

The Sacrificial Knight

By

Kestrel Drake



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Love is an Open Road

An M/M Romance series

THE SACRIFICIAL KNIGHT

By Kestrel Drake

Introduction

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

What Is Love is an Open Road?

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 is an Open Road*.

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.

Each year, a dedicated group of Volunteers from the M/M Romance Group work hard behind the scenes to bring these stories to you. Our Editors, Formatters, Proofreaders, and those working on Quality Assurance, spend many long hours over a course of several months so that each Event is a success. As

each and every author also gives freely of their time and talent, it was decided that all edits suggested may be accepted or rejected by the author at any given time. For this reason, some stories will appear to be more tightly edited than others, depending on the choice of the author.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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Photo Description

Through the mist-swept streets of the capital city, a young knight leads a dragon on an enormous pair of reins. Though the creature towers over the knight, it follows willingly, its intense blue gaze focused on the man who looks back over his shoulder, the connection between them intense and undeniable.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

Remind me why I'm doing this?

Walking through the not-surprisingly empty streets of Dorbarra behind a man holding reins. My reins? Like I'm one of those stupid sirit that humans use?

I could breathe on him and poof! bits of ash drifting in the morning mist.

He's barely longer than my forearm. I could curl my claws around him, lift and snack. Though probably not. Great-great-great-Aunt Grnvlia had one once during an attempted hoard heist, and she said the rumors are wrong. They don't taste like chicken. At all. Nasty after-taste, too.

I could raise my head, yank him off the ground, shake, and see how far he'd fly before bouncing off... something-or-other.

I could stand tall, walk forward two fast steps and drop. His king's street sweepers would have something to sweep... or mop... up.

I could... shift. Rip my clothes off. His. Bend him over and fuck him here and now. Or perhaps not in the street. Humans are so touchy about public displays of affection. But there's a nice, shadowed alley over there. No one would notice. Much. Though they'd hear his howls of pleasure. And mine.

If I could do all that, and I so easily could, then why...

Oh.

Fantasy. Dragon shifter. Sex, please. Humor would be nice, too.

I hope someone will want to have fun with this.

Sincerely,

Eric (of the Alan Westfall variety)

Story Info

Genre: fantasy, alternate universe

Tags: shifters non wolf/cat, first time, smart-mouthed dragon shifters, virgins, knights, telepathy, a touch of magic, steamy hot loving between a dragon shifter and his virgin

Content Warnings: hints of off-page rape

Word Count: 35,211

Dedication

For my mother, who always wanted to see something of mine in print; and who, when I received a lovely coffee table book about dragons for my birthday a few years ago, said, “You still really like that stuff, don’t you?” with a baffled look on her face. Yes, Mom, I still really like that stuff. So be careful, because here, there be dragons!

Acknowledgements

To Eric (of the Alan Westfall variety), for giving me “the boys,” and for The Prompt. Those words were what made me fall in love with the dragon. They took root in my mind, gave him a voice, and made him live for me. I hope I have made him live for you, here on the pages of this story. And thank you, Eric, for being the kind of mentor an unpublished (but hopeful) writer can only imagine in her wildest dreams. You, sir, are my hero.

To Robert, Melody, Ryan, and Frances, for proofreading at the drop of a pin, sometimes into the wee hours of the morning—particularly Robert, for brainstorming with me when I was just stuck, and Melody, for her keen eye and meticulous attention to detail.

To my family, for their patience while I was lost in the writing cave.

Last, but not least, my thanks to the many writers who participated in previous DRitC events. Without you, I never would have found the Goodreads M/M Romance group, which has been one of the greatest treasures a reader or writer could discover.

Author's Note

Music has always been an important part of my life. I was in choir and dance from grade school on. When music isn't playing on some device in my vicinity, it's playing in my head. When I finish a book that has really touched me, I always wonder what music the author listened to while writing it. For those of you who think along those lines, here's a list of the music that helped my dragons to fly and my knight to risk everything for love:

Shinedown "Fly From the Inside"

Foo Fighters "Learn to Fly"

Creed "My Sacrifice"

Collective Soul "Shine"

Slash "Bent to Fly"

Soundgarden "Fell on Black Days"

Incubus "Wish You Were Here"

From the Moderators

Due to unforeseen circumstances, Kestrel Drake was not able to complete the editing with the event team. Only significant spelling and punctuation errors have been corrected.

THE SACRIFICIAL KNIGHT

By Kestrel Drake

Kynbraxxas

The human was mine. He just didn't know it yet.

He was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen. Considering how long it takes a *Ddraig* to reach maturity, that was saying something. His hair was what I noticed first. It was a blaze of autumn tones shining through the early morning-frosted branches that arched over the country road he traveled with a small company of men, well-armed and mounted. From high above, where I glided cloaked by gloomy clouds that boded ill for the travelers' rest come nightfall, he was the single point of color in a world gone grey with the beginning of winter. I'd flown out that afternoon to feed the hunger in my belly, but it was a different sort of hunger altogether that concerned me as I dipped below the cloud cover for a closer look.

The man was young, just come into manhood, if I judged aright. A few years earlier he would have been gamboling through the forest, tickling fish in the stream, or playing war games with other boys in the ominous shadows cast by the late afternoon sun slipping through the trees. Perhaps even playing Capture the Dragon, I thought to myself with an inward smile.

Though his face was beautiful beyond imagining, with full, rose-tinted lips made for kissing, he was undeniably male. His shoulders were broad, his waist narrow, his legs long and beautifully formed as they hugged the sides of his mount. I wanted them wrapped around me—in my human form, of course. Some may accuse me of possessing a ribald nature, but even I balk at the joining of human and dragon. The discrepancy in size alone...

But I digress. My eyesight is acute enough to discern great detail from on high, and I had long since perfected the art of gliding silently on the wind, so I had a good, long look at the object of my desire. It gave me time to formulate a plan.

He wore the garb of the scion of a noble house. His *sirit* was of good stock, bred to carry a man into battle. With a closer look, and a chance to get my hands on the animal, I could most likely tell the young man the names of its sire and dam. As the owner of the finest stud farm in Amaranthe, if not all of the Seven Kingdoms, I was in a position to know my bloodlines. My warmounts were in such high demand, even kings had to content themselves with a spot on my waiting list.

From the road they were on and the direction they were traveling, the party was headed for Dorbarra, the capital city of Amaranthe—which happened to be my destination, as well. Judging by the armed guard and the age of the young man, it was apparent that he was a Candidate, headed to the capitol to take part in the Choosing in honor of the Great Pact.

Well, that was just dandy. So was I.

The Candidate

“Keep to your horse, boy!” the captain of Sir Merek Gillivray’s guard said. He’d seen the hazard on the road before his charge had and judged aright that the young knight was in danger of being unseated.

Merry jerked his attention back to the road, feeling the slow burn of embarrassment flood his face. The men surrounding him made no attempt to hide their amusement at his expense. He’d been distracted ever since they’d turned onto this road after leaving his brother’s lands. Something had been following them for some time. He was sure of it, but he could never seem to catch more than a fleeting glimpse of a shadow overhead.

Captain Carac had less patience for Merry’s distraction. “A knight unhorsed is a kn—”

“A knight unmanned. I know.”

The grizzled captain eyed his charge balefully, gauging the likelihood of Merry attending to yet another lecture on proper comportment while in the capital city of Dorbarra. Not liking his chances of getting anything through that notoriously hard skull, especially when Merry had good reason for his obvious distraction, he let the matter drop with a loud, “Hmph!”

A low whistle brought Merry’s attention to Dain, the youngest of the guards Carac had handpicked for this journey, and closest to Merry in age. “He’s gettin’ more tetchy the further we get from home,” Dain observed. “It’ll be a miracle if we all get back with our heads on our shoulders.”

Rulf, riding beside Dain, gave his fellow guard a clout on the shoulder that would have unseated a less well-trained man. “Mind yerself, fool,” he growled at Dain.

“Aye, mind yourself, for no one else will,” Merry quipped, eager to lessen the sudden tension that rose among the men surrounding him. By unspoken accord, no one had mentioned what lay at the end of this journey—and he preferred they keep it that way. He was a Candidate, one of fourteen young nobles groomed for the duty of fulfilling the terms of the Great Pact. This could be the last time he rode out in the company of these men who had helped train him, some like Dain, having grown up with him.

Turning his thoughts away from that sore subject, Merry considered himself fortunate to be let off so lightly after having allowed his attention to waver from

his duty. Carac had been known to skin the hide off a new recruit who took to daydreaming when he should have had his mind on controlling his animal. The captain was skilled with many weapon types, but he was ever fond of saying that the warmounts that carried his soldiers into combat were the heart and soul of an army. They deserved the respect and the full attention of their riders.

While the other Candidates traveled with chaperones, attendants, valets or lady's maids, and tutors in the various arts thought to improve their chances of being Chosen—or more likely, their chances to catch the bachelor king's eye—Merry traveled much like any other young nobleman might. He had his own arms and armor, though he wore only a light leather jerkin due to the unseasonably warm weather. Accompanied by twenty well-armed and mounted guards under the command of his brother's best captain, and traveling under the king's banner just like every other Candidate did, he felt safe enough.

A low rustling in the underbrush drew Merry's eye to the antics of a pair of squirrels. These woods were teeming with wildlife, and he spared a thought for what he might have been doing if he were back at home. With training done for the day, he'd be free to take out his birds and dogs, and see what they could find for dinner. He especially missed his blue petaltail darter. She was not the newest bird in his mews, which was his pride and joy, but she was his favorite. Small, swift, and sleek, she was only suitable for bringing down small game, like mice, voles, squirrels, songbirds, doves, and such. Though she was one of his smallest hawks, she was fierce and fearless.

For his twenty-first birthday, his older brother had given him a fine tiercel with snowy breast and leg plumage and rich blue wings and crown. It was an extravagant gift for the brother of a nobleman of modest means, but exactly the sort of gift one gave to a Candidate about to step onto the Choosing Field. So while he'd smiled and been appropriately grateful, Merry had secretly wished that he had been just another young man who'd earned his spurs and was about to take on the duties of a new knight on his brother's estate. He would have been happy just to have been given something practical that spoke more of his brother's affection than of his pride at having their family's name honored by hosting one of the Candidates who would fulfill Amaranthe's part of the Great Pact.

There were fourteen of them selected every seven years, though Amaranthe only hosted the Choosing twice a century. Seven youths and seven maidens was the agreement, and from those fourteen, a representative of the dragons would select one human to be the sacrifice, the Chosen. Because any one of them

might be the Chosen, all were treated with equal deference. For those who returned home, there were honors and gifts from the Crown. For the family of the Chosen, there were gifts of land, new titles, and a place on the Roll of Honor, where their family name would be remembered for centuries to come. For the Chosen... Well, no one knew the answer to that. They left with the dragon and were never seen or heard from again.

Speculation on the fate of the Chosen was a popular pastime. Since he'd been selected to be a Candidate in his fourteenth year, Merry had deliberately avoided any conversation that centered on the Candidates, the Great Pact, or dragons. Most of his fellow Candidates enjoyed the attention and the gifts, preening under the approbation of a grateful public. Once they were selected for the honor, they threw themselves into the role of national hero with vigor, according to Merry's brother and everyone else who tried to coax him to rake in the benefits of his position while it lasted. Instead, Merry trained for his knighthood, built his mews and tended his birds, and went on as if he were any other young Amaranthine noble with nothing more to concern him than the passing of the seasons and the care of his family's lands.

A shadow passing overhead interrupted Merry's gloomy thoughts. Though it had passed before, his keen hunter's eye was able to acquire and identify it. Merry felt confident that whatever it was, it had been tracking them since they'd turned off of the track from home and onto the market road that would link them with the road to Dorbarra.

It was there that Merry would meet his fate.

Kynbraxxas

It had all started for me when I was summoned by my great-great-great Aunt Grnvlia to the massive cave system that housed the elders of our Clan. She generally left me to my own devices, so I knew something was amiss the moment her summons arrived.

Great Aunt Grnvlia disliked using her human form so much that it had been decades since I had seen her as anything other than a dragon. In private, or when speaking to those outside the immediate family, I had been known to speculate whether this particular quirk had more to do with the fact that dragons showed little sign of aging in their true forms, than with any dislike for humanity in general. As she was the representative for our Clan on the High Council of the *Ddraig*, Grnvlia held the highest rank most of our kind were ever likely to meet. Every child of our Clan had been or would be instructed by her at some point in their education, so that all grew up with a healthy respect for her.

It was that respect that had me in my dragon form when I reported to her quarters. Like many in my Clan, I am a blue dragon. Contrary to popular imaginings (where do humans come up with these strange ideas about dragonkind?) our coloring has nothing to do with our abilities. Blue dragons do not breathe ice any more than gold dragons shit coins. I cannot put it any more succinctly than that.

Like every other *Ddraig* ever born, I can mindspeak with other *Ddraig*, some humans, and some of the higher orders of beasts (don't tell the humans I described it this way; they're so sensitive about their supposed superiority over other life forms). I can create fire in my second stomach and breathe it in both dragon and human form—though it's much more impressive in dragon form. Obviously, I can shift between my two forms at will, though doing so too frequently can be very draining and require refueling and rest before having full control of my powers again.

What is lesser known is the ability all *Ddraig* have to heal themselves and others. Our saliva and blood hold healing properties that greatly accelerate the speed at which other species can heal. It should be fairly clear why we keep this aspect of our power to ourselves. Humans can be a brutish and selfish lot; it's why the Great Pact exists in the first place.

I suppose I should explain the Great Pact, as it bears no small significance to this tale. You might want to lay in a bit of sustenance, as this is a somewhat tedious subject.

The official story is that every seven years, the humans select seven maids and seven youths of the noblest houses in the Seven Kingdoms. Those fourteen sacred virgins are ritually purified and dressed in their finest raiment. Surrounded by an honor guard of the greatest warriors in the kingdom, each sacred virgin mounts a prized beast specifically bred for this purpose. The virgins and their guards follow a route that is ancient and steeped in history and blood and fire. All along the way, the nobles and commons assemble to watch and see that the Pact is once more fulfilled. Their destination is the Choosing Field, and during their ride, people will offer them gifts of journeycakes and sparkling fruit wines. As they draw near to their destination, the landscape grows quiet. There are fewer people, fewer herds, fewer signs of cultivation. The Field looms ever closer, and beyond it lie the cave-riddled cliffs that house the beast they have come to appease. The land is quiet, for this is the realm of the dragon.

Bullshit.

Every seven years, the humans enact this dolorous farce, because that is how they justify the agreement they made with us at a time so far back in memory that none of us can honestly say that we were there when the bargain was struck—not even my ancient great-great-great aunt. Which is saying something, because our kind can live a very. Long. Time. Our oldest recorded lifespan was eight thousand years. That might not seem all that impressive when compared to the entire span of history, but let me tell you—it impresses the hell out of me.

The truth is that Amaranthe, the kingdom in which I live, is one of the oldest of the Seven Kingdoms, going back for five thousand years of recorded history. Its enemies go back a similar length of time, which is why the bargain was struck in the first place. Amaranthe and its rivals nearly destroyed all of humanity. In truth, they were well on their way to taking the rest of us with them.

But let us turn back to the subject of Great Aunt Grnvliia. She was a blue dragon, as well, though her hue was quite different from my own. Whereas I was the blue of a winter sky and could easily hide within the clouds or mist when I flew over them, she was as vivid as the summer sky. Many a fine day

had I spent with her, flying over our lands, chasing the herds that were kept solely to fill our bellies. Well do I remember the first time I explored the human lands by myself—well—and how was *I* to know their herds were not meant for us?

When I entered her cavernous parlor, I dipped my snout in respect to her. She returned the greeting, her own snout only slightly less vibrant in color than it had been when I was a hatchling. She looked over her shoulder as her great-great niece approached from another room. Grndda—my lady mother—moved gracefully into the great chamber, pausing for a moment within the brilliant shaft of light that shone through an opening that had been cut cleverly in the side of the mountain allowing natural lighting to enter the otherwise gloomy cavern. We might live in caves to accommodate our dragon forms, but *Ddraig* loved the light too much to sacrifice its warmth for the sake of the large living quarters afforded by the natural caverns that dotted the mountains of Amaranthe.

With my mother in attendance, I knew I wasn't going to like what Aunt Grnvlia had to say. My mother and I were close; some might even call us the best of friends. *Ddraig* do not require their parents after a certain age, so while our families are fiercely loyal, we are also quite independent of each other in the normal course of affairs.

This was clearly *not* the normal course of affairs.

Settle yourself, whelp, Grnvlia said in the mindspeak we used in our dragon forms.

Though, to be fair, we used it often enough in our human forms as well, since it had the benefit of keeping our conversations private from most humans, and could be heard across a goodly distance.

I tucked my wings in close to my body and assumed a polite, attentive stance.

Hmph! Did I mention that Grnvlia had had the teaching of me for a number of years? She knew me too well to believe the angelic attitude I attempted to exude.

Nothing for it but to put it to you plainly, she said. **You have been selected to choose from among this year's Candidates.**

My jaw dropped, rudely displaying the rows of razor-sharp teeth that filled my mouth.

You'll report to the Choosing Field on the appointed day and claim your Chosen. The expression in her eyes softened. **This is no mistake, youngling. Our Clan holds the honor this year, and I could name no finer representative than you.**

While I stood there in stupefaction, she resumed her customary forbidding scowl. **Now get your carcass out of my cave! You have much to do. Go make yourself pretty for your Chosen. Gods know you'll probably scare him witless if left to your own devices, so take Grndda with you.**

She turned her back on us, signifying that the “discussion” was over. My mother prodded and shoved until I managed to shift myself out of the chamber. Once we were clear of Grnvlia's sight, she shifted to her human form and led the way to the alcove where we'd left our clothing.

It was no use trying to maintain my dignity with my mother; she was all too fond of reminding me how many times she'd wiped my bottom when I was a hatchling. She watched me dress and shook her head at the state of my clothing.

“Really, Baxx, a summons from Great Aunt Grnvlia, and this was the best you could do? I know you can afford better.”

Baxx is the name I go by when in my human form. My mother enjoys the maudlin tale of my clumsy attempts to speak my true name when I was a whelp as the source of the nickname. My stance is that it just makes sense as a shortening of my proper moniker. Kynbraxxas is something of a mouthful, after all, and too obviously not human in origin. It would give me away as a shifter in a heartbeat, and many humans had prejudices against the Otherkin in our many and splendid forms. The humans had prejudices against each other, let alone those of us who had mystical powers. Sheer jealousy, most likely. Prejudice usually was.

“Don't sulk, dear. It doesn't become a *Ddraig* of your years.”

I knew better than to scowl at my mother. Instead, I took a moment and examined her own choice of finery. For simplicity's sake, she'd selected a gown that required no handmaiden's assistance. It was cut with a full skirt and a fitted bodice that buttoned up the front. I noticed that the buttons were carved in the shape of tiny birds. She had a passion for them, much as I did my warmounts. The fabric must have been hand dyed to just the right shade of blue to enhance her coloring.

While Grnvlia and I were blue dragons, Grndda was a golden beauty. It was a rare color among us, and she was renowned as the fairest of our kind to be hatched in a millennium. What can I say? *Ddraig* like shiny things.

