

## CHAPTER 6 – THE DRAGON

Tebanis stirred. His ears perked and swiveled as he caught the soft sound of the girl's breathing. His snout nestled on her silken hair. The smell of the soap she had discovered the night before filled his nostrils. Her arms rested around his canine form, held him close for warmth and comfort. Unwilling to wake her, he did not move and just breathed in her familiar scent. She smelled unlike anything of this world, indescribable in any tongue he knew, and as he waited for her to return to consciousness he allowed his nose to rest against her throat. Her fingers clutched gently at his fur and she nuzzled into his neck.

His mind drifted to the night before, to the description of events as Koragi had relayed them. She had claimed that the agents from COIL had questioned her about both him and Lord Herial and that they had used magic on her only after she had insisted that she knew nothing. He had listened closely to her words, though. He had caught the way she had tucked her hair behind her ear and looked away. She had protected him. When faced with an unknown enemy and their potential to cause her great harm, she had been resistant enough to make them resort to magic that had physically harmed her, tortured her in their attempt to convince her to speak of him. Yet she had held firm. She had told them nothing and they had not then discovered her identity after organizing the pieces of information they did have about him.

But she did not truly know him. They had spent little time together in Cordak and she had never learned that he had arrived all those years ago solely to be her guardian. That she had chosen to suffer for him, a familiar stranger, filled his heart with warmth. He had always admired the girl for her strength of character and the quiet manner in which she observed the world, but she had so smoothly grown into a woman that he could not recall when the transition had finally taken place.

Koragi's arms released him, but she did not wake. Quietly moving out of her reach, he stretched and dipped his nose to the stone floor. Magic encircled his body and sent a ruffle through his fur, as if a gentle breeze materialized around him. His fur receded and his bones creaked as they repositioned and grew larger. When the magic faded, Tebanis knelt next to Koragi, wrapped in his cloak. He turned to

wake her, but his hand went still as he gazed upon her sleeping face. There was something different about her, a glow that he had never seen before perhaps. The light of the morning sun filtered in through the shutters of three large windows, but he saw her well even in the shadows. Her hair shined, stuck to her face where it had been pinned down beneath his head.

He brushed the hair back, his fingertips dancing along her cheek. She stirred under his touch. Turning her face down into the cushions, she stretched her arms and legs. Tebanis remained crouched close to her, waiting for her to open her eyes.

"Good morning, milady," he said softly.

Koragi stared up at him. A faint smile settled on her lips. "Good morning, Tebanis," she replied.

The swordsman reached up to unclasp his cloak, and then offered her a hand as he stood. Once she settled on her feet, he wrapped the cloak around her and closed the clasp under her chin. His eyes lingered on the golden chain and pendant about her neck. Koragi noted the gaze, but did not speak of it after Tebanis drew away and urged her to wear the hood of the cloak. She pulled the hood up over her head and joined him as he led her out of the room. They hastened down the hallway away from the changing room. They then passed through a smaller door that led to a corner of the empty ballroom that had been so full of life last night.

Tebanis led her out into the foyer, where the city's bustle had come into the great government building with the start of a new day. They passed without incident or pause. Surprised by the chill in the air, Koragi was grateful for the heavy wool cloak that now rested around her shoulders, dragging slightly on the ground behind her feet. Tebanis still wore his deep red tunic and stood out more than she did with her dress covered by the cloak.

His hand often rested on the small of her back as they walked, as if to ensure that she stayed close to him. She silently lamented that they had not walked back to the inn the night before. What was she supposed to tell the others when she showed back up now with Tebanis, wearing the same dress she had last night and now wrapped in his cloak? The suggestions her state of dress could trigger made her face flush red.

To her surprise, Tebanis had an answer for the awkwardness that erupted from the villagers when they arrived. He told them exactly what had happened. It was only then that Koragi realized that his tunic, his cloak, and her boots still carried signs of the struggle. Blood did not so easily hide, even on black wool. Tebanis took Gerian aside and spoke with him while Gilly and Jori joined Miss Adger in making sure that Koragi was all right.

The children played on the inn grounds under Ravian's watch. Koragi stood quietly as the others fussed over her, her gaze drifting back to Tebanis whenever she didn't have to address them. He didn't look in her direction even once. With a quiet apology, she politely excused herself and returned to the room where she had left her belongings.

