



A Kiss of Air & Fire

(Darkstone Academy)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: Can a lost princess reclaim her heart from the shadows of her past with the dragon king who never stopped loving her?

After years in hiding and a harrowing escape from captivity, Princess-Royal Jonquil finds sanctuary in the one place she fears and longs for: the Dragon Kingdom of Kappadokia, ruled by King Menelaus, the fierce dragon who once loved her beyond measure. As dangers from her past threaten to engulf her once more, Menelaus vows to shield her with fire and fang.

Returning to Menelaus's side, Jonquil is swept into a world where her every hurt is met with his relentless determination to protect and heal. As they confront the sinister plots of the Duke de Norhas, their rekindled bond faces the ultimate test. Amidst the political storms, Jonquil must lean on Menelaus, letting his strength bolster her own, as she fights not just for her kingdom, but for the peace she has been denied all her life.

Bound by love and battle, will the dragon king's protection be enough to free Jonquil from her nightmares, or will the ghosts of her past force them apart once more?

This novella is a retelling of the events of Chapters 24–33 of *A Kiss of Healing Honor* from Jonquil's point of view and contains major spoilers for the events in the last quarter of *A Kiss of Healing Honor*.

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Page 1

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D ucal Palace Baleares, Province of Espola

“Forgive our doubts.” Duke Ramón respectfully inclined his head to me, then to Jacinthe. “We welcome Your Imperial Highnesses and your retinue as our guests here in the palace for as long as you require. Is there any other way we may assist Your Highnesses?”

I took a deep breath, willing my heart to slow.

Moments ago, my situation had seemed hopeless. I’d been close to breaking my hard-won composure. After spending nearly twenty years in hiding, followed by an eighteen-month ordeal as a traitor’s captive, how could I possibly prove my true identity to the Duke and Duchess of Espola?

Once again, my old teacher and beloved mentor, Mage-Healer Niccolò Armand, had stepped in to save me.

Guilt twisted in my gut like a venomous snake.

Because of me, he’d lost his exalted position as Chief Court Healer to my father, Dominus Victor Augustus the Eighth, ruler of the Imperial Dominion of Human Lands. Even worse, Papa had sent Mage Armand into exile on Darkstone Island, a fate normally reserved for traitors and the nobly-born criminals.

I also resented young Count Fernan’s intercession on my behalf. I didn’t want to owe the son and heir of Duke Beltrán de Norhas anything .

But beggars can't be choosers.

"Your Graces, I thank you for your hospitality." I sank into a shallow curtsy. Even after all this time, I remembered the precise degree of courtesy owed a duke.

Beside me, Jacinthe followed my lead.

I continued: "I have a most urgent message to send to my esteemed mother, Domina-Regent Jacinthe." I tried not to choke on the words, grateful for the years of court training I'd endured never to betray my true emotions.

Esteemed mother, hah!

After what she and Papa had done to me, the only thing worse than helping her was the prospect of Duke Beltrán sitting on the imperial throne.

So, here I was.

"At this very moment, the Duke de Norhas is marching on the capital with six turncoat legions. Count Fernan informs me that his father intends to usurp the throne."

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Beltrán's dark-haired spawn nod vigorously.

At my news, whispers and murmurs of alarm filled the jasmine-scented air in the duke and duchess' airy audience chamber.

Espola was the second-most prosperous province in the Dominion. Its citizens relied on shipping and trade, both of which would be disrupted by civil war.

Duke Ramón's thick, dark brows shot up at this revelation. Duchess Sibilla, sitting

next to her husband on a cushioned divan placed on a low dais, stared at me in shock and dismay.

I finished my plea. “And we would be most grateful for your help in repairing and provisioning our ship, so that we may continue our journey north to the capital.”

Duke Ramón looked around the audience chamber, which was crowded with petitioners and courtiers.

“Everyone except the Princess-Royal and her party—get out!” He made a sharp shooing movement with his hand. “This audience is now private.”

When the room had been cleared of petitioners, courtiers, and servants, and the brass-inlaid doors closed, the duke leaned forward and braced his hands on his knees.

“Tell me what happened,” he demanded, then belatedly added, “Please. Your Imperial Highness.”

Ah, Divine Mother, protect me! I didn’t want to talk about my recent ordeal.

After Jacinthe had freed me from the vile compulsion charm that had enslaved me for over a year, I’d firmly shoved all my memories of that time into an iron-banded strongbox in the deepest cellar of my mind.

It was over. The past couldn’t be changed, and I needed all my wits and strength to move forward.

So, I used every mental trick I’d learned to bury everything that had happened to me. I vowed never to remember or think about those dark weeks and months.

But of course, it wasn’t that easy. It never was.

Pretend you're describing something that happened to Narcissa. I realized this was the only way I could get through the next few minutes without ending up a sobbing heap on the audience chamber's beautiful mosaic floors.

"I was returning home to the Western Isles on an imperial mail ship when De Norhas' men captured the vessel and all its passengers," I began.

To my relief, my voice emerged with no humiliating croaks or quavers.

Mother would have been proud of me as I calmly recounted how Duke Beltrán's men had recognized and abducted me, using a black magic compulsion charm to keep me compliant while Duke Beltrán declared me his betrothed and wooed military commanders and imperial bureaucrats in my name.

I then outlined the duke's plans for usurping the throne. My recitation ended with a summary of the past week's tumultuous events—my reunion with Jacinthe, our escape from Duke Beltrán's foul compulsion charm, and how Jacinthe's friends had coordinated a rescue attempt that ended with the duke's flagship in our hands and the duke himself our captive... briefly, anyway.

"This is outrageous!" Duke Ramón thundered when Mama finished speaking. "Suborning imperial legions, invading our province, abducting members of the imperial family—Beltrán de Norhas goes too far!"

Duchess Sibilla leaned forward on the divan, her eyes flashing with indignation.

"Your Imperial Highnesses, rest assured, you are under our protection. We will do everything in our power to assist you."

I caught my breath. Despite the dismal start to this audience, things were turning out better than I'd dared to hope.

“I’ll send messengers and courier birds north to the capital immediately,” Duke Ramón said, his voice tight.

It was a struggle not to grin or leap in the air in triumph and relief. But my early training in court protocols still held.

A member of the imperial family must never indulge in unseemly displays of emotions. How often had I heard that growing up?

I said only, “Thank you, Your Grace.”

The tight band of anxiety that had constricted my chest for most of the past two weeks finally eased with the duke’s promise of aid.

“However,” he cautioned, running a hand through his dark hair, “there’s a good chance Duke Beltrán will intercept our messages before they reach the capital. He’s got a reputation for thoroughness. He’ll have troops or agents stationed along all the roads leading north.”

Of course he would, I thought . My heart sank again.

Duke Beltrán was an experienced military commander, after all. He would’ve predicted that Baleares would be my first port of call.

Jacinthe glanced at me, a worried expression in her hazel eyes. Unlike me, she’d never been trained to conceal her emotions.

Living in the safe obscurity of Bernswick Village, I hadn’t inflicted the imperial disciplines on my hot-tempered, free-spirited, highly intelligent daughter. I’d wanted to give her the freedom of thought and action I’d never had growing up in the rigidly controlling confines of the imperial palace.

“What do we do now?” she asked. “According to Captain Jaquob, our ship will need a lot of repairs and new sails before we can sail it to Neapolis Capitola.”

“And how much help can we really offer the domina-regent, Your Highness?” asked Lord Ilhan of Parrish.

He was a breathtakingly handsome youth, heir to the Duke of Frankia, and one of my daughter’s loyal companions. And very possibly one of her lovers.

Something I tried not to think about too much.

In my absence, Jacinthe had reacted to her dire circumstances by attracting a band of steadfast protectors to her. This relieved me but also made the familiar sharp teeth of guilt gnaw at my heart.

I should have been there to protect her!

The Divine Mother knew I’d tried my best to keep my eldest daughter safe by living in obscurity and sealing away her dangerous power, which had manifested at a perilously early age.

Instead, I’d left her vulnerable and helpless in the clutches of my late husband.

Baldwin. Trickster curse him for a treacherous weakling! Those sharp teeth took another bite out of my heart.

Over the years of our otherwise happy marriage, I’d learned that Baldwin was lazy and a spendthrift. But he’d always adored me and he’d been a good father to our four daughters.

I never imagined he’d sink to beating and starving Jacinthe after Duke Beltrán

captured me.

Or that Baldwin would promptly take up with that mediocre mage, Narcissa of Camarcon, of all people! Ugh .

And now they're both dead. Killed by Duke Beltrán's agents, if what Jacinthe heard was true .

I suppressed a shudder and tried to keep my expression composed as Lord Ilhan continued, "We're only seven people. What can we bring her Imperial Highness that would be useful?"

Duke Ramón and Duchess Sibilla exchanged a dismayed glance.

That was when I knew they wouldn't offer me the force of armed men I'd been hoping for.

I knew better than to ask. A refusal would not only be humiliating, it would weaken my already precarious position.

I might be the imperial heir... for now ... but the Espolans clearly wanted to hedge their bets in case Duke Beltrán prevailed against Mother and took the throne.

Apparently, I wasn't the only one who sensed their reluctance to offer more than messengers and hospitality.

"How about an army of Wind-Walkers?" Boreas boomed from behind me.

Jacinthe's Dragon protector stepped forward, grinning, revealing sharp white teeth. In his human form, he was a giant of a man, heavily muscled, with flowing red hair and smooth brown skin.

Like all the Wind-Walkers I'd known—I firmly quashed an inconvenient memory—he exuded confidence and vital energy.

“Why not ask King Menelaus for aid?” Boreas continued. “The Kingdom of Kappadokia is only a short distance to the south of here.”

His suggestion felt like a kick to my midsection, driving all the air out of my lungs.

No! I wanted to scream. I can't!

It took all my strength not to react beyond a blink.

“Travel to the Dragon Kingdom, Your Highnesses?” Duchess Sibilla's eyes widened in surprise. “Prince Boreas, how can you be sure your King Menelaus would offer his aid to humans?”

Sibilla didn't know what I'd done in my foolish youth. How could she? It was my family's deepest, darkest secret—

“Of course he will,” Boreas countered enthusiastically. “Princess Jonquil is his mate and his hatchling Jacinthe is a member of my aerie. And the rest of you,” he gestured to our group, “are bound to her by blood, magic, or loyalty. You'll all enjoy King Menelaus' hospitality.”

Well, so much for my big secret, I thought wryly.

Apparently, all the Wind-Walkers were aware of what had happened between Menelaus and me during his time at Papa's court, all those years ago.

And now the Duke and Duchess of Espola were aware of it, too.

Then I remembered something else Boreas had said just now.

He called me Menelaus' mate. Present tense. What does that mean?

My hopes soared like birds freed from a cage. I grabbed them and firmly stuffed them back into captivity.

Menelaus hates me , I reminded myself. After what Mother and Papa did to him, how can he not?

Duke Ramón and Duchess Sibilla exchanged another long look. But neither of them looked shocked at this revelation of my scandalous past.

Maybe Mother and Papa hadn't been as successful at suppressing the truth as they thought.

And Boreas clearly doesn't think Menelaus hates me.

No matter how quickly I tried restraining my hopes, they evaded my clutching fingers and fluttered free. Could getting the help we need really be that simple?

But everyone in the Dominion feared Wind-Walkers. They'd been humanity's enemies for centuries.

I glanced around at Jacinthe's companions, gauging their reactions.

Lord Ilhan spoke up first. "I agree with Boreas," he said, surprising me. "Wind-Walker allies are our best chance to keep the Duke de Norhas from taking the throne with his legions."

"I agree," said Prince Gwydion the Fae. His unearthly silver eyes gleamed with

malice. “He’ll never see that coming!”

“I agree also,” Ilhan’s sister Lady Alondra spoke up. “ If Boreas thinks we’ll be safe in Kappadokia. I mean, Wind-Walkers are technically our enemies.”

“I agree,” said the taciturn but eerily beautiful silver-haired merman Tama.

Jacinthe looked at Boreas, and I saw her heart in her eyes. And he looked back at her with equal measures of affection and longing.

Very well, I thought. I have to take the chance if I want to stop Duke Beltrán. The worst Menelaus can do is tell me no.

Actually, he could do a lot worse , the annoying voice of reason said inside my head. He’s a Dragon. With a Dragon’s temper.

But I couldn’t let myself dwell on the possibility.

“Very well then,” I said before I could talk myself out of risking everything. “I will go. Who will come with me?”

Oh no. That sounded too much like a plea.

Looking around at Jacinthe’s companions, I added quickly, “After all you’ve done for me and my daughter, I won’t be disappointed if any of you choose to remain here in Baleares.”

One by one, their hands shot up.

First Jacinthe, then Boreas, who was grinning from ear to ear. Next, Ilhan, his jaw set with resolve. Alondra followed, a hint of excitement in her eyes. Then Count Fernan,

looking nervous but determined. Finally, Prince Gwydion and Tama.

I won't have to do this alone.

This time, my relief and gratitude broke through my self-control. I smiled gratefully at them. "Thank you all."

"If you follow the coast road south, Your Highnesses could reach the border in three days, maybe four," said Duke Ramón.

"Why ride horses when we could fly there?" Boreas asked. "We still have my saddle back on the ship, along with my excess mass."

My breath caught at his proposal. I'd never ridden on Dragon-back before.

But I've ridden a Dragon's front.

It was a wicked, completely inappropriate thought. And one utterly unfitting to my age and dignity as an imperial princess.

And yet, I had to fight hard to repress a smirk.

I nodded. "We'll depart tomorrow morning."

"Your Graces, before we leave here, could you ask your servants to repair the broken safety harness on the saddle?" Alondra asked anxiously.

Boreas had worn the saddle to ferry Jacinthe's friends from Darkstone Island to the Duke de Norhas' flagship. The safety straps had been a casualty of the battle that followed.

“Of course,” the duchess replied. She turned back to me. “I hope you will at least join us for supper and stay the night, Your Highness! We invite you to make our humble home your own. And if there’s anything we can provide to ease your journey, you have only to ask, and it will be given to you.”

When the audience ended a short time later, we followed a servant from the audience chamber to the guest suites on the other side of the ducal palace.

Beneath my brittle glaze of serenity, my body thrummed with mingled anticipation and terror.

Tomorrow, I’d come face to face with King Menelaus of the Wind-Walkers.

And he would know at last that he had a half-human daughter.

I glanced at Jacinthe, who glowed with excitement and nerves.

Divine Mother, protect her. If Menelaus takes vengeance on me, let Jacinthe be spared.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 2:07 am

Dragon Kingdom of Kappadokia

“This is it?” Lady Alondra asked in dismay the next afternoon, her voice echoing in the vast, warehouse-like space of what the Kappadokian border guards had called a guest house. “We have to stay here? For how long?”

The huge, crumbling stone building standing next to the highway that connected Espola and Kappadokia had clearly been built to house Wind-Walkers. It was the most unwelcoming place I’d ever seen... and I’d visited the Imperial Prison back in my court healer days.

The dim, musty-smelling interior was vast and echoing, clearly meant for Dragon occupants, not humans like us. The floor was hard-packed dirt, dotted with piles of dirty hay here and there. Crumbling plastered walls revealed crude stone blocks beneath.

There were windows and no human furnishings. Just the bare expanse of dirt and hay. It reinforced that humans weren’t wanted or welcomed here.

Boreas heaved a loud sigh. “Until Lady Aeolia gives her permission for us to enter the kingdom.”

“Were the guards right about you getting in trouble for adopting me into your aerie?” Jacinthe asked, voicing the question I’d been itching to ask the young Wind-Walker.

Boreas had sworn to Jacinthe and me we’d be welcomed with open wings in his homeland. Yet the two border guards had been openly hostile to us.

Even worse, they'd refused to allow us to continue our journey until someone named Lady Aeolia decided whether we'd be allowed to see Menelaus.

A Dragon bureaucrat. How delightful, I thought sourly.

"They're full of shit. My clutch-mother will understand it was necessary," Boreas declared, sounding as confident as ever.

"I'm sure this is all just a misunderstanding, and everything is going to be all right," I said in my most soothing tone.

For the record, I didn't actually believe either of those things.

I hadn't missed how Boreas had flattened his green-and-gold feathers defensively at his mother's name. What else had the brash young Wind-Walker failed to tell us about the situation in his homeland?

But at this moment, my daughter and her courageous but painfully young companions all needed reassurance. They didn't need to hear that I thought we'd just made a gargantuan error in coming to Kappadokia.

I traded a wry glance with Mage Armand. The old man was looking weary after a day spent in the saddle.

To be honest, I wasn't feeling my best, either. My legs were stiff and my lower back ached, and I longed to loosen the corset I wore beneath the formal gown I'd donned this morning for my expected meeting with King Menelaus.

I looked around the group of unhappy-looking young people and squared my shoulders. "In any case," I announced, "we won't know anything until morning. There's still food left in the saddlebags from the luncheon that the duke and duchess'

servants packed for us. Let's have a bite to eat and try to get some rest."

* * *

Will we even be allowed to see King Menelaus?

Later, I lay on the hard dirt floor, rolled in my travel cloak and wide awake as an avalanche of worries roiled in my mind. All around me, Mage Armand, Jacinthe, and her companions slept fitfully.

I couldn't quiet my thoughts, no matter how many times I told myself that it was foolish to fret about things I had no power over.

Last night, I'd tossed and turned for hours in the ducal palace's comfortable guest suite, wondering if Menelaus could look past the marks time had left on me and see the young, passionate princess he once loved.

I remembered the way he'd looked at me when we first became lovers. His golden eyes had been filled with fierce love and possessiveness. He hadn't cared that I was the daughter of his enemies, a human girl in a world that feared his kind.

I remembered our whispered plans, our belief that we could defy the world. That our love would conquer all, and heal the centuries-old conflict between humans and Dragons.

Instead, my parents had punished him harshly for loving me.

He'd once declared Wind-Walkers were loyal to the death when they took a mate. But how could I expect Menelaus to welcome me with open arms after all these years?

The long years separating us had left their marks.

My belly was stretched and scarred by three pregnancies, especially the last one, with the twins. My hair, once as black as a raven's feather, now shimmered with silver threads. My waist had thickened, and lines bracketed my mouth and radiated from the corners of my eyes.

Would Menelaus feel disappointment when he saw how old and careworn I was?

And then, of course, there were my children.

Menelaus might welcome Jacinthe, since she was only half-human and his daughter.

But how would he react to the news that I'd married Baldwin of Bernswick and borne three more daughters?

Would Menelaus understand how powerless I'd been?

My parents' law, the one that forbade human-Dragon unions, had made our love a capital crime. The mages of Papa's court had locked Menelaus in human form and exiled him to the prison island of Darkstone. How could Menelaus ever forgive that?

Under arrest and confined to my apartments at the imperial palace, I'd done the only thing I could think of to save the baby growing inside me. With Mage Armand's help, I had faked my suicide and fled Neapolis Capitola.

As a fugitive from my parents' harsh imperial justice, I'd done whatever I had to do to survive and create a safe home for Jacinthe in the Dominion's most isolated province.

A fresh spring of rage bubbled to the surface and made my stomach churn as I

remembered how vilely Baldwin had betrayed my trust in him.

I took a deep breath and forced it down. Baldwin is dead and gone. Don't waste precious energy on regrets.

And don't think about Duke Beltrán, either, or what he did to me.

Later, I could scream and cry and rage all I wanted. But right now, I had to stay strong and do what needed to be done to keep my daughter safe.

To keep everyone safe. Even Mother.

I turned and curled on my side, willing myself to be strong, willing sleep to grant me a few hours of oblivion. Dawn seemed as far away as my youth, and almost as unreachable.

But each time I closed my eyes, I remembered my last sight of Menelaus, bound and rendered helpless by a spell as the imperial guards dragged him away. His golden eyes had blazed with murderous rage and betrayal.

What if he looks at me tomorrow and sees a coward instead of his lost love? What if he's found another mate, and happiness?

I knew I should want that for him. But every part of my soul screamed in denial.

* * *

The stark light of early morning found us huddled around an unappetizing breakfast. The remaining border guard, Pyllos, had delivered a pile of raw meat at dawn.

Jacinthe used a Fire magic spell to cook it, and all of us did our best to choke in

down, along with the last of the provisions we'd brought with us from Baleares.

A sudden commotion outside had Jacinthe and the others all scrambling to their feet. I rose more slowly, every joint aching from a chilly night spent on a dirt floor, and gave Mage Armand a hand up.

I offered my old mentor my arm and together we hobbled through the Dragon-sized doorway of the guest house.

A Wind-Walker, easily twice Boreas' already impressive size, came in for a landing. Her gleaming green and gold plumage matched his, and her burning gaze was fixed on Boreas.

He groaned, and his huge, curving talons dug deep furrows in the dirt.

"Boreas?" Jacinthe asked in a shaking voice. "Who is that?"

His head drooped. "That's...that's my clutch-mother. Lady Aeolia," he muttered, confirming my guess. "She came to see for herself."

The newcomer landed in front of us. Her blazing golden gaze locked onto Boreas.

She opened her muzzle, revealing rows of deadly fangs as long as my forearm, and roared in fury. The sound echoed off the stone building behind us and washed over and through me, shaking my very bones.

Boreas shrank down on his belly and lowered his head to the ground.

It didn't seem to appease Aeolia. She continued roaring at him, her volume deafening.

She halted occasionally to let Boreas reply in the screeching, whistling Wind-Walker language before resuming her tongue-lashing.

This went on for some time. I watched with concern as Boreas continued to flatten himself against the ground after each exchange.

Jacinthe's mouth thinned, and a frown drew her auburn brows together. Her hand remained resolutely buried in Boreas' neck feathers as she stared up at Aeolia, apparently unintimidated by the huge Wind-Walker.

At last, Aeolia turned her burning golden gaze on us.

I reflexively tried to brush some of the dirt clinging to my once-grand gown. Then I straightened and prepared to present my request to be allowed to travel on to the Royal Aerie of Hierapolis.

But Aeolia wasn't interested in anyone other than Jacinthe.

"You, human," Aeolia said in perfect Capitolan to my daughter. The Wind-Walker's voice was curiously high and fluting. "I am the High Lady Aeolia, Royal Vizier to King Menelaus of the Anemodareis and clutch-mother of the Argestes Aerie." Her lips curled into a sneer as she added, "An aerie that has never accepted humans into its ranks."

I saw Jacinthe gasp, and her eyes widen. All around me, Jacinthe's companions seemed rooted to the spot.

Oh, no, you don't! I was not simply going to stand here and allow this creature to threaten my daughter!

Before I dwell on the foolishness of confronting a full-grown Wind-Walker, I strode

to Jacinthe's side.

I summoned the memory of Mother's haughtiest tones and let her spirit flow through me. "And I am the Princess-Royal Jonquil di Severieri, heir to the throne of the Imperial Dominion of Human Lands," I announced. "I wish to speak with King Menelaus regarding an important matter, and—" I rested my hand on Jacinthe's shoulder reassuringly. "I wish to introduce him to his daughter."

"You want me to believe that fool actually took a human as his mate instead of just fucking around with you?" Aeolia scoffed.

How dare you!

I crossed my arms defiantly and glared up at the feathered beast as I bit back my first angry retort and tried to rephrase it to something that wouldn't get us all roasted on the spot.

Slowly, Aeolia lowered her gigantic head until it almost touched Jacinthe and I. My fingers dug into my daughter's shoulders as I fought the urge to flinch and cower.

Aeolia had only to open her jaws, and she'd be able to gobble up both of us in a single snap of her gargantuan jaws.

Hot breath reeking of brimstone washed over us. Her nostrils flared as she inhaled.

And now we die. My heart pounded in a heavy, panicked drumbeat that echoed through my head. But I held my ground.

So did Jacinthe, my brave daughter. I was so proud of her.

Then, something pale and silver streaked past us at inhuman speed. Tama, the

merman, suddenly appeared between Aeolia and Jacinthe.

He flung out his arms in a protective gesture, clearly ready to die in Jacinthe's defense.

But Aeolia didn't attack. She didn't move at all for what felt like endless moments.

"Well," she said at last, her voice oddly soft. "So, it's true. These two humans really are Menelaus' mate and hatchling."

She sounded disappointed.

Sudden hope exploded inside me like Victory Day fireworks. Maybe Aeolia wouldn't eat us, after all.

The Wind-Walker exhaled a gusty breath that billowed our garments and sent Tama's long silver hair streaming like a banner. "Very well. I will take you to the royal aerie at Hierapolis."

* * *

Once more airborne, Boreas followed Lady Aeolia. Seated on his back along with Jacinthe and the others, I eagerly craned my neck as the two Wind-Walkers flew south along a rugged coastline.

Gradually, the landscape below us changed, the jagged volcanic peaks giving way to a pale, undulating landscape of buff-colored hills, spires, and mesas, their sides riddled with dark holes and openings. Lush canyons sparkling with streams threaded between the hills, vibrant green ribbons against the pale stone.

"There it is!" Boreas shouted at last. "The royal aerie of Hierapolis!"

The royal aerie itself was nestled in a breathtaking natural amphitheater shaped by eons of wind and water.

As he descended, I realized the sky was crowded with Wind-Walkers of every color—crimson, emerald, sapphire, gold—arriving from all directions. There were hundreds of them already gathered on the cliff ledges around the amphitheater, like a living tapestry draped over the cream-colored rock.

“Word of your arrival has spread,” Boreas called over his shoulder. “Everyone wants to witness your audience with King Menelaus. Half the kingdom is probably here.”

My heart began pounding again. I raised my hands and smoothed my braided hair—for all the good it would do—acutely aware of all the wind-whipped strands that had come loose during the long, uncomfortable night and two days of travel on Dragon-back.

Is it too much to hope that Aeolia will allow us to wash up and change our clothes before we meet with her king?

My green silk gown was a disgrace, and Jacinthe’s gold dress looked no better after two days of travel and a night spent sleeping on a dirt floor.

“But we only just got here. How could they possibly know already?” Jacinthe shouted.

“News travels fast among Wind-Walkers,” Boreas replied. “Especially juicy gossip. And a human visitor claiming to be the king’s long-lost mate returned from the dead? That’s the juiciest gossip to hit this kingdom in twenty years. Mark my words, the wagers are already flying about whether it’s really true.”

I wonder if any of them are betting he’ll roast us in Dragon-fire? The dark thought

intruded as Boreas started his descent.

Jacinthe bowed her head, as if in prayer. Not a bad idea.

I bowed my head and sent a brief, desperate plea heaven-ward.

Divine Mother, let Menelaus not punish Jacinthe for my sins. And please let him not be too angry at me.

That seemed the best I could hope for, even from the Mother of All.

Moments later, Boreas landed with surprising grace on the grassy floor of the massive canyon.

We unbuckled our safety harnesses and slid down from the saddle. Lord Ilhan, ever the gentleman, helped me down, then did the same for his sister and Mage Armand.

My knees were shaking with nerves as I settled my rumpled skirts into place. Jacinthe turned to me and reached for my hand, squeezing hard.

“Mama, it’s going to be all right,” she said.

I laughed shakily. “Isn’t that supposed to be my line?”

Meanwhile, Aeolia was marching away with giant strides, clearly expecting us to follow.

We half-walked, half-ran in her wake across the surprisingly lush canyon floor. I noticed dozens of caves and tunnels dotting the cliff faces, their entrances decorated with elaborate carvings and pillars and curtained by colorful painted leather hangings.

What seemed like hundreds of Wind-Walkers perched shoulder to shoulder on wide ledges, watching our procession with avid interest.

And ahead, lounging on a wide, cushioned bench in the center of a vast meadow, sat a giant of a man, watching us approach.

Menelaus.

He was not in his Dragon form as I had expected, but in human shape.

My breath caught and my throat went dry.

Like me, he'd changed in the twenty years we'd been apart. Unlike me, he'd filled out and only grown more magnificent.

Towering and broad-shouldered, with rich brown skin and a wild mane of red hair the same shade as Jacinthe's, he looked every inch a virile and mature warrior.

His short black velvet tunic was trimmed with gold and revealed heavily muscled arms and legs thick as tree trunks. A thick golden torc circled his neck, and he wore a golden diadem set with polished topazes and rubies.

He was so alive with magnetic vitality that it made my heart ache. How could he be anything but disappointed when he saw me up close?

Those last few steps seemed to take an eternity. I felt as if I were wading through knee-deep water while an inexorable tide tugged at my legs.

Menelaus watched our approach with an intensity that made my knees weaken. His gaze was fixed on me, and his eyes blazed with intense emotion and single-minded, predatory focus.

I swallowed hard as a new thought struck me. Maybe Aeolia had spared us only so that Menelaus could take his long-delayed vengeance on me.

Divine Mother, let him spare our daughter and her friends. And Mage Armand.

