



### LEGEND OF THE WHITE DRAGON: LEGENDS

The sorceress Lusiradrol, exiled to human form thousands of years earlier from her life as the terrible black dragon, has awakened her Red Clan. The true dragons are ready to renew their ancient wars to save the world, but they cannot do it alone. Unfortunately, the magi and the two races of men are far from ready to face the darkness unleashed by Lusiradrol.

The white dragon was made to banish her, one who could unite all beings of Light, but his return is not as any foresaw. Through a woman who guards his power and his spirit, he will be reborn. But will he be too late to save the world?

LEGEND OF THE WHITE DRAGON:  
LEGENDS  
(Book 1 of 3)

by  
Melanie Nilles

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# LEGEND OF THE WHITE DRAGON: LEGENDS

by  
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## Introduction: The Dragon's Return

Setheadroc. Formerly known as *senthir rî Afdroc*, or "hill of the Dragon", the resting place of the white dragon. Through time it passed into legend, its meaning forgotten by men of the Second Race, along with those who named it and were driven out and those who lived in a time of war against a darkness fouler than any man could imagine.

Thousands of years and hundreds of wars later, a palace was built on the hill. Noble and grand and home of the royal family of Cavatar, the greatest nation of the continent of Ayrule, this glorious structure stood out among others. Constructed with the exquisite beauty of Rivon architecture and the blood and sweat of Cavatar citizens, it testified to the strength of the alliance between Cavatar and Rivonia.

But not all had forgotten the legends.

Driven by a desire to break the alliance lasting hundreds of years, one man raised an army to conquer Cavatar. In his quest for power, the man known only as Tyrkam sought the forgotten secret of Setheadroc. He arranged the abduction of the quiet princess Istaria Isolder with the hopes of appealing to the spirit guarding the power of the white dragon resting beneath the palace. Little did he know that power was already possessed by the princess when she escaped with the woodsman, Darius.

Determined to conquer all of Cavatar, Tyrkam laid careful plans to seize the palace quickly. With the cooperation of one of the local lords willing to betray his king for the right price, he succeeded and named himself Overlord.

However, while his army maintained order of his new empire, they could not subdue the hearts of the people, particularly the personal attendant of the princess. Calli would not sit idly by while imagining her friend suffering. Regretting her inability to stop the bandits who took Istaria from their carriage, she pushed herself beyond the training her father gave her before his death. The mockery of the prince and the trainers he assigned to dissuade her ignited her determination to rescue her friend. Stronger than under her father's tutelage, she defeated the weapons masters Donaghy and Morain.

Seeing his plan backfire, Phelan made one last plea for Calli to stay and to ensure her return, he gifted of a sword, a horse, and the seal of Cavatar as a marriage vow. With those gifts, Calli set out to find Istaria and bring her home, unaware of the prophecy that fate imparted on her friend.

That fate guided Istaria and Darius to cross paths with the dreaded black dragon exiled to human form, Lusiradrol. In that battle, they were aided by a mage known as Jayson, who

revealed himself as a lingering reminder of Darius's past. Both were part of the secret order of the Sh'lahmar, guardians of the vault where the Red Clan slept for thousands of years, Lusiradrol's clan.

But the dark woman was more than even she realized...

Long ago, she was the Darklord, the answer to the creation of the Majera, the force of Light, which was split into three pieces that became Tahronen (mother of the magi), Haiberuk (leader of the Sh'lahmar), and the Unnamed One. When the Majera and their dragons had the Darklord trapped and weak and on the brink of destruction, he escaped into the embryo of one of his Red Clan. The black dragon was far more intelligent than any other and fiercer in her determination to rid the world of the life the Majera created. Not until she reigned did the Majera and others realize the Darklord survived in the dragon named Nefarthissen.

In an effort to defeat the black dragon, the Majera combined their powers into a single dragon embryo, who was born white. The white dragon was young when he faced his nemesis, and could do no more than transform her into a form she despised—a human. Furious, Nefarthissen, who changed her name to Lusiradrol, led her Red Clan on a rampage over the world of Gairdra. With the other forces of the Darklord defeated, the Red Clan were the last survivors, but they were vicious.

Bent on the white dragon's destruction, Lusiradrol warped the mind of the last Great Magi with her dark powers.

Under her twisted power, Mallenor arranged for the white dragon's death in the cave in which he slept, but with the Majera's power as his, the white dragon foresaw his death. When the warrior hired by the mage slew him, the white dragon sealed his power within his heart and bound his spirit to protect it. A time would come, he prophesied, when darkness would arise again and he would be needed. He cursed Mallenor with immortality and instructed him to watch for the day when he would return to the world.

Ashamed at what he had done after breaking Lusiradrol's spell, Mallenor changed his name to Makleor and set out to eliminate the threat that remained—Lusiradrol and her Red Clan. In a fierce battle, he gathered his power and cast a sleeping spell on the enemy. Thinking it would be death, Lusiradrol escaped.

The place where the dragons fell was covered with earth. Haiberuk took up guardianship of the location and took on the training of the magi men, the descendants of the Great Magi, to protect the vault of the sleeping dragons. There the Red Clan rested indefinitely, the hidden vault guarded by the men known as the *Shinna rî Aflahamar*, the Guardians of the Secret.

Jayson and Darius were part of those guardians, later known simply as *Sh'lahmar*, and guided by Haiberuk, until Darius could not kill an innocent who wandered close and he gave up his post. With Jayson secretly trailing him, poised to assassinate him or anyone he told, Darius wandered the land until he settled in Wynmere Forest.

Those decisions placed him in the right place at the right time to help the white dragon, who guarded the magic he transferred to Istaria. She had been chosen as the vessel through which the white dragon planned to return.

Thus was set the events in motion. While Darius led Istaria to the dragons of the Second Realm, Jayson departed to reach the Sh'lahmar and warn them of the impending return of the

white dragon. His paths crossed with Calli, whose life he saved, and his journey was interrupted by a new calling, that of his heart. He guided Calli and a following of those who also sought to restore Cavatar into the mountains to seek refuge from Tyrkam's forces and shelter from the encroaching winter.

The mountains hid their own secrets, ones Jayson was aware of but could not tell the others. In a valley shrouded by magic, they discovered Linfrathâr, a fortress of the Ancients, the First Race, who were driven out thousands of years before.

But Jayson could not stay. His duty to the Sh'lahmar beckoned. The possibility that Lusiradrol could end it all hovered over his shoulders. He had to leave to fulfill his duty.

Unfortunately, one person discovered his secret and followed him back to the vault...

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## Jayson

He had failed his brothers of the Sh'lahmar. He had failed the world by leading Lusiradrol to the vault.

But he would not fail Calli.

Jayson would give his life to protect her from the terror Lusiradrol sought to unleash; to gaze on the woman Calli rarely revealed through the tough exterior of a warrior; to hear her admonish him for letting his black hair grow to shoulder-length, when hers reached her waist. Then again, she always bound it up, except those few times she let anyone see her as a woman, the rare moments in his memories that sustained him in this time apart.

The shadow crept through his mind, colder than the approaching winter and blacker than the shoulder-length hair that sweat glued to his face and neck. He shivered and pushed aside the distraction to maintain the barrier.

He would protect Calli. Haiberuk's cleansing had left his feelings for her intact, despite the master's preaching never to form attachments. Haiberuk had allowed him that, and Jayson would not give it up.

The forces around him twisted with a sickening menace he recognized from his last encounter with Lusiradrol. Where was she?

Daring to break part of his concentration from their barrier before the vault, he reached out through the colors of magic and discovered the truth. Darkness invaded the spectrum, black and vile, but not near them. Haiberuk and the others battled her at the sanctuary.

Jayson focused on the barrier with increased intensity, unwilling to allow her to distract him. The barrier wavered as others made the discovery, most likely the younger members.

"Hold it steady!" Jayson called out. "She seeks to divide our attention."

The barrier strengthened again. Acolytes. Would they hold up to whatever words or magic she used to twist their thoughts?

He could only hope.

Sooner than he expected, a pillar of flame flared and disintegrated on the top of the hill facing them, leaving the woman standing in its place on the knoll. She stood as menacing as a dragon, dressed in black plated armor from head to foot and her black hair twisted and wrapped up off her slender shoulders..

Jayson watched her closely, pouring forth all his effort into maintaining the barrier around the vault of the sleeping Red Clan and setting an example for the couple dozen others standing before the entrance with him.

In a blink, Lusiradrol vanished and reappeared within feet of the invisible barrier. The smile on her black-red lips fixed on him. "So this is your secret." Her eyes scanned the arc of robed figures. "Your little friends cannot keep me out."

Jayson braced for the worst, prepared for any attack she might conjure. Instead, her smile crooked upwards with sinister mischief. "Just as the spells of Arronfel cannot."

*Calli! No!*

She struck at their barrier. Despite the fear and worry sprouted in him, he stayed in place and refocused his power.

The magic held.

Lusiradrol hissed. "If you keep me out, I will destroy them."

"You would destroy them anyway."

Her eyes narrowed and she organized the magic into something he never felt before in their encounters. It grew in scope, eating away the varied colors of magic and leaving only a void. Was this the Darklord in her?

*Stand strong!* he called to the others.

They increased their power to the barrier and stood their ground, although doubts sprang up in a few of the younger men and weakened the connection. Lusiradrol could intimidate anyone who heard stories of the death in her wake. But he had survived. She might have let him the last time, but in their first encounter, he had defeated her. He had help from Istaria and Darius then, but it proved she could be defeated, especially if they combined their powers against her.

This time, he fought for more than their world. He fought to protect Calli from the horror the demon would unleash. He would not let the others fail.

When Lusiradrol struck, the force of her blast knocked several men to the ground. Only a few rose again on unsteady legs.

She laughed in mockery. In a blink, she sent some of the weaker members bouncing away from the barrier.

Only a few standing held the line.

Her face turned livid with anger. "Fools!"

*Not fools. Honorable magi.* Jayson's powers weakened with each spell she unleashed. He grew tired with the strain of holding against her, but he would fight to the end with his brothers.

Where was Master Haiberuk? What had she done to the others?

Lusiradrol formed another collection of power as he watched. In his heart, he knew they would fall with one more, unless reinforcements arrived in the next few seconds.

One did.

His confidence climbed at the sight of the master, who materialized behind her in his simple brown robes.

Lusiradrol whirled, her face hardening. "You! You're no mage." She searched around her. "Where are the others of your kind?" She knew exactly what Haiberuk was.

But that would not deter her. A moment later, she let loose her final stroke at the barrier.

The force of her power shoved Jayson onto his back, the wind knocked from him. Through the spots in his vision, he made out Haiberuk's battle with her. He wanted to help, but he could hardly move. His chest hurt.

Lusiradrol knocked Haiberuk's containment attempts aside and strode for the opening of the vault. The four guards waiting there raised their spears. The magic of their powers surged in a new shield.

*No more.* Jayson regained his breath and jumped on her. She collapsed with him and rolled to the ground. He held fast, but in his weakened state, he was no match. She escaped his hold and threw him aside like a rag. The ground slammed against him.

Black spots danced in his vision. Through it, he saw Lusiradrol let loose a blow that rocked the ground beneath them. All four elite guards flew into the hillside with enough force to leave indentations in the rocky soil.

Unimpeded, she entered the vault.

Jayson crawled to his feet, determined to stop her, but had to pause for a second. The spots in his vision threatened to close on him with the throbbing of his head. In seconds it faded, and he straightened.

Haiberuk stood next to him. "Come. We've one last option."

One last option that only the master knew.

Jayson nodded and followed his master into the dark maw, the patter from the feet of a few others behind him. They ran through the descending passages of the old caverns, now filled with stalagmites and stalactites over sections of smooth surfaces. Ancient writings covered the walls, but Jayson rushed past, following a touch of magic from Haiberuk to light the way.

