he said eventually. "I'm sure there's a reason for that."

"Do you think that I would choose someone besides you?" Rilvor said, sounding startled. "If I have done something to make you doubt my affection for you, please tell me at once!"

Jasen rubbed the back of his neck as he struggled to find the right words. "I heard that when you were married, you had... other companions. Male companions. Is that true?"

The king took some time to answer. "As I said, I barely knew my wife before we married. I did grow to love her, but as a friend and the mother of my children. My preference has always been for men, not women. We had an arrangement to seek our pleasures elsewhere. This is not unusual, and in other circumstances, it might have worked. But I am Lord of the Drae as well as king. I must be able to draw from my spouse, and that was difficult on both of us."

He put a hand over his eyes, overcome by some sudden emotion. Eventually, he spoke again. "I am afraid that's what made her ill," he said, so quietly that Jasen strained to hear. "I am afraid that I killed her."

Jasen put a hand on his shoulder, not sure of what else to do. The king took a few deep breaths, composing himself. When he looked at Jasen again, his eyes were wet. "I'm sorry," he said.

"Don't be," Jasen said.

Rilvor took Jasen's hands in his own. "Before I met you, I had resigned myself to closing my heart to the possibility of true love forever. I would try to find joy with my children and my people, but I felt my own heart would remain broken from the losses I've endured. But now you have given me hope. I do not want you as merely a companion. I want you as my partner, my life-mate, my second heart."

Jasen felt dizzy. "Are you proposing to me?"

"I suppose I am," he said with a small smile. "Do you want me to say the words?" Since Jasen found himself too flummoxed to respond, Rilvor pressed on. "Will you marry me?" he asked.

Jasen opened his mouth, trying to will himself to give an answer. "I don't—I wasn't prepared—I mean, we haven't even kissed yet."

Rilvor moved closer to him. "No," he said, "we have not." He released his hands so that he could cup the back of Jasen neck, threading a hand through his hair as he moved even closer. "Have you ever been kissed before?" he murmured.

Jasen couldn't make sense of the question at first—it seemed like a bizarre thing to ask. But then he remembered he was supposedly a chaste young consort-in-training, and perhaps the king had mistaken his undoubtedly still panicked expression for the nervousness of someone inexperienced in the physical side of love. In truth, Jasen had had his first kiss at fourteen, and it was all downhill after that. In the past year alone, he'd had four different lovers—all young men like him with nothing as serious as marriage on their minds, but cheerfully interested in exploring what their bodies had to offer.

He opened his mouth to reply, his mind reeling as he tried to think of a way to explain it all. To his completely shock, what came out of his mouth instead was, "No."

"May I have the honor of being your first?"

Jasen gave a vague nod. And then, Rilvor's mouth was pressed against his own. It was closed-mouthed at first, but that didn't last for long. All of the insecurities and doubts Jasen had felt began to melt as the kiss deepened. He

felt heat, everywhere—on their lips, inside his body, all over his skin... Rilvor wrapped his arm around Jasen's waist, and suddenly Jasen forgot that he was supposed to be new at this. He surged forward, only thinking of getting more. The heat grew, and grew more—he was so hot that he had to pull back to gasp—

—and his gasp turned into a surprised shout. They were engulfed in flames. Or at least, that's what it seemed like at first. But the flames weren't burning anything; they were just *there*, licking the blanket and the surrounding grass.

Rilvor's eyes had been closed, but they opened at Jasen's outburst. He seemed as startled as Jasen at first, but seemed to accept the situation much more readily. He even smiled.

"Why are you smiling?!" Jasen shouted. "We're on fire!"

Rilvor reached out a hand to one of the flames; the light glowed on his skin, almost as if he'd scooped out a piece of it. "We are not on fire," he said. "This is something else."

Jasen stared at the light on Rilvor's hand, then back to the silently burning flames. He touched one himself; it was warm, but not scorching. "Is this part of your magic?"

"No."

"How can you be so calm if you don't have any fucking idea what this is?"

"Because if it is not my magic, then it must be yours."

Jasen's mouth dropped open. "Mine? But I'm not dragon-blessed!"

"It appears that you are."

Jasen stared at the flames around them, which began to flicker out as if a breeze were blowing through. When they were gone, nothing had been damaged. In fact, it seemed like the grass was a little greener... but maybe he was imagining that.

Jasen had always secretly wished for magical abilities, but now that it seemed as if he had them, he wasn't sure what to think. He felt Rilvor's hand on his shoulder. "You seem troubled," he said.

Jasen met Rilvor's concerned gaze. "A lot has changed since this morning," he said finally. "It's a bit overwhelming."

"Of course," Rilvor said. "Perhaps you need some time to think on it."

“Yes,” Jasen said, grateful that he understood.

Rilvor gave him a kiss on the cheek. “Take all the time you need,” he said.

Just then, the sky darkened as the dragons returned. Rilvor and Jasen gathered their things as the dragons landed. They approached their respective dragons. As Tassenred lowered his head, Jasen looked into his enormous, golden eye. “What did you do to me?” he said under his breath.

Tassenred blinked, but offered no answer.

Jasen didn't mind too much—he wasn't sure he could handle any more life-shattering information. He got up on Tassenred's back, and then they were off again, back to Strengsend. He started to think that he was looking forward to some normalcy, which was insane. Nothing was normal in his life any more. It might not ever be again. And he didn't know whether he was excited or frightened by that prospect.

Chapter Seven

Jasen was in agony the rest of the day, waiting for night to come so that he could tell Risyda everything. He had to stop the story when he got to the part about how he'd told Rilvor he'd never been kissed before, because Risyda started laughing so hard she went into a coughing fit.

"I'm glad you found my pain amusing," Jasen mumbled.

"Why in heaven's name would you tell him that anyway? Especially after he confessed that he and his wife both kept lovers on the side."

"I don't know!" Jasen said miserably. "It's just that he had been talking about how having different lovers may have doomed his wife, and then he just assumed that I was a virgin, and it just didn't seem like the best time to correct him."

Risyda passed the hookah to Jasen. "Here. Have a few puffs and *relax*," Risyda said. "Think about it—how would he find out that you weren't entirely truthful? It isn't as if he's going to bump into any Grumhulians here. Besides," she added. "Now you have your way out, if you want it."

"What do you mean?"

"Let him find out the truth somehow, and then you'll be off the hook for the marriage."

Jasen took a few morose puffs. "I don't want off the hook," he said.

"A ha!" she said. "I knew it. You *are* going to marry the king."

Jasen groaned and buried his head in his hands. "I don't want to marry the king. I want to marry Rilvor. Do you think I can get him to abdicate?"

"I'm afraid it doesn't work like that," Risyda said. "The Lord of the Drae is a position that only ends with death. So unless you want to marry a corpse..."