In her human form, her hair was like spun gold, her eyes the most piercing, clear cerulean blue you could imagine. While I have my father's darker chestnut hair, I have my mother's eyes exactly. I'm told they are one of my finest features. The other nominees for that honor vary according to whom you question on the subject.

As for the rest of my features, I'm told they are a perfect blend of my two parents. My father having been killed when I was a mere hatchling, I had no basis for ascertaining the truth of the matter. Grndda showed me a miniature portrait of him once. It depicted a man with smoldering amber eyes, a widow's peak, thick eyebrows, a fairly straight nose, and a wicked smile. It was her custom to keep that portrait hidden among her most intimate possessions at the heart of her hoard. My mother she may have been, but I could see how it hurt her to share that last piece of him even with me, so I never asked to see it again.

Like most other sentient species, *Ddraig* mated for many reasons—for companionship, for mutual gain, for political expedience. Ours is a long-lived race, so most of us mate more than once in our lifetimes. When I say “mate,” I do not mean “procreate.” Gestation is a lengthy process—one does not merely drop an egg and leave it—and rearing young that take the better part of a century to mature into adulthood is not for the faint of heart. We understand the importance of family, of Clan. We are a loyal species, on the whole, and when we give our word, we keep it.

My father took our Pact with the humans seriously, and when the borders of Amaranthe were threatened by a pirate fleet, he answered the king's call for help. Unfortunately, the pirates turned out to be the naval forces of the king of Farradh. His ancestors may have signed the Great Pact, but that meant nothing to him—not when there was profit to be made by raiding the shores of a country he considered to be inferior to his own. Farradh had its own population of *Ddraig* and had spent centuries studying them. As my father flew overhead, their cannon discharged a special shot designed to ravage a dragon's wings. As he plunged into the sea, other ordnance rained ruin upon his body. Even our remarkable healing ability couldn't keep pace with the damage.

That was five monarchs ago, in Amaranthe's history. For the humans, it is long forgotten. For my mother, it was but a season ago. Grnvliia taught me the tales of my father's exploits, and as I grew up, I decided that it wasn't surprising that he died in such a way. It was what came of *Ddraig* mixing in human affairs.

Grnvlia knew how I felt about this. It was most likely the reason for her ambush tactics. I thought it both cowardly and a masterful stroke of manipulation for her to leave me to my mother's tender mercies after delivering such a blow. Before she opened her mouth, I knew Grndda would give me a lecture about honoring my father's memory by keeping the Pact he died protecting.

Shows how much I understand about females.

"There are lands beyond the Seven Kingdoms," she said.

I gaped again, as I had done when Grnvlia had informed me of my fate, only this time with fewer teeth.

"We could arrange transport for a portion of your stud farm—a stallion or two and a selection of your best mares. You could begin afresh elsewhere."

"What... You have a plan?" To say I was dumbfounded would be a gross understatement.

"I won't watch my son fall to the same empty Pact that killed his father." Her lovely face was set in lines that were startlingly grim. It was the strongest emotion I'd ever seen her display.

It was odd. I hadn't been keen on this idea—Well, I'd been dumbfounded, to tell the truth. How the Council had come to the decision that I would be the best *Ddraig* for the job, I didn't think I'd ever understand. But Grnvlia was a wise old female, and I'd never made a habit of second-guessing her. Not for many decades, at least.

"No. I'll do it."

It was gratifying to see that even my perfect mother could adopt the same gobsmacked expression that frequently plagued me. I let her sputter for a moment or two because, well, what can I say? It was just too rich. Of course, I knew better than to let her see how amused I was. I'm not that much of an idiot.

"But... but... you..." She tilted her head, and her expression softened. "You'll be responsible for this human for the rest of its life."

"His life, Mother. I know most of us like to experiment, but I've never had any interest in females—of any species!"

She smiled. "Yes, I know. I've, um... I've spoken with a couple of *Ddraig* who were in your position in the past."

I stiffened. She meant well, but I could tell from her uncharacteristic hemming and hawing that I wouldn't care for the answer. "It won't make any difference—"

"One of them was happy. Her human had found a need for his skills in one of the Other communities, and she saw him from time to time before he passed. The other..." Her voice trailed off.

Much as I loved her, I was done with the dramatics. "Just say it. There's no need to walk on eggshells."

"He fell in love with his human. He tried mating her, but it didn't take. You know it usually doesn't with a non-magical race. And he pines for her still."

Fuck. I sighed. "I have never formed that kind of attachment," I said as calmly as I could manage. She meant the best, I knew that, no matter how frustrating she was being. "I enjoy bedsport freely with several species of Otherkin. Why would I succumb to mindless passion with a human, of all things?"

She gave me one of those looks that mothers will do from time to time. The one that says you're a complete shit-for-brains who can't be trusted to know his arse from his elbow. Trust me, no passing of time or number of centuries under my belt would erase that look from her repertoire of motherly expressions.

I'd earned that expression on just about every subject *but* the one we now discussed. Grndda had a good deal more to say about the idea of me taking on the responsibilities of representing the *Ddraig* in this Choosing, but I was stubborn. It was one of my most endearing traits.

But there was no real answer to her concern. I could only fly where fate and the gods led me.

The Journey

As they turned onto the road to Dorbarra, Merry noticed that their erstwhile shadow had left them. Without this mystery to ponder, the journey began to grow dull, the monotony of travel broken only by the occasional meeting with fellow travelers on their way to the capital city. In the forenoon of the second day on the road, they met with an itinerant knight who told them he was bound for the tourney to be held on the evening after the Choosing.

People always had questions about being a Candidate. The one they asked most often was how did he deal with the forced celibacy—it being a long-established rule that only virgin sacrifices were acceptable to dragons, and whether they used the word officially or not, Candidates were nothing less than sacrifices.

The odd thing was, celibacy had never been difficult for Merry. He had the typical morning wood and general randy thoughts of a healthy young man, but he'd never fixed those thoughts on anyone in particular. No one had ever made him burn.

So when their party came across a tall man walking the most magnificent warmount Merry had ever seen, he had no idea what to make of the tightness he felt deep in his gut. Flustered, he allowed Carac to do the talking while he cast surreptitious glances at the knight and tried to sort through the chaos of his thoughts.

The most striking thing about the knight was the pure cerulean blue of his eyes. Outside of a clear autumn sky or the petals of certain flowers, Merry had never seen such a color in nature. There was more to them than the incredible color, though. They flashed with a wicked sense of humor and an indefinable sense of... wisdom, far beyond the man's apparent years.

"That's a striking mount you have there, good sir," Carac said as he looked over the animal with an experienced eye.

Standing a full nineteen hands high, he was the largest *sirit* Merry had ever seen. Merry had no doubts whatsoever about the gender of the animal; the proof of its masculinity hung heavy between its legs. A glossy red coat testified to its overall health and vigor. The man walking beside him topped his beast's withers with inches to spare, making him easily six foot seven. Used to being one of the tallest men in the room, Merry would have to tip his head back to

look up at him if they stood toe to toe. For some reason, that image made his face flush with heat, and he fiddled with his reins for a moment to give himself time to school his expression.

The stranger smiled and slapped the beast's side with evident affection. "Aye. He's the prize of my stable. And knows it, too," he added with a good-natured laugh.

Carac raised a brow, impressed. "Your stable, eh? You run a stud?"

"I do. And Beast, here, is the best stallion I've ever bred." The stallion in question swung its head around and seemed to glare at the knight from one enormous amber eye set round with reddish-brown lashes. Giving his steed an affectionate nudge with his shoulder, he held a hand out towards Carac. "Forgive my manners. I am Baxx, of Shadow's Pass. You've met Beast."

Captain Carac met the proffered hand with his own and shook it heartily. "Carac, captain of this company. Allow me to present my lord, Sir Merek Gillivray." He gestured towards Merry, who nodded politely.

Baxx gave Merry a perfectly executed bow, and looked up at him with a grin that seemed to invite him to share in some unspoken jest. "Sir Merek, I am honored to make your acquaintance. Are you bound for Dorbarra to participate in the tourney?"

"How come you to be walking instead of riding yon magnificent fellow?" Carac interjected.

Baxx accepted the redirection amiably. "He's thrown a shoe. I'm hoping to find someone with a forge along the way. I can easily act as my own farrier, as long as I have access to a good forge."

Carac gave the man an approving smile. There was no quicker way into his good graces than to exhibit devotion to the care of one's mount. Merry watched them, kindred spirits together, as they examined the stallion's feet and enjoyed a lively debate of the finer points of hoof care.

Baxx's chestnut hair was plaited into a long queue that trailed down to his waist. It gleamed in the sun next to Carac's shorter, grizzled hair, which he'd clubbed at the back of his neck to keep it out of his face in the morning breeze. For all that Carac looked to be the elder of the two, Baxx was the more self-possessed and self-assured.

Late in the afternoon, they came upon a village large enough to support a smithy. Baxx charmed his way into the smith's good graces and received

permission to use the forge. Carac kept a close eye on the proceedings, and by the time Beast was properly shod, Baxx had clearly won the old soldier over completely. With their captain's approval came the men's, and it was decided that Baxx would join them on the final leg of their journey.

With Baxx now mounted, the party picked up speed and made good time. Carac had decreed that they would avoid inns along the way, the better to maintain Merry's anonymity as long as possible. It wasn't that anyone would dare interfere with a Candidate on the way to the capital; but Merry was a private person, and he hated being made a spectacle. The time would come all too soon, when he would have little choice in the matter, so Carac allowed him his privacy while he could.

Even so, it didn't take Baxx long to conclude Merry's true identity. They'd stopped for the night, and Merry had left the party to fetch water from the stream which had been the deciding factor in the placement of their campsite.

“Shouldn't one of the soldiers be doing that?”

Merry had been in the process of bending over to fill one of the water flasks when Baxx's amused voice caught him by surprise. He twisted without quite straightening up, and went down hard at the edge of the stream. Stifling full-fledged laughter, Baxx sauntered over and offered him a hand up.

At the first touch of their palms, Merry's body flushed with heat, and even Baxx seemed to fall still for a moment, frozen in that space between being strangers and being... something else altogether. The merriment fled from that mobile face, and was replaced by an expression Merry could not begin to identify. All he knew was that it made him go tight and tingly, as if he'd been caught out in a thunderstorm.

Then the moment passed, and Baxx hauled him up, steadying him with his free hand on Merry's elbow. Each new point of contact made Merry's senses light up, and he began to see what everyone had been talking about when they spoke of the burden of celibacy. If he'd known this man for the last few years, would he have thought of it as too great a burden to bear? In the long run, it wouldn't have mattered. He was a Candidate, and that was an end to it.

Baxx helped him fill the rest of the skins and flasks as well as a pail to use in the camp stew Carac had planned for their supper, and carried the larger share of it back to the campsite. Merry grumbled beneath his breath that he hadn't asked for help—or at least, he'd thought it was under his breath. Evidently, Baxx had unnaturally keen hearing because he stopped so abruptly that Merry squashed his nose against the powerful muscles of Baxx's back.

“No, you didn’t. I offered it not because I thought you weak, but because I wanted to do it. The other men are talkative, but you’re a closed book. I followed you out here because I wanted to get to know you.” He’d turned as he spoke, and though Merry had expected to see amusement, Baxx’s expression, for once, did not invite laughter. He was in earnest, the hail-fellow-well-met air he’d worn all day replaced with a humming sense of expectation. Without doubt, this was the most confounding man Merry had ever met.

“There’s not that much to know,” Merry said, adjusting his hold on the straps of the skins to keep from meeting Baxx’s eyes.

“A patent lie,” Baxx said in a low voice that rumbled through Merry’s bones like the purr of a great cat. Everything about this man stoked Merry’s senses and threw him off balance. For someone who had never experienced basic physical attraction before, it was overwhelming.

He stepped away from Baxx, clutching the water skins in a white-knuckled grip. “No lie. I’ve spent my life studying and training. There’s nothing more to know.”

“No pastimes? Music? Literature? The hunt?”

Merry paused. “I-I do keep a mews. Only a few birds, but... Watching them fly gives me a sense of, of...” He let his voice trail off, unable to find the right words to express what he felt when he watched his birds soar.

“Freedom,” Baxx concluded. He seemed charmed by the admission of Merry’s interest in falconry.

“Freedom,” Merry agreed. For a moment, they shared the fellowship of a common interest; then Merry remembered just how little freedom was left to him. He ducked his head, once more the uncertain youth he seemed doomed to play in the company of this man.

Baxx sighed. “I wish you wouldn’t feel obligated to hide from me.”

Merry shook his head. “You have a strange way of addressing people you’ve only just met. What is it you want from me?”

“You intrigue me. That doesn’t happen often.”

“I? You’d be hard pressed to find a more ordinary person than the man you see before you.”

Baxx’s eyes twinkled. “I like everything I’ve learned so far about the man before me.”

Merry found himself speechless once again. No one spoke to him in such a familiar way, not even his brother. This went beyond polite conversation, or even friendly camaraderie. This was flirting.

“Sir Merek?” Merry and Baxx turned to face the soldier who had called out. “Captain sent me to check was everything all right with you.”

Merry blushed as if he’d been caught red-handed. Instead of answering, he pushed past the soldier, flasks jangling against his leg. He left the pail for Baxx to manage.

Carac eyed him quickly but thoroughly as he set down his burdens and stalked off to set up his bedroll. After years of acting as his brother’s squire, Merry was accustomed to tending to his own needs, especially in the company of other men sleeping rough on the road. Baxx followed him at a leisurely pace, nodding at Carac as he entered the clearing, and heading straight for Beast.

Game was still plentiful enough that they had sufficient hare for a rich, filling stew that made the men lean back and rub their bellies. Though Merry had little appetite, he noticed that Baxx had taken a double portion. He supposed it took a lot of fuel to maintain that powerful body. Those who had first shift of guard duty disappeared into the dusk, and the rest settled down to cards and conversation.

Though he did his best to concentrate on the conversation between the trio of guardsmen grouped to his right, Merry kept hearing snatches of Carac’s interrogation of their guest. Baxx had a deep, rich voice that was both soothing and unsettling for Merry. He closed his eyes and let the rhythm of that voice wash over him, and for the first time, he felt regret for his fate.

If only he had met Baxx earlier, he could have had time to explore these feelings... But no, he had to remain untouched for the Choosing. He had the suspicion that if he’d had more time to get to know Baxx, he wouldn’t have remained untouched for long. Virgin he might be, but he’d grown up around farm animals, and the people who lived on his brother’s demesne made no secret of their intimate activities. Matches were made, unions celebrated, births recorded in an unending cycle, with only Merry left out of the loop. Or so it had often seemed.

He’d spent years wondering what all the fuss was about, and on this day, in one fell swoop, all of Merry’s questions and confusion seemed to have been answered—the truth revealed by the simmering of Merry’s blood in the presence of a beautiful stranger.

Baxx looked up from his conversation with Carac, right into Merry's eyes. At that moment, Merry knew he was not alone, and that Baxx, too, acknowledged whatever this was that drew them to each other. Baxx went still as he gazed at Merry, then it seemed he put all the heat he was feeling into his eyes. Merry shivered under the regard of that unearthly blue gaze.

One of the things Merry prided himself on was his ability to face uncomfortable truths. So there was no denying this particular uncomfortable truth; for the first time in his life, Merry was well and truly smitten.

Kynbraxxas

After leaving Grndda, I decided it was time to examine my options. One of the greatest advantages of my dragon form was the way the myriad shades of blue mimicked the sky that surrounded me. Whatever the season, I could usually blend in as long as I was gliding. The movement of my wings would attract the eye no matter how perfectly matched my coloring was. After all, the sky doesn't flap, does it? So I was fortunate enough to be able to enjoy a degree of anonymity wherever I flew—as long as no one watched the sky too closely.

When I said, "...examine my options," I meant, of course, that it was time to spy on my young knight. And I had the perfect means to insinuate myself into his party. Grndda herself had given me the idea, inadvertently. Her mention of my stud farm had reminded me that I had an ally for whatever endeavor I chose to undertake. For, you see, I did not breed ordinary warmounts. Nor were they mere quadruped ungulates that grazed on grasses and grains.

My stud was founded on a species that evolved separately but similarly to the standard *sirit* used by humans to bear their burdens and their posteriors hither and yon. They looked enough like the *sirit* to blend in, though even the average human would—did—give them a second glance. My steeds were taller, with denser bones and thicker muscles. They were bred to bear *Ddraig* in their human forms. We tended to be taller, and we were definitely stronger, than humans. And then there was the matter of our dragon forms.

No matter how well we could blend in with the human population, many animals could sense that we were Other. We could charm most animals well enough to pass among them without too much bother. Domesticated animals were open to mental manipulation. However, it was one thing to allow a *Ddraig* to pass by, but quite another to allow one to mount you. So to speak.

Ahem. Back to my stud... The prize of my stable; the sun, moon, and stars; the prince among stallions, was Beast. What? I'm not a sentimental male, and I'm certainly not pretentious enough to bestow names such as Grand Prancer Joust-a-Lot, or whatever ridiculous thing humans call their mounts. "Beast" suited him. He liked it; he told me so.

I did mean that literally. One of the most important traits of my warmounts was their intelligence. Earlier, I mentioned the ability to mindspeak. Every foal

born in my stable has this ability. It was a trait carried by some of their species, and I had selected my breeding stock to enhance it. Beast was the most perfect stallion I'd ever bred. It was sheer good fortune that he had also become my friend.

So when I departed Grnvliá's cavern, I flew straight to the small estate I maintained on the human side of the Veil to facilitate the sale of select mounts to those humans wealthy enough to equip and maintain the magnificent steeds my stable produced. There I outfitted myself as a fairly well-to-do knight/breeder. It wouldn't do to be ostentatious in my dress or equipment; wealthy men tended to travel in style and with a great deal of fuss. I would present myself as a trained fighter who had accrued sufficient funds to found his own stud. It wasn't far from the truth; it just wasn't the whole of the truth.

As I saddled him, I prepared Beast for the role he would play.

You're an especially fine battle steed from a prestigious bloodline.

True. Beast arched his powerful neck and bobbed his head, obviously preening.

I paused my brushing of his mane. His mane and tail were his crowning glory, a slightly brighter shade of red than his coat, and he was quite vain about them. The upkeep on his hair was time-consuming, and under normal circumstances, a stable hand would brush and braid it for daily exercise. If left loose, his mane and tail attracted mud, dirt, straw, and every other irritant he encountered. He usually wore it in braids, but when showing him to the prospective buyers of his foals, I had him brushed until he gleamed, even down to the feathering on his hooves. Of course, before battle, I clubbed his hair up in a war braid I had designed myself.

He was proud of his appearance, and well he should be, but his true value lay in his abilities on the battlefield. The humans trained their mounts to kick approaching enemies, charge down a man standing in their path, even bite their masters' opponents. Beast could do all this, of course, but he could also think. He was sentient, cunning, loyal. In short, he was the perfect partner and companion.

At the moment, my companion was staring at me shrewdly, head cocked as if seeking to read my thoughts. I scoffed and shook my head. That was one thing he could not do. Thank the gods. **That was not an observation, you great lug,** I said. **It was a reminder of your role. A certain amount of attitude is to be expected from a quality warmount, but don't overdo it. Human-bred sirit do not offer their opinions.**

He snorted, a puff of warm breath that blew back the strands of hair that clung to my forehead. **Pity for them.**

I doubt we'll come across anyone who could hear our mindspeak, but when we come to any populated areas, keep it to critical communication.