Through the twists and turns, they followed the echoing footsteps of their attacker.

"Death and famine on them all for this!" Her voice echoed through the passage from somewhere ahead. "Awaken, my brothers and sisters!"

"Hurry!" Haiberuk sprinted ahead with no indication of tiring.

Jayson dipped into his last reserves of energy for the strength to keep pace. Ahead of them, threads of dark magic wove their way through the caverns. Would this nightmare not end?

No. It was just beginning.

At the chamber of the sleeping dragons, Haiberuk's light cast shadows through the chamber.

Jayson gasped. Never had he set foot inside the chamber—their purpose was to prevent anyone from entering. Over a hundred dragons must have filled the vault, red mounds of scales and wings. The First Race had formed the cavern around the clan after the casting of the spell that bound them.

Already a few of the red beasts stirred from their drowsiness. Their heads measured as long as a man stood tall, marked by various patterns of spikes and ridges. Yellow reptilian eyes blinked away the millennia of slumber, awakened by their master's call. The great mounds shifted and stretched weary limbs.

The Red Clan awakened.

The Sh'lahmar who had followed halted behind him, their presences in the flow of magic dwarfed by those of the dragons.

"Join me." Haiberuk held out his hand to Jayson.

Jayson placed his palm over the master's and turned to the next closest of the Sh'lahmar. Haiberuk pulled the power flowing through their connection to himself. What little remained to him, Jayson gave up freely.

Growls and groans reverberated in the underground chamber.

Whatever Haiberuk planned, he'd better hurry.

The nearest beast rose up using the clawed joints of its wings. With powerful hind limbs and long tails, they resembled their brethren, but these were not like the other dragons.

Jayson gasped at the sight of the wyverns, the vicious creatures of nightmares, moving. They were said to be smaller than the true dragons but these were larger than he expected.

The Red Clan screeched their anger.

"Rise, brothers and sisters!" Lusiradrol's triumphant voice rose over the clamor of their awakening. "Today you shall have your revenge!"

Haiberuk lifted his eyes to the roof of the cavern. A grim expression fixed on his face, his eyes focused on the stalactites, some as large as the dragons.

The cavern shook, breaking the enormous spears free. They rained down on the beasts, stabbing many in their vulnerable points on their heads and leaving them dead. The hardness of their scales shielded their flesh from serious injury, except in that soft spot.

"NO!" Lusiradrol turned to them, her eyes ablaze with malice.

The cavern continued to shake beneath them. They would likely die in the attempt. Jayson took small comfort in knowing they diminished the population of the Darklord's servants.

Lusiradrol wobbled amid the pounding of rock collapsing around her. One of the wyverns ducked down, and she jumped aboard its neck with a deftness that could only have come from magic. Together they rushed the Sh'lahmar.

Jayson winced at the wave of red bodies racing at them. They'd never stop the onslaught and the Red Clan would escape.

Apparently Haiberuk thought a chance remained. He stood his ground, still focused on pulling down whatever he could to pummel the beasts.

The one bearing down on them with Lusiradrol on its shoulders let loose a breath of flame, but Haiberuk deflected the fire upwards without touching it.

Lusiradrol drove the beast to attack.

At the last second, Jayson and the others let go and ducked away. He rolled into a pile of rocks and slammed his head into a boulder. His vision scattered, though he thought he caught sight of the dragon running through the master. Unlikely, but not impossible. The Majera were not corporeal beings, but they would not let this happen.

After they passed, Haiberuk stood in the same place.

The last vision Jayson caught as a dream. One by one the wyverns rushed out of their hibernation.

The fight drained from him with the realization that he failed.

Somewhere in his dream Master Haiberuk stood over him and smiled. *Trust in yourself, child. You are the last.*

The world faded. *Calli...*

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## Calli

"Jayson!" Calli gasped and sat upright from the cot. Where was she? The stone walls tight together like a narrow corridor with a window at one end opened at the other to a darker interior room. Through the fog of sleep, reality returned. But it had all felt so real, like she'd been there watching.

She had dreamed of a red sea of scaled bodies and falling rocks in a dark cave. Somewhere amid the chaos lay Jayson, wounded or worse.

No. She shook the images away. *A dream; only a dream.* It was not real, despite all her senses telling her she had been there.

Calli slid her legs over the edge of the cot and rubbed her eyes. She flung the braid of fiery hair over her shoulder and noticed the dirt stains on her clothes—boots and breeches, tunic and bracers.

She still wore her fighting gear. *Fighting... Yes.* Now she remembered. But her sword—  
On the floor where she laid her scabbard before falling asleep in the quiet nook.

The morning rushed back into her memories. She had struggled against General Marjan's masters but defeated them, this time. He respected her enough to challenge her, but she paid for it. One missed strike had allowed Roan an opening.

Calli twisted to check the wound in her side, and winced at the sting when she moved. Damned be the strength of a man to slam even a wooden blade with force enough to break skin. At least they had found healing herbs in the valley. Already the cut was nothing more than a nuisance that reminded her to move quicker. She would next time. The bruising would last a while, though.

How long had she rested?

She retrieved the sword from the floor and made an effort to stand, but the stinging of the wound and her muscle aches flooded her with pain. She sucked in a deep breath through her teeth. For too long she had focused on cleaning up the fortress and pushed her training aside.

Now, she paid for it with the reminder of muscles not used and a wound from not moving fast enough.

With each step to the window, she walked off the stiffness in her muscles. By the time she reached the glassless, arched window, she stepped with a normal stride.

Fresh air greeted her from the valley graced by the sun, which dipped to the line of mountain peaks behind and to her left. The shadow of the ancient five-tiered fortress fell short of the cliffs to her right. Beyond the shadows, the remainder of one legion of Cavatar's army practiced their combat skills. Marjan's troops were more than ready to make up for the damage caused by Overlord Tyrkam.

No. Not yet. He had told her he was not, even if the men were.

Jayson would have been impressed.

Jayson. The dream. Her heart sank, not for the first time since he left them less than a moon cycle ago. His presence had boosted her morale and her confidence for the short time he had accompanied her.

Every night she thought of him and wished he would ride into the valley, lingering at her bedroom window until the moon rose over the mountaintops. If he returned, she would greet him with open arms and never let go. She should have told him how she felt before he left. Maybe he would have stayed.

Each day he failed to return, her heart weighed heavier with grief.

"My lady." The stern voice cracked the cloud of regrets sinking over her.

Calli turned to General Marjan, her sword belt in her hands. The commander of the men in the valley stopped at the entrance of the nook where she rested. The stiff lines of his face softened minutely beneath the gray-streaked beard, though never affected the air of authority that clung to him, despite the simple dark blue tunic he wore, secured at his waist by the ever-present sword belt. Marjan saw her as a lady more than a warrior. They all did, but she would continue to prove them wrong. Her father, Kaillen, had been appointed to train the royal guards, and he had trained her, although in secret, with the skills of his homeland.

Those skills had not helped her save Istaria from Tyrkam, though.

"Feel better now, lass?"

"Much, thank you." She forced the longing from her voice and straightened to match his rigid posture. As part of their agreement in sharing the riches of Arronfel, the valley hidden by magic and abandoned when she and Jayson found it, he granted her the respect of counsel as the first to

have found the hidden fortress, and as the bearer of the seal of the House of Isolder, given to her as a marriage vow by the prince, Phelan Isolder.. She in turn left him to command his troops without interfering, but she had no interest in leading them. She never had. All she wanted was to rescue her friend, the princess she served until the day Tyrkam's soldiers abducted her from their carriage.

A hint of a smile touched his lips beneath the gray-peppered mustache. "A fine tough lass, but no less human than any man." He spoke softly, as if he understood the longing of her heart.

She smiled. Marjan had always been fair to her. She admired his ability to coordinate life in the valley. He was unlike the other generals who had visited the court. He was not arrogant or hard, but he could be when the situation called for it. "How goes the training of the new recruits?"

Marjan's scouts had made contact with scattered groups of the king's disbanded army and others who simply wished revenge against Tyrkam's treachery. Their army grew each day. Three thousand strong called Arronfel home. Once more the ancient fortress resonated with life.

"They grow stronger and restless. They desire the blood o' Tyrkam's men."

Calli nodded, understanding exactly what he meant. The contempt in his voice mirrored what she felt. "And the season?" She guessed that the same magic hiding the valley also protected it from the extremes of the higher altitude of the mountains and the seasons. Never did snow fall within the valley nor the temperature rise or fall beyond comfort.

"My men report heavy snow on the road, though much less in the lowlands."

Winter was a difficult season to tolerate on the continent of Ayrule, even worse among the Northern Mountains. If the men grew too restless, they might jeopardize the occupation of the valley. They needed a way to expend that energy. "Might we send small groups to harass Tyrkam's men?"

He frowned and shook his head. "I advise against it. Winter brings nothing but hardship and disloyalty, and the roads are treacherous."

"I see..." The road through the mountains could prove difficult to use in the winter months. She had overlooked that fact when they found the valley occupied only by a herd of horses.

"Banish such ideas, or no man'll respect your decisions."

Recalling the winters of Cavatar and its burden of cold and snow, she nodded. "I've too long forgotten."

"At least we may grow and prepare for spring. They understand that. In the meantime, I've come to bring you to eat."

"Personally?" He could have sent Quentin, the small-statured scholar who advised him and recorded everything.

"As our agreement, I wished no others to see you in pain, Lady Calli."

She flinched at the formal title, hating everything it reminded her of losing, especially the mistress she had served and sought to rescue, until Cavatar fell to Tyrkam.

Yet she respected the general's thoughts to send no one else to retrieve her for the meal. Calli smirked and took a deep breath, which released the tension. "Thank you."

"I gave my word." Without further comment, he strode away.

Calli followed, wincing at the first few steps before the stiffness again worked out from her movements. Lessuel Marjan never turned but continued to lead through the rooms and corridors of Linfrathâr.

She hid the pain lingering in her heart, or thought she did, but perhaps Marjan saw and chose not to make his notice obvious, as with her physical discomfort. The war for Cavatar had taken

its toll on her and torn her heart to shreds with the loss of family and friends, including her father and Phelan and Istaria.

And now Jayson.

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## Jayson

Like a flash of lightening through the dead of night, the pain shot through his skull. Blurry images in his memory sharpened with each second of awareness until he opened his eyes.

A dim light permeated the cool black of the underground cavern. He barely made out the enormous dimensions of what remained of the cavern and mounds of rubble, and something else.

The stench attacked as swift as the pain. He pinched his nose to block the sickening odors of reptiles and death. They were nearly as bad dead as alive. He rolled to his side and groaned. Bad move. His body ached and his head throbbed as if pounded beneath the talons of the red wyverns that had escaped their slumber.

Mindful of the pain, he moved slowly from the ground. When he licked his dry lips, he frowned at the metallic taste. Blood. How bad was it?

Jayson probed with his fingers along his face and followed a crusted trail through his tousled black hair to the back of his head. Wonderful. Just what he needed.

With a groan, he struggled to sit up.

Through the sudden seizure of pain freezing his movements, the escape of the Red Clan flooded back from his memories.

What had he done? Where were the other Sh'lahmar guards who defended the vault?

Jayson moved slower to sit up, wincing with each nuance of pain accosting him. His vision cleared in the faint light, which he saw came from a hole above the cavern, to discern mounds of charred something—scales?—among the rocky rubble.

Not a hole but, rather, the ceiling had partially collapsed. They must have broken through above. The passageway would have been tight for them, if they could squeeze through.

Haiberuk failed to stop them all. Lusiradrol had escaped with a good number of her clan before Jayson blacked out.