Jasen aimed a kick at her, but missed. She laughed and grabbed the pipe, taking a deep puff. When she had finished, he spoke again. "There's more," he said. "I have a magical ability now."

Risyda sat up straight. "No!" she said with a delighted gasp. "Really?"

Jasen nodded.

"Well, come on—what is it?"

Jasen explained what had happened with the strange fire.

“Hmm,” she said. “Interesting. Do you think you can do it again?”

“I don’t even know how to try,” Jasen said. “We don’t have magic in Grumhul, remember?”

“All right, quick lesson,” she said. “Abilities are regulated through your emotions. I was blessed with fire, which means my ability stems from the more active emotions—my instructors kept trying to get me to use passion or righteousness or some other such nonsense, but for me? Anger is the key.” She held out her finger. “I dredge up a memory, concentrate, and then—” A flame burst from her fingertip. “It takes practice to control, but once you find your trigger, it gets easier.”

Jasen put up his own finger. The kara weed was making him a little woozy; he wasn’t sure if he could feel anything strongly at this point. “Should I try to be angry?” he said.

Risyda shrugged. “You said it was some sort of fire; it seems reasonable it might work.”

Jasen thought very hard about some of Polina’s nastier comments, but nothing happened. “It’s not working.”

“Maybe you aren’t thinking of something strong enough,” she said. She looked to her own finger, where the flame was still burning. “Like—think about your father. Think of how he’s using you. Think of all the slights, the sneers of disappointment, the utter dismissal of your worth beyond what price you could fetch—” Her flame suddenly burst larger and hotter, flames shooting upward nearly to the ceiling. She cried out and shook her finger. The flames vanished, but there was a dark smudge on the ceiling.

“Well, that was unexpected,” she said, her voice shaking a little. “That hasn’t happened to me in years. Particularly since the queen died. Magic started taking more effort after that; I usually don’t overshoot that much.” She looked at her finger. “Damn. It’s been a while since I’ve burned myself.”

Jasen leaned forward. “Is it bad?” he asked.

“Not terribly so. I should probably still bandage it.”

The strange heat that Jasen had felt before began to bloom in his chest again. Without thinking, he took Risyda’s hand in his own. Flames flickered

from his hand to hers—warm, but not burning. Her finger faded from an angry red back to its normal tone. She took her hand from his and held her finger up; they both gazed at it in wonder.

“Did that really happen?” Jasen asked.

“I think so,” she said. “Or else Larely got ahold of some especially high quality kara weed.” She grinned at him. “Healing. That’s a rare one.”

Healing. His mind went back to his last conversation with Rilvor, and how he had talked about his broken heart. It wasn’t a literal injury, but the man was clearly wounded. Was that why Tassenred had given him this ability?

A knock on the door startled both of them—it was Larely’s characteristic knock. Risyda weaved her way over to the door and opened it, letting him in.

“Larely!” she said. “Glad to see you! Jasen’s here—it’s been forever since it’s been the three of us, hasn’t it?”

Larely stepped in, and gave Jasen an awkward wave. “Hello.”

“Hello,” Jasen said. He was surprised to see him; he’d thought after their last meeting that Larely wouldn’t be joining them anymore. He was glad to see otherwise.

Larely wrinkled his nose. “Did you set something on fire in here?”

“Only my finger,” Risyda said. “But Jasen fixed it.”

“...how?”

“Oh, he was dragon-blessed,” she said.

“Since when?”

“This afternoon. Also, he’s getting married.”

“*Risyda!*” Jasen said, throwing a pillow at her.

“Married?” Larely echoed. He turned to Jasen. “Really? To the king?”

Jasen bit his lip. “It hasn’t entirely been decided yet,” he said. “And it’s supposed to be a secret,” he said, shooting a look at Risyda.

“What, like we weren’t going to tell him?” she said with a shrug.

“Well, congratulations,” Larely said with a forced smile. “I should be going. Captain Ingo is slightly less drunk than usual—he might actually notice I’m not doing my duties. I just stopped in to say hello.”

“But you just arrived!” Risyda said. She looked back and forth between the two of them, as if noticing the awkwardness for the first time. “Have I missed something?”

“Good night,” Larely mumbled in place of a proper answer. He shut the door.

Jasen got to his feet. “I should go, too.”

“Oh no, you don’t,” Risyda said. “What happened between you two?”

“I’ll tell you later,” Jasen said. He slipped out the door before she could protest any further.

Jasen saw Larely just as he was about to disappear up the stairs. “Wait!” he said as he scrambled to catch up with him.

Larely stopped at the foot of the stairs. “Yes?” he said when Jasen caught up to him.

“See me back to my room?” he asked, hoping for another few minutes to figure out what to say.

They said nothing on their way up the stairs. By the time they reached Jasen’s room, he still hadn’t decided what he wanted to say.

Fortunately, Larely spoke first. “Is it what you truly want?” he asked. “Marrying the king, I mean.”

“I think so,” Jasen said. “I mean—I’m still not sure about the whole marrying-a-king part of it, but I—” He choked on the words, but eventually pushed them through. “I love him.” He felt a little dizzy. It was the first time he’d said it out loud, but he realized it was true.

“Then I am happy for you,” Larely said. “Truly.” He gave Jasen one of his familiar grins. “I don’t know if I’m going to ever get used to calling you ‘Your Majesty’.”

Jasen paled. “Oh gods, I hadn’t even thought about that.”

Larely grinned. “I suppose I’ll just stick with ‘my lord’ for now.”

“Or Jasen,” he said. “Are we still friends?”

“Of course we are!” Larely said. “Can you blame a man for needing a little time to mend a broken heart?”

“I broke your heart?” Jasen said, alarmed. Had Larely really felt that strongly about him?

“Well, perhaps ‘break’ is too strong,” Larely conceded. “But it was a little bruised.”

“Is it better now?”

“It is.”

Jasen smiled. “I’m glad.”

They said their good nights. Jasen changed into his night shirt and climbed into bed. In spite of the chaos of the day, he found falling asleep much easier than usual.

It was several days before Jasen saw Rilvor again. This time, they actually did go horseback riding, stopping for a luncheon in one of the gazebos of the Bedrose Gardens. They kept their talk light at first, not referencing either the proposal or Jasen’s newly discovered magical abilities. But the weight of what had happened was too much to ignore, and eventually their light talk petered out.

Jasen was the one who broke the silence. “I discovered what my blessing is,” he said.

“You have?”

“Yes. A friend of mine hurt her finger. I was able to heal it.”

Rilvor seemed taken aback. “That’s an exceedingly rare ability,” he said.

“That’s what she told me.” He pushed his food around his plate.

Rilvor gave him a searching look. “Is there something the matter?”

Jasen put down his fork and sighed. “I just never expected any of this.”