Less charitably, I added, But you can do whatever you like with Fernan de Norhas.

The youth had been on his best behavior during our journey, but I would never trust the spawn of Beltrán de Norhas' loins.

Then I saw Menelaus throw back his head and inhale deeply. An instant later, he was on his feet, his arms flung wide.

“Jonquil,” he shouted. “My love! My mate! You’re alive! You’ve come back to me at last!”

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 2:07 am

At Menelaus' jubilant greeting, relief rushed through me like a flood of sunlight, sweeping away every doubt that had sprouted like fungus during the long hours of night.

On its heels came a joy, overwhelming and so absolute I could no longer stand in its way.

His arms flung wide to greet me, Menelaus looked at me as if I were still everything he'd once wanted. Suddenly, I was young Princess Jonquil again, running headlong into the unknown, ready to follow him anywhere.

My pulse roared like a storm. My reply tangled in my throat and emerged as a choked sob.

The unaccustomed brightness of hope seared me, burning away years of fear and grief as if by Dragon-fire. My entire being ignited with feeling, even more than it had when I was young, reckless, and sure of love.

The leaden weight encasing my heart fell away and dissolved, until I felt nothing but joy, nothing but love, nothing but hope.

Can this be real? Is it even possible, this return of my life and dreams?

His eyes locked onto mine with love, with longing, with desire .

I craved his touch. His greeting had claimed me. He still belonged to me and I to him.

One step forward, with my back straight and my shoulders back, as befitted a princess-royal.

Then, my body rebelled against the constraints of the rigid self-control that had been drummed into me since childhood.

I forgot Jacinthe, and all the onlookers, and even my hard-won dignity as I lifted my stained skirts and sprinted across the grassy space separating us. Even if I'd wanted to, I couldn't have stopped myself from running into his outstretched arms.

Memories rushed through me as I neared him. Our love. Our passion. The days we never got to have. My life with him had ended before it began, yet my feet moved as if nothing had ever stopped me, not my fears, not my parents, not my age, certainly not the Duke de Norhas.

We were close now. His golden eyes burned with promise, and he was smiling the wicked grin I remembered so well.

And then he was there, solid and sure and undeniable.

"I had to fake my death," I managed before he caught me and lifted me.

The sky spun. The world whirled around us as he pulled me tight, so tight, against his impossibly broad chest. Tears of joy blinded me as they overflowed onto my cheeks.

His lips met mine, and it was as if the very world melted around us. His hot mouth held me in a bubble of flame, of life, and I could not think beyond him. My lungs were empty of everything but the brightness of him, of his joy. I gasped at it, clung to it, clung to him, my Dragon, my true love.

And we kissed and kissed and kissed. I clung to him. He was everything I had gone

without during the long years of my exile.

He held me like I was real, like I was not a shadow, not an old memory, but real, so real, in his arms. I no longer cared I wasn't young and beautiful anymore.

The only thing that mattered was that I was here with him. I laughed and sobbed and couldn't speak a coherent word.

It was madness. It was everything .

When we pulled apart at last, I was breathless and dizzy, and I could still feel the heated imprint of his lips against mine. I gazed up and saw my joy reflected in his eyes. I felt my relief beat with his heart, full and endless.

The Divine Mother had granted all my prayers, even the ones I was too afraid to voice to Her.

And now that Menelaus and I were together once more, I had no idea how to keep us from ever parting again. I only knew that I needed to. Desperately. Fully. Forever.

The only thing bigger than the love we had was the loss of it. We'd both lived with that for too long.

The Twelve Gods couldn't be so cruel as to force us apart again. They had to give us this. They had to.

Menelaus smiled down at me, his expression tender and joyful. Then his gaze went over my head. "And who have you brought with you, my mate?"

My mate . The sheer possessiveness of that title sent a thrill shooting through my chest like an arrow.

My heart was too full for words, but I had to speak.

I turned in his embrace and found Jacinthe and the others staring at me, wide-eyed with shock. I motioned her forward to join us.

When she reached us, I took her hand and drew her forward.

“Menelaus, my love,” I managed, my throat thick. “I—I have someone very special I want you to meet. This is Jacinthe, our daughter.”

Jacinthe looked apprehensive as Menelaus studied her intently. She had the smooth brown complexion and fiery hair of a Wind-Walker human form, but her hazel eyes and her features were from me.

Menelaus’ face split into a wide, delighted grin.

“Jacinthe, my hatchling!” he boomed, his voice echoing off the canyon walls. “By the Unconquered Sun, look at you! As lovely as your mother, and with my coloring. And I hear you’ve tamed that troublesome fledgling of Aeolia’s, eh?”

He chuckled and glanced at Boreas. The young Wind-Walker ducked his head sheepishly as Lady Aeolia snorted.

Menelaus released me at last and swept past me to enclose Jacinthe in a hearty embrace.

She squeaked in surprise as he lifted her off her feet and kissed both her cheeks.

“Welcome to my aerie, little whirlwind,” he boomed. “I am overjoyed to meet you at last.”

Fresh relief surged through me at his enthusiastic acceptance of the child he'd never met.

I saw Jacinthe's eyes shine with happy tears of her own. "H-hello, Father," she ventured, then returned his embrace.

When Menelaus released her, he kept his hands on her shoulders and examined her carefully. I tensed.

Had he discovered some flaw in our perfect daughter? Would he hold her human blood against her, as Aeolia had?

"I sense mage power in you," he declared. "Tell me, Fledgling Jacinthe, can you wield the Fire magic of our people?"

"Yes." I saw Jacinthe's relief as she answered him. She added, with a wry smile, "But I'm still learning to control it. I... I accidentally set fire to my room at Darkstone Academy. Twice."

I laughed, picturing it. "My love, Jacinthe has a rare gift," I told Menelaus, eager to share how special she was. "She can draw on the power of all five elements."

Menelaus looked suitably impressed. "All five? Truly remarkable! I'd expect nothing less from a hatchling of my seed."

My face flushed at his mention of 'seed.' It was followed almost immediately by a twinge of apprehension.

Now that we were reunited, I guessed Menelaus would be eager to reacquaint himself with me... and my body.

And I want that, too, I told myself, pushing down the memory of Beltrán de Norhas' nightly visits to my bed while I'd been his captive.

Later. I'll deal with that later.

Like a driver controlling a runaway carriage, I reined in my thoughts and forced them away from the dark paths they wanted to plunge down.

I returned to the conversation to find Menelaus still chatting amiably with Jacinthe about her abilities.

"Now," he said to me in his deep voice, "who are these Fae and humans you've brought with you, my mate?"

He nodded towards Jacinthe's companions, who stood gathered around Boreas.

Glad of the distraction, I smiled and introduced each of Jacinthe's companions.

Menelaus greeted them all warmly, even a nervous-looking Count Fernan, who looked extremely ill at ease among the assembly of Wind-Walkers.

"Please, sit," Menelaus invited when I'd finished the introductions. He swept an arm out toward the low couches and cushions scattered around us. "Wine! Refreshments!"

He drew me down to sit beside him on the padded royal bench.

A bevy of Wind-Walker hatchlings, each the size of a large pony and covered in gray, fuzzy down instead of feathers, scurried to obey.

"Lady Aeolia's latest clutch of hatchlings," Menelaus explained. "She believes in every aerie member making themselves useful."

I saw Boreas shift uncomfortably at his clutch-mother's name. He'd settled into a crouch in an open space behind the human-sized furniture.

Jacinthe and the others sipped at goblets of hot spiced wine, and enjoyed skewers of grilled meat. Menelaus turned to me.

"Jonquil, my heart, I have to ask. What brings you here after all this time? Not that I'm not overjoyed to see you," he added quickly, "but I sense there's more to this visit than a simple reunion."

I sighed and bowed my head. I'd rehearsed my speech for hours last night and on the flight south from the border, but it suddenly felt mercenary to ask Menelaus for aid immediately after our reunion.

But without the Wind-Walkers on our side, we didn't stand a chance of defeating Beltrán de Norhas and his suborned legions. The Dominion would dissolve into a bloody civil war, victimizing and killing ordinary citizens for the sake of power and riches.

I took a deep breath and prayed that Menelaus wouldn't think I was just trying to use him for my own ends.

"Staying away from you was never my choice, Menelaus," I said. "But I had to protect our daughter from those who would harm her. For years, we hid in the remotest corner of the Dominion, living under false names in a small village. Even then, I was always looking over my shoulder."

He nodded sympathetically.

I continued. "Last year, when I had to leave the village for important business—" Now was not the time to mention my younger daughters. I promised myself I'd tell

him everything later. “—the Duke de Norhas captured me and enslaved me with black magic to force me to agree to become his mate. I—I only escaped because Jacinthe found me and broke the foul enchantment binding me to the duke’s side. Now he seeks to overthrow my mother’s throne and seize power for himself. Civil war looms on the horizon, and I fear for the safety of our people.”

Menelaus’ face darkened with anger as I finished speaking. His muscles bulged with tension beneath his black velvet. “This Duke de Norhas,” he growled, his voice low and dangerous. “How dare he lay hands on you, my mate!”

His protectiveness warmed me as I pushed down unpleasant memories with all my strength. “He’s ambitious and utterly ruthless. He’ll do anything to claim my mother’s territory and my birthright. That’s why I’ve come to you, Menelaus. I need you and your people to help me keep the Duke de Norhas from tearing the Dominion apart.”

“Of course!” Menelaus said without hesitating. He straightened and looked out over the assembled Wind-Walkers. Raising his voice, he announced, “As your mate, it is my duty and my honor to stand by your side in this fight and help you in any way I can. The Wind-Walkers will not stand idly by while this duke threatens our loved ones and the people of the Dominion.”

Oh, Divine Mother be thanked! I sagged against his side. “Thank you,” I whispered to him.

Then Lady Aeolia heaved her immense bulk to her feet.

“With all due respect, my king,” she began in Capitolan. “You’re letting your emotions sway you. We Wind-Walkers should not involve ourselves in human affairs.”

Scowling, Menelaus asked, “And why is that, Lady Aeolia?”

“Need I remind you of what happened the last time Wind-Walkers fought against the army of Norhas? The humiliating defeat we suffered at their hands?”

The onlookers fell silent.

She was referring to the Battle of Invictus Pass, the landmark event two centuries ago that had led to human unification under the Imperial Dominion.

Aeolia continued in a blistering tone, “The royal aerie has been forced to pay tribute and send hostages to the humans for two hundred years. Is that a mistake you wish to repeat?”

Oh, no , I thought, as my hopes came crashing to earth like a spent firework.

Boreas shoved himself to his feet and came forward. “Permission to speak, my king!”

“Permission granted,” Menelaus said.

Boreas swung his head around.

“With all due respect, Lady Aeolia,” he began, “this isn’t about human politics. This is about defending our own.”

“Is that so, hatchling?” Aeolia’s feathers rippled down her long, sinuous neck as she fixed her piercing gaze upon her son.

Boreas didn’t retreat. “As we’ve just heard, the Duke de Norhas has not only abused our king’s mate, but also threatened his hatchling.”

He swung around to face the gathered Wind-Walkers on the cliffs all around us. He shouted, “What fire-blooded Wind-Walker among us would let such insults go unavenged?”

Roars and whistles of agreement rose in a cacophony that echoed off the canyon’s steep walls.

Boreas turned back to Menelaus. “My king, your mate and hatchling need you. They need all of us. If we turn our backs on them now, we turn our backs on our honor and our blood!”

I held my breath as Menelaus looked first at Aeolia then at Boreas, his thick russet brows drawn together in thought. And then, with a decisive nod, he rose to his feet.

“Boreas has reminded me of my duty!” Menelaus declared, his voice ringing with authority. “The insults against my mate and hatchling cannot go unanswered. Vengeance is necessary.”

Aeolia’s eyes narrowed, and her plumage rippled in displeasure.

But the king was not finished.

“Moreover,” he continued, “Lady Aeolia has reminded me it’s well past time for the Wind-Walkers to send an official embassy to our neighbors. Helping my mate’s mother defend her territory is a good first step in re-establishing friendly relations between our kingdoms.”

He rose to his feet, his powerful form exuding an aura of authority and determination. “I will accompany my mate and hatchling north to Neapolis Capitola,” he proclaimed. “There, I will fight at the domina-regent’s side to protect her territory from the intruders who dare threaten what is rightfully hers.”

He turned to Lady Aeolia. “In my absence, Lady Aeolia, you will govern the Wind-Walkers. I entrust you with the safety and well-being of our people.”

Lady Aeolia flattened her bristling feathers and bowed her head. “As you command, my king.”

Menelaus tilted his face up to address the gathered Wind-Walkers on the cliffs. “I invite the unmated young Wind-Walkers of our kingdom’s aeries to join me in fighting for my mate’s territory. Fledglings, this is your chance to prove your mettle, to forge your own legends in the heat of battle!”

A roar of approval erupted from the assembled Wind-Walkers. A renewed surge of relief washed over me.

Saved! I thought, eyeing Boreas with gratitude. Time after time in the past two weeks, Jacinthe’s companions had provided us with invaluable help. Their unwavering loyalty was a testament to the ruler that my daughter would someday become.

As the noise subsided, Lady Aeolia rose once more. “Before this audience ends, I wish to introduce one more piece of business. It concerns Boreas of Argestes Aerie.”

A hush fell over the assembly. The air suddenly felt thick with tension and anticipation.

Jacinthe’s expression fell as Boreas stiffened and pulled his feathers tight against his body.

“Boreas,” Lady Aeolia began, still speaking Capitolan, “you have disgraced yourself and our aerie with your outrageous behavior among the humans. You have acted without honor, without regard for our traditions, and challenged the authority of your

clutch-mother.”

Boreas flattened himself to the ground. “Clutch-mother, I’d never mean to harm the aerie,” he protested. “Or challenge you. I only wished to help Princess Jacinthe!”

“You overstepped your bounds, Boreas. Repeatedly,” Aeolia snarled, her feathers bristling with anger. “Worst of all, you placed our aerie mark upon King Menelaus’ hatchling without my knowledge or approval. I don’t tolerate that kind of insubordination from any of my hatchlings, much less one so recently fledged!”

She drew herself up to her full height, her massive form towering over Boreas. “From this day forward, let all be advised that I expel my hatchling Boreas from Argestes Aerie!” Her words rang out into the sudden silence. “He has forsaken your own kind in favor of the humans he apparently adores.” She turned to Boreas and added contemptuously. “Go. Let the earthworms be your family now.”

Boreas staggered back as if he had been struck.

“Clutch-mother, I beg you,” he whispered, his wings and long neck both drooping, “do not cast me out. Argestes Aerie is my home. I have nowhere else to go.”

Jacinthe turned a pleading look on Menelaus. “Can’t you help Boreas... Father?”

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 2:07 am

Menelaus shook his head, looking regretful. “This is aerie business. I cannot undermine a clutch-mother’s authority over her hatchlings.”

Lady Aeolia snorted in reply to Boreas, curls of smoke rising from her nostrils. “You should have thought of those things before you betrayed my trust,” she spat. “If you choose to remain here, you will live as an outsider, a pariah.” Her golden eyes fixed on the young Wind-Walker with the merciless gaze of a predator. “You are nothing now, just a friendless, kinless, homeless vagrant.”

Boreas bowed his head, chin pressing into the grass. On his own, he was a brash, powerful Dragon. But when compared to his mother, I saw he was only half-grown. It might be years before he reached his full potential as a Wind-Walker and could successfully challenge an adult as large and powerful as Aeolia.

Then horror washed over me as I saw Jacinthe stride forward to stand at Boreas’ head. My daughter had always had a hot temper. Now, I saw her clenched fists and flushed face and knew she was in the grip of a monumental rage.

“How dare you?” she snarled fearlessly up at the Wind-Walker towering over her. “How dare you treat your own son with such cruelty, such heartlessness? Boreas has done nothing to deserve this!”

Oh, Divine Mother, Aeolia is going to eat her! I half-rose from my seat to spring to Jacinthe’s defense.

Menelaus’ arm around my shoulders suddenly felt like a bar of iron.

“Peace, Jonquil,” he murmured. “Aeolia won’t hurt our fledgling.”

“I have to help her!” I whispered frantically.

Menelaus, looking maddeningly calm, shook his head. “Jacinthe has a Wind-Walker’s spirit. Let her fight for Boreas. She’ll only be the stronger for it.”

I stared at him in disbelief. He’d never seemed less human than right now. “Fight Aeolia? How?” My voice cracked.

Thanks to the events of the past fortnight, I knew how brave and strong Jacinthe was. She could wield Fire magic. And break supposedly unbreakable restrictor collars.

Even so, how could she prevail over a fully grown Wind-Walker who dwarfed and intimidated even Boreas?

“Have faith,” Menelaus said in a low voice. “I’ll intervene if things get out of hand.”

I felt anything but reassured. But his confident demeanor convinced me to wait and see. I settled warily back down onto the bench to watch the confrontation... and prepared a defensive spell. Just in case.

“You presume to question my authority as clutch-mother, human?” Aeolia’s crest bristled with indignation. “I repudiate the aerie mark my hatchling so foolishly gave you. You are an outsider and have no say in the affairs of Argestes Aerie.”

I winced.

“Boreas is my mate!” Jacinthe declared fiercely, her gaze never wavering from Aeolia’s. “His happiness is my concern. I won’t stand by and watch you cast him aside like a piece of refuse.”

My daughter had been just as fierce when she protected her younger sisters from the insults of the village bully. Despite my worry for her safety, I couldn't help admiring her unbroken spirit.

I watched anxiously to see how Aeolia would react to Jacinthe's scolding.

To my relief, Menelaus' advisor seemed amused, rather than insulted.

"Very well. He is yours now," Aeolia declared. "Take him and do with him whatever you wish. I'm done with him. He's no hatchling of mine. Not any longer."

She crouched and leaped into the sky. A few wingbeats brought her to the top of the canyon's cliffs. She banked and disappeared from sight.

Jacinthe reached up and pressed her shaking hands to Boreas' great, scaly muzzle.

They spoke for a few moments in low voices.

And then his wings unfolded and wrapped around my daughter, holding her against his feathered chest.

It looked like everything was going to be all right.

Weak with relief, I leaned against Menelaus' solid body and felt him squeeze my shoulders gently.

"Audience is over for the day," he announced in a voice that carried to every part of the crowded amphitheater. "If anyone has a petition they want to present, come back tomorrow afternoon."

He snapped his fingers and a fuzzy young Wind-Walker scurried over to us.

“Show my hatchling and her companions to the guest caves,” he ordered the chick.

It cocked its head and studied me from obsidian-dark eyes, then bobbed its head and hopped its way over to where Jacinthe and Boreas still stood.

As the little Wind-Walker led Jacinthe and the others away, my daughter glanced back at me inquiringly.

Menelaus laced his fingers through mine, and his palm burned against my skin. He showed no signs of releasing his hold... and I didn't want him to.

“Go on, dearest,” I said to Jacinthe, my face heating. “Menelaus and I have some catching up to do.”

My heart pounding, I watched my daughter and the others leave. Mage Armand winked at me before he hobbled away. He'd supported my relationship with Menelaus from the very beginning... and paid a steep price for it.

When they were out of sight, Menelaus rose, drawing me up with him. “Come, my mate. Let me show you my aerie.”

* * *

Menelaus' living quarters at the royal aerie were carved into the living tufa of the canyon wall.

As he pushed aside a painted leather curtain and led me inside, he snapped his fingers.

A rush of Fire magic tingled my skin and dozens of lamps instantly sprang to life, banishing the darkness in soft golden light.

I found myself in a spacious, high-ceilinged chamber floored with stone tiles and richly furnished with plush, colorful imported carpets and enormous, Dragon-sized stuffed cushions.

My heart was pounding again, echoing in my ears, deafening me. My chest felt tight with anticipation, as if I'd laced my corset too tightly this morning. I couldn't draw a full breath.

"Are you hungry, my mate?" Menelaus asked, moving to stand in front of me.

I shook my head. "N-not for food," I managed.

Why did I feel so shaky? Every part of me trembled with the force of my racing heart, and my knees wobbled.

"Ah." Menelaus smiled and put his hands on my shoulders. The heat of his touch burned through the thin silk of my gown.

I thought I might faint from the intensity of wanting him. How was it possible to feel so alive after all this time? After everything we'd lost?

"Let me show you my home."

He led me through a succession of chambers, each large enough for his Dragon shape.

The last room was the smallest, though still large by human standards. It was furnished with pieces built to human scale and draped in soft, vibrantly colored fabrics. The enormous bed looked downy and inviting, especially after spending a sleepless night on a dirt floor.

“I made this for you as soon as the border guards reported your return,” he said. “I hope it’s to your liking.”

“You created this for me? In less than a day?” I asked, shame sweeping through me like a wave over sand. I’d spent the past two decades married to another man, bearing his children and forcing myself to forget my old life. “You never doubted me, even after I spent years hiding from everyone?”

“Never,” Menelaus declared.

His loyalty made me feel small and very humble. I bowed my head and looked away.

He put a finger under my chin and gently raised my face to his.

“I’ve missed you, Jonquil.” His rumbling voice shook me to my core. “Half my soul was missing until today.”

My throat seized up. I could only nod. His admiring gaze made me feel beautiful and desirable, as if no time had passed, as if the years apart had only intensified our longing.

As if savoring the moment, he cupped my cheeks between his large, burning hands and bent his head to me with aching slowness.

I shook with the anticipation of his kiss, with the need to be his once again. His .

His gaze met mine, fierce and intent. He brushed aside a stray lock of my hair with the same tenderness I remembered from when we were young. How could his touch still make me shiver like this? How could I still want him so badly?

Even before his lips touched mine, I felt the air between us hum with heat, with the

fierce burn of long-denied desire.

Captured in the web of Beltrán's vile compulsion spell, I'd been ensorcelled to believe I was in love with the duke.

But it had been a vile illusion, nothing more. What I felt for Menelaus was honest and true. The voice of my heart and soul, free of dark influence.

Menelaus' lips found mine. I melted into him, my thoughts dissolving into pure sensation.

He kissed me with a passion that consumed my every doubt. His touch was gentler than I remembered, but still enough to make my skin burn with the need for more.

Time folded in on itself as I lost myself in his kiss and the hard certainty of his embrace. I was aware of nothing but the hunger of my heart and pulsing heat between my thighs.

His arms around me were strong and sure, and I wound my arms around his neck as if to anchor my spirit to his.

I panted shamelessly as his hands stroked my back and waist, leaving trails of heat in their wake.

How had I lived so long without this? Without him? He made me feel young again. He made me new.

I pulled him toward the waiting bed with urgent, desperate hands. He chuckled against my mouth and we moved in step like dancers, never breaking our kiss or our embrace.

When the bed frame hit the back of my legs, Menelaus unfastened my bodice with an aching tenderness that filled me with hope and want. He let the embroidered shell drop to the floor, then unwrapped me like a treasure, freeing me from layers of silk and ruffles. When I stood in a pool of stained green fabric, his large, blunt-tipped finger deftly unhooked my corset.

My breath caught at the gentle, teasing caress of his touch through the thin, almost transparent fabric of my chemise.

I was utterly in his power. I fought the sudden urge to scream and push Menelaus away.

But I loved Menelaus. And he was not Beltrán de Norhas. And I was no longer under that foul spell that had compelled my obedience.

Even so, my heart was pounding with terror as well as desire.

This is my choice , I reminded myself. I want this .

Oblivious to my internal struggles, Menelaus pulled the chemise over my head, baring me completely to his gaze.

My hands instinctively went to my belly, covering the stretch marks.

“Oh, you are beautiful, my mate.” There was nothing but admiration in his voice, and nothing but desire in his eyes.

I closed my eyes as his burning mouth kissed my throat and traveled down to my bare shoulder, as if reclaiming the long-lost landscape of my body.

Arousal rose higher inside me, the growing ache between my legs building with every

caress, pushing out my doubts and worries.

I reached out and fumbled with his clothing, eager to find the warm, bare skin beneath and explore him the way he was exploring me. I needed him more than I needed breath.

I thought I might be consumed by it. I wanted to be consumed by it. I wanted to be his, entirely, absolutely, completely.

When he was finally naked, he lifted me onto the bed. I fell back against the pillows, breathless with wanting him.

He slid over me and settled himself between my parted thighs with a hungry grin.

“There’s no perfume that smells as sweet as my mate’s desire,” he rumbled, and lowered himself to kiss my breasts.

His hot, heavy body pressed me into the mattress as his sharp teeth nibbled my tender skin, raising a shiver of delight that raced down my spine.

Then, from nowhere, a rush of terror struck me like a rogue wave, knocking the wind out of me.

What’s happening to me? I couldn’t speak, couldn’t even choke out “Stop,” as panic choked me.

I couldn’t breathe. I couldn’t think. My very soul was frozen with fear.

Everything around me turned frantic and strange. It moved too fast and not at all.

Suddenly I was back in the ship’s cabin, pinned beneath Beltrán de Norhas and

drowning in the scent of the sandalwood pomade he favored.

How many nights had I spent like this, in the thrall of his foul compulsion charm and helpless to resist?

I thought I'd escaped him, but here he was, pinning me down as he prepared to take his pleasure.

My blood ran cold as he held me in an unbreakable grip, smiling and mouthing sweet nothings in a horrible parody of love, all the while twisting my will to match his own.

I had no way to fight, no way to stop what he was doing to me.

He's not really here , I tried to tell myself. I was safe in the Royal Aerie with Menelaus , not back on that ship with Beltrán.

I'm a guest of the Wind-Walkers, not the captive of a man who stole everything I was.

But the memories still dragged me under relentlessly, drowning me in terror.

The bedchamber's walls closed in around me, transforming into a small, dimly lit ship's cabin. Cold sweat prickled on my skin, and my limbs trembled uncontrollably.

My vision blurred with tears, distorting the soft candlelight into menacing glares. My heart raced, and I couldn't seem to catch my breath. Dizziness overwhelmed me.

I desperately needed space, needed to escape the body pressing me down into the bed. But just like before, I couldn't move. I couldn't free myself.

Even in Menelaus' arms, I was still Beltrán's prisoner. His toy. His puppet.

“My love?” Menelaus raised himself on his elbows and gazed down at me. “What’s wrong?”

Panic finally broke through my strange paralysis. I let out a strangled scream and tried to push Menelaus off me.

He rolled away instantly, freeing me from his weight.

I curled into a ball, drawing my knees to my chest, and tried to breathe.

“Did I hurt you?” he asked, his voice filled with concern.

Menelaus is safe. He loves me. He wants to help me.

Over and over again, I reminded myself that I was no longer in Beltrán’s clutches, but in the arms of my protector.

Slowly, the wild panic loosened its hold on me. Bit by bit, my breath steadied. My heartbeat slowed.

“I’m—I’m sorry,” I managed. “You did nothing wrong. It was—it was just a bad memory.”

Gently, so gently, Menelaus curled his large body around me, and took me into his arms again.

His love and care for me felt like the wind—fierce and gentle all at once, sweeping me up and holding me close. It wrapped around my heart and my soul, gathering up every loose, unmoored part of me.

I was unworthy of it. And of him.

He cradled me, warm and comforting and undemanding, and I felt myself dissolve into him. His body next to mine was strength and warmth and kindness. It was everything I'd lived without for so long.

“Jonquil, my mate,” he murmured, his breath stirring my hair.

The comfort he offered terrified me. Is this real? Can it last? How can it possibly last when I'm this damaged? This broken?

If he finds out how ruined I really am, will he still love me?

His hand stroked my hair, my cheek, and the kindness of it overwhelmed me.

My self-control shattered like a dropped vase. I sobbed like a child.

And he just held me, stroking my hair. Patient. Undemanding. He was simply there, so steady, so certain.

When I finally got hold of myself again, Menelaus turned me toward him and studied my ravaged face.

Then he leaned in and kissed away my tears, so gently I thought my heart would burst, and held me as if I were made of blown glass.

“My love, who hurt you like this? What happened to you after your parents arrested me?”

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 2:08 am

Tell me what happened.

I swallowed and gathered my nerve. He needed to know the truth.

“Menelaus, I...” My voice faltered.

What will he think of me when he knows the truth?

He pulled me closer. “You’re all right, love. I’m here.”

Yes. I had never thought I would feel the warmth of his body against mine again.

His powerful hands rubbed my back, easing the residual panic from the tidal wave of unpleasant memories.

I drew in a shaky breath. “You deserve to know what happened after Papa’s guards dragged you away.” My mind returned to that awful moment twenty years ago, when my world had fallen apart.

“We had everything planned so carefully,” he said. “What went wrong?”

“When I found out I was pregnant, I knew we couldn’t wait any longer.” I rolled over and faced him. “I never thought humans and Wind-Walkers could have children together.”

