







# Tainted Beauty (All That Glitters)

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**Category:** YA&Teen

**Description:** A dragon's curse, a deadly touch, a maiden tainted by beauty... can they break the curse—or will it consume them?

Aurelius has lost everything. Desperate to regain his worth, he accepts a gift from a dragon, but it comes at a terrible price. Now, the beast within him is out of his control—and it's too late to undo the damage he's caused.

Then he meets her.

The most enchanting maiden he's ever seen.

Melora is trapped in a life she never wanted, sold off to the highest bidder to pay her father's debts. But, when his greed takes things too far, she sacrifices herself to save her sister from a monstrous dragon.

Swept away to the dragon's gilded domain, Melora finds Aurelius. He is arrogant, proud, and infuriatingly persistent—but there's a side to him that calls to her, that makes her feel valued in a way she's never known before.

Captive in this glittering world, Melora is surrounded by secrets that threaten to destroy them. Why won't he touch her? What lies behind the forbidden door?

As the days pass, their time is running out. Will they break the curse before it's too late, or will the glint of gold taint everything?

Tainted Beauty is a reimagining of "Beauty and the Beast" intertwined with "King Midas." Fly away with a dragon shifter in this thrilling and swoony fairytale romance, part of the All That Glitters series—a collection of twelve books brimming with Tales of Treasure and True Love. Each book is written by a different author and can be enjoyed in any order, so pick a new favorite and discover that not all that glitters is gold.

**Total Pages (Source):** 29

## CHAPTER ONE

Gone! Everything was gone.

Aurelius glanced at his mother's drawn face. Would she ever find happiness again? It was now his responsibility to care for her—and already he was failing.

He clutched the offending missive between trembling fingers, still not quite believing what he was seeing. But the king's signature and seal glared up at him, crisp and clear.

His worst fears had come to pass: not only had he lost all of their finances, but now his title—his very identity—was being stripped from him.

Aurelius cast one last longing look at Chrysion Hall—its strong white Corinthian pillars standing proudly, bearing the weight of both the majestic building and the memories of his childhood. The pristine gardens mocked him with their grandeur as he was forced into the waiting carriage with his mother. One poor investment, combined with his father's debts and King Iver's disdain, had divested him of everything.

Lord Aurelius of Sovia was no more.

His gut clenched as the coach ambled down the road, past his beautiful ancestral land and toward the farthest reaches of the Bannwood Forest—isolated from all civilization.

The world he knew was crashing down around him, crumbling to bits like the dust billowing up past the creaking wheels, as worthless as the name he once bore.

Mama reached out, clasping his hand in hers. “We’ll get through this, Aurie.” Her lips pressed together in determined optimism; the blue eyes he’d inherited from her shone against smooth ebony skin, hiding the pain she must be feeling.

As usual, she refused to see him for the failure he knew he was. Aurelius’s thoughts turned bitter. His father had known all along. Now, mere months after that cantankerous man’s passing, the weight of his failures surrounded his widow and son—embodied by the king’s scowling men riding alongside the carriage sent to ensure Aurie’s exile, as harsh and indelible as the stain on his reputation and his lost title.

After arriving with the life-altering missive, the king’s men had allowed them only a few short hours to pack their belongings and leave. Mama had been near tears at the mandate.

Aurelius wrapped her in his comforting embrace. “We’ll get through this, Mama. Take what is most important. The rest of it is just stuff.”

She sniffed. “I know, I’m probably being silly and sentimental.”

“No. This wouldn’t be easy for anyone, Mama.” He glared over her head at the king’s men, resentment simmering beneath his calm. Why hadn’t they allowed more time? Pleading had done little good. He shouldn’t have expected any better from the king.

And then, as if stealing their dignity wasn’t enough, the audacious men had ordered the servants to leave as well.

That was where Aurelius drew the line.

“You have no say over the employment of my servants.”

His gaze found Mrs. Calla, who clutched her daughter protectively. The woman had baked bread and simmered stews for him since he was a boy, and young Lyra recently began serving Mama.

“Gather your things,” he said gently. “You’re welcome to join me and Mama. We’ll still need a cook and a lady’s maid. And tell Galen I’m still in desperate need of a steward.”

Now, Aurie tried to ignore their unwanted escort as Galen drove the carriage away from the only home he had ever known. Once certain they could no longer turn back, the men had ridden off and left the outcasts to their bleak future.

At least his father was no longer around to gloat.

After a long and uncomfortable drive, they pulled in front of a small manor. More of a cottage really, Aurie thought, far smaller than the home they had left behind. Though she tried to conceal it, he saw Mama’s discouragement. Her strained smile resembled a grimace as they looked at the manor. “Well, sitting around won’t accomplish anything. Let’s go see how Everrose looks after all these years.”

While he appreciated her attempt at optimism, her words weren’t enough to lift his spirits as he stepped down from the carriage. Nearby, Galen was busy unpacking their meager belongings—there were no other servants around to help. He held his arm out to Mama, a small gesture of dignity in a place that offered none. He was supposed to protect her from a life like this, not be the cause of it.

It hadn’t helped his cause that he’d opposed King Iver at every turn. The monarch likely rejoiced at the excuse to rid himself of the young upstart lord who loudly decried the laws that burdened the people with unreasonable taxes. King Iver, like

Aurelius's father, only ever saw gold—people were a means to an end. It would be ridiculous for Aurelius to imagine receiving the king's favor. Or even wanting it.

Yet, for all his ideals, Aurie now found himself penniless and homeless—well, almost homeless.

Thankfully, Mama owned Everrose Manor. He stared at the once-handsome estate. Gray stone walls peeked through strangling ivy. Weathered shutters hung beside the tall arched windows, angled like broken wings.

Mama patted his arm. “Come, my dear, it's getting late. Let's go inside.”

Forest shadows closed around them, weaving a cramped network of isolation. They were so close to the Valkovian border here that the land was nearly lost to the Mistral Mountains, their forced sanctuary. While thankful for shelter, he couldn't shake the feeling that any value he'd once held was forever lost to his past. Society had no purpose for an ex-lord.

He nodded numbly and sighed. “Of course.”

A wolf howled in the distance. It wasn't safe out here.

Together, they toured the manor that had sat in disrepair for decades. Luxury had surrounded Aurelius his entire life. And now he was reduced to this? Out-of-date furnishings with a layer of dust covering every surface. Repairs would almost certainly cost more than what little money he had left to his name. How could he even begin to afford to replace the once elegant furniture and to repaper the rooms with the high vaulted ceilings? They would have to repair what they could on their own. He consoled himself with the knowledge that no one was around to witness the levels of depravity to which they had sunk.

However, one room gave him pause—his father's gallery.

Aurie had managed to save a few of his favorite paintings from Chrysion Hall—there hadn't been time for much more. He had nearly forgotten about the art collection here at Everrose, but it had evidently been well preserved in their absence. Curious, he tugged down the fabric draped over one of the paintings to reveal a familiar image of a boy gazing longingly at a rose garden—his painting. His heart stuttered. What is this doing here? He'd given it to Mama years ago, but Papa always said his skills were mediocre at best.

When the family visited this cottage in his childhood, Papa had built the gallery to show all the neighbors their wealth and status. But as time passed, the family had stopped coming to Everrose. His father came to hate “that tiny cottage on the edge of nothing.”

Aurie drew a long breath and turned from the painting, filled with fresh determination. He couldn't wallow in self-pity any longer. Mama needed him. And something about the place sparked hope that, perhaps, he could make a home here. “I'm going to fix this, Mama.”

They would do more than survive—he would rectify things. He would build a home and a life that would make Mama proud.

While Aurie, his mother, and the servants spent the next several weeks working to restore Everrose Manor to its former glory—or at least to a tolerable level of comfort—Aurie remained confident that with enough determination and a few tasteful furnishings, they could somehow reclaim the wealth and happiness they once knew. Then he would prove to King Iver and his father just how wrong they had been—that he was worthy and valuable, a man to be respected. Not one to be tossed aside.



Aurie tapped his quill upon the desk in his office, puzzling over the problem for the hundredth time. Investments obviously hadn't been the answer. One poor investment had landed him in this situation in the first place, but perhaps he had been looking in all the wrong places. His eyes scanned the room, hoping for some kind of inspiration. If only he could magically make all his problems disappear...

That's it! Magic! Why hadn't he considered it before? Magic could solve many problems. Why couldn't it help him now? He was no mage, but surely, he could find someone or something to help.

He pressed his lips together as his quill tapped all the faster. Yes, there had to be a magical way to solve his problems—except that mages who sold their services were notorious for misrepresenting themselves. How could he ensure that he'd found a reputable one? Not just any mage would know how to help restore him to his wealth and power—he would need to find a high-level mage—an enchanter.

As he pondered this conundrum, his eyes landed on a book of dragons tucked away on his shelf. Unless... A smile spread across his face. Who better to ask for power and wealth than the creature who valued such things? Better yet, they were old enough to understand the most powerful of magic.

Yes! Aurie jumped to his feet. His circumstances were about to change for the better.

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Plain gray stones turned to crystal as he drew closer to the cave. They sparkled red and gold in the radiance of the setting sun behind him. As he approached the entrance, a spectacular prism of light glowed, cascading rainbows all around the cave's opening—confirming that he was in the right place.

Months had passed since he concocted his plan. His mother had fretted over his

obsession—watching as he poured over research day and night, then disappeared for weeks at a time to search. He had been all through the Mistral Mountains on his quest—and it was finally— finally paying off.

Aurie had found an elusive dragon's lair.

Dragons were famous for adorning their homes with layers of magic and beauty to house their hordes, but even the grandest stories and tales had not prepared him for the wondrous cavern before him.

The promise of gold and untold riches within taunted him. What he'd do to claim some treasure for himself! A single handful of the treasure from the stories would go a long way toward restoring his wealth. However, he was wise enough to heed the warnings in those stories. Dragons cursed or killed unwanted trespassers. Besides, he would gain far more by seeking the dragon's help rather than incurring its wrath.

Donning his courage like a well-worn cloak, Aurie took a deep breath, clapped three times as forcefully as he could—as was the tradition—and declared, "Greetings, oh Great One. I am L—Aurelius of Sovia." He caught himself just in time—he needed to remember that his title was gone, and accidentally mentioning it would do more harm than good. "I've come seeking your great wisdom."

He then pulled his sword from its scabbard and stabbed it into the ground and knelt. Keeping his hands upon the hilt, he bowed his head. One must never appear to be a threat to a dragon unless one wished to lose one's life. Complete submissiveness was key.

The minutes stretched out, time passing interminably as he waited. The sun sank below the ridges of the mountains, and still Aurie stayed. His legs trembled from the strain of kneeling. He wondered if he ought to repeat himself. Had he been loud enough? Perhaps the dragon wasn't even at home. Yet he knew the possibly deadly

consequences that awaited impatient men, so he continued to wait, his head lowered. If it seemed the dragon either wouldn't engage in conversation or wasn't present, he'd slowly back away, keeping his head down and sword lowered.

Just when he thought his legs might give way, a deep rumble shook the ground, followed by a gruff, rasping voice booming inside of his head. What do you want, human?

Aurie winced and glanced furtively about, keeping his head down. He knew dragons communicated differently, but experiencing it firsthand was quite unexpected.

A growling chuckle rang through his mind. You may rise, human, and look upon me.

As he lifted his head, he saw a glint of red, then all at once, the large, magnificent form of a dragon stood before him. Towering over him, as immense as two bears standing one on top of the other. His ruby red scales shimmered as if creating a light all their own. The dragon tilted his massive head as he studied Aurelius, his expression unreadable.

Why have you come?

Aurie's insides trembled at the terrifying creature before him. Confronting a dragon suddenly felt like a terrible idea, and part of him began calculating a hasty exit. When he'd first concocted this senseless plan, he'd reasoned that things could not be any worse—but standing before the dragon now, he realized they could indeed get worse. This powerful creature was just as likely to hurt him as to help him. Indeed, why would he help a lowly human like himself?

His mother's face flashed in his mind. After coming all this way, he had to try. It was the least he could do. She deserved so much more than he had to give. Before he could second-guess himself, he took a deep breath and opened his mouth, hoping for

the appropriate words. “Oh, great and powerful dragon, I come seeking a solution only you can find.” It was always best to stroke a dragon’s ego while in its presence. “Everything—my money, my home, my land—even my title—has been stripped from me.”

And you wish for me to bring it back. The dragon’s intense look was disdainful. I don’t deal with human politics. His wings fluttered restlessly, and he huffed, creating a warm wind that tossed around Aurelius’ jerkin and hair.

Aurie’s fingers turned white as he clutched the hilt of his sword with all his might. “I—I no—I learned of the legendary treasures and power of the dragons and?—”

A booming growl filled his head, cutting his words short. Aurie’s eyes squeezed closed, and he gritted his teeth together at the dragon’s growing agitation. Have you come to steal my treasure?!

What had he been thinking? Why had he ever mentioned the treasure? He shook his head vigorously and rushed to explain, desperate to fix the muddle he was making of this. “No-no! Of course not. I would never suggest such a thing!” Sweat dampened his brow. “Knowing your brilliant success with gaining treasure, I seek your wisdom on how I might also gain such wealth. No one could possibly know better than your esteemed self.” With his head down, he squeezed his eyes shut, his entire body tensing with fear as he prayed to the Great Creator not to let him die here. He wanted a chance to redeem himself, to prove his worth, but this plan had been foolhardy from the beginning. The dragon was sure to strike him down now. He deserved no less.

The blow he expected never came. Instead, the air became still. He opened his eyes. The dragon had folded his wings and stared at him critically.

You think treasure and wealth will solve your problems?

“We humans put a lot of stock in gold.” Aurie couldn’t look up at the dragon as he spoke. “If I had the finances, I could take proper care of my mother and perhaps even convince King Iver to give me back my land and title. Without it, I am nothing.”

The dragon’s face was much too close, peering at him with his large reptilian eyes. Is the place you currently live not an acceptable home? Your mother cannot be happy in reduced circumstances? Can you not raise funds of your own? Do honest work you can be proud of?

Aurie couldn’t hide his grimace as his thoughts turned to the small manor he and his mother now resided in. “It is hardly what we are accustomed to. Besides, I cannot bear the thought of my land and title going to some unknown upstart.” The vehemence of his words shocked even him. He hadn’t realized he held such resentment toward whoever took his place.

The dragon contemplated him for several long moments, his hot breath seeming to singe Aurie’s hair.

Should he step back? No, he mustn’t falter.

What will you give me? The voice booming inside his head startled him. He had been preparing for the worst. This near consent was quite shocking.

What could he offer a dragon? His mind raced, frantic to come up with something—but he had nothing of value left. Why hadn’t he thought of this before? Of course the dragon wouldn’t give him something for nothing! He had been so consumed with finding this place, so sure it was the answer, that he had been reckless.

The dragon grew impatient with his floundering. Aurelius winced, sure a blow was coming.

What is it worth to you? This status and wealth and revenge? Are there not more important things in life?

Aurie blinked at the unexpected question. “Status and wealth give you everything in life. Without it—I am nothing. Without it, I cannot care for my mother who’s now my responsibility. I have failed her—and my late father.”

Another long, uncomfortable silence stretched out as the dragon studied him, seeming to peer into his very soul. He nodded once sharply. I will grant your desire. Perhaps it will teach you what has true value in this life. Unless your heart becomes consumed with it instead. Then you would no longer be a problem to the humans—or to me.

Aurie furrowed his brow at this ominous sounding riddle, shocked he was alive and uncertain how to ask for clarity and remain so.

The dragon’s large mouth opened. Aurie squeezed his eyes shut, sure the dragon had tired of him and would now strike. His heart pounded frantically, preparing to meet his fiery end—but instead, hot breath blew over him, making his skin tingle from head to toe. He gasped and pressed a hand against his heated chest, as a strange sensation filled his heart. Magic hummed and shimmered all around him. His clothing became unexpectedly stiff and heavy. Even the sword beneath his hand seemed to tingle from the dragon’s breath—and yet he did not feel the burn of fire or smell the acrid smoke he’d expected.

He was still alive.

When he opened his eyes, he was even more shocked to discover that the sword beneath his hands had transformed entirely into gold. He gazed at its gleaming surface in awe, not quite comprehending what was happening. His mind raced with the possibility of selling it and how much he could gain. It may not be enough to restore what he had lost, but it was a start, and if he invested the funds correctly this

time...

I have given you the touch of gold.

The dragon's rasping voice in his head brought him even more elation. The touch of gold?!

Everything you touch will turn to gold.

Aurie's eyes widened and his heart raced as the possibilities exploded in his head. He would be the wealthiest man alive! Then, the king would surely see his value and give back what was rightfully his.

The golden touch is a powerful thing—and no respecter of persons. The dragon's warning resonated deep within him. Be careful that you don't allow greed's flame to consume you or your heart will be mine. You will forget your humanity and become a creature who only loves treasure.

But such was Aurie's excitement that he was only half listening. Of course, he wouldn't allow it to consume him. He only wished to take back what was rightfully his.

To reverse the spell, you must demonstrate that you long for the golden touch to be removed more than you long for riches and power. However, I will warn you that all of the gold will revert to what it once was.

He couldn't fathom wanting to lose such a blessing, especially if it meant everything would return to the way it was before—as if he'd never received the gift.

A strange grin spread across the dragon's lips. I've always wanted a human heart. The dragon's chuckle reverberated within Aurie's chest as it stepped past him, out of

the cave. Powerful wings blew a mighty wind around him, and then the dragon was gone, his large form disappearing into the sky.

A human heart? What could he mean by that? Aurie pressed a hand against his chest, his heart pounding wildly. He reassured himself that it was still there. The dragon couldn't possibly take it from him.



### CHAPTER TWO

U pon returning home, he was elated to discover that everything he touched did indeed turn to gold. Even his clothing had become golden during his encounter with the dragon. As he grasped the doorknob, it shone brightly.

Pressing a hand to the simple wooden door, he watched in delight as it transformed into a resplendent ornament. He then moved his hand to the building, awed as the bricks shifted one by one, gold traveling up the wall until the entire manor glinted and gleamed in the light.

This was better than he'd ever expected! Overjoyed, he rushed to tell Mama.

When he called her outside to show her how Everrose had become pure gold, she was incredulous.

“What illusion is this, Aurie? What have you done?” Her eyes narrowed.

“It's a gift from the dragon, Mama. Come, I'll show you.”

She shook her head but followed him into the rose garden. “What did you give the dragon, and how is a golden building helpful?”

“It'll make us rich, Mama!”

Surely then King Iver would have to return his title and his land.

But his mother was not so easily convinced. “I don’t want to sell Everrose. This is our home now. It has been in my family for generations. Besides, a little money is unlikely to change the king’s mind about restoring you to your rightful place. You don’t need that man’s approval anyway.”

His jaw tightened. Deep down, he knew she was probably right, but he refused to accept it. The need for power his father had instilled in him remained as strong as ever. Without his title, he was nothing. Though he didn’t agree with the king or even like him, he still craved the man’s approval.

“He must give me my title back. You’ll see, Mama, everything will be better. But we don’t have to sell this manor if you don’t want to. Anything I touch will turn to gold. I can make as much gold as I want.” Eager to show off his new skill and prove to her how helpful this gift would be, Aurie reached out and touched a lovely red rose, one of his mother’s favorites.

Surely, she would be delighted to have it turned to pure gold. He couldn’t think of a more perfect thing. The rose beneath his fingers glinted and shimmered, spreading the metallic hue from the delicate petals down to its stem and encompassing the entire bush.

Mama gasped.

Aurie grinned, sure that he was hearing a sound of delight and awe. Except when he turned, her eyes were filled with shock and something far too uncomfortable.

“It’s gold, Mama, genuine gold! See? I merely have to touch a thing for the spell to work.” He grinned and touched another plant to prove his point. Surely, she could see the wonder and beauty of such a spell. The dragon had been most generous.

“Aurie, what—what happened to you? How did you do that? What did the dragon

do?” Horror and concern filled her eyes.

He shook his head. This was not something to be horrified over—it was a gift. This was exactly what they needed to change their circumstances. To finally have the life they deserved. Why couldn’t she just see that?

He tried to impress upon her how this was going to change their bad luck, but she only looked more horrified, if that were possible.

Liquid gathered in the corners of her eyes.

Blast! He had done this for her. This was supposed to fix things, not make his mother cry. With time, he hoped she would see how much this would mean to them.

“Can you turn it off?” she asked, a tear leaking down her cheek. He stepped toward her, wanting to wipe it away, but she quickly retreated. “Don’t touch me, Aurie. What if you turn me to gold?” She held her hands out to protect herself.

His eyes widened. He had never considered that contingency.

“Aurie, you must be extremely careful about what you touch. Don’t you see how dangerous such a thing can be?”

“It’s fine, Mama. I’ll wear gloves.” Searching his pockets, he found a handkerchief and wrapped it around his hand to demonstrate. “See, nothing to be afraid of.” His fingers brushed another rose bush while safely encased by the now-golden handkerchief. Except the leaf shimmered and hardened, the green yellowing to gold. He caught his breath as the entire plant turned to gold, just like the rest.

“Oh, Aurie! You must give this—this magic back. You can’t live life turning everything to gold. How will you eat?”

He shook his head vehemently. “No.” His voice was harsher than he expected. “I won’t take it back. It will be fine. The dragon wouldn’t have made it impossible for me to eat.”

This only made Mama’s cries intensify.

Concern twisted his heart, but he quickly stuffed it down. “This will change everything for us, Mama. You’ll see.”

While his mother refused to appreciate the dragon’s gift, Aurie was determined to make the most of it. There might be some slight drawbacks, but the gold was worth it. Though he could no longer touch his food with his bare hands, their new wealth meant that he could have Mrs. Calla cook gourmet dishes for everyone to enjoy—they’d eat like royalty. All it required was the use of a utensil. Nothing as dramatic as his mother feared.

Initially, Aurie had thought golden furniture quite delightful, a far sight better than it was before. However, he quickly learned just how uncomfortable gold furniture could be. Sleep was rather difficult upon his once plush feather bed. While the fabric of the mattress remained flexible, the feathers inside became sharp once turned to gold, crunching and poking him the whole night through. He began sleeping on the floor and sitting in chairs that had been entirely wooden before he transformed them. This proved easier to endure than the constant poking. It seemed a small price to pay for such wealth.

Their once simple cottage in the middle of nowhere had become quite grand, the gold glistening beautifully in the sun. Aurie wanted to sell it and buy a bigger home for his mother. Truthfully, he wanted to win back the home they’d lost. Unfortunately, that land was tied to his title, and wealth was not enough to sway the king to buy back what he’d lost—though he’d certainly pocketed the gold Aurie had sent him. The King’s displeasure ran deeper than money.

News of the king's decision brought Aurie low once more. Would he never find value again? He consoled himself by turning even more things into gold, starting with the garden. The lone rose bush needed the enhancement of more golden plants. Before he had quite realized what he was doing, his mother's entire rose garden, along with all the plants surrounding it, shone a brilliant gold. He stood watching the sunset, elated at how the gold glinted in the evening light.

He may not have regained his worth, but perhaps he could bring his mother the beauty she deserved.

He went inside to find more items to transform; though he was careful to leave several of the couches and other pieces of furniture so his mother would remain comfortable. Perhaps it would lift her spirits to redecorate. They could purchase whatever she wished—cozy items to accent the gold. Yes! He was certainly wealthy enough now.

As Lyra came in to clean the room, his thoughts turned to his servants. Hadn't her mother mentioned a sister who had a new baby and no money to pay the taxes? He could send some of the money off to help Mrs. Calla's family and even Galen—he had been a most stalwart steward. Not to mention the people of his village who were in need. There was no end to the things money could do. He didn't need the approval of the greedy king!

Still caught up in the dazzle and gleam of all the gold, he was shocked to discover himself quite changed when he awoke one morning a week later. It was incomprehensible. Everything suddenly looked much too small—the colors strangely vivid. His golden blanket had shrunk, barely covering him. The space around him felt tight and cramped. As he clambered to his feet, something whipped him from behind. He turned to find an iridescent scaly tail attached to his body!

A snort of astonishment escaped his lips. He reached for his mouth to find the source

of that strange sound only to discover paws instead of hands, with claws curling at the ends of his fingers. He stepped backward in shock and felt something flutter at his back. What had happened to him?!

The new maid who'd just come to light the fire in his bedroom screamed and fled.

Her scream startled him further, making him turn toward the door. As he did so, his tail whipped round the room, slammed into the mirror, and brought it crashing to the ground. A snarl flew from his mouth, shocking him to silence. The mirror's golden frame was broken beyond repair, the shattered shards scattered across the floor reflected strange shimmering scales.

What had become of him?! Unable to fit through the door, he awkwardly unlatched the large double wide window and squeezed his way outside, using his unfamiliar wings to coast to the ground and hurry to the pond.

A dragon's reflection—foreign and terrifying, three times his usual size—gaped back at him. Sharp pointed teeth filled an uncannily reptilian muzzle. Gilded horns grew from his head, and spines lined his back. Iridescent scales with golden undertones had replaced his skin, shimmering with a rainbow sheen. A small flame-shaped marking—pure gold and no larger than a drachma—gleamed on his chest. Only his blue eyes remained the same, the last trace of familiarity in this monstrous new form. The dragon's warning rang in his ears. Be careful that you don't allow greed's flame to consume you or your heart will be mine. You will forget your humanity and become a creature who only loves treasure.

Unfamiliar claws brushed against the marking on his chest as his heart beat a painful rhythm. Had the dragon meant that literally? Had something happened to his human heart, transforming him into a dragon? Would he remain like this forever?

Fortunately, this fear proved unfounded. He remained a dragon for only half the day,

turning back into himself by evening. The only evidence of the change was the small gold marking on his chest, slightly to the left—directly over his heart. His mother was quite upset over this new development and became even more vocal in her demands that he reverse the curse, insisting that all the gold was tainted, anyway.

“This must stop, Aurie! You aren’t sleeping, you can’t receive physical affection, and now you’re changing into the same monster that put this curse upon you. You cannot live like this! I cannot live like this! I just want my boy back!”

“I’m not a child anymore! Turning into a dragon now and then isn’t the worst thing. I find that I don’t mind it, and if you’d let me, I could show you just how fun it can be, flying in the sky. Besides, I’ve been sleeping just fine. The golden touch doesn’t work in my dragon form and it gives me magic, Mama.”

“Do you even hear yourself, Aurie? You have become a monster!”

“No, I’m not!” he growled, his voice sharp. “Dragons are perfectly respectable! People go to them for advice all the time. Plus, my mind is still intact while in my dragon form. A dragon is the reason you are currently enjoying the level of wealth and comfort you have today! You should feel indebted to the dragons!”

“Wealth, I already told you I don’t need! I need you, Aurie, not gold! You must reverse this curse before it is too late. What if the dragon takes over and you never return to your human form again?” She moved dangerously close to him, her eyes pleading.

Aurie backed up, his fists clenched, his jaw hardened. She didn’t understand. “I can’t reverse it, Mama. It is a part of me now. I don’t understand why you don’t want me to buy you a larger home. We could be living like royalty now. We needn’t hide away in this tiny cottage. You’ll never need or want for anything again.”

“I never said I wanted any of this! We were fine with what we had before.”

“When we were destitute? No. I lost everything!” He threw his arms out, voice raw with emotion. “I could barely afford our food, let alone provide the comforts you were accustomed to. I was a failure, just like Papa always said I’d be. I’m all you have now, don’t you understand? I need to take care of you to make Papa proud! Even King Iver could see the failure I was and stripped me of my title!” His eyes flashed with anger as he stepped closer. Pain gripped his heart, a bitter reminder of how far he had fallen.

“Oh honey, you cannot base your worth off anyone or anything, especially not the king. Even with all the wealth in the world, he won’t give you your title back. You are a wonderful man and were a wonderful lord over Sovia, putting the needs of the people first. Unfortunately, King Iver doesn’t care about the people. You know this, and you can never make that man happy, nor should you try. Keep being you!”

Moisture built behind his eyes. He blinked it away. She couldn’t be correct. He refused to accept the loss of his title and land, no matter how much he disliked the king. How could he make any kind of difference without it? How could he help make any changes? He was nothing now. A nobody. “I’ve helped make things better for us.” He gestured to the glistening room around them. “How can you not see that? With money, I’ve been able to hire staff, helping them make a decent living as well. Money helps everyone.”

“Those who aren’t too afraid to stay.” She muttered so low, he wondered if she had meant for him to hear. Her eyes sought his. “You sound like your father. Life isn’t about gold, Aurie. You can still find happiness without it.” Her words clawed deep, causing a physical ache. He never wanted to be like the haughty man his father was.

He pressed a hand to his smarting chest. “And yet we need money to survive. Would you rather live on the streets begging for food? Because that’s where we would have



ended up if I hadn't sought help from the dragon!"

"That's enough!" She slashed her hand through the air, cutting off any further words. "I don't want to hear any more. Can't you see this curse is destroying you?! You aren't the man I thought you were! You must reverse this spell before it consumes you, twisting you into a man even more unrecognizable. I just want my son back." Her tears were falling heavily now. "If you don't do something about it, I will leave. I cannot continue on this way."

He drew in a sharp breath. Her words pierced him more powerfully than any weapon. She spun on her heel to storm out of the room. How could she say that? Why couldn't she understand that he had done this for her, for his people? Money made everything possible.

"Wait!" He rushed after her, but she kept going. "Stop!"

She shook her head, refusing to stop or turn around. "I won't change my mind, Aurie."

Unthinking, he reached out to stop her himself. She had to listen to reason. He couldn't allow her to leave like this. He couldn't stand for her to think of him thus. He was not his father! It wasn't until his hand brushed the skin of her arm that he remembered why he could touch no one—especially his mother!

He hastily dropped his hand as his eyes widened in horror. "Mama!" He choked on his desperation, unable to stop the gold from traveling up her arm and consuming the rest of her body. It was too late! She turned to solid gold, frozen in the act of leaving him, proving her point more profoundly than anything she could possibly have said.

His mind fought to recall the dragon's words as anguish engulfed it. There had to be some way to reverse this!

The tears he'd been battling fell down his face unrestrained as he cried out. His sobs, raw and desperate, bled into the agony of his soul. His body vibrated as claws sprouted from his fingers, his shoulders broadening with raw power, until a deafening roar tore from his throat—echoing the pain of the monster he had become.

### CHAPTER THREE

“Melora! Nerissa! Get in here, you worthless girls!”

Melora stiffened at her father’s biting voice and dropped the laundry she’d been washing. Her eyes met her sister’s. Papa was home early, and he sounded drunk. Arriving home early always meant trouble; it likely meant he was out of funds and even angrier than usual. Melora reached out a damp hand to grasp Nerissa’s arm, shaking her head. “I’ll deal with Papa. You stay here.” She would keep her little sister out of danger as much as possible.

Nerissa chewed her lower lip in concern. “I don’t know, Mel. He sounds furious.”

“That’s precisely why you must remain. We can only hope he didn’t go into debt. I need you to finish the laundry so we’ll have enough provisions for the next few days. I’ll take care of things with Papa. If I give him a bite to eat, hopefully, he’ll fall asleep.”

Nerissa’s dark features looked wary, but she nodded her agreement, wordlessly taking the washing from Melora. While they needed the funds that taking in laundry provided, they couldn’t possibly allow Papa to find out. He would be livid. Though he used every drachma he earned on his gambling or drinking, he refused to allow his daughters to do anything so demeaning as work. He insisted they project the facade of perfection. So long as no one knew their true circumstances, all was well.

Melora’s mind frantically prepared for the numerous scenarios she could encounter once she entered the house.

Papa glared as she entered, his dark eyes cold, his lips compressed in displeasure. His thick finger jabbed into her chest. "It's time you earned your keep, girl. You're eighteen now and soon to be someone else's problem."

She tried not to flinch at his words. Without her, they would have no food to eat and no place to stay, but she knew better than to mention such things.

"Go to town and purchase some food. The cupboards are bare. While you're at it, be sure to flutter those big eyes at Sir Calix. He asked about you again. I plan to make the most out of the union."

She did her best to keep her expression clear while her insides roiled with disgust. Sir Calix was a pompous and cruel man. Just thinking about him made her skin crawl.

As she approached her eighteenth birthday, Papa had become obsessed with auctioning her off to the highest bidder. "After all," he would say, "Your beauty has to be good for something, especially after how much it has cost me to raise you and your sister." While Melora tried to remain unaffected by his words, they still cut. It seemed that her beauty was all she was ever good for. She had spent many long hours working out how she might escape the impending engagement.

She would soon have enough saved up to put her plan into action and leave for Sovia with her sister while she still could, and perhaps from there they could leave Valkovia altogether, travel through the Mistral Pass, and find a safe place to live in the mountains. She'd almost saved enough months ago, but then she'd had to spend it all on medicine when Nerissa fell ill. But this time, there'd be no stopping her. Nerissa might only be sixteen, but she couldn't be sure that Papa would wait before pushing her younger sister toward the same fate. Either way, she refused to leave Nerissa alone with Papa. There was no telling what would happen to her.

For now, Melora served Papa some food and quickly left to do his bidding without

asking for funds. She didn't want to upset him any further.

As she hurried into town, she covered her dark wavy hair with a handkerchief despite the heat of the day. She hoped to disguise herself as much as possible from Sir Calix. If Papa thought to ask, she'd tell him that Sir Calix hadn't been in town. She calculated it in her head: with another week or so of washing, she should have scraped together just barely enough to secure lodging for herself and her sister. Then they were leaving. The plan wasn't as good as before, but she no longer had the luxury of time.

Unfortunately, Sir Calix was waiting for her. He spotted her almost as soon as she entered town and sauntered toward her, a smirk dancing upon his lips.

"What is this?" He asked, tugging at her kerchief. "Trying to hide that glorious hair from all your other suitors?" His fingers stroked her hair as they slid down the kerchief. She pulled away from his touch. He chuckled and sidled closer, his eyes bright. While many women thought his powerful form and suave ways attractive, Melora despised his slimy charm and wished to escape posthaste. The other women could have him. She wanted someone who would respect her.

He folded his arms in a way that accentuated his large muscles. "Miss Melora, it's always such a delight to see your beautiful face. When your father said you'd be in town, I knew you simply couldn't resist me."

"I think you misunderstood. You see, I'm quite busy." She turned briskly away from him and began walking toward the mercantile, not bothering to hide her scowl. She should have anticipated her father planning something like this.

Not missing a beat, he hurried to walk beside her, slinging an arm around her shoulder. "What's the rush, my dear? Such a lovely lady as yourself should never hurry anywhere."

“Well then, it’s a good thing I’m not a lady. Some of us don’t have time for distractions. We have work to do.” She shrugged his arm off and picked up her pace.

Sir Calix smirked. “I know you find me quite the distraction, my dear—all the women do.” He seemed to puff out his chest as his steps hastened to keep up with hers.

She held in a laugh at his ridiculousness, not wanting to give him the wrong idea.

“As my wife, you won’t need to concern yourself with manly work. No need to waste your beauty.”

She bristled. “I’m not anyone’s wife.”

“Not yet. But don’t worry, I have an offer your father cannot refuse. Soon you’ll be mine in every way.”

She hoped not. She shivered and wrapped her arms around herself, but Sir Calix wasn’t finished.

“If I had my way, we would have been married months ago, but your father is being difficult.”

For once, she was grateful for her father’s stubbornness. He was asking for an outlandish price for her hand in marriage, claiming that her exquisite beauty was a dowry in itself, and any man would consider himself fortunate to pay for the privilege of marrying her. Melora had hoped this would keep the men away. Who would choose to pay for a wife when they could have a perfectly good woman with a dowry? Except, Papa had somehow enticed several men to make offers for her hand. And even more ridiculous, he had pitted them against each other, driving up the price. As the wealthiest of the prospective suitors, Sir Calix was the most determined.

Unfortunately, little deterred him when he decided he wanted something.

She cringed; just thinking about it made her feel used and slimy. Marriage was supposed to be about love and creating a life together—but then such fancies were only for those who could afford it.

She picked up her pace as she neared the mercantile. Instead of taking her hint, Sir Calix easily caught up to her, grabbed her arm, and tugged her against his hard chest. She squirmed, trying to break his vise-like grip. “Papa wanted me to purchase some items. You know how he hates waiting.”

“Don’t worry, my dear. I already spoke to him. Metis promised me that we could take as long as we wish.”

The spark in his eyes made her stomach clench in fear as her heart tried to leap out of her chest. Turning her head sideways, she pushed at his chest, unable to escape. As she struggled, a glint of something bright caught her attention; a man dressed entirely in gold. His attire gleamed in the evening sun. As their eyes met, she widened hers desperately, though she wasn’t quite sure if the vision before her was real. She’d never encountered such finery before.

Sir Calix leaned far too close, his acrid breath hot against her ear. “I was hoping you’d accompany me to my home for a bit. I have much to show you.”

The blood drained from her face.

“Is this man bothering you, ma’am?” The rich voice sent shivers down her spine as the man in gold stepped closer, his long, open jerkin flowing elegantly around him. She longed to confirm that Sir Calix was indeed bothering her, but her mouth had become as dry as the desert sand.

“Of course not.” Sir Calix jumped in, “Not that it’s any of your business, but I was headed to dinner with my fiancée .” He gripped her arm and pulled her toward a nearby tavern.

The mysterious man narrowed his eyes as Melora looked back at him, her eyes locked on his strikingly blue gaze. Her breath caught as something seemed to pass between them. It was as if she could see into his soul, which was as beautiful as the man himself... but how could she know that? He struck an imposing figure with his broad shoulders, his black skin glowing against his fine golden attire. And still, she couldn’t seem to form any words, inadvertently letting Sir Calix drag her away. At least he was only taking her to the tavern, she thought, grateful the attractive man had spared her from whatever Sir Calix had planned at his home.

\* \* \*

Dinner dragged on interminably as Sir Calix droned on and on. “And then I shot the wild boar right between the eyes while even my hounds cowered in fear.” He loved nothing more than talking about himself and his many exaggerated accomplishments.

Melora restrained several eye rolls as she wondered how soon she could escape. She ate her food as quickly as politeness would allow, then stood and curtsied. “Thank you for dinner, sir. Now I’m afraid I must depart. I must finish my tasks before the mercantile closes.”

Sir Calix launched out of his chair and stepped in front of her, beer still gripped in his hand. “Now wait one moment, Miss Melora!” He took a lumbering step toward her and wrapped his free hand around her waist, backing her against the wall. “I purchased you dinner, now you owe me.”

Her heart stilled, then beat double time as her eyes darted around, seeking help. Where was the man in gold when she needed him? No one else seemed to notice



them tucked away in the corner. How had she failed to notice how secluded their seating was?

She would just have to take matters into her own hands, as usual. With the beer still gripped in his hand, he only had one available hand...

“Now come, my dear, it’s time—” He jabbed the hand holding his drink toward her, forgetting he held it. The cold, foul-smelling drink sloshed down her front. She gasped. Of her three dresses, this was her second best, but it was likely ruined. The smell would be virtually impossible to scrub out, as she well knew, having washed similar stains for her customers far too often.

Sir Calix merely laughed and set his mug unsteadily down on the table, having no care for how his thoughtless actions might have affected her. He pulled out a handkerchief and tried to wipe at her chest. “Don’t be shy. We’ll be married soon, after all.” The gleam in his eye had her stomach in knots. He was looking for any excuse to touch her.

Cheeks flaming, she warded off his hands and ripped the handkerchief from them. “I’ve got it!” She did her best to soak up the liquid. It made little difference. Curse this pale-colored dress!

He leered at her and leaned close, pressing his hand against the wall above her, keeping her trapped. “Don’t worry about it. You are welcome to come to my house and change.”

“No!” She crossed her arms against her chest, doing her best to cover up. “I don’t need your help. I have to go now.” Again, she tried to push away, no longer caring about her damp dress or anything but escape.

“Oh no, we had a deal.” He clamped his arm tightly around her waist.

“I didn’t agree to any deal.” She shoved against his arm, desperate to break free.

A large man in fine attire unexpectedly tapped Sir Calix on the shoulder, startling him. “I believe the lady asked to leave.”

An uneasy breath rattled out of Melora’s lips.

Puffing up, Sir Calix squared off with the stranger, glaring. “Mind your own business. She’s my fiancée. I’ll do with her as I wish!”

The man’s jaw twitched under his blonde stubble. “I apologize. I neglected to introduce myself. Lord Rafe of Lykos.” He gave a perfunctory bow.

Melora started even as Sir Calix paled. The arrogant squire had somehow found himself at odds with the lord of the land.

“Now if you’ll kindly release the lady, I shall escort her wherever she wishes to go.” Lord Rafe extended a hand to her, and Sir Calix couldn’t say anything as she finally broke free from him and gripped the lord’s hand like a lifeline. Though she had never met the allegedly shy aristocrat, his face seemed as kind as the rumors suggested, and his gallant actions only reinforced that impression.

“I owe you my profound thanks,” she said once they were far enough away from Sir Calix.

He kept his eyes averted but nodded his head.

“I’m Melora, by the way.” It was odd, but she wished she were introducing herself to another rescuer... She shook the golden man’s image from her mind. It was ridiculous—she knew nothing about that stranger. He hadn’t even saved her from Sir Calix, but there was something about his eyes... something about him that called to

her like no man she'd ever known.

“A pleasure, my lady.” Lord Rafe finally looked her way as he bowed appropriately. Then he grimaced as he took in her damp dress. “Perhaps I ought to get you a new dress. I’m afraid that one... is quite ruined.”

He glanced away and cleared his throat. “I’m sorry that such an incident took place in my land. I feel somehow responsible.” He shook his head, muttering as if to himself, “I should have him kicked out of the kingdom for what he did to you.”

“Oh no, it’s not a problem. Please, I don’t want to be any trouble.” The mere thought of what her father would do if he found out she’d gotten Sir Calix banished sent a chill down her spine.

He studied her for a long moment, then nodded. “Very well. It is probably for the best. Where to, my lady?”

She smiled. “I’m afraid I’m no proper lady, but here at the mercantile should be fine.”

He bowed crisply and watched her hurry inside.

\* \* \*

The trip to the mercantile was quick but awkward. She could do little to cover her damp gown and had no funds to purchase something as frivolous as fabric for a new one. So, she did what she always did in such situations. She held her head high and ignored the judgmental looks tossed her way while she waited for her order.

Once outside, she released a deep sigh—as if exhaling her burdens upon a breath—until she noticed Sir Calix waiting impatiently for her on a bench near the mercantile. She glanced away and hastened her steps. Why wouldn’t the man just

leave?

“Melora!” he called after her.

A small groan escaped her lips as he caught up to her. If only he would use his persistence on more important things like... taking care of the poor. Why did he have to be such a creep?!

“You needn’t worry. I’m not angry with you. Though I am miffed at how you left me in the tavern. Leaving with another man was hurtful. However, I’m willing to put that all behind us.”

She paused to stare at him, unable to believe the sheer audacity of his words. “No, Sir Calix. We are finished, good day.” Spinning on her heel, she began storming off once more. A figure suddenly appeared in front of her. She gasped and stumbled, nearly colliding with the man in gold.

“Don’t touch me!” he bellowed, darting out of her way, his silken jerkin flowing behind him.

She cried out as she tripped, all of her goods tumbling upon the ground along with her.

But instead of helping her collect the items now littering the ground, the golden man cursed and dodged her purchases as they rolled near him—as if touching her things was somehow beneath him.

She scowled. Could this day get any worse? He had seemed so dashing before, but she was obviously mistaken. He hadn’t actually done anything for her anyway, but then, she hadn’t exactly asked for help. Did she really have to request help, considering he was at fault for her supplies spilling on the ground in the first place?

Hopefully, nothing was damaged.

“What are you doing here?” Sir Calix said to the man. He folded his arms and puffed out his chest to its best advantage. “I already told you that Melora is my fiancée!” Then he turned his hard eyes toward her as she rushed to gather her things between the men. “Melora, have you been unfaithful with this man?”

