

Draigo burst through the shimmering border from the Outerlands with a deafening crack that echoed out across the forest. His bronze and deep blue scales gleaming in the early morning sun, he let out a great roar to expunge his pent up frustration. Soaring and somersaulting, the ancient dragon stretched his powerful wings to their fullest, riding the wind currents with abandon, reveling in the joy of being home.

I have returned.

As swiftly as an arrow finds its mark, the words penetrated the mind of the sleeping Queen miles away. Jolianna awoke with a start, realizing the cloaking spell her twin Lilianna had used to conceal the dragon had lifted. Sitting straight up in bed, she felt a flood of relief. Her long dark hair fell softly around her fair face, and a high red color rose in her cheeks. *Draigo, you are safe!*

Of course, he trumpeted. Who is there that could hurt me?

My friend, how I have missed you.

The Queen rose from her bed, reaching for her scarlet dressing gown. *My sister's magic is strong, that she can keep you from me.*

For a thousand years I have protected these lands, it will take more magic than your sister has at her disposal to change that, the dragon declared with a loud snort. The Queen smiled.

Banking high and swooping first right then left, Draigo made large overlapping circles above this land he loved, savoring his freedom. *Your highness, the King sends his regards. There is much to tell. I am on my way.*

The Queen crossed her bedchamber and flung open the leaded windows that looked out over her beloved garden, drinking in the freshness of early morning and seeing this day in a new way. The King had been gone since late spring. With the last of the ripe apples harvested and autumn on their doorstep, any news that Draigo could bring would be most welcome. *I shall be glad to hear it. For too long I have been in darkness.*

Closing her eyes, she reached out to her dragon. Their connection ran deep and with little effort she could feel the wind against his crested head. Her dragonsight allowed her to see what he was seeing. Unable to resist the desire to tease him just a little, she said, *Shadikar and Dragofinn have done a fine job of surveying our borders in your absence.*

Harrumph was his answer. She burst out laughing as another loud snort echoed in her head.

With two powerful strokes of his wings, Draigo caught an updraft, launching himself at great speed in the direction of Ravenscroft Forest. Looking down from his lofty height, he noted swirls of smoke drifting up lazily through the tall trees. A faint hint of a smile curled at the edges of his mouth. The creatures and denizens of this primordial land seemed as they always were, and that was comforting.

As the dragon reached the edge of the great forest, the castle came into view. At the heart of the land of Anara, the magnificent Castle Caernag nestled into a valley pass between two great mountains high above the Merk Valley. At the beginning of all things, the ancient ones had used the earth magic of geomancy to situate the castle according to the land currents and dragon lines that flowed in this sacred place. The castle had long been protected by sentinels as well as spells. For many an age there had been no threat of invasion, so the inhabitants of this magical land had adapted to a life of peaceful and pastoral pursuits. The surrounding forest readily provided all manner of game and fowl, and larders were full of provisions. With pens teeming with geese and ducks, and salmon so plentiful in the River Caerne that you could almost catch them with your bare hands, the folk of this land had wanted for little.

The Queen felt as if she herself were riding her dragon as Draigo swooped lower, passing over the farmland of the Merk Valley. Row upon row of the last summer vegetables were being harvested and the cornfields were being gleaned and the stalks set up in bundles for fall bonfires. The front meadows, under skillful plough, gave off a sweet scent of freshly turned soil that spoke of new crops to be seeded and planted come early spring. Giant haystacks stood out against the clear blue sky, and horses of the kingdom grazed peacefully among them. Staying high enough to avoid causing them alarm, the dragon flew over a herd of grazing cattle ascending the steeper passes, their curved horns and brown shaggy coats a familiar sight. Banking away from the mountain, Draigo began his descent.

The Queen flung open the door to her bedchamber and ran down the quiet hallway, past the King's empty rooms, other apartments and up the staircases that led to the top level. Centered on the highest level of the castle, a circular Great Hall crowned the castle and seemed to grow out of the mountain itself, its copper roof gleaming in the early morning sun. Running through its open interior doors, she crossed this room where feasts and celebrations took place, ran past twin marble dragons flanking the rear door and through a vaulted corridor that led outside to the top-level terrace. It stretched from mountain to mountain and for a half mile from front to back. It would take a crowd of thousands to fill up the space. Dragons had plenty of room to fly in and land, dispatching their riders before they went back to their dens in the various caves tucked into the mountains.