“What did you expect?”

“I don’t know. I came here to marry a lord, I suppose, but I never imagined there would be so much for me to learn, or that I would be dragon-blessed. And I certainly never expected to have a marriage proposal from a king. I’ve never done well with responsibility, and now I feel like the fate of the entire Allied Realms has somehow fallen into my lap.”

Rilvor was silent for a moment. “I must confess that it had not occurred to me that if I found someone, he might not want me,” Rilvor said eventually. He gave Jasen a sad smile. “I have never considered myself arrogant, but perhaps I was wrong.”

“No, no!” Jasen said, taking one of Rilvor’s hands in his own. “It isn’t that I don’t want you! I just don’t want the rest!”

Rilvor looked down at their joined hands. “But I cannot be separated from the rest,” he said gently. He gave Jasen’s hand a brief squeeze before pulling it away. “You will have to make a choice. I will understand if you decide it’s too much for you.”

Jasen felt a pang in his heart. “And if I refuse you, what am I supposed to do? Marry someone else? Go back to Grumhul and forget any of this ever happened? Forget that I fell in love with you? I can’t do that, either!” The words were out of his mouth before he realized it.

Their gazes locked. “You love me?” Rilvor said.

There was no sense in denying it. “I do,” he said.

Rilvor was out of his chair in an instant; he pulled Jasen to his feet and kissed him. Jasen threw his arms around him and kissed him back. It was everything it had been before, and more. For the moment, there was nothing but their lips against each other’s and their bodies crushed together. Jasen worked his hands under Rilvor’s frock coat, ready to slip it off his shoulders. He might have gotten somewhere if they weren’t interrupted by someone politely clearing his throat.

It was one of the king’s valets. “Pardon, Your Majesty,” he said. “But there are several lords and ladies approaching; they are scheduled to take luncheon here.”

They were both reluctant to part. “We can go back to your apartments,” Jasen said hopefully, but was not surprised when Rilvor shook his head.

“It would not be proper,” he said, extracting himself from Jasen’s arms. “Especially if we aren’t betrothed.”

That dumped a bucket of ice water on Jasen’s desire. “No, I suppose it wouldn’t,” he said.

Rilvor looked as if he were going to say something else, but decided against it. He offered Jasen his arm. “I will escort you back to the East Wing.”

They were quiet much of the way back. The erotic energy hadn’t entirely dissipated; Jasen was very aware of the way their arms touched, and the closeness of their bodies. His normally healthy sex drive had been smothered under the burdens of his training, but he felt it roaring back to life. It seemed

monstrously unfair and borderline insane that he should have to agree to marriage before they could even properly touch each other.

When they reached the East Wing, Rilvor kissed his hand. "I enjoyed our luncheon," he said. "It would please me if you would join me again tomorrow."

Jasen felt a spark of irritation at his formal tone—as if moments before they hadn't been wrapped in each other's arms. "What, for another horseback ride?"

"If you like."

"Fine," he said, perhaps more shortly than he intended.

Rilvor looked at him in puzzlement. "If there's something else you would like to do..."

"There is, actually, but I don't think you'd go for it," Jasen said. "I'll see you tomorrow, *Your Majesty*."

Jasen marched off to the front door, not looking back. He felt guilty almost as soon as he was inside. He sighed. Why was everything so complicated here? He would have to apologize tomorrow.

Jasen did apologize, vaguely, for his ill humor, but left the exact cause unnamed. After a rather terse ride, Rilvor invited Jasen to dinner with himself and his children. He wondered if Rilvor had brought the children in as defense against Jasen's foul mood. It normally would have worked, as he enjoyed being with the children. But as they were eating, Jasen was suddenly struck with the thought that if they married, he would be a second father to these children. He nearly ran from the room screaming. It wasn't that he didn't care for them. In fact, he was already growing to love them, but it was one more responsibility that he had to consider. Could he be a good father? And he was only seven years older than Ados, which was a disquieting thought.

His mood didn't improve in the coming week. Every night in Risyda's room, he talked and talked around the question of whether or not to accept the proposal. One night, he talked about it so much that Risyda fell asleep in the middle of it. He didn't blame her; he was exhausted by the subject himself.

To add to the stress, the suitors would start to arrive within the week. Everyone was in a tizzy over it. Polina especially seemed to be losing her mind. Her hairstyles kept getting bigger, her waist smaller, her dresses wider, and her

shoes taller. Jasen wasn't sure how she was able to move. It was hard not to get swept up in the excitement of it, even though Jasen knew he wouldn't be fishing for a husband.

Jasen didn't see Rilvor again for a few days, as he had some kingly duties to attend to. That was fine with Jasen; he needed all the time he could get to think. But when Rilvor finally invited him for luncheon, he still had no idea what he was going to say.

Rilvor greeted him warmly, but Jasen couldn't quite return the enthusiasm. They made some small talk, but soon lapsed into silence.

Rilvor twisted a ring on one of his fingers. "Have you thought about what I have asked you?" he finally said.

Jasen wasn't sure how to begin. "I've only kissed you twice," he replied at last. "I don't think I can agree to marry someone I've only kissed twice."

"But that is an easy problem to fix," Rilvor said with a smile. "I can kiss you now."

Jasen's gaze went to where he knew the servants were standing nearby, even though they were discreetly out of sight. "I don't mean the sort of kiss you can do in front of other people."

"Ah," Rilvor said.

"Let's take the dragons again," Jasen said. "Out to the valley where we went before."

Rilvor shook his head. "The nobles will be arriving soon; I don't have the time to disappear for that long."

"The gardens, then," Jasen said. "Everyone knows you take a walk by yourself every day. Meet me in the wildflower field tomorrow. You can escape for at least an hour."

"I am not sure that is such a good idea," he said. "If we are married, there will be plenty of opportunities to—"

"But we're not married," Jasen interrupted. "Not yet." He rubbed his face. "I just want some more time where I can be with you as Rilvor, not as the king. A half an hour. Another kiss. Give me that, and I can make my decision."

Rilvor was silent for a few moments. "All right," he said. "I will meet you."

Jasen ventured a smile. Rilvor smiled back. The tension dissipated, and they were able to finish their meal in better spirits. Jasen knew that his demand was a little silly, but he couldn't say yes all at once. He had to work his way up to it.

Since lessons were over, Jasen found it relatively easy to slip away at the time they had agreed upon. He wore the work clothes he'd donned on his last escape, which had the advantage of being both inconspicuous and easy to remove.

Rilvor was already waiting when he arrived. Jasen very nearly tackled him; they half-fell to the ground, with Jasen landing on top of him, his mouth already pressed against Rilvor's.

Rilvor let out a muffled laugh. He tried to say something, but Jasen shushed him.

"No talking," he said. "Wastes times."