No. *He* failed. He, Jayson, inadvertently led Lusiradrol to this place. He should not have returned, but she would have found it one way or another with Darius's brooch. What else could he do but return to warn them?

*Stayed with Calli. Protected her. Fool! I did this.*

Jayson winced. Damn! His head hurt.

He rose to his feet a little at a time, as his head permitted. How long had he been out?

The noise of his movements resounded throughout the cavern as he kicked gravel and rocks aside while attempting to make his feet stay under him. He leaned on a large boulder until his feet agreed to cooperate.

Once standing, he gazed about while the throbbing in his head lessened.

A few of his colleagues had fallen in battle. Like faded shadows, they left impressions in the magic. If they were dead, where were the bodies?

The obvious answer made him cringe. Of course the Red Clan would be hungry when they awakened—after more than three thousand years—but why leave him if that was the case? How did they miss him?

Someone must have survived as the dragons rushed from the vault, or he would be dead. He had to find them, if humanity was to be saved. He also had to warn Calli, or he'd never forgive himself.

Moving a step at a time, Jayson fumbled his way through the corridors. Rubble lined the path where the dragons had knocked chunks from the walls and ceiling. That answered one question—at least some of the Red Clan had passed through the corridor.

After some stumbling, he emerged into the fading light of day filtering into the cavern. Silence surrounded him. Everyone was gone.

Jayson squinted in the warm sunlight outside the dark vault. His eyes focused amid the spots dancing in his vision.

A couple steps outside, he halted. Ash and dust stirred up beneath his feet. The black death left from dragon fire coated the ground in the small valley around him. Blackened tree stumps stuck up like giant teeth, smoking from the fire that had must have consumed them and burned out.

He fell against a large boulder hewn from the entrance of the vault and gazed in shock. What had they done? How long had he been out?

A hawk's shrill call pierced the air, rousing Jayson from his stupor. The raptor glided down. The weak stirrings of magic from it relieved his confusion.

Gaispar!

She hovered above the ash for a moment. The wings grew into cloaked arms and the young woman stood on the earth. A small cloud of gray dust rose about her boots. She threw back her hood from a head of blonde hair, her blue eyes scanning the destruction surrounding her.

He grimaced at a throbbing hammer in his head. "How bad is it?"

She met his eyes with a frown. "Not as bad from the air. They've only scorched this area, but I spied dragons grounded to the south."

"She's heading for Tyrkam." There was some satisfaction in this mess. "Imagine his face." Tyrkam had struck a deal with Lusiradrol to help find her clan in return for her support to conquer Cavatar. From Makleor—the old mage who pretended to help Tyrkam—Jayson understood that the overlord had canceled that arrangement. The black dragon wanted his hide for that.

Gaispar attempted a smile but it twisted into a grimace. "Unless they work with him."

"I preferred not to consider that."

"Whatever the matter, the others should know."

"If they've not already seen it." Master Haiberuk told him and the other Sh'lahmar that, though the true dragons resided in a completely different realm, they observed happenings in this world. If so, then they already knew, as would Darius and Istaria. What actions would they take?

What actions indeed. Dragons against dragons would be fascinating but terrible at the same time, but there were other matters now to concern him. "What of the Lumathir?"

"I'm on my way to meet with Tahronen now. Istaria wished to know of her family, so I left three days ago. This—" She indicated the cinders with a gesture of her head. "—will change things."

"That I've no doubt." It changed too many things. "Chaos is unleashed."

One fine eyebrow arched on her face. No panic. No fear. Just a single eyebrow lifting. Not what he would have expected, but he supposed if he had lived three hundred years with immortality, he might not find much excitement in this.

"Never did it leave this world. Or do you know something I do not?"

Jayson shook his head and rose to his feet. The throbbing returned with the movement, but it bothered him less than it had previously.

She was right; he would grant that. The Darklord was a creation by the original Chaos of the universe in answer to the formation of Light and Order. Since the Darklord resided in Lusiradrol, Chaos had never left the world.

With a few seconds of no movement, the throbbing lessened. Jayson blinked and met the eyes of the woman, a touch of his usual liveliness returning with the lessening of the hammer pounding his head. "Lovely to chat with you, but have we not other duties to attend?"

A thin smile played across her lips. "I'll find you later."

"Provided I've not fallen to that devil by then."

Her smile curved higher. "I doubt that." She lifted her arms and transformed into the hawk. Gaispar rose into the sky.

When she vanished over the horizon, he returned his attention to more immediate concerns.

Moving with care to avoid setting off the aches and pains in his body, Jayson walked in the direction of the living quarters of the Sh'lahmar. They were once the Guardians of the Secret, the magi trained to keep the vault hidden and protected since Makleor and the dragons cast the sleeping spell over the Red Clan. Already cursed to human form, Lusiradrol fled before Makleor's spell trapped her. Only recently had she sought her clan, and only because she found a clue left by Darius when he fled with Istaria from Tyrkam's forces.

The lung-stinging smoke of smoldering wood choked him into fits of coughing. Jayson emerged from the cinders of what had been the trees surrounding the square of rubble. There, a whisper of magic called to him, stirring the colors somewhere ahead.

He turned in the direction from which it flowed, peering through the haze for the smoking cinders of what was once the master's abode.

A single hooded figure materialized from the gray.

Jayson's jaw dropped. Now he knew the source of the power. "Master!"

Haiberuk pulled his hood back, revealing a grim face.

Had he trusted Haiberuk, they might have stopped the clan from escaping. He shriveled inside from shame and bowed his head. "Forgive me."

The Majera, one of the three immortal beings who created the world, stopped before him and reached a hand to his head. A surge of magic froze Jayson for an instant. In that instant, power rushed through him with a cleansing purpose. Jayson inhaled sharply but a second later let it out.

When the master removed his hand, Jayson straightened. The pain was gone. He stared in disbelief at the immortal's calm visage. "Why?"

"You are the last of this realm. We need all who can be spared."

"I deserve no forgiveness for my lack of faith."

Haiberuk shook his head. "No less than human. For that you deserve no punishment."

"I failed you, and the others." Jayson swallowed. The others vanished, likely filling the bellies of the hungry beasts. Why had he been spared?

Haiberuk's image wavered and grew translucent. "You aided our purpose more than you know. Go and carry out your duties."

"What duties?"

The image faded like smoke.

If not for the healing, Jayson would've questioned the encounter as his imagination. It would not have been the first time he'd breathed in something foul.

But what duties did he have with the Red Clan free? Only one—to warn others of the hazards of the dragons.

Renewed by the healing, Jayson left the protected lands behind to travel the outside world once more. He had once sworn to secrecy to prevent Lusiradrol from learning of her clan's sleep, but now he no longer needed to hide his purpose. In fact, he needed to make humanity aware of the dangers. He would find Calli, and he would tell her the truth.

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## Makleor

Brrr! Makleor shivered, but the chill wind blew through his soul. He glanced from his work in the study to the closed windows through which a faint wind whistled. Winter came early, but the cold was not physical.

The magic twisted as if to move away from something empty. He closed his eyes, his right shutting with the left that never saw, and followed the trail through that other sight. Through the magic, he traced it to the approaching threat, a disturbance he recognized from ages past, a darkness one never forgot. His heart nearly stopped.

*They came!*

He closed the dusty tome with a heavy thud and called his staff to his hand from its place against the wall. With that to support him, he rose from his chair but paused at a glance of the *Sôrath Ron*. Something was wrong—the crystal held by the dragon carved of dragon's tooth at the top of the wooden staff had clouded.

It mattered not. He needed no seeing stone to know trouble approached.

The dark hood of his mantle over gray hair left only his long beard exposed. Long ago he gave up shaving as a young man's necessity to a woman's heart. He had no one to impress, and every reason to hide the wrinkles of millennia.

Leaning on the staff, he hobbled from the upper room in the palace to find Tyrkam. Although it would likely prove futile, he had to warn the man. The warlord could put up some defenses against the beasts.

Now, where to find him...

*Ah, yes!* The closed session with the regional governors, establishing his rule. Rule! Peh! Tyrkam ruled by force. The individual provinces would revolt if he pushed them with unreasonable demands. Makleor had tried to warn him, but Tyrkam refused to listen to reason.

Unlike the old castle of Wynmere with its dreary halls of stone, Setheadroc Palace shone bright. The stone fit precisely in smooth lines and round columns and gold-accented ceiling murals and sky lights. No plaster was used to cover the rough cuts. No rough stone was exposed. Rivon architecture also used doors that curved to a point, a style they incorporated in parts of the palace of Setheadroc. Simple yet elegant, a work of art. Its beauty almost matched the works of the Ancients.

But the sights were not his concern. Finding Tyrkam within them was.

He stopped at a closed door and listened. Muffled familiar voices filtered from the other side.

Without knocking, Makleor commanded the door open. The table of rough-looking figures in various degrees of raiment from mail to leather hauberks silenced. From the far end, Tyrkam's glare hit him like a winter blast, his darker complexion standing out among the fairer men of Ayrule.

"This better be important, old one."

Makleor allowed a faint smile and bowed his head. "Important, yes. Your life—lives—it bears."

Tyrkam straightened, his jaw clenched. When he said nothing, Makleor continued. "Legends arise. On the winds of destruction they will soon arrive."

"Speak sense, wizard!" Tyrkam crossed his arms.

If that's what it took to light a fire under the man, so be it. "She comes, my lord, borne by kin."

Tyrkam's arms fell slack. "Lusiradrol!" He rushed to the window and threw open the shutters to a cold, biting wind. A low howl reached them, an unearthly scream in the distance that could have been the wind but for its chill on the soul.

Tyrkam whirled on his gathering. "Make ready the palace. Rouse the men for battle."

The officers frowned in confusion. "What is it, my lord?" one of them asked.

"Dragons."

The men turned to one another with questioning looks.

"Wizard!"

Wizard, indeed. Makleor was magi, the last of the Great Magi, the children of Tahronen. Only the Majera, the creators of their world, were more powerful than he. But Tyrkam had no idea.

"Cast your spells to protect this place."

Makleor bowed his head and turned to leave. From behind him the questions arose. Once outside the room, he chuckled. The human would pay for his crimes against his own for selling his soul to a demon of a woman.

For the moment the only sound in the corridor rose from the steady tap of his staff. Soon it would fill with the clamor of men in armor.

Makleor took the opportunity of the quiet and formed the magic to protect the palace. By the time he reached the stairs, he maintained a barrier that would keep a dragon out. He descended the spiral stairway to find Tahronen, while drawing the forces of magic together to strengthen the barrier.

He reached the second floor and followed the colors of magic to the queen's chambers. Two figures holding hands down a sunlit path towered above him in dark-oiled oak, carved on the massive doors.

He pushed one of the doors aside with magic—his strength was inadequate—and stepped into the bedchambers. The door thumped closed behind him.

The three golden-haired women ignored him. Instead, they focused their attention on the center of their triad, where a glowing ball hovered in the air. Their blue eyes fixed on movement within the orb.

Makleor hobbled to them, certain of what the orb contained. Their attention focused on the images.

"You would be safer elsewhere," he said.

"They're not on the warpath. I suspect other reasons." Tahronen never turned when she answered. The ageless face of a young woman gazed into the sphere. One of the three Majera, she had given rise to the magi long ago, when she took men of the Second Race as lovers. The children of the Light were known as magi for that part of their heritage that granted them access to magic.

Of slightest figure, Damaera glanced beyond the orb to him, her face rigid with deep shadows where there should be ample flesh. She hated him for his part in her daughter's

abduction, though it had to be done. Her sister, Gayleana—resembling Damaera in many details but taller and of normal flesh for a healthy woman—focused with Tahronen on the orb.

Makleor stepped closer and examined the woman on the red beast within the orb. Instead of the dark anger he knew too well, a mischievous smile hinted of other intentions. The coal black of her hair hung in a braid down her back. It matched the depths of her eyes, which revealed much about her thoughts.