Two tall stone towers stood as anchors at the back corners. In the center, a massive spur of flat rock jutted out from the mountain, connected to the terrace by a stone bridge. Along the ramparts, a dozen bright banners fluttered in the breeze. They represented the various tribes of Anara. Jolianna crossed the bridge to meet Draigo as he descended

gracefully, the displaced air below his wings churning up dirt on the slab of granite. Upon landing, he raised his head, arched his neck, and bellowed to the sky several times, announcing his return.

She flung herself at him as he lowered his head and wrapped herself around his neck. *Oh Draigo* she kept repeating. Then, as she used to do as a young girl, she released him and ran to the natural stairs created by the wall of stone adjacent the spur. Jumping from one rock to the next, with her scarlet gown flapping in the breeze, the Queen came to a small ledge at the top. Her dragon moved alongside. In a move reminiscent of her youth, she landed between his wings, tucked her bare feet along his back and prostrated herself upon his neck. He let out a raspy chuckle. *Maybe I should go away more often.*

Don't you dare. When I am denied both of you it is unbearable.

Turning his head, with a tenderness not often seen in such a powerful creature, he nuzzled her gently. Her dark brown eyes looked deeply into his faceted sapphire irises, as his pupils expanded then contracted to their vertical slits as their connection was renewed again.

The Queen was reminded what she had been told about the first time they had met. Upon their return from Lanskule, the King and Draigo had entered the Great Hall. As they neared the throne where her mother, Queen Rowena, sat with her twins, the King was delighted to see his young daughters again and shouted a greeting as they crossed the hall. Draigo snorted his approval at being home and scared Lilianna. As her sister turned away in fear and hid in the Queen's arms, Jolianna felt only a kinship from the instant her eyes locked with the dragon's at this first meeting. The dragon respectfully lowered his head to acknowledge the two young princesses, a month past their one year birthday. Lilianna started to cry, but Jolianna toddled over and squeezed the dragon's snout horn and tried to climb onto his head. Gently, the great dragon lifted her up onto his back. She was told that she giggled as he carefully placed her between his wings, and cried when her father tried to remove her an hour later. A bond that would last a lifetime was forged, to the surprise of many. Draigo had other riders, but never a woman. A bonding could not be forced, nor ignored when it took place. She lived with hollowness inside when he was absent, as if a piece of her heart was missing. Their intimacy was their own, never revealed in the presence of others.

Let's go inside. Tell me everything!

Jolianna rode her dragon back into the empty hall through the tall corridor, his wingtips grazing the walls and stirring tapestries hanging there as he passed. He knelt by the raised throne tucked into an alcove in the middle of the back wall. The Queen dismounted, rubbed his nose and settled comfortably into one of the large chairs.

"The King is with Lord Balathar in Lanskule and is well. Lilianna would not dare raise a hand against him, at least not yet. Your sister has aligned herself with Malleus. He stokes the embers of her jealousy into flame and plays on her weaknesses."

“I thought that horrid wizard had passed into darkness?”

“It seems Malleus was patiently waiting until the seeing stones told him the time was at hand for a bid for power. His dragon Buthar does not have the strength that he once had but Malleus is still a formidable opponent. Of greater concern is that there are over 100 five-year-old dragons that have not yet formed an allegiance. That is a problem.”

The Queen nodded gravely. *“And beyond Lanskule?”*

“The Kingdom of Brinduie is failing. King Gael is at the end of his days, his power waning. His sons squabble over who is best fit to be the new king, and the King himself pits them against each other in some kind of wretched game.”

The Queen said, “The only one suitable to lead with any wisdom is Gareg. Being the youngest, that is not very likely. Algol, the eldest, is cruel in his own right and would bring great sorrow to the land of Brinduie. Did you see Sebastian?”

“No. Some of the scouting party had a conversation with him. He was on the road leading to Blackthorn Hall.”