He brought his mouth to Rilvor's and kissed him again, and again. The kisses started out shallow at first, but soon grew more heated. Jasen pulled back and tore off his cap, throwing it to the ground. His hair fell in a curtain around them as he leaned down to bring his lips to Rilvor's again. After a brief kiss, he traced his mouth down Rilvor's neck, relishing the wonderful masculine scruff of his beard against his skin.

Rilvor let out a moan that went straight to Jasen's cock. Jasen sat up so he could whip off his tunic. He could feel Rilvor's hard cock against his ass, so he began to rock, just a little. Rilvor gasped, and then groaned so deeply that Jasen could swear he could feel it reverberate throughout his whole body. Rilvor grabbed Jasen's ass.

Jasen abruptly dismounted at that. It had been so long since he had release (well, release with another person present, at any rate) that he was afraid of embarrassing himself. He was about to tell him that he just needed a moment to catch his breath when Rilvor was suddenly kneeling in front of him and grasping his hands in his own.

"I beg your forgiveness!" he said. "I am moving too quickly for you—I assure you that I did not mean to lose control and touch you as I did—"

"What?" Jasen panted, and then remembered his supposedly virginal status. "Oh, no! It was fine! Better than fine. I just—"

Just then, they heard someone approaching. They both froze for a moment, but Jasen had the presence of mind to dive into some nearby bushes. It was not the first time he'd had to avoid being caught in a compromising situation.

"Oh, Your Majesty!" said a familiar, treacly voice a few moments later. Jasen peeked out of the bushes and sure enough, there was Polina.

"Princess Polina," Rilvor said, sounding impressively composed. "What are you doing so far off the path?"

"Oh, my apologies, Your Majesty!" she said. "You must come here often for privacy and personal reflection, and here I am disturbing your peace. I was taking a walk, you see, and I became so engrossed in the beauty of the gardens that I quite lost my way!"

Rilvor gave a quick glance to the bushes; Polina did not seem to notice. "I would be happy to show you the way to the main path, Princess."

She batted her eyelashes. "Oh, Your Majesty, I would be most grateful!"

Jasen felt equal parts annoyance at and pity for Polina. It was a ridiculous story—they weren't *that* far from the road. Her motives were so transparent; surely she didn't think Rilvor really thought she was lost. He hoped Rilvor would be able to get rid of her quickly. They started to leave, but then Polina dramatically stumbled into Rilvor, who had no choice but to catch her. "Oh!" she wailed. "Oh, how embarrassing! It's these shoes—I simply can't walk in them properly!"

"They do seem uncomfortable," Rilvor said kindly as he helped to right her. "Shall we continue?"

"Thank you, yes." They didn't make it more than two steps before she stumbled again. "Ah! My ankle! I fear I have twisted it!"

"Perhaps you should sit down," Rilvor said.

"Your Majesty is so gracious!"

He sat her down on the grass, positioning her with her back to Jasen. "Perhaps I should summon someone to assist us," he said.

"Oh no!" Polina said quickly. "That is—I am sure if I rest a moment, I will be able to walk again. With your assistance, of course."

Rilvor glanced again at Jasen and gestured slightly with his head, indicating that he should leave. But Jasen wouldn't be able to move without her hearing him, and besides, he wasn't going anywhere without his tunic and cap.

There was an awkward silence. Polina chose to break it with a shrill gasp. "Oh my, I just noticed my clothing! Oh, it's too embarrassing that you should see me this way!"

"I do not see anything amiss," Rilvor said.

"My skirts," she said. "They don't match! At all! Oh, you must think me very hopeless!"

"You have always seemed to me to be a very elegant young lady."

"You are too kind, Your Majesty, but it simply isn't so. I'm very clumsy and unpolished and—and I so desperately need someone to show me what to do!"

"I am certain that is not true," Rilvor said.

"It is, though! Why, just the other day, I..." She trailed off. "What is that?" she asked.

Jasen couldn't see what she was referring to, so he very carefully moved some of the branches out of the way. It was his tunic. Just then, one of the branches snapped. Polina whipped her head around. Jasen tried to hold still, but it was no use—she'd spotted him.

Since there was little sense in staying crouched in the bushes, he stood up. "Hello," he said.

Polina looked back and forth between the two of them, her mouth a perfect *oh* of surprise. "I was not aware that—I mean to say, I did not know you were—" She looked over to Jasen again. "Not alone," she finished lamely.

"Princess, I would be most grateful if you did not mention this to anyone," Rilvor said.

"Of course, Your Majesty," she said. She got to her feet. "My ankle is much better now. I believe I can find my own way back. Thank you for your kindness." She dipped a brief curtsy and fled.

Once she had gone, Rilvor went to Jasen and offered him a hand, helping him out of the bushes. He handed him his tunic. "Perhaps this is not the best time for this, after all."

"Perhaps not," Jasen was forced to admit.

"Was that a friend of yours?" Rilvor asked.

“Not precisely,” Jasen muttered. “Will it cause a big scandal if this gets out?” he said more clearly.

Rilvor turned him around. “Only if we are not to be married,” he said. He gave Jasen a look of anticipation. Jasen was suddenly reminded of the very first time he’d seen him, when he was only seventeen and newly a king. It was like he was that awkward young man again. Jasen felt a surge of tenderness.

“Then I suppose we should get married, then,” Jasen said.

It took a moment for Rilvor to absorb that. He let out a laugh of joy and pulled Jasen to him, picking him up and spinning him around. Jasen couldn’t help but laugh, too. And then they came together for a kiss, their arms wrapped around one another.

They had to break away at last, but they kept their gazes locked. Jasen could feel his heart in his throat. It really was going to happen. There was a feeling so large inside of him that he couldn’t classify it—something both joyous and terrifying. When they kissed again, Jasen felt the sorrow of one story coming to an end—his life in Grumhul, his father and his old friends and lovers and what he now realized was a mostly carefree life. But there was also the excitement and joy of a new beginning—one he would be starting with a man that he... that he loved.

Rilvor brushed his hair back from his face. “On our wedding night, I will kiss you as much as you like.”

“I hope there’s more to it than *that*.”

Rilvor laughed. “There will be. I know what it is to be young and impatient, but it will be worth the wait. You deserve to have your first time to be more than rolling around in the bushes.”

The joy Jasen felt took on a queasy quality as he was reminded of his lie. “My first time,” Jasen mumbled. “Right.”

If Rilvor noticed a change in his mood, he didn’t show it. He kissed his cheek, and then pulled away. “We should go.”

“I don’t think it’s fair that I should decide to spend the rest of my life with you one minute, and then have you leave the next.”

Rilvor brought Jasen’s hand to his lips. “We will have the rest of our lives.”