She grabbed an apple, tempted to hurl it at one or both men, but she refrained, tucking it back into her bag before glaring up at him. “Of course not. Not that it matters. As I told you before, we are not engaged.”

Sir Calix’s pale face turned bright red.

The golden man stepped casually between her and Sir Calix. “Do you wish to be with this man?” he asked, his voice gentle.

“No.”

He gave a curt nod before turning. His strong angular jaw twitched, his fingers curled into fists as he stood before Sir Calix, tall and imposing, his muscles tense and ready for action. “I believe it’s time you leave. Regardless of her apparent status, the lovely lady does not wish to be with you.”

Melora looked up at him in shock, slowly climbing to her feet and dusting off her skirts. Was this truly happening? After his earlier actions, she’d been certain he would leave her and this awkward situation as fast as he had darted from her spilled groceries. Instead, he was defending her. Few men in her life had ever defended her, especially a man as wealthy as this one appeared to be.

“Get out of my way! She is mine!”

The golden man stepped deftly back before Sir Calix could shove him.

“Leave! Unless you are willing to pay...” The double meaning behind his words twisted Melora’s stomach, making her feel sick. She knew the price her father had been asking for her and that Sir Calix was eager to pay.

A growl, followed by the metallic clang of a sword being unsheathed, cut through the air. The sun glinted off a sword as golden as the man’s clothing. “I believe you are the one who should leave, unless you want to feel the bite of this sword. No lady should be treated in such a manner.”

“Styx!” Sir Calix cursed. “I didn’t do anything to you. Just who do you think you are?”

“Hurry, I’m losing my patience.” His nostrils flared as he continued to glare, sword at the ready.

Sir Calix swore again and raised his hands in the air, then backed away. “Calm down, I’m leaving. Not that it’s any of your business.” Once he was safely away, he pointed to Melora and said, “I’ll be speaking to your father about this. Soon he will agree to my terms and no...” he looked the golden man up and down and spat his next words, “no— peacock —can take you away from me.” With that threat hanging in the air, he turned and scurried away, his movement just slow enough not to be considered a flat-out run.

With a hand pressed against her thrashing heart, Melora released the breath trapped in her lungs. The soft shing of his sword sliding into his scabbard brought her attention back to the man who had chased off Sir Calix. Just who was he? She couldn’t quite believe what had happened. It all seemed like a strange dream—a dream she never wanted to wake from. “Thank you.” Further words failed her.

“Are you all right, my lady?”

She nodded, feeling suddenly shy. The wind blew against her still damp dress. She shivered and crossed her hands over her chest. Blast ! She had nearly forgotten about the ruined material. Heat crept up her neck and face. She hoped that her coppery-brown skin was dark enough to hide the intense blush. This man was seeing her at her absolute worst. “I think so, thanks to you. I don’t know what I would have done had you not arrived. I might’ve... I might have clocked him in the head with an apple. It would have been a waste of a perfectly good apple. Such a lovely fruit doesn’t deserve such a fate.”

A grin spread across his face, making her heart pound. “Thankfully the apple was mostly spared. I apologize for knocking your things to the ground.”

She glanced back at the ground where she had fallen, unsure if she could meet his eyes. A warm heaviness engulfed her as the man draped his long golden jerkin over her shoulders. Her eyes widened and she tried to ignore the alluring scent permeating the garment. “Oh no, I couldn’t possibly.” She shifted to take it off, her eyes flicking up at his stunning blue ones once more.

“Please, keep it.” He held up a hand. “You need it more than me.” He gestured toward her dress, then looked away.

“Ug, I must look quite the sight right now... and smell like an ale house.” She wrinkled her nose.

“You look quite lovely. I think my jerkin looks better on you than me.”

“Oh.” The heat already warming her face intensified. What must he think of her? She wasn’t the kind of woman to take favors from strange men. But then what choice did she have? It was either wear this expensive jerkin or face the world in a see-through

beer-soaked gown. She slid her arms into the sleeveless garment and wrapped it firmly around her front. Would the humiliation of this day never end?

The fabric felt just as fine as she'd anticipated. Her eyes fluttered closed as she subtly inhaled the spicy scent with musky undertones—she could get lost in such a scent. She peered up at her rescuer. The fear that had been knotting her stomach turned into a cacophony of butterflies. Why did he have to be so handsome? It almost made her embarrassment worse.

While Lord Rafe had been attractive enough with his pink-beige skin and his perfectly coiffed blonde hair, the man before her made her insides tremble and her knees go weak. Tightly cropped black hair revealed his perfectly chiseled jaw and intense features; his blue eyes, contrasting with his rich black skin, were most striking, glowing like stars in the night sky. And the contrast of the golden attire against his skin made it all the more stunning as his silken tunic pressed against the muscles of his arms, a subtle pattern shimmering upon the fine fabric.

“Such an enchanting woman should not be walking alone. May I escort you?”

“Yes, I'd like that.” She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, suddenly worried that it, too, was a mess. That would be just her luck.

After such gallant actions, she expected him to offer to carry her things and perhaps offer her his arm as well. But he did none of those things. Instead, he watched as she struggled to lift the two hefty bags, one over each shoulder.

“Are you certain you have everything? That looks quite heavy.”

It was. She pursed her lips, doing her best to keep her voice even under the weight. “Yes, I'm ready.” Again, she waited for the proffered hand that never came. What was wrong with him? She took matters into her own hands, taking a step toward him.



“Are you planning to escort me?” She raised a brow, her eyes flickering toward his arm in question.

“Yes, of course. I’m always happy to escort a beautiful woman.” His eyes sparked as he patted his pockets. “I’m afraid that I cannot hold your hand properly, but perhaps this will do.” Even the handkerchief he tugged from his pocket was golden—of course it was. She nearly rolled her eyes. Why was everything about this man gold? There was no need to flaunt his wealth in such a manner.

He dangled the handkerchief toward her. “There you are. I cannot touch you, but you may safely grasp this.”

She raised her brows. Was he quite serious? So now it was beneath him to even touch her? Her heart pricked. How dare he! She was through with this man and this entire day. Ignoring his fancy handkerchief, she twisted away and began marching purposefully toward her home.

“Wait! I apologize. I was only trying to be gentlemanly.”

“Gentlemanly?!” she nearly exploded, spinning back toward him. “I don’t know who you are or where you are from. But where I’m from, men do not offer women a handkerchief so they don’t get sullied by touching her! I may not be as wealthy as you, but I deserve to be treated with respect!” Having said her piece, she turned back around, the jerkin flaring dramatically behind her as she continued on her way. The hurt she was feeling at his thoughtless words assuaged any former guilt she’d had about accepting the fine garment.

It looks like I won’t be needing an escort after all, she thought.

### CHAPTER FOUR

A urie blinked in confusion as the most beautiful woman he had ever seen practically ran away from him. How in all of Vilastoria had he so thoroughly offended her? Women generally thought him handsome and charming...

He glared down at the offending handkerchief before stuffing it into his pocket and out of sight. It had seemed like such a good idea at the time. He hadn't realized that not touching a woman would be so offensive. But then, perhaps he wasn't quite himself.

He had just come back from bathing in the Spring of Ambrosia, his heart heavy with disappointment. The spring was said to heal numerous ailments—but the golden touch clearly remained after he'd washed himself.

The spring showed evidence of his failed attempt. The rocks gleamed, making the very water glitter like liquid gold. His shoulders hunched, and he felt all the more wretched and hopeless. He should have brought Mama with him instead—or maybe the water needed to be brought to her—but he hadn't brought anything with him to carry it in, and even if he did, his faith in its powers had waned. After nearly a year of trying, would he ever heal his sweet mother from this curse?

Again, his eyes strayed to the maddeningly beautiful woman who was even now disappearing in the distance. Miss Melora, the man had called her, an angelic name to match the woman. Would he ever have a chance with someone like her without the wealth from his golden touch? Never... and yet he couldn't help noticing how fine his glimmering jerkin looked against her gown. Her eyes had shone with appreciation

before he'd unwittingly insulted her.

What if it were possible to rescue his mother without ridding himself of the curse entirely? Perhaps then he could find a way to soothe the woman's injured feelings by plying her with gifts to match the spark in her molasses eyes. For some unfathomable reason, he couldn't bear for the feisty, headstrong woman to be angry with him.

He hurried to catch up to her, determined to fulfill his promise to her and see her safely home. "My apologies, my lady. I meant no offense. I can see you have been having a bad day. I too, have had a rough time of it."

He flashed a grin at her as she looked back at him. How was it she was so captivating, even when angry?

Silky dark strands of hair floated about her head like a cloud as she shook her head. Her full lips pressed together. "I highly doubt that your day can compare. Regardless, I cannot deal with your bruised ego on top of everything else right now. Why don't you take your fine jerkin and go?"

Bruised ego? He tried not to flinch at the accusation. He had been gallantly helping her. This had nothing to do with ego. Right? Perhaps she was still upset over the handkerchief. Had he been able to offer his arm in the normal fashion, she would not be so vexed with him. A twinge of regret shimmered through his mind before being replaced by a reminder of his reduced circumstances and all he would lose without the golden gift. No! He would never be that worthless man again!

Straightening his shoulders, he reminded himself that he was possibly the wealthiest man alive. Once she understood that he wasn't some abysmal upstart, surely she would change her tune. They had simply gotten off on the wrong foot.

"Please keep the jerkin. My gift to you. I have plenty of others. Besides, I never

looked so fetching in it as you do.”

“Of course, you’d say something like that.” She rolled her eyes, but she didn’t try to give the jerkin back again. It gave him a strange sense of delight to see her wearing his garment.

As they walked, he thought briefly about the magical border around Everrose. He was glad it protected him from unscrupulous visitors and kept thieves from his gold, but he hadn’t meant to block out the entire world—especially from people like Melora. If she ever did visit, the jerkin would allow her to cross the magical border he’d cast around his land, as would any golden item he’d freely given to another person.

They soon came upon a tiny cottage in a sad state of disrepair.

He gaped. He’d thought his house was bad, but Everrose Manor was practically a castle in comparison, and that was before he’d turned it to gold. She couldn’t possibly live here.

Except, as he turned toward her, she was curtsying prettily. “Thank you, Sir, for your escort and your... gift?” Her voice rose on the last word as if she was still uncertain, her fingers running down the fine fabric. Perhaps she was questioning his sanity for giving away such extravagance. Seeing her circumstances firsthand, he wondered if she had ever seen so much gold.

He returned her curtsy with a bow. “You are most welcome. It was the least I could do after nearly plowing into you. And I wouldn’t be any sort of gentleman had I left you in such a state.” Even in front of the tiny cottage, she somehow looked utterly mesmerizing. Realizing he was staring, he cleared his throat and forced his voice to be flippant. “Gold is your color, I believe...” But his sentence unraveled midair as he got caught in her enchanting glance. “It makes your eyes shine like molten bronze.”

“Thank you.” She repeated, her voice sounding much too small for such a previously feisty woman. “I truly am grateful for all of your help, but I must bid you good day.”

No. This couldn’t be goodbye. He had to see her again! “I wish to call upon you in a few days’ time if that would be acceptable. I’ll even leave my handkerchief behind if you find it too offensive.” He smiled wryly.

An abrupt laugh escaped her lips. He found he rather liked the tinkling sound. She shook her head in confusion. “Are you quite certain? You don’t find me repellent and far below your station?”

“Repellent?” He pressed a hand against his chest and stepped back, as if physically struck by her words. “No, no, you have it all wrong. Quite the opposite, really. I’ve never met a lady as captivating as you, and I’ve been in all the courts of Valkovia.” He wished to reassure her of his desire to get to know her, especially after his epic fumble with the handkerchief.

She stood still, guarded, her eyes searching for something more. He didn’t want to scare her off. Perhaps he should invite her to come to him instead. “If ever you need me, just wear my golden jerkin and head into those woods.” He pointed in the correct direction. “Head southeast until you see a tree that has been struck by lightning; there you’ll find a pathway that will lead you to my home. You can’t miss it.” He flashed her his most charming grin.

Never had he felt so drawn to a woman! What was it about her that had him longing to swoop in and slay all the demons she faced? Was it the adorable wrinkle of her nose, the fire that lit her eyes with defiance, or was it the sweetness tempered with determination that he glimpsed beyond her beauty?

He unconsciously swayed toward her. Careful! He caught himself before she could see straight into the recesses of his unworthy heart.

His invitation still hung in the air, her beautiful eyes uncertain. He'd better try again. Perhaps a bit of charm was necessary—it worked for the ladies of court. In a voice as smooth as gold, he added, “You, my dear, were blessed by the fairies of Arindia with a beauty that shines brighter than the sun. It would be a shame to never see you again.” What was he saying? He couldn't wax poetic about her beauty, she hardly knew him, yet the words were the truest he'd ever spoken.

The light that had previously sparked in her eyes now dimmed. “Is that all you see?”

He blinked in response, startled out of words. Was she angry again? No, worse. She was disappointed. Why? Compliments usually worked with the ladies of Valkovia.

“Good day, sir. I wish you the best in your endeavors.” She turned away from him without another word and fled into her house, the door closing with a resounding snap.

He winced. Why did he feel like the door had just been slammed in his face?

\* \* \*

“Melora! Come quick! Sir Calix is speaking with Papa about marrying you.” Nerissa said, tugging her sister inside toward Papa's study.

Dread pooled in Melora's stomach. It was only a week since the incident in the marketplace. She had hoped that the encounter with the golden man would keep Sir Calix away, like the nasty rodents the mage spells in the market repelled. Unfortunately, he was more persistent than the vermin.

Melora reached for Nerissa's hand, both to comfort her anxious sister and to steady herself as they listened at the door. The drone of Sir Calix's annoying voice bargaining with Papa sounded through the wood. “It's the best offer you're going to

get for her—unless, of course, you’d like to go to debtor’s prison.”

Debtor’s prison? The sisters looked at each other, eyes wide. They knew Papa had a gambling addiction, but they hadn’t realized he had fallen that far.

Melora remembered Sir Calix’s awful mention of an offer her father couldn’t refuse, and the even worse one that followed, “Soon you will be mine in every way.” He’d said that he would convince Papa to agree to his terms, but Melora still couldn’t quite believe it was happening. Alarm stiffened her shoulders. She couldn’t possibly marry the horrible Sir Calix. She had convinced herself that it would never come to that—she would leave first, escape before it was too late. She had been looking for a place to sell the golden jerkin and get the funds necessary. At least she’d been able to keep its existence from Papa. But despite her best efforts, time had slipped through her fingers, and now her worst fears were coming true.

“What are we going to do?” Nerissa whispered, the fear in her expression as palpable as the horror twisting in Melora’s stomach. “You can’t marry him!”

“We’ll think of something.” She tried to appear confident for her sister while inwardly panicking. How indeed could she stop this from happening?

The men were finishing up. The sisters slipped silently away from the study door and hurried to sit casually in the sitting room. Her heart raced as if she’d run to the market and back. She wished she could run to the market now and hide away forever from all of this, but such daydreams were futile, and leaving would only anger Papa.

Unbidden, those beguiling blue eyes invaded her thoughts. No! Not now! Such frivolous fantasies were useless when reality stared her in the face. But despite her best efforts, thoughts of him had tormented her since she’d stormed away from the annoyingly attractive would-be rescuer. It only grew worse as her fate closed in. There could be no escaping Sir Calix’s impending proposal.

Papa found them. “Nerissa, come with me. Sir Calix would like a private audience with Melora.”

Her sister reluctantly left Melora to her fate, giving her an empathetic look on her way out. Sir Calix closed in on her the moment the door closed. Melora remained seated and kept her hands gripped in front of her as a protection.

He appraised her with unsettling thoroughness. “Miss Melora, you are the picture of beauty. It’s been far too long since I saw you last.”

“Has it? The days have certainly flown by for me. Why, our last meeting feels quite recent.” She did her best to keep her expression placid, not quite making eye contact with him.

He knelt before her but couldn’t take her hand in his since she was clasping her hands so firmly together. “My dear, I imagine that you already know why I am here. I have spoken to your father, and we have come to an agreement. In just two days’ time, you and I are to be wed.”

“Wh-what?” She stood abruptly, shaking her head. That couldn’t be right. He wouldn’t dare marry her without her consent. “No, I?—”

“I know it seems sudden, but with how long we have anticipated this day, I hardly think it fair that we wait any longer.” She flinched away from his touch as he reached out to stroke her face. “You don’t have to worry about a thing. I have it all worked out.”

She backed away, her head still shaking. “I’m sorry, but I can’t?—”

Closing the distance between them, he squeezed her arms. “I don’t think you understand, Melora.” He hissed, all pretense gone. “You will be mine in two days’



time. I've waited too long for this."

His fingers bit into her arm as he leaned down to kiss her. She turned away, and his wet lips smeared against her cheek.

The door flew open, and Sir Calix reluctantly released her as Nerissa and Papa entered the room. Melora shot her sister a grateful look for convincing Papa that enough time had elapsed.

"I believe congratulations are in order," Papa said. "I'm so glad everything is settled. We'll have a simple wedding in two days' time."

Melora sucked in a sharp breath, desperation lodging like a fist in her throat. What could she do? Two days would be insufficient time to procure a place for herself and her sister—the several months she'd already spent seeking a refuge had proved inadequate—but staying here meant marrying Sir Calix. She just had to trust that they would find a buyer once they had gotten far away from here.

A shiver trickled down her spine. The alternative—being stuck with this vile blackguard for the rest of her life was unfathomable! Her chest tightened until she could hardly breathe. Everything felt especially horrible after the tantalizing draw of the golden man. He had called her a lady worthy of his rich cloak. For one shining moment, she'd felt more precious than gold—but that moment had been far too fleeting.

Forget his beguiling eyes. Therein lay heartbreak. She must leave behind childish delusions and find a way out before it was too late!

### CHAPTER FIVE

Before dawn the next morning, Melora finished packing the essentials in her rucksack—a few changes of clothes, her mother's locket, the last of her savings. She hesitated only a moment before slipping the gold jerkin in among her meager possessions. While she knew it was necessary to sell it for her plans to work, a part of her resisted letting the elegant garment go.

Papa believed she was packing for her life as Mrs. Calix. Not a chance! Unfortunately, she still had no idea where she would go or what she would do. She had tried calling upon Lord Rafe at Lykos Manor, but his sister had informed her he was not at home. What was she going to do? Feeling Nerissa's worried gaze upon her, Melora took a steadying breath.

"I do hate to leave you this way, Nes. I wish I could take you with me, but until I sell this jerkin, there simply aren't enough funds and I couldn't live with myself if I placed you in even more danger. I promise that once I have a stable income and a place for us to stay, I'll come for you. You still have a few years before he'll try to sell you off in marriage."

Nerissa sniffed and wiped her eyes, trying hard to be reassuring. "I'll be fine, Mel. I'll miss you to be sure, but Papa's harsher with you than with me."

It was true. Where Melora was petite and curvy—everything Papa believed a man wanted in a bride—Nerissa was tall and slender, already surpassing her older sister in height. While she thought her sister was beautiful in her own right, Melora lived in fear of the day she developed more curves. She would never allow her younger sister

to be bartered and sold off to the highest bidder as she had been.

Could men ever see beyond beauty? She thought again of the mysterious man swathed from head to toe in shimmering gold—even down to his handkerchief. He had shown some honor, but in the end, even he had seen her as little more than a beautiful possession. But what could she expect from someone who flaunted his wealth so openly?

Those beguiling blue eyes haunted her thoughts once more. She was grateful for his rescue—if she could even call it that—but it only made her yearn for the protection of a true gentleman.

Stop it! You're being childish! Weak! No one was going to save her. She must do it herself.

Melora pulled her sister into a tight hug. "I'll come back for you as soon as I can. I promise."

Blinking back tears, Nerissa nodded and squeezed her sister even tighter. Neither of them knew when they would see each other again.

Twilight bathed Melora as she darted through the streets of Lykos. A woman traveling early in the morning was far safer than in the dead of night, and Papa never stirred before late afternoon. If she timed this right, she would be long gone before he even opened his eyes.

She had stifled her own tears—they would only make things worse now—and pressed onward. She must get as far away as possible, but she was uncertain where to go. The golden jerkin folded in her rucksack called to her, the golden man's words echoing in her mind like a siren's song, "If you ever need me, just head into those woods... until you see a tree that has been struck by lightning." Her gaze caught upon the woods

once more. Perhaps... she shook her head. No. Ridiculous! She was practically alone. She couldn't rely on the generosity of a single man she knew nothing about except that he lived in the middle of the woods. No one traveled into the Bannwood Forest alone. And what of the dragons? Rumor had it that there was a particularly aggressive one protecting these woods.

As the sun rose and people trickled outside to start their days, Melora turned down the road to the next village. She had formed a plan. She would travel as far as she could tonight, to a city where neither Papa nor Sir Calix could find her, where she would seek work and lodging. Then she would sell the jerkin to start a new life. Yes! Hope began to grow within her. The garment must be worth a fortune as it seemed to be spun from pure gold and people in a large city were sure to have funds to pay her what it was worth.

She wasn't far from Lykos Manor when hoofbeats thundered along the pathway intersecting hers. Squinting into the sun, she could barely make out the rider. He looked somehow familiar. Recognition dawned as she noticed the glint of blonde hair and fine clothing.

"Lord Rafe!" She waved, a reckless idea rapidly forming in her mind. He had been such a gentleman to her at the tavern that day. If she married someone else, Sir Calix couldn't marry her. And who better than a wealthy Lord? There was no doubt in her mind that he could also help protect Nerissa, and he would certainly be a better husband than any of the other men of her acquaintance. But would he want to marry her? She knew it was a desperate plan—she would never have dared if she weren't leaving Lykos—but if it worked, it would be her best option. It couldn't be too hard to show him how desirable she was.

"Lord Rafe." She called again when it looked as if he would pass her by without stopping.

She waved a hand in the air.

“Good morning, Miss Melora.” His voice was as kind as she remembered. Calmed by this, she steeled her nerves to do what was necessary, squelching the memory of the annoyingly handsome man in gold.

Her hips swayed gently as she walked toward him, heart hammering against her ribs. She pressed close to his horse, praying he couldn’t see how her hands trembled. “I’m so glad I ran into you.” She tried to make her voice sultry and deep as she petted his horse near his leg, though the words felt clumsy and false.

He shifted uncomfortably.

Please, let this crazy plan work, she thought. “When I visited last week, Lady Rowena said you’d be gone for the foreseeable future, but I just knew you’d be back soon.” She tried to appear coy as she peered up at him. Gulping, she did the unthinkable and sidled even closer, until the horse’s warmth pressed against her skirts. Blood rushed in her ears as she forced out the words: “You promised to take me shopping for a new dress, after all.”

Such an intimate gift nearly suggested a declaration, if he wished to make it. Flashing her most flirtatious smile, she gently caressed his leg instead of the horse.

Lord Rafe nearly jolted out of his saddle. He backed the horse up, forcing her to step away and drop the hand that had been touching his leg.

This was not going well at all, unless nearly jumping off his horse was some hidden sign of attraction. Still, she had to try—she needed to remind him that it had been his idea to purchase her a dress. “It really was so nice of you to offer to purchase a new dress for me after that oaf spilt beer all over me.” She fluttered her lashes, wondering if she looked as ridiculous as she felt.

The horse danced under him, looking as impatient as he was. “Ah, yes, I remember,” he said quickly. “I am certain that Rowena would be happy to accompany you to the market to replace your damaged dress.”

Her shoulders sank as he refused to meet her eyes. She lowered her own eyes, saddened that her desperation had caused him discomfort. If she hadn’t been planning to leave, social ties with Lord Rafe’s sister would be most welcome.

“As you can see, I have other places to be right now.” He paused as if searching for the right words, “And a princess to finally propose to.”

Of course, there was someone else—and a princess, no less. No wonder he had backed away from her. What a silly notion that he would ever consider a gambler’s daughter. She silently berated herself as she tucked her hands behind her and took a small step back. If only she’d asked him for help instead of rashly throwing herself at him!

“Of course, I didn’t mean to detain you.” Her cheeks warmed as she took several more steps back, biting the inside of her cheeks. She would not cry. Lord Rafe had been a long shot, anyway. “You needn’t worry about the dress... I shall be fine.”

Determined not to let her disappointment show, she forced a smile. He continued to insist she go shopping with his sister. He was far too kind, especially after her awkward flirtation. She made a noncommittal sound. Shopping wouldn’t help her now, but he needn’t know that. “I shan’t bother you any longer. I wish you the best of luck with your princess.”

His expression softened into a boyish grin. “Thank you. I’ll need it. Best of luck to you as well, and please feel free to come to Lykos Manor if you find yourself in need of any help.”

While she knew she would be unlikely to make use of his kind offer, his words warmed her. A genuine smile broke through as she fought unexpected emotion. “I always knew you were an honorable man, Lord Rafe. You deserve the best.” She found she meant it. She genuinely wanted him to find his own happily ever after, even if she couldn’t.

\* \* \*

Hope seemed to seep out of her with Lord Rafe’s departure. She had nowhere to go and knew no one who could help. It was at times like this that she longed for a friend, the companionship of someone to share life’s trials. She had distanced herself from potential friends in the past—she didn’t want to burden anyone with her problems, and Papa didn’t like her being close with anyone. Nerissa was all she had, and now she was leaving her behind. It seemed impossible to sort out this situation on her own. But sort it out she must, for Nerissa’s sake if nothing else.

Hours passed and still she pushed onward, alone with her thoughts, regret roiling in the pit of her stomach. She hoped that the pittance she had brought would be enough money to see her through until she felt safe enough to sell off the golden jerkin. Nerissa had more need of the money than she did.

Hoofbeats crashed upon the road behind her. She stepped to the side to let the rider pass as she had all morning, except this time, the horse slowed down. Her heart began racing painfully as she discreetly tried to glimpse the rider.

“Styx, Melora! Just what do you think you are doing?!”

Fear gripped her in earnest as she recognized the voice. Her breath caught in her throat as she just managed to say, “Papa!” All her plans came crashing down around her. She felt dizzy with their descent.

“You will come home with me this instant! What were you thinking?!” He climbed off the horse, closing in as he continued jabbing a finger at her. “Your fiancé has been worried sick about you, as well as your sister. We’ve all been searching for you for hours! When I woke to find you gone, I thought something must have happened to you. But no! I find you perfectly well, running off on your own. All for what? To prove you can make it on your own? Selfish girl! If Sir Calix hadn’t told me that he still wishes to marry you, I’d kick you out and make you fend for yourself, see how you’d manage. I’ve taken care of you your whole life, and this is how you repay me?! Let me tell you, the streets aren’t friendly.”

He reached out and grabbed a handful of her long hair, making her cry out in pain. “You will get on this horse and come home where you will stay until the wedding. Then you’ll be Sir Calix’s problem to deal with as he wishes.”

Tears sprang to her eyes as he yanked her violently toward the horse. She tripped and dropped her bag, its contents pouring all over the ground. Unfortunately, the golden jerkin came spilling out along with her things. It glinted conspicuously in the sunlight.

Papa stilled. “What is that?! Did you steal gold from me?” He yanked her hair again.

“No!” she cried, pressing a hand to her head while trying to contain her tears. “I haven’t stolen anything from you.”

Enthralled by the gold, he finally released his hold on her hair. Silent tears trailed down her cheeks as she held her aching head in her hands, leaning against the horse for support. Papa was so captivated by the gold that he noticed hardly anything else as he leaned down to tug the gilded fabric from the bag. His fingers slid reverently across its surface. He laughed, feeling the weight in his hands. “Where did you get this? Did you steal it?”



Of course, he would think the only way she could acquire such a fine garment would be by theft. “No, I didn’t steal anything. It was given to me.” Bits and pieces of the story fell from her lips.

“Who was this mysterious man? Where did he come from? It sounds as if he is quite wealthy.”

“I-I don’t know.”

Papa suddenly grabbed her arms, shaking her harshly, his eyes looking wild. “Then tell me what you do know! I’ll not be played with, girl!”

“A-all I know is that he said his home was in the Bannwood Forest.” She choked the words out around a knot of emotion.

“See now, that wasn’t so hard. Now get. I believe I shall take a quick trip before the wedding, but first I’m going to make certain you cannot escape again. You won’t like what will happen should I return to find you gone. Someone will pay if I cannot find you. Do you understand me?”

She nodded, thinking of Nes. Too many times she had sacrificed herself to spare her little sister from Papa’s wrath, and she wouldn’t stop now. Marrying Sir Calix was not the worst thing that could happen after all.

### CHAPTER SIX

A clanging startled Aurie from a deep sleep. He jerked upright from where he'd been curled up on a comfortable bundle of blankets. Sharp dragon eyes assessed his surroundings. Warm night air blew in through the large open window of his tower. Crickets and cicadas chirped merrily away outside, but little else moved in the predawn light.

He settled back down, huffed, and turned over. It was far too early to be awake yet. His emotions had been close to the surface ever since his encounter with the enchanting Melora. He had become a dragon for the second time in a week. Hopefully, it wouldn't last too long this time. At least as a dragon, he could sleep more comfortably. The golden touch didn't work after he shifted.

The clatter from outside came again. His sharp dragon ears better attuned to sound than his human ears could not ignore it. Was someone or something in his garden? A piercing snap made him rise and shake out his wings. It was time to patrol his property. Launching out of the window, he flew toward the disruptive sounds. The faint glow on the horizon gave poor light to see by, but his keen eyes let nothing slip past.

There! In his mother's rose garden, he spotted the shadow of a man. A low growl reverberated in his throat as he watched the man stuff golden foliage into his pockets. Who was this intruder and how had he crossed the magical border without Aurie sensing anything?

How dare you steal what is rightfully mine!? He boomed in a voice quite unlike his

own—a voice that penetrated the thief’s mind like the dragon’s had done to Aurie all those months back. He still found it quite disconcerting to hear his voice reverberate through his mind rather than come out of his mouth.

Upon hearing the resounding voice, the man looked up in wide-eyed terror, dropping the clump of leaves he held. Aurie landed several paces from the man, glaring.

“I-I-I apologize, O Great One. I didn’t know anyone lived here.” The trespasser’s voice quivered as he hastily dropped to his knees and bowed in the traditional greeting for a dragon.

Aurie flicked his wings and stamped his feet in agitation. Something about the man put Aurie’s teeth on edge. He was especially annoyed when he eyed the man’s bulging pockets. Was he foolish enough to try to steal from a dragon?

This gold is cursed. Take none of it. Empty your pockets!

“C-c-cursed?”

Yes. Empty your pockets and leave before I become even more angry.

The man hesitated a moment before muttering something unintelligible under his breath and emptying his pockets. One golden item at a time. At this rate, they would be here all day.

I ought to roast you for waking me before dawn and stealing from my garden! Aurie advanced upon the man, snatched his leg with his claws, and turned him upside down, shaking the rest of the gold from his pockets. The man yelled, thrashing wildly, pleading for forgiveness.

That was when Aurie noticed something that made his ire burn white hot. The man’s

jerkin glinted, shimmering in the pale light—it was made entirely from gold. Suspiciously like another jerkin he'd recently given away.

To avoid accidentally hurting or crushing the man in his anger, he tossed him back onto the ground. The thief yipped and scurried backward.

Aurie's scales trembled as his vision turned red. How dare he!

Where did you get that jerkin, and what happened to the woman to whom it was given? If he discovered this man had harmed the beauty whose memory consumed his thoughts day and night, Aurie would crush him. No wonder the coward had been able to cross the boundary.

The cad visibly trembled, looking wild. "I-I don't know what you mean. This jerkin is mine."

LIES! Aurie stamped his feet upon the ground, claws clanking against gold twigs and leaves and making the foliage nearby clatter. You think I don't recognize what once belonged to me?

"You?! No, that is impossible. A man gave it to my family."

Your family? A beautiful woman with enchanting eyes received it. Is she your family? He couldn't countenance it.

"Melora?" He squeaked out the name. "She is my daughter. What's hers is mine. So you see, it's my jerkin."

A snarl rumbled past Aurie's lips. Ridiculous! How dare the man steal from his own daughter, then have the audacity to steal from him ! His claws crashed upon the ground as he stormed toward the man, nearly running the crook over as he scuttled

away. Thief!

“No! Please, I beg of you, I meant no harm!” He cowered, covering his head with his arms—as he should.

Aurie scoffed and flapped his wings impatiently. What should he do with this pathetic creature before him? And how could this scum be Melora’s father? His thoughts drifted to the enchanting woman as they had countless times before. Her inky black tresses shining like spun silk as they danced about creamy brown skin that glowed with copper undertones. He saw clearly in his mind her large, determined, luminous eyes and those luscious rosebud lips—and he recalled them trembling with anxiety... if this wretch was her father, how much of her difficulty might be caused by him? He shook his head. Father or no, he had no right to steal from her! He refused to allow this rodent to hurt her any further.

As he watched the man squirm on the ground in fear, he knew he couldn’t harm him. Aurie was no beast.

But how could he make the man suffer without harming Melora?

While Aurie pondered the dilemma, the scoundrel began sneaking away, surreptitiously snagging a rose he’d snapped off the bush and tucking it into his pocket, then dashing off between the trees, where the forest was too tightly grown for a dragon to enter.

Aurie growled and flew over the trees after him, his wings beating a furious staccato. That villain was not getting away with this! He easily spotted the man below—however, before pummeling him, he wondered if he ought to follow the little reprobate instead and see for himself what had happened to his bewitching daughter. Perhaps then Aurie could find a punishment befitting the crime.

\* \* \*

As the morning sun rose higher, Aurie shadowed the man to a familiar small cottage on the outskirts of Lykos, a trip that would have been much faster had he not been following the thief. Aurie snickered, seeing the rascal glance behind himself once again, anxious to escape into the safety of his home.

Since becoming a dragon, Aurie had been delighted to discover that he'd acquired basic dragon skills and magic, including the ability to blend in with his surroundings whenever he chose. His scales reflected the landscape, making him nearly impossible to spot unless someone looked properly, which this dunderhead did not.

Near the cottage, a familiar beefy squire waited—the man who'd been harassing Melora. Aurie's hackles rose. What was he doing here and what were his connections to the gold thief?

Aurie landed without a sound, his camouflage magic still in place, though it was weaker at close range. He crept forward, each movement deliberate, his thoughts fixed on how best to make the miscreants pay for their mistreatment of Melora. Perhaps there were some unexpected advantages to being a dragon.

As he neared, he could hear the men arguing.

"I've been here since dawn, and she refuses to come out." The squire said in his superior, whiny voice. "You'd better not be reneging on our deal! I've waited long enough. I'm ready for her to be mine."

"Of course not! My daughter is worth every drachma you're paying. You'll not find a more beautiful bride, or a more spirited one." The gold thief chuckled. "I've kept her in her room while I was away."

“Good. Can’t have her escaping before we are wed. She’s a wily one. Perhaps I’ll need a bit of rope to keep her by my side, but I’m sure it will make our life together even more exciting.” A cold chuckle escaped him at his awful joke.

Aurie clenched his sharp teeth together, repressing a strong urge to bite this man in half. Despite his efforts to stay silent, a low growl rumbled out. How dare they speak of any woman in such a manner! As if she were property to be tied up or sold! And what did he mean by keeping her in her room? Had he locked her in there? Hopefully, he hadn’t tied her up! What kind of life must she have lived?

“What did I tell you? She is quite the deal. Don’t worry, I’ll go get her, and you’ll be married before you know it.”

As the thief entered the house, Aurie’s plans quickly shifted from making him pay to getting Melora out of a marriage to this monster. In fact, it could be the perfect revenge.

Then, his prey walked out with the woman who had been haunting Aurie’s sleep—Melora, a name as beautiful as her face. However, her expression lacked the lively spark that had been present during their encounter. Indeed, she looked utterly broken. Aurie’s nostrils flared, and he felt the fire within him heat. He was determined to rekindle her fiery spirit.

“Here she is, just as lovely as ever, and looking forward to being your wife, I’m sure.” The thief gestured toward her.

She folded her arms, her lips twitching in irritation. Aurie was gratified to see a bit of spark return to her eyes.

Her supposed fiancé beamed. Reaching for her, he tugged her hand free to clasp it. “Ah, Melora, my dear, you are a vision. You shall make the perfect wife.” Bowing

elaborately, he kissed her hand. “I was worried when you didn’t immediately come out to greet me.”

She tugged her hand out of his grip. “Unfortunately, I was otherwise detained. But that will no longer be a problem.”

“Now that your father is here, let us proceed with the wedding preparations. First, you will need this.” He thrust a box into her hands, a predatory smile upon his smug lips. Aurie longed to wipe that unctuous grin right off him, perhaps with a claw. The idea of drawing blood suddenly held more appeal than ever before.

From the box Melora pulled an elegant wedding dress of pale blue, adorned with lace and pearls. “Oh.” She breathed, her eyes going wide.

“Isn’t it perfect? I commissioned it just for you. Now, put it on and let’s head down to the church for our wedding.”

“N-now?”

“Of course, now.” The man’s scowl twisted his face, making its angles harsh and unforgiving. “Why do you think I’m here? I refuse to wait a moment longer than necessary.”

“Wouldn’t a larger, more extravagant wedding be preferable?” She took a step backward, her hands trembling against the box she still held.

“Of course, I wish for everyone to know you are my bride, but we don’t need a fancy wedding, my dear.” He leaned down to whisper something into her ear, making her skin pale.

Smoke steamed from Aurie’s nostrils as a low growl rumbled from his lips. He’d



heard enough of this nonsense!

“What was that?” Both men jumped, looking about.

Melora used the distraction to thrust the parcel back. “I-I think I need a moment.”

The brute snatched her wrist before she could leave, shoving the gift back into her arms. “Why don’t you take that moment and change? You’ll find that I’m not a patient man, my dear.”

“Do as he says,” the thief said, bringing Aurie’s attention back to him and the stolen jerkin he still wore, the golden rose glinting in his pocket.

Aurie was ready for this whole charade to end. But how could he simultaneously halt the wedding, reclaim his belongings, and hold these men accountable? As he prepared to act, a tall, slender young girl stepped out of the house.

“Oh! What’s happening?” she directed the question to her father, eyeing Melora and the intimidating knave still clutching her wrist.

“Your sister is getting married. Help her change into her wedding garment.”

“Right now?” She blinked large wide eyes, as pretty as Melora’s, and looked to her sister for confirmation.

The hulking would-be bridegroom propelled Melora toward the startled girl.

Without further planning, Aurie dropped his camouflage magic and let out a louder growl as he loomed over everyone. I believe you have something that belongs to me. His voice resonated in the minds of all present as the varying degrees of shock and fear attested.

The younger girl screamed and ran to grasp her sister's arm, pulling her away from Aurie and attempting to hide behind her, while Melora's face registered shock and uncertainty.

The gold thief seemed to shrink upon recognizing the dragon he had stolen from. Aurie longed to make his voice louder and harsher in the ears of only some. Unfortunately, that was not a skill he possessed. He could direct his words to one person at a time, but he'd felt it imperative that all heard him at this moment.

Give it back.

"No one has anything of yours, Beast! I gave back your gold." The man fiddled with the pocket of the golden jerkin he wore as he backed up toward the cottage.

What about the jerkin you still wear? And the rose you stole before departing so hastily?

"A d-dragon?!" the hulking suitor squeaked, cowering as he finally found his voice, if not his composure. He turned toward the older man. "What have you done? I've no part in this. I'm no thief."

Aurie turned his attention toward the scoundrel whose bravery evaporated in the face of genuine threat. What about this woman you are forcing to marry you? She clearly wants nothing to do with you.

The coward swallowed several times, his throat bobbing up and down. "I-I-I... She is my fiancée. If she wanted nothing to do with me, we wouldn't be getting married." He quickly turned to Melora. "My darling, it seems your father has some unfinished business to take care of before we are wed. I'll just see you then." He made a hasty bow and an equally hasty retreat, scurrying away from Aurie like the gutless rat he was.

Aurie snorted and pawed the ground before turning back to her father, allowing a tendril of smoke to encompass the man. I demand recompense for your lies and thievery. Return what is mine.

The thief trembled in his boots, which Aurie found particularly satisfying after seeing how he treated his own daughter. He needed to fear for his own life. However, he continued to stand his ground, refusing to return the jerkin or the rose. “I-I have no rose, and I told you the jerkin was given to me. Tell him, Melora.”

Aurie lowered his head and blew hot air in the man’s face, letting out a fierce growl. Don’t bring your daughter into this. You are the one who hides your thief y and wears the jerkin intended for another .

The man fumbled with the jerkin’s pocket before awkwardly sliding the precious gold vestment off. “H-here, y-you can give it back to Melora.”

Aurie snatched the garment from his trembling fingers with his teeth, making the man jump. He turned and held it toward Melora. She hesitated, her own hand trembling before she took it from his fangs, offering a quiet thank you. She slipped it on, clearly not wishing to offend him. Aurie turned back to the thief. He had no desire to frighten Melora further.

And the rose?

“I have no rose.” The man lied.

Aurie growled, allowing flames to flicker from his lips this time. He could hardly believe how the liar still refused to hand over what he had stolen. However, perhaps he could use this to his advantage. You destroyed my garden and took what wasn’t yours. You must learn from your folly. What will you give me as recompense?

Shaking, the cur covered his head just as he had in the garden. “Please don’t hurt me. As I told you before, I didn’t know.”

And yet the damage was still done. You must pay.

The man’s eyes flicked desperately around before landing on his younger daughter. He jumped up and sidled next to his girls, then pushed the slender girl out from behind Melora and toward the dragon. “Here, take my daughter as recompense. She’s a good hard worker and will do what you ask of her.” The young girl’s lips trembled in terror as she stood before Aurie. Silent tears trailed down her face.

How dared he place his daughter in danger! Had he no affection at all for his children? Before Aurie could comment upon this appalling proposition, Melora stepped bravely in front of her sister. “No! Take me instead. Nerissa is young and inexperienced. I’ll assist you in what you need.”

“No, Melora.” Her father reached out and snatched her arm. “Your place is with your fiancé.”

She tugged her arm from his grip. “No.”

Your father was paid to marry you off to that man? Aurie asked, directing his question to her mind alone.

She turned her attention back to Aurie, eyes wide as she nodded. “Yes.” Her voice warbled, though she kept her shoulders back and her chin high.

He turned narrowed eyes back to the thief, projecting his voice to everyone. I find this arrangement to be acceptable. The wedding is off. Miss Melora will come and stay with me.

Before anyone could protest, he spread his wings and grasped her arms carefully between his claws, bringing her up into the air with him.

She let out a cry of surprise. He released a soothing sound, a gentle rumble deep in his chest. The last thing he wanted was to scare her. Her father, on the other hand? Aurie was coming back after this to place a mirror tracker nearby so he could monitor the weasel and that horrible suitor.

Melora's sister cried out in distress, her arms reaching out toward the one who had sacrificed everything for her. Poor girl. Something twisted in his chest at the sight of her desperation. He wished he could do more, but for now, spiriting Melora to safety would have to be enough. He would find a way to help them both. Later.

### CHAPTER SEVEN

Talons gripped Melora's upper arms, lifting her into the air; a gasping yelp escaped her lips as the wind tugged at her hair and dress. When she'd taken her sister's place, she hadn't contemplated what being taken by a dragon would mean.

Now she was ascending into the clouds, her feet dangling below her while her stomach felt like it had tumbled to the ground, battered and bruised by the rocks below. Nerissa's cry still rang in her ears. She prayed to the Great Creator that Papa would spare her sister while she was away—and that she would survive whatever the dragon had in store for her. But first and foremost, she prayed she would survive this terrifying flight.

Her knuckles turned white as she clutched the dragons's paws—as if her desperate grip would save her should the creature lose his hold. She squeezed her eyes shut to avoid looking at the dizzying distance below while her heart raced like a hummingbird's wings.