Chuckling, the Queen said, *“My younger brother makes himself welcome wherever he goes. He is probably still trespassing on their hospitality at this very moment.”*

For the next hour, the Queen continued to listen as Draigo relayed all that he had seen and heard during his absence. The dragon concluded with a private message from the King.

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Back in her bedchamber, Jolianna sat down at her dressing table and began brushing out her hair. A soft knock at the door announced the arrival of Ygayla, her Lady-in-Waiting.

“Good morning, your highness,” Ygayla said as she entered the bedchamber. As her mother before her had held the same position under Queen Rowena, it was Ygayla’s duty and honor to look after this Queen. Born within the same week, they grew up in the castle, sharing many secrets. Ygayla was more of a sister to the Queen than her own flesh and blood. “Here, let me help you with that.” Crossing the room, Ygayla took the brush from the Queen and began untangling and sectioning out her hair in a ritual they had shared for many years.

Bursting with delight and relief, the Queen told her, “Ygayla, Draigo has returned.”

Ygayla smiled warmly and bent to hug her. “That is wonderful news. I thought I heard him earlier.”

Laughing, the Queen said, “Yes. Draigo made quite a racket when he arrived. He has been with the King, who is well. My heart hasn’t felt this light in months. It brought such relief, but it sets in motion a great deal. We must convene the Faery Council.”

“Just the Council, m’lady?” Ygayla asked. “The last time we did that, everyone came anyway.”

The Queen laughed. “Of course. I do remember. Let us plan for that. Things are changing and all need to be on alert. It may come to nothing, but we must be prepared. I have been fretting for months waiting for news about the King and Draigo, and now there is so much to do. I feel as pent up as a mountain goat herded into a pen with no room to turn around. I would like to go for a ride. Will you please send for Nicholas and Aubriana and ask them to join me in an hour at the stables?”

“Of course.”

“To complicate matters further, as foretold by the Court Astrologer, Alessia, our visitors will begin arriving with the full moon. We must prepare.”

An uneasiness struck Ygayla with those words as she felt a shadow steal across her heart. “Yes, m’lady.”

“It has been a long while since we have had a gathering of this magnitude. We are about to be very busy, my friend.”

Ygayla finished braiding the Queen’s hair, lifting it up and off her face but with tendrils curling down her cheeks as the Queen preferred. She added a few trinkets and some leather strips to her hair, and positioned the ruby circlet on the queen’s forehead. Jolianna’s pointed ears were adorned with several golden rings. The ornate tattoos inked across her shoulders stood out against her pale skin. They were the unique and ancient markings of the Faery Court. Each tribe in Anara had its own design, and all knew at a glance which part of the land someone came from by these markings alone. “There you are, m’lady,” Ygayla said as she stepped back to admire her handiwork.

“My dearest friend,” the Queen said with true affection as she rose from the dressing table. “What would I do without you?” She leaned in and gave her a hug.

Smiling, Ygayla responded, “It is my pleasure, as always.”

The rising sun splayed across climbing yellow roses on the west wall of her private garden as Jolianna pushed open the stained glass doors and stepped into morning coolness. A meadowlark’s sweet song greeted her from the central fountain. The courtyard was a profusion of blooming roses and raised beds filled with the last of the summer flowers. Long-stemmed lavender kissed the walls on all four sides, and its soft scent filled the air. Crossing the courtyard, she seated herself on a wooden bench under a massive maple tree,

brilliantly red with fall's glory. Her mind was racing, but she would find order here. This was her sanctuary, a place of solitude and meditation, a place to think clearly. Breathing deeply, the Queen allowed her anxiety to melt away, listening to the soothing sounds of the lark and the splashing water as her breath slowed. Stilling her mind, she began to quietly contemplate what needed to be done. The time had come for old forgotten friendships and alliances to be renewed. A great awakening was taking place in the world of men, and the inhabitants of this magical place would play a major role in this shift. There was so much to do. With another deep breath the tinkling sound of the fountain faded away as she slipped away into the deep.

Ygayla rose and quietly pulled the glass doors shut. With the Queen in meditation, she set about cleaning up the room, deep in troubled thought. Smoothing the silk coverlet, she made her way to the alcove where the Queen's wardrobe was kept. Pulling out her tan breeches and chocolate leather vest, she set them out across the four-poster bed and went in search of the Queen's boots and a suitable blouse.