He nodded his large, elegant head, but rolled his eyes to indicate his opinion of the likelihood of finding humans who could overhear us. Mindspeak was usually secure between parties who intentionally linked together. It was rarely overheard, because we were all trained to shield our thoughts from the time we learned to speak. It took a very powerful mind to eavesdrop on mindspeak. Beast was most likely correct in his assessment of the security of our communication.

A plan?

It was a fair question. I'd made him a part of my scheme; he should understand what I was about to do. Still, I hesitated. It was a harsh blow, realizing I was about to embarrass myself in front of my companion. There was no way he would ever allow me to forget having developed an infatuation with a human, even one who was a Candidate.

I scouted out some of the Candidates.

The males?

He knew me well. **Of course. I found one who... He's...**

Beast whickered softly and pushed his nose into my shoulder. **You are love-struck.**

I stared at him. Very well, I gaped at him. It's not something I do often, but lately everyone around me seemed to excel at shocking the hell out of me. **I never—I don't...**

Never mind. Explain the plan.

I closed my mouth and gave him a good, hard glare, just to remind him who was in charge. Then I explained the plan.

We caught up with my prey's party late in the morning. The captain of the guard was a tough old soldier called Carac. I saw the way he eyed Beast, and rightly deduced that the way to his heart was through my knowledge and care of my animal. Once he accepted me, his men fell into line easily. If only the same could have been said for the object of my little charade.

His name was Sir Merek Gillivray. Carac called him Merry, a name which did not seem to suit him at first. He was hesitant and shy, barely looking at me long enough to acknowledge the introduction. Until meeting him, I'd thought Beast's coat and mane held the most spectacular shades of red and auburn to be found. He was beyond beautiful, and I found him utterly charming.

Up close, I finally saw that his eyes were an amazing shade of grey, lightening to almost silver in full sunlight. I would have expected brown or even amber with that lovely head of auburn hair, but once I got over the surprise, I couldn't imagine any other color fitting him. His fair skin turned an enchanting shade of pink whenever he was flustered—and almost everything I said seemed to fluster him.

My golden moment came when I caught him alone, filling water skins at the stream. I startled him, and he fell flat on his arse at the edge of the stream. For a moment, I mourned the fact that he'd missed the water entirely; I would have paid good coin to see him wet. Then again, it was the end of autumn, and he might have caught a chill, though I would have been just as happy to help him warm up. *Ddraig* are hot-blooded, after all.

I reached down to help him up, and when he clasped my hand, everything went still, as if the forest itself paused to recognize the significance of the moment. Merry's eyes widened, and a burst of pheromones bloomed on his skin. The scent of aroused virgin filled me with rapture. And yes, I *could* smell his innocence. Even in human form, I retained many of my *Ddraig* abilities. Healing, mindspeech, heightened senses, strength, pretty much everything except for those things physically tied to my dragon form, such as the ability to fly—all of these gifts were mine whenever I required them.

The problem was, I'd never really dealt with a virgin before. The Great Pact called for Candidates to be virgins because they would never return to their homes and families after having seen our world. Taking only virgins was meant to help ensure that no one lost their true love in the name of keeping the Pact. Millennia ago, when the Pact was made, many humans had some innate magic. It was a kind of magic none of the Otherkin could command, and it was called the *Seithre*.

The *Seithre* was different from the common sort of parlor tricks that passed for magic among human society. It was contained within certain bloodlines and could only be passed on to someone from one of those bloodlines. Its potential was passed from parent to child, but its use had been taught in the College of

Magisters. Practitioners were magical artificers who had created items and weapons that could enhance the natural powers and abilities of those who wielded them. Generations ago, long before my birth, there was a rift between the College of Magisters and the human government. We never learned the details, but the result was that the College was disbanded, and the bloodlines were decimated.

Where once the Pact had been fulfilled by humans with blood ties to the *Seithre*, over time it became more about maintaining tradition than about gaining access to the *Seithre*. Fewer and fewer humans had any trace of the *Seithre* within them. The *Ddraig* had long been a bridge from the human world to the Otherkin. Over time, we'd brought many members of the bloodlines across the Veil, and they had mated with some of the compatible species of Otherkin. But the bloodlines grew thin over time, and it became more and more difficult to control the devices and weapons that had been made by the artificers of the past. Our goal in claiming a Candidate was always to find one of the lost bloodlines, but that hope dimmed over time. Tradition was all that was left.

As I filled my lungs with Merry's delicious scent, I believed that I'd found a reason that trumped tradition. Grndda would scoff, and Grnvliia would cackle in that annoyingly superior way, but I swore I'd found the piece that had been missing from my life for almost three hundred years.

Beast was right; I was love-struck, indeed.

At the campsite, I watched as the firelight flickered over Merry's ivory skin and sparked off the vivid red of his hair. He had long, strong legs with the muscular thighs of a rider. I daydreamed about having those legs wrapped around my waist, imagined the feel of the fine fur on those limbs tickling my ribs and back as they held me close. What would he look like, stripped to the skin? Would his bush be red or brown? Would it be thick and coarse, or silky and soft? I couldn't get a good sense of his intimate scent through his clothing, and I wanted more than anything to have him to myself so I could strip him and bury my face in his groin. I wanted to memorize the smell of him so I could find him anywhere. No, fuck that; I wanted to bind him to me so he would never be farther than an arm's length away.

And that was just the start of the evening. I wolfed down two portions of the stew Carac made, only dimly recognizing that it was surprisingly good for camp fare. All I could concentrate on was Merry, even as I indulged Carac's lively after-dinner inquisition. He could see where my interest had settled. I

sensed that, under other circumstances, he would have approved of my suit for his charge. But Merry was a Candidate, and it was Carac's duty to deliver him *virgo intacta*, as it were, to the Choosing Field. He sympathized, but he was steadfast in his duty. I rather liked him.

As I bedded down that night, I fell asleep to thoughts of what sounds I could wring out of Merry's sweet mouth once I finally had him to myself. Though I'd scouted a few of the other Candidates, I knew that I needed to search no longer. I'd found my Candidate.

In the morning, I helped break camp, keeping out of Merry's way as much as possible. He'd been somewhat spooked the previous night, and I wanted him to become comfortable with me. The time would come soon enough when I would be forced to reveal myself to him. I hoped to win his favor before that time arrived.

I rode at Carac's side all morning. We took a meal break around noon, and Merry used the opportunity to find a few moments of solitude. Leaving Beast to graze at leisure, I followed the object of my desire into the forest.

He didn't seem surprised to see me, but his expression wasn't exactly welcoming. Shafts of sunlight trickled through the branches, covering him in a patchwork of light and shadow. I stepped in close and heard his breath catch in his throat. He was a few inches shorter than I, and his head tilted back at the perfect angle for kissing when he looked up at me. The temptation was nearly unbearable, but I wanted more than the immediate ease of my lust for him. I needed to know if I could kindle the same lust in him.

His face could have made poets weep: with large, grey eyes framed by long, black lashes with copper-tinted tips. His nose was straight, a little short, with an up-tilt to the end that begged for kisses. High cheekbones, a delicate jawline that led to a remarkably stubborn-looking rounded chin, and luscious lips that I swore were made to pillow my cock completed the picture of perfect seduction coupled with absolute innocence. That stubborn chin and the defiant arch of his brows saved his face from being effeminate. In fact, everything about Merry was beautiful, yet masculine; delicate, yet strong; tender, yet fierce. He made my blood boil, made me want to climb the tallest peak, defeat the direst foes, and shield him from the world with my body, with my very life. In mere days, I would claim him before the entire nation. He would be my Chosen.

He would be terrified.

Custom dictated that I would claim my Chosen in dragon form. I wasn't entirely certain, but it had been thus for so long that I suspected the humans had quite forgotten that we even had a human form. They'd always treated us like dangerous—if sentient—animals. Rumor, that stock-in-trade of the traveler, said that the Candidates were sacrifices to the dragons that protected Amaranthe and the other six kingdoms that were part of the Pact. It had made little difference to the outcome of our encounters with the human governments, so we'd done nothing to stem the legends that had sprung up about us.

Watching the way desire battled with resolve in Merry's face, I regretted that he now thought of himself as doomed. Soon, he would learn what every other Chosen had learned—that we were the protectors and guardians of so much more than the Seven Kingdoms. Soon, he would see the other side of the Veil, and like those who had come before him, he would find a new life for himself amongst the Otherkin. But before then, I had to find a way to tell him that he had nothing to fear while still maintaining the shroud of secrecy dictated by custom.

He'd been watching me as I watched him, his heart beating a bit too fast, and a fine flush of pink painting his cheeks and throat. He swallowed, and I followed the ripple of muscles along his throat with an avid eye. All I could think of was what he would look like swallowing me down, and my breeches had become too tight for comfort.

“Don't.”

His breathless command startled me, drawing my attention back to his eyes. I realized I had braced my hands against the tree on either side of his head, pinning him there between my body and the trunk of the tree. I murmured, “Of course,” and lowered my hands, backing off a half step.

“I must—”

“Would you—”

We both stopped, and I gestured for him to continue with what he'd meant to say.

“I must be getting back. Carac will be looking for me.”

I nodded and gave him what I hoped was a soothing smile. “I'm sure he will. He takes very good care of you.”

He shrugged. “It's his job.”

“It’s his pleasure,” I corrected him. “He does it out of love as much as duty. You are as a son to him. Even a stranger can see that,” I teased.

Merry’s lips tilted up at the corners—not quite a smile, but it was enough to make my heart swell in my chest. Gods, he was sweet! I took another half step back for fear that I wouldn’t be able to stop myself from reaching for him before he was ready.

“What—” He licked his lips, further disrupting the fit of my breeches and the course of my thoughts. “What were you about to say?”

“Um... I...” I laughed at myself. “It’s difficult to think clearly around you,” I admitted.

His tilted head and puzzled expression caused another swell of affection within my chest. With some chagrin, I acknowledged that it would take little effort for him to wrap me around his littlest finger. “Merry,” I whispered. “May I call you Merry?”

Solemn grey eyes observed me, unblinking. Instead of answering my question, he posed one of his own. “What do you want from me? You must know what I am.”

“I do.” My mouth was almost too dry to utter those two words.

“Then you know that nothing can happen between us. I must remain untouched.”

“You will,” I swore.

He shook his head, a gesture of censure. “What you want from me leaves no room for chastity.”

“Is it only what *I* want from *you*?”

The sound he made was eloquently impatient. “It matters not what I want. Nor what you want. I am a Candidate, and by this time next week, I may well be no more.”

It was such a bald statement, so desolate, yet said with such conviction. He believed he might soon die, and he had made his peace with that. He was willingly sacrificing his life for the benefit of his country. In all my days, I had never witnessed such courage, such a fierce will to serve his community. Looking back now, I think it was at that moment that Merry captured my heart.

I responded without thinking. “You won’t die.”

His whole body jolted at those words, and his expression went from resolute to unsure. “H-how do you know that? How *can* you know that?”

Gods, what an idiot I was! How was I to—*Ahh*. “I travel all over the Seven Kingdoms. My warmounts are coveted by kings and nobles from every point of the compass. I hear tales from lands you’ve never dreamed of.”

This time he was the one to close the distance between us. “Do you know what happens to the Chosen?” he asked eagerly.

What the hell could I say? Until he went through the Veil with me, I was forbidden to give him the answers he needed. I couldn’t even tell him that he would be the Chosen, or that *I* was the dragon that would claim him. Yet I had to say something, and everything in me demanded that I soothe his fears and comfort him.

“I can’t tell you much, but I can say that legend speaks of another realm where a select few humans live amongst amazing creatures, dragons being but one of them. The tales say that these humans hold honored positions within these lands, and that they live long and fruitful lives.”

He gave me a small, sad smile. “Children’s tales. I suppose there are magical beings with the power to grant wishes, as well.” He shook his head. “It changes nothing about my fate. And you would do well to stay away from me. I already leave behind enough people who will be saddened by my passing. I don’t want you to grieve for me too.”

I felt as if I’d taken a blow to the chest. “Merry—”

“Baxx.” It was the first time he’d said my name, and he smiled and said it again, as if he enjoyed the sound of it. “Baxx, I must remain untouched, and not merely in body. My heart must be whole, and if you continue to press this thing between us, my heart will not be mine to give for much longer.”

Did he mean...? Oh, merciful gods, he did! He meant that he felt the same for me as I did for him. I wasn’t about to question the speed of this emotion that had built between us. I’d told Grndda that I was prepared to accept my duty to the *Ddraig*; I’d told myself that I was willing to accept what fate, and the gods, had in store for me. Who was I to argue against what the gods had decreed? If Merry felt the same things I’d been feeling since I first spotted him, it had to mean something. I’d experienced desire before, even the kind of instant lust that comes with a purely physical attraction. What I felt for Merry, with Merry, was entirely new. If I was going to accept my fate, I was going to follow it all the way to the end.

Still, I had to reassure him somehow. Since I couldn't tell him that being Chosen would not be the end of things for him, or for us, there was only one way to achieve my goal. "There are thirteen other Candidates," I reminded him. "It may well be that you will not be Chosen. I know I can't stay with you; you have much pomp and ceremony to endure before you go to the Choosing Field. Yet, I make you this vow: after the Choosing is done, I will be waiting for you. Nothing will keep me from you, Merry."

"Nothing except a dragon?" he asked with a watery smile.

I touched my fingers to his cheek, thrilled to see the way his pupils dilated at the contact. "Not even a dragon could keep me away."

From the direction of the road, Carac called Merry's name. The man had impeccable timing. Merry and I both blushed, and I urged him to leave first. I needed a moment to allow my erection to deflate before joining the other men.

As I returned to the group of men and *sirit*, I noticed several frankly assessing stares cast my way. Carac hadn't been the only one to notice Merry disappearing for half an hour at the same time I did. I gave them a friendly smile; I had nothing to hide. More importantly, I didn't want to give them the idea that I might be anything less than open in my admiration of their lord's brother. Hiding things made men suspicious.

The rest of the day passed as pleasantly as travel along a busy public road could. In other words, we were dusty and tired by the end of the day, and our animals had had enough of the sedate pace. Beast, in particular, wanted a good run. We'd left the forest about an hour past and were setting up to camp on the open plain for the night. The stream, for the most part, followed the road, but at this point, it was a good quarter mile off. I volunteered to fetch water for the camp, intending to let Beast run for a bit before we returned.

Carac eyed Beast's shifting feet and twitching hide, and suggested a short sprint. "Just to knock the dust off these fellows," he said, indicating our mounts. I agreed with a smile.

There was no way Carac's *sirit* could compete with Beast, but my boy had manners, and he let the slower mount pull ahead for a short while before overtaking him and winning the race. The huge grin splitting the old man's face told me he knew what was what, and he dismounted so we could fill flasks and skins together.

"That's a fine animal you've got there," Carac said. "You said you bred him; did you also train him?"

“I did; or he trained *me*.” Beast nodded his head and nudged my shoulder, making Carac laugh.

“Seems he understands what we say, some of the time.”

Capping off the skin I’d just filled, I nodded. “Seems like he does, much of the time,” I agreed. “Other times, though...”

I ended up taking a sudden step into the stream, grateful for the thigh-high leather boots I wore as Beast shoved me from behind. Carac, of course, laughed like a demon.

I turned on my stallion, scowling. **What in the twelve hells are you doing?**

Beast just brayed, a kind of equine laugh that set my teeth on edge and made me promise dire consequences for later. He bobbed his head up and down while Carac chortled himself half-sick.

We led our mounts back, laden with the filled containers, and enjoyed the quiet of the evening.

“You aren’t cooking tonight?” I asked

“We take it in turns. You were lucky last night, though tonight shouldn’t be so bad. Bord has the feeding of us tonight, and he’s not half-bad. Two nights ago, it was Rulf; he near killed us.” He shook his head at the memory.

I cringed in sympathy, and could tell he was amused with my antics. After a brief pause, he took a deep breath and came to a halt. I closed my eyes for a moment, and stopped beside him. There was something on his mind, and we were going no farther until he’d given it voice.

“I think ye’re a fine young man,” he began. I stifled a snort at the idea of being the younger of the two of us. “But this thing between you and Merry—”

“I know what he is,” I interrupted. “We spoke of it today. I wouldn’t dishonor him; I just wanted a bit of time with him.”

He nodded, obviously relieved. “In case he comes back from the Choosing Field, aye. Should that be the case—and I hope it is, for more than your sake—I’ll be happy to speak to his brother on your behalf. The boy could do a damn sight worse than you, Baxx of Shadow’s Pass.”

To my surprise, I found myself choking up with emotion. I hadn’t expected—or needed—the old man’s approval, but finding that I had earned it meant more to me than I could have anticipated. I cleared my throat and

nodded, blinking away the misty feeling in my eyes, and walked on toward the campsite.

Merry glanced up as we returned, meeting my eyes and blushing from his hairline to his throat. Maybe even beyond, but his clothing barred me from seeing just how far the blush went, and I found myself grinning like a hatchling who'd just found something shiny.

Beside me, Beast just couldn't resist adding his commentary. **Love-struck,** he said, and I could hear the laughter in his tone.

Aye was all I said in reply.

A soft gasp from Merry brought my eyes up to meet his, and the surprised wonder I found there made me come to an abrupt halt, jerking Beast's reins in the process.

Clumsy, he grumbled.

Merry's startled eyes darted to Beast, then back to me. All I could do was stare back, a hollow feeling expanding in my belly as I struggled with the idea that he was able to hear some portion of Beast's mindspeech. It was a rare ability for a human, but not unheard of. This, however, was neither the place nor the time to explore this exciting possibility. I gave Merry a tiny shake of my head to indicate that he should be patient. Then I thought, what the hell? And I sent him a single word, as gently as I could manage. **Patience.**

He composed himself, stared at me a moment longer, then gave me a barely perceptible nod before turning his attention to the tasks at hand.

By the sacred shell of the first dragon! He could hear mindspeech! But could he send thought as well as receive it? I could scarcely contain myself through the evening chores of setting up camp, preparing and eating dinner, arranging the guard rotation, and so forth. My mind was all awirl, considering the ramifications of this potential discovery.

I was one of the guards for first watch, and I wasn't surprised when Merry crept up beside me after the camp was still. He settled beside me so that our arms touched, and I was comforted both by his presence and by this proof that he needed my touch as much as I needed his.

By way of testing my theory, I sent him a tendril of thought. **Merry.**

His body jerked as if jolted by a lightning strike. I reached my hand out to him and touched my fingers gently to the back of his hand. He definitely heard me. But could he send his own thoughts, as well?

“Shhh. Just breathe slowly,” I said softly, not wanting our voices to carry. Over the open plain, the sound would reach the other guards all too easily, and this was not a subject for their ears.

“You’re in my head,” he said somewhat breathlessly.

“Not *in* your head. I can’t just plunder your thoughts.” Well, not without causing him a fair degree of pain, I thought, but this wasn’t the time to go into that ability. “What I did is called mindspeak, and if you can hear it, you can probably do it too.”

“How?”

“Just form my name in your mind, look at me, and then imagine that you are sending the thought to my mind.”