That was true enough. Still, it was difficult to watch him go. Rilvor left first. Jasen waited a good ten minutes before leaving himself in the opposite

direction. Now that he was alone again, his mind began racing as he thought of all the hundreds of implications this decision had. Oh, his father was going to be insufferable about this. Risyda, too.

Then there was the matter of Polina. His mouth settled into a grim line. He had to talk to her.

He knew that Risyda was going to want to hear every single detail and wouldn't rest until she'd wrung them out of him, so he decided he'd wait until they were alone in her room that night to tell her. Just before they retired, he told her that he had something he needed to do, and that he'd meet her later. He then went in search of Polina. She was still awake, sitting alone in one of the parlors with some needlework in her lap. She seemed surprisingly calm.

He stood over her for a moment, trying to work out what to say, but she spoke before he had the chance. "You don't need to worry about me telling anyone what I saw," she said, not looking up from her work. "I won't."

"Ah, thank you," Jasen said awkwardly.

"It isn't a personal favor," she said. "What possible gain would it be to me to anger the king?" She continued her work, still not looking at him. "You're to be married, aren't you?"

"Yes."

She nodded and said nothing more for a few long moments. "I suppose he loves you very much," she said.

"He does," Jasen said. "And I love him, too." Jasen made a sound of exasperation. "I don't understand you. I know you don't love him. Why do you want to be queen so badly?"

Polina didn't respond at first. "I have four older sisters," she finally began. "Two of them are queens. One is a duchess. The other is a powerful draeideess. My oldest sisters were swept up their very first stay at Court—in fact, they each had multiple suitors battling over them. My draeideess sister exhibited extraordinary magical abilities from the moment she was dragon-blessed. I, on the other hand, am in my third season at Court. I have not had a single proposal. I have no magical abilities at all. And I have tried. I have tried so very hard. I thought that maybe if the Lord of the Drae wanted me, then..." She trailed off, looking down at her needlepoint. "You know, my needlepoint instructor said I had the nicest, most precise stitches she'd ever seen. What a useless talent to have."

“You wouldn’t be happy,” Jasen said. “Believe me, if I could take Rilvor and leave the Lord of the Drae, I would.”

She laughed bitterly. “Ah, so I should not envy you for becoming Lord Consort because you have found pure and true love. That’s like saying I shouldn’t envy your wealth because of your incomparable beauty.”

“You’ll find someone of your own,” Jasen said hesitantly.

“No, I won’t,” she said. “Do you want to know why?” At last, she looked up at him. “It’s because I’m not a very nice person. It doesn’t matter how wealthy I am, or how beautiful, or how fine my manners are. I’m unpleasant. No one truly wants to be around me. And so I’ll be alone.”

Jasen had no idea what to say to that, but fortunately, Polina didn’t seem like she was expecting an answer. She gathered up her needlework and left the room.

For the second time that day, Jasen watched Polina leave. He wasn’t quite sure what to make of it, but he shook it off. Polina’s emotional well-being wasn’t any of his concern. Right now, he was going to have a much-deserved celebration with his best friend.

Chapter Eight

The time came at last for the suitors to arrive. Now that lessons had ended, everyone devoted their full attention to preparations for the welcoming ball. A certain hysterical air had settled in on the East Wing. Even Jasen and Risyda were not completely immune to it.

“So are you looking forward to meeting Lord Angunto?” Jasen asked her one day as they sorted through her dresses.

Risyda rolled her eyes. “I feel as if I’ve met him already, the way Lady Isalei has been pushing him on me.” She frowned at her closet. “Do you think blue for the welcoming ball?”

“Why would you ask me?” Jasen said. “My sense of style is not exactly famous.”

Risyda laughed. “That’s going to change once you become Lord Consort of the Drae. You could wear a potato sack and the rest of the nobility would follow your example.”

Jasen sighed. “Arbiter of style. Yet another job I didn’t know I was signing up for.”

Risyda grinned slyly at him. “I am so glad I have no other friends to tell your news to,” she said. “I’m not sure I could keep it in.”

“You won’t have to for much longer.” A sudden, terrible thought came over Jasen. “And then you’ll be leaving. I hadn’t even thought of that.” He slumped down on the sofa. “I’m going to be all alone.”

“You’ll have Larely.”

Jasen made a non-committal noise at that. He knew that Risyda knew that something was fishy between them, but Jasen had thus far dodged her attempts to pry it out of him.

“And of course, you’ll have your one true love,” she continued.

“Yes, but that’s not quite the same as a friend, is it?”

She threw a glove at him. “You aren’t losing a friend, either. It isn’t as if we’re to be ever separated, like tragic lovers. We’ll see each other again.”

“I suppose,” Jasen said, although he didn’t feel much cheered. He stood up. “I should go,” he said. “My father arrived last night and I’m supposed to see him for dinner.”

“Does he know yet?”

“I don't think so.” Jasen rubbed his face. “He is going to be even smugger than you were when he finds out.”

Risyda laughed. “What tragic problems you have, Lord Jasen. Go then.”

Jasen left to return to his room. When he arrived, he found Captain Ingo waiting for him. “The Lady Isalei wishes to see you,” he said. He seemed strangely hostile.

Jasen gave him a puzzled look. “Why didn't she just send Rotheld?”

“Because I wanted to see you there myself,” he growled. He didn't so much as offer his arm as take Jasen's, gripping him as he would a prisoner.

The captain led him to Lady Isalei's parlor. She was sitting ram-rod straight in her chair. No cozy tea was set out. “Lord Jasen,” she said, “have a seat.”

Jasen did as he was told. “My lady,” he said, “is there something the matter?”

She regarded him coldly. “What is the nature of your relationship with the guard Larely?”

The question took Jasen completely by surprise. “We're friendly,” he came up with eventually.

The lady's look grew even colder. “I suppose that is one way to put it.”

“I don't understand what you mean.”

“Then I will be blunt. I have discovered your affair.”

“Affair?” Everything seemed to suddenly grow dimmer. “We haven't had an affair!”

“He has been seen coming to and from your room late at night. Do you deny it?”

That was true, but how could he explain it without getting into a different kind of trouble—and without dragging Risyda into it? “I-it isn't...” But there was nothing he could say.

“So it is true.”

“No! I mean, yes, he did come to my room, but I never let him in.”

“And why was he coming to your room, then?”

"I like to go on walks at night," Jasen finally said. "I know it isn't allowed, but I thought if he came with me for—for protection, it would be all right."

"And did Lady Risyda also enjoy these walks?"

Jasen's eyes widened. "Why would you ask?"

"Because you and Larely both were seen coming to and from her room."

"By who?" Jasen said, suddenly angry. "Who saw these things?"

"That is not your concern. Answer my question."

Jasen tried to think of how to answer. Should he deny her involvement entirely? Or would that make things worse? "Yes, she did," he said. "For walks. Do you think the three of us were having at it—is that what you're suggesting?"