They flew in silence for several interminable moments. The sun moved higher in the sky as they soared further and further away from her home and everything she knew, toward the woods and the mystical Mistral Mountains.

Would she be forced to stay in a cold cavern? What could the dragon possibly want from her? Perhaps he wished her to be his maid, someone to clean his treasures. She certainly couldn't protect them from anyone. She had no fighting skills—though there had been times when she'd wished that she'd had some knowledge of self-defense, particularly with Sir Calix. Not that a dragon would need protection.

Whatever he required of her, she certainly hoped she would be up for the task.

Just as she became accustomed to the constant whipping of the wind against her face and limbs, the dragon encouraged her to open her eyes. We are nearly there. I think you'll enjoy the view from above.

Her grip tightened on his paws. His voice echoing in her head was just as startling as the first time she'd heard it. She wasn't sure she was brave enough to open her eyes. When at last she dared to peek, she nearly lost what little breakfast she'd eaten.

I'll move lower for you. Perhaps it will help if we aren't up so high.

She could feel them descending. When his flight seemed to straighten out again, she squinted her eyes, not quite willing to commit, but a bright glint in the distance made them fly wide open. She caught her breath. Were those trees golden ? Surely she would have heard rumors if the forest had golden trees.

Blinking rapidly, she cast her gaze around again. She had to be imagining things, but the trees were still gleaming bright yellow in the sun. As they approached, she noticed more gilded foliage, then suddenly an exquisite manor shimmered into view, tall and majestic amid the trees. She gasped as it winked brilliantly in the sunlight, its walls seeming to catch fire in the light. More shocking still, the dragon descended closer and closer to the golden manor until he placed her gently down near steps that gleamed like molten treasure.

Her mouth hung open as she gazed at the splendor surrounding her. A glittering archway towered above her while sun-kissed blooms and burnished foliage adorned the ground. What was this place? She had never seen anything like it. Almost reverently she approached the archway, placing her hand upon the warm metal that seemed to glow from within. "Is this really gold?" Her awed whisper must have found the dragon's sensitive ears, because he assured her it was genuine.

She turned toward him, eyes gleaming in wonder. “You don’t live here, do you?” Never had she imagined such an opulent castle for a dragon, and yet the honey-colored treasure seemed to suit the creature. His own scales glinted an iridescent rainbow of colors, with an underlying hue straight from the molten sun and a golden flame marking his chest.

Yes, I do. Welcome to Everrose Manor. He preened as he spoke.

“You live in a golden castle?” She asked again, too stunned to believe it even with the evidence before her.

Could a dragon grin? Because she had the distinct impression his lips had curled up. Of course, and you shall stay here with me .

Reality crashed down on her as she recalled her situation, stealing her breath like a sudden blow. She had escaped her father and Sir Calix to become a servant in a dragon’s golden castle. What would become of her? Would the dragon treat her well, or had things just gotten worse?

She wrapped her arms around herself and swallowed the lump in her throat. “I-I should be angry at you and this whole state of affairs. I can’t believe that Papa would trade his own daughter as payment for his sins.”

The dragon’s enormous head lowered, and he nudged her shoulder. She gasped, then found herself looking into large, kind blue eyes that seemed to reflect understanding. Tentatively, she reached out and stroked his head. The action somehow comforted her. She should be terrified, yet as she looked into his warm eyes, she somehow felt safe.

Suddenly she remembered her manners. She’d just touched the dragon, but she still had no idea how to address him. Backing away, she said, “Forgive me, I’ve just



realized I don't know your name."

The dragon hesitated long enough for Melora to wonder if her question were somehow offensive. Finally, he said, You may call me Dragon. Come . His voice sounded almost gentle amid the gruffness. Let's get you settled.

The doorway before them caught her attention. While its double doors were large, rising twice her petite height, they were no larger than expected for a house this size. She glanced back at the dragon. Would he fit? The opening seemed quite small indeed in comparison. She opened her mouth, then closed it, quite at a loss. "I'm sorry, but is there a more appropriate entrance for you?"

He bristled, the spines along his back standing up. The front door is quite suitable. It is my door, after all.

Something about his huffiness made her want to laugh, but she refrained.

He stepped forward and blew a puff of air at the doors, causing them to swing open. After gesturing for her to precede him, he followed, hunching down to squeeze his bulk inside.

She gasped upon entering. Not only was the outside of the manor crafted entirely from the precious metal, so too was the interior. Bright wallpaper with intricate patterns of roses decorated the walls. The seating gleamed with swirling patterns of gold. Even the tile under foot shone as her soft slippers tapped against its polished surface. And high above her arched a ceiling supported by beautifully burnished golden beams. A large, intricate chandelier shimmered in the center of the room, casting twinkling lights across the space. Several arched windows allowed natural light to flood in, adding an extra sparkle. Brocade curtains glowed in the windows, swaying gently in the breeze.

The enormous dragon looked quite comfortable in the cavernous space.

Melora spun in a circle, her serviceable skirts billowing out around her, along with the long golden jerkin. She was unable to hide her delight. "It's like a dream, isn't it? I feel like a princess in a fairytale."

The dragon had that satisfied look about him again.

"I thought this jerkin extravagant, but this..." She shook her head, unable to form any words for the sight before her. "Wow." The word exhaled on a breath. "Is the entire manor like this?"

The dragon's claws clicked against the floor. Would you like a tour of your new home?

"Home?" She scrunched her nose up. "I can't imagine such a place being home. It's much too grand for the likes of me. Besides," she placed her hands on her hips, "I'm only here to pay off my father's debt. Once that is complete, I'll be out of your hair... uh, claws."

I'd like for you to think of it as your home while you are here.

She shook her head. "No. I'll not be staying long, so I shan't think of it as home." She looked at him, questions filling her mind.

"Did you forget that I'm here as your prisoner?" There was an unintentional bite to her words. After all, her trust had been broken far too many times, and only a fool would trust a dragon. Her fate was to be his servant. How could he expect her to forget for a moment that she was not here for pleasure?

The dragon scowled, looking quite terrifying. You'll be no such thing. I'd much

rather you feel like a princess than a prisoner. You are my guest while you stay here, not my servant.

Not a prisoner or a servant? Just why had he brought her here? He was treating her with kindness, but she couldn't fathom why. Melora had heard that dragons always kept their agreements. She steeled herself and spoke.

"Regardless, I demand to be treated with respect while here and refuse to remain forever." Her fingers bunched into fists as the dragon regarded her with a calm expression. Just what was happening inside its head? She added a bit of flattery for good measure. "Though it is quite luxurious."

Of course! The dragon lowered the spines on his back, standing up once more as he shifted his large wings. You'll be treated with the utmost respect here. Safe from that horrible brute your father nearly forced you to marry. Despite the circumstances, I hope you enjoy your stay here as much as possible. Come, I'll show you to your room.

Well, that went better than she could have expected. But a fresh concern emerged. "Could I perhaps get a tour? I'm afraid I'll get lost just trying to find the kitchen."

He nodded and showed her to a few more rooms on the first level, including a sitting room with elegant white sofas. "Oh! They are white."

Yes

"I'm only surprised they aren't golden like all the rest."

Yes, well, it turns out gold isn't all that comfortable. You'll probably appreciate this room more than the other sitting rooms for that reason.

“Oh. That makes sense. I’d just never considered...”

Not all that shines is golden, and some things are more valuable, such as comfort. He spoke with a wryness that surprised her. Next, he led her up a spiraling grand staircase. Instead of attempting to navigate the narrow space, he flew up the stairs, landed lightly, and waited for her at the top. The guest wing is to your right, and to your left is the family wing.

“Oh, then I guess you’ll want me to stay in the servant’s wing. Where is that?”

As I told you before, you’ll be treated as a guest in my home, not a servant. Come. He turned right.

Uncertain what to say to that bit of nonsense, she simply followed him. He couldn’t possibly be serious. She had practically been purchased, traded in for her father’s folly—whether this dragon wanted to acknowledge it or not. She just hoped he would be true to his word about letting her leave once the debt was paid.

He pressed down the handle to open the first few doors, swore, and hastily closed them before moving on. She lingered behind, wondering just what was amiss with the rooms. After dismissing the fifth room, she had to satiate her curiosity. While he was distracted, she opened a door to investigate. An opulent room of pure gold greeted her. She could only stare in awe. How could one home hold so much treasure? It was mind-boggling.

Too much gold. The dragon grumbled behind her. I’m afraid that all of these rooms have been corrupted with it.

“Corrupted? With gold?” She blinked, then remembered herself. Of course, he didn’t wish her to sully such rooms. She knew her place. She was a simple laundry maid, despite the high price tag her father had placed upon her.

Come, perhaps there is a room left untouched this way. He turned toward the family wing.

“Oh, but that is the family wing. Surely those will be much too elegant for the likes of me.”

Quite suddenly, she found herself directly confronted with the dragon’s large face. What do you mean by that statement? What lies has your father told you?

She narrowed her eyes and folded her arms. “It’s not a lie, Dragon. I know my station. I help provide for my family by doing laundry. See these?!” She held out her hands, showing the reddened, tender areas on her palms and fingers. “These are the hands of a working woman, not some noblewoman or princess who lives in a golden castle. That’s why Papa sent me to you—to work for you, not to bask in opulence.”

The dragon looked down at her hands and huffed, a growl rumbling in the back of his throat. I should have roasted him when I had the chance.

Seeking a distraction, she pointed toward what could only be the master bedroom. “Is that your room?” Though she couldn’t see how he could possibly fit, as these doors were even smaller than those to the entry hall.

No. I sleep in the tower. However, the master of the house will sleep there.

The master of the house? To whom did he refer? She’d seen no one as of yet who could be considered such.

He began again to peer into each room in search of a suitable one, starting at the end of the hall and working his way toward the master’s suite. Thinking to help him narrow down the choices (though she wasn’t entirely certain what he sought—less gold, perhaps?), she opened the first door on the opposite side of the hallway, closest

to the master suite.

Before she could even peer inside, a growl rent her ears and claws gripped her dress, pulling her backwards. Not that one! What do you think you are doing? That room is off limits! The door slammed shut.

With a terrified gasp, she wrapped her arms over her head and cowered, her entire body trembling as the dragon loomed over her. For the first time, she feared the beast. “I merely wanted to help.”

This is my home! I’ll not have you snooping in any room you wish! You are never to go near this room again. It, too, belongs to the master. Do you understand?!

She nodded, remaining crouched on the floor. The dragon had spread his wings and puffed out his chest, looking even more formidable. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I didn’t know.” What would happen to her? She had been only a day in his presence, and already she had made Dragon angry.

His wings stilled, collapsing in upon themselves as his posture relaxed. I apologize. Of course, you couldn’t have known. This has been a trying day. Now come, I believe I found a suitable room for you. He swung around, his talons clanking on the floor as he approached a room in the middle of the hallway opposite her.

Drawing a hesitant breath, she pushed herself shakily upright and followed him to peer into a room that, while not full of gold, had its own elegance. A delicate peachy-floral wallpaper brightened the walls surrounded by white crown molding. Matching gauzy curtains framed two large windows, brightening the room. Dominating the room was a canopy bed with a light floral pattern on the quilt. Yet the room was large enough to fit a sofa and a chair along with a vast wardrobe. She could never imagine having enough clothes to fill such a space.

Heart still racing after her encounter with the dragon, she gaped at the exquisite room. He couldn't possibly mean for her to reside here. She backed up. "Oh no, I couldn't, possibly. I-I'll just find the servant's quarters."

Nonsense, he grumbled. No one is using this room, and it's the most comfortable. Besides, it's the least I can do after my outburst. He nudged her with his large head, pushing her back into the room.

How could she possibly refuse a dragon?

### CHAPTER EIGHT

What had he been thinking, yelling at her like that? When she unwittingly opened his mother's door, he hadn't thought, he'd just reacted. The look of absolute terror on Melora's face haunted his thoughts.

He really was a monster.

He gnashed his sharp teeth together and flicked his tail. Well, what did you expect? an inner voice nagged. You are a terrifying dragon.

Had he been human, he wouldn't have frightened her so. But then, he also wouldn't have had the pleasure of her touch. A thrill went through him at the memory of her hand softly stroking his scales. It had been a very long time since he had been touched so gently, so casually. The last person he'd touched was his mother...

He shook that thought away. It wouldn't do to dwell on unhappy thoughts. As a human he could never feel her touch, but at least she wouldn't look at him with fear in her eyes. He wouldn't be a monster. She'd seemed to take an interest in him when they first met. In any case, his incredible wealth couldn't hurt.

Yes, he needed to shift out of his dragon form posthaste. The trouble was, his control over the shifts had lessened with time as the golden flame over his heart seemed to flicker and grow. In the first few months, he had shifted almost at will—but since his mother... Well, he was finding it more and more difficult to remain human. Fear of what the dragon's spell was doing to him gnawed at his thoughts. But if he was honest with himself, he was losing any reason to remain human. He was grateful that



he'd been able to shift long enough to meet the beautiful Melora in person even though his original mission to break the curse for his mother had proven fruitless.

Melora made everything worth it.

If only he could be human for her once again, no longer a terrifying beast to cower before. Shame ate at him. She'd been avoiding him all day long. Smoke curled out of his nostrils as he huffed. She obviously enjoyed staying at the exquisite castle. She just didn't like him. He had only himself to blame.

Pacing his tower wasn't helping. Perhaps what he needed was a change of scene. Besides, if he did manage to shift back, he would likely turn all of his blankets to gold again—the last thing he needed. Few enough comfortable things remained in the house as it was.

Unfurling his massive wings, he flew out the open window and descended into his mother's rose garden, the only place that seemed to bring him comfort anymore. Breathing in the soothing scent of roses, he closed his eyes.

However, instead of his mother's calming presence, a more beautiful face took her place in his mind—Melora.

He pictured the joy and wonder on her face as she'd spun in the middle of his home, enchanted. The way her smile had brought that adorable dimple into the middle of her cheek. He wanted to give her more reasons to smile and laugh. Would she find such a reason with his human self? He hoped so.

They had seemed to have a moment when their eyes first connected—until he'd offered her that blasted handkerchief! He chuckled to himself. He would not be so remiss when next they met.

As he pictured himself speaking to her once again, encouraging that captivating smile, his scalp tingled, the sensation moving down his spine into the rest of his body and all the way to the tip of his tail. He felt himself shrinking, his body pinching as the transformation took place—finally. Perhaps now he would have a chance to woo her properly.

\* \* \*

She was dealing with a volatile dragon! Since the glistening creature raged at her for opening the wrong door, she'd avoided him. While initially she had felt safe with him, she now knew there was no telling what he might do should she accidentally displease him again.

For that matter, she wasn't at all certain how to be a guest in such a house. As a dragon, he had no clothing to wash or mend. Knowing little of dragon activities or diet, she was unqualified to attend or feed him. The only task that remained was polishing the gold. Surely he would need help with such a monumental task. But first, she would indulge in a bit of a walk. The day was warm and the sparkling gardens beckoned.

The golden foliage stood unnaturally still, as if frozen in time. While it glinted and glistened in the sunshine, it felt almost cold. Part of the garden seemed caught amid winter, the slender branches bare, while other parts of the garden seemed to be frozen in spring, full of leaves and flowers. What a strange juxtaposition, especially as she walked deeper into the garden, the ornamental foliage interspersed with the green of fresh new life. Spring was quickly turning into summer. Why were some plants golden while others were not? How had such a transformation occurred?

She had just been contemplating the oddity of the garden when she walked through an archway, entering a new area of the grounds. She inhaled the wonder of the gilded roses as they twinkled all around her, huge flowering blooms alongside delicate buds.

The roses climbed trellises, tangling with each other, feeling somehow more alive than the normal flowers sprinkling the garden.

“Beautiful isn’t it? Roses were my mother’s favorite.”

She gasped and turned round to face a familiar man clad entirely in gold. “It’s you!” How did he manage to look so dignified without a jerkin? His fancy tunic did little to hide the well-defined muscle beneath. “What— What are you doing here?” she managed once her tongue no longer felt stuck to the roof of her mouth.

He grinned, making his deep-blue eyes dance. Rarely had she seen such striking eyes—they seemed to shine against his rich obsidian skin. It made her want to peer closer. Was it perhaps a trick of the light?

“Your eyes are blue.” She blurted without thinking.

He chuckled, making his eyes twinkle even more as he struck a pose. “Yes, they are. My mother always said they were my best feature.” He batted his lashes. Dramatically, making Melora laugh.

“Well, I’ve heard that mothers do know best. Not that I would know much about that...” Her voice trailed off. Why had she said that? What was it about this man that made her simultaneously unable to speak and wanting to voice every thought at once? She shook herself. She’d never lost her head over a man before, and she refused to begin now.

He deftly snapped a large gilded rose off the nearest bush and bowed with an exaggerated flourish, pretending to flick out his nonexistent cape before holding out the offering. “A lovely flower for an enchanting lady.”

“Oh!” She covered her mouth and fought a giggle at the ridiculous picture he made.

Melora never giggled. With her father constantly berating her, there was so rarely anything to laugh about. Her father... But that thought reminded her of the dragon's anger.

Hadn't she been sent here over a stolen rose? All levity fell away, and her eyes widened as she glanced about and backed up, as if the dragon might appear at any moment. "While I appreciate your thoughtful gesture, sir, you should put it back. You might not know this, but a dragon lives here, and he doesn't appreciate people stealing his gold. Especially not the flowers."

Her words abruptly cut off at the sound of his sputtering snicker. "I'm afraid it's too late to put it back now."

Her teeth ground together. Why was he making light of this? She stamped her foot. "This is no laughing matter. I merely meant to spare you from the wrath of a fearsome dragon!"

He choked back another laugh. "Fearsome? I hope not."

Grunting in exasperation, she spun on her heel to leave. If he wouldn't take her seriously, then let the dragon punish him for his own stupidity. She'd have no part in it.

"Please, Miss Melora, don't leave. I promise to contain my mirth."

She scowled. He was missing the entire point. Then realization sliced through her worry. "How do you know my name?" she demanded. Despite encountering him thrice now, she still had no inkling of who he was. She hated to be at such a disadvantage.

He had the decency to look bashful. "I can't help but remember what that man called

you.” He took a step closer, still holding the golden rose. “Melora is quite the beautiful name. It means golden apple, did you know?”

She pressed a hand against her rebelliously fluttering heart. “I’m still irritated with you. Don’t try to flatter me. I find myself at quite the disadvantage as I still don’t know who you are. It seems unfair that you know my name and I don’t know yours.”

“I do apologize. Lor— that is, Aurelius, at your service.” He gave a quick bow and again pointed to the rose. “I didn’t mean to anger you. I should have explained sooner. You see, this is my estate.” Spreading his arms, he indicated everything around them. “So you see, Dragon should not be angry at me for picking my own roses.”

“Your roses?” Heat rose in her cheeks. She folded her arms and looked away, hoping he didn’t notice the heightened color. “You should have told me that before I made a fool of myself instead of laughing at me.”

“I apologize. I didn’t mean to laugh at you. It was just the thought of putting the rose back before Dragon terrorized me...” He coughed. “Regardless, you could not be a fool. You are far too pretty.” He flashed her a dazzling smile.

Pretty? She refrained from rolling her eyes. While she loved a compliment as much as the next woman, she’d learned long ago that men wielded praise of her beauty like a weapon. Behind the pretty mask they all wanted to see, a woman of substance and fire ached to be released. “Fools come in all shapes and sizes, pretty and ugly alike,” she snapped.

He batted his ridiculous lashes at her and moved closer, holding the rose out to her once again. “But you are clearly no fool. I see intelligence in those lovely eyes of yours.”

Her lips twitched, and her heart gave a flutter.

“Might I make it up to you with a golden flower?” That smile of his was irritatingly endearing. Especially along with his puppy-dog expression.

With a deep sigh, she reached for the rose. “I suppose it might make things better. Marginally.”

Except he couldn't simply hand her the rose as a gentleman would. He flinched as her hand neared and awkwardly edged his hand up the stem, poking the end toward her hand. Making an entire production of giving her the rose without actually touching her.

She frowned, feeling a strange mix of hurt and resentment. “I don't bite.”

“Of course not. I merely wanted to be sure you were safe from... the thorns.”

Had he wanted to do that he could have removed them! Part of her wanted to throw the rose back into his face, though at the same time she longed to keep it. Never had she owned something so exquisite. She fiddled with the delicate stem, avoiding his eyes. “I'm not as wealthy as you obviously are, but that doesn't mean I'll somehow sully you if you touch me.” She was embarrassed when her voice cracked.

“Oh no, I never said anything of the sort! I never meant?—”

“You didn't have to.” Arms pressed tightly against her chest, she spun round and hurried back toward Everrose, trying to keep her tears at bay.

He chased after her. “Please, Miss Melora, that is not what I meant at all. I find you engaging and enchanting.”

Her feet marched onward and she refused to look back. “Your pompous attitude would suggest otherwise. First you laugh at me, then you are so careful not to touch me that it is painful.” She blinked furiously, banishing the tear hovering on her lashes.

“I just didn’t want to hurt you.”

She hastened her step. Hurt her? The gall! How stupid did he think she was? She would soon be inside, back in her room where he could no longer bother her. Part of her longed to escape this whole situation. She would keep her word to Dragon, but that didn’t mean she had to listen to this pompous jerk any longer.

He caught up to her just as she reached her temporary quarters. She twisted around to glare. “Congratulations, Aurelius, you did hurt me,” she said before closing her door in his bewildered face with a satisfying click.

### CHAPTER NINE

How could Aurie explain to her that his mere touch was deadly without revealing the truth about the golden touch—the truth of what he'd become? The truth his own mother, frozen forever in gold, confirmed.

He constantly messed things up where Miss Melora was concerned. Which was most disconcerting, since he had never wished to succeed more.

He simply needed to prove his admiration and how much he longed to get to know her better. Where had his legendary charm gone? How many times had the ladies at court proclaimed that he could turn even the hardest heart to gold with just a smile? He grimaced—well, that was ironic. His efforts were proving insufficient.

If only she would grant him another opportunity, but she had secluded herself in her room for hours. How could he get her to come out?

After stewing over the whole situation for some time, he finally spoke with the cook, Mrs. Calla, about making her a lavish meal. Melora had to eat sometime, and what better way to show her she wasn't some social pariah? The irony! In his entire life he'd never wanted anything more than he now wished to touch her lovely skin!

Gathering his courage, he marched back up the stairs and knocked at her door, hoping to invite her to dinner. Silence answered his knock. She couldn't possibly have left her room. He would have noticed, considering he'd watched her door like a lovesick schoolboy all afternoon. He knocked with more authority. "Miss Melora, it's me, Aurelius. I'd like to invite you to dinner. Mrs. Calla is preparing a splendid array of



foods for you even as we speak. It should be ready in about half an hour. I'd be happy to escort you if you'd like." As soon as the words were out of his mouth, he winced. How was he to escort her without touching her? Forget the handkerchief! He could already hear her indignant fury at being kept at arm's length... again.

The silence stretched out so long that he concluded she would never answer... and then she spoke. "Are you certain you want a mere peasant to dine with you?"

He blinked. How could he rid her of that ridiculous notion? "Of course, I wish to dine with you, Melora. Your station matters not to me." Why must she make a simple invitation so difficult? "Indeed, I would quite enjoy your delightful company." There, hopefully that would entice her and make up for whatever folly he had created. The accompanying silence extended. "Please." He added, feeling almost desperate.

A shuffling sounded on the other side of the door. He held his breath. Would she finally agree?

"I don't have anything appropriate to wear." Her voice sounded closer. He grinned, his heart lifting in sudden hope. Pressing his hand against the door, he felt as if he'd made some kind of breakthrough.

"Whatever you are wearing will be perfectly adequate. I don't stand on formality. Besides, you look quite beautiful as you are." He longed to see her face and assess whether his words had heightened the color in her beautifully smooth coppery cheeks.

"Will Dragon be there too?"

"No," he said a bit too hastily.

"Why not? Perhaps I ought to eat with him."

“He, uh... he rarely eats in the dining hall. He is a dragon, after all. And his, uh, meal is sure to offend your sensibilities. I promise I’ll make a far better companion.” Closing his eyes, he felt quite ridiculous. Who would have thought he’d be competing with himself for a dinner companion... and losing?

Knuckles lightly tapped against the door as she came to a decision. “I suppose you’ll have to suffice, then.”

He just barely refrained from pumping his fist in victory. Who knew that a grudging reply could be such sweet music to his ears?

\* \* \*

M elora had refused to let him escort her down to dinner—a fact that set relief and disappointment to war in Aurie’s chest. Relief won, if only because it spared him from igniting that glorious temper of hers by keeping his distance.

Now he sat at the head of a long and lavishly appointed table, drumming his fingers against its polished surface while stealing glances at the doorway. Where was she?

Waiting had never been his strong suit.

Would she find the dining room pleasing? The elaborate place settings gleamed in the candlelight, making the empty chair beside him seem even more conspicuous. He tugged at the collar of his tunic. Why was the blasted thing so high? Had the room always been this warm? He stood, thought better of it, then sat back down. Lyra would lead her here perfectly well.

The seconds dragged interminably, and he began to wonder if she wouldn’t show up after all. Had she chosen to have dinner served in her guest chambers instead of with him? He ran a hand over his tight curls as he rubbed the back of his head. Dragons

were supposed to be the scary ones, yet here he was, unable to convince a girl to dine with him.

His foot bounced, and he rubbed the mark over his heart as he tried not to check the time. Perhaps dinner wasn't such a good idea. But if she refused to interact with him while they ate, he didn't know what else to try. Would she have dined with him as Dragon? But Dragon terrified her—or so he'd thought.

The door opened. He quickly stood and bowed, relief seeping into him and warming his heart. She came.

“Miss Melora, I'm so glad you could make it.”

She looked so small and vulnerable beside the door. When she turned her head, he noticed the glint of a flower tucked into the intricate braid crowning her head. The rest of her hair fell loose, framing her face.

He swallowed and hurried to her side, careful to keep his hands to himself—though he longed to run his fingers through her lovely locks. He gestured for her to follow him toward the dining room, then carefully pulled out her chair, moving his fingers before she sat.

Taking his place at the head of the table, he waited while Galen brought in their meal. The way her eyes lit up at the sight of roasted squash brimming with savory herbs and spices was priceless. Better than any delicacy he could have ordered.

She froze when she noticed him watching her, her lovely copper cheeks warming with that enchanting blush of hers. Looking away, she bit her full lower lip.

With excruciating effort, he pulled his gaze away and focused on eating his own meal, careful to touch nothing on his plate with his hands. Though initially awkward,

his new eating habits had become second nature after months of practice. Utensils clanked against ceramic as Galen placed roast venison in front of each of them. They continued to eat in silence.

Sweat gathered on Aurie's brow. How could he win her over when his usually eloquent words splattered across his mind in a chaos of color? He cast about for some topic of conversation. Never had he felt such pressure to impress anyone. As he meticulously diced a piece of meat, he cursed himself. Surely, he could manage better conversational topics than food and the weather! Talents? Yes, everyone had those, didn't they?

"Do you enjoy painting?" He inwardly cringed. Painting? What had made him bring that up? She was more likely accomplished at the piano. But there was nothing he could do. He was now committed to the topic.

"Painting?" Her brow furrowed. "I'm afraid I have little time for painting. But I admire the arts as much as the next person."

Anticipation uncoiled within him. "You do?" He cleared his throat, thrilled at the first crack in the ice between them. Remembering the awe on her face as she entered the rich splendor of his home, he knew exactly what to do next. "Then you'll be certain to love the gallery." Why hadn't he considered the masterpieces before? His father had curated his art collection for decades. It alone was likely worth more than his resplendent home—maybe.

"Oh, I suppose. I've never seen a gallery before."

He grinned, settling into himself. "Perfect. I shall take you after dinner." His delight at his own brilliance left no room to await her reply.

\* \* \*

Melora knew little of art and artists, famous or otherwise, and honestly couldn't see what was so great about a bunch of splatters.

“And this is an original Jason. It is one of his early paintings using this technique.”

She smiled and nodded, as if what he said made any sense. However, as she continued to watch him, she became far more interested in his passion over the subject than in the actual art.

“My father purchased it from Queen Amoreland herself.”

She made a sound of acknowledgment, turning to stare in awe at the riches surrounding her. The gallery was enormous, with three chandeliers hanging from the ceiling, lighting the burnished walls and making each gilded frame sparkle. Each painting was unique and exquisitely done. At least that's what Melora gathered from Aurelius's enthusiasm.

Her tour guide—adorably proud of his collection—beamed as he showed off a large canvas splashed with vibrant, seemingly chaotic strokes.

When they moved to a new section with a very different style of art, he came alive, his countenance radiating excitement, igniting an inner light that seemed to fill the entire room as he pontificated over an admittedly exquisite painting of some lilies by Claudius. She found herself drawn in— not just by the lovely color palette and loose, representative style, but by his infectious delight. She nodded and caught herself smiling at his animated gestures while he discussed the skill required in its creation and the emotion it evoked.

Far too soon, they came to another painting—one he seemed to prize more for its ownership than its artistry—so different from his sincere love of the Claudius. He spoke of the painting's worth and how his father had acquired it rather than the

details of the painting itself.

“This is a lesser-known artist, but my father always insisted that he would become the next big Pavlo.”

She nodded. At least, the large shapes seemed to form an interesting figure. However, her attention wandered as he expounded on its supposed value. A plain wooden frame caught her attention, almost hidden among the larger, more elaborate frames. She walked up to it as he talked, too caught up in his grand tour to notice he'd lost his audience.

The scene within the frame caught her attention more than any other. It was an image of a young boy dressed stiffly, looking out upon a rose garden with such longing... She leaned forward, the emotion on his face pulling her in, but she stopped herself from touching the painting.

Aurelius was still talking about the new artist, oblivious to the painting that had captivated her.

“Aurelius.” When he didn't seem to hear her, she reached out to tap him on the shoulder, hoping to gain his attention and ask him about the rose garden. “Aurelius.”

“Don't—”

Her hand hovered in the air above where his shoulder used to be as he stumbled backwards, his eyes wide and panicked.

She curled her fingers into themselves, retracting her hand. Her fingers twined themselves into the sturdy fabric of her dress. How could she have forgotten the way he found her very touch appalling? “I apologize. I shouldn't have tried to disturb you. I didn't think...” She dropped her gaze and flinched, waiting for a blow that never

came.

Groaning, he ran a hand across his head. “No. I’m the one who should be apologizing. I shouldn’t have panicked. You startled me, is all. No one touches me anymore.”

“Oh.” She looked up at him and blinked in a bit of shock, not sure what to think. No other man had ever apologized to her for his poor behavior.

“Now please,” he said. “What was it you wanted?”

“I’m sorry. I just meant to get your attention.”

He chuckled. “Well, you do have my undivided attention. Indeed, I can’t seem to pay attention to anything else when you walk into the room.”

She should be irritated with him, yet she couldn’t help the blush that warmed her cheeks along with her insides. Obviously, he wouldn’t have been so startled if she had claimed his complete attention. And yet, what was it about this man? He irritated her yet made her blush in the next breath. Especially when he looked at her, like now, those blue eyes of his making her feel like she might melt right into the floor.

He stepped closer, and she nearly forgot to breathe. “Please, tell me,” he begged again. “What did you wish from me?”

Her teeth pressed into her bottom lip. “I just...” She hesitated. Would he think her silly? She was no connoisseur of art and yet... “That painting over there. It’s captivating! Who is the artist?”

He blinked at the painting in question. “That one?”

She nodded.

“With the roses?” His brow furrowed, then he straightened and adjusted his golden jerkin. “That is amateurish art,” he said flatly. “Now, if you look this way, you’ll see another piece by a true master and you’ll see a world of difference.”

“Oh.” Her voice came out small as she rubbed her fingers against her dress. “I may not know a lot about art, but I still like this piece best.” For some reason, she refused to be swayed in her preference despite his greater knowledge. “I mean, just look at the emotion on the boy’s face. He seems almost lonely despite the splendor of the rose garden and the way it radiates light...” She turned to drink in the painting, once again captivated.

She chanced a glance at him. Instead of disgust, he looked mesmerized... by her. “You really think so?”

She nodded, her teeth worrying her lip again.

His throat bobbed in a swallow. "If—if you find that painting lovely, then you must come watch the sunrise over the gardens with me tomorrow morning. The gold sparkles like you’ve never seen."

She blinked once, twice. The gold? Must? How did that even compare to such artwork? She shook her head, trying to rid herself of any fanciful notions about him. How dare he dictate what she should do! Papa had ordered her around her entire life, and she refused to be commanded by this man as well. He seemed bewitched by gold and ownership, blind to the soul within each piece—and blind to his own demands. “You may watch the sun rise over all of your wealth, but I am not interested.” With that, she turned on her heel and stormed from the gallery, leaving him among his precious metals and hollow pride.



“Keep your cold splendor,” she muttered fiercely to herself as she tromped down the hall toward her room. “I’ll take the whispered truth of that single portrait over all your glittering wealth.”

### CHAPTER TEN

How had he upset her again? His father had drilled into him the fact that ladies want only a man of wealth and status. And yet... he couldn't forget the look in her eyes as she gazed at his painting.

Was she offended that he had dismissed his own painting? Yet they'd seemed to have a moment when she confessed to the emotion the piece evoked within her. Warmth filled him. Never had anyone else been so interested in his art.

He hadn't known how to react. His father had always ridiculed his desire to paint, and even his mother seemed to view art only as an expensive hobby. But his father had hung his painting here in his beloved gallery, so perhaps he'd seen something worthwhile in it.

No! Aurie shook his head. He couldn't compare with the greats.

He studied his painting again, recalling the look of awe and wonder on Melora's face. It had almost rivaled the expression she'd worn when she first entered his house. Why had she found such a simple painting so captivating? His breath caught just thinking about it. Melora was the first person to see it—to truly see him .

He had longed to see that wonder in her face again, and he couldn't imagine a more beautiful sight than sunrise over the gold of Everrose and the garden. Of course, he'd also hoped it would put Melora in mind of his wealth, elevating him in her eyes. He couldn't imagine why she'd become almost angry at his suggestion.

“You may watch the sunrise over your wealth, but I will not.” Her words echoed painfully in his mind.

Was she truly as unimpressed with his wealth as she pretended? Perhaps it somehow made her feel inferior. If only he could make her understand how all of this could be hers. How his wealth meant nothing without someone in his life to make it matter...

He shook his head at the directions of his thoughts. She must have misunderstood something, for he simply couldn't make sense of her refusal. He would give her one more chance before giving up. And if she still refused to view the marvel of his garden at sunrise, perhaps she would give him a reason.

Early the next morning he hesitated outside her door. Should he chance waking her up if she wasn't a morning person? His fist hovered near the door. He longed to see her again. To impress her with everything that could be hers... Would he miss his opportunity if he failed to knock now?

Sucking in a breath of determination, he firmed his resolve and knocked at her door, his stomach clenching.

He heard only the stillness of the morning.

He knocked louder the next time, hoping he wasn't waking her. “Miss Melora, if you are amenable, I'd love for you to join me to see the sunrise this morning.” He knocked again for good measure. “Melora?”

The minutes stretched until he finally heard some sound from the room. His heart felt ready to leap right out of him with excitement when she opened the door.

“What's wrong? Why are you pounding on my door so early?” Tired eyes peered up at him from beneath a mass of adorably mussed hair. Charming tendrils escaped a

long braid, and one of those locks curled under her chin, pointing up toward her full lips. Suddenly, all he could think about was kissing those lips and tangling his hands in her hair.

Don't forget what your touch did to your mother! his own mental voice admonished him. Reining in those wild thoughts, he clasped his hands behind his back to prevent them from doing other things. Swallowing hard, he said, "I-I thought you'd like to watch the sunrise with me. It's an exquisite sight—the way it crests the mountains and bathes the manor in brilliant light, setting it all ablaze."

She groaned and pressed a fist to her forehead. "You woke me before dawn to see the sunrise I specifically told you I don't want to see?"

How could his heart be galloping one moment, only to feel like it was falling out of his body the next? He swallowed three times before his throat could work again. "I, uh... thought you might appreciate the opportunity. I didn't want you to miss it if my faux pas was the only thing keeping you— That is to say, I'm sorry."

She groaned again, more dramatically this time. "Well, you should be. Your wealth and my obligation to be here do not add up to me being at your beck and call. Goodnight."

The door snapped shut in his face. It felt as if his feet had been knocked out from under him. He couldn't breathe as the flame against his heart pulsed. Of course she wasn't opposed to the sunrise, she was opposed to him. His hand clutched at his heart as pain rippled down his body. His vision blurred, and he stumbled backwards, his hand hitting the wall to break his fall.

Not again!

He blindly staggered away from her door and down the stairs. Pins and needles

prickled across his skin, cutting into his fingers as claws began to grow from them. He needed to leave the castle. The change was always better when he had more room. Except, there wasn't time.

A groan of pain tore through his lips, turning into a growl as the pain intensified. Spines rose from his vertebrae all the way down his back and into his tail as it lengthened. He roared again as his limbs and body continued to expand to three times his usual size, shredding his clothing while his skin turned into iridescent scales.

Heaving a sigh of relief as the transformation ended, he lay upon the golden floor, feeling helpless and exhausted, his heart still racing. Any control he'd had over the timing of his transformations was completely gone. What reason did he have to be human, anyway? Melora obviously hated him. He closed his eyes, vaguely wondering what he would do now.

A rhythmic pattering descended the stairs. Was someone coming? Why? Melora had gone back to sleep. What if he'd awakened one of the servants? Moaning, he covered his face with a massive paw. How embarrassing!

"Dragon?" The sweet unexpected voice sent a shiver down his spine. "What has happened? Are you well? You sounded like you were in pain?" Soft hands stroked his scales, making his insides quiver. A year without any affectionate touch now melted him under her fingers.

He slid his paw from one eye to peer up at her gratefully, uncertain what to say. He couldn't quite believe that she had come to comfort a dragon when he knew she had been angry. She continued her ministrations as she sat beside him, her hands stroking down his face and back, soothing away the pain he had just experienced.

He moaned softly.

“I’m sorry you are in pain. I wish I could do more to help you.”

More? Melora, you are a treasure. Your gentle touch is a healing balm. Especially after he’d frightened her the last time she’d seen him as a dragon.

She chuckled in a self-deprecating manner but didn’t stop stroking him. “Me? I doubt it. Nothing I do ever seems to make a difference.”

His ears pricked up at this absurd statement. You are making a difference to me right now. And I believe you made quite a difference to your sister. It was a brave thing for you to do, offering yourself instead.

Her hands stilled. She remained silent for so long that he was beginning to worry he’d somehow said the wrong thing. When he shifted his head to see her face, tears glistened upon her cheeks.

Blast. I’ve said the wrong thing, haven’t I? I apologize. I seem to keep making things worse. He lifted his large paw to wipe away her tears, thought better of it, and laid his head down with a huff. He was a dragon, for Vilastoria’s sake. Of course, he was making life worse for her.

Insecurities ate at him. Much as he would love to keep reveling in her touch, he should let her go back to bed, where she’d wanted to be when he’d rudely awakened her not once, but twice.

He was a putz.

Reluctantly, he sat up. Forgive me. I’ve imposed upon your good graces long enough. I’ll be fine now. You may go back to bed. I didn’t mean to wake you.

He began clambering to his feet.

“Wait!” Her soft voice gave him pause, her small hand pressing against his scales.

He looked down into her luminous eyes.

“Thank you.”

Thank you? What could she possibly have to thank him for?

“For what you said.”

He lowered his head so he could see her more clearly.

“No one has ever said anything like that to me,” she continued.

His large reptilian brow furrowed.

“My sister... I’ve done my best to care for her, but I’m afraid it will never be enough. I may have kept her from being sacrificed to a dragon, but for how long? What next? Perhaps I should have let her come here instead. You’re not that bad.”

His lips twisted. I’m grateful that I’m not that horrible of a host.

“Oh! I didn’t mean—” Then she noticed his expression and laughed, shoving against his leg. “You know what I mean. You’re a dragon! I had no idea what to expect.” A smile played at her lips before her expression became serious. “You see, he wanted to marry me off to that horrible man. I cannot bear for my sister to face that fate too.”

He bobbed his head up and down. I know. Hopefully, his mental voice wasn’t too gruff or forceful. Having seen what her father planned for his daughter, both daughters, he didn’t want to frighten her with his fury.

She peered up at him tenderly, making his heart take flight. In this moment, he would do anything for her.

“I don’t know if you realize this, but I also owe you my thanks for saving me from having to marry Sir Calix.”

His throat bobbed up and down at the kindness and—dare he hope?—affection, shining through her suddenly watery eyes.

“Thank you.” She sniffed and dabbed at her eyes before giving him a forced smile.

What should he do? He constantly seemed to make a mess where this woman was concerned. Even when trying to help her, he brought her to tears.

“I apologize. I didn’t mean to get all emotional. It’s just... when I think about what almost happened with Calix—I’m just so grateful that you showed up when you did.” Before he could think about what to say to that, she flung her arms around his neck.

He stood completely still as warmth rushed over him.

Was she reacting this way to his rescuing her or was it his earlier compliment that unleashed this affection? Either way, he planned to shower her with compliments. Also, he would rescue her anytime... provided she didn’t end up as his newest golden ornament.

Her eyes shone for a moment, making him forget everything but the molten honey of those gems.



### CHAPTER ELEVEN

Perhaps she should have gone to see the sunrise with Aurelius?

No, the memory of him coming to wake her up so he could show off his gold made her teeth clench. She'd told him no more than once. What arrogance! The way he repeatedly brushed her refusals aside made his lack of respect clear. He obviously viewed her as his inferior.

Melora wished she could go back to bed and begin this crazy day over, but now she was wide awake. Yet she couldn't regret helping Dragon through his pain. It was against her nature to allow any animal to be in such agony and do nothing. Besides, dawn and she were old companions—she'd learned as a child to work in the quiet hours before her father woke from his drunken stupor.

Her lips pressed into a thin line, again thinking of Aurelius. Everything seemed to be about gold with him. She would not feel guilty... even if his eyes did make her feel a bit melty. She pulled out her dress and put it on over her shift, then made the bed. Perhaps she could sew another dress... but where and how could she obtain fabric? Dared she ask Dragon? Would he help her? Or would her question somehow upset him?

A crisp knock resounded on the door. She opened it to find a young maid with a breakfast tray. "Good morning, Miss! I'm Lyra, and I'll be your lady's maid." Her smile practically lighted the room with its dazzle. "I thought you might be hungry. I know I can never be awake long without eating; it's bad for the constitution. Besides, Mr. Aurelius is nothing if not accommodating of his guests, and he told me I ought to

be extra accommodating because you are a special guest.”

She bustled into the room without permission and placed the breakfast tray on an end table. Wiping her hands on her apron, she turned to look at Melora.

“Oh! I see you’ve already gotten dressed. I’ll just have to help you when you get ready for dinner tonight. Meanwhile, let’s do something about that hair.” She prodded Melora to sit at the vanity and began tugging at her hair before she could refuse. “You really have the loveliest hair. I’m sure you are the envy of your village with all this volume and shine, not to mention thickness. And just look at that natural wave!” She sighed dreamily.

“Thank you. I have only the one gown, so you needn’t worry about helping me change for dinner.” She’d never had a maid help her get dressed before, though her sister often helped with her hair.

“One dress!” Lyra froze and blinked at her in shock. “Well, that won’t do at all! Months may have passed since I was a proper ladies’ maid, but I know Mrs. Sunniva would be horrified if I left you with only a single gown! Even I have more than that! I’ll be certain to let Mr. Aurelius know. He’ll be equally horrified!”

“If you could just ask him for some fabric, I can quickly sew another dress.” Who was Mrs. Sunniva? She was aware of only one other woman in the manor, the cook, but Melora was pretty sure she’d been introduced as Mrs. Calla.

