



The Dragon King's Pregnant Mate (Dragons of Kaldoria #2)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: I fled from my forced husband, the cruel Dragon King.

But now, pregnant with his child, I must find a way to survive in the harsh world outside.

Even if it means making a deal with the King's cruel, possessive brother...

The King is hunting for me, and I am not safe.

When he catches me, I have no choice but to come with him.

And soon, his forced proximity is taking its toll on my exhausted body...

I have not forgotten how he used to play with my body.

I have not forgotten how he broke my heart.

But when his flames burn down the world around us...

Will he be the dragon daddy I long for him to be?

The Dragon King of Kaldoria is the monster of your nightmares. He gets what he wants, he makes no compromises, and he claims his one true mate without apology. She's his forever, whether she likes it or not.

This is Book 2 in the Dragons of Kaldoria series. The books are best read in order.

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The snow falls like ash all around me, thick and relentless. Each step is a battle against knee-deep drifts that seem to grab at my legs, trying to drag me down into their frozen depths. My borrowed boots—stolen from a dead soldier outside Millrath's walls—have long since soaked through, leaving my feet numb and clumsy as I forge ahead through the desolate forest.

I've lost track of how long I've been walking. Days blend into weeks, marked only by the endless cycle of dawn and dusk, each sunrise bringing a colder wind than the last. The forest stretches endlessly before me, a maze of black tree trunks against white snow, their bare branches clawing at a steel-gray sky.

Something is wrong with this winter.

I feel it in my bones, in the way the storms follow me like hungry wolves, growing stronger with each surge of fear or exhaustion that ripples through me. The snow falls harder when I stumble, when my resolve weakens. Sometimes, in the dead of night while huddled beneath pine boughs, I could swear I hear the wind whispering my name.

I curl around my midsection and try to remember how to breathe on those nights. I have one sole thing in this world to protect, I know. One purpose, a lone pillar in the endless cold.

My magic, once dormant, though it seems a lifetime ago, now pulses beneath my skin like a second heartbeat. It responds to every emotion, every fragment of fear or anger or despair. Each day I can feel it tearing at something inside me like delicate lace, a barrier I had not previously known was there; of course, now I know. All I have in

the long, cold nights is this knowledge, my deep, eerie certainty that something is coming apart. I try to control the force of it, to keep it contained, but it slips free anyway—wild and untamed as the ancient power that flows through my veins.

The forest has grown preternaturally quiet tonight, as if holding its breath. No birds call, no small creatures rustle through the underbrush. Even the wind seems muffled, creating an eerie stillness that makes the hair on the back of my neck stand up. I've learned to trust the feeling in my gut during these silences, or perhaps simply the silences themselves—they usually mean soldiers are nearby, combing the wilderness for any sign of their runaway queen. I can kid myself into believing the storm is quelling to warn me, sheltering me in the eye of the hurricane. Or perhaps it, too, wishes that I be found and dragged back south to my gilded cage.

But the wind does not know I am queen. The thought is a scant comfort.

I pause to catch my breath, leaning against a massive pine tree, listening hard. Its rough bark bites into my shoulder through the layers of stolen clothes—a guard's leather jerkin beneath a refugee's worn cloak. Neither meant for this kind of cold. My hand drifts unconsciously to my stomach, still flat beneath the leather, though I know what grows there. Their presence is sharply rendered in my mind every day, stronger all the time.

"We'll be alright," I whisper into the cold, breath turning silver upon the air. My voice sounds small and lost in the vast silence.

What pitiful words they are. What a pitiful thing I have become. At least I am free, I think, wildly, furiously. At least I am free.

But where might house me now? Who would take me, this thing I have become, the danger it brings? Where could I possibly escape from the fearsome cold, the near-endless night? Essenborn, my home village, now merely rubble, is west of where I

stand. I know Fort Caddell lies somewhere ahead, further north, beyond these endless trees at the foothills of the jagged mountains that loom on the horizon like teeth of the jaws closing endlessly around this nation. The last human stronghold in Kaldoria, where dragons are forbidden to enter. It might offer sanctuary, if I can reach it before Arvoren's forces find me. If the brutal cold doesn't claim me first.

Arvoren . His name sends a painful twinge through my chest. In my weaker moments, usually in the dark hours before dawn, I let myself remember: the warmth of his arms around me, the fierce protectiveness in his golden eyes, the way his voice softened when he spoke my name. But those memories are dangerous. They make me want impossible things.

A distant horn blast shatters the silence, sending my heart racing. The sound echoes through the trees, followed by answering calls that seem to come from all directions at once.

They're closer than I thought. I have to move.

I push away from the tree, forcing my frozen legs to move. The snow is falling faster now, responding to my fear, thick flakes swirling around me in a dizzying dance. My magic rises unbidden, making the temperature plummet until the very air seems to crack with the cold.

The horns sound again, closer this time. The soldiers are coordinating, moving in formation through the forest. Hunting. Always hunting—hunting me, though I know they do not know I'm here. They're hunting me everywhere, I know. Across all of Kaldoria, they howl my name, or the only name that matters now: heretic, heretic, heretic .

I stumble forward, no longer trying to be quiet. Speed matters more than stealth now. The snow pulls at my feet, dragging me down, each step requiring more effort than

the last. My breath comes in ragged gasps that tear at my throat. The cold seems to reach inside me, turning my lungs to ice.

Through the curtain of snow, I catch glimpses of movement—dark shapes moving between the trees, too precise to be shadows. The soldiers are spreading out, trying to encircle their prey. Me.

My grandmother's voice echoes in my memory. Magic responds to need, little one. The greater the need, the stronger it flows. At the time, I cared not for the meaning of her words, nor why she suspected I might need them. I only wished to hide in the soft warmth of her voice.

Somehow, she must have sensed that need would arise someday in me. I need it now. Need it desperately.

I reach deep inside myself, past the exhaustion and fear, past the bone-deep cold, to that well of power that broke free in Millrath, worlds away from this place. It shies for a single moment from my grasp, a startled animal. Then, seeming to sense I am as desperately afraid and furious as it is, it rises eagerly, too eagerly, surging through my veins like liquid fire.

My ears begin to ring. As my vision spots with black, tiny dots swimming up into my sight, I hear shouting in the trees, though I cannot see what is happening. The wind howls and my legs tingle fiercely, then my arms, then my entire body.

The world disappears into white. I hear more shouts of alarm from the soldiers as their carefully coordinated hunt dissolves into chaos—a distant scream, a harrowing yelp from a hunting dog. The smell of death. The wind howls, drowning out their voices, driving the snow horizontally through the trees with enough force to strip bark from trunks.

Something in the back of my brain, the strain of animal instinct we all have within ourselves, tells me to run.

I run. Or try to. My legs are leaden, my whole body trembling with the effort of maintaining whatever fury my power has unleashed upon the forest. The ringing gets louder. I feel tiny, sharp skittering like static electricity in all my limbs now, travelling up and down. Too much. It's too much power, too fast. But I can't stop. Can't let them find me. Can't let them take me back to him.

Can't let them hurt my child.

A wave of nausea hits without warning. I stumble, catching myself against a tree as my stomach heaves. Nothing comes up. I haven't eaten since yesterday. The storm falters with my lack of concentration, the wind dying momentarily.

Through the trees, I hear the stampeding of horses, the single distant, solitary crack of an arrow hitting something hard not far from me. A brief, sharp snap of laughter echoing in the night. A viscerally angry shout, then dozens of voices calling out to regroup.

Heretic, heretic.

Something shifts inside me then, a strange pulse of awareness that makes me gasp. The magic flowing through my veins feels different suddenly—wilder, more unpredictable. There is an untold well inside me. I feel it and know it all at once, as if it has been there for some time now. An untold beacon of force, pushing out from me.

The temperature drops so rapidly that tree branches in all directions crack and shatter in the cold. Their breaking sounds ring like thunder in the eerie silence. There is suddenly no more shouting, no more stampeding. No more hunting. The hunt is over.

I press myself against the ancient trunk of a massive pine, trying to steady my breathing, to rein in this savage power somehow, though it is far too large for me; I feel its furious shrieking and straining like a physical tearing. But it's too late—I can feel the winter deepening around me, spreading outward like ripples in a pond.

This storm is mine, born of my fear and desperation, but it's growing beyond my control.

Voices carry through the whiteout, closer now. But they are not the voices of the hunt, now dead. They are not even the voices of the dead.

Mine, Arvoren says in my mind, in my soul. Little bird.

I hold my breath, pressing deeper into the shadows of the ancient forest. Only the gods could possibly know why I am so afraid. There is nothing to be afraid of here, naught but the dead. The thick trunk shields me from view as dark shapes seem to flurry past in the wind, barely visible through the curtain of snow. My heart hammers against my ribs, every beat seeming to echo in the strange silence.

Time stretches like frozen honey as I wait, scarcely daring to breathe. My legs tremble with exhaustion, and I can feel sweat freezing on my skin despite the bitter cold. The child's presence feels stronger somehow, as if they know we're in danger. As if they're lending me their strength, helping me stay conscious even as my body screams for rest.

Gradually, the shadows seem to fade, moving deeper into the forest. Somewhere far beyond this stretch of woods, soldiers are still searching, but here, I am alone. Not even ghosts linger to watch me tread stubbornly on.

I wait longer still, counting my heartbeats.

“It’s okay,” I find myself murmuring, over and over, time and again, into the eerie quiet. I’m not sure whether I’m speaking to myself or my child. “It’s okay. It’s all going to be alright. It’s okay.”

When I finally dare to move, my muscles protest every motion. I push away from the tree, stumbling slightly as a fresh wave of dizziness washes over me. The magic is still there, humming beneath my skin, but it feels muted now, drained. Like me.

I need shelter. Need rest and warmth and food, or neither of us will survive another night in this wilderness.

As if in answer to my desperate thoughts, a glimmer of gold catches my eye through the trees, far in the distance, set against a far-away hill—warm and steady, unlike the harsh white of snow-reflected sunlight.

Lamplight. Or firelight. Somehow, my fury did not snuff it out.

My breath catches in my throat. After so many days of endless forest, the sight of that gentle glow feels impossible, like a mirage or a fever dream. But as I squint through the falling snow, I can make out more details: the dark bulk of a building, smoke rising from a chimney to disappear into the white sky.

Every instinct screams that this is dangerous. Any shelter could be a trap, any warmth a lure to draw me into the open. But what choice do I have? My body is failing, the child sapping what little strength remains. I won't survive another night exposed to this cold, especially not with my magic so volatile, so hungry for release.

I take a hesitant step toward the light, then another. The glow seems to beckon, promising warmth and safety, though I know better than to trust such promises. Still, I move forward, drawn like a moth to flame.

The storm eases slightly as I trek toward the distant glow, as if my magic recognizes the possibility of sanctuary. Through the thinning snowfall, I can see eventually that it's a house—large and well-built, with thick stone walls and heavy shutters drawn against the cold. Smoke curls from two chimneys, and lamplight spills from gaps in those shutters, painting the snow in stripes of amber.

Beyond it, a handful of other tiny golden lights glimmer through the night. A village, albeit a tiny one. Perhaps close enough to Fort Caddell that it may be a human village. Wishful thinking on my part, I know. Yet I wish fiercely for an ally.

I pause at the edge of the clearing, my hand resting protectively over my stomach. Everything in me yearns to rush forward, to pound on that solid wooden door and beg for shelter. But I force myself to wait, to watch. To be sure.

No soldiers' horses in the yard. No tracks in the fresh snow save those of wildlife. No sign that anyone has passed this way recently. Just a house, isolated and somehow untouched by the chaos that's consumed the rest of Kaldoria.

I take a deep breath of knife-sharp air, steeling myself for whatever comes next. Then I step out of the forest's shadows and into the light, knowing that this choice—like so many before it—could mean either salvation or doom.

But I'm out of options, out of time, out of strength. Whatever waits behind that door, it has to be better than freezing to death in the endless dark of the forest. Not even the storm that has, for reasons beyond my comprehension, shielded me from harm will shield me from that fate.

Holding fast to my faltering bravery, I move forward into the light.

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Dawn creeps over Millrath like a thief, pale light filtering through clouds thick with endless snow. I stand at the window of my private chambers, watching as the city below stirs reluctantly to life. The streets are muffled in white, the usual clamor of morning commerce dulled to whispers. Even the forges of the Iron Quarter across the water burn lower these days, their smoke thin and hesitant against the grey sky.

This weather is killing my kingdom's trade, its industry. I have not yet been successful in bringing myself to care. There is a sorrow upon the wind that has settled upon my city, the single jewel of my crown. I can feel it in my bones, in the way the cold seems to seek out every crack in the castle walls, every gap in ancient mortar. Some nights, in my most desperate and shameful moments, I find it carries her scent somehow—a crisp, sharp sweetness that makes my blood sing with recognition.

Then, it's gone again.

A knock at my door breaks the silence. I grunt, permitting entrance. I have not the patience nor energy to raise my chin, to square my shoulders. My gut feels cold all the time these days, heavy as a stone. There is no fire there anymore, just a lump of obsidian, an oxidised heart of sulfur. Something that burned eternally until it didn't.

"My king," Darian's voice is tight with tension. "The Lords have arrived for the audience."

Of course they have. Like scavenging birds, they circle my throne, waiting for any sign of weakness. Even now, after the fury I rained upon them after their most recent and treacherous disobedience, they know not when to cease from disquieting me.

I straighten my shoulders, adjusting the heavy crown that never seems to sit quite right anymore. At least I still know how to bear its weight, I remind myself. I know how to wear it. How to carry what I must carry.

"Very well," I say to the glass, to the city. To the sky pouring snow down upon the world I once, briefly, believed I could love. To Calliope, or the wealth of absence that she became.

The walk to my underchamber feels longer each day. Servants scurry out of my path, heads bowed, though I catch them watching from the corners of their eyes. They whisper when they think I can't hear, spreading stories about their missing queen, about the endless winter, the deaths by freezing, the missing troops, the momentarily-quelled coup. About their king's growing obsessions, madnesses, frenzies, furies. His silence and terror.

Let them whisper. They know nothing of obsession. Nothing of the way her absence feels like a physical wound, raw and bleeding beneath my carefully maintained facade of control.

I take my throne. I raise my head.

The dragon skulls lining my throne room walls cast long shadows in the torchlight, their empty eye sockets seeming to watch the proceedings with ancient disapproval. I sit straight and stoic, letting the cold iron of my crown rest heavy against my brow as I survey the six lords standing before me.

Their wounds from our recent battle are still fresh—bandages peek from beneath fine clothing, and more than one of them favors an injured leg or arm.

Good. Let them remember the price of treachery.

Lord Bellrose of Estwell steps forward first, his silver-streaked hair catching the firelight. Even with his arm in a sling, he carries himself with the insufferable pride of old nobility. Traitor , cries my blood. You should be dead for what you have done, what you have attempted.

"Your Majesty," he begins, voice dripping courtesy like poison. "We come seeking reassurance."

"And so soon," I reply, noting the lord's immediately evident discomfort. "It seems we only recently saw one another."

Mere weeks ago, I sent the fools limping back to their backwater hovels at our borderlands with their troops half-demolished and power severely diminished. I won the day, yet they still believe I did not win the war. They believe the war is not over until they decide.

They know nothing of war.

"We seek...clarification," Bellrose corrects in a strange, soft voice.

"Do you?" I lean forward ever so slightly. Several of them flinch at the movement. My merest movement terrifies them. Once, I might have relished that. "I would think my mercy after your failed rebellion would be reassurance enough."

"Your...forgiveness is appreciated, eternally," Lord Vos interjects, his thin face pinched with barely concealed disdain. His house suffered some of the heaviest losses in the battle, and the bandages around his throat barely hide the claw marks I left there. "However, there are more pressing concerns that bring us here today."

"The winter," Lord Morwen cuts in, his scarred face twisted with barely concealed fury. "It grows worse by the day. In Whiteraid, livestock freeze in their barns. Crops

die in the fields. Trade caravans can't get through the mountain passes. The Great River is frozen; we port cities in the west are starving, running out of resources. Our poorest won't survive until spring. And...the common folk whisper that it's her doing."

And then, he is wise enough to close his treacherous mouth.

My fingers tighten on the throne's armrests, leaving impressions in the metal. My wife—my eternal torment.

Even now, weeks after her disappearance, the sound of her name—spoken or merely thought—sends a jolt through me like lightning. I see her in every shadow, dream of her every night. The memory of her power exploding through the castle that final night still burns behind my eyes.

That a soul in my kingdom might dare to blame her brings a fury upon me so thick I can hardly breathe through it.

"Rumors and peasant superstitions," I say coldly, levelly. I was born to make my way in this chamber, I know. Crafted to keep my temper. Only one could ever make me lose control. "Nothing more."

"With respect," Lord Sturmsen rumbles, his massive frame shifting as he steps forward. "The matter at hand is worth higher regard than mere superstition. My own mages confirm it—there's power in this storm. Old power. The kind that hasn't been seen since the days of the old witches, an ancient power."

Sturmsen is an interesting lord to hear such sentiments from. He's usually very nonsense, an unruffled lord of a strong house with innumerable sons. Only two of the Draconic Houses represented here today did not participate in the rebellion that almost toppled my House and city mere weeks ago; Lords Sturmsen and Caddell are

the only two Lords present with the right not to fear for their very lives in this chamber, and they both appear to know it, worlds more relaxed than their fellow leaders.

Favoured or not, I will not allow the sturdy, northerly leader of Fjordmarse to speak ill of my wife.

A muscle ticks in my jaw. "Choose your next words carefully, Sturmsen."

Sturmsen laughs lowly, a rumbling sound, not unkindly and yet clearly without regard for the risk at hand. He does not offer me a response.

Lord Caddell, likewise, is silent. The sole human present, he is the slightest and shortest of the Lords, a middle-aged man I have not spoken with personally in years and would not care to. He has the unkempt, wispy look of the Caddells about him, but his eyes are set upon me, and he does not appear nervous. I feel a miniscule thread of approval within me at the bravery of that, but it is near silent beneath my rage.

"Where is she?" Morwen demands, sharp voice cutting across the room and echoing. Unlike his fellow Lords, he makes no attempt at courtesy. "Where is the queen? If she's truly contained as you claim, then surely—"

"My wife ," I say, emphasizing the word, "is safely confined within the castle, recovering from wounds sustained during your ill-conceived rebellion." The lie tastes like ash on my tongue, but I deliver it with perfect coldness. "She poses no threat to you or your lands. Some Houses are older than others, Lords, might I remind you. Some cities can weather a harsh winter."

"If you speak the truth, produce her." Bellrose's pale eyes narrow. "Let us see this claimed confinement with our own eyes. Surely you understand our concern? The commonfolk grow restless. They blame this endless winter on dark magic—on her. If

she truly is as you say, perhaps allowing us to verify—"

"You would make demands of your king?" I rise from the throne in a single fluid motion, letting my presence fill the room like smoke. The torches flicker, and I know my eyes have begun to glint with that inner fire that marks my bloodline. "After your treachery? After I showed you mercy when I should have taken your heads?"

The Lords take an involuntary step back—all except Bellrose, who merely inclines his head in a gesture that manages to be both respectful and mocking. "Of course not, Your Majesty. We merely thought to offer our assistance in these...difficult times."

"Your assistance?" A bitter laugh escapes me. "Like the 'assistance' my dear brother offered you in forming the coalition, Bellrose? If I didn't know better, I might suspect he is your favoured heir of my House." If I didn't know better, I might suspect you know where he is now. "I don't suppose you have anything of value to say?"

The question hangs in the air, the frosty snap of a winter's morning. Impossibly present and yet desperately fragile. No one speaks.

We all know Ulric vanished during the chaos of that final battle, when Calliope's power transformed the night into day. His body was never found among the dead, though the burns she inflicted should have killed him. Some say he fled north, gathering allies among the outlying settlements. Others whisper that he was consumed entirely by her magic, reduced to less than ash.

I know which possibility I vastly and eternally prefer.

"Your brother's treachery is not our concern," Lord Vos finally says, though his voice wavers slightly. "We speak only of the present danger. This winter—"

"This winter will pass," I cut him off. "Like all things. Until then, I suggest you focus

on keeping your own lands in order. Unless you'd prefer another demonstration of why my family has held this throne for centuries?"

The threat in my voice sends a visible shiver through a couple of the Lords.

But Bellrose holds his ground, his pale eyes like chips of ice. "We doubt nothing, Your Majesty. We merely seek to protect our interests. The people suffer. Trade routes are closed. Rumors that the winter will not...will not end, my King."

"Rumors?" I bare my teeth in what might technically be called a smile, but would not be by any sane man. "Like the rumors that my queen has escaped? That she runs wild in the north, gathering power? That your king is weak, unable to control his own wife?" I step down from the dais, my boots ringing against stone as I approach them. "Tell me, my Lords—do you believe these rumors?"

They exchange glances, no one quite willing to answer. I look each of them in the eye. Sturmsen and Caddell are the only lords capable of holding my gaze. No surprise there.

Finally, Morwen speaks, his voice carefully neutral. "We believe only what we see, Your Majesty. And what we see is a kingdom sliding into chaos while its king...grieves. All present parties have committed grave errors, my king. But the future is unwritten. And your people freeze—they freeze as we speak."

The words hit like a physical blow, though I don't let it show on my face. "I don't recall asking for your assessment of my state of mind."

"Nevertheless—" Bellrose begins, but I've had enough.

"Leave," I command, my voice dropping to a growl that's more dragon than human. "Now. Before I reconsider my previous mercy."

They bow—some deeper than others—and file out, their footsteps echoing in the vast chamber. I catch fragments of their whispered conversations as they go, though they think themselves too quiet for my hearing.

Perhaps they are. Perhaps the whispers are my own madness, finally realised, finally leering up from inside me into my dull and harried senses.

"—lying, obviously—"

"—the witch has escaped—"

"—cannot be trusted—"

"—brother was right about him—"

When the heavy doors finally close behind them, I allow my rigid posture to crack. My hands shake as I run them through my hair, almost dislodging my crown. The irony isn't lost on me.

"My king?" Darian emerges from the shadows where he'd stood guard throughout the meeting. His face is lined with concern, though he tries to hide it. "Are you—"

"Any word?" I cut him off, unable to keep the desperation from my voice. "Any trace of her?"

He hesitates, which is answer enough. "A troop of soldiers has frozen to death fifty miles from Fort Caddell, not far from the foothills of the Peaks. The latest scouts from the area report strange weather patterns in the northern forests. Storms that appear and disappear without warning. But the trails are all dead ends. She has not been seen in many days, not reported anywhere. And none of the prior reports have yielded substantial leads."

A laugh tears from my throat, bitter as winter wind. Darian does not flinch—such is not in his nature—but I can tell I have startled him.

"Perhaps she truly curses my kingdom," I murmur into the quiet. "Perhaps she curses me."

We ascend into the castle in silence. Darian follows wordlessly as I step into the light above, two paces precisely behind me. Reliable as my shadow.

I move to the nearest window, very nearly pressing my forehead against the frozen glass like a child, though I resist the urge. Outside, snow falls into the black water in a steady curtain, blanketing the city in white silence. Somewhere out there, she's watching the same snow, feeling the same cold. Unless she's already—

No. I can't let myself think that way. She's alive. I would know if she weren't. Would feel it like a knife between my ribs.

"Her power is boundless," I say after some time has passed.

Behind me, Darian says nothing. He simply watches.

"Say it is her doing this," I murmur, breath fogging the glass. "Say it is true. This winter. This endless cold. Why? What is she trying to accomplish?"

Darian is quiet for a long moment. When he speaks, his voice is careful. "Perhaps she's not trying to accomplish anything, my king. Magic is mysterious. It is its own mover."

The implication sends a chill through me that has nothing to do with the weather. I remember the raw power that roared from her that fateful and terrible night, the way it transformed her into something both awful and beautiful. I recall the sheer terror of

witnessing her, how it was almost an apotheosis. If that power is truly beyond her control...

"Double the search parties," I order, turning from the window. "I want every forest, every mountain pass, every abandoned shack searched. She has to be somewhere. Has to need shelter, food, warmth."

My voice cracks slightly on the last word, remembering how she used to seek warmth in my arms during those cold castle nights. Unbidden, the thought occurs to me: she must be so cold.

"Yes, my king." Darian bows, but pauses before leaving. "And...your brother? Should we continue searching for him as well?"

Ulric. In the chaos of searching for Calliope, multiple times now I've almost forgotten about him. My only remaining family, and yet he has been the architect of so much suffering. I should be furious, I know. I think beneath my exhaustion and fear, I am. But I cannot feel the heat of my rage, not yet. The snow has dulled it into an ache.

I want him dead, though. And I want him dead slowly.

"He'll surface eventually," I growl, the words burning in my throat like dragon-fire. "Snakes always do. But she is the priority. Find her, Darian. Whatever it takes."

When his footsteps fade away, I'm left alone with the shadows and the falling snow. I retrieve my crown from my head, turning it in my hands. The metal is ice-cold to the touch.

"Where are you?" I whisper to the empty air. "Why did you run? I could have protected you. Could have given you everything."

But Calliope cannot answer me. I cannot hear the sorrowful and desperate and beautiful call of the caged bird now, not anymore.

Perhaps it was always going to end up this way.

The snow continues to fall outside my window.

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It was real. It wasn't a hallucination.

The third village I've seen in as many days appears through the swirling snow like a mirage—a handful of sturdy wooden buildings huddled against the bitter wind, smoke rising from stone chimneys in thin, wavering columns.

My relief at the sight is so profound it brings tears to my eyes, though they freeze almost instantly on my cheeks.

I've been walking for three days since fleeing the house in the woods, after discovering my would-be benefactor was one of Arvoren's spies—I escaped the encounter alive and intact, but only just, after he cornered me in his cellar, the walls rattling with the harsh winds, swearing he'd deliver me to the King himself for the price on my head. He lies dead now, frozen by the storm as he tried to pursue me into the dark. Blood on my hands, and yet they are too numb to feel it. Three days of trudging through knee-deep snow, sleeping in hollow trees, and eating nothing but pine nuts and dried berries foraged from beneath the ice. My stolen boots are falling apart, my feet bloody and numb inside them.

The village seems abandoned at first glance—no people in the streets, no sound except the mournful howl of wind between buildings. But I can smell woodsmoke, hear the distant bleating of sheep. Someone still lives here, despite the brutal winter.

I hesitate at the edge of the tree line, one hand pressed against my stomach. I imagine my child pulsing with warmth, a hearth of safety and comfort, the only part of me that

isn't freezing. I imagine them safe and unafraid, knowing they are protected.

A door creaks somewhere in the village. I duck behind a tree, heart pounding, as heavy boots crunch through snow. Two men pass nearby, their voices carrying clearly in the crystalline air.

"—third group this week," one grumbles. "Running from the winter, they say. More likely running from the law."

"Long as they pay, who cares?" The second voice is deeper, with an accent I don't recognize. "Gold spends the same, deserter or criminal."

They pass out of earshot, but their words send a chill through me that has nothing to do with the cold. This is no simple village—it's a waypoint for those fleeing south, probably run by draconic mercenaries who prey on desperate travelers.

There are likely bounty-hunters here. Vicious and cruel, and they would do anything for the price on my head.

I need to get out of here.

I should run. Should turn back into the forest and try my luck elsewhere. But my legs tremble with exhaustion, and my vision swims whenever I move too quickly. I need real food, real rest, or neither of us will survive much longer.

I think of my child. It's the only thing stronger than the fear.

Keeping to the shadows, I work my way around the edge of the village. Most of the buildings are dark, but one structure stands apart from the rest—larger, with warm light spilling from its windows and the sound of voices drifting from within. An inn, or something like it. If I'm careful, maybe I can—

A hand clamps over my mouth from behind.

I try to scream, to call my magic, but exhaustion has left me slow. Strong arms drag me backward, lifting me off my feet. I kick and thrash, but my captor is immensely strong.

"Well, well," a voice purrs in my ear, hot breath reeking of smoke and meat. "What do we have here?"

He spins me around, and I find myself staring into eyes that glow like banked coals. A shifter. His human form is massive, all muscle and scars, but I can see the dragon beneath his skin—scales rippling just beneath the surface, smoke curling from his nostrils with each breath.

More figures emerge from the shadows, surrounding us. All shifters, I realize with growing horror. Their eyes gleam with predatory interest as they circle closer.

"Caught this one sneaking around the perimeter," my captor announces, giving me a shake that makes my teeth rattle. "Another runaway from Fort Caddell, by the looks of her. A deserter. They'll pay well for her."

"Please," I gasp, trying to sound appropriately terrified. It's not difficult. "I'm just looking for shelter. I have coin—"

"Oh, we'll take your coin," one of the others laughs. He's smaller than the first, but his smile is cruel. "Among other things."

The others join in his laughter. I count six of them total, all bearing the telltale signs of their draconic nature—glowing eyes, too-sharp teeth, incredible height and bulk, smoke rising from their skin despite the cold.

My captor drags me toward a gap between buildings, away from any prying eyes. Fighting hard, I kick up gusts of snow. Dark laughter echoes around me. I struggle harder, panic rising as I realize what they intend. The child's magic pulses inside me, responding to my fear, but I dare not release it. If they discover who I really am...

"Feisty little thing," one comments as I manage to land a kick to his chest. "I like that. More fun when they fight."

"Been a while since we had any entertainment up here," another adds. "These winters get so boring."

Bile rises in my throat. My fear is so intense my head spins with it.

They force me back, back, until my shoulders hit rough stone. We've reached the edge of the village, where a rocky outcrop rises from the snow like a broken bone. The shifters spread out in a semicircle, cutting off any escape.

"Now then," my original captor says, reaching for my cloak. "Let's see what else you're hiding under there, little mouse."

I could kill them. Could let my power loose, freeze them where they stand. But using that much magic in my weakened state might harm the child, or I might pass out and freeze in the snow. Besides, the moment I reveal myself as more than human, word will spread. Arvoren will know exactly where to find me.

But as rough hands stretch out toward me, I realize I might not have a choice.

The first shifter's scales ripple fully to the surface, his face elongating slightly as he lets his dragon nature show. Heat radiates from him as he leans closer, smoke curling from between sharp teeth.

"Don't worry," he growls, the words distorted by his partial transformation. "We'll make it quick. Probably."

Something inside me snaps. Damn my worries and fears. The gods only know I have nothing left to be afraid of.

I am Calliope Windward, last of my bloodline, Queen of Kaldoria for better or for worse. I have faced worse than these creatures. Have survived worse.

Will survive worse.

The wind picks up, swirling snow around us in a tight spiral. The shifters pause, suddenly uncertain as the temperature plummets. Frost spreads across the rock at my back, crackling like breaking bones.

My magic surges up from that deep well inside me, wild and uncontrollable. I feel it building like a storm, like lightning about to strike. The child's presence amplifies everything, turning my desperation into raw power that crackles through the air.

The ice beneath our feet groans.

"What's happening?" one of the shifters snarls, smoke pouring from his mouth as he starts to transform. "What are you—"

The crack comes suddenly, a sound like thunder that splits the night. A fissure opens in the frozen ground, zigzagging between the mercenaries' feet. One of them screams as the ice gives way beneath him, sending him plummeting into an expanding well of darkness. His cry echoes up from the depths until it fades to nothing.

The others scramble back, their transformations stalling as they try to find stable ground. But my magic isn't finished. Ice spreads up their legs, trapping them in place

as the wind howls louder, driving snow and shards of ice like daggers.

"Witch!" my original captor roars. He manages to complete his transformation, scales erupting across his skin as his form swells. Heat radiates from him in waves, melting the ice that tries to claim him. "I'll tear you apart!"

He lunges for me, claws extended. I raise my hands, preparing to unleash everything I have left, knowing it might kill me, knowing I have no choice—

A talon larger than my head, razor-sharp, lashes through the air toward my face impossibly fast.

All at once, in a fraction of a second, I see multiple distinct images in my head: my grandmother in the firelight, Lyra giggling in a pretty dress in Essenborn, the long and lonely road to Millrath, the terrible beauty of the Sanctum seeming to glow beneath the moonlight, Arvoren tipping his head back gently as he laughs his rough laugh. A child not yet born, sharing my dark hair and Arvoren's sharp eyes, squealing with joy in a warm, sunlit chamber, tiny fists wheeling in the air.

I hold my breath and prepare for death.

A shadow detaches itself from the storm.

The figure moves like liquid darkness, like death given form. In the space of a heartbeat, my attacker's roar turns to a gurgle. The talon whips away from me, a hair's breadth from my face as it swings into the dark and the snow. Blood sprays across the ice at my feet, black in the dim light, as a blade opens his throat with surgical precision.

The remaining shifters try to flee, but the shadow is everywhere at once. Steel flashes. Bodies fall. One mercenary manages to fully transform, but even his dragon

form isn't fast enough. The mysterious fighter flows around his flames like smoke, finding gaps in his scales, striking vital points until the massive creature crashes to the ground.

In seconds, it's over.

My legs give out. I slide down the rock face, the rough stone scraping through my clothes as my vision dims at the edges. The magic drains from me like water from a broken cup, leaving me hollow and shaking.

The figure approaches through the swirling snow. Tall, powerful, moving with a warrior's deadly grace. My heart leaps treacherously in my chest.

Arvoren?

But no—even through my blurring vision, I can tell the shape is wrong. This person is shorter than my husband, more slightly built. They kneel beside me in the bloodied snow, and a voice that's definitely not Arvoren's says something I can't quite catch.

Hands catch me as I start to slump forward. The world spins lazily, darkness creeping in from all sides. I try to fight it, to stay conscious, but I'm so tired. So cold.

"...safe now," the voice says, seeming to come from very far away. "You're safe..."

As consciousness slips away, I find myself wishing, despite everything, that it was Arvoren's arms around me. That he had found me, had come to take me home to warmth and safety and his fierce, possessive love.

The thought follows me down into darkness as the storm rages on.

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Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:44 am

I wake with her name caught in my throat.

The remnants of the dream still cling to me like frost, settled on my skin. I see in my mind the ephemeral glow of the vision sleep brought. In it, I was flying through an endless storm, following her voice on the wind. Ice formed on my wings, weighing me down, but still I pushed forward, desperate to reach her. Then suddenly, I was falling, and the cold was everywhere, inside and out, crushing the breath from my lungs—

The last visage of the dream fractures and slips away, leaving only a bone-deep chill that even my dragon's blood can't seem to warm. My chambers—our chambers—feel cavernous and empty in the pre-dawn light. The bed is too large, too cold. Her scent still lingers on the pillows, growing fainter with each passing day.

I rise, pacing to the window where frost has painted delicate patterns across the glass. The sun hasn't yet crested the mountains, but already I can hear the city stirring below. The sound seems muffled, distant, as if the endless snow has wrapped Millrath in wool.

A knock at my door breaks the silence.

"Enter," I growl, not turning from the window.

"My king." The spy enters silently, as his kind are trained to do. I catch his reflection in the glass—a slight man, easily forgettable, exactly as he's meant to be. "I bring news from the north."

My heart kicks against my ribs, but I keep my voice steady. "Speak."

"There was a disturbance in one of the border villages a day and a half ago, not far from Fort Caddell. A human woman matching the queen's description was seen fleeing into the forest, pursued by shifter mercenaries. When our agents reached the site, they found the mercenaries dead. They were...they were torn apart, my king."

I turn slowly, studying the spy's face for any hint of deception. "And the woman?"

"Gone, my king. The storm was too fierce for our trackers to follow. But..." He hesitates, weighing his next words carefully. "The villagers speak of strange magics. Of ice that moved with a will of its own, and winds that whispered with a woman's voice. They believe it was the queen. Fear and superstition run high, my King, but..."

My claws emerge unconsciously, scoring deep marks in the windowsill. Calliope. It has to be her. My fierce, beautiful wife, running wild in the frozen north while her power grows stronger by the day. The thought fills me with equal parts pride and terror and pain.

"Show me," I demand, crossing to the large map spread across my desk. The spy points to a spot near the border of Fort Caddell's territory, where the great northern forests meet the mountains.

"Here, my king. The village of Thornhaven."

I trace the distance with one claw, calculating. She's moving fast, despite the weather. Heading north still, probably seeking sanctuary among the humans. But she's weakening—the attack proves that. No matter how powerful she's become, she wouldn't have revealed her magic unless truly desperate.

"Prepare a squadron," I order, already reaching for my armor. "I'll lead them myself."

If we move quickly—"

"My king." Another voice from the doorway. Darian enters, his face grave. "There's been an incident among the Lords."

The words stop me cold. "What kind of incident?"

"An assassination attempt. Lady Bellrose's youngest son was attacked in his chambers in Estwell mere hours ago. The assassin escaped, but left this." He holds up a scrap of black fabric, emblazoned with a familiar sigil—the mark of House Morwen.

Ice forms in my veins, colder than any winter storm. "The boy?"

"Alive, but badly wounded. His father demands justice."

Of course he does. The fragile peace between the Houses already strains at its seams—this could shatter it completely. And if civil war erupts now, while Calliope is still out there, vulnerable...

"My king," the spy ventures carefully, "the trail in the north grows colder with each passing hour. If we don't act soon—"

"I know!"

The word comes out as a roar, making both men flinch. Smoke rises from between my teeth as I struggle to contain the dragon's rage building inside me.

"Leave us," I snap after a moment of silence.

The spy bows and retreats. Darian remains, watching me with the careful concern of a

man who's served long enough to speak freely.

"The Houses are testing you," he says quietly. "This assassination attempt, the timing of it...they're watching to see how you'll respond. Morwen did not do this, and we both know it. Whichever of them did, it's doubtless a scheme. If you leave now to chase rumors of the queen—"

"They're not rumors." I slam my fist down on the desk, cracking the heavy wood. "She's out there, Darian. Alone. Growing stronger but also more desperate. I feel it—something's wrong. She needs me. And I need to bring her back, before..."

I trail off.

Before she is lost to me forever. One way or another.

"The kingdom needs you." Darian's voice is gentle but implacable. "You can't protect her if you lose your throne. And, my king, if I may...we have never been so close to losing the throne. And you know it to be true."

I close my eyes, fighting back the urge to transform, to take to the skies and burn anyone who stands between me and my wife. But Darian is right. He's always right about these things.

"Send riders," I say finally, each word tasting like ash. "Your best trackers. Tell them to be careful—she's powerful, but also frightened. And Darian..." I meet his gaze, letting him see the dragon in my eyes. "Tell them if they harm her, I'll eat their hearts while they watch."

He bows and withdraws, leaving me alone with the map and my churning thoughts. I trace the path she might have taken, imagining her stumbling through endless snow, using her magic to survive. Is she wounded? Hungry? Does she regret running from

me yet?

Does she miss me as I miss her?

The sound of bells startles me from my dark thoughts—the city's warning system, calling the noble houses to emergency council. The assassination attempt has already spread through the court like wildfire. They'll all be gathering now, circling like vultures, watching to see how their king handles this latest crisis.

I don my formal armor mechanically, piece by piece, feeling its weight settle onto my shoulders like another kind of chain. The crown comes last, cold iron pressing against my brow, a constant reminder of duty and power and the cost of keeping both.

A memory surfaces unbidden: Calliope's fingers tracing the crown's edge, her touch gentle despite her captivity.

She believed me cold, cold as this winter, cold as her storm.

I'd kissed her then, trying to prove her wrong, to show her the fire that burned beneath the ice. But perhaps she'd been right all along. Perhaps that's why she ran—because in the end, I couldn't be anything but what I am: a creature of iron and frost, of duty and possession, of power that corrupts everything it touches.

The bells continue to toll as I descend to my council chamber, where the Lords await with their accusations and demands. I force thoughts of Calliope to the back of my mind, lock away the heart-deep ache of missing her. I cannot be her husband now. Cannot be the man who dreams of her every night, who would burn the world to find her.

I must be their king. Their dragon. Their monster.

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Consciousness returns in fragments, each one sharp as broken glass.

First comes the cold—bone-deep and merciless, seeping through stone walls that could be centuries old. Then pain, radiating from what feels like every muscle in my body. The surface beneath me is too hard to be snow, too soft to be stone, too smooth to be forest floor. A bed, then, though barely worthy of the name. More like a wooden shelf with a thin mattress, stuffed with what might be straw.

I keep my eyes closed, forcing my breathing to remain slow and even as I take stock of my surroundings. The air smells of dust and old stone, with an underlying sweetness I can't quite place. Herbs, maybe, or incense. A fire crackles somewhere nearby—I can hear the pop and hiss of burning wood, feel its heat struggling against the pervasive chill.

"I know you're awake." The voice is male, cultured, carrying a note of amusement that sends ice down my spine. "Your breathing changed."

And I know that voice.

Slowly, agonizingly, I open my eyes.

I'm in a circular room that might once have been part of a watchtower. Arrow slits pierce the curved walls at regular intervals, letting in thin streams of gray light that do little to illuminate the space. The ceiling vanishes into shadow far above, while the stone floor is partially covered by threadbare rugs in faded patterns I don't recognize.

Another tower. My heart sinks like a stone. All I've fought, all I've struggled, and I

am in another tower.

The man sits in a high-backed chair near the fire, one leg crossed elegantly over the other. Golden hair catches the firelight, framing features that are both familiar and wrong—like looking at a painting of Arvoren done by someone who'd only heard him described. The resemblance is uncanny enough to make my heart stutter, but where Arvoren's face is all hard angles and barely contained power, this man's beauty has a softer edge, a charismatic tilt. Of the two brothers, he's the charmer.

I should know; he charmed me.

"Ulric."

The name comes out as barely more than a whisper.

Prince Ulric smiles, and the expression is like watching a knife being unsheathed. "The very same. Though we were never properly introduced, were we? Or, rather, you knew me by another name. And lest we forget, the last time you saw me, I was rather...indisposed."

Images flash through my mind: that final night in Millrath, the explosion of power that tore through the castle. Ulric, burned and broken, vanishing into the chaos.

Those burns on his skin are gone now. Evidently, some have stayed loyal to him. Someone healed him, freed him. Brought him out of the city.

Someone allowed him to continue hunting me like this.

I try to sit up, but my body protests the movement. Every muscle feels like it's been worked past its limit, trembling with exhaustion. The child's presence is stalwart inside me, a warmth that's both reassuring and terrifying—how much did the magic

drain from us both?

"Careful now." Ulric rises smoothly, crossing to a small table where a pitcher and cup sit waiting. "You've been unconscious for nearly two days. The mercenaries did quite a number on you before I intervened. Or perhaps that was your own...stress."

He pours something that steams in the cold air, the same sweet smell I noticed earlier. When he offers me the cup, I hesitate.

His smile widens slightly. "If I wanted you dead, little bird, I wouldn't poison the good tea. It would be a waste."

"Don't call me that." The words come out sharper than I intend.

"No?" Ulric sets the cup on a small table within my reach, then returns to his chair. "But we are family, after all. Or perhaps not anymore. It seems we've both become estranged from the king as of late."

There's something wrong with the way he says it, an edge beneath the casual mockery that raises the hair on the back of my neck.

I force myself to sit up fully, ignoring the way the room spins. "Why did you save me?"

"Can't family help family?" When I don't respond, he sighs dramatically. "You wound me, Calliope. Here I am, offering sanctuary from both the winter and my brother's rather overzealous pursuit, and you suspect ulterior motives?"

"The last time I saw you, you were trying to kill your brother and take his throne. You would have killed me. We both know it."

"Ah, but I failed rather spectacularly at that, didn't I?" He spreads his hands in a gesture of mock helplessness. "And now here we both are—outcasts, fugitives, seeking shelter in this gods-forsaken wilderness. The irony isn't lost on me."

I study him carefully, noting the way his fingers tap restlessly against the chair's arm, the tension barely hidden beneath his casual pose. His clothes are fine but showing wear, and there are shadows beneath his eyes that the thick shadow doesn't quite hide.

"Where are we?" I ask finally.

"Far enough from Millrath that you can breathe easy," Ulric tells me, and for once, I believe him. He wouldn't have taken me back. We're both safer far from the capital. "This tower has stood empty for centuries—a remnant of some long-forgotten border dispute at the mountains' edge. Now it serves as a temporary refuge for those of us who've fallen from my brother's grace, it seems."

The tea still steams on the table beside me. I'm desperately thirsty, but I don't trust anything he offers. Instead, I ask the question that's been burning in my mind: "How did you find me?"

Something shifts in his expression—a predatory interest that makes my skin crawl. "I've been tracking you since you fled my House's city. You're not as difficult to follow as you might think. The winter follows you like a loyal hound, Windwaker. And then there was that charming couple who sheltered you, just after your escape. What were their names? Ah yes—Thomas and Marina."

My blood runs cold. "What did you do to them?"

"Nothing permanent." His smile doesn't reach his eyes. "They were quite helpful, once they understood the situation. Told me all about the frightened young woman who stayed with them, how dire her circumstances seemed. How she was with child."

I can't stop my hand from moving protectively to my stomach. Ulric's eyes follow the movement, that predatory interest sharpening. When I say nothing, he does not laugh, though I sense that he would like to.