He stared at me for a long moment, brow scrunched up in concentration, and so damned cute, it was all I could do not to grab him and kiss him silly. Finally, I felt the edges of his mind probing mine, and then, **BAXX!**

My whole body jolted with the force of his shout, and a sharp pain sprang up between my eyes. Pinching the bridge of my nose, I said, “Maybe not quite so much force, next time.” Then I added, **I can hear you just fine without you shouting. Think at me as if we were having a normal conversation.**

The moon hadn’t risen yet, so I couldn’t pick out details, but it didn’t take much light to tell that his jaw had dropped and he was gaping at me like a fish out of water. It was all I could do not to laugh at him, but my will was strong. I nudged him, encouraging him to try again and then braced myself for the headache that was sure to come.

I heard you. In my head. Can you hear me? I’m not hurting you, am I? Why did it hurt you before? How far away can we be, to talk like this? Wait a minute, did I hear your SIRIT before? He can TALK? He’d started out softly enough, but as his questions rose in speed and volume, my head began to pound again. I had to shut him up out of sheer self-preservation. Also, how could I answer any of his questions unless he stopped talking? So of course, I had to do what I did next.

I kissed him.

It wasn’t the kind of kiss I’d been fantasizing about; it was sweet and soft, the merest meeting of the lips. Just the barest brush of my mouth over his, but it was enough to bring everything, all of our thoughts, to a crashing halt.

Had Merry said that he'd never been kissed? Then where in the twelve hells had he learned to use his mouth like this? He responded to my every move as if we'd performed this dance together countless times before. Yet every sensation was new and fresh, cleansing my soul and creating me anew, changing me into the man who would belong to Merry.

And how do I explain the softness of his lips, the taste of innocence, of *Merry*? All I had to do was catch the merest trace of Merry's scent, and the pure *want* of him threatened to drive me wild. There are no words, other than, *sublime...*

One of the advantages of being *Ddraig* is the highly sensitive organ we have on the underside of our tongues. This small bud enables us to "taste" the air. By sampling only the tiniest particle of a substance, we can gather information that ranges from the ordinary things a predator could learn from its sense of smell, to changing weather patterns and messages carried on the air itself in ways no ordinary animal could do. It can be overwhelming when dealing with the human world, so we've learned to stifle it, reduce its sensitivity to a level that allows for some relief from the cacophony of data.

So distracted was I around Merry, though, that I sometimes forgot to suppress this heightened perception. When Merry's combined scent and taste burst across my senses in our first kiss, I moaned aloud and wrapped my arms around Merry, pulling him close enough to see how perfectly he fit against my body. By the shards of the First Egg, he tasted divine! He was passion and prudence, courage and serenity, the fire that ignited my desire, and the calming winds that soothed my spirit. He was so much more than any of that, beyond defining, beyond the scope of language. My soul recognized him.

Even sweeter than his taste or scent was the soft sigh of surrender he breathed into my mouth. With a final flick of my tongue to capture a little of his essence to carry with me, I ended our kiss.

Hands, smaller than mine, but still the strong hands of a trained fighter, rested gently against my chest. I looked down onto Merry's well-kissed face, and decided he was even more beautiful this way. I think we both stopped breathing for a time, staring into each other's eyes, our faces so close, but no longer quite touching. Then he gasped for air, reminding me that it would be a good idea to get some oxygen into my own lungs, and we moved apart. Though not too far.

It was a struggle to remember what we'd been discussing, but I dealt with his questions in order, to the best of my memory. **You didn't do me any harm;*

*it just felt the same as it would feel to you if someone shouted into your ear. We can speak over some distance, though it varies from person to person. We'll just have to experiment to see how far you can hear me.** As for the questions about Beast, I rather hoped he would be too distracted to recall that line of inquiry.

Can other people do this? Why have I never heard of it before? Why have I never heard anyone else's thoughts before?

I could tell that my curious boy would be a handful; I couldn't wait to show him all of the wonders on the other side of the Veil. However, this was not the time nor the place to go into such weighty topics. **All in good time,** I told him. **I'm supposed to be on guard duty, and you are very distracting.** I let him hear the desire in my tone, and it worked like a charm. His posture softened, and he seemed to melt into my side, his body begging me to put my arm around him.

So I did. He rested his head on my shoulder and sighed. "So much is changing, so fast," he whispered. "Is it normal to get a headache from what we did?"

"It's called mindspeak," I reminded him. "It's fairly common where I come from, but I haven't met anyone in these parts who could hear it or speak it. You're the first."

He thought for a moment, worrying his bottom lip between his teeth. My groin tightened, watching him nibble that lip, and I had to look away.

"You said, 'All in good time.' But I don't have much time left, Baxx."

Ah, that was unfair. This time it was my heart that clenched. I rested my head atop his and sheltered him against my body as the night cooled. There was a definite nip of frost in the air, and while our bodies were well insulated by our clothing, neither of us had worn a cap. But that was all just excuses; the truth was that I simply wanted to hold him, and he was content to be held.

Bord showed up a couple of hours later to take the next watch, and Merry and I crawled gratefully into our sleeping rolls, which had been placed well apart under Carac's supervision. I was pretty sure he'd had someone watching us while Merry had shared my guard duty, just to make certain things didn't go too far between us. I was fine with that; it was good to know that Merry had such a staunch champion. I would have to leave him soon, and it was good to know that he would be safe until I could claim him.

My sleepy mind struggled with the question of how to reassure Merry that he would be safe. There was so little I could tell him without breaking my oaths. It seemed like all I could do was keep repeating that I would be waiting for him. It was true, but he had no reason to believe that I could make it happen. I couldn't tell him who I was, what I was. It seemed that all I could do was give him empty platitudes and hope that he would understand the need for my deception. How could that be enough for him, when it was almost unbearable for me?

These questions continued round and round my head even as we set out anew the next morning. Merry gave me a shy smile in greeting, and it lit me up inside. Carac's smile was warm also, but tempered with the knowledge of what lay ahead for both of us. He was a good man, and I knew Merry would regret the loss of him.

We sent quiet thoughts back and forth to each other as the day progressed. There were no more burning questions. He seemed to realize that the presence of the other men would make it awkward to get into any deep discussions. Or maybe he worried that one of them might carry the ability as well and would overhear us.

In the end, it didn't matter. I'd lost track of the days, lost in the pleasure of Merry's company, and we came to the gates of Dorbarra before nightfall. Merry's party would stay this night at an inn. Then in the morning, he and the other Candidates would enter the palace, where they would stay until they journeyed to the Choosing Field.

Merry's demeanor had changed. No longer the shy, inquisitive young man I'd met on the road, this was Sir Merek, brother of Lord Gillivray, Candidate to fulfill the Great Pact. Even though I knew I would soon claim him, and we would have all the time we desired, all I could feel was his sorrow at the loss of us. Of me. Because I could not kiss his lips, I bowed to him and took his hand, then laid a brief kiss upon the backs of his fingers. I heard his breath catch, felt his fingers twitch in my grasp, then came the whisper.

“Good-bye.”

In my heart, I was already begging him to forgive me.

The King

Merry was overwhelmed by the palace. The journey to Dorbarra, meeting Baxx, and knowing that his last days as a Candidate were coming to a close made time seem to stretch and then snap back in a disorienting manner that had his head spinning. Their parting at the gates of the city was too quickly done, and suddenly Baxx was gone with only a promise that he would find Merry when it was all over. All Merry wanted to do was grab hold of some fixed point and have those last few moments back, so he could say a proper good-bye, just in case that was all they would have.

Then he was inside the city walls and being taken to meet the other Candidates. It was an odd atmosphere. With their introduction to the king imminent, the young men and women present seemed to be caught between vying for attention and succumbing to the very real terror they were all obviously fighting. Conversation was a bit too bright, laughter a bit forced, and Merry was just tired and ready to be done with the entire event. One young woman seemed to share his opinion, hanging back and quietly sipping a cup of the expensive chilled juice they'd been served. Everything was the highest quality, from the exotic meats and sauces to the elegant desserts and summer fruits that had to have been grown in a special greenhouse to be so fresh at this time of the year. It all made him very aware that one of them was about to die.

It was all so very civilized.

He didn't even have Carac with him any longer. His guards had been quartered with the rest of the Candidates' escorts. Now that they were within the palace walls, they were the king's responsibility. They were being housed in two large, well-appointed dormitories, one for the men and one for the women. The furnishings were of the highest quality, and they each had a privacy screen and velvet hangings on their beds to close out the rest of the world for a few brief hours at night. They were treated with deferential care, and several of their number were clearly soothed by the attention.

They were even given a private tour of sections of the palace normally available only to the king and his closest councilors. The visit to the royal stables reminded Merry too much of Baxx and his stud farm. The demonstration of valor given by the elite guards made him homesick for the training grounds where Carac had taught himself and the other young fighters the art of combat. It wasn't until they were given access to the Royal Archives that Merry found his interest piqued.

There were more books than he'd ever seen in his life. The library was adorned with row after row of shelving, all carved out of dark wood polished to a high sheen. Several desks carved of the same wood were scattered about the space between the shelves, accompanied by beautifully sculpted chairs topped by cushions stitched with the royal arms of Amaranthe. It was all quite elegant and expensive, yet designed for comfort. A dozen or more glass display cabinets held various treasures: a bejeweled illuminated manuscript bound in tooled leather; a collection of whole eggshells ranging from tiny songbird eggs to *dszennet* eggs the size of a man's two fists placed side by side; a stuffed ruddy skyraptor which was easily the largest winged beast Merry had ever seen.

As the others moved on, seemingly bored to tears, Merry stopped to examine the huge bird's plumage. It was positioned on a tree branch, posed with its wings folded against its body, and he found himself wishing they'd stretched out at least one of the wings so he could get an idea of its wingspan.

"Rather intimidating, isn't he?"

Merry turned to find a genial man outfitted in the armor of the elite King's Guard smiling at him. "Oh. Yes, he is. He makes my little hawks at home look like songbirds in comparison."

"You like hawking, then? Wonderful. Perhaps I can get you in to see the king's mews, if that would interest you."

Merry grinned so widely, he felt his jaw crack. "Yes, please, if it wouldn't be too much of a bother."

"No bother at all. The king wants each of you to enjoy your visit to the palace."

The reminder dimmed Merry's pleasure a bit, but not enough to make him decline the invitation to the mews. He looked around to see if any of the others might be interested and was surprised to find himself alone with the guard. The older knight noticed his wandering attention and laughed good-naturedly.

"You did hang back from the group a bit. I was sent to round up our stray. I'm Sir Cantrith."

Merry managed to give him a courtly bow and flush with embarrassment at the same time. He hated making a scene, and here he was forcing them to come searching for him because he'd been daydreaming instead of following the tour. "I am sorry to cause you trouble," he began, but Sir Cantrith waved his concerns away.

“The king will be only too pleased to learn that someone enjoyed seeing his collection. That great fellow you’ve been eyeing was the pride of his father’s mews back before I was born.” He paused, seemingly struck by an idea. “I could show you directly to the current king’s pride and joy. The others will be finishing the library tour. Right now, I suspect they’ll be hearing a lecture on the proper curing of hides to make the perfect parchment sheets. But I suspect you’ll find more to your liking among the spoils of war and diplomacy. There are some rare weapons there, and some exotic gifts from beyond the Seven Kingdoms. Which shall it be? Parchments or weapons?”

“Weapons, please,” Merry said with another grin.

Sir Cantrith escorted him down a narrow corridor, past several large wooden doors wrapped in iron and other metals that made Merry wonder what took place behind them. After a few turns, they emerged into a large chamber with a central skylight that illuminated the entire room via a clever system of mirrors. There were more display cabinets, but many items were left out, resting in velvet-lined boxes.

“Feel free to explore at will,” Sir Cantrith told him. “Everything fragile is behind glass. Just watch for sharp edges on some of those weapons, and don’t worry about leaving a smudge or two. Helps keep the cleaning staff on their toes.” He winked, and Merry smiled at him once more, glad that he had been fortunate enough to be assigned one of the younger, more gregarious guards.

He moved about the room carefully, conscious of the weight of years and historical significance that surrounded him. One of the artifacts that had been left out in the open was shaped like an egg, but crafted of some sort of stone, with delicate little hinges that were clearly meant to be opened. He reached out to touch one of the silver hinges, and received a jolt that stung the tip of his finger. Shaking his hand with a rueful smile, he peeked over at Sir Cantrith to gauge his reaction. When he saw only a commiserating smile on the guard’s face, he continued exploring.

There was an elaborately carved wooden box with scenes of dragons flying and clashing together in glorious midair combat that must have been the work of a master craftsman. Merry let his hand hover over the box, mindful of the jolt he’d gotten from the egg, before running the tips of his fingers across the grain of the wood. It had been polished to a lovely patina, but there must have been a splinter along one edge, because Merry felt a sharp prick accompanied by an odd swooping sensation. For the barest fraction of a second, it was as if

he were one of the dragons depicted on the box, and then he was back in his own head, fighting off a wobbly, tingling buzz that made him feel slightly dizzy.

That was decidedly odd, Merry thought. Perhaps the stress of the upcoming Choosing was taxing his mind, making him imagine things. Or could it have something to do with the mindspeech Baxx had begun to teach him? The buzzy, achy feeling in his head was similar. If so, Merry certainly didn't want to explore the phenomenon right now, in front of the king's personal guard. Unfortunately, it seemed that Sir Cantrith had noticed that there was *something* out of sorts about his behavior. The guard was standing straighter, his expression sharper in some indefinable way that set Merry on edge. He gave the guard a smile, though he feared it was shaky around the edges.

Moving in what he hoped appeared to be a nonchalant manner through the remaining displays, Merry's attention was caught and held by an artifact that appeared to be entirely out of place among the priceless relics he'd already viewed. It looked like nothing more than a tangle of leather straps, until he drew closer and noticed the bits of metal that joined the straps here and there. He reached out to untangle the thing, and his vision went grey.

“Majesty.”

King Bendic XII of Amaranthe looked up from the enormous tome he was studying to find Sir Cantrith, a member of his elite personal guard, down on one knee, fist over his heart in the traditional salute. He sighed over the interruption, but gave no thought to rebuking the knight. Cantrith had been hand-selected for his post, and Bendic knew he would never interrupt the precious few moments he was able to steal away from state business in order to pursue his obsession without good reason.

“Speak,” he commanded.

Sir Cantrith looked up at him then, face alight with excitement. “I believe we've found him, Majesty.”

Bendic stood abruptly, one hand still braced upon the page he'd been studying. “The signs?”

Sir Cantrith nodded. “As you commanded, all Candidates were taken on a special tour of the castle, including the Archives. The artifacts were laid out according to your instructions, and one—” He took a shuddering breath. “One youth responded just as you described.”

Several strands of inky hair fell over the king's brow as he leaned forward over the desk. "A youth? How did he react?"

"At first, he passed his hand over his brow, as if he had a headache. We thought nothing of it, but as the Candidates progressed, he grew ever more disconcerted. At one point, he reached out and touched one of the artifacts, then jerked his hand back, as if he'd been stung. He touched another, and wavered a bit where he stood. Then he came to one that seemed to draw him to it, and was taken over all peculiar. We did not press him for explanations but took him aside to offer refreshment and allow him to compose himself. He rests even now."

The king straightened and smoothed his hair back into place. "Take me to him at once."

The knight rose and saluted his king, and then led him from the room. As they walked, the king asked, "How does this youth compare to the others? Is he likely to be Chosen?"

Sir Cantrith flashed a genuine smile. "Majesty, he is the fairest youth to pass through the program for many cycles. The fairest I've seen, at least. And from the reactions of several of the other Candidates, I'd say they're all aware of his allure."

Bendic frowned. "Are they jealous? Is he likely to need protection? There have been incidents in the past."

"I think not, Sire. He is quiet and unassuming and has easily befriended several of them. Some few are obviously envious, but their attempts to turn the others against him have fallen short of the mark. He seems not to worry about being Chosen, despite the increased honors it would bring to his family, is diplomatic and charismatic, and is a good conversationalist on many topics, once you get past his shyness. Hawking seems to be a particular passion."

"His name?"

"Sir Merek, son of the late lord Gillivray of your acquaintance, and brother to the current lord."

The king stopped abruptly. "*Sir?*"

"Yes, Sire. The knighting is freshly done; it seems he was particularly insistent upon being knighted ere he embark upon the journey here. It had been a dream of his late father, and the boy made a vow on his father's deathbed that he would complete his training and earn his spurs."

“Odd behavior for the father of a Candidate. After being selected by his local Master of Candidates and then interviewed by the Headmaster, his future would have been assured. Even those who are not Chosen gain enough in wealth and gifts, both from the government and from local tradesmen and artisans, to keep them comfortably for life. How could the late Lord Gillivray have thought his son’s future would be in doubt?”

“I know nothing of the circumstances of that arrangement, Sire, only that the boy was his brother’s squire for some years, then knighted recently, almost upon the very day of his twenty-first birthday. The estate is somewhat isolated, and the master of Candidates for that area quite elderly. I took the liberty of questioning the Headmaster on your behalf before I interrupted you. It seems that there were no reports of this boy’s possible suitability for the program until a chance visit from the Headmaster of Candidates, himself. He discovered the boy’s potential entirely by accident.”

This news did nothing to ease the king’s scowl, and his dark eyes flashed with outrage. “By accident?”

“It seems the Headmaster found the boy playing in a river with a group of crofter’s children. He reports that it appeared to him that the child had been instructed to get as muddy as possible, but he had no proof beyond his own suspicions.”

“So he was meant to remain hidden, was he?” The king’s voice was cold. “The Pact is fulfilled once every seven years, and we share the burden with the other kingdoms, so we’re only asked to contribute once every forty-nine years. I’ll never understand the type of cowardice that motivates these people. They live in luxury and never want for anything. Yet they can’t bear the one duty all noble families must bear—to make their children available to be assessed for their fitness to become Candidates for the fulfillment of the Great Pact.”

Cantrith bowed his head, but spoke his mind without fear, knowing his king preferred his guards to have the courage of their convictions and offer their opinions without hesitation. “Fortunately, it is rare to find resistance among the nobility. But I have heard it said that some feel that you never knew the fear of becoming the Chosen, because you were never at risk for becoming a Candidate, Sire.”

“If I’d been a younger son, I would have been. Or if I’d had siblings, they would have been under just as much risk as any other noble children. The terms of the Pact dictate that it can only be upheld by those of noble blood.”

“Yes, Sire.”

The king shook his head. His ire was not aimed at Cantrith, and there was little point in continuing the debate—not when the end of his quest was in sight. “Never mind. It makes no difference now. Take me to the boy, and let us see if we have finally found the last piece of the puzzle.”

Cantrith led him through a narrow passage into an alcove that sheltered an oblong viewing hole covered by a sliding panel. The young man who waited inside the room on the other side of the panel was nothing like Bendic had expected. He drew in a deep breath and held it as he watched the embodiment of all his years of planning take a sip from a cup embellished with the amaranth flower, symbol of the kingdom they all served. He felt Cantrith slide into the alcove behind him and released the breath he’d been holding.

“He’s perfect,” Bendic whispered, his voice trembling with excitement. “Now, at long last, we may be able to free ourselves of this Pact and bend the dragons to our will without ever having to sacrifice another of our children again.”