The maid blinked several times, her lips parted in shock, and she was chattering again before Melora could ask about the mysterious Mrs. Sunniva. “You can sew an entire dress? Are you a seamstress?” She leaned in conspiratorially. “Are you well versed in all the latest fashions? There’s an upcoming dance I long to attend. Mama is horrible at fashion and will purchase anything the modiste tells her is the most expensive.” She rolled her eyes as her hands twisted and pinned Melora’s hair. “And let me tell

you, expensive does not equal fashionable! I swear she just adds frills to charge Mama extra because she works for Mr. Aurelius and he is notoriously wealthy, you know. I mean, look at all of this gold! Mama and I get paid quite well.”

Wide eyes suddenly met Melora’s in the mirror. “Please, don’t tell her I said that! I’m not supposed to talk about money, but my mouth often runs away with me, it does.”

Melora chuckled. “I promise not to say a word. But I’m afraid I’m not really a seamstress. More like a laundress.”

Lyra looked down at her shabby dress and frowned. “Ah. Then perhaps you wouldn’t know fashions after all.”

Melora nearly choked on a laugh. The girl looked truly distraught about losing her fashion help. “Well, I’m not completely hopeless at fashion either. Perhaps I can give you a few pointers that you can share with your modiste.”

Lyra’s eyes practically glowed. “Would you?!”

For some reason, Melora was delighted to help the girl. She longed to put her skills to use by making an elegant gown. Her fingers rubbed against the rough fabric of her serviceable dress. She sighed longingly, wishing for a beautiful dress of her own. Not that it mattered. She wasn’t here to play the fancy lady. Dragon had brought her here to pay a debt. Perhaps she ought to get started cleaning and polishing the gold. It wasn’t as if she had anything else to do. With practically every inch of Everrose made of the precious metal, the task could take her weeks.

Would Dragon release her once the task was done?

Outside her room, with hair pinned up in a ridiculous courtly fashion ill-suited for the task ahead of her, Melora contemplated her surroundings. Perhaps she should begin

with the floor. That was sure to be the dirtiest. Next, she could tackle this hallway, then work her way down the stairs and into the large rooms there.

Thankfully, Lyra had been kind enough to provide her with a large bucket of soapy water and a rag, though the sweet girl complained that Mr. Aurelius might not like her doing chores. Melora didn't care two figs what that arrogant dandy thought.

On her hands and knees, she began scrubbing the diamond-shaped tiles at the end of the hall nearest the master bedroom, which she realized must belong to Aurelius. Hopefully, he was still outside enjoying the early morning sun. She didn't wish to encounter him just then.

As she shoved the heavy tub along before her and dutifully polished the golden tile decorated in a subtle, delicate leaf pattern, her thoughts returned to her sister. How was she faring with Papa? Did he yell at her like he'd yelled at Melora? Was she still able to take in laundry? What if Papa had caught her and demanded she stop? What if he tried to sell Nerissa off too?

Melora shook out her circling thoughts as she progressed along the hallway, passing the stairs she thought might lead up to Dragon's tower. She momentarily debated about washing his steps but decided to wait. Dragon hadn't been feeling well, and she didn't want to anger him again.

As she shoved the tub past that staircase, she tried to picture better times in the future for herself and her sister. Once she was finished here, Melora would return for Nerissa and do what she should have done years ago, leave. The glinting gold surrounding her inspired a faint hope that Dragon might reward her with some.

With a groan, she returned her focus to the tile and scrubbed with more vigor. No more of such vain hopes. Accepting gold had gotten her into this mess. She would figure things out without Dragon...

He'd helped her more than he would ever know.

Hours passed before she finished polishing the entire golden hallway. The water in the tub was dark gray, and the soap bubbles had all popped. She had just rubbed out the last smudges on the landing when she heard a distant tap-tap-taping.

Her heart raced. Where had she heard that sharp clicking sound before? She winced. It sounded like knives scraping against stone.

Too late, her brain put together the pieces. Dragon appeared along the hallway, the steady tapping changed tempo as he came careening toward her and the tub of dirty water in a desperate scrabble, his huge feet slipping and sliding beneath him.

She froze as he overturned the tub, but there was no time to move before impact. Dragon's momentum pushed them both to the top step, racing the soapy cascade of dirty water to the edge. A scream tore from Melora's lips as the waterfall carried them over the brink. Her eyes squeezed closed. This couldn't end well for either of them.

Large claws clutched at her back. Smooth metallic scales pressed against her face. Instead of the tumble down the stairs she had expected, she seemed to be... floating?

### CHAPTER TWELVE

M elora held her breath, her feet dangling in the air above the staircase. Hot breath ruffled her hair as Dragon clung to her, his paws wrapped firmly about her. She had to trust him to keep her safe as he descended because, with her arms pinned to her sides, she couldn't even hold on. His wings beat steadily as he gently lowered her to the ground, setting her down in an upright position, then landed beside her at the base of the dripping stairs.

The air rushed out of her lungs as her heart continued to pound with adrenaline. She was safe. They were safe.

The rag she hadn't realized she'd been strangling was suddenly plucked from her fingers.

What's this? Were you cleaning the floors? Dragon held the offending rag in the air between his claws.

She cringed as his voice boomed in her mind, unconsciously covering her head. Words failed her, but Dragon didn't seem to have the same problem.

At least, I assume that is what you were doing, not polishing the floor into a death trap. Didn't I tell you not to worry about any of that? You are my guest. What were you thinking? You could have been injured!

She shook her head. "I'm sorry. I only meant to help."

Well, stop! This is not helpful! He shook the rag at her before flinging it to the ground.

She watched the dirty blue fabric land with a wet smack on the floor. Her lip trembled, and a tear made its way down her face to drip off her chin. “Isn’t that why you brought me here?”

Dragon huffed as he noticed her distress and lowered his head to her level. No! Look, I’m know I’m a terrifying dragon. I’m not trying to scare you. I just hate to see you injure yourself. Especially doing something as unnecessary as polishing my floors.

She looked up into his reptilian eyes, which were nearly as blue as that rag, and found genuine distress. She wiped her eyes. “You’re not mad at me?”

Mad at you ? Far from it! His wings twitched in agitation, and he shook his large head back and forth. I’m mad at myself for endangering you and pushing you over the stairs! I was terrified that I’d drop you!

Something warmed within her. He wasn’t as terrifying as he let on. Her thoughts turned to earlier that morning when she had found him in pain and vulnerable. She released a breath, along with the tightness inside her chest. There was no need to fear him.

Taking a step forward, she reached out her hand and pressed it against his warm scales, stroking his side. “Thank you. I’m safe. I didn’t mean to polish the floor until it became impossible to walk on. It never occurred to me that it might cause you to slip. Perhaps what you need is a few rugs to make it easier.”

The tension seemed to seep out of him. I’m the one who should be apologizing — first for crashing into you, and second for letting my fear and temper run away from me. However, I demand you cease all cleaning activities at once! I stand by what I

said before. You are my guest, not my servant.

“What would you have me do to pay off my father’s debt?

Nothing!

“Nothing? My sister and I did most things for my Papa and even took in extra laundry to help pay...” her voice trailed off. Why was she telling him this? He didn’t need to know how desperate they had been.

Fire sparked in his eyes. Regardless of what your father made you do before, you are not responsible for his debt! But I thought it appropriate to inconvenience him by taking you so he would lose the money he stood to make from your marriage. Now perhaps you will have time for hobbies and doing things you enjoy.

“Hobbies?” There was never time for hobbies... she barely had time to think beyond taking care of herself and her sister and planning out how to avoid Papa’s anger. What would she do with free time? Her teeth teased her bottom lip.

Yes, hobbies. Surely there is something you’ve longed to do or try.

She fiddled with her dress, grasping desperately for something she could mention that would satisfy him. What hobbies did people even have? “I’m rather good at sewing. I make my own dresses and my sister’s dresses. Perhaps you have something in need of sewing or mending I could do for you.” Her eyes lit with the prospect of finally finding something she could do for him. Until he moved his tail and she came to her senses.

He was a dragon! What need had he of clothing?

Sewing? You want to spend your free time making something for me ? He said, his



voice tinged with confusion.

Her shoulders slumped. Of course, she was horrible at the one thing he asked of her. “I’m sorry. I’ve never had much time for hobbies. I promise I’ll find some skill to make you proud.”

Don’t have time ? M ake me proud? He grumbled the words, shaking his wings in exasperation. It is not me you need to make happy. I merely wish for your comfort and joy while you are here.

“Oh.” No one had ever wished for her comfort and joy before. She’d barely had time to think of survival and finding little things to make Nerissa happy, but her own happiness?

What do you and your sister enjoy doing together?

“Um... Sometimes we like to go on walks together.” It was true—they often walked together to collect and deliver laundry. Besides, it was safer if they remained away from home as much as possible.

He studied her with those uncanny blue eyes of his.

“I always love being outside,” she continued. “I enjoy the feeling of nature all around me. The smell of the plants, the beautiful flowers and trees and animals. Feeling the wind on my face with all that open sky. In those moments, I am truly free.” She closed her eyes, picturing the beauty she described and how she and Nerissa would enjoy being outside regardless of the weather. Warm breath wafted her face. She opened her eyes to find Dragon watching her.

How would you like to go for a ride?

She blinked several times, not understanding what he meant. “A...a ride?”

His head bobbed. Atop my back, not like last time. Then you can enjoy the freedom of the sky in relative comfort.

Her lips parted and her eyes widened with realization. Dare she take him up on such an offer?

Imagine the wind on your face, letting go of all worries, and simply relishing the journey. His wings spread in anticipation.

Excitement surged inside her belly as she bit her lip. Could she really do it?

I will keep you safe. I promise. He held his paw out to her in a very human-like gesture.

“Alright. Let’s go!” She grasped his paw, her eyes bright with anticipation.

\* \* \*

A urie sighed as she gently laid her hand upon his paw, his scales tingling at her touch. He hadn’t realized just how much he missed human contact until Melora showed up in his life.

He led her outside as if he were a gentleman. Except he was no gentleman. The scales upon his body, the flutter of his wings, and the swish of his tail proved just how beastly he had become. He was a dangerous dragon—a monster. He glanced toward her as they entered the courtyard. Her posture was relaxed, a smile dancing on her full lips. She didn’t seem to be scared of him at all. So, why was she constantly annoyed with him when he was a human? What was he missing?

Closing her eyes, she breathed in the crisp afternoon air, her expression radiating joy. He couldn't look away. Her eyes opened, taking in all of the golden foliage.

Unconsciously, he puffed out his chest, feeling proud of the wealth surrounding them.

When she looked over at him and smiled shyly, weird things happened to his stomach. "I've never done anything like this before. How should I...?" she said, her voice trailing off in question. She shook her head.

He bent his knees and crouched down as low as possible. Go ahead and climb on.

She took several tentative steps toward him, eyeing his back as she determined how she should ascend. She reached out to touch his shoulder and hesitated, making him shiver as her fingers caressed his scales.

You can step on my paw and grab my wing. I promise it won't hurt me. Not that he had any kind of experience with being ridden but her petite form couldn't weigh much at all.

"Are you sure?"

The long-suffering look he gave her made her laugh. With his permission, she stepped on his paw and used the leverage to grab his wing and hoist herself up.

The closeness of her nestled comfortably in the divot in front of his wings, gripping his spines so trustingly, made him feel powerful in a way he'd never felt before—as if she was right where she belonged. But that was crazy. He wasn't even supposed to be a dragon!

Spreading his wings, he took off. He was surprised at how perfectly she fit. Her hands tightened against his neck, and he felt a rush of warmth. Conviction filled him. He

would do everything in his power to protect this woman.

Perhaps he would strengthen the obscuring spell he'd placed around Everrose Manor to further protect her. No one was going to take her from him. He'd make certain of it!

\* \* \*

Melora gripped Dragon's surprisingly smooth iridescent spine in her hands, her gut a whirring riot as he took off running, his large wings flapping. A swooshing filled the pit of her stomach; it felt as if its contents had been left somewhere behind them as his feet left the ground. They rose higher and higher into the air, his flight smooth and graceful.

When she noticed the ground far below them, she gasped and squeezed her eyes closed, leaning forward. Dragon's scales were warm and solid beneath her.

What do you think? His voice came to her mind crystal clear.

"I don't think I've ever been this high before." She practically had to shout to be heard over the wind.

I'll never let anything happen to you. I promise. You are safe with me. Here, this should help.

She felt a deep hum of magic as he breathed a stream of shimmering air. The magic tingled against her skin, calmed her nerves and wrapped her in warmth, settling her stomach as they flew through it.

Wind lashed against her, whipping her hair across her face as she lifted her head just enough to see ahead of them. They soared through misty clouds. Dew collected upon

her skin and clothing, making her laugh in wonder. The frantic beating of her heart slowed. She sat up further and reached her hand out to touch the clouds swirling through her fingers. The sky was vast and beautiful. The air smelled crisp and clean.

She looked around a bit more, taking in the wispy clouds with sunlight filtering through them. The trees of the forest below were small, all blending together. The ocean expanded widely to the right of them while the Mistrial Mountains were far in the distance.

“Why can’t we see the castle? All that gold should make it obvious. We can’t have gone that far.”

I’ve been working on an obscuring spell around Everrose to keep people away. I quickly discovered how dangerous owning large amounts of gold can be. It’s unwise to flaunt it.

“Yes, that makes sense.” She thought of all the things her own father had done for gold, which got her to wondering. “Except, how did my father find you, then?”

He had the golden jerkin. It allowed him to find what was only ever meant for you.

Her heart raced for a whole new reason. What did that mean? She thought back to Aurelius giving her the garment. Had he really desired her to have it for more than just her modesty? Had he wanted her to find him? He had told her to look for him in the forest... But how did Dragon know? Had Aurie told him?

Her question died in her throat as Dragon growled, banked sharply, and hurtled towards the ground. She gasped and leaned forward, grasping his spine once again. The wind pulled tears from her eyes with the speed. The howling of a wolf rang through the air. Another growl rumbled beneath her as they headed into the forest.

Several wolves barked and yipped below them, the sound becoming more frantic as they neared. Dragon blew hot shimmering air at them as he swooped down. Their barking stopped. They shook their heads in confusion and whimpered. After a moment, they darted away in retreat.

“What just happened? What were those wolves doing?”

They were magicked to find you. Thankfully my magical boundary stopped them from getting any further.

A knot tied in her stomach.

“Me?” She shook her head. “Why would anyone want to find me? That’s ridiculous. Surely, they were trying to find the gold, or perhaps they were just hungry.”

Yes. Trying to find an entire castle of gold made much more sense than someone spending magic to find her.

Dragon grunted. You are much more valuable than you give yourself credit for. I know I would spend all I have to find you if something happened to you.

Her cheeks warmed and she buried her face in his neck. What a silly thing for him to say. No one wanted her, except perhaps her sister. Her father only tried to sell her off to the highest bidder.

Nevertheless, Dragon’s words warmed her heart. How had they become such close friends after so short a time?

### CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Melora? Ridiculous?! Never ! Her words from the day before swam through Aurie's mind, making his vision turn red. It hurt that she thought so little of herself. Especially since she was becoming increasingly more important to him. He never wanted to let her go.

His tail flicked and thumped against the ground as he paced the magic solarium. He loved her devotion, the way she protected her sister from their father. He admired her tireless passion in caring for others, her quiet humility that never sought praise. Here was someone whose kindness flowed as naturally as breath, matched only by her unwavering work ethic. Mountains of gold didn't tempt or change her. She was honest. Plus, her unprecedented beauty? Any man would be lucky to marry her.

And now her father and that horrible brute of a suitor were looking for her. She deserved better than the life she had. She should be treated like a princess.

He paused to take several deep breaths. His anger stoking his dragons's flame. At least he had added that extra protection to his magical border to keep dangerous animals from crossing. He headed to his magical potions shelf, where numerous jars of liquids, powders, and herbs lined the gilded wall, his claws clicking against the tile. It only took him a moment to find the crystal container he was looking for: mirror powder.

Thank Vilastoria, he had thought to place the tracker that allowed him to see and hear what was going on around it shortly after Melora's arrival. Especially after finding those blasted wolves. He was determined to do everything in his power to protect her.

What must her life have been like if her own father wouldn't protect her?

He sprinkled the mirror powder into the reflection bowl carved seamlessly from stone as part of a Corinthian-style pedestal. He hated the idea of such a beautiful soul being trapped and treated so abominably. He couldn't regret bringing her here. If only he could shift back into a human and let her know that she wasn't alone in this. Unfortunately, his anger was too high and he couldn't shift. He huffed in irritation, smoke curling out of his nose. He could do only so much as a dragon.

Thankfully, magic was one of those things.

It was time to put the mirror powder to use once again. The last two times he had tried since returning from their flight had proven fruitless. Staring into the bowl, he spoke the name of the tracker he had placed days prior. An image of the inside of Melora's cottage, along with two men, rippled upon the water. He had tossed the small enchanted pebble through the window to glean better information. Thankfully, it had gone unnoticed.

"—mean they brought back nothing? I thought you said you paid a mage to cast a spell on them to find her!" Aurie's heart raced and his senses tingled as he recognized the angry man. This is what he had been waiting for: proof that her father and former fiancé were responsible for the bewitched wolves.

"I already told you. Some kind of magic blocked them! They were close to her. I'm certain we just need to follow the wolves to find the dragon. And if we find the dragon, we find Melora."

"We've wandered all over those woods already. There is no dragon or gold. Perhaps you remember wrong or you wish to cheat me out of what you promised!" The speaker pounded the table, making the older man jump. "I'm through with playing games!"



Aurie sighed in relief. His obscuring spells were working against the wolves and the men.

Soft footsteps sounded nearby. He waved his claws over the water, erasing the image. No need to upset Melora over this now.

A gentle knock tapped upon the door.

Come in.

Melora poked her head around the door. “Excuse me, Mr. Dragon. I’m sorry to bother you, but have you seen Mr. Aurelius recently?” She stepped further into the room, moving toward him. “I’ve looked everywhere and even knocked on his door, but I can’t seem to find him anywhere.”

He stared at her petite form in shock while his heart fluttered with joy. She was looking for him? This made him wish he could shift even more! Especially since she was wearing his golden jerkin. What did it mean? He shook his head, unable to speak.

She pursed her lips and folded her arms, looking irritated. “After practically demanding I spend time with him yesterday, I was certain I’d see him again, but it seems I was wrong.”

His heart pinched. Was she angry at him still? But she was wearing his jerkin.

“I mean, I thought he at least wanted to spend time with me, but it seems he is licking his wounds. That ego of his.” She shook her head. “He probably just vanished to annoy me and hopes that I’ll miss him.” She released a groan. “Has he always been like this? Sometimes he is just so annoyingly pompous and arrogant! Assuming I’ll want to do something without even asking, especially when I tell him no. But at other times he seems so tender and thoughtful...” She shook her head as if shaking away

her unpleasant thoughts.

It felt like a rock had lodged in Aurie's throat. What could he say to that? She thought him pompous and arrogant? Perhaps it was a good thing he was still a dragon and wasn't being humiliated right now. I, uh... I'm certain he wants to see you. It was a good thing dragons couldn't blush, because he was certain he would be blushing. Until he met Melora, he'd never been a blushing man. What was she doing to him?

I mean, who wouldn't rush to spend time with you? You are kind and beautiful, and you honestly care about all those around you, even terrifying dragons. Not to mention you are hardworking. I can hardly get you to stop cleaning. Valhalla! Your dedication to labor is unprecedented. I swear you would have polished the entire staircase to within an inch of its life had I not slipped and almost fallen down the stairs on top of you.

She chuckled at that. "I'm afraid that's what I'm used to. We grew up without a mother. Papa said she died giving birth to Nerissa. He didn't take her death well and began drinking and gambling. Growing up, I did my best to care for Nerissa even though I was just a kid myself."

And that is exactly what I was talking about. You are an exceptional woman, Melora. Most women your age are only concerned with wealth and making an advantageous marriage, not with taking care of their families.

Aurie remembered the ladies of the court well—they would never have looked at him if not for his title. And after it was swept away? He might as well had been executed.

Melora looked down, fiddling with her dress. "Oh, I'm nothing special. I'm certain there are loads of other women in a situation similar to mine."

But that's just it, Melora. You are exquisitely special. There is no one else quite like

you. You are exactly the person the Great Creator meant you to be.

A sweet smile danced about her lips, and her eyes glistened as she stood on her tiptoes to wrap him in her embrace, her tantalizing scent weaving through his senses.

Could he love this woman more? Her story made him ache for little Melora, trying to take care of everything and protect her sister on her own. Everything about her was beautiful. Yet now he saw more clearly than ever before that, despite her physical beauty, she was kind and humble. Never had he met someone with a purer heart. He longed to turn into his human form and press her close to kiss her the way she deserved to be kissed.

He groaned inwardly.

Except he was a dragon. And even if he wasn't a dragon, it would be impossible for him to even touch her. For perhaps the first time, he began to regret the golden curse. When his mother first turned to gold, he had longed for some way to have both her and his miraculous touch.

But Melora? She was worth breaking the spell over. He looked down at the beautiful woman before him in her simple dress with his golden jerkin wrapped around it. Melora was everything he had ever wanted, and she didn't seem to care about his wealth. Unfortunately, if her words were anything to go by, she also didn't seem to care for him.

He huffed.

She was still wearing his jerkin... perhaps there was still hope. As for Aurelius, perhaps he improves as you get to know him. I'm certain he didn't mean to be rude to you.

She laughed humorlessly, her posture stiffening as she raised her chin high. “Didn’t mean to be rude? Not only has he demanded I spend time with him several times, but he woke me before dawn to see the sunrise I had specifically told him I did not wish to see! All he wants is to impress me with his gold anyway—it’s not as if he cares about me! What does he want? For me to ooh and ahh over his wealth? If that’s not rude and arrogant, I don’t know what is!”

He winced. Her words were sharper than a double-edged sword. The rock in his throat turned into a giant boulder. He’d meant to impress her, not alienate her. What, indeed, had he been thinking?

While he regretted his actions—waking her to show off his place had clearly been a colossal mistake—he was determined to shift back into a human and redeem himself. He refused to allow her to continue to think so poorly of him.

Surely as she got to know him better, she would see him as he really was.

\* \* \*

“A letter’s arrived for you Miss.” Lyra interrupted Melora as she was just finishing breakfast, holding out a tray with a crisp letter.

Melora’s heart pounded. Who would be sending her a letter? Who would even know she was here?

Lyra practically bounced on the balls of her feet. “I do hope it’s good news. It’s always delightful to get good news, isn’t it?”

Melora pressed her lips together to contain her mirth. “Yes, thank you, Lyra.” While she liked the younger girl, she was desperate for some privacy to read the letter, especially after seeing her sister’s name. Her heart pounded in her ears. As soon as

Lyra left the breakfast room, she ripped the letter open.

In her letter, Nerissa explained how directions had mysteriously arrived for how she could reach Melora, so she was writing posthaste. She then laughed about how Sir Calix had run away with his tail between his legs when the dragon arrived. Apparently, he had returned to the cottage a few times to speak with Papa.

Melora sighed. Nerissa's words were lighthearted. Everything seemed to be well with her. She could still take in laundry and squirrel away the funds for later. Papa hadn't lost his temper with her, but then, would she say if he had?

Melora walked down the hallway, tapping the letter against her hand, contemplating all that her sister had said.

She knew she should have done something more before now. There was no telling what was going on that Nerissa hadn't mentioned. Still, she was profoundly grateful for her letter. The light, happy message lifted Melora's spirits.

Just then, the letter slipped from her fingers. It fluttered to the ground, skittered across the slick floor, and slid right under a closed door.

Blast!

Light filtered through the crack at the bottom of the door. Heart thumping, she reached for the golden doorknob. She couldn't remember what was on the other side of this door. Hopefully, it wasn't another forbidden room.

She glanced nervously from side to side. It wasn't as if she were doing anything bad. She simply wanted her letter. Inhaling, she pushed the door boldly open, only to feel resistance and hear a thud as it hit something on the other side.

She gasped.

“Styx!” a rich, low voice grumbled.

“Aurelius! Are you okay? I’m so sorry!” She rushed into the room to see Aurelius pressing a hand to his head, his expression pained.

She advanced, pulling out her handkerchief. “Are you bleeding? I feel horrible. I didn’t expect anyone to be on the other side.”

He stumbled backward, arching away from her. “I’m fine. See?” He lifted the hand he’d pressed against his forehead, revealing a nasty bump already purpling with a slight laceration.

Almost unconsciously, she reached out to soothe the wound, while her heart squeezed with concern. “Oh, Aurelius! I’m so sorry!”

“Please, Melora, it’s fine.” He tripped and fell back with an “oomph” onto a nearby chair as he hastily backed away from her.

She tried not to laugh at the picture he made, awkwardly sprawled over the arm of the chair. Her fingers pressed against her lips to contain her mirth. “Oh dear. I seem to make things worse, don’t I? I really should have knocked.”

He grunted.

She reached out a hand. “Here, let me help you up.”

Before she could move closer, he jerked away. The oddest gasping cry tumbled from his lips. “No! No thank you, I-I’m perfectly comfortable here.”

A laugh bubbled out as she clasped her hands together. “I’m not going to hurt you. Are you quite certain? You don’t look comfortable there at all.”

He folded his arms and scrunched down into the seat. “What are you even doing here?” Something about the timbre of his voice made her shiver.

“My letter, it slipped under the door.” She backed up a few steps. “It’s from my sister. I’ve been worried about her. When I dropped it, I didn’t think before pushing the door open to retrieve it—I didn’t imagine you’d be on the other side.” Her eyes flicked to his wound once more. She flinched, covering her eyes in shame. What had she been thinking, bursting into the room like that?

A rustle followed by footsteps tapping against the gold tile made her freeze. The air seemed to thicken around her as Aurelius closed the distance between them. “Please, don’t blame yourself. It was an accident. Of course, you need the letter from your sister. How is she?”

Her breath caught as she looked up at him, noticing again his strong jaw and smooth, rich skin with those piercing blue eyes. The air vibrated between them while tiny dragons seemed to flutter within her. “She seems to be doing well. Reading her letter was a comfort. She said directions for where to send the letter mysteriously arrived one day. You wouldn’t know anything about that, would you?”

The smile that creased his lips warmed her right down to her toes. “I may know something about it. I thought you might need to hear from your sister for yourself. Since I know you were worried about her.” He really had done this for her!

She pressed a hand against her stomach as her body leaned toward his, their breath mingling.

Then he looked down and stepped back, breaking whatever had been brewing

between them. She straightened, confused, but not completely surprised. The man clearly didn't like to be touched.

"That must be the letter from your sister." He indicated a small white rectangle upon the floor.

She nodded.

"Who knew that such a small piece of paper could cause such a scene?"

She chuckled, the tension from earlier seeping out of her. "My sister never knows the trouble she causes." Melora bent to retrieve the letter. As she stood, she took in the rest of the study. Instead of a classic wooden desk and chair, everything was golden, just as she had come to expect with the rest of the house. And were those paintbrushes? Their black brushes stood out upon the desk among all the gold.

"Do you paint?" She blurted, glancing toward him. Several awkward moments stretched between them, his expression so stricken she felt like she needed to make it right. "I'm sorry, it's none of my business what you do in your spare time."

He sighed and shook his head. "Melora, you needn't apologize, especially not for asking about me. I like that you care."

Her heart fluttered, and her eyes flew to his. Why would he care about what she thought of him?

"I just..." He pressed his lips together. "I'm not that good of an artist, but yes, I do paint."

She thought of that gallery filled with beautiful paintings. Were some of those his? "Will you teach me? I've never painted before." Her smile stretched across her face



as she thought of watching an artist at work.

His usually confident expression turned somehow bashful. “You want me to teach you to paint?” His eyes flicked nervously around the room. “I’m...I’m not exactly qualified.”

The more she thought about it, the more she warmed to the idea. She had never seen him look so vulnerable. “I’ve never painted anything before, so anything you know will be more than I know.”

“Never?”

“Never had the time or resources.”

Those blue eyes of his were suddenly so intent upon her that she felt like he was going to ignite her insides. “Well then, we’ll have to rectify that.” The smile he flashed her before turning to collect his supplies practically had her melting into a puddle on the floor.

### CHAPTER FOURTEEN

“N o one has ever asked me to teach art before.” Aurie said, still feeling uncertain about the whole situation as they sat in the sunlight, each with a golden easel Galen had set up for them. However, he was relieved that she wanted to do something other than clean.

Melora beamed, taking in a deep breath as she looked around. “It’s gorgeous out here, especially with that stunning view of the mountains. I can see why you enjoy living in this place.”

His stomach clenched as he gazed at her beautiful profile. The sunlight haloed her against the mountains. He did like it here, didn’t he? His eyes scanned their surroundings, taking it in with a new light. It really was beautiful. Resentment about losing his title and home had built up for so long that he’d blinded himself to the beauty surrounding him.

He sighed. She was right. He resolved to better appreciate the value of what he had.

She turned to look at him, her eyes meeting his as she grinned. “Definitely an image worth capturing.”

His lips pulled up. He couldn’t take his eyes off her. He loved the infectious joy she radiated from the simplest of things. “Yes, it is.”

She laughed and looked away, her coppery complexion deepening to a beautiful pink as she caught his double meaning. Focusing on her paintbrush, she turned toward her

blank canvas and held it aloft. “Tell me what I’m supposed to do.”

Without thinking, he reached toward her, a soft chuckle puffing out. “First lesson. Holding a paintbrush is not the same as holding your quill.” He froze as his fingers neared hers—much too close. He abruptly pulled back, as if he had been shocked. It would have served him right had he been struck by lightning. He’d almost forgotten his curse and was a breath away from turning her to gold.

His heart throbbed painfully as he took another step back. Instead of adjusting her fingers to stop them from pinching the bristles as he had nearly done, he picked up his own brush to show her. “See, you want to cradle it between your fingers so you don’t choke the bristles. This will give you a nice range of motion and allow you to make smooth strokes.”

She scrunched her face adorably as she focused on her brush, moving her fingers, attempting to copy his. She frowned. “My fingers feel so far away. How will I ever have any control?”

“Holding it this way allows fluid movements like this.” He carefully dipped his brush in his paint and demonstrated on his canvas, making broad strokes while capturing the mountains on the horizon.

When he glanced back at Melora, she was biting her lip in a most distracting way. She nodded, then attempted her own strokes, laughing as she got a feel for it.

As they continued to paint, he verbally corrected her grip and explained different motions for her to practice.

He was surprised by how much fun he had teaching her. She was an apt student, picking things up quickly and complimenting him frequently. Rarely had he received such praise, especially for his own amateurish art and novice teaching. He wasn’t

quite sure what to do with her words, but they made him feel confident and alive.

His father had always dismissed his painting as a hobby, insisting he focus on more important things. Aurie had been a lord—destined for greatness—until he wasn't. Banished to the middle of nowhere, and yet... Again, he focused on Melora and the beauty she had brought into his life.

Perhaps losing his station wasn't so bad, not with her by his side, reminding him to look around and find joy despite his circumstances.

He painted the sun radiating against the mountains, making everything glow just as she did.

“Aurelius, that's gorgeous!” She was suddenly behind him, studying first his painting, then the mountains. “How did you make them glow like that?” she gushed. “It's as if they've come to life! It's absolutely stunning... it reminds me of that painting in the gallery of the boy with the roses. It had a similar glow...” His hand stilled and he turned to look at her as she continued. “You didn't paint that image in the gallery, did you? Is that why you insisted it was mediocre?”

His jaw went slack, and he was unable to formulate any words. How had she figured it out? A slight trembling built within him, spreading to his hands. He put his paintbrush down before she could notice.

“I haven't the slightest idea why you insist on calling your work mediocre. Your paintings are exquisite, with such a distinctive style.”

“No, no,” he sputtered. “You saw the paintings done by the masters. I can only dream of being that good. My paintings pale in comparison.”

She met his gaze, her expression firm and serious. “Aurelius, I don't know how to tell

you this, and I'm afraid it might make that already huge ego of yours grow to ridiculous proportions, but I feel that I must inform you. You are an amazing artist and teacher. Your work belongs among the greats."

His insides warmed, and his lips parted. Was she right? He looked down at his canvas. Were his paintings better than he gave himself credit for? While he would never presume to compare himself to the greats, the fact that she did warmed him straight through, as if a cozy dragon fire had been lit within. As he began to consider that perhaps he was a good artist, his eyes skimmed over all the places where he could see his mistakes.

No. No, she was wrong. His head shook of its own accord. While her words were well intended, she was no expert. However, her painting was pretty good for a beginner.

Quite suddenly, something wet brushed against his cheek. His eyes widened. He blinked and backed away as his hand instinctually rose toward his face.

Melora's tinkling laughter met his ears. "Oops. I believe you got a little something right there." Holding back a grin, she indicated her own cheek. She looked even more radiant with barely suppressed giggles bubbling inside of her.

Blood rushed into his ears, and his heart thudded with a bit of fear mingled with relief. She hadn't turned to gold. He wiped the dab of paint off his face. With difficulty, he found his voice. "What was that for?"

She shrugged, looking coy with her pert little nose stuck up in the air. He was thankful she hadn't seemed to notice that the dark yellow paint she had dabbed on him had changed to gold. "You were looking entirely too intense, studying your art. Besides, if I recall correctly, you told me once that it was important to have fun in life, to find a hobby, and I have to agree. My sister and I always tried to make our

mundane tasks fun. It made all the difference.”

Without thinking, he took his own brush and dusted a streak of blue across that cute nose of hers, careful not to touch her in any other way.

“Oh, now you’ve done it!” Her eyes positively danced, glowing with delight as she came at him with her own brush once more.

“Melora, don’t.” He backed up, holding his paintbrush between them for protection, his heart thudding. He shouldn’t have followed that impulse. Much as he wanted to give in to the chase and simply play, fear for her overrode all else. He must not endanger her any further. “Please, don’t touch me.” He tried to put as much seriousness as he could muster behind his words.

Her brush tickled across his knuckles.

“I’m serious Melora! Stay back. I’m dangerous.”

Her laughter cut off as she froze. Confusion furrowed her brow. “Wh-what do you mean? How can you be dangerous?” Her voice still held half a laugh. “I can see why some might call your handsome looks dangerous, but I don’t think that makes you a threat—other than to unsuspecting females.” She lowered her voice conspiratorially. “Don’t worry, I’m not scared of you.”

He swallowed. She should be. He hadn’t meant to tell her, fearing she’d hate him for it. He couldn’t stand to lose what they had. And yet, it had become impossible to remain silent. Melora had to know the truth for her own safety. Yet he wasn’t certain he was ready to tell her—at least not all of it.

“You must understand! You must keep your distance from me, because I’m cursed.” It was the first time he’d called the golden touch a curse out loud, but in this moment,

there was no other word for it. He would never be able to touch her as he desired. “I kill anything I touch.”

She pressed her hand against her heart, still clutching the paint brush. “Kill? What are you saying? That can’t be right. You have to touch things to live.”

He shifted, uncomfortable with the reality of what she was saying. While he liked to pretend otherwise, he missed human touch more than he’d realized. Unfortunately, he hadn’t seen the full implications of the “gift” the dragon had given him until it was too late.

“I can touch non-living things just fine. It’s the animals and humans that present a problem. I never want to do anything that could hurt you. That’s why I decided to help—” He snapped his mouth shut. He’d already said too much. He definitely couldn’t tell her about being a dragon as well. He rubbed a hand across his jaw and lips. One secret was enough for today.

“You can obviously touch yourself.” She folded her arms and looked pointedly at his hand. “What about food? You seem to eat alright. You don’t poison it when you touch it, do you? Are you immune?”

“Something like that. I can eat just fine, so long as I use utensils.” He desperately needed to turn this conversation away from him and onto something else. “Now that we have that settled, can I count on you not to touch me?” He attempted a light joke to break the tension: “I know I’m irresistible, but your safety is my top priority.”

She snickered, her uncertainty melting away, just as he’d hoped. She wiped her paintbrush down his face.

“Melora!”

She laughed. "What? I didn't touch you." She turned and hurried back to her canvas, acting as if nothing had occurred.

His lips twitched upward. What was he going to do with this woman? How could he go on if he couldn't bestow the simplest of touches upon her? He feared he wouldn't be able to resist. He must redouble his efforts to rid himself of this terrible curse.



### CHAPTER FIFTEEN

M elora was surprised at how much fun she'd had painting and teasing Aurelius. She'd originally thought he was too self-absorbed, but seeing his humility about his amazing talent, she knew she'd gotten it wrong. She was shocked to realize that he genuinely didn't see the value of his art. She couldn't explain it, but his paintings moved her more than any of the others he'd shown her. Perhaps his seemingly pompous attitude was covering something else.

She looked out her window at the golden foliage and the very mountains they had painted, wondering what had happened to make him so afraid to share his gifts with the world. Had someone belittled him just as her father had done to her? Perhaps they were more alike than she'd originally thought.

She smiled as she remembered their time together that afternoon. She couldn't recall the last time she'd had so much fun. A sigh puffed out her lips. She was quite shocked at how well her own painting had turned out. He was a good teacher. She'd never had time for such things before, and certainly never considered herself artistic, but Aurelius insisted she was a natural. Recalling his words sent a little thrill through her once more.

Perhaps her time here wouldn't be as bad as she'd thought.

Except... there was the matter of his curse. She shivered and wrapped her arms around herself. His touch was deadly? She couldn't quite believe it. What kind of curse made someone's touch deadly? The only thing she could think was that his touch was somehow poisonous. As far as she could tell, he seemed able to touch

regular objects—his paintbrush, the utensils, the entire manor... Unfortunately, if what he said was true, he was unable to receive any physical touch. How long had he been cursed like this? She couldn't imagine going for a long period of time without human contact. Her heart ached for him.

She awoke the next morning to sunlight dancing around her, feeling far more content and relaxed than she ever remembered feeling. This bed was more comfortable than any she'd ever owned. She was usually tense and on edge, waiting for Papa to explode, anxious to keep herself and her sister safe. But here, she had nothing to fear. Even Dragon had turned out to be a big sweetie under that terrifying exterior.

As she stretched and extracted herself from her warm bed, she noticed a vase of flowers twinkling upon the small end table. She moved toward them and touched the golden roses gently, a small smile pulling at her lips. They had to be from Aurelius. No one had ever given her anything so exquisite before—there was the golden jerkin Aurelius had given her, but that was more to protect her modesty than because he'd wanted to give her something nice. A glint upon the table drew her attention to a note written on golden paper. She chuckled and picked it up—why was everything about him always gold?

I quite enjoyed our time together yesterday. Nothing would be more delightful than to spend more time with you. If you are amenable, I would love to properly show you my mother's rose garden. I'll be waiting for your response when you wake.

Yours, Aurelius

P.S. I promise I won't steal anything.

Something fluttered inside her, warming her down to her toes as she chuckled softly over his subtle reference to when they had met in the garden. Unfortunately for him, that meeting had been nearly as awkward as their first—yet here she was, longing to

see him again more than she'd ever longed to do anything before.

She pressed the letter against her heart, and leaned over to smell the roses, heady with her feelings and not really thinking—golden roses would certainly smell like metal. She was pleasantly surprised when the most exquisite, sweet floral smell filled her senses. She blinked and smelled them again, just to be certain. The fact that the golden roses seemed to be living only made her smile harder. She rubbed a hand over her face in an attempt to fight these rising feelings. She couldn't forget the curse he had mentioned the day before.

She reread the letter, this time noticing its last line. He was waiting for a response. Perhaps she should tell him in person. Was he even now waiting at the bottom of the stairs? Rushing over to the wardrobe, she pulled out her only dress, wishing she'd brought something else to wear, perhaps something as lovely as the dancing dress Lyra had yearned for.

She shook her head and pulled on her muslin underdress, followed by her blue overdress, tying it in front. It was worn and faded with time. Reality couldn't be wished away. She would just have to make the best of her situation, as she always did. It wasn't as if he'd ever commented upon her simple attire.

Once she was dressed, the long golden jerkin seemed to wink at her from the wardrobe. She ran a hand down the golden fabric and gave into the impulse to put it on once again. Ever since receiving the garment, she couldn't help but want to wear it every chance she got, even though it surely made her own dress look cheap in comparison.

A urelius was waiting for her at the base of the stairs—all in gold as usual: a golden short-sleeved tunic with another long sleeveless jerkin flowing over it, decorated with intricate golden embroidery. His trousers somehow gleamed a darker gold.

Though she had initially been annoyed with the constant flaunting of his wealth, she was beginning to see the man beneath the golden facade.

A sigh puffed out her lips at the sight of him, and her stomach twisted. He was far too handsome for his own good. She couldn't deny how the color complimented his skin. She also couldn't hide her smile as she descended the stairs, eager to spend more time with him. She hoped this outing would be an extension of the day before. It'd been a long time since she'd had so much fun. She yearned to reach out and take his hand...but a sudden pain twisted her gut—he could not touch her.

What must it be like to never again touch another person? However did he manage if he couldn't even take her hand... she suddenly froze on the second-to-last step as she began to piece together his actions during their first meeting.

“Your handkerchief! It was the curse!” He hadn't meant to offend her at all. He'd merely been trying to come up with a solution to escorting her without touching her. She bit her lip and clutched the buttery fabric of the golden jerkin he'd given her, as everything she thought she knew about this man began shifting.

He tilted his head and gave her a funny look. “My handkerchief?” Confusing her meaning, he pulled out another golden handkerchief, bowed, and held it out to her. “As requested, my lady.”

Her stomach danced as she chuckled and grasped it in her hand. He didn't let go.

“Thank you.” Why did her voice sound breathless? She never sounded breathless!

“Would you like me to escort you? I cannot do it properly, but if you are amenable, we can use this fine fabric.”

She pressed her lips together and glanced away from his intense gaze. “I'd like that.”

He gestured with his free hand and led her outside, holding the door open like a true gentleman.

Her fingers kept hold of the golden fabric as they walked down the mosaic-tiled pathway. She longed to actually hold his hand but now understood why she couldn't. Not that someone like her would ever end up with someone like him. She was fooling herself if she thought that anything real could come from this... whatever this was. But it was nice imagining for a moment that they could be something more.

He led her under an archway with roses climbing up its sides, entering a courtyard of sorts with a fountain in the center. Golden roses were everywhere. Across from where they stood, there was a trellis covered in roses with golden benches on either side. She gasped in delight. "This is where we met—for the second time."

He chuckled. "Yes, I fear I made rather a muddle of things. Both times. I was quite distracted by your beauty."

She looked away from his intense gaze, letting the handkerchief slip from her fingers as she wandered through the captivating garden. His words meant little—many men admired her beauty, but few truly saw her. Pausing, she traced the delicate golden petal of a large rose.

Why had he brought her here? Was he trying to teach her something? "Is this where my father stole a rose?" she asked.

The atmosphere suddenly felt cold and uncomfortable. "Yes."

She glanced at Aurelius. His arms were folded across his broad chest, his expression intense. "But that's not why I brought you here."

She swallowed, her throat feeling dry, "It's not?" Where did that high breathy voice

come from? She cleared her throat.

“No. I apologize. I hadn’t considered that bringing you here might bring up painful memories. I thought to take you to a place as lovely as yourself, not that anything can compare, but...”

She sighed and turned back toward the roses. She had hoped he was different but he was just like the other men she’d known—so blinded by her beauty that he could see nothing else.

He let out a low groan, drawing her attention back toward him. “Have I inserted my foot in my mouth again? I always seem to do so in your presence. Do you not like compliments? I could shower you with gifts instead... judging by your past circumstances, I doubt you’ve had many of those before.”

Her breath hitched. “How would you know anything about my circumstances?”

He gave her a sidelong look. “I escorted you home after that incident with your horrible fiancée.” He stepped toward her, making her heart practically leap out of her chest. “Don’t tell me you forgot. I did rescue you.”