“Nor did I.” His words rumbled deep in his chest. There was no anger there. Not yet.

His hand found mine, and he laced our fingers together.

“So I went to Mother and Papa,” I said. “I thought it would be better to choose the time and place, rather than having them find out from one of the palace maids or mages.”

I hadn’t thought about that terrible day in many years. Now, I relived it as if it had happened yesterday.

* * *

The Imperial Palace Neapolis Capitola Twenty years ago

“You let that Dragon defile you?” Papa’s voice cracked through the air like a whip. The impassive expression he usually wore gave way to rage.

It was after supper, and we were in the imperial palace’s Blue Salon, playing cards as we usually did.

I’d picked this time to broach the topic of Prince Menelaus with my parents because it was the only time during the day when no imperial officials or servants attended them.

“Oh, Jonquil, how could you? Knowing the scandal you’ll unleash upon us all?” Mother’s expression was tight with anxiety. “The imperial council is already chafing at your father’s new tax proposal. They’ll seize any excuse to make trouble for us. You know that!”

“But I suppose you’re only thinking about yourself. As always.” Papa’s tone was glacial. His disapproval froze me to the core. “It’s bad enough that I have no sons and that you’ll be the first reigning domina in the Dominion’s history. But now, with this

scandal, the nobles will eat you alive.”

“They’ll eat us alive,” Mama added, wringing her hands. “Your father is already walking a tightrope with the council. Certain parties —” Her lip curled with contempt. “—insist that a woman can’t rule the Dominion by herself, and are pressuring us to arrange your marriage to one of their heirs. A scandal of this magnitude will give them a sword with which to behead us!”

“But it doesn’t have to be a scandal,” I protested, though I knew exactly which parties Mother was referring to. Though the duchies and principalities of the Dominion had been unified for over two centuries now, the wealthiest and most powerful nobles still chafed against the reins of imperial authority.

Only the hope of an imperial marriage kept them intriguing against each other rather than allying themselves against Papa.

I hated how my voice shook, even though I’d rehearsed this speech a hundred times. I plowed on.

“You could tell the council that if I marry Prince Menelaus, we can have a lasting peace with Kappadokia that doesn’t require hostages. This—this isn’t just a love match, Papa. It’s a diplomatic alliance. It—it could save money on our southern border defenses. And, um, lower taxes for everyone?”

In the privacy of my apartment, in front of my mirror, my speech had sounded like a steady, bold declaration with irrefutable logic.

Now, confronting my parents’ anger, it deflated into a pathetic plea.

“I can’t believe I actually have to say this, but I absolutely forbid you to marry a Dragon!” Papa turned away from me and snatched up a handbell to summon a

servant.

When Junior Chamberlain Lucius entered, Papa snapped, “Summon the imperial guards and Court Mage Guibert. Arrest Prince Menelaus and put him in a cell until I figure out what to do with the miserable wretch.”

Lucius shot me a quick, almost sympathetic glance before he bowed to Papa. “Yes, Your Imperial Highness.”

When the door closed behind him, I tried one last time to make my parents understand. “Don’t do this!” I begged. “Please! I love him!”

Mother looked back at me. Her mouth was pinched with disapproval and her gaze was filled with withering scorn. “Does that mean you were foolish enough to lie with him?” she asked.

My expression must’ve betrayed me, because before I could reply, she shook her head. “Divine Mother, this situation truly is beyond repair!”

“I’m pregnant!” I blurted.

Papa’s face flushed with anger. He seized me by the shoulders. “Wasn’t it enough that you shamed our family by consorting with that Dragon? You’ve actually soiled our bloodline?”

He shook me so hard my teeth clacked together.

From long experience, I knew further pleas were useless when Papa was in the grip of one of his rages. I sent Mother a pleading look.

Her full mouth was opened into a horrified “O.” I couldn’t tell whether her horror

was because of my confession or Papa's reaction to it.

"Even if we agreed with you, which we most certainly don't," she managed in a strangled-sounding voice, "marriage between humans and Dragons is forbidden on pain of death under the Supernatural Relations Act. We can't risk flaunting the law, not now, not with the dukes of Frankia and Norhas both opposing your elevation to Imperial Heir."

"Once we've dealt with that troublemaking Dragon," Papa said to Mother, "we'll order Mage Armand to deal with that... that creature growing inside her."

"No," I whispered. My hands went to cover my still-flat belly in an instinctive gesture.

"If we can keep this a secret, perhaps the Duke de Norhas will agree to a marriage between Jonquil and his heir, Count Beltrán."

Her words hit me like a blow. "You're trying to marry me off to De Norhas' son?" I gasped. I couldn't believe my ears.

Before either of my parents could answer me, there was another knock.

At Papa's curt command, Court Mage Guibert entered. He was a young mage who served as the Head of Palace Security.

"Your Highness, it's done. I put a restrictor collar on that Dragon before my men arrested him. We have a few injured, but no one's dead," he reported coldly. "What do you want us to do with the beast?"

"Sadly, we can't just kill him." Papa scowled at Mage Guibert. "Send him somewhere far away, where he can't cause more mischief."

Mage Guibert bowed. “I know just the place, Your Highness. Darkstone Island—it’s where we exile lawbreaking mages. If we keep the prisoner collared, he won’t be able to fly away.”

“Very well,” Papa said.

“No!” I’d heard the rumors about Darkstone Island.

Papa and the mage both looked at me in surprise, as if they’d momentarily forgotten my presence.

“Collar her, too,” ordered Papa, releasing my shoulders and stepping back.

Mage Guibert had apparently been expecting this order. He’d come prepared.

Before I could react, he whipped a golden circlet from a pocket in his dark-blue robe and closed it around my neck.

The restrictor collar instantly hummed to life, powered by my magic.

I knew the more I tried to use my powers to defeat it, the more powerful the collar would become.

I was trapped.

“Take her away and lock in her rooms until we decide how to handle this... delicate situation,” Papa said.

Mother added, warningly, “And not a word to anyone about this, Mage Guibert. Or we’ll send you a one-way voyage to Darkstone Island, too.”

* * *

Royal Aerie of Hierapolis Present Day

Menelaus sighed. “Those flat-faced earthworms caught me by surprise, Jonquil. I didn’t have the chance for a proper fight before they trussed me up with a spell and put me on a ship.”

I raised my face and found his mouth.

“I thought they were lying about sending you away. I was convinced they were going to kill you, my love,” I confessed between frantic kisses.

“They didn’t dare, not with my clutch-mother, Lady Asteria, serving as vizier to King Ouranos. They sent me to that island and left me in that damned collar until my term as diplomatic hostage ended. By then, I’d received word that you were dead, either by your own hand or in some terrible accident. It knocked the fight out of me.” He kissed my forehead and stroked my hair. “What happened next?”

In the comfort of his arms, I let myself believe I was strong enough to tell him the rest.

“I knew I had to escape. And I had to do it without my magic. It was the only way to save our child.”

“Someone helped you.” It wasn’t a question.

“Mage Armand,” I said. “He was Chief Court Healer, and the only one I could trust.”

Menelaus stiffened. “The old man I met today?”

I nodded. “When he came to my rooms to administer the potion that would end my pregnancy, I begged him to help me. And he did. He risked his life and position.” My mind skimmed over the details like a dragonfly over the surface of a pond. “He removed my restrictor collar, and together, we made it look as though I’d killed myself before he arrived. Then Mage Armand got me out of the palace and to the riverside docks, where he gave me all the money he had. I didn’t dare take my jewelry or anything else from my rooms in case someone noticed things were missing. I took the next ferry downriver, then boarded a mail ship north to the Port of Felicitas Victoria.”

“I should have been there to protect you. To fly you to safety and slaughter anyone who tried to stop us!” His tone sounded anguished. He pulled me against him, his warmth and solidity anchoring me to the present. “What happened after you left the capital?”

“I knew that the body double spell that Mage Armand and I cast wouldn’t last long. I had to get as far away as I could before Papa ordered all the ports and roads leading from the capital closed.

“When I arrived in Felicitas Victoria, I rushed to buy passage on another mail ship headed to the Western Isles. It was the most remote place I could think of that was still part of the Human Dominion.”

I didn’t mention the dread that followed me every step of the way. As I hurried along the quays, I’d been sure that someone would spot me and arrest me before I was safely away from the Imperial Capital State.

“Why didn’t you take a ship going south?” Menelaus asked.

I blinked, unsure why he was asking. “South? To Baleares? Too risky.”

“No, to Kappadokia,” he said. “You could’ve come here , to the royal aerie. Human ships dock near here several times a week.”

I stared at him, stunned. Even after becoming Menelaus’ lover, the thought of seeking refuge among humanity’s traditional enemies hadn’t occurred to me back then.

“What? Did you think my clutch-mother and my father wouldn’t protect you?” Menelaus sounded insulted. “Ouranos would have sheltered you until I was released. You and the hatchling would’ve been safe, even if I couldn’t protect you myself.”

And my life would’ve been very different. There would’ve been no Baldwin... and no Talisa, Mira, or Juno.

My heart clenched at the thought of my daughters, alone and unprotected at the Imperial Academy, with Duke Beltrán’s legions marching north to lay siege to the capital.

I nodded. “After Papa arrested you, I thought I was on my own. And that your parents might be as angry about our union as my parents.”

My mind skipped back over the years, leaving some memories behind while lingering on others.

The lamplight cast gentle shadows across Menelaus’ face, revealing his intense focus on my words.

“I used the last of Mage Armand’s money to rent a shop with living quarters above it and set up a medical clinic as Mage-Healer Isabeau of Felicitas Victoria.” Now we were getting to the parts of my past I didn’t want to talk about. “There, I gave birth to our daughter. I named her Jacinthe, after my mother... though I don’t know why. Maybe I was hoping for my parents’ forgiveness someday.”

Menelaus' eyes softened, but his grip tightened, protective. "And then?" he urged gently, sensing my hesitation.

I swallowed, the knot in my throat tight with the resurgence of past fears. "Jacinthe was barely two when her Fire magic manifested. It nearly destroyed our home. I sealed her powers, but the incident drew unwanted attention from the officials in Herrewick. Isabeau is a common name, but I couldn't risk anyone investigating me and realizing I wasn't who I said I was. We had to vanish once more."

Menelaus listened, his face a mask of pain and understanding. "I wish I'd been there."

"I settled in a village in the island's interior. That's where I met Baldwin of Bernswick." The words tasted bitter on my tongue. "A mage-healer of mediocre talent but with a kind heart—or so I thought at the time. He courted me."

Menelaus' jaw tensed at the mention of Baldwin's name. But he remained silent, allowing me to continue.

I took a deep breath, the hardest part yet to come. "I—I accepted his suit. It was... convenient. A single woman, even a widow, drew too much attention in the village. Wives, on the other hand, were respected but essentially invisible among the islanders."

The space between us filled with silence—a quiet before the inevitable fury. I waited for him to curse my name, to turn away from me.

"You felt compelled to take another mate," Menelaus said at last. His expression remained unreadable.

Then, to my surprise, he exhaled slowly, his expression pained rather than angry. "I

wish I'd been there," he breathed. "So that you didn't need to hide, or feel so alone."

Now came the hard part. "Baldwin and I... we had three daughters. Talisa, and a set of twins, Juno and Mira." My voice faltered as I completed my confession. "Living in Bernswick... it was safe. Jacinthe looked different from the islanders, of course, but no one suspected she was a Wind-Walker's child. And even if they had... well, many people in the Western Isles claim they have Fae or Sea People blood. They aren't like the people on the continent who pride themselves on having pure human bloodlines."

Menelaus nodded, pulling me closer. "I'm glad you and our hatchling were safe... for a while, anyway. Now, tell me how you fell into the Duke de Norhas' clutches," he demanded, his voice a low growl of suppressed rage.

I closed my eyes and snuggled into his chest, praying that talking about my ordeal wouldn't shatter the fragile peace I'd found in his arms. His skin burned inhumanly hot against my cheek.

"When the younger girls' magic manifested, I knew they needed proper training. They were offered enrollment at the Imperial Academy for the Magical Arts, the same place where I studied magecraft." I paused. "Baldwin... Baldwin suffered from terrible sea-sickness. I knew returning to the capital would be risky, but they couldn't travel all that way by themselves. And I didn't think anyone would look at a humble mage-healer from the Western Isles and see a dead princess come back to life." I sighed. "Things went smoothly until I boarded a mail ship for my return to the islands. The ship was seized by rebels loyal to Duke Beltrán. I was recognized by one of the duke's mages, overpowered, and taken to him."

Menelaus tensed against me. "Go on."

My thoughts skittered away from the grimmest details of my captivity. But I owed Menelaus the truth.

“Duke Beltrán... he used a compulsion charm to force me to love him, then announced our betrothal as a stepping stone to the throne. He forced me to share his bed... no, he raped me, over and over again, and turned me into his pet.” My voice broke.

Robbing someone of their free will was considered the vilest form of black magic, and rightfully so.

Menelaus growled, deep in his throat, and the bass rumble shivered through my bones.

I forced myself to confess the most shameful part of all.

“And despite all that, I didn’t want to escape because it would’ve meant leaving him. He made me complicit in my captivity until Jacinthe broke the charm,” I finished, as loathing choked me.

I’d taken a mage-healer’s oath to do no harm, but still, I wanted to see Beltrán de Norhas hang.

Or burn .

Menelaus wouldn’t hesitate to use Dragon-fire on my erstwhile captor. And I would shed no tears to see Beltrán roasted alive.

“It’s not your fault. You did nothing wrong, my love, my mate.” Menelaus wrapped me in his arms. “I’m so sorry I failed to protect you. I should’ve been there.” His deep voice was hoarse with emotion. “I swear by the Unconquered Sun, I’ll never leave your side again.”

As he apologized, a weight I hadn’t realized I was carrying fell away. His vow felt

like a balm on my battered spirit.

Here, with Menelaus, I might find healing from the wounds that Beltrán de Norhas had inflicted on my soul.

He kissed me on the forehead, each eyelid, and finally, my lips, his lips exquisitely gentle.

I lay in his arms for a long time, feeling drained but better after my confession.

Despite everything I've done, he still loves me!

I craved his touch, yet feared it. My experiences with Beltrán had left deep scars.

I wondered whether Menelaus' love could restore me. Or would Beltrán's shadow always taint our time together?

My thoughts were interrupted by an undignified gurgle and growl from my stomach. Our scanty breakfast at dawn had long since worn off, but I'd been too nervous to eat earlier.

Menelaus chuckled. "I'll order food for us, my mate. Afterwards, we can bathe in my private hot spring before we discuss how best I can help you defeat your enemies."

He gave me a predator's smile, all sharp teeth and gleaming golden eyes. "You have my oath as your mate that Beltrán de Norhas won't live long."

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 2:08 am

The next two days passed in a frenzy of preparations.

Menelaus, Aeolia, and I worked frantically from dawn until dusk to supply and plan our flight north. Jacinthe and her companions helped where they could, which lightened our burden considerably.

I was proud of how much my daughter had matured during the eighteen months we'd spent apart. She'd grown into a fine young woman able to command the loyalty of a diverse group of friends, including the Duke of Frankia's children.

I recalled how the present duke's father had been a thorn in my parents' side when I was younger, along with Beltrán's father.

For my part, I shared how the imperial legions marched and fought, and everything I'd learned about Beltrán de Norhas, who'd served as the Dominion's defense minister until his downfall for plotting against Mother.

Fernan de Norhas willingly told us all he knew about his father's plans to usurp the imperial throne, and his information helped shape our strategy.

Every night, I slept in Menelaus' arms in the chamber he'd dug and furnished for me deep in the cliff's heart.

We tried making love again on the second night, only to have an unreasoning, breath-stopping fit of panic seize me once more and fling me into the grasping hands of the recent past.

After that, we kissed freely and traded cautious caresses, but took things no further.

Menelaus evinced no irritation, only concern for me. But I chafed at the knowledge that Beltrán's treatment had broken the wings of my soul.

Even though Jacinthe had freed me from his foul compulsion charm, I was still crippled and unable to fly free, even in the hands of the Wind-Walker I loved and trusted completely.

Despite my exhaustion at the end of our busy days, I still lay awake for a long time, wondering how soon Menelaus would lose patience with a mate he couldn't bed.

Wondering if my invisible wounds would ever heal, or if they'd continue to fester for the rest of my life.

* * *

On the third day after our arrival, Menelaus and I departed the royal aerie of Hierapolis and headed north to the capital.

I only prayed we weren't too late to stop the Duke de Norhas. Beltrán had been planning his coup for years, and had suborned half the legions in the imperial army, while I'd had less than a week to gather allies to oppose him.

Then again, my allies were Wind-Walkers, who commanded the elements of Air and Fire. Beltrán de Norhas and his forces wouldn't be expecting Dragons to cross the border and fight to defend the Domina-Regent. That gave us the element of surprise and a slim chance of victory.

On the four-day journey to Neapolis Capitola, Mage Armand shared my saddle on Menelaus, while Jacinthe and her friends accompanied us on Boreas' back.

We followed the coast north, with a loosely organized group of several dozen Wind-Walkers flying in our wake. All of them were young, unmated males and females eager for battle and enough booty to establish their own aeries.

My love was a vision of shining black plumage. His Wind-Walker form was larger than even Lady Aeolia. His proud crest feathers were brilliant red, and his wings were edged with matching scarlet feathers.

Using a navigation spell to guide us, we crossed the invisible border dividing the Province of Monteleno from the Imperial Capital Territory and turned inland, crossing over vast swathes of green pastures and fields verdant with sprouting wheat and barley.

My chest tightened with emotion as the outskirts of the capital city finally came into view an hour later. The Fluvian, the great river that linked Neapolis Capitola to the sea, flowed through the heart of the city in a broad gray-green ribbon.

I gazed down at the vast metropolis that stretched out on both banks. It looked exactly the same as when I'd last seen it twenty years ago.

Dozens of graceful stone bridges still arched over the water like the stitches of an elaborate tapestry. Columned temples and ornate civic buildings with colored marble facades gleamed in the afternoon sun as they always had.

Mansions belonging to the Dominion's leading aristocratic families lined the wide boulevards, high walls hiding their lush gardens from passers-by.

On the south bank of the river, my old home, the imperial palace, sat in the middle of a vast walled park.

"Jacinthe, look," I shouted to my daughter, pointing down at the sprawling, tile-

roofed complex of buildings and courtyards. “I never thought I’d see this place again. And not like this!”

I leaned forward and patted Menelaus’ neck feathers. “Brings back memories, doesn’t it?”

“Most of them good,” he replied. “Except for that last day.” He huffed a laugh.

I couldn’t argue with him. I’d spent a happy childhood within those walls.

Then, after graduating from the Imperial Academy as a mage-healer, I’d worked at the palace infirmary under Mage Armand a few days a week. My parents had also started training me to prepare for my future role as domina. I remembered sitting at Papa’s side during endless hours of imperial council meetings and formal audiences with officials and ambassadors.

Behind me, Mage Armand said, “I heard Mage Koray was promoted to Chief Court Healer after I was exiled. I wonder if he’s living in my old apartments at the palace.”

I remembered Tansel Koray. We’d attended many of the same classes at the Imperial Academy for the Magical Arts, and we’d both served as Mage Armand’s apprentices in the academy’s infirmary.

“At least Papa promoted someone competent,” I commented, recalling some of my better-connected but less-talented classmates at the academy.

“Indeed. He was one of my best students, though not as powerful a mage as you, Highness.” Mage Armand said. He added, “He was kind enough to send me most of my library after I arrived at Darkstone Academy.”

“Do you want us to land in the palace gardens?” Menelaus called.

Well, that'll give the palace guards the shock of their lives , I thought with amusement.

“Yes, but don’t—” I began.

Then the thunderous roar of cannon fire and the distant clamor of battle caught my attention.

In the distance, but far too close to the city’s eastern suburbs—and the Imperial Academy—for my comfort, I saw smoke rising.

“A battle! And close by!” Menelaus exclaimed eagerly.

My stomach dropped. Are we too late? Has Beltrán already defeated Mother’s troops? Will his legions overrun the academy grounds?

Worry for Talisa, Mira, and Juno washed over me, immediately followed by concern for all the other students there.

“Forget the palace,” I decided. “We need to see what’s happening over there.”

He banked and flew toward the smoke and noise.

There, on a vast plain just upriver from the Imperial Academy, we found the beleaguered imperial forces locked in desperate combat with Duke Beltrán’s turncoat legions.

The rebel legions marching under Duke Beltrán’s silver and black double-mountain standards were accompanied by dozens of wagon-mounted cannons and other weapons of war.

As Menelaus neared the battle, I saw the loyalist forces were being forced to retreat towards the city.

Neapolis Capitola had torn down its walls a century and a half ago. It had no defenses. If Beltrán's troops broke through the imperial defensive lines, they could slaughter the helpless citizens and loot the city at will.

The sight of wounded and dead loyalist soldiers, their bodies scattered across the trampled grass like broken dolls, made my stomach churn with rage and despair.

"We have to help them," Jacinthe shouted. "All those soldiers down there!"

She'd always been compassionate to a fault. When we were reunited a fortnight ago, I'd learned she was studying to become a mage-healer like me, with Mage Armand as her mentor.

But as a princess-royal, I'd learned that a ruler must sometimes sacrifice for the greater good.

Jacinthe's friends were speaking to her. I prayed Boreas, Lord Ilhan, and her other friends could talk her out of breaking ranks to set up a field hospital.

"I don't know! " The wind carried Jacinthe's words over to me. "But we can't just let them die without doing something! "

I had to do something. And now. Before she divided our forces.

I called, "Jacinthe, my dearest, I know it's hard, but we have to stay focused on our mission. If we don't stop the Duke de Norhas here and now, he'll take the city and the imperial throne."

Her mouth thinned in an expression eerily like Mother's as she considered my advice.

I held my breath, hoping she wouldn't let her emotions override the necessity for our small force to stay focused on the greater goal.

"All right," she said at last, her expression unhappy but resolute. "Let's go stop the Duke de Norhas."

Menelaus opened his jaws with a deafening roar of approval. His body thrummed with anticipation, and his golden eyes blazed with joy.

He dove towards the battle raging far below us. As one, the Wind-Walkers followed us.

"There!" I heard Lord Ilhan shout. "The left flank is weak, and their center is overextended. If we strike there, we can break their lines and send them into disarray."

"The human fledgling is right," Menelaus said, and banked sharply.

The fighting faltered as loyalists and rebel soldiers stared up at us with awe and terror. Some fell to their knees, others brandished their weapons defiantly.

For thousands of years, Wind-Walkers had raided across our borders, carrying off livestock and peasants alike from farms and villages. They were still legendary monsters among the commoners.

"Fear not!" Menelaus bellowed, his voice carrying across the field like a thunderclap. "The Wind-Walkers fight for the domina-regent this day!"

Moments later, Menelaus issued a piercingly loud command in the Wind-Walker

tongue.

As one, Boreas and the other Wind-Walkers opened their great jaws and unleashed torrents of white-hot Dragon-fire upon the rebel legions massed below us.

I watched, horrified, as soldiers and wagons burned like torches. Horses reared and bucked, throwing their riders to the ground and trampling them underfoot in the ensuing chaos.

Below us, kegs of gunpowder exploded with deafening blasts, and thick, billowing gray smoke cast a dense pall over the battlefield.

The acrid stench of sulfur and smoke from burning wood made my eyes water and my throat burn.

The Wind-Walkers dove with mighty wingbeats, scattering men and horses alike. Huge taloned feet bent and crushed cannons.

Menelaus let out a triumphant roar, his voice seeming to shake the very sky. His roar was echoed by the Wind-Walkers all around us.

The duke's soldiers quailed before this onslaught, their courage failing in the face of such raw, primal power. Many threw down their weapons and fled, their black-and-silver standards falling to the ground as they deserted their posts.

Victory appeared to be within our grasp, though at a terrible price.

Then I heard Jacinthe's friends shouting in distress.

Menelaus banked and wheeled around. In the distance, I spotted Boreas diving toward the ground. To my horror, Jacinthe was slumped forward in the saddle.

Behind her, young Lord Ilhan held her around the waist.

“Twelve Gods!” Mage Armand exclaimed from behind me. “She’s dying!”

His gnarled fingers dug into my waist as Menelaus drove forward with powerful beats of his giant black wings.

What? My blood ran cold.

I opened my mage senses and saw twisting darkness invading my daughter’s bright aura.

“Hurry!” I urged Menelaus.

Ahead of us, Boreas unleashed a torrent of Dragon-fire on a cluster of black-robed mages, instantly engulfing them in an inferno of flames. As they shrieked in agony, Jacinthe shuddered and her screams joined theirs.

What in the name of the Divine Mother is happening to my daughter?

“Jacinthe, hold on! We’ll break the curse, I swear it!” Gwydion shouted.

I felt sick. Beltrán’s mages put a death-curse on her?

“Hurry!” I screamed at Menelaus. “There isn’t much time!”

The world around me blurred into a tempest of fear and worry as Menelaus beat his mighty wings, driving towards the patch of ground where Jacinthe now lay on the ground, surrounded by her friends.

“My love, hold on! We’re nearly there!” I shouted to Jacinthe, my voice cracking

under the strain of my fear.

The sight of my sweet daughter, writhing on the crushed grass, her aura rapidly darkening as a curse devoured her life inch by inch, sent me into a protective fury.

Lord Ilhan and Prince Gwydion kneeled on either side of Jacinthe, their hands pressed to her torso as they poured a torrent of Wood magic into her. But the healing green light wilted and withered away as soon as it touched the foul curse's tendrils.

Both young men wore expressions of panicked desperation. I watched with horror as Jacinthe fought to breathe while the black magic tightened inexorably around her chest.

Boreas, who lay curled protectively around Jacinthe and her companions, bellowed in agonized fury.

Then Menelaus landed next to Boreas. With desperate haste, I unbuckled the safety straps holding me to the saddle and slid down his side.

I only paused long enough to help Mage Armand dismount before I sprinted to where Jacinthe lay.

I fell to my knees next to Lord Ilhan and pulled her convulsing body into my arms. "Dearest, I'm here now."

I looked up to see Mage Armand lower himself to the grass at Prince Gwydion's side, across from me.

Recklessly, I promised, "We're going to fix this, I swear it."

"How can we help?" asked Lord Ilhan.

“We saved her from a death curse once before,” Prince Gwydion informed us, his inhumanly silver eyes shining with sincerity. His pale, beautiful features looked strained.

“The soul-bonding spell?” I demanded.

Both young men nodded, as did Tama, who hovered protectively behind Gwydion.

“Tell me,” I ordered.

“And hurry. We have little time,” Armand urged, confirming what I suspected.

As Gwydion quickly explained how to perform the Fae purification spell, I placed my hands next to Ilhan’s and added my power to fend off the curse’s advance.

When Gwydion finished speaking, I said, “I don’t care if the spell binds me to Jacinthe, as long as it saves her life.”

Mage Armand nodded. “I believe I know how to adjust Apprentice Gwydion’s spell to prevent it from binding us. If we translate the working to ancient Sabaeen, we can alter the spell’s third verse...”

I listened to my old mentor’s explanation as I continued to channel the life energy of Wood magic into Jacinthe.

Gwydion cocked his head in a curiously birdlike gesture, as if thinking, then nodded.

“That’ll work,” he said, to my overwhelming relief. “I only wish I’d thought of it the first time we performed the spell.”

“I regret nothing ,” Ilhan said under his breath. A blush rose from his shirt collar and

washed over his chiseled jawline.

Armand directed Gwydion and Ilhan to each take one of Jacinthe's hands. They chanted the sustaining verses of the spells as they channeled a non-stop flow of life-energy into her.

Then Tama, Boreas and Menelaus added their own powers to the spell, their deep, resonant voices joining the chant as they poured their strength into my daughter.

Meanwhile, Armand and I joined hands. I let Armand take the lead in weaving the complex purifying spell as we invoked the power of all the primal elements while we sang the cleansing verses in Sabaeen.

At first, the twisting black tendrils of the death curse resisted the white-hot purity of our spell. Desperately, I wielded our combined powers like a surgeon's scalpel, slicing through the foul coils.

Slowly, much too slowly for my liking, the curse's foul tide retreated from Jacinthe's heart. Armand and I drew ruthlessly on Menelaus and Jacinthe's friends to burn away every bit of darkness.

As we worked, Jacinthe's tortured body gradually relaxed. Her expression shifted from agonized to peaceful.

The last vestiges of the curse shattered like a blown glass orb, then faded into nothingness.

I stared down at my daughter's motionless form, frantically looking for signs of life. Had we beaten back the curse in time?

Unspeakable relief washed through me like cool water as she drew in a deep breath.

“We did it!” I exclaimed, every part of me trembling with fatigue and disbelieving joy. “We broke the death-curse. You’re safe now, my dearest.”