He had the satisfaction of shocking her, but that was grim comfort. "No, I am not," she said. "I found kara weed in Larely's possession. I know of Lady Risyda's habits, and now I know where she was getting it from. It is forbidden, naturally, but I was willing to overlook that small vice. However, if she knew about your affair with Larely, especially after the king began to court you—well, that is a different matter. Did she know about the two of you?"

"No, because there was nothing to know!" Jasen exploded. "We smoked kara weed together—the three of us. But that was the extent of it!"

"I wish I could believe you," she said. "I wanted to give you the benefit of the doubt. But I received some information this morning that cast your behavior in a different light."

"What does that mean?"

"Having inappropriate relationships with servants is a bit of a pattern for you, isn't it?"

There was a roaring sound in his ears. Everything around him seemed very far, as if he were falling down a pit and watching the world shrink away. "Who told you that?" he whispered.

"It doesn't matter. It's true, isn't it?" When Jasen didn't reply, the lady continued. "I am sorry that it came to this. You will understand that I must dismiss you from Court."

"But you can't!"

"Of course I can."

“No! You don’t understand. Rilvor and I—” He stopped, stumbling over his words. “I mean, the king and I, we’re—he asked me to marry him!”

Lady Isalei regarded him for a long moment. “And do you think,” she said slowly, “that once he learns this information, he will still want you?”

It was true. He had lied—several times, in fact. And once Rilvor knew that, would he believe him when he said that he and Larely were never involved? “I don’t know,” he said.

Lady Isalei looked on him with something close to pity. “The others will be told your father became ill, and you had to accompany him home,” she said.

“What will happen to Larely and Risyda?”

“Larely has been dismissed. Risyda will be going home as well.” She stood. Jasen struggled to stand as well, although he felt his legs might give out at any moment. “This is for the best,” she said. “It is clear that the position of Lord Consort would have been too much for you. It is a special burden to bear.”

In that moment, Jasen suddenly realized that the burden was already his. He had denied, shied away from it, claimed that he didn’t want it for weeks—but it wasn’t true. He thought about the healing flames that danced from his fingers. His body had already accepted it, even if his mind had not. It was his responsibility.

And he had already failed.

“Your father has been summoned,” she said. “Rotheld has packed your things. The two of you will leave as soon as he arrives.”

Jasen walked out of the room in a daze. Captain Ingo was there with a bewildered Risyda. “Jasen! You look like death! What’s happened? Why are we being called like this?”

“She knows,” Jasen said.

“Oh, is that all?” Risyda said. “Don’t worry too much—I’ll have this all taken care of. It’s not the first time I’ve—”

Lady Isalei’s voice interrupted her, calling her in. Risyda gave him a reassuring smile as she entered the room. He hoped they’d let him see her again before he left.

When he turned away from the door, he was confronted with Captain Ingo’s sneering face. “Larely was a good lad,” he said. “Had promise. And that’s all for nothing now, because of you.”

"I'm sorry," Jasen said in a small voice.

"Now shall I show you back to your room, *my lord*?"

Jasen made the trip back up the stairs for the last time. As Lady Isalei had said, his things were all packed. The clothes he'd arrived in were laying out on the bed. "My lord will want to change before his journey," Rotheld said.

Of course. These weren't his clothes, after all. He held his arms out and let Rotheld strip him, as he had gotten used to over the past three months. Usually when the laces from his corset were loosened, he felt a sense of release as he could breathe freely at last, but not today. He felt like he would never breathe easily again.

When he was changed back into his old Grumhulian clothes, Rotheld bowed and left, leaving the door open behind him. Jasen was glad he said nothing else; enough of his dignity had been stripped that he didn't care to dwell on it with someone else. It was only after he'd left that he noticed a tea with all of his favorite foods had been laid out on his table for him. He almost smiled. He sat down and tried to enjoy his last Draeland biscuit.

But even that small pleasure was denied him. No sooner had he taken a bite than a shadow darkened his doorway. For a moment he thought it was Risyda, but it was Polina instead. She folded her arms over her chest as she looked at him, her gaze cool and knowing.

"How?" Jasen asked simply.

"Your father arrived last night. I had a cousin of mine see what he could get out of him. I thought maybe there would be something I could use against you, but I honestly wasn't expecting to have it handed to me quite so easily."

Jasen shut his eyes. He tried to feel angry at his father, but found that well empty for once. Perhaps it was for the best, as Lady Isalei said. "And what about Larely?"

"Was I right?"

"No."

"Surprising, given the way he looked at you." She shrugged. "It didn't matter if it was true or not. It just had to *seem* true. And it seems like I've gotten rid of Risyda as well. I hadn't even been aiming for her." Instead of sounding smug, her tone was strangely flat.

"The king will never chose you," Jasen spat. "You'll never be queen!"

"I know that."

Jasen blinked in surprise. "Then... why?"

"I told you," she said. "I'm not a nice person." And with that she left, her shoes clicking down the hall.

Jasen sat staring dully at his tea. His appetite was now completely gone. Some time later, he heard footsteps again—high shoes, so not a guard, and they were stomping. Risyda appeared, looking breathless. "This," she said emphatically, "is *bullshit*. She has nothing—no proof of anything going on between you and Larely except for rumors. And she admitted as much, but said that you all but confessed! Why would you do that?" She paused. "Is it true? About you and Larely?"

"Of course it isn't true!"

"Then why are you sitting there slumped over like you've been found out?"

"Because the other parts were true. About the lovers I had in Grumhul."

"How did she find out?"

"It was Polina. She had a cousin of hers get my father drunk."

"That bitch."

"She did me a favor. It would have been a disaster. I don't have what it takes to be Lord Consort of the Drae."

"Aren't you at least going to wait to hear the king's opinion on the matter?"

"He'll agree once he finds out."

"How do you know that? Don't you want to hear it from him, or are you just going to let them cart you off like a criminal?"

"They aren't carting me off," Jasen said. "I want to go home."

"So that's it, then?" Risyda said, her voice rising. Her face was flushed. "You'll just leave?"

Jasen shrugged.

"But you can't!"

"I can," Jasen snapped, "and I will. It's over. You can either shut up about it or leave me alone."

Risyda took a step backward. For the first time since he'd met her, she looked hurt. "I'll leave, then," she said. And she did. He wanted to call after her

to apologize, but he felt too miserable to move. Jasen slumped over in his chair, burying his head in his arms, willing away tears.

Some time later, a guard he didn't recognize arrived at his door. "Your carriage has arrived, my lord," he said. Jasen somehow got to his feet and followed the man downstairs. His father was waiting for him outside the carriage, his hat in his hand. "O my son," he said, his brown eyes watery.