She sputtered a laugh. “Rescue me? I thought you ungentlemanly, refusing to help me gather or carry my things and not even deigning to touch...” Her voice trailed off and he raised his eyebrows, making her want to give him a good shove, but she refrained.

“I wish I could have helped you with your things, and I’d never wished to allow someone the simple gesture of holding my arm as much as I wished you could. But as I told you yesterday, I’m afraid that my touch has been rendered deadly.”

She clutched her fingers together to keep from doing anything stupid as her heart took a wild, galloping journey. He was just a flirt, she reminded herself. She refused to get

her hopes up only to get hurt—as she had been in the past. She couldn't believe anything he... How did she even know there was a curse?

He leaned down to pick the golden rose she had been inspecting—it broke from its stem with a brittle snap before he offered it to her. “Roses were always my mother's favorite, and after I saw your expression when you first entered this garden, I knew that I needed to give you another rose. As many as you desire. I'm afraid that I scared you away the first time. I don't wish to do so again.”

Her heart became melty all over again. What was he doing to her? “Perhaps roses are becoming my favorite too, especially golden ones.” She couldn't stop her lips from turning up in a grin as she took the rose from him, careful not to touch his fingers. “Tell me about your mother. Does she live close?”

His expression fell, and he looked suddenly uncomfortable. He turned away and was silent for several long moments. “This manor was her inheritance. She gave it to me.” He reached out and brushed his fingers against a golden tree.

Melora held her breath as she waited for him to say more. He tapped his fist against the tree, then looked back toward her, his eyes full of sorrow. “She never liked the gold. Said the flowers had become tainted.”

She blinked and looked at the golden foliage all around them. Gold? Tainted? She shook her head. “How? I don't understand. I've never seen such gold before. It's like the garden is still living. The roses smell more lovely than any roses I've ever smelled before.”

He nodded. “You are correct. It is living metal. There aren't many other gardens with it. There is the fabled Forest of Abundance. It is said that the trees there are made of silver and gold with diamond flowers that bloom in the spring. Then of course, there are the golden apples of youth—though only the fruit of the tree is said to be golden.

My garden is the only one made entirely of gold.”

“Well, not entirely. I’ve seen some normal plants here and there, especially further out.”

“True.”

“I never really considered the fables to be real.” She took in the garden around her with new eyes. Golden roses cascaded everywhere, even the fountain in the middle was made entirely of the precious metal. “It really is quite stunning and unique.”

“Unfortunately, my mother didn’t see it that way.”

Melora stilled.

“I hoped it would make her happy, but I was wrong. She said she would rather have her son.”

His words only expanded the puzzle that was Aurelius. “Were you an only child?”

“Yes. She and I were pretty close at one time.”

She looked at the gleaming garden again, furrowing her brow. “So, was this garden created after you moved here? Did it take something away from you? Are you some kind of mage?”

Her mind began reeling with all the things he had told her.

“The curse! Did this garden give you the dangerous curse?” Was the garden even safe? Was it tainted in a more literal sense? She drew her arms around herself but didn’t want to let go of the rose he’d given her. Surely, he wouldn’t bring her here if



it was dangerous.

“In a way. I guess you could say that this garden is part of the curse.”

Part of the curse? “How can that be? A beautiful golden garden hardly seems to be a curse. It’s not dangerous is it?”

“No, it’s quite safe, but I’m afraid that my mother would have disagreed. It created the greed that led her to... her circumstances.” He shook his head as if shaking off unwanted memories. “Never mind all of that. Let’s speak of happier things. I hate to be the cause of the sparkle dimming from your eyes.”

He leaned toward her and carefully plucked a petal from the rose she was still holding, making her breath catch with his nearness. She held perfectly still. He pulled back and rubbed his thumb over the smooth gold. Why did the action make her heart race?

“Besides, I have a reputation to uphold. It would be a tragedy if you started associating me with dreary things instead of the impossibly charming man who bestows you with treasures.” He winked, then held up the petal. It glinted in the sunlight. “This garden may be exquisitely beautiful and unique, but I’m afraid it pales in comparison to you.”

She couldn’t stop the blush from staining her cheeks even as she choked back a laugh. “You are being ridiculous. My dress is old and worn, and besides... physical beauty fades.”

“Not yours. See, your beauty is more than skin deep. It comes from the person you are on the inside.”

Her lips parted, and her heart soared at his words.

“I mean, yes—” he continued, “you could wear a potato sack and still be the most exquisitely beautiful creature I’ve ever had the pleasure to encounter, but it’s your inner beauty that enchants me. It shines through your eyes. I want to know everything about you.”

“Aurelius—” she started, then floundered. It wasn’t often that she didn’t know what to say. Many people had told her she was beautiful before. However, no one had ever complimented her in such a way, acknowledging that she was more than her outward appearance.

“Please,” he said, “call me Aurie.”

“Aurie,” she echoed the name. It suited him... she couldn’t take her eyes off him. Her unruly brain seemed unable to form a decent response.

His eyes flicked toward her lips, and the air between them seemed heavy, sparking with invisible electricity. Was he going to kiss her? He was so close that she could feel the spice of his breath gently brushing against her face. They seemed to be drawing closer together.

Abruptly, he pressed his lips together and stepped back several paces, breathing heavily. “Forgive me. I’m afraid that you turn my head into mush. I nearly forgot myself.”

Melora caught her breath. She had forgotten herself, too! If his curse truly would kill her...!? At least someone had been thinking!

He turned away and headed down a pathway away from the rose garden. “Come, I have something to show you.” He looked over his shoulder. “I promise I’ll keep my hands to myself.”

\* \* \*

Aurie couldn't believe he had almost kissed her! What was he thinking?! His stomach clenched. He could not be so careless, especially not with sweet, trusting Melora who had unknowingly placed her life in his hands. Then, to make matters worse, he had brought up his mother. He silently berated himself for his mounting mistakes as he led Melora toward a carriage he'd had Galen, his loyal steward, pull up.

He'd come so close to revealing the extent of his curse. Under no circumstances could she discover what he had unintentionally done to his mother. She would be terrified of him and hate him for sure... and rightfully so. He was a bit terrified of his powers himself. She was just so blasted easy to talk to—it was easy to forget himself.

If only he hadn't asked for this cursed gift in the first place! He ran a hand across the back of his head. Gold was beginning to lose its shine. Perhaps it was just as tainted as his mother had said. But how to get rid of it? Surely, she was worth divesting himself of the golden touch.

He watched her twist the golden rose between her fingers as they walked, her expression contented. She'd probably never owned something so exquisite before, and now she had several. Would he lose his value to her if all the gold was stripped away? He could barely convince her of his worth now. Perhaps seeing his land would help her to understand all he had to offer her. While he may not have much without his gold, he was beginning to be grateful for the home and land his mother had given him. And with Melora around, Everrose was actually beginning to feel like a home.

She slowed as they neared the carriage and turned toward him. "Is that carriage for us?"

He grinned and nodded, happy to be the cause of the surprised delight shining

through her expression. “My lady, your carriage awaits.” He struck an exaggerated bow, flicked out his ever-present jerkin in a mock courtly gesture, and waved toward the fancy carriage.

She giggled and curtsied before turning back toward their opulent ride. He watched her take in the intricate bars of gold swirling in a whimsical pattern around gilded seats. She bit her lip and looked at him as if seeking permission once more. Galen stepped down from the driver’s seat to help her in, taking her delicate hand in his. Aurie’s gut twisted as jealousy rose up. He longed to feel those slender fingers against his own.

He tucked his hands behind his back to keep from reaching out, and waited until everyone was safely out of his way before joining her in the carriage. “Do you like it?” he asked.

“Like it? Aurie, this is like a dream. I’ve never ridden in something so fancy. The design itself is gorgeous—and to have it made entirely of gold.” She shook her head in awe. “I feel like a princess in someone else’s fairytale.”

“Good. You deserve to be treated like a princess. However, I’m afraid I must inform you that this might be your very own fairytale.” He nodded for Galen to begin driving the carriage around the boundaries of his property.

She laughed, the sound warming him from the inside out. Such pleasure could feed his soul for years.

The carriage glided along the pathway through the sparkling golden trees and foliage, looking ethereal in their frozen beauty. Words passed between them with a rhythm that felt both new and familiar, shifting from playful banter to quiet revelations and stories.

As usual, Melora was easy to talk to, and Aurie found himself telling her of his childhood and how he ran through these very woods. Before long, he was even confiding about how he had always longed to make his father proud yet never seemed to succeed. Had he really told her all about his father? He was rarely this vulnerable. Normally he'd be terrified of rejection, but in her eyes there was nothing but acceptance.

She shared her own childhood adventures, many of which had been spent with her sister. As she recounted making a game of housekeeping and cooking the food before her papa came home, he was struck with how similar yet vastly different their childhoods were. It seemed that both of them had fathers who were impossible to please, yet he was grateful he'd never had to fear the wrath of his father the same way she had. He wished he could go back and protect little Melora from the man. He loved how she had been determined to find joy and happiness despite her difficult circumstances.

The more they spoke, the more fascinated he became with her, and the rest of the world around them seemed to fade away. He found himself memorizing the way her eyes shone when she was excited, and how her hands seemed to dance as she spoke.

As they were circling the boundary of his land, he heard a grunt, followed by a loud metallic clank. "What's that?"

Styx! The wolves had distracted him before he could finish fortifying the magical boundary. How could he have been so careless?

"Galen, stop the carriage!"

They'd traveled far from the gleaming heart of Everrose where he had transformed most of the forest into shimmering gold. This distant part of the forest remained largely untouched by his gift—or curse—since he rarely ventured so far from home.

Except to visit the sanctuary he was taking her to now. This place he knew intimately; a secluded spot near the fence line that offered a serene view, with a bench where he would often retreat to gather his thoughts. It had become something of a haven since the gold touch changed his life. Though no one else knew of its existence, anyone who stumbled upon it would be drawn to the scattered golden treasures he had absentmindedly created during his contemplative visits.

He left the carriage, heedless of Melora, and hurried to the place that had become an oasis to him. Someone was stealing from him again! He cursed himself as he calculated the last time he'd strengthened the boundary. It had been far too long. He couldn't allow greed to sweep through the village once more.

After he'd given gold items to those in need, rumors had abounded. A few men had banded together and set out to find the man with the gold, hoping to pilfer more. When his gilded manor was discovered, they'd determined to steal it at any cost. Aurie had been forced to defend his home, and the attack had nearly killed him. Thankfully, his dragon form had saved him. The magical boundary he'd placed afterward, along with new rumors of a dangerous dragon, had protected him ever since.

He longed to be a dragon right now to intimidate the thief and to use his magic to strengthen the boundary. He was determined to protect Melora at all costs. As he neared the golden oasis, he heard the scamper of feet and the heavy breathing of the intruder.

"What are you doing on my land, stealing my gold?!" he demanded in the most aggressive voice he could muster—which wasn't nearly as intimidating as when he was a dragon.

He clenched his hands together to ensure that his anger didn't get the best of him. Even a thief didn't deserve to be turned into solid gold. He spied a pair of shoes

behind some golden shrubs. “Come out and face me like a man!”

Except it wasn't a man. The figure who emerged from the bushes trembling with fear was a boy.

### CHAPTER SIXTEEN

What was happening? Melora stood up as Aurelius suddenly darted from the carriage, heading off into the woods. She hurried after him. There was no way she was staying behind. The more her fondness for him grew, the more desperate she became to learn everything about him. And if he was hiding something—if this had something to do with the curse, she needed to know.

She hadn't gone far before she noticed that the golden forest which mostly surrounded Everrose also extended to this small section of the wood.

Aurelius's harsh voice stopped her cold, making her heart stutter as he accused someone of trespassing and stealing, then demanded he come out and face him like a man. She had never heard his voice sound so harsh. Her stomach clenched. Had he seen her father when he'd stolen from him? Had he been the one to send Dragon? Would he call for Dragon now?

She carefully made her way toward Aurelius and the alleged thief, except it wasn't a dangerous man as she'd feared—it was a young boy.

The small boy held out a trembling hand clutching a golden branch toward Aurelius, his expression contrite. "I-I'm sorry sir. We were hungry. I thought maybe a bit of this gold could help us pay taxes. I heard there was some in the Tameion Wood and thought it was just part of the forest. I didn't realize it belonged to anyone." His gaunt cheeks turned red as he attempted to look strong. Melora's heart went out to the poor lad; surely there was plenty of gold to help his plight.



Aurelius stood silent for several long moments, his large form looming over the boy. “You assumed a forest made entirely of gold on the far side of a fence you had to climb didn’t belong to anyone? I find that difficult to believe.”

The boy hung his head in shame as he scuffed the dirt with the toe of his tattered shoe. His trousers, several inches too short, exposed skinny ankles streaked with dust.

Melora chewed her lip. What would he do to the boy?

“What of your family? Do they know where you are?” Aurelius asked.

The boy shook his head, his blond hair falling into his eyes. “Papa says not to venture into the woods too far because of the dragon. I saw this gold nice and close and thought I could grab it fast before the dragon came. Is it true? Is there a dragon?” His eyes suddenly brightened, and he looked hopeful as he gazed up at Aurelius.

“Your Papa is correct.” Aurelius’s voice was firm but gentle. “A dragon does reside in these parts, and he most definitely does not take kindly to people stealing his gold.”

Was Aurelius trying to protect the boy from the wrath of Dragon? Melora wondered, surreptitiously searching the sky.

The boy’s eyes stretched wide, as if he were gazing at the most terrifying yet awe-inspiring treasure. “Really?”

“Yes. Now, what do you say about returning to your family?”

He turned away and fidgeted. “I’m afraid I’ll disappoint them.”

Melora found herself drawing closer to the boy and couldn’t help the words that

popped from her mouth. “What would they have to be disappointed about? I think you made a stalwart, though misguided, effort to help.” While she didn’t agree with stealing, the boy was obviously desperate. Surely Aurelius would offer some kind of help.

Aurelius nodded his head in agreement with her words even as his eyes narrowed at her presence. She raised her eyebrows and tilted her head in defiance. She had every right to be here.

The boy twisted his foot in the dirt. His shoulders slumped. “You don’t understand. I was supposed to help make money, but I failed. My bow broke and I didn’t know what else to do.” He sniffed, “I-I am sorry. I shouldn’t have tried to take what wasn’t mine.”

Aurelius nodded sagely. “No, you should not have. However, I’m certain that your family will be glad to know you are safe.” He gestured toward their carriage through the trees. “I imagine that you have been gone for a while; they are probably worried. Let’s get you home.”

The boy chewed his lip, gave one last longing look at the golden forest, then followed them to the carriage.

\* \* \*

Aurie didn’t know what to think of the young would-be-thief. On the one hand, he knew how enticing gold was, and he understood how detrimental the high taxes were to the people. That had been one of the many things he’d disagreed with King Iver about, something that had probably cost him his title. However, that didn’t negate the boy’s actions. At such a young age, he needed to learn that stealing was wrong no matter the circumstances. There were other ways to solve a problem. And, while he wanted to help the boy, he knew that he needed to tread carefully. Mountains of

unexpected gold, especially curious objects, would only make him and the boy's family a target.

Soon they arrived at the boy's home. He looked both eager to leave the carriage and stretch his legs and reluctant to face his family's possible disappointment. Aurie could understand that. He felt as though he had constantly faced his own father's disappointment. It never seemed like he could do anything right.

A woman spilled out of the house almost before they stopped, a babe on her hip and a little girl clutching her skirts, with two more young children following after her.

"Taren! Where have you been?!"

While his mother began to lecture him, Aurie couldn't help but notice a key figure missing...

"Where is Taren's father?" Perhaps he was still at work—and yet, looking at the condition of the cottage before him, something felt off. No father should allow his wife and young children to live in a house with a roof that looked like that.

The woman froze, seeming to notice them for the first time. Her pink skin paled. "Forgive me, your lordship. We meant you no harm. Taren is just a boy up to his tricks. I'll be sure to keep him away from your land, Sir. He must have gone exploring too far; you know how boys can be.

His heart clenched at the reminder of his stolen title. "I... I'm..." He cleared his throat. "I'm no lord. But we did find Taren trying to steal from my land."

She gasped, placing a hand to her heart, and tightened her grip on the babe in her arms as she looked down to scold the boy, "What were you thinking, Taren?! Stealing is wrong! You could have been punished, beaten and thrown in a cage like they did to

those poor fae! Then where would we be?”

Taren shifted, tears welling up in his eyes. “The roof is broke, and you said Lilly needed milk, and I’m supposed to be the man of the house now. I wanted to use my bow to get meat like a man, but it broke too.”

Aurie’s heart melted a little at his words. Though the boy was nearly as tall as his mother, he was far too young to be worried about such things.

Melora stepped in, placing a hand on the boy’s shoulder. “Taren knows that it is wrong to steal, and he returned the item. I’m certain no further punishment is needed.” She gave the boy a stern but warm look—an expression a mother would give her child.

Something within Aurie shifted; she would make a wonderful mother someday to some lucky man’s children. Except... why did the children he imagined her having possess her enchanting eyes and his dark head of curls?

“However,” Melora continued, “we would like to offer our help.”

Aurie’s stomach was still swooping as he blinked back the distracting mental images of children startlingly similar to the beauty before him. With some effort, he reined his mind back to the present. Why had she said that?

“We would?” He swallowed. How exactly could he help? Didn’t she remember his warning that his touch was dangerous? Had she not believed him? Turning this sorry cottage to gold would help no one, least of all this poor family. They didn’t want unscrupulous gold-seekers to descend upon them.

“Yes. I had to help my father thatch our roof when it began to leak a few springs ago—I know what I’m doing.” Melora spoke with a firmness that allowed no

arguments, aiming her intense, no-nonsense expression his way. He felt a sinking sensation in his stomach. Was she trying to humiliate him? He could not see this ending well, but he also knew that he would do anything for this woman, including humiliate himself.

She called for Galen to come help them and pushed toward the cottage. “Now, will you show me your roof?”

It wasn’t long before Aurie found himself standing uselessly to one side of the house while Galen climbed on the roof as Melora gave him instructions. He hadn’t even been able to purchase new thatching for fear of what would happen if he touched it—Galen had done all the work. He still felt the tension radiating from her when he also refused to get on the roof or touch the thatching. His shoulders slumped.

“Are you going to help us?” Taren asked, looking up at him with wide, innocent eyes.

He shoved his hands in his pockets, a sharp pain piercing his heart. What kind of example of manhood was he being? He felt even more worthless after watching the boy’s mother take care of her five children. “I’m no good at building things,” he lied. “I paid for all of the materials, and I’ll send my cook around with some food later.”

Taren’s eyes widened further. “Will there be cake?”

Aurie smiled. “I think I can make that happen.”

Mrs. Helen, Taren’s mother, who had been listening nearby, stepped in. “Oh no, we wouldn’t want to inconvenience you, sir. We’ll be just fine without your fancy things.” There was a bite behind her polite words. She gave Taren a look, and he scurried off to continue helping with the roof. She then bounced the fussy babe in her arms. “It must be nice, having all that wealth. No need to worry about menial tasks.”

Aurie's throat felt tight, and for once he found himself wishing he could perform such menial tasks. Melora had even recruited several of the children to help—and yet here he was, standing uselessly by; forced to stay back for fear of touching something.

The baby began fussing, and Mrs. Helen excused herself before Aurie could think of something to say—not that there was anything to say.

She was correct. He was useless.

His fingers curled, reminding him that he had been the one to seek out the golden touch in the first place, all because of his dissatisfaction with his circumstances. And now here he was, with the power to make anything into gold—and still he was dissatisfied. The dragon was right. He had a lot to learn.

“Pwetty.” He looked down to find the little girl who'd been clutching her mother's skirts still standing next to him, sucking her thumb. A worn stuffed bunny was clutched in her arms. She was pointing at his golden attire.

“You like this?” He asked, shaking his long jerkin.

Her eyes brightened, and she nodded vigorously as she took a small step closer. She popped her thumb out of her mouth long enough to ask, “Awe you a pwince?”

Smiling, he shook his head and crouched down to her level. “No, I'm afraid I'm just a normal man.” He leaned in. “I'll tell you a secret, though. I'm not even a lord anymore. King Iver doesn't like me much.” He winced. He probably shouldn't have said that.

“He doesn't wike us either,” she confided in a loud whisper. “Mama says he stole all our money. Stealing is bad.”

Aurie nodded seriously. Looking into the eyes of this innocent child, he got a wild, crazy idea. Perhaps there was something he could do. It would have to be small enough not to raise suspicion or cause a craze, but enough to help this family. He would have to be careful that no one noticed. His eyes flicked to their mother, who was anxiously watching the older children help. Though she wouldn't take his money or a handout of provisions, he could leave her with a little something. She just didn't have to know it was from him.

“Maybe I can help you. Do you have anything that you'd like to become gold?”

Her eyes seemed to become bigger than a drachma as her lips paused their sucking. She held out the stuffed bunny she had been clutching.

He shook his head. She definitely would not appreciate her favorite bunny being turned into hard gold. It would no longer be the item of comfort it was now. He thought for a moment. “What about a rock?” He gestured toward a pile of rocks nearby. A natural item would be far less suspicious as gold than a unique object.

She hurried to the pile he'd indicated and came back with a rock clutched in each hand, her bunny still pinched under her arm and her thumb inserted back into her mouth. He gestured for her to put them on the ground and back up.

After scanning the area to make certain everyone was properly occupied, he reached down and touched first one, then the other. Gold sparked and quickly encompassed each stone.

She gasped, then clapped her hands in delight. “Pwetty! Again! Again!” She rushed back over to collect more rocks, setting them down in front of him once more.

No one seemed to be paying them any mind, so he turned a few more to gold for her, enjoying her absolute delight every time. While he would have been glad to continue

indefinitely in order to absorb her adorable wonder, he knew they had to stop. Mrs. Helen would not accept the gold if there was too much, and each modest-sized rock was now worth a great deal. Hopefully it would help them in ways he physically could not.

The little girl collected a handful of her “pwetties” and rushed off to share them with her mother, as he had encouraged her to do. He casually pushed the rest of them near the house where they would hopefully be discovered later.

Taking note of the delighted child skipping toward her mother, Melora turned to look at him, a question in her eyes.

Just then, Galen climbed off the roof and wiped his hands on his trousers. “That should do it,” he told Mrs. Helen, who looked to be on the verge of tears as she took in the roof, her eyes flicking from Galen to Melora in thanks.

Again, Aurie wished he had been able to help the way Melora had. His paltry assistance felt small in comparison.

His eyes found Melora’s. She had seen their need and immediately jumped in, ready to do what was necessary and directing everyone to make it happen. Had anyone ever been so beautiful? This woman truly was a wonder.

As they climbed back into the carriage and Galen helped Melora in once more, Aurie felt another pang of jealousy. All the money in the world wouldn’t allow him to touch her, and right now he’d trade all of his golden possessions to offer her this simple gesture his steward was able to do without hesitation. A common courtesy he no longer had.

His eyes flicked toward the cottage and the newly repaired roof—something he couldn’t even lend a hand with—all because of his own foolishness and greed. If only



he'd never made that deal with the dragon! But then he would still be poor, and perhaps Melora never would have noticed him in the first place.

He sighed deeply as his thoughts spun round. Nothing he could do would undo the past.

“Aurie, what did you give that little girl? She looked absolutely delighted.” Her expression turned soft at the memory.

How would she look at him if she knew the truth? Perhaps he was just as arrogant as she had first believed. He shrugged dismissively. “Just a few pretty rocks.”

Her eyes sparkled. “Just pretty rocks or not, it seemed important to her.”

He rested his head in his hand—Oh, those eyes! He didn't deserve that sparkle. He'd been useless while his steward had been the one to save the day. All he'd been able to offer was a few rocks.

Useless.

Less than useless.

“I'm certain Taren's family appreciated your paying for the new roof. And I heard you offer to have Mrs. Calla send them some of her delicious food.”

He folded his arms moodily. He felt lower than a wingless dragon caught in a pit. “She didn't want my help. I did nothing. You are the one who deserves praise. You acted quickly and were able to give them the exact help they needed. You and Galen were the true heroes. Meanwhile, this blasted curse made me useless.”

She pressed her lips together, leaning away from him as the sparkle faded from her

eyes. She fell silent, probably because he was right. He was as useless as his father had always told him he would be.

What a joke his big romantic outing had turned out to be. Instead of showing her how much he had to offer, he'd succeeded only in proving just how worthless he was. She must hate him as much as he hated himself right now. His body trembled beneath his folded arms—and suddenly a new fear gripped him. He gritted his teeth as the golden flame on his chest pulsed and grew. The dragon within was trying to escape.

Styx!

How could he be so careless as to lose control of his emotions at a time like this? He knew what happened when he did. He had to contain it until Melora was no longer here to see.

He peered out of the carriage to see how close they were to home just as a sharp pain rippled down his body. There wasn't much time before the dragon would come out. Thankfully, he could see the spires of Everrose's turrets shining above the trees ahead. And still, he was afraid that he wouldn't have time.

His hands trembled. Would he need to abandon Melora and the carriage? Unable to help himself, he looked up toward her beautiful face. Her brows were etched with concern. Everything had started off so well—and for a moment, he'd had hope that maybe—but no. It had been a ridiculous dream. He would never be free from this curse. And even if he was, what made him think he would ever be worthy of this amazing woman? A beauty like her would never love a monster like him. Especially if she understood the truth of his curse.

“Are you quite well?”

He could barely stand her tender concern. He shook his head, unable to formulate

words as the dragon rippled just under his skin. Grimacing, he turned toward Galen and managed to grind out a single word, “Faster.”

Galen picked up the pace without question.

“Aurie? Aurelius! What’s going on? How can I help?” She hovered nearby, her hands uncertain.

He didn’t answer—he couldn’t, and even if he could, he wouldn’t know what to say.

They had nearly reached the manor when his vision began to blur and pain exploded down his back as spines threatened to burst through.

“Stop!”

He leapt out of the carriage before it even came to a complete stop and raced into the dark woods, hoping the forest would hide the truth from Melora.

\* \* \*

Melora blinked back the tears that began blurring her vision, staring dazedly in the direction Aurelius had bolted. Was he okay? Should she go after him?

No. His expression and body language said he didn’t want her. Her heart clenched. What had she done wrong? She hadn’t meant to offend him. Was he angry that she had insisted upon helping Taren’s family? She sniffed and squared her shoulders. If he was, then he wasn’t worth her time anyway. Serving others was in her nature. Oh, why did she care so much?

Her lips trembled. Unbidden, more tears skittered down her cheeks. He could barely bear to look at her. Of course he didn’t want her—any more than her own father

wanted her.

After allowing herself a small cry, she dashed away the tears and dried her face. Galen studiously pretended not to notice and quietly drove her the rest of the way to Everrose. The manor gleamed in the sinking sun, looking somehow foreboding now. So much for the romantic day she had imagined when she'd first received the roses.

### CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Hours had passed and there was no sign of Aurelius. Dragon, however, had finally made an appearance, looking just as grouchy as Melora felt.

“Don’t tell me you’re having a bad day too?” she asked, feeling sympathy.

You could say that. His voice boomed inside her head, sounding distinctly morose.

She huffed and flounced down upon a nearby chair, only to grimace. “Why must everything be made of gold? Didn’t anyone tell Aurelius that it makes the most useless furniture? Unless this is your decorating prowess?” Folding her arms, she narrowed her eyes at Dragon, who was contentedly curled up on the rug beside the fireplace like a gigantic dog.

Gold does, indeed, make the most useless furniture. Come, you may sit against me where you can get comfortable.

She hesitated a moment, then gave in to her need for the comfort of physical touch, moving to nestle into his side. Those liquid blue eyes of his made her feel safe and cherished.

The tears she’d barely been holding at bay came spilling out in wrenching sobs, her shoulders heaving. “I ruined everything, Dragon. He... he and I...” More sobs choked her words. She didn’t even know how to formulate her thoughts into words, how to express the pain she was feeling. This was far worse than when her father rejected her. She’d grown used to that.

But with Aurie, she'd allowed herself to hope.

A hope that was destroying her now.

Without a word, Dragon wrapped his wing around her, cocooning her in his comforting embrace. She pressed her face against his smooth scales, allowing the pain to seep out of her. "I was just trying to help that family, so I offered to help mend the roof." A hiccup interrupted her words. "How was I to know his curse extended to touching inanimate objects? I'm just so, so foolish. I should have known it was a bad idea, but I insisted we do it. I even recruited Galen to help. But that only made things worse for him." More tears spilled forth.

"He didn't want my help. No one ever wants me. My looks are the only valuable thing about me."

I wish you would not speak of my friend Melora that way. Your value extends far beyond your looks. Your kindness and love shine through in everything you do. Of course you are wanted. What would that family have done without you? It sounds to me like you were their hero today. His rough voice was somehow soothing.

She blinked up at him through wet lashes, taking in sharp, short breaths. "You really think so?"

I know so. There was no way you could have known the full extent of Aurelius's curse. He hadn't told you.

She shook her head and buried her face back into his scales. "You don't understand, Dragon. You didn't see him. He must hate me. He wouldn't even look at me. He was so angry he dashed away before we had even reached Everrose." It would seem that her well of tears wasn't quite as dry as she'd thought, as even more came rolling down her cheeks, the large drops splashing against Dragon.

She snuggled into his embrace, feeling the rhythm of his breathing. As the sobs slowed, she began syncing her breath with his.

I doubt he hates you. I've known him my whole life and... I'm quite certain that he... he cares a great deal for you. Dragon nudged her shoulder softly with his head. Surely, he was just as worried about what you thought of him as you were about what he thought of you. And once he has made his peace with things, he will come back and work things out with you. That is... if you still want him to. Do you? He seemed to swallow. Do you want to work things out with him? How do you feel about him? Could a dragon's words sound hesitant?

She swallowed and pulled back to really contemplate his question. How did she feel about him? She lightly traced the golden flame upon Dragon's chest. "When I first met Aurelius and he refused to help me, I thought he was a bit of a privileged snob, too arrogant for the likes of me. But then I got to know the man behind the flashy golden attire." She gave a half-smile. "I'm afraid I did the very thing I accused him of doing; I judged him on his outward appearance instead of who he was underneath."

And now what do you think? Dragon's usually deep, resounding voice almost sounded breathy.

Her eyes grew distant. "I think he's hiding behind a wall as gilded as the clothing he wears, afraid to be his true self. Under his facade, he's sweet and thoughtful and a rather talented artist, though he's too humble to really consider he has any kind of a gift. Which was oddly unexpected. If he truly was as arrogant as I first thought, he'd be crowing about his talent to anyone and everyone—and yet he insists that his paintings are worthless..."

She shook her head, her stomach dropping again as her reality descended.

"Not that it matters. Who am I to penetrate those gilded walls of his? I'm just a poor

nobody. He deserves someone so much better than me, someone who helps him see who he truly is, not someone who embarrasses him in front of others. Not someone who has no value or standing in society.” Her shoulders slumped as more tears dampened her cheeks. If she had never let that blasted hope in, she wouldn’t be feeling this way now.

Dragon nudged her shoulder again and rested his head against her. She wrapped her arms around his neck, pressing her moist cheek against his scales.

Melora, you are the most wonderful, thoughtful, hardworking, loving person I know. Don’t let anyone tell you differently. You matter. You are more than needed, you are necessary! I selfishly brought you here with me because I needed you.

She choked on a laugh. “I doubt it. How would you even know? You hardly know me.”

I wouldn’t be too sure. He winked at her with one large reptilian eye, lightening her mood.

She hugged his neck, thankful to have him to lean on. “Well, I’m glad I could be of service... Since you won’t let me polish your gold.”

His rich laugh rumbled inside of her head, warming her down to her toes.

\* \* \*

A urie felt like Vilastoria’s biggest heel for making Melora cry like that. She had to know that his running had nothing to do with her and everything to do with him. But how could he tell her that when he was stuck as a dragon again? Hopefully the curse wouldn’t trap him for too long this time. His heart ached for her. From this moment forward, he vowed that she would never have to feel so alone again. The burdens of



the world did not need to weigh upon her shoulders alone.

Three days passed, and still he couldn't turn back into a human. On the one hand, he longed to be human again and defend himself—to let her know how much he wanted her, how much he was beginning to value her. The very thought of life without her sent a panic through him unlike anything he had ever known. And yet, he was the one who had brought those tears to her eyes. He was the one who was unworthy of her—not the other way around.

How could he face her after what he had done? He hadn't meant to hurt her, but the shame of his curse had been too great. Worse still, the dragon had broken through while she was with him, and he'd been unable to control it—proving that he was nothing but the privileged, arrogant snob she had originally seen. He didn't deserve such a beautiful, kind, and loving woman—someone who showed concern for him, when she deserved the recognition for all her hard work. No. He didn't deserve any love at all. His mother's fate proved that. The memory of her contorted face mocked him. But he was too selfish to break the curse even for his own mother. How had his love of money and wealth become stronger than his love for her?

No wonder he had become a monster.

\* \* \*

N early a week passed without any sign of Aurelius, and Melora was beginning to worry. Dragon had lamented that Aurelius was called away to town on urgent financial business, but she didn't believe it.

Either her actions had affected him more than she realized, or something was wrong. He hadn't been well when he ran off, and she wished she could put her anxiety to rest. She longed for an opportunity to talk with him about what had happened and apologize for hurting him. She must explain; he had to know that she honestly hadn't

realized that he would be unable to help more.

Each time she mulled over their day at the cottage, she was impressed with how Aurie had interacted with Taren's little sister. She thought she'd seen the glint of gold in the girl's hands. Obviously, he had helped in his own way.

She knocked on the door to his room for what felt like the thousandth time over the past several days. Just like every other time, silence met her insistent knock. He still seemed to be gone. Where was he? Where would he go?

As she thought back to all the things they had talked about, she realized she still knew little of his family. His father had passed away less than a year ago, but he was strangely tight-lipped about his mother. Perhaps he was visiting her?

She knocked again, only to be met with echoing silence. After an extended wait, she gave up on his door and began searching the manor. She opened each and every door save the one Dragon had insisted she never open. Though she doubted that Aurie would be hiding in one of the bedrooms, she had to do something, or she might just lose her mind.

When she reached the stairs leading up to Dragon's turret, she paused. He had been a constant companion since Aurelius's disappearance, and a balm to her hurting heart. Perhaps he would have news.

She soon found Dragon out in the gardens, stretching his wings and blowing smoke as he flew in tight circles.

"What do you have to be grouchy about?" she called to him.

Upon hearing her, he immediately landed and shook out his wings, his reptilian brow furrowed adorably.

“It’s a beautiful day,” she said. “Is the wind poor for flying?”

No. But seeing you has already brightened my morning.

She chuckled. “Are you sure I haven’t become an annoyance?”

Melora, you could never become an annoyance, no matter how hard you tried. Though I do appreciate that you took my advice and stopped trying to clean everything. Lyra says you only clean your room.

“Well, I was taught to clean up after myself. I’m not used to having servants.”

Have you been enjoying your project?

She nodded. After Aurelius vanished, she’d asked Dragon for some fabric to begin making another dress. He’d insisted upon giving her the most luxurious fabric along with the serviceable fabric she’d requested. She needed something to keep her mind off things, and Dragon seemed satisfied that she was doing something for enjoyment. She had to admit, if she hadn’t been so stressed about Aurie, she would have enjoyed all this time to herself and hours spent talking to Dragon. He proved to be an enjoyable companion.

“I know I already asked you, but is there any news of Aurie?”

Dragon huffed in agitation, smoke puffing from his mouth.

Melora took a step backwards, her heartbeat picking up. Rarely did she see him so volatile; she often forgot that he was a dangerous dragon. He was usually more careful around her. Perhaps she ought to give him some space.

Why would you still want to speak with him anyway? After he left you and made you

cry like that, I'd think you'd be glad he's gone.

She blinked. Dragon usually encouraged her to forgive Aurie, not the other way around. "I'll admit he was a bit of a jerk, but that doesn't mean I don't want to speak with him. I was at fault, too."

Dragon's uncanny blue eyes softened. You are far too kind. He doesn't deserve your forgiveness.

"No one truly deserves forgiveness, and yet the Great Creator offers it freely—and asks us to do the same, no matter what someone has done. Holding onto bitterness only harms my own heart. I choose to let go, not because they deserve it, but because I want peace."

Dragon narrowed his eyes and raised his head, shaking his wings. Melora took another step backwards, her heart fluttering far too fast. No matter what? His voice rang in her mind in a terrifying manner. Even your father? He practically sold you to that man and then gave you to me! Your suitor only saw you as property! I can only imagine what he would have done with you had he succeeded in marrying you.

"Yes. I forgive all of them. It's important to understand that forgiveness doesn't mean I condone their actions or that I'm saying what they did was okay. Quite the opposite. I'm just choosing to let go of the power they hold over me. Their actions can only harm me now if I keep holding on to them."

Dragon shook his large head. I don't see it that way. His voice rumbled in her mind. And if your father dares to ever come back, he'd better watch out! If you refuse to protect yourself, I will." Another puff of smoke curled out of his lips.

She sucked in a breath as a frightening thought struck her. "Dragon, you didn't—you wouldn't... Do you know what happened to Aurie? You didn't do anything to him

did you?” Sometimes she forgot just how dangerous he could be.

Dragon’s growl resonated through her mind and all around her. What difference does it make? I can’t bring him back, now can I?

Color drained from her face, and she covered her mouth to stifle a gasp. No! He couldn’t, he wouldn’t! Rarely had she seen Dragon so angry. “I-I have to go.” She turned toward the pathway leading back to Everrose.

Dragon grunted but made no move to stop her as her feet carried her faster and faster away from him, her heart thudding a frantic dance. She barely noticed the uncannily still forest around her. The flowers, leaves, and trees all standing frozen, like sentinels—watching her.

What was going on?

Had Dragon really done something to Aurie? Surely not.

And yet... it wasn’t like him to be so surly and evasive. Visions of their first meeting flew through her mind—the terrifying dragon that had emerged from the trees, standing larger than life in front of all of them.

Next, she remembered the moment she had nearly opened the forbidden door. He had been fiercely angry then. What was behind that door? Could it possibly contain the answers to Aurie’s disappearance? Before today, she would have said with absolute assurance that Dragon was safe and kind. There was no way he would hurt anyone despite his chilling appearance.

Now she couldn’t help but wonder: what secrets was he hiding?

And the even bigger question—if he were as generous and big-hearted as he seemed,

then why had he brought her here in the first place?

Without conscious thought, she had left the forest, made her way up the stairs and into the family wing. She was drawn to the forbidden room, pulled by an unseen force, powerless to resist.

Her breathing increased, and her hand trembled as she reached for the metal door, her eyes darting around as if Dragon might show up at any moment.

Assured she was alone, she pulled open the door.

At first, everything looked the same as the other bright, metallic rooms. Gold shone, from the walls and the long flowing curtains to the uncomfortable chairs in the sitting room. The only obvious difference Melora noticed was the vase of golden roses upon the end table, much like the vase of roses Aurelius had given her.

However, despite the normality of the room, something felt deeply uncomfortable. Pushing aside her anxiety, she moved further into the room, entering the sleeping chamber.

She couldn't help herself as a scream tore through her lips at the horrifying sight before her.

### CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

M elora's harrowing scream tore through Aurie like a claw piercing his heart. Instinct took over, and he half flew, half ran toward the sound, nearly crashing into her as she careened down the stairs.

"Get away from me!" She pushed against him and continued her mad dash.

His claws skittered upon the ground as he hurried after her. What happened? What is wrong? Is someone here? He was determined to get to the bottom of this and protect her from the unknown assailant, regardless of her current feelings toward him.

"Yes, something is wrong! That-that woman is entirely gold!" Suddenly she rounded on him, pointing an accusing finger. "What did you do to her?"

Blood pulsed in his ears as adrenaline rushed through his body. You were in the forbidden room?

"Of course I was in the forbidden room! Nothing would have needed to be forbidden had you not done something to her!"

His heart sank.

There was no turning back. She had seen what he'd done and now had proof of exactly what he was. Nothing was left of his own mother but a statue frozen in time—her expression shocked and hurt. He had done that to her, all right—all because of his own greed. A scenario likely worse than Melora could have ever

imagined. His shoulders slumped, and he hung his head in shame. No wonder she had run screaming. What kind of monster would do that?

Melora was in shock, her words tumbling over each other. “She-she looks far too realistic. The expression on her face... She’s not just a statue.” She shivered, wrapping her arms around herself.

After several deep breaths, she collected herself and straightened her shoulders, turning to face him squarely. “I don’t care what you say. I’m leaving here now. I’ve stayed long enough, and I refuse to become some kind of gilded trophy to add to your collection.”

Before he could think of a way to defend himself, she spun on her heel and bolted to the door.

Melora, wait! It’s not safe out there alone! While he couldn’t blame her for being angry with him—Hades’ flames, he was angry with himself—he also couldn’t let her run off on her own into the potential dangers of the forest. But how could he protect her from himself? He was the frightening beast here. At least as a dragon, he couldn’t accidentally turn her to gold.

Perhaps it was better if he let her go. He’d always known he didn’t deserve her.

\* \* \*

Tears streamed down Melora’s face as she fled from the gilded house that concealed its horrors with sparkle and wonder. She couldn’t get the image of the woman from her mind. Her expression, her position; it was not the whim of some artist. Something deep inside told her that the woman was real, trapped in the facade of gold.

Her mind raced through all the things she’d seen crafted entirely from gold—things



that had no business being made of metal. There was the wildly impractical furniture—who in their right mind would want something so uncomfortable in every room? Even the forest seemed somehow alive, despite being made of solid metal. What other awful secrets lurked beneath the polished veneer?

She shuddered, keeping her arms tight around herself. Her feet pounded against the dirt in a direction she hoped was homeward, the glint of Everrose fading farther and farther behind her. While she didn't fully understand what was happening, she began to wonder if Dragon had been transforming everything to gold for his horde. Was that what happened to Aurie after their carriage ride? Dragon had been angry and defensive when she'd last asked him about it...

Another shiver traveled down her spine. Even while the evidence had been all around her, she didn't want to believe it. Dragon had become her friend and confidant. She just couldn't imagine him harming others that way—and yet she couldn't deny what she'd seen.

Hours passed and the sun sank behind the trees. Heat seeped away from her, along with the light as darkness descended. She rubbed her arms and stumbled through the forest at a more sedate pace. As time continued to pass, she longed for a horse or a carriage—anything to relieve the burden of this endless walk. Perhaps she'd run off too hastily. The distance to her home hadn't seemed nearly this long when Dragon had flown her.

More concerning still, she wasn't entirely certain she was headed in the correct direction. Perhaps she ought to stop for the night and find somewhere to rest. Leaves rustled in the gentle summer breeze, and cicadas hummed as she scanned the scenery. Somewhere in the distance an eerie howl echoed. The hairs on her arms stood on end.

Several more howls responded, closing in on her.

Wolves!

Her heart crashed painfully against her ribcage. She stood, momentarily frozen, before turning to run. Low-hanging branches ripped against her and bushes caught upon her dress as she crashed through the woods, running aimlessly, desperate for escape.

A twig snapped nearby. A low growl rumbled.

Melora pressed her lips together, trapping her scream. Her sprint became even more frantic, feet flying over rocks and roots.

The rhythmic pounding of paws came closer and closer.

Glancing over her shoulder, she couldn't see anything. She turned to face forward and screamed. Two yellow eyes peered at her directly ahead. Her feet skittered, stumbling against loose dirt and twigs as she pivoted and darted in another direction. The wolf loped after her, his paws eating up the ground between them. More wolves joined the chase.

Her breath came in uneasy gasps as she pushed her body harder. How could she escape the inevitable? She refused to be torn to shreds by these animals. A tree not too far ahead with a low-hanging branch seemed to beckon her. If only she could reach the tree, then she could climb up it to safety. Wolves didn't climb trees, did they?