"The master manipulator."

Tahronen's fine lips curved into a smile on a youthful, immortal face. "Perhaps Tyrkam shall have a guest?"

He nodded his agreement. For all appearances, he would guess the same purpose to Lusiradrol's approach that Tahronen might suspect. "You'll be well?"

"She'll not find us here."

Makleor smiled. Of course. The Majera had her own plans that would not permit room for Lusiradrol's intentions. She protected the queen and her sister, like the rest of the Lumathir, the descendants of her children, the brothers and sisters Makleor long ago outlived because of the white dragon's curse.

With as much of a bow as his tired bones allowed, he left the three women.

Tahronen would likely transport them directly to the gates of the city in which the Lumathir dwelt, especially since the queen had recovered from her illness.

Tyrkam would rage about not being able to question the queen further. If the warlord chose to punish him for their disappearance, Makleor feared nothing. He was immortal, cursed by the white dragon to pay for his betrayal. He welcomed the release from life, so he could die in peace. That would not come until the dragon returned to lift his curse.

Until then, Makleor would do all he could to ensure the prophecy came to pass.

Until that happened, he would deal with Lusiradrol and Tyrkam.

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## Lusiradrol

The palace was not what it had been. She needed no magic to alter her sight. Magnificent spires reached for the sky but caught no sunlight. They no longer shone as if made of gold but were tarnished by the scorch marks of Tyrkam's attack.

Lusiradrol hated it as it had been. It symbolized all she hoped to destroy. The imperfections satisfied her.

Soon. By the speed of Fresthan, they would be there before Tyrkam could prepare any defenses. She could have transported herself right into Tyrkam's walking path, but the dragon would provide an intimidation effect upon his soldiers.

In the ancient times, the humans refused to call her clan dragons, but gave them another name instead—wyverns. They considered the creations of the Majera to be the true dragons. The Red Clan were the dragons of the Darklord but humans denied them their heritage. She was one of them and would not tolerate the disrespect.

The flap of giant wings beat the air on either side of her and the wind of flight blew across her face. She straddled one of the largest of the red dragons, Fresthan, the patriarch. His rough scales formed a perfect seat for her on his shoulders, although she would have preferred flying herself.

Awakening her clan had been easy, after destroying the elite guards. The Sh'lahmar had protected the vault in which the feared beasts slept. The mage who cast the spell was careless in his procedures, since in his haste he had not prevented the dragons from a simple awakening spell. All to her favor.

Lusiradrol smirked. Despite all his care to prevent her from dominating the world, the old mage lapsed by not doing more to destroy her clan.

Perhaps he could not.

A weakness? She pushed aside the fact that his spell and the guards had prevented her clan from three thousand years of destruction. "The old man is limited, else he would have killed you all." She patted the thick scales beneath her.

Fresthan's only response came in the steady rise and fall of his shoulder muscles with the flap of his wings.

The white dragon had cursed her to human form all those millennia ago. She longed to feel the wind beneath her wings, her tail steadying her flight. He escaped her once already, but she would banish his spirit forever. He and that old man stole all she was.

She could not pass through the gateway to Eyr Droc, the Second Realm, where the princess and Gilthiel's spirit now resided.

But a mortal like Tyrkam could. He would fulfill her desire for vengeance.

The city in the distance grew larger amid the rolling green hills. The closer they glided, the clearer she made out the blackened areas. Repairs were a low priority from the looks of it.

A hint of Light touched her black core, irritating her into snarl. Makleor was in the palace, but there was another of greater power.

Damn him! Tyrkam knew that she feared the old mage. Although she now doubted the old man could kill her, he was still dangerous. That was why the warlord kept him around. Now he added another to protect him. Wise, or very foolish.

One way or another, she would have her way.

Lusiradrol made mental notes and alterations to her plans.

As they passed over Setheadroc, Fresthan spiraled down to the palace and its city. The people below rushed about as if they could stop her. She almost laughed at such beliefs. No arrow nor sword could pierce dragon scales. Human weapons only hurt dragons if they penetrated vulnerable areas—the soft flesh beneath the scales or the unprotected skin over the hearing lobes. But one had to counter the magic of a dragon to get that close. Tyrkam was a fool if he believed such pitiful weapons could stop her.

Ignoring the bustle of soldiers and common folk, she directed her mount to a place outside, where the two protective walls met. Fresthan obeyed.

The wall formed no obstacle to the size of the dragon. He hunched down to rest his claw-tipped wings at the battlements. Men scattered from the sharp, curved hooks, which sent bits of stone crumbling to the courtyard below.

With a hungry eye on the humans, Fresthan lowered his head to the wall for her.

The men stared dumbfounded and afraid as she jumped from the dragon's snout to the walk. Lusiradrol studied them, searching for the face she hoped to find. If she knew Tyrkam, he would be hiding. A knowing smile crept to her black lips.

She patted the nose of the dragon. "They cannot hurt me. I'll return soon from this errand. Have patience." She added the last at the touch of her brother's hunger. The crimson beast had eaten, but not enough to stave off his appetite. He could wait until she finished, unless she needed him to make an example.

Fresthan huffed a cloud of smoke from his nostrils in warning to the armed soldiers and lifted his claws from the wall.

Lusiradrol called on the magic to transport her within feet of Tyrkam.

The magic failed.

His mage had cast a spell. She growled and turned to the men. Behind her, her brother's steps trailed off.

With her hands on her hips, she spoke so all could hear. "I demand an audience with your Overlord Tyrkam!" She spat the title in mockery. Overlord of nothing! He was a pitiable fool if he believed this would last.

The men looked to each other for someone else to respond. None wished to confront her. As it should be. All should fear her, but for the moment, she wished to face the man who dared challenge her. "NOW!"

The thunder of her voice made them jump. One of them stepped forward hesitantly. "I will. Follow me." He waved her forward.

Lusiradrol followed. The others cleared a wide path before him leading to the steps of the Grand Hall. The normal activity of the palace courtyard stood frozen in its motions. All eyes watched her pass.

The soldier commanded the doors be opened for her and men rushed to open the tall, ornate doors. Proper respect would gain them a little more time to live.

Despite the light from the windows above, her shadow stretching down the hall silenced the few people littering the high-ceilinged chamber. Six wide columns—three on each side of the center aisle with its diamond and square patterned floor tiles—rose overhead, supporting balconies above.

From the staircase along the far side, Tyrkam strode down, surrounded by his guards. His decorated armor reflected the light of the candelabra with the sheen of polished metal. His dark skin tone stood out from the pale-complexions of the Ayrulean guards around him.

In contrast, her black riding outfit absorbed all light in the room like the deepest shadow. She glided across the floor and stopped several strides from the bottom of the stairs. Tyrkam said nothing as he descended, although the scowl amid the ring of thick, black hair encircling his mouth said enough.

Only when he reached the floor of patterned tiles did he say anything. His words came out in an icy hiss. "Dragon!"

Dragon, indeed. He complimented her. "Lord Tyrkam, or should I say, 'My liege'? Or have you taken this land as a gift for me?" Not that she needed or wanted land. She simply plucked his emotions.

Despite his efforts at control, his eyes betrayed his fear of her. It intoxicated her with power. He knew she would come only as his superior.

And he was without his protector. The mage hid from her sight. His presence stirred elsewhere in the palace, along with the greater power she sensed from a distance. Good. He would not interfere.

But that other power... A sense of familiarity about it crept to her memories. She could almost identify it...

"What's your purpose here?"

Lusiradrol blinked away her distraction and refocused on the stubborn human before her. "You owe me a debt."

"I owe you nothing."

Anger flared within her, but she suppressed the expression of it with a forced smirk. "I gave you the tools to make this possible. For that you promised to find my clan. You did nothing." Her voice cooled. She needed him cooperative, not combative. "I offer a chance to make amends."

His dark eyes narrowed with suspicion. His guards rested their hands on their swords.

They were no match for her. Still... "We'll discuss this in private."

"We can speak here."

She transported him with her—

To a windy mountain ledge overlooking the shimmering heat from meandering lava flows—the Dark Hills, the ancient breeding grounds of her clan and soon to be once more.

"Perhaps now you'll listen to me."

From the tension in his body, she recognized his anger, and his fear. But he controlled his emotions. Except for his hand on the pommel of his sword, he stood otherwise unmoved. "Say your piece."

"You wish your revenge on the one called Istaria?"

He nodded and lowered his hand from the sword. "You can make this happen?"

"I know how to reach Eyr Droc, the Second Realm. That's where they've taken her. Bring her to me and I'll forgive your failure."

"If you know this place, why do you not enter?"

How dare he question her! But she expected such a question and calmed. "I cannot. Powerful spells protect the portal and are set against me.

"But they do nothing to mortals. It's the legacy of he who trained our enemy; that dragons and mortals live together. You'll have your revenge, my Lord Tyrkam. Obey me and I'll reveal their secrets."

He gave a slow nod. "I'll consider it."

"Think fast."

The muscles of his neck flexed, his eyes narrowing. "Return me to my palace. I have plans to make."

*So easy.* In a blink they stood in the middle of the Grand Hall.

The thumping of boots on stone tiles echoed around them. "Milord!"

Tyrkam turned to the captain of the guard.

In that moment, Lusiradrol transported herself to her waiting mount at the edge of the forest. It took less than a thought to place herself at the foot of the creature.

A difficulty turned to advantage. The effect of riding in and walking amid the soldiers could not have been less to her favor. They would remember the threat.

*He will do it, sssisster?*

She patted Fresthan's crimson face before climbing aboard the jagged scales along his neck. "He knows the risks if he fails."

A rumble of pleasure escaped the large beast as he lifted into the air.

Wearing a smirk, she looked back at the palace. She would have her revenge of Tyrkam and the white dragon.

But what of the other magic users in the palace? They had vanished before her return with Tyrkam. The thought of such power in the hands of her enemies troubled her. The being she sensed awoke strange feelings of familiarity and, with that, a burning hatred.

Damaera shivered from the breeze ruffling her long gown and adjusted her coat.

She followed Tahronen and Gayleana through the lonely, stone streets branching around tall structures. Stone unbroken with cut lines flowed in smooth, solid forms several floors up. Wind whistled through the shattered protrusions of glass.

Vague memories stirred from her youth, flickers of this same place but seen through less experienced eyes.

Gayleana walked on her other side. Her younger sister of some two or three years; her blood sister of the same mother and father. The woman turned brilliant blue eyes to her and smiled. "Welcome home, Damaera."

Home? That place was not her home. Her home had been the palace before Tyrkam laid siege to it. Her home had been with her two children, before they disappeared. Her home had been in the comforting presence of her husband, King Alric Isolder, before Tyrkam killed him.

She wished she could think of Euramai as home, but her home was torn asunder by the wrenching of her emotions. The devastation destroyed her body and soul; all she loved was gone. Euramai was never truly home for her, even in the past.

"Forget who you were taught to be." Tahronen's voice rang clear with a wisdom and guidance that calmed Damaera's soul. "You are who you were meant to be. Here you'll learn further the gifts of your lineage."

The High Priestess lowered her voice. "You are all my children. Only together can we defeat the darkness."

Damaera glared but said nothing. She hated this but could not go back. This would have to be her home until she could join her children, all she had left in the world dear to her.

They passed through a high-ceilinged library—built on a grand scale with tall columns and seamless stone like everything in the city—and descended a set of wide steps, where several women sat alone in meditative quiet.

From the bottom of the wide steps to the columns at the opposite side of several acres of sectioned areas spread a garden like none she had seen. Barren tree branches swayed in a light breeze. The wind hushed through the trim hedges along the diverging paths through the garden. A few flowers still lingered at the edge of winter.