She draped the borrowed cloak on her bed and quickly changed into fresh clothing: a long-sleeved blue blouse with brass buttons down the front and a pair of loose brown pants. Tossing aside her bloodied boots, she fetched her old pair and tucked her leggings inside, clasping both buckles. It was the most elegant blouse she owned, with lace frills at the bottoms of the sleeves, a high collar, and a simple black belt attached at the waist to hold a few small pouches she usually reserved for her sewing materials. Today she left them empty.

Her gaze was distant as she gathered her luggage and stuffed her dress and boots into a bag, uncaring. She didn't want to be reminded of all that had happened and would have preferred to just leave the dress wadded into a corner, but that would be impolite to the innkeeper. Instead she carried her bags and the cloak out of the room and slipped back outside to find the wagons so she could store everything out of sight.

As she stepped into the grass outside the inn, she paused when she noticed the others near their wagons. They had already prepared the horses and oxen and the guards strapped down the last of the empty crates. The villagers from Cordak usually visited the East District on the third day of the Festival, where they paid their respects to the gods at their temples. It didn't look as if they intended to make the walk east, though. The children already sat in the wagons, where they bounced around, eagerly showing

off the baubles and gadgets they had purchased with their allowances. Koragi looked at Miss Adger when she approached.

"Are we not visiting the temples?" she asked.

"Gerian and Tebanis said it was best if we left immediately," Miss Adger answered. "Given what happened to you I cannot say I disagree."

Koragi frowned and looked toward the wagons. Tebanis stood away from the others with his chestnut stallion, looking in her direction. She carried her bags to the back of the second wagon and stowed them in one of her empty crates, and then joined Tebanis and offered his cloak to him. He inclined his head and took it from her.

"We are leaving early?" she asked him.

"The sooner we leave this city, the better." Tebanis studied her. "Are you all right?"

"I will be." She looked dismally at the wagon. As much as she wanted to know just what was going on, she was unsure how eager she was to run home and find out. Her mind had become filled with all manner of possibilities ranging from learning she was the princess of Camriole to finding something had been injected into her body. She had plenty of rational guesses, too, but she feared most that the truth would prove more alike her irrational fears.

"I would have you ride with me, milady."

Koragi went still as she looked back at Tebanis. He brushed his hand lightly over his horse's neck and shoulders and gazed at her intently as he awaited a response. Koragi drew in a deep breath and looked at the horse.

"We are going to ride ahead of the caravan," she said.

"Yes."

She nodded then and watched as he folded his cloak and attached it to the saddlebags. Tebanis mounted the horse and offered a hand down to her, helping to pull her up behind him. The horse stepped uncomfortably to the side as it adjusted to the additional weight, but settled again when Koragi went still and wrapped her arms around Tebanis. The swordsman called out to Gerian Mere, who lifted his arm and

bade them both to travel swiftly. Tebanis then led the horse at a trot and left the other villagers behind. Koragi could not help but notice the longing looks she received from Gilly and Jori, while Ravian shot her a jealous glare. Koragi wondered if they would be so jealous if they had heard the story in its entirety. She was sure Tebanis had failed to mention to them the magic, the torture, and the bloodshed.

The seamstress held Tebanis tightly as he guided the horse through the streets, evading the carts and crowds. They reached the gate and Tebanis lifted his hand, showing that he carried an emblem of the ducal family. The guards allowed them to pass unhindered. When they finally crept beyond the mass of incoming and outgoing visitors, Tebanis kicked his heels and coaxed the horse to break into gallop, following the road due south. Koragi clung to Tebanis, her head pressed against his back.

While it was pleasant to sit close behind him in the saddle like this, she could not force her mind to remain on the enjoyable thoughts. Her stomach churned and her face flushed feverishly. The sensation came from nowhere, as if a heavy weight pressed down on her shoulders and threatened to empty what little substance remained in her stomach. As she tried to concentrate on the bounding movements of the horse and the warmth of the man in front of her, tears stung her eyes. She didn't know why, but that weight continued to grow, becoming a sharp ache that made her heart pound faster.

They rode for hours, keeping a steady canter following their steed's initial burst of speed. The movements of the horse were not harsh and even seemed calming to the young woman who clung to Tebanis. It nearly lulled her to sleep, until that sharp sense of discomfort struck her again abruptly. She lifted her head, panicked, and Tebanis shouted with alarm just as they crested a hill. When she peered around him, the bottom of her stomach gave way and terror clutched at her heart. The horse again reached a gallop.