The wolves snarled behind her as she ramped up her speed and focused on her new goal. She had to make it to the tree!

Her sides ached and her calves protested. She'd never sprinted so far and so quickly in her entire life, but she could not stop, as even now she felt the wolves' breath on

her legs. She prayed to the Great Creator for help as she grasped the low branch, propelling herself up the tree.

A wolf leapt after her, snapping at her foot. She yelped and kicked her legs as its teeth scraped her ankle, catching her shoe and yanking it off as she pulled her feet up. She pressed her back against the trunk and tucked her legs against her chest, wrapping her arms around her knees protectively.

Several wolves surrounded the lone tree, snarling and jumping up to nip at her dress and toes. One of them succeeded, latching onto her hem. She yelled and stood, shaking her skirt until it tore free. The wolf fell back to the ground with a yip, making the other wolves growl with anger.

Her breath came out in uneasy pants as she pressed her back to the tree. She had to get higher! Another wolf nearly caught her dress despite her standing. Gripping a higher branch, she nestled her bare foot into the crook of another limb and climbed.

The wolves snarled, turning almost crazed as she pulled herself just out of their reach and folded herself against the tree trunk. Would she be forced to stay here all night? She could admit that she'd experienced some horrible nights, but this was definitely one of the worst.

Suddenly, a loud roar tore through the air. Melora gasped, pressing a hand to her speeding heart. Dragon swept down, smoke and magic spewing from his mouth, directed at the frenzied wolves. Several whimpered and tucked their tails between their legs. Yet they stood their ground, refusing to leave Melora and the tree.

Dragon landed on the ground, snarling as he flapped his wings aggressively. Instead of running from the terrifying beast, the wolves circled him, teeth bared. They growled deeply, ears folded back. Suddenly as one, the wolves attacked.

“Dragon!” she screamed, wishing she could do more than cower in a tree. Her stomach twisted with fearful anticipation.

Dragon’s pain-filled roar lanced through her heart.

He grabbed the wolf that had sunk its teeth into his neck and tossed it away. The wolf hit a tree and whimpered. Another took its place while two more jumped on his back, one latching onto his wing. He cried out, fire spewing from his mouth this time.

The scent of singed hair filled the air as three more wolves ran away with burns. Blood oozed from Dragon’s wounds as he fought with the remaining two wolves. One attacked his tail while the other came at him from the side, its jaws seeking purchase in his flank.

He quickly dispatched the one at his flank but cried out as the final wolf sank its teeth into him. He flicked it away with his large tail.

Melora was already climbing down the tree and running toward Dragon. She threw her arms around his neck. “Dragon! Are you okay? You’re wounded.”

I’m fine. Get on my back before they return. His sides were heaving from the fight.

She hurried to comply. They both needed to get to safety as soon as possible. Dragon’s wounds needed tending.

Together, they soared upward, turning back toward Everrose.

It seemed that she wasn’t done there yet.

### CHAPTER NINETEEN

Aurie berated himself the entire flight home.

He was furious with her father and that awful man who had sent the wolves after her. No normal wolf would act like that, especially not after he'd spewed a good amount of distraction magic at them. They clearly had a spell cast upon them, forcing them to remain and complete their mission of finding her despite their terror.

He thanked the Great Creator he had finally come to his senses after the hurt and shock of her accusation so he could arrive in time. Otherwise, her father might even now be forcing her into marriage with that horrible man for his own gain. Aurie refused to allow that to happen. He hadn't brought her here only for her to be sent right back to her appalling circumstances.

Except, how could he convince her to stay now? After the truth she had seen, how could she ever forgive him? She had run for a reason.

Her words from earlier that day came back to him: "No one truly deserves forgiveness, and yet the Great Creator offers it freely... I choose to let go, not because they deserve it, but because I deserve peace." Would she truly forgive him? He could only hope so, as he landed on the ground with far less grace than usual, careful to avoid the gilded plants in front of Everrose as the wound on his wing stung painfully.

"Dragon!" Melora slid off his back, her gentle hands running over his scales. "You're hurt."

I'll be fine, he grumbled. Trying to shake off the pain.

“Dragon! Now is not a time to be strong and gallant. You were just attacked by about ten wolves all at once—and you heroically defended me! But there are injuries all over you, so stop whining and come inside where we can get you some help.”

I don't need help, he grouched, allowing her to lead him inside. What about you? Did they hurt you before I arrived? I apologize. There was no time to assess your wounds. I should have come sooner. He twisted his head to peer at her.

Her hair was in disarray, the silky strands half up and half down, falling unevenly about her face. Minor scrapes marred her arms, along with streaks of dirt staining both her skin and her dress. Then he noticed her ripped hem and missing shoe.

He narrowed his eyes at her bare foot—she was limping. Your foot. You are indeed injured. Why didn't you say anything?

She hastily tucked her toes behind her other foot, trying to hide the injury he'd already seen. “It's nothing. Just a small scratch. You're the one with serious wounds.”

He grumbled but conceded, afraid he might drive her away. I'll allow you to tend my wounds if you wash your own first. I'm afraid my claws would only injure you more.

The next thing he knew, she was calling for Galen to help her get him inside while Lyra ran to get clean cloths and boil water. Once in the Great Hall, she urged him onto one of the blankets that Mrs. Calla had retrieved from his tower and she'd spread across the tile.

Once Lyra had wrapped Melora's ankle and tended to her scrapes—at his insistence—Aurie finally gave in, letting Melora tend to his wounds. He savored her

gentle touch, just as he always did while in dragon form.

The number of wounds she tended surprised him. He hadn't realized just how injured he'd been. "Your poor wing," she murmured. "I don't know what to do about it. That blasted wolf seems to have taken a chunk out of it."

That would explain why it hurts so much.

"I cannot believe you flew me home on that."

You were in danger. I wasn't about to let anything happen to you.

"Even after I ran away?"

You had good reason to. Now why don't you sit down? You've had a harrowing day. You should relax.

Thankfully, she didn't argue, sinking onto the only comfortable chair in the room. Her eyes fluttered and her head bobbed.

I'm fine now. Go ahead and take a nap. He gently tucked a pillow onto the sofa. She yawned and lay down upon it. He took one of the blankets and gently placed it over her. She snuggled in, her breathing becoming heavy and even. Within minutes, his exhausted friend was asleep.

He looked down at her, his heart aching with desire. Her silky hair hid her too-often-troubled brow, which was now smooth with sleep. It was his fault this had happened to her. He never should have let her leave. He gingerly ran a claw down her cheek, wishing he could feel her soft skin with his natural fingers. If only he could change back into a human, then he could finally explain to her what had happened. He hated that she still believed he had run from her, despite his assurance that he had merely

gone off on business. His pathetic excuse had fooled no one.

But he couldn't ignore the statue in the room. She deserved to know about his mother. Unfortunately, it was a story that should only be told as his true self—Aurelius. She needed to hear it from his lips, not from a creature she thought was separate from him.

He looked down at the large pads of his fingers, his sharp claws extended. Would she forgive a monster? She claimed she would, but he wasn't sure he believed it. His eyes lingered on her sleeping form once again. There was only one way to find out. He would have to transform back into a human. Perhaps this time, he would finally get it right.

He closed his eyes and focused on his breathing. From experience, he knew that he only ever transformed back when he was calm. He took another deep breath and released it, thinking once more about Melora—for her! He had to do this for her. She had to know that she was blameless in all of this. He simply couldn't allow her to hold on to all that guilt.

He thought about how it felt to be human, with his hands and his feet. His fingers and toes claw-free, his skin smooth and dark, and hair—how he missed the curls of hair atop his head.

Another breath.

He thought of his mother, frozen in gold—all because of him. Even so, she wouldn't want him stuck as a dragon. She hated every bit of the curse, but she especially disliked how he'd turned into a dragon.

In and out.



He remembered Melora standing in front of her sister—terrified of the dragon she knew nothing about but determined to protect her sister at all costs; the smarmy smile her false fiancé had given her as if she were his.

Aurie shuddered and released his clenched claws. No! He refused to let that man win—and he would, if Aurie could not stop being angry and be completely calm. He thought of what Melora had said—choosing to let go, not because they deserve it, but because he needed peace.

He needed peace for her .

He slowed and focused his breath once more.

In and out.

For the first time in days, he felt a familiar tingling sensation down his spine and throughout his body.

In. Out.

He needed to assure Melora that he was well. That "Dragon" had done nothing to him—at least not in the way she was thinking. But he was definitely at fault— If only he had been a better son. If only he hadn't invested all of his money in such a risky scheme. If only he had never gone to the dragon in the first place. Regret filled his mind with "if only's," berating him for the decisions that had led him to this point.

He could feel the dragon within him roaring, trying to take control of his body once again. His heart pulsed with heat and his paws trembled. No! He refused to give into the pull of the dragon. Melora! He needed to be human for her!

He took another breath, releasing the self-loathing that had been building inside—not

because he believed he was innocent, but because he needed peace.

For her.

As he focused again on Melora, a great calm came over him. The tell-tale tingling sensation returned, more powerful this time. He sucked in a breath as his claws retracted and his spines folded back into his body, along with his wings, and he shrank back down to his normal size.

He couldn't help the cry that slipped out as the painful transformation continued—much more painful than usual with his fresh wounds. He had just enough presence of mind to grab his blanket before he collapsed in a heap.

“Aurie!” He heard Melora gasp from the sofa.

What had he been thinking, transforming with her in the room!?

\* \* \*

Melora blinked the sleep from her eyes. The blanket Dragon had tenderly tucked around her slipped to the ground. She couldn't quite believe the sight before her. Dragon shrank before her eyes, a roar spilling from his lips as golden dust shimmered in the air. With a partly human hand he grabbed the blanket she'd laid over him, then fell to the ground in a heap.

“Aurie!”

She gasped. The blue blanket shimmered, gold surging down its fibers, transforming the entire thing to pure gold.

“Aurie!” she called again, rushing to his side. Her heart crashed in an uneven

cadence.

Dragon had turned into Aurie!

Unless she was dreaming! She reached out to touch him, to assure herself that he was real, but stopped herself just in time. His warning of a deadly curse rang in her ears.

Her eyes traveled down his muscular back to the golden blanket covering the bottom half of him—the blanket that had been blue just moments before. The geometric pattern it originally had was now in subtle shades of gold... just as golden as the rest of the house...

Her mind flew to the day at the village when he'd been unable to help repair the roof. She had been certain that he could touch objects, so it never occurred to her that he would be unable to help. She quickly began cataloging things he had touched. He'd knocked on her door and eaten with utensils... all the roses he'd given her...

Every single thing she recalled him touching—including the blanket that now covered him—had one thing in common: gold.

Every stitch of clothing he ever wore was in some shade of gold, even the jerkin he had given her. His gleaming skin caught her eye; the black tone contrasting beautifully with the blanket. She'd always thought he wore it because it showed his status—and it highlighted his broad, muscular shoulders, she acknowledged with a blush, as she couldn't help but notice them now—but she was beginning to realize that it was impossible for him to wear anything else. It was always gold.

He moaned and shifted, bringing her attention back down to him. Mesmerized, she watched his back muscles ripple as he turned and sat up.

She wetted her suddenly dry mouth. "Aurie, what exactly is going on? I saw...

Dragon... you... the blanket. I don't understand." Who exactly was the man before her? She shook her head, her breath coming out in short gasps.

He sat up in one fluid motion, giving her a close-up view of his bare chest. A golden marking of a flame accentuated the defined muscles there—just as powerful and striking as the lines of his back had been.

Swallowing, Melora tore her gaze away. She refused to be caught ogling his chest—especially not at a time like this. She met his piercing blue eyes as they focused intently upon her. Had his cheeks just flushed? Probably not, though his dark coloring made it hard to tell.

He shifted uncomfortably, readjusting his blanket as the silence continued. He had some explaining to do! "I... I guess you saw that."

Her shoulders straightened, and she pursed her lips. "If by that you mean some kind of magical transformation, first of you, then of your blanket, then yes."

A sigh fluttered from his lips before he turned his eyes back toward her. "I'm cursed. It's just as I told you before, but what I didn't tell you was that it's my own fault."

She sucked in a breath, almost afraid of the answer. "What do you mean? Why would you curse yourself? Why couldn't you just tell me who you were when I was looking for you? I was so worried." Her voice wavered, heavy with the emotion from the long day. as a tear unexpectedly leaked down her cheek.

"You have to understand—I lost everything after my father died. All I ever wanted was to be enough for him, but it was a task I always failed at. He insisted that a person's value was tied to their wealth and status. When I discovered the sad state of our finances after his death, I set out to prove myself by investing most of our money, sure it would double what we had, except that isn't what happened. I lost everything.

The investment wasn't as sound as I'd been led to believe."

He pressed his hand to his forehead. "But that wasn't all. Immediately after I received news that my investment had tanked, the king sent another message, revoking my title. While he had always liked my father, he despised me. We frequently disagreed on politics, particularly when I stood firm about lowering his ever-increasing taxes. He claimed that the people I invested with were traitors, and that even in ignorance, my actions served his enemies, making me unfit for my title. He was looking for an excuse to remove me, and my poor choice of where to place my trust gave him one. He forced us to leave our own home. Thankfully, my mother still owned Everrose. But I wanted more."

He went on to explain how he had sought help from a dragon to regain his wealth, and the dragon had granted his request by causing everything he touched to turn into gold. He shared about the dragon's warning, lamenting how lust for the gold had consumed him and turned him into a dragon—just as he had been warned.

"And the woman I saw in the forbidden room?" Melora wrapped her arms around herself, almost afraid of the answer, still reeling from all that he had told her.

He averted his gaze, his shoulders slumping. "My mother." The words came out in a near whisper.

She sucked in a sharp breath and pressed her hand to her chest. "No!" Her head was shaking back and forth along with the rest of her body. His mother? He must have... No!! Her thoughts swirled as her heart ached—to turn his own mother to gold—she couldn't imagine the pain and guilt he must be feeling.

"She tried to tell me to break the curse, but I was still consumed with the need to prove myself to my dead father. We argued, and I accidentally touched her." His words came out thin and strained, pitched higher with pain. "Turning my own mother

to gold.”

A tear glistened on his cheek.

“I really am a horrible beast.”

She caught her lip between her teeth as her heart wrenched at his confession—he mustn’t believe such a thing!

“Aurie, no! You’ve proven yourself to be a kind-hearted and loving man.” She saw in a new light the glints of gold in the little girl’s hands at Taren’s house. “You helped Taren when you could have turned him away or demanded recompense for trespassing and stealing—allowing us to fix their roof and giving his sister gold. Even my father! You could have been much harsher with him for his deceit. Instead, you used his folly to help me. You don’t need wealth or power to be a good man and to make a difference. You only need to be your best self and use what you have to offer.”

His lips parted, and he leaned closer to her. “Since meeting you I have regretted the curse more than ever before. Particularly now. I wish I could touch you. Even the simplest of gestures to show you how much I appreciate your words.” He pressed his hand to his chest. “No one has ever believed in me like you do. You constantly amaze me. How can a person be so beautiful, both inside and out?”

She laughed self-consciously, picking at her sleeve. “Now you’re just flattering me. I’m no one important.”

“And yet, didn’t you just say that you don’t need to be anyone important to make a difference? You make a difference just by being you.”

Her heart turned to liquid gold, the burning within her making it glow brightly and

melt into a gooey puddle. They gazed at each other for several minutes. His warm breath gently caressed her skin, smelling like smoldering spice with deep, earthy tones.

Tension sparked between them. They swayed closer.

He sucked in a breath and pulled back, looking down in shame. “I apologize. I almost forgot myself. I refuse to allow you to be another casualty of my curse.”

A smile twitched at her lips. “Then, let’s stop it.”

“Stop what?” He looked confused.

“The curse, of course. What do we need to do to break it?”

Troubled eyes met hers. “It won’t work. Don’t you think I’ve tried everything to free my mother?” Emotion made his voice heavy.

She scrunched her brow sympathetically. “Of course, you did. Perhaps together we can come up with the solution, but we will need all of the information.”

“To break the curse, I must demonstrate that I long for the golden touch to be reversed more than I long for riches or power.” he recited, “But I’ve tried everything I can think to change my mother back, and she is still gold, and I’m still cursed. I’m running out of hope.”

“Well then, together, we are going to change that.”

### CHAPTER TWENTY

M elora hated seeing Aurie like this. While thankful that he remained human, he seemed so dejected and defeated.

“Tell me what you have already tried,” she said the next morning at breakfast, trying to imbue her voice with more optimism than she felt. Reflecting his doubt would do no one any good.

He looked at her blankly. “Tried?”

“Yes. What have you tried to do to break the curse? You said that you’d tried several things.”

He carefully set his utensil down and leaned back, his expression resigned. “I did my best not to touch anything new for a week, which was difficult but fruitless.” He began counting his failed solutions off on his fingers. “Then I decided to prove I didn’t need gold by giving it away. I gave some to my servants and sent them off with various pieces to share with the villagers. It didn’t take long before I stopped that.”

She furrowed her brow. “Why? That seems like such a kind-hearted thing to do.”

“In theory, but not in reality. Unfortunately, it just started rumors, and people began trying to infiltrate the manor to steal and destroy things—including parts of my mother’s garden.” He swallowed and looked down at his hands. “At one point, the people were so frenzied with greed that I nearly lost my life.”



She gasped and pressed a hand to her mouth as her heart seemed to stop at his words.

“Besides, who knows what will become of the gold in the possession of others once the curse is broken? It’s all supposed to revert to its original state, but then, I don’t know if the laws of magic change once it no longer belongs to me...” He stared off in the distance, his hands pressed tightly together. A muscle ticked in his jaw.

He continued, “I was only just awakening to my dragon magic then, but I learned to create a magical barrier around Evermore, obscuring it from view. However, the damage was already done. People kept coming in search of treasure, fighting among themselves, ransacking and destroying everything in their reach. So, I began flying over the forest as a dragon, starting new rumors while setting up a wider boundary to keep unsavory people out. From then on, only people who carried an item of my gold, given by me, would be able to get through.”

She was stunned. Never had it occurred to her that such a kind and simple deed could blow up in his face so spectacularly. “I just can’t believe people would do that.”

“Money and greed can make people do unexpected things. I don’t blame people like Taren and his family for wanting more, especially in this economy, but it’s not good to tempt people with unfathomable amounts of wealth and gold. I learned why it is better for money to be earned.”

She could barely take it in. “What did you try next?”

He held up another finger. “I spent some time yelling at the Great Creator and the universe. As you can imagine, that didn’t help much. And why would I deserve mercy after all that I’ve done?

He touched another finger. “I’d heard of the Fountain of Hope and decided to give bathing there a try. I had just returned from that worthless journey when I met

you—so... the journey wasn't so worthless after all."

He winked at her, making her cheeks burn. She looked away, a smile playing at her lips. Why did he always make her feel all fluttery inside?

"Anything else?" she managed to ask.

"By that point, I had other concerns and was running out of ideas. So, no."

She pondered all he had said for a moment. "What if you personally helped others instead of delegating that task to your servants?"

"In the beginning, I personally helped hand out gold. However, after what I experienced, I'm afraid that only created more greed and entitlement. Dealing directly with people is dangerous—I might accidentally turn someone to gold again. I fear that giving away gold will make little difference to the curse. Besides, I cannot risk anyone else trying to come here, not when I have you to protect. Keeping the wolves out has been bad enough. The spell that was cast on them is powerful, forcing them to find you."

"Me?" Her heart stuttered. "That can't be right. Who would go to all that effort for me? Spells like that cost a lot of money."

"Your father and your former fiancé."

She inhaled sharply. "Sir Calix?"

His expression darkened, one fist clenching before hitting his palm. "Is that his name? I'd like to teach him a lesson. I won't let him have you. You aren't some prize to be won. You are a woman of greater worth and intelligence than he'll ever know."

“Aurie.” She pressed her hands to her burning cheeks. “Stay on task.” Did he really believe she was all that clever? And of worth? No one had ever said such things to her before. With difficulty, she kept her own mind on solutions. “Now, have you tried touching things of greatest value to you and imagining them back in their natural form? Perhaps that would prove that you long for the golden touch to be gone more than you long for gold. Or what about your dragon magic? Have you tried breathing it onto the gold to change it back? If it could affect the wolves like it did, I don’t see why it can’t be powerful enough to affect the golden curse.”

“We could definitely try the first idea, and while the second one has merit... I’m afraid that—” He rubbed his hands nervously. “I don’t want to change back into a dragon anytime soon.”

“What do you mean? Why not?”

He shivered. “I feel less human every time, and that last time... I didn’t purposely stay away from you. I longed to return and explain myself so you would stop beating yourself up for my mistakes. But no matter how hard I tried, I couldn’t change back.”

Melora leaned forward. “What do you mean? Don’t you have control over when you shift?” It hadn’t occurred to her that he might not.

“Not exactly. Turning into a dragon always feels easier. It tends to happen when I’m feeling disappointed or angry at myself. It also happens when I long to escape my reality or I feel worthless, something that seems to happen more and more often as of late. It can come on suddenly, like it did on our drive home from the village.”

She pressed a hand to her mouth, relief filling her as she suddenly saw the events in an entirely new light.

“It was all I could do to remain human for as long as I did. Unfortunately, I couldn’t

make it.”

“That’s why you ran?”

“Yes. More than anything, I wanted you to know that it had nothing to do with you. But of course, I could only explain so much as a dragon. And I felt like you deserved to hear the truth through my human lips.” Groaning, he hung his head in shame and covered his face with one hand. “I’m such a mess.”

She pushed her chair back and came round the table, getting as close to him as she dared. “Aurie, you are not a mess. You simply made a mistake. And together we are going to figure out a way out of this. We will break the curse!” She hit the table for emphasis.

He looked up at her, his blue eyes hopeful. “I hope so.”

\* \* \*

Aurie cried out in frustration.

It was all useless! They’d tried everything! He stomped around his room, struggling to pull himself together before he faced Melora again. He knew she was only trying to help, but he was a failure—wasting her time.

They’d already spent two days trying to break the curse, all to no avail. He should have known that their joint attempts would be just as futile as his had been. He ran his hands down his face, their failed efforts spinning through his mind. He’d touched item after item, trying to imagine each of them back into their original form—and nothing. They’d tried touching possessions with the most monetary wealth, like his glistening manor, and things that held sentimental value to him, like his mother’s rose garden. All ending in complete and utter failure just like him.

Now, Melora had convinced him to try the one thing he had been avoiding. His mother. He wasn't sure he could do it. But for her, for her he could at least try. After several calming breaths, he straightened his tunic and opened the door to go and find Melora. It was time to face his demons.

\* \* \*

Together, they traveled to the forbidden room. Sweet, wonderful Melora patiently waited beside him while he gathered his courage to enter the room he'd been avoiding since the incident occurred and his faithful servants moved her out of sight.

Aurie raked his hands through his hair as he remembered seeing his mother's face again, frozen in the middle of their argument, her expression full of sorrow for the man he had become. It freshly brought to his mind how determined she'd been to leave him, and how, instead of allowing her the grace to leave, he'd turned her to gold. Keeping her forever just out of reach.

His fingers trembled as he reached out and brushed her arm, just as he had that fateful day, except this time he imagined her living and breathing once again, ready to argue with him about the curse. Even though he desperately longed to have his mother back, he feared that he was too late.

"Close your eyes and picture her as she was," Melora gently coached him.

He did as she directed, remembering the good times with his mother, her love and acceptance of him, even when his father insisted he was worthless. The familiar tingling began in his fingers. Hope sparked within him once more, and he thought for one fleeting moment it might work. But just like that, his father's words returned to him. "You're useless, Aurie. How do you expect to amount to anything if you keep giving everything away! Let this be a lesson to you. Gold is might. Never be without it, boy, or you'll be more useless than you are now." How could he take care of his

mother, or even Melora, if he lost everything?

Then and now, he felt that uselessness more deeply than ever.

The tingling stopped, even as his body shook from the emotional effort. He opened his eyes to find his mother exactly as she'd been, frozen by his own worthlessness and folly. A tear slipped down his cheek. His heart was too corrupt to ever reverse the damage he'd done—and he couldn't change it. When Melora tried to console him, it was more than he could bear. She'd been patient and kind, but he was the beast who had killed his own mother.

“Leave me,” he whispered.

He ground his teeth. He hated to send Melora away. It wasn't her fault he was like this, and he hated to hurt her once more. Yet he wasn't ready to face her again.

It was all too much. With his curse he was a monster. Without it, he was nothing.

Aurie struggled mightily that night to calm himself enough to remain human and eventually fell into a fitful sleep.

The next day, Melora roused him from bed, refusing to give up. “You can't let this get you down, Aurie. Every success begins with failure. There must be some way to break this curse, and we are going to find it. I've been thinking of some other options. I know you don't want to change back into a dragon, but do you think you could access your dragon powers as a human?”

He sighed, focusing on her compassionate expression. Though he barely believed change was possible for him, he was willing to try again—for her sake. He must believe it was possible. He must resurrect his hope—the hope that had weakened as the months passed and his mother remained the same, as his curse worsened and the

flame over his heart grew larger and larger. Perhaps with Melora's support he could do this, just as he'd compelled himself to turn back into a human. "I've never tried before, but we might as well see if it is possible."

Several hours of strain and frustration followed. It turned out that dragon magic could not be accessed by his human form. They then tried another of Melora's ideas—various ways of symbolically letting go of the golden touch. He took golden pieces that were of great value, trying to reject them: he'd sent one away, buried another in the ground, even going so far as trying to break another.

But that effort only left him with bent and ruined gold pieces and ruined hope. Anger twisted his gut. Anger at the dragon for giving him this blasted curse, and anger at himself for being unable to let go of his love of the cold metal enough to finally escape its grasp. What if the dragon lied about the ability to change back? How much time was left before the flame completely consumed his heart? He could feel its heat rising in his chest. What if he was already out of time and all their efforts had been in vain?

Aurie was on the verge of emotional collapse when Melora held out a hand. "Stop, Aurie. I think it's time for a break. You can't keep pushing yourself like this."

His breath heaved as he glanced desperately at the bent and deformed pieces glinting around him, mocking him, as deformed and ruined as his own soul. Would he ever be whole again, or would the golden touch and the dragon ruin him forever?

"Come on, Aurie. Let's leave all this and do something fun." She reached toward him, then, seeming to remember herself, dropped her hand.

"Fun?" His eyes lingered on her hand. He didn't want to always have her nearby without ever being able to touch her. This beautiful woman deserved to be treasured and held—something that—he reminded himself with clenched hands—he could

never do. And yet, she was encouraging him to have fun. Hadn't he been doing the same for her not long ago? He looked up at her, seeking... he didn't know what.

"Yes, fun! Look, I have an idea." Her eyes glowed as she pressed her hands together in excitement. "How about you go spend some time painting while I prepare a surprise for you?"

"I'm not sure I can paint... but I'll definitely look forward to a surprise from you."

"Sure you can. Just put paint onto the canvas. It doesn't need to be pretty. Life is messy sometimes. Let all your emotions out. You don't even have to show it to me. Then, once the surprise is ready, I'll send Galen to let you know."

He smiled. "How did I get to be so lucky?" Just watching her enthusiasm warmed him. "What do I need to do to get ready for this big surprise?"

The more they spoke of it, the more excited he became.

"Get all that pent-up emotion out through your painting," she said. "Then dress in something elegant for dinner. Although, with all your golden attire, I'm certain anything you wear will be perfect." She winked.

"Does this mean I'll get to see you all dressed up?"

She giggled. "If I told you, it wouldn't be a surprise. You'll just have to wait." Her eyes sparkled, and for the first time in days, he felt like he could breathe. "Now go get that beastly emotion out. I have tasks to do."

He laughed as she shooed him away.

\* \* \*



As it turned out, throwing paint at the canvas was more cathartic than Aurie would ever have guessed. Painting allowed him to feel and to let go in ways that he'd never expected, especially when he wasn't worried about what the end result looked like.

After smearing the canvas with color for a time, he began thinking about Melora, her face emerging from the swirl of colors. It felt somehow appropriate, since she had brought color back into his life after it became a monochrome. Without the contrast of other colors, gold had lost its shine. But Melora made everything bright again.

He painted the beauty she couldn't hold back, no matter how hard she tried. It was a simple and elegant beauty, deep inside. A smile that constantly danced at her lips despite her circumstance. His brush caressed her cheek, longing to touch the real thing... but such a wish was impossible right now.

A knock sounded at his door, and Galen poked his head in. His usually stoic expression looked bright with happiness. "Your maiden awaits and has sent me to prepare you for dinner. Trust me, you don't want to be late for this."

"She told you the surprise, but not me?"

"You didn't expect her to do everything on her own, did you?"

"Definitely not, though I wouldn't be shocked if she tried." Aurie chuckled to himself, thinking about her determination as he began cleaning his supplies, unwilling to miss the big surprise. That woman could do anything! "I'm glad she asked for your help."

"It's good to hear you laugh again, sir. If I may be so bold."

Aurie paused. Galen was correct. Not only had Melora brought light back into his life, she had restored the laughter. Perhaps change was more possible than he'd

thought. It seemed he was making all kinds of changes for her.

He wouldn't have it any other way.

Aurie quickly cleaned up and shaved, taking the time to look his best, smoothing oil over his tight curls. He always kept his hair cropped short and easy to manage, though now he wondered if she preferred it longer. Oh well. He hardly had time to grow it out. As he put on his jerkin, he couldn't help but think of petite Melora wearing the one he'd given her—of course, she looked better in it than he did, never mind if it swallowed her. He grinned to himself, eager to see what she had planned for them.

He was ready before anyone sent for him. After an agonizing wait of a few moments, Lyra knocked on his door.

"Is she ready?" he asked, his insides dancing.

She nodded, a grin spreading across her lips. "You are going to love it! She looks so beautiful." She clasped her hands together, her eyes going misty.

"Shall I go get her, then?" He stepped into the hallway, closing the door behind himself.

"Oh no! That would ruin the entire effect."

"Is that so?" he asked with half a laugh.

"You must meet her in the grand hall. It has that epic staircase so she can make an entrance. You are simply going to love it!" She led him down the hall, practically skipping with excitement.

“Ah yes. We wouldn’t want to deny her an epic entrance.”

Nearly as soon as he entered the grand hall, the delicate strains of a violin filled the room. Something drew his eyes to the top of the stairs.

His breath caught. Lyra was correct. Standing at the top of the stairs, resplendent in an exquisite white gown, Melora made a glorious entrance. Her whole being glowed as she floated down the stairs, her skirts billowing behind her.

Aurie’s mouth went dry. He could hardly breathe. His heart felt as if it would beat only for her, informing his mind of what he already knew: he was in love with this woman. How could he make certain that she would remain in his life forever?

He watched every graceful movement as she descended. Her long, dark hair was piled on top of her head in an alluring fashion with strands flowing and curling around her face and down her back. He longed to pull down those thick, tantalizing locks and tangle his fingers in them, to cradle her head in his hands and touch her enchanting lips with his...

He exhaled, clenching his hands against his trousers, afraid of what they might try to do if he wasn’t careful. He must remember not to touch her, no matter how tempted he might be. Despite their efforts, he remained cursed.

When she descended the last stair, he bowed, wishing he could hold out his hand and escort her, like a true gentleman.

Her smile widened as she curtsied. “Thank you for coming, Aurelius.”

He opened his mouth, then closed it, words escaping him. He cleared his throat. “I wouldn’t miss it for all of Vilastoria. You... you look stunning, but then you always do. You could be in rags, and you’d still steal my heart.”

Her copper cheeks pinked, kindling a fire in the pit of his stomach. A sense of pride filled him. He'd brought that glow to her face, and he longed to do it again and again.

"You really think so?" She looked down at the dress, twirling the skirt back and forth shyly.

"I know so."

She pressed a hand to her stomach. "I made it myself."

"I shouldn't be surprised. You are quite a talented woman. I'm looking forward to discovering the delightful evening you have planned, but I doubt any of it can compare to seeing you thus."

She laughed and swatted his comment away before pressing her hands to her burning cheeks. "Stop. Now you are just being ridiculous."

He shook his head, laughing inwardly, "Never!"

A tantalizing smile played at her lips. "Okay Mr.-I-Think-I'm-So-Charming, let's go have dinner now."

He sputtered a laugh and followed, happy to spend every moment with her.

She led him to a table set for two, draped with a glittering tablecloth. Flickering candles stood in its center, adding to the enchanting ambiance of the grand hall.

He pulled out her chair and released it before she sat down, determined to be gentlemanly and to act with the utmost care.

Once he sat, Lyra entered with their meal on a platter, all while the violin's soft

strains continued. A few mistakes here and there were hardly noticeable, he was so enamored with the woman before him. “Where is the violin music coming from? I don’t recall any musicians nearby.”

Her expression glowed with delight. “Galen told me he plays.”

“Galen? I never knew.” He gazed at her in awe. Never would he have thought to ask Galen if he could play the violin, of all things. “I cannot imagine how that conversation even came up.”

Her laugh added to the trilling music. Nothing could ever sound quite so captivating.

“I merely told the staff I wanted to plan a romantic evening with you and asked if anyone could play an instrument. Galen confessed that he could play the violin. Though he felt inadequate, I convinced him to play for us.” She leaned forward to whisper. “Between you and me, I think he severely underestimates his talent, much like you do.”

His nod froze, turning into a shake. While he could agree that Galen had some untapped talent, he just couldn’t accept his own.

“Yes, you do, Aurie. Your paintings are exquisite. They fit right in with the masters. I’m hoping you’ll show me what you were working on earlier. And don’t tell me you didn’t paint, or that it is of little consequence. Galen already ratted you out.”

A chuckle bubbled out. He was thankful for his dark skin, hopeful it would hide the blush he felt burning in his cheeks at her praise. “I’m afraid you’ve set the entire staff against me.”

“Not against you, quite the opposite. You just don’t always know what you need.” She winked.

He laughed again. How he loved this woman. From the moment he met her, he knew his life would forever be changed.

Mrs. Calla had prepared his favorite dinner combined with some of Melora's favorites, making it that much better. Laughter and smiles flowed freely as the evening continued. Aurie loved seeing her like this, confident and radiant. He enjoyed getting to know her better and sharing more about himself.

Once they had eaten their fill, the bewitching strains of the violin changed into the chiming of a piano.

He grinned at Melora, shaking his head in wonder. "Don't tell me Galen plays the piano, too. If so, he is quite accomplished."

"If he does, he did not confess to me. That is Lyra." She laid her napkin down and bit her lip before standing, her hand beckoning. "Come, we mustn't let all of this lovely music go to waste."

His heart sank. He looked up at her, longing to do as she bid, to hold her in his arms and dance as he'd never danced before—only he couldn't. Perhaps in her excitement, it hadn't occurred to her that he would be unable to dance.

"Melora, much as I long to dance with you, I cannot for fear of turning you to gold."

"Oh! Of course. But it is possible to dance without touching. You'll see! It will be a lot of fun! I've never had a handsome would-be-rescuer to dance with before."

He barely suppressed a grin at the reminder of their first meeting even as his stomach sank. The temptation to give into his desire to dance with her was strong, though he couldn't see what plan she could have that would make it possible.

She pulled out a length of fabric and held it toward him. “I know you cannot touch me, but I believe you may safely grasp this.”

The echo of the words he’d spoken to her during their first meeting raised his hopes. He stood. Perhaps it was possible.

“Though I was offended at the time—because I didn’t know about your curse—you are the one who gave me the idea. If we keep this ribbon between us at all times, I think we can make it work.”

Without a second thought, he reached out and snagged the cloth. Magic shimmered and hummed, glowing as it traveled down the fabric, changing it from the pristine white that matched her dress into gold.

Melora gasped in wonder. “I knew that your touch would turn things to gold, but it’s quite different seeing it in action.” She gazed up at him, her warm doe-like brown eyes wide with wonder.

“It’s a magical experience, isn’t it?”

“Yes.”

The awe in her voice warmed him deep within. He longed for her to always hold him in such awe.

“Was this part of your dress?”

“Oh yes, I made it specifically for this purpose. Which reminds me, I have another one so we can hold one in each hand.”

Stepping closer, he reached out and grasped the second ribbon, eliciting a gasp of

pleasure. He'd turn the entire world to gold to bring such a response from Melora. Then he shook his head, dampening that thought. He needed to rid himself of the curse so he could finally be with her without this blasted distance.

They stood gazing into one another's eyes for a moment, clinging to each ribbon as the piano rang a beautiful melody. The music shifted into a waltz, accompanied by the violin. Aurie grinned. "Lyra and Galen have outdone themselves. Shall we honor their efforts with an actual dance?"

Her laugh fanned the fire inside him.

He carefully led her to the center of the dance floor and counted the beats out loud before beginning. He simply couldn't risk either of them making an error—the consequences were too high.

Melora gracefully moved with him in time to the music, though he felt like she was so far away. She followed his lead as he lifted his arm to twirl her carefully under the ribbon. It was mesmerizing to watch her glide through each movement, radiating happiness. One dance faded into another. They danced easily together with only a few missteps because of the distance between them and the awkwardness of holding and releasing the ribbon instead of hands. However, she recovered quickly and glided effortlessly across the floor once more.

His heart pulsed to the sound of the music, the sound of her, until he longed to hold her closer.

When the song ended, he paused their dance.

"I have an idea." Tugging the ribbon from her fingers, he wound the ends together in a firm knot. "There." He grasped the end and offered her the length of the fabric. "Now take that end and wrap it around your waist, then hand me the other end.



Hopefully, this will allow us to dance a bit more appropriately, but we still needn't touch."

"Are you certain?" The hopeful look in her eyes confirmed that she wanted to try it as much as he did.

"You can trust me," he whispered.

She bit her lip and nodded, wrapping the length of the ribbon around herself and holding the end out toward him.

He grasped the string and tugged her closer. Energy coursed between them. They mirrored each other, each holding one hand up as if clasping palms and keeping the other down at their sides. This time it was easier to lead her through the steps; however, the risk of mistakes was higher.

Her skirt billowed like a cloud as he spun her in a tight circle. Their feet moved in a more intricate dance. She twisted around him and under his arm before coming back to him. Her sweet scent wafted around him. He could almost feel her against his skin. The movement was perfect, like a scene from a fairytale— his fairytale. Though he wasn't entirely certain that he deserved such happiness.

After turning her around in an elegant promenade, he reached for the fabric of the ribbon he'd released. Except, instead of grasping the string, his fingers accidentally brushed against the silk of her full skirt.

"No!" His breath hitched, feeling a visceral pain as if a talon had pierced his heart. Instinctively, he stepped away from her, watching helplessly as magic sparked where his fingers had so carelessly grazed, staining the pure white of her dress, rippling and traveling across the length of her gown and up her chest.

Agony consumed him, causing his whole body to tense inward as his hands groped uselessly. But there was nothing he could do to stop the inevitable transformation. Soon she would be nothing but a golden statue, tainted by his curse—like his mother.

### CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Melora gaped down at the gold rippling up her dress, the magic twinkling in a terrifyingly captivating way. She couldn't look away even as fear gripped her. Was this the end? Was she to become a statue as trapped as Aurie's mother? Once again, her desire to be loved and appreciated had only caused trouble, but this time, the consequences were permanent.

Gold encompassed her entire skirt, weighing it down. It rose up her bodice and down her sleeves where, thankfully; it seemed to stop.

She continued to stare down at her golden dress for several moments, her heart pounding rapidly. Nothing more happened. The transformation was complete. She released her breath and looked up at Aurie, who looked back at her in horror. He'd moved several paces away from her, clenching his fists in despair.

"I'm okay, Aurie. It was just the dress." She flicked at her dress to show him, to prove that she was fine. "Just like the ribbon before. You touched the fabric of my dress, not me." She stepped closer, wanting to reassure him, to remove that self-condemning expression from his face. Everything had been going perfectly until this point. She'd wanted so badly to create a fun, memorable evening for him after all their hard work in trying to break the curse.

He backed up several paces as she neared him, his eyes wide and wild. "Stay back! It's too dangerous to be around me. I'm dangerous." He shook his head back and forth with intensity as if fighting the emotion rising up into his jaw. "What if it hadn't stopped!? I was careless! I could have easily brushed your skin instead. I-I can't do

this. I'm sorry. I'm nothing but a monster!" His whole body visibly trembled. Turning away, he ran from the room, his golden jerkin glinting behind him.

Melora chased after him, a task made more difficult by the extra weight of her now-golden dress. Her hand pressed against her chest as she followed him into the garden, trying to hold together the broken pieces of her heart.

"Aurie!"

But it was too late. Spines ripped through his clothing, his skin shimmered and grew, and a torturous roar spilled from his lips, the sound echoing in her heart.

There was nothing she could do. She covered her mouth and watched in horror as she watched the reverse of what she had seen just a few days prior. His body continued to expand, wings unfurled from his back, and a tail appeared, slashing with agitation. Finally, his face turned reptilian, and Dragon stood in his place, his scales shimmering with iridescence.

He roared angrily to the sky. Melora ran to him and threw her arms around his neck, desperate to calm him.

"Aurie! It's okay. I'm safe." Tears cascaded down her face.

He groaned and leaned his head against her shoulder.

"This is all my fault. I'm so sorry, Aurie. Had I not insisted on dancing with you, none of this would have happened. I was too selfish, and now you've shifted into a dragon once more. I know you didn't want to shift. I'm so sorry. But we'll fix this! I'm more determined than ever to make this right. We are going to break the curse this time, I promise!" She asserted, as if she could will it into happening.

Shouldn't make promises... can't keep, he said.

Her tear-stained face turned up, and she gazed at at the familiar blue of his eyes.

Not your fault, he said, his voice sounding gruffer than usual.

“Dragon? Are you okay?” She ran a hand down the smooth scales on his face. He didn't normally speak in such a broken manner. Even as a dragon, his speech had always been eloquent.

Not your fault. This is what I am.

“Oh, Aurie! No. We can fix this. We have to fix it.” She clung to him, her sobs intensifying. Somehow, she'd made everything worse!

\* \* \*

Aurie became sullen and withdrawn. He was avoiding her. Melora knew he must be berating himself about nearly turning her to gold so she gave him some space. After all, she was the one at fault here, though he steadfastly disagreed. She had flirted with the boundaries, and he had paid the consequences—so she allowed him his space for the first few days.

However, after some time had passed, she sought him out. She had made him a promise, and she intended to keep it, regardless of whether or not he was happy about it.

Her steps echoed down the hallway, along with her determination. She would break this wretched curse and free Aurie from this burden if it was the last thing she did. While he had been wallowing, she had been thinking about how to break the curse. She kept returning to the same thing. They needed to get the exact words the dragon

had spoken. There had to be some piece that they were missing. Perhaps there was some way to speak to the dragon who had given him the golden touch.

Her heart warmed at the thought of finally solving this seemingly unbreakable curse. Over the time she had come to know him, she had learned how wrong her first impressions had been. She had begun to like him despite his arrogant facade, because she knew that he was really kind and thoughtful in spite of the hurt he was feeling inside.

Her shoes padded up the stairs to Dragon's tower. Though she didn't like to intrude on his domain, she had already looked everywhere else. She couldn't break this curse without him, and she was past being delicate with his feelings.

She pounded on the door. "Aurie! I know you're in there. Open this door. I've given you several days to sulk, but now it's time to get up and get to work! You need to take charge of your own life. You got yourself into this mess, and you can get yourself out. Only you can finish this, but I'm here to help."

A grumbling reverberated in her head. Not waiting for permission, she pushed the door open. An enormous dragon lay in the center of the room atop a massive pile of soft blankets, looking pathetic. His eyes moved toward her, but he made no move to get up.

She clapped her hands. "That's enough! You've been resting for three days now. It's time to get up and act like the man you are!"

He bared his teeth at her. Dragon... not a man.