Jasen couldn't bring himself to be angry. It was Jasen's own lies that got him into this mess. He walked up to his father and hugged him. "I missed you," he admitted. And it was the truth. His father was insufferable at times, but he was still his dad.

His father was surprised for a moment, but returned the embrace. "I missed you as well."

Jasen pulled back. "Let's go home."

As they got into the carriage, he waved to Garyild and Rodrad, who were sitting at the front along with another servant—presumably there to drive them until they reached the inn at which their own horses were stored. It was good to see them as well. He tried to focus on the good that he could see in order to avoid the creeping sense of loss that filled him.

"I am surprised you're speaking to me," his father said as they got settled. "Curse the wine! And curse those slippery eels at Court! I swear I will never drink a drop again! Not one!"

Jasen spotted a wine skin on the seat beside him and grabbed it. "This is half empty," he pointed out.

"Well, not a drop *after* that's empty," he said. "They filled it up for me without asking. Doesn't make sense to waste good wine."

Jasen undid the cap and took a long swig, then passed it to his father. His father took a demure sip.

Jasen didn't look out the window until after they were out of Strengsend. He even resisted until they were out of Draethenper altogether. But when they were gone, he couldn't resist taking a look back. The city was as beautiful as the first day he saw it. Maybe even more so, now that he knew it contained Rilvor, and his children, and the dragons, none of whom he would ever see again. He slumped back into his seat, despair filling him.

"What's wrong, son?" his father asked as he took another drink.

“I was going to marry the king,” he said.

His father spit out the wine. “*What?!*”

Just then, a shadow fell over them, like a cloud passing overhead. But it wasn't a cloud, for Jasen felt warmth in his chest, stronger than it had ever been. He heard the horses whinny and balk, and a moment later, the ground shook. Jasen stuck his head out the window; Tassenred had landed in the road ahead of them.

He opened the door and got out of the carriage. His father also got out, his mouth hanging open in awe. Jasen half-walked, half-ran to the dragon; he couldn't decide if he was happy to see him or angry at him for starting him down this path to begin with. “I know you think that I can heal him, but I can't!” he shouted. “You chose the wrong person. I'm not fit. I can't do it! Find someone else!”

Tassenred didn't budge. He lowered his head until his snout was within reach of Jasen's touch. He found himself staring into one golden eye, as he had the first time they met. The warmth in Jasen's chest flared again, along with an ache to touch the dragon, just one more time. Jasen put a hand on his snout. “I'm sorry,” he said. “I tried, but I can't. I just want to go home now. Please.”

The golden eye blinked at him. Then the dragon lowered his head further. He wanted him to get on.

“What's going on?” his father shouted.

Jasen looked back at the carriage; the others were staring at Jasen and the dragon with gobsmacked looks on their faces. He looked to Tassenred, then back to his father. “I'm going home,” he shouted back. “I'll see you there.” Then he climbed onto Tassenred's back and they were off, soaring in the sky for one more flight.

He wasn't sure how long they flew. He lay with his whole body pressed against the dragon, his face resting against the smooth scales of his neck as comfort and warmth pulsed through him. Time seemed to stand still. There was nothing but him, Tassenred and the sky.

But as with everything, it had to end eventually. As Tassenred began to descend, Jasen lifted his head from his neck and became more aware of his surroundings. The land below them was beautiful, full of marshes that were

green and wet with life. As they got closer, he realized that it was Grumhul. Rilvor was right; it did look beautiful from the air.

Tasenred circled for a while, looking for a place to land. Finally, he found a patch of dry land that was large and clear enough for him, although the landing was very awkward. Jasen slid off of his back. "Sorry," he said. "I suppose there's a reason your kind doesn't come around here often."

He stretched, breathing in the deep, marshy smell of home. By the position of the sun, he could tell they'd only been flying for a few hours. He had heard that travel on dragonback was quick; he never thought he'd have the opportunity to experience it first-hand. It was amazing that a journey that took so long by land could be covered so quickly in flight.

Now that he was off of the dragon's back, the real world began to crash in on him once more. He sat down on the ground and drew up his knees. "Thanks for the ride home," he said to Tasenred. He felt a little guilty about leaving his father like that. He was also going to have to answer a lot of questions to his fellow Grumhulians. His arrival by dragonback would probably be the talk of Grumhul for at least the next decade. Some were probably already on their way here, if they'd seen them land.

He rested his head on his knees for a few moments, then took off his boots and his socks. He stood up, walked over to the marsh, and plunged his feet in the muddy waters. He sighed with contentment. "My feet have been aching for months. Good old Grumhulian mud does wonders for achy feet, you know." He squished the mud between his toes. "I shouldn't have ever left here. This is where I belong. There's not much to it, but I was happy here."

Tasenred blinked at him.

"Well, all right, maybe I wasn't happy here, either." He rubbed his face. "It seems that I don't belong anywhere." He drew up his knees and put his head on them. "But that isn't really true, is it?" he said. "Because I belong with him." The loss of it finally hit him with its full force, and Jasen began to weep.

Tasenred nuzzled him with his snout; Jasen turned and put his arms around the dragon's neck. He wept until there was nothing left in him. Eventually, he released the dragon and turned around to lean against him. The hard edge of his despair had softened, but now he felt empty. "It doesn't matter, though. He won't have me. And he shouldn't, because I do everything wrong. I could never be Lord Consort of the Drae. I couldn't bear the weight of that responsibility, don't you see?"

But as he thought about it, he realized that wasn't entirely true, either. If the weight had truly been overwhelming, shedding it should have left him feeling free. But he didn't feel free; he felt unmoored, like a ship being tossed in a storm. It was then he realized that weight wasn't always the same thing as a burden. It could be an anchor—what held you secure in a world that was often chaos.

But what use was that realization now? Everything was still ruined. Except—he hadn't even given Rilvor the chance to forgive him. He'd just run away like a coward. He owed it to both of them to see if they could work through it.

He stood up. "Will you take me back?" Jasen asked Tassenred. The dragon lowered his head. Jasen was just about to climb on when he saw something in the sky, growing larger as it moved towards them. It was a dragon. A familiar dragon.

Rilvor had come after him.

Woria had the same trouble landing as Tassenred had, especially with Tassenred taking up so much space. Tassenred ended up with his feet in the mud as well. Rilvor nearly flew off of Woria's back and ran towards Jasen, straight into the swamp. Before he could think of how to react, Rilvor grabbed him into a tight embrace. "Jasen," he said, his voice full of emotion. "My darling. My love. Why did you run away?"

Jasen pulled back, looking at him in bewilderment. "But... didn't they tell you?"

"About the guard? Yes. I knew it was false. I knew that even before I talked to him. I talked to your friend Lady Risyda as well."

"You talked with them?"

"Yes, and I have made sure neither of them will receive any punishment."

"But what about the rest?"