Jacinthe struggled up to a sitting position. I opened my arms, and she clung to me, burying her face against my shoulder.

Too close ... I’d almost lost her forever. It made me want to scream. And fall down on the ground weeping.

But right now, my daughter needed me to be strong. And my people—the helpless citizens of Neapolis Capitola—needed me to protect them from Beltrán de Norhas.

I could fall apart later, when I was alone. When no one could see how weak I really was.

When Jacinthe raised her head at last, she looked around at the circle of concerned faces.

“Thank you,” she whispered. “That’s two death curses in a row foiled, thanks to you all.”

“We’re becoming experts in banishing those things,” Gwydion said flippantly, his Fae composure restored. “Perhaps we should advertise our services once we’re back at the academy.”

He, Tama and Ilhan helped Jacinthe, Mage Armand, and me to our feet.

I didn’t miss how fervently Ilhan embraced Jacinthe, or the tenderness with which he kissed her temple.

“Let’s saddle up,” he said to her. “The battle isn’t over yet.”

“Not while that fucking earthworm Beltrán de Norhas still draws breath!” Menelaus growled. His enormous head swung toward me, his eyes glowing with predatory intent. “My mate, come. We still have work to do.”

“Damn right we do,” Boreas agreed, crouching so that Ilhan and Tama could help Jacinthe back into the saddle.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 2:08 am

As we took to the skies once more, I saw the Wind-Walkers had continued their devastating aerial assault on the Duke de Norhas' forces. Their blasts of Dragon-fire reduced cannons to molten slag and mowed down entire centuries of legionaries.

Ahead, I saw Boreas' sleek green-and-gold form join the fray with Jacinthe, Ilhan, Tama, and Gwydion on his back.

She was still visibly weak from her brush with death. I was terrified for her safety. Nearly losing her just now had ripped me apart inside.

Menelaus dipped and banked sharply to avoid the chaotic crisscross of arrows and artillery fire where the remaining cannons fired wildly in our direction. All around us, dozens of Wind-Walkers were attacking the surviving rebels with fire and claw.

I could see the desperation in the turncoat legionaries' faces as Menelaus dove and took out the last wagon-mounted cannon in a burst of Dragon-fire.

The massed Wind-Walkers terrified the troops into a panicked retreat. Within minutes, even the staunchest of the rebels broke ranks and scattered, casting away their weapons as they fled the field.

The bodies of fallen men, horses, and mules littered the ground beneath us. The cold spring wind was heavy with the stench of brimstone and burning flesh. I felt sick at the carnage.

Then a cluster of blue banners with the golden imperial eagle caught my eye.

“Down there!” I called, pointing. “That’s the standard of the Supreme General of the Imperial Legions.”

“I hope they thank us for saving their asses,” Boreas called, flying over to join Menelaus as we banked and descended to land near a group of uniformed men gathered beneath the eagle banner.

A man wearing a splendid plumed helmet and gilded armor, both stained with blood and soot, approached us.

With a shock, I recognized Gundo Clovis, former captain of the palace guard.

I’d occasionally wondered if he’d been demoted and punished when my faked suicide came to light. If so, his career had recovered in the most spectacular way if he now held command over all the remaining legions.

Before I could greet him, Boreas bellowed, “Bow, earthworms, before Their Imperial Highnesses, Princess Jonquil and Princess Jacinthe!”

Oh no . That was not the way I’d planned to introduce myself to Mother’s commanders.

I looked over at Jacinthe and saw her wince.

General Clovis scowled. “While my fellow commanders and I are grateful for your aid, your joke goes too far, Lord Dragon!”

“Joke? I’m King Menelaus of the Wind-Walkers!” rumbled the Dragon beneath me. “Do you question the identity of my mate?”

Time for me to intervene. I slid out of Menelaus’ saddle, and drew myself up, trying

to look as regal as I could in with my wind-whipped hair and travel-stained clothing.

“General Clovis, I congratulate you on your promotion,” I said. “The last time we met, you were the captain of the palace guard. Papa always said you would go far.”

Clovis gave me a hard, assessing stare. Then his eyes widened.

“Divine Mother preserve us! It’s truly you, P-princess Jonquil! Back from the dead!” He hastily unbuckled the chin strap on his plumed helmet and swept it off his head before bowing deeply.

His companions gaped at me for a moment, then hastily echoed his gesture.

At least I wouldn’t have to waste precious time trying to convince these men of my true identity.

“What news, General?” I asked eagerly. “Have you captured the Duke de Norhas yet?”

Clovis’ expression turned grim. “Your Imperial Highness, I regret to inform you that the Duke de Norhas fled the field. My men report he was last seen riding hell for leather toward his camp.”

“We can’t let him escape!” My chest tightened with incipient panic.

As long as Beltrán de Norhas walked free, I’d never know a moment of true peace.

I turned to Menelaus. Only then did I see that his shining black chest feathers were dulled and crusted with rusty red. As I watched, fresh blood dripped onto the grass beneath him.

As he shifted his weight and prepared to rise, I saw a gash deep enough to show a gleam of bone.

At least one shot aimed at us had found its mark.

“Don’t,” I whispered, put my hand on his stiff plumage. “You’re hurt.”

He glared down at me. “Say nothing of this.”

Jacinthe hadn’t yet noticed her father’s wound, but Boreas had. We traded quick, horrified glances.

“Leave it to us!” Boreas boomed. “We’ll capture him and put an end to this, once and for all.”

“No—” I began.

“Let the fledglings prove themselves.” Menelaus’ tone was pure steel.

“But—”

“The more we protest, the more we insult them.” He held my gaze with a silent plea not to humble him in front of our daughter.

Menelaus couldn’t take to the air again, not with a wound like that. But if we did nothing, Beltrán would go free.

I swallowed hard and forced out the words. “Very well. But be careful, all of you. We may have defeated Duke Beltrán, but he’s still a powerful mage.”

Jacinthe nodded. Her features were stark with fatigue beneath her smooth brown

complexion, but her eyes were fierce. Her companions looked worried but steadfast.

With a roar, Boreas surged skyward, his powerful wings raising a windstorm around us.

Divine Mother, protect them. I'd almost lost Jacinthe once already.

She was the most powerful mage I'd ever encountered, but right now, she was weak in the curse's aftermath.

If Boreas tracked down the duke, would she and her friends be strong enough to defeat Beltrán's spells?

I'd spent months observing Beltrán. His powers were strong, but more importantly, he was well-trained and experienced in combat magic.

How could a young Wind-Walker and a group of exhausted students prevail against him?

"Have faith," rumbled Menelaus, who was still watching me.

I nodded, but still watched anxiously until Jacinthe and her friends had dwindled to a tiny speck.

When I turned back to Menelaus, I realized how fatigued I was in the aftermath of the purifying spell to dispel the death curse.

But I couldn't let myself fall apart. Not yet. I still had work to do.

I turned to Menelaus. "Your injury. Let me examine it."

“Let us work together,” called Mage Armand, who was still seated on Menelaus’ back.

“Your Highness, if there’s anything we can do to help—” Clovis began.

“Bring me a medic’s kit,” I snapped, and went to help Mage Armand down from the saddle.

* * *

The work of stitching together torn muscle and skin, followed by a healing spell that drained my power to the dregs, kept me from thinking and worrying about Jacinthe and her friends.

When it was done, Armand and I both sagged gratefully onto a pair of camp stools. A young aide-de-camp brought us restorative mugs of steaming beef broth.

My heart leaped as a shout alerted me to Boreas’ return. I rose to my feet and peered at his approaching shape, anxiously counting his passengers.

All present. And no one was visibly wounded.

Relief washed over me like cool water on a hot day.

“The Duke de Norhas is dead,” Boreas announced as soon as his scaly, taloned feet touched the ground.

“He killed himself before we arrived,” Jacinthe added.

“Probably wanted to avoid arrest and public execution,” commented Prince Gwydion.

Fernan, his face bleached and his expression ravaged, said in a bitter tone, “My father was a fool and a traitor. It didn’t have to come to this.”

Unwilling sympathy for Beltrán’s son and heir snaked through me. No one should have to see their parent dead and bleeding.

Lord Ilhan asked, “Have his legionary commanders surrendered yet?”

Then Boreas’ words finally sank in. Beltrán de Norhas is dead. Dead.

Dead .

My head was filled with a sound like the tolling of a gigantic bell and my mind went blank. I couldn’t believe it.

Over the last year and a half, Beltrán had dominated my waking hours and haunted my nightmares.

“I—I need to see for myself,” I croaked.

“I’ll take you,” Boreas offered.

“No. I’ll take my mate,” Menelaus’ tone was pure steel.

I watched apprehensively as he slowly unfurled his huge, scarlet-edged wings and stretched them to their full length. Normally, I would’ve advised a patient to take things easy for at least a week following a severe injury.

But I knew Menelaus wouldn’t be deterred.

And coward that I was, I didn’t want to face my greatest enemy, even dead, without

Menelaus.

Boreas gave us directions, and I climbed back into Menelaus' saddle.

He crouched and sprang smoothly into the air. I detected no weakness in the strong downbeats that carried us up and up.

When we reached the rebel camp, I saw a round pavilion cut from crimson fabric standing at the center of neat rows of tents. The roof of the pavilion had been torn away, exposing the luxuriously furnished interior, but the black-and-silver double-mountain banner of Norhas still flew defiantly above the entrance.

My stomach clenched in dread. Was Beltrán really dead?

My rational mind assured me that Boreas and Jacinthe wouldn't have made a mistake.

But my heart still couldn't comprehend that the ambitious, ruthless, energetic and oddly charismatic man who'd held me prisoner for so many months was simply... gone .

As Menelaus swooped low and circled the pavilion, I peered down and spotted Beltrán de Norhas, still wearing his gilded armor, slumped over a wide wooden desk.

A blood-stained dagger lay between his head and his limp hand. A wide pool of drying blood haloed his dark hair and chiseled profile, drowning the scattered papers and maps on the desktop.

"Do you want me to land?" Menelaus asked, snaking his head back to look at me.

"Yes."

Neither of us spoke again until he'd landed in front of the damaged red pavilion and I'd dismounted.

"Do you want me to come with you?" he asked.

"I—I need to do this alone," I said.

He didn't argue with me. "I'll wait here. I won't leave you."

The quiet certainty in his voice made me feel a flicker of warmth.

I drew in a deep breath and walked toward the roofless pavilion. My legs felt unsteady, and my mind felt detached from reality, as if I was performing a play.

The last part of my long, painful journey was just steps away.

I pushed through the entrance flap and stepped inside.

A strange, clinical detachment took hold of me as I looked at Beltrán's corpse. The harsh afternoon sunlight picked out every detail.

I thought I would feel relief. That I would feel something. Some kind of catharsis.

But nothing happened. The numbness and detachment remained firmly in place.

I stared at his body for a while longer.

How many times had I fantasized about spitting on his corpse?

But Beltrán de Norhas was gone, leaving behind an empty body.

When I realized no miraculous revelation was forthcoming, I walked forward.

Steeling myself against the touch of his cooling flesh, I lifted his left hand and pulled the ducal signet ring from his finger.

It was proof of death. And as the new Duke de Norhas, Fernan would want and need it.

Then I turned away and left the pavilion.

Menelaus was curled on the bare ground in front of the tent, waiting patiently for me.

“It’s him,” I said, still numb. “And he’s dead. He’s really dead.”

“And?” Menelaus asked, his eyes searching mine.

I wanted to tell him everything was better now. That I was healed because Beltrán’s death had released me from the bonds of my long captivity.

But the words stuck in my throat.

“I need time,” I said finally.

Menelaus looked at me for a long moment, his great golden eyes studying me intently.

“Then you shall have it, my heart,” he said. “As much as you need.”

But I didn’t want time. I wanted my freedom from Beltrán de Norhas. I wanted to feel like my old self again.

“I thought seeing him dead would make me feel better.”

“It will.” Menelaus stretched out his black-feathered neck and gently touched me with his nose.

I opened my arms and embraced his scaly muzzle, then just leaned against him. His hot, brimstone-scented breath washed over me, filling me with the warmth that I couldn’t seem to find on my own.

Tired. I was just so tired.

“Is there anything else you wish, my mate, before we return to the others?” he asked at last.

I raised my head and looked around, trying to force my fatigued mind to think.

“Take the banner,” I replied, pointing at the length of cloth still flapping forlornly over the pavilion’s entrance. “It’ll convince the remaining rebel commanders to surrender once they see it.”

“Then you’ll rest, my mate?” he asked.

He snaked his long neck forward and snapped the banner pole between his jaws.

I shook my head. “Not until I’ve seen the wounded triaged and tended to.”

* * *

The rest of the afternoon passed in a blur as I worked alongside Mage Armand and his apprentices to triage and treat the wounded.

We were assisted by a cadre of military healer-mages and their assistants, but the unending flow of casualties, many of them suffering from horrific burns, stretched our capabilities and resources to the limit.

As the hours passed and the news of our victory spread through the city, we were joined by civilian healer mages and other helpers. Wind-Walkers air-lifted the most critically wounded to nearby hospitals.

At sunset, General Clovis, looking as tired as I felt, entered the infirmary tent. He walked up and down the rows of cots, pausing to exchange a few words with each of the wounded loyalist legionaries.

Then he approached Jacinthe and me and waited as we finished sewing up a gash. We'd long since exhausted our powers, and were concentrating on preparing the injured so that fresher mage-healers could work the spells.

"Your Imperial Highnesses," he said, once we were done with our patient. "The legionary commanders and I request the honor of your presence at our victory banquet tonight."

Aching with fatigue, I wanted nothing more than to bathe and then to sleep.

"It would mean the world to my legionary commanders and their officers," Clovis implored when I hesitated. "Princess Jacinthe and her companions are invited, also... and the, uh, Dragons, too."

"Thank you for your kind invitation," I forced myself to say. How quickly my palace training had returned! "We'd be delighted to attend."

Jacinthe looked ready to protest, but I shot her a warning look. As imperial princesses, we had a solemn duty to represent the dominus and domina in public.

Even if I hadn't seen my parents in twenty years, and Jacinthe had never met them. But the general and his men deserved our best effort.

"I'll escort you all to the legionary headquarters," Clovis said, smiling now.

Swallowing a sigh, I looked down at my blood-stained healer's apron and the tattered, soiled remains of my green silk skirts beneath it. Right now, I looked the furthest thing from an imperial princess.

"I'll go tell Ilhan and the others," Jacinthe said, sounding resigned.

* * *

The vast dining hall of the imperial legionary headquarters echoed with loud music and shouted conversations.

The kitchens had produced a surprisingly lavish feast on short notice, and the trestle tables stretching the length of the dining hall were laden with platters of meats and vegetables, baskets of bread, and soup tureens the size of bathtubs, interspersed with steaming pitchers of mulled wine.

Menelaus, who had transformed into his human shape, was seated at my side. We shared the head table with General Clovis and his commanders.

The other Wind-Walkers, now a crowd of boisterous young men, crowded the long tables, elbow to elbow with human military officers and nobles. Jacinthe and her companions sat just below us.

I was starving, and ate my fill unabashedly. Mother would've been appalled to see me accept a second helping, and then a third.

When the dessert course appeared, I hoped it meant the banquet would soon end. General Clovis had invited our little group to stay at his mansion in the city, and I was desperate for a bath and sleep.

Beneath the table, Menelaus found and squeezed my hand.

Then the music stopped.

A moment later, an imperial messenger dressed in palace livery strode into the dining hall and approached the head table.

A murmur of speculative comments rose.

“By order of Her Imperial Highness Domina-Regent Jacinthe and the imperial council, the supposed Princess-Royal Jonquil and her companion, one Apprentice Jacinthe of Bernswick, who dares calls herself ‘Princess Jacinthe,’ are summoned to present themselves at the imperial court at noon tomorrow. Their claims will be examined, and the truth of their identities determined.”

So, my reunion with Mother would come sooner than I thought.

I wonder if she’s changed at all? The weight of my fatigue crushed any apprehension. I just wanted to get it over with.

The messenger continued, “Be warned, those found to impersonate an imperial official or member of the imperial family face severe penalties under the law.”

“We shall attend Her Imperial Highness as summoned,” I said, hiding my true feelings just like Mother had taught me.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 2:08 am

To my relief, the banquet ended shortly after the imperial messenger departed. General Clovis commandeered several carriages and drove our little group of travelers to his home in the capital's suburbs. The other Wind-Walkers were quartered at the legionary headquarters.

Jacinthe, Menelaus, and I were given a carriage to ourselves, in deference to our royal status.

On the drive over, I stressed the need for us to avoid scandalizing the general and his wife. Menelaus and Jacinthe both reluctantly agreed that the men in our party should stay in separate guest quarters for tonight.

After my initial shock, I'd reconciled myself to Jacinthe's highly unconventional arrangements with her four guardians. But I knew that most people would react badly if they knew the truth.

Of course, the same was true of my forbidden relationship with a Wind-Walker, even if he was a king. We'd have to be discreet in public, a challenge for my impetuous mate.

I wondered how I'd be received at the palace tomorrow when I arrived with my Wind-Walker lover and the granddaughter Mother considered a half-human abomination.

When we arrived at the general's opulent mansion, his wife, Lady Livia, greeted us with genuine warmth and installed us in a pair of richly furnished bedrooms on the top floor.

While I waited for a promised bath to arrive, I opened the double doors leading from my room out to a loggia. I found Jacinthe leaning over the railing, watching fireworks light up the sky over the river.

This high up, I could see over the mansion's garden walls to the wide boulevard beyond. Torches and bonfires turned the street into a torrent of dancing gold and orange light, and citizens celebrated Duke Beltrán's downfall to the pounding beat of drums and wild skirling of flutes.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" I inhaled deeply, the mingled scents bringing back memories. "I'd forgotten how much I missed this city."

Jacinthe turned to me. "Mama, are you nervous about tomorrow?" she asked, reaching for my hand.

It was strange to see how my daughter had turned into a confident and mature woman during our time apart.

"Terrified," I confessed. Eighteen months ago, I wouldn't have admitted my true feelings to her. "I never thought I'd see Mother again, much less dressed like... this," I added wryly.

I ran my hand down the travel-worn green silk rags that had once been a gown fit for a duchess.

Jacinthe grinned, plucking at the wide skirts of her stained gold velvet. "We're quite the pair, aren't we?"

I laughed, but more from nerves than amusement. "Oh, my dearest girl. What will Mother think when she sees us dressed like beggars?"

“She’ll see her daughter,” Jacinthe said firmly. “And, hopefully, her granddaughter.”

I pulled her into a fierce embrace, kissing her braided red hair. “If she doesn’t accept you, then I don’t care if she acknowledges me .”

“We’ll just have to hope for the best.” Jacinthe returned my hug with equal strength. “And if she tries anything we don’t like, remember that we have an army of Wind-Walkers at our back. King Menelaus will burn the capital to the ground if he thinks anyone here disrespected his mate.”

Oh dear . I hadn’t considered that possibility. “Let’s hope it doesn’t come to that. It would be a pity to destroy the city right after we worked so hard to save it.”

“Your Highness,” a maid called from inside my room. “We’ve brought the tub and hot water for you.”

“Divine Mother be thanked!” I exclaimed, and Jacinthe laughed.

She made a shooing gesture. “Go bathe, Mama. I’ll see you in the morning.”

* * *

After scrubbing away the grime of the long flight and the battle, I soaked for a long time before donning a borrowed nightgown and crawling into the welcoming embrace of the soft bed.

Despite my bone-deep exhaustion, I lay awake for longer than I expected in the unfamiliar surroundings. I missed Menelaus. We’d scarcely spent more than an hour or two apart since our reunion, and I’d slept in his arms every night since then.

When I finally fell asleep, I found myself back on Beltrán’s flagship.

The cabin is shrouded in darkness, with only faint light filtering through the porthole. I lay on the hard mattress, stiff with terrified anticipation, every sense on high alert.

Then a sudden creak of the floorboards breaks the silence. A faint reek of musky cologne reaches my nose. My heart begins pounding. I know what is coming next, and try to roll away.

Icy hands clamp around my wrists, pinning them to the bed.

“Jonquil, my sweet.” It’s Beltrán’s voice, but oddly distorted.

I don’t want to open my eyes. But I don’t have a choice.

Beltrán de Norhas bends over me. He’s pale and naked... and erect.

Below his jaw, a wide slash, the edges black with dried blood, gapes across his throat like a second mouth.

“Did you think you could escape me so easily, Highness?” He bends to kiss me with slack, icy lips.

I can’t move. I can’t even scream. When I try, only a faint whimper escapes my throat.

Beltrán puts one knee on the bed. His stiff cock presses against my bare hip.

And I realize I’m naked, too.

“Did you think you could escape me? You’re mine,” he whispers, grinning down at me with blood-stained teeth. “You’ll always be mine.” An icy hand dives between my legs, parting them. “Now, be a good girl and show me you love me—”

“Jonquil!”

Beltrán and the ship both vanished.

I blinked, bewildered, and found myself in an unfamiliar bedchamber with embroidered hangings and the floor-to-ceiling windows.

Where am I? Where did the ship go?

Someone shifted on the bed next to me, and I froze.

“My mate? Are you awake now?” Not Beltrán’s voice, but Menelaus. Relief flooded me.

It took me another moment to remember I was in General Clovis’ guest room. Menelaus sat on the edge of the bed, watching me with concern.

“You were having a bad dream.” His deep voice pushed away the last vestiges of my nightmare. “You’re safe.”

Safe . I wanted so badly to believe it.

But my body still quaked from the suffocating intensity of that too-real dream.

“W-what are you doing here?” Hadn’t the general’s staff housed all the men downstairs?

Menelaus’ thick fingers brushed lightly over my damp forehead and cheeks. “I was outside, guarding your room, and heard you cry out.”

I fought to control my breathing, still fast and uneven, as Menelaus continued to

watch me. His golden eyes, so fierce in battle, were tender now.

Beltrán de Norhas was dead . I'd seen his corpse, even touched it. How could he still terrify me like this?

I turned my face away, ashamed. In my adult life before Beltrán, I'd never been the weak one, never the one who needed protecting. I'd been the strong one, who fought for my daughters and sacrificed for them.

Now, as Menelaus lay down and wrapped his arms around me, it was humbling to know that he thought of me as someone weak enough to need protection.

He gathered me close to his bare chest and held me. I nestled closer, fighting the aftereffects of the nightmare and drinking in his strength.

As always, his nearness was a kind of torture. I lay against him, torn between the need for comfort and the knowledge that every touch promised him something I couldn't deliver.

"You must wonder if you'll ever have your mate back," I commented bitterly.

The duke was dead. We'd finally defeated him. So why was I still his prisoner? Even the strength and warmth of Menelaus' arms couldn't shield me from my continuing captivity.

Menelaus' steady heartbeat should have comforted me, but the suffocating weight of panic lingered, curling around me like smoke. "I know I will," he said. "I'm willing to wait as long as it takes."

But what if he has to wait forever? How long until he realizes I'm too broken to mend?

Beltrán might be dead, but his vile compulsion still worked its evil, making me panic every time I tried making love with Menelaus. My chest ached with the futility of it.

“His death should have set me free,” I said, my voice breaking. “Instead, he still has me trapped.”

“You will be free,” Menelaus told me. His large hands, hot with the fires that ran through his veins, framed my face. His golden eyes stared deep into mine, willing me to believe. “You just need time to heal.”

But what if I couldn't? What if nothing could break Beltrán's last hold on me?

I lay in Menelaus' arms, even now fighting the panic that gathered at his nearness. “I want to believe you,” I whispered.

His fingers traced my cheek, burning a path of warmth. “You should,” he insisted. “I won't let anything keep us apart.”

He sounded so sure. So determined. But I couldn't imagine ever being wholly myself again.

Is this my life from now on? Loving Menelaus, longing for him, yet never able to hold him close?

“I wouldn't blame you,” I said, my voice thin and brittle, “if you decide you need a mate who can actually function. A mate who will be as loyal to you as you've been to me, not someone who married someone else and had three children by him.”

Menelaus' body turned to granite against mine. It took a long moment for him to reply, and I knew my words had thrust deep, like a poisoned dagger.

When he finally spoke, his tone was sharp with anger.

“Do you really believe I’d abandon you because of what you endured? Because of what you did to survive when I wasn’t there to protect you, my mate?” He rose on his elbow and took my chin in his hand, forcing me to hold his gaze. “Jonquil, my heart. You’re wounded. Wounds take time to heal—you know that better than I. But never think I’d leave you. It insults my honor.”

My heart twisted painfully, and I struggled to swallow past the sudden knot in my throat.

“You’re my mate,” he said. “I’ll never desert you, no matter how long it takes for you to heal.”

I breathed shakily, unable to speak. I hadn’t realized how much I needed him to say it until his words filled the hollow spaces inside me.

Menelaus shifted his hand to cup my cheek. His touch was firm but gentle, and it burned against my skin like lava. “I won’t leave you,” he said again, “so don’t you give up either.”

A tremor ran through me, part anguish, part gratitude. My fingers tangled in the sheets, too shaky to reach for him the way I wanted to.

“I can’t remember what it feels like to be free,” I confessed. “I’m terrified, Menelaus.”

He leaned down and kissed my forehead. “What if you sought a healer’s aid?” His tone was carefully neutral. “There’s no shame in asking for help if you need it.”

Hope exploded inside me like the fireworks from earlier.

“The Temple of Limnis,” I said, thinking aloud. “She’s the goddess of transitions and passages between states of being. She oversees both healing and death, and other kinds of changes as well. Her temple has mage-healers who specialize in unusual injuries, even ones to the spirit. If—if things go well with my interview at the palace tomorrow morning, they might be able to help me.”

I’d visited the temple several times as a student, as part of the mage-healer curriculum at the imperial academy. But I’d never imagined needing the aid of Limnis’ priests and priestesses for myself.

“Yes, visit the temple healers. And don’t worry about tomorrow. All will be well,” he declared. “If your clutch-mother doesn’t welcome you back into her aerie, you have a place in mine, as my mate and queen-consort.”

“I’m sure your presence will make everything better,” I said wryly, trying to imagine Mother’s reaction to my unexpected return with Menelaus in tow.

It would serve Mother right if she saw that her plans to control me and separate us failed.

“I’ll accompany you to the palace in the morning. I won’t let any harm befall you or our hatchling.”

His reassuring words swept away my misgivings and gave me hope. “Thank you, my love.”

“You need your strength for the meeting,” Menelaus said, curling protectively around me. “Sleep, Jonquil. I’ll keep the nightmares away.”

After that nightmare, I didn’t think I could fall asleep again.

But the warmth of his body lulled me. My eyes drifted shut, my muscles uncoiling with relief. I let myself believe his promise as I sank into the warmth of his protective embrace.

I let myself hope I could free myself from Beltrán's ghost.

No nightmares found me.

* * *

An unexpected wave of homesickness washed over me when we arrived at the Imperial Palace the next morning. It had been twenty years since I stepped through the giant bronze double-doors of the formal entrance, but not a thing had changed.

Thanks to Lady Livia's generosity, both Jacinthe and I wore fresh gowns, hastily altered to fit and elegant enough to pass muster at court.

Mage Armand, Fernan, and Menelaus also wore borrowed garments.

I wondered where Lady Livia's staff had found a shirt, doublet, and hose large enough to fit Menelaus on such short notice, not to mention a pair of polished boots.

"This place is overwhelming," Jacinthe muttered as we entered the vaulted entrance hall. "Did you really grow up here, Mama?"

I looked around with the fresh perspective of twenty years spent in the humble village of Bernswick.

"I never noticed how grand it is, but it hasn't changed a bit."

When I'd lived here, familiarity had blinded me to the intricate mosaics beneath our

feet, depicting historical scenes with semiprecious stones. Marble columns soared up to a vaulted ceiling adorned with frescoes and delicate gilded plasterwork. Priceless works of art stood in alcoves and hung on walls.

Any of the statues in the alcoves or the hangings on the walls could've paid for a new public hospital to replace the old, overcrowded one in Herrewick or any of the other towns in the far-flung provinces of the Imperial Dominion of Human Lands.

As our little group was ushered into the Blue Salon, my heart was pounding so hard that I wondered if Menelaus could hear it.

But instead of finding Mother waiting to receive us, we encountered the hostile stares of three men and two women wearing court livery and the gold badges of imperial household officials.

I recognized the badges of the Imperial Herald's office, along with the badges for Palace Archives, Imperial Secretariat, Court Inquisitor, and the Palace Chamberlain, but recognized none of the officials wearing them.

"So, there you are at last," said a portly man with a thin mustache who wore a Palace Chamberlain's badge.

I noted his conspicuous lack of honorifics. Unease crawled through my gut and joined the nervous churn of anticipation I'd been feeling all morning.