"They're alive," he adds, though I didn't ask. "I'm not the monster my brother would have you believe."

He's lying. I can see it in the way his smile doesn't quite fit his face, in the calculated casualness of his posture. Thomas and Marina are dead, and their blood is on my hands as surely as if I'd killed them myself.

"Why?" I force the word past the tightness in my throat. "Why help me? What do you want?"

Ulric rises again, moving to one of the arrow slits. Snow swirls outside, though the storm seems calmer than it has in days. "Want? I want what I've always wanted—justice. Freedom from my brother's tyranny. A chance to restore Kaldoria to what it should be."

He turns back to me, and for a moment I glimpse something broken behind his careful mask. "But more immediately? I want to ensure that the child you carry survives to see its first breath."

My hackles rise. I wish I could kill him—I wish I could kill him with my bare hands. But I feel so desperately weak, like a baby bird. Feeble and broken. Fallen from the nest too soon into a brief and desperate journey toward the unforgiving ground.

"Why do you care about my child?" I demand, trying to sound unafraid.

"Because, my dear sister-in-law, that child represents the future. The first union of dragon and Windwaker blood in centuries. A power that could reshape our world."

His voice takes on an almost fevered quality. "Or destroy it completely, I suppose. Either way, it's far too important to leave in my brother's hands."

Understanding dawns, cold and terrible as the winter outside. "You want to use my child as a weapon."

"I want to protect it." Ulric spreads his hands as if meaning to hold the entire world within them, to mould it for himself. "To ensure it's raised properly, away from my brother's influence. To give it a chance to become something more than just another link in our family's chain of violence and control."

"Like you're so different?" The words come out before I can stop them. "You, who murdered innocent people just to find me? Who tried to kill your own brother? I have not forgotten Lyra, Ulric. I have not forgotten what you did to me." And, though I don't say it: what you did to my husband.

For a moment, something dangerous flashes in Ulric's eyes—a glimpse of the dragon beneath his carefully maintained humanity. Then it's gone, hidden behind that knife-edge smile.

"Rest," he says, moving toward the door. "Recover your strength. We can discuss the future once you're feeling more...reasonable." He pauses with his hand on the latch. "Oh, and Calliope? Don't bother trying to escape. The weather may be your ally, but this tower has stood against worse storms than yours. And in your condition..." He lets the threat hang unfinished in the air.

The door closes behind him with a sound like a tomb sealing shut.

I wait until his footsteps fade before allowing myself to shiver. The fire has burned lower, shadows creeping across the floor like grasping fingers. Outside, snow continues to fall, though I can't tell if it's my magic responding to my fear or simply

the natural weather of this desolate place.

My hand rests on my stomach, feeling the warmth there—the only part of me that still feels truly alive.

"I'll protect you," I whisper to the child growing inside me. "Whatever it takes. Whatever I have to do. He'll never have you. He'll never have you, not as long as I live."

For now, our survival means playing Ulric's game. Appearing grateful, cooperative, while I gather my strength and look for a way out.

I've survived one dragon's cage—I'll survive his brother's, too.

But as darkness falls outside and the temperature continues to drop, I can't shake the feeling that I've traded one form of imprisonment for something far more dangerous. At least with Arvoren, I always knew where I stood. Ulric's motives are as shifting as the shadows that fill this ancient tower, and I fear I've only glimpsed the edges of his true plans.

The tea sits forgotten on the table, growing cold in the gathering dark.

Hours pass, marked only by the slow dimming of light through the arrow slits and the gradual dying of the fire. I doze in and out of sleep, so exhausted and worn that time takes on an elastic consistency, moving strangely around me. A servant appears at dusk—a thin draconic woman who refuses to meet my eyes—bearing bread, cheese, and a bowl of steaming stew.

Ulric follows shortly after, moving to stoke the fire.

"You really should eat," he says without turning, silhouetted against the flames in the grate. "The servants tell me you haven't touched a thing since you woke. Not even my tea."

In the firelight, his resemblance to Arvoren is almost painful. They share the same proud profile, the same predatory grace, but where Arvoren's features are hewn from stone, Ulric's seem carved from ice—similarly beautiful, but with none of the underlying warmth I'd eventually discovered in his brother. I find him repulsive, somehow. This strange mutation of the man I know, the man I...

I think suddenly, aching, of quiet moments in the castle, of Arvoren's rare, unguarded smiles. Of the way he would watch me when he thought I wasn't looking, his expression caught between possessiveness and something softer, something he couldn't quite allow himself to show. For all his cruelty, all his need to control and possess, there had been moments of tenderness I couldn't deny.

"You're thinking of him." Ulric's voice cuts through my reverie. "I can see it in your face. Tell me, Calliope—do you miss your cage? I wonder often whether you regret it, any of it."

"You don't know anything about us," I say, but the words sound hollow even to my ears.

"Such conviction." His laugh is soft, almost gentle. "You really believe he loves you, don't you? That somewhere beneath the monster lies a man worth saving?"

The food's aroma makes my stomach clench painfully. I reach for the bread, if only to avoid answering immediately, but then cannot bring myself to take a bite. "You talk about him as if he's irredeemable, but look at yourself. How many people died so you could find me? How many bodies lie in your path to power, Ulric?"

"Ah, but I never claimed to be good." Ulric settles into the chair opposite me, watching as I eat. "I simply want change. Real change. And that child you carry—dragon's blood and Windwaker magic combined—could be the key to everything. It isn't a play, nor ploy. It's a fact."

Something cold settles in my chest. "My child is not your weapon."

"No?" He leans forward, shadows dancing across his face. I have to resist the urge to shudder. "Then what is it? My brother's heir? Another link in the chain of his tyranny? Your tenuous tie to the King? Or perhaps..." His voice softens dangerously. "Perhaps it could be something new. Something that breaks the cycle entirely. Don't tell me that doesn't excite you, Calliope. It is in your blood to crave a good storm." He laughs, gesturing to the walls, beyond which the wind howls furiously.

I rest my hand protectively over my stomach, feeling that familiar warmth. Despite everything, despite even Ulric's terrifying presence and prescience, I find myself thinking of Arvoren again—not the King, not the dragon, but the man who would sometimes wake in the night just to pull me closer, who struggled so visibly between his need to possess and his desire to love.

The implications turn my stomach, but I force myself to think past the fear. He's revealing too much, too quickly. Either he's more unstable than he appears, or...

"You're trying to frighten me," I realize aloud. "You believe that will stoke the storm, is that it? You're hiding in the floorboards of your brother's kingdom, even now. A rat in all but form. You wish for a storm that will conceal you until you have possession of my child."

Something flickers in Ulric's expression—surprise, maybe, or respect. "Clever girl. But not quite right. I'm trying to make you see that there are no good options. My brother would cage you, use you and that child to secure his power. I'm merely

offering...an alternative. I don't want to kill you, Calliope. It would be a horrible waste."

"An alternative where you use us instead?"

"An alternative where you have choices." He gestures to the food. "Starting with whether or not you eat. Though I should warn you—starving yourself will only harm the child. And we wouldn't want that, would we?"

The threat is clear beneath his solicitous tone. I look at the food again, weighing my options. He's right—I need to keep up my strength if I'm going to find a way out of this. And the child...

I fumble with the bread in my hands, tearing off a small piece. Ulric's smile widens.

If it is poisoned or drugged, I risk my child's life. But without food, they'll die anyway. Plaintively, I miss the castle for a moment, with a desperation so intense I can hardly breathe through it.

I chew a piece of bread to stave off my sadness.

"There. Was that so difficult?" Ulric settles into the chair by the fire, watching me eat with unsettling intensity. "You know, I've always wondered what my brother saw in you. Beyond the obvious political advantages of a powerful bloodline, of course. He's never been one for...attachment. After he had you dragged out of that dump out by the river, I remember nothing he'd ever done had confused me more. He knew not what you were. Why, then, his obsession?"

I chew slowly, using the time to choose my words. "You don't know him as well as you think."

"Don't I?" Something dark passes across his face. "I grew up in his shadow, watching him take everything that should have been shared between us. The throne, our parents' love, the respect of the Houses, the heads of our family's murderers.... He is a creature of possession, nothing more. Whatever he claims to feel for you is just another form of ownership."

I peer at him with the hardest eyes I can muster. "Is that why you tried to kill him? Jealousy?"

His laugh has an edge of genuine pain. "Jealousy? No, Windwaker, no. I tried to kill him because he is exactly what our parents made him to be—a tyrant who sees the world as a thing to be owned and controlled. The throne made him worse, but the seeds were always there."

I think of Arvoren's fierce protectiveness. "You're wrong about him."

"Am I?" Ulric leans forward, his eyes reflecting the firelight like a cat's. "Tell me then—in all your time with him, did he ever truly give you a choice? About anything? Or did he simply decide what was best for you, secure in his rightness?"

The words hit closer to home than I'd like to admit. I focus on the food, using it as an excuse not to answer.

"You see?" His voice softens with false sympathy. "I'm not offering ownership, Calliope. I'm offering partnership. A chance to shape the future rather than simply being shaped by it. All I ask is that you trust me enough to listen. To consider the possibilities. There is nothing in this world more important than power, it's true. But I believe one must have the freedom to take it."

"And if I refuse to listen to you?" I ask. "What of my freedom then, Ulric?"

He sits back, that knife-edge smile returning. "Then you'll find this tower far less comfortable than it could be. I'd prefer not to resort to such measures, but..." He spreads his hands. "The future of Kaldoria is at stake. I'll do what I must."

The food turns to ash in my mouth, but I force myself to keep eating. Every bite is another small piece of strength recovered, another step closer to escape. I just have to play along, appear compliant, until I find an opening.

"Rest," Ulric says, rising. "Think about what I've said. We'll talk more tomorrow."

He pauses at the door, glancing back with an expression I can't quite read. "And Calliope? I truly am glad you're here. Whatever you might think of me, whatever stories my brother told... I'm not the monster in this tale."

The door closes behind him with the same tomb-like finality as before. In the renewed silence, I can hear the wind picking up outside, driving snow against the ancient stones.

My hand drifts to my midriff, feeling the warmth there—the only constant in this shifting game of powers and possibilities. The child moves slightly, a flutter so faint I might have imagined it. Perhaps I did. Perhaps I am going mad like a hypothermic wanderer, convinced he is burning alive. The cold rots peoples' minds away. I have seen it in these past weeks. I know what it can do to people.

"We'll survive this," I whisper, though I'm no longer sure who I'm trying to convince. "We'll find a way."

But as night falls properly and the fire burns low once more, I can't shake the feeling that I'm caught between forces far larger than myself. Arvoren's possession or Ulric's manipulation—are those really my only choices?

The wind howls outside, and for the first time since fleeing Millrath, I find myself longing for the simplicity of iron chains.

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Weeks bleed into one another like blood running thin in rain, losing their colour and shape. From my throne, detached from it, I watch as winter tightens its grip on Millrath, each day bringing fresh reports of disaster. The Great River has frozen utterly solid for the first time in recorded history, its surface a mirror of cracked ice that reflects the perpetually gray sky. None of the westerly cities can export or import food. If this keeps up, they will be starved out. Trade ships sit trapped in the harbor, their hulls slowly being crushed by expanding ice. Reportedly, the bombastic sound of splintering wood carries across the water at night, loud as eerie demolitions, as if the city itself is groaning in pain.

Every morning, more petitioners crowd my castle gates. Merchants whose caravans are stranded in the mountain passes. Farmers whose winter stores have frozen and burst. Fishermen who can no longer feed their families. Their voices blend into a constant murmur of desperation that echoes through the castle halls.

I receive them all, dispensing what aid I can while searching their faces for any hint, any whisper of news about Calliope. If it weren't for my desperation to find her, I would cast them all away. But if they know anything, fear keeps them silent. The common folk whisper that she's become some kind of winter spirit, stalking the northern forests and freezing anyone who draws too near. Others claim she's gathering an army of her own, preparing to return and claim the throne for herself.

Let them whisper. Their fear is nothing compared to the ice that grows in my own heart.

The Lords circle like vultures, growing bolder with each passing day. They send missives full of thinly veiled threats and demands for action. Bellrose writes of unrest

in his territory, of peasants who blame the crown for their suffering. Morwen speaks of trade routes that must be reopened, no matter the cost. Even Sturmsen, usually of steadfast neutrality, sends firm and unsympathetic warnings of rumblings of rebellion in the border towns, of skirmishes with Fort Caddell.

Only Lord Caddell himself remains silent, though his human city in the north must be suffering worst of all. His silence worries me more than the others' complaints.

I spend my nights pacing the castle battlements, watching the endless snow fall. The guards have learned to keep their distance when they see me coming, steam rising from my skin as I fight to contain the dragon's rage that builds with each day she's gone. Sometimes, in the darkest hours before dawn, I swear I can smell her on the wind—that crisp sweetness that always clung to her skin, now turned sharp as broken ice.

Darian tries his best to maintain order, to keep me focused on the immediate needs of the kingdom. But his voice of reason grows fainter with each passing day, drowned out by the howling storm in my head. My dreams are filled with visions of her lost in the wilderness, alone and afraid. Or worse—not alone at all.

The castle feels like a tomb without her. Servants whisper that the very stones know their queen is missing, that the ancient magic woven into the foundations yearns for her return. In our chambers—my chambers now—the bed remains untouched. I sleep instead in my study when exhaustion finally claims me, surrounded by maps marked with every reported sighting, every rumor of her whereabouts.

None of it makes sense. The patterns of the storms, the movements of troops in the north, the whispers of rebellion—there's a shape to it all that I can't quite grasp. Like a word on the tip of my tongue, or a shadow glimpsed from the corner of my eye.

Until today.

The spy was caught trying to access my private correspondence—specifically, letters between myself and Lord Sturmsen regarding troop movements near Fort Caddell. Darian found him, severed his hand almost clean off. A minor breach of security, ordinarily. But something about the timing, about the specific documents he sought, nags at me like a splinter under the skin.

I've left him to stew in the dungeons for three days now, letting the cold and dark work on his resolve. The dungeons beneath Millrath were built long before my time, their walls blackened by centuries of dragon-fire, mere feet above the crypt, the tombs. Water seeps eternally through cracks in the ancient stone, leaving mineral deposits that gleam like teeth in torchlight. The air down here tastes of rust and old fear, thick enough to coat the tongue.

It has been some years since I last carried out an interrogation myself.

Now, as I descend the worn steps into that eternal darkness, each torch I pass flares higher, responding to the rage that simmers beneath my skin. The guard at the interrogation chamber door snaps to attention, but I barely notice him. My focus has narrowed to a knife's edge, honed by weeks of frustration and fear.

The spy hangs suspended from iron chains, his feet barely touching the floor. He's young—probably no more than twenty-five—but his eyes are old, hardened by whatever training turned him into this tool of the Houses. Despite three days without food or water, he watches my approach with unnerving calm.

"Let's not waste time with preamble," I say, keeping my voice conversational though smoke curls from between my teeth. "We both know how this ends. The only question is how much pain you endure before we get there."

The spy's laugh is dry as dead leaves. "You know how this ends, my king. Kill me now, if you are so merciful. At least these dungeons retain some warmth."

I pace the length of the chamber, my boots echoing on stones worn smooth by generations of my bloodline. Various implements of persuasion are laid out on a table, though I doubt I'll need them. Sometimes the oldest methods are best.

"You were caught trying to access sensitive diplomatic correspondence. Letters between myself and Lord Sturmsen regarding troops' movements in the north." I stop directly in front of him, letting him see the dragon in my eyes. "Why?"

He stares back, unflinching. His resolve would be admirable if it weren't so infuriating.

"The north holds many interests these days, Your Majesty." His voice is steady despite his cracked lips. "What with the endless winter and all. They say the storm follows your witch queen like a loyal hound."

My claws emerge involuntarily, scoring deep marks in my palms. "Careful."

"Why? Going to kill me for speaking the truth?" A smile splits his dry lips. "The whole kingdom knows she's fled. Knows you can't control her. Can't even find her."

The urge to tear his throat out is almost overwhelming. I turn away, moving back to the implements of persuasion. My fingers trail over them, considering options. "You seem very interested in my wife's whereabouts."

"Me? No." He coughs, the chains rattling with the movement. "But others...well. Let's just say there are those who'd pay handsomely for information about the Queen. Especially given her supposed...condition."

I go very still. "What condition?"

"Oh." His laugh turns into another wet cough. "You don't know? Now that is

interesting."

Moving faster than human eyes can track, I grab his throat. Scales ripple beneath my skin as I fight the urge to transform fully. "Speak plainly, or I'll tear the words from you piece by piece."

"Your brother sends his regards."

The words hit like a physical blow. I tighten my grip, feeling his pulse flutter beneath my fingers. "Ulric is dead."

"Is he?" The spy wheezes out another laugh. "Then who leads the army gathering in the northern mountains? Who rallies the dissatisfied Lords to his banner? Who shelters your runaway queen?"

"You lie ."

But even as I say it, doubt creeps. The reports from the north have been confused, contradictory. Scant facts reach us here in the south, where at least we can still move, may still travel upon the frost-hardened roads.

And Calliope...

I release his throat, stepping back. "My wife would never align herself with a traitor."

"Wouldn't she? After what you did to her?" The spy's voice is raw but triumphant. "Face it, my king. You're losing everything. Your kingdom fractures, your queen runs wild, and your brother rises again. How long before—"

His words cut off in a gurgle as my claws open his throat.

Blood sprays across the stones in an arc of crimson. For a moment, the only sound is that eternal dripping of water, keeping time with the spy's weakening heartbeat. Then silence.

I stare at my bloodied hand, at the scales that have emerged fully now, glinting red in the torchlight. The spy's final words echo in my mind, feeding doubts I've tried to bury since Calliope fled.

Would she truly ally with Ulric?

After everything he did, all his lies and manipulations? But then...after everything I did, all my attempts to cage and control her, would I blame her if she did?

A sour taste rises in my mouth. I feel strange, lightheaded, like a sort of fever.

"My king?"

I turn to find Darian in the doorway, his expression carefully neutral as he surveys the scene. Blood has splattered across my formal clothes, ruining the expensive fabric.

"Get rid of that." I gesture to the corpse. "And send word to our agents in the north. I want confirmation of every rumor, every whisper about my brother. If he lives..." My claws scrape against stone as I clench my fists. "If he has her..."

There is no mercy in my soul left for my brother. I knew this already. But now...

My bloodlust is infinite. I'll kill him impossibly slowly if he has hurt her. If he has taken her.

"Your courtiers await above," Darian reminds me gently. "They expect you to address the grain shortage—"

"The people of this wretched place can rot." Smoke fills the air with each word. "My brother plots against me while my wife's power grows stronger by the day. The grain shortage means nothing if we don't—"

"It means everything," Darian cuts in, with the authority of decades of service. It is unusual for him to be so forward. "Your people freeze and starve while you hunt shadows. The Lords see weakness in your obsession with finding the queen. If you ignore them now—"

"What?" I whirl on him, letting my rage show fully. "They'll rebel? Plot against me? They already do! At least with Calliope by my side, they feared me. Feared us. Her power is the key to everything—you saw what she did that night. What she was capable of."

And if I don't get her back, if I don't find her, I'll gladly burn this kingdom to the ground. I know it with an innate, terrifying ferocity.

Darian doesn't flinch from my anger. "And if the spy spoke truth? If she's truly allied herself with your brother?"

"Then I'll kill him." The words come out in a growl that's more dragon than human. "I'll burn every fortress, search every mountain cave until I find them. And then I'll show them both why the Dragon Kings have ruled for a thousand years."

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Time moves strangely in Ulric's wretched tower. Days blur at the edges, marked only by the changing quality of light through the arrow slits and the irregular appearances of silent servants with meals I'm never sure I should eat. The ancient stones seem to absorb sound, creating a perpetual twilit hush that makes me question whether the world beyond these walls still exists at all.

My first week here passes in a haze of fever and exhaustion. The magic I unleashed fighting the mercenaries took more from me than I realized, leaving me weak as a newborn colt. I drift in and out of consciousness, aware only of my child's steady presence within me and the eerie silence that pervades the tower. When I'm lucid, I catalogue my surroundings: the chamber is circular, perhaps twenty feet across, with seven slits placed at irregular intervals in the walls, too narrow to see through well. The stones are old—older than Millrath's walls—and covered in carvings so worn they're barely visible. Sometimes, in the strange half-light of dawn, I swear they move.

Perhaps this place is older than even Arvoren's family's dynasty. But I know it is not older than the Windwakers. I don't know how, but I know.

The servants who tend me never speak. A woman with burn scars across her throat brings breakfast at irregular intervals. A boy missing three fingers replaces the rushes on the floor. An ancient man with milky eyes changes the bedding. They are all draconic, but I know not where they hail from. Their silence feels deliberate, orchestrated, like everything else in this place.

Ulric visits daily, always at different times. Sometimes he brings books—histories of Kaldoria, treatises on magic, accounts of the old wars. I am reminded in these hours

of his ruse, the man he pretended to be when I knew him in Millrath. He sits in a high-backed chair near my bed and reads aloud like we're still in that library, his voice smooth as honey, weaving together fact and implication with surgical precision.

"Did you know," he says one gray morning, "that the first Dragon Kings were more beast than man? True shapeshifters, not bound by human morality or weakness." His eyes flick to mine over the top of a leather-bound tome. "Unlike now, when we chain ourselves with crowns and laws, pretending at civilization. I wonder often what a creature such as you might make of that."

I recognize the bait but take it anyway. "You think your brother pretends?"

"Don't you?" He marks his place with a ribbon of deep red silk. "All that careful control, that rigid adherence to tradition—it's a cage he built for himself, then tried to force everyone else into. Even you."

The words hit closer to home than I'd like. I turn away, ostensibly to pour water from the pitcher beside my bed. My hands shake slightly. "You seem very interested in your brother's marriages."

"Marriage, singular." His smile is razor-sharp. "There will never be another, you know. Not now that he's tasted real power. That's what draws him to you—not love, whatever he claims. You're simply the strongest weapon he's ever tried to possess, I believe. Power is the only vector by which he can see the world around him. He has always been this way."

"And what am I to you?" The question slips out before I can stop it.

His laugh is soft, almost gentle. "An ally, I hope. In time. I'd gladly have your friendship, Calliope. You know I would."

By the second week, I'm strong enough to leave my chamber, though I suspect Ulric allows this only because he knows I'm still too weak to attempt escape. The rest of the ancient compound reveals itself slowly, like a puzzle box with too many solutions. Staircases spiral in impossible directions, and corridors that should connect instead dead-end in empty chambers thick with dust. Windows that face north in the morning somehow look south by afternoon, or perhaps I truly am going mad.

An ancient magic, almost dead now, lingers here. Some empire I will never know nor understand.

The few guards I encounter move like ghosts through the halls, their armor scuffed and antiquated, bearing no House colours, their eyes downcast. None wear Ulric's sigil. When I pass them, they press themselves against walls as if afraid to touch me.

"They fear what you represent," Ulric tells me over dinner in a chamber whose ceiling vanishes into darkness. Candles float above the table, their flames perfectly still despite the draft that whistles through the arrow slits. "Power untamed by tradition. Magic older than our petty kingdoms."

"Your brother's soldiers never feared me," I say, watching his reaction carefully.

Something dark flashes across his face. "My brother's soldiers are trained dogs, nothing more. These men? They know of the old ways. The true ways." He gestures to our surroundings. "This tower stands on the bones of the first dragons' strongholds. The very stones remember what real power feels like."

I've noticed how the tower seems to respond to my presence. Frost patterns appear on windows I pass, spreading like delicate lace. Temperatures drop in chambers where I linger. Sometimes, late at night, I swear I can hear the stones whispering in voices that sound disturbingly like my grandmother's.

The child grows stronger too. I feel them moving more now, responding to my magic in ways that both thrill and terrify me. Their power mingles with mine, making it harder to control but also more potent.

One morning, after a particularly vivid nightmare about Arvoren, I wake to find my entire chamber encased in ice.

Ulric finds me there, huddled in the center of the frozen room. His breath fogs in the air as he picks his way across the rime-covered floor.

"Remarkable," he murmurs, reaching out to touch one of the ice-sculptures that have formed from the furniture. "Do you see now? This is what he fears. What he'd destroy if he found you."

"You're wrong about him." But the words sound hollow even to my ears.

"Am I?" He crouches beside me, his voice gentle. "Then why did he chain you? Why did he never tell you about your own power, your true heritage? He knew what you were, Calliope. Knew what you could become. And he tried to keep you weak, contained."

I think of the cursed chains around my ankles, the way Arvoren would watch me with equal parts desire and wariness. Had he known? Had he sensed the magic growing in me and chosen to keep me ignorant?

"His armies move north," Ulric continues softly. "Did you know? Burning villages, torturing anyone who might have seen you. He claims it's to protect you, to bring you home safely. But we both know what happens to threats to his power."

"Prove it," I challenge, though my voice shakes.

His smile is sad now, almost pitying. "Come with me."

He leads me through the tower's twisting corridors to a chamber I've never seen before. Maps cover the walls—detailed renderings of Kaldoria and its territories. Markers show troop movements, colored pins indicating different Houses' forces. And there, spreading north from Millrath like a crimson stain, are Arvoren's armies.

"Reports come in daily," Ulric says, handing me a stack of papers. "Eyewitness accounts, military dispatches, letters between commanders. Read them yourself."

I do. For hours, I pore over accounts of villages searched, refugees questioned, suspected sympathizers executed. The pattern is clear, methodical, terrifying. Like a noose slowly tightening.

"How can I know this is real?" I ask finally, my throat tight.

"I respect you enough not to lie to you, Calliope." He places a hand on my shoulder, and it takes all my willpower not to flinch away. "That child you carry? It could reshape our world. Break the cycle of violence and control that's ruled Kaldoria for centuries. Or..." He lets the words hang in the air.

"Or become another weapon in the king's arsenal," I finish.

"Precisely." He squeezes my shoulder once before letting go. "Think about it. About the future you want for your child. We'll talk more later."

When he leaves, I stay in the map room, tracing the paths of armies across paper territories. The child shifts restlessly within me, responding to my turmoil. I press my hand to my stomach, feeling that precious warmth.

"He's lying," I whisper, though I'm not sure which 'he' I mean anymore. "Or at

least...not telling the whole truth."

Because that's the key, isn't it? Ulric's words are too perfect, his evidence too convenient. He's playing a game—a game where my child and I are merely pieces to be moved across the board. But this time, I won't be the naive village girl swept up in dragons' schemes. This time, I'll be smarter.

I turn back to the maps, memorizing details, noting inconsistencies. I'll learn his game, learn its rules and rhythms. I'll let him think he's winning, let him believe his honeyed words have swayed me. And when the moment comes...

"We'll win," I promise the child, my voice barely a whisper in the tower's eternal twilight. "Whatever it takes, whatever I have to do. This time, we'll win. I'll be smarter than I was in Millrath."

But as I make my way back through the tower's impossible geometry, I can't shake the feeling that I'm being watched by more than just Ulric's silent servants. The very stones seem to hold their breath, waiting to see which dragon's game I'll choose to play.

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I wake with her name caught in my throat, the remnants of the dream still clinging to my skin like frost.

She was alone in an endless expanse of white, her dark hair whipping in a bitter wind, scarred face stark against the darkness. Snow had soaked through her thin shoes, leaving bloody footprints in her wake. I could feel her exhaustion, her bone-deep cold, as if it were my own. When she stumbled, I tried to reach for her, but my hands passed through her like smoke. She looked right through me, her eyes glazed with fever and fear.

The vision was so vivid I can still taste the ice in the air, can still feel the phantom touch of snowflakes on my face. This isn't the first such dream, but it's the clearest yet—and the most haunting. They're getting stronger, these nighttime visitations. More real. Sometimes I wake convinced I can feel her presence like a physical ache beneath my ribs, though I know that's impossible.

Madness, whispers the rational part of my mind. You're going mad with obsession.

Perhaps I am. But I can't shake the certainty that she needs me. That she's out there somewhere in the endless northern winter, cold and afraid and mine.

Dawn hasn't yet touched the sky when I summon Darian to my war room. My commander arrives looking grave, as if he already knows what I'm about to say.

"Gather six of your best men," I tell him, studying the map spread across my desk. Tiny markers show the latest reported sightings of Calliope, forming a scattered trail leading north. "We ride within the hour."

"My king." Darian's voice carries the weight of decades of faithful service. "Your enemies gather like vultures. If you leave now—"

"They'll make their moves regardless." I trace the path north with one claw, scoring the parchment. "My presence here only delays the inevitable."

"And what of the throne? Your responsibilities to the kingdom?"

"What kingdom?" The words come out as a snarl, smoke curling from between my teeth. "The Houses plot rebellion. The people whisper of revolution. Winter tightens its grip with each passing day." I turn to face him, letting him see the dragon in my eyes. "Without her, without her power to prove the strength of my bloodline, how long before they tear it all apart?"

"All the more reason to stay and fight." He steps closer, daring to lay a hand on my arm. "Send more search parties. Double the patrols. But you cannot abandon your post—"

"Cannot?" The temperature in the room seems to drop several degrees. "Choose your next words carefully, old friend."

To his credit, Darian doesn't flinch. "The other Houses will see it as weakness. They'll move against you the moment you're beyond the city walls. And if Ulric's forces truly gather in the north..."

As if summoned by his brother's name, a courtier bursts into the room, face flushed with urgency. "My King! Lord Bellrose demands an audience. He says it cannot wait—"

"Tell him his king rides north." I buckle on my sword belt, already striding toward the door. "If he wishes to discuss matters of state, he can direct his concerns to my

court.”

The courtier pales. "But sire, the Lords are already gathering in the great hall. They demand answers about the queen's whereabouts—"

"Then let them demand." My patience, already threadbare, snaps entirely. "I'm done playing their games while my wife freezes in the wilderness."

"Your Majesty—" Darian tries one last time.

"Enough." The word emerges as a growl that silences them both. "I've made my decision. Gather the men. We ride in an hour."

They exchange glances but know better than to argue further. As they leave to carry out my orders, I return to the map, memorizing the terrain we'll need to cover. The northern reaches are treacherous even in summer. In winter, they're deadly.

Good. Let them be deadly. Let them try to keep her from me.

Movement catches my eye—the courtier hovering nervously in the doorway. "What is it?"

"The priestess Varya sends word, my king. She says the gods are restless. That your absence will doom us all."

I bare my teeth in what might technically be called a smile. "The gods have never cared for my happiness before. Why should I care for theirs now? And Varya should be dead. If she should demand my ear, tell her I shall flick her like a bug off this earth if she should dare speak of gods in my presence again.”

An hour later, I stand in the courtyard as my chosen warriors assemble. They're my

finest: seasoned dragonborn soldiers who've proven their loyalty a hundred times over. Even so, I see the doubt in their eyes as they prepare their mounts. They think this mission is folly—a king abandoning his throne to chase ghosts through the snow.

Let them think what they will. None of them can understand the drive that burns inside me, the need that claws at my chest with every breath. None of them wake in the night reaching for her, convinced they can feel her fear and loneliness like a physical wound.

"The horses are ready," Darian reports, leading my stallion forward. His tone makes it clear this is his last attempt to change my mind. "But the storm grows worse by the hour. If we wait until it passes—"

"No more waiting." I swing into the saddle, ignoring the way the guards along the walls shift nervously. They can probably smell the coming chaos on the wind. "We've wasted enough time already."

As if to punctuate my words, a horn blast echoes from the city walls—the signal that riders approach. More lords coming to demand answers I won't give. Let them come. Let them find my throne empty and cold.

"Remember your orders," I tell Darian as we ride out. "Keep the peace however you must. But find her. Whatever it takes."

The city gates groan open, revealing a world of swirling white. Snow drives sideways through the air, thick enough to obscure the road ahead. But somewhere beyond that curtain of white, I swear I can feel her. Can sense her presence pulling me forward like a lodestone to true north.

I'm coming, my wife, I think, hoping somehow she can feel it through whatever mad connection has grown between us. Wait for me.

We ride out into the storm, out past the city's borders, and somewhere in the endless white, I swear I hear distant laughter—the gods, perhaps, watching and waiting to see what chaos I'll unleash in my desperation to reclaim what's mine. Or perhaps it is my sorry ancestors, watching, baying like hounds, vicious and cackling.

Let them watch. Let them laugh. I'll burn the world to find her.

The storm grows teeth as we ride north.

Wind howls between ancient pines, driving snow and ice sideways with enough force to strip bark from trunks. Even my powerful blood can barely keep the cold at bay. The men fare worse—I can smell their exhaustion, their fear. Twice already we've had to stop to warm them before the frost could claim fingers or toes.

"We should transform," Kestrel suggests during one such stop, his voice barely audible over the wind. As my youngest warrior, he's the only one who still dares make such obvious suggestions to his king. "We'd cover more ground in dragon form."

"And announce our presence to every enemy scout within fifty leagues." I don't bother hiding my irritation. "The Houses have eyes everywhere. The moment they confirm I've left Millrath—"

"They'll move against the throne," he finishes. "But surely should you propose that finding the queen is worth—"

"Enough." The word comes out sharp enough to make him flinch. "Ready the horses. We move in ten minutes."

In all truth, I know transforming would lead us to her faster. But I dare not indicate to my enemies that she may indeed be in the north. Should they reach her first...

My mouth is sour once more. I rub my eyes hard enough to hurt.

As he hurries to comply, I catch Darian watching me with that knowing look I've come to hate. He's been my shadow since we were boys, the only one who truly remembers what I was before the crown's weight twisted me into this creature of iron and frost.

"Say it," I growl, turning away to check my mount's tack.

"You're not sleeping."

"I'm fine."

"You haven't slept properly since we left the city." He moves closer, lowering his voice. "The men notice. They whisper about your midnight wanderings, about the way you speak to the wind—"

"Let them whisper." My hands tighten on the reins until the leather creaks. "They're not here to judge their King's sanity."

"No. They're here because they're loyal. Because they believe in you." He pauses, choosing his next words carefully. "But they also believe you're being driven by something beyond mere duty. These dreams you keep having—"

"Are nothing." The lie tastes like ash on my tongue. "Tricks of an exhausted mind."

But even as I say it, I feel that familiar pulse beneath my ribs—that impossible sense of connection that grows stronger with each league we travel north. Sometimes I

swear I can feel echoes of emotions that aren't mine: fear, determination, a bone-deep weariness that makes my chest ache. And underneath it all, that strange warmth I can't explain, like a candle flame cupped against the wind.

Madness, perhaps, but if it is, I am mad enough indeed to cling to it. To hope beyond hope that somewhere in the sensation, she lies.

We ride on as the day bleeds into the endless twilight of northern winter. The horses struggle through drifts that reach their chests, their breath freezing in the air. Around us, the forest grows older, darker. These ancient pines have stood witness to centuries of winters, their branches heavy with ice and secrets. Darian is sleepless with determination. Kestrel is forever cleaning our weaponry, sharpening our blades. Atticus, one of my longest-serving soldiers, a man who I might have even called a friend once, often tries to encourage me to sleep, though it's a fruitless endeavour.

Something watches us from those shadows. I've felt it since we crossed the border of my regular hunting grounds—a presence that makes the dragon in me want to bare its teeth. Not a threat exactly, but...interest. As if we've drawn the attention of forces that normally slumber through the long dark of winter.

She passed this way, the wind seems to whisper. The one who carries new magic in old blood. She hungers for you.

I shake my head sharply, trying to clear it. The cold must be getting to me, making me imagine things. And yet...

"My king." One of the scouts materializes from the whiteness ahead, his face grave. "Tracks, less than a day old. A large party passed through here, heading northeast."

My heart kicks against my ribs. "Show me."

The tracks are partially filled with fresh snow but still readable to draconic eyes: at least twenty horses, moving fast despite the weather. Merchants wouldn't dare these roads in winter. Refugees would be on foot. Which leaves...

"Ulric's men." Darian voices what we're all thinking. "They're hunting her too." Or perhaps they have her. Perhaps they have truly taken her.

The rage that surges through me is almost enough to trigger transformation. Almost. I force it down, forcing myself to think past the dragon's need to destroy any threat to what's mine.

"Break camp," I order, already turning my horse northeast. "We ride through the night."

"The men need rest—"

"The men can rest when we find her." Smoke curls from my nostrils, making the horses stamp nervously. "Or would you rather my brother reach her first?"

No one argues further. They know what Ulric is capable of, what he'd do to anything I hold dear just to spite me. The thought of him finding Calliope, of him laying one finger on her...

The storm intensifies as we ride, as if responding to my fury. Night falls properly, turning the wilderness into a maze of shadows and swirling snow. The men's torches create small islands of light that only serve to make the darkness beyond seem deeper, hungrier.

We push on until the horses begin to stumble, their legs trembling with exhaustion. Even I have to admit we're more likely to break their legs than make real progress in these conditions. When we finally make camp in the lee of a massive fallen pine, the

men are nearly dead on their feet.

"Two-hour watches," I tell Darian as the others set up the tents with shaking hands. "We move again before dawn."

He just nods, knowing better than to argue. But as he turns away, I catch him watching me with something like concern. Like he knows I won't sleep again tonight.

He's right. I pace the perimeter of our camp as the others settle in, scanning the darkness for any sign of movement. The strange presence I felt earlier has grown stronger, pressing down like a physical weight. Through the gaps in the storm I catch glimpses of stars, wheeling in patterns that seem wrong somehow. As if the very sky is holding its breath, waiting.

The wind whispers. Soon you will understand.

When exhaustion finally claims me, I dream of her again. The dream is different this time.

Instead of the endless white wilderness, I find myself in a circular chamber that seems to stretch endlessly upward into shadow. Moonlight streams through narrow arrow-slits, cutting silver paths across worn stone floors. The air feels strange—heavy with age and magic that makes my scales want to emerge.

And there she is.

Calliope sits on the edge of a narrow bed, her dark hair falling forward to hide her face. She looks thinner than I remember, more fragile, though somehow her presence fills the space like smoke. Even in dreams, the sight of her makes something twist painfully in my chest.

"Little bird," I breathe, and her head snaps up.

For a moment—just a moment—our eyes meet across the impossible distance. Recognition flares in her gaze, followed by something that might be hope, might be fear. Then she shakes her head violently, pressing her hands to her face.

"Not real," she whispers, and the broken sound of her voice makes my dragon blood howl. "Just another dream. He's not really here."

I try to reach for her, to cross the space between us, but my feet won't move. All I can do is watch as she curls in on herself, one hand pressed protectively over her stomach. That strange warmth I've been sensing pulses between us like a captive star.

"I'm coming for you," I tell her, willing her to hear me, to believe. "I'm closer than you think. Just hold on—"

The dream begins to fade, the edges of the room dissolving into mist. The last thing I see is her face, turned toward where I stand as if she heard me after all. A tear traces down her cheek, catching the moonlight like a fallen star.

"Arvoren?" she whispers, and the sound of my name on her lips follows me into waking—

I wake with a snarl, claws fully extended, smoke pouring from my mouth. It takes a moment to recognize my surroundings: the small tent, the furs beneath me crusty with frozen sweat. Outside, the storm continues its endless assault, but something has changed in the air.

Power thrums through the night like a plucked bowstring. When I throw open the tent flap, I'm met with a sight that makes even my dragon's blood run cold.

The storm has...stopped. Not ended, but frozen in place. Snow hangs suspended in the air, caught between one moment and the next. Through the gaps in this impossible stillness, stars wheel in patterns I've never seen before, casting an eerie light that turns the world to crystal and shadow.

And there, moving between the frozen snowflakes, are the shapes I've been sensing. Not quite visible, but not quite invisible either—forms that hurt the eyes to look at directly. They drift through our camp like curious ghosts, leaving neither tracks nor shadows.

The gods are walking.

"My king?" Darian's voice seems to come from very far away. He stands at the edge of camp, sword drawn, though what good steel would do against divine curiosity, I can't say. "What's happening?"

"I don't—" The words die in my throat as one of the shapes drifts closer.

It towers over me, a suggestion of wings and eyes and ancient hunger that makes my dragon want to both attack and submit. A voice that isn't a voice whispers through my mind, tasting of storm winds and mountain peaks.

Before I can begin to understand what it speaks, time snaps back into motion. Snow resumes its relentless fall, and the strange shapes fade like smoke in wind. But the power remains, humming in the air like the aftermath of lightning.

"Sound the alarm," I order, already striding toward my horse. "We ride. Now."

"The men are exhausted—"

"Now, Darian." I swing into the saddle, ignoring the way my hands shake.

"Something's changed. She's close. I can feel it."

And I can. That pulse beneath my ribs has grown stronger, more insistent. The dream left me with a certainty I can't explain: she's somewhere ahead in this endless white, and she needs me. Whatever strange magic connects us, whatever interest we've drawn from powers better left sleeping, none of it matters except finding her.

The men scramble to break camp, no one daring to question their King's urgency. Within minutes we're moving again, pushing deeper into the storm-wracked wilderness. The cold bites deeper with each passing hour, but I barely feel it. All I can think about is that circular room, that impossible warmth, the terror and hope in her eyes when she almost saw me.

Hold on, I think, hoping whatever connection we share carries the words to her. I'm coming. I swear on my crown, my blood, my very breath—I'm coming for you.

Somewhere ahead in the endless white, my wife waits in a tower I've never seen. And all around us, ancient powers watch and whisper, their interest a weight that presses down like wings made of night.

Let them watch. Let them whisper. I'll tear apart heaven and earth to find her.

The storm rages on, and we ride deeper into the heart of winter.

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Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:44 am

I wake from dreams of fire and wings, his voice still echoing in my head.

Hold on, he had said, or perhaps I only imagined it. I'm coming for you.

The words felt real—more real than anything in this cursed tower, where time moves like frozen honey and the stones themselves seem to watch my every move. But I know better than to trust dreams. Know better than to hope.

Still...something has changed. The constant drain of winter magic on my body has eased slightly, leaving me feeling almost strong for the first time in weeks. Strong enough, perhaps, to do something monumentally stupid.

I dress carefully, choosing the plainest of the gowns Ulric has provided. The fabric is still too fine for my taste, too similar to what I wore in Millrath, but at least it's practical—dark wool that won't show dirt, with enough give to hide the slight swell of my stomach. Not that it matters. Ulric already knows about the baby. Already watches me with that calculating gleam in his eyes, like a merchant appraising valuable goods.

The guards outside my door straighten as I emerge. They're an odd pair—one missing three fingers, the other bearing burn scars across his throat. Neither speaks, but their eyes follow my every movement.

"I'd like to walk the grounds," I tell them, keeping my voice light, uncertain. Playing the scared little bird they expect me to be. "Just to get some air. Surely I'm allowed outside? Even for just a few minutes?"

They exchange glances. The scarred one shakes his head slowly.

"Please?" I let a hint of desperation creep into my tone. "I've been cooped up for so long. I only want to know where I am. Whether we're still even in Kaldoria, or—"

"The prince will see you." The words emerge as a rasp from the scarred guard's damaged throat. It's the first time I've heard either of them speak.

"Oh, I wouldn't want to bother him." I take a step back, letting fear show on my face. "Another time, perhaps—"

Rough hands close around my arms. I could fight them—could call the storm that perpetually rages outside these walls. But that would reveal too much, and it would drain me further. Better to play the helpless captive, to let them think me weak. Better to build my strength and wait to strike.

They march me through twisting corridors that seem to defy geometry. Left turns become right turns, stairs spiral in impossible directions. Sometimes I swear the windows face north, then south in the space of a few steps. If I weren't already familiar with the strange magic that permeates this place, I'd think I was going mad.

Ulric's study lies at the heart of this maze—a circular chamber whose walls are lined with maps and scrolls. Ancient weapons hang between tapestries depicting battles I don't recognize. The air smells of ink and leather and something sweeter, more cloying. The same scent that's been in my food lately, I realize with a chill. Perhaps there's something in the water of this place.

He stands at a massive desk, golden hair catching the wan light from the narrow windows. The resemblance to his brother is still shocking—they have the same proud profile, the same predatory grace. But where Arvoren's features are hewn from stone, Ulric's seem carved from ice.

"Leave us," he tells the guards without looking up from whatever he's writing. They withdraw silently, closing the heavy door with heavy, final sort of sound.

I wait, letting the silence stretch. Playing his game. After what feels like hours, he finally sets down his quill and turns to face me.

His smile doesn't reach his eyes. "Curious about the world beyond these walls?"

"I only wanted some air." I fold my hands demurely, the picture of innocence. "It's so stuffy inside, and in my condition..."

"Ah yes. Your condition." He moves around the desk with fluid grace, reminding me uncomfortably of a snake. "How are you feeling? The morning sickness has passed, I trust?"

The concern in his voice sounds almost genuine. Almost. "Yes, thank you. Though lately I've been so tired—"

"A natural result of bearing such powerful blood." He's closer now, too close. "Dragon-King and Windwaker both. An unprecedented combination."

I take a step back, but my heel hits the desk. He follows, pressing closer until I can smell wine on his breath. One hand comes to rest on the wood beside my hip, caging me in.

"You've grown very important to me, Calliope." His voice drops to something approaching tenderness. "More important than you know."