The room in which they’d left him was elaborately appointed, a parlor fit for a king, indeed. Merry tried not to speculate on what might be about to happen to him. On the one hand, he couldn’t bear the thought of being found inadequate at this late hour; it would shame his family, his community, and himself. On the other hand, if he were flawed, he would be freed, and he could find Baxx and explore everything that lay between them—the mindspeech, the pull to be closer, the heat that always rose between them. It was a rift between his honor and his heart, and at no point in his life had he ever envisioned choosing heart over honor. He didn’t think he would do it now, if given the choice. And that was why he was so discomfited at the moment; because it seemed as if it might soon be taken out of his hands entirely.

If they gave him a chance to explain himself, he could mark it down to the excitement and stress of visiting the palace, and counting down the final hours before stepping onto the Choosing Field and having his fate decided by some alien power.

Sir Cantrith had furnished him with a cool cloth for his head and another cup of the delicious chilled fruit juice they’d been served before. He was sipping from the cup when the door opened, and Sir Cantrith returned, accompanied by another man.

Tall, though not quite as tall as Baxx, with coal-black hair, deep-set eyes of a matching hue, and a distinguished bearing, the newcomer swept into the room with a polite smile on his breathtakingly handsome face.

Young and inexperienced, Merry might be, but he wasn't stupid. The clothing might be less formal than it had been when the Candidates were presented to the court, but the stranger's casual arrogance and the deferential manner of Sir Cantrith told Merry that he was in the presence of King Bendic XII of Amaranthe, his liege lord. His hand barely trembled as he set aside his cup and straightened his tunic before bending at the waist in the deep, courtly bow he'd been taught from the cradle. No son of Lord Gillivray would be caught neglecting his duty to his king.

The king chuckled and moved toward Merry with fluid steps, a man whose every motion had been molded by tutors and dancing masters until each breath he took was a marvel of elegance. A wave of his hand urged Merry to stand straight before him. Then the king reached out to touch Merry's jaw and tilt his face up toward the light.

"Hmm. Very nice," the king murmured. As close as he was standing, Merry could see that his eyes were a true black, darker than the night sky, otherworldly in comparison with any other eyes he'd ever seen. They were framed by sooty lashes thick enough to make it seem as if the king had lined his eyes with kohl, like so many of the court ladies did. Equally black brows formed strong, thick arches over those deep-set eyes. A carefully trimmed beard shaped in a thin line followed the angle of the square jaw and came to a downward point at the tip of the chin. The beard was complimented by a thin moustache that did for the king's mouth what the beard did for his jaw. Taken as a whole, the king's facial hair had the effect of showcasing his refined elegance and masculinity. Like everything else about him, it told a story: *this man is sophisticated, worldly, refined, and you... are not.*

Merry felt his face fill with heat as he lowered his gaze in belated respect. It wasn't an auspicious beginning, to forget that one never looks directly into the monarch's eyes. His tutors would have had his guts for garters, if they'd seen his performance.

"You're a brave young man, Sir Merek," the king said.

"Oh... No, Sire. It's... Anyone would be—" He broke off as the king shook his head.

King Bendic smiled. "Be at ease, young Candidate. Cantrith tells me you were indisposed. I hope we find you quite recovered?"

Merry wondered if the blush was going to become a permanent part of his appearance. “I feel much better now, Your Majesty; fine, really...” His voice trailed off uncertainly. He hadn’t been prepared for a private audience with the king.

“Excellent,” the king said with a catlike smile that made his moustache curl up at the corners in an almost sinister way. “Then may we sit and converse for a time? I have something rather important to ask you; something I believe that only you can do for the kingdom.”

Astonished, Merry merely nodded and sat as the king directed him, while Sir Cantrith brought another chair for the king.

“You know how important it is for us to have the protection of the dragons,” the king began. Merry simply nodded. The stories of the wars and the Great Pact were taught to every child in the Seven Kingdoms. “I want to tell you of a time before the Pact, before there were Candidates sacrificed to the dragons, when Amaranthe had the power to protect itself without sacrificing our sons and daughters.

“Long ago, there were great wielders of magic. I speak not of conjurers of handfire or those who create illusions for the entertainment of children. I speak now of true magic. I speak of the *Seithre*.” He stared at Merry, searching for a sign that any of these things held meaning for him, but Merry could only stare back, wide-eyed and nervous, and feeling that he was missing some vital clue.

“The *Seithre* was a branch of magic that allowed its users to create and use artifacts of immense power. Some of the weapons you saw today in the Archive were created with it. They have the ability to do things such as create a wound that will not stop bleeding, or to drain the strength from any man with a single blow. These are the kinds of weapons that can win battles, win wars. They were made by Magisters long ago, and they were used by trained warriors who also carried the bloodlines of the *Seithre*. The tragedy is, that these bloodlines have died out. No one now living is known to be able to activate these powers, and so these legendary weapons are merely what they seem to be—a sword, a lance, a mace—with none of the power of old. So they molder in our Archives, nothing more than the basis of pretty tales. And our kingdom is vulnerable. Thus, we were forced to enter into the Pact, much though it saddened my ancestors to agree to the dragons’ heinous terms. Long have we waited for a sign that the bloodlines have not died out, but to no avail. Until today.”

He watched Merry with a calculating air, making him fight the urge to squirm in his seat. How was he expected to react to this tale? What had it to do with him?

King Bendic leaned forward and lowered his voice. “You, Sir Merek, show signs of bearing the blood of the *Seithre*.”

That startled Merry out of his uncomfortable musings. “What?” he blurted.

The king’s smile turned deadly. “You activated some of the ancient artifacts in the Archives today. You can wield them, control them. *You* will liberate us from the dragons.”

Kynbraxxas

It was the most nerve-wracking event of my life. I had to appear on the Choosing Field on the appointed day, at the appointed hour, in my dragon form. For the first time in my life, I wondered if my butt was too big. Of course, in this form, my *everything* was too big for my sweet Merry. I was mortally afraid that he would die of fright before I ever had the chance to reveal my true identity to him.

To make matters worse, when I was nervous, I had a tendency to smoke. In my human form, it would manifest as simple heartburn, but my dragon form would translate it into a fire in my belly. Literally. It was nothing too obvious, just a few tendrils wafting from my nostrils, but I was worried about how it would look to the humans. They would probably think I was about to roast them.

The day was bright, at least; if good weather made for a good omen, that is. I wasn't entirely certain, but thought I remembered something about humans equating pretty weather with a favorable outcome. I tried to comfort myself with that thought. The sun was certainly beaming with all its might, creating a dazzling display as it glinted off the armor and weapons of the King's Guard, who marched in two lines to either side of the Candidates as they walked two by two, male and female, up to the summit of the Field. I, of course, was alone. Beast was stabled not too far away, along with a special gift I'd arranged for Merry.

Since we tried not to advertise the fact that we had two forms, it was impossible for me to meet my Chosen as the man he'd come to know. It also precluded bringing attendants of my own kind. It had been tried in the past, but had resulted in the humans trying to "free" the *Ddraig* in human form from the clutches of the vile dragon they accompanied. That had been a diplomatic mess that had encouraged us to send only the dragon who would claim the Chosen. As far as I knew, every human who had been Chosen had been quite satisfied with their lot once everything had been explained to them, and none of them had yearned to return to their human lives. That was the wisdom of accepting only virgins; they had fewer attachments to those they left behind. And each Candidate knew that they might never see their families again once they set foot on the Choosing Field, so they really weren't missing out on anything. Instead, they'd gained a new and exciting life in a world filled with delights they'd never dreamed of in their previous existence.

So why was I still so damned nervous? Probably because Merry and I had shared a connection, brief though it had been, that had earned him my honesty at the very least. Custom and wisdom had prevented me from giving him the truth, but he would have it the moment we were freed from all of this blasted pomp and ceremony.

The question was, would he be content to continue as we'd begun, or would he be profoundly disillusioned with me and choose to live out his life elsewhere among the Otherkin?

Horns blasted, jarring me out of my—yes, I'll admit it—sulk. I caught the scents rising up from the group of Candidates. Mostly, they smelled of fear, but I could tell that one of them, at least, had not kept to the rule of chastity. Yes, virginity has an aroma all its own. I can't describe it, but I certainly know it when I smell it. As they came to a stop before me, I realized that several of them had, in fact, lost their right to be among those gathered on the Field that day. How odd.

It mattered not a whit, though, because there was only one person who would be leaving with me this day, and he was as pure as the day I'd met him. He stood, pale and proud, near the front of the group, and the sun shone all the brighter for having touched the lustrous flame of his hair.

Oh, fuck, he turned me into a blithering idiot.

I lowered my head as a gesture of respect to the human king. He was tall, dark, and handsome. I'd heard stories about him: Bendic XII, black of hair, black of eye, black of heart. I'd never quite understood the last bit, because by all accounts he was a fair and devoted monarch to his people. When I asked why his heart was thought to be black, the only answer I'd received was that he was reputed to be a ruthless man who would go to any lengths to protect the citizens of Amaranthe. I still didn't understand. Personally, I thought that a fine quality, indeed.

Each Candidate had been garbed in white, the females in long, flowing gowns embellished with seed pearls and thick with embroidery, and the males in white leather boots and trousers with long leather belts whose ends dangled oddly down along their thighs, and billowing white linen shirts decorated in the same manner as the gowns of the females. Every last one of them wore a crown of white blossoms on their head, obviously plucked from some greenhouse dedicated to producing spring flowers. No one could accuse the humans of skimping on the grandeur of the event. I couldn't wait to rid Merry of his lovely

new clothing. Just the thought of it had my prick trying to peek out of its sheath, and wouldn't *that* be a fine view for all of these stately lords and ladies? Let's just say that if they thought a stallion's member was a daunting sight, they would faint dead away if confronted by mine!

At a nod from the king, the lines of Candidates spread out into one long line with plenty of space between each Candidate. The idea was to make it easier for me to make my selection without touching anyone other than my Chosen. I had the feeling that they viewed this as some sort of protection for themselves, whereas I saw it as a benefit for me; I certainly didn't want to touch anyone but my Merry.

As I approached slowly, I had time to notice that while some of the Candidates were, as I mentioned, no longer chaste, most of the others were... off. I took a deeper whiff and was disgusted by the realization that they were drugged to the gills. What, were they all so spineless that they couldn't face their calling? It was a good thing I had eyes only for my Merry, because he was the only one left who was neither intoxicated nor deflowered (as it were).

I stretched one foot out towards him and bent my neck so that my eyes were directly in front of his face. He controlled his flinch (my head was easily as large as his entire body), and stood tall before me. I hummed a little, both with pleasure at seeing him again, and with pride for his bravery, and his eyes darted up to meet mine. I swear I saw the beginnings of recognition dawn on his lovely face, but we were rudely interrupted by the blast of a horn. I turned to glare, only to find that the rest of the Candidates had stepped well away from Merry, and the king was striding forward with a huge grin on his face.

The king began an impassioned speech about the good fortune that would grow from this gesture of diplomacy and blah, blah, blah... Truly, I heard nothing, except that he was acknowledging that Merry was mine, my Chosen, and I was impatient to be gone from this place so that we could begin our lives together.

A knight strode forward to offer Merry a steadying hand so that he could climb my leg and take his place on the back of my neck, just in front of my shoulder blades. My kin had affixed a little strap there that Merry could cling to during the brief flight to the place I'd selected for us to rest this night.

And by rest, I hope you will understand that I do not mean sleep.

With Merry settled on my back, I lifted my wings and waited politely for the humans to clear the Field before pushing away from the ground with my powerful hind legs. I heard Merry gasp once, then we were flying. Out of

deference to his inexperience, I kept us low to the ground, barely skimming the tops of the trees. I wanted to mindspeak with him, but was afraid he would be startled and let go of the strap midair. I was confident in my ability to heal him if he were injured, but thought this would be a less than optimal way to begin our new relationship.

Within a few minutes, we arrived at the little house I'd taken. Beast neighed a greeting as Merry slid more or less gracefully to the ground, unwinding the belt from around his waist as he did so. While I appreciated the sentiment, I was somewhat confused, seeing as how I hadn't yet revealed my identity to him. Before I could gather my thoughts, he threw the leather straps over my head, muttering words in some language I couldn't quite catch.

Suddenly, I was overcome with pain. Agony shot through every limb, and my head felt as if it would burst. There was a flash, then I heard myself scream, and then I was standing before Merry naked.

Human.

The Revelation

The past few minutes had been filled with trepidation and terror, but both of those feelings faded into insignificance when Merry beheld the form of his would-be lover shivering on the ground before him, wrapped in the straps of the artifact the king had called The King's Reins. A great noise erupted to his right, and suddenly Beast was there standing between himself and Baxx defensively, as if Baxx required protection from him.

Merry's mind worked sluggishly to fit the facts before him into some semblance of order. He'd slipped the Reins over the head of the dragon who had claimed him, and now Baxx was tangled up in those Reins. Baxx, who was shivering, in pain, naked. Baxx, who was...

The dragon.

In the back of his mind, he realized it made a kind of weird sense that the man he'd begun to fall for would also be the dragon who had come to claim him. Fate was playing a heavy hand here.

Movement brought his attention back to more immediate matters. He stumbled forward to help free Baxx from the Reins, only to have Beast shove him back hard enough to make him stumble.

"Beast... stop," Baxx ordered weakly, still trying to untangle the leather straps that clung to his limbs.

The moment Beast eased off, Merry darted forward to wrench the offending artifact from Baxx's body. It refused to loosen at first, and Merry forced himself to pause and go still the way Baxx had taught him when they were exploring Merry's ability to mindspeak. As Merry focused his thoughts, the Reins loosened and released Baxx. Merry shoved them to the ground and kicked them far away from Baxx's trembling body.

"Gods" was all Merry could think of to say. He wedged one shoulder up against Baxx's side and half carried him towards the little house that stood mere yards away. At least, he assumed that was where they'd been meant to go. Gods...

The door opened immediately under Merry's touch, and he hauled Baxx inside before kicking it shut behind them. Beast could fend for himself, he assumed, obviously no dumb beast at all. He settled Baxx into a chair set beside

a table and looked around the room for something to cover the man's—dragon's?—shivering body.

“Hey.”

Merry looked down at Baxx, who lifted a trembling hand to his face. “What?” he asked with an air of distraction.

“I’m sorry,” Baxx said.

Everything within Merry stopped. “Why are *you* sorry? I’m the one who—”

“I’m sorry because I couldn’t tell you before now. Couldn’t tell you about being the dragon.”

Baxx’s expression was so worried, and things felt so surreal to Merry, that he simply began laughing. He laughed until Baxx stood on trembling legs and folded him into his arms. He clung shamelessly to Baxx, thrilling in the warmth of his body and allowing it to chase away the symptoms of shock he was feeling.

It was the fine shivers that continued to take hold of Baxx’s body that forced Merry out of his strange mood. “You’re freezing,” he grouched. “Where can I find clothes for you?”

“Shhh,” Baxx soothed. “I’m fine. And to be honest, I hadn’t expected to wear too many clothes once I got you back here.” He gave Merry a weak smile, then continued on with an awkward little shake of his head. “I did mean to reveal the truth a bit more diplomatically, though. How did... Did you *force* me out of my dragon form?” His tone was incredulous, and he wore a frown that made Merry wince with guilt.

“It was the Reins,” he began. “The king gave them to me, told me I was the last of the *Seithre* bloodlines, and—”

“The king knows this?” Baxx seemed stunned by this news.

Merry nodded. “He knew even more than what you told me about it. And no, I told him nothing of what you said, nor that you were teaching me mindspeech.”

“I know you didn’t,” Baxx assured him, cupping Merry’s face in his broad palms. “I trust you with everything I am,” he added. “But why did you throw your belt onto me? And why couldn’t I remove it?”

“It was no belt. It’s an artifact known as The King’s Reins, and I was told it would place the dragon under my power. Once I had control of the beast—um,

sorry—you, I was to make it—you—take me back to the city gates. Then I was to lead you through the city streets, right up to the palace, where I was to hand over control of you to the king. He told me that the Reins gave a human of the bloodline the power to control whatever beast wore them. The king means to break the tyranny of the dragons, to stop the sacrifices. Once he controls you, he can use you to protect Amaranthe without paying the price. He means to break the Great Pact.”

Merry was breathless, his eyes bright with unshed tears when he finished. Baxx looked straight into his eyes and let Merry see everything he was feeling. There was desire there, of course, but also pride and a hint of sadness that Merry wished he could erase.

“Don’t worry so much,” Baxx told him. “You clearly acted out of loyalty to your king. You had no way of knowing that he was using you, that he was lying about the fate of the Candidates. Hells, I’m not even certain whether or not any living monarch does know the truth. We left it to the human leaders to manage their own people. All we required was that they follow the rules of the Pact. After all this time, who knows what any of the monarchs think? I certainly never concerned myself with the politics of it; I didn’t even know I’d be the one tasked with claiming the Chosen this time around—not until shortly before I met you.”

Then Baxx began the long explanation of the true history of the Great Pact, not leaving out any treacherous, selfish act perpetrated by one human king against another, and ending with the agreement the Clans had entered into in order to save the humans from their worst selves.

Just the sound of Baxx’s voice soothed Merry, though he thought it would take more than that to shake him free of the guilt of allowing himself to be duped into playing the role of traitor—both to Baxx and to his own countrymen, did they but know the truth of their own history. What the king had tried to do would have put every citizen of Amaranthe at risk if it had worked. The idea of what the dragons might have done in revenge for the loss of one of their own chilled Merry to the bone. If they’d wanted to, the dragons could have attacked outlying villages without the king’s forces being able to do anything about it.

“But why would your kind get involved?” was all Merry asked at the end of the tale. “Why not leave humanity to wipe itself out, leaving the world free for your kind?”

“Because we never wanted to see the end of your race,” Baxx explained. “There have been many good humans, people who have been heroes to their own kind as well as Otherkin, and created much beauty in the world. And because we need you, dear heart.”

Merry blushed at the endearment but urged him to explain.

“Early on, humans were filled with magical powers and abilities,” Baxx began. “Along with the *Seithre*, you had natural mental and psychic powers that meshed well with those of many of the of the Otherkin. In fact, most of the Otherkin trace their beginnings to human bloodlines that were rich with abilities. After a time, inbreeding caused some human bloodlines to lose their powers, and that was the beginning of the separation between our world and yours.”

“Your world? I keep hearing you refer to it as if it were another place.”

“Our world lies beyond the Veil. It’s a mystical barrier that separates the human world from the world of the Otherkin. It was set into place millennia ago in order to protect our races from the loss of their powers.” He broke off and smiled suddenly. “It’s where you’re meant to go, along with every other Chosen we’ve ever taken. There’s a life awaiting you there—one you can live as you choose. There’s so much to tell you, so much I can’t wait to show you. For now, what matters is that we didn’t want to become like most of the humans are today—headblind, we call it. As I told you before, when we were working on mindspeech, we find fewer and fewer humans who can use mindspeech, which would seem to indicate the thinning of the bloodlines of the *Seithre*. But even if you were to lead a dragon to the king, how would he be able to control it?”

“He said that he has devoted his life to studying the lore of these artifacts and their uses. Those Reins were once used to command an army of dragons, or so he told me.”

Baxx shivered. “There are stories in our culture, but nobody really believes them. I wonder if—”

“Stop,” Merry ordered. Baxx looked startled and jerked his head back to examine Merry as if surprised to find him so close. “You’re cold. We need to get you warmed up before any more conversation. I can’t believe I’ve let you stand here talking while you’re shivering hard enough to shake the shingles off the house.”