He continued, "Duke Fernan, King Menelaus, please allow us to offer Your Excellencies refreshments in the Red Salon while we question these two ladies."

He ignored Armand's presence at my back.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Menelaus stiffen in protest. I put one hand behind

my back and signaled him to cooperate.

To my relief, he grumpily allowed a servant to lead him into an adjoining room.

When they were gone, an older woman wearing an Imperial Herald badge addressed the three of us. “Her Imperial Majesty has tasked us with verifying your identities.”

Annoyed, I drew myself up. Didn’t we just save everyone here from the Duke de Norhas?

“I was told we would see Domina-Regent Jacinthe today,” I said icily. “Let my mother vouch for my identity.”

The officials looked displeased at my reply.

The Court Inquisitor stepped forward. She was a woman with graying hair and sharp eyes. “We cannot take the risk of admitting two strangers to Her Imperial Majesty’s presence. Do you have any proof that you are who you claim to be?”

Alarm tightened my chest. Why didn’t Mother send someone who knew me?

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 2:08 am

Even after a twenty-year absence, surely there were still imperial staff here who remembered me!

“What proof do you require?” I let frustration spur my next words. “If you would only let the domina-regent see us, she would recognize me.” I spread my hands. “I grew up here. Ask me anything about the palace or the royal family twenty years ago.”

“I can vouch for Princess Jonquil and Princess Jacinthe,” Mage Armand said.

The inquisitor stared at him. “And who are you, pray tell?” she asked in an affronted tone.

My heart began pounding. But they summoned Mage Armand here. By name!

Is Mother playing some kind of game with us?

Mage Armand drew himself up proudly. He wore new black velvet robes, his golden mage-badge with the imperial eagle pinned over his heart. “I am former Chief Court Healer Niccolò Armand, now Infirmary Head at Darkstone Castle.”

The man wearing the herald’s badge huffed a disdainful laugh. “Oh, really? You really expect us to believe that the famous Mage Armand has returned from the dead, too?”

“Who said I died?” Armand sounded indignant.

“We’ll deal with you later,” the chamberlain’s official said.

Now I was sure that they were playing with us. But what did they hope to accomplish?

The inquisitor turned back to me. “Describe the painting hanging in the imperial family’s private dining room,” she demanded.

Ah, a trap! I thought.

“In my time here, there were two paintings in the dining room, one large and one small,” I replied. “The larger painting depicts the coronation of my many-times great grandfather, Dominus Victor Augustus the First. The smaller painting is a wedding portrait of the first dominus and his domina-consort, Duchess Oriana of Monteleno.”

“Hm.” My interrogator seemed displeased by my answer, but she didn’t deny it.

The portly chamberlain narrowed his eyes at me. “When Princess-Royal Jonquil was ten years old, a notable incident occurred in the Imperial Gardens. Describe the incident and explain how Their Imperial Highnesses reacted.”

That day was burned into my memory. “I noticed one of the swans in the pond had broken its wing. My powers awakened when I tried to heal it. Mother and Papa immediately summoned Chief Court Healer Armand.” I turned and smiled at my longtime mentor. “He tested me for mage potential. After that, Mother and Papa enrolled me under a false name at the Imperial Academy for the Magical Arts. There, I studied to become a mage-healer.”

The officials traded glances. The archivist spoke next. He was younger than the others, with thinning light brown hair. “Name at least three members of the imperial council who served during the Princess Jonquil’s lifetime.” He smiled thinly at me,

and added, “And tell us which council member was forced to resign, and why.”

“Duke Cahill of Frankia, Duchess Renata of Monteleno, and Earl Murad of Demirkalé,” I answered promptly. “Earl Murad was dismissed from the council after Papa found out about his Fae mistress and half-Fae son. No one wanted the scandal to become public knowledge, so Earl Murad told everyone he resigned on account of ill health. He retired to his estate and received an imperial pension in return for his discretion.”

The archivist’s eyes widened. “That... that is correct.” He sounded surprised.

“It proves nothing !” the chamberlain snapped. “Anyone could’ve heard the gossip.”

“There was no gossip,” the archivist argued. “Those council records were sealed.”

The inquisitor turned her attention to Jacinthe, her lips pursing in disapproval as she surveyed my daughter’s foreign appearance.

“And this girl claims to be the domina-regent’s granddaughter?” She raised a skeptical eyebrow. “With that coloring? Preposterous.”

I saw Jacinthe flush with anger under her smooth brown skin and recognized the gathering fury in her eyes. Her exotic looks had been inherited from her father, and had always drawn attention, especially among the pale Western Islanders.

I shared her anger. “I assure you,” I said through gritted teeth, “my daughter is—”

“Some Southern Continent half-breed, at best,” interrupted the portly official, the ends of his waxed mustache quivering with disdain. “My lady Whoever-You-Are, how in the world did you expect anyone to believe your ridiculous charade?”

“Why not just use a truth spell on us?” Jacinthe blurted, visibly frustrated.

All the officials stared at us in horror.

I wondered what in the seven hells had happened to my daughter at Darkstone Academy that she would refer to black magic so casually.

“What did you just say?” gasped the imperial inquisitor.

I had to do something, and fast. Trying to conceal my dismay, I turned to Jacinthe.

“Dearest, truth spells are considered coercion of free will,” I hurried to explain. “They’re illegal. You’ll learn all about things like that in your third-year Ethics of Magic class.”

“Oh,” she said, crestfallen. “Then how do we get these people to believe us?”

“You don’t,” the inquisitor scoffed. “The only reason you two weren’t arrested on the spot for impersonating a member of the imperial family is because of the aid you rendered Their Imperial Highnesses yesterday. But a few good deeds don’t make you royalty.”

An older man with kind eyes entered the salon with brisk steps. He wore a chamberlain’s badge, with the enamel flourish that identified him as Head Chamberlain. He looked familiar somehow, but I couldn’t place him.

As I racked my memories, trying to identify the newcomer, he stopped short and stared openly at Armand. “By the Twelve, is that really you, Mage Armand?”

Armand’s lined face broke into a rare smile.

“Chamberlain Lucius? It’s been far too long, old friend!”

Lucius? I stared at him in shock. He looked so old!

Slowly, the Lucius of my memories merged with the man standing before us now.

His gaze shifted to me, and his eyes widened. “And... Princess Jonquil? I heard a rumor about an imposter, but it’s really you!” He bowed deeply. “Welcome home, Your Imperial Highness!”

And with those words, he changed everything.

“Head Chamberlain Lucius, are you quite certain that this woman is truly the lost Princess-Royal?” asked the imperial inquisitor. Her gaze darted nervously between Lucius and me.

“Yes, Inquisitor Ricfrid,” Lucius replied, his gaze never leaving mine. “Come, Your Highness. Your imperial mother is waiting to see you.” He glanced at the portly chamberlain. “Osman, fetch our other guests. I’ll escort them to Her Imperial Majesty.”

* * *

My heart raced as we followed Chamberlain Lucius through a maze of familiar corridors, each step bringing us closer to my long-anticipated reunion with Mother.

Over the years, I’d heard so many rumors about Papa’s withdrawal from public life and his need for a regent. Was he still alive? And if so, was he in any shape to see me?

I thought my mask of calm dignity was firmly in place, but Jacinthe squeezed my

hand, her skin warm against mine. “Breathe, Mama,” she whispered. “We’ve come this far.”

I nodded, but couldn’t summon words to reply.

Behind us, Menelaus’ presence was a steady warmth, while Mage Armand and Duke Fernan trailed at a respectful distance.

We paused before the entrance to the private audience chamber, the door set with the imperial eagle in solid gold.

My heart hammered painfully in my chest, each beat echoing with apprehension.

It had been twenty long, fraught years since I had last seen my parents.

Did Mother even want to see me? Our reception so far had been less than welcoming.

More importantly, will she find it in her heart to forgive me for breaking the law all those years ago?

Chamberlain Lucius knocked sharply, then opened the heavy door. He announced, “Your Majesty, may I present Princess-Royal Jonquil di Severieri and her daughter, Princess-Royal Jacinthe. They look forward to sharing a private moment with you. With them are King Menelaus of the Anemodareís, Duke Fernan de Norhas, and Mage-Healer Niccolò Armand.”

With a gesture, the chamberlain beckoned us forward. I couldn’t breathe as I stepped into the wood-paneled room where I’d spent so many hours learning the art of imperial diplomacy at Papa’s side.

My gaze immediately found the woman seated in the gilded chair of state at the far

end of the room.

Mother! I couldn't get the words out of my tight throat.

Two difficult decades had etched deep lines into her face and turned her dark hair to pure silver. My heart ached at seeing her look so careworn.

But it was her gaze that pinned me in place. She looked unsure of herself. Her hazel eyes, so like my own, were wide with shock.

“Jonquil, my dear? Is it—can it be? You're alive?” Mother's voice, normally so cool and composed, actually trembled with raw emotion, breaking slightly on the last word.

Her question shattered my hard-won control like fragile porcelain. Tears welled up, blurring my vision.

“Yes, Mother,” I managed, my voice barely more than a whisper. “I've come home hoping you've finally forgiven me.”

“Oh, my darling girl!” she cried, her voice breaking into a sob.

I stared at her in disbelief at this break in her self-control. She'd spent years training me never to reveal my emotions in front of outsiders.

And with Menelaus, Armand, and Fernan de Norhas in the room with us, this was hardly a private reunion.

My shock deepened as she pushed herself upright and rushed toward me with her arms wide open.

An instant later, I was wrapped in her embrace. Her familiar rose perfume enveloped me in a haze of nostalgia.

“Jonquil, my darling, how I’ve missed you!” she exclaimed. “I’m so, so sorry for driving you away. I’ve missed you so very much and I’m glad you’ve finally come home to us.”

My tears flowed freely. I wanted to believe in her whole-hearted welcome. I wanted to trust that I’d truly returned home after two decades in exile.

But some part of me wondered whether if Mother had planned this extravagant show of emotion to throw me off-balance. She’d always expertly manipulated Papa, the imperial council, the common people, and, of course, me.

Maybe all these things were true, but my heart didn’t care. I clung to her and felt her shaking body. Her tears soaked the shoulder of my borrowed gown.

Maybe this isn’t an act. Maybe she’s truly sorry for what she and Papa did.

There was only one way to find out.

I broke our embrace and wiped at my eyes, trying to gather my composure. I couldn’t let emotion overwhelm me when I needed my wits.

“Mother, I’d like you to meet someone.” I turned and extended my hand to Jacinthe, who stood looking at us, wide-eyed. “This is Jacinthe, my daughter. Her father is King Menelaus.”

I watched Mother’s expression, trying to gauge her reaction to her half-human granddaughter.

Jacinthe, her expression tight with anxiety, dipped into a wobbly curtsy.

Menelaus took my hand. I studied his profile and saw that he, too, was intently waiting for Mother's reaction.

Mother opened her arms. "Jacinthe," she breathed, her face lighting with a radiant smile. "My dear, dear granddaughter. How wonderful to meet you at last!"

I stood frozen with shock as she embraced Jacinthe.

"You have my eyes," Mother said, stepping back and studying my daughter intently. "And your father's coloring. You are beautiful, my dear."

Jacinthe's smile looked shaky. "Hello, Grandmother Jacinthe. It's, ah, nice to meet you."

Mother stroked her cheek with ringed fingers.

Mother's smile disappeared as she looked up at Menelaus and me, standing side by side, our hands entwined.

"Jonquil, King Menelaus," she said, her voice thick with emotion. "I have apologies to make to you both. I beg you both to forgive me and my husband, even though the hurt we caused you was unforgivable. We were wrong, so terribly wrong, back then. And I've bitterly regretted it for years."

Her unexpected apology hit me like a blow. Twenty years ago, Mother would have never admitted to wrongdoing, much less apologized for it.

Is this some kind of trick? Menelaus and I traded disbelieving looks.

But she seemed sincere, shining tear-tracks marring the makeup on her cheeks. Her shoulders sagged under the weight of regret.

“We made so many mistakes,” she continued, her voice thick with grief. “But none greater than how we handled your love affair. As parents, we broke your trust. As rulers, we squandered a chance for lasting peace with the Dragon Kingdom.” She shook her head, silver hair and jewels catching the light. “We were short-sighted and foolish, blinded by our own prejudices and fears. I see that now.”

How often had I dreamed of a scenario just like this in my darkest hours after fleeing the capital and starting my new life in the Western Isles?

Now that it was actually happening, though, I didn’t feel vindicated. Or triumphant.

Just suspicious.

Years of pain warred with my longing for reconciliation.

Menelaus squeezed my hand and released it. I took a deep breath, debating whether Mother was truly sincere or playing some game, and made my decision.

I took Mother’s hands in mine. They were cold—perhaps from nerves, or simply from the poor circulation that often comes with age.

“Mother,” I croaked. I cleared my throat before continuing. “Thank you for your apology. And I—I forgive you.”

A tight knot of old pain loosened deep in my chest.

“And you, King Menelaus?” Mother asked, looking nervous. “Can you find it in your heart to forgive an old woman’s foolishness?”

I tensed, seeing his jaw muscles clench as his golden eyes narrowed. Then his expression softened.

“For Jonquil’s sake,” he rumbled, “and for the sake of peace between our peoples, I accept your apology.”

“Thank you. Humans and Wind-Walkers have been enemies for far too long,” Mother said, looking relieved. “You have our eternal gratitude for your aid in defending the capital yesterday. General Clovis reported your Wind-Walkers turned the tide and gave us victory.”

Menelaus grinned. “It was fun. It’s been years since I saw action like that! And you’re welcome,” he added.

Then she turned back to me with an air of renewed purpose.

My gut clenched. Here it comes. She wants something from me.

“Jonquil,” she said, her voice taking on a more formal tone. “In the interest of public stability, will you resume your role as Princess-Royal and heir to the throne?”

I’d been an only child. When I escaped the palace and went into hiding, I knew my disappearance would trigger a crisis. But I’d foolishly thought that the ambitious lords on the imperial council would keep each other in check until my parents decided on the succession and adopted an heir.

Instead, my parents had done nothing to ensure the succession. The council had eventually devolved into an open conspiracy between the powerful dukes of Frankia and Norhas.

“I...” I began, intending to refuse.

Then I had a horrifying epiphany. All the deaths and injuries in yesterday's battle were partially my fault. If I hadn't run away and gone into hiding all those years ago, then perhaps Frankia and Norhas wouldn't have plotted to seize the throne.

Of course, then Jacinthe would've never been born.

If I refuse my duty now, how many more people will die?

"Yes, Mother," I said, resigned.

She beamed at me approvingly. It was so odd to see her abandon the emotionless mask she'd worn all throughout my early life.

Menelaus made a sound deep in his throat. I glanced up at him with sudden guilt, and saw his dismay and hurt.

Oh, Divine Mother. I just made a life-changing decision without consulting the one who so faithfully kept the vows he'd made me so long ago.

I touched his arm. "We'll talk later," I whispered.

He nodded curtly. He was angry. As he had every right to be.

I saw Mother's appraising glance return to Jacinthe. I could almost see her weighing my daughter's worth as a backup heir against her half-human status.

"And you, Jacinthe," she said, apparently reaching a decision. "As the second in line to the throne, you too have a vital role to play in securing the future of our Dominion."

"I... I'm honored," my daughter stammered, looking anything but pleased.

“You should be.” She smiled. “You shall be granted the traditional titles and estates befitting your station: Princess-Royal of the Imperial House, Duchess of the Western Isles, Countess of Felicitas Victoria, and Baroness of Tria Flumina.”

Jacinthe’s eyes widened. “I—I don’t know what to say,”

“There is, of course, a price for such power and privilege,” Mother said, her tone sharpening.

Ah yes, there it is at last: the hook set into the luscious bait.

It seemed Mother hadn’t changed as much as I’d hoped.

“We expect you to do your duty in securing the future of our dynasty,” Mother continued. “That means wedding a suitable candidate as soon as possible and bearing children to continue the imperial line.”

Jacinthe’s mouth pulled into a straight, displeased line reminiscent of Mother. I guessed she was thinking of Tama, Boreas, Gwydion, and Ilhan. I wondered if she was going to explain the unique relationship she shared with them.

“Your choice of the new Duke de Norhas as your betrothed is... interesting,” Mother said. “Tell me, child, did you plan this marriage to secure the future loyalty of Norhas to the Dominion?”

Jacinthe and Fernan traded panicked glances.

“No, Grandmother Jacinthe,” she replied. “I was coerced into agreeing to the betrothal by Lady Erzabetta de Norhas, who was working on behalf of her uncle, the late Duke Beltrán de Norhas. I have no intention of marrying the present Duke de Norhas.”

Fernan cleared his throat. “And, if Your Imperial Majesty will pardon my honesty, I, too, was coerced into signing the betrothal contract. Princess Jacinthe and I have mutually agreed to nullify this contract. I... I wish to wed another. The Duke of Espola’s daughter.”

My grandmother nodded. “Good. Then that’s settled.” Her expectant gaze returned to Jacinthe. “Which leaves you still in need of a husband. And children.”

Had I just made a mistake in agreeing to step back into my old role as Princess-Royal? And would Menelaus and Jacinthe now both pay the price?

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 2:08 am

“There’s something you need to know about me,” Jacinthe began, her voice trembling.

She put her hand on her belly. A twinge of dread shot through me. I’d seen the long scar that stretched from hip to hip beneath her clothing.

“Last summer, I nearly died after I was stabbed with a blade poisoned with a death curse. Because of it, I... I cannot bear children.”

I gasped. Jacinthe had told me of her brush with death and how it had bound her to her four companions. But I’d thought her completely recovered from the wound.

Damn Beltrán and his godforsaken family for blighting my daughter’s future!

“No!” Mother protested with genuine dismay.

“It’s unfortunately true, Your Imperial Majesty,” Mage Armand interjected, his weathered face etched with sorrow. “The damage the curse inflicted has rendered Princess Jacinthe unable to conceive.”

Mother’s expression hardened, her eyes flashing with frustration. Now she looked more like the stern parent I remembered.

Papa had been the easy-going one—until something roused his temper.

“This is unacceptable,” she snapped, as if her disapproval could cure scars. “Jacinthe, even if you cannot bear children, you must make a good match. The stability of the

Dominion depends on it!”

I drew breath to protest this sudden demand, but Jacinthe countered before I could.

“What about Lord Ilhan of Parrish? He’s a dear friend. And as the son and heir of the Duke of Frankia, an alliance with him would surely help secure your control of the Dominion.”

Oh, Jacinthe, you clever girl! I thought approvingly.

A match with one of her soul-bound companions would be perfect.

Mother’s eyes narrowed thoughtfully as she considered the suggestion. I held my breath.

“That... might be acceptable,” she said at last, then added, “Though his father, the Duke of Frankia, is a traitor who conspired with Duke Beltrán. Let us think about it.”

Jacinthe nodded. “Grandmother, before you marry me off, I beg your permission to return to my studies at the academy.”

“Return to your studies?” Mother didn’t sound pleased. “But you’ve only just arrived, and there’s so much to be done here.”

Luckily, Jacinthe had inherited my mother’s stubbornness... and mine. “I understand, but I wish to complete my training as a mage-healer before taking up my royal duties.”

Mage Armand nodded approvingly.

Mother turned to him. “Mage Armand, are you absolutely certain that Princess

Jacinthe is... is barren? That she will never bear children?"

Armand's voice was solemn as he replied, "Yes, Your Imperial Highness. I'm sorry."

Mother seemed to shrink under the weight of her elaborate robes. "Not as sorry as we are. If the imperial line ends with Jacinthe, we haven't saved the Dominion, only delayed its death throes for a few more years."

I heard genuine despair in her voice.

When I heard the news of Mother assuming the role of regent, I'd still been living in Bernswick. My first thought had been that Mother had finally achieved her dream of becoming a ruler rather than remaining a mere consort.

Now, I wondered if I'd misjudged her. It seemed she actually cared for the welfare of the Dominion's people. Maybe her official statements that she assumed the regency only to prevent civil war had actually been true.

Her increased responsibilities had clearly aged her.

I decided to tell her something I'd deliberately omitted earlier when I introduced Jacinthe.

"Mother, I have three other daughters from a marriage made during my exile," I confessed.

The relief in Mother's face smoothed out many of her careworn lines. "Three more daughters? The Divine Mother be thanked!"

"Talisa is the eldest after Jacinthe. She'll come of age next year. The twins, Mira and Juno, are—" I stopped to think. I hadn't seen my girls in a year and a half. "Nearly

fifteen now. All three are currently enrolled as mage-students at the Imperial Academy here in Neapolis Capitola.”

“Very well, Jacinthe. You have our permission to return to your studies,” Mother said, smiling. “We will arrange your immediate transfer to the Imperial Academy for the Magical Arts. You’ll join your sisters here, in the capital.”

That would be ideal, I thought. Instead of being stuck at that remote, dreary reform academy alongside criminals and traitors.

But Jacinthe clearly had other ideas. “Thank you, Grandmother, for your generous offer. But I respectfully decline. I wish to continue at Darkstone Academy with my friends and complete my studies there.”

Mother wasn’t used to people telling her no, and it showed. Her mouth thinned. “You actually want to return to that desolate prison island?”

As much as I hated agreeing with Mother, she was right.

What on earth was my daughter thinking , to pass up an opportunity to attend the finest academy in the Dominion?

Jacinthe didn’t reply immediately. I saw her auburn brows draw together as she thought.

“But it could be so much more,” she said at last. “Meeting and befriending the diplomatic hostages there made me wonder if maybe Darkstone Academy could become a place where students—and teachers—from the supernatural nations mingle with human mage-students and mage-instructors.”

I was impressed by her suggestion.

At the same time, I understood why she was fighting so hard to return there... her unorthodox relationship with her four companions would be impossible at the Imperial Academy, which was barred to non-human students.

“What do you mean by ‘mingle’?” Mother asked, suspicion lacing her tone.

“During my time at Darkstone Academy, I’ve seen how Wind-Walkers, Fae and Djinni use magic in ways very different from how humans use it. We could learn so much from each other!” Jacinthe fairly glowed with excitement. “Instead of treating the island as a place to exile the unwanted, what if we— you —turned it into a haven for scholars and students from all over the world? They could share knowledge and work together to develop new spells and ways to help, well, everyone.”

“I think that’s a very interesting idea,” I said.

Apparently, I wasn’t the only one who’d noticed the many injustices in our current system and longed to fix them.

“We’d need the right people to lead the change,” I added. “Take Adele, Lady Margrave, for example. She’s worked miracles reforming the public hospital system in the Western Isles. It was her idea to outfit ships as fully staffed traveling clinics and send them out to the remotest fishing villages.”

Mother nodded. “Hm. Our councilors have been telling us for years that Darkstone Castle is an unnecessary drain on the imperial treasury,” she said, sounding thoughtful. “But if we transform it into an elite center of learning, we could make it pay for itself by charging tuition and developing new and better ways to do things.” She smiled. “Yes, we are beginning to like this proposal of yours, Jacinthe. It has both potential and merit. We shall bring it up with the imperial council.”

“Thank you, Grandmother Jacinthe!” my daughter exclaimed.

“Speaking of the imperial council, Jonquil,” Mother said to me, “we hope you will take a seat there. With Duke Cahill of Frankia imprisoned and Duke Beltrán de Norhas dead, the Dominion needs you.”

Duke Fernan’s expression clouded at the mention of his late father. I wondered if Mother intended to appoint Fernan to the council, or whether his father’s treachery would cast a long shadow over the new duke.

I glanced up at Menelaus, who still looked unhappy. Inspiration struck me.

“Actually, Mother, I have a better idea. What if I became ambassador to the Dragon Kingdom of Kappadokia instead?”

“Yes!” exclaimed Menelaus.

Mother’s brows shot up. But she didn’t say no.

“Plus, from there, I could supervise the changes taking place at Darkstone Academy,” I continued, eager to plead my case. “The island is only a day’s flight on Dragon-back from Hierapolis.”

“Hm.” Mother didn’t look entirely convinced yet. But she hadn’t yet opposed the suggestion, either.

“Mage Armand, would you be willing to continue serving as Jacinthe’s mentor at Darkstone Academy?” I asked.

My old mentor’s face softened, a smile crinkling the corners of his eyes. “Your Highness, it would be my honor to continue teaching Princess Jacinthe,” he said gruffly. He added, “I have four very promising apprentices there, and I’ve grown rather fond of living on the island, with its fresh air and mild winters.”

Then we all waited anxiously as Mother pondered the issue. Finally, she let out a resigned sigh.

“Very well, Jonquil,” she said grumpily, waving a hand adorned with glittering rings. “We’ll appoint you as ambassador to the Dragon Kingdom.”

Menelaus’ expression cleared, and he grinned at her. I beamed at Mother.

She shook her head and added wryly, “If we said no, you’d find an excuse to travel there, anyway.”

“Thank you!” I couldn’t believe Mother had yielded without a fight.

After what just happened, she must be really desperate for official heirs.

“At least now we have three additional granddaughters to stand in line for the succession,” Mother said, as if consoling herself for having yielded to my wishes and Jacinthe’s. “We’ll be keeping a close eye on the girls, and monitoring their progress at the academy. We’ll see which of them proves to be the best candidate for the imperial heir.”

I felt a spurt of guilt for putting my daughters under the burden of an imperial heirdom. I worried about the pressure they would face.

I would go visit them at the academy tomorrow. After all Jacinthe and I had endured, I needed to know that my three youngest children were safe and doing well.

Mother now waved Fernan forward. He’d been waiting patiently for his turn to present his petition to restore his confiscated De Norhas ducal estates.

While Mother quizzed him about his loyalties and Fernan pleaded his case, I let my

thoughts drift to the future.

What will it feel like not to have to live in hiding anymore?

Will I really be happy living among the Wind-Walkers in Kappadokia?

And can the priests and priestesses of Limnis really help me banish Beltrán's poisonous specter from my bed, so that I can truly share my life with Menelaus?

Thoughts of the healing temple brought to mind Papa and his mysterious illness.

He'd vanished from public life years ago, and some of Beltrán's followers had been convinced Papa was dead and Mother was hiding the truth to continue her reign as domina-regent.

When Mother had finished terrorizing Fernan before extracting an oath of fealty from the youth, I asked, "Might I see Papa? It's been so long, and I'd like him to meet Jacinthe."

The sadness that swept over her face made her look suddenly older, more vulnerable.

"Of course," she said. "But we must warn you... your father has more bad days than good now. He may not recognize you."

She looked at Fernan and Menelaus. "Will you wait for us here? The dominus is... fragile. He can't deal with too many visitors."

* * *

"Are you ready?" Mother asked a few minutes later.

We were deep inside the private wing of the palace, and Mother now stood in front of the door to Papa's apartment.

I took a deep breath and braced myself for the worst. Mother hadn't described Papa's condition at all, which led me to believe it was dire.

She opened the door, revealing a sun-drenched sitting room.

Papa sat in a cushioned chair, looking vacantly out the window at the gardens below.

I hardly recognized him. Like Mother, he'd aged dramatically during the years I spent in exile. Gone was the tall, hearty man I'd adored. He looked skeletally thin and frail in his loose robe and sleeping trousers.

"Papa?" My voice cracked as I stepped forward.

Papa turned, and my heart broke at the confusion clouding his features. No wonder Mother didn't want visitors to see him!

"Who...?" Then his eyes widened with recognition. "Jonquil? Is that you, my little flower?"

I rushed to him, falling to my knees beside his chair. "Yes, Papa, it's me. I'm finally home."

He cupped my face between his trembling hands and smiled down at me. It momentarily erased the terrible toll the years and illness had taken, and I was once again a child with her beloved papa.

In that moment, I forgave him for his anger when I asked to wed Menelaus, and for his cruel order to end my pregnancy.

Then his gaze dimmed. He frowned at me.

“Nurse?” he called, his gaze sliding past me and fixing on Mother. “Who are these people?”

Fresh tears welled up in my eyes. Trying to suppress the sobs tearing through me, I reached for Papa’s hand and clung to it.

“Princess Jonquil,” a soft voice interrupted me sometime later. I looked up to see Lucius standing in the doorway. His expression was carefully neutral. “When you’re ready, I can show you to your apartments.”

I examined Papa intently, but he was staring out the window now, lost once more in his mental haze. He seemed to have forgotten my presence at his knee.

I wiped my eyes and rose, only reluctantly releasing Papa’s bony hand.

“Yes, thank you.”

I saw my anguish reflected in Mother’s gaze. “I’ll give you both some time to settle in and rest before the midday meal. Someone will come to escort you to the private dining room to sup with me, King Menelaus, and Mage Armand.”

I couldn’t help casting one last glance at Papa as Lucius escorted us out of his sitting room, hoping against hope for another flash of recognition. It didn’t come.