Clusters of women and young girls added color to the garden with their groups of same-colored robes, like artificial flowers to replace those that lost their blossoms at the end of the growing season.

She descended the steps with Gayleana and Tahronen and followed them over one of the stone paths through the garden. They passed the groups in small open areas. Most members of each group appeared of similar ages, but the different groups they passed ranged from young children to adults. In a couple, one or two individuals stood out as older, although she noticed a younger face in one group of older women. They sat around elder women who wore robes of similar simple design to Tahronen and Gayleana.

Damaera turned to Gayleana, a question on her lips.

Gayleana spoke up. "The colors designate the level of training."

Gayleana wore green. What did that mean?

She counted five groups by the time they reached the two-story building at the opposite end of the garden. Neither Gayleana nor Tahronen gave any inclination for further explanation. She put the matter aside for later, as was appropriate when a guest to someone such as the High Priestess. Tahronen would explain when the time was right. At least, she hoped.

Patience had been drilled into Damaera since the time she started her foster care with the nobles of Brethin. Her teacher, Mistress Laurel, was quick with discipline but restrained with compliments. In that Damaera had learned the restraint and decorum required of the royal court of Cavatar.

For the moment, she pushed aside her questions and took in the beauty of the arch overlooking the far end of the garden. Up close, she made out the detail of the figures carved on it. They stood larger than life on the face of the arch sheltering the entrance from the elements. Two figures in the center—a man and a woman—almost held hands, but their hands blurred in a formless object between them from which rays spiked out. On either side bowed dragons, humans, and other creatures to the center figures.

The Creators of the world, the Majera. Tahronen had showed her the truth after healing her. The Light created the Majera, who was split into three beings. One took no form, but the other two took male and female. It shattered everything her foster family taught her about the one Goddess.

Tahronen looked to both of them with an understanding smile sparkling in her eyes as clear as it curved up her lips. "Come." She waved them forward.

Damaera glanced aside at Gayleana, but she only shrugged. Tahronen had a purpose, but not even Gayleana could say what that was.

They followed the Majera under the archway and into a candlelit hall of low tables and pillows with two fireplaces on the opposite wall. Candles sat cold in their sconces around the room. Not a seam broke the rock face, like all the buildings they passed, yet the interlocking circles on the floor were comprised of different colors and patterns of stone polished smooth.

Light poured in from the tall windows on either side. Amid the shadows of the arched doorway at the far end rose a staircase.

"What is this place?"

"It serves many purposes. When we're not eating, it's a meditation room or a testing room." Gayleana untied the leather belt securing her cloak at her waist to keep the wind out. The room was strangely warm without the fires lit. "Several smaller rooms are maintained throughout the grounds to aid in the enrichment of the Lumathir."

Tahronen led them up the spiral staircase, her steps making no sound on the stone. They ascended to an antechamber with two columns a few steps before a plain wooden door. On the columns hung green banners billowing softly in the breeze through the lone open window. A breeze that should have chilled the room but did not. Winter was forbidden in this place.

The priestess walked ahead and opened the door on quiet hinges. She motioned for Damaera to follow. "I must speak to my child alone," Tahronen said to Gayleana. "I ask you to stand watch outside the door."

Gayleana bowed her head and stepped back for Damaera. Tahronen followed and let the door close with a small thud behind her.

A sheer curtain hung down the center of the room Damaera entered. It shimmered in the light of the falling sun through the window, where a noble hawk perched. The High Priestess motioned for her to take a seat on the pillows on the other side of the curtain. Damaera obeyed, while her teacher sat opposite her.

In the air between them, a ball of smoke formed. Images coalesced, moving in and out of the view. Damaera recognized some as they changed from one group of individuals to another.

All of the scenes shared one commonality—red dragons attacking men, women, and children; destroying homes and land. They left nothing but black ash in their wake. Fires blazed while the shadows of people fled each scene.

Too shocked and afraid to look away, Damaera watched in horror as one of the red wyverns swooped down on a woman and swallowed her whole. Her stomach twisted in disgust. "They must be stopped."

The smoke dissipated to reveal Tahronen's frown. "You know the purpose for Istaria's powers. She must be protected. I doubt not that Lusiradrol will find a way to destroy the spirit of Gilthiel and his power she carries. At all costs, we must keep her from that goal."

A lump formed in Damaera's throat. She thought Istaria was safe when they revealed her whereabouts. Now that wasn't true? "How?"

"Mortals may cross the barrier."

"Any mortal? Any man?"

"Yes."

No. Istaria was not safe there. "But if someone knows—"

"She is surrounded by the dragons and guarded by the spirit. You will see her when the time is right." Tahronen dropped her eyes. "Now, our task is to gather. The Red Clan is awake. The war is upon us, but the white dragon is not yet ready. We must do all we can without him to stop the darkness Lusiradrol has unleashed."

Soft hands enclosed hers, calming her worries. "All children of Light must unite. We're here for this purpose, that the white dragon will be ready when the time comes to destroy the Darklord in Lusiradrol. We can only pray Lusiradrol does not discover it within herself before the task is finished."

She released her gentle hold. "All are needed, though your sacrifice is the greatest. I know your doubts. Heed them no earth in which to root. You were meant for this and will yet have a part to play in his purpose."

With a deep sigh, Damaera nodded. She had known all her life, though the memories of her brief time in Euramai as a child provided little preparation for this. She mourned for her family and would honor them with her efforts.

Tahronen smiled with the gentleness of one who understood. "You were chosen for this path. Let go any doubts you have. Release your guilt. Such emotions can be used against you."

She was chosen? Who made that decision? Why? Questions swirled in her head, stirring her frustrations to the surface. The answer came like a jolt. "You sent me to be fostered in the practices of the royal courts. You sent me to Brethin."

The calm on Tahronen's face showed no shame or regret. "With each generation, the power of my descendants waned. I saw the potential and had to do something. Haiberuk and I guided them to one another to rebuild that power. Alric was gifted, but he was never told. The Isolder line has had infusions of mage blood, but yours is the purest line to my children. Yours is the strongest."

Fury rose up at the realization of what the Majera was telling her. "You bred us like cattle."

Hands clasped around hers in a grip too firm for a normal woman, but the unnatural beauty of Tahronen was that of no woman. She was the Creator, a being beyond any mortal.

That still gave her no right.

"Calm yourself, Damaera. Only a mage of great power could bear the power of a dragon without being taken by madness or being consumed by it. Yes, we guided the family lineage, but it was necessary to prepare for this time."

After losing all she had loved, hearing that it had all been arranged for generations to fall upon them like this burned within Damaera; but she could not deny the necessity of it. Still, it was her daughter, her beloved Istaria, who suffered for the indignity. And Damaera had loved Alric after some time forced into the marriage and lost him to Tyrkam's greed. It had all been pre-ordained. Did she not have a choice in the fate upon her? Did Istaria? Did anyone?

"Join us."

Emotions threatened to boil up, but the currents of magic changed and distracted her. They flowed from Tahronen like tidal waves of an ocean. Caught in the currents of power, Damaera forgot what stirred her emotions. Instead, she lost herself in the Light surrounding and penetrating her with its warmth.

But she would not forget that she had been nothing more than a pawn in a larger game.

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## Calli

Calli swung the wooden practice sword in a swift parry, deflecting the strike of one of Marjan's lieutenants, a short but quick-moving man called Dravis. Wood knocked together. She ignored the sweat tickling down her neck and stray red hairs plastered to her face. Her entire attention focused on her opponent. She vowed to maintain the level of training she obtained prior to leaving the palace.

His practice sword arced through the air. She anticipated his move and swung around. He swiped through empty air. When she brought hers to his throat, he looked genuinely surprised.

She breathed hard from the workout, almost as hard as he did.

A mocking grin climbed through the mustache on his face.

"Two for three," she said and lowered the practice blade. "I believe you owe me."

He frowned at her words.

"Y'd best keep your word, Dravis. Who can tell what she'd do with a real sword."

He eyed the three soldiers gathered to watch the fun. Although Dravis could be trusted for his commander's life, he had a mouth that bested him at times. This was one of those times.

At Marjan's insistence, Calli had taken his bet that he could defeat her in swordsmanship. After she first defeated him, he pressed for two out of three. Fair fight—he won. Third time was a charm and tie breaker. She defeated him. Maybe his pride would mellow for a while.

She used her sleeve to brush away the sweat, hiding her grin behind her arm. Marjan had warned her about her skills being challenged, but after witnessing for himself her talents, he advised she take on any challenger who dared to cross her. Being the daughter of Kaillen was never enough to prove herself.

In secret he had trained her, since most men of the continent despised the idea of women fighting.

After Istaria's abduction and Calli's insistence on rescuing her, Phelan assigned the two weapons masters, Donaghy and Morain, to train her with the hopes that they would break her spirit. Within two cycles, she bested them at swords and staffs.

Her father was the best, unbeaten in combat. It took a snake in his bed, while he slept, three years ago to take down the mighty Kaillen. It should never have happened.

She caught the eyes of the general several paces away. He turned, hiding the smile creeping out.

Perhaps now the others would respect her as the general did. A mere lady? Not for her.

Calli lowered the wooden sword and set it aside on a rack of myriad weapons. At a glance of their small audience, she recalled the first practices with Jayson. He had never doubted her, but he also joined her in the midst of a fight in a small village tavern. Without him, she could not have won.

Unconsciously, she grabbed at the pendant hanging on its chain around her neck. Her loyalty to her mistress had led her to Jayson. Her loyalty to the prince faltered.

"Next time..."

The threat in the voice distracted her from the memories. She turned at Dravis's gruff voice. He scowled and turned away.

Calli shook her head. Most of the men she met had a problem with her knowing how to fight. Donaghy and Morain were thorough in teaching her techniques of as many different weapons as they could—or, rather, refreshing—and she impressed them. The challenges from Marjan's soldiers continued that training since one of them caught her practicing her combat skills with Marjan's master.

She strode away from them, her mind shifting to the gray gelding grazing in one of several stone-fenced paddocks with his travel companion, a bay mare named Danny. Both the draft-blooded mare and the lighter saddle horse watched the commotion in the largest of the paddocks.

When Calli approached his paddock, Duke shifted his attention and walked to the fence to greet her. Calli smiled and stroked the dark, dappled face.

Phelan had given the horse to her as a means to ensure she would return. He also gifted her with a sword made by the finest swordsmith for the same reason. The seal hanging on the chain around her neck represented his promise to her, when she returned.

But her heart now belonged to Jayson, and she had nothing to return to.

The gelding nuzzled her shirt.

"Good to see you too. Ready for a little ride?"

In answer, Duke pawed impatiently at the ground. Calli chuckled and patted his neck. "Me too. Just wait a bit more." She kissed his muzzle, his whiskers tickling her face, and headed to the fortress. She could use a good wash and rest, but first a little ride. Duke had fattened on the lush grass and lack of exercise. They both needed a good stretch.

The builders of the fortress included baths in their design; baths filled by the mountain runoff and heated by stoves beneath the floor. The soldiers discovered several large public baths and a few small, private baths throughout the fortress.

If she managed to get away to continue her quest for the princess, she would miss the luxuries of Linfrathâr.

"General!" The voice sounded distant, and frantic.

Calli turned to find the source.

"General Marjan!"

A rider returned! Lather covered the horse's neck where the reins rubbed, and along its cheeks from the bridle. The horse gleamed with moisture from head to tail. She knew none of the riders sent out, but Marjan would.

The general watched from the base of the fortress with a group examining items pulled from the wreckage of the fortress. The rider streaked straight to him.

Curious, Calli jogged to join him. Something was wrong. She wanted to know what.

His fur-lined cloak and hair were dark with water as he reined the horse to a hard stop before the general. The chestnut horse stood on trembling legs, wheezing and coughing. A trickle of blood dripped from its nostrils.