Cordak stood in the distance, black smoke billowing into the sky. A fire still raged within the walls and black specks poured out of the gates, villagers fleeing the inferno. As they drew nearer, Tebanis cursed. Koragi stared, dumbstruck, while her eyes took in the sight of a massive form that rested atop the collapsed northern wall of the village. Gold glistened in the sunlight, reflecting off the shape's surface. To either side, huge appendages lay bent and sprawled, a pair of battered wings contorted grotesquely. The

creature's long neck ended in a broad head lined with large spikes. A tall, barbed frill traveled down its spine, all the way to the tip of its blunt tail. Koragi knew what it was long before they saw the razor-like claws or the fangs that jutted out from the beast's bloody maw.

*A dragon*, she thought, stunned.

When they drew close enough to see that the dragon was dead, its scaled body torn and broken, impaled upon iron bars and wooden planks once used to hold up the wall, Tebanis reined in the horse and stared with an angry scowl on his face. Koragi tightened her grip on him and whispered.

"That...that's a dragon. What is going on, Tebanis? What happened here?"

He did not answer. With a shouted command to the horse, he jerked the reins and Koragi had to grab Tebanis about the middle yet again as the stallion suddenly turned and whisked them off toward the escaped villagers who gathered far from the village walls. Many were injured, arms and faces covered with lacerations. Blood smeared nearly every dress and tunic. Children wept. Koragi comprehended the horror in their eyes. They had witnessed something that left emptiness in their faces.

The horse drew to a stop and Koragi jumped down before Tebanis could stop her. He called her name, but she already ran through the crowd of villagers, shouting for her mother. Myra wasn't among the survivors, and no one answered her when she asked after her. They stared blankly at her, as if she had spoken in a language they could not understand. Her heart pounded wildly as dread consumed her. Where was her mother? Why could no one speak or answer her?

Finally she abandoned the crowd of villagers and ran toward the village gates. Militia men lay scattered about the entrance, gaping holes in their chests. Blood splatters covered the ground. Koragi reached out and screamed for her mother when strong arms wrapped around her midsection and stopped her from entering the fiery village. Tebanis gripped her arms and turned her to face him. She pounded his chest, pushed at his arms, and desperately tried to break free of his restraint. But he grasped her tightly, shaking her as he raised his voice.

"Look at me, Koragi! Listen to me!"

But she couldn't. She didn't want to. She knew what he would say and she was not ready for the reality that Myra could be gone. There were only a few dozen survivors outside the walls and the raging fire within made it clear that the presence of more survivors was impossible. So Koragi clutched at his tunic and collapsed, sinking down to the ground while Tebanis pulled her close. He looked past her, narrowing his eyes on the gates. Other remains lay near the corpses of the militia men, but Koragi had not seen them. She didn't know the signs. Piles of jet-black ash dotted the area, steam still rising from them. This had been an attack by darker creatures than cultists and goblins.

Tebanis pulled Koragi into his arms, lifting her as she offered a weak struggle in protest. He ran to the nearest remaining member of the militia and ordered him to take his horse and ride north to warn the caravan. The militia guard was dazed, but recovered easily when Tebanis repeated the command in a growl. The man ran to the horse Tebanis had left standing by the shaken villagers.

Koragi struggled again when she regained her wits. Tears bursting from her eyes, she kicked Tebanis in the knee and he lost his grip. She jerked away from him, but he leaped to catch her wrist again. She grunted when he turned her around and then gripped her face with both hands. Looking directly into her eyes, he spoke in a quieter tone. Grief rang clear in his voice.

"Koragi, your mother is the dragon," he said. Koragi drew in a sharp breath. She stared at him with disbelief, but he just moved his face closer to hers and repeated the words intently. "Your mother is the dragon."

She couldn't breathe. His words were impossible and she pushed him away again. She swung wildly, blinded by her tears, as she tried to make him release her. But he would not let go. Dragging her to the huddle of survivors, he pushed her down into the grass and let her weep on the ground. Whether she understood or not, the loss was tremendous. Every sob that wracked her body spoke her grief.

Tebanis looked around at the villagers. Many of them stared at him with lingering fear and confusion. They knew about Myra now. The fell creatures that had attacked must have come in waves to leave so much devastation behind and to kill such a powerful guardian.