Baxx smiled tenderly down at him. He wore that slightly unfocused expression that Merry had come to learn meant that he'd done something that Baxx found particularly amusing—or worse, cute.

“Merry.” Baxx laid his palms gently on Merry’s shoulders. The drowsy, heated look in his eyes told Merry that Baxx was done with the practical discussions of who and what and where things went wrong in the past, let alone what might be done to fix it in the future. Right then, Baxx was focused on one thing only, and it made Merry’s breath catch and his heart soar in response.

He slowly tilted his head back until he could meet Baxx’s eyes. “Yes?” He heard the soft, tremulous sound of his own voice, but couldn’t bring himself to care how he sounded. Sweet gods, those haunting eyes were filled with a blue flame that soon encompassed all of Merry’s vision. Baxx leaned down just as Merry stretched up, and their lips met effortlessly in a reverent kiss. Baxx might have wanted to go slowly, keep them both fixed on the sacred aspects of these first few moments of their joining, and in fact he tried to do just that. Merry wouldn’t have any part of that, and when he parted his lips and invited Baxx in, he was thrilled that Baxx lost the battle to remain in perfect control. He plunged his tongue into Merry’s mouth, taking everything he wanted, and Merry gave himself over to the man who would soon be his lover.

Baxx’s kiss was a sacrament. Merry wanted to crawl inside and make a little place for himself where he never had to be apart from Baxx again. A feeling of peace welled up within him, and he gave a contented sigh.

As if that sigh were the final note in the movement of a dance, Baxx held Merry away with stiffened arms, determination written on his dangerously attractive countenance.

“I, Kynbraxxas of the *Ddraig*, claim you, Sir Merek Gillivray, to be my Chosen. I will shelter you and honor you with my body and all that I own for as long as we two wish to abide together, and then I will allow you to go your own way freely and amicably. I will provide for you now and until you obtain the means to provide for yourself. I swear this with my whole heart by the gods of both our worlds. I offer you now the kiss of peace. Will you accept me?” He spoke in a formal, stately voice, and Merry was enchanted by its almost musical quality.

He could have listened to that voice all day. Standing transfixed, Merry stared into the almost hypnotic blue of Baxx’s eyes until he noticed that Baxx had begun to twitch. With a long-suffering sigh, he asked, “Will you have me, Merry?”

“Have you?” Merry repeated, having a difficult time concentrating on the content of Baxx’s speech when he was so entranced by the sound of the man.

“By the gods, Merry, will you accept me?” Baxx gave him a little shake, and Merry managed to recall that a question had been asked.

“I-I... What do I say?”

“Kiss me, damn you!”

Merry broke out into a fierce grin. “Kiss me, damn you!” he said with a laugh.

Baxx growled deep in his throat and swooped upon Merry like a hawk going after a field mouse. This was not the gentle kiss they’d shared on the road, nor even the passionate one that had passed between them minutes before; it was hot and wet and messy. Baxx’s tongue flicked across Merry’s lips until they parted, and then Baxx swept into his mouth like a conquering hero. He explored the wet heat of Merry’s mouth until they both moaned and Merry’s body felt as if it would combust from the passion Baxx was waking within him. When Baxx released him, Merry looked up, dazed with lust, and was lost in the beauty of Baxx’s eyes.

It was amazing how much those eyes conveyed, Merry thought. They were the color of the sky, and shifted through shades of blue much like the sky did at the changing of the seasons. For the most part, they were the hue of a clear autumn sky just after the noonday sun had burned off the clouds, leaving deep cerulean behind. A shift in mood could bring a shift in color, and when Baxx’s emotions were really intense, they glowed with an eerie light that made Merry wonder how this magical being had come to be interested in him, an ordinary human with unruly auburn hair and pale skin that never did tan like the rest of the men with whom he’d trained.

Just at the moment, Baxx’s eyes wore a happy, mischievous look that blended well with the desire that caused a flush of pink to stain his aristocratic cheekbones. Merry tried to sense what Baxx was thinking, but he was shielding most of his thoughts. The little bit that leaked through startled a laugh out of Merry. So Baxx thought he was cute when he was teasing him? Part of him objected to being thought of as cute, but mostly he was happy to have amused Baxx and to be the cause of the joy that emanated from him. He took advantage of Baxx’s light teasing to initiate the next kiss between them. Baxx needed to know that he wasn’t the only one who was eager for things to progress between them.

“Tell me,” Baxx demanded breathlessly as he broke away from Merry’s kiss. The way he bit off his words told Merry that he was nearing the end of his patience, and that gave him a fierce sense of pride. “Tell me now if you don’t want this.”

Merry marveled at those words. Not want Baxx? The idea was laughable. Now that he knew what his fate would be—a life spent in another realm with the man who had awakened his heart—he had no lingering regrets about leaving his home and family behind.

Once more, Merry was the one who brought their lips together, and he eagerly opened for Baxx, hoping to convey all the feelings that were pent up within him. Impatiently taking what was on offer, Baxx wrapped an arm around Merry’s slim waist and pressed their bodies together from chest to knee. Their kiss continued, first playful, then tender, then fierce and increasingly frantic.

Their erections teased each other through Merry’s clothing. Baxx seemed to realize it at the same time as Merry, and put a little distance between their bodies. Merry moaned in distress at the loss of the delicious pressure, but Baxx just smiled down at him tenderly as they both struggled to regain their breath.

“I can’t answer for my actions if we don’t stop now,” Baxx said roughly. “If you want this of your own free will, you have to tell me.”

Merry shook his head at the besotted look Baxx gave him, but he was secretly charmed. This vibrant man, possessed of such preternatural power, was drawn to him, desired him, *liked* him. And Merry liked who he was when he was with Baxx. So if Baxx needed the words, Merry would give them to him. He reached up and mimicked Baxx’s actions from earlier, cupping Baxx’s harshly handsome face between his hands and holding him there as he spoke.

“I want you Kynbax—”

“Kynbraxxas.”

“Kynbraxxas of the *Ddraig*. For as long as you’ll have me, I accept you.” It was all he could remember of the speech Baxx had recited for him, but it seemed to be enough, if the gleam in Baxx’s eyes was any proof.

Baxx grinned at him, a pirate’s smile that sent the blood hurtling to his poor cock, encased in its leather prison. “Are you ready to end your virginity, dear heart?”

The air left Merry’s lungs in a rush, but he knew his answer was in his eyes, and Baxx understood the message well enough. He struggled to swallow the

lump in his throat as Baxx began working on the leather tie that laced up the front of his trousers. The act reminded Merry that, while he was fully clothed, Baxx was stark naked. He looked down between their bodies, and gasped at the beauty of the man who stood before him.

Baxx's body was unrepentantly masculine, with olive skin gleaming over hard-packed layers of muscle that could have been formed under the hand of a master sculptor. His torso was almost hairless, with only a thin line of hair that began below his navel and then traveled down to fan out just before it joined the silky bush that surrounded his cock. And there, Merry's mind came to a crashing halt. He'd trained among knights and other soldiers for the better part of his life, and it was impossible to avoid ever seeing another man's naked form. But Baxx was no ordinary man.

The organ that Merry now saw was magnificent. In length and width, it was perfectly proportioned to Baxx's body. Which was to say that it was larger than Merry had imagined on those nights when he had allowed himself to succumb to forbidden fantasies. Virgin, Merry might be, but he had known from early adolescence that he preferred to look at men's forms. Some of the soldiers had shared his preference, and a bit of judicial spy work had given him some idea of what went on between two men who shared their bodies and their beds with each other. He took a moment to imagine that great organ stretching his lips wide or working its way deep within his body, and he knew an instant of real fear for his ability to take it.

Baxx caught Merry's chin in the cup between his finger and thumb and tilted the young man's face up so he could see what went on behind those eyes. "Dear one," he crooned, "I will allow no harm to come to you. Will you trust me?"

His expression was so earnest, how could Merry fail to give his trust? He nodded, licking lips gone dry. Baxx's eyes fixed upon the motion of Merry's tongue, and it gave him some room to relax. If he could cause a response in this man by so small a gesture, maybe he wasn't so out of his element as he feared.

"I do trust you, Baxx. But... but shouldn't you tell me about this other name of yours? Kynbraxxas, was it?"

"Later," Baxx said hoarsely. "Bed now, talk later."

Any lingering nervousness Merry might have had was banished when Baxx finished unlacing his trousers and moved on to his shirt. Dozens of seed pearls formed the buttons, and it wasn't long before Baxx lost patience with them.

Setting a hand on either side of the collar, Baxx ripped the shirt off Merry's body in a spray of seed pearls that pinged across the polished wooden floor.

Merry cried out in protest at the ruination of the lovely thing, but Baxx cut him off. "I'll buy you another; I'll buy you a dozen. I'll find every last pearl and sew them back on until my fingers bleed. Just let me love you," he pleaded.

All Merry could do in response was raise his arms and drape them over Baxx's neck, lifting his mouth up to be plundered. Baxx captured his lips, pushing inside to lick and nip at the tender flesh before scooping Merry's legs up and carrying him to the back of the house, into a room that seemed to be all bed.

When Baxx laid Merry out on the enormous mattress, he took a long moment to look down at Merry's body—long enough that Merry began to feel self-conscious. When he moved to cover himself, Baxx's words stopped him.

"By the gods, you're gorgeous," he muttered, reaching out to fondle Merry's nipples. "Almost exactly the same shade of pink as your sweet lips. Gods, I can't wait to see if your cock matches the rest of you." He wrenched the boots from Merry's feet, then stripped him of the rest of his clothing between one breath and the next.

Before Merry could draw another breath, Baxx swooped down and engulfed Merry's cock in his mouth, driving down to swallow around the cockhead in a practiced, rippling motion that had Merry shouting his pleasure. With Merry's hands clutching his hair, Baxx bobbed up and down several times until Merry felt his balls begin to draw up against his body. Baxx pulled up just an inch or so, then milked him dry, caressing the satiny skin behind Merry's balls and brushing the tips of his fingers across Merry's virginal hole. It was all over in minutes, leaving Merry a trembling mess, and Baxx smacking his lips as if he'd just savored a delicious appetizer.

The sounds he'd wrenched from Merry would have been embarrassing if Merry'd had the energy to care. He didn't. For that moment, he was floating in a sea of bliss, barely aware of Baxx's movements around him.

As Merry lay shaking and dazed, Baxx settled beside him and encouraged him to rest his head on Baxx's chest. The room was silent, save for their breathing, for several minutes. Then Merry tilted his face up to look at Baxx.

"I know I'm new at this, but even I know that you didn't... you know."

The expression on his face clearly said that Baxx was smothering the urge to laugh at Merry's bashfulness. "No, I didn't... you know." He tweaked the

end of Merry's nose playfully. "I don't always have to... you know. And besides, don't think I didn't enjoy that thoroughly."

Merry pinched his side for teasing him. "Well, *I* certainly enjoyed it, but—"

Before he could finish his sentence, Baxx flipped him onto his back and leaned over him with mock menace. "Do not presume to know what gives me pleasure," he said with an overly theatrical scowl. "I've been waiting to do that since the day I first saw you." He laid a tender kiss upon Merry's lips. "Your sweet cries of ecstasy were very, very erotic."

That damnable blush was back, but Merry didn't try to hide it. Baxx knew he had no experience, and wanted him anyway. He would have to tune out his fears and insecurities and trust that Baxx knew what he wanted.

"Teach me to please you," he demanded.

He was rewarded with that wicked smile that had set Baxx apart from the beginning. "You want to make me come, little one?"

Merry supposed he couldn't object to that endearment. He was both smaller and younger than Baxx, so it was the literal truth, if nothing else. He decided he liked this gentle, intimate teasing, and smiled up at his lover. "I want to make you come, Baxx."

The smile melted from Baxx's face, and was replaced by what Merry was coming to recognize as his lustful expression. "Fuck," Baxx groaned. He reached onto the bedside table for a small pot, opened it, and scooped out a dollop of whatever it contained. It appeared to Merry to be a cream of some kind. Straddling Merry's hips, Baxx reached behind himself and did something that Merry couldn't see. Whatever Baxx did, it made him close his eyes and groan again. His hips began to undulate in a way that made Merry's own cock rise again. Gods, Baxx had a beautiful body.

Before Merry could question him, Baxx reached further back and grasped Merry's cock in greasy fingers. Merry squeezed his eyes shut and moaned at the feeling of Baxx's fist enclosing his cock and pumping him with firm strokes.

"Open your eyes, *kheredec*," Baxx commanded, squeezing Merry's poor, weeping cock when he was slow to obey. "That's better. Now, keep your eyes on mine. I want to watch your first time."

"First—Oh, gods, Baxx! Ungh—time?"

“We’re talking about fucking, sweetheart. We’re talking about *you* fucking *me*. Right now.” As he spoke the last words, he stood Merry’s cock straight up and positioned it between the muscular cheeks of his ass. Before Merry could process his lover’s words, Baxx pushed down, and the head of Merry’s cock popped through a strong ring of muscle, then another, and then slid up into the most intense heat he’d ever felt.

Giving a sharp cry as their bodies were joined for the first time, Merry’s head went back and his eyes almost slid shut. His lover’s rich, deep voice reminded him to keep them open, though, and he was glad he did. Baxx was more magnificent than ever as he slid up Merry’s turgid member and then back down again, doing something with his internal muscles that threatened to fracture Merry’s mind. He’d never been so hard before, never dreamed he could be. But then, he’d never imagined someone like Baxx coming into his life.

“So good, so sweet,” Baxx moaned.

Merry gave a jerky nod of his head and whimpered with pleasure. His linguistic skills seemed to have deserted him when the majority of his blood volume had fled southward.

Baxx bent down to kiss Merry almost chastely on the cheek and whisper one last, lewd declaration in his ear. “I’m going to ride you until you come deep, deep inside me; until you come so hard you see stars and fill me with your seed. And you’re going to watch me, watch my cock gushing over and over and over again until you’ve drained me dry. Because you’re going to make me come harder than I ever have in my long, long life.”

Merry suddenly understood why Baxx had brought him to climax first; those words alone could have sent him spiraling into orgasm without so much as a touch to his cock if Baxx hadn’t taken the edge off. And then Merry stopped thinking about anything at all, because Baxx began to move.

He moved like an elemental being, with the grace and timeless power of the ocean tide, starting off slowly, then swirling and churning his hips in a relentless pace. Each time Merry’s cock brushed against a little bump deep within him, Baxx groaned anew. There was so much to look at, Merry hardly knew where to focus his sight at any given time. The matter was settled for him when he realized that Baxx’s cock was rigid, the head purple and weeping a clear, crystalline fluid that accumulated on Merry’s belly. Thinking of Baxx’s titillating words, Merry dipped a finger into the small pool, then brought it up, gleaming with Baxx’s juices, and touched it to his tongue.

Sweetness, with a hint of something musky and masculine, burst upon Merry's taste buds. Mmm, essence of Baxx. He smiled and looked up to find Baxx's eyes fixed upon his mouth with an avid stare, the cerulean eyes mere slits.

Baxx rasped his name, his voice gone hoarse as his rhythm faltered. Merry made a show of sticking out his tongue and lapping at the liquid on his finger. The knowledge that it had come from Baxx's body, that it was the physical proof of Baxx's desire for him, was so intoxicating that Merry almost lost track of the deliriously wonderful sensations Baxx was wringing from his own body.

"Fuck," Baxx rasped. "Fuck, Merry. Merry, fuck me. Fuck me! Ah! Ahh!"

Baxx fell apart before Merry's ardent eyes, streams of ejaculate spurting over Merry's belly and chest. His inner muscles clamped down on Merry's own cock like a vise, pulling a second orgasm out of him even before he realized it was about to happen. He felt himself spew into the depths of Baxx's body, and it drew another oh, so, sexy moan out of his lover, causing rapturous aftershocks of pleasure for Merry. With a profound sigh, Baxx bent over Merry, nuzzling his neck, and Merry buried his nose in Baxx's damp hair, breathing in the aroma of warm, sated man.

Time seemed to have stopped outside of the little house they occupied. Or perhaps it had merely slowed. After Baxx had gently pulled off of Merry's spent cock, he'd cleaned them both up, using great care with Merry, who still couldn't stop his blushes. After setting aside the cloth he'd used, Baxx sat beside Merry and laid one hand along Merry's jaw in a silent caress.

Something clogged up in Merry's chest, a swell of emotion that caught him by surprise and had him wavering on the verge of tears. He'd never been a maudlin lad. His father had been kind, and his brother had been distant but pleasant enough, and he'd managed to avoid unnecessary attachments successfully—right up until meeting the man who sat beside him now. Merry could see that Baxx would break through each of his previously impervious barriers until he confronted the very core of who and what Merry was.

And Merry was, oddly enough, undaunted by that prospect. In fact, he was rather comforted by the thought of his life being inextricably entwined with that of a dragon.

Baxx pushed his fingers through Merry's tousled hair, massaging his scalp soothingly. "What ponderous thoughts plague you, *kheredec*?"

Merry smiled and gazed into Baxx's eyes. Up close, they were even more exquisitely lovely than he'd realized. He could drown in those cerulean depths and be happy forever after. "I was thinking that I just... I was just taken by a dragon." The blush made yet another appearance, but Merry was learning to ignore it.

Baxx's laugh was deep, shaking the bed and lighting up his eyes so that they glowed from within. Merry caught his breath, remembering something that he'd thought he merely imagined while they'd been joined. "Your eyes, they... they glowed, didn't they? While we... I mean—"

Baxx leaned down and kissed the tip of his nose, chuckling when Merry squinched his face up and tried to dodge the light peck. "Still can't bring yourself to say the words, eh, little one?" Baxx teased. "Yes, my eyes may have glowed while we had *sex*, my sweet. They do glow when I use my powers, or when my emotions run high. So, yes, it seems likely that they would do so when I was being well-*fucked* by my lover."

Though his words and his tone may have teased, Baxx's mien told Merry that he spoke seriously, as well. Certain words, however, caught Merry's attention and made him wonder...

"Am I your lover, then? I mean, will we continue to..."

"Will we continue to... you know?" Baxx's smile softened and his eyes grew tender. "Yes, my heart. I hope we will continue to... you know, very, very frequently. And maybe one day, you'll learn to say the word, 'sex,' or, 'fuck,' or—"

Merry smacked Baxx with one of the pillows. "Very well, you lout! While I enjoyed what we did immensely, you may or may not have noticed that I am still a virgin. I don't think the Pact is fulfilled until you have relieved me of that burden." He wagged his eyebrows suggestively.

"Dear heart, you *aren't* a virgin. I still have your spunk inside me, which is proof of your lack of virginity."

Merry went beet red, but persevered. "No, but I am technically a virgin."

"You're not."

"I *am*!"

"Not." Baxx tapped him on the nose with his forefinger, as if he were an errant schoolboy in need of reprimand. "You've fucked me, darling. And an

excellent job you did of it, too. *Poof!*” He made a little explosive gesture with his fingers. “No more virgin. And,” he added before Merry could continue to argue the point, “we have plenty of time to explore all of the other delicious things we can do to each other in bed. And in any other room you can think of. Or even outdoors, in the stable—though Beast might object to such antics, so perhaps only when he is not in residence. In a cave, under a tree, in the bath, or even in the ocean with the tides rocking against our bodies. We can fuck each other, suck each other, tease each other, please each other, *love* each other anywhere, anytime, as often and as thoroughly as our hearts desire.”