Breathing nearly as hard as the horse, the short man jumped from the saddle to land on unsteady legs. He must have ridden hard. He leaned on the horse until his legs steadied.

Taelyn? That name wanted to fit with the face from her memories.

"Sir..." He paused. A young recruit took the reins of the horse and led it away. "Sir, I—"

Marjan crossed his arms, a stern look on his face. "We've few good mounts, and none deserve such cruelty."

"My apologies, sir." The rider paused. "I've a horror on my tail, though."

"Tyrkam?"

He shook his head. "That's the least concern. A new terror reigns."

Calli stiffened. What could be worse than Tyrkam? She glanced aside at Marjan, who gave no more indication of his concerns than the slight shift of his jaw.

Taelyn focused on the general. "The legends are true! The dragons have returned."

"Dragons?" Marjan lifted a hand to the brown and gray stubble covering his jaw.

"Three chased me into the mountains, one almost to the valley. I dared not look back but believe they came not beyond the snows falling."

Calli shivered at the familiarity with the tales her father told her. Dragons could not be real. Not now. Not here on Ayrule. "They are myth."

"Myth or not, I know what I saw. I know what scared the horse to this." His eyes widened, exposing the fear gripping him. No man familiar with the blood of war feigned fear like that. If not for that glimpse of his soul, she would still doubt.

He turned back to Marjan. "I beg forgiveness for my waste of a good horse, but felt haste was prudent, General. These red beasts threaten all the people of Ayrule, not just Cavatar. They attack the villagers and set fire to the lands."

Part of Calli feared for Jayson, while the other part of her wished he was there to advise them. She suspected he knew more than he let on, particularly since he seemed comfortable with the magic of the valley. If not for his suggestion of crossing the mountains, they would not have found it. Had he intended that all along?

Did he know anything about dragon lore? Only her father's bedtime stories came to mind, and they were of good dragons of most colors except red. Never had they instilled a fear as this news did.

Marjan clamped his jaw, chilling the air with his silent contemplation. He motioned the rider away and turned to face her. "My lady," he said in a grim tone, "if you take my counsel, we've more important matters than Cavatar and Tyrkam to attend."

She glanced to where the horse walked with one of the younger lads to rest. It coughed almost nonstop, broken from its arduous race. For many reasons, she was glad the scout rode hard, but for the animal's sake, she wished otherwise. "Graver matters indeed, General."

He gave a nod and strode away.

Calli hurried to the fortress. Her ride could wait.

\* \* \*

"What proof have yeh?" Kale crossed his arms, a glint of challenge within his dark eyes.

Calli looked around the room from one old soldier to another and back to Marjan, who studied Kale from across the table, a heavy frown on his face.

In the worn and haggard face of the captain, she could draw a map of a grim land. According to what she'd heard, he'd seen his share of death, most of it at his own hands. He was rough but

influential on the others. His judgment tipped the scales in any decisions in which he participated. If he doubted any of what Taelyn said, the others might also.

Except Marjan. His opinion counted more than any. "We've a dead horse. I've known no animal to run itself like that from any less than mortal danger."

"A dead horse is not proof."

"See for yourself!" The sudden disruption of Taelyn's conviction silenced the room. The seven other men turned to him. "They lay waste to our homelands. Every living thing is ash behind them. Cattle and sheep vanish. The people will starve within a year, if they're not first eaten."

Another soldier, a voice of reason among Marjan's council, raised his voice. "Where did these creatures come from?"

Men turned to one another. Calli looked to Marjan, who shrugged. No one knew the origins of these creatures. They came out of nowhere, as if they sprang from the pages of the old books.

Part of her suspected Jayson would know. He knew more history than anyone.

"The problem is not whence they come but that they are." The calming voice of the elder soldier, Lauflan, diffused the building tension like a leak in a water sack. More gray than brown covered his head.

"Exactly." The lines in Marjan's face softened with relief and he leaned over the table, which—by the score marks—was once part of a supply wagon. "We've a new matter to concern us. Tyrkam threatens us less than these creatures. We must learn what we can of this new enemy."

A few heads nodded in agreement, though no one volunteered the inevitable.

A knot tightened in Calli's stomach. The conflict between her desire to see the world outside of Arronfel and the fear inspired by the sight of the dead horse twisted within her. She had to know what happened to her home in the palace, yet caution raged within her to stay safe in the valley.

For several long seconds, no one said anything. She caught the eyes of a couple men, only to spy the fear they hid before they turned away. No matter what they might say, they believed Taelyn. They all saw the horse before it collapsed. They realized the truth of the terror that chased it to death.

"I'll go."

Heads turned to her. A sudden warmth rose to Calli's cheeks. That was wrong. She never intended to say it, whether thinking it or not. "I mean..." Despite her best intentions to stay, the part of her that wanted to know took over. "What friends I have will no doubt join me." She hoped.

Marjan's grim face hid the surprise that slightly lifted the pitch of his voice. "I'd rather a lass as yourself—"

"General, I must." The conviction in her voice startled her. She lowered her tone and took a deep breath to calm her heart pounding in her ears. "I've too long settled here. My mission was to rescue the Lady Istaria, but that changed. I owe my life to the family. I must know what's become of Cavatar. Tyrkam I expected. This, I've no knowledge." She let out a sigh and dropped her eyes. "I'll take a few others bearing my deepest trust. You—all of you—serve best through your experience. I've not near that, but need to see for myself."

*And you wish to find Jayson,* her inner voice said. She looked up to a curious rise of Marjan's brow. He probably suspected her true reason. "I must, or I'll never rest."

He gave a slight nod and looked to the others. "Have we no others brave enough to join the lass?"

Narrowed eyes and clenched jaws answered his question. None of them dared speak up, lest he look the fool by his tongue.

The grizzly old Kale grunted his sentiment. "The smaller the group, the better."

From what Marjan told her, Kale, reckless a warrior as he might be on the battlefield, spoke with the wisdom of experience. They would agree with him so no one joined her. He had, in effect, denied them any chance they might have considered.

If that's the way he wanted it, he could have it. Calli swallowed her doubts and straightened with the conviction of her choice. "Only a few." She brushed aside stray hairs with unnecessary force to steady her trembling.

It might have been a foolhardy plan, but they wanted more information. The only emotions she read in the faces of the men around her were relief and pity. They probably pitied her for being the one to take on this mission and felt relief that Marjan let them choose not to join her. None would think less of her for backing down.

That was not an option. She had to go.

"The matter is settled." Marjan took in each pair of eyes as if trying to will at least one of them to join her. She appreciated that. At last, he gave a minute sigh. "Our Lady Calli will leave us to learn what she can o' this new threat."

Calli overheard a whisper from one officer to another: "Better that Marjan answer to no one."

She bit her tongue on a retort. Marjan granted her the satisfaction of seeing the offender wither from his cold look. Whether he heard the exact comment or not, he knew the speaker never approved of their arrangement.

*Perhaps best if I leave now that the tension ease.*

"Good luck, lass," Marjan said.

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## Jayson

Jayson climbed the hilltop overlooking the Abregow River on its lazy course through what had once been land lush with foliage. Now, black ash and dust lifted in small clouds around each of his footfalls. His boots hid beneath a coat of it. Any snow in this area had melted from the fiery breath of the wyverns.

Since his emergence from the vault, he found the path of the winged beasts and avoided becoming a meal for several. They were easy to follow, since they left blackened debris in their wake, but they crossed paths with others. He knew not whether he followed the same group. They probably split and went their separate ways to wreak destruction on the world.

He halted at the knoll, his foot stopping next to a fistful of green grass scored black at the ends by the fires of the beasts. In the low valley before him, four red mounds crowded the landscape.

He dropped to the ground, careful not to send up too much dust and ash into the air. To cover his tracks, he focused his power on the wind to blow his scent away rather than toward the beasts. Unfortunately, it meant the scent of death carried to him from the wyverns.

The four beasts slept without fear in the open. The trees bent over from the weight of the beasts pressed against them. One slept on the remnants of a scorched building, its tail curled around the blackened masonry of the hearth.

*What poor soul appeases you?* He grimaced at the thought. For them to sleep soundly after just a few days of awakening from their four thousand year slumber could only mean full bellies.

They would take more if possible. He'd be sure to give them a bellyache if they caught him, but they wouldn't. A simple wide berth was all that he needed to avoid them.

As he prepared to back away, the desire to punish them for their atrocities stopped him. He caught himself arguing against his previous logic. As much as Jayson wished to kill them, four to one posed enormous odds against him succeeding. One dragon drew good odds against him. Not exactly what he liked.

*I'll not chance it. I've not the power.*

But he needed not that kind of power. The sleeping beasts blew wisps of smoke out their nostrils with each deep breath. They slept as they had in the vault. Perhaps this was his chance to make up for his mistake. If he could stab at least one of them in one of the two soft spots on its head, he could kill it, but the power of the beast could as well kill him.

Not even Haiberuk would dare risk it.

A tingle of power shivered through his limbs.

Jayson lifted a hand before him. The aura of magic shimmered in the afternoon sun like the heat off the land in the summer. He marveled at the transparent emanations of power and smiled. Never had magic flowed as freely through him. Had Haiberuk done this when he healed him? Or was this the master's idea all along?

Either way, his chances of success turned a little to his favor.

*Now, how best to use this gift...* His mind raced to form a plan. Magic could not kill dragons.

One thought distracted him—that he would return to Calli, using this new ability, and save her from these beasts. His heart thumped at the idea, emotions demanding to protect her.

While caution roared through his mind against the actions forming in his thoughts, he made his decision. A new boldness quieted the voice of caution.

Using the simple trick of invisibility, he proceeded with his plan.

The Red Clan remained sleeping at his approach, their deep breaths echoing in their bellies. The foul odor of decayed flesh topped with the stench of something he could not compare almost choked him.

He stopped in front of the nearest wyvern. A few of its jagged teeth protruded from its jaw. Rough scales lined its face and the crest of its head. The eyelids remained shut, but he dared not look away.

Jayson walked closer to the left eye and stopped. The eyelids covered a socket the diameter of his arm length. Despite the intimidation of the creature's size, determination seized him in his mission. Without thinking, he lifted his hand above his head as if raising a spear.

Borne from the energy coursing through him, a spear blazed within his grasp. Jayson looked up in astonishment for only an instant. He jabbed it down into the wyvern's soft spot a few feet behind its eye.

And found himself several strides back while the red wyvern twitched within a glowing ball of energy. With its magic loosed, it burned from the inside out. Magic crackled and snapped.

The other three stirred from their slumber.

As if watching from outside his body, Jayson saw himself rush to the next wyvern and attack with the same weapon as the first. Without pausing to watch the results, he hurried to the third of the four

The red beast lifted its head. It stared at the sizzling, smoking mound of its two kin.

The large yellow eyes scanned its surroundings with the fourth. The two remaining wyverns stood up and spread their wings, howling with rage.

Jayson covered his ears.

He should be dead, but they ignored him. Was he still invisible? He'd lost his focus on the spell, yet it continued its effectiveness.

They searched every place but where he stood. Their dark thoughts whispered at the edge of his awareness as they communicated their desire for revenge. Finding no one to blame for the deaths of their kin, the two lifted from the ground. Their wings pounded the air.

Jayson covered his head with his arms. One thought troubled him—that they would take out their hatred upon the innocent. How could he follow? He could not allow anyone to die for his mistakes.

What of the others? Would they not also bring death and destruction on the innocent? He could not save them all. Only the true dragons could counter these terrible beasts.

He shaded his eyes to watch the two wyverns vanish into the distance. The dragons of Eyr Droc likely knew of the reawakening but had not the chance to react, or perhaps they planned not to.