Tebanis inhaled deeply as he examined the survivors. Only one Elder remained among them. Elder Rydar Garen, the blacksmith, wore his smithy apron and gloves, skin blackened as if he had just stepped out of his forge. He sat upon a stone with his head buried in his hands. He was alone. His wife and younger daughter had not escaped the attack. With a glance at Koragi, who stared up at the sky with an empty gaze, Tebanis approached the Elder and spoke quietly. Others around them looked upon the younger swordsman for direction. Suffering from varying levels of shock, the attack and the heavy losses filled the survivors with fear and uncertainty. The quiet innocence the people of Cordak once held had shattered.

"Elder Garen," Tebanis murmured. The blacksmith slowly turned his head, the skin around his eyes moist and red. "You have to get these people to Eiskre. It is not safe for them here. The creatures will return."

A murmur stirred the crowd as Elder Garen stood. His body shook, hands clenched into fists.

"I will lead them to safety," he said finally. "You must take her and flee, Tebanis."

Tebanis nodded once. "Keep safe, Elder Garen. I pray this is not the last time I will see you."

The Elder then turned to push the dazed guards into action. He sent runners to check the farm houses outside the village proper, before the fields could erupt in flame and carry the inferno to other possible survivors. Tebanis seemed satisfied with the pace the villagers took and he turned back to Koragi.

But she was gone. His eyes turned frantically and he shouted when he spotted her. She had crossed the field back toward the village, circling around to the collapsed wall, where the dragon lay fallen. Tebanis raced through the grass to meet her, her name upon his lips. She paused when she heard him, her hands folded in front of her. When he slowed his pursuit and came to a stop next to her, she spoke.

"My mother was a dragon?" she asked. Soot danced through the air, filling it with the stench of flame and death. The smoke did not reach this side of the wall yet and they stood before the corpse of the



golden dragon that had fought desperately to save the lives of the villagers. Tebanis placed his hand on her shoulder.

"Myra was your surrogate mother, milady," he said. "She was your keeper and protector long before I was."

Koragi squinted through her tears as she stared at the dragon. For some reason it seemed a fitting description for Myra. The truth resonated in her bones, as if she had always known. But that was ridiculous. She had never had any reason to suspect that Myra had been a surrogate mother.

But then why did it seem so right that Myra was a dragon? Why did she feel as if a part of her had already accepted it?

Lifting her hand, she placed her fingertips to the little golden orb Myra had given her just two days ago. She didn't know what the little bauble was, but it had become the only physical piece of Myra that she had left.

"We must go to Raitom," Tebanis said suddenly. Koragi looked at him, her eyes distant and unfocused. He squeezed her shoulder. "Without Myra, you are not safe amongst your people. She prevented the enemy from finding you."

Koragi's brow furrowed and her voice strained. She tried desperately to keep her wits about her this time.

"Who is the enemy, Tebanis?" she asked.

He set his jaw and lifted his chin, a dangerous look flashing over his eyes as he glanced up again at the dragon's corpse.

"I will explain everything to you along the way. Right now I need you to trust me again and do as I say. It is imperative that they do not find you."

What else could she do? Wrapping her arms around herself, she lowered her gaze and drew in a shuddering breath. Everything was gone, destroyed by an enemy she had never seen, one she did not know. Her life as a seamstress had ended before it had ever truly begun.

What else could she do?

Brushing her hands over her face to wipe away her tears, she turned to Tebanis and stood up straighter. Her grief lingered, but determination had worked its way into her eyes. He thought he glimpsed something even deeper, something that glimmered behind the blue irises that looked upon him.

"Will there be justice for this, Tebanis?" she asked.

Warmth washed over Tebanis as he looked upon the brave young woman. He sensed her battling emotions as vividly as his own. Dropping to one knee before her, he grasped one of her hands in both of his. His touch calmed Koragi and she gazed into his dark, fierce eyes. The anger and sincerity in them caught her breath.

"I am at your service, milady," he said. "You will have justice."

Koragi looked upon the dragon once more, steeling her resolve as she curled her fingers into a fist. The danger of the situation still stood just outside her ability to fully comprehend, but the anger in her heart made it easier to push through her apprehension. And as she met her new companion's gaze once more, her fear made way for stronger objectives.

She would not rest until she discovered exactly what kind of war she had fallen into, and how she and Tebanis could stop whoever had done this to her beloved mother.