Over the course of this speech, Baxx’s expression had gone from playful to passionate, and there was no doubt in Merry’s mind that he meant every single word.

“What say you, *kheredec*?” Baxx asked quietly at last. “Will you be mine, and take me for your own, for as much time as the gods see fit to grant us?”

Merry cupped Baxx’s jaw, his fingers trembling slightly as he brushed them across the light stubble he found there. “I will, Baxx. With all my heart, I will. But won’t you... I mean, don’t your kind live for many centuries?”

“Ah.” Baxx lifted one eyebrow in a practiced move that Merry wasn’t sure he’d ever be able to mimic. “There are many things to tell you about my race—the *Ddraig*, by the way, in case I failed to mention earlier—and my world. But to answer your immediate question, the blood of my kind has healing properties. It can be used to make an elixir that extends human life far beyond the normal span of years.”

Merry’s eyes were so wide he wouldn’t have been surprised if they’d popped right out of his head. “H-how many years?”

“Centuries,” Baxx replied with a complacent smile. “It’s one of the reasons no Candidate ever returns to your side of the Veil. We offer a chance to fulfill whatever dream they may have, become whatever they wish to be, and extend their lives far beyond their wildest dreams.”

“What do you mean, become whatever they wish to be?”

“Not what you’re clearly thinking,” Baxx said with a brief laugh. “I mean that they can pursue any trade, craft, hobby, or career they wish. Many of them have become poets, craftsmen and women, teachers, musicians and artists, anything they want to be. Most of them have found love, or at least a contentment that would have eluded them in the human world, where

everything is regulated by barriers of class and family, by being born into a role that you may not have the heart to follow. And it isn't only Candidates that have crossed the Veil. Humans of all classes, if they are in the right place at the right time, can find themselves suddenly in contact with one of the Otherkin. These encounters have fed countless stories and legends, with few humans aware of the truth behind them."

Merry shook his head in wonder at the images Baxx had laid out before him. Then he frowned as he remembered what had brought them together at this time. "Baxx, the king is expecting me to deliver you to the palace. We have to tell him the true story of the Pact. We have to tell—"

"Peace, my heart. We can't do any of that. The Clan Council forbids it, and for good reason. Somehow, your king has stumbled upon an artifact that can force a *Ddraig* out of his or her dragon form. You cannot comprehend the danger of such knowledge. Even with so few humans carrying the bloodlines of the *Seithre*, the very idea that your kind could capture and control my kind... Merry, it has been done before, in the distant past. The Pact was created to curb human greed, which all but destroyed both worlds! Humanity is inventive and clever, and the peace between your Seven Kingdoms is rocky at best. It's only the threat of the *Ddraig* stepping in, in fulfillment of the Pact, that keeps them from each other's throats." He grunted with frustration. "I don't know if I can explain this clearly—"

Merry took hold of Baxx's hands, soothing him. "I know. I see; I do, Baxx. I truly do begin to see. The details are unimportant just now. But we must act in response to this... this assault upon you. Gods, if I had known!"

"Shh," Baxx soothed his agitated lover. "You were loyal to your king, and you had no idea it was a choice between him and me. I wouldn't want you to do any less than honor dictates, my Merry. It's one of the qualities that drew me to you. After your very distracting self, of course," he added, trying to coax a smile out of his lover. "As for your king..." He looked away, gathering his thoughts for several moments, while Merry did his best to exercise patience.

When a sinister smile spread across Baxx's dangerously handsome face, Merry felt something within himself begin to relax. Baxx would know what to do, and he was far more than a mere man. Whatever his plan was, Merry trusted his dragon to keep them all safe.

Kynbraxxas

When it came time to act upon my plan, I had to admit to feeling some trepidation.

We'd chosen the early morning hours, when the frost had yet to be swept from even the grand High Street of Dorbarra. There was a fine mist to accompany the frigid air, and I saw Merry shiver in the heavy leather armor I'd made him wear. If the shiver stemmed from any other cause, I certainly wasn't going to be the one to point it out to him.

Never had I been more aware of my size. The streets were certainly wide enough to accommodate my dragon form, so long as I kept my wings in close to my body. There would be no quick escape from this boulevard with its dragon statuary perched on the high rooftops. Visibility was limited because of the mist, and I could see the glow of my eyes reflected in the tiny particles of water that hung in the frosty air.

It was an eerie effect, even for me.

**Remind me why I'm doing this?*

**Walking through the not-surprisingly empty streets of Dorbarra behind a man holding reins. My reins? Like I'm one of those stupid sirit that humans use?*

**I could breathe on him and poof! Bits of ash drifting in the morning mist.*

**He's barely longer than my forearm. I could curl my claws around him, lift, and snack. Though probably not. Great-great-great Aunt Grnvliia had one once during an attempted hoard heist, and she said the rumors were wrong. They don't taste like chicken. At all. Nasty aftertaste too.*

**I could raise my head, yank him off the ground, shake, and see how far he'd fly before bouncing off... something-or-other.*

**I could stand tall, walk forward two fast steps, and drop. His king's street sweepers would have something to sweep... or mop... up.*

I could... shift. Rip my clothes off. His. Bend him over and fuck him here and now. Or perhaps not in the street. Humans are so touchy about public displays of affection. But there's a nice, shadowed alley over there. No one would notice. Much. Though they'd hear his howls of pleasure. And mine.

Are you enjoying yourself? Merry interrupted the little fantasy I'd been composing in my head. His tone was a tad sharpish.

I snorted, disgruntled at his prudish attitude. Though he might just have a point. I doubted the sight of my impressive, dragon-sized boner would put the king in a more benevolent frame of mind.

Well, I was, I told him, letting my inflection clue him in to my disappointment at his unwillingness to play. We hadn't had time to make love again before implementing our plan, and I was feeling out of sorts because of it. There was so much more I wanted to do to him, so many places on his delectable body I had yet to explore.

Are you always this—

Horny?

Immature, he corrected firmly. My, my, how brazen my little knight had become since losing his virginity. I had to admit, I liked it, though I was compelled to make a show of disapproving, just for the sake of appearances.

Our cheerful camaraderie was forced to a close, however, when I perceived the presence of men and *sirit* masked by the hoarfrost. There were a great number of them.

Merry faltered, but I was certain none but myself could have noticed the minute hesitation. He lifted his head and straightened his shoulders, and I sent him a wave of approval through the linking of our minds.

There was movement in the buildings that lined the street on either side of us. We were being surrounded. I lowered my head and did my best to appear lousy and muddled, the way I assumed they would be expecting me to behave if their confounded plot had worked. In reality, the lower vantage allowed me to better assess what sort of opponents might end up confronting my Merry if things went belly-up at the last minute. I was confident in my abilities to protect both of us, but I'd long since learned never to underestimate the power of sheer bad luck to completely bollocks up a perfectly good plan.

Which ours was. Perfectly good, I mean. My scales were hard enough to protect my internal parts from most weapons; but—as I had pointed out to Merry—just because the king had said Merry was the only person he had who could access the *Seithre*, didn't mean he'd been telling the truth. All it would take would be for one enhanced weapon to score a lucky hit to a vulnerable portion of my anatomy, and things would go south for us pretty damned

quickly. I had confidence in Merry's martial skills because he wasn't the sort of man to make empty boasts, and because Carac did not strike me as someone who would recommend spurs be granted to anyone who was less than worthy for knighthood. I also knew, however, that even the most experienced warrior's concentration could be ruined if he thought his beloved was in danger.

I grinned as I had that thought—I was Merry's beloved. Apparently, a grinning dragon is a frightening sight—or so the gasps that suddenly sprang up on either side of me attested. I made sure to bare as many teeth as possible as I widened my grin further. Fear is an invaluable weapon, and there are few things as frightening as dragons.

We continued our slow walk up the city's main thoroughfare. I could hear the dull roar of agitation in Merry's mind even through the shielding I'd helped him to establish before we returned to the city. If there was anyone in the king's employ who could use the *Seithre*, I hoped he was novice enough not to be able to penetrate Merry's nascent shields, or to ascertain that I was not under the control of the false set of Reins we'd quickly assembled in aid of our deception.

Another block in, I heard the scrape of boots on the stones behind me. They were closing in on us, surrounding us completely now. At least I could count on their *sirit* to flee as soon as I loosed my roar upon them. We'd agreed that I should avoid roasting the king's men unless they gave me no choice. Even without flames, though, I made a harrowing enemy. By my guess, we'd lose a few of the soldiers to fear, as well. It wasn't cowardice, really. But it took a special breed of man to face down an enraged dragon. I was hoping that there weren't many of that sort among the king's army.

When Merry could make out the army unaided by my superior perception, he brought me to a halt.

"I come under the command of the king," he announced in a clear, proud voice. My little knight, so fierce, so noble. So eminently fuckable.

A quick jerk of the reins told me that thought had dribbled through our link. If I were in human form, I would have shrugged.

One man detached himself from the group. It was not the king, I noted derisively.

"Sir Merek Gillivray," the man intoned with a voice that carried in the morning air. "Have you fulfilled the task set to you by His Majesty, King Bendic XII of Amaranthe?"

“I have.” I knew Merry hated to lie, so I was glad to hear the wording of the question. Since he’d been instructed to place the Reins over my head and use them to lead me back into the city, he was able to answer honestly that he had, in fact, completed his task. It was a fine distinction, but an important one.

“Then bring forth the monster.” Merry tightened his grasp on the strips of leather in his hand, inadvertently jerking my head down even further. I didn’t have to feign discomfort; the bit we’d cadged together to fit in my mouth was rough and abrasive on my tongue. I sent forth a quick warning to prevent him from apologizing or showing concern for me. He took a deep breath and settled himself back into his role.

Merry led me through the palace gates, which had been thrown open wide to accommodate me, and I walked behind him, docile as a lamb. The first thing that caught my eye once we’d passed the gates was an enormous contraption which I deduced was meant to contain me. The officer who had questioned Merry outside the gates motioned impatiently for him to lead me into this enclosure. Merry made a show of nodding and gathering the reins in both hands, seemingly to force me into their trap.

This was the pivotal moment upon which everything depended.

So of course, something had to go wrong.

A sudden gust of wind cleared away a section of the ice fog, and at just that moment, one of the guards looked up and saw...

“Dragons!”

The panicked cry rang out on the frigid air, and the eye of every human present turned skyward.

Those statues I mentioned earlier? They were some of my relatives, who’d taken the place of the stone sentinels quietly in the night. With the mist swirling about them, and sitting as still as... well... statues, they’d gone unnoticed until that inopportune breeze happened along.

With the ruse exposed, Merry gave a quick jerk of the reins and freed me from our homemade artifact. I spat the bit out of my mouth, which was my best weapon under the circumstances.

“Treason!” the king snarled, and I turned to see him high on the wall, pointing down at Merry and me. The guards rushed our position, and my blood ran cold.

As the humans brought their great siege weapons to bear on the members of my clan, I took a bounding leap forward, protecting Merry with my body, and let loose a great roar that shook the ground beneath the humans' feet. Merry pressed his back against my side, keeping us aligned in the best position for battle, and I followed this immediately with a thin stream of fire that scorched a line in the stones before me and served as a warning of worse to come.

If that wasn't enough, the other dragons, whose wings were free to unfurl, took flight and made a tight circle around the army before releasing their own cautionary blasts of flame. It was swiftly and efficiently done, and I was feeling particularly proud of myself for having had a hand in this victory over the treacherous human king.

Then I heard the scrape of a sword in its scabbard behind me at the same moment that I lost contact with Merry, and a cold dread snaked its way through my veins, stilling my heart.

Merry!

There was no answer. I tried to turn, but the tightness of the courtyard prevented my movement. Prevented me from seeing what had happened to my lover, I thrashed, taking out the soldiers who tried to close in on me. I bellowed, demanding that Merry answer, but there was only silence where his voice should have been in my head.

There was a cacophony in my head, dragons calling out to each other and planning counterattacks, but no Merry. Grndda's voice pushed past my panic, demanding that I stay calm. My response was vicious and not at all respectful. She didn't understand! She didn't know what Merry was to me.

"Cease or he dies!" a human voice bellowed.

Everything went still, save for the thunder of my terrified heart. Around me, the humans quieted and cleared room for me to move. I cautiously turned to see my Merry held in the arms of a huge mountain of a man.

A blade was held to his throat, and he slumped in the man's arms, unconscious.

I swore I saw red, my vision eclipsed by the blood I yearned to spill.

A tall man emerged from behind the bastard who held my Merry. The king, though not so finely garbed as he'd been on the Choosing Field. Not so jubilant, either, though there was much of triumph in his face.

I caught the reflection of my glowing eyes in the king's black gaze.

"For once, we have what you crave, dragon," the king said scornfully. "You will submit, or you will watch this traitor die before your eyes." He held up one hand before I could form a response. "Yes, I know you would smite me down where I stand, but *he* would still be dead. I have the courage to stand before you and demand what my people require; do you have the courage to watch your new toy die?"

Oh, that he should speak of my Merry so! I shook with rage, but he had me where he wanted me, and he knew it. I lowered my head to the ground and stood still as a swarm of humans closed around me, throwing chains over my body and tightening them around me. In truth, there was a flurry of activity, and I was dimly aware that I was suffering numerous tiny hurts, but nothing could tear my watchful eyes from Merry's pale face or the razor sharp metal still pressed against his vulnerable throat.

Overhead, I heard the mournful calls of my family, but none of them would endanger my lover.

When I'd been trussed to the king's content, he approached until he was close enough to touch me. I think he knew better than to try it, however. Whatever his faults, he wasn't a stupid man.

"You'll understand if I keep young Merek in my custody," he said with a great show of magnanimity. "So long as you perform your new duties to my satisfaction, he will be treated well. He will be housed in a private room and be treated as a valued guest. In the meantime, you and I will explore the artifacts I've gathered. Oh, and you will arrange to have The King's Reins returned to me. That one works to a certain degree, even if not exactly as I would have predicted. Merek should live a long, full life as a ward of the Crown. He is a young man; I should be able to solve this riddle before he succumbs to age or... accident. In the meantime, you shall be my creature, at my beck and call. Agreed?"

What could I do? There was no way for any of my family to act without endangering Merry. I closed my eyes and felt a sharp pain in my side. Grndda's voice cried out in despair above me, and a cold lassitude slipped over me and pulled me down into darkness.

Get up. Move! I tried to open my eyes, but they seemed impossibly heavy.

They're coming, and I can't get to you yet. Was that Merry's voice? If he was safe, then I could relax.

No! They're coming for you, Baxx. You must move! His tone was harsh, as if he'd been calling for ages. But that was wrong, for I hadn't heard anything from him for days. *It must be another dream*, I thought. I'd been doing little else besides dreaming, deep within the murky fog of the drugs they'd found to subdue me. How had the humans come into possession of one of the rare substances that could put a *Ddraig* down? It was too much to ponder just then, and I was too tired to fight the chains of sleep that tried to drag me under again.

Wake! Wake, you damned stubborn dragon. It's time to fly, Baxx.

Fly? I forced my eyes open and discovered that the shackles that I'd grown accustomed to were gone. I was outside, where I'd been since the whole debacle began, but I was free! Looking up, I saw flashes of light in the distance, drawing nearer. My family, flying, flaming, fighting for me!

I stretched out wings which had been kept tight against my body for who knew how long. They were sore where the restraints had worn against my scales, and from the enforced inactivity, but they worked when I demanded it of them. I flapped them once, twice, a third time, feeling the strength flow back into them.

Now! Fly! Fly for me, Baxx!

I used the momentum of Merry's words to pull myself up onto my hindquarters. I beat my wings faster, then *pushed* up and let the earth fall away beneath me. Below, I heard the soldiers running, shouting at me to stop. I ignored them all. Ignored, too, the brief flare of pain where the odd lance struck an unprotected spot. There were questions—so many questions—about how the chains had been removed, who had aided us. None of it mattered. I was free.

The Aftermath

It had been Merry's own people who had won the day for them. Still within the palace walls when events played out, Carac had guided his men in a mission to protect their young lordling, so miraculously returned to them from the brink of death, or so they'd thought. Upon learning that the dragon had taken Merry as his very willing lover, and that they would live a long and happy life together, Carac's men had taken it upon themselves to free Merry from the king's luxurious prison and reunite him with his lover.

"Bord had a couple days to make friendly with a cook in the kitchens," Carac told them with a wry wink. He'd been enjoying a round of celebratory ale with Merry, Baxx, and the entire group of guards who'd escorted Merry to Dorbarra.

After their escape from the palace, they'd traveled with some haste—and the aid of a small display of Otherkin ability that shook even Carac's ever-present equanimity—to the nearest border, which happened to be with Sannark, the homeland of Carac and Dain. With allies close at hand eager to be of service for the price of the true story of the events at Dorbarra—or as true as they could be after some judicious reconfiguring of the facts surrounding the role played by the dragons—the humans and Baxx had gone to ground in comfort. Merry wasn't sure what Carac had told their hosts, but Baxx seemed content to trust the warrior, and that did much to ease Merry's worries.

"As you well know, after me, Bord's the best cook among us," Carac said as he continued relating the tale of their escape. Bord made a choking sound in the background, but Carac ignored him, warming to his tale. "And he'd been spending a goodly amount of time in the kitchens, chatting up the maids and arguing with the cooks over the best ways to flavor soups and stews. So when the furor dies down, a week or so after the big hullabaloo in the palace courtyard, Bord here strides into the kitchens, casual as you please, goes right up to one of the little kitchen wenches he'd been whiling away his time with, and kisses the stuffing out of her. While she's turning red as a beet and getting the scolding of her life from the head cook, Bord slips a little something special into the beverage set aside on a tray, ready to be sent down to the guard on Merry's door. Then he turns to the cook and gives her a hearty buss for good measure." The company of soldiers slapped Bord on the back and wiped tears of mirth from their faces, thoroughly enjoying the scarlet hue of their friend's

face and his scowl that held the promise of retribution for each of them, once he wasn't outnumbered and in the presence of their captain.

"After that, it was easy as tickling a fish in a stream," Carac continued. "Yon brave knight here was insensible with whatever filth they'd been pouring down his throat." Baxx growled low in his throat at that, and Merry was amused that no one seemed disturbed by the fact that there was a dragon among them—albeit in human form at present. They'd accepted Merry's lover, made him one of their own, and folded him into their camaraderie with an ease for which Merry was profoundly thankful.

"Aye," Carac said in response to Baxx's growl. "And if I could roast every one of them bastards over a slow fire, it wouldn't be a bad enough ending for them. But we carried him out between us, peaceful as a sleeping babe, and smuggled him out right under the king's nose."

"Wasn't the king suspicious of you, seeing as how you were Merry's own men?" Baxx asked. Where Merry sat snuggled in the circle of his arm, Baxx's voice rumbled through his body, waking a warmth in his belly that made him squirm in his seat.

Carac nodded. "That he did. But we'd spent the time between the Choosing and the escape making the acquaintance of some of the palace's inhabitants—"

Rulf and Dain barked with laughter, and Bord led a group of the others in hooting and jeering at their captain's choice of words.

"I'm still your captain, and every man that doesn't shut his yap in about five seconds flat will find himself assigned to such vile tasks that he'll be wishing for latrine duty." Carac's sharp words created an instant silence so profound, Merry could hear the little chirrups of some insect outside the open window of the house where he and Baxx had been quartered.