* * *

Nothing had been changed in my palace apartments. They looked as if they’d been preserved like a museum exhibit after I escaped. I showed Jacinthe around my old rooms. Her wide-eyed reaction to the luxury I’d taken for granted back then

simultaneously amused and saddened me.

Jacinthe had grown up in a comfortable but humble three-story half-timbered house in Bernswick, a prosperous but humble village on the Island of Abbonay, the largest island in the province.

Even visiting the lovely ducal palace in Baleares couldn't have prepared my daughter for the splendor of the imperial seat.

After I'd regained my tattered composure and written a note to Talisa, Mira, and Juno, letting them know I was alive and coming to visit them, Lucius returned to escort Jacinthe and me to the family dining room.

It was a far cry from the vast grandeur of the formal banquet halls in the public wings of the palace. Tall, graceful windows along one wall looked out over the meticulously palace tended gardens.

The high ceiling showcased exquisite plasterwork, molded into delicate garlands and painted medallions that celebrated famous landmarks from around the Dominion.

The walls, painted in soft shades of duck-egg blue and cream, were adorned with the ancestral portraits I'd been quizzed on earlier.

In the center of the dining room stood a polished mahogany dining table, gracefully curved and modestly sized for family gatherings. Elegant chairs upholstered in embroidered silk with delicate floral motifs surrounded it.

The table was set for the midday meal with fine porcelain plates rimmed in gold, sparkling crystal goblets, and elegant silverware precisely arranged, reflecting the refinement expected at even the simplest imperial family meals.

Mother was waiting for us at the head of the table, with Menelaus and Mage Armand seated in places of honor.

Fernan was nowhere to be seen—presumably, Mother had given him leave to depart after granting his petition.

“Why the game this morning with the sham interrogation?” I asked when the servants had served the first course and withdrawn, leaving the five of us alone.

By coincidence or design, the kitchen had prepared my favorite asparagus soup, garnished with crème fraîche and edible flower petals. It was accompanied by a selection of freshly baked bread rolls and herb butter.

Mother drew herself up indignantly at my question.

“Sham interrogation? Game?” she demanded. “You know I couldn’t just take the word of two strangers who claimed to be my long-lost daughter and granddaughter!”

I gave her the same look I used on my daughters when I caught them in a stupid lie. “Oh, I understand. So why not send Head Chamberlain Lucius—or anyone else who actually knew me—to question me, instead of a gaggle of ignorant underlings?” I shook my head. “Speaking of Chamberlain Lucius, did you order him to stage that dramatic rescue, or did he take pity on us and intervene?”

Her lips pressed together in a displeased line, but her gaze darted away guiltily.

Caught her! I thought.

Menelaus growled softly.

“I had to be absolutely sure,” Mother insisted.

“And it wasn’t because you chafed at owing me a debt for saving you from the Duke de Norhas?” I shot back. “With the aid of Wind-Walkers?”

Mother’s face colored. She said nothing.

Thought so.

“I mean, I understand how having your dead daughter lead enemy troops to save your throne might be a little politically awkward for you,” I said, doing my best to radiate sympathy as glee bubbled up inside me.

Menelaus bellowed a laugh.

Mother’s eye twitched a little at my dig, then she countered.

“Speaking of Wind-Walkers, please tell me you weren’t serious about wanting to abandon me to live among them? You have responsibilities here, Jonquil, and I need to prepare you properly for them.”

I thought we’d already settled this! I’d forgotten Mother’s habit of trying to renegotiate anything unfavorable to her until she wore down her opponent.

I stared at her with all the coldness I could muster. I’d already made all the concessions I was willing to make. She wouldn’t get better terms from me.

Menelaus’ fingers tightened on his spoon, and I saw the silver handle bend. I reached over and covered his hand with my own.

“Mother, stop it. I’m not staying here,” I told her flatly. “Tell the people whatever you like—you’re good at that, Mother—but I’m leaving with Menelaus. The Wind-Walkers have much to teach me about how to rule with the consent of the governed,”

I added snidely.

Mother's cheeks went pink.

But I was serious.

Returning to the imperial palace after spending so many years living as a villager had given me a sense of perspective.

If Mother was serious about making me as the Dominion's first ruling domina, then I needed to consider what changes to make.

If our current system of rulership was so fragile that a single family's reproductive misfortunes could cause the entire government to tear itself apart, then we needed a more stable structure.

Her gaze moved to Jacinthe, who was watching us with fascination.

"And you, child?" Mother asked. "Once you finish your studies, will you return to us and learn how to rule? We won't live forever, you know. Nor will your mama."

Jacinthe blinked. Not quite a flinch, but close to it. "I—I need to think about it. Becoming domina... that's an enormous responsibility. What if I get it wrong? People might die."

"But isn't that also true of working as a mage-healer?" Mother asked shrewdly. "Your patients won't always survive."

"It's different when you send an army to their deaths, versus losing a single patient," I pointed out.

“The battle yesterday—I don’t know if I could take responsibility for ordering something like that,” Jacinthe added.

“Not even to save a city from being slaughtered?” Mother put down her spoon and stared at us fiercely. “The casualties at yesterday’s battle were high, yes. But they were mostly on the enemy’s side. We lost five hundred troops, with another thousand injured. That’s a tiny fraction of the number of people living in Neapolis Capitola.”

Jacinthe’s cheeks flushed. She looked down at her pale green soup.

Mother added in a softer tone, “Believe me, child, I regret the sacrifices my troops had to make, but with over eight hundred thousand unarmed souls in my capital to protect, I would make the same decision again tomorrow.”

“I agree,” rumbled Menelaus, unexpectedly.

I looked at him in surprise.

“I’d order every adult Wind-Walker to fight to the death to protect the hatchlings and fledglings in our aeries,” he continued. “And for the greater good, they’d go happily into battle.”

“Also, they’re Dragons,” I said dryly. “They love fighting.”

“That, too,” Menelaus agreed, flashing me a toothy smile.

“I need to think about it,” Jacinthe repeated. “I don’t really want to become the domina. But if there’s no other choice...”

“A famous philosopher once observed that the best rulers are forged from the reluctant steel rather than ambitious metal,” Mother countered. “If you truly feel

yourself unsuited—or if my councilors oppose your elevation as heir on, ah, certain grounds—” Her gaze flicked to Menelaus. “We have your sisters as backup. They’re fully human, are they not?”

I thought of Talisa, Mira, and Juno, and shuddered. They were far too young to take on a burden like Imperial Heir without preparation. It had been hard for me, and I’d been raised in the palace and trained from early childhood in the duties that awaited me as an adult.

“We’ll see what the future brings,” I said as neutrally as I could. “You’re still in good health and vigor, Mother. We have time.”

“But not forever,” she warned. “Don’t wait too long. It’s vital we set up a smooth transition of power. Or there will be another Duke Beltrán to tear this realm apart.”

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The rest of the day passed in meetings with Mother and the heads of all the major imperial administrative departments. There were many unfamiliar faces among the senior imperial bureaucrats, which only drove home the length of my absence from the palace.

Mage Armand busied himself with visiting the Imperial Collegium of Certified Mage-Practitioners. Mother had tasked him with recruiting new instructors for the improved Darkstone Academy for the Magical Arts.

After lunch, Mother and I met to discuss how I intended to balance my duties as Imperial Heir with my new ambassadorship. In return, I'd extracted her promise to repeal the old, unjust laws against relationships between humans and non-humans.

As a test of her sincerity, I'd insisted Menelaus be allowed to share my apartment as my official consort. She'd agreed with surprisingly good grace.

Meanwhile, Menelaus was kept busy with the first of many meetings to come with the imperial council, as they formalized the resumption of formal diplomatic ties with the Dragon Kingdom of Kappadokia, and discussed establishing the first Wind-Walker embassy at the capital.

After dinner, Menelaus and I were finally free to relax in privacy.

Jacinthe and her companions were staying a few doors down on the same floor of the palace's family wing.

They'd been given the apartments that usually housed the imperial children. Since I'd

been an only child, those apartments had been locked and unused during my childhood and adolescence. The always-efficient palace staff had quickly aired out and prepared them for their first guests in decades.

They'd also already moved my meagre personal possessions from General Clovis' mansion to my old apartment in the imperial palace, and even restocked my clothes closet with a selection of new garments in my size. I wondered if someone had consulted Lady Livia's seamstress for my current measurements.

It had been a day filled with high emotion, and I felt wrung out.

Changing out of my borrowed formal gown, I removed my corset and put on a loose, comfortable house gown with a warm robe.

Then Menelaus and I sat side by side on the antique brocade sofa that had been in my sitting room for as long as I could remember.

Menelaus draped his brawny arm around my shoulders like he usually did, but I felt a surge of apprehension when I noticed his unusually serious expression.

"We need to speak, my mate." His usual exuberance was missing from his tone.

"Is it about me agreeing to become heir to the throne?"

He nodded. The guilt that had knotted my stomach all afternoon flowered into apprehension. In the heat of my reunion with Mother, I'd behaved like the perfect daughter instead of a true mate.

Did I ruin everything with my thoughtlessness?

"I should have consulted with you first before agreeing to Mother's request." I

reached up to lace my fingers through his. “I’m so sorry.”

“Apology accepted,” Menelaus said, his tone still grave. “But I must ask you: are you serious about being my mate?”

His question took me off guard and made my face burn with shame.

I didn’t blame him for asking. After all, I’d married Baldwin during my exile, though that decision had been driven by desperation rather than love.

“Of course I am! I thought I made that clear when I told Mother I wanted to return to Kappadokia with you.” My heart began thudding painfully in my chest. “Isn’t that what we hoped for, when we first planned our lives together all those years ago?”

“I admit you salvaged a difficult situation, my clever mate.” Menelaus let out a long breath. “But it’s a short-term remedy, at best. You told me your father is in frail health. What happens when he dies? Won’t you become domina then and find yourself obliged to return to this place?”

I swallowed hard. I’d been wondering the same thing since seeing Papa this afternoon. He’d dwindled into a frail ghost of his former self.

I devoutly wished I had a better answer. “If Jacinthe is ready to ascend to the throne by then, I’ll abdicate immediately and continue serving as ambassador to Kappadokia. Or... if you want, I’ll resign my ambassadorship and become your queen-consort in an official alliance between our kingdoms.”

He nodded gravely. “And if Jacinthe isn’t ready to rule?”

He was asking the hard questions that needed to be asked. The answers weren’t easy, but I owed him the truth.

“Then I’ll have to rule as a stopgap measure until Jacinthe completes her studies. It would probably only be for a year or two. Three at the most,” I said. “Then I’ll abdicate and come to you in Kappadokia.”

Once again, I was expecting him to wait patiently for me. But I had no actual choice if I wanted to prevent the Dominion from tearing itself apart after Papa’s death.

The recent conspiracies against the throne by the dukes of Frankia and Norhas had showed me what happened when there was no legitimate successor to the imperial throne.

But it wasn’t fair to Menelaus, and I knew it. He deserved to come first in my priorities. Always.

My heart in my throat, I waited for his reaction.

Menelaus smiled at last. “I thank you for your honesty, my mate. If needed, I can live with coming second to our hatchling for a few years.”

I’d been so afraid my impulsive decision would make him think I wasn’t serious about our relationship. My relief now was so overwhelming, it made me dizzy.

He turned to me, cupped my cheek in his big, warm hand, and leaned in to kiss me. His touches since my first terrible panic attack had become soft, almost tentative.

Tonight, I wanted more from him. I drew his head down and returned his kiss with passion, pressing my lips fervently against his. His tongue tangled with mine, igniting a fire that sped through my entire body before settling between my legs with an urgent throbbing.

He lifted me onto his lap and fervently kissed his way down my throat. His touch was

electrifying, each caress leaving a trail of warmth that lingered on my skin. Our kisses deepened, full of urgency and desire, as if trying to make up for the time we had lost.

The hard bulge of his arousal pressed against the side of my thigh with almost bruising intensity despite his trousers and my robe.

Maybe we couldn't fully make love yet, but that didn't mean I couldn't do something for him.

As long as I'm in control, I'll be all right.

My senses burning with desire for him, I slid off his lap and off the sofa. I landed on my knees before him, the thick carpet cushioning my knees.

Menelaus inhaled sharply as I began fumbling with the buttons on the front of his trousers. The fabric was stretched tight over the long ridge of his erection. "My love, are you sure?"

"Yes. Let me do this for you." Desire curled low in my belly, mingling sweetly with nervous excitement. "I want you, Menelaus."

Finally, I freed him from his tight fabric prison. His thick cock was even larger than I remembered. Menelaus, in human shape, was much larger than an ordinary human man, and all his parts were in proportion.

His erection was hot and stiff against my palm and curled fingers as I drew it out.

I remembered my shock and nervousness the first time I'd seen him naked, all those years ago. But he'd been so gentle with me our first time making love, as if he'd been afraid of breaking me.

Even now, as old and experienced as I was, I felt a twinge of nervousness. Then I gazed up into his golden eyes and saw my love and adoration for him returned in kind.

Slowly, teasingly, I licked my lips and leaned forward to taste him, savoring his deep groan of pleasure as my tongue swirled around the broad tip of his cock.

The pulsing heat between my legs intensified at his obvious enjoyment of my attentions. I opened my mouth and drew his thick length inside.

As I worked him with lips and tongue, I lost myself momentarily in the memory of the first time I tried this. How worried I'd been about fitting his length into my mouth. And how careful I'd been with my teeth.

Then Menelaus groaned again, and his hips thrust upward involuntarily. His cock hit the back of my throat.

I gagged and fought to keep from throwing up. Then he put his hands on my hair in a reassuring gesture.

The darkness that had been waiting to ambush me surged up, dragging the memories I'd fought to bury to the surface.

"Highness, you're so beautiful when you're kneeling for me," Beltrán's mocking voice echoed.

I remembered how, caught in the compulsion charm's delusion, I'd eagerly gripped his lean hips and parted my lips for him.

As the memory swept over me like a polluted wave, Menelaus' gentle touch morphed into the late duke's cruel grip on my hair.

At the time, I'd been flattered that his desire for me made him lose control. Now, freed of his black magic's hold over my mind and my emotions, I remembered the truth.

Beltrán habitually twisted my braid around his hand to hold me captive as he ruthlessly raped my mouth. He'd enjoyed my squirms and whimpers of discomfort and my struggle to accommodate his length as he took his pleasure from me.

Revulsion ripped through me like a lightning strike. My breath caught painfully, lungs tightening, air refusing to fill my chest. Panic clawed at my throat, choking me.

I jerked away from Menelaus, trembling violently.

My heartbeat thundered in my ears, and cold sweat broke across my skin. My vision blurred, the love and safety I felt with Menelaus dissolving into a chaotic swirl of remembered fear and helplessness.

"Jonquil!" Menelaus' voice cut through my panic, raw with worry and anguish. "Did I hurt you?"

"Divine Nemara, take Beltrán's soul and torment it for all eternity!" I pressed my hands to my face. My body shook with deep, gasping sobs.

I'm in my room. Beltrán de Norhas is dead and gone. I'm safe.

I silently chanted this mantra as I struggled desperately to ground myself in the here-and-now.

Menelaus flung himself off the sofa and knelt at my side. His powerful arms came around me, holding me close as I shook.

He whispered soothing words. His warmth and scent slowly penetrated the haze of mindless terror engulfing me. Whether wearing human skin or Wind-Walker plumage, he always smelled faintly of brimstone.

Clinging to him, I wept helplessly into his shoulder. I mourned the loss of our tender moment and felt an overwhelming sense of failure as his mate.

He'd already done so much for me, expecting nothing in return! I loved him with all my heart and soul, and I hated being so crippled I could offer him nothing more than kisses and chaste embraces.

"We—we can't go on like this," I said hoarsely once I'd gathered the fragments of my shredded composure around me. "I'm going to the Temple of Limnis as soon as I return from the Imperial Academy tomorrow, and I'm going to beg them for help. On my knees, if I have to. But—but it might take weeks or even months to cure me," I added, with a qualm.

Menelaus kissed away the tears from my cheeks. "I'll wait for as long as it takes for you to heal."

"And if I never heal?" I didn't want to hear the answer, but I had to ask.

"You will always be my mate. My one and only love. I'll wait for you until the Unconquered Sun dims in the sky."

Fresh tears prickled my eyes. I buried my face in his shoulder once more. "I don't deserve you, my dearest Dragon. I'd go to the temple first thing tomorrow morning, but I need to see my other daughters first."

"I'll come with you," he said instantly.

“Thank you,” I said, stroking his cheek, “but I think I should see them on my own.”

“You’re certain?”

“It would be too much for them.” I searched for the right words to let him know how nervous I was about facing my daughters. “So much has happened since we last saw each other. I don’t even know where to begin.”

I was already more nervous about my upcoming reunion with the girls than I had been flying into battle two days ago with Menelaus.

From what Jacinthe had told me about what had happened in the wake of my abduction, my daughters all thought I was dead.

How had they reacted to the note I’d sent them this morning? Did they know about Baldwin’s murder? Had they guessed I was actually the long-lost princess-royal who’d arrived on Dragon-back and defeated Duke Beltrán’s forces?

And that was just the beginning of the many tumultuous changes that had occurred since our parting. I could only imagine how shocked Talisa, Juno, and Mira would be.

How in the world am I going to tell them they’re now in line for the imperial throne?

And that Menelaus is Jacinthe’s father? Or that Menelaus and I plan to spend the rest of our lives together?

“Understood.” Menelaus nodded, his expression unreadable. “I’ll check on the Wind-Walkers who came with us and make sure they’re being treated with all the honors due to them. And then I have another meeting scheduled with the imperial council to negotiate a formal treaty of alliance.” He grinned at me with his usual confidence. “I’m sure I’ll keep myself busy here while you’re gone.”

“I’ll introduce them to you, in time,” I said. “Just not yet. I need to see them and talk to them, first, before I tell them that their new stepfather is the Wind-Walker king.”

“As you think best, my love,” he said. “Know that I’ll treat them like my own hatchlings. Now, come, and let me hold you. And tell me what changes you want to make to my aerie when we return to Hierapolis...”

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 2:08 am

The next morning, my stomach churned with nerves and excitement about my impending reunion with Talisa, Mira, and Juno. Despite Menelaus' fussing, I only managed a cup of tea and a few bites of toast.

The palace's majordomo and her staff had stocked my closets with a selection of clothes and shoes for all occasions.

I stood in front of a row of gowns, each draped on a mannequin made to my measurements, racked with indecision.

Should I arrive at the Imperial Academy in court dress as a noblewoman? Or masquerade as a court official, clad richly but soberly in the sapphire blue livery of the imperial civil service?

The Divine Mother only knew what my daughters would think, in either case.

In the note I'd sent to them in care of the Imperial Academy yesterday, I'd told them nothing of being restored to my former rank. Only that I'd been a captive of the Duke de Norhas for the past eighteen months, had come to the capital with the Wind-Walkers to defeat the duke, and was currently a guest at the imperial palace.

I wished I still had my own clothes. But those were long gone, discarded by Duke Beltrán's agents when they abducted me.

Perhaps I could borrow a simpler gown from one of the palace maids?

Jacinthe knocked on my door while I was still dithering in a welter of anxiety. She'd

chosen to wear imperial livery, with discreet pearl jewelry and an imperial household badge embroidered in gold thread on her bodice over her heart.

“Is this all right, Mama?” she asked, smoothing her midnight-blue velvet skirts. “The maid said that since you declined a full escort, our guards would prefer us not to draw notice to ourselves.”

I nodded. According to protocol, if I arrived at the academy with a full escort, then Chatelaine Lirelle and her staff would be obliged to receive us with a formal ceremony.

But I wanted to meet with my younger daughters in private and with no fuss, so that we could have some privacy to greet each other and catch up on all that had happened since we last saw each other.

“Yes, it’s a perfect choice,” I said, and made my decision. “I’ll wear imperial livery as well.”

The Imperial Academy for the Magical Arts was located an hour’s drive from the capital. We rode there in a coach, driven by a court mage and propelled by an Air spell. Two taciturn mage-bodyguards, assigned to us by the Head of Palace Security, accompanied us.

To my relief, the gilded imperial eagles painted on the doors attracted no attention as we left the palace and drove east along the broad avenue that led out of the city. Official vehicles were a common sight in the capital, and the citizens ignored anything short of the official coronation coach or highly decorated coach-of-state.

Jacinthe and I discussed our plans for the rebirth of Darkstone Academy during the drive.

I occasionally pointed out landmarks I remembered—the Pantheon of the Twelve Gods, the enormous stadium where the Dominion Championships for Magical Sports were held, and, once we left the suburbs behind, the walled riverside estate of the Imperial Summer Villa.

When our conversation faltered, we both stared out the windows at the passing scenery. I didn't know what my eldest daughter was thinking, but my mind was racing through dozens of scenarios for my impending reunion.

What have they heard about my return to the capital? Have they guessed that Princess-Royal Jonquil and their Mama, the humble village healer Mage Isabeau of Bernswick, are one and the same?

When we passed through the gates of the Imperial Academy for the Magical Arts, a wave of nostalgia choked me. I drank in the sight of the elegant marble buildings built around large, grassy courtyards, their columned facades gleaming in the spring sunshine.

All around the cluster of buildings, vast parklands stretched as far as the eye could see, dotted with trees.

“It's going to be a challenge to make Darkstone Academy feel as welcoming as this place,” Jacinthe commented.

“I have some ideas,” I replied as my gut churned with anxiety. “We'll talk about them later.”

As the coach pulled up in front of the administration building, a stern-looking woman emerged. She wore an elegant gown in imperial blue with the Imperial Academy's badge on her breast.

“Your Imperial Highness, this is an unexpected honor!” She sank into a deep curtsy as I followed my bodyguard out of the carriage, followed by Jacinthe and her guard. “Lirelle de Plons, at your service. I am the chatelaine of this academy. Your daughters await you in my office.”

My heart raced as we followed Chatelaine Lirelle up the shallow marble stairs and into the building.

The chatelaine’s office door swung open at our approach, and my breath caught. How much have my girls changed since I last saw them?

“Mama! Jacinthe!” called a trio of familiar voices.

Talisa, Mira, and Juno surged forward, their faces alight with joy and disbelief. Jacinthe and I were engulfed in a whirlwind of embraces and tearful exclamations.

“Jacinthe, I’ve missed you so much,” Talisa cried, her voice choked with emotion as she hugged her sister.

At seventeen, she had grown into a striking young woman, her features sharper and more defined than I remembered.

The twins clung to me, their faces buried in my neck. At nearly fifteen, they had blossomed from girls into tall, graceful young ladies.

They were all clean and well-groomed, but shabby. I noticed immediately that all three of them wore the same gowns they’d left home with, with strips of darker fabric where seams and hems had been let out and restitched.

We all cried, and I kissed them over and over again.

At last, when the initial rush of our reunion had passed, I wiped away my tears. “My dearest ones, it makes me happy beyond belief to see you all safe and well. I have so much to tell you!”

“Is it true that you’re really the long-lost Princess Jonquil?” Talisa asked me in a challenging tone.

“Yes,” I said, and added, “I’m sorry I couldn’t tell you the truth before. I was afraid it would put you all in danger.”

Talisa pressed her lips together in a displeased line and looked away.

“Does that mean we’re princesses, too?” asked Mira.

“I hope so!” Juno said vehemently. “It’ll teach all those stuck-up aristocrat kids here to respect us!”

I’d never considered what attending the Imperial Academy might be like as a commoner, and felt a surge of guilt.

Chatelaine Lirelle, who’d been waiting patiently just out of earshot, cleared her throat politely. “Perhaps Your Highnesses would like to continue your reunion over tea and sandwiches in my private garden?”

“That sounds perfect, thank you,” I replied.

We followed her out to a secluded courtyard, where a table laden with delicate sandwiches, fresh fruit, and steaming pots of tea awaited us.

“How do you like the Imperial Academy so far?” Jacinthe asked warily when we’d settled ourselves.

Talisa's eyes flashed with anger.

"I hate it," she spat. "Everyone here treated us like dirt from the moment we arrived. Called us 'hicks' and 'island savages.' Made fun of our accents, even though we speak perfect Capitolian."

Mira and Juno exchanged a glance, their identical faces mirroring each other's pain. Juno said, "They accused us of pretending to be something we're not. They told us we didn't belong here."

I met Jacinthe's eyes and saw the same spark of protective fury that surged through me. How dare they treat my girls this way?

Finding out that Jacinthe had been sent to Darkstone Academy as an indentured servant had been bad enough.

But the Imperial Academy was supposed to be the finest educational institution in the Dominion... and its charter proudly stated that it treated all students according to their potential rather than their rank.

Sounds like I need to have a word with Chatelaine Lirelle after this, I thought angrily.

Talisa lifted her chin, a fierce pride in her eyes. "I stood up to them. Defended Mira and Juno. I wasn't about to let some pampered little lordling push us around."

Jacinthe grinned. "Good for you!"

Talisa's next words sent a spike of hot pain through my heart. "And then we heard about Mama's death," she whispered, her eyes filling with tears. "Everything just... fell apart after that."

“It’s been a nightmare,” Juno added, her voice barely audible. “Papa’s remarriage to that awful Narcissa... and then he died, too. We thought we were all alone in the world.”

So, they know Baldwin is dead. I was glad I wouldn’t have to mar the joy of our reunion to break the news to them.

“We thought we were orphans!” Mira exclaimed.

I was appalled at what they’d just told me of their experiences here so far. I’d enjoyed my years at this academy.

“My brave, strong girls,” I said, leaning forward to put my hands on the twins’ shoulders. “I’m so sorry you’ve been mistreated, and that I left you alone and without protectors. If I could’ve come to you, I would have.”

“I know, Mama,” Juno said, patting my arm comfortingly. Her sisters nodded.

I continued, “But now you know you have family here in the capital—your grandmother would very much like to meet you.” I took a deep breath. “If you dislike it here, would you like to transfer to another academy? Or complete your studies at the palace with private tutors?”

By law, all young people identified as potential mages were required to attend one of the Dominion’s many academies for the magical arts. But exceptions for private lessons had been made before.

A fresh spurt of guilt reminded me I’d promised Menelaus I’d return to Hierapolis with him. But I couldn’t possibly abandon my daughters if they needed me here in the capital.

To my surprise, all three girls shook their heads.

What? I looked at them in disbelief. I would've wagered a month of my Bernswick shop's earnings that the girls would be eager to leave here.

"It's getting better." Talisa had always been a terrible liar.

Before I could question her further, she plastered on a fake smile, turned to Jacinthe, and said, "But that's enough about us. I want to hear about you, Jacinthe. How in the world did you end up with magic? Last time I saw you, you couldn't even light a candle!"

Jacinthe smiled wryly. "Well," she began, "it's a long story. I somehow ended up at Darkstone Academy as an indentured apprentice. Things were... challenging at first. Then I had an accident. I almost died, actually. But somehow, that trauma awakened my magic."

Her sisters listened, spellbound, as Jacinthe told a brief, highly edited version of her adventures at the isolated prison academy, ending with our reunion aboard Duke Beltrán's flagship.

When Jacinthe finished, Talisa's gaze returned to me. "Everyone at the academy has been talking about the Princess-Royal returning from the dead with an army of Dragons to save the capital. That was you, Mama?"

I nodded. "Jacinthe's father, King Menelaus of the Wind-Walkers, helped us against the Duke de Norhas."

Mira and Juno exchanged wide-eyed glances, their excitement palpable. "Wind-Walkers?" Juno whispered. "You mean, Dragons?"

“And their king is your father? ” Mira breathed.

Smiling, Jacinthe nodded.

Talisa shook her head. “Jacinthe, you’ve had such incredible adventures. Your life sounds like something out of a storybook. I’d give anything to meet a Dragon!”

Jacinthe’s smile widened. “I could arrange that before I leave the capital.”

She was referring to Boreas, of course. But I wondered if she’d just handed me the perfect excuse for introducing Menelaus to the girls.

“Leave the capital?” Juno asked, looking confused. “But aren’t you coming here to study with us, now that you’re a princess, too?”

The question hung in the air, heavy with expectation.

Given what the girls had told me earlier about their experiences at this academy, I was wondering whether publicly declaring them my daughters was the wisest move.

Jacinthe shook her head. “No. I’ll be returning to Darkstone Academy soon. I have a lot of friends there, and a wonderful mentor.”

Talisa’s dark brows drew together. “You don’t want to be with us?”

“You don’t need me,” Jacinthe replied with a regretful shake of her head. “Now that you’re imperial princesses, you outrank all the other students here.”

Talisa’s eyes widened, and I saw possibilities ticking through her brain.

But I knew how aristocrats thought. If being commoners had made my daughters easy

targets for bullying, then a sudden elevation to the imperial family would be even worse.