"I'm flattered," I manage, though my skin crawls. "But I belong to your brother—"

"Do you?" His other hand comes up to brush my cheek. I fight the urge to flinch.

"The same brother who kept you in chains? Who tried to break your spirit? Who even now hunts you across the continent?"

I think of Arvoren's fierce protectiveness, of the way he would watch me when he thought I wasn't looking. Of the growing warmth in my dreams that feels more real with each passing night.

But I can't let Ulric see any of that. Can't let him glimpse the truth buried beneath my careful facade.

"I don't know what to believe anymore," I whisper, letting my voice catch.

His smile widens fractionally. "Then let me help you believe in something new. Something better." His thumb traces my lower lip. "We could be extraordinary together, you and I. Could reshape this kingdom into something worthy of your power."

Every instinct screams at me to pull away, to call the storm that howls against the tower walls. Instead, I force myself to stay still, to look up at him with wide, uncertain eyes.

"I...I need time," I say softly. "To think. To understand what you're offering."

For a moment, I think he'll push further. But then he steps back, that knife-edge smile never wavering.

"Of course. Time is something we have plenty of, after all." He returns to his desk, dismissing me with a wave. "You'll dine with me tonight. We can discuss the future then."

The guards escort me back to my chambers, where a meal already waits. The same

sweet smell rises from the soup, making my head spin. I eat it anyway, knowing I need to keep up my strength. Knowing my child needs the nourishment, whatever poison Ulric might be feeding us.

As evening approaches, exhaustion crashes over me like a wave. My limbs feel leaden, my thoughts moving through molasses. I barely make it to the bed before darkness claims me.

And then I dream.

He's there again, more clearly than ever before. Arvoren stands in swirling snow, his face lined with exhaustion and worry. When he speaks my name, it resonates through my bones like dragon-song.

Wait for me , he says, and this time I'm certain it's real.

I try to reach for him, to tell him about the baby, about Ulric's plans. But the dream is already fading, leaving only the lingering warmth of his presence.

I wake with tears frozen on my cheeks and winter howling at my window. The connection is growing stronger, I can feel it. But will he find me in time? Before whatever Ulric has planned comes to fruition? Before the poison in my food does its work?

Touching my stomach, I feel the child's presence—steady and warm despite everything. They're strong, like their father. Like me.

"We'll survive this," I whisper, though I'm no longer sure who I'm trying to convince. "Whatever it takes, whatever I have to do. We'll survive."

But as night falls properly and the temperature plummets, I can't shake the feeling

that time is running out. That Ulric's mask of charm conceals something darker than I've yet glimpsed.

The storm rages on, and somewhere out there, Arvoren is coming for me. I just have to stay alive long enough for him to find us.

I just have to survive.

The silent servants come for me at dusk. My limbs feel like lead as I follow them through the tower's twisting passages. That strange sweetness lingers in my mouth from the soup, making the edges of my vision blur. Each step requires more concentration than the last. Something is definitely wrong with me, beyond the usual drains of pregnancy and winter magic.

The dining chamber they lead me to is smaller than I expected—intimate, with shadows pooling in the corners despite the dozens of candles that float impossibly in mid-air. Their flames don't flicker, even when wind howls through the arrow slits. Like everything else in this cursed place, they feel wrong somehow. Suspended between one moment and the next.

Ulric rises as I enter, ever the gracious host. He's dressed for dinner in deep blue velvet that makes his golden hair shine like a crown. The resemblance to his brother is stronger in this light, but there's something off about it—like looking at a painting done by someone who'd only heard Arvoren described.

"You look pale, my dear." He pulls out my chair, his fingers lingering too long on my shoulder as I sit. "Are you not feeling well?"

"Just tired." I force my voice to remain steady as the room spins lazily around me.

"The baby takes so much energy..."

"Ah yes. The child." He takes his own seat, watching as servants lay out the first course. That cloying sweetness rises from the soup, stronger than ever. "Such a precious gift. Though I wonder if you truly understand its significance, even now. I endeavour to teach you, Calliope. But even my brother seems to have identified that you're...something of a slow learner."

I stare into the golden liquid, fighting a wave of nausea. "What do you mean?"

Ulric's voice takes on that fever-bright quality I'm learning to dread. "I'm willing to give you your time, of course. But the child will be born in due time, sooner or later, and..."

The way he says it makes my skin crawl. I push the soup away, no longer trusting myself to hide my revulsion. "I'm not very hungry—"

"You must eat." All pretense of charm vanishes from his voice. "For the child's sake, if nothing else."

The child. Not my child.

A threat lurks beneath the words, sharp as the knife beside my plate. I force myself to lift the spoon, to swallow past the fear closing my throat. The soup tastes of honey and something darker, metallic.

"There." Ulric's smile returns as I continue eating. "Isn't that better? We must keep up your strength."

I wish I could kill you, I think but don't say. Instead, I ask the question that's been burning in my mind: "Why the fine foods? I know there has been famine in the

north.”

"Because you deserve better than what my brother offered." He reaches across the table to catch my hand. His skin is fever-hot against mine. "Because I see your potential, your true worth. Arvoren would cage you, control you. I want to set you free."

The lie is beautifully crafted, wrapped in just enough truth to be dangerous. But I've learned to recognize the hunger in men's eyes. Arvoren's possession was fierce but honest—he never pretended to be anything but what he was. Ulric's desire is something colder, more calculated.

"And what would you want in return?" I make myself sound uncertain, yearning. Like I'm actually considering his offer.

His thumb traces patterns on my palm that make my skin crawl. "Only your trust. Your...cooperation." His eyes drop to my stomach meaningfully. "A chance to help guide that child toward its true destiny."

The room spins faster as whatever poison he's fed me takes stronger hold. Black spots dance at the edges of my vision. Through the haze, I see something move in the shadows behind him—shapes that might be faces, might be wings. The tower's strange magic feels heavier suddenly, pressing down like a physical weight.

"I..." The word comes out slurred. I try to pull my hand away, but my muscles won't obey. "Something's wrong..."

"Shhh." He's beside me now, supporting my head as it lolls back. "Don't fight it. The draught simply helps you rest. Helps keep that storm of yours under control while we...talk."

Arvoren , I think desperately as darkness creeps in. Please. Where are you?

Viscerally, I miss the scent of him, the feeling of him. The taste of his lips on mine. The eternal warmth of him, his hands, his body. The solid and unshakeable truth of what he was willing to do.

And somehow, impossibly, I feel him answer. A pulse of warmth beneath my ribs, a sensation of wind and wings and fierce determination. The connection between us flares stronger than ever, cutting through whatever drug Ulric has given me.

His voice whispers in my mind. In the haze, I cannot make out the words.

But he is there. His presence is within me somehow. I know it like I've never known anything before.

"Take her back to her chambers," Ulric orders someone I can't see. "Make sure she's comfortable. We have much to discuss when she wakes."

Rough hands lift me from the chair. As consciousness fades, I catch one last glimpse of Ulric's face. The mask of charm has slipped entirely, revealing something cold and hungry beneath. Something that sees me not as a person but as a tool, a vessel, a means to an end.

I'll die before he takes my child, I know.

The last thing I'm aware of is that pulse of warmth inside me—Arvoren's presence, growing stronger with each passing hour. Whatever game Ulric is playing, whatever poison he feeds me, he can't sever that connection.

I fall into dreams of snow and winds and a voice calling my name across the endless dark.

Wait for me, it says. I'm coming.

And this time, I believe it.

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The forest bleeds silver in the midnight hour.

Moonlight filters through ice-crusting branches, casting strange shadows across the snow. My platoon moves like ghosts through this ethereal landscape, their armor dulled to prevent reflection. Only the occasional stamp of a horse's hoof or clink of steel breaks the unnatural silence.

Something has changed in the air since our encounter with the gods. The very woods feel watchful, as if the ancient pines have awakened from centuries of slumber to observe our passage. Even my men sense it—I see it in the way they grip their weapons, in how their eyes dart between the trees.

But it's the other change that truly unnerves me.

I feel her.

Not constantly, not clearly, but in fragments that cut through my consciousness like shards of ice. Fear. Exhaustion. A bone-deep weariness that makes my dragon blood howl with protective fury. The sensations come without warning, lasting only moments before fading like smoke.

"It wasn't like this before," I murmur, more to myself than to Darian who rides beside me. "When we were first married, when she was in the castle..."

"What wasn't, my king?"

"This...connection." I press a hand to my chest where that foreign warmth pulses like

a second heartbeat. "I could sense her magic, yes. But not her emotions. Not her pain."

Darian's silence speaks volumes. We both remember how it was in those early days—my obsession with her, my need to possess and control. But this is different. Deeper. As if something fundamental has shifted between us, though I can't begin to guess what.

A scout materializes from the shadows ahead, interrupting my brooding. "My king. Travelers on the road, half a league north."

My pulse quickens. "Numbers?"

"Eight, maybe ten. Mercenaries by the look of their gear. They've made camp in a clearing."

"Armed?"

"Heavily." The scout hesitates. "They're...celebrating something. Talking about a reward for information about a 'witch queen' they claim to have spotted."

The dragon in me surges forward, claws emerging before I can stop them. Smoke curls from between my teeth as I snarl, "Show me."

We leave the horses with two guards and proceed on foot. The mercenaries' camp comes into view through the trees—a handful of crude tents arranged around a low fire. They're a rough-looking bunch, their armor mismatched and bearing no House insignia. Sellswords, then, probably hired by one of my enemies to track Calliope.

"...swear it was her," one is saying as we creep closer. "Dark hair, fancy clothes. Running from something fierce by the look of it."

"And the storm?" another asks. "They say weather follows her like a loyal hound."

"Aye, never seen anything like it. Wind came out of nowhere, turned the whole world white—"

I've heard enough. Standing from my crouch, I step into the firelight.

The mercenaries scramble for weapons, but they're slow from drink and cold. My men emerge from the shadows like demons, steel gleaming in the firelight. What follows isn't really a battle—it's a slaughter.

I take the leader myself, catching his sword with one clawed hand and yanking him close.

"When?" I demand, smoke pouring from my mouth. "When did you see her?"

"Weeks ago!" He tries to pull away, eyes wide with terror. "Heading north, toward the mountains! Please, we didn't hurt her, we didn't catch her, we don't know where she went but she's gone —"

His words end in a gurgle as I crush his windpipe in my hand. The others fall just as quickly to my warriors' blades. In moments, the only sound is the crackle of their abandoned fire and the endless howl of wind through the trees.

"Search the bodies," I order, wiping blood from my claws. "Any letters, maps, anything that might—"

Pain lances through my chest, sharp and foreign. I stagger, catching myself against a tree as a wave of fear that isn't mine floods my senses. For a moment—just a moment—I smell that sickly-sweet scent that's been haunting my dreams.

"My king?" Darian steadies me, concern etched on his face. "What is it?"

"She's afraid." The words come out in a growl. "Something's wrong. She's—"

"My king!" A rider bursts into the clearing, his horse lathered with sweat despite the cold. One of the messenger ravens I ordered to follow us. "Urgent news from Millrath!"

I already know what he'll say. Can read it in the fear on his face, the desperation in his voice. But I force myself to take the letter he thrusts toward me, to read the words by firelight, in the frantic hand of one of my advisors:

The Lords gather their armies. House Bellrose moves against the capital. Without your presence, the throne stands undefended. Return immediately or risk losing everything.

The parchment crumples in my fist.

I should go back. Any sane ruler would. The kingdom I've spent my life defending teeters on the brink of continued civil war, and here I am chasing ghosts through the frozen north.

But then that alien fear spikes again, stronger this time. An image flashes through my mind: golden hair, a knife-edge smile, hands that burn like fever. My brother's face, but wrong somehow. Twisted.

The choice crystallizes like ice.

"Make for the mountains," I tell my men, already striding north. "We're close. I can feel it."

"My king." Darian's voice carries the weight of decades of faithful service. "The throne—"

"Will mean nothing if he finds her first." I don't need to specify who 'he' is. We all remember Ulric's madness, his obsession with power. "The Lords can plot all they want. But if my brother gets his hands on her..."

I let the sentence hang unfinished. We all know what Ulric is capable of. What he'd do to anything I hold dear, just to spite me.

The messenger shifts nervously in his saddle. "What...what should I tell them, sire?"

"Tell them their king hunts in the north." I bare my teeth in what might technically be called a smile. "Tell them to remember what happened when last the Lords moved against my throne. They'd do well to fear the cold."

We push deeper into the wilderness, following the mercenaries' trail. That connection pulses stronger with each league we cover, tugging me ever-north, an impossible gravity. Sometimes I catch glimpses of her through it—a circular room, floating candles, the taste of poison sweet as honey.

The moon rides high above the ancient pines, turning the world to silver and shadow. And somewhere ahead in this endless night, my wife waits in a tower I've never seen, growing weaker by the hour.

Let the Lords plot. Let the kingdom burn. I'll tear apart heaven and earth to find her.

Nothing else matters now.

The mercenaries' trail leads us to an ancient road I've never seen before.

It winds between the pines like a black serpent, its stones worn smooth by centuries of use. No snow settles on its surface despite the endless storm. The men eye it warily, and with good reason—we've all heard tales of the old ways that still cut through these northern reaches. Roads that lead to places better left forgotten.

"This shouldn't be here," Darian mutters, his horse dancing nervously beneath him. "No maps show a paved road this far north."

"No current maps." I dismount to examine the strange stones. They're carved with runes that seem to shift when viewed directly, patterns that make my dragon blood sing with recognition. "This is older. Much older."

"From before the Dragon Kings?"

"From before everything." The certainty in my voice surprises even me. Something about this place resonates with magic that feels ancient and familiar at once. Like the power that exploded from Calliope that final night in Millrath.

The road winds on through the gathering dark, and somewhere ahead, my wife waits in a tower that shouldn't exist. I'll find her. Will tear apart anyone who stands between us. Will burn the world to ash if that's what it takes to bring her home.

The strange warmth pulses beneath my ribs like a second heartbeat, guiding me forward into the endless night.

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The first blow catches me off guard.

I stumble back against the cold stone wall as the larger of Ulric's guards grabs my throat, his calloused fingers digging into soft flesh. The second laughs, a sound like breaking glass, while the third circles behind me, boots scraping against ancient stone. Their eyes gleam with predatory interest in the guttering torchlight—inhuman and yet more vicious than most dragons I've known, something worse than both. In the flickering shadows, I catch glimpses of scales rippling beneath their skin, smoke curling from between sharp teeth with each breath like chilled winter sighs.

My head spins, still foggy from whatever Ulric gave me. The edges of my vision blur and swim, making the hallway seem to twist and stretch impossibly before me. Even the torches on the walls appear to float and dance, their flames casting strange patterns that hurt my eyes to look at directly.

"Look at her," the one holding me sneers, his breath hot against my face. "Some heretic you turned out to be. Weak as a nestling. Can't even defend yourself without that storm of yours." His grip tightens, fingers pressing into the soft hollow beneath my jaw. "What's wrong, witch? Too weak to call the wind?"

He's right. I am utterly physically drained, my magic a faint whisper beneath my skin where it once roared like a tempest. I can barely feel the storm that usually rages at my call. Even now, I sense it weakly battering the tower walls, but it feels distant, muffled, like trying to hear through water or thick wool. The connection that once felt as natural as breathing now slips through my fingers like smoke whenever I reach for it.

"Maybe she needs some encouragement," the third man suggests, producing a knife that glints dully in the darkness. The blade is crude iron, unadorned—a torturer's tool, not a warrior's weapon. Its edge is notched and worn, designed to tear rather than cut clean. "The prince said not to mark her face, but he didn't say anything about the rest of her—save the child, of course. Might be fun to see if she bleeds red like a human or blue like the ice witch they say she is."

From his seat by the great hearth at the end of the hall, Ulric watches with that knife-edge smile, making no move to intervene. He's given up on niceties, I know. The game has changed. The firelight catches in his golden hair, casting about his head a mockery of a crown. He's waiting for my fear—testing me, pushing me, trying to see what will make me break. The wine in his crystal goblet looks black as blood in the firelight, and I wonder if it's drugged like everything else he offers me.

I have to steel myself, I know. I can't afford to break. I think of my child, growing stronger each day despite everything. Think of how they deserve better than this end in a cold hallway at the hands of common thugs. The fury that rises in me is sharp enough to cut, bright enough to burn. My magic stirs weakly, responding to my fear and rage, but it's like trying to lift a mountain with trembling arms.

"I wouldn't," I manage through gritted teeth, though my voice comes out weaker than I intend, breathless from the grip on my throat. "You have no idea what I'm capable of."

They laugh again, the sound echoing off ancient stones. The one with the knife steps closer, close enough that I can smell stale wine and something fouler on his breath, something that reeks of old blood and cruelty. His free hand comes up to grasp my chin, forcing my head back against the wall.

"Big words from such a small—"

The temperature drops so suddenly that their next breath freezes in the air.

For a moment—just a moment—my magic surges through whatever barriers Ulric's poison has erected, wild and uncontrolled. Frost spreads across the walls in delicate patterns like deadly lace, crackling as it expands. The torches sputter and dim, their flames turning an eerie blue before guttering out entirely. The spy's fingers go slack around my throat as his skin begins to blacken with frostbite, the flesh cracking like river ice in spring.

Something moves within me—a flutter of movement, a pulse of foreign power. The child, lending me their strength. Their presence burns like a star in my chest, cutting through the fog of exhaustion and fear. For one crystalline moment, I feel truly awake for the first time in days.

Then, just as quickly, the power gutters out like a candle in wind. My knees buckle as darkness crowds the edges of my vision. Only the wall at my back keeps me upright as exhaustion crashes over me in a dizzying wave. The child's presence dims, retreating deep inside me as if frightened by the sudden surge and collapse of magic.

"Enough." Ulric's voice cuts through the darkness, soft but full of authority. There's something else in his tone too—interest, maybe, or hunger. As if he's seen exactly what he wanted to see. "Leave her. She's learned her lesson, I think."

The guards—or spies, or lackeys, or whatever they are—step back, though their eyes still burn with cruel promise. The one who held me flexes his frostbitten fingers, wincing. Even in the dim light, I can see the blackened flesh beginning to peel away from bone. "Yes, my prince."

He'll need a strong potion if he wants to keep his fingers. I relish the thought that they won't be able to save them.

As they retreat into the shadows, Ulric rises from his chair with fluid grace. He approaches slowly, each step measured and deliberate, boots ringing against stone. When he reaches me, he brushes his knuckles across my cheek in a mockery of tenderness. His skin burns like fever against mine.

"You see?" he murmurs, his voice almost gentle. Almost kind. "This is what happens when you refuse my hospitality. I know you've been refusing the draught that would keep you safe, keep you calm. You think I seek to poison you. But I only want to keep you safe. The world is full of dangers, sister mine. Let me protect you from them."

His thumb traces my lower lip, and it takes everything in me not to bite it off. I want to spit in his face. Want to freeze the smile from his lips, to turn him to ice from the inside out. But my child's presence pulses within me, reminding me to be smarter, to play this game more carefully. They need me to survive this, whatever it takes.

Still, I can't quite keep the bitterness from my voice when I speak. "Like you protected those human villagers? I'm not quick to forget cruelty, Ulric."

Something dangerous flashes in Ulric's eyes. For a moment, I glimpse the dragon beneath his carefully maintained humanity, ancient and cruel and hungry. Then it's gone, hidden once more behind false concern. But I've seen it now. I always knew it was there, but I can feel its hunger.

"Rest," he says, stepping back. His smile never wavers, but there's a new edge to it. A warning. "We'll speak more when you're feeling less hysterical."

I flee to my chamber, though I know it's no real sanctuary. The room spins lazily around me as I sink onto the narrow bed, pressing my hands to my temples. My throat throbs where the spy grabbed me, and I know it will bruise. Even that small burst of magic has left me shaking, drained to the point of collapse.

What's happening to me?

The question echoes in my mind as consciousness begins to slip away. Even now, I can feel my power trying to rise, to break free of whatever chains Ulric has placed upon it. But it's like trying to catch smoke—the harder I grasp, the more it seems to slip away. Each attempt leaves me weaker, more confused.

The tower feels wrong tonight, more so than usual. The shadows in the corners writhe and twist when I look at them directly. The carvings on the walls, worn almost smooth by centuries of wind and weather, seem to move in the corner of my eye, forming patterns that hurt to look at. Ancient magic lingers in this place, I know, but tonight it feels active, awakened. As if something is stirring in the bones of this forgotten stronghold.

The last thing I'm aware of is the storm still howling against the tower walls, its voice almost mournful in the gathering dark. Then exhaustion claims me, dragging me down into dreams.

I find myself in an endless expanse of white, where snow hangs suspended in the air like stars. The cold should bite, should freeze me to my bones, but instead I feel only a strange warmth radiating from within. Through the curtain of frost, a familiar figure approaches, tall and powerful, moving with predatory grace.

"Arvoren," I breathe, and the name feels like a prayer.

He's different than I remember, somehow both more and less than the king who kept me captive. His crown is missing, his formal clothes replaced by worn traveling leathers stained with blood and frost. There's an edge of desperation to him that I've never seen before, a wildness in his dark eyes that makes my heart ache. He looks like a man who's been riding through endless winter, searching, hunting.

When he speaks my name, it resonates through my entire being like dragon-song.

"I'm coming for you," he says, reaching for me with hands that pass through me like smoke. His voice carries all the fierce possession I remember, but there's something else there, too—fear, maybe. Worry. Love? "I'm closer than you think. Just hold on. A reckoning is coming."

I try again to tell him about the baby, about Ulric's schemes, as I know I should, but the words still stick in my throat. All I can do is watch as he begins to fade, his form dissolving into the swirling snow. The last thing I see is the naked anguish on his face, the way he strains toward me even as he disappears. There is something strange in his face, and I recall the distance, the fury, the strain. I recall all we have both lost to one another. Nothing seems so simple all of a sudden.

"Wait," I try to call, but the dream is already slipping away, leaving only that lingering warmth behind.

I wake with tears frozen on my cheeks and the taste of winter on my tongue. The fierce echo of his presence seems to reverberate through me like a tuning fork, sharp and jarring and unending. But still, the warmth of him lingers in my chest, fighting back the perpetual chill that seems to seep from the very stones of this place. I still don't know whether I hate the feeling of it.

Something moves within me then, a flutter so distinct it steals my breath.

My hands fly to my stomach as I feel it again—the lightest of movements, like butterfly wings against my palm. The child, making themselves physically, tangibly known for the first time, cutting through my very worst fears. Their presence feels stronger suddenly, more defined, as if the dream has awakened something in both of us.

And with that touch comes understanding, sharp and clear as breaking ice.

The strange warmth I've been feeling, the impossible connection to my husband that grows stronger each day—it's not just my magic reaching for Arvoren. It's our magic. The child's power mingles with mine, amplifying everything, creating a bond that even Ulric's poisons can't fully sever. No wonder he's so desperate to keep me drugged, to keep me weak. He must suspect what's happening to me, must have suspected it long before I could hope to guess it. He must have figured my magic will only grow stronger still as my child grows.

Dragon and Windwaker blood combined. Something unprecedented. Something that could reshape the world, for better or worse. I know what he meant now, though I still despise the words.

A tap at my window draws my attention. Through the narrow arrow-slit, I catch glimpses of the storm still raging outside. But it looks different now, more purposeful somehow. The wind seems to move with intent, driving snow against the ancient stones in patterns that almost look like words, but then they're gone again, and I am alone, and I am cold, and I yearn so strongly for safety and warmth that it feels as if it might break me open.

I press my hand harder against my stomach, feeling that precious warmth. The child moves again, stronger this time, as if responding to their father's voice on the wind. Whatever else Arvoren might be—dragon, tyrant, monster—he is also the other half of this miracle growing within me. And something deep in my soul knows he would die before letting Ulric harm us.

"Your father's coming," I whisper to our child, though the words catch in my throat. My voice sounds small and lost in the vastness of the tower, but I feel the truth of it in my bones. "And whatever your uncle has planned, whatever poison he feeds us, he can't break this connection. We just have to survive until then. We just have to hold

on.”

And after Arvoren finds me?

No matter what, I will fight for this child until my dying breath.

The wind howls fiercer, making the tower's ancient bones creak and groan. I curl around my midsection, trying to share what little warmth I have with our child. Outside my chamber, I hear the heavy tread of guards changing shifts, the whispered conversations of servants who never meet my eyes. Sometimes I catch fragments of their words, carried on drafts that whistle through cracks in the mortar. Whispers of armies moving in the night, of strange lights in the northern sky.

Ulric's lies still weigh on me—the possibility, if he speaks the truth, that Arvoren truly has ordered my death, that my husband sees me as nothing more than a threat to be eliminated. But the dream planted more than doubt. It gave me hope, dangerous as that might be.

I refuse to believe a single lie again in this life, I swear to myself.

And when I doubt, when I fear, I close my eyes, remembering the desperate longing in Arvoren's gaze. Despite all else between us, his love is an anchor, an island in a vast and churning ocean. A single solid thing. My feet seem to brush against it for a moment, a single instant of stability before I am whisked away. No matter what Ulric claims, those weren't the eyes of a man who wants me dead. They were the eyes of someone who would burn the world to find what he's lost. I've seen that look before, in quiet moments when he thought I wasn't watching—when his mask of cold control would slip, revealing something fiercer and more tender beneath.

I know it. I know so few things in this world, but I know Arvoren will love me until he dies.

Whether that will be enough is another question entirely.

The child moves again. I swear I feel something else—a pulse of foreign emotion that cuts through my exhaustion like a blade. Determination. Fury. A bone-deep need to protect. Arvoren's feelings, bleeding through our connection, growing stronger with each passing hour.

Let Ulric play his games. Let him think his poisons and schemes can break us. He doesn't understand what he's really fighting, not truly. He cannot understand that which he will never feel.

We just have to survive long enough for Arvoren to find us. Just have to stay strong, stay smart, stay alive.

The storm rages on, and somewhere out there in the swirling white, a dragon hunts through the night, following the impossible tether of magic and blood and love that binds us all together. I feel him drawing closer with each passing hour, his presence growing stronger in my dreams, in the child's movements, in the very air around me.

I press my hand to the cold glass of the window, watching frost spread from my fingers in delicate patterns. The storm responds to my touch, snow swirling closer, and for a moment I swear I can smell smoke and dragon-fire on the wind. Somewhere out there, Arvoren rides through the endless night, drawing closer with each passing hour.

And when he finds us—when he discovers what his brother has done, what he planned to do—I'm certain that one way or another, there won't be enough left of Ulric to bury.

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The stronghold rises from the ravine below us like a broken tooth, black against the predawn sky.

I stand at the edge of the ridge, snow swirling around my boots as I study the ancient fortress below. Even from here, I can feel the weight of centuries pressing down—there's old magic in those walls, maybe older than my kingdom itself. The tower seems to twist strangely when viewed directly, its geometry refusing to settle into anything that makes sense. Sometimes I count seven levels, sometimes nine. It is enchanted so thickly that it gives me a headache.

My dragon blood recoils from it instinctively, scales rippling beneath my skin as I fight the urge to transform, to take to the sky and burn this cursed place to ash. But that would mean risking her. And I've risked her enough already.

"No wonder it's not on any maps," Darian mutters beside me, his voice barely audible over the wind. Steam rises from his armor where snow melts against the metal, heated by the fire that burns in all dragonborn. "Place doesn't want to be found. Doesn't even want to be seen."

He's right. The fortress seems to resist observation, as if the very act of looking at it too long might draw its attention. The stones themselves appear to shift and flow like water when studied too carefully, and the longer I stare, the more my head begins to ache with the wrongness of it all.

"It's older than the records," I say, more to myself than to Darian. "Older than the first Dragon Kings. Maybe even older than the Windwakers."

"The men don't like it." Darian moves closer, lowering his voice though we stand apart from the others. "They say it whispers to them in their sleep. Say the stones remember things better left forgotten."

I've heard the whispers too, though I haven't slept more than fragments since we began our journey north. In those brief moments of unconsciousness, I hear voices that sound like grinding stone, like ice cracking in the depths of winter. They speak in languages I almost understand, almost remember, as if the knowledge is written in my blood but the words have been lost to time.

The men make camp in the shelter of a stone outcropping, their movements mechanical with exhaustion. We've been riding for days without real rest, pushing harder as that connection to Calliope grew stronger. Now, finally, we've found her, and I almost wish we hadn't. There's something wrong about this place, something that makes my scales want to emerge even in human form.

Kestrel approaches with an armful of firewood. "The storm's getting worse, my king. Can barely see ten feet ahead now to the south."

"Let it rage," I tell him, not taking my eyes from the fortress. "The worse the weather, the better our chances of taking them by surprise."

"If we don't freeze first," he mutters, but quietly enough that I can pretend not to hear.

He's not wrong. The cold has grown teeth since we arrived, biting deeper with each passing hour. Even my dragon's blood can barely keep it at bay. The men's armor creaks with ice, and frost forms on their beards between breaths. Only the small fires we dare to light keep us from freezing entirely.

"The approach will be difficult," Darian says, unrolling a crude map drawn by our scouts. Frost crackles as he smooths the parchment against a boulder. "The ravine

walls are sheer ice, and the winds are unlike anything we've seen. Three men nearly froze trying to find a path down. Whatever magic protects this place, it doesn't want visitors."

I barely hear him. My attention is fixed on a window near the top of the highest tower, where candlelight flickers behind frosted glass. Something pulls at me, a tug beneath my ribs that I've come to associate with her presence. She's up there. I know it like I know my own heartbeat.

The connection between us has grown stronger since we crossed into these mountains. Sometimes I catch fragments of her thoughts, her emotions—fear and determination wound together like twin snakes. She's fighting something, I know. Fighting to stay alive, to stay herself.

"My king?" Darian's voice draws me back. "The men await your orders."

"Send the scouts again," I tell him, not taking my eyes from that window. "I want to know everything—guard rotations, entry points, any sign of my brother's forces. Leave nothing to chance. We cannot afford to risk this fight."

He hesitates, and I know what's coming before he speaks. The same doubts that have plagued our journey north, growing louder with each league we cover.

"And...of the queen?"

My fingers tighten on the pommel of my sword until the leather creaks. "What about her?"

"The men talk." He chooses his words carefully, as he always does when telling me things I don't want to hear. "Some say they've seen her walking the battlements freely, no chains, no guards. Others whisper that she's Ulric's willing ally, that she—"

"Enough." The word comes out in a growl that's more dragon than human. Smoke curls from between my teeth despite the bitter cold. "She is my wife."

"And you are my king. Which is why I must ask—are you certain? After everything that's happened, after she fled—"

"She fled because I caged her," I cut him off. The admission tastes like ash on my tongue. "It's a mistake I won't make again."

But even as I say it, doubt gnaws at me, winter wolves at a carcass. I remember how she looked that final night in Millrath, her power exploding through the castle like sudden daylight. She'd been magnificent in her fury, terrible and beautiful, and I'd known in that moment that I never truly had her. Never truly could.

Would she truly choose Ulric over me? My brother, who tried to kill us both?

The thought burns like acid in my throat.

A commotion at the edge of camp draws my attention. One of our scouts, Brendir, staggers in from the storm, his armor crusted with ice. Blood stains the snow where he falls to his knees, though I can't immediately see where he's wounded.

"Report," I demand, hauling him upright. "What did you see?"

"The queen," he gasps, his words forming clouds in the bitter air. "In the tower. She...she seemed well-treated. Saw her dining with the prince, walking the halls freely. But..."

"But?"

He breaks off, coughing. When he spits, his saliva is flecked with frost. "I heard the

servants whisper. Something is wrong with her, some sickness. They say the prince has plans for her, for the—"

I drop him to the cold ground as a pulse of foreign emotion cuts through me like a blade of steel. Fear. Pain. A bone-deep exhaustion that makes my knees want to buckle. Through our connection, I feel echoes of Calliope's presence—and there's nothing willing or free about it. She's trapped, drowning in whatever poison my brother feeds her.

My gaze snaps back to the scout crumpled in the snow. His gasping breaths fog in the air as he scrambles back, hand going to his throat where my claws drew blood.

"She's his prisoner," I growl, and this time I know it's true. The certainty burns in my blood like dragon-fire. "Whatever game he's playing, whatever lies he's spinning, she's not there by choice."

As the hours pass, more of my soldiers-turned-scouts filter in from the storm, each with their own conflicting reports. Some bleed, chased by hounds out of the ravine. None can seem to decide the circumstances of her residence in that accursed place. Soon, I can no longer bear to listen.

"Windows sealed with iron," I hear one telling Darian urgently, standing in the swirling snow. "Runes carved in the frames. Old magic, by the look of it."

"Enough!"

The word comes out as a roar that shakes snow from the trees. The scant few men around our makeshift camp fall silent, watching me with wary eyes. They've seen what happens when my control slips, when the dragon rises too close to the surface.

I force myself to breathe, to pull back the scales that have begun to spread across my

skin.

"We attack at dawn," I tell Darian, cutting through the confusion of reports. "Prepare a plan of assault with our current intelligence, prioritising stealth. I want every warrior ready to—"

The world disappears.

One moment I'm standing on the ridge, snow swirling around me. The next, I'm somewhere else entirely: a dark corridor lit by guttering torches, the air thick with the taste of ancient stone and strange magic.

And there, running through the shadows ahead of me, is Calliope.

She stumbles as she runs, one hand pressed against the wall for support. Her face is too pale, drawn with exhaustion, but her eyes burn with desperate determination. She's thinner than I remember, more fragile, though somehow her presence fills the space like smoke. Even in this vision, the sight of her makes something twist painfully in my chest.

The stones around her seem to pulse with an inner light, responding to her passage. Frost spreads from her fingertips where they brush the wall, delicate patterns that glow with an eerie blue radiance. The tower itself seems to recognize her, to reach for her magic.

"Please," she whispers, though I don't know if she's speaking to me or to whatever pursues her through the dark. Her breath frosts in the air, tiny crystals that catch the torchlight like stars. "Please, I can't—"

Footsteps echo behind her, heavy boots on ancient stone. A voice that sounds horribly familiar calls out, dripping false concern:

"Little bird? Where are you flying to?"

Ulric. My brother's voice sends rage burning through me like dragon-fire, but I can't move, can't reach her. Can only watch as Calliope presses herself against the wall, one hand clutching her midsection as if in pain.

"No," she breathes, and the word carries more than fear. There's something else there, something protective and fierce that I don't understand. Something that makes her magic flare wildly, causing the torches to gutter and ice to spread across the ceiling in crackling sheets. "No, you can't have—"

The vision cuts off abruptly, leaving me gasping in the snow. The world spins lazily around me as I struggle to orient myself, to separate reality from whatever I just witnessed.

Darian steadies me as I stagger, but I barely feel his touch. All I can think about is the terror in Calliope's eyes, the way she curled around herself as if protecting something precious. Something vital.

My men gather around me, their faces lined with concern, but I wave them away. How can I explain what I've seen? How can I make them understand the urgency burning in my blood?

The wind howls across the ridge, driving snow like daggers, but I barely feel the cold. My focus has narrowed to that window high in the tower, where candlelight still flickers behind frosted glass. Something is happening up there, something that makes my blood roar in my ears with protective fury.

"Now," I hear myself rasp. "Men. We attack...now."

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Of course, I should have known I wouldn't have a chance to get far. Still, stupidly, I tried rifling through the cupboards and drawers of Ulric's study, desperate for any kind of intelligence, consumed with a suffocating and frantic desire to know. To understand.

And as the door creaks open behind me, my hands full of useless papers I can barely decipher, I know I have made a dire mistake.

"Find anything interesting?"

My blood turns to ice at his voice. I turn slowly, letting the parchment fall from nerveless fingers.

Ulric stands in the doorway, golden hair catching the firelight. His smile is knife-sharp, but his eyes are cold as midwinter frost. He looks more than ever like a twisted reflection of his brother—all of Arvoren's predatory grace but none of his fire, none of his heart.

"I was looking for a book," I lie, though we both know better. My voice sounds weak even to my own ears, slurred slightly from whatever poison still lingers in my blood. "One of the histories you mentioned—"

"Come now, Calliope of Essenborn." He steps into the room, closing the door with a soft click that sounds like a tomb being sealed. Each step is measured, deliberate, a hunter stalking wounded prey. "Haven't we moved past such childish deceptions? I've welcomed you into my home, shared my table, offered you freedom from my brother's tyranny. And this is how you repay my hospitality? By sneaking about like a

common thief?"

I back away as he advances, but my heel hits his desk. There's nowhere left to retreat. The room suddenly feels smaller, the shadows in the corners writhing like living things. Or perhaps that's just the poison making the world shift and blur. My head spins with each movement, and my magic feels distant, muffled, like trying to hear through deep water.

"Your hospitality?" A bitter laugh escapes me. "Is that what you call drugging me? Keeping me weak? Having your men terrorize me? Some host you've been, Ulric."

"I protect you from yourself." He's closer now, too close. His hand comes up to brush my cheek in a mockery of tenderness. His skin burns like fever against mine. "From the magic that would destroy you if left unchecked. You have no idea of your true potential, of what we could accomplish together."

"I know exactly what you want to accomplish." I jerk away from his touch, my back pressing harder against the desk. "Ulric, I know precisely what you want. What you are. You want to use my child as a weapon. Or kill them, if you can't control them. I have never doubted it. I never will."

Something darkens in Ulric's expression. His fingers catch my chin, forcing me to meet his gaze. The gesture is so similar to how Arvoren used to touch me, yet utterly wrong. Where my husband's grip always held a careful restraint, Ulric's fingers dig in hard enough to bruise.

"Such an uncharitable interpretation." His voice drops lower, honey-sweet but laced with poison. "I want to ensure that child becomes everything it's meant to be, free from my brother's influence, free from the chains of tradition. Can't you see? Kaldoria destroyed you, Calliope, just as it was built to. It ruined you. Your dear husband stripped you of your very soul when he locked you in that castle, you know it as well

as I do. He took something from you you'll never get back. We could have built a better world, a world where you might have been able to be free. But perhaps he rendered you too weak to dare."

"Better?" The word tastes like ash. "You murdered innocent people to find me. Tortured them. You're the reason my friend is dead, the reason my child is in danger. You kill, you lie, you steal, you betray. It's all you know. And I know you well enough to know my child will die at your hand eventually, one way or another, if I stay in this wretched place."

"Only if necessary." Ulric's thumb traces my lower lip, and it takes everything in me not to bite it off. His eyes track the movement, something hungry entering his expression. "But it doesn't have to come to that. Not if you're smart, Calliope, as I know you can be. Stay with me willingly. Let me guide you, teach you. We could be extraordinary together. We could bring down the very walls of Kaldoria and build something glorious from its ashes."

He leans closer, his breath hot against my face.

When he moves to kiss me, something inside me snaps.

The magic comes without warning, surging up from that deep well inside me that even Ulric's poisons couldn't quite reach. Power explodes outward in a wave of killing frost, throwing him across the room. He hits the far wall with a satisfying crack, ice spreading across his fine clothes in tiny, intricate patterns. The temperature plummets until the very air seems to crystallize, frost coating every surface in patterns that glow with an eerie blue light.

"Don't touch me," I snarl, my voice raw with fury and fear. The words emerge in clouds of frozen breath. "Don't ever touch me again."

For a moment, Ulric just stares at me, genuine shock written across his features. Then his smile returns, sharper than ever. Blood trickles from a cut on his forehead, freezing before it can drip from his chin. "There she is. There's the queen I've been waiting for. Such power, such potential. You see? This is why I had to keep you contained. Why I had to wait until you were ready."

I don't wait to hear more. Staggering slightly—even that small burst of magic has left me dizzy—I flee into the corridor beyond. Behind me, I hear him laughing, the sound echoing off ancient stones like breaking glass.

"Run all you like, little bird! There's nowhere left to fly!"

The tower's maze-like passages twist and blur around me as I run. Left or right? Up or down? The geometry makes no sense, and the poison in my blood makes everything shift and dance. Shadows seem to move in my peripheral vision, and the worn carvings on the walls appear to writhe when viewed directly. Sometimes I swear I pass the same window three times, though I know I've been running straight ahead.

My child's presence pulses within me, responding to my fear. Their magic mingles with mine, lending me strength I didn't know I had left. But it's not enough. It will never be enough, not with whatever drug Ulric has been feeding me still coursing through my veins.

A horn blast echoes through the corridors, deep and resonant. Then another answers, and another. The sound seems to come from all directions at once, bouncing off stone until it becomes a physical pressure against my skull.

"Find her!" Ulric's voice carries clearly, amplified by the tower's strange acoustics. "Bring her back alive!"

Boots thunder on stone as guards mobilize. I hear them shouting to each other, coordinating their search. They know these twisted passages far better than I do. It's only a matter of time before they corner me.

I duck into a servant's passage, barely more than a crack in the wall. The space is tight enough that I have to turn sideways to squeeze through, my breath coming in sharp gasps that echo too loudly in the confined space. After what feels like an eternity, the passage opens into a wider corridor lit by guttering torches.

But I've barely taken three steps when voices echo from ahead—more guards, coming this way. I press myself into an alcove, holding my breath as armored footsteps thunder past. My heart hammers so hard I'm sure they must hear it, but they pass without stopping.

I can feel my lips moving as I whisper to my child, one hand pressed protectively over my stomach. Their presence feels stronger suddenly, more defined. As if they know we're in danger. I have no idea what I'm saying. My head spins with terror and fury.

I break from the corridor out into a broad, high-ceilinged chamber I don't recognise. Across the space, three guards race in my direction, and I raise my hands in front of me, preparing to fight, preparing to freeze them alive—

Then, the world explodes.

The ornate ceiling above me shatters with a deafening roar, showering stone and ice and ancient timber. Dust curls high into the air all around. The ground shakes and I peel my gaze toward the sky with fierce desperation.

I see them.

Through the gap, silhouetted against the night sky, massive shapes descend. Dragons, their scales gleaming like black glass in the moonlight. They move with deadly grace, all coiled power and barely contained fury. Steam rises where snow touches their heated scales, and their eyes burn like blackened coals in the darkness.

And I know whose dragons those are.

The king's warriors have found us at last.

Chaos erupts in the fort. Guards pour in from all directions, scrambling across and over and under still-falling rubble, shouting orders and drawing weapons. The dragons land with earth-shaking force in the cold, dusty light, their wings spreading to block any escape. They're huge. They're terrible.

My ears ring, and my eyes burn, and I hold in my heart a relief so strong and desperate it almost brings me to my knees.

Battle breaks out mere moments later. I press myself against the wall. The first clash of steel on steel rings out like a bell, echoing off ancient stones. One of Ulric's men charges forward, sword raised, only to be caught by massive talons and torn nearly in half. Blood sprays across ice-covered walls as more guards rush to engage. Dragon-fire fills the air, turning the chamber into an inferno. The heat is so intense that the frozen stones crack and shatter.

And there, in the center of it all, a humanoid figure drops from the ruined ceiling like death given form.

Arvoren.

He lands in a crouch, snow swirling around him like a cloak. When he rises, his movements are pure predator—all lethal grace and contained violence. His formal

clothes have been replaced by worn leather and steel, and his crown is missing, but he's never looked more like a king than he does in this moment. Steam rises from his skin where snow touches him, and his eyes burn with an inner fire that marks his bloodline.

"Find her," he snarls to his men, his voice more dragon than human. Smoke curls from between his teeth as he speaks. "Kill anyone who stands in your way."

The battle explodes around us like a storm breaking. Steel rings against steel, dragon-fire casting strange shadows on ancient walls. The air fills with smoke and steam and the copper tang of blood. Screams echo off stone as Ulric's men fall to tooth and claw and blade. Through it all, I remain frozen in my alcove, unable to look away from my husband's terrible fury.

Then his head turns, and his eyes lock with mine.

Time seems to stop. The sounds of combat fade to a distant roar as we stare at each other across the chaos. His expression is dark with rage, but there's something else there, too. Fear, maybe. Uncertainty. The same desperate longing I've felt in our shared dreams.

For a moment, I see him as I did that first night in Millrath: the Dragon King in all his terrible glory, beautiful and deadly and alien. The connection between us flares stronger than ever, cutting through whatever drugs Ulric has used to keep me weak, cutting through my fear and sorrow. I feel his fury, his peril, his bone-deep need to protect me.

I see his lips form the shape of my name.

Before either of us can move, a familiar laugh cuts through the din, over the sounds of battle.

"Welcome home, brother." Ulric's voice carries easily over the combat. He stands at the end of the corridor I just emerged from, hair catching the firelight from the burning tapestries. Blood still stains his face where my magic threw him, but his smile is triumphant. "I was wondering when you'd finally find us. Though I must say, your timing is...inconvenient."

I stagger backward blindly, hands raised before me, tripping and scrambling over the rubble at my feet.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Arvoren's expression goes cold as winter itself. He begins to stalk toward us—Ulric sweeps forward, planting himself between me and my husband, standing in the rubble with his arms raised, a false prophet. A tyrant through and through.