"About your past lovers? I do not care. I told you I had my own. Why should I care if you did as well?"

"I lied to you."

Rilvor actually smiled. "Perhaps you were under the impression that it mattered to me, and if that is the case, than the fault lies with me, not you."

"Truly?" Jasen said.

“Yes, truly!”

Jasen felt relief flood through him. “Are you sure you still want me? I’m impulsive and ill-mannered and a mess in general.”

“Do you not see that is exactly why I need you?” Rilvor said. “I am surrounded on all sides with proper and correct, and it is suffocating me.”

“But the others—”

“Hang the others! If they want magic in their realms, they must accept that the Lord of the Drae must look after his heart more than their social niceties.” He tipped Jasen’s face up. “I *need* you, Jasen. I love you. Please, will you come back with me?”

Jasen’s heart felt like it could burst. “Yes,” he said, putting his arms around Rilvor’s neck. “*Yes.*”

And then they were kissing, so caught up with one another that they might as well have been one person. Warmth flared all around them; when they parted, they were both glowing with Jasen’s strange fire—a fire that healed rather than burned. Like him, it was a fire that didn’t behave the way it was supposed to.

And that was what made it work.

Epilogue

The wedding was full of as much pomp and circumstance as one would imagine. He and Rilvor survived it. It seemed as though they had barely said their vows when they were ripped apart again at the reception, both of them inundated with well-wishers—or at least, those who wanted to seem as if they were wishing them well. Jasen knew that many still thought the king had made a foolish choice, but the formerly weak magic across the realms had already sprung back, twice as strong as it had been before—that shut up even the greatest skeptics.

His father made a predictably embarrassing spectacle of himself; he kept clapping Rilvor on the back and calling him his “son.” Rilvor didn’t seem to mind; he actually said he found Jasen’s father “charming.” Jasen loved his father, but he was glad that he was going to be charming from a distance. After the wedding, they were sending him back to Grumhul with all the riches he had dreamed of—along with an extremely stern royal accountant, who would make sure his father didn’t lose any of it. They were also sending along a team to help renovate their old castle. He and Rilvor planned to make Grumhul their home away from home. After all, it was just a short dragon’s flight away.

Jasen managed to pry himself away from it all to find Risyda. She’d arrived a few days ago, but they’d barely had time to speak with all of the preparations. In spite of the king’s pardon, she had opted to leave Court. When he and Rilvor had returned, she had cursed him out mightily before forgiving him, and they’d parted on good terms. He finally spotted her by one of the buffet tables, wearing the traditional red garb of a draeideess. Her decision to turn to a religious life didn’t surprise Jasen as much as he thought it would. After all, he knew first-hand how difficult it was to deny a dragon.

They ducked into a corridor. “Good job up there,” Risyda said, grinning. “You only looked like you were going to faint once. Maybe twice. And the party is absolutely splendid.”

Jasen grinned back. “Has all of this made you miss the decadent life?”

“Not in the least,” she said. “By the way, I didn’t get to tell you earlier that I stopped by to see Larely on my way to the palace.”

“You did?” Larely had decided to give up his position as a guard and go to work at his father’s vineyard. “How is he?”

“He’s doing really well,” Risyda said. “He wished he could have been here.”

“I’m glad to hear it. And I haven’t had the chance to tell you—I received a letter from Polina.”

Risyda smirked. “Don’t tell me she was groveling for forgiveness so she could come back to Court. Or no—actually, *do* tell me she was groveling. Tell me every pathetic detail.”

“She left Court of her own volition,” Jasen reminded her. Polina had packed up and left immediately after her final confrontation with Jasen. She’d been gone before Jasen and Rilvor had returned. No one heard from her for weeks. “She did ask for my forgiveness, but I wouldn’t say she groveled. She’s joined the Sisterhood of the Dragon.”

“No!” Risyda gasped. The Sisterhood was an order of nuns who, although not dragon-blessed, desired to live a life of religious service. They were famous for their renunciation of everything “worldly,” leading lives even more austere than those of the draeids and draeidesses. “Are you sure it wasn’t some sort of joke?”

“You know that she doesn’t have a sense of humor,” Jasen said with a grin, “and she was sincere. It was a very nice apology, actually. It seems like she’s found some peace.”

“Well, good for her.” Risyda looked thoughtful for a moment. “Perhaps I should go visit her.”

“I think she would like that.” Jasen glanced into the main hall again. He sighed. “I should get back. I have many more hands to shake and ass-kissings to endure. You will be coming tonight, won’t you?”

“What kind of question is that?” Risyda said, hitting him on the shoulder. “Of course I will.”

After the human festivities concluded, Rilvor and Jasen were going to the draemir for their Drae Wedding—a much more important affair than the human one they had just endured. It was there that Jasen and Rilvor’s bond would be magically sealed. Only those who had received a dragon’s call were permitted to attend.

The reception ended at last. He and Rilvor retired to the royal apartments—which were Jasen’s apartments, too, now that they were married. As soon as

they were alone, Rilvor swept him into an embrace. "How are you faring?" he asked.

"Better, now that it's over."

"It isn't over yet," he said.

"Yes, but it's no hardship to be around dragons. Especially since we won't have to wear all of this ridiculous nonsense."

"No, we won't," Rilvor said, his voice deep. He trailed a hand down Jasen's back, brushing his fingers against the lacing of his breeches.

Just then, there was a knock on the door. It was the children with their nurse. Rilvor and Jasen parted reluctantly. They had waited this long—a few more hours wouldn't make much of a difference. Besides, Jasen was glad to see the children; it was nice to have a little time to celebrate as a family. The servants brought up a light meal, and then the children were taken off to bed.

Afterward, he and Rilvor stripped out of their fine clothes and changed into more primitive garb. Jasen wore a newly made Drae's cloak, made from Tassenred's teeth and scales and clasped shut with a bright red dragon's tear. When they were ready, they made their way to the draemir. They were accompanied by a procession of dozens of draeids and draeidesses; he spotted Risyda, who gave him a little wave.

Dragon lights were lit all over the draemir, giving it an unearthly glow. And even more unearthly were the dragons in attendance—dozens of them crowded in the grassland, more perched on the mountains, looking down. Tassenred and Worja stood with Jasen and Rilvor as they intoned their vows in the ancient language. And when the last word was said, they embraced, all of the dragon lights grew brighter and brighter until it almost seemed like daylight. Jasen felt the magic flow between them, binding their souls together. They were bound, yes—but not chained. In fact, he had never felt so free.

The End

Author Bio

Sera Trevor received her B.A. in English Literature, but couldn't help but notice the lamentable dearth of hot guy-on-guy action in the Western canon. Fortunately, she discovered that the internet is teeming with what the classics lack. She's thrilled to add her own books into the mix. She lives in California with her husband and two children.

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