The girls would spend the rest of their time here surrounded by flatterers and bootlickers eager to exploit a connection to the domina-regent.

Jacinthe laughed and ruffled her sister's hair. "Use your power wisely."

"How did you convince the Wind-Walkers to help us, Mama?" Juno asked me. "They've hated us ever since we won the war."

I swallowed hard. Other than telling the girls about Baldwin's murder, this was the moment I'd been dreading the most. "King Menelaus of the Wind-Walkers is, ah, an old friend of mine," I reminded her delicately.

Jacinthe threw me a narrow-eyed glance. "He's more than just a friend, Mama."

She turned to her sisters. "Remember how I just told you King Menelaus is my father?"

I saw Talisa blanch as the implications finally sank in. "You—you took a Dragon as your lover, Mama?"

My face heated at the shock in her tone. "That was before I came to Bernswick and met your father," I blurted. "I met Menelaus when he was still a prince. He came to Neapolis Capitola as a diplomatic hostage," I began.

Talisa and the twins listened with open fascination as I told them the story of my doomed romance with Menelaus, my parents' reaction to my request to wed him, and my panicked escape from the palace and flight from the capital to the Western Isles.

“Your mama and papa—I mean, the dominus and domina—wanted to kill Jacinthe? Even though she was only a baby?” Talisa asked, scowling.

“Yes, but your grandmother apologized to us yesterday,” I countered. “I think she’s sincere. And she’s promised to repeal the Supernatural Relations Act.”

Talisa’s scowl didn’t soften. “I don’t think I want to meet her.”

Her tone and her expression reminded me strongly of Mother. If Talisa became an imperial heir, Mother and the officials of the imperial court would have a difficult time molding her into what they wanted.

And it would serve them right, I thought. The Dominion needs fresh blood and independent thinkers.

“Very well,” I said. “You can always change your mind later.”

But speaking of Mother spurred me to ask Talisa, Mira, and Juno the question that had been building in my mind throughout our conversation.

“Now, a further question: do you want Chatelaine Lirelle to announce you’re the domina’s granddaughters? Or would you prefer to continue here in your current identities as three extremely talented but common-born young mages from the Western Isles?”

The girls traded wide-eyed glances. No one spoke.

“I—I don’t know,” Talisa said finally.

“Wouldn’t it be easier if we were princesses?” Mira asked. “At least the aristos here would have to be polite to us.”

“Yes, but only because our grandmother is important,” Talisa shot back. “We already know what they really think of us.”

“Talisa’s right,” Juno said to her twin. “I mean, think of Lukhan... and Damien, too, when we first him.”

I wondered who Lukhan and Damien were, and what they’d done to my daughters.

Mira’s cheeks went red. But she nodded. “I... guess you’re right. But wouldn’t it be nice to have them respect us, even just a little?”

“If I show them I’m as talented with magic as the rest of them, they’ll have to respect me!” Talisa snapped. “But if I use my new rank to force them to respect me, then I’m no better than Lukhan.” Her voice gentled as she reached out to stroke Mira’s light brown hair. “And even if we get special treatment from now on, what about the other commoners, like Elio? I’m sure his parents aren’t secretly royalty.”

I heard the bitterness in her tone. Now I was determined to find out who this Lukhan was.

“But if we’re princesses, no one will dare be mean to us anymore,” Mira pleaded. “I don’t know how you can stand cleaning Lukhan’s rooms. And I’m tired of running love letters between Lady Amaryllis and Lord Evariste. The last time I had to deliver one, he yelled at me in front of all his horrible friends that Amaryllis is too ugly for him, and why won’t she leave him alone?”

A new spear of guilt pierced my chest. No wonder the girls looked exhausted, if they were studying full time and working to earn money for their tuition and fees!

Juno groaned in agreement. “Exactly. Yesterday, Lady Clarimond spilled her inkwell across her desk and then demanded I clean it up, even though she could’ve easily

done it herself with a two-second cleaning spell. She sat there smirking at me the whole time and told me if my spell went wrong and I got ink on her expensive lace gown, she'd complain to Chatelaine Lirelle."

"The decision is yours," I told them. "If you have any doubts or you need to think about it for a while, it would be easier to remain who you are for now. We can always make a public announcement later."

"So, Mama, did you attend this academy as a princess-royal?" Talisa's voice was steady, her gaze piercing.

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 2:08 am

“No, not exactly,” I admitted. “I enrolled using the identity of my second cousin Azalea, a minor noblewoman from your Grandmother Jacinthe’s side of the family. It was safer. Only the academy’s chatelaine was aware of my true identity.”

Talisa nodded, then lifted her chin defiantly. “Then I want to continue my studies as Talisa of Bernswick, a commoner from the Western Isles.”

“Talisa! Haven’t we been bullied enough already?” Mira exclaimed, her face flushed with frustration and worry.

“It’s three Yes votes or one No,” Talisa said stubbornly. “And you heard Mama—we can change our minds anytime we want.”

“Then I vote we stay quiet about the princess thing for now,” Juno said, surprising me.

Jacinthe spoke up unexpectedly. “Talisa, I think you’re doing the right thing. If you’re going to rule one day, you need genuine insight into the true nature of the people around you. The aristocrats will always mask their true selves around a princess-royal, but they’ll reveal their genuine characters to someone they believe beneath them. It’s a harsh truth, but necessary.” Her eyes darkened briefly, and I knew her wisdom must stem from bitter experience at Darkstone Academy’s kitchens.

Talisa glanced at Mira and Juno. “Jacinthe is right. We need to know who we’re really dealing with, not some fake-nice version.”

Juno sighed. “Fine. As long as I don’t have to clean up after Lady Clarimonde and the others anymore, I won’t tell anyone the domina-regent is our grandmother.”

Mira bowed her head and studied the cucumber sandwich on her plate for a few moments before replying. “Fine. But you promise we can change our minds later, right?”

“I promise,” I said. “And you won’t have to work for tuition and fees anymore. I’ll settle accounts with Chatelaine Lirelle before we leave today. I’m also going to have a word with her about how I expect you—and the other commoner students here—to be treated henceforth.”

“Will we at least get to visit the palace?” she asked, sounding plaintive now. “I heard the Dragons are staying there.”

Apparently, she wanted to meet the Wind-Walkers more than the domina-regent. I tried to suppress a smile .

In Mira’s place, I’d probably be more interested in seeing Dragons than an old stranger, grandmother or not.

“If you three want everyone to continue thinking you’re commoners, then visiting the palace right now might not be the best idea,” I advised. “Maybe you can come during spring break.”

“It’s probably already too late,” Jacinthe said. “The imperial carriage parked outside will already have started rumors about our visit today, and our interest in Talisa, Mira, and Juno. We’ll need to come up with a convincing story about why three commoner students received visitors from the imperial palace.”

I nodded. “I have an idea. My dearest girls, are you certain about remaining

commoners for now?”

All three nodded.

“For now,” muttered Mira.

I continued, “Then I’ll ask Chatelaine Lirelle to announce that you three won a special scholarship for disadvantaged students.” I paused, considering. “It would be more convincing if some other commoner students received this scholarship as well. Girls, do you have any suggestions?”

When we’d drawn up a list of candidates, Jacinthe said, “Let’s hold a scholarship presentation ceremony in a few days. Then Boreas or my father could fly us here, and you could meet them.”

“Really?” Juno’s eyes shone with sudden excitement.

“Of course,” I said.

Mira brightened immediately. So did Talisa.

* * *

When we finally returned to the imperial palace a few hours later, I had a new goal.

Besides getting the Supernatural Relations Act repealed, I wanted to fight for a better future for not only my daughters, but for every common-born citizen in the Imperial Dominion. I wanted to reform our ancient system of privileges granted to aristocrats through an accident of birth, and ensure that every person within our borders could be recognized for their true worth and not judged by their origins.

“Am I selfish for leaving my daughters behind when we leave for Hierapolis?” I asked Menelaus when I’d finished telling him about my visit.

I was curled up next to him on my sofa, my head on his shoulder.

“They’re not helpless hatchlings anymore but fledglings eager to stretch their wings,” he pointed out. “Is attending this academy is a common rite of passage to adulthood among you humans?”

“It is for those who have mage potential,” I answered. “I’m just worried about them. A lot has happened since I enrolled them there... and that’s not even considering all the horrible things that happened to Jacinthe at Darkstone Academy!”

“Jacinthe survived, and became the stronger for it,” Menelaus reminded me. “And she wishes to return there, so it cannot be so bad.”

I raised my head and looked at him incredulously. “She almost died!”

He touched his forehead to mine, and I felt him through every pore of my skin. “I swear to you, my mate, if they ever truly need you, I will fly you to them.”

“Thank you,” I said, relieved.

He smiled down at me. “And it’s not selfish to want to make your mate happy,” he reminded me.

“I want to make you happy.” I kissed him. “You’ve been more than patient. Now, let’s see if the Temple of Limnis can help me.”

* * *

After supper, Menelaus and Mage Armand accompanied me to the Temple of Limnis, located across the river from the palace.

This morning, before leaving to visit the Imperial Academy, I'd sent a request to the temple for a private consultation. When I returned to the palace, I found a reply welcoming me to visit the temple after-hours.

Moonlight reflected off the temple's grand columned facade as we walked across the wide, cobbled forecourt. I held Menelaus' hand while Armand walked beside us with the determined stride of an old man who could still ride into battle on Dragon-back.

I glanced up at the temple's tall bronze doors, closed for the night. An anxious breath fluttered in my throat. Would the healer-priests and healer-priestesses be able to help me?

Beneath my nerves ran a current of shame. Mage-Healer, heal thyself. Why don't I have the strength to do that?

Menelaus squeezed my hand. "You're trembling," he said. "Tell me what to do, and I'll do it."

The memory of my last attack burned in my chest. I was more terrified right now than I'd been at the battle. "My demons are mine to fight."

What if the goddess turns Her face from me, and Her healers can't help me?

We climbed the wide marble steps and found a young woman in acolyte's robes awaiting us. She showed us to a small side door, and we entered the temple.

The vast candle-lit space, its vaulted ceilings lost in shadows, was bathed in quiet serenity. It made my hammering heart seem as loud as a drumbeat.

“Princess Jonquil,” a soft, melodic voice greeted me. “Be welcome in Limnis’ name. We are honored to assist you on your healing journey.”

The high priestess of Limnis was perhaps the same age as Mother. Her silvery hair was caught up in an elegant chignon, and her lined face radiating a gentle compassion that immediately eased some of my worry.

I inclined my head respectfully, my voice shaking a little as I replied, “Thank you for seeing me on such short notice.”

She held out her hands. They were dry and warm against mine, which were icy with nerves. “I can see how damaged your aura is. We wish to help you in whatever way we can. Please come with me.”

She led us to an alcove furnished with a curved, cushioned bench. As we sat, I noticed how Menelaus positioned himself protectively at my side. Mage Armand discreetly settled nearby, his presence comforting.

“Tell me of your ordeal, Highness,” Serafina prompted softly. “Only as much as you feel comfortable sharing.”

Drawing a steadying breath, I clasped my hands tightly together. “The Duke de Norhas—he captured me, placed a compulsion charm on me, and for many months, I had no will of my own. He forced me to—” My voice cracked, and I looked away, tears stinging the corners of my eyes. “Whenever my consort and I attempt, ah, to be intimate, I... I panic. The memories overwhelm me. I—I can’t breathe, I can’t think.”

Menelaus took my hand, silently lending me strength.

“I see. Will you allow me to assess you?” the priestess asked in a gentle tone.

At my nod, she rose and came to stand before me. She placed her hands lightly on my head, a comforting touch. “Close your eyes, and breathe deeply.”

Familiar with the practice of aura-reading, I obeyed her without qualm.

“Once... twice... and again.” A moment later, her touch vanished. “You may open your eyes, Highness.”

Serafina gazed down at me, understanding etched deeply in her dark eyes. “You have deep spiritual wounds. This is common among survivors of catastrophic events. The trauma you’ve endured manifests itself in powerful and unexpected ways.”

“Yes,” I whispered, my heart pounding again.

“Your spirit seeks to protect you from harm by forcing you to relive your fear, but we can teach it that the danger has passed.” Her voice was soothing, like cool water on fevered skin. “Our spiritual healing ritual uses enchanted mirrors as tools that guide our patients through their darkest memories, helping transform them into visions of strength and positivity.”

“Limnis be thanked!” I breathed, relief flooding through me.

Serafina regarded me gravely. “If you choose to undertake this healing journey, know it will not be easy, Highness. There is no quick cure, no instant exorcism of your demons. Confronting such memories will be painful, but also deeply cathartic.”

No surprises there, I thought. In my experience, healing from a severe wound could be more painful than the injury itself.

“Thank you, Priestess Serafina. I must admit, as a mage-healer myself, I’m curious—and admittedly apprehensive—about your method.”

Serafina nodded, her gaze kind yet penetrating. “Your concern is entirely natural, my dear princess. Many healers find it challenging to relinquish control and allow others to guide their healing. But to cure the wounds of the soul, we must first confront the source of the injuries directly.”

I swallowed hard, glancing nervously at Menelaus, whose reassuring presence steadied me. “What should I expect from the treatment?”

“Perhaps it’s easier if I show you.”

The priestess guided us into a side chamber, where a large mirror framed in an intricate silver frame stood gleaming softly in the candlelight. “This enchanted mirror reveals memories, allowing you to experience and gradually reshape your emotional response to traumatic events.”

“But reliving these memories—won’t that trigger more panic?” I asked, my voice tight with anxiety.

I don’t want to relive those long months with Beltrán!

Yet, I knew the only way to cure a festering abscess was to drain it of its putrid matter. Only then could it truly heal.

“Initially, yes,” Serafina admitted, her voice soft. “The first week will be the hardest to endure. You’ll relive key moments of your injuring events, but I will teach you powerful grounding spells, enabling you to anchor yourself during these sessions.”

Menelaus put his arm around my shoulders, offering unspoken reassurance as Serafina continued. “By the second or third week, you will notice marked improvement. The panic attacks will lessen in frequency and intensity. You’ll start to reclaim your confidence and comfort, especially in intimacy and close relationships.”

My heart quickened at the thought of finally being able to lie with Menelaus. “And after that?”

“Weeks four and five involve deepening this healing,” Serafina answered. “You’ll practice independently, reinforcing your resilience with a few guided sessions. By this stage, your daily life will be mostly normal again.”

I dared to feel hopeful. “And when will I know I’m fully healed?”

“Usually, by the sixth week, those who follow our method no longer require formal treatment sessions. You can call upon the grounding techniques whenever needed, but the most critical wounds will have transformed. Your heart and mind will feel truly your own again.”

A lump formed in my throat, but beneath my fear, determination sparked. “I want to do this.”

“Very well,” Serafina replied with a gentle smile. “Rest well tonight. With Your Highness’ permission, we will begin tomorrow morning after the second bell.”

“Thank you,” I said with heartfelt gratitude.

She inclined her head graciously. “It will be a long and painful healing journey. But I sense your heart is strong. Through the goddess’ mercy, you will be transformed and made stronger.”

* * *

That night, nestled safely in Menelaus’ arms, sleep came more easily than it had in months, a gentle tide pulling me into dreams untouched by nightmares.

The following morning, my courage wavered only slightly as I returned to the Temple of Limnis.

An acolyte led me into a side-chamber where Mage Serafina awaited me.

She stood next to the mirror she'd showed me last night. Its reflective surface shimmered with a faint magical glow, rippling like water.

"Stand here, Your Highness," she instructed softly. I stepped hesitantly before the mirror, my reflection uncertain, the shadows beneath my eyes reminders of all I'd endured. "Close your eyes and recall the memory that triggered your last panic attack. Allow it to fill your mind."

I shuddered as the vivid images returned.

When I'd been in the grip of Beltrán's compulsion charm, I'd fallen eagerly to my knees and welcomed his every attention, no matter how rough. The black magic had twisted my thoughts to believe that he only hurt me because he desired me so badly that he lost control of himself.

I'd wanted him to hurt me because it proved his love for me.

Now, my mind clear of his vile spell, I recalled the truth about those encounters. He'd taken more pleasure in hurting me and humiliating me than I'd ever given him with my lips and tongue.

My chest tightened with the awful, familiar sensation of not being able to breathe. My heart hammered in my chest and cold sweat prickled under my arms and down my spine.

"Breathe deeply," Serafina guided me gently, her voice calm and firm. "Visualize

roots growing from your feet into the earth. You are grounded, safe.”

As she continued to guide me, I focused on my breathing, slow and even, imagining deep roots anchoring me securely. Gradually, the panic’s hold loosened.

Serafina commanded softly, “Open your eyes now and watch your memory.”

Reluctantly, I obeyed.

The horrific scene swirled in the enchanted mirror, vivid and painful.

“Breathe. In... out... draw on the power of Earth to anchor your roots... Now, imagine your enemy diminishing in strength. He cannot hold you. He cannot bind you...”

Because he’s dead.

As I continued to draw on the grounding spells under Serafina’s calm instruction, the images in the mirror shifted. Slowly, subtly, Beltrán’s mocking grin faded and his expression became worried, even fearful.

With a flash of insight, I saw how his need to dominate and control me was rooted in terrible insecurity. He’d been afraid of me!

And he’d been terrified of the consequences if he lost control of me and failed to seize the throne for himself.

I remembered how he’d killed himself rather than face the consequence for his crimes. A mixture of pity and contempt flowed through me, sweeping away the choking terror.

His ghostly grip on my braided hair loosened, then vanished.

“Now,” Serafina encouraged warmly, “see yourself as you truly are, Jonquil: strong, whole, surrounded by love.”

My reflection in the mirror altered gradually, showing me upright and proud in my favorite gown. Menelaus stood protectively at my side, with my daughters around us, smiling and happy and safe .

The image was powerful, grounding, and deeply comforting.

Tears spilled down my cheeks, relief mingling with gratitude and hope. I felt lighter, freer, more myself than I had in a long while.

Serafina gently placed a comforting hand on my shoulder. “You have done well, Princess Jonquil. The path ahead will take much strength, but you possess it in abundance.”

I smiled through my tears. For the first time since my ordeal, I allowed myself to truly believe that healing was within my grasp.

Page 14

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 2:08 am

Imperial Palace Neapolis Capitola Six weeks later

I took a deep breath, steadying my nerves as I listened for Menelaus' footsteps in the corridor outside.

The long weeks of healing rituals at the Temple of Limnis had cleansed my mind and spirit. The memories of my time in captivity remained like fading bruises—tender, but no longer incapacitating.

Tonight, I would reclaim the last piece of myself that Duke Beltrán had stolen. Like a shattered alabaster vase, I'd been repaired. The cracks in my soul were still there, and I would never be the same person I'd been before my ordeal. I only hoped the glue was strong enough to hold.

I ran my fingers through my freshly washed hair, still damp and smelling of jasmine. The palace seamstresses had crafted a nightgown of plum-colored silk so fine it felt like water against my skin.

I'd dismissed my new ladies-in-waiting, wanting privacy for what I planned.

My heart fluttered against my ribs like a captive bird.

What if I'm not truly healed?

What if, during our lovemaking, those terrible memories resurface to ambush me once more?

Consumed with anxiety, I'd asked Serafina those questions during our final session together.

She'd told me that even if I found myself lost in a terrible memory, I had the tools—and the power—to break the hold of fear and banish Beltrán's ghost.

"Highness, just believe in yourself. You are strong enough."

I pressed my palm against the cool glass of the window, focusing on the sensation, grounding myself in the present moment as Priestess Serafina had taught me.

The door opened with a soft click. I turned to see Menelaus enter, his massive frame filling the doorway. Even after all these weeks together, the sight of him stole my breath.

"Jonquil, my mate," he said, his voice a velvet rumble that warmed me from within. His eyes traveled the length of my body, taking in the new nightgown with undisguised appreciation. "You look beautiful."

I smiled, hoping he couldn't see how my hands trembled. "Are the preparations for our journey tomorrow complete?"

The edges of my sitting room were crowded with trunks of clothing and boxes of books and medical supplies I'd purchased for the journey south. When I wasn't at the temple or immured in meetings with Mother and the imperial council, I'd been studying Wind-Walker healing texts. Once I arrived at the royal aerie, I planned to open a clinic and resume practicing as a mage-healer in addition to serving as ambassador.

Menelaus crossed to the sideboard, where a silver decanter and a large platter of savory mushroom pastries awaited. "Yes. The other Wind-Walkers will meet us in

the gardens at dawn.”

When the Wind-Walkers shed their excess mass and assumed human shape for their stay in the capital, the huge black stone statues that remained behind had been carted to the palace gardens.

Menelaus and the others would need those statues to transform back to their Dragon bodies.

He poured two goblets of rich red wine and offered one to me. “The journey to Kappadokia will take us three days. I’ve arranged comfortable accommodations along the way.”

I accepted the wine, letting my fingers brush against his. Even that small contact sent a thrill through me. “I can’t wait to leave the palace and start our new life together.”

“Nor can I. I only wish we could have our official mating ceremony right when we arrive at the royal aerie.”

“According to Mother, it’ll take the Chief of Protocol and the imperial council months to arrange and negotiate a ceremony that, and I quote, ‘symbolizes reconciliation, peace, and the promise of a unified future’,” I said dryly. “And that’s before they ask the Wind-Walkers for their input.”

Getting married had definitely been easier when I was just Mage-Healer Isabeau in Bernswick.

Baldwin and I had gone to the village mayor’s home to register our union in her official record book. Then we’d walked to the village’s small Temple of the Twelve Gods, exchanged our vows in front of witnesses, and received the nuptial blessings of the Divine Mother and of Vesta, goddess of home and hearth.

“I’ll leave the details to Lady Aeolia,” Menelaus said. “You’re already my mate. As long as you’re with me, I don’t care about ceremonies and witnesses and all that.”

The moment had come. I took a fortifying sip of wine, then set my goblet aside. I crossed the room and stood before him. As always, I felt the heat radiating from his body.

“Menelaus,” I began, my voice steadier than I’d expected. “I had my final session with Priestess Serafina today. She assures me I’m cured. The rituals have cleansed the last of Beltrán’s influence from my aura.”

Menelaus’ expression remained carefully neutral, though I could see hope kindling in his eyes. “That’s wonderful news.”

I took a deep breath and met his burning golden gaze. “I’m ready, my love. Tonight, I want to be with you. Completely.”

His breath caught. “Are you certain? There’s no rush—”

“I’ve waited twenty years to be in your bed again,” I said, surprising myself with the firmness in my voice. “I don’t want to wait any longer.”

He stood slowly, as if afraid a sudden movement might shatter the moment. His hands settled gently on my waist. “The last thing I want is to hurt—”

“You won’t,” I assured him, reaching up to cup his face. His smooth skin burned against my fingers. “The healers have helped me understand my triggers. I know what to avoid. And more importantly, I know what I want.”

“And what is that, my love?” His voice had dropped to a husky whisper.

“You,” I said simply. “ All of you. I want to reclaim what time and the Duke de Norhas stole from us.”

Menelaus’ eyes darkened with desire, but I could still see concern warring with his need. “At the first sign of discomfort, you will—”

“I’ll tell you. But I won’t break, Menelaus. I’m stronger than what Beltrán did to me.” I rose onto my tiptoes, bringing my lips a breath away from his. “I need this. I need to feel you against me, inside me. I need to know that part of me is still whole.”

A shudder passed through his powerful frame. “By the Unconquered Sun, Jonquil.”

“Let me show you,” I whispered, closing the distance between us.

Our lips met in a kiss that started tender but swiftly ignited into something more desperate, more primal. Two decades of separation, seven weeks of careful restraint—all of it combusted in an instant. His arms tightened around me, lifting me slightly off my feet as my fingers tangled in his fiery mane of hair, and our lips and tongues tangled with frantic need.

I clung to Menelaus, pulling him closer, his heat all around me as I pressed myself against his hard body. His desire for me was already straining against the fine linen of his trousers. The hard heat of it sent a sharp thrill through me. I needed him now, right now, without the least delay.

So many nights of restraint made me bold and impatient.

When we finally broke apart, both breathing hard, I saw the same wonder in his eyes that I felt in my heart.

No panic, no flashbacks—only desire, pure as spring water.

“Take me to bed,” I ordered, surprising myself with my boldness. “Make me yours again.”

Menelaus’ eyes blazed with Dragon-fire. “With pleasure, my mate.”

As he lifted me into his arms, I felt a surge of triumph. Tonight would be my ultimate victory over Duke Beltrán’s ghost. Tonight, I would reclaim not just my body, but my future.

“I’ve dreamed of this moment,” he murmured against my lips. “Dreamed of you beneath my hands again.”

“So have I,” I whispered, fingers already working at the laces of his tunic. “Let me show you.”

His large hands cupped my face, tilting it up toward his. The intensity in his gaze sent liquid heat pooling between my thighs. Slowly, reverently, he brushed his thumbs across my cheekbones.

“First,” I said, my voice hoarse with desire, “I want to see all of you.”

I resumed tugging at his laces.

He smiled and helped me, pulling the garment over his head to reveal his massive torso. My breath caught, as it always did at the magnificent sight.

My hands moved to the waistband of his trousers, unbuttoning them with fingers that trembled not from fear but anticipation. As the fabric loosened, I pushed it down his powerful thighs. He stepped out of his breeches, revealing a distinct lack of undergarments.

My eyes widened at the sight of his erection—impossibly large, jutting proudly from a nest of coarse red hair. I had forgotten the sheer scale of him, how his Dragon nature manifested in his human form. A flutter of anxiety mingled with my desire. Could I still accommodate him after so long?

As if reading my thoughts, Menelaus brushed a reassuring hand along my cheek. “We’ll go slowly. I won’t hurt you.”

“I know,” I said, leaning into his touch.

“Your turn.” He reached for the thin straps of my nightgown, sliding them down my shoulders with exquisite care. The silk whispered against my skin as it fell, pooling at my feet in a puddle of plum fabric.

His sharp intake of breath told me everything I needed to know.

“Beautiful,” he breathed, his gaze roaming over my body.

I flushed under his scrutiny. Over the past few weeks, I’d made my peace with my body and the marks left by time and childbearing—silver stretch marks across my hips, the softness around my middle, breasts that were fuller but less firm than in my youth.

With surprising gentleness for one so large, Menelaus swept me into his arms. I gasped at the sensation of being lifted as though I weighed nothing. My naked body pressed against his heated skin. He carried me to our bed and laid me down with care on the brocade coverlet.

“Do you remember,” he said, voice dropping to a husky rumble as he stretched out beside me, “how I used to worship these beautiful breasts of yours?”

My nipples tightened in anticipation at his words. “Touch them . Please .”

He smiled, a predatory flash of teeth that reminded me of his true nature. “First, I want to look at them.” His eyes dropped to my chest. “They’re ripe and perfect.” His finger hovered just above my skin, not quite touching. His deep voice roughened as he continued, “I’m going to trace circles around these pink tips until they’re hard and aching for my mouth.”

A whimper escaped me at his words. He hadn’t even touched me yet, and already I felt myself growing wet with need.

“Then,” he continued, his breath hot against my skin, “I’m going to taste them. Slowly. I’ll start with gentle licks, getting them nice and wet and hard. Then I’ll suck them into my mouth, one at a time, rolling them with my tongue until you’re writhing beneath me.”

“Menelaus,” I gasped, arching toward him involuntarily.

“And when you’re desperate for more,” he growled, “I’ll graze them with my teeth—just enough to make you feel that edge between pleasure and pain.”

His finger finally touched me, tracing the contour of my breast exactly as promised. I shivered at the sensation, my body already responding to the combination of his touch and his words.

“Please,” I whispered. “Don’t make me wait.”

He lowered his head to my breast, his hot breath teasing my nipple for one agonizing moment before his mouth closed around it. The wet heat of his rasping tongue sent a jolt of pleasure straight to my core. He suckled gently at first, then with increasing pressure, drawing a moan from deep within me.

His hand caressed my other breast, thumb circling the nipple in time with the ministrations of his mouth. I tangled my fingers in his coarse red mane, holding his head against me as he lavished attention on the neglected breast.

True to his word, he grazed the sensitive peak with his teeth, the slight edge of pain heightening my pleasure until I was gasping beneath him. My hips rose of their own accord, seeking friction against the throbbing ache between my thighs.

“So responsive,” he murmured against my skin. “I’ve missed the sounds you make when you’re aroused, my mate.”

His mouth traveled lower, leaving a trail of kisses across my ribcage and down to my navel. His large hands spread my thighs with gentle insistence, exposing me completely to his heated gaze.

“Now,” he said, settling between my legs, “I’m going to taste the sweetest part of you.” His breath stirred the curls at the apex of my thighs. “I’m going to lick your beautiful cunt until you’re dripping with pleasure.”