"I've been taking good care of your wife." Ulric's smile is sharp as broken glass. "Though I'm not sure she wants to leave. Do you, little bird? You can't truly wish to return to Millrath. Not when you fought so very hard to escape."

My husband's gaze snaps to me, uncertainty flickering in those dark eyes I have dreamed of for so long. Despite everything we've shared through our dreams, through our connection, doubt creeps in. Did he truly believe I might choose Ulric over him?

The fighting continues around us, but it feels distant, unreal. In this moment, there are only the three of us—husband, wife, and the serpent who came between them. The ancient tower groans around us, magic crackling through its stones like lightning through storm clouds.

And in that frozen moment of choice, everything changes.

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The ancient stones groan beneath my feet as I storm through the ruins of the demolished ceiling. On the walls of the chamber all around I see flames licking up tapestries and turning ice to steam. Bodies litter the floor at my feet as the battle rages around me—both my men and Ulric's, their blood freezing almost instantly on the frost-covered stones. The battle rages around me in a chaos of steel and scale and fire.

But I barely register any of it. My focus has narrowed to a knife's edge, every instinct trained on the woman standing amid the destruction.

Calliope.

She's thinner than I remember, more fragile, dark hair falling in tangles around her scarred, too-pale face. The fine dress she wears hangs loose on her frame, and there are shadows beneath her eyes that speak of exhaustion. But gods, she's still the most beautiful thing I've ever seen. Even weak and afraid, her presence fills the space like smoke, like storm clouds gathering before lightning strikes.

Our connection flares stronger than ever, cutting through my rage, then sitting in the burning center of it. I feel her exhaustion, her fear, but also a fierce determination that makes my blood sing with recognition. Something else pulses between us too, strange and warm, but before I can identify it, movement catches my eye.

Ulric stands in the rubble between us with the posture of a serpent rearing, loosed from its den, brushing dust from his fine clothes with casual grace. Blood stains his face and coats one side of his golden hair, but his smile is triumphant as ever. Looking at him—at the brother I trusted once, so very long ago—makes something twist painfully in my chest.

"I must say, brother," he calls over the din of battle, "you're losing your touch. I expected you days ago. The Lords must be keeping you busy indeed."

Smoke rises between my teeth. "Not too busy to deal with traitorous ghastrs like you."

"Traitorous?" Ulric laughs, the sound sharp as breaking glass. "I prefer...ambitious. Someone has to drag our family's legacy into a new era. And speaking of family..." His gaze slides to Calliope, something possessive in his expression that makes my scales ripple beneath my skin. "Your wife has been quite the delightful guest."

"Guest?" The word comes out in a growl that's more dragon than human. I turn to Calliope, really looking at her now. She stands unbound, unchained—free in a way she never was in Millrath. She's well-dressed, if thin and haggard. Her cold and ice swirl around us with fierce promise.

But— no . It can't be true. I've felt her fear, seen her distress. If she stayed, it must have been because she had no choice, or so I desperately try to convince myself.

"Arvoren—" Calliope takes a step toward me, but sways slightly, catching herself against the wall. Something's wrong with her movements, sluggish and uncertain. "It's not what you think."

"Calliope." Bitterness floods my mouth like acid, and I speak before I can stop myself, desperate to know. "Tell me this—was my brother's prison more to your liking than mine?"

The words come out harsher than I intend, driven by weeks of fear and doubt and desperate longing. I see the hurt flash across her face and hate myself for putting it there, but I can't seem to stop. Not with Ulric watching us both with that knife-edge smile.

"You don't understand," she says, her voice raw. "He's been—"

"Oh, come now," Ulric cuts in smoothly. "No need for dramatics. Why not tell him the truth, little bird? About our talks, our plans? About the future we could build together?"

The possessive note in his voice makes my vision bleed red at the edges. Before I can stop myself, I've crossed the space between us, catching him by the throat. Scales ripple fully to the surface as I slam him against the ground hard enough to crack the ancient stone.

"Choose your next words carefully, brother," I snarl, smoke curling from my mouth. "They may be your last."

But Ulric just laughs, even as my claws dig into his flesh. "Going to kill me, Arvoren? In front of your wife? Show her what a monster you truly are?"

"He's lying," Calliope calls out, desperation in her voice. "Arvoren, he's been drugging me, keeping me weak—"

A horn blast cuts through the chaos above us, deep and resonant. Then another answers, and another, the sound echoing off stone until it becomes a physical pressure against my skull. Ulric's smile widens as fresh troops pour in from both ends of the corridor—at least thirty warriors, all bearing his personal sigil.

"Did you think I wouldn't be prepared?" he asks softly, for my ears alone. "That I wouldn't have plans within plans? You've grown predictable, brother. All that power, all that fury, and still so easy to manipulate."

I release him with a snarl of rage, falling back to where Calliope stands. My own forces are outnumbered at least three to one now, and more of Ulric's men arrive with

each passing moment. Already I can hear fighting on the floors above and below as the rest of his garrison mobilizes.

"Darian!" I shout to my commander, who battles three guards near the ruined ceiling. "Fall back! Defensive positions!"

He acknowledges with a sharp nod, calling orders to the others. My warriors begin a fighting retreat, forming a protective ring around Calliope and me. But Ulric's men press forward, forcing us deeper into the castle's maze-like corridors.

"Stay close to me," I tell Calliope as we back away. She stumbles slightly, and I catch her arm to steady her. Her skin burns despite the bitter cold. She's shaking a little, perhaps with adrenaline.

"I can help," she insists, though her voice shakes. "My magic—"

"You can barely stand." The words come out harsher than I intend, driven by fear for her safety. "Just stay behind me."

A flash of her old defiance sparks in her eyes. "I don't need your protection—"

"Clearly you do," I snap, ducking as a crossbow bolt whizzes past my head. "Or was letting my brother get this close part of some grand plan?"

Her sharp intake of breath tells me I've gone too far, but there's no time to take the words back. Ulric's men are everywhere, pressing us back with coordinated attacks that speak of careful training. These aren't common soldiers—they're elite warriors, probably hand-picked for this very confrontation.

We retreat through torch-lit corridors that seem to twist and change with each turn. The tower's strange geometry works against us, passages that should connect instead

of leading to dead ends. More than once we're forced to double back, barely escaping becoming cornered by Ulric's forces.

The fighting grows more desperate with each passing moment. My warriors are some of the finest in Kaldoria, but they're exhausted from days of hard riding, and the confined space prevents full transformation. One by one they fall—Kestrel takes a sword through the gut, while Atticus is overwhelmed by sheer numbers. Their deaths fuel my rage, but rage alone won't be enough to save us.

"This way!" Calliope tugs at my arm, pointing down a narrow side passage. "There's a way out through the kitchens, I think—"

An explosion rocks the corridor before she can finish. The ceiling caves in ahead of us, blocking our intended path with rubble. Through the settling dust, I see Ulric pelting across the far end of the hall, approaching fast.

"I tried to be reasonable," he calls out, his voice carrying easily over the chaos. "Tried to show you a better way. But if you insist on clinging to the old order..." He draws the longsword at his hip. "Then the hard way it is."

Ancient magic crackles through the air like lightning before a storm, making my scales ripple uncomfortably beneath my skin. This is more than just architecture—the entire fortress is a weapon, and my brother knows exactly how to wield it.

If we don't run now, cut our losses and break for the cold beyond this place, we will die here.

I know it with terrifying certainty.

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:44 am

The world burns and freezes alike around us as we run.

Dragon-fire licks up ancient walls while frost spreads in delicate patterns across stone, the competing magics turning the air to steam. Through the shattered ceiling above, I catch glimpses of a storm unlike anything I've ever seen—snow and ice driving sideways with impossible force, as if the very sky is at war with itself.

I am only partially aware, as if my body is not fully under my own control. My head reels, pounding with pain and energy, fear and fury. Arvoren half-drags, half-carries me through the chaos, his grip on my arm tight enough to bruise. The clash of steel on steel rings off stone, punctuated by inhuman snarls and the wet sound of talons tearing flesh.

My legs can barely hold me. Whatever poison Ulric fed me still courses through my veins, making the world tilt and spin with each step. The child's presence pulses within me, lending what strength they can, but it's not enough. It's never enough.

"Stay with me," Arvoren growls as I stumble again. His voice is rough with smoke and fury, but there's fear there too. "We're almost out."

Almost out. The words echo strangely in my head. When was the last time I saw the sky? How long has it been since I breathed air that wasn't tainted with ancient magic and my brother-in-law's lies?

We round a corner and suddenly there it is—a ragged hole torn in the fortress wall, opening onto a world of swirling white. Snow and bitter wind howl through the gap, casting ice crystals that catch the torchlight like stars.

"Go!" Darian shouts from behind us, his sword a blur as he holds back three of Ulric's men. Blood runs down his arm from a nasty gash, freezing before it can drip from his fingers. "Get her out! We'll hold them!"

Arvoren hesitates for a fraction of a second, torn between duty to his men and the need to get me to safety. In that moment, I catch a glimpse of the king beneath the fury—the leader who inspires such loyalty that his warriors will die to buy us time.

Then he's moving again, practically lifting me as we sprint for the opening. Behind us, I hear Darian roar in pain, followed by the terrible sound of a blade finding flesh. I try to look back, but Arvoren's grip prevents it.

"Don't," he snarls. "Nothing we can do for them now."

The words are cold, practical. The voice of a king who's lost men before. But I feel him trembling with suppressed rage, with the need to turn and fight. To burn everything that threatens what's his.

We burst out into the storm, and the bitter wind steals my breath. The fortress rises behind us like a twisted shadow, its impossible geometry even more apparent from the outside. The walls seem to writhe when viewed directly, and strange lights flicker in windows that shouldn't exist. It is wounded. It is dying. I pray I will never set eyes upon it again.

A steep ridge of ice-covered rock stretches before us, dropping away into darkness on either side. The path—if it can be called that—is barely wide enough for two people to walk abreast, and the footing is treacherous with frost.

"There's a break in the cliffs ahead," Arvoren says, guiding me onto the narrow trail. "If we can reach it—"

An arrow hisses past my ear, close enough that I feel its passage. More follow, forcing us to press ourselves against the cliff face as Ulric's archers find their range.

"Keep moving!" Arvoren pushes me ahead of him, using his body to shield me from the barrage. I feel him flinch as an arrow finds its mark, but he doesn't slow. "Don't stop, no matter what!"

"I can help!" I try to reach for my magic, to call the storm to our aid, but the power slips away like smoke through my fingers. "If I could just—"

"Calliope, I can't trust you right now!" The words crack like a whip, and they hurt. "Just go!"

The accusation in that statement has hit me harder than any arrow. "You don't understand, Arvoren—he was drugging me, keeping me weak—"

"And I'm supposed to—" Arvoren breaks off sharply, shoving me down as another volley of arrows whistles overhead. His body curves over mine, sheltering me from the onslaught. Through our pressed-together forms, I feel him trembling—with rage or fear or both, I can't tell. His breath comes in hot bursts against my neck, smelling of smoke and dragon-fire.

Despite myself, his scent is like coming home.

I want to scream at him, to make him understand what Ulric did to me. But the words tangle in my throat, choked by exhaustion and the lingering effects of whatever poison still dulls my senses. How can I explain the fog that's clouded my mind for weeks, the way my own magic slipped through my fingers like water? How do I tell him about the fear, the brutality, the endless confusion, the terror of being trapped in my own weakened body?

How do I explain all of that, and then still manage not to collapse right back into Arvoren's clutches once I've said it all?

More arrows clatter against stone. One grazes Arvoren's shoulder, drawing a hiss of pain. Blood drips onto the snow between us, freezing instantly into crimson beads. The sight of it stirs something protective and worried in me, despite everything.

"We need to move." His voice is rough, tight with something I can't quite read. Not quite anger anymore, but nowhere near trust. "The cliff path narrows ahead. If we can reach the tree line—"

Movement in the swirling snow catches my eye. At first, I think it's more of Ulric's archers.

But no—these shapes are wrong, ethereal, drifting through the storm like fragments of moonlight given form. Their features shift and flow like water over ice, hauntingly beautiful but utterly inhuman. Ancient magic radiates from them in waves that make my teeth ache.

The spirit guardians. The true protectors of this cursed place.

And they won't let us go without a fight.

The sounds of the battle far behind us seem to dull, consumed by the swirling blizzard. No more arrows fly through the cold air. Arvoren has seen them too, I know. His grip on my arm tightens painfully as they close in, dozens of them now, their forms rippling between solid and translucent. The air crystallizes around us, patterns of frost spreading across stone in delicate, deadly spirals. Behind us, I know Ulric's men approach at this very moment, or will soon, their boots hard on fresh-fallen snow, following our scent into the storm. We're surrounded. The noose is closing; I can feel it.

"Stay behind me," Arvoren growls, but I can hear the edge of real fear beneath his bravado. These aren't enemies he can fight with fang and talon, not with his brutal force.

The nearest spirit reaches for me with fingers like icicles. Their touch burns with impossible cold, sending pain shooting up my arm.

They speak in voices like winter wind through dead branches, in a language that tugs at something deep in my blood—words I should know, should remember, as if they were whispered to me in a dream I've forgotten.

I think for a moment, absurdly, lucidly, that I may die. I feel death so very close upon me, a fearsome sensation, and then something settles into place within my gut, perhaps something that has been waiting to take rest there. Power surges through me, different from before—wilder, more ancient. My magic mingles with the baby's, amplifying everything, burning through whatever remains of Ulric's poison.

The sensation is terrifying and exhilarating at once, like standing on the edge of a precipice in a long fall.

Cracks appear in the ice beneath our feet, spreading outward like a web of silver lightning. The spirits pause, their glowing eyes fixed on me with sudden intensity. Not hostility now, but recognition. They can sense it too—the old power stirring in my blood, in my child's blood. Magic older than Kaldoria itself.

Like calls to like.

"Calliope?" Arvoren's voice seems to come from very far away. There's something new in his tone—uncertainty, yes, but also wonder. "What are you—"

The ice across the bottom of the ravine shatters.

Raw power explodes from me in a wave of killing frost, turning the very air to crystal. The spirits cry out in voices like breaking glass as my magic catches them, pulls them down into the frozen depths to our left. They try to resist, their own power flaring bright as starlight, but they can't fight what they themselves are made of—winter claiming its own.

One by one they dissolve, their ethereal forms absorbed into the depths they once guarded. Their voices fade to whispers, then silence, leaving only the howl of the storm and the crackle of spreading frost. Behind us, I sense Ulric's advancing men fall back in terror as the ancient magic ripples outward, freezing the air in their lungs.

The effort leaves me hollow, trembling. Black spots dance at the edges of my vision as whatever strength the magic granted fades. My knees buckle, and I would have fallen if not for Arvoren's arms around me.

He catches me against his chest, and for a moment—just a moment—I let myself remember how it felt to be held by him without fear or doubt between us. His heart hammers against my cheek, dragon-fire warmth seeping through his clothes. When I look up at his face, his expression steals my breath: shock and awe and something deeper, something that makes my own heart stutter.

"How did you..." He trails off as shouts echo from the fortress. More of Ulric's men are coming. Whatever fragile moment we've shared shatters like the ice beneath our feet. "Never mind. We need to move. Can you walk?"

I manage a nod, though my legs feel like water. "For a little while."

"It'll have to be enough."

He half-carries me across the remaining ice, which groans ominously beneath our feet. The storm rages fiercer than ever, driven by my fading magic and desperate fear.

Through the curtain of white, I catch glimpses of endless forest stretching out below—a sea of dark pines frosted with snow and ice. Somewhere out there lies safety, if we can reach it.

Behind us, I hear cursing and the clash of steel as our pursuers pick their way more carefully across the treacherous surface. An arrow whizzes past, then another, but the storm makes accuracy impossible. Arvoren's grip never wavers as he guides me down a treacherous path I hadn't even seen, his body angled to shield me from the worst of the wind and any stray arrows.

We reach the tree line just as dawn begins to stain the eastern sky. The ancient forest closes around us like a shroud, swallowing all sound save the endless howl of wind through branches. Soon we're deep enough in the wilderness that pursuit becomes dangerous even for Ulric's skilled trackers.

We've escaped. For now.

But as exhaustion claims me and darkness creeps at the edges of my vision, I can't shake the feeling that we're running from more than just Ulric's forces. The spirit guardians recognized something in me—something old, something powerful. Something that even Arvoren, with all his dragon's wisdom, doesn't fully understand.

Perhaps they will give chase. Perhaps this nation itself, this very land, shall be my enemy after all.

And there's something else too, harder to name. In the way the king holds me now, the way his thumb brushes absently against my arm as he steadies me, I sense the battle raging within him—between the possessive monarch who sees betrayal at every turn and the man who still, despite everything, yearns to trust me. To love me.

I don't know which side will win. Don't know if we can ever bridge the chasm of

doubt and fear between us.

But as consciousness slips away and the storm rages on, I feel the child move again within me—a flutter of warmth and magic and possibility. And for the first time since I fled Millrath all those months ago, I let myself hope.

The ancient forest swallows us whole, and somewhere in the endless white, powers older than kingdoms or crowns stir from centuries of slumber.

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Blood freezes black on snow in the gathering dark.

I settle us upon the snow. We cannot afford the risk of a fire, not yet, and so I clean Calliope's wounds with hands that want to tremble, though I force them steady despite the bitter cold. I know I shall not freeze—dragons such as myself cannot, our fire too intense. I'll have to keep her warm tonight, somehow. The gash on her arm from the spirit's touch has turned an ugly purple, the flesh around it crystallized as if touched by deep frost.

She winces when I probe the edges, but doesn't pull away. Doesn't look at me, either.

The ancient pines loom above us like sentinels, their branches heavy with ice. No birds call, no creatures stir in the underbrush. Even the wind seems muffled, as if the forest itself holds its breath.

We've been running for hours, putting miles between us and Ulric's stronghold, though every shadow still feels like a threat.

"This needs proper healing," I say, the words coming out rougher than intended. Smoke curls from between my teeth—I can't quite keep my dragon nature contained, not with her sitting so close, not with the memory of her in my brother's fortress still burning in my mind. "I don't have the right supplies—"

"It's fine." My wife's voice is flat, exhausted. "I've had worse."

The implication—that she's suffered worse injuries during her months of running and then captivity—makes my blood boil. I want to demand answers, to shake the truth

from her about what happened in that cursed place, in her months alone. But I remember how she looked at me when I accused her of betrayal, and something in my chest twists painfully.

I finish binding her arm in silence, using strips torn from my cloak. It's painful even now to see her so frail. She shouldn't look so weak. When my fingers brush her skin, I feel her shiver. From cold or fear or something else, I can't tell.

Nonetheless, I cannot bear how cold she is, how blue her lips are turning. I start a fire in silence as she watches me with dull, strange eyes. Neither of us speaks.

When I sit back down at her side, the fire I've built casts strange shadows through the trees. She's still weak from whatever Ulric did to her, and the temperature drops with every passing hour. She needs it, I tell myself. Anything she needs, despite it all, I shall do. Through our bond, fresh as an open wound, I feel echoes of her exhaustion, her pain.

"Why didn't you find a way to send word?" The question burns in my throat like acid, like bile. I have no choice but to spit it out. "If he was truly keeping you prisoner, surely there was some way to—"

"To what?" Calliope looks at me finally, and the bitterness in her voice cuts deep. "To beg the mighty Dragon King for rescue? To throw myself on the mercy of the man who kept me in chains? I left you, Arvoren. Surely you have not forgotten that."

"Those chains were to protect you—"

"I can't argue with you about this now. Not now. And you know I can't. They were to control me." Her dry, unkind laugh is sharp as breaking ice. "Just like everything else. The guards, the rules, the constant watching. You never trusted me to stay of my own will."

"Because you ran." The words emerge in a growl that's barely human. "I gave you everything—"

But Calliope is shaking her head back and forth steadfastly, firmly, as if the answer is clear, as if she can't bear to listen. "A prettier cage than this one, maybe, but still a cage. Even now, you can't see it. Can't understand why I had to leave. I should have known nothing would have changed."

When I shuffle toward her, she moves away sharply. Blood burning, bones settling with a deep and heavy ache, I stand and begin to move, unable to stay at her level, desperate for something to do, staring off into the dark forest around us.

Steam rises where my boots touch snow as I pace. "What I understand is that my wife fled in the night like a thief. That she hid from me for months while my kingdom fell apart. That I found her in my brother's fortress—"

"After he saved me from freezing to death, from dying alone, from murder ! What choice did I have?" Calliope runs shaking hands through her tangled hair. "I would have died out there. The gods know I came close. The entire kingdom was hunting me. Your soldiers were everywhere. I couldn't—" She breaks off. "I did what I had to do to survive."

"What was I supposed to think?" Smoke rises thicker as my control slips. "I found you in his fortress, unchained, while my kingdom falls apart—"

"I was playing his game!" The words burst from her like she's been holding them back for hours. "I was trying to survive, to protect—" She breaks off, one hand pressing briefly to her stomach before falling away. "I did what I had to do. Just like I did with you."

The comparison stings more than it should. "So I'm no better than him? Is that what

you're saying?"

"That's not—" Calliope makes a sound of frustration, running her hands through her tangled hair. "You're twisting my words, just like you always do. You hear what you expect to hear, what confirms your worst fears—"

"And what should I hear?" I rise, pacing the small clearing. Steam rises where my boots touch snow. "That you didn't choose to stay with him? That you didn't—"

"I didn't choose any of this!" My wife stands too, swaying slightly. Through our bond, I feel her exhaustion warring with her fury. I quash the urge to steady her, to guide her back down. "I didn't choose to be taken from my home, to be made your prisoner, to discover I had magic that made me valuable to men like you and your brother—"

"I am nothing like him." The words come out in a snarl that's more dragon than human. "Everything I did was to protect you."

"To protect me?" Her eyes flash. "Or to protect your claim on me? Your precious bloodline? That's all I ever was to you—a vessel for your heir, a tool to secure your throne. Maybe you loved me, Arvoren, and maybe you still do. But you did not love me nearly enough."

"You know that's not true." But even as I say it, I feel sick.

"Do I?" Despite her weakened state, there's still that fierce defiance that drew me to her from the start. She steps closer, close enough that I can smell the crisp sweetness of her skin beneath the lingering taint of Ulric's fortress. "You say you're nothing like him, but you both speak of protection while meaning possession. At least he never pretended it was respect. He knew I knew the rules of the game."

The accusation hits like a physical blow. "Is that what you think? That I never—" I break off, smoke curling thick between my teeth. How can I make her understand what she means to me when I barely understand it myself?

"Arvoren," she says softly, and somehow that hurts worse than anger would have. I cannot bear the shape of my name on her lips. "You didn't know how to love without consuming—without consuming me. My greatest fear has been, all this time...that you would never learn." And, unspoken: and you haven't.

"You don't know how to trust," I snap back. "How to stay and fight instead of running at the first sign of conflict. You talk of freedom, but you're just as trapped by your fears as I am by mine. Millrath was your home, I am your husband —"

"My husband?" Her laugh is bitter as the cold wind around us. "You don't know anything, my king. My fears kept me alive these past months. Running kept me safe—"

"Safe?" I gesture to her wounds, to the purple-black bruises visible at her throat. "You call this safe? Whatever game you were playing with Ulric, you lost —"

"Don't." Calliope looks truly angry for the first time, some of that hollowness cracking and melting. She glares up at me from the other side of the fire. "Don't you dare judge what I did to survive when you're the reason I had to run in the first place. When you still can't see—" She breaks off, pressing her hands to her face. Through our bond, I feel her exhaustion, her frustration, but also something else—a desperate longing that mirrors my own.

"What?" I step closer, close enough to feel the magic radiating from her skin like heat. "What can't I see, Calliope?"

"That I wanted to stay!" The words burst from Calliope like she's been holding them

back for months. "That I wanted to believe in you, in us, in everything you promised. But how could I? How could I trust you with—" She catches herself. "How could I trust you when you never truly trusted me?"

The silence that follows feels like a physical weight. We stare at each other across the small space, both breathing hard, both unable to bridge the chasm of hurt and fear between us. Snow falls thicker around our small camp, as if responding to her turbulent emotions.

"I searched for you." My voice comes out rougher than intended. "Every day since you fled. Every report, every rumor, every whisper of your whereabouts. I left my Kingdom on the brink of civil war to find you."

"Because you needed your queen." The bitterness in her voice makes my chest ache. "Your symbol of power. Your—"

"Because I needed you !" The words emerge in a roar that shakes snow from the branches above.

Calliope flinches at my outburst, but doesn't back down.

After a silent moment, she rises to her feet, her movements slow and deliberate despite her exhaustion. The firelight catches in her hair, turning it to molten copper, and for a moment I'm struck breathless by her beauty, her fierceness. Even wounded and weary, she stands before me like a queen—no, like a goddess of old, terrible and magnificent.

"You needed me," she repeats, her voice low and dangerous. "And what of what I needed, Arvoren? What of my choices, my desires?"

She takes a step forward, and I feel the air thicken with magic—hers and mine,

intertwining, pushing against each other like storm fronts. The snow falling around us begins to steam and hiss where it touches our skin. The fire flares higher, casting wild shadows across her face. The tension between us crackles like lightning, electric and dangerous. Calliope's eyes flash with defiance, with hurt, with something else I can't quite name. The air grows thick with magic, snow hissing as it melts against our skin. Her hair whips around her face, caught in a wind that seems to emanate from her very being.

I can't look away from her—the curve of her neck, the set of her jaw, the way her chest rises and falls with each rapid breath. Even in her anger, even after everything, she's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen.

"Calliope," I growl, her name a plea and a warning all at once.

She steps closer, close enough that I can see the flecks of gold in her eyes.

When I surge forward to kiss her, it's as if no time has passed at all.

Our lips crash together with the force of a storm breaking. My arms encircle her waist, pulling her flush against me as if I could somehow erase the months of separation through sheer will alone. Calliope's hands tangle in my hair, nails scraping my scalp as she presses herself closer. The kiss is all teeth and tongue and desperation, a battle for dominance neither of us is willing to concede.

Steam rises around us as snow melts beneath our feet. The air crackles with magic, with the clash of fire and ice, with the raw power of our bond flaring to life once more. I taste smoke and sweetness on her tongue, feel the rapid flutter of her pulse beneath my fingers as I cup her narrow throat in my hands.

She doesn't say she loves me, even as she kisses the breath from my lungs. I suppose I can't expect it from her, not after everything.

Later, as the fire burns low, we curl together near the flame. We didn't go further than kissing, not now—I'm not sure either of us could quite bear to. Calliope sleeps curled against my chest. Her breath comes slow and even, but I feel her trembling slightly even in sleep. Whether from cold or lingering fear, I'm not sure. I pull her closer, letting my warmth seep into her frozen limbs.

The forest watches us with ancient eyes. Out in the darkness, branches crack under the weight of fresh snow. Every sound makes me tense, expecting Ulric's men to materialize from the shadows. But it's not just enemies I fear now. The spirit guardians recognized something in Calliope—something that made them pause, that made their ancient magic bow to hers. Something I don't understand, for all my dragon's wisdom.

Movement in the trees makes me stiffen, but it's only Darian, limping out of the darkness. Blood has frozen in his beard, and his armor bears deep gouges from talons and steel. The sight of him alone tells me everything I need to know.

"The others?" I ask anyway, though I already know the answer.

He shakes his head once, heavily. "Ulric's men showed no mercy. I only escaped because—" He breaks off, glancing at Calliope's sleeping form. "The magic she unleashed. It gave me the opening I needed. I knew I needed to follow you."

I close my eyes briefly, grief warring with rage. Good men died today, men who swore their lives to my service. Their blood is on my brother's hands—and on mine, for leading them into his trap.

"You need to return to Millrath," I tell Darian, keeping my voice low. "The throne stands undefended. It will not stand for long."

Darian must know some madness of mine has abated with her presence. I can see it

on his face. He's relieved, but grim.

He eyes Calliope's wounds, then the treacherous landscape around us. "My king, you cannot stay out here alone. Let me help you get her back to the city—"

"She's too weak to hold on to me, and I won't risk carrying her in this weather." The thought of trying to navigate the bitter winds with her in my talons or on my back, of dropping her into the endless white below... "No. I'll get her back on foot. But someone needs to hold the castle until we return."

"Arvoren." He uses my name rarely, and only when he needs me to really listen. "The kingdom needs its king."

"The kingdom needs its queen." The words come out fiercer than intended. Calliope stirs slightly against me but doesn't wake. "I won't lose her again, Darian. Not to Ulric, not to the storm, not to anything. Whatever she's been through, whatever lies he fed her..." I trail off, smoke curling from my mouth. "I have to make this right."

Even if she'll never trust me. Even if this can't be fixed. I have to try.

Darian studies me for a long moment, his expression unreadable. Then he bows, wincing slightly at the movement. "As you command, my king. I'll return when I can, with aid."

He limps out into the darkness, and soon I hear the sound of massive wings beating against the storm through the impenetrable gloom. I pull Calliope closer, breathing in the crisp sweetness that always clings to her skin. Through our bond, I feel her magic pulse in time with that strange warmth deep inside her.

Whatever happened in that fortress, whatever game she played to survive, I know one thing with bone-deep certainty: she is still mine. My wife, my queen, my heart's

greatest weakness. And I will burn the world to ash before I let anyone take her from me again.

The storm rages on, and somewhere in the endless dark, my brother plots his next move. But for now, in this small circle of firelight, I hold what matters most. Everything else—the throne, the kingdom, even vengeance—can wait.

I press my lips to Calliope's hair and settle in to watch the night, dragon-fire burning in my blood to keep her warm.

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:44 am

Dawn bleeds silver through the pines, turning frost to diamonds on bare branches. I wake to find Arvoren exactly where he was when exhaustion finally claimed me—sitting against a massive trunk, one arm still curved protectively around my shoulders. Steam rises faintly where snow meets his heated skin. The fire smolders, smoking but barely there. He hasn't slept; I can tell by the tension in his jaw, the way his eyes track every shadow in the pale morning light.

For a moment, I let myself remember other mornings, back in Millrath. How he would watch me then, too. Something has changed, but I cannot describe or understand quite what it is. The difference makes my chest ache in ways I can't quite name.

"The storm's dying," he says when he notices I'm awake. His voice is rough from disuse, but gentler than it was last night. "We should be able to cover more ground today."

I sit up slowly, wincing as my body protests. Everything hurts—the spirit's burn on my arm, the lingering weakness from Ulric's poison, the deep bone-weariness of pushing my magic too far. I haven't felt truly comfortable in months. The child's presence pulses steady and warm within me, but I can feel their magic taking its toll, too, draining what little strength I have left.

"Where are we going?" I ask, though I already know the answer.

"Millrath." When I stiffen, he adds quickly, "The castle is the only place I can properly protect you. At least until we deal with Ulric—"

"I won't be locked away again." The words come out sharper than intended. "I can't."

He looks away, smoke curling from between his teeth. "You really think I would...after everything that's happened, you still believe I'd treat you like that?"

"I don't know what to believe anymore." I wrap my arms around myself, trying to hide how my hands shake. "You saw me in that fortress and assumed the worst. Didn't even try to understand—"

"Because it looked like you'd chosen him!" Real pain edges into his voice. "My own brother, who tried to kill us both. Who would have torn apart everything we—" He breaks off, running a hand through his hair in frustration. "How was I supposed to trust what I saw?"

"Arvoren, how am I supposed to trust you? Even—" I stop, pressing my lips together. Even now, I can taste the sickly sweetness of the tea, feel the fog that clouded my thoughts for weeks. "You see betrayal everywhere you look because that's all you expect to find. Perhaps you gave me the habit. I can't trust that you'll be the husband I need you to be, not until you show me it's true."

Something flickers across his face—hurt, maybe, or recognition. But before he can respond, a sound cuts through the morning quiet: branches snapping, something large moving through the underbrush.

Arvoren is on his feet instantly, pushing me behind him as shadows detach themselves from the murk beyond the trees.

They move like liquid darkness, these creatures. Bigger than wolves but wrong somehow—too many joints, too many teeth gleaming wetly in the pale light. Magic ripples across their shadowy forms like oil on water. I count five, then seven, then lose track as more emerge from the forest, moving around us, flowing synchronously.

Their eyes glow with an inner fire that speaks of ancient power and hunger. I feel them watching.

I cannot yet tell whether they're hostile. Whether they want us dead.

"Stay close," Arvoren growls, scales rippling beneath his skin as his dragon nature rises to the surface. "If they're Ulric's—"

"No." I recognize the magic radiating from them—older than Ulric, older than kingdoms or crowns. "These aren't his. They feel...different. They're wild."

This is wild magic. I know it as well as I'd know my own flesh and blood.

The beasts circle us with impossible grace, their movements too fluid for their massive bodies. When they breathe, frost forms in the air, and the temperature around us plummets. One lets out a sharp, crackly sound like ice cracking in the depths of winter—a hunting call that makes my blood run cold.

The attack comes without warning.

Two launch themselves at Arvoren while another lunges for me. He meets them with fire and fury, dragon-flame turning the morning air to steam, shifting instantly. I stumble backward as he towers above me, trying to call my magic, to summon the storm that always hovers at the edges of my consciousness.

Power rises, but something's wrong. Pain shoots through my abdomen, sharp and unexpected. I double over, one hand pressed to my stomach as black spots dance at the edges of my vision.

Too much. Too much.

With a thrill of fear, I know my body is reaching its inevitable limits.

"Calliope!" Arvoren's voice seems to come from very far away. Through blurred vision, I see him tear through one of the beasts with terrible efficiency, his partially transformed state letting him match their impossible speed. But there are so many, and they keep coming, flowing out of the shadows like living darkness.

I have to help. Have to fight. But the magic slips away like smoke through my fingers, and the pain intensifies with each attempt to grasp it. The child moves within me, their presence both comfort and terror. What if using too much power hurts them? What if—

A shadow falls over me. One of the creatures looms above, its too-many teeth bared in what might be a smile. This close, I can see the patterns of frost that spread across its midnight fur, the way its form seems to shift and flow like water in moonlight. Ancient magic radiates from it in waves that make my teeth ache.

It lunges. I throw myself sideways, but I'm too slow, too weak. Claws like icicles tear through my sleeve, drawing blood that freezes instantly on my skin. The pain clears my head enough to access a fragment of power—just enough to send a burst of killing frost into the creature's face. It reels back with a sound like breaking glass.

"No!"

Arvoren's roar shakes snow from the branches above. Dragon-fire fills the air as he barrels into the beast, tearing it apart with claws and flame. But more circle behind him, their movements coordinated, patient. They know they have us outnumbered. Know we're already exhausted—from our flight from the fortress, from his desperate search for me, from my dire and unending ordeal.

I try once more to reach for my magic, gritting my teeth against the pain. The child's

power pulses within me, eager to help, but I force it down. I can't risk them, not to save myself. Not even to save their father.

Arvoren fights like a demon, his partially transformed state letting him match the creatures' impossible speed and strength. But he won't leave my side to pursue them properly, won't risk them getting past him to me. His protection will get him killed.

It will get us both killed. All three of us.

"Go!" I shout as another beast lunges. "I can—"

The words die in my throat as agony tears through me. The child's magic surges despite my attempts to contain it, responding to my fear. Power explodes outward in a wave of killing frost, turning the very air to crystal. The beasts cry out in voices like breaking glass. Tree branches crack and shatter in the sudden cold.

The last thing I see before darkness claims me is Arvoren's face, transformed by terror as I crumple into his arms. His lips form my name, but I can't hear him over the roaring in my ears. Can't tell him about the life growing inside me, about why I'm so afraid.

Can't trust him with this final, precious secret. Not yet. Maybe not ever.

The world fades to white, and somewhere in the endless dark, our child's magic pulses like a second heartbeat.

I wake to warmth and the steady rhythm of a heart beating against my cheek.

For a moment, I'm disoriented—where is the perpetual chill of Ulric's tower, the

whispers of ancient magic in the walls? But no—I'm curled against Arvoren's chest, his arms wrapped around me like steel bands, dragon-fire warmth seeping into my frozen limbs. Somehow he's found us shelter: a shallow cave carved into the hillside, partially hidden by a curtain of ice-heavy pine boughs. Snow falls beyond our sanctuary in lazy spirals, turned gold by the last light of sunset.

He's finally succumbed to exhaustion, his breathing deep and even. One of his hands rests protectively over my stomach, and the intimacy of it makes my heart ache. In sleep, his face loses its hard edges, the constant tension melting away. He looks younger, almost vulnerable. More like the man who would wake in the night just to pull me closer, less like the king who kept me in chains.

The child moves within me, a flutter like butterfly wings, and I have to bite back a gasp. Their magic pulses in time with Arvoren's heartbeat, reaching for him even as I hold myself back. How would he react if he knew? Would he see our baby as a miracle or a tool to secure his bloodline? Would he lock me away "for my own protection," keeping me safe until I deliver his heir?

He'll know soon, I know. I'm already showing, though it's subtle enough that I can hide it. But it won't be long.

I want to believe he's changed. Want to trust the tenderness in the way he holds me, the fear in his voice when I collapsed. But I remember too well the possessive gleam in his eyes when he first claimed me as his queen, the way he watched my every move as if expecting betrayal. His brutality. His cruelty. The fear that still hasn't left me, that I will carry for the rest of my life, of having no freedom ever again.

Careful not to wake him, I trace the line of his jaw with trembling fingers. There's a new scar there, very small and faint, still pink and healing—earned searching for me, perhaps? He shifts slightly at my touch, pulling me closer even in sleep, and murmurs something that might be my name.

I love him. That's the terrifying truth of it. Maybe I always did, despite everything. When he fights to protect me, when he looks at me like I'm something precious rather than something to possess... it would be so easy to let myself fall. To give up.

But it isn't enough, is it? Not without trust. Not without the freedom to choose, the knowledge that our child— my child—will be safe, provided for. Treated gently. Treated with a dignity Millrath stole from me for a long, long time.

Unbidden, tears prick at my eyes. They deserve better than a life of suspicion and control. Deserve to be loved for themselves, not for their power or their bloodline. What if Arvoren sees them as just another piece in his game of politics and power? What if—

He stirs, his arms tightening around me.

"Calliope?" His voice is rough with sleep and worry. "Are you hurt? The magic you used—"

"I'm alright." I press my face into his chest, hiding the warring emotions I know must show on my face. "Just tired."

He makes a sound deep in his throat, almost a growl. "You shouldn't have tried to fight. Should have let me—"

"Let you what? Die protecting me?" The words come out sharper than intended. "I'm not helpless, Arvoren. Not anymore."

Arvoren's hand comes up to cup my cheek, turning my face toward his. There's something in his eyes I can't quite read—fear? Hope?

"I know you're not helpless. I know you're stronger than I ever imagined. But I

can't—" He breaks off. "I can't lose you again. Not to Ulric, not to anything."

The raw honesty in his voice makes my chest tight. I want to tell him everything. Want to take his hand and press it to my stomach, to share this miracle growing within me. Want to believe that he could love us both without needing to control us.

Instead, I lean up and brush my lips against his jaw, tasting smoke and winter wind on his skin.

"Sleep," I whisper. "We're both safe for now."

He subsides reluctantly, but his arms stay locked around me, as if afraid I'll disappear the moment he lets go. I listen as his breathing evens out again, feeling the steady rise and fall of his chest beneath my cheek.

Outside our shelter, the storm rages on. But here, wrapped in dragon-fire warmth with our child's magic pulsing between us, I let myself imagine a future where trust comes as easily as breathing. Where love doesn't mean possession. Where we can build something new from the ashes of what we were.

It's a beautiful dream.

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:44 am

Ice claims everything up here. The path—if it can be called that—winds between sheer walls of black rock, barely wide enough for two to walk abreast. Each step must be placed with careful precision; one wrong move means a fall into the endless white below. Wind howls through the pass like a living thing, driving snow and ice sideways with enough force to draw blood.

Calliope stumbles again, catching herself against the cliff face. Her breathing comes in sharp gasps that crystallize instantly in the bitter air. Through our bond, I feel her exhaustion like a physical weight, though she tries to hide it. Always trying to hide her weakness from me, even now.

We've been moving for days. She refuses to stop, and I can hardly blame her, though I try to fight it. She knows what is at stake.

"We should rest," I say anyway, touching her arm. Steam rises where my heated skin meets her frozen sleeve. "There's an overhang ahead—"

"I can keep going." My wife's voice is rough, determined. But I feel her trembling beneath my hand, see the way she sways slightly with each gust of wind.

The urge to simply pick her up, to carry her to safety whether she likes it or not, burns in my blood. But I remember too well how that ended last time—my need to protect becoming possession, driving her away. Still, when she takes another step and her knee buckles...

I catch her before she can fall, pulling her against my chest. "Enough."

She starts to protest, but I cut her off: "You can barely stand. Let me help you. Please."

That last word seems to surprise her. She looks up at me, snowflakes caught in her dark lashes, and for a moment I see a flash of the trust we once shared. Before I ruined everything with chains and guards and my desperate need to keep her close.

"Just until the next bend," she finally concedes. "I don't want to slow us down."

I want to tell her that nothing matters except getting her somewhere safe. That my kingdom could burn if it meant protecting her. But the words stick in my throat, tangled with all my fears of losing her again. Instead, I sweep her into my arms as gently as I can, cradling her against my chest.

Calliope is too light, I realize with a fresh surge of fury. Whatever happened in that cursed fortress has left her thinner, more fragile. Something has changed in her magic, in her very essence, though I can't quite grasp what.

Once, when I was a child, my mother was bed-bound for a month after receiving news that her own mother from the human territories—my grandmother, who I never met—had died. She refused to see anyone but her husband and children, retreating from courtly duties, sleeping for hours each day, weak as a fawn. I recall my father feeding her soup late one evening, hands so gentle on her thin, delicate skin, stroking her hair when she was done.

Sometimes, when you're very, very sad, it can make you unwell, my dearheart, and it can be hard to get better again, she told me when I asked. She must have seen my face fall, because she said: but when people love you very much, and they care for you, you'll always be alright in the end.

I wonder whether I broke some part of her, of Calliope. I wonder whether my

enduring and fearsome love is the cure or the source of the sickness itself.

We continue up the treacherous path, my dragon's blood keeping us both warm as the storm intensifies. Calliope burrows closer, seeking heat, and my heart clenches at the simple trust of the gesture. How long has it been since she willingly pressed herself against me like this? Since she sought comfort in my arms rather than fearing my grip would turn to iron?

"I've got you," I murmur, though the wind probably steals the words. "I won't let you fall."

She makes a soft sound that might be acknowledgment, might be protest. Through our bond, I feel her exhaustion warring with something else—fear? Hope? The connection between us has grown stronger since I found her, but also stranger. Sometimes I catch fragments of emotions that don't feel quite like hers, echoes of something I can't identify.

The path grows narrower, ice coating every surface. Each step must be tested before I put my full weight down, and even my enhanced vision can barely pierce the curtain of white ahead. But I don't dare stop, don't dare set her down in this killing cold. Her body temperature drops steadily despite my efforts to warm her, and that strange pulse of magic within her seems to draw more strength with each passing hour.

"Stay with me," I growl when her head lolls against my shoulder. "Just a little further."

She stirs slightly. "Always so certain...you know where you're going..."

Isn't that always the way, I think with grim, tired irony. I'm always so certain.

"I'll find us shelter." I tighten my grip as another gust of wind tries to tear her from

my arms. "I won't let anything happen to you. Not again."

The words carry more weight than I intend. Through our bond, I feel her register the promise—and the possessiveness beneath it. Her fingers clench in my cloak, though whether in acceptance or resistance, I can't tell.

How do I make her understand? That every protective instinct, every surge of possessive fury, comes from the terror of losing her again? That I would give her all the freedom in the world if I could just trust she would choose to stay?

But I can't force that trust, any more than she can force herself to believe in me again. All I can do is hold her close, shielding her from the storm with my body, and pray that somehow it will be enough.

The wind howls fiercer, and somewhere in the endless white ahead, shelter waits. If we can reach it. If she can hold on. If I can keep from driving her away with the very love that burns like dragon-fire in my blood.

The cave mouth appears through the storm like a wound in the mountainside, barely visible beneath a thick crust of ice. It's deep enough to offer real shelter, the tunnel curving away from the bitter wind. Some ancient creature probably carved it ages ago—the walls bear scratch marks from claws larger than mine, worn smooth by centuries of wind and weather.

Calliope stirs as I carry her inside. "Where...?"

"Safe." I set her down carefully, keeping one arm around her waist when she sways. "At least for now."

The space is larger than it first appeared, the ceiling high enough that I could transform if needed. More importantly, the curve of the tunnel blocks the worst of the

wind, though ice still coats every surface. A good defensible position, with only one entrance to guard.

Not that it matters. In her current state, we couldn't fight our way out of a burlap sack.

"You're doing it again," Calliope murmurs, and I realize I've been scanning the cave like a soldier, categorizing threats and escape routes. Old habits.

"Doing what?"

"Planning for war." She shivers despite my dragon-warmth pressed against her side. "Always ready for the next battle."