"Currently, but not forever. Under all those scales, you are still a man."

Not much longer.

“No more pessimism! We are going to break the curse. I keep my promises. I’m not leaving at the first sign of duress.”

Don’t want... hurt you.

She placed her hands on her hips and tilted her head. “You will not hurt me. You are hurting me now by acting like this and giving up.”

Those big blue eyes of his stared at her sorrowfully, so warm and familiar. How had she missed it before?

Time running out.

“Then you’d better get up and get moving. No time like the present.” She moved purposefully toward him and shouted, shoving against his massive leg. “Alright then, up, up!” He remained motionless, but Melora kept at it. “First thing we are going to do is put that dragon magic of yours to the test, since you are already a dragon.”

Won’t work.

“Oh, you’ve tried it already?” He remained silent, confirming her suspicions. “That’s what I thought. Now where is that man who persistently pursued me, even when it seemed hopeless?”

His long narrow mouth twitched upward at the corners, and he finally climbed to his feet and shook his body. He leaned down and blew hot air at her. Let’s do this.

Melora grinned. That was the man she’d come to know and love. Love? She stilled as her heart beat a rapid cadence. Did she really love him?

Thoughts of their time together over the past few weeks flashed through her mind:

laughing as she painted his cheek, comforting him when he was in pain, confiding some of her deepest fears to him, the tension sparking between them as they danced... He'd become a true friend and confidant. Somewhere along the way, he'd become someone she simply didn't want to live without.



### CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

As he followed Melora down the stairs toward the great hall, Aurie felt ashamed of himself—ashamed that Melora had seen him at his worst. He'd been so despondent that he'd been unable to get up; he hadn't realized that days had gone by while he'd been sinking into a haze of self pity and despair. He'd barely registered when Melora first came to rouse him. His dragon voice felt rusty. Speech was difficult. Nothing about him felt human.

Yet, looking at her determination and devotion made him want to be human again, to continue the life that felt like a fairytale. The very idea of losing everything if he remained a dragon forever lanced hot pain through his heart. That thought had propelled him to get up and follow her.

She was right. His story wasn't over yet.

With her help, anything was possible. He didn't think he'd ever be worthy of her, but he was grateful to have her here.

Once they reached the great hall, he continued through the front door and faced Everrose Manor in all its sparkling radiance. His mother had never liked it this way—cold and gaudy. He would restore it to its former charm. Though it hadn't been fancy, it had been a comfortable and safe place to live. He took flight and circled the building. Breathing his dragon magic upon it, he willed it to turn back.

His eyes kept returning to Melora. What about her? What would she think of him once all of the gold was gone and he was nothing but a poor ex-lord once again?

While she claimed to want the curse gone for him, he had seen the way she practically glowed with awe when she'd first entered the golden walls of Everrose. He remembered the delight radiating from her eyes when he had turned the ribbons to gold in front of her. She might not think she wanted all this gold, but he was certain she did.

His father's voice echoed in his mind, crisp and disapproving, "Money is power, Aurie. Without it, you are nothing. No one will listen to you. They won't take you seriously. And you can bet no one will want to be with you. Money is what makes the world go round."

He shook the thoughts away and landed, feeling annoyed. Everrose winked at him in the sunlight, shining as brightly as ever. He should have known it wouldn't work. He was a failure. His father's disapproving face filled his mind followed by memories of his childhood—a childhood filled with failed attempts to win his father's affection. The painting he'd given him that his father rejected... Showing his father the investments he'd made, only for the man to roll his eyes and tell him how useless he was... That slight hint of a smile when his investments had paid off...

Aurie had been chasing that hint of a smile his whole life. Gold shimmered through his vision. Gold was the only way for him to ever find love—how could he let that go completely? His father was right.

He scowled.

"Aurie, are you well?"

Fine. His voice came out gruffer than he intended. Forgive me. I just... It didn't work. Again. Words and coherent thoughts were becoming more and more difficult to form. Thoughts came to him in a mishmash of colors and pictures, bright with emotions. It was difficult to convey that into words.

Despite his frustration, he and Melora continued trying to use his dragon magic in various ways to reverse the curse. As usual, nothing worked.

Break? He asked after growling at her for the third time. He tried to blink away the haze of emotion. He didn't want to growl at her. The day was fading away, and he was feeling more and more disgruntled. Why must they continue this pointless task? Perhaps it was time for them to accept his fate and move on.

But that wonderful fire of determination still blazed in Melora's eyes, her dark hair flowing around her face and down her back. He wanted so much to be with her—but he knew he should probably send her away for her own protection. Unable to help himself, he leaned forward and nuzzled her with his scaly nose in apology.

She sighed and rubbed his head, her arms coming around his neck. The action calmed the dragon within him. His heartbeat slowed to match hers, and he breathed her in. At least as a dragon he could touch her. He sighed. He could stay like this, wrapped in her embrace forever.

“You know, sometimes I wonder if you even want to be human again.” She gently stroked his scales down his head and neck. “Have you... Have you tried to shift recently?”

He grunted and nudged her hand. She'd paused her rhythmic stroking. He didn't want to talk about being human again.

“All right, I get it.” She huffed out a laugh and continued petting him.

After a few brief moments, her fingers stilled, and she placed her tiny hands on either side of his face, turning it so he could look directly at her. Her dark eyes blazed a bright caramel as they gazed at him. “Now tell me, Aurie. Have you tried to turn back into a human?”

He huffed out a breath. As he took a moment to think about her question. Yes.

“When?”

It took him a moment. Time was becoming fuzzy. Yesterday or the day before... he recalled being desperate to change back, but no matter what he did, he remained a dragon.

“Can you try again? Please, for me?”

He looked at those warm golden eyes. He didn’t want to deny her anything. She had become his most precious treasure. And yet, he was afraid he didn’t know how to try again.

Fly? He tilted his head in a way he knew she couldn’t resist, hoping to distract her.

Her lips twitched in a grin. “Okay, we’ll fly first. Then you’ll try to turn human?”

He gave his head an indeterminate bob, then nudged her toward his back, eager to carry her up into the clouds once again.

Once she was secure upon this back, he launched into the sky. His heart ignited at the sound of her laughter. He longed to continue to make her laugh. To stay like this forever. Dragon and human.

\* \* \*

Something was seriously wrong with Aurie. Over the past three days he seemed to have become more animalistic than he was even before she knew he was a man. His frequent growls and broken speech scared her. She could understand why he had been afraid to change back to a dragon—but now he didn’t seem to want to be human

anymore. She'd done all she could to coax a promise out of him to try to shift again, and now she would hold him to it, no matter how much he scowled at her.

That scowl deepened, and he snarled after another failed attempt.

She leaned against him, needing to feel his warmth. "I don't understand. Don't you want to be human again?"

He nosed her cheek. With Mel... Always.

She looked him in the eye. "As a human?"

He puffed out an annoyed sound. Cursed, arrogant, jerk.

"You're not an arrogant jerk, Aurie. At least not anymore."

But cursed. Hurt you. His words rang, foul and frightening in her head, causing tears to well up. She forcefully pushed back at them with her own words.

"Not forever. I refuse to believe that. I've been thinking that we need to go to see the dragon who cursed you. Surely he'll be able to help us untangle how to break the curse instead of guessing."

Aurie bristled—his spines and even his scales seemed to stand on end, his ears flattened.

"Please, Aurie, at least think about it. I-I don't know what else to do."

Better this way.

"No! No, it's not. We can still fix this. I'm not giving up. We are so close."

He looked at her with hopeless eyes, sorrow pooling in their blue depths.

The tears that had been building in hers finally slipped out. The pads of a large paw caught them and whipped them away.

Stay with me.

“Of course I’ll stay with you. I don’t know what I would do without you.”

Love you.

Her breath caught, and she turned toward him sharply. “Aurie! I... we...” More tears spilled down her cheeks. “I can’t do this right now.”

He turned away, his expression pained.

She touched his cheek, bringing his head back toward her. “Let’s first sort out your curse. Then we’ll think about the future, all right?”

He bobbed his head, but the look in his eyes was not reassuring. She prayed he hadn’t given up hope. She needed his help if they were to have any hope of breaking this curse. No one deserved this fate, especially not Aurie. Determination had served her well in the past, and it would serve her now! She wasn’t prepared to think of a future without him in it.

### CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

O minous howling woke Melora in the middle of the night. Heart racing, she lay frozen upon her bed, unable to move for several long moments. The haunting wail came again, chillingly close. Was Aurie correct? Were they here for her? A shiver stole through her body. Wasn't there a boundary to keep them away? How had they gotten so close?

A snarl rang below her window. Her breath caught as her heart leapt into her throat. What should she do? The wolves couldn't climb in through the window, could they? She was a story up. The snarls turned hungry, desperate for her blood. More yipping joined the wolf below. She couldn't stay here! It wasn't safe. She needed to get away from the window as soon as possible.

Aurie was correct—they had to be following her!. Why else would they be so close to where she slept?

Aurie!

He would know what to do. Surely a dragon was enough to scare them away.

Cursing her flagging courage, she stiffly pushed the covers back, hearing every heartbeat echo loudly in her ears. Could they hear it too? Is that how they knew she was here? Squeezing her eyes shut, she tried to gather her courage. She slipped off her bed and tiptoed speedily to the door, slipping out as quietly as possible. After shutting the door behind her, she dashed down the hall the short distance toward Dragon's tower, more grateful than ever that he had insisted she stay in the family

wing.

Once she arrived at his room, she didn't even knock, bursting through the door, desperate for his protection. She bolted across the room toward his enormous form, which lay nestled in a pile of blankets. She flung her arms just below his neck and buried her face in his iridescent scales, clinging to him as her whole body convulsed.

His head shot up and he looked down at her, bleary-eyed.

A growl rumbled in his chest. She didn't care. He was not the one she feared. She knew she would be safe with him.

Heedless of his snarl, she pressed closer to him, feeling the steady rhythm of his heart.

His warm breath spread over her face.

What happening?

"They are here! The wolves—I heard them right under my window."

He stiffened under her arms, his sinewy neck twisting toward his large window. He scowled. Not for long.

She clung tighter to his neck. "Please, please don't leave me."

He nuzzled against her face. Safe here. Up high. Be back—fast.

Her lip trembled. She hated how vulnerable and helpless she felt. She was being a burden. She swallowed back her fear. She could be brave enough to wait for him here. "Promise you'll stay safe! I couldn't bear for anything to happen to you." Her



arms reluctantly fell away as she wrapped them around herself for comfort.

His leathery lips brushed against her head, his breath warming her, then he turned to open the large shutters covering the window.

He looked back at her one last time. Safe. Promise. He launched out of the window and into the night.

She wasn't sure whether his promise referred to himself or to her, but as she watched him fly with grace and purpose around the side of the manor, she trusted him to return to her.

Snatching up one of the mismatched blankets, still warm from his body heat, she wrapped it around herself and snuggled down into his nest. His musty, slightly wild scent comforted her.

\* \* \*

Fury burned through Aurie as he flew around Everrose. He could smell the wolves on the light summer breeze almost immediately. How had they gotten so close? Had he become so lost as a dragon that he'd forgotten to reset the magical boundary?

As he neared Melora's window on the opposite side of the manor, he heard gently clinking metal and saw movement in the bushes against the building. With a powerful roar, he breathed his magic down upon the intruders. Several wolves whimpered, three coming out of the golden leaves with their teeth bared.

He roared again, this time blowing out just enough fire to singe them. They yipped and gnashed their teeth, backing away with their tails between their legs. Two of the wolves ran off into the gilded gardens, while another tried unsuccessfully to leap at his back. Aurie's claws snagged him mid-leap and flung him away. The wolf let out a

howl and ran, whimpering. Aurie continued to fight the wolves for several moments, chasing them off his land. Once the last wolf had turned tail and run, he reset the magical boundary, fury boiling in his veins.

How dare they try to steal Melora away right under his nose! Mine! Mine! He had growled angrily at them, then shook his head. No, that wasn't right. She didn't belong to anyone—but he belonged to her—heart, body and soul.

When he finally returned to the turret, he found Melora curled in his mound of blankets, trembling. He nudged her gently with his nose, longing to take away her fear.

“Aurie?” She looked up at him, reaching to rest her hand against his face.

Wolves, gone. Safe.

Her breath came out in a woosh as she sat up more fully. She flung her arms around his neck, hugging him close. “Oh Aurie, I was so worried. Especially after the last attack. Are you alright? Did they injure you? They were so close!”

Her breath against his neck warmed his insides.

Safe. He assured her again. You sleep?

Her head moved back and forth. “Not much. I've been too anxious.”

Sleep now.

Her arms tightened around him. “Please, stay with me. I don't think I can be alone right now. Even if the wolves are gone. I'm just... just so scared.”

Always, stay with you.

Shifting, she made room for him to curl next to her, and she curled against him. The weight of her body felt more soothing than anything he'd ever experienced. She was trusting her tiny life to him. He wasn't convinced that he was up to the task, but he would do his very best.

His erratic breathing calmed. He rested his head round her and fell asleep, her heartbeat close to his.

\* \* \*

M elora awoke, feeling more comfortable and safe than she could ever recall feeling. Sunlight streamed in through a large window, dancing around the unfamiliar room. Rhythmic breathing rose and fell to the sound of her heart. A weight rested against her hip. Moving her head, she realized that shimmering, colorful scales had been her pillow—Aurie. He had cradled her between his paws.

Memories of the night before flashed through her mind—her terror when the wolves had come seeking her, Aurie heading out into the night to protect her, her begging him to stay with her and finally cuddling with him as she drifted off to sleep. Who knew that such a large, scaly animal could be so comfortable? She sighed and turned onto her back. He lifted his paw off her, leaving her feeling chilled. The desire to grab his claw and wrap herself back into his embrace overwhelmed her—she barely resisted the absurd impulse.

Awake? Aurie's gruff dragon voice felt gentle and intimate inside her head.

She looked up, her eyes catching his. "Yes. Thank you for protecting me last night."

Always. Love you. Keep safe, no matter what.

A burning filled her belly at his bold words. She pressed against him, kissing his chest. “I-I think I...” Could she admit the truth, be vulnerable and confess the feelings that burned at the back of her throat, waiting to be released since the moment she’d felt them? “I love you too, Aurie.” It tumbled out in a rush, but the breathless declaration filled her with deep satisfaction and relief—especially when she saw the answering pleasure in his eyes, now misty with emotion. “That’s why we mustn’t give up on breaking the curse,” she blurted. She never wanted her time with him to end.

Keep safe first.

She nodded, feeling a giddy burst of pleasure as she climbed to her feet. Was this what love felt like? This security mingled with excitement and purpose? She was floating on the clouds of Arindia. Nothing like what her father had tried to force upon her with that awful Sir Calix!

Aurie shook out his wings before arching his back in a catlike stretch.

She hid a smile behind her hands. How could a dragon be so endearing?

Come. He gestured with his neck for her to follow. See sent wolves.

Her brow wrinkled as she followed him, confused. “How can we do that?”

Magic. Mirror powder.

She’d never heard of mirror powder, but then she wasn’t any kind of mage. She had no idea how it might work or what it would do, but if it would help them learn more about the wolves and how to be rid of them, she was all for it. A shiver ran down her spine as she recalled their howls when she had run from them in the forest—and when she’d felt the wolf’s teeth sink into her ankle. If Dragon— Aurie , she corrected

herself—if Aurie hadn't come when he did... She shook those unhelpful thoughts away.

He led her to a large open room that was easy for him to navigate as a dragon. Several large windows made the space bright. Shelves lined the walls, full of books and mysterious vials. A book lay open across the desk, surrounded by several powders and vials, along with an unfinished note or list of some kind, as if recently used.

She gazed around in wonder. He hadn't brought her here when he'd given her the short tour weeks ago. "What is this place?"

New. Magic solarium. Practice magic.

Her eyes widened. "Oh! And you never had magic before becoming a dragon?" She recalled him saying something about coming into his magic.

He bobbed his head once, indicating a bowl of water atop a short pillar. Yes. Not mage. He delicately picked up a glass jar between his claws and shook some kind of white powder into the bowl. Look. His blue eyes were bright with concern as he peered into the water.

She wrapped her arms around herself. What was there to see? Did she even want to know? As she hesitantly approached, he called out in a loud, crisp voice. See Metis.

The water shimmered and an image of her home, along with her father, began to appear. Her lips parted in surprise. "How are we seeing this?"

Mirror tracker at home. Watch him. Don't trust. Bad man. Sent wolf with Sir Calix. There was a pause between each short phrase, as if speaking was too difficult.

Her eyes widened. Her own father truly had been the one responsible for those horrible wolves? She couldn't believe it when Aurie had mentioned his suspicions before. Despite his many failings, she thought her father still loved her. How could he do this to her? She had tried so hard not to be a burden for her Papa, and yet he hurt her again and again. Would she never learn that he'd stop at nothing to bend her to his will?

In the water, she watched Sir Calix come into view, his wide shoulders raising as he plotted with her father. As she focused in on the scene, their words became intelligible. "...Came back empty again!" Sir Calix was angry, pounding a fist against the table. "You told me that the magic would help them get her."

"Be patient. They will retrieve her. I paid a seidr good money for that spell. His power is strong enough to do the task. It's that blasted dragon and those eerie woods!" The bitter words chilled Melora. She wasn't sure she wanted to hear more, and yet she couldn't look away.

Sir Calix scowled, unconvinced by her father's explanation. "Next time, you go with the wolves, then we can take the dragon out. Melora is mine! You promised her to me."

"And you shall have her—and more, once we find the golden castle the dragon lives in. The seidr has a few tricks up his sleeve." The smile twisting her father's lips made her feel sick. "The dragon won't know what hit him. We'll be rich beyond your wildest dreams! You should be thanking me."

"Thanking you?" Sir Calix rounded on him, his usually pale face reddening as his voice rose. "Thanking you!" His hand slammed against the table once more. "You still owe me! And now, you have cost me the most desirable bride in all of Vilastoria—whom you'd already forced me to wait a year and a half for, just so she would be an age you deemed acceptable!"

Melora sucked in a breath. She hadn't known that her father held him off for so long. She'd assumed he'd been waiting for a better price. Hadn't he? Or was there some sort of fatherly instinct left in him?

"The wolves are getting closer. They brought back her shoe recently."

"That was weeks ago! I want her, not her shoe!" Sir Calix grabbed a mug from the table and threw it. The ceramic dish flew just to the left of Papa's head, crashing against the wall where it shattered.

Papa's head bobbed a quick agreement, the tremble in his hands giving away the fear he was hiding. "And you shall have her. You're right, perhaps we should follow the wolves this time, then we can bring back more than her shoe. Remember all that gold the dragon is hoarding?"

"Gold only you have seen! It means nothing if you can't produce either it or your daughter!" He advanced toward Papa threateningly.

"Papa?" Nerissa's small voice interrupted the heated argument.

"No!" Melora gasped! Heart squeezing with fear. Not Nerissa! Her knuckles turned white as she gripped the basin, but she could only watch in horror as the reflection of her sister looked toward Papa, her shiny black hair slipping over her gaunt face.

"Get out of there!" Melora yelled. Unfortunately, no one could hear her.

Aurie's large paw gently rested against her shoulder. Stop, if too much.

"No, I need to see what happens." She turned back to watch the sickening scene unfold upon the water.

“Can’t you see I’m in a meeting, girl?!” Papa thundered, making her hunch her slender shoulders and retreat inside herself. Was Nerissa eating enough? Melora had never seen her sister look so frail.

“I just thought you might be getting hungry.”

Sir Calix’s eyes fixed on Nerissa’s cowering form. Then they flickered back toward Papa. “If you refuse to bring me what is mine, I will personally make sure you go to debtor’s prison. While I’m not interested in this scrawny girl, I’ll sell her off to make up for the rest of your debt. She should catch a good price.” His voice was low and threatening.

Nerissa’s panicked expression turned from Sir Calix to Papa.

Papa stood, his bloodshot eyes a bit wild. “There is no need for all of that. I’ll bring Melora to you, just as promised, along with the gold.”

Sir Calix pursed his lips, watching Papa with hard eyes. “I’ll give you two more days to bring me my bride.”

Papa’s face paled as Sir Calix swept from the room, leaving behind a cloud of darkness and sucking all the warmth out of the room Melora was in.

She stood, clutching the basin of water as the image faded away. She couldn’t breathe. Nerissa! Her name echoed through her mind with each beat of her heart. How could she let this happen to her sister? She shouldn’t have left her to fend for herself!

Aurie gently helped her to a nearby chair where she collapsed, cradling her head in her hands. Had she married Sir Calix, Nerissa would have been safe. Debtor’s prison?! Her father was being blackmailed! Now she understood why Papa had been



so desperate. Sir Calix would have revenge on her entire family because she ran away. But she couldn't turn back time. After several moments, determination filled her. It was time for her to leave and do what she should have done in the first place. She looked up at Aurie, meeting his eyes. "I have to save Nerissa. I won't let him sell her!"

He stood and gave a single nod as if making a decision, then shook out his wings. Stay . I go get sister.

She pressed a hand against his flank to stop him. "No, Aurie! Didn't you hear? They'll kill you! They have some kind of magical trap for dragons! You have to stay here, within the boundary where you're safe. Besides, Nerissa doesn't know you. She'll be terrified. I have to be the one to go." Her heart thudded loudly in her ears as horrible images of Aurie being attacked by something more frightening than wolves flashed through her mind.

His reptilian eyes narrowed, and he huffed. No! Dangerous! His voice cracked into a low growl. A shiver rippled through his scales. Stay! Protect Melora and sister.

Her breath caught, and her stomach clenched in fear. Much as she wanted his help, she was afraid of what might happen. He didn't understand. Sir Calix was more unscrupulous than he imagined. How could she get him to stay? "It's too dangerous! You're a colossal dragon. Papa will see you for sure and then what would happen?"

Camouflage. Grab sister. Fly.

" You don't know what they're capable of!" Her voice rose along with her frustration. "I know you mean well, but you can't just go grabbing my sister and bringing her to the middle of the woods against her will like... like some kind of prisoner—at least I came with you willingly!"

His breath caught, and he recoiled as if she'd struck him. Prisoner? The single word came out broken, strangled. His wings drooped, and for a moment he seemed to shrink slightly, smoke curling from his nostrils.

“She'd be petrified! This is my sister! She isn't just a problem to be solved!” Tears hovered on her lashes as her passion intensified. “Don't you see? I have to be the one to rescue her! I can sneak inside and get her away. You can't do that.”

I jailer— like father? The spines on his back seemed to stand on end, and he shook his head back and forth. I bad, he growled, his wings flaring wide as his claws gouged lines across the golden tile. Melora winced at the sound. One powerful forelimb jerked out in agitation—and though it would not have hit her, Melora instinctively ducked, the rush of air from his movement tossing her hair back.

He froze.

Her wide eyes met his half-wild ones. He looked almost feral, and the golden flame on his chest seemed to flicker and glow. Was it getting bigger?

“No! No, Aurie, you're not like him.” She moved toward him, wanting to reassure him. “You're trying to protect us, but protecting isn't the same as choosing for us!”

Stay back! He jerked backward as smoke curled from his nostrils. Dangerous! I dangerous! He panted, sides heaving.

“I trust you, Aurie.”

No. His wide eyes were full of pain as he looked at her. Stay safe. Magic, protect Melora. Aurie can't.

She stilled. “Magic? What magic?”

Come.

### CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

He'd almost hurt her! Aurie's mind raced as he led her to his desk, replaying the incident again and again. Hurt and anger had blinded him. The curse was consuming him! The dragon was taking his heart along with his humanity. How could he protect her from anything if he couldn't even protect her from himself?

He riffled furiously through the books. If he couldn't protect her himself, at least he could offer a spell to help her slip in and out speedily, and he refused to let her get attacked by those wolves again!

He found the book with the correct spell but... he was helpless! His claws were too blasted long and sharp—they would rip the delicate pages to shreds. Usually, he asked Galen to help, but in his frenzy, he hadn't thought to ask for his steward. He glared at the book before scanning the room for some kind of solution.

He sucked in a breath as Melora tugged the book from his grip and flipped through the pages. "What are we looking for?" she asked, looking trustingly up at him with her sweet, molasses eyes. Careful to keep his distance, he managed to guide her with his broken speech to the correct spot. Finding the spell, he breathed a sigh of relief and went to track down the ingredients. An ancient rose—thorns and all. Snapping two of his mother's gilded roses from the bush, he returned. Fairy dust was quickly located among the vials. Next, three drops of dragon's blood. He could do that! Melora cried out as he pricked his tail, reopening the wound from his skirmish with the wolves the day before.

"No, Aurie!"

She didn't understand—he'd give every drop of his blood to keep her safe!

Okay. Need it, he reassured her.

Finally, he needed an item they could place the transportation spell on.

The item would need to be something small and easy for her to carry around. He looked down at the spell. Something twists? He grumbled aloud. What could they possibly find that was small and could twist? He scowled at the room, eyes darting around, hoping to land on something useful. They hadn't come this far to be stumped by something that twisted!

"A ring!" Melora said with confidence. "It would be perfect. You can take it off and put it back on easily and twist it around."

He gazed at her for a moment in awe. Brilliant. Mother ring. He rushed up to his mother's room to find it, his claws fumbling awkwardly with her jewelry. As he found the keepsake, he didn't question the idea of giving it to Melora. He knew his mother would approve.

Returning to the solarium, he laid the ring on the table and prepared the items. Then, he rested the ingredients atop the precious circle before speaking the correct words. The air around the ring shimmered, sinking into the gold material. The sapphires glowed brightly with power for a moment, then faded, leaving the jewelry looking deceptively normal.

They both stared at his mother's keepsake for several long moments. Yours. He insisted, gesturing to it with his head. Go save sister.

She reached out and touched the ring hesitantly, then picked it up. Her eyes found his. "I'll come back to you, Aurie. Once I know my sister is safe, I promise I'll come help

you.”

Don’t worry... me. It was too late, anyway. His humanity was slipping. The flame had grown to cover his heart—surely that meant it was already gold. Sister need you. He tried not to let her see the sorrow spilling out as he gave her the extra rose. He could not allow himself to hope that she would use it to return across the boundary, but he needed to give it to her, needed to know that she had something to remember him by when he was gone.

She tucked it into her hair as her lips trembled with emotion. “Oh, Aurie!” The tender expression in her eyes as she gazed at him nearly tore him apart. “I don’t think I can ever look at a rose the same again!”

His heart ached. He wasn’t sure he’d ever see her again. The dragon’s curse was nearly complete—his loss of control earlier proved it. But saving her sister was more important. They didn’t stand a chance at breaking the curse, anyway. Her time was better spent doing something that made a difference. He didn’t want her to feel like a prisoner with him.

It didn’t matter what happened to him. He was worthless as a human anyway. That was what the dragon had been trying to tell him with his cryptic words. If only he had listened. If only he had seen just how useless the gold was before... Perhaps it was better this way. He could do more as a dragon—at least he could help Melora and her sister.

There might have been a chance for him had he listened earlier, but he couldn’t change the past. And now, he refused to allow his sins to consume anyone else—especially not the beautiful, tenderhearted, determined Melora. Letting her go was the right thing to do. For once in his life, he wouldn’t be selfish. He would be benevolent and put someone before himself, something she seemed to do daily.

She rushed toward him and flung her arms around his neck, giving him the hug he desperately longed for. A hug that would have to last him for perhaps the rest of his days. Unable to resist, he leaned down and rested his chin against her shoulder, gently nudging her face.

Thank you. Always remember you.

“I’ll return as soon as I can. I haven’t forgotten my promise to you, Aurie. Once I’m back, we’ll find the dragon who cursed you, and together we’ll break the spell. With this magical transportation ring you made, I’ll be so quick, you’ll hardly miss me.”

His lips twitched and his nostrils flared. Doubt it. You—treasure. Love you.

She pressed her body closer and tightened her arms. “I love you too, Aurie. Thank you for everything.”

With her breath warm against his cheek, his belly kindled, he longed to kiss her. But not as a dragon—as a human. Something that was no longer possible.

She pressed a kiss to his cheek. He nibbled at her ear, making her laugh. He needed her laughter to hold on to. “Soon Aurie. You’ll be yourself again.”

Her hopeful words pulled at his tainted heart in a way he had never experienced before. She made him want that impossible dream, but for her, he would give it up.

She gave him a brilliant smile and stepped back. “This isn’t goodbye,” she promised. Following the instructions, she lifted her hand, and slipped the ring upon her finger. With one last longing look, she clearly stated her destination, and twisted the ring three times. The surrounding air hummed and shimmered with magic. Light flashed. And then she was gone. A slight haze was the only indication she had ever been there.

He moved to stand exactly where she had been, wanting to breathe in the last of her essence. He curled up and lay down, his heart aching.

It was over.

He'd let go of the best thing to ever happen to him. It wouldn't be long before his dragon form was permanent and his heart was entirely gold, draining the last of his humanity to the dragon who had cursed him.

He wouldn't hold her back. Eventually, she would find a real man to love and care for her. Someone who wasn't an arrogant, proud jerk getting himself cursed because of his own greed. She deserved so much more than he could offer.

\* \* \*

Magic buzzed through her body as she twisted the ring, activating the transportation spell. Time and space whooshed past, flashing gold then red and purple all at once as she was suddenly pulled from Aurie's gilded manor. She nearly stumbled over her own feet as the front of her childhood home appeared before her like a strange dream.

After spending time with Aurie in a home that felt warm and inviting despite the hard metallic surfaces, the old cottage felt empty and cold. The flowers she had meticulously tended were wilting from neglect. A few baskets and a laundry line waited, as if she had been gone for a mere moment. And yet, it no longer felt like home. Her life here seemed a lifetime ago. She pushed sentiment aside. It didn't matter anymore. She wouldn't be staying long. As soon as she found her sister, they were leaving, never to return.

"Nerissa?" she called, peering into the cottage. Anxiety attacked her stomach as she hovered on the threshold. Shadows loomed around her. She cringed, forcing herself to face the darkness inside. No one seemed to be in the center room that doubled as



the kitchen and living area. Was Papa out? That was his habit at this time of day. It was late enough that he was likely off drinking and gambling already. She took a deep breath, gathering her courage. The time to act was now! They would need to hurry and pack so they could leave before Papa came home, and his return could be unpredictable.

But where was her sister? She should be home now.

She stepped fully into the house. “Nerissa?” The door clicked shut behind her, darkening the already dingy gloom. Hardly able to breathe, she made her way to their shared bedroom. Nerissa! Please be here! If she wasn’t outside and she wasn’t in the shared living space, then surely she’d be tidying their tiny room. The wood of the bedroom door seemed especially creaky as she pushed it open to reveal yet another empty room. The bag Melora had brought when she had tried to run away from Sir Calix weeks prior, still rested upon the floor. Melora blinked in confusion, her movements slow as she entered the familiar room. Where was her sister? Perhaps Nerissa had gone to fetch more laundry while Papa was out.

Melora clutched her fingers together. What was she to do? Well, she wasn’t going to sit around waiting. Looking at what she’d packed all those weeks ago, she grabbed a few more necessities and tossed them in. She was just finishing up when she heard the main door shut and a rustling in the other room.

Her heart sped up. Was Papa home early? Had she come too soon in her eagerness to protect her sister? She scanned the room. Should she hide?

The sound of footsteps grew closer. What if it was her sister? She couldn’t hide here all day if Nerissa was home. She moved closer to the door and pressed her ear to the wood, hoping to learn something about who was on the other side.

The bedroom door swung open unexpectedly, sending Melora sprawling back.

“Mel? What are you doing here?” Then she was being gathered into her sister’s tight embrace. “I’m so glad you’re all right! I was so worried about you.”

“What about you? Are you well?” Melora pulled back, looking her sister over. “You’re practically skin and bones. Has Papa been using all the money again? I never should have left you behind.”

“I’m fine, really. It’s you I’m worried about.” Nerissa gripped her shoulders. “Sir Calix is determined to have you. He and Papa sent wolves after you.” She shivered. “Much as I’m delighted to see you, you can’t stay here. You need to leave, posthaste. You were lucky to escape that man the first time. He won’t let you go a second.” Her eyes flicked around the room as if he might turn up at any moment.

“I’m not leaving without you! What about Sir Calix’s plans to sell you off to pay Papa’s debts if he can’t produce me ?” Melora shook her head vehemently. “No. I won’t allow it. You are coming with me, and that is final.”

Nerissa’s eyes were wide. “How do you know about that?”

“I have my ways. Now come. We’ll leave this place together as we should have done years ago. Then perhaps none of this would ever have happened.”

“You can’t blame yourself, Mel. We were just children. We couldn’t have known Papa would sell us off.”

“Yes, well, we can’t change the past now, can we? Let’s hurry and get you packed. There isn’t much time.”

Nerissa nodded in agreement, and they quickly began gathering her meager belongings. Melora told her sister all about Aurie and Dragon and the golden castle while they worked. She explained how Papa had first broken through the boundary by

wearing her golden tunic and described how kind Aurie had been.

Nerissa was completely enthralled. “It seems too fantastic to be real.” She sighed longingly, hugging a dress against herself.

“Yes,” came a sickeningly familiar voice from just outside the room. “Imagine my surprise at finding my bride and learning that the tales of a golden castle are true. It must be my lucky day.”

Melora drew in a sharp breath.

“Calix.”

He leaned casually against the doorframe, his large arms folded. As she spoke his name, he grinned cruelly and pushed away from the door, advancing on them. Melora backed away from his imposing figure. Why did such a comparatively small man instill more fear in her than a terrifying dragon ever had?

“Yes, my dear bride, I’m here to collect what’s mine. I was planning to go with your father to track down this palace of gold, but this—” he spread his hands, a wry smile upon his lips. “This is so much better. Don’t you think?”

Melora rubbed the ring resting against her finger. All she needed to do was grab Nerissa, remove the ring, say the spell, and twist it a few times. They would be out of here in moments. But she couldn’t allow Calix to know what she was doing. If only she could keep him talking—that should distract him enough. It shouldn’t be too hard, since the man loved nothing more than to talk about himself.

With careful steps, she positioned herself closer to her sister, waving her fingers behind her back for Nerissa to come closer.

“You’ll never get the gold,” she said. “As you witnessed, there is a monstrous dragon guarding it.”

“Yes, and yet you seem to be perfectly well after your encounter with the deadly beast. It must not be a very dangerous dragon, or perhaps you are the key to keeping it tame.”

Her heart drummed so loudly in her ears that she was nearly certain he could hear it. Nerissa thankfully had taken her hint and sidled closer while they conversed. She grasped her hand. Perfect. Now she only needed to keep him distracted enough to activate the ring. Then they would forever be gone from here.

“He’s definitely not tame. I’ve seen him fight off at least eight wolves at once and easily win. Besides, you’ll never get across his boundary. His magic keeps outsiders like you from entering.”

He leaned closer to her. “And yet, you entered. What was it you said to your sister just now? Ah, yes! I just need some of his gold to get through, the gold you’re conveniently wearing.” He eyed the rose in her hair.

“I—” Melora paled as she fumbled with the ring. Her fingers were trembling too hard to put it on, but they needed to leave now. Calix suddenly lurched forward and snatched her wrist, causing the ring to slip from her fingers and clank to the ground, rolling under her desk. She gasped, her heart wrenching. No!

“Where did that ring come from?” He snarled, glaring at the space where it had vanished before turning back to her. “The only ring you should wear is mine.”

“Never!” she spat, struggling against his viselike grip. She was through with being submissive. They were leaving with or without the ring—though losing it would make the journey much harder.

Papa chose that moment to burst into the room. “What is going on here?”

“I was just having a little discussion with my future wife. She has come home to me, but it seems she’s acquired someone else’s ring.” His dark eyes turned toward her, burning coldly.

Papa tsked. “You will obey him, girl. You are no longer my problem.”

His heartless words sliced through any hope she still held of ever feeling his love and acceptance.

“If what she says is true, then there really is a castle made entirely of gold. More wondrous than I ever imagined.” Calix seemed almost intoxicated by the idea.

Papa sniffed. “Of course it is real!”

Calix nodded sharply. “Come, darling, riches beyond our wildest dreams await.” Gripping her wrists painfully in his large hands, he began dragging Melora from the room. She dug in her heels. This couldn’t be happening! She wouldn’t let it! She’d come here to save Nerissa, not put both of them and Aurie in danger!

Nerissa’s usual calm snapped, and she ran at Calix, pulling on his arm. “Let her go, you big lummo! She doesn’t want to go anywhere with you.”

Calix shoved her away while Papa grabbed her around the waist, pulling her back like a naughty child. “That’s enough! Perhaps I should look into Sir Calix’s plans to sell you off. You’re more trouble than you’re worth.”

“No! I won’t let you!” Melora screamed, struggling harder while Nerissa fought against Papa’s grip.

Melora finally got one of her hands free, but before she could make good use of it, Calix was wrapping his beefy arms around her waist. “Melora, Darling, calm down.” She fought against his stifling hold, her elbow connecting with his stomach. He grunted. “Stop being ridiculous!”

“Getting the gold will be nearly impossible if we have to fight my unruly daughters the entire time.” Papa deftly yanked Nerissa’s hands behind her back, making her cry out, and tied them together with a length of rope. With that done, he handed some rope to Calix, who did the same to Melora, tightening the rope until it bit into her skin.

Calix followed Papa, who was leading them toward the cellar. “How will we defeat the dragon without Melora as leverage?”

“As they have just made abundantly clear, the girls will only get in the way. Remember I got numerous magical items from that seidr who gave us the tracking spell for the wolves. We’re guaranteed to defeat the beast.” Papa’s lips twisted in a way that made Melora’s stomach clench.

“He’ll never fall for it! He’s far too clever.” She hoped to instill doubt in them even as she prayed she was correct and Aurie would be safe.

Papa thrust Nerissa into their tiny cellar.

Calix twisted Melora around and leaned to whisper in her ear. “Don’t worry, I’ll come back for you, darling. Then we shall finally have that wedding. Meanwhile, I won’t let the dragon or his magical boundaries get the best of me.” He plucked the rose from her hair and grinned. “Thanks for the tip. All that gold will be ours.” With that, he shoved her in after her sister and winked before snapping the trapdoor closed, locking them into the cold, dank room.

### CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

A urie eyed the large window from his comfortable bed of blankets. Everrose felt cold and empty without Melora's presence. She had brought sunshine into the dreary corners of his life and warmth into the hollow halls, giving his life purpose and meaning. The servants had tried to get him out of his tower, but the memory of her in this room fortified him as nothing else could. The lifeless gold filling the rest of the house was no substitute.

He huffed in agitation as the birds outside his window chirped merrily, as if the best thing in his life hadn't just been ripped from him. Now was not a time to be happy. Life had lost its shine.

Magic tingled against his senses. He snorted and shifted, trying to get comfortable. The tingling came again, an uneasy feeling against his chest. He sat upright as his ears twitched. What was that? Was something trying to get in? Had the wolves been sent again? He narrowed his eyes. If so, he was feeling particularly grouchy and could use a fight.

With new resolve, he stood and shook out his wings before heading to the window and launching out. He would find what was causing the disturbance and perhaps let a bit of his aggression out. Whoever or whatever it was had better be prepared!

As he neared the boundary, he heard chillingly familiar snarls and yips. The wolves were at the boundary again, biting and snarling. This time, the magic kept them at bay as it was meant to. But Melora was gone. Why were they here? He hoped this meant that she'd managed to avoid both her father and Sir Calix and had safely escaped with

her sister.

The wolves stilled their frantic pacing and yipping for just a moment as he neared, then they became even more frenzied, trying to bite their way through the border.

Movement behind the wolves caught his attention as two men emerged from the woods. Sir Calix stared boldly and bravely across the distance, directly at Aurie, his gaze dangerous and unwavering. Aurie's ears flattened against his head, and he growled low and menacing.

"We must be nearing its domain. See? There is the infamous dragon." Sir Calix pointed him out to his companion, who Aurie now recognized as Metis, Melora's father. "All of the gold and riches are nearly in our grasp!"

Aurie flicked his tail. He didn't like this one bit. At least Melora had already left, and his homeland was secure—his boundary firmly in place.

The two men strode forward with proud confidence. Aurie's breath hitched when they easily crossed the border, leaving the wolves behind. Metis turned back to yell at the animals, "Come! Why did you stay behind? Cowards!" The beasts whimpered, refusing to move forward.

"We don't need them." Sir Calix said. "I think I can see the golden castle, there between the trees."

Aurie glowered down at the men, hovering for a moment. How had they breached the border? Then gold glinted from Metis's pocket. The golden rose he'd stolen! Of course. Aurie knew he should have been more thorough and made certain to take it back, but he'd been too distracted trying to save Melora at the time. But how had the other man made it through? They both would have needed something of his in order to cross. His jaw flexed when he noticed a matching rose in Sir Calix's pocket, the



presence of which could only mean one thing.

They had Melora!

What had they done to her? The blood within him boiled as smoke trailed from his nostrils. Aurie turned in midair and flew back home. The same distance would take the men an hour to traverse, so he had a little time to investigate.

He hurried to his magic solarium and shook the mirror powder into the basin. However, when he looked inside her cottage where the talisman was, he was met with an empty room cloaked in silence. What had they done with her? He paced in agitation and checked a few more times—still nothing. Where was she?! His anger burned hot. He felt so helpless.

Finally, he heard a clamor outside. The men were approaching. Aurie snorted as his vision turned red. They wouldn't get away with this! He stormed out the open window, flying round the building, coming at the men from an angle they would least expect. He roared out his fury, fire melting the golden landscape. The men turned wild eyes toward him but stood their ground. Aurie was ready to release all his pent-up rage. Let the battle begin.

\* \* \*

The chill of the cellar seeped through Melora's thin dress. She tried to ignore the gooseflesh popping up on her skin as she did her best to comfort Nerissa. Her little sister was more important than minor inconveniences. "I promise, we are not going to let Papa and Calix sell you off. We are going to get out of this." Never had she been more determined in her life. Her sister's life was at stake.

"But how?" Nerissa sniffed. She'd been crying for hours. "This is my fault. I never should have fought against Papa. Had I been more obedient and submissive, he

might've found me more useful, and he wouldn't have considered selling me."

"Papa made his own choices. He likely would have done the same thing, no matter how obedient you were. You know as well as I how bad his gambling has become. It is not our fault that he is in debt. Besides, if anything, this is my fault. Had I simply married Calix that day instead of leaving with Dragon, we wouldn't be here now."

Nerissa made a sound of protest. "No! You mustn't!"

Melora soothed her again. "It's okay. I'd never— It's just... well, the best we can do now is get out of here. Aurie gave me a ring enchanted to transport the wearer anywhere they choose. I dropped it in our room, and it rolled under the desk. Don't you see? If we can just find a way out of here, we can transport back to the castle. We don't have to be part of Papa's schemes any longer!"

Nerissa kicked at the dirt. "It doesn't matter anymore. How could we even get out of here? We're trapped, and there isn't anyone around to hear our cries."

In the dim light seeping between the floorboards overhead, Melora glanced at the dank walls of their prison, hating that her sister was right. The cottage was isolated that no one would ever think to come here. Unless she found some way out, they were at the mercy of Papa and Sir Calix, who were even now out there hunting Aurie! She sent another prayer up to the Great Creator that Aurie would be prepared for their attack. Please let him be safe.

She then prayed for herself and her sister. We need a way to get out of here, Oh Great Creator, please provide a way for u s! But her silent plea was met with only more silence, and her thoughts spiraled back to how entirely alone they were and just how hopeless it was.

Then, just as she began to spiral deeper into despair, Aurie's sweet words to her

suddenly penetrated her mind, “You are a woman of great worth and intelligence.” Her heart warmed. What had happened to her faith?

She squared her shoulders and twisted her wrists, testing the bonds. A hiss of pain escaped her as the rope rubbed against raw skin. It was no use. She couldn’t simply break out of her bonds. She made out Nerissa’s dejected form in the dim light. Her arms were also tied uselessly behind her back.