I moaned at his crude words, feeling myself grow wetter in response.

“I’ll start with slow strokes,” he continued, his voice a sensual weapon that built my arousal to almost unbearable heights. “From your entrance to this perfect little bud.” He blew gently across my exposed pearl, making me jerk with sensation. “Then I’ll lick you, circling it with my tongue, flicking it, sucking it into my mouth.”

My hands clutched at the bedsheets, my body trembling with anticipation.

“And when you’re close to the edge,” he promised, “I’ll push my tongue deep inside you, fucking you with it, tasting you from the inside out while my thumb works your pearl. I’m going to make you climax again and again until you’re begging me to

stop.”

“Gods, Menelaus,” I panted, beyond shame or restraint. “Please, I need—”

His mouth descended on me without warning. The first broad stroke of his tongue drew a cry from my lips. He groaned against me, the vibration adding another layer to the overwhelming pleasure.

“You taste even better than I remembered,” he said, briefly lifting his head. “Like honey and salt and woman.”

He returned to his task with a Dragon’s single-mindedness, lapping at my folds with long, deliberate strokes that made my hips buck against his face. When he focused on my pearl, circling it with the tip of his tongue before sucking it gently between his lips, I nearly came undone.

My hands found his head, fingers tangling in his hair, as I held him against me. The sight of his powerful body between my thighs, his broad shoulders keeping me spread wide open for his pleasure, was almost as arousing as his skilled mouth.

“Yes,” I gasped. “There, just like that—don’t stop—”

He growled his approval, the sound reverberating through my most sensitive flesh. His pace increased, tongue flicking rapidly against my swollen bud while one thick finger teased at my entrance.

The climax took me by surprise, crashing over me with stunning intensity. I cried out his name as waves of pleasure radiated outward from my core, my inner walls pulsing with release.

Triumph surged through me alongside the pleasure—my body was again mine to

command, my pleasure again mine to claim.

Far from being deterred by my climax, Menelaus seemed encouraged. He maintained his attention on my sensitive flesh, easing the pressure slightly, but never stopping. Before I could fully come down from the first peak, he slid a finger inside me, curling it upward to stroke against that secret spot that made me see stars.

“Again,” he demanded against my flesh. “Give me another, my love.”

His tongue returned to my pearl, circling it relentlessly while his finger worked inside me. A second finger joined the first, stretching me deliciously, preparing me for what was to come. The dual stimulation quickly rebuilt my arousal, sending me spiraling toward another peak.

This time when I came, it was with a keening wail that echoed off the bedchamber walls. My back arched off the bed, thighs clamping around his head as pleasure more intense than the first washed through me.

Tears leaked from the corners of my eyes—not from pain or fear, but from the sheer overwhelming relief of reclaiming this part of me.

Menelaus lifted his head, his mouth and chin glistening with evidence of my pleasure. His golden eyes, when they met mine, blazed with satisfaction and barely restrained need.

“Beautiful,” he said, pressing a kiss to my inner thigh. “You’re so beautiful when you come apart for me.”

I lay trembling in the aftermath of pleasure, triumph surging through me like wildfire. No panic had overtaken me, no ghostly hands had torn the breath from my lungs.

The shadow of Beltrán de Norhas, which had haunted every intimate moment since my escape, had finally been banished. I felt tears of relief slide down my temples into my hair.

I was free.

“You’re crying,” Menelaus said, his voice laced with concern as he moved up my body to brush the tears away. “Did I hurt you? Did I trigger—”

“No,” I interrupted, smiling through my tears. “These are happy tears. I felt nothing but pleasure.” I reached up to trace the strong line of his jaw, marveling at the miracle of being able to touch him so freely, without fear. “I’m finally whole again.”

His smile was radiant, transforming his fierce features into something achingly beautiful. “I would have waited forever for you if needed.”

“I know.” I pushed myself up on my elbows, feeling a renewed surge of desire as my gaze traveled down his magnificent body. His erection hadn’t flagged in the slightest while he’d attended to my pleasure. If anything, it looked even larger and more imposing than before, flushed dark with need. The sight awakened a powerful hunger within me.

“I want more,” I said, my voice husky with renewed desire. “I want all of you.”

His nostrils flared, catching the scent of my arousal. “How do you want me?”

I considered for a moment. Serafina had warned me that certain positions—particularly those where I felt pinned or restrained—might trigger flashbacks to my captivity.

“Let me ride you,” I said, the boldness of my words sending a thrill through me. “Let

me take you and ravish you, my love.”

A slow smile transformed into the predatory grin of the Dragon he truly was. “With pleasure, my mate.”

He rolled onto his back in one fluid motion, his massive body stretching across the bed like Ishkur the Stormbringer. The firelight played across his dark skin, highlighting the scars that mapped his battles and the powerful muscles beneath. His erection stood proud against his abdomen, thick and intimidating.

I raised myself to my knees, glorying in my power. This was my choice, my desire. I was in control of our pleasure now and determined to make him see stars.

The head of his cock brushed against my entrance, hot and insistent as I straddled his hips, positioning myself above him. Menelaus’ hands settled on my waist, supporting but not directing.

“Take what you need,” he encouraged, his voice strained with the effort of remaining still. “However you want it.”

I reached between us to grasp his length, guiding him to my entrance. The first touch of his tip against my slick heat drew gasps from us both. I was wet from his previous attentions, but his size would still require patience and care.

His broad head stretched me immediately as I lowered myself onto him, a delicious burn that bordered on discomfort. I paused, breathing deeply, allowing my body to adjust.

“You feel incredible, my mate,” Menelaus groaned, his fingers tightening on my hips. “So tight, so hot.”

His words encouraged me. I sank down another inch, feeling him stretch me further. The initial discomfort gave way to pleasure as my body remembered him, welcomed him. I continued my slow descent, taking him deeper with each careful movement.

“Gods, yes,” I breathed, head falling back as he filled me. The sensation was overwhelming—stretched to my limit, fuller than I’d been in twenty years.

When I finally settled fully onto him, sheathing him to the hilt, I paused to catch my breath. He was deep inside me, touching places I’d forgotten existed.

“Jonquil,” he whispered, his voice reverent. His hands slid up from my hips to cup my breasts, thumbs brushing over my sensitive nipples. “My queen. My mate.”

I placed my hands on his broad chest, using it for balance as I lifted myself halfway off him, then sank back down, testing the sensation. Pleasure shot through me like lightning. I did it again, establishing a slow rhythm that had us both panting.

His groans of pleasure fueled my confidence. I increased my pace, finding angles that sent sparks of pleasure cascading through my body. Each time I sank down onto him, he met me with a gentle upward thrust, enhancing my pleasure.

The feeling of power was intoxicating. I set the pace, controlled the depth, decided how much pleasure to give and take. After Beltrán’s usurpation of my free will, this reclamation of my body and desire was nothing short of revolutionary.

Sweat beaded on my skin as I worked myself on his length. My thigh muscles burned with the effort, but I couldn’t stop. Each stroke brought me closer to another peak.

Menelaus’ hands roamed my body, caressing my breasts, my waist, my thighs. One hand slipped between us, his thumb finding my pearl with unerring accuracy. The added stimulation made me cry out, my rhythm faltering momentarily.

“That’s it,” he encouraged, circling the sensitive bud in time with my movements. “Take your pleasure. Show me how much you want this.”

I rode him harder, driven by his words and touch. The sight of him beneath me—his face contorted with pleasure I was giving him—filled me with fierce joy.

“I love you,” I gasped, the words torn from the deepest part of me.

His eyes blazed with emotion. “And I love you. My heart, my soul, my only mate.”

The pleasure was building again, coiling tight at my core. Menelaus sensed it, his thumb moving faster against my sensitive flesh, his thrusts becoming more deliberate.

“Let go,” he urged. “Come for me now, Jonquil. Let me feel you.”

This new climax claimed me with stunning intensity, radiating outward from where we were joined. I cried out his name, my inner walls clenching rhythmically around his thick length.

The sensation wrung a guttural groan from Menelaus, his hands gripping my hips as he fought to maintain control. His hips jerked upwards, burying himself to the hilt, and with another deep groan, he shuddered in release.

As the waves of our mutual pleasure receded, I collapsed onto his chest, panting against his skin. His arms wrapped around me, holding me close while his heartbeat thundered beneath my ear.

“You’re still hard,” I murmured.

He chuckled, the sound rumbling through his chest. “Has it been so long that you forgot that Wind-Walkers aren’t like puny human men?”

I giggled.

“We have all night, my love. And I intend to explore every way I can please you.”

I lifted my head to meet his gaze, overcome with love for this man who had waited so long and so patiently for me.

“Then let’s continue,” I said, feeling younger and more alive than I had in years. “I want to try everything. I want to make up for every moment we lost.”

His smile was both tender and wicked. “As my mate commands.”

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 2:08 am

For the next few hours, we explored each other with the hunger of lovers separated too long, yet with the care of those who knew the fragility of second chances.

Menelaus guided me into positions that kept me from feeling trapped—always ensuring I had space to move, to breathe, to maintain my sense of control. His consideration only heightened my desire for him.

Every touch, every kiss, every thrust was an act of joyous reclamation.

After I had caught my breath, Menelaus rolled us to our sides, facing each other.

He hooked my leg over his hip and entered me again with a slow, deliberate thrust that made me gasp. In this position, we could move together as equals, neither dominating the other.

His mouth found mine in a deep, languid kiss that contrasted with the increasingly urgent movement of our hips.

When that position left us both wanting more, he guided me onto my hands and knees.

I felt a moment of hesitation as the healers had warned this might trigger an attack, but I felt powerful rather than vulnerable. The angle allowed him to reach impossibly deep inside me, hitting places that made me cry out with pleasure.

His large hands caressed my back, my hips, my breasts as he moved within me, setting a pace that was neither too gentle nor too rough. I pushed back against him,

taking control of my pleasure even as he filled me so completely.

My next climax built more slowly but crashed over me with stunning intensity, leaving me trembling and gasping his name.

As my breathing steadied, a new desire formed within me. I turned to face him, guiding him until he was sitting on the edge of the bed. His erection still stood proud and unquenched, glistening with evidence of my arousal.

“There’s something else I want to try,” I said, my voice husky with desire as I kneeled between his thighs. “Something I couldn’t do before.”

Understanding dawned in his eyes, followed by a flash of concern. “You don’t have to—”

“I want to,” I insisted, running my hands up his powerful thighs. “I’ve dreamed of tasting you again.”

During my captivity, Duke Beltrán had used this act to humiliate and hurt me. But now, kneeling before Menelaus—my choice, my desire—I felt only anticipation.

Menelaus watched me with heated eyes as I wrapped my hand around his thickness. There was no fear, only a thrill of excitement as I leaned forward to taste him.

The first touch of my tongue against him drew a sharp intake of breath. I looked up, meeting his gaze as I traced the prominent vein along the underside of his shaft. The taste was familiar yet new—salt and musk and something uniquely him. I explored him slowly, relearning what pleased him most.

When I took the broad head into my mouth, Menelaus groaned, his fingers tangling gently in my hair. “Gods, Jonquil,” he rasped. “Your mouth... it’s perfect.”

Encouraged by his response, I took him deeper, using my hand to stroke what wouldn't fit in my mouth. I fell into a rhythm, hollowing my cheeks as I sucked him, swirling my tongue around the sensitive head when I pulled back.

Menelaus was vocal in his pleasure, praising me with broken words and guttural sounds that sent thrills of satisfaction through me. This was power of a different sort—bringing my love to the edge of his control with nothing but my mouth and hands.

“Enough,” he growled eventually, gently pulling me off him. “Any more and this will end too soon.”

He stood, bringing me to my feet with him. His kiss was fierce, possessive, as if he could taste his own need on my lips. When he lifted me, I instinctively wrapped my legs around his waist.

“I want to fuck you against the wall,” he said, his crude words sending a fresh surge of heat between my thighs. “Would that be all right?”

I nodded eagerly. “Yes. Please.”

He carried me across the chamber, his erection pressing insistently against my core with each step. When my back met the cool stone wall, I shivered with anticipation. Menelaus supported my weight with one arm while positioning himself with the other.

The first thrust drove him deep inside me, making us both cry out. The angle was exquisite, allowing him to penetrate me fully while my weight drove me down onto him.

“Hold on to me,” he commanded, and I locked my arms around his neck as he

moved.

Gone was the careful restraint he'd shown earlier. Now he took me with all the primal force of his Dragon nature, each thrust driving the breath from my lungs.

Six weeks ago, this raw, animalistic coupling would have sent me into a panic attack. Now, instead, it liberated me. Each powerful thrust of Menelaus' hips reclaimed another piece of what I'd thought I'd lost forever.

"You feel so good," Menelaus growled against my neck, his breath hot on my skin. "So tight around me. So perfect."

I could only respond with incoherent sounds of pleasure as he shifted his angle, hitting that perfect spot inside me with unerring accuracy. My nails dug into his shoulders, but they left no marks on his smooth brown skin.

Dragon hide, even in human shape, could resist even the cut of a whip.

"Mine," he rumbled. "My mate. My love."

"Yours," I agreed breathlessly. "Always yours."

"Come with me," he urged, his rhythm faltering as he neared his own release. "Together, Jonquil. Let me feel you."

My orgasm hit me like a tidal wave. I cried out his name as my inner walls clamped down around him, drawing his own climax from him with pulsing contractions. Menelaus roared—a sound more Dragon than human—as he emptied himself deep inside me, his powerful body shuddering against mine.

For long moments, we remained joined, panting against each other's skin as the

aftershocks of pleasure rippled through us. Eventually, Menelaus carried me back to the bed, still inside me, unwilling to break our connection just yet. He settled us carefully onto the rumpled sheets, cradling me against his chest.

Only when our breathing had steadied did he finally slip from my body, drawing a small whimper of protest from me at the loss. He gathered me close, his large hand stroking my back in soothing circles.

I laughed softly, feeling weightless with satisfaction. “That was perfect.” I pressed a kiss to his hot chest, directly over his heart. “I feel... whole again.”

I felt rather than saw his smile as he pressed his lips to the top of my head. “You never ceased to be whole, my love. You were merely healing. Now we should sleep.” Menelaus pulled the covers over our cooling bodies. “Tomorrow’s flight will be long.”

“Mmm,” I agreed, already drifting toward sleep, pleasantly exhausted in every muscle. “Kappadokia awaits.”

“And beyond that, the rest of our lives.” His arm tightened around me protectively. “No more separations. No more years lost.”

As sleep claimed me, I felt lighter than I had in years. The healing rituals had cleansed my mind, but this night—this communion of bodies and souls—had cleansed my spirit. Duke Beltrán’s malevolent shadow was finally banished from my life.

Tomorrow we would journey to Menelaus’ kingdom. I would meet his people, learn their ways, build a new life alongside my Dragon king. But tonight, in the safety of his arms, I had already come home.

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 2:08 am

Royal Aerie of Hierapolis Dragon Kingdom of Kappadokia Six months later

I smoothed my hands over the heavy silk of my wedding gown, its fabric a deep, midnight black embroidered with threads of crimson that caught the light with every movement.

The dressmakers had labored for weeks, creating a garment that honored both human traditions and those of the Wind-Walkers. The high collar, reminiscent of classic Dominion fashion, gave way to flowing sleeves slashed to reveal crimson silk beneath, echoing the wing patterns of Menelaus' Wind-Walker form, with his black wings edged in brilliant scarlet.

Mother, who stood next to me waiting to escort me for the next part of the wedding ceremony, smiled approvingly.

“When you first proposed a black gown rather than the traditional Divine Mother’s green, I doubted you, Jonquil,” she said, her tone measured but her expressive hazel eyes—so like my own—twinkling. “But you were right to choose your husband’s colors. It makes a bold statement.”

I returned her smile. I’d argued and negotiated with her and Lady Liliane, the Chief of Protocol, through the spring and summer about every detail of this landmark wedding. I’d compromised on many items, but not this one.

In the end, our wedding ceremony incorporated both human and Wind-Walker traditions.

It had begun a short time ago with a modified version of the traditional Wind-Walker nuptial flight.

Menelaus, in his Wind-Walker form, had carried me on his back as we flew, circling the royal aerie three times. The first circuit symbolized strength, the second circuit protection, and the final circuit eternal vigilance.

After landing gracefully in the canyon amphitheater's center, Menelaus had withdrawn to change into human shape and his wedding attire.

Meanwhile, Lady Aeolia, in her magnificent Wind-Walker shape, and the Chief Imperial Councilor, Duchess Violetta of Monteleno, clad in full imperial court finery, jointly delivered a welcoming address that emphasized reconciliation between the human and Wind-Walker realms, peace, and the promise of a unified and prosperous future.

I stood at the entrance of Menelaus' cave, my heart brimming with joy as I listened to the speeches and waited for my cue.

The pale stone walls of the canyon amphitheater rose around me, illuminated by the golden light of the afternoon sun.

Their surfaces were dotted with countless cave entrances where Wind-Walkers made their homes. Each opening was hung with vibrantly dyed silken banners that fluttered in the gentle breeze. Wind-Walkers perched on wide ledges carved into the amphitheater walls, their massive wings tucked tight against their sides, their feathered forms a brilliant counterpoint to the pale stone.

Beyond the open space that served as the Wind-Walker's gathering place, lush vegetation flourished—an explosion of green that wound like a verdant river between the pale stone cliffs. The contrast between the stark, weathered tufa and the abundant life mirrored the journey Menelaus and I had traveled—from desolation to this

moment of flowering joy.

The human guests were seated in chairs and on long, padded benches on the canyon amphitheater floor. Nearly the entire imperial court was in attendance, having sailed down the coast earlier this week in what had been nicknamed “The Grand Wedding Fleet.”

They’d put in at Baleares briefly to pick up Duke Ramón and Duchess Sibilla.

In gratitude for all they’d done for me and Jacinthe when we first arrived at their ducal palace, I’d insisted on awarding the Espolan couple the coveted position of official wedding attendants.

“...and so, on this historic day, let the vows spoken and promises forged beneath these skies forever bind our two realms in harmony and peace, as we celebrate a love that heals the wounds of the past and lights the path to a brighter future,” Duchess Violetta said in her clear, trained voice, concluding the Welcoming Address.

As a human choir burst into a joyful hymn to Vesta, Mother took my arm and escorted me to the dais in the center of the canyon amphitheater. There, Lady Aeolia (still in Wind-Walker form), Duke Ramón, and Duchess Sibilla waited for us.

Mother kissed my cheek and withdrew. My gaze followed her as she left the dais and took her place next to Papa.

He looked frail and hunched in his throne-like chair at the front at the front of the crowd of guests gathered to witness my historic union with Menelaus. Mother sat next to him on an equally carved and gilded chair.

During a brief period of lucidity after his arrival, Papa had met with Menelaus and me, and given his ceremonial blessing for the match. Papa had also been introduced to Talisa, Mira, and Juno when they’d discreetly visited the palace during the

academy's spring break.

My daughters sat on chairs next to Papa's throne. They'd accepted the news of my marriage to Menelaus with varying degrees of enthusiasm, but they were here, and that was what mattered.

Jacinthe, who'd been the most supportive, caught my eye and gave me a broad smile and an encouraging nod.

With her stood her four soul-bound companions. The young Wind-Walker Boreas, his expression solemn for once, had his arm draped around her shoulders. Beside them stood Tama of the Sea People, the Dark Fae prince Gwydion, and Lord Ilhan. It was an unlikely gathering that represented the very unity Menelaus and I hoped to foster.

My heart leaped when Menelaus strode into view a moment later.

His powerful human form was now draped in flowing robes of imperial blue trimmed with gold braid. His fiery red hair blazed in the sunlight, worn loose and flowing past his shoulders, and the golden crown of Kappadokia rested upon his brow.

I wanted to savor each moment, to imprint every detail of this day upon my memory—the play of light on stone, the distant calls of birds circling high above, the sweet scent of flowers, the warm sunlight against my skin. And most of all, the expression on Menelaus' face as he drew nearer—fierce joy and tender love mingled in equal measure.

When at last he reached us, Menelaus leaped up on the dais, then turned and extended his hands to me. His palms burned against mine, his grip firm.

“At last,” he whispered, his voice so low that only I could hear.

“At last,” I echoed, my voice thick with emotion.

Lady Aeolia curled her great feathered form around the dais as his chief witness.

Around us, the assembled wedding guests fell silent.

“We gather today beneath the Unconquered Sun,” Aeolia intoned in Capitolan, her voice carrying easily through the amphitheater, “to witness the union of two souls, two bloodlines, two realms.”

She then repeated herself in the whistling Wind-Walker language.

Menelaus faced me fully, his massive frame seeming to block out the rest of the world.

His golden eyes, fierce and tender all at once, held mine as his thumbs stroked the backs of my hands in a gesture so achingly familiar that my throat tightened with emotion.

For an instant, we were young again, discovering each other in the hidden gardens of the imperial palace, our love new and dangerous and utterly irresistible.

When Aeolia finished speaking, Duke Ramón and Duchess Sibilla stepped forward. Each of them held one of the elaborate floral wedding garlands traditionally used in human weddings.

The blossoms had been gathered from the imperial gardens and preserved with a spell. The garland makers had interspersed the flowers with colorful Dragon feathers contributed by each of the major Kappadokian aeries to symbolize the Divine Mother’s love combined with the Wind-Walkers’ commitment to shelter and protect their mate.

Menelaus accepted a garland from Duke Ramón and placed it around my neck.

His deep voice broke the silence, resonant in the natural acoustics of the canyon.

“I, Menelaus, King of the Wind-Walkers in Kappadokia, take you, Jonquil di Severieri, into my heart, my life, and my soul. For centuries, the flames of war have divided our realms, but today, I commit myself not only to you, my beloved mate and queen, but to the peace our union represents.”

Our announcement of our union in late spring had been met with controversy. Some among his people doubted the wisdom of their king taking a human mate. Many of my people still feared the Dragons who had been their enemies for generations.

Yet here we stood, determined to forge a fresh path.

“Before our peoples and beneath the Unconquered Sun, I vow to love you fiercely, deeply, and endlessly, to shelter you beneath my wings, and to uplift you upon the strength of my devotion. I swear to embrace your people as my own, to guard their lives and dignity as fiercely as those of the Dragons, and to strive unceasingly for harmony between our realms.”

His massive hands tightened around mine, as if he could infuse his words with physical strength. My eyes stung with unshed tears.

“Together, let us lead our peoples by example, teaching them to look beyond fear and prejudice and to embrace each other as one united aerie. Jonquil, with these words, I pledge my strength to your protection, my wisdom to our united future, and my heart to your happiness. Let this moment mark the dawn of peace, unity, and lasting love between us, between Wind-Walkers and humans, forevermore.”

I thought of the centuries of conflict, of mistrust, of blood spilled on both sides. I remembered of the laws that had forbidden our love, the prejudices that had torn us

apart. And I thought of Papa, who had been so blinded by tradition and fear that he had nearly murdered his own daughter and grandchild rather than accept a Wind-Walker into his family.

Finally, I thought of my own wounds—the pain of separation, the years of living a lie, the constant fear of discovery that had shadowed my days as Isabeau of Bernswick.

My vision blurred and hot tears escaped my eyes, tracking down my cheek. Menelaus released my hands to brush the wetness away with his thumbs, the gesture so tender that it threatened to undo my careful composure entirely. His touch lingered on my face before he took my hands again.

I turned my head and met Jacinthe's eyes. They, too, shone with tears, and I guessed she was thinking of her own journey—the painful discovery of her true heritage, the death curse she had barely survived, the bonds of love she had forged across racial divides.

In so many ways, she was living proof that love could transcend the boundaries our peoples had established.

“May this bond between Wind-Walkers and humans, forged in love, be a beacon of hope, peace, and reconciliation.”

His words painted a vision of the future I wanted to see: human mages studying alongside Wind-Walkers, trading knowledge and customs; diplomatic marriages like our own creating bonds between families; ancient hatreds giving way to new understandings.

“From this day forth, you shall never stand alone,” Menelaus continued, his voice dropping to a more intimate tone, meant for me rather than the assembled witnesses, “for you are the mate of my heart and the queen of my people.”

The depth of emotion in his eyes as he spoke these last words nearly undid me.

Now, with his vows complete, Menelaus lifted my hands to his lips and pressed a kiss against my knuckles—a gesture at once courtly and deeply intimate.

A chorus of approving whistles from the Wind-Walkers assembled on the ledges all around us split the air, echoing from the canyon walls.

Now it was my turn to speak my vows.

Duchess Sibilla handed me a garland of flowers and feathers. I went up on tiptoes and placed it around Menelaus' neck.

“I, Jonquil di Severieri, Princess-Royal of the Imperial Dominion of Human Lands, stand before you, King Menelaus, and before all who gather here, to speak these vows from my heart. For too many years, fear and misunderstanding have shadowed our peoples, dividing our lands and hearts alike. Today, I come to you freely and with boundless hope, pledging not only myself, but the promise of peace and unity in our united realms.”

It wouldn't be easy. Centuries of conflict and prejudice couldn't be undone in a single generation. But in our daughter and her companions, I saw proof that change was possible. That love could create bridges where none had existed before.

“I vow to cherish and honor you, my dominus-consort, to walk beside you in both sunlit days and darkest storms. As your wife and queen, I promise to respect and protect the ways of your people as dearly as my own, to learn your customs with reverence, and to bridge the distance between our worlds with empathy, understanding, and love.”

I'd already begun that learning process. In the months since arriving in Hierapolis, I'd been studying Wind-Walker history and traditions, the complex etiquette of the

aeries, the significance of gift-giving in their culture, and the rituals that marked the changing seasons. I'd listened to the stories of Wind-Walker elders, had attended their council meetings, and had observed their methods of conflict resolution, so different from the law courts of the Human Dominion.

“In binding our lives and our realms together, may we usher in a new age of harmony, healing ancient wounds and guiding both Dragons and humans toward trust, friendship, and mutual respect. Menelaus, from this moment onward, your joys shall be my joys, your sorrows my sorrows, and your dreams my dreams. Together, let us forge our future, side by side, heart to heart.”

As I finished speaking, I released Menelaus' hands and reached up to cradle his face between my palms.

As always, his skin was hot beneath my fingers. His golden eyes, filled with an emotion too complex for simple words, locked with mine. For a moment, we were alone in the crowded amphitheater, wrapped in a private world of shared memories and promises.

Then, with a tenderness that belied his massive strength, Menelaus covered my hands with his own, pressing them more firmly against his face before slowly lowering them. Then we prepared for the next part of the ceremony.

Together, Duke Ramón and Duchess Sibilla lifted a huge, double-handled golden bowl where it stood at the back of the dais, and brought it over to us.

They set it in front of Menelaus. He spread his right hand over the mouth of the bowl and invoked Fire magic.

A flame, scented with incense, sprang to life inside the bowl.

Then he lifted the bowl and presented it to me. “My mate, take the gift of my fire. Let

it warm you and protect you always. I entrust it to you as I entrust my heart into your safekeeping.”

I took one handle as he kept hold of the other, and together we held the burning bowl between us. “My mate,” I replied. “I cherish the gift of your fire and your heart. I will honor both until the end of my days.”

“The vows have been spoken,” Lady Aeolia intoned, her voice carrying to every corner of the amphitheater. “And their fires mingled. What begins here today—this union of Dragon and human, of king and princess, of man and woman—carries the weight of history and the hope of the future.

“With the blessing of the Unconquered Sun, I declare this mating valid and binding. May your lives together be long, your love be enduring, and your shared path bring prosperity to both your realms.”

The choir started singing another hymn, but were drowned out by a chorus of congratulations as Wind-Walkers whistled and screeched and humans applauded and shouted.

Menelaus drew me close and bent his head to me. His lips met mine with exquisite gentleness, a brief, tender press that respected the public nature of the moment while promising more to come.

When he drew back, his eyes held a heat that made my cheeks flush and my breath catch.

“My queen,” he breathed, the two simple words carrying the weight of dreams fulfilled. “My mate.”

“My king,” I replied. “My husband.”

Not lover, not the secret paramour of my youth, but husband . Mine, openly and without shame, before all our peoples.

Around us, the celebration began in earnest, the formality of the ceremony giving way to the joy of the occasion. Wind-Walkers took to the air, performing aerial acrobatics that left swooping shadows against the canyon walls. Musicians struck up traditional songs from both cultures, the melodies weaving together in unexpected harmony.

I stood in the center of it all, my hand firmly clasped in Menelaus', feeling the last pieces of my long-fractured heart finally knit themselves whole.

* * *

Thanks for reading Jonquil and Menelaus' story! I'm currently working on a spin-off series that follows Talisa's adventures at the Imperial Academy for the Magical Arts.