Because the next battle is always coming. Because everything I love eventually becomes a target, a weakness to be exploited. But I can't say that without sounding exactly like the paranoid tyrant she fled from.

Instead, I focus on practical matters. There's enough debris scattered around—old branches, dried vegetation blown in from outside—to build a small fire. It takes more effort than usual to summon a flame; the altitude and bitter cold sap even my enhanced strength. But soon a cheerful blaze casts dancing shadows on the ice-slick walls.

"Sit." I guide her closer to the fire. "Before you fall."

She doesn't argue, which tells me more about her condition than any words could. As she settles, I notice fresh blood soaking through her sleeve—the spirit guardian's burn has reopened, probably from the endless jostling of our climb. Without asking permission, I kneel beside her and begin unwrapping the makeshift bandage.

The wound looks worse than before, the flesh around it blackened as if touched by

deep frost. This close, I can smell the lingering corruption of whatever poison Ulric used, mingled with something else—a sharp sweetness that seems to radiate from her very skin. When my fingers brush the injury, she flinches.

"Sorry." I try to be gentler, though gentleness has never come easily to me. Through our bond, I feel her pain as if it were my own. Feel something else, too, that strange pulse of warmth deep inside her growing stronger. "I don't have any proper medicines. But maybe..."

I let my dragon nature rise closer to the surface, just enough that my palm grows fever-hot, and press it carefully over the wound, hoping my fire can burn away whatever lingering magic taints her blood. She gasps—in pain or relief, I can't tell—and her free hand comes up to grip my wrist.

"Trust me," I murmur, though I have no right to ask that of her. Not after everything. "Please."

She says nothing, but she doesn't pull away either. We stay like that for long moments, my fire seeping into her frozen flesh as shadows lengthen around us. Outside, the storm rages fiercer, as if angry at having lost its prey.

Finally, I lift my hand. The blackness has receded slightly, though the wound still looks angry and raw. It's the best I can do without proper healing supplies. I start to move away, to give her space, but her fingers tighten on my wrist.

"Stay?" Calliope's voice is barely a whisper. "Just...I'm so cold."

The words twist something in my chest. Perhaps it is my heart. Perhaps it is failing, after all this time. I settle beside her, pulling her close against my side. She burrows into my warmth like she used to, back before chains and crowns came between us. Her head fits perfectly beneath my chin, as if she was made to rest there.

"Sleep," I tell her. "I'll keep watch."

She makes a soft sound of protest, but exhaustion is already pulling her under. Through our bond, I feel her consciousness fading, feel that strange warmth inside her pulse stronger as she drifts off. Her fingers stay tangled in my cloak, as if afraid I'll disappear.

I press my lips to her hair. Even now, after everything, the urge to possess burns in my blood. To lock her away somewhere safe, where nothing can ever hurt her again. To burn anyone who tries to take her from me.

But I remember too well how that ended last time. Remember the look in her eyes when she realized the pretty cage was still a cage. Remember waking to find her gone, taking half my soul with her.

So instead, I hold her gently. Let her choose to stay close, to trust me with her vulnerability. Try to believe that maybe, this time, it can be different.

The fire burns low, and somewhere in the endless dark beyond our shelter, enemies gather. But for now, I have her in my arms. For now, she's choosing to stay.

It will have to be enough for me.

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:44 am

The old fortress rises from the mountainside like the bones of some ancient beast, its walls black against the endless white of snow. Wind howls through empty arrow slits and crumbling battlements, carrying echoes that sound almost like voices—soldiers long dead, still standing their eternal watch.

I barely notice its grim majesty. The world has narrowed to the next step, the next breath, the desperate need to keep moving despite the weakness that threatens to drag me under. Our child's magic pulses within me like a captive star, growing stronger even as it drains what little strength I have left.

"Almost there." Arvoren's voice rumbles against my side where he supports most of my weight. Steam rises where his dragon-heated skin meets the frozen air. "Just a little further."

The words swim in and out of focus as darkness crowds the edges of my vision. How long have we been walking? Hours blur together, marked only by the endless rhythm of stumbling steps and the child's strengthening presence. Sometimes I think I hear them in my dreams—not crying, but singing, their magic harmonizing with mine in ways I don't understand.

We cross what remains of the outer wall, ancient wards crackling faintly beneath the ice that coats every surface. The sensation sends shivers down my spine that have nothing to do with cold. This place remembers what it once was—a bastion against the horrors that lurked in the peaks beyond Kaldoria's borders. Now it stands empty, its only sentinels the wind and snow.

"Here." Arvoren guides me through a half-collapsed doorway into what must have

been the garrison's main hall. The ceiling has partially caved in, letting pale light filter through gaps in tumbled stone, but the space is dry and defensible. Faded banners still hang on the walls, bearing sigils I don't recognize—Houses long forgotten by history.

My legs finally give out. Arvoren catches me before I can fall, lifting me as easily as a child. The world spins lazily as he carries me to a relatively intact corner, where old furs still line stone benches built into the wall. The military precision of the ancient garrison's construction protected this small shelter from the worst of the elements.

"Your fever's worse." His voice seems to come from very far away as he settles me on the furs. His hand feels shockingly hot against my forehead—or am I just that cold? "Whatever Ulric did to you..."

"Not him." The words scratch my throat. "Not anymore. It's..."

But I can't finish. Can't tell him that it's our child's magic taking its toll, growing stronger as they grow within me. That every day I feel them more clearly, their power mingling with mine until I can hardly tell where one ends and the other begins.

The last thing I see before exhaustion claims me is Arvoren's face, lined with worry in the dim light. Then darkness sweeps in, carrying me down into dreams.

I stand in Ulric's study, heart pounding as he circles me like a predator. Snow falls endlessly outside the arrow-slit windows, and the cloying sweetness of tea coats my tongue.

"That child you carry," he says, his voice honey-sweet but edged with poison. "Do you really think my brother will let either of you live once he knows? A child with that much power...he'll see it as a threat to his throne. To his control."

The scene shifts, dissolves, reforms. Now I'm in the Sanctum at Millrath, where Arvoren and I were married. But the glass walls show only darkness beyond, and when I touch them, they're warm as blood.

"Mine," Arvoren's voice echoes from everywhere and nowhere. "My wife, my queen, my heart's greatest weakness..."

The words overlap, tangle, become something else: "My possession, my prisoner, my chain..."

But then another voice cuts through the darkness—my grandmother's, though I haven't heard it since I was a child. She stands before me, though her form shifts and flows like smoke on water.

"The old magic stirs," she says, and her voice carries the weight of mountains. "Powers long sleeping begin to wake. The child you carry...they will reshape this world, for better or worse. But first, you must choose. Trust or fear. Love or control. The future hangs by a thread of ice, little one. What will you make of it?"

I wake with a gasp, the dream fragments clinging like frost to my skin. The hall is darker now, though a small fire burns nearby, casting dancing shadows on ancient stone. Arvoren sits beside me, his expression unreadable in the flickering light.

"You were calling out in your sleep," he says softly. "Begging someone not to take them. Who were you afraid of losing?"

The question hangs in the air between us, sharp as broken glass. Through our bond, I feel his fear, his desperate need to understand what's happening to me. To us.

And suddenly, I can't bear the weight of this secret anymore.

My hands shake as I push myself to sitting. The child's magic pulses stronger, as if they know what I'm about to do. As if they're trying to give me courage.

"Something's changed in you." Arvoren's voice is barely more than a whisper. "I feel it through our bond—a warmth I don't understand. Power unlike anything..." He breaks off, smoke curling from between his teeth. "Please. Just tell me what's happening. Let me help you."

The raw need in his voice makes my chest ache. I look at him—really look at him—in the dance of firelight and shadow. The proud Dragon King who kept me in chains, who watched my every move with possessive intensity...but also the man who carries me through endless snow, who tends my wounds with shaking hands, who looks at me now with such desperate hope.

"I couldn't trust you before," I say finally. "I was so afraid you'd...and I still am. And I still can't. But..."

"What?" He moves closer, though he's careful not to touch me. Through our bond, I feel his fear warring with restraint. "Afraid I'd what?"

"Lock me away again. Keep me prisoner until..." My hand drifts unconsciously to my stomach. "Until I gave you what you always wanted."

His breath catches. For a moment, there's only the crackle of flames and the endless howl of wind through ancient stone. I feel him piecing it together—the changes in my magic, my weakening body, that pulse of warmth deep inside me.

"Calliope." My name emerges as barely more than a breath. "Are you..."

The words stick in my throat. Instead, I take his hand—his skin burning hot against my frozen fingers—and press it to my stomach. Through our bond, I feel the exact moment he senses it: our child's magic, singing in harmony with mine. The incredible power growing within me, born of dragon's blood and Windwaker ancestry combined.

"How long?" His voice shakes. "How long have you known?"

"Since before Ulric found me." The truth spills out like water from a broken dam. "I had just left...left the city. I was so scared, Arvoren. Scared you'd see our baby as just another piece in your game of politics and power. That you'd chain me again, keep me locked away until..."

"Until our child could be a proper heir?" The bitterness in Arvoren's voice makes me flinch. "Is that really what you think of me? That I would—"

He breaks off, pulling his hand away as if burned. Smoke pours from his mouth as he stands, pacing the length of our shelter like a caged beast.

"What was I supposed to think?" My own anger rises to meet his. "You kept me in chains! Watched my every move like you expected betrayal at any moment. How could I trust you with something so precious when you never truly trusted me?"

"Because I love you!" The words explode from him like dragon-fire. "Everything I did—every chain, every guard, every moment of watching and waiting—was because I couldn't bear the thought of losing you. And you proved me right, didn't you? You ran. You left."

"I left because I had to!" I struggle to my feet, though the room spins alarmingly. "I need my freedom, Arvoren—I need it more than anything. And once I knew... once I knew, I couldn't come back. I couldn't let our child be born in a cage, no matter how

gilded. Because I needed to know if you could ever see me as something more than a possession to be controlled."

He whirls to face me, and for a moment I glimpse the dragon beneath his skin—scales rippling, eyes burning with inner fire. But then he seems to crumple in on himself, the fury draining away to leave something raw and vulnerable in its wake.

"I failed you," he says quietly. "Failed both of you. Everything I did to keep you close only drove you away. And now..." He gestures helplessly at my weakened state. "Now our child drains your strength while I can do nothing but watch."

The defeat in his voice undoes me. Without thinking, I close the distance between us, taking his face in my hands. His skin burns against my palms, dragon-fire warming my frozen fingers.

"Then do better," I whisper. "Be better. Show me I can trust you with this. With us."

He shudders, pressing his forehead to mine. Through our bond, I feel his turmoil—the possessive instincts warring with his desperate desire to prove himself worthy of my trust. To be the man I need him to be. The father our child deserves.

"I want to," he breathes. "Gods, Calliope, I want to be everything you need. But I don't know how. I don't know how to love without trying to possess. How to protect without controlling. How to—"

I silence him with a kiss, but it isn't bruising, isn't forceful. I just know in my gut I have no choice but to do it. He seems to know too. Our lips meet softly at first, a tentative brush like the whisper of wind through autumn leaves. His breath catches, and I feel the tension in his body—the dragon's instinct to claim, to possess. But he holds back, letting me set the pace.

I deepen the kiss, my fingers sliding into his hair. It's like touching living flame, warm and alive beneath my hands. Arvoren makes a sound low in his throat, a sort of contented growl. His arms encircle me, but gently, as if I'm made of spun glass.

Through our new bond, I feel his struggle—the battle between primal need and this new, fragile tenderness. I pour my own longing into the kiss, showing him without words that I want this too. That I've missed his touch, even as I feared it.

The kiss turns heated, passionate. His hands roam tentatively, tracing the curve of my spine with reverent fingers. I arch into his touch, a soft gasp escaping my lips. Arvoren pulls back just enough to meet my gaze, his eyes molten gold in the firelight.

"Is this okay?" he whispers, his voice rough with need.

I nod, unable to find words. My skin tingles where he touches me, as if his dragon-fire has ignited something long dormant within me. I let my own hands explore, marveling at the play of muscle beneath his skin, the impossible heat radiating from his body.

Arvoren's breath hitches as I trace the line of his collarbone, my fingers dipping lower to rest over his thundering heart. Through our bond, I feel his desire warring with an almost painful tenderness. He touches me like I'm something precious, irreplaceable.

His lips find mine again, more urgent now. I melt into him, letting the warmth of his body chase away the lingering chill. My fingers trace the ridges of scars across his back, mapping a history of battles fought and won. Arvoren's hands ghost over my sides, leaving trails of fire in their wake.

"You're so cold," he murmurs against my skin. "Let me warm you."

With infinite care, he lifts me into his arms and carries me to furs warming near the

fire. He lays me down carefully, his eyes never leaving mine. The firelight casts flickering shadows across his face, softening the harsh planes and angles.

Slowly, reverently, he begins to undress me. Each inch of skin revealed is met with gentle kisses, as if he's discovering me anew. I shiver, but not from cold. Arvoren's touch ignites something primal within me, a hunger I've denied for too long. I reach for him, pulling him closer, needing to feel the solid warmth of his body against mine.

He comes willingly, covering me like a living blanket of heat and muscle. His skin shimmers in the firelight, scales rippling just beneath the surface. I trace the patterns with wondering fingers, marveling at the play of human and dragon. Arvoren shivers at my touch, a low rumble building in his chest.

"You're so beautiful," he whispers, voice thick with emotion. His hand splays across my stomach, cradling the slight swell there. "Both of you."

I guide his face to mine, kissing him deeply. For the first time in a long time, I regret nothing. I hold no shred of cold fear in this wounded heart.

We move together as one, our bodies joining in a dance as old as time. Arvoren enters me with exquisite gentleness, his eyes never leaving mine. He holds me as if I'm the most precious thing in this world. I gasp at the feeling of completeness, of two halves finally made whole. He stills, letting me adjust, his whole body trembling with the effort of restraint.

"Are you alright?" he whispers, voice rough with need.

I nod, unable to speak. The bond between us pulses with shared pleasure and awe. Slowly, Arvoren begins to move. Each thrust is careful, measured, as if he's afraid I might shatter beneath him. I wrap my legs around his waist, urging him deeper.

The fire casts flickering shadows across our entwined bodies. My husband's skin shimmers, scales rippling just beneath the surface. I trace the patterns with wondering fingers.

Our movements grow more urgent, a rising tide of passion and need. He captures my hand, pressing a kiss to each fingertip before guiding it to where we're joined. The sensation makes us both gasp. Through our bond, pleasure echoes and amplifies, building like a gathering storm.

I arch into him, wanting—needing—to be closer still. Our bodies move in perfect synchronicity. Our movements quicken, driven by a primal need. Arvoren's skin blazes with inner fire, his touch searing yet impossibly gentle. I cling to him, nails raking down his back as pleasure builds within me like a gathering storm.

Through our bond, I feel his desperate restraint warring with dragon-fierce passion. His eyes lock with mine, molten gold swirling with human tenderness.

"Let go," he breathes. "I've got you."

Something breaks loose inside me at his words. I cry out, back arching as ecstasy crashes over me in dizzying waves. Arvoren follows a heartbeat later, his whole body shuddering as he buries his face in my neck. For a timeless moment, we're suspended in shared bliss, two souls merging into one.

Slowly, reality reasserts itself. Arvoren's weight settles beside me. He holds me close, a sort of desperate closeness, but it isn't rough, isn't full of peril. He just holds me as a man holds his wife. I relish in the sensation of his warm breath against the back of my neck. I relish in him. I have never needed anyone or anything more, I think.

Later—much later—we lie tangled together on the furs, his dragon-warmth keeping the bitter cold at bay. One of his hands rests protectively over my stomach, and I feel

him marveling through our bond at the pulse of magic beneath his palm. Our child seems to reach for him, their power harmonizing with his in ways that bring tears to my eyes.

"I'll do better," he murmurs into my hair. "I swear it. Whatever it takes, however long it takes to earn your trust...I'll prove myself worthy of you both. You don't have to believe it yet."

I want to believe him. Want to trust the fierce tenderness in his voice, the way he holds me like something precious rather than something owned. Want to believe we can build something new from the ashes of what we were.

But I don't answer. Instead, I hope we can sleep.

Eventually, we do.

The dream takes us both at once.

One moment we're lying tangled together in the ruined fortress; the next, we stand atop the highest peak of the Dragonspine Mountains, where the air is too thin to breathe and stars wheel impossibly close overhead. The snow beneath our feet glows with an inner light, and the wind that howls around us carries voices older than kingdoms or crowns.

Arvoren's hand finds mine in the darkness. Through our bond, I feel his awe and terror mirror my own. This is no ordinary dream.

The old blood stirs. The voice seems to come from everywhere and nowhere, ancient as ice and twice as merciless. Dragon and Windwaker combined...such power has

not walked these lands since first we blessed them.

Shapes coalesce from the swirling snow—figures too vast and terrible for mortal eyes to comprehend fully. I catch glimpses of wings made of starlight, of eyes like frozen suns, of forms that shift between dragon and storm and something else entirely. The gods of Kaldoria, watching us with ancient interest.

This child, another voice whispers, and the very air seems to crystallize. This impossible child...they could heal the rift between magic and mankind. Could restore what was broken when the first dragons turned from our ways.

Or destroy everything. This voice burns like frost. They almost sound gleeful. Such power cannot be contained. Cannot be controlled. They will remake this world or end it.

The assembly wars, squabbling. Images flash through my mind like lightning: a child with my dark hair and Arvoren's straight nose and hard-drawn mouth, standing amid a storm of their own making. Cities rising from ruins, dragons and humans living in harmony once more. But also: armies clashing beneath a blood-red sky, the very mountains themselves burning with dragon-fire as ancient powers wage war once again.

"Kaldoria." Arvoren's voice rings with certainty, though his hand trembles in mine. "There was once nothing I loved more."

Laughter like breaking ice fills the air. You? Love? Look at you. Look at what you have become.

You think you can stop what has been set in motion? This child's destiny was written in the stars long before either of you drew breath.

But which destiny? Another voice, gentler somehow. That remains to be seen. A thousand possible paths, each leading to a different fate. The future is unwritten.

More visions overwhelm us: our child growing up in Millrath, loved and protected but also watched by forces beyond our understanding. Learning to harness their incredible power, to bridge the gap between dragon and human magic. Standing against some nameless darkness that threatens to consume everything. Or perhaps becoming that darkness themselves.

"No." The word tears from my throat. "I'll go to war for them. I'll bring you low, should I need to."

Brave words, little Windwaker. But you cannot fight what is already written. The only question is: will you guide them toward salvation or destruction? Will your love free them to choose their path, or will your fear chain them to fate?

The world shifts, dissolves, reforms. We stand in the Sanctum at Millrath, but the glass walls show only stars wheeling in endless dance. Our reflections ripple like water, showing a thousand possible futures: queen and king, prisoners and rulers, lovers and enemies, parents to a child who could reshape the world.

Choose wisely, the voices whisper as darkness creeps in.

I wake with a gasp to find Arvoren already alert, his arms tight around me. Dawn paints the ruined fortress in shades of pearl and silver, but the dream's chill lingers in our bones. Through our bond, I feel him processing what we saw—the terrible weight of destiny pressing down on our unborn child.

"It was real," he says quietly. "Wasn't it? The gods truly have plans for our child."

"Plans we don't have to accept." I press closer to his warmth, one hand curving

protectively over my stomach. Our baby moves within me, their magic pulsing strong and sure. "They're ours, Arvoren. Not the gods', not fate's. Ours to protect. Ours to love."

He's quiet for a long moment, his hand covering mine where it rests over our child. Through our bond, I feel his fierce protectiveness warring with lingering fear. "Together then," he says finally. "Whatever comes, whatever the gods or fate have planned...we face it together. As equals."

I turn in his arms to look at him—really look at him.

"Together," I agree softly, because I know he needs to hear it. Because I love him enough to give him that.

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:44 am

Even hours later, the gods' voices still whisper at the edges of my consciousness, their ancient magic lingering like frost on glass. As Calliope sleeps against my chest, her breathing slow and even, memories rise unbidden—fragments of a past that feels like it belonged to someone else entirely.

I have heard more from the gods since I met her than ever before in my life. They have historically been silent to my ears. Or perhaps I was not listening.

Summer in the castle gardens, the air heavy with the scent of night-blooming jasmine. Ulric and I sprawled on sun-warmed stone, barely more than boys, watching stars wheel overhead through gaps in the flowering vines. His hair caught the moonlight like a crown, and when he laughed, it was still his own laugh then—not the knife-edge sound it would become.

“Tell me about the dragons again,” he said, eyes bright with genuine wonder. “The first ones, the ones who taught our ancestors to shift.”

I obliged, as I always did back then. Told him the old stories our parents had passed down—tales of creatures vast as mountains, wise as time itself, who saw something worth saving in humanity. Who shared their fire and fury with those they deemed worthy, creating the first shapeshifters.

“Do you think they're still out there?” Ulric's voice held none of the bitterness that would later poison it. “The ancient ones?”

“They definitely could be.” I remember how simple certainty felt in those days. “Sleeping in the peaks beyond the northernmost frontier, waiting for...something.

Some sign that we're ready for their return."

"We'll find them someday." He sat up, golden hair falling in his eyes. "You and me, brother. We'll fly higher than anyone ever has, discover all the old mysteries. Make our parents proud."

But even then, something darker lurked beneath his dreams of glory. I know that now. Perhaps some part of me always had. I saw it in the way his hands clenched when he spoke of pride, in how his smile never quite reached his eyes when our father praised my progress in training.

The memory shifts, dissolves, reforms into something else entirely. The gods' magic pulls me deeper, forcing me to witness their terrible vision:

Ulric stands in a chamber I don't recognize, its walls covered in runes that pulse with sickly light. Calliope kneels before him, blood frozen black on her skin. One of his hands tangles in her hair, forcing her head back; the other holds a blade of strange dark metal against her throat.

"Did you really think you could protect her?" His voice carries the mockery I've come to know too well. "That you could keep something so powerful contained? She was never meant to be yours, brother. Her child will reshape this world—but not as your heir."

"Please," Calliope whispers, one hand pressed to her stomach. Through our bond, I feel her pain, her terror—and beneath that, our child's magic pulsing. "Ulric, don't—"

The blade moves.

Blood blooms like roses on snow.

I wake with a snarl, halfway toward shifting, fire under my skin. It takes several heartbeats to orient myself—to recognize the ruined fortress around us, to feel Calliope's solid warmth against my chest. She stirs slightly with my jolting but doesn't wake, exhausted from the day's revelations and the gods' visions.

The dream clings like poison. Even now, I can smell the copper-sharp scent of her blood, see the light fading from her eyes. My arms tighten around her unconsciously, scales rippling beneath my skin as the dragon in me roars for blood.

But the protective fury is tempered by grief. I remember too well the boy who used to beg for stories, who dreamed of flying higher than anyone before. When did that wonder curdle into bitterness? When did his hunger for glory become this obsession with destroying everything I hold dear?

I would gladly kill him. Perhaps that's why I am already halfway done grieving him.

Through the gaps in crumbling stone, I watch dusk paint the mountains in shades of blood and shadow. The storm has quieted somewhat, but that only makes it easier to imagine what moves in the gathering dark, out of eyesight, out of earshot. Boot-steps crunching on snow. Metal clinking against metal. The soft whisper of blade leaving sheath.

They're coming. I feel it in my bones.

Calliope shifts in her sleep, pressing closer to my warmth. One of her hands rests protectively over her stomach, and through our bond, I feel our child's magic pulse in time with her heartbeat. The power growing within her is incredible, terrifying. No wonder Ulric wants to claim it for himself. No wonder the Gods themselves take interest in our child's fate.

I should wake her. Should start moving while we still have cover of twilight. Millrath

lies weeks of hard travel to the south, and my throne grows more vulnerable with each passing day. The logical choice—the kingly choice—would be to fly us both back to the capital immediately, to secure our position before the Houses can move against us.

But I remember how pale she looked after the gods' visitation, how the magic drains more of her strength each day. Would she survive such a journey? Would our child? And even if they did, what then? Lock them both away in the castle while I wage war to keep my crown?

Choose wisely.

The sun sets. Darkness creeps in. And somewhere in the gathering gloom, enemies close like a noose around our shelter.

Eventually, I wake Calliope. We trudge onward.

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:44 am

I wake to the snap and flutter of canvas strung in wind. The makeshift shelter around us trembles, pine boughs creaking against each other where Arvoren lashed them together hours ago. Through gaps in the greenery, I glimpse a pearl-gray sky heavy with coming snow. My bones ache with more than just the endless cold—they seem to know the storm building on the horizon, to resonate with it like struck crystal.

Arvoren kneels beside our nest of furs, studying a spread of wrinkled parchment by guttering candlelight. The flame casts strange shadows across his face, deepening the exhaustion etched there. His formal clothes, once immaculate, now bear the marks of our journey: tears from thorns, scorch marks from battle, bloodstains that won't wash out. A fresh scratch mars his jaw, still crusted with blood he hasn't bothered to clean away.

My heart clenches at the sight. Even now, after everything, the urge to reach for him burns like fever beneath my skin.

"How long until dawn?" I ask instead, my voice rough with sleep.

He doesn't look up from the maps. "An hour, maybe less. The weather's turning. We need to move."

I push myself to sitting, biting back a groan as my body protests. The child's magic pulses within me, stronger every day, but it takes its toll. Each surge of power leaves me weaker, as if they're drawing strength from my very blood to fuel their growing abilities.

Sometimes I catch Arvoren watching me with a mix of wonder and terror when he

thinks I'm not looking. He can sense the changes in me through our bond, though he tries to hide his concern behind his usual mask of control. But I see how his hands clench when I stumble, how his jaw tightens each time I press a hand to my swollen belly.

"Here." He hands me a water skin without looking. "Drink. We have a long day ahead."

The water tastes of snow and pine needles. I drink deeply, watching him trace our route with one claw. His shoulders are rigid with tension, scales rippling beneath his skin in response to some thought he won't voice.

"What aren't you telling me?"

Now he does look at me, his dark eyes unreadable in the dim light. "The pass ahead is controlled by House Morwen. Their patrols have increased since—" He breaks off, smoke curling from between his teeth.

"Since your brother tried to claim your throne," I finish quietly.

His expression hardens. "We'll need to move quickly, stay off the main paths. If they catch your scent—"

"They'll what? Kill the heretic queen?" The words come out bitter. "I'm already marked for death by half the Houses in Kaldoria."

"They won't touch you." The possessive growl in his voice makes something low in my belly clench with heat. "I won't allow it."

"And what of our child?" I rest my hand over the swell of my stomach. "What future awaits them in a kingdom that sees their mother as a curse?"

He's beside me in an instant, his fever-hot hand covering mine. Through our bond, I feel his fierce protectiveness war with fear. "They will be safe. You know that."

"If we survive long enough to see it." I lean into his warmth despite myself. "If your kingdom doesn't tear itself apart first."

His other hand cups my chin, turning my face up to his. "Then we'll build something new from the ashes. I'd do it for you."

The promise in his voice makes my chest ache. I want so badly to believe him—to trust that the man who once kept me in chains can become the protector our child needs. But trust, like love, must be earned. Must be chosen, again and again.

Before I can respond, a gust of wind tears through our shelter, snuffing out the candle and sending the maps scattering. Arvoren curses, gathering them quickly as the temperature plummets. Fat snowflakes begin to drift through the gaps in the pine boughs.

"We need to move," he says again, more urgently. "Now."

I struggle to my feet, wrapping my cloak tighter as another shiver wracks me. The storm builds in my blood like lightning about to strike, responding to my unease. Soon the very air will crack with winter's fury.

Arvoren dismantles our shelter with efficient movements while I force down some dried meat and berries. The food sits heavy in my stomach, but I know I need the strength. Know our child needs it more.

We set out just as false dawn begins to paint the sky in shades of iron and pearl. The eerie silence of the forest has begun to settle within me. It feels almost a part of my being now, after all this.

Arvoren leads the way, his steps careful on the treacherous ground. Ice coats everything, making each footfall a battle against gravity. I follow in his tracks, one hand pressed to my belly, the other trailing along tree trunks for balance.

The miles crawl by in a haze of exhaustion and growing cold. My legs shake with each step, and black spots dance at the edges of my vision. The child's magic pulses erratically, making the temperature fluctuate wildly. One moment sweat freezes on my skin; the next, I burn with fever from within.

Eventually, he notices my failing strength. Of course he does—he feels it through our bond, just as I feel his mounting concern. But we can't stop, can't risk being caught in the open when the storm hits. So he slows his pace, staying close enough to catch me if I fall.

The attack comes just before nightfall.

One moment we're picking our way through a dense stand of pines; the next, figures melt from the shadows ahead.

Their armor bears House Morwen's sigil, though it's partially obscured by frost and grime. The stench of cheap alcohol carries on the wind.

Drunkards, and fools. But we cannot afford a fight. Not in my condition. Not with the cold, the long journey, the exhaustion, the hunger...

"Well, well." The largest of them steps forward, smoke curling from his nostrils. "What have we here?"

Arvoren moves in front of me, his voice deadly quiet. "Stand aside."

The soldier laughs, the sound as sharp as breaking ice. "The dead king gives orders

still! And what's this?" His eyes fix on me, gleaming with cruel interest. "You know, they say in Millrath that the people pray for your deaths. Our lord cares not, but he will pay well for your heads."

More soldiers emerge from the trees, forming a loose circle around us. I count six, then eight, then lose track as the world begins to spin. The child's magic rises unbidden, making my vision blur with power I can barely contain.

"Last warning." Scales ripple across Arvoren's skin as his dragon nature surfaces. "Move, or die where you stand."

"Bold words for a fallen king." The soldier draws his sword, the metal singing in the frozen air. "But there are eight of us and one of you."

Everything happens at once.

The transformation begins before any of us can move. Scales burst through Arvoren's skin in waves of ruby red, his formal clothing tearing as his body reshapes itself. Steam pours from between elongating teeth as he places himself between me and the soldiers, who take involuntary steps backward at the display of raw power.

But they've come too far to retreat now. The first soldier launches himself forward with impossible speed, his own partial transformation letting him match Arvoren's movements. Their bodies crash together with enough force to shake snow from nearby branches. Blood sprays across white ground as Arvoren's claws find flesh, but more attackers press in, their weapons gleaming dully in the fading light.

I try to help, reaching for the storm that always hovers at the edges of my consciousness. Power rises like a tide, making the very air crystallize—but something's wrong. The magic slips through my fingers like smoke, leaving me hollow and shaking. Black spots dance at the edges of my vision as another wave of

weakness hits.

My knees buckle. The world tilts sideways as I collapse into snow, one hand still pressed protectively to my stomach where our child's magic pulses erratically. Through blurred vision, I watch Arvoren fight with terrible efficiency, his partially transformed state letting him tear through flesh and bone as if they were parchment. But there are too many, and exhaustion slows his movements. A blade catches his shoulder, drawing first blood, and his roar of pain shakes loose more snow from the pines.

Then everything changes.

The temperature drops so suddenly that the air itself seems to crack. Sound dies, swallowed by a silence deeper than mere absence of noise. Through the gathering dark, shapes begin to coalesce—forms that hurt the eyes to look at directly. They drift between the trees like liquid moonlight, their features constantly shifting between dragon and storm and something older than either.

The soldiers falter, their weapons lowering as ancient magic floods the clearing. Even Arvoren goes still, steam rising from his bloodied mouth as he stares at the impossible beings surrounding us. Blood drips from his claws, freezing before it hits the ground.

One of the spirits flows closer, its form rippling like smoke on water. When it speaks, its voice carries notes of avalanche and aurora lights: "The old blood stirs. The child grows strong."

More spirits press in, their presence making my teeth ache with cold. But rather than fear, I feel something else—a connection that runs deeper than bone, older than kingdoms or crowns. Recognition floods through me: these are the true children of Kaldoria, the powers that walked these lands before the first dragons flew. Before the

gods themselves turned their eyes to mortal affairs.

They reach for me with fingers like icicles, their touch promising an impossible cold. But they don't hurt me. Through that contact, I feel them recognize what grows within me—dragon and Windwaker blood combined into something that hasn't existed for centuries. Their interest feels like lightning in my veins, terrible and beautiful at once.

"Protect them," I whisper, though speaking feels like swallowing shards of ice. "Please."

The spirits turn as one, their forms solidifying into something almost human. Almost dragon. Almost storm. The temperature plummets further as ancient magic fills the air, making it difficult to breathe.

"You dare threaten what is ours?" Their voices blend together into a sound like breaking glaciers. "You who have forgotten the old ways, forgotten what it means to carry sacred blood?"

The soldiers try to fight. They're brave, I'll give them that. But their weapons pass through spectral forms like smoke, and where the spirits' touch lands, flesh blackens with frost. Screams echo off ancient pines as the attackers fall one by one, their bodies frozen from within.

"No, please—" The leader drops his sword, backing away. "We didn't know—"

But there's no mercy in these ancient beings. They flow around him like living darkness, and his plea cuts off in a strangled cry. When they pull back, he stands frozen in a pose of terror, ice crystals forming in his eyes.

Arvoren takes advantage of the distraction, tearing through the remaining attackers

with ruthless efficiency. Blood steams where it hits snow, and the copper-sharp scent of it fills the air. In moments, it's over.

He's at my side instantly, gathering me into his arms. His skin burns fever-hot against mine, chasing away the bone-deep cold left by the spirits' touch. Through our bond, I feel his fear warring with awe at what we've witnessed.

"I've got you," he murmurs into my hair, his voice rough with emotion. "I've got you both. You're safe now."

The spirits linger at the edges of the clearing, their forms growing less distinct as true night falls. Snow begins to drift down, already erasing signs of the battle. Soon there will be nothing left but memories and questions.

"Why?" I ask them, my voice barely more than a whisper. "Why help us?"

One spirit drifts closer, its form settling briefly into something almost feminine. "The child you carry bridges ancient magics, Windwaker," it says in a voice like wind through ice caves. "What was sundered might be made whole again. What was broken might be reformed."

"The gods will not all be pleased," another adds, its shape suggesting wings and frost. "But they will be watching."

"Let them fear us, then." Arvoren's arms tighten around me, scales still rippling beneath his skin. "They won't touch either of them."

The spirits seem to smile—terrible, beautiful expressions that speak of avalanches and aurora lights. "Brave words, dragon-king. But you will need more than courage in the days ahead." They begin to fade like morning frost in sunlight.

"Wait—" I reach for them, but my hand passes through mist. "What do you mean? What's coming?"

But they're already gone, leaving only whispers behind: "A new day dawns for Kaldoria."

Silence falls with the snow, broken only by our breathing and the soft crackle of ice forming on dead flesh. Arvoren shifts me in his arms, his transformation slowly receding as the immediate danger passes. Blood still seeps from the cut on his shoulder, but he seems not to notice.

"Are you hurt?" His hands move over me with infinite care, checking for injuries. "The baby—"

"We're alright." I cover his hand with mine where it rests on my swollen belly. Our child's magic pulses between us, stronger now than before the spirits' intervention. "Just tired. So tired..."

He presses his lips to my temple, and I feel him trembling slightly. Whether from battle-fury or fear or both, I can't tell. "I should have protected you better. Should have sensed them coming—"

"Shh." I turn my face into his neck, breathing in the familiar scent of smoke and winter air. "You did protect us. We're still here."

Around us, snow continues to fall, already covering the frozen bodies of our attackers. Soon there will be nothing left to mark this place as anything special—just another clearing in an endless forest. But we'll remember. The land will remember.

Arvoren gathers me closer, his fever-warmth chasing away the last of the spirits' cold. Through our bond, I feel his fierce protectiveness warring with lingering awe at what

we witnessed. What it might mean for our future.

"We need to move," he says finally, though I feel his reluctance to disturb this moment of peace. "Find shelter before the storm worsens."

I nod against his chest, knowing he's right but not quite ready to face the world again. Here in his arms, with ancient magic still singing in my blood and our child's power pulsing between us, I can almost believe in happy endings.

He stands carefully, cradling me against him as if I'm made of glass. Steam rises where his boots touch snow, and frost patterns dance in the air around us—dragon-fire and winter storm in perfect harmony.

Above, the storm breaks at last, and snow falls thick and fast. But we're together, we're alive, and we're not alone in this fight.

Whatever comes next, we face it as one.

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:44 am

The dawn bleeds silver against black stone. We make our way down a narrow mountain path, my boots finding purchase where Calliope's would slip. She sleeps against my chest, cradled there, breath coming in soft puffs that freeze in the bitter air. Her magic pulses erratically—sometimes a small storm, sometimes barely a whisper. The child grows stronger each day, while I know she grows weaker.

There is a war inside me, a conflict of such magnitude I have never had to weather before. But I do now. I know I have no choice.

I've carried her since sunrise. Since the night before that. Since she stumbled three days ago and could not rise again. The exhaustion that claims her now is deeper than mere physical fatigue—it roots in her bones, in her blood, in the very essence of what she is. What our child is making her become.

I do not resent our child. How could I? Already, I feel the kind of love for them I never thought I could be capable of, not before Calliope. Still, seeing her this way is unparalleled agony.

The path winds endlessly south. Jagged peaks loom on either side, their ancient faces scarred by wind and ice. Even my enhanced vision can barely pierce the pre-dawn gloom. But I know these mountains, know their moods and mercies. Know how they can kill.

At some point, Calliope stirs against me. The hours have been passing strangely, too fast and too slow all at once.

"Put me down," she mumbles. "I can walk."

"You can barely stand." The words come out harsher than intended. Smoke curls from between my teeth despite the bitter cold. "Save your strength."

"For what?" Her laugh is soft, humorless. "The next fight? The next storm? Your brother's next scheme?"

I say nothing. What can I say? That I would burn the world to keep her safe? That every step south feels like betrayal, leaving my kingdom vulnerable while I carry my pregnant wife through endless winter? That the fear of losing her again burns hotter than any dragon's flame?

Instead, I adjust my grip, pulling her closer against the wind that howls between peaks. Her skin feels too cool even through layers of fur and leather. The storm that has followed us for weeks has gentled somewhat, but the cold remains deadly.

"There's a sheltered valley ahead," I tell her. "We'll rest there. Find food."

She doesn't argue, which worries me more than her earlier protests. Through our bond, I feel her exhaustion like a physical weight. I feel each inch of pain her ordeal has left her bearing. I wish I could take it for her, take it from her.

The sun climbs higher as we descend, washing the snow in shades of rose and gold. The path widens slightly, allowing me to move faster. Every so often, Calliope's hand drifts to her swollen belly, a gesture that makes something twist painfully in my chest. How long before I can no longer hide her condition? How long before my enemies learn of this vulnerability?

Near midday, we reach the valley I remembered. Ancient pines crowd close here, their branches heavy with snow but offering some shelter from the wind. A stream still runs beneath thick ice, and I catch glimpses of fish moving in the clear water below.

I set Calliope down carefully in a hollow formed by massive tree roots. She leans back against ancient bark, eyes closed, breath shallow. The shadows beneath her eyes have deepened, and her cheekbones stand out too sharply in her pale face.

"Rest," I tell her. "I'll find food."

Her eyes flutter open. "Be careful."

The words catch me off guard; not a command or challenge, just simple concern. Like a wife worried for her husband. Like we're normal people who can afford such ordinary fears.

I touch her cheek briefly, savoring the trust in that small gesture. Then I move into the forest, tracking the scent of prey through snow-muffled silence.

The hunt is quick—these woods still hold game, sheltered from the worst of winter's fury. I return with two hares, already cleaned and ready for the fire I know she needs more than I do. My blood keeps me warm, but Calliope...

She's dozed off again, curled around her belly as if protecting our child even in sleep. I build the fire without waking her, positioning it to reflect heat off the stone outcropping behind us. The flames catch quickly, and soon the scent of cooking meat fills our small shelter.

"You remembered." Her voice startles me. I turn to find her watching through half-lidded eyes.

"Remembered what?"

"How I like them cooked. Not too rare." A ghost of a smile touches her lips. "Toward the end, you used to have the kitchen staff prepare them specially. I never asked you.

But you knew."

The memory hits unexpectedly: Calliope in our chambers in Millrath, those days after we first started to see eye-to-eye when I was still learning her preferences, still trying to win her trust through small kindnesses even as I kept her chained. How young we both seem now, looking back. How foolish I was, thinking I could cage something as wild as her heart.

It was mere months ago, but it could be lifetimes away from us now.

"Here." I hand her a portion, carefully cooked through. "You need to keep up your strength."

She eats slowly but steadily, and I feel some of her exhaustion ease through our bond. The food seems to calm the magic within her, too—the air grows noticeably warmer around us, the endless winter relaxing its grip just slightly.

We rest through the afternoon, conserving energy for the journey ahead. I check her wounds; the spirit guardian's burn is healing slowly but cleanly, and no infection has set in. Small mercies.

The sun begins to set, again bathing the snow in shades of amber and rose. Calliope dozes against my chest, one hand resting over her belly. Through our bond, I feel the child's magic pulse in time with her heartbeat—a rhythm that both terrifies and awes me.

"Tell me about Millrath," she says suddenly, her voice soft in the gathering dark. "What I might find when we return."

If we return, her tone implies. If we survive this journey. If you don't lock me away again, and I can see the city, truly see it.

I choose my words carefully. "The Lords were circling when I left. Bellrose especially—they've always wanted the throne. But Darian will hold them off as long as he can."

"And if he can't?"

"Then we'll rebuild. Find somewhere to live on." The words come easier than I expected. "Whatever we find when we return—the kingdom, the castle, all of it—none of it matters as much as keeping you both safe."

I almost mean it. She can tell I'm lying, but she can also tell I wish I wasn't.

She shifts to look up at me, firelight catching in her dark eyes. "You're kinder than you used to be, Arvoren." A simple sentence, rich with implication, rich with what she will not say.

I touch her cheek, marveling that I'm allowed this simple intimacy now. "I hope I am."

When we make love that night, it is achingly slow and tender, not a frenzy of impossible passion and desire. I take my time, savoring every moment with her. Calliope's body is softer now, frail from all she went through but growing with pregnancy, a testament to the new life we've created between us. The life she has held, despite it all. Her skin feels like warm silk under my fingertips as I trail them along her curves, memorizing each dip and swell. I want to etch these contours into my very bones, never forgetting how she feels in this moment.

She undresses me just as unhurriedly, her fingers brushing against the rough fabric of my shirt before it pools at my feet. The chill air bites at our bare skin but we don't care; all that matters is the heat between us. Our breath mingles in the frigid air as our lips meet.

I go slow, exploring, considering. Calliope's lips part with a soft gasp as I trail kisses down her neck, savoring the quickening pulse beneath my lips. She arches into my touch, a quiet moan escaping her as I cup her fuller breasts. They're sensitive now, and I'm careful as I lavish attention on them with gentle caresses and feather-light kisses.

Her fingers tangle in my hair, urging me lower. I oblige, mapping the swell of her belly with reverent touches. I press a tender kiss there before continuing my journey downward.

Calliope's thighs part for me as I settle between them. The scent of her arousal is intoxicating.

“I love you,” I promise her. I’ve never meant anything more.

As I ravish her, she moans high in the back of her throat, head tipping back, legs shaking. I bring her to climax twice as her fingers thread gently through my hair, holding me as if she can't bear to think of me hurt, even now. Even despite everything.

As the last tremors of pleasure fade, Calliope's body relaxes against mine. I gather her close, cradling her head against my chest. Our skin is flushed and damp despite the chill air, a sheen of sweat glistening in the dying firelight. I pull the furs over us, cocooning us in warmth.

For a long while, we simply breathe together. I listen to the steady rhythm of her heartbeat, feeling it slow in time with mine. Her fingers trace idle patterns on my skin, following the lines of old scars and newer marks. The calluses on her hands catch slightly as they move, reminding me of all she's endured, all the strength that lies within her seemingly fragile form.

The sun sets fully, stars wheeling overhead in ancient patterns. Tomorrow we'll continue south, seeking paths through these treacherous peaks that might lead us home. But for now, in this moment, I hold everything that matters in my arms.

I press my lips to her hair and settle in to watch the night.

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:44 am

The following day passes in fragments, like shards of broken ice catching sunlight. Each step blurs into the next as Arvoren carries me through endless white. My protests grow weaker as the hours stretch on. I drift, caught between sleeping and waking, aware only of Arvoren's fever-warmth against the bitter cold.

Memories and sensations surface and submerge, fish moving beneath frozen water, mere shadows: the crunch of boots on snow, the whisper of wind through ancient pines, Arvoren's voice rumbling in his chest as he speaks to me, though I can't make out the words. At some point, we pass the bleached bones of some massive creature half-buried in snow. Dragon bones, perhaps, or something older still. I try to ask, but exhaustion drags me under before I can form the question.

The brief moments I'm fully conscious paint a stark picture of our journey. Arvoren's jaw is set with determination as he picks our path through treacherous terrain, though I feel his own exhaustion through our bond. His clothes bear fresh tears and bloodstains—evidence of skirmishes fought against wolves and beasts while I slept. Once, I wake to find him arguing with a group of shadows that might be spirits, might be memories. His voice carries on the wind: "She needs rest. Please."