Melora couldn’t break her own bonds, but perhaps... An idea began to form.

She scooted closer to her sister. “Nerissa, can you turn around? I need your back to mine.”

Nerissa’s head turned up. “Why?”

“I think I can pick the knot on your wrists if we’re back to back. Then once I untie you, you can untie me.” A new energy coursed through Melora as she shared her plan.

“Do you really think it will work?”

“It’s worth a try.”

Nerissa heartily agreed, turning to press her back against her sister’s.

Melora moved as close as possible, shifting her hands around and twisting her arms until her fingers were gripping the knot on Nerissa’s bonds. After getting a feel for the knot, she began picking at it. It proved to be much more difficult than she’d expected, with her wrists bound so tightly and her hands behind her back, but she persisted.

She picked and pulled, her fingers turning nearly as raw as her wrists, and still nothing seemed to budge. Gritting her teeth, she continued, scrunching her face in concentration. Though her fingers were sore, she couldn't let go of the knot for fear of losing her position.

Finally, she felt the slightest of shifts. Bolstered by the movement, she redoubled her efforts as a seed of hope sprouted within.

Her fingers ached from the exertion, and still she shoved them down into the crevice, wiggling them deeper. She relentlessly kept going as the coarse rope pricked her fingers. She was so close, she could feel it. Again and again, she tugged at the slightly loosened loop that her fingers kept slipping off.

Sucking in a breath of pain, she shook out her fingers.

“Are you okay? I understand if you need to stop.”

“I'm fine. No, I don't need a break. I'm almost there.”

“Are you sure? It's okay if you need one.”

“Yes. Now keep holding still.” She felt her sister's nod as she twisted her body to get at the stubborn knot once again.

This time the loop loosened with a small amount of effort, shifting under her fingers. Melora released a relieved breath as exhilaration built. She pulled on the loop again until the entire knot gave way.

Nerissa gasped. “You did it!”

The ropes slid to the ground as they came undone, Nerissa twisting out of the

bindings. She stood and shook out her hands, rubbing against her sore wrists. “Now it’s your turn.”

Melora turned her hands toward her sister, who skillfully picked at the rope. With the advantage of movement and sight, Nerissa was able to loosen the knots quickly.

“Melora, your hands!”

Melora curled her fingers, trying to hide the damage, not wanting her sister to see the extent of her sacrifice. “They’re fine.”

Nerissa sighed but didn’t press the issue as she finished her task. Melora’s bonds finally gave way, falling off her aching wrists. She grinned, elation filling her as she flung her arms around her sister, pulling her into a tight hug. They were really going to get out of here! “We did it! Thank you, Nerissa!”

Nerissa bashfully looked away. “You’re the one who did all the hard work.”

Melora tugged her into another hug. “Regardless, I’m so glad I could help you.”

They held each other for several long moments, just breathing each other in. When she finally moved back, Melora rushed to the trapdoor and threw her shoulder against the rough wood. The way out was locked. Of course. While they might be free of their bonds, they were just as trapped as ever.

\* \* \*

A deafening sound pierced Aurie’s ears, momentarily disorienting him. What was that?

Sir Calix held a horn of some kind, a self-satisfied smirk tugging at his lips. Aurie

could smell the magic from it. He growled, releasing his own terrifying sound before circling low and blowing a stream of fire directly at them. He wasn't playing around.

The men covered their ears and closed their eyes as flames covered them. Magic shimmered and hummed in the air, clouding over their bodies. Styx! They had some kind of magical protection against fire. Once the fire faded away, Sir Calix blew his deafening horn again while Metis produced a long black chain and spun it round in the air. "You're ours, Dragon! Along with your gold."

Never!

A booming sound rang through Aurie's ears once again, blurring his vision. He shook his head and flapped his wings, barely staying up in the sky. His jaw tensed. He had to get rid of that cursed horn!

Metis flung the thick chain at him. Aurie dodged out of the way as it hurtled through the air. The sharp sting of metal cut his thigh. The chain slithered around of its own accord, seeking to encircle his leg, but he'd already pulled upward to safety.

Styx! That chain had been enchanted, too? Just how had these mortals acquired so much magic?

"Give up, Dragon!" Sir Calix taunted, his expression sinister. "You can't beat us. You're weak, just like Melora."

Fire filled Aurie's belly, adrenaline coursing through him. How dared he belittle the most courageous woman he'd ever met! He opened his mouth and blasted them with his own shot of magic. A deafening sound vibrated the air particles that only the men could hear, causing great confusion among them as they stumbled around.

What done with her?!

The men cowered, covering their heads like the weaklings they were, their implements falling to the ground. Sir Calix screamed and grabbed his horn, barely managing to blast it back at Aurie. Its powerful noise enveloped and smothered the magic erupting from his dragon throat. The trumpeting sound reverberated in his head, deafening and blinding him. Just as the noise began to subside, the horn thundered through his skull again. While he was thus incapacitated, the chain snapped against him again, this time wrapping itself securely around his middle and over his back.

Aurie roared, blasting magic in vain as he was pulled from the sky.

### CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Melora pushed uselessly at the door above them again and again with her already raw hands. She let out a little scream of frustration, exerting all her effort, then hit the door as if that would do anything to break the lock. If only she hadn't dropped the ring!

"Take a break, Mel. You'll just bloody your hands more at this rate."

"We...have to... get... out... of here!" she said, punctuating each word by slamming her body against the door.

"Of course we do, but throwing yourself against a locked door won't do much. You must stop before you use up all your energy."

Reluctantly, Melora pulled away from the door, groaning as she flopped down on the filthy ground next to her sister. Her breathing came in short pants, hope of ever escaping seeping away with each one. She pushed back against the encroaching despair. "There must be something we can do—some way out of here. I can't accept defeat. There is too much at stake." Tears clouded her vision. She blinked them away. Now was not the time to cry. She needed to be strong for her sister. For Aurie.

Nerissa bobbed her head in agreement. "I hope so. But smacking against the door won't give you any ideas."

Melora grinned. Perhaps it was more of a grimace. "Why must you always speak such sense?"



“Because I’m sensible.” They laughed harder than the comment warranted, needing the emotional release.

Melora sucked in a breath, reining in her wild emotions. “All right. Let’s think this through. There aren’t any windows, so the door is the only exit—a door that’s obviously locked shut.” She groaned. Yeah. Going through their options hadn’t helped. It still felt hopeless.

“Too bad there isn’t some secret door we could sneak out of.”

Melora grunted in answer to her sister’s wish and climbed to her feet. “Unfortunately, this is just a normal cellar. But what do we have at our disposal?” She eyed her sister’s clothing. “You don’t have your sewing scissors in your apron, do you?”

“No, I would have used them on that rope if they were. Sorry.”

Melora sighed. Of course she would have.

The sisters turned their attention outward, scanning the dim room. The shelves were filled with jars and bags of food, and several bottles of wine.

“It’s just a lot of food.” Nerissa said dispiritedly. “Perhaps we should just accept our fate.”

“No! I refuse to accept any of this. Papa and Calix haven’t won. They won’t get either of us.” She stamped her foot for emphasis and walked around the edge of the room. There had to be something useful. “Maybe if we could find some kind of thin flat object to slide between the doors and break the latch...”

Nerissa’s eyes widened, and she bounced with renewed anticipation. “That’s brilliant!”

“But what? All these bottles are much too wide. Maybe a piece of wood.”

They began searching the room with renewed purpose, feeling against the shelves and walls for something flat.

“What about this?” Nerissa excitedly held up a rotting piece of wood.

They hurried to the door, Nerissa wielding the wood. Unfortunately, they immediately encountered a problem. “Ugh! It’s too wide. It won’t fit.”

“Are you sure?” Melora didn’t say anything, but she was afraid they wouldn’t find anything slimmer. She took the wood from her sister and tried fruitlessly to squeeze it into the crack, all to no avail.

With a groan of irritation, she flung the wood into the dirt and stamped around the room again.

Nerissa fiddled with her fingers. “We can’t give up now. We are so close. Let’s keep looking. Maybe we’ll find something that will fit.”

Melora was beginning to doubt her fortitude for this situation but kept her pessimism to herself. She released a breath along with her frustration and sent up another small and simple prayer, pleading for calm and help. Her heart warmed, and when she opened her eyes, she felt drawn to a specific corner of the room. She almost ignored the thought since she’d already looked there several times, but she looked again.

Just then, the glint of something behind the shelf caught her eye. Crouching, she examined it closer. The metal was so slim and narrow that she almost didn’t see it, and she wouldn’t have if the sliver of light streaming in around the door hadn’t caught the corroded edge at just the right moment. She yelled enthusiastically to Nerissa about her find, then leaned forward to pry out the stubborn stem of metal.

At first, she could barely move the thing because the edge was so wedged into the shelf. She grunted with determination. The long, slender metal pole wiggled and shifted. She rocked the thicker end back and forth several more times until what looked like a long metal stick finally slid out. “I got it!”

“Yay! Now let’s see if it works.”

Now that she'd drawn the rusty metal out from behind the shelf, she could see that the slender pole was an ice pick, probably left here years ago, if the battle she'd just waged to release the relic was anything to go by. She fed the flat end between the doors below where she imagined the latch to be. The metal end fit! Just barely, but she'd take it. This felt like a blessing from the Great Creator, and her hope rose once more. It had to work! Once it was positioned, she pulled up with all her might and felt it catch on the latch.

Nothing.

She grunted and called for Nerissa to help. She wasn't strong enough alone. This time, they wrenched the pole upward together. A beautiful click met their ears. The leverage worked!

Finally, they were getting out of here! They cheered and hugged each other before hastening out of the room to find that ring! It was time to leave their childhood home behind for the last time—time to go help Aurie.

\* \* \*

C hains bit into Aurie's scales despite their hardened exterior, as he was yanked unceremoniously from the sky. His blast of magic did nothing to stop the determined men from their task.

If it were only his sorry life at stake, he wouldn't have cared nearly as much. But they had Melora. Regardless of what it cost him, he wouldn't allow anything to harm her. She was more precious to him than all the gold in Vilastoria.

The chain slithered around him, binding his wings to his sides and wrapping him even more securely as he came crashing to the ground. A feral snarl tore from his mouth. How could he be of any use to Melora if he was trussed up like a hog?

"There now. That wasn't too hard." Sir Calix gloated, that smirk twisting his ash-covered face. "That mage friend of yours has an impressive array of magical objects, Metis. Now, do you have that sword that's strong enough to penetrate dragon scales? We can't have him getting in the way of our gold."

Aurie growled and struggled against the chain. Opening his mouth, he blasted them with another round of fire. Perhaps their protection spell had worn away, but no! They were impervious to it, though he was satisfied to note that they smelled slightly singed.

Where Melora? He boomed in their heads. Knowing how disconcerting his voice could be. Cannot kill me. I hunt you. Kill you! A growl slipped out through this stream of words. Unless find Melora!

Sir Calix pressed a hand to his head, his jaw tightening as he clenched his fist. "She's mine!" he bit out through gritted teeth. "You'll never have her. You're nothing but a monster."

Aurie thrashed. Metis yanked on the black chain to keep him still. "Don't antagonize it, Calix." Then he pulled out some kind of powder that he blew at Aurie.

Aurie blinked in a haze, his limbs suddenly feeling weak, his lids heavy. What was happening to him? How could he protect Melora if he was incapacitated? A blade

glinted in the sunlight. Sir Calix grinned as he held the blade aloft, pointing it at him, ready to put an end to him.

Then he heard a sweet voice that froze everyone in their tracks. “Aurie! Sir Calix, stop! What are you doing to him?” her pain-filled words lanced through his heart. Melora! What was she doing here? This wasn’t safe! She needed to get out of here. He tried to warn her away, but he was unable to speak. A weak Mel was all he got out. His voice was thin and airy, sounding small and helpless. He struggled against the magical powder to stay alert. He didn’t want her to see him like this, but more importantly, he refused to allow anything to happen to her—not while his heart was still beating.

Through the fog filling his mind, he watched her running toward him—and was that her sister? No! Again, speech evaded him.

Sir Calix pivoted to face her, the wicked blade slashing through the air. It was too dangerous! She mustn’t be here! But he was helpless to do anything.

### CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

“Melora, my darling, stand back.” Sir Calix shouted at her. “I’m securing all this wealth for us. I just need to kill this dragon, then it’s ours.” He spread his arms, indicating with his sword the golden trees nearby, the gilded manor, and all the gleaming forest across the way.

“No! I don’t want wealth, especially not at the expense of a life.” Fear curled in her belly as her heart thundered. What could she do against two men? Men who had nearly felled a dragon—Aurie. If only she could free him.

Calix laughed coldly, swinging the sword around without a care. “Of course you want riches. Besides, this is a monster—hardly a life that matters.”

“All life matters.” Most especially Aurie’s—but she wasn’t going to antagonize Sir Calix just now. Her jaw set as she eyed the sword. If only there was a way to distract Calix from using that dangerous blade and simultaneously take the chain away from Papa...

Calix sputtered a laugh while Aurie shifted and tried to shake the chain away almost drunkenly. What had they done to him? Papa pulled the chain even tighter, biting into his scales, making him screech in pain.

Something was wrong. Aurie looked half-dazed. He should be fighting, not defeated like this.

“Get out of here, you useless girl, and take your sister with you.” Useless? Even now,

Papa's derision was more painful than she cared to admit. To him, she would always be a burden. And now, he was using his words as weapons, trying to render her helpless again, unable to save the love of her life.

"You don't need to see this." Papa continued, his voice dripping with contempt. "Look at you! Always making things more difficult. Can't you see you're in the way? Get out of here before I make things even worse for you!"

Her eyes narrowed. Everything he said was wrong—her skills and talents had value. She had value, and she would no longer tremble like the frightened little girl she'd once been.

She straightened her shoulders. There was little time.

"Unless she wants to see the dragon's demise." Calix held the blade up, ready to slice downward. "Or maybe a quick slice to the jugular would be too quick. I want to make him suffer." With a quick flick of his wrist, he sliced open Aurie's flank.

Melora's cry mingled with Aurie's as blood oozed from his wound.

Calix grinned wickedly. "This blade slices through those hard scales like butter."

Melora felt sick. What could she do? She was no match for their physical power, let alone the magic they were wielding. Her eyes swept over the ground for anything to use against them, and she briefly wondered about the rocks and twigs she saw. Some of the twigs were gold. The metal would be harder than regular wood but was no match against an enchanted sword.

She had to have something else that could help... the ring! That was it! She could use its power to her advantage... Determination filled her as a plan formed in her mind. She wasn't certain it would work, but she had to try for Aurie.

However, she was anxious about what her plan would entail for Nerissa. She wouldn't be able to do it without her help. "Nerissa?" She whispered, a plea in her voice.

"Whatever it is, I'll do it." Nerissa gave a firm nod as she spoke. Melora conveyed her plan in a quick breath.

"Shall I get his wing next? It looks so thin and useless." Sir Calix's voice was harsh and frightening, but just then a rock thudded squarely against his back, thumping to the ground as he twisted to strike. A golden twig smacked against his face. Calix turned, fuming, but Nerissa held another rock, ready to throw that too. Melora hadn't meant for her sister to get pulled into the fight, but she hoped it helped her cause. "Stop it, you big jerk! You may be strong, but that's a dragon you're antagonizing!"

Calix growled with a fiery glare at Nerissa, while Papa began reprimanding her for her atrocious behavior.

"You want to see atrocious behavior ?" Nerissa hurled several more rocks, one pelting Calix in the arm. He seethed, and this time he advanced toward her.

It was time to act. Melora had slipped from her sister's side during the chaos. She whispered the location where she wished to travel, right behind Papa as he continued yelling at Nerissa, the chain in his hand going slack. Melora prayed it could take her to such a specific location and twisted the ring three times. The air around her hummed and her skin tingled and pricked from the magic of the ring. Sound and time whooshed around her, and she was standing behind Papa, just as she'd hoped.

Aurie went still, his blue eyes wide and focused on her. Nerissa continued her verbal assault. With quick, nimble fingers, Melora tugged the dagger out of her father's belt, where she knew he kept the dangerous weapon, then grabbed a section of the chain. "Release," she said to it, knowing such enchanted objects responded to commands.



Before Papa could react to her sudden appearance, she threw her elbow into him, shoving him backward, his own weapon pointed at him.

He stumbled, his grip on the chain slackening enough for her to rip it away from him. She felt the heavy enchantment begin to lift.

“Melora! What are you doing, child?” He held up his hands as she pointed the dagger. “You wouldn’t hurt your own Papa.”

“No?” She raised her brows. “You’re right. I’m not like you, Papa.” She yanked again on the chain, magic humming as the heavy clasps fell completely away from Aurie. “I don’t prey upon those weaker than me.”

Aurie spread his wings, rounding on Sir Calix, who had just caught hold of Nerissa to stop the onslaught of hurled rocks. Sir Calix, recognizing the danger, released her and looked up in terror, pointing his wavering sword at the dragon towering before him.

Papa’s eyes blazed, and he used the distraction to lunge at Melora. “Now see here, girl! Don’t you speak to your father that way!”

She reacted swiftly, swinging the chain toward him. “Capture.” She commanded. The dark links obediently wrapped around him, bringing him to the ground.

“What have you done?!” His eyes were wild as he looked up at her.

“What I should have done ages ago. I’ve taken back my power. You don’t get to decide anything for me anymore.”

\* \* \*

Aurie’s heart swelled at Melora’s words and actions, but he had no time to revel in

the moment. Sir Calix advanced on him, his expression determined as he sliced his sword through the air, the blade piercing Aurie's leg. Shaking off the rest of the strange magical sedation, he roared his displeasure, blasting the man with flame and power. While he knew it was unlikely to hurt the brute due to their fire-proof magic, he hoped it would serve as a distraction long enough.

Sir Calix cursed, slashing blindly with his blade.

Melora's cry froze Aurie's blood. What was happening? Through the smoke that he'd created, he could just make out her and Metis fighting for possession of the chain. She must have been too focused on Aurie's fight, and Metis had taken full advantage, wounding her in a bid for escape.

The sharp bite of steel sliced through the scales on Aurie's chest, magic making the blade more powerful. He roared, his flesh screaming in pain.

Nerissa yelled more insults and threw more mini projectiles—thankfully, her efforts were enough to distract Sir Calix. Aurie lashed out at the man, snatching up the sword with his teeth. Sir Calix shouted and lunged for the heavy steel, stepping in the blade's way as Aurie turned his head to look for Melora.

Sir Calix cried out and crumpled to the ground, blood seeping from his wound. His eyes were wide with disbelief. "You stabbed me!"

Aurie snarled in the back of his throat, the sword still between his teeth.

Sir Calix drew a few labored breaths, then his eyes went blank. Aurie stared at him for a long moment, his own chest heaving with exertion. He hadn't meant to kill him. He'd only wanted to protect Melora and her sister.

Melora!

His gaze swung back toward her. Was she still in distress? He was relieved to see that she'd won possession of the jangling chain from her father.

"Aurie?" Her sweet voice cut through the haze of his thoughts and the mad hum of stillness—he felt as if he were underwater. "Aurie, you're bleeding. We should call for a healer." She handed the chain to her sister and advanced toward him.

Killed him. His body trembled as he blinked down at her, unbelieving. He shook his head as everything turned red, Melora's shape distorting.

Melora's gentle hands caressed his flank, careful of his wounds. "I know you didn't want to, Aurie. But he was trying to kill you and nearly succeeded." Emotion laced her voice, "I, for one, am grateful you are the one who survived the encounter."

He... took you. Hurt? He lowered his head to better examine her and fight back the fog filling his mind. He sniffed her clothing for signs of distress. They held the distinct hint of mustiness.

She took his head in her hands. "I'm fine, Aurie. They didn't hurt me. Although they did lock us in the cellar."

Cellar? Escaped? His head felt fuzzy, words slipping away along with his human memories. He tried to hold on to the image of her before him, not wanting to lose that too.

"Yes. After hearing their plans to kill you for your gold, I was determined to protect you."

He nuzzled against her hand. Clever, feisty warrior. Love you.

She chuckled as his eyes lowered with fatigue. "I wouldn't go so far as to call myself

a warrior.”

Fight father — bare hands. His eyes closed again for several long moments as his breathing slowed and his thoughts scattered. A groan rumbled out as a burning sensation spread through his heart and the flame pulsed. Gold had nearly consumed his heart. Would he lose his memories of her too?

“Galen! I need you to call for a healer! Quick!”

But he knew it was too late for him. Everything was slipping away, soon all that would be left was the beast who loved gold more than life. No matter. She was safe now.

“Hold on, Aurie. I can’t lose you. I love you!” There was a desperate edge to her voice, making him fight to open his eyes once more.

Don’t worry. Safe. Sleep now.

“No, Aurie. Don’t sleep yet! You’re injured. I need you to stay awake for me, please.”

Love you. He gazed deep into her eyes. He could get through anything with her by his side... if he could remember her. He traced her beloved features with his eyes as memories of their time together blurred. Human, dragon, what was he? Was he a danger to this angel before him? Sorry — took too long. Dangerous.

“Aurie, you’re talking nonsense. You’re not dangerous. You’ve been here with me the entire time, and now I’m afraid I’m losing you.” A tear splashed against his scales. He longed to wipe her tears away, but he was too weak to move.

Don’t cry. His sides heaved in a labored breath as his heart burned. This was the end, he could feel it. The curse had consumed his heart. Melora—strong, incredible

Melora—needed to know before he was lost to the dragon forever. He used all his remaining effort to tell her. You more... more precious than gold. Only need... you. Love you... always.

His eyelids closed, and he felt himself slipping away. He heard sobbing in the distance but could not find his way back to her—the one who should mean everything to him, but he couldn't remember why...

Suddenly, Aurie's body began to tingle in a familiar sensation while his heart burned. His eyes flew open with abrupt awareness of his surroundings. Melora! He breathed a sigh of relief when her familiar features came into view, thankful she was still here, thankful he could still remember her. Though he wasn't entirely certain how...

Back! He warned. He knew what came next, and he was terrified of what might happen if she were to accidentally touch him as a man. Much as it pained him to push her away, she couldn't remain close. It was too dangerous—he was too dangerous. At least he'd been gifted some extra time with her. How, he didn't know.

“Aurie, what?”

He scrambled backward away from her, crashing into a large golden tree in his haste. Pain contorted his features as the dragon began retreating. He couldn't speak as the transformation took hold. His heart tingled and heated. He groaned, seeing the surrounding air shimmer. A bright light nearly blinded him.

Melora gasped as his form began shrinking to its usual size. Pain lashed across his leg, chest, and side. His wounds still bled.

Suddenly, Melora disappeared, magic humming where she had stood.

Then, just as suddenly, a blanket appeared and fell across his frame, protecting his modesty—Melora must have used the ring to retrieve it from his room. Now she moved closer, hovering over him, her features twisted with concern at his injuries. “Stay. Back.” He ground out, his fear overcoming his difficulty speaking. His voice was gruff and gritty from misuse.

“Aurie—the spell—the castle. I... I think it’s broken.”

She reached for him. He flinched away. “No! I won’t let you turn to gold! No more gold. You’re too precious to lose.”

“Aurie, look around. Just look at the blanket.” Her voice was tinged with excitement.

He blinked up at the sky in confusion. What did she mean, broken? His fingers grasped the blanket, and he noticed something odd. It was soft against his skin—yes—soft and light. Very unlike gold. He looked down at the green fibers in his hands. Though he was holding the blanket, it remained the same. “How?” His brain felt fuzzy with confusion. Perhaps he was hallucinating. It had been nearly a year since anything remained soft beneath his touch.

Melora came close once again, tearing strips of fabric from the hem of her cotton shift. He tried to sit up, then winced and hissed in pain, looking down at the blood that coated his blanket. “Lie back down and let me bind your wounds. You’re in no condition to be moving around yet.”

“No!” he gasped and slid away from her touch until he backed against the tree once more. He blinked in confusion at the green leaves overhead and stared in awe at its scratchy brown bark. How was it alive and colorful and real ? He’d changed all these trees into gold months ago.

He reached out a hand and slowly rested his palm against the tree’s rough bark.

Nothing. No tingling, no flash, no gold. The beautiful natural vegetation remained as it was, its leaves rustling a beautiful music overhead.

“See? Your curse! It’s gone.” Melora stepped toward him once more, holding out the strip of white fabric she’d just torn from her underdress. “Touch it.”

Tentatively, he reached out and brushed his fingers against the cloth. When nothing occurred, he grasped more firmly, gazing at the light cotton in awe and bewilderment. How could this be? He just couldn’t comprehend how his curse could be broken. He instinctively looked down at the marking on his chest... It was gone!

Then, without warning, Melora’s hand pressed against his cheek. He sucked in a breath, his eyes wide and panicked.

“Shh. It’s all right, see? You did it. The curse is broken. You are free to touch whatever you like without fear of turning it into gold.”

Relief overwhelmed him. She hadn’t turned to gold like his mother! How? Melora— It had to be her. He remembered the all-encompassing feeling that she was more important than anything—especially gold—and that he would throw every bit of his cold metal away for the chance to save her! Had this moment of clarity come before his heart was entirely gold? Before his humanity was lost forever to the dragon? He reached up with trembling fingers and touched the delicate hand against his skin. The fog had lifted from his mind. He was aware, bright, alive, and human . His body shuddered, reveling in her warmth, in the feel of her soft palm against his human skin. He hadn’t felt such a sensation in nearly a year.

Feeling braver, his fingers seemed to have a mind of their own, reaching to slide through her dark, silky locks. It felt just as wondrous as he’d imagined.

She leaned in, sighing at his gentle ministrations. Those tempting lips of hers hovered

just above his, so very close. She trembled as her lips parted, her large brown eyes connecting with his. Her breathing seemed to speed up. Had she moved closer or had he?

“I-I think I’m going to kiss you now,” he said.

She laughed, the breath escaping from her lips to brush against his skin. “I was hoping so.”

His lips twitched with a smug delight before closing the short distance between them, brushing his lips against hers, gently at first, almost afraid something would happen to ruin this fairytale.

She gripped his bare shoulders, leaning more securely into him. His fingers threaded through her hair, and he tugged her closer, deepening the kiss, tasting her sweetness. Had anyone ever seen him as she did? She saw him, flaws and all, and still she wanted him—loved him. even. Her heart was more beautiful than gold. A goddess like Melora could hardly be contained—her beauty brightening the lives of everyone she knew. And here she was, kissing him—a man who had once thought he was worthless. But she had seen something more. She found value and worth inside him and made him want to be better. How had he gotten to be so lucky?

She made a little sound that heated his blood, making him want to pull her even closer. Her hand pressed against his chest, and a sharp pain invaded his love-induced haze.

She withdrew. “Oh no, Aurie, your wounds! I should have wrapped them first.” She tried to pull back even farther, but he captured her fingers. “Stay. I-I like having you close.”

Her eyes glowed like warm honey, her teeth teasing her lip as she grinned.



He groaned. “Don’t tempt me like that, woman!”

With a snickering laugh, she leaned in, her hair falling around them as she pressed her lips to his once again, careful not to touch his wounds this time. His pain was forgotten as he lost himself in her scent, her taste, the light touch of her fingers against his neck.

“Aurie?”

He nearly whimpered in protest as Melora jumped back, looking down and away in shame, her cheeks a lovely shade of rose.

“Aurie?”

He blinked. He knew that voice—it was as familiar as his childhood.

“Who is this woman? I hope you’ve offered for her. I seem to have caught you in a terribly compromising situation.”

Tears stung his eyes at her gentle reprimand. His breath came out in a whoosh, along with all the hurt and regret he’d been holding.

“Mother.”

He laughed. He couldn’t quite believe it, couldn’t care less that he was in a ‘terribly compromising situation.’ His bare chest exposed, merely a blanket to cover the rest of him. He wanted to leap up and dance with joy. His mother was alive and well, no longer tainted by his greed.

Melora looked back at him with glistening, joyful eyes. The most remarkable woman he’d ever had the pleasure of knowing loved him. Together, anything was possible.

After all, hadn't she broken through his curse with her beautiful strength and courage? She reminded him that he didn't need wealth or riches to be of worth. His value lay not in what he owned, but what he did. And she made him long to continue to become the kind of man she could be proud of.

Their lips met in another kiss, and he was completely unfazed by the shocked gasp it elicited from his mother. This woman was going to be his wife!

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 6:52 am*

Never in her wildest dreams had Melora imagined that her life could be so wonderful.

Nerissa curled her sister's hair while chatting happily away as she helped Melora get ready for her one year wedding anniversary. "Aurie is going to be so enchanted—as if he isn't already." She giggled.

It was comforting to finally see her sister so cheerful and relaxed. Papa had sucked the joy right out of their lives. Melora scowled at the memories. But no longer would they have to wash extra laundry and hide their money to make ends meet. No longer would they have to spend their days in fear.

After the attack, Aurie and Galen had taken Papa into town and turned him over to the bailiff. They discovered that without Sir Calix's wealth, Papa's debts had been too high, and he was facing prison even without the added charges of assault. His creditors had been threatening him for months, but instead of changing his ways, Papa had tried to use his daughters to solve his problems. No longer. Now he would have to face the consequences of his actions on his own.

A knock sounded on the bedroom door, bringing Melora back to the present.

"Are you nearly ready?" a warm female voice called. "Your husband is growing quite impatient, though I daresay a lesson in patience wouldn't hurt him." Melora smiled her heart warming as she invited her mother-in-law in.

Sunniva bustled in oohing and ahhhing over Melora and helping Nerissa with the final touches. She'd almost immediately become the mother the girls had never had. "Oh Melora, you look quite the vision. I'm certain Aurie won't be able to take his

eyes off you.” She added a gold rose, one of the few that remained, those pieces Aurie had given out of love—to Melora’s hair and clapped her hands in delight. “There now, you’re perfect. And he’ll be even more thrilled with the news!”

“News?” Nerissa asked, looking quite puzzled. She looked back and forth between them. “What news? Mel, what aren’t you telling me?”

Melora’s eyes were wide, her cheeks warm. “How... how do you know? I haven’t told anyone.”

“You have a certain glow about you. Mothers know these things. I only needed to take one look at you to confirm what I was already sure of.” She glanced meaningfully at the hand Melora had unconsciously been rubbing against her flat stomach. “Besides, Lyra said you’ve been nauseous and recently saw a healer who’d left you grinning.” She clasped her hands under her chin with a happy expression. “Aurie will be so delighted.”

“I’ll have to have a word with Lyra,” Melora said firmly, though her smile betrayed her.

“Are you saying Mel is pregnant?” Nerissa’s eyes were wide as she looked at Melora, positively bubbling with excitement.

Melora’s lips twitched, still smiling. “Don’t you think I should tell my husband first?”

Nerissa’s jaw dropped. “That’s why you wanted to plan this whole evening!” Then she squealed and bounced on the heels of her feet. “I can’t believe I’m going to be an aunt!” She did a little dance. “Valhalla! You need to tell Aurie! You look perfect. Let’s get you out of here.” Nerissa squeezed her again, then nearly dragged her out the door.

Melora laughed at her sister's gleeful behavior, allowing herself to be pulled down the hall. As Nerissa went on ahead to let everyone know she was coming, she took a breath to calm her racing heart, remembering she still had to share the news with Aurie. She knew Mama was right, he would be thrilled—and he would make a wonderful father. He had a heart of gold—thankfully not literally. He spent hours helping others in the village now that things were back to normal, and they had further discovered that the gold he'd given to others with pure intentions had miraculously remained.

Drawing another deep breath to calm her excited insides, she smoothed out her white gown as she walked—the same gown she'd worn nearly a year ago at a similar evening she'd prepared just for him. She paused, her eyes lingering on the wooden banister at the top of the grand staircase. It looked so different now that it was stone and wood instead of gold. She caressed the wood for a moment. She loved every nick, every worn spot where countless hands had touched it, and how it held the memories of generations of his family. Now the history of her family would join with his as they made this home theirs.

She remembered with a grin the time she and Aurie had nearly tumbled down the stairs because she'd over-polished the gold. Oh, how she loved his dragon-form, both then and now that he could transform at will—a strange but wonderful piece of the curse that had remained. Suddenly, she pressed her hand to her belly—would Aurie's ability to transform affect their child? A new wave of anxiety at the news she was about to share washed over her. She shook herself, realizing Aurie was waiting for her at the bottom of the stairs. Come what may, they would deal with it together.

The gentle strains of a violin filled the air as she descended, her eyes fixed upon the dashing figure of her husband. His black curls had been tamed into submission, his jaw smooth-shaven and firm. He swallowed, and his lips parted.

The moment was aching familiar. She had only just started to realize her love for

this man the first time they stood like this, gazing longingly at one another—unable to touch. This time, he was dressed more simply in a plain linen tunic and trousers, covered by a long blue jerkin she had lovingly sewn for him. His affectionate grin made her insides burn. She pressed a hand against her roiling stomach once more.

“I swear you get more beautiful with each passing day.” He bowed and held out his arm.

She chuckled, shaking her head as she reached for him, enjoying the feel of his powerful arm beneath her hand. They had made it only halfway across the ballroom before he paused and wrapped her in his arms. “I hope you don’t mind, but I think we should dance first. I couldn’t wait all the way through dinner to hold you close.”

Laughing, she squeezed his biceps. Since the curse had been broken, he seemed to be making up for the loss of physical contact. She didn’t mind. His tenderness and love made her feel more cherished than ever before.

She reached up to whisper. “I always enjoy a good dance before dinner.” Since she couldn’t quite reach his ear, she pressed a kiss to his neck.

He growled and pulled her flush against him, pressing a kiss to her temple. Piano music joined the violin.

“I think that’s our cue to dance,” she murmured.

His deep chuckle sent chills down her spine before he spun her around the room in an intricate dance they’d practiced many times. It wasn’t long before she became lost in him and his movements. They were dancing on the clouds of Arindia. The warmth of his palm against her back penetrating straight through her, their hands forever intertwined—she was living out her fairytale. Never had she felt so needed, so precious and loved. Their story was just beginning.

“Aurie.”

“Yes, my love?”

“I have something to tell you.”

“Is it about how utterly attractive you find me? Because I don’t think you can ever tell me such things too often.”

“No,” she said with a laugh, gently swatting his chest. “Well, I mean, you are devastatingly handsome and attractive. But more importantly, you’re kind, thoughtful, and strong. A man worth his weight in gold.”

His breath hitched before he swallowed. “That’s more like it.”

Her eyes danced as she gazed up at him. “That’s why I think you’ll make a wonderful father.”

He stilled. “Father?”

“Aurie, you’re going to be a father. I’m pregnant.”

“I’m what?!” He crowed in delight and picked her up, spinning her round in a circle, making her dizzy with happiness before he dipped her elegantly down and swooped in for a kiss. His lips were sweet and passionate. She wrapped her arms around his neck, threading her fingers through his hair. He picked her up and they continued to kiss, their touch warm with desire. Joy filled her entire body. She had everything she’d ever imagined and more. She never would have expected to fall in love with a dragon and turn him into the man of her dreams.

Aurie laughed, his lips hovering over hers. “I can’t believe it! I thought I needed gold

and wealth to be happy, but it turns out that all I need is you. Melora, you've made all the dreams I didn't even know I had come true."

"Funny, I was thinking the same thing about you."

She grinned as he captured her lips once more.

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*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 6:52 am*

King Lionel of Danzari was running out of options. The blight on his land had dragged on for three long years. Despite his best efforts, the crops continued to wither and the animals continued to perish at an alarming rate. Their silk worm population was half of what it once was. The people were barely hanging on, hungry and angry. If he didn't do something drastic, Danzari would cease to be the beautiful, thriving country it had always been. Consequently, he found himself bouncing in his carriage on a rash journey into the lush land of Kelkona to speak with the infamous Dark King.

It had only been three years since Prince Drake was crowned King Kelkona, and already he had been given the dubious title of Dark King. This was due, in part, to the abrupt illness and deaths of the former King Kostis of Kelkona and his eldest son Crown Prince Conan, shortly after some festival. Many speculated that the Dark King had murdered them to ascend the throne.

Lionel shivered. If it weren't for his desperation, he would never have come. But Kelkona's rich thriving land was legendary. Perhaps therein lay the answers to saving his own kingdom. He was determined to find out.

Surely the rumors were unfounded.

They had nearly reached the castle when he and his entourage were forced to stop at the edge of a moat. Lionel waited for half an hour in the muggy heat while his men tried to find some way across. More stories of the Dark King assailed his mind: a disappearing cousin and unnatural sorcery. His rational mind tried to convince him to turn around and go home. He pushed these thoughts away. They are just stories, he told himself. He needed to focus on what he had come here to do: heal his land.

Startled exclamations erupted throughout the ranks of men as a dark stone archway abruptly appeared out of the mist. There was a groan as a bridge extended from a duplicate archway across the moat until it clicked into place. Men murmured in dissent, their ears still buzzing from the magic. Many refused to cross the unsettling bridge into the domain of the Dark King. Leaving them behind, Lionel's carriage clanked across the bridge, accompanied by only his most loyal guards.

Before long, he entered the gray stone castle and stood before the Dark King.

King Kelkona seemed nothing like Lionel had hoped, and everything that rumor had claimed. The king's dark form loomed above Lionel like a dragon watching its prey. Hooded brows accentuated dark, calculating eyes. A tall golden crown encrusted with silver branches, metallic leaves, and diamond flowers stood atop untamed curls. Light glinted off bronze skin revealing a ruthless expression that sent shivers down Lionel's spine. He prayed that "dark" had more to do with the king's overall appearance and less to do with his heart.

As he waited for King Kelkona's greeting, Lionel took in the room itself. While vast and extravagant, it seemed somehow... empty. Lionel shrugged off the feeling. Any place would seem quiet when not filled with his daughters.

He refrained from fidgeting as the silence persisted—a skill developed over many years of sovereignty. A skill the younger King Kelkona had already mastered, his steely eyes assessing Lionel. No matter how uncomfortable the moment, Lionel would follow protocol and wait for King Kelkona to address him first.

Time stretched as the two kings assessed one another. Finally, King Kelkona broke the oppressive silence. "Danzari, why are you here?"

Lionel blinked, shocked at King Kelkona's informal query. He had come to expect a certain amount of smooth talking and political niceties before discussing anything of importance. He certainly hadn't expected King Kelkona to so tersely demand to know

why he was here, while deliberately dropping his title.

Determined to remain unruffled, he executed a brief bow, as expected between kings. “I have come seeking your illustrious advice.”

King Kelkona’s brows shot up and he gave a dry, humorless laugh. “My advice? How could I advise you? I’d expect quite the opposite.”

“Then, perhaps we can help each other.”

King Kelkona scoffed and sank into his throne, leaving Lionel standing. “I doubt it, but do continue. I’m curious to know how I might be of any help too old, experienced Danzari.”

Lionel flinched at being called old, even if it was disguised as a compliment. No matter how irritating King Kelkona was, he needed help with his land. “It is said that Kelkona has the most fertile land in all of Vilastoria.”

King Kelkona raised his brows and tilted his head.

Lionel continued, “I hope I might entice you to share with me something of the secret to keeping your land so fertile. I am afraid a magic blight has been upon Danzari for three long years, and I have been unable to rectify the situation.”

King Kelkona fiddled nonchalantly with his signet ring. “Have you spoken to the nature dryads? They have a magical bond with the lands. Surely they are the ones to go to, not me.”

“I have indeed consulted with a dryad. After surveying my lands, she informed me that the magic had quite run out. She then insisted that the solution to my problem lay in the riches of Kelkona. This, along with your notoriety as a great enchanter, convinced me that you were the one to come to for aid.”

“I understand your problem. Unfortunately, I cannot give you what you need.”

Lionel’s face paled. The dryads had been so certain that this was the only way. Kelkona had to help. Perhaps if he could only see what he had to gain by helping. “I am prepared to offer you fifteen thousand drachma.” He quoted the beginning sum he and his advisors had previously agreed upon. King Kelkona’s face gave nothing away. Lionel continued, “In addition, I would like to offer you first pick of our acclaimed silk.”

King Kelkona drummed his fingers upon his throne. “I already told you, I cannot help you. At least not for another six mon—” He abruptly broke off as a lanky, silver-haired man—who Lionel had only just noticed by his side—approached.

The man whispered in the king’s ear. King Kelkona’s expression shifted, the hard lines clearing. For the first time he looked at Lionel squarely. “Are you in possession of several daughters?”

“Yes,” Lionel swallowed. “I have twelve daughters, Your Majesty.”

King Kelkona nodded, his eyes dangerously bright. “And your eldest daughter is the beautiful and well-known Princess Faelynn. The people are quite taken with her.”

“Yes. We are quite proud of Crown Princess Faelynn. However, her reputation has no bearing on this conversation.”

“That, Danzari, is where you are wrong.”

Lionel felt his mouth go dry.

“We might indeed help each other.” Cold eyes met his. “In six months’ time, I will have what you need to heal your land. In exchange, I would like to marry the renowned Crown Princess Faelynn. Surely, with twelve daughters, you can part with

one.”

No . He had promised his wife, Damiya, that their daughters could have a say in whom they married, even if they couldn't entirely choose. He simply could not agree to such an alliance, especially with the Dark King. Tension knotted Lionel's stomach. He should have prepared for this turn of events. Such alliances were made all the time. How could he save his kingdom while still protecting his daughters?

“I will, of course, require half the ten thousand drachma I hear her dowry consists of, plus the fifteen thousand for helping you.” King Kelkona fiddled casually with his ring once more, looking unconcerned.

While a part of him was surprised that King Kelkona only asked for half her dowry, another part of him wanted to cut his losses and run. However, Lionel knew that King Kelkona held the key to saving his kingdom. Any other solution was more myth than reality.

Desperate to avoid any sort of marriage alliance, Lionel countered with twenty-five thousand plus exclusive silk rights—much more than previously discussed with his advisors.

King Kelkona would not be moved. “Keep your five thousand. I will accept your daughter plus the amount previously mentioned or there will be no deal.”

Sweat trailed down Lionel's forehead. Somehow, he had to save his land while still protecting his daughters. Knowing this would take some delicate maneuvering, he began carefully, “I will give you my consent to marry one of my daughters, but only if she accepts your suit. I have promised them that they may have a say in whom they marry. Only then will you receive the dowry as well as the money. In exchange, you will give me what I need to heal my land.”

Dark eyes glinted. “That is agreeable. In six months, I will have what you seek. After

I have married your daughter, then I will help heal Danzari. Besides, a union with Crown Princess Faelynn would merge our kingdoms.”

“After... merge our kingdoms—!” Sputtering, Lionel snapped his jaw closed to keep his reaction contained. How could he possibly put Faelynn or any of his daughters in such a position? Besides, merging Danzari and Kelkona hadn’t once crossed his mind when he began this journey. He had hoped to gain help without any undue attachment to the Dark King and his infamous reputation.

How had it come to this? He could not possibly tell his daughters that in order to heal Danzari, one of them, preferably Faelynn, must marry the Dark King. It was becoming abundantly clear that he could not hang all his hopes upon King Kelkona. Lionel resolved that King Kelkona would not be seeing a single gold piece unless he actually helped Danzari.

There had to be some other way. He could not, however, discount King Kelkona entirely. Perhaps the rumors were untrue and one of his daughters would agree to such a marriage. He sent up a quick prayer to the Great Creator for help and guidance. Resolved upon his course, he nodded. “I would expect nothing less. You will, of course, be paid in full after such information is shared and Danzari has been helped.”

King Kelkona’s lips twisted into what might pass for a smile. “I am glad we are of one accord. You can expect to see me within the next few weeks. I plan to claim the hand of your lovely daughter without delay.”

Lionel signed the agreement, even as he prayed for some other answer to manifest itself. Just what had he gotten himself into, and how would his daughters react to such news?