He was warned from the inside out, watching these men, his friends and companions, who had risked so much for him. He'd never known how deep their loyalty to him ran. They were his brother's men, entrusted with his safety until he reached the palace. Once the Choosing had taken place, they should have been off on their way home. Carac claimed to have stayed to enjoy the festivities and general air of revelry that had taken over the city once the tension of the Choosing was over. Merry, who had known the man from his earliest memory of trying to swing a practice sword, had his doubts about that; Carac had never been one for frivolity before. But the men had stayed, whatever the reason, and so they'd been witness to what Carac had called the

“most shameless act of knavery” he’d ever had the misfortune to behold in his life. Without needing to know what lay behind the king’s actions, Carac was on Merry’s side, and therefore on his dragon’s side as well.

And Merry had to admit that it had been amusing to watch Carac’s face as he learned just who their traveling companion had been for those idyllic days on the road to Dorbarra. When he’d opened his eyes to find Carac and the others at his side, ready and willing to begin planning Baxx’s rescue, it had been all Merry could do to hold back tears of relief. With gratitude and awe at their loyalty swelling his throat, he’d spilled forth the entire story. Even the parts on which Baxx had sworn him to silence had come tumbling out. How else could he enlist the aid of these men, if they knew not what—and who—they were being asked to rescue? Not one of them had faltered at the task ahead. When told that the dragon who had Chosen Merry was none other than Baxx, their erstwhile traveling companion, Carac had treated Merry to a long, searching stare. Then, with a single nod of acceptance, he’d moved on to planning the rescue of the dragon.

That had been a tense time for Merry. Their greatest weapon of surprise was Merry’s ability to communicate with Baxx over distance. The problem was, they’d not had the opportunity to experiment and discover how far apart they’d have to be before mindspeech failed them. So when he couldn’t raise a response from Baxx, he couldn’t know whether it was distance or something more dire that blocked their communication. Carac had talked him down from his panic, reminding him that the dragon was too valuable to the king to be discarded lightly. Plus, the only thing protecting the palace from the wrath of an entire clan of dragons was Baxx’s safety.

Remembering that Baxx had other allies led Merry to speculate on his ability to contact other dragons. Without knowing whether he was breaking some strict protocol, or even if anyone would be able to hear him, Merry had focused his mind and sent out a query that had been answered by none other than Baxx’s mother. Though Merry couldn’t hear Baxx’s thoughts, his mother ensured him that she could sense that he lived. She told him that Baxx was being kept sedated somehow, and there was an undertone of rage in her speech that left Merry in no doubt as to the fate of the person responsible for drugging her son if and when she discovered their identity.

So the dragons and their human allies had planned a coordinated effort to free Baxx. It meant someone had to infiltrate the palace, and many of Merry’s guards were too easily remembered to return safely. A small group of *Ddraig* in

human form met up with Carac's men, who directed them to the best manner of ingress to the palace, as well as producing a good map of the route they would have to take to get to Baxx and free him from his chains. Grndda and several others remained in dragon form to attack from the air and provide cover once Baxx was freed from his unnatural sleep.

It was a wonderful plan, and Merry was grateful for the combined tactical experience of Carac and the *Ddraig*—right up until the moment they unanimously forbade him from joining the rescuers. He argued loudly and with increasing ire until Grndda put an end to the discussion.

Young Merry, she began, the tenderness in her tone at odds with the controlled violence evident in her dragon form, **Kynbraxxas spoke to me of his great affection for you when we planned the ruse that was meant to get you close enough to the king to change his mind about reneging on the Pact. He asked for my promise to protect you should anything happen to him. Your part in this mission lies in your connection with him. If he has suffered an injury, having you hale and whole beside him will be crucial to his healing. Would you endanger his recovery merely for the chance to strike back at his captors?**

Of course not was the only reply he could make.

I assure you, his treatment will be avenged. Besides, if you were with the rescue party and they encountered guards, you would either be distracted from the fight or from your connection with Kynbraxxas. You cannot do both jobs at once.

Her logic was frustratingly sound, and Merry gave in with as much good grace as he could manage. Carac, Bord, and a few others who had made a few “friends” within the palace stayed behind with Merry, while the rest joined the rescue party.

While he hadn't been present in body, Grndda had kept him apprised of everything that transpired during the mission to release Baxx. Her people carried with them everything they thought they might require to rouse Baxx from his unnatural slumber. She'd been right; it had come down to a skirmish with the guards defending Baxx's prison while Merry concentrated on sensing the instant Baxx regained consciousness.

It had taken what felt like forever to push Baxx out of his drugged state so that he could participate in his own liberation, and Merry had been limp with exhaustion by the time Baxx had taken flight. None of it had mattered, though, when he'd seen the enormous silhouette overhead. Watching Baxx land, he'd

felt a surge of renewed energy, and when the great blue dragon had settled to the ground, Merry had run to him, wrapping his arms as far around the thick neck as he could and burying his tear-streaked face against his lover's supple flesh.

After that, it had all been a blur of frantic questions, a hurried gathering of the troops, and a mind-boggling walk between worlds that had Merry and the other humans gaping in awe at the sights that surrounded them. And that was part of the world that would be open to Merry as Baxx's lover and companion, he marveled. One or two of the *Ddraig* had grumbled at leading such a large group of humans through territories they should never have known existed, but Grndda and Baxx had a brief, if tense, discussion with them that seemed to put an end to their worries. Or, if it didn't, they certainly weren't inclined to offer any further impediment to the plan.

And hadn't it been an unsettling turn of events to have his first face-to-face meeting with Grndda in her human form? As beautiful as Baxx was to him, Merry had to admit, Grndda outshone anyone he had ever beheld with his own eyes. Baxx had told him she was called Grndda the Golden by the *Ddraig*, and golden she was, from her hair to the honeyed tint to her skin, with stunning cerulean eyes—an exact match to Baxx's—set into her face like the rarest of jewels. While Baxx's coloring must have come from his father, the eyes weren't the only things he'd inherited from Grndda. When she laughed, he heard the echo of his lover. Likewise, when she gave her son a particularly wicked smile—and Merry was fairly certain they were discussing him when he saw Baxx actually *blush* at something his mother said—Merry saw where Baxx had obtained the expression that made his blood heat, frequently at inopportune times.

Now they were safe and fed, and the poison that had filled Baxx's veins had been flushed out of his system by the healing potions Grndda's people had provided. Merry's only complaint was that they hadn't had a moment truly alone since the time they'd spent in the little house Baxx had prepared for him on the day of the Choosing. And that had been far too long ago.

Twisting to look up into his lover's face, Merry's breath caught in his throat. No matter how many times he saw the man, he didn't think he'd ever take this view for granted. Wicked blue eyes danced with merriment in the devastatingly perfect face that had captivated him from the first moment he'd laid eyes upon it. One look at that arrogant, high forehead with its sharply arched brows; the thickly lashed cerulean eyes; the strong blade of a nose; the

elegant cheekbones; and the wide, expressive mouth framed by the meticulously sculpted beard and moustache, and it had all been over for him. No more could he entertain thoughts of celibacy, nor did he need to do so. He could spend a lifetime looking at that face. He looked forward to stretching those years as far as humanly—or Otherly?—possible.

As Baxx returned Merry's regard, some of the humor bled out of his countenance, replaced by a heat that was never far away. It scorched Merry, and he swore he could *hear* his own blood thrumming in his veins as his heart rate sped up and his cock began to fill. Baxx's nostrils flared, as if he were catching Merry's scent, and that was the final straw. He stood abruptly, holding out a hand to Baxx and ignoring the fact that all of the conversations around them had died off at his sudden movement. With a savage grin, he took Merry's hand and pulled himself up, then seized Merry's mouth in a deep kiss that elicited shocked laughter from their audience.

When he'd reduced Merry to putty in his hands, Baxx lifted his head and said, "My friends, I bid you good night!" He dipped one shoulder, but Merry guessed his intent and scurried out of his reach before Baxx could hoist him over it. While the others laughed at their playful antics, Baxx chased Merry into the room they'd been given, locking the door behind them.

Kynbraxxas

Goddess, he was beautiful! And in my bed at last.

I'd stripped him the minute I turned the lock on the door. He'd tried to kiss me then, but I'd thwarted him, pushing him onto the bed and enjoying the sight of him sprawled there, open to my view. Gods, the things I wanted to do to that gorgeous, leanly muscled body!

He grew still as I began peeling my clothes off, tossing each item to the floor, where I'd already tossed his clothing mere moments before. I found myself growing even harder under his watchful gaze. It had been two weeks, at least, since we'd had each other in that little house where I'd thought we would while away a month before I took him home with me.

We still weren't home, but we would be soon. Beast had come with my Clan when they'd rescued me from Bendic's mad plan—and we had yet to come up with a workable solution to *that* problem—and his presence made me feel more like myself again. It had been humiliating to be subjected to such a captivity in front of the man I loved, but my mother had shown the value of her presence in my life yet again on that count when she'd slapped me across the back of the head and told me to stop being such a damned baby and be thankful that my lover still wanted such a lugheaded dolt as myself. My mother's love is not without its painful moments, but she did have an excellent point.

A tickle on my leg pulled my attention to the sight of Merry's slim, pale foot tracing the muscle of my thigh. When his toes reached the spot where my thigh met my hip and he ran them along the crease there, my half-hard cock jerked to life. His eyes were drawn to the sight, and he licked his lips with an avaricious expression that threatened to make me climax right then and there. No, no, no, that was *not* going to happen, I told my overeager member. Capturing that foot, I parted Merry's long legs and pushed myself into the vee I'd created.

Merry moaned into my mouth as I bent over him and claimed his moist lips. I delved deep, quickly growing intoxicated on his taste. I pushed him up higher onto the mattress, climbing onto him as I went and trapping him beneath the cage of my body. He wasn't a small man, but he was smaller than I, and more delicately made. Everything that was different about him enchanted me: his pale skin, softer than the finest silk; his auburn curls that tumbled in wild

disarray about his head; his slender, yet strong body, trained in the art of war, but yet untried in combat. If I had my choice about it, he would never have cause to fight his own battles. But even as I thought it, I could almost hear my mother's voice in my head, telling me that it would be better for him if he did have that kind of experience. The gods knew, I couldn't be assured that I would always be there when trouble found him.

Yet I loathed the idea of taking that one last bit of innocence away from him. His hand reached down to cup my balls, and I was reminded of one area of innocence, at least, which I would very much enjoy stripping from him, just as I'd enjoyed stripping the clothes from his body. He laughed in response to my feral smile, assuring me he would be an eager participant in his fall from virtue.

To my surprise, he rose up all of a sudden and flipped me onto my back. I pretended to be aggrieved, until his silver-grey eyes locked on my turgid member, and he licked his lips with diabolical indolence. I let my eyes narrow to mere slits as his head bobbed slowly over my groin, his wild auburn hair curling and winding across the tops of my thighs. The sheets were soft beneath us, the air just cool enough to make me intensely aware of every inch of my exposed skin. I hissed as Merry gave me a languid sweep of the tongue up the length of my erection, following the vein that fascinated him so and then swirling around the glans and dipping into the slit to capture the drops of precum that had gathered there. I felt myself pulse in Merry's mouth, releasing a brief preview of the copious outpouring to come.

Not wanting to miss a second of the show, I reached down and swept a handful of tumbled red curls away from Merry's face, tucking it back behind one delicate, not-quite-pointed ear so that I could see the face of the man loving me. Then my breath caught and my abdomen tensed as Merry eased up until he barely held the head of my cock between his petal-pink, satin-soft lips. He sucked on it, concentrating all of his efforts on the tip of my dick as he cradled it in his hands.

I've mentioned before that I've had a number of lovers, from several races of Otherkin, as well as humans, in my long life. Never had I beheld such an erotic sight as that of my Merry loving me with his mouth. He concentrated, his brow furrowed as if it were the most important task he'd ever undertaken. Just watching him made me breathless, and the sensations he was delivering to my flesh threatened to unman me in an embarrassingly brief time.

So, as beautiful as the view was, I needed to level the playing field, as it were. I reached down and grasped him under the arms, hauling him up my body and forcing him to release my cock with a wet *pop!*

“Two can play that game,” I told him. Hitching myself around so that we were nose to tail, I grasped his dick and held it upright and then swallowed it down to the root, wringing the sweetest cry from Merry’s throat. I bobbed up and down a few times, and I tasted the first hint of Merry’s impending orgasm just before he took up the challenge and began suckling on my own dick. The sensations racing through me were even more intense than they’d been minutes earlier when he was giving me the best tongue-bath of my life.

Then my darling Merry showed me a trick that surprised even me.

I don’t want to go like this. His mindspeech startled me so that I lost my rhythm and pulled off him.

“What?”

I said, I don’t want to go like this, he repeated, still lapping at my cock with delicate little licks that made me legs tremble with the urge to thrust into him. **I want you inside me when I come.**

“Wait.” I had to move up and off, because he showed no sign of being willing to give up his prize, for all his demands to the contrary. “Wait, you want me to fuck you? Now?”

He pouted, his lips swollen from sucking on my dick, which distracted me more than I like to say. “I want to come when you’re inside me,” he repeated aloud. “I want to clench around you when I come, and I want to feel you fill me—”

I flipped around and shut him up the only way I knew how—with my mouth on his and my tongue down his throat. He hummed happily as I shuddered at the pretty picture he’d painted for me. Gods, the very thought of filling him full of my seed made me ready to shoot off right then and there. My body thought it was a fine idea, but my brain was flashing the word *Virgin! Virgin! Virgin!* in bright, strobing colors. Though the man didn’t talk like any virgin I’d ever heard of.

I pinned his hands to the bed, holding them shackled by the wrists on either side of his head. All he did was grin up at me. I’d never seen him so carefree, and I said so, not bothering to hide my wonder at his attitude. Not that he’d ever been precisely frigid, but he’d had trepidations. And now he was asking me to fuck his virgin ass... I truly couldn’t fathom the swiftness of the change.

His expression grew tender, and he writhed gently in my grasp—more to entice me than to try to free himself, I thought. And entice me, he did. The sight

of him beneath me, wanton and wanting, made my mouth dry, made me send up a prayer of thanks to the deity who chose this man and placed him in my path.

“You haven’t answered my question,” I reminded him, kissing the tip of his nose while he crinkled it up at me.

The tilt of his head as he processed my words was the cutest thing I’d ever seen. “There was a question? No, I think I’d remember if you asked a question, and you definitely did not.”

“Brat,” I teased. “I want to know why you’re so eager to be fucked, all of a sudden.”

“You think this is sudden? I spent days in that prison, drugged insensible, having horrible dreams that you were gone. Just... gone, forever. And we’d never... I’d never felt you inside me. No this is not sudden, and I do want it now. Right now, Baxx!”

His eyes had gone from that lustrous silver they turned when he was aroused, to a flat grey that looked like smoke. They were still beautiful, of course—I didn’t think Merry was capable of being anything less than luminous on his worst days—but I didn’t like the anguish I saw in them. He hadn’t spoken of these things before, merely expressing his joy at our reunion, but I shouldn’t have been surprised. Why did I persist in believing that his feelings ran less deep than mine?

There was nothing I wouldn’t give him, so I set about preparing him so thoroughly that he would feel nothing but bliss when I finally entered him. I’d acquired a special oil from an apothecary in the town in which we were currently quartered. It smelled of lovely things: vanilla, aromatic wood oils, and exotic flowers melded in a rich blend that inflamed the senses. But its unique property was that it made the skin more elastic while desensitizing it. Perfect for our purpose.

Coating my fingers with the oil, I rubbed them along his crease, massaging the tightly closed rosette until it began to relax. I introduced one finger into his tight heat, biting back a groan at the thought of feeling that clench on my cock and watching his face closely for signs of discomfort.

His eyes were locked on mine as I added a second finger and began working him open. A flush rose up from his chest, and his breath came in uneven pants. The third finger was a difficult fit, and he winced for the first time. When I tried

to pull back, however, he reached down to grasp my wrist, preventing me from moving until I nodded to show I understood what he wanted. As I began seesawing my fingers inside him, he let his eyes fall shut, and he furrowed his brow in concentration.

By the time he was prepared to my satisfaction, he was thrashing and moaning, and I was ready to chew off my own arm for the chance to get inside him. I greased up my cock and guided the tip of it up against his virgin hole. As I pressed gently against the sphincter, it fluttered around the spongy head of my cock. Gods, the sight of it threatened to snap my control.

Taking a deep breath to steady myself, I pushed forward slowly, and he eased open around me as if he'd been made to take me. My eyes were glued to the place where our bodies were joined, but I could hear the soft groans that spoke of Merry's pleasure, and they filled my heart with gladness. Then I was sliding into the tightest, hottest sheath I'd ever dreamed of, and I couldn't think any longer.

The cries I pulled from Merry's throat were music to my ears and food for my soul. Though I knew I must be making similar noises, I was aware only of him, of Merry. I filled him, finding the sweet spot within him almost immediately, and then we were flying together. I rocked into him over and over and never wanted this ecstasy to end.

I might have been able to make it last, but then Merry undid me with a single, breathy statement. "Baxx, oh, Baxx, love you..." His voice rose into a jubilant wail as his ass began to spasm around me. There simply wasn't any way to hold back at that point. I shouted as I spilled into him, and if I hadn't already been in love with him, I would have fallen for certain when that sign of my pleasure sent him into another, albeit smaller, orgasm that milked every last drop from my poor, exhausted cock.

Careful not to crush him, I nuzzled my face into the curve of his neck and breathed deeply of his scent. We were both still, trying to maintain the connection as long as possible. Eventually, my spent dick eased out of him, and we both sighed at the loss. We kissed then, for long, languorous minutes as the moon rose in the sky and the house grew quiet around us. The others were either for their beds, or had moved on someplace where they didn't have to listen to our love play. I cared not, nor, I was certain, did Merry.

"Mmm, I wonder if there's anything to eat downstairs," Merry murmured at length.

I chuckled, making his head bounce on my chest until he pushed off of me with a delectable moue.

“You wouldn’t make faces like that if you knew what they make me want to do to you,” I taunted.

He canted his head to one side, a delightfully impish expression on his face. “Are you sure about that?” he countered.

I laughed, filled with joy at his playful demeanor. He was a good match for me in every way, as far as I could see. At any rate, I looked forward to discovering all the ways in which we fit together. Even our differences would be a joy to discern. Best of all, our life would be seasoned with laughter.

I twisted around him and pretended to capture his arms. “Best beware, my fine knight. Haven’t you heard; dragons eat virgins for breakfast.” I gave him my most wicked leer, and he giggled. I wouldn’t have thought such a sound could be so appealing to my ears, and I realized just how firmly I was caught in his snare.

With a contented sigh, I curled my body around his and tucked him up tight against me.

The human was mine, now and forever. I’d made damned sure he knew it.

The End

Author Bio

When I mentioned I needed to write an author bio, my eldest daughter suggested the following:

“Hi. My name is Kestrel, and I like dragons, shiny things, and hot man-loving.”

I’m not really certain where she got the “shiny things” part, but the other things are certainly true. As for the rest, I’m a mother, a grandmother, a wife, a daughter, a singer, a dancer, a cat whisperer, a geek, a dreamer, a survivor, an ally, an artist, a reader, and a writer. After several years honing my craft as a member of RWA, The Sacrificial Knight is my first published work.

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