But when I blink, the shadows are gone, and I can't be sure they were ever there. I suspect I may have dreamt it. Nothing feels real.

Now I wake to silence.

The first thing I notice is the absence of wind. After weeks of endless howling between peaks, the quiet feels almost holy. I'm lying on something softer than frozen ground, my head pillowed in Arvoren's lap. The air smells of old leather and wood

polish, with an underlying sweetness I can't quite place.

When I open my eyes, I find myself in what appears to be an abandoned carriage. Moonlight filters through gaps in boarded-up windows, casting strange patterns across worn velvet seats. The space is small but well-crafted, though years of exposure have left the wood warped and the upholstery faded. Still, it offers real shelter—the first we've had in many hours.

"How long was I asleep?" My voice comes out rough from disuse.

Arvoren's hand strokes my hair, a gesture so gentle it makes my chest ache. "Most of the day. You needed it."

"Where are we?"

"An old trade route, I think. This carriage has been here years." His fingers continue their gentle motion. "The wheels are shot, but the body's solid enough. Good shelter."

I start to sit up, but he places a hand on my shoulder, keeping me still.

"Rest. We're safe for the moment."

Through our bond, I feel his exhaustion warring with alertness. He hasn't slept, of course. Never does when there might be threats lurking in the dark. But there's something else in his posture, a tension I can't quite read.

"What is it?" I ask, though I'm not sure I want the answer.

Before he can respond, sound breaks the silence: boot-steps crunching on snow, the soft clink of weapons against armor. Many sets of feet, moving with military precision.

Before I can think, before I can even move to grasp his hand, we're surrounded.

Arvoren moves with liquid grace, helping me to my feet while positioning himself between me and the carriage door. Smoke curls from between his teeth as scales ripple beneath his skin. Ready to fight. Ready to kill.

"Stay behind me," he growls.

"I can help—" But even as I say it, my knees buckle. The child's magic pulses erratically, responding to my fear. Black spots dance at the edges of my vision.

Arvoren catches me with one arm, his other hand already reaching for the door. "Just stay close. I'll keep you safe."

We step out into knife-sharp air. The carriage sits in a natural hollow, surrounded by towering pines whose branches bend under the weight of fresh snow. Moonlight turns the world to silver and shadow, bright enough to see the armed figures emerging from the trees.

Their armor catches my eye first—the distinctive, blue-tinted steel of Fjordmarse craftsmanship, elegant yet practical. The soldiers move with the fluid grace of dragonborn warriors. I can practically smell their draconic nature. But behind them...

"Hold!" A voice rings out, clear and commanding. "We mean you no harm, Your Majesties."

Two figures step forward, and I have to blink to make sure I'm seeing correctly. The messengers wear the earth-toned leathers of Fort Caddell rangers, their faces bearing the weather-beaten look of humans who spend their lives in the northern wilderness. One carries a white flag of parlay.

"Impossible," Arvoren snarls, pushing me further behind him. "The forces of Fjordmarse and Fort Caddell work together about as well as fire and ice. This is a trap."

"Times change, my king." The taller messenger bows deeply. His accent marks him as northern, indeed a human settler—the hard consonants of the accent Ulric once used to fool me into believing he was Linus. "When word reached us of your presence here—"

"Word?" Arvoren's laugh is sharp as breaking glass. "And how exactly did you come by this intelligence?"

The female ranger steps forward, her silver-streaked hair catching moonlight. "We've had scouts watching the passes since reports came of the attack on Ulric's fortress. We've been trying to intercept you."

"You're avoiding my question." Smoke pours thicker from Arvoren's mouth. "Why are you really here? Why work together now, after centuries of border wars? I want a straight answer. I am your king."

The Fjordmarse commander removes his helm, revealing features carved from ice and shadow. Steam curls from his nostrils as he speaks: "Because we remember, my king. When the coalition moved against you, both our Houses stayed loyal. We know the cost of chaos. Here in the north, we cannot afford a coup. We deal in loyalty."

"Pretty words," Arvoren growls. "But Lord Sturmsen has never been one for poetry. What does Fjordmarse gain from this alliance?"

"Survival." The commander's voice carries the weight of mountains. "The winter grows worse by the day. Trade routes are frozen. The undead mass at our borders while we waste strength fighting each other. We need a strong throne—and a queen

who might actually unite human and dragon blood. Our cities can take no more war.”

I feel Arvoren's surge of protective fury through our bond.

" Careful ," he snarls. "Choose your next words with extreme care."

"Peace, my king." The human female ranger raises her hands. "We want to help you. We want to bring you back to Millrath, protect you on your journey, ensure your survival. You won't live long enough to make it in this cold without help. We are loyal to the throne.”

"My lord," the Fjordmarse commander cuts in smoothly, "we have supplies. Food, medicine, warm clothing. A proper camp not far from here. Let us help you both."

As if on cue, more soldiers emerge from the trees, bearing packs and bundles, tents and wagons. The scent of bread and dried meat makes my stomach clench. How long since we've eaten real food?

"Arvoren." I touch his arm gently. Through our bond, I feel his struggle—the need to protect me warring with the reality of our situation. "We need help."

He glances at me, and something in his expression softens fractionally. After a long moment, he nods once, sharply.

"Any false move," he tells the soldiers, "any hint of treachery, and I'll burn this forest to ash, and your cities with it."

"Understood, my king." The commander bows. "Shall we escort you to camp? Our healer is waiting."

Arvoren's arm tightens around my waist as we follow them through the trees. The

soldiers give us a wide berth, though I catch several of them exchanging knowing looks. Whether they're reacting to my obvious weakness or my condition, I can't tell.

The camp appears through the darkness like a dream—proper tents made of thick canvas, cooking fires burning cheerfully, the smell of food and medicine and safety . My knees buckle again, but this time strong hands catch me before I can fall.

"Easy there, my queen." The female ranger steadies me. "Let's get you to the healer's tent."

"Be gentle with her," Arvoren growls, but he releases me carefully into the ranger's care. I feel his reluctance through our bond, his need to keep me close warring with the knowledge that I need proper medical attention.

"I'll be fine," I tell him, though we both know it's at least partly a lie. "Go. Talk to the commanders. Learn what's really happening out there."

Arvoren touches my cheek briefly, a gesture so tender it makes my chest ache. Then he turns to the waiting officers, his posture shifting into something more regal, more controlled. The King reasserting himself after weeks of being simply a man protecting his wife.

The ranger helps me toward a large tent that smells of herbs and clean linen. A woman waits in the doorway, tall and lean, with the sharp features common to Fjordmarse dragonborn, though her eyes hold a healer's gentleness.

"Welcome, my queen," she says softly. "Let's see what we can do about making you more comfortable."

After I have been assured by the medic that, miraculously, my baby appears to be developing at a perfectly normal rate and is in good health, I stagger back into the snow like something revived, as if this body is new to me. I feel made anew. Something tightly knotted and furiously worried inside me has loosened. I didn't hurt them, not with the stress and starvation and fighting. They're alright. The draconic magic confirmed it.

For once I barely notice the cold. Our child's magic pulses within me, strong and steady, no longer paired with the erratic surge of anxiety that's plagued me for weeks. The medic's touch—dragon-warm and ancient with knowing—showed me what I couldn't see before: our baby grows perfectly. I protected them.

I only have to protect them a while longer. Millrath, city of my downfall, will protect us.

Sounds of the military camp drift through the darkness—soldiers talking in low voices, weapons being sharpened, the crackle of fires burning against the bitter night. Steam rises from cookfires where massive pots simmer with something that smells rich and hearty. The scent makes my mouth water, but I need to find Arvoren first. Need to share this precious certainty with him.

I find him in the commander's tent, bent over a spread of maps with several officers. Their voices carry into the night, tense with carefully contained urgency. Even before I enter, I catch fragments that make my blood run cold:

"—proclamation sent to all the major cities—"

"—claiming the king died in the northern reaches—"

Arvoren's head snaps up as I push through the tent flaps. His eyes find mine instantly, and through our bond I feel his fierce surge of protectiveness mixed with mounting

fury at whatever news he's receiving. Steam curls from between his teeth, and scales ripple beneath his skin in the lamplight.

"My queen." The Fjordmarse commander bows deeply. His armor gleams blue-black in the dim light, and his breath frosts despite the warmth of the tent. "We were just discussing—"

"Ulric." Arvoren's voice is deadly quiet. "Tell her what you just told me."

A new figure steps forward—a draconic man wearing the elaborate insignia of a high-ranking General. His face bears the sharp, angular features common to their people, but his expression is grave. "Word reached us three days ago. Your brother sits upon the throne in Millrath. He has declared the king dead—fallen in battle in the northern reaches. He claims the throne by right of succession, as the last of your line."

The words hit like physical blows. "But surely no one believes—"

"Many do." This from one of the Fort Caddell scouts, his weathered face lined with concern. "But many care not, so long as aid is promised. The winter grows worse by the day. Trade routes are frozen. The people are desperate for stability, even if it means accepting a usurper's claim."

"He's convinced them the king died trying to reclaim his runaway queen." The general's voice carries centuries of ceremonial gravity. "That the storm that follows you, my queen, claimed them both. He speaks of building a new Kaldoria, one free from the 'tyranny' of the old ways."

"While our armies watched the northern borders," another officer adds, "he gathered support in the south. The Iron Lords have already sworn fealty to him. Others will follow."

Arvoren's growl fills the tent, smoke pouring thick from his mouth. The temperature spikes as his dragon nature surfaces. "How long to ready an escort south?"

"We can have you on the road by dawn," the Fjordmarse commander says quickly. "A small force, moving fast. The bulk of our armies will follow."

"Not fast enough." Arvoren's claws score deep marks in the wooden table. "Every day he sits that throne—"

"My king." The general's voice cuts through Arvoren's fury. "There's more. He speaks of...continuation. Of securing the future of the realm through a proper heir. He's claiming...claiming to have a child of his own."

I feel Arvoren's rage through our bond, hot enough to scorch. Smoke rises where his hands grip the table's edge.

He means to take my child.

"He will not touch them." The words emerge in a snarl. "Either of them."

"No," the general agrees simply. "He will not. Both our cities stand ready to march. The armies of Fjordmarse and Fort Caddell united for the first time in centuries—all to see the true king restored."

"And your lords?" I ask. "They support this alliance?"

The commander and general exchange looks. "Lord Sturmsen and Lord Caddell understand what's at stake," the commander says carefully. "A child of both bloodlines...the significance cannot be ignored. For our cities, it signifies a break in a long, long war that has cost us innumerably."

I feel Arvoren's protective fury surge again at the mention of our baby, but before he can speak, the general continues.

"More importantly, they know Ulric of old. Know his instability, his hunger for power. They will not see him destroy everything your line has built, my king."

"Then ready your fastest horses," Arvoren orders. "We ride at first light."

The tent erupts into activity as officers hurry to carry out his command. I stay where I am, one hand pressed to my middle. Whatever comes next, whatever battles await us in Millrath, at least I know they're safe. Know that despite everything, we haven't lost what matters most.

Arvoren's hand finds mine in the chaos, fever-hot against my frozen fingers. Through our bond, I feel his struggle—the need to reclaim his throne warring with his desperate desire to keep us protected. To keep us close.

For the first time, I believe they could be one and the same. If we're smart, they could be.

"They're alright," I whisper, just for him. "The baby. The healer confirmed it. They're growing perfectly."

His other hand comes up to cup my cheek, and for a moment I glimpse the man beneath the fury—the father beneath the king. The man I've been searching for, tracking down, teasing out into the light.

Then he straightens, scales rippling beneath his skin as he turns back to his commanders.

"Whatever it takes," he tells them, smoke curling from between his teeth. "Whatever

armies you can muster. My brother will not keep my throne. Will not threaten my family."

The officers bow, and I feel the weight of ancient oaths in the gesture. These unlikely allies—dragon and human united—will follow him south. Will help us reclaim what's ours.

The question is: will we be in time?

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:44 am

The carriage cuts through snow like a blade through flesh, its enchanted wheels never quite touching the ground. Fjordmarse craftwork—ancient magic bound in steel and silver, designed to bear their nobility across treacherous mountain passes. The vehicle remembers its purpose even after centuries of disuse, responding to my blood as if it knows its duty to the crown. The well-oiled mechanisms whisper secrets in a language I half-remember from childhood lessons, speaking of roads long buried and kingdoms long fallen.

We make better time than I dared hope. What took weeks on foot passes in mere days as we race south, the landscape blurring past enchanted windows. Calliope sleeps more easily now, curled against my side as mountains give way to foothills, then to the great dark forests that surround my city. The steady motion seems to soothe her, and for the first time in weeks, her skin holds real warmth.

The healer's confirmation of our child's health has lifted something from her shoulders, though I still catch her hand drifting to her belly when she thinks I'm not watching.

Each dawn brings us closer to Millrath, each dusk reveals new signs of my brother's influence spreading through the land. We pass abandoned villages where every door bears his proclamation, the parchment crackling with frost. Trading posts stand empty, their usual winter stores depleted by desperate refugees heading south. Occasionally we glimpse other travelers—merchants' caravans moving in armed convoys, families with their possessions piled on sledges, the occasional patrol of soldiers bearing unfamiliar sigils.

We travel with a small escort—just enough soldiers to defend us if needed, but not so

many as to draw attention. Fort Caddell rangers scout ahead while Fjordmarse warriors guard our flanks, the unlikely allies working together with the precision of those who have everything to lose. Their coordination still unsettles me. Centuries of hatred don't vanish overnight, yet here they are, united in purpose. I catch them exchanging techniques during brief rests—human rangers teaching dragonborn warriors their silent ways of moving through snow, Fjordmarse soldiers showing the humans how to predict weather changes by taste and scent.

The winter seems to ease somewhat as we travel, as if even the land itself recognizes its rightful rulers. The endless storms that followed us north have gentled to occasional flurries. Through our bond, I feel Calliope's magic settling into new patterns, no longer the erratic surge that drained her strength.

I learn more from our escorts as we travel. Ulric's proclamation spread quickly through the major cities, carried by ravens and riders alike. He speaks of building a new Kaldoria, one free from the "tyranny" of the old bloodlines. The Iron Lords of Brittletale support him, their forges working day and night to arm his growing forces. Other Houses sit neutral, waiting to see which way the wind blows.

But it's the rumors about Calliope that truly make my blood boil. They say she bewitched me, drove me mad with her magic until I pursued her into the deadly northern reaches. They whisper that the endless winter is her curse upon the land, punishment for rejecting her. Some even claim she works with dark powers, that she means to destroy the ancient bloodlines entirely.

If they only knew the truth growing within her. If they could see how she reaches for me in sleep, how her magic harmonizes with mine in ways I never thought possible.

Our final night's camp lies just beyond sight of the city's inner walls. Millrath rises from the darkness ahead like a sleeping beast, its towers black against star-scattered sky. The familiar silhouette of my castle perches on its rocky outcrop, but even from

here I can see the changes. Black banners catch in the winter wind. My brother prepares for war.

We camp at the banks of a small lake in the foothills of the mountains surrounding my city, its surface frozen for the first time in living memory. The black ice reflects torchlight far in the distance, making it seem as if two cities exist—one above, one below, both waiting to swallow us whole. The sight stirs something in my blood, an ancient recognition. This is what it means to be king, to hold this dark jewel of a city, to protect its people even when they forget who their true ruler is.

In our tent, Calliope lies against my chest, her breath frosting despite the furs wrapped around us. Her fingers trace idle patterns on my skin, following the ridges of scales that refuse to fully retract. Through our bond, I feel her rising tension, her fear warring with determination.

"Tell me what you're thinking," she murmurs.

"That I should have killed him when I had the chance." The words emerge in a low rumble. "After the coalition's attack, when he first showed his true colors. I was weak."

"You loved him." Calliope's voice holds no judgment. "He was your brother."

"And now he sits on my throne. Threatens my wife. My child." Smoke curls from my mouth, making the tent's canvas ripple. "Tomorrow, when we enter the city—"

"He'll know we're coming. Will have forces waiting."

"Let them try." I pull her closer, breathing in the crisp sweetness that always clings to her skin. "Let them see their true king and queen return. Let them witness what happens to those who threaten what's mine."

Her hand comes up to cup my cheek, turning my face toward hers. "We'll need more than just force, Arvoren. The people must choose us. Must see that we offer something better than your brother's false promises."

The moonlight filtering through canvas paints her skin silver, catching in her dark hair like stars. Her eyes hold that fierce defiance I first fell in love with, tempered now with something deeper. Something that makes my dragon blood sing with recognition. When I kiss her, she tastes of winter wind and ancient magic.

The kiss deepens, and suddenly the tent feels too small, too confining. Without breaking contact, I gather her into my arms. She weighs nothing to my dragon's strength, her body fitting against mine as if carved from the same stone. Through our bond, I feel her desire mirror my own—a hunger that burns hotter than dragon-fire.

The night air bites at our skin as I carry her from the camp, but neither of us notices the cold. Moonlight turns the forest into something out of ancient legend—branches weaving intricate patterns against the star-strewn sky, snow glinting like scattered diamonds in the darkness. Steam rises where my boots touch frozen ground, leaving a trail of melted footprints that will be gone by morning.

In a hollow between ancient pines, I find what I'm seeking—a patch of clover somehow preserved beneath the frost, its delicate leaves a reminder that spring still exists somewhere beneath all this endless winter. The ground here remembers warmth, protected by the massive trees whose roots have guarded this space for centuries.

I lower Calliope onto the soft green with infinite care. Her dark hair spreads across the clover like spilled ink, and when she looks up at me, the fierce love in her eyes steals my breath. Moonlight paints patterns across her skin, turning her into something ethereal, a creature of starlight and storm, beautiful enough to break kingdoms for.

"I love you," I breathe against her lips. The words feel inadequate, but they're all I have to offer besides my heart, my crown, my very breath.

Her fingers trace the scales rippling beneath my skin as I lean down to capture her mouth again. Around us, the forest holds its breath, bearing witness to this moment between king and queen. Tomorrow, we fight for our throne, our future, our child's birthright. But here, in this hollow of ancient magic and tender green, we are simply man and woman, husband and wife, dragon and sorceress, two hearts beating as one beneath the endless stars.

The city waits, black against stars, patient as stone. It has outlasted centuries of war, has watched kings fall like leaves in autumn. Tomorrow it will watch again as we fight to reclaim what's ours.

I press my lips to Calliope's hair and settle in to guard her sleep, smoke curling gently from my mouth as I watch our destiny approach with the dawn.

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:44 am

The great iron gates of Millrath loom before us like the jaws of some ancient beast.

No horns announce our arrival. No guards rush to bar our path. Only silence greets us—a silence thick with waiting, with watching, with the held breath of a city that has forgotten its true rulers.

Arvoren's hand finds mine as we approach his city, fever-hot against my frozen fingers. Through our bond, I feel his mounting tension, his dragon nature prowling beneath his skin like caged lightning. The soldiers of Fjordmarse and Fort Caddell move with practiced precision around us, their unlikely alliance a shield against whatever waits within those walls.

"Ready?" My husband's voice is low, smoke curling from between his teeth despite the bitter morning air. Gentle, my mind supplies. Despite what's at stake, he's being gentle to you now.

I squeeze his hand in response. I hope he understands what I mean by that.

The moat stretches before us, its surface frozen for the first time in living memory. Our boots ring against black ice as we cross—king and queen returning to claim their throne. Above, archers line the walls like carrion birds, their arrows nocked but undrawn. They make no move to stop us. Make no sound at all. Only watch with eyes that gleam in the wan winter light.

We pass beneath the gatehouse arch, and suddenly we're inside—back in the city that was once my prison, that became my escape route, that might now become my true home. The streets look different in morning light, the cobblestones dusted with frost,

the buildings hunched against endless winter. Faces peer from windows and doorways as word of our arrival spreads like wildfire through the narrow lanes.

"The king lives," someone whispers.

"The queen returns," breathes another.

"But the storm follows still..."

People begin to line the streets, emerging from shops and homes to watch our procession. Some bow deeply. Others make signs against evil. Most simply stare, unsure what to believe after months of Ulric's lies.

I recognize the fear in their eyes—the same fear I once felt in this place. A part of me still feels it.

I will stop this winter, I wish I could promise them. The moment I'm safe here. I can feel it. The storm will end.

A child darts forward, only to be yanked back by their mother. But not before I catch their wonder-filled gaze, their small hand reaching toward the frost that sparkles in my wake. I realize suddenly that to these people, I am something out of legend—the Witch Queen who fled north, who commands winter itself, who returns now with armies at her back.

"You're trembling," Arvoren murmurs, his thumb stroking my knuckles.

"Last time I walked these streets, I was bound in rope," I remind him, chin held high.

"Dragged here in a wagon like chattel to be sold."

His grip tightens fractionally. "And now you return as queen."

"I do." The words feel different now—not a chain anymore. My gut knows the difference. I'm not sure how it does, but I cling to the feeling.

The castle rises before us, perched above Lake Shale like a crown of black stone. As we approach the final bridge, the great gates begin to open, grinding against ice that has formed on ancient hinges. No guards challenge us. No horns sound. Only that watching silence, that held breath, that sense of destiny balanced on a knife's edge.

Movement catches my eye—a flash of steel, a hand reaching for a blade. One of Ulric's supporters, perhaps, thinking to earn favor through violence. But before the weapon can clear its sheath, the Fjordmarse commander steps forward. Steam rises from his armor as his dragon nature surfaces, scales rippling beneath his skin.

"Choose carefully," he growls, voice carrying clearly in the quiet street. "Your king returns."

The would-be attacker's hand falls away from his weapon. Others like him shrink back into the crowd, their resolve wavering as they realize the strength of our escort. These are not common soldiers, but elite warriors of the north—dragon and human united in common cause.

We ascend the final steps toward the castle proper, toward the throne room where everything began. Where everything will end, one way or another. Arvoren's posture shifts subtly, becoming more regal, more controlled. The bearing of a king.

But his hand never leaves mine as we approach the final door. Whatever comes next, we face it together.

The guards at the door step aside, and darkness yawns before us like the maw of destiny itself.

The underchamber doors groan open on ancient hinges, and my heart clenches at the sight of the near-black interior. This room—this vast, dark space where Arvoren first claimed me as his—has changed. Black banners bearing Ulric's personal sigil drape the walls, covering the ancient dragon skulls that once watched over the throne. Braziers burn with unnatural blue flame, casting strange shadows that seem to move of their own accord. The air tastes of copper and ozone, thick with a magic that makes my teeth ache.

And there, upon my husband's throne, sits Ulric.

He lounges across the ornate seat as if born to it, one leg thrown casually over the armrest. His golden hair catches the eerie light, forming a mockery of the crown he hasn't dared to claim. Courtiers and lesser lords cluster around him like moths to flame, though I notice they keep their distance—close enough to show support, far enough to flee if needed. I don't spot any of the major lords, but some must be here, I know. Perhaps waiting out the day to see who wins this battle.

"Brother." Ulric's smile is sharp as broken glass. "I must say, you're looking rather...alive for a dead man."

"And you're looking rather comfortable in a seat that isn't yours." Smoke curls from Arvoren's mouth with each word, the temperature around us rising as his dragon nature surfaces.

"Isn't it?" Ulric straightens, his casual pose dropping away like a shed skin. "The people seem to think otherwise. They've grown tired of the old ways, brother. Tired of kings who let winter freeze their children."

His eyes find mine, and something hungry enters his expression.

"Welcome home, Calliope. I trust your little northern adventure was...illuminating?"

I've missed you."

The spike of fury I feel from Arvoren would have, on any other day, taken me to my knees with its force. But I stand tall.

"Enough games." Arvoren takes a step forward, slightly in front of me, scales rippling visibly beneath his skin. "Stand down, brother. While you still can."

"Or what?" Ulric rises from the throne, his own dragon nature beginning to show. Steam rises where his boots touch stone. "You'll kill me? Your own blood? Like you might well have killed our parents?"

The accusation hits like a physical blow. Through our bond, I feel Arvoren's surge of grief and fury. "I did not—"

"No?" Ulric's laugh is cruel. "You certainly didn't seem to mind how it worked out. Power, glory, blood—that was what their deaths gave you. You won the day."

"You dare?" The words emerge as a roar that shakes dust from the rafters. "You, who tried to murder your own brother? Who would have killed your queen?"

"I would have freed her." Ulric's gaze finds mine again. "Would have shown her what true power means, without your chains and control. Would have given her child a proper father—"

The last word is barely out of his mouth before Arvoren moves. One moment he stands beside me; the next, he's across the room in a blur of scales and fury. His clawed hand closes around Ulric's throat, lifting him off the throne as if he weighs nothing.

"Choose your next words carefully, brother," Arvoren snarls. "They may be your

last."

Ulric's laugh sounds wet, choked. "You won't kill me. You never could."

Magic crackles through the air as Ulric breaks his brother's grip, transforming partially to match Arvoren's state. The brothers circle each other like wolves. The temperature in the underchamber seems to rise sharply in the span of half a second. The watching courtiers scramble back, pressing against the walls, eyes blown huge and fearful.

"The throne is mine by right," Ulric hisses, sharpened teeth glinting in the dull light. "The people chose me. Chose stability over your chaos, chose peace over your endless war—"

"Peace?" Now it's Arvoren's turn to laugh, the sound sharp with dragon-fury. "Is that what you call this? Betraying your blood? Threatening my wife? My child? This city will become a necropolis under your rule, Ulric, and we both know it."

Ulric's eyes widen fractionally at those last words. "You're so small-minded, brother, even now. You have no idea what I can make your city into—what I could make your wretched runt into."

He doesn't finish. Arvoren's fist catches him in the jaw, sending him staggering. Ulric recovers quickly, retaliating with a strike of his own. The brothers crash together like storm fronts, magic crackling around them as they battle for dominance.

I step forward, ready to help, but Arvoren's voice cuts through the chaos: "Stay back!"

Faintly, I register fighting all around me, in all directions. The Fjordmarse and Fort Caddell forces battling back castle guards, restraining traitors against the walls. But I

have eyes only for my husband.

His shouting holds all his kingly authority, but I hear the fear beneath it—fear for me, for our child, for what Ulric might do if he gets too close.

But I am not the same woman who fled this castle in terror.

Our child's magic pulses within me, strong and sure, reaching for its father. I feel ancient power stirring in my blood, responding to the dragon-fury that fills the air. Frost spreads beneath my feet in delicate patterns, climbing the walls like deadly lace.

The temperature plummets back down violently as my magic rises. The unnatural blue flames in the braziers sputter and die, replaced by an eerie white glow that emanates from the frost itself. Servants and courtiers gasp, pressing closer to the walls as ice creeps across the floor.

Ulric and Arvoren break apart, both breathing heavily, steam rising from their partially transformed bodies. Blood drips from Ulric's split lip, freezing before it hits the ground. His eyes find mine, and something like real fear enters his expression.

"You see, brother?" He takes a step back, his smile wavering. "Your queen has grown stronger than either of us. If she isn't snuffed out, Kaldoria will freeze solid. No nation can live in this eternal winter. Better that she be snuffed out mercifully. Better it be raised by someone who understands true power—"

"You will never touch them." The words emerge in a snarl that's barely human. Arvoren's transformation completes in a surge of magic, his massive dragon form filling half the chamber. "Never."

People flee toward the doors as Ulric's own transformation takes hold, his scales catching the strange light. The brothers face each other in their true forms, equally

huge, equally terrible, looming above me in the massive space.

I raise my hands, ice crystals dancing between my fingers as I prepare to defend my husband, my child, my crown. Whatever comes next, we face it together.

The real battle is about to begin.

The brothers collide with enough force to crack the ancient stones beneath their feet. Dragon-fire fills the air, gold flame meeting black in explosions that shake the very foundations of the castle. Their roars echo off the walls—primal sounds that speak of betrayal deeper than blood, of wounds that will never truly heal.

Through our bond, I feel Arvoren's fury and grief warring with each other. Every strike against his brother costs him something precious, every wound he inflicts tears at his own heart. But beneath that pain burns something fiercer: the need to protect what's his, to end this threat to his family once and for all.

It will hurt him if he kills his brother today, I know. But he won't regret it.

Ulric is the quicker of the two, using his smaller size to dart beneath Arvoren's guard, scales flashing as he lands strike after strike. But Arvoren's greater bulk gives him raw power that his brother can't match. When his claws connect, they leave deep gouges that steam in the frozen air.

I press myself against a wall as their battle rages, one hand curved protectively over my stomach. Our child's magic pulses wildly, responding to both dragons' power. The air grows thick with competing magics—Arvoren's formidable strength, Ulric's desperate fury, my own winter storm rising beneath my skin.

Another explosion rocks the chamber as the brothers' flames meet again. Through the smoke, I see several of Ulric's remaining supporters draw weapons, preparing to

intervene. Without thinking, I send a wave of killing frost in their direction. They stumble back, blades falling from frozen fingers as ice creeps up their arms.

"My queen!" The Fjordmarse commander appears at my side, steam rising from his armor. "We should get you to safety—"

"No." I straighten, frost dancing between my fingers. "I won't leave him."

Above us, Ulric lands a lucky strike that sends Arvoren crashing into a wall. Ancient stone cracks under the impact, and I feel Arvoren's pain lance through our bond. Before his brother can press the advantage, I act.

Power explodes from me in a wave of winter fury. Ice spreads across the floor like living crystal, climbing the walls in patterns that pulse with otherworldly light. The temperature plummets until even the dragons' breath frosts in the air. Every surface the frost touches begins to sing with strange harmonies—the music of deep winter, of magic older than kingdoms or crowns.

Ulric falters, his scales dusted with frost. His supporters cry out as the cold bites deeper, dropping their weapons and fleeing toward the doors.

Through the bitter chill, I hear them shouting to those beyond the chamber, frantic and vicious: "The heretic is here!"

But this is no mere storm. In that moment, I am no longer only myself. I am more. My magic rises like a tide, filling the chamber with swirling snow and crackling ice. The very air seems to crystallize, turning each breath into shards of frozen light.

Arvoren recovers, using my distraction to launch himself at his brother. This time when their flames meet, my ice joins the fray. The resulting explosion throws Ulric back, sending him crashing into his stolen throne. The ornate seat shatters beneath his

weight.

"You see?" Ulric snarls, struggling to rise. "See what she's become? What that child will become? Too powerful to control—"

"She was never meant to be controlled." Arvoren's voice fills the chamber, dragon-deep and terrible. "She was meant to be queen."

An absurd, powerful, brilliant joy flowers inside my chest. It could melt me, I know. I could die right here.

As if to emphasize his words, our magics surge together—his dragon-fire and my winter storm combining into something new, something awesome and terrible. The remaining courtiers flee in terror as frost and flame dance through the air, turning the throne room into a place of legend, a spectacle of light and heat and cold.

"You're finished, brother." Arvoren advances, his massive form blocking any escape. "Yield, and I may yet show mercy."

For a moment, something like regret flashes in Ulric's golden eyes. Then his expression hardens, scales rippling as he gathers himself for one final attack. "Never."

He launches himself at Arvoren with desperate fury, claws extended for a killing blow. But this time, we're ready. My ice catches his wings, slowing him just enough. Arvoren meets his charge with terrible efficiency, centuries of training evident in every movement. Their flames collide one final time—brother against brother, pretender against true king.

The entire room shakes. I fall to one knee, gasping, as something high above our heads crashes, a massive, distant sound.

When the smoke clears, Ulric is gone.

A hole in the ceiling reveals his escape route, his dark form swirling away into the winter sky high above the city, vanishing into the quelling storm. Several of our soldiers start forward, human and looking desperate but determined, but Arvoren stops them with a growl.

"Let him run," he rumbles, scales rippling as he begins to transform back. "He won't get far. Not now."

Outside, there is a keening screech, answered by a number of others. I spot, through the entryway, half a dozen shifters from the army of Fjordmarse take to the skies, brilliant ice-blue scales flashing in the snowy white light, giving chase.

There is hubbub outside. Shouting, confusion, chaos. Soldiers roam, shouting orders, as civilians fight to see what's happening.

None of it matters.

Arvoren approaches his throne. Steam still rises from his skin, and his eyes still burn with inner fire. But when he reaches for me, his touch is gentle as ever.

Neither of us sits. The throne is broken now, destroyed, and its remains are like a tomb in the center of the room. I know in my gut that when Arvoren orders for its replacement, they will have to construct or procure another, if I am to sit at my husband's side in court. I'm eager for that day.

We stand before the throne. I take my place beside him, frost trailing in my wake. Through our bond, I feel his fierce satisfaction, his relief, his bone-deep need to keep me close. Our child's magic pulses between us, strong and steady, finally at peace.

"Your Majesties." Detaching himself from the chaos, a Fjordmarse commander kneels, a handful of other soldiers following suit. "The throne is yours."

Arvoren's hand finds mine as we face our subjects together, hearts beating as one. The air grows warmer as my winter storm slowly but surely subsides around us, leaving only a gentle snowfall that drifts through the broken ceiling like a blessing.

We have all changed since that first meeting in this chamber, I know. We will continue to. The fight isn't over. There will be more battles ahead, more challenges to face. But for now, we stand united, stronger together than we ever were apart.

"Rise," Arvoren commands, his voice carrying all the authority of the Dragon Kings. "Your king and queen have returned."

The words echo off ancient stones as morning light spills through the broken ceiling, turning frost and flame to diamonds in the winter air.

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:44 am

The light falls differently in these chambers now.

I carry Calliope up the winding stair, her head tucked beneath my chin, her breath warm against my neck. My muscles ache from battle, but she weighs nothing to my dragon's strength. Never has. Steam rises where my boots touch stone—I can't quite keep my inner fire contained, not with her pressed so close, not after everything we've fought through to reach this moment.

"I can walk," she murmurs, though her fingers tighten in my cloak.

"Let me have this." I breathe in her scent—crisp sweetness beneath the lingering smoke of battle. "Let me bring you home properly."

Home. The word catches in my throat like smoke. This was once her prison, these halls witness to my desperate attempts to possess what could never truly be caged. Now she returns as Queen, as my equal, carrying our child beneath her heart. The changes in me feel as monumental as the changes in her.

When we reach our chambers—our chambers, truly ours now—I shoulder open the heavy door. The room looks different too, though nothing has physically changed. Moonlight spills through tall windows, catching on frost patterns that spread across the glass at Calliope's presence. The massive bed still dominates the space, its curtains drawn back to reveal fresh linens. Someone—probably the servants who remained loyal—lit the fire and left food on the side table.

I lay her on the bed with infinite care. She sinks into the softness with a sigh that makes my heart clench. How long since she's slept somewhere truly safe? How many

nights did she spend freezing in the wilderness while I searched, or trapped in my brother's cursed tower while he plotted to steal our child?

"You're brooding." Calliope's voice draws me back. Her hand comes up to touch my face, fingers tracing the new scars there. "I can feel it."

"I should have found you sooner." The words burn like acid. "Should have protected you better—"

"Shh." Calliope tugs me down beside her, and I go willingly, gathering her close. "We're here now. We're safe."

I feel it through our bond—that pulse of magic that grows stronger each day in impossible harmony with mine. My hand splays across her stomach, marveling at the miracle we've created together.

"I can't believe it sometimes," I murmur into her hair. "That you're truly carrying my child. That you chose to keep them, even after everything..."

"They're ours ." Her voice holds certainty that steals my breath. "Not a bargaining chip or a weapon. Not a tool for power. Just ours to love."

Love. Such a simple word for something that burns like dragon-fire in my blood. I remember how it felt when she first fled—the desperate possession that drove me to hunt her across the continent. Now that same fierce need has transformed into something deeper, something that makes me want to be worthy of her trust. Of both of them.

A knock at the door makes me tense, scales rippling beneath my skin. But he speaks my name, and it's only Darian. My oldest friend survived Ulric's dungeons with his loyalty intact.

He doesn't come in, just speaks through the door.

"The city is secure, my king." His voice carries the weight of his steadfast service. "The remaining supporters of...of your brother have surrendered or fled. The other Lords will surely send word of their renewed allegiance, upon your return."

Of course they will. Vultures, circling back now that they see which way the wind blows. But those battles can wait. Right now, nothing matters except the woman in my arms, the child growing within her, the future we might build together.

"Thank you, old friend." I don't take my eyes off Calliope as she drifts toward sleep. "Post guards, but otherwise...let us rest."

Darian withdraws silently, and we're alone again. I should sleep, too—the battle has drained even my enhanced strength. But I can't stop watching her, can't quite believe she's really here. That she chose to return, chose to trust me with her heart, with our child's future.

The firelight paints her skin gold, catching on the silver threads in her dark hair. Even exhausted, she's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen. I trace the line of her jaw, the curve of her throat, memorizing her all over again. Her magic responds to my touch, frost patterns delicately spiraling across the sheets.

I used to fear that power in her. Used to think I needed to contain it, control it, keep it safely caged. Now I see how wrong I was. She's strongest when she's free—we both are. Together we toppled my brother's forces, united ancient enemies, reclaimed our throne. Together we might reshape this kingdom into something worthy of our child's inheritance.

The thought of fatherhood still terrifies me. What do I know of gentle things, of nurturing new life? My own parents died when I was young, leaving only lessons in

power and control. But when I feel our child's magic pulse beneath my palm, when I imagine teaching them to fly, to love, to rule with wisdom rather than fear...I want to be better. For them. For her.

Calliope shifts in her sleep, pressing closer to my warmth. Through our bond, I feel her contentment, her bone-deep relief at finally being somewhere safe. The winter storm that has followed her for months gentles to soft snowfall outside our windows. Even in sleep, she trusts me to protect her, to keep them both secure while they rest.

I will not waste this second chance. Will not let my need to possess overcome my desire to love, to support, to protect while still allowing freedom. She is not a bird to be caged, but a queen to rule beside me, a mother to nurture our child, a partner to face whatever challenges still lie ahead.

"I will love you forever," I whisper into her hair, though she's too deeply asleep to hear. "Both of you. All my life, I swear it."

The words feel inadequate, but they're all I have to offer besides my heart, my strength, my very breath. Tomorrow, we begin rebuilding—our relationship, our kingdom, our future. But for now, I hold everything that matters in my arms.

The fire burns low as night deepens. Outside, the city sleeps, snow falling gentle as a blessing. And here in our chambers, finally home where we belong, I keep watch over my wife and child until dawn streaks the sky with shades of silver and gold.

Let Ulric run. Let the Lords plot. Let winter rage beyond our walls. Nothing can touch us here, in this moment of perfect peace. Nothing matters except the miracle of her choosing to stay, to trust, to love.

I press my lips to her hair and settle in to guard her sleep, smoke curling gently from my mouth as I watch our future approach with the dawn.

Morning light falls strangely in my study, filtering through narrow windows set high in ancient walls. The beams catch on dragon skulls that watch from shadowed alcoves, their empty eyes holding centuries of secrets. This deep into the castle, the air always tastes of copper and old magic, thick with the weight of ritual and sacrifice.

I find Darian already waiting, his armor gleaming dully in the strange light. He doesn't look cold despite the lingering chill—like all dragonborn, his blood runs hot against the lingering winter chill. He stands before the war table, studying maps and missives spread across its scarred surface like fallen leaves.

"The city quiets," he says without looking up, ever-practical even now. "Most of Ulric's supporters have either fled or sworn new oaths. The rest..." He trails off, but I catch his meaning. The rest won't trouble us again.

I move to stand beside him, scanning reports written in hands I recognize—commanders from the outer reaches, lords of distant holdings, all scrambling to declare their loyalty now that the battle's done. Smoke curls from my mouth as I read, scales rippling beneath my skin at some of the more flowery proclamations.

"Vultures," I growl, though we both know such promises are necessary. "Yesterday they'd have seen me dead. Today they write of eternal devotion."

"They write of survival." Darian's voice holds careful neutrality. "And of hope."

I glance at him sharply. In the strange half-light, his expression gives nothing away. But we've known each other too long for such careful masks.

"Speak plainly, old friend."

He considers his words with the same precision he brings to battle strategy. "The queen's return changes things. Her power, her condition...the Houses will see opportunity there. They know she is powerful. They will either wish to persuade you of their acquiescence or their threat. Who knows what the future holds. Perhaps they await word of Ulric's death."

But Ulric is not dead. They haven't found him. In my gut, I know they won't.

I grip the edge of the table. "They will not touch her."

"No," Darian agrees simply. "But they will watch. And wait. And wonder...."

He trails off again, but this time I hear the question he won't voice. The same question that haunts my own dreams, though I try to bury it beneath certainty and love.

"She'll stay." The words emerge rougher than intended. "She chose to return."

"She did." Darian begins sorting reports with methodical care. "Just as she chose to flee before."

Smoke pours thicker as my control slips. "That was different. I was different."

"Yes." Now he does look at me, and there's something like approval in his expression. "You were. You are." A pause, heavy with meaning. "But is it enough?"

The question hangs in the air that grows warmer by the moment. Through our bond, I feel Calliope still sleeping peacefully in our chambers above, her magic gentle as the falling snow. So different from the desperate storm that once raged within her.

"It has to be," I say finally. "I won't cage her again. Won't try to possess what can only be freely given."

Darian nods, as if I've confirmed something he already knew. "Then perhaps that's all the answer we need."

We work in silence for a while, sorting intelligence and planning next steps. The underchamber grows lighter as morning climbs, sun-shafts moving across ancient stone like measured breaths. This place has seen so much—marriages and murders, oaths sworn and broken, power claimed and lost. The very walls remember.

"She's different too, you know," Darian says eventually. "Stronger. She seems more like your wife now than she ever did here, if you'd permit me to say it."

"I know." I trace the line of the Dragonspine Peaks on a map before us, remembering how she faced down my brother on those sacred peaks. "She's everything I never knew I needed. Everything this kingdom needs."

"She reminds me of your mother sometimes."

I hum. I don't deny it. Darian looks like he's considering saying more, but stops himself.

"The Houses will want guarantees," he says instead, ever-practical. "Proof that things truly can be different."

"They'll have it." I straighten, decision crystallizing like frost on glass. "Summon them all—every Lord who claims loyalty to the throne. Let them see what we might build together. What she might help us become."

Darian studies me for a long moment, steam rising where his fingers touch ancient

stone. "And if they resist? If they cling to old fears, old hatred of her kind?"

My laugh holds notes of my fire, my fury. "Then we win."

He smiles then, a rare expression that transforms his battle-hardened features. "You sound like her."

"Good." I gather the most urgent reports, leaving the rest for later consideration. "Perhaps I'm finally learning the right lessons."

Morning light fills the underchamber now, turning shadow to gold and secrets to possibility. Through our bond, I feel Calliope beginning to wake, her magic reaching instinctively for mine even across the distance between us.

"Post extra guards in the garden," I tell Darian as I turn to leave. "She'll want to work there today, to see what survived the winter."

"Already done." His smile turns knowing. "I remember how she is with her herbs."

I pause at the door, looking back at this man who has served me through darkness and light, who has watched me become someone better than I was. "Thank you, old friend. For everything."

He bows, the gesture holding genuine respect rather than mere ceremony. "For the kingdom, my king. And for you."

I leave him to his duties, climbing through shadows toward morning light. Toward my wife, my child, my future. Toward everything that matters.

The rest will sort itself in time.

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:44 am

The castle gardens remember winter differently than I do.

Frost crunches beneath my feet as I make my way through the maze of dormant beds, my boots leaving perfect prints in the thin layer of snow that still clings to shadowed corners. The air carries that peculiar silence of deep winter, though the brutal cold of recent months has begun to soften around the edges. Even my breath, frosting silver in the weak morning light, seems less substantial than it did just days ago.

I trace my fingers along frost-blackened stems, sensing the dormant life beneath frozen bark. It's hard to believe that before all of this, plants were my very lifeblood—they were my day and night. My world began and ended at the border of the herb garden I maintained in Essenborn. Most of the plants have died back to their roots, waiting out the endless cold I brought upon them. The roses are mere thorny skeletons now, their summer glory reduced to black stems against graying snow. The great oak that once shaded the central courtyard stands naked against the pearl-gray sky, its mighty branches etched like ink strokes against clouds that promise more snow but never quite deliver.

But here and there, stubborn life persists. Winter jasmine climbs the garden walls in delicate sprays of yellow stars, each bloom perfect despite the killing frost. Hellebores nod their poison-bright heads in the weak sunlight, their colors ranging from deepest purple to the white of fresh snow. In sheltered corners, rosemary and thyme remain green and fragrant when crushed between my fingers, their hardy leaves carrying memories of summer kitchens and healing teas.

The survivors. Like me, I suppose.

A week has passed since we reclaimed the throne. Seven days of gradually strengthening sun, of snow melting from rooftops in crystalline drops that catch light like falling stars. Seven days of my storm finally beginning to loose its grip on Millrath. I can feel the change in my blood, in my bones, in the way my magic settles into new patterns. The wild power that protected me through months of running is gentling now, like a wolf learning to be a hound.

I rest my hand on the swell of my stomach, well visible now beneath the heavy wool of my dress. The fabric is finer than anything I wore during my months of flight—deep blue silk beneath black wool, embroidered with silver thread in patterns that echo frost on windows. A queen's garments, though I'm still learning to feel comfortable in them.