If he sought their counsel, he would again encounter Darius and Istaria.

Jayson brightened at the thought and took his bearings by the sun. Darius! Of course! One of the only Sh'lahmar he knew still alive. With Darius was the princess, the vessel of the white dragon, the one creature who could undo the damage Lusiradrol wrought.

With that thought, he started out on a new course. Although the decision to abandon Calli to the possibility of an attack by Lusiradrol pained him, duty called. If he allowed her to perish, he would never forgive himself. But if he allowed his feelings and emotions to interfere with his sacred duty to serve all mankind, he could never live with himself.

*May fate protect her, he prayed for Calli. Since I cannot.*

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## Istaria

Istaria woke with a start. A hint of dread lingered from her dreams, dark dreams she could not describe within reason. She rubbed her eyes to try to clear them away but the strange images stuck in her head. Nothing would erase it but a distraction to anchor her in the physical world.

She sat up and pushed the silvery white braid of hair behind her. In the palace, a few courtiers had mistaken her for an old woman because of that hair and the veil she had worn to cover her face, until someone identified her. Now, at seventeen, she was a grown woman. Moonlight spilled through the tall window onto the smooth wooden floor and rugs. A gentle breeze played with the curtains hanging over the window. The bureau across the room held so little, and the rough angles created sharp shadows.

This was no palace, but it was her home and more of a home than any she had known.

Next to her, Darius snored lightly, his back to her. He had stood by her through many obstacles, but the baby within her would challenge them both. Darius would never abandon her, though. As a Sh'lahmar, he had lived his life to serve the white dragon. Now, he would live the rest of his life to serve his own child.

Their child. She rubbed her belly. As her middle grew, the nausea of the first few moon cycles waned. Her energy also returned. Although some scents yet churned her stomach, she resumed her teachings with Sethirngal, the eldest of the firebrakes, without interference.

With the resumption of lessons came the uncontrolled visions. The more she practiced, the easier the magic flowed. Precognition was one of the white dragon's best known abilities, according to the others.

She wished it was something else, anything else. The visions were often of horrible scenes that caused a queasiness made worse by the pregnancy.

This hadn't been a premonition, though, but just as bad. The eerie sensations brought on by the shadow at the edge of her awareness disturbed her still after waking. She wanted to hide but could not escape the dread lingering over her heart.

She had faced it in the dreams, the looming darkness surrounding her. She had confronted it and her fears, but it was all a dream, not real. This was different, the physical world and not the imaginings of her mind, and the darkness still lingered.

She had to distract herself.

Istaria slid her legs off the bed and landed softly on the floor. The chill of the wood under her bare feet sent a shiver through her while the cool breeze billowed the ends of her nightgown around her ankles. Nights in that realm were cool but not cold. Winter never came.

She hurried to the door and pulled it open quickly to avoid making too much noise. Darius swore he'd put some oil on the squeaky hinge, but more important matters distracted him. After a glance back to be sure Darius laid undisturbed, she slipped out.

Moonlight cast a faint glow on the banister overlooking the lower level. She followed it to the stairs and descended. The wood creaked beneath her bare feet. She winced but hurried to reach the dining room, where a pitcher of cool water awaited.

As she stepped onto the quiet main floor, a familiar voice reached out to her.

Istaria halted, listening.

*Milady! Milady!* A blurry, shadowy shape darted past her. She turned in the direction it flew to find that the reptilian drakin circled back to her. Its weight landed on her shoulder, and tiny claws pricked her skin through her gown.

Jaren blinked his large, dark eyes, which reflected the wan moonlight from the windows. He tilted his head in the jerky motion of a bird while settling his wingtip claws onto her gown for balance. She tried to stay still. Those claws hurt when he gripped to keep his balance. Although she would have preferred he land elsewhere, he was there and she had no intention of sending him away yet.

*Milady*, he said in a less frantic tone and squawked.

Istaria clamped her fingers around his extended jaw. *You'll wake Darius.*

*Forgive me, Lady. I come from the dragons. They are always aware of events outside the gateway and wish only to protect you and the baby. Only today—*

*What's the matter?* Jaren was useful as a messenger, but he was prone to jabbering more than she preferred, or anyone preferred. Interrupting him was a necessity of cutting an often long and unrelated discourse.

*The old ones are troubled. They wish you to join them if you hope to save your realm. Lusiradrol has loosed her clan upon the lands.*

Istaria put her hand to her heart to calm it. This was no coincidence. The chill of her sleep meant something—a vision of the present, or at least one interpretation of it.

She gave her hand to the small dragon-like creature. He crawled onto it. *Wake Darius. Have him join me at the gathering place. Go now!* She tossed him into the air.

Jaren fluttered up to the second floor banister.

She hurried barefooted out the front door of the house. The gathering place, the large meadow favored by the five elder drakes, was close. She raced over cool grass, through the trees, to the group of various colored dragons in their place of council.

Five bodies ranging from blue to gold shimmered beneath the light of two waxing moons. With wings folded against their bodies, the dragons formed the points of a star. A cloud of smoke hovered around the center, blurring the reptilian heads ranging in accents from smooth scales to spiked.

Istaria stood at the outside looking in. Although she hated the smoke of their internal fire, she had no choice if they summoned her. The elder drakes were the five remaining of those who battled the Darklord before he merged with the dragon embryo and lost his memory. The other elder drakes had died in the dragon wars. None of the other living dragons were born until after the black dragon. These five alone possessed the knowledge to battle the Darklord and his minions.

A long, graceful neck rose above the cloud. The moonlight set the smooth scales aglow on the gold dragon, Dethanea. She blinked large eyes set well back of the jaw full of pearly teeth. *Come, child.*

*We've matters long due gone;  
on your shoulders they rest upon.  
This night bears ill  
with the burden of winter's chill.*

Curious but cautious, Istaria strode between two bodies to the cloud. At her approach, the four heads in close proximity pulled away, clearing the air around an orb hovering above the ground at the level of her eyes.

Colors blurred within the orb. The images sharpened at her approach, and she stopped two strides away. *What's this?*

Her teacher, Sethirngal, blew a swirl of smoke from his nostrils and a faint growl rumbled from deep within his green body.

*While men suffer, we cannot sit by.  
To save the true we must try.*

*That leaves us one problem posed—  
that you with child are exposed, said Frendal, a topaz dragon of rough scales.  
Istaria frowned. I thought I was safe here.  
From Lusiradrol's magic, you've no fear;  
but other mortals may enter here.*

Istaria inhaled sharply. She assumed only particular individuals could pass through the gate of Eyr Droc. The shock blinded her from a familiar presence in the magic.

The warmth of his touch on her shoulder startled her. She whirled on Darius.

"Easy, my love." The gentle smile melted some of her tension. "I followed as soon as I heard Jaren."

Istaria caught her breath and laid her forehead against Darius's chest. His arm over her shoulders drained away the panic and his body warmed her in the cool night.

*Our time has come to step in, Sethirngal said,  
if we are this war to win.  
Your skills are needed here  
to keep the future clear.*

Darius nodded his agreement. His eyes dropped from the dragon to her, the gentle smile on his face reassuring. "None will harm them. I pledge my life on that."

Dethanea dropped her head to meet their eyes.

*A pledge you gave once before,  
now to keep ever more.*

"Do what you must. I'll protect them. You have my word." Darius rubbed Istaria's shoulders and held her close. "Our friends and family are at stake."

Istaria set her hand on his and squeezed it. Not one cycle of the first moon had passed since the release of the Red Clan from their long slumber. Although he acted unaffected, Darius had taken the news hard. His practices lengthened. Part of her wondered if he mourned his fellow guardians, despite his assurances otherwise.

*The drakin your watchers will be  
along with the youngest of our family.*

*But the one called Jaren wills it so,*

*with us to carry messages will go.* The dark blue dragon known as Darmîndren blinked and stretched his wings. The others also stretched in preparation for flight.

*What of my lessons?*

Sethirngal lowered his green head and fixed his large eye on her. She swore a wry smile curved up his scaly lips.

*Many thousands of years had we;  
as much they spent stationary.*

*Think not we shall be missed,  
but back when all is accomplished.*

Although she feared the worst, Istaria found hope in his words. I'm eager for your return.

Starting with the gold dragon, each took to the sky, heading in the direction of the portal to the First Realm. They returned to their first home, and hers. The Second Realm was only a sanctuary.

The last to take flight was her primary teacher, the largest of the elder drakes and the darkest of the green dragons. A touch of anxiety crept into her mind at his leaving. He had taught her much, yet many times made it clear that she had far to go in using the powers bestowed upon her by the spirit of Gilthiel.

After all the elder drakes vanished through the portal, she turned to Darius. *I never thought I would miss a dragon's company.*

"You've come far in little time." He lifted her hand to his lips and gently kissed the back.

Despite his and the dragons' reassurances, doubts lingered in her mind.

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## Dorjan

Dorjan turned from the window to the scene behind him, exasperated to be in the same room as the spoiled young steward of the Wynmere territory.

"Never question my judgment!" Vahrik's dark eyes blazed with anger. Dorjan knew that look well. How many times had Tyrkam expressed the same hot temper in their early years, until experience and the discovery of the white dragon cooled his head? Vahrik took after his father more than either would admit.

This boy would never match his father, though. Too spoiled on the privileges afforded him. Tyrkam had learned the hard way how to survive. He also possessed the patience necessary to achieve his goals. Vahrik, in his youth, showed none of the patience.

Had he known the child would grow into a pompous fool, Tyrkam would have left him for the Rivon. Tyrkam had raised the boy in the hopes that he might one day serve him.

The eighteen year old sent the woman scurrying out of the room. A pair of armed guards stood watch at the door, leaving Dorjan otherwise alone with Vahrik.

The boy turned his scowl on Dorjan. "Will you also oppose me?"

Dorjan smirked beneath his ruddy beard and peered up from under heavy brows. Although he appeared many times the boy's age in his purposefully unkempt appearance and so he was, but Dorjan was young by standards of those like him and could take Vahrik faster than he could blink.

Tyrkam wanted more than Vahrik, though. The guards at the door were among many in the castle loyal to the petulant child. The boy hinted of what Tyrkam suspected—betrayal. Dorjan would need more information before sending word back to the overlord.

Dorjan took two steps to stop at the long table, fearing nothing.

"Since I claimed my place, you've nothing but disdain, or dare I say jealousy? He made me steward of the western lands."

Dorjan said nothing, though his amusement struggled to escape. Never had he the desire for power and the risks with it. He merely advised Tyrkam and stood in the shadows to watch; just as his brother, Kaillen, had come to guard Muriel in her quest for information before following her in death. Dorjan harbored no interest in the affairs of the Second Race or those seeking power. The ways of his race were not theirs.

Rather, he bided his time until the day he learned the truth of his brother's and Muriel's deaths.

"Speak, laggard!" Vahrik stopped on the opposite side of the table, a dark scowl on his clean-shaven face. "Say your piece. I see your thoughts work."

Tyrkam had ordered Vahrik beaten for letting the princess escape cycles ago. The boy's manners had not improved. On the contrary, the raging temper within boiled over more than ever.

"You wish to control me, too? I see it in your face. You think me less competent in thought and deed than you. I am keeper of the western territories now. My word is law."

For all intents, Vahrik's words indicated he tried to convince himself that he held authority. The boy lacked true confidence and masked the weakness in arrogance.

Vahrik slammed his fists on the table. "Damn you!"

A rumble too close for comfort shuddered through the stones at Dorjan's feet and up through his body. That was not the boy.

Vahrik seemed not to notice, his eyes still intent. "Shall I cut out your tongue?"

Ignoring the tantrum, Dorjan rushed to the window. The calm of the day greeted his eyes. It was too calm; something was wrong.