I am warm all the time now, though. I haven't felt cold in days.

"Your Grace?"

I turn at the quiet voice, movements slower than they once were. The weight of the child and what I went through changes everything—my balance, my stride, the way I carry myself through these familiar-yet-strange spaces. A young woman hovers at the edge of the herb bed I've been examining, her rough hands twisted in her apron. She's human, judging by her height and build, with earth under her fingernails and worry in her eyes.

"The frost killed most of the medicinal herbs," she says, gesturing to the bare beds where neat rows of healing plants once grew. Her accent marks her as local—probably born and raised in Millrath's lower town, where the few humans in this city live. It's an awful life. She's likely experienced hardships I'll never understand. I wish I could ask her, wish I could talk to her. "We tried to protect them when the storms came, covered them with straw and canvas, but..."

"But my winter was too strong." I finish for her, keeping my voice gentle. These are my people now, truly my people, and they need to learn not to fear me. The humans especially—they've lived so long under draconic rule, never quite sure of their place. "Don't worry. Plants are more resilient than we think."

I kneel carefully, one hand bracing against a stone planter for balance. Beneath dead leaves and the detritus of winter, tiny green shoots push through the frozen soil. Brave little soldiers declaring war on the cold. "See? Life finds a way. Even after the harshest winter."

The gardener—barely more than a girl, really—edges closer to look. Her eyes widen as she spots more signs of coming spring: swelling buds on bare branches, the first spears of bulbs pushing through snow, scattered patches of green where particularly stubborn herbs refuse to admit defeat.

"Those are mugwort," she says, pointing to a cluster of serrated leaves. "And there—that's yarrow. Mother used to say yarrow can survive anything. Wars and winters and worse."

"Your mother was wise." I straighten carefully, one hand still pressed to my lower back where the weight of the child pulls hardest. "What's your name?"

"Mari, Your Grace." She bobs a quick curtsy. "My mother was a healer in the lower town, before..." She trails off, but I can guess the rest. Before the winter. Before the storms. Before everything changed.

"Was she skilled with herbs?" When Mari nods, I feel something click into place—a piece of the future I've been trying to envision. "Would you be interested in helping restore these gardens? Not just clearing the dead growth, but planning what to plant come spring? Which medicines the city needs most?"

Her face lights up, then falls just as quickly. "I...I'm just a gardener, Your Grace. The master herbalist..."

"Fled with my brother-in-law's supporters." I wave away her hesitation. "And frankly, I trust someone with dirt under their nails more than all his fancy theoretical knowledge. You know these plants. Know how they grow, how they heal. That's worth more than any number of fancy titles. I grew up selling herbs in my village. It's work anyone can do, with a little care."

She stares at me for a long moment, hope warring with generations of knowing her place. Finally, she nods. "I'd be honored, Your Grace. Shall I have the beds cleared for spring planting?"

"Not yet." I shake my head, remembering my grandmother's lessons about the rhythm of seasons. "Let the earth rest a while longer. Some things need time to heal. But come back tomorrow—we'll start planning what to plant where. How to make this garden serve the whole city, not just the castle."

Mari withdraws with another curtsy, but there's a new lightness in her step. I watch her go, thinking about changes big and small, about how rebuilding a kingdom sometimes starts with something as simple as planting herbs.

The sound of boots on gravel makes me smile. I know those footsteps like I know my own heartbeat.

"I thought I'd find you here." My husband's voice carries equal measures of affection and concern. When his arms slide around me from behind, I lean back against his chest, letting his warmth settle upon me, settle into my very bones. His skin burns fever-hot even through layers of cloth. I could sink and drown in that feeling. I think I'll always feel that way. "You should be resting."

"I've rested enough." But I cover his hands with mine where they rest over our child. Through our bond, I feel his fierce protectiveness, his constant worry that I'm pushing myself too hard. The connection between us grows stronger each day, letting me sense not just his surface emotions but the deeper currents beneath—love and fear and desperate hope all tangled together. "How went the meetings?"

He makes a sound somewhere between a growl and a sigh, steam curling from his mouth. "House Bellrose sends renewed oaths of fealty, for whatever those are worth. Their ravens arrived this morning—pages and pages of flowery language about eternal loyalty, as if they hadn't been ready to support my brother's claim just days ago."

"They're scared." I trace patterns on the back of his hand, feeling scales ripple beneath his skin at my touch. "All the Houses are. After what happened...they need to know where they stand."

"Where they stand is at our mercy." But there's less heat in the words than there would have been months ago. "Morwen and Vos suggest a grand council to 'discuss the future of the realm.' As if I don't know what that means—they want concessions. Guarantees. Promises written in blood and sealed with magic. There is only so much they can demand. They know what to fear." Unspoken: you.

"Would that be so terrible?" I turn in his arms to face him, studying the new lines that worry has carved around his eyes, sedimented there. Dark circles beneath them speak of too many sleepless nights, too many hours spent poring over reports and negotiations. He's hardly rested since we got back to the city "The Houses aren't our enemies, Arvoren. Not anymore. They're part of the kingdom we'll build together—the kingdom our child will inherit."

His jaw tightens, scales rippling beneath his skin. "They turned on me once. Supported my brother's bid for power. How can I ever trust them again?"

"The same way I learned to trust you." I touch his face, thumb tracing one of those new worry lines. "By choosing to believe in the possibility of change. Of growth. Of something better than what came before."

For a long moment he just looks at me, and I see the battle in his eyes—the need to protect warring with the desire to grow, to change, to become the king his people truly need. I can tell he's remembering all I've told him, the warnings I gave him when we were alone in the frost.

Finally he sighs, pressing his forehead to mine.

"House Morwen arrives next week to begin negotiations," he says. "Vos and Bellrose the week after. Their ravens say they're bringing their families this time—wives, children, their whole courts. As if that proves their peaceful intentions."

"Or as if they truly want to start fresh." I smooth my hands down his chest, feeling his heartbeat strong and steady beneath my palms. "Will you let me help? Not as your prize or possession, but as your queen? Your partner?"

The word makes something warm unfurl in his chest. I feel it through our bond, eternal sunrise after endless night. "You know I value your counsel more than anyone's now. But the Houses...I fear they may not be ready to hear wisdom from the heretic."

"Then they'll learn." I smile, letting a hint of winter steel enter my voice. "As you did. As we all must."

He laughs—a real laugh, not the sharp bark of dragon-fury I grew used to in those early days. "Sometimes I forget how fierce you can be, little bird. Even now."

"I'm not so little anymore." I gesture to my swollen belly with mock indignation, and

am rewarded with another laugh. Through our bond, I feel his joy and terror mingle as our child kicks, strong enough for us both to feel.

"No," he agrees softly, hand spanning my middle. "You've grown into something far more magnificent than I ever imagined. Than I ever deserved."

"Arvoren..." But before I can protest this self-recrimination, another kick interrupts me. His eyes widen, and through our bond I feel his awe overshadow everything else.

"They know their father's voice," I say, covering his hand with mine. "They always move more when you're near. Can you feel how their magic reaches for yours?"

Arvoren's hand trembles slightly where it rests against my belly. For all his power, all his strength, nothing undoes my husband quite like these small reminders of the life we've created together. Through our bond, I sense him reaching with his own magic, dragon-fire meeting winter storm in the space between heartbeats.

"I never thought..." He breaks off, smoke curling from between his teeth. The air around us warms noticeably, snow melting in a perfect circle where we stand. "When you fled, when I couldn't find you...I thought I'd lost everything. But you came back. You chose—"

"I chose us," I finish for him, remembering dark nights and darker choices. "Chose to believe we could build something better than what we were. I chose to trust that you could become the man I needed you to be. And I'm beginning to believe I was right."

He kisses me then, gentle as falling snow. I melt into him, savoring the way his arms tighten around me—protective but not possessive, strong but not crushing.

We've both learned so much about the difference between holding and containing.

A gust of wind sweeps through the garden, carrying the crisp scent of coming snow. Dead leaves skitter across frozen ground, and the bare branches above us creak and sway. For a moment—just a moment—I think I catch another scent beneath the winter-clean air, something I can't place.

Arvoren feels my sudden tension through our bond. "What is it?"

"Nothing." I try to smile, but the unease lingers. "Just the wind."

His eyes narrow as he scans the garden, scales rippling beneath his skin. He knows me too well, knows my every tell. Knows what I refuse to say out loud.

"You're worried about Ulric."

"Aren't you?" I press closer to his warmth, though the chill I feel now has nothing to do with the weather. "He's still out there somewhere. Nursing his wounds, plotting his revenge. I know your brother, Arvoren. He won't simply vanish into exile."

"Let him plot." Smoke curls thicker from my husband's mouth, and the air around us grows noticeably warmer. "Let him gather whatever broken forces still follow him. He'll never touch you again. Either of you. I made a promise. I intend to keep it."

I want to believe him. Want to trust that we're truly safe, that the future stretching before us holds nothing but peace and healing and the joy of watching our child grow. But I remember the madness in Ulric's eyes during that last battle. Remember his obsession with power, his need to possess what was never his to take.

"We'll be ready," Arvoren says, reading my thoughts through our bond. "Whatever comes next, we face it together. No more secrets. No more running."

"No more cages," I add quietly. "For any of us."

He nods, understanding all I leave unsaid. Together we look out over the winter-quiet garden, where tiny green shoots promise renewal beneath the snow. A weak ray of sunlight breaks through the clouds, turning frost to diamonds on bare branches.

So much has changed since I first walked these paths in chains. The woman I was then feels like a stranger now—afraid and angry and so desperately alone. I touch my belly, feeling our child move beneath my palm. They carry both our magics, winter storm and dragon-fire combined. Something that could reshape this kingdom, if we raise them with wisdom and love instead of fear and control.

"We should go in," Arvoren says reluctantly. "You'll freeze out here."

I laugh, letting my magic swirl playfully around us in a flurry of snowflakes. "I never freeze, my love. Or have you forgotten who you married?"

His smile shows teeth, sharp and bright in the winter light. "How could I forget? You remind me every day what a miracle it is that you chose to stay. That you're truly mine."

"Yours," I agree, taking his hand. "As you are mine. As we both belong to this land, to our people, to the future we'll build together."

We walk back toward the castle, our footprints mingling in the fresh snow. Above us, clouds gather for another storm—but a gentle one this time, promising renewal rather than destruction. Spring approaches, carrying with it the chance to grow something new from the ashes of what was lost.

I lean into my husband's warmth as we climb the steps, feeling our child move between us. There will be more battles ahead, more wounds to heal, more trust to build between not just us but all the broken pieces of this realm. But for now, in this quiet moment as weak sunlight gilds frost into diamonds and our magics dance

together in the winter air, I let myself believe in our future.

The garden remembers winter. But it also remembers how to bloom.

It is a cruel irony that the next time I stand in that very garden, the worst comes to pass.

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:44 am

Maps spread across the war table like fallen leaves, their edges curling in the heat from my skin. Steam rises where my fingers trace trade routes and border lines—old habits die hard, and my dragon nature still bleeds through when I'm agitated. House Morwen's latest missive lies open before me, its careful script outlining terms and conditions, promises and platitudes. The Lords arrive within days, and every word must be weighed, every concession measured against generations of mistrust.

My father's voice echoes in memory: Never let them see weakness. Never let them think they have the upper hand.

But my father died believing in people. He believed in a world where we could be different. I wonder what he would make of me now, seeking peace instead of submission.

On happier days, I think he might have been proud.

Candles gutter in their holders as I pace the length of the chamber. Dawn paints the eastern windows gold, but I've been here since midnight, reviewing proposals and counterproposals until the words blur together. The Houses want guarantees—of autonomy, of protection, of respect for their ancient rights. They want proof that the Dragon King has changed, that his witch-queen has tempered his fury into something they can trust.

A bitter laugh escapes me, smoking in the cool air. Trust. Such a simple word for something that feels impossible after everything that's happened. But Calliope believes in it—in the possibility of building something new from the ashes of the old ways. And these days, I find myself believing in her more than in my father's ghost.

A knock interrupts my brooding. "Enter."

Darian slips through the door, and immediately my scales ripple beneath my skin. My oldest friend's expression carries that careful neutrality that always means trouble.

"Report." Smoke curls from my mouth despite my efforts at control.

"My king." He hesitates, which sets off more warning bells. Darian never hesitates. "The queen...it seems she's not in your chambers. Or anywhere in the castle that we can find."

The maps beneath my hands begin to smolder. "What do you mean, you can't find her?"

"The guards say she left the royal wing shortly after dawn. But she hasn't been seen since, and none of the usual places..."

He trails off as I grip the table hard enough to splinter the wood beneath my hands.

"And you're only telling me this now?" My voice drops to a growl that's barely human.

"She's been gone less than an hour." Darian keeps his tone deliberately calm, reasonable. "And she is free to move about the castle now. Perhaps she simply wanted to explore—"

"She would have told me." Through our bond, I reach for her, seeking that familiar pulse of magic and life. The connection feels strange—muted somehow, tinged with something that might be fear. "Something's wrong."

"My king—"

But I'm already moving, my partially transformed state letting me cross the chamber in two strides. "Search everything. Every room, every passage. Send riders to check the city—"

"Arvoren." Darian catches my arm, a liberty only decades of friendship allow. He looks at me flatly—not an unkind or scolding look, just a hard, level stare. "Forgive my tongue, my king, but...remember what happened last time you tried to cage her. She chose to return to you. Chose to trust you. Don't throw that away over simple paranoia."

The words hit like physical blows. Because I know he's right. I remember too well how my desperate need to possess, to control, drove her away before. Remember the look in her eyes when she came here. She knew from the very start that her pretty cage was still a cage. She knew how the game worked, and she played it. And torturously, I remember waking to find her gone, taking half my soul with her.

But this feels different. Through our bond, that thread of unease grows stronger. Something's wrong. I know it in my bones, in my blood, in the very air that crackles with tension around me.

"Ulric's still out there." The words emerge in a snarl. "Wounded, humiliated, but alive. You really think he's given up? That he won't try to take what he sees as his?"

"All the more reason to trust her to protect herself." Darian's voice gentles slightly. "She's not the same woman you first brought to this castle. She's stronger now. Wiser. And she carries your child—"

"Exactly." Smoke pours thicker as my control slips. "She's carrying our child. If anything happened to either of them—"

The bond between us flares suddenly, sharp with fear that isn't mine. An image

flashes through my mind—stone walls, shadows moving where they shouldn't, a familiar scent that makes my dragon blood howl with protective fury.

I shove past Darian, already half-transformed. "Search the castle. But do it quietly. I don't want the Lords' spies catching wind of this."

"And you?"

"I hunt." The word comes out garbled as my throat reshapes itself, scales rippling across my skin in waves of ruby red. "Whatever's frightened her, I'll find it. I'll tear it apart."

I don't wait for his response. The window before me shatters as I complete my transformation, wings spreading wide as I launch myself into the dawn-painted sky. Below, the city spreads like a map of black stone and iron, its streets beginning to fill with morning crowds. Somewhere in that maze of buildings and shadows, my wife needs me.

I'm coming, I think fiercely, hoping she can feel it through our bond. Whatever's happening, wherever you are, I'm coming.

The hunt begins.

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:44 am

The herbs slip from my fingers as the first stick strikes my shoulder.

"Witch!" The word rings across the meadow, sharp as the pain blooming beneath my skin. "Look at the little witch, gathering her poisons!"

I know better than to run. Running only excites them, like wolves scenting blood. Instead, I kneel carefully, gathering the scattered yarrow and feverfew back into my basket. My hands don't shake—I won't give them that satisfaction. Won't let them see how my heart hammers against my ribs, how fear turns my tongue to lead.

They're just boys, I know. Boys throwing twigs. They won't hurt me.

Thomás emerges from the tree line first, flanked by his usual pack. The tanner's son stands head and shoulders above other boys his age, all bulk and meanness, taking after his father in the worst ways. His cronies spread out behind him—smaller boys eager to prove themselves through cruelty, their faces flushed with the thrill of cornering acceptable prey.

"Picking flowers for your spells?" Thomás scoops up another stone, tossing it between his hands. "Going to curse the village like your grandmother?"

"They're medicines." My voice comes out steadier than I expect. Grandmother's lessons echo in my head: Keep your chin high. Show no fear. They can only hurt you if you let them see you're afraid. "For your sister's fever. Your father asked—"

"Liar!" The second stick catches my hip, but I don't flinch. "My father would never deal with witches. Everyone knows what you are."

His friends snicker, and I resist the urge to scowl. It'll only make it worse.

They're closer now, circling me. I count six of them—Thomás and his usual followers, plus two I don't recognize. Probably visiting from the next village over. News of the witch-child spreads, after all. Everyone wants their chance to prove their bravery against the monster.

But I am not a monster. And I am very, very tired of being afraid.

"You know what my father says?" Thomás takes another step forward, stone raised. "Says we should have drowned you when you were born. Says you'll bring nothing but trouble, you and that crazy old—"

"Careful." The word comes out soft, but something in my tone makes him falter. "You wouldn't want to catch it, would you?"

"Catch what?"

I smile, slow and secret. "Haven't you noticed? The way it spreads?" I gesture to his arm, where angry red welts have begun to appear—poison oak I recognize from the forest edge where they were hiding. Of course they didn't notice it. Fools like them don't know danger until it's upon them. "First the rash. Then the fever. Then...well. I'm sure you've heard the stories."

Thomás looks down at his arm, eyes widening. Two of his friends back away, scratching unconsciously at their own reddening skin. I rise slowly, brushing dirt from my skirts.

"Don't worry," I say, careful to keep my voice gentle. Concerned, even. "I'm sure it won't affect you too badly. Not like the last boy. The one who went mad from the pain. Unless..." I tap my chin thoughtfully. "Did any of you eat blackberries from the

woods? The ones growing near the old oak?" I know they did; I can see it around their mouths, the dark stains.

They are the monsters. Not me.

More scratching now. One of the smaller boys looks ready to cry.

"You're lying." But Thomás's voice shakes. "You're just trying to—"

"Am I?" I meet his eyes steadily. "Look at your hands, Thomás. See how the veins are darkening? That's how it starts. But I'm sure you'll be fine. Probably. And if not..." I shrug, gathering my basket. "Well. You know where to find me. If you want the cure."

I walk away slowly, keeping my steps measured. Behind me, I hear urgent whispers, the sound of bodies crashing through undergrowth in their haste to reach the stream. To wash away the phantom poison they imagine coursing through their veins.

Only when I'm safely hidden behind my grandmother's garden wall do I allow myself to laugh. Allow the fear to drain away, replaced by fierce pride. I didn't need magic or strength to defeat them. Only wit, and their own ignorance, and the power of fear turned back on itself.

"Well done, little one." Grandmother's voice makes me start. She stands in the doorway, eyes bright with approval. "You're learning."

"They'll only come back angrier next time."

"Perhaps." She takes my basket, examining the scattered herbs with practiced hands. "But they'll come back warier too. And that's its own kind of power."

"I wish I really could curse them." It's the first time in my memory I have said such a thing aloud. "I wish we really were witches."

"No." My grandmother's voice turns sharp. "That's not our way. Real power isn't about hurting others. It's about knowing yourself. About turning their fear into your strength."

I nod, though I don't fully understand. Not yet. That lesson will take years to truly sink in—years of being hunted, years of being feared, years of learning that true strength often looks nothing like power at all.

But the seed is planted that day, taking root alongside the herbs in my grandmother's garden. A truth I'll carry with me through all the dark days ahead:

Sometimes the greatest victory is simply refusing to break.

The cold wakes me first—a deep, bone-cracking cold that even my winter magic can't quite shield me from. Then pain, radiating from the back of my skull where something struck me. The world swims into focus slowly, fragments of memory piecing themselves together like shards of broken ice: walking in the lower gardens, a shadow moving where it shouldn't, a familiar voice carrying an edge of madness, speaking one word.

Speaking my name.

When I open my eyes, I know exactly where I am.

These peaks tower above Millrath like the teeth of some ancient beast, their jagged faces permanently wreathed in storm clouds. Arvoren brought me here once, in those

early days when he was still trying to break my spirit. I remember how terrified I was. The fear brings a sour taste into my mouth. The drops are just as terrifying now as they were then, the winds just as bitter.

But this time, I am not here with Arvoren. I am not here with the man who would come to love me.

I'm here with a monster.

"Finally awake, Calliope?"

I hate the way he says my name. I wish I could rip out of his mouth, curse him to never say it again.

Ulric's voice carries none of its old charm. He stands at the edge of the narrow ledge where I lie bound, golden hair whipping in the frigid wind. His fine clothes are ragged now, his face gaunt and haunted. Burns from our last battle still mar his skin, the scarring worse than I remembered. He's clearly been hiding for days from the dragons hunting him, looking wild and unkempt.

But it's his eyes that truly frighten me—there's nothing left in them of the charismatic prince who once pretended to be my ally. Only madness remains, sharp as broken glass.

"How did you get into the castle?" My voice comes out weaker than I'd like, but I force myself to meet his gaze. "The wards—"

"The wards remember me." His laugh holds an edge of hysteria. "Just as the stones remember. Just as everything in that cursed city remembers who I was meant to be, before my brother stole it all. The walls remember my blood. Really, it's all about blood."

I test my bonds carefully, trying to access my magic. But something's wrong—the power feels distant, muffled, like trying to hear through deep water. When I reach for the familiar pulse of winter storm, I find only echoes.

"Wondering why your little tricks aren't working?" Ulric's smile is knife-sharp as he holds up an iron pendant. Ancient runes pulse with sickly light along its surface. "Amazing what you can find in the old places, if you know where to look. The first dragons knew how to bind magic. Knew how to cage things that were never meant to be caged. It won't last long, but then again, you won't be conscious long. I'm going to make sure you have a...painless pregnancy."

I struggle to sit up, fighting waves of dizziness. "He's going to find me. How does it feel, Ulric? To be the monstrous failure you are? It can't feel good."

His expression darkens.

In two strides he crosses the ledge, fingers tangling in my hair as he yanks my head back roughly. "You think you're clever, don't you? Think you've won? My brother's tame little witch-queen, carrying the heir that should have been mine—"

"I was never yours." The words emerge fierce despite my fear. "Never meant to be."

"No?" His grip tightens painfully. "Then why did the Gods lead me to you? Why did they whisper of your power, of the child you would bear? A child of dragon and Windwaker blood, strong enough to reshape the world...." His voice drops lower, edges of madness creeping in. "Fate wanted me to rule this place. I know it. But if I can't have that power, if I can't rule through that child, then neither will my brother. I'll see you both dead first. Perhaps I should just kill you both now. Either way, I'd get what I want."

Terror claws at my throat as his meaning sinks in. One hand moves to my swollen

belly, feeling our child's magic pulse beneath my palm. They're moving less than usual, as if the binding magic affects them too. The thought sends fresh fear coursing through me.

"They're innocent," I whisper. "Whatever quarrel you have with your brother—"

"Innocent?" Ulric's laugh echoes off the mountainside, startling the circling dragons. "Was I innocent, when our parents died? When Arvoren claimed everything that should have been shared between us? When he left me with nothing but scraps and shadows?" His fingers dig deeper into my scalp. "Now he'll know how it feels. To watch everything he loves torn away. To be left with nothing but memories and regret."

The wind howls fiercer around us, driving snow like daggers. But for once, I'm not the one controlling the storm. My magic feels weaker by the moment, drained by whatever power pulses in that cursed pendant. Even our child's strength seems to fade, their movements growing sluggish, uncertain.

Desperately, I reach for my bond with Arvoren. The connection flickers like a guttering candle, but I pour everything I can into it—my fear, my location, my certainty that time grows short. Please, I think fiercely. Please feel this. Please come.

"He won't find you in time." Ulric reads the hope in my eyes. "By the time he realizes you're gone, by the time he tracks you here...it will be far too late." He releases my hair, stepping back to survey me with clinical detachment. "I wonder, should I wait for him to arrive? Let him watch as I end his legacy? Or would it be crueler to leave him wondering, searching forever, never knowing exactly how you died?"

"You really hate him that much?" I ask, though I already know the answer. "Your own brother?"

"Hate?" Something shifts in Ulric's expression—grief perhaps, or what remains of it beneath the madness. "You don't understand. You couldn't. Do you know what it's like to grow up in his shadow? To watch him take everything, claim everything, own everything? To know that no matter what you do, no matter how hard you try, you'll never be anything but the spare? The backup plan?"

His voice cracks on that last word, and for a moment I glimpse the wounded boy beneath the monster—the child who never felt good enough, who learned too young that love was conditional on success. But then his eyes harden again, and that glimpse of humanity vanishes like smoke.

"But none of that matters now." He draws a blade I recognize—the same dark metal as the pendant, inscribed with runes that make my teeth ache. "All that matters is making him suffer as I have suffered. Making him understand what it means to lose everything."

I try to scramble backward, but there's nowhere to go. The ledge drops away behind me into endless white, and my bonds prevent any real movement. But as Ulric advances, blade raised, something shifts inside me.

Our child's power flares, stronger than I'm used to, and suddenly I know with bone-deep certainty that Arvoren is coming. I feel him through our bond like approaching thunder, like the promise of dragon-fire and fury. My husband is hunting, and all of Ulric's madness and magic won't stop him from finding us.

"He's coming," I say, and there must be something raw and truthful in my voice because Ulric falters. "You know he is. You can feel it too, can't you? The way the very air changes when he hunts?"

"Let him come." But there's fear beneath the bravado now. "Let him watch you die—"

"He'll tear you apart." The words emerge in a whisper, but they carry the weight of prophecy. "Not quickly. Not cleanly. He'll make you suffer for every moment of fear you've caused me, for every threat to our child. And this time...this time I won't try to stop him."

Ulric's hand shakes slightly, the blade wavering. "You think I fear him? After everything—"

"I think you've always feared him." I meet his gaze steadily, though my heart hammers against my ribs. "Why else spend so long trying to prove yourself? Why else this desperate need to take what's his? You're still that little boy, aren't you? Still trying to step out of your brother's shadow?"

"Shut up." The blade presses against my throat, drawing blood that freezes instantly in the bitter air. "You know nothing about me. About us. About what it means to be the second son—"

But I see the truth in his eyes now. Behind all the madness, all the cruelty, all the carefully crafted schemes...he's terrified. Of Arvoren, yes, but also of himself. Of what he's become. Of the monster he chose to be when being second-best grew too painful to bear.

He's just a man, I realise. An angry, scared, viciously cruel man like any other.

And today, he's going to die.

A roar splits the sky in the far distance—a sound of such primal fury that the very mountains seem to tremble.

Ulric's head snaps up, eyes widening as massive wings blot out the sun. His grip on the blade tightens, but I see the way his hands shake, the way sweat beads on his

forehead despite the killing cold.

"Brother," he whispers, and for the first time since he took me, real fear enters his voice. "You're too late. Far too late—"

The blade moves.

But I am not the same woman he once tried to break. I dodge, roll hard to my left, and fight.

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:44 am

Blood freezes black on snow in the gathering dark.

My roar splits the dawn like thunder, echoing off ancient walls, shaking ice from battlements. The sound carries all my fury, all my fear, all my desperate need to find her before it's too late. Already dragons burst from towers and guard posts, my elite warriors taking wing like living shadows, their scales catching the first rays of sunlight as they spiral upward. The response is immediate, instinctive—they know that sound. Know their king hunts.

"Arvoren!" Darian races across the courtyard toward me, steam rising from his armor as his own dragon nature responds to my partially transformed state. Behind him, more warriors pour from the barracks, weapons half-drawn. "The trackers found signs of struggle in the lower gardens. And this—"

He thrusts something toward me that makes my blood run cold—a scrap of blue silk, embroidered with silver patterns. The fabric Calliope wore this morning still carries her scent, crisp sweetness mingled now with copper-sharp fear. Through our bond, I feel her terror like physical pain.

"How?" The word emerges in a snarl that's barely human. Smoke pours from my mouth as scales ripple faster beneath my skin. "How did he get past the wards?"

"We don't know." But Darian's voice carries the weight of bitter understanding. Deep down, we both know what it must be.

My brother's betrayal doesn't change the fact that he was born here, that our parents' magic runs in his veins just as it runs in mine. Once again, my own heritage, my own

blood, has been turned against me.

Around us, more warriors gather, their own transformations beginning in response to my fury.

"Search patterns!" Darian barks to the assembled warriors, not waiting for my command. He knows we have only minutes. "Northern quadrant first—across the lake—"

"He'll want somewhere defensible," I cut in, already moving. Every second feels like an eternity. Like failure. "Somewhere he can..." I break off as another wave of fear hits through our bond. "Somewhere symbolic. Begin with—"

"The peaks." Darian nods sharply. "Of course."

More dragons launch themselves from the castle walls, their wingbeats stirring snow into whirlwinds. The courtyard becomes a chaos of orders shouted, weapons distributed, warriors transforming in sprays of steam and shadow. My elite guards know what Ulric is capable of. Know what he'll do to Calliope if we don't find her in time.

But first, there's something I must do.

"Coordinate the search," I tell Darian, already turning toward the highest tower. "Start with the northern ridges, the old hunting paths. He knows them as well as I do. But when you find him..." Smoke curls thicker as my control slips. "Wait for me. He's mine to kill."

I don't wait for his response. The tower stairs blur beneath my feet as I take them three at a time, my partially transformed state letting me move faster than any human could manage. Guards flatten themselves against walls as I pass, sensing their king's

fury. Steam trails in my wake where my too-hot skin meets frozen stone.

The Sanctum doors burst open at my approach.

Inside, time seems to slow.

Sunlight streams through walls of enchanted glass, casting rainbow patterns across floors still scarred from that final battle. Here, where ancient magic runs deepest, I first tried to bind Calliope to me through ceremony and force. Here, where my ancestors communed with powers older than kingdoms, I learned that some things cannot be contained, only cherished.

My parents were married here. Died here, defending their throne from assassins when Ulric and I were barely more than boys. Their spirits still linger in this place—I feel them in the way the air thickens, in how the light seems to catch on nothing, casting shadows that move when you're not looking directly at them.

I have so little time. But I need to do this. I need to, or I'll never be able to live with myself.

"I know what you'd say." My voice echoes strangely in the vast space. Despite my desperate need to move, to hunt, to find her, something holds me here. Some power older than my rage. "That he's my brother. That we're meant to protect each other, no matter what. That's what you taught us, isn't it? Family above all?"

The shadows shift, and for a moment I swear I catch a glimpse of my mother's face in the glass, the curve of her brow as she laughed, gentle and sad as the day she died. Her soft voice as she played with us, held us.

Dirt flakes from our clothes as Mother separates us, holding us by our collars like scruffed cats. Ulric's nose bleeds freely, the blood freezing before it can drip onto his

fine tunic. My eye is already swelling shut where his elbow caught me.

"Look at you both," she says, and there's something in her voice that makes us both stop struggling. Not anger—disappointment. It cuts deeper than any scolding. "Princes, fighting like common street children."

"He started it," Ulric spits, golden hair wild around his face. "Said I wasn't strong enough to—"

"I did not! You're the one who—"

"Enough." Mother's is firm, unyielding, but not unkind. She kneels before us, taking one of our hands in each of hers. Her skin burns fever-hot, like Father's. Like mine will someday, though Ulric still runs cooler. "Do you know why Kaldoria was founded by your— our family, so very long ago?"

We shake our heads, though we've heard this story a hundred times. Some lessons bear repeating.

Her slip of the tongue doesn't register in my young mind. But I'll remember it later.

"Because they understood that true strength comes not from power alone, but from the bonds between us. From protecting what we love." She squeezes our hands. "You boys are all each other has. The world will try to turn you against each other—the crown, the court, your own pride. But you must never let it."

"Why?" Ulric's voice is smaller now, younger.

Her eyes grow distant for a moment, a single blink. I'm not sure whether my brother has seen it there, too.

“Losing one’s family is the worst pain a person can go through,” she murmurs. “You must never lose each other, not if you can help it.”

"I don't understand. I could just find someone else," I say, but she just smiles sadly.

"You will understand it. Not now, but someday." She draws us both close, and for a moment we're just children again, safe in our mother's arms. "Promise me you'll protect each other. No matter what comes. Promise me you'll remember that you're brothers first, princes second."

"We promise," we say in unison, and we mean it. We're too young to understand how promises fail. How they mean nothing. How there is nothing in the world that can hold us together, not really.

But Mother is pleased by our answer. I see it now in my memories—the bittersweet grief in her eyes, the way she held us tighter. The quirk of her downturned lip. It was as if she already knew how it would end. As if she'd seen all of this in some terrible vision: her sons at each other's throats, the castle burning, winter descending at last.

"I'm sorry, Mother," I whisper to the empty Sanctum. "It was never meant to be."

Time crashes back into normal speed as another wave of fear hits through our bond—sharper this time, more urgent.

No mourning. Not anymore.

I have no brother.

I burst from the Sanctum at a dead run, shattering its glass like Calliope once did, my transformation ripping free from me with a ferocity I cannot recall ever having felt.

He has to die. The words emerge rough with smoke and grief from the recesses of my tired, furious, terrified mind. For her. He'll die for her.

As I soar upward, breaking free from the Sanctum, something brushes my scales—a touch light as falling snow, gone before I can be sure it was real. The air grows heavier, charged with magic older than my bloodline. I see more dragons high above the city, their wings casting shadows like storm clouds across Millrath's streets, soaring toward the mountains.

No answer follows me into the cold air. No ghostly voices offer absolution.

I roar, a terrible, rapturous sound.

Above, my warriors take wing in perfect formation, scales glinting like stars against the morning sky. They fall into hunting patterns with practiced precision, years of training evident in every movement. But I barely notice them now. All my focus narrows to that flickering connection, that pulse of magic and life that tells me she still lives.

Let Ulric play his games. Let him think he knows what power is, what strength means, what it takes to rule. I've learned better. Learned that true strength comes not from forcing others to kneel, but from choosing to kneel yourself. From letting love transform you into something greater than you were.

I am not the same man who once kept Calliope in chains. Not the same King who thought fear was the only way to rule. She changed me, with her fierce heart and gentle wisdom, with her endless capacity for growth and forgiveness and love.

And now I'm going to prove it.

My wings catch the wind as I bank north, toward the ancient peaks where this all

began.

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:44 am

Something is different about the wind up here now.

I feel it first in my bones, then in my blood, then in the very air I breathe. The storm that's followed me since I fled Millrath months ago has changed. No longer just my magic responding to fear and need, but something older. Something that makes my teeth ache and my child's magic pulse like a second heartbeat.

I know Ulric notices too. I see it in the way his golden hair stands on end, how his scales ripple beneath his skin more frequently now. The air around us has grown thick with power that neither of us fully understands.

"Your magic grows stronger," he says, but there's uncertainty beneath the mockery. "Or perhaps it's not yours at all. Perhaps it's the child's. My brother's heir, already showing such...promise. We're running out of time to chat, dear Calliope."

The way he says that last word makes my skin crawl. I shift carefully, testing my bonds, keeping him talking. I got one good kick in at his face. Now we're at an impasse, me propped back in the snow, bound hands holding me up, and him wiping blood from his split lip.

"You never did tell me about your parents," I say, though I know the story. I have to stall. "About how they died. About why you hate him so much."

His laugh holds an edge of hysteria. "I can see what you're doing." He paces the narrow ledge, and I notice for the first time the ancient carvings beneath our feet—runes that pulse with faint light when his boots touch them. "You don't understand. You couldn't. You weren't there when they died—"

"Then help me understand." I pour every ounce of sincerity I can muster into my voice. The longer I keep him talking, the more time Arvoren has to find us. And something tells me we need to be found soon. The air grows heavier by the moment, charged with power that makes even my weakened magic sing in response. "Tell me what happened."

For a moment, something human flickers in his eyes—grief, perhaps, or what remains of it beneath the madness. Then his expression hardens, scales rippling faster beneath his skin.

"You want to understand?" Steam rises where his feet touch the ancient stone. "You want to know why he doesn't deserve any of this? Why he has to learn what it means to lose everything?"

The transformation begins before I can respond. His body swells, bones cracking and reforming as scales burst through skin. Within moments he towers above me, a dragon of impossible beauty and terrible fury.

But something's wrong. The sacred ground seems to recoil from his presence, the very mountain shuddering beneath us.

Wind howls through the peaks, but these aren't the mindless storms of my making. Voices ride the bitter air—whispers in languages I shouldn't understand, and I don't, but somehow. I know they're speaking of ancient pacts and broken promises. Of brothers turned against brothers, of sacred bonds corrupted by power and pride.

The gods are watching. I feel their presence like physical pressure, drawn by my child's unique magic and the blasphemy unfolding in their sacred place. Their interest burns like ice in my veins, terrible and beautiful at once.

I will never understand the gods, I know now. I'll never know a life without the

familiar crooning and screeching of them in my mind, either.

Perhaps it was always meant to be that way.

Ulric rears back, flames gathering in his massive throat. Before he can strike, something shifts inside me. Our magic surges, stronger than ever before, creating a barrier of pure winter between us. Ice spreads from where I kneel, forming patterns that echo the ancient runes beneath us.

The old blood stirs, a voice whispers, both in my mind and in the howling wind. It's happening, it's happening, it's happening.

This child... Another voice, colder than the first. The rift. It will restore the rift. It can heal what has been broken for good.

Perhaps the kingdom would be better broken.

A new day dawns!

Or the end of everything. This voice burns like frost, almost gleeful. Such power cannot be contained. Cannot be controlled.

Ulric's flames crash against my shield of ice, but the barrier holds. Through our bond, I feel Arvoren drawing closer, his fury and desperation building with each passing moment. I just need to survive a little longer. Need to protect our child until he finds us.

"You can't kill me." The words emerge stronger than I feel, carrying the weight of prophecy. A laugh ripples up through my voice, sharp, mocking. "You know you can't. The gods won't allow it."

Ulric's dragon-laugh shakes snow from the peaks. "Gods? You think they care about us? About any of this? They abandoned us long ago, little bird. Left us to tear each other apart over scraps of power and—"

A crack like thunder splits the air. For a moment I think it's more of Ulric's blasphemy drawing divine wrath. Then I realize it's not thunder at all.

It's the crack of wings upon the wind. Coming fast.

The mountain seems almost to shudder beneath us, ancient stone groaning like a living thing. Ulric's massive form blocks out the weak sunlight, his scales catching what little light remains and turning it sickly, wrong. Steam rises where his claws touch the sacred ground, as if the very mountain rejects his presence here.

"You feel it too, don't you?" His dragon-voice fills the air with smoke. "The power in this place. The old magic." He laughs, and the sound sets my teeth on edge. "Did my dear brother take you here, little bird? Did he want to grind you into dust just like I do? We're one and the same, Arvoren and I."

I feel sick. I struggle against my bonds, but the cursed metal holds firm. Still, I feel myself growing stronger by the second, my magic returning to me like an old friend. I cannot be held for long.

"He would do this," Ulric continues, circling closer, voice monstrously contorted by the transformation. His massive tail sweeps across carved stone, scattering centuries of ice. "If it were he that lost. If he had been the brother left alone in this world. He'd want you dead, too. It's the creature he is—it's what the world made us. And you'll be living with it forever, Calliope. You can't deny it."

"Your parents loved you." The words emerge sharp as broken ice. "Is that why you hate him so much? Because he grew into the good man they raised him to be, and you

didn't?"

His roar shakes snow from the peaks, but I see the blow strike home. Scales ripple faster across his body as rage wars with old grief.

"You know nothing of that day!" Flames gather in his throat, turning his words to steam. "Nothing of what it means to watch everything you love burn while your perfect brother does nothing—"

"Or did they choose him over you?" I press harder, knowing I'm prodding an open wound but unable to stop. Every moment I keep him talking is another moment closer to salvation. "Did they see the monster in you even then?"

The fire comes fast and terrible, but something rises to meet it—another wall of pure winter, drawn not from my weakened magic but from the very air around us. Ice and flame collide in an explosion that rocks the mountainside, sending ancient snow cascading down distant slopes.

The old ones remember, whispers a voice like grinding stone. The sacred ground remembers.

I suspect the Windwakers have known this land for a very, very long time.

Ulric rears back, genuine fear flickering in his massive eyes as the ice beneath us pulses brighter. The air grows impossibly thick with power—not just the gods now, but the weight of centuries of ritual and sacrifice upon this land. Of oaths sworn in blood and fire, kept and broken.

"They're here," I breathe, understanding finally what this place truly is. What Ulric's rage has awakened. "You can't hurt me. They're here."

"Lies!" But there's panic beneath the fury now. Steam pours from his jaws as he speaks, melting the ice that tries to claim his claws.

The pacts remain. This voice burns like frost, ancient and merciless. The bonds endure. Brother against brother, blood against blood. Some sins cannot be forgotten.

The wind rises, carrying voices that sound almost human—screams of the sacrificed, prayers of the faithful, oaths sworn and broken across centuries. Snow swirls around us in patterns that hurt to look at directly, forming shapes that shift between dragon and storm and something else entirely.

Our child moves within me, their magic responding to the ancient power that fills the air. I feel them reaching, connecting with forces I barely understand. The runes carved into the stone begin to sing, harmonizing with the storm in ways that make my bones vibrate.

"Enough!" Ulric's voice cracks like breaking ice. "Your gods can't save you. Your magic can't protect you. You'll die here, Windwaker, where so many others—"

The mountain itself cuts him off. Stone groans beneath us as ice spreads faster, crawling up Ulric's legs despite the heat pouring from his scales. The voices in the wind grow louder, more insistent, speaking in languages that taste like lightning on my tongue.

The child must live, they whisper. The blood must continue. The storm must break. A new day for the kingdom.

"You feel it, don't you?" I meet Ulric's massive eyes, seeing the fear beneath his rage. "What this place truly is. What you've done by bringing me here. By threatening your own blood."

"My blood?" His laugh sounds strangled now. "You think that thing you carry is my blood? My family? It's an abomination. A mistake. Something that never should have—"

But his words fade as something changes in the air—a shift in pressure, a new current in the endless wind. Through our bond, I feel Arvoren's presence like approaching thunder, like the promise of dragon-fire and fury.

My husband is coming. And all of Ulric's madness and magic won't save him from what follows.

Ulric's massive head snaps toward the horizon, scales bristling at some sound I can't yet hear.

"He won't reach you in time." His dragon-voice shakes loose more snow from the peaks, but I hear the lie in it. His tail lashes against sacred stone, scattering centuries of ice. "I'll finish this now—"

"Did you know," I say, keeping my voice steady despite my fear, "that Arvoren comes here sometimes? To speak to them?" The words feel right, though I don't know how I know them. "To beg forgiveness for what happened to your parents?"

"Lies!" But Ulric's wings mantle with agitation, stirring the strange mists that have begun to gather around us. "He never cared. Never mourned. Never—"

"He mourns them every day." The truth of it hits like physical pain—I see it now in my memory, all those times I caught him staring at nothing, hands clasped halfway to a prayer, lost in thoughts he wouldn't share. "Just as he'll mourn you, when this is over. When he has to—"

"Enough!" His roar splits the air like thunder, but there's something broken in it now.

Something almost human beneath the dragon's fury. "You think you know him? Think you understand what he is? What he's done?"

"I know he loves you." The words emerge gentle despite everything. "Even now. Even after everything you've done. That's why this place responds to him. He can love, Ulric. You can't. You never will."

For a moment—just a moment—I glimpse the wounded boy beneath the monster. Grief flashes in those massive eyes, quickly buried beneath rage. But it's enough to know I've struck true.

"Love?" Ulric's laugh sounds like breaking glass. "Is that what you think this is about? Love?" His tail sweeps across the sacred ground, scattering ancient snow. "He never loved anything but power. Never cared for anything but his precious throne—"

The mountain itself seems to shudder at his blasphemy. Ice spreads faster now, crawling up his legs despite the heat pouring from his scales. The voices in the wind grow louder, more insistent, speaking in languages that taste like lightning on my tongue.

"Listen to them." I struggle to rise, fighting against whatever power binds my magic. I'm unbalanced, arms bound. "Feel what this place truly is. What you've awakened by bringing me here."

But Ulric is beyond reason now. Madness fills his massive eyes as he rears back, gathering flame in his throat. "The gods abandoned us long ago. Left us to tear each other apart over scraps of power and—"

A roar splits the sky, a sound of such primal fury that the very mountains seem to tremble.

Ulric's massive, scaled head snaps up, eyes widening as another pair of massive wings blots out the sun.

"Brother," he whispers, and for the first time since he took me, real fear enters his voice.

Despite myself, I start to grin.

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:44 am

I find them on the sacred peak where everything began.

The wind carries their scents to me before I see them—Calliope's crisp sweetness tangled with my brother's copper-sharp rage. Steam rises from my scales as I bank through ancient stone teeth, wings catching currents that feel wrong somehow, heavier than they should be. The air itself seems to resist my passing, thick with power that makes my blood sing with recognition.

Through our bond, I feel Calliope's fear spike sharply. The sensation drives me forward faster, each wingbeat carrying me closer to where my brother holds my wife captive on a narrow ledge. Ice coats every surface, but it's not Calliope's doing—the patterns are too old, too strange, spiraling in ways that hurt to look at directly.

When I catch sight of them, something in my chest cracks open.

Ulric looms over her in dragon form, his scales catching weak sunlight. The brother I once played with, trained with, swore to protect, has become something twisted—something that makes the very mountain seem to recoil. Steam rises where his claws touch sacred stone, and the ancient runes carved into the rock pulse with sickly light at each point of contact.

But it's Calliope who truly catches my attention. My fierce, beautiful wife, somehow still defiant even bound and threatened. Frost spreads from where she kneels, forming patterns that echo the mountain's own ancient markings. Our child's magic pulses within her, reaching for me even as Ulric's corrupt power tries to suppress it.

I don't hesitate. Can't hesitate. Not anymore.

My roar splits the sky like thunder as I dive, tucking my wings close to pick up speed. The sound carries all my fury, all my grief, all my desperate need to protect what's mine. Behind me, my warriors fan out in practiced formations, but I barely register their presence. All my focus narrows to that ledge, to my wife, to the brother who dares threaten everything I hold dear.

Ulric's massive head snaps up at my approach.

"Brother." His dragon-voice carries that knife-edge mockery I've come to hate. "Come to watch your legacy die?"

I crash onto the ledge with enough force to crack ancient stone, partially transforming as I land. Scales ripple beneath my skin as I struggle to contain the dragon's rage that threatens to consume me. Steam pours from my mouth with each breath, turning the air around me to fog.

"Let her go." The words emerge in a growl that's barely human. "Last warning."

Ulric's laugh shakes loose avalanches on distant peaks.

"Warning? You still think you have the right to warn me about anything?" His tail lashes against sacred stone, scattering centuries of ice. "Look at her, brother. Look what your precious queen has become—carrying that abomination, that thing that should never have been."

"Don't." Smoke curls thicker from my mouth as my control slips further. "Don't speak of them."

But he doesn't stop. Can't stop. I see the madness burning in his eyes, any lucidity there replaced by something fevered and wrong.

"Did you really think you could keep this power for yourself? That the world would allow such a union?" His claws dig deeper into ancient rock. "The gods don't care. The gods want you dead, brother—"

The mountain itself seems to cut him off. A groan emanates from deep within the stone, a sound of such ancient fury that even my dragon blood runs cold. The runes beneath our feet flare brighter, their light catching on ice crystals in patterns that seem almost alive.

Through our bond, I feel Calliope's magic surge despite whatever binds it. The air around us grows impossibly thick with power—not just hers, not just mine, but something older. Something that makes my teeth ache and my scales ripple faster beneath my skin.

"You feel it too," Calliope calls out to me, and there's something in her voice I've never heard before—a certainty that steals my breath. "They're not happy with him. They want us to kill him."

The voices start then—whispers in the wind that speak in languages I shouldn't understand but somehow do, carrying the weight of centuries of sacrifice.

"Enough!" Ulric's roar sounds desperate now. "Your gods can't save you. Your magic can't protect you. I'll see you both dead before I let you keep this power for yourselves!"

He launches himself at me with all the fury of his madness.

I meet him head-on, completing my transformation just as his claws would have found my throat. Our bodies crash together with enough force to crack the ancient stone beneath us. Dragon-fire fills the air, gold flame meeting black in explosions that shake the very foundations of the peak.

I'm larger, stronger, but Ulric fights with the desperate intensity of someone with nothing left to lose. His teeth find my shoulder, tearing through scales that should be impenetrable. The pain barely registers through my fury. My own claws rake his sides, drawing blood that steams in the bitter air.

We roll dangerously close to the ledge's edge, a tangle of wings and teeth and ancient hatred. Far below, the valley yawns like a hungry mouth, waiting to swallow us both. I hear my warriors crying out, but I can't spare the focus to answer. Can't think of anything except protecting Calliope, ending this threat to my family once and for all.

"You never understood!" Ulric's voice cracks like breaking ice even through his dragon-form. "Never saw what they did to us, how they twisted us into these...these monsters—"

My tail catches him across the jaw, sending him staggering. "The only monster here is you, Ulric!"

My once-brother's flames crash against my defense, but something else rises to meet them—a wall of pure winter that must be Calliope's doing. Ice spreads from the ancient stone beneath our feet, trying to claim my brother's claws even as steam rises from his scales.

"Can't you feel it?" I snarl as we circle each other. "This place rejects you. Everything you've become—"

"Everything I've become?" His laugh holds an edge of hysteria. "What about you, brother? Still playing at being king, still pretending you deserve any of this?" His tail lashes against stone. "You let them die! Let them burn while you did nothing—"

The accusation hits like a physical blow. Images flash through my mind—our parents' bodies on the Sanctum floor, smoke rising from scorched stone, Ulric's screams as

guards held us back. But I force the memories away. I can't let him distract me. Can't let him twist this into something it's not.

"They would be ashamed of what you've become," I tell him, and I see the words strike home. "Everything they taught us about family, about protecting what matters—"

His roar of fury shakes loose more snow from distant peaks. He comes at me again, all precision lost to madness, flames pouring from his jaws in a torrent that should melt stone. But something rises to meet his fire—not my own flames, but ancient magic drawn from the very mountain itself. Ice and fire collide in explosions that light up the storm-dark sky.

The runes beneath our feet pulse brighter with each clash, their light catching on frost in ways that form almost-recognizable patterns. Through the chaos, I glimpse Calliope working at her bonds, her own magic beginning to break free of whatever curse my brother placed upon her. Our child's power pulses between us like a captive star, harmonizing with the mountain's ancient song.

"You think you can protect them?" Ulric's voice carries mockery even through his dragon-form. "Think you can keep them safe? You couldn't even save our own blood—"

I slam into him before he can finish, driving us both dangerously close to the precipice. My teeth find his throat, tasting copper and smoke as I tear through his scales. He thrashes beneath me, claws raking my sides, but I barely feel the pain. All I can think of is Calliope's fear through our bond, our child's magic reaching for me, everything I stand to lose if I fail here.

"I am not that child anymore," I snarl, punctuating each word with another strike. "Not the boy who couldn't save them. Not the brother who trusted you. I am king."

The voices in the wind rise to a crescendo, and suddenly I understand acutely that this place is a judgment ground.

Here, betrayers face divine justice today.

Smoke rises between us as my brother's blood meets ancient stone. The runes flare brighter, their light catching on his scales in ways that seem almost alive. I feel the weight of centuries pressing down—all the rituals performed here, all the sacrifices made, all the oaths kept and broken.

Dozens of dragons circle us overhead, not yet descending, waiting. They know it is a dragon's honour to fight such battles alone.

Should I die, they'll know who the new king is. Should I live, they'll soar back over my city to the ground far below.

"The world abandoned us!" Ulric's voice cracks with desperation. "They abandoned us!"

"No, brother." The words emerge in a growl that carries all my grief, all my fury, all my desperate need to end this. "You abandoned everything they taught us. Everything we were meant to be. When you're dead soon, I won't mourn you."

My brother twists beneath me with impossible strength, throwing me back against stone that cracks under the impact. I hear Calliope scream as he launches himself at me one final time, all precision lost to madness.

"Then let's finish what started that day! Let's see if you can save them this time—"

But as he moves to strike, ice spreads like an arrow shot from a crossbow out across my brother's body, from Calliope's direction, crawling up his legs despite the heat

pouring from his scales.

I see real fear flash in his eyes as he realizes what's happening—what this place has judged him to be. What my wife has judged him to be, the once and future queen.

"You've become everything they warned us against." My voice carries all the grief of years wasted, of trust betrayed, of bonds broken beyond repair. "Everything they died trying to prevent. In the afterlife, I hope they find it in their hearts to forgive your treachery. If I was them, I wouldn't."

Through our bond, I feel Calliope's magic finally break free of the last of its bindings. Winter storm meets dragon-fire as our powers surge together, harmonizing with the mountain's ancient song. Our child's presence pulses between us, lending strength to us both.

Ulric thrashes against the ice claiming him, but it's too late. The magic that once accepted our bloodline now rejects him utterly, seeing him for what he's become—an oath-breaker, a kinslayer, a perversion of everything our line was meant to protect.

"Arvoren—"

For just a moment, I hear the boy he once was in that voice. The brother I loved, the child who laughed as we played in these very mountains.

"Please—"

But that boy is long dead. Only the monster remains.

My flames catch him full in the throat as he tries to speak again. There's no hesitation now, no mercy. Just the clean certainty of ending a threat to everything I hold dear. His frozen scales blacken and peel as fire meets ice, their magic combining into

something that burns beyond mere flesh.

His eyes bulge huge, upturned toward the sky. I see pain on his face, a kind of deep sadness, there and then gone.

Then, slowly as a mountain falling, I watch Ulric's monstrously huge body topple backward off the edge of the mountain, into the chasm far below us.

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:44 am

Ulric falls like a dark star through endless white, his massive form growing smaller and smaller until the storm swallows him whole below us. For a moment—just a moment—in that battle, I think I caught a glimpse of the boy he must have been, before power and jealousy twisted him into something monstrous. I saw a flash of it in him, there and then gone.

Now he's dead, leaving only silence and softly falling snow.

The mountain seems to exhale around us. Ancient power settles back into weathered stone like frost melting in spring sunlight, centuries of ritual and sacrifice returning to slumber. Even the air feels different—lighter somehow, as if some terrible weight has lifted from the world itself. The sacred ground remembers its purpose, remembers what it means to pass judgment on those who would break the most ancient bonds.

From above comes a sound I've never heard before—a keening that starts low and builds until it fills the bitter air. The dragons who witnessed our battle cry victory to the heavens, their voices carrying notes of triumph and hunger that make my bones vibrate. One by one they plunge into the chasm after their fallen prince, scales flashing like captured stars as they vanish into white nothing.

I don't need to understand their ways to know what comes next. Some crimes demand payment in flesh and blood.

My legs fold beneath me as the last echoes of their cries fade away. The binding magic's remnants cling to my skin like spider silk, making the world tilt and blur at the edges. But before I can crumple completely, strong arms catch me, fever-hot even through layers of torn fabric. Arvoren moves fast, gathering me against his chest as if

I weigh nothing at all.

His breath stirs my hair, impossibly warm. Through our bond, I feel the storm of emotions he's barely containing—fierce protectiveness warring with bone-deep fear, relief tangled with lingering fury. His hands tremble slightly as they move over me, checking for injuries with a gentleness that seems at odds with the power I just watched him unleash.

I press closer to his warmth without thinking, seeking the steady thrum of his heartbeat. Our child stirs within me, their magic reaching instinctively for their father's now that nothing suppresses it. The sensation makes my breath catch—this perfect harmony of winter storm and dragon fire, this proof that something beautiful can grow from even the darkest beginnings.

The voices in the wind have gentled to whispers, no longer carrying that edge of divine judgment. Snow falls in lazy spirals around us, catching strange light in ways that make each flake look like a fallen star. The gods' presence lingers in how the air shimmers, in the way frost forms patterns that hurt to look at directly. But their fury has passed, replaced by something that feels almost like benediction.

Arvoren sinks to his knees, taking me with him, one hand splayed protectively over my midriff. Snowflakes melt gently against his skin.

When he speaks, his voice holds none of its usual command—only raw emotion that makes my chest ache.

"When I felt your fear through our bond..."

I touch his face, thumb brushing away what might be tears or might be melted frost. His skin burns against my fingers, scales rippling beneath the surface as he struggles to contain his dragon nature. After everything we've been through, every betrayal and

hurt, every step of this impossible journey, we've somehow found our way here—to this moment of perfect understanding.

He catches my hand, pressing it harder against his cheek. Through our bond, I feel his desperate need to know this is real, that we're both truly safe. That everything he just sacrificed wasn't in vain.

"I knew you'd find us," I say softly, letting him feel the truth of it through our connection. "I never doubted. Not really."

His other hand ghosts over the bruises darkening my wrists where the binding metal cut into flesh. When he sees the marks his brother left, scales ripple faster beneath his skin, but he forces back the transformation. Forces himself to be gentle, to be what I need right now instead of what his rage demands.

I lean into him, letting his warmth chase away the bone-deep cold that Ulric's bindings left behind. The mountain cradles us in its ancient embrace, the worst of the wind dying down to leave us in a pocket of relative stillness. Only the soft whisper of falling snow breaks the silence.

Our child moves again, stronger now that the suppressing magic is gone. Arvoren's hand spreads wider over my belly, protective and wondering at once.

"They've always known you," I murmur, covering his hand with mine. "Even when I wasn't sure I could trust you again. Even when I was running. They would reach for you in my dreams..."

Something breaks in his expression then—grief or gratitude or both, I can't tell. Steam curls thicker from between his teeth as he presses his forehead to mine.

"I didn't know how to be worthy of either of you."

The words come out rough, barely more than a whisper against my skin. Through our bond, I feel his uncertainty warring with hope, his desperate desire to be better than what he was. To be worthy of the trust I'm slowly learning to place in him again.

I shift closer, seeking his warmth as much as trying to offer comfort. The ancient runes beneath us pulse gently now, their light soft as starshine. Where before they hummed with judgment, now they seem almost to sing—a melody of acceptance, of balance restored.

"You're learning," I tell him simply. "We both are."

Our child moves between us, their magic reaching for us both equally now. No longer just seeking Arvoren across distance, but embracing us as one. Tears spring to my eyes at the simple rightness of it—this moment of perfect harmony I never thought possible when I first fled this kingdom of ice and iron.

Arvoren's arms tighten fractionally around me, and through our bond I feel everything he can't put into words—love and grief and desperate gratitude all tangled together. Steam still rises where snowflakes touch his skin, but his eyes hold none of their usual fire. Only bone-deep relief and something softer, something that makes my heart catch.

We stay like that as snow continues to fall, each flake catching strange light in ways that make them look like falling stars. Whatever comes next, whatever battles still lie ahead, we face them together. The mountain remembers, and so do we.

The gods whisper in the wind, and for once, their voices hold no malice. Only the weight of prophecy, of destiny slowly unfurling like frost across glass. Our child moves again, magic pulsing in time with the ancient power that fills this sacred place.

A new day dawns for Kaldoria.

Later, they come to me in dreams, pale as moonlight on new snow.

I find myself standing in a grove I half-remember from childhood—the kind of place my grandmother would have called magical, where frost forms patterns that speak of older magics than any mortal knowing. The winter spirits gather like mist between ancient trees, their forms shifting between woman and wind, between ice and memory.

"The thaw comes," they whisper, their voices carrying notes of breaking ice and midwinter winds. "We feel it in our bones, in the very air. Spring approaches, and with it, change."

Their grief catches in my throat like the last bitter wind of winter. These ancient beings who have watched over Kaldoria since before the first dragon kings, who have danced through countless storms and sung to the frozen stars—they fear becoming nothing more than legend, mere whispers in the warming wind.

"We are the cold's children," one says, her form rippling like snow devils in moonlight. "What becomes of us when the ice melts and green things wake?"

I reach out, not certain whether I'm truly here or lost in some strange dream where reality blurs at the edges. Frost spreads from my fingers in delicate patterns, catching starlight like diamonds.

"Winter always returns," I tell them softly. "The wheel turns, the seasons change, but the cold will come again. It's the way of things."

"But you were ours," another whispers, her voice like icicles in darkness. "Now your magic gentles, your child grows warm with dragon-fire..."

"I'm still yours." The words emerge as mist in the bitter air. "But Kaldoria needs spring now. Needs warmth to heal what winter has frozen. I'll see you again."

They drift closer, these beings of frost and starlight. Through them I glimpse the endless cycle of seasons, the dance of warm and cold that keeps the world in balance. I feel my child stir within me, their magic a perfect harmony of ice and flame.

"We will sleep then," they say, their forms beginning to fade like morning frost in sunlight. "Dream in the deep places, in the shadows of mountains. And when winter comes again..."

"I'll dance with you beneath the frozen stars," I promise. "Teach my child the old songs, the ancient ways. Some magics never truly fade."

They smile then—terrible, beautiful smiles that speak of avalanches and aurora lights. One by one they dissolve into silver mist, sinking into earth that has already begun to dream of spring.

The last one pauses, her form barely more than moonlight and memory. "The land remembers," she whispers. "And so shall we."

I wake to find frost patterns on my pillows, already melting in the pre-dawn light. Through our bond, I feel Arvoren's warmth beside me, and our child's magic pulses steady as a heartbeat.

Outside, the world thaws.

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:44 am

Spring comes to Millrath like a fever breaking. Time stretches strangely around us in the following weeks. I watch it happen gradually, then all at once: frost retreating from windowpanes that haven't known clarity in months, black ice dissolving from the moat in sheets that catch sunlight like dragon scales, ancient stone remembering warmth it had forgotten. The city awakens slowly, cautiously, as if unsure whether to trust this gentle thaw.

The changes within the castle mirror those without. Servants who once scurried through shadows now linger in patches of sunlight streaming through tall windows. The endless fires that kept us from freezing burn lower, their smoke no longer a constant presence in every room. Even the dragon skulls that watch over my throne seem less fearsome, their empty eyes catching new light in ways that make them look almost alive again.

Calliope's magic shifts with the seasons. The storm that followed her across the continent gentles day by day, her power finding balance as our child grows stronger within her. Sometimes I wake in the night to find frost dancing across our bedchambers, delicate as lace—not from fear or pain now, but from dreams that make her smile in her sleep. Her unconscious magic plays like a child testing boundaries, and I find myself mesmerized by these small displays of joy.

Watching her heal is like watching spring return to a land long frozen. The shadows beneath her eyes fade slowly, replaced by a glow that has nothing to do with magic and everything to do with life growing within her. She moves more carefully now, one hand often pressed to her swollen belly, but there's a sureness to her steps that speaks of someone who knows exactly where she belongs.

The Lords will arrive within days to begin negotiations for a new peace. Ravens bring messages of cautious hope, of desire for change, of willingness to try something different than endless rivalry. My brother's death seems to have broken something loose in the kingdom—some terrible tension that held us all rigid with fear and pride.

But those are thoughts for another hour. Right now, in the gentle light of early morning, I have more immediate concerns.

"You're brooding again." Calliope's voice draws me from my thoughts. She stands in the doorway of our chambers, wrapped in a robe of deep blue silk that makes her skin glow like moonlight. Her dark hair falls loose around her shoulders, still damp from bathing.

"Not brooding," I counter, though steam curls from my mouth with the words. "Planning."

She crosses to where I stand by the window, bare feet silent on ancient stone. When she slips under my arm, fitting herself against my side, I feel her shiver slightly at my fever-warmth. Even now, these casual intimacies catch me off guard—how easily she chooses to be close, how naturally we fit together.

"Tell me," she says simply.

I gather her closer, one hand splaying over her belly where our child's magic pulses in time with her heartbeat. Through our bond, I feel her contentment, her quiet joy at this moment of peace.

"The Houses will want guarantees," I say finally. "If we want stable peace—real peace this time—we need to make a lot of promises. They need to know I am...generous."

"Aren't you, though?" But there's no accusation in her voice—only that gentle wisdom that still leaves me breathless sometimes. "Isn't that exactly why you can change things? Because you know what it means to rule that way, and you've chosen something different?"

I press my lips to her hair, breathing in the crisp sweetness that always clings to her skin. "When did you become so wise?"

"I've always been wise." She elbows me gently. "You just weren't listening back then."

The simple truth of it makes me laugh, though steam still curls from my mouth. She's right, of course. She usually is, about the things that matter most.

Through the window, across the dark water, I watch the sun climb higher over my city. Merchants have begun setting up their stalls in the market square, their voices carrying faintly on the morning breeze. Here and there, patches of green show through melting snow—the first hints of grass this land has seen in months.

Calliope follows my gaze, her fingers tracing idle patterns on my chest. Through our bond, I feel her own quiet amazement at the changes happening around us.

"Will you come to the gardens today?" I ask, though I already know her answer. Since that day when Ulric took her, since I killed my own brother to keep her safe, she's made it her mission to reclaim that space. To turn fear into something beautiful.

"Mmm." She stretches like a cat in sunlight. "The hellebores are blooming. And I need to check on the herb beds—some of the hardier plants survived the winter. With luck, we might have fresh medicines by summer."

The casual way she speaks of the future catches in my chest. Not so long ago, she

couldn't imagine staying here, couldn't see past the chains I placed on her. Now she plants roots both literal and metaphorical, making this place her own in ways I never could have forced.

"Take guards," I say, because I have to, because the memory of her being taken still haunts my dreams. "Just in case."

"Just in case," she agrees easily. Then, with that slight smile that still makes my dragon blood sing: "Though I think we both know I can protect myself now."

I capture her hand, pressing a kiss to her palm where magic still dances beneath her skin. Through our bond, I feel her pleasure at the gesture, her love for me tangled with amused exasperation at my protective nature.

"I know you can," I tell her. "But humor me?"

She rises on tiptoe to kiss me softly, then pulls away before I can deepen it. "Always so demanding," she teases. But her eyes are soft when she adds: "I'll take guards. And I'll be careful. I promise."

I watch her dress for the day, marveling at how naturally she moves through our chambers now. She chooses a gown of pale green silk that makes her look like Spring incarnate, though she grumbles good-naturedly about how none of her clothes fit properly anymore. When she struggles with the back, I move to help her, my fingers careful against silk and skin.

"The Lords arrive tomorrow," she says as I work. "Are you ready?"

"No," I admit, because I can be honest with her now, can show weakness without fearing she'll use it against me. "But I will be. We will be."

She turns in my arms, her expression serious despite her smile. "Together then?"

"Together," I agree, and seal the promise with a kiss that tastes of spring sunlight and endless possibility.

Some changes come slowly, like ice melting from ancient stone. Others happen in an instant, like the moment you realize you've become someone different than you were. I'm learning to welcome both kinds, learning to trust that transformation doesn't always mean loss.

Outside our window, Millrath wakes to another day of gentle thaw. Soon I'll need to be King again, need to face the challenges that come with rebuilding a broken kingdom. But for now, I hold my wife close and watch sunlight paint our city gold, knowing that whatever comes next, we face it as one.

The rest of forever stretches out before us, bright as morning.

My study echoes with memory as I review the latest messages from the Houses. Sunlight streams through windows that haven't known clarity in months, catching on ancient tapestries in ways that make the thread-of-gold dragons seem to move. The throne that once felt like an extension of my power now sits empty more often than not—I prefer the war table these days, where maps and missives spread like fallen leaves across scarred wood.

They're still crafting Calliope's matching throne down in Brittleale. It wouldn't feel right to take mine without her at my side.

Darian sorts through reports at my side, his armor gleaming in the morning light. Steam rises where our hands touch parchment, dragon-warmth meeting cool air. Neither of us has quite adjusted to the thaw; our blood still runs hot against the lingering chill.

"House Morwen sends terms," he says, passing me a scroll sealed with white wax. "Lord Morwen writes that he'll represent his son's interests personally, given his youth, but that he intends to ascend soon. He seems...cautiously optimistic."

I have learned to exercise endless caution with the hardy people of Whiteraid—sharp as a blade and twice as dangerous, but fair in their own way. Now, they're crippled by the famine the winter brought.

But they're going to recover. We're going to send help. Calliope insisted, and I know she's right for a lot of reasons.

"And Bellrose?"

"Still demanding reparations for losses during the freeze." Darian's voice carries his careful neutrality, ever-present. "Though they've softened their stance somewhat. The latest letter mentions possible trade agreements rather than gold."

Progress, however small. I scan the documents before me, noting the subtle shifts in tone from each House. Where once they wrote with barely concealed hostility, now their words carry notes of genuine desire for change. Perhaps they learned from Houses Caddell and Sturmsen. Perhaps they're merely being pragmatic—better to ally with a strong throne than risk another civil war. But something tells me it's more than that.

The sound of laughter drifts through open windows—clear, bright notes that make my scales ripple beneath my skin. In the gardens below, Calliope works with her new apprentices, teaching them the properties of herbs that have somehow survived the endless winter. Through our bond, I feel her contentment, her quiet joy at passing on her grandmother's knowledge.

I find myself drawn to the window, watching as she guides a young woman's hands in

harvesting hardy winter herbs. Her guards maintain a respectful distance, alert but unobtrusive. They've learned to read her moods almost as well as I have, to recognize when she needs space and when she welcomes protection.

"She's good with them," Darian observes, coming to stand beside me. "The common folk trust her. Even the ones who once feared her magic."

"She understands them," I say quietly. "She knows what it means to be powerless. To need hope."

Memory rises unbidden—Calliope in chains, defiant and terrified all at once. The man I was then seems like a stranger now, though I know better. Know that the capacity for cruelty still lives in my blood, held in check only by choice and love and endless vigilance.

A knock at the chamber door draws me from darker thoughts. One of the younger guards enters, bowing deeply.

"My king. The advance riders from House Sturmsen approach the city gates."

Of course they're early. The Lord of Fjordmarse has always been punctual to the point of aggression. I nod, already reaching for the formal mantle I've barely worn since retaking the throne.

"Have rooms prepared in the east wing," I tell him. "And inform the kitchens—Lord Sturmsen prefers his meat barely cooked. It should practically still have a pulse if he's to eat it."

The guard withdraws, and I turn back to Darian. "Send word to Calliope? She'll want to prepare for—"

"Already here." Her voice carries amusement as she enters the room, bringing with it the scent of crushed herbs and morning dew. Despite the dirt under her fingernails and the simple cut of her dress, she moves like the Queen she truly is—graceful and assured, power held in perfect check.

Through our bond, I feel her quiet excitement. She enjoys these diplomatic dances more than I ever have, seeing the subtle ways people reveal themselves through word and gesture. Where I was taught to rule through force, she understands the power of gentle persuasion.

"Lord Sturmsen brings his daughter," she says, joining us at the table. "The message mentioned she's interested in healing arts. Perhaps while you discuss borders and trade routes, she and I can speak of more practical matters."

I catch her meaning immediately. The young lady's interest provides a perfect cover for building less formal relationships between our Houses. Personal connections that might outlast political convenience.

"Clever," I murmur, and feel her pleasure at the compliment through our bond.

"I try." Her hand finds mine beneath the table, fingers twining with mine. Through the touch, I feel our child's magic pulse in time with her heartbeat—dragon-fire and winter storm in perfect harmony.

Darian clears his throat discreetly.

"I'll see to the guard rotations," he says, gathering scrolls with practiced efficiency. "Make sure everything's in place for our guests."

We watch him go, and I'm struck again by how much has changed. Months ago, my commander would never have left us alone together, fearing what I might do to my

unwilling bride. Now he trusts us both—trusts me to be better than I was, trusts her to handle me when I'm not.

"Quiet," Calliope observes, bumping her hip against mine.

"Reflecting," I correct, pulling her closer. She comes willingly, fitting herself against my side as if she was made to be there. Her skin holds lingering warmth from the morning sun, and frost patterns dance where my fingers brush her arm.

"On what?"

I consider my answer carefully, watching dust motes dance in rays of sunlight. "How far we still have to go."

She hums thoughtfully, one hand drifting to her swollen belly. Through our bond, I feel her own contemplation—not just of the past, but of the future we're building together. The kingdom our child will inherit.

"We'll get there," she says simply. "Not quickly, maybe. Not easily. But we will."

I press my lips to her hair, breathing in that crisp sweetness that always clings to her skin. "If I could live a life without such endless menial meetings, just us in the tower, some days I find myself thinking I might just do it."

Calliope gives a mock gasp, laughing in the back of her throat. "How would you keep me in the style to which I've become accustomed?" And she twirls in her skirt, giggling.

Before I can respond, another knock sounds at the door.

More messengers, more preparations, more steps toward the future we're trying to

build. Still now, Calliope squeezes my hand once before stepping away, already settling into her role as queen.

"Shall we?" she asks, and there's something in her voice that makes my dragon blood sing with pride and possessiveness and love.

"Together," I agree, and seal the promise with a kiss that tastes of herbs and sunlight and endless possibility.

Lord Sturmsen arrives like a storm front, his massive form casting shadows across the courtyard as guards scramble to attention. Even in human form, his draconic nature bleeds through—scales rippling beneath skin that holds the blue-white sheen of glacial ice, steam rising where his boots touch stone still warm from morning sun. His daughter follows in his wake, all arctic grace and careful poise.

I meet them at the castle steps, deliberately without crown or ceremony. Let them see that things truly have changed in Millrath. That their king can welcome them as equals rather than subjects.

"My Lord Sturmsen." I incline my head just enough to show respect without subservience. "Welcome to a warmer Millrath than has been typical of late."

His laugh holds notes of breaking ice. "Indeed, Your Majesty. Though some of us prefer the cold." His pale eyes track to where Calliope approaches, her simple green gown a stark contrast to the formal attire of our guests. "Your Queen has brought interesting changes to our realm."

Through our bond, I feel Calliope's amusement at his choice of words. She dips into a perfect curtsy, though we both know she'd rather not bow to anyone. "The seasons change as they will, my lord. We merely adapt."

Young Lady Sturmsen steps forward then, all of sixteen years but carrying herself with the gravity of ancient ice.

"Your Majesty." Her curtsy puts Calliope's to shame. I can feel that Calliope already likes her, though they couldn't have been raised more differently. "I've heard such tales of your healing gardens. Might I...?"

"Of course." Calliope's smile holds genuine warmth. "Though I'm afraid you'll find them rather humble compared to Fjordmarse's famous glass houses."

They withdraw together, already deep in discussion of herbs and tinctures. Through our bond, I feel Calliope's quiet satisfaction—she's been planning this since we received word of the girl's interests. Trust her to forge alliances through shared knowledge rather than political maneuvering.

"Clever woman, your queen." Sturmsen watches them go, steam curling from his nostrils. "She understands what so many forget."

We walk together through corridors that seem to remember their ancient purpose, gold light streaming through windows that once stayed shuttered against endless storms. Servants bow and withdraw, though I notice they no longer scramble away in terror. Another change I owe to Calliope's influence.

In my private study, where dragon skulls watch from shadowed walls, Sturmsen settles his bulk into a chair that creaks ominously. I pour wine without asking his preference—some courtesies are remembered in the blood.

"You've surprised us all," he says finally, studying the dark liquid in his glass. "When word reached Fjordmarse that you'd married a witch...well. We expected fire and chaos. The end of days, perhaps." His smile shows teeth sharp as icicles. "Instead, we find peace. Growth. Peace talks with the Caddells have been going well for the first

time in...well. Centuries. They seem to believe she signals a real future for their people. They no longer anticipate cruelty at all junctions."

Steam rises from my own glass as I consider his words. "I was that king once," I admit, because we both know it's true. "The one who would have crushed her, claimed her power for my own. A king that would have burned Fort Caddell to the ground should they have angered me. Sometimes I still am. But change comes, and we must grow. Or the world will leave us behind."

Sturmsen sets his wine aside, leaning forward. He looks at me with a plain, unembellished smile, seeming to mean it. "That's what matters, in the end. The choice to be better than what we were made to be."

Through our bond, I catch glimpses of Calliope in the gardens with young Lady Sturmsen. They kneel together beside a bed of newly sprouted herbs, the girl's eyes wide as Calliope demonstrates some simple magic, teaching her that power can heal as easily as harm.

"The other Houses will need more convincing," I say, turning back to Sturmsen. "Bellrose especially—they've always wanted the throne."

"They've always wanted what comes with the throne," he corrects. "Power, security, control. Give them that through peace and commerce, they'll sing a different song." His expression grows shrewd. "Especially once word spreads about the child."

My scales ripple faster at the mention of our baby, protective instincts surging. But I force them down, reminding myself that this is precisely why we need allies. Why we must build a kingdom worthy of the future they'll inherit.

"A child of dragon and Windwaker blood," Sturmsen muses. "The old powers wake in their presence, or so I'm told." He pauses, watching steam curl from my mouth.

"They say the gods themselves take interest."

"The gods can watch," I mutter, though I know he speaks truth. We've both felt their presence growing stronger as Calliope's pregnancy progresses. "But they will not touch what's mine."

His laugh fills the chamber, sharp with genuine amusement. "There's the dragon I remember! But peace, my king. I didn't come to threaten, only to observe." He rises, frost crackling beneath his feet. "And what I observe gives me hope. Real hope, for the first time since your father's death. I knew him well. He was a good man."

I appreciate it. I sense that he knows that.

"Come," I tell Sturmsen, already moving toward the door. "Let me show you what else has changed in Millrath. What we might build together, if you're truly interested in more than observation."

His smile shows teeth again, but there's respect in it now. Maybe even the beginnings of trust. "Lead on, my king. Lead on."

We walk together through corridors that grow warmer with each passing day, discussing trade routes and border treaties and all the mundane matters that peace is built upon. Through our bond, I feel Calliope's quiet pride, her certainty that we're moving in the right direction.

One step at a time, one choice at a time, we build something new from the ashes of what was lost. Together.

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:44 am

Our daughter arrives with the first true heat of summer, when the air hangs heavy with the scent of roses and even the ancient stones of Millrath remember warmth. The healers tell me she fought her way into the world like a storm breaking—all the windows broke when she first screamed into the warm air of our chambers, little lungs working as magic cascaded out against the walls. I remember only fragments: pain that felt like it might kill me, Arvoren's fever-hot hands clasping mine so tight it made my bones creak, the sound of his voice around my name.

"She's strong," the healers whispered as they placed her in my arms. "She's healthy. Your daughter."

Now she sleeps against my chest, impossibly small and terrifyingly perfect. Her skin burns with her father's heat, but I can see already that she looks like me. She'll be slight for a draconic shifter. But already I can feel her magic pulsing like a second heartbeat—something intent and dual, something perfectly harmonized. The power that runs through her blood should be impossible, should tear her apart. Instead, she exists in perfect equilibrium, as if the ancient magics that warred for so long were only waiting for her to show them how to dance together.

"Look what she does when she dreams," I murmur to Arvoren, who hasn't left my side since the labor began. Tiny snowflakes spiral above our daughter's sleeping form, catching sunlight like diamonds before melting in the warm air.

He leans closer, one hand spanning our daughter's tiny back while the other traces idle patterns on my arm. Steam rises where his skin meets the cool air, but his touch stays gentle, controlled. Through our bond, I feel his fierce joy warring with bone-deep fear—not of her power, but of failing her somehow. Of not being worthy of this

miracle we've created together.

"I never thought..." He breaks off, smoke curling from between his teeth. "When you first came here, when I first saw you in that village..."

"We were different people then." I catch his hand, pressing it over our daughter's back where her tiny heart beats steady and strong. "Both of us."

Sunlight streams through tall windows, painting patterns across the massive bed where I rest. The chamber that was once my prison now feels like sanctuary, filled with the scent of summer blooms that my apprentices bring fresh each morning. Even the dragon skulls that watch from shadowed walls seem to smile, as if they, too, have been waiting for this moment.

A knock at the door makes Arvoren tense, scales rippling beneath his skin, but it's only Mari, my most dedicated apprentice. She carries a basket of fresh herbs, their sharp green scent cutting through the sweeter flowers.

"The gardens send their blessings, Your Grace," she says softly, setting her burden aside. "The yarrow bloomed this morning, and the roses—you should see them. It's like they're celebrating too."

I smile, remembering those first days after reclaiming the throne, when Mari helped me restore the castle gardens from winter's ravages. "Thank you. Would you like to meet her?"

Mari approaches cautiously, her eyes widening as she takes in the frost patterns still dancing around our daughter.

"She's beautiful," she breathes. "Like summer and winter all at once."

I think she's right.

"She needs a name," Arvoren says after Mari withdraws. "Something worthy of both her bloodlines."

I study our daughter's face, memorizing each perfect detail. She has my dark hair but Arvoren's sharp features, softened by sleep and innocence. When she opens her eyes, they shift between storm-gray and dragon-gold, unable to decide which parent to favor.

"Aurelie," I say finally, testing the shape of it on my tongue. "It means—"

"Golden light." Arvoren's voice holds wonder. "Like sunrise after endless night."

"Yes," I agree softly. "Our little light."

He kisses me then, tasting of smoke and summer air. Through our bond, I feel everything he struggles to express—love and gratitude and endless devotion, tempered now by wisdom hard-won.

Another knock interrupts us, and this time it's Darian, coming to report that the Lords have all sent messages of congratulation. Even our bitterest rivals offer gifts and good wishes for the princess.

"The city celebrates," he tells us, keeping his voice low as Aurelie sleeps. "They say she's a sign of true peace."

"What do you think, old friend?" Arvoren asks. "You've seen enough of politics to know symbols aren't always enough."

Darian studies us—the king who learned to love instead of possess, the queen who chose to stay when she could have run, the child who bridges ancient magics.

"I think," he says carefully, "that some symbols carry their own power. I'm happy for

you, Arvoren. And you, of course, my queen."

He withdraws silently, leaving us in peace. Outside, I hear the sounds of revelry drifting up from the city—music and laughter carrying on the warm summer breeze. So different from the fearful silence that once filled these streets.

As evening approaches, Aurelie wakes hungry and fussing. Her magic flares with her cry—some strange force rattles around the room. I can already tell she's going to rattle this castle almost to its knees with the force of her tantrums as she grows. But Arvoren and I take care of her, working together just as we've learned to do in all things.

"Shh, little one," I murmur, settling her to nurse. "You're safe. You're loved. You're exactly where you belong."

"She already looks like you," Arvoren murmurs into my ear, lips near my cheek. "I regret so many things, my love."

"We've all grown," I remind him, reaching for his hand. "All changed. And...look at her. What is there to regret, when we have this?"

He settles beside us, fever-warm and solid. "I can see that look in your eye. Tell me what you're thinking."

I consider the question, watching Aurelie's tiny fingers curl against my skin. "I'm thinking about that day in the underchamber, when you first brought me here. How terrified I was. How angry." I smile, letting him feel my contentment through our bond. "And I'm thinking about all the days that followed—every step that led us here, every choice that made us who we are now."

"Do you regret any of it?"

"No." The certainty in my voice surprises us both. "It wasn't easy, wasn't always right. But it brought us here."

Arvoren looks at me searchingly. "Would you do it again?"

It's a different question and we both know it.

"Yes," I say, and I mean it.

Aurelie finishes nursing and yawns, sending tiny snowflakes spiraling through the warm air around us. Arvoren takes her with infinite care, his massive hands impossibly gentle as he settles her against his chest. Steam rises where their skin touches, but she only sighs contentedly, already used to the play of ice and fire in her blood.

"We'll teach her better than we were taught," I say softly. "Show her that strength comes in many forms. She'll be so very loved."

"Of course she will." His voice holds certainty now. "The future Queen of Kaldoria."

He kisses me again, deeper this time, and I taste the promise in it. Whatever comes next, whatever challenges our daughter's power brings, we face them together. No more prisons, no more chains. Only choice and trust and love, freely given and freely returned.

As night falls, torches flare to life in the city below—countless points of light like earthbound stars. Aurelie sleeps between us, frost and flame dancing in perfect harmony around her tiny form. Soon we'll have to face the world again—there are celebrations to attend, diplomats to greet, a kingdom to govern. But for now, in this perfect moment, we simply exist together. A family born from winter's fury and forged in dragon-fire, ready to write our own story at last.

"I love you," Arvoren murmurs into my hair.

"More than life itself?" I tease gently, remembering all the times he's said those words before.

His laugh holds notes of dragon-fire. He presses his lips to my temple. "Thank you for staying."

It's such a simple sentence, but it almost brings me to tears.

I turn in his arms, careful not to disturb our sleeping daughter. "Thank you for learning. For trying. For becoming the man I knew you could be."

Aurelie sighs in her sleep, and frost patterns dance across the blankets once more. This time, we let them spread—delicate spirals catching torchlight, a reminder of the magic that flows through all our veins. Not a curse to be controlled or a power to be feared, but a gift to be cherished. To be shared.

The future stretches out before us, endless as winter stars.

Together, we'll make it worth the waiting.

Six weeks later, after a long, exhausting day of caring for our baby, we retire to bed alone for once, leaving her with only our most trusted nurses for a while. Now that Aurelie is finally asleep, I know better than to anticipate being ravaged. Instead, because Arvoren knows how exhausted I am, we go slow.

He takes me to our bed, kissing me with a sweetness I didn't know until recently he possessed the capacity for. His touch is gentle as he lays me on our bed, the sheets cool against my skin. He takes his time, fingers tracing patterns of frost and flame

across my body. Each caress is reverent, worshipful, as if he's rediscovering territory both familiar and new.

I reach for him, but he catches my hands, pressing soft kisses to my palms.

"Let me," he murmurs, voice rough with emotion. "Let me show you how much I love you."

His lips follow the path his fingers blazed, leaving trails of tingling heat in their wake. He lingers at the places where pregnancy has changed me—the curve of my hips, the swell of my breasts, the silvery marks stretched across my belly. Through our bond, I feel his fierce pride, his endless wonder at what my body has accomplished.

"Beautiful," he breathes against my skin. His hands cradle my hips, thumbs tracing the skin there. "Perfect."

I shiver as his lips follow, kissing a reverent path across my belly. Through our bond, I feel his awe—not just at my body, but at everything it represents. The strength that carried our child, the magic that nurtured her, the love that brought us to this moment.

Arvoren takes his time, savoring each new curve and hollow. His touch is feather-light but leaves trails of tingling heat in its wake. When he finally settles between my thighs, I'm trembling with need.

"Arvoren," I breathe, fingers tangling in his hair.

He looks up, eyes dark with desire. He wants me so badly that I can almost taste it, a fierce, desperate desire for me.

"Tell me what you need," he murmurs, pressing a kiss to my inner thigh.

"You," I whisper. "Just you."

His tongue traces delicate patterns, frost and flame dancing wherever he touches. I arch into the sensation, magic thrumming beneath my skin. Arvoren takes his time, savoring each gasp and shiver as if committing them to memory.

When he finally presses his fingers inside me, it's with exquisite care. I tip my head back and moan softly in my throat, desperate for him, needing this so very immensely. Through our bond, I feel everything he can't put into words—gratitude, wonder, fierce protectiveness, and love so deep it makes my chest ache.

His hands caress my sides, tracing the new curves in amazement. His touch leaves trails of tingling warmth, chasing away any lingering aches. I arch into him, craving more of that soothing heat.

"You're so beautiful," he murmurs, voice rough with emotion. His lips trace over me, pressing soft kisses to each stretch mark, each scar and blemish. Each patch of soft, unbroken skin.

I reach for him, but he cages me gently with his body, pressing us back against the pillows.

"Let me," he breathes against my skin. "Let me worship you properly."

He lowers back to my sex and his mouth continues its reverent exploration, lingering at the places most sensitive from nursing on his way down. The scrape of his teeth on my clit sends shivers through me, pleasure tinged with the faintest edge of pain, fingers still within me.

His touch grows more insistent, stoking the fire building within me. When his tongue presses hard against me while his fingers curl, I gasp, arching into the sensation. I tangle my fingers in his hair, torn between pulling him closer and pushing him away

from the almost overwhelming sensation. Through our bond, I feel his fierce joy, his pride in drawing these reactions from me.

"Arvoren," I breathe. The dual stimulation has me trembling on the edge.

His fingers curl again inside me, finding that perfect spot that makes stars burst behind my eyelids. His tongue traces intricate patterns, alternating between feather-light teasing and firm strokes that have me gasping his name. Frost spreads across the sheets in delicate spirals, catching the candlelight like diamonds.

Through our bond, I feel Arvoren's fierce joy at my pleasure, his pride in drawing these reactions from me. Steam rises where his fever-hot skin meets my cooler flesh, creating a sensual mist that carries the mingled scents of our arousal.

I arch into his touch, magic thrumming beneath my skin in time with the building tension. Arvoren hums in approval, the vibration sending new waves of sensation coursing through me. His free hand strokes my thigh, leaving trails of tingling warmth in its wake.

Arvoren's touch grows more insistent, his fingers curling inside me as his tongue traces intricate patterns. I arch into the sensation, frost blooming across the sheets in delicate spirals. Steam rises where his fever-hot skin meets my cooler flesh, creating a sensual mist that carries our mingled scents.

"Let go," he murmurs against my inner thigh, his breath scorching. "I've got you. Let yourself fall."

I surrender to the building pleasure, trembling as waves of sensation wash over me. My magic surges in response, frost and flame dancing across my skin. Arvoren groans, pressing closer as if he can't bear even an inch of space between us.

As the aftershocks subside, Arvoren gathers me into his arms. His skin burns fever-

hot against mine, chasing away the lingering chill. I curl into his warmth, savoring the steady beat of his heart beneath my ear.

"I love you," he murmurs, pressing a kiss to my temple. His fingers trace idle patterns along my spine, leaving trails of tingling heat in their wake.

I say something that terrifies me then, something I've wanted to say for some time but haven't been able to bring myself to.

But despite it all, I need to know.

"Unless I ask, you won't let me go?" I ask.

I feel him still for a moment. Then, he kisses the top of my head once more, lips pressing into my hair.

"I won't let you go," my husband promises. I believe him.

THE END