He searched the line of trees past the clearing outside the wall. The trees stood naked, except for a light coating of snow highlighting the branches. The virgin snow started at the edge of the forest, where the troops housed below dared not tread.

He knew of the creatures inhabiting the forest from the strange sensations they caused him, but they never posed a threat; nor would they interfere with his mission.

On the other side of the castle, a sheer drop into the deep ravine through which the Braenbirm River flowed protected them from attack.

Another rumble vibrated from his boots, through his legs, and up his spine. It increased in intensity this time, yet nothing within his view warned of trouble. What was it?

“You will answer me!”

Dorjan turned and held up his hand to silence the boy. *Could it be...* Without a word, he strode out of the room, his insides twisting into knots of steel.

“I will not be ignored!” Vahrik’s voice trailed after him. “Guards!”

With each successive rumble growing in strength, Dorjan's steps sped up across the castle. Since Tyrkam found the Flying Dragon amulet and made his deal with Lusiradrol two years ago, Dorjan wondered what else might return from history. Worse, what might attack.

He hated to prove his suspicions correct.

As he strode out the door and into the crisp evening air, the rumbling grew louder. Soldiers stood in silence, their gazes fixed on the wall overlooking the ravine. Dorjan hurried across the courtyard, expecting something large to crash down on the wall at the edge of the chasm. Despite his hesitations, he climbed the steps to the top.

Another rumble nearly shook him off. He grabbed the stones of the balustrade to keep his balance from the vibrations and shock.

A claw crashed down on the wall and a red-scaled head rose above it.

He stared into the wyvern's yellow eye. Stones gave beneath the weight of the beast, sending him tumbling. He struggled to keep his place but rolled down the steps.

Dorjan rolled to his feet and pulled his sword in time to stare up at a large body of red scales. Lusiradrol had found her clan after all. The legends of his people warned of their evil.

Amid the turmoil throughout the courtyard, Dorjan made out the shouts of Vahrik commanding his guards to protect him.

“Fool,” Dorjan muttered. His sword would do nothing against those scales, but it felt better than nothing in his hands.

The dragon easily climbed into the courtyard amid the chaos and up the tallest building. It blew no fire nor made any attempt to attack.

Men attacked with arrows, which bounced off the thick scales. Leathery wings opened and the claws attached to them secured to the stones.

In only a few steps, the red wyvern reached the top. Stones and planks pounded to the ground as the roof on the top level collapsed. The red beast coiled its long tail around the keep and lifted its head high into the air.

Yellow eyes fixed on the forest of Wynmere and a sinister snarl curled back its lips.

Dorjan rushed through the throng of men, most giving up their futile attacks to stare in silence. He reached the open front gates as the dragon let loose with a stream of fire aimed at the forest.

Two more times the dragon blew fire at the bare trees. The thin layer of snow vanished beneath the heat of the flames, which reached high into the sky.

What was it doing? His thoughts echoed the questions asked among the guards.

The dragon finished its attack on the forest and lowered its head. It watched the flames from its perch atop the keep, a glint of dark satisfaction in its eyes.

“Do something! Were you not told to protect this castle?”

The petulance in the voice made Dorjan grit his teeth. If not for his promise to take down all of Vahrik's supporters with him, Dorjan would have slit the boy's throat at that moment. In spite of his great patience, even he could not abide such whining.

Instead, he took a deep breath and turned to face the boy.

Vahrik frowned as if expecting more.

Too happy to oblige, Dorjan swept his arms aside to point at the wyvern on its perch. "Thereupon sits the beast. Not arrow nor sword shall pierce such hide. Have you better ideas, I'll hear them."

A low growl rumbled from Vahrik's throat, though he held his tongue.

Dorjan glared.

Motion from the red beast silenced all. It lifted its head and shifted its weight, gathering its hindquarters beneath it. It lifted its wings and let out a screech that rattled Dorjan's teeth. Like all others, he dropped his weapon and covered his ears to muffle the piercing wail. The flap of wings beat at the air above. Something upset it.

Still holding his hands over his ears, Dorjan turned to the forest. A blue glow gained strength, extinguishing the flames from each tree.

The dragon ceased its shrieking objection to once again blow flames on the barren trees.

This time nothing happened.

"The forest—It *is* enchanted!" one of the guards said.

"Of course it is." A self-satisfied smirk slithered up Vahrik's face.

Dorjan retrieved his sword from the mud, uneasy with this new development. Why did the dragon attack? Would more follow to continue its work?

The beat of wings pounded the air. A few men fell back from the onrush of wind. Dorjan braced himself against the wall.

The angry beast flew over the forest and let loose another fiery assault. Although it attempted to destroy the trees, the protectors of the forest smothered its fire. No return attacks came from the forest.

With his personal guards beside him, Vahrik ordered men to organize repairs to the castle.

Dorjan shook his head and cleaned his muddy sword on his cape. "You must send a message to Lord Tyrkam."

Vahrik scowled. "Send a rider...if you must."

Dorjan gave a nod and strode away, glad to put distance between the brat and himself. He would catch Vahrik soon. The disrespect grew by the day, and would continue until Vahrik broke. The boy could be manipulated to show his true loyalties all too easily.

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## Vahrik

Vahrik snarled at the old warrior's back. Dorjan always questioned his decisions. Both Dorjan and Tyrkam conspired against him. They would see that he, Vahrik, was better than them both combined. His word would be law.

When Dorjan disappeared inside the keep, Vahrik looked up again at the crushed top floor. Tyrkam would find a way to blame him for the damage.

"Milord."

Vahrik turned to his lieutenant, a young soldier of similar age with a rough voice. Cathair had joined him from the far southwestern fjords of Hadeon and pledged his loyalty only to him. He had been the first, and together, they had organized the others.

"Follow me." Vahrik led him to the living quarters. They needed privacy to speak to assure that the wrong ears would not hear.

Once inside the intact structure attached to the keep, they diverted to a private room. There Cathair closed the door behind them, sending a dull thud echoing in the chamber.

Vahrik stomped to the windows. "If not for that Isolder wench vanishing, I'd be free of this. He'll never trust me now." He paused long enough to ball his fingers into a fist and slam it into the wall. "Damn them all!"

Plaster of knotted gold design flaked off to reveal the raw stone beneath.

"Milord, what of the dragons?"

Vahrik turned on his chief advisor. "Let them eat him. Better, get me what magic protects that forest. With such power I'd not fear the dragons."

Cathair raised an eyebrow.

"Do it!" How dare the soldier question him.

In a flowing motion, the young man bowed and whirled away. In a few long strides, he was out the door, and it closed between them.

If he possessed what magic the creatures of the forest used to extinguish the flames, he, Vahrik, might find a way to defeat Tyrkam with it. The idea flourished within the vortex of anger in his soul, drawing a smile to his lips. Yes, the defeat of his own overbearing father would satisfy him.

A shadow chilled through his soul.

"Why ask the boy for tricks when a sorceress can give you so much more?"

Vahrik straightened at the silken voice and turned to face her. "Demon wench."

A sinister smile curved up black-red lips. Lusiradrol glided from the shadows with the silence of a predator stalking its prey. "No different from your father." She traced the gold-threaded design along the front of his black tunic before turning her eyes up. "You also underestimate me, little prince."

His temper flared at the insult. Vahrik grabbed her delicate, feminine hand and squeezed it so tight any ordinary woman would have knelt in pain.

Not Lusiradrol. Her smile grew, and darkened. Vahrik shuddered from the cold shadow that fell over him and released her hand as if stung.

"Much better." She might have laughed but it was a small, cold sound. "Now, have you any desire to live, you'll open your ears."

Sure, he would hear her purposes for bothering him, but he did not have to cooperate. He crossed his arms and watched her circle around him toward the window draped in dark linen. "What do you want?"

After a brief pause, she lifted the covering aside and peered out. Something sinister passed over her in that moment.

Vahrik blinked, finding himself a step back from her.

"Destroy the forest." Lusiradrol dropped the covering and turned to him, all semblance of amusement gone. "You saw the attack. They live in the forest, thrive on the life there. I want them gone! Cut down the trees! Burn them to ashes! Whatever it takes, I want it gone!"

Vahrik restrained a smile. *Have you a weakness, Lusiradrol? Can you not have your way this time?* Tension slackened within his muscles. *Why the urgency now?* Here was a power play he might use to his advantage. "What is the worth of this act?"

Her eyes narrowed. "Destroy the forest and I'll give you the princess."

"The Isolder cow?"

The sly smile crept back to her lips as she approached. "If I feel generous, I might toss in her little friend too."

"Darius!" The woodsman had caused him trouble from Tyrkam for the taking away the princess and hiding her that day she escaped him. When he visited the single-room house all those cycles ago, after the disappearance of the princess from his care, Vahrik felt something odd. Nothing he could place his finger on, but he knew something was amiss. The air sizzled with tension. Darius feared him, something out of character for the bold but silent woodsman.

Vahrik returned later to follow up and discovered him gone and noticed the small footprints in the soft earth next to the woodsman's larger prints. His anger consumed him into burning the house to the ground, but it lacked the satisfaction of torturing the woodsman.

"Not Darius; your mystery rebel."

Vahrik sucked in a deep breath. The bandit from the rumors. "How?"

"When guilt bears the burden upon one's heart, friendship and loyalty carry the soul."

He frowned, uncertain what riddles she spoke.

"She's of minor consequence to me, but of some importance to you."

"She." A woman. They suspected, although he doubted a woman committed the acts reported. That a woman could take on several men at once and walk away without harm intrigued him. Here was a woman he would enjoy taming.

"I have your interest?"

Vahrik snapped from his sadistic fantasies and focused on the dark woman once more. Her smile teased him. She was desperate to raze the forest. The creatures helped the princess escape, and he wanted it destroyed as much. But, if she wanted it enough to give him what he desired, why had she not done so herself?

She could not.

For the first time since she appeared, a smile crept to his lips. "Cannot the mighty Lusiradrol, who can grant me my desires, not fight her own battles?"

His throat pinched. Vahrik gasped for breath and clawed at his throat, but his fingers could not remove the claw. He blinked, making out a shadowed visage hovering above him.

"Do not forget who I am—what I am." The deep growl made his heart pound and the air thin.

With unexpected suddenness, he gasped for air and received it. He sucked it in gulps, seeking to relieve the throbbing of blood in his ears and chest. He braced himself against the wall.

"I'll not tolerate insolence from any man. Do as I ask, and this incident will be forgotten."

Vahrik looked up at the slender figure standing with her arms crossed and all the fires of the Dark Hills blazing in her eyes. "And if I dare not?"

When the fires flared hotter, he flinched. Her menacing scowl sent a shiver down his spine.

"Deny me nothing," she said in an icy tone, "or you'll be next!"

A plume of fire consumed her in an instant and as quickly vanished. He stood alone in the room, able to breathe and think again.

In a few seconds, he made his decision. Considering Lusiradrol's strength against him, he dared not challenge her. Though bold in facing her this time, he now understood why Tyrkam feared her. Never again would he underestimate her.

Besides, she made a delicious offer. He would destroy the forest for the chance to punish the princess and the woman who caused so much trouble for them.

Vahrik breathed deeply of the pleasures to come. Not only would he have the pleasure of the princess and the woman who could defeat men, but Tyrkam and Dorjan would not dare to turn against him with Lusiradrol at his side.

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Melanie Nilles grew up on a western North Dakota cattle ranch and farm. Along with her interest in horses, she always had a fascination with science fiction and fantasy. She currently resides in central North Dakota with her family, which includes her husband and kids, and two cats. Her published works include the STARFIRE ANGELS series and the LEGEND OF THE WHITE DRAGON epic. Besides writing, she also trains and shows her horse. For updates, visit her website at [www.melaniennes.com](http://www.melaniennes.com).

**Thank you!**