Something was bothering her. An old story whispered in the shadows was tugging at her memory, trying to come to the surface. An old prognostication. It was about Jolianna and her twin sister Lilianna, born to Queen Rowena and King Budell. At their birth, the entire land of Anara was overjoyed. "Twice the luck ~ twice the delight," everyone had said. Born only minutes apart, the twin girls were opposites in every way imaginable, including temperament and appearance. Alessia had said that one would grow to envy and hate the other, bringing strife and sorrow to a once peaceful land. Everyone knew the prophecy. Shaking it off, she went back to thinking about the arrival of Draigo and the news that the King was safe. They had all been living in the shadow of the unknown during the King's absence and Ygayla realized she too had breathed a sigh of relief. Draigo's return was indeed a cause for celebration.

Lightly dusting the writing table, she made a note to herself to replace a vase of wilting flowers and bring in fresh bundles of lavender for the wood beams. Ygayla glanced around the room. The stone floors were strewn with thick sheepskins in need of a good shake. It was time to have chambermaids in to dust the tapestries and give the room a thorough scrubbing. She wasn't the only one who was about to be very busy. After straightening up the Queen's chamber, she silently slipped out the door and began fulfilling the Queen's requests.

After rousing Aubriana, Ygayla found Nicholas in the kitchen seated at a wooden table fully engaged in eating and talking to Cook. He had been outside with his falcons, and still had his protective leather arm sheath on as he plowed into a breakfast of sausages, eggs and mushrooms.

"Good morning, Nico," Ygayla greeted them both with affection. "Good morning, Cook."

“Good morning LaLa,” Nico answered, a warm smile crossing his lips. As a child, the prince had trouble saying her name and his childish nickname had stuck between the two of them. He was eighteen now, tall and good looking, with wild sandy blond hair that brushed his shoulders and deep brown eyes, wise beyond his years.

“You look more like your father each day.” Ygayla exclaimed.

“Except I’m taller,” Nicholas said proudly.

“And probably not done growing, is my guess,” she added.

“He is already more handsome than the King,” Cook interjected as she moved to the stove to check on her sauce. “The castle is buzzing with the return of Draigo.”

Surprised, since this kitchen was on the opposite side of the castle from the Great Hall, Ygayla asked, “How did you know that?”

Nicholas laughed out loud. “Well, I was out at first light with my falcons. It is pretty hard to disguise a creature that big that flies right over your head. We don’t need to talk to him telepathically to know when he returns. He is pretty hard to miss.”

Ygayla laughed as well. “Point well taken. Your mother is quite relieved that Draigo is back.”

“And Father?” Nicholas asked.

“Your mother tells me all is well. On all fronts.” Ygayla smiled as Nicholas nodded and went back to his breakfast, obviously relieved. “She would like to go for a ride with you and Aubriana. Clear the cobwebs out.”

“It has been a long time. I’m glad. It will do us all a lot of good,” The Prince said.

Cook clapped her hands together. “I suppose that means her appetite will return. The Queen has gotten too thin. She hasn’t been eating enough to keep a hen happy. Now, that is an idea. I shall make a nice stuffed chicken this evening with some lovely root vegetables and a mushroom soup.” She started pulling out pots and pans then headed off towards the larder.

“That’s Cook for you, always trying to fatten you up,” said Nicholas.

Ygayla smiled and nodded. “She’s right, though. Your mother has gotten very thin. I too hope that her appetite will return. Aubriana will be joining us shortly. She was still asleep. I do not know how that girl sleeps so much.”

Cook came back in holding a fat plucked chicken. “Fiddle faddle, I know exactly why she sleeps so late,” Cook interjected. “She is almost sixteen, I would imagine she

spends half the night writing secrets in her journal. Longing for true love, I'm sure," she said wistfully.

Ygayla was skeptical. "A bit young for that, I think. Whatever the reason, she is up now and getting dressed." Turning her attention to other matters, she said, "Cook, the Queen is in her garden. Draigo returned with a great deal of news, and the Queen is calling the Faery Council to order in three days. As in the past, we should expect almost everyone to attend. The Queen will be down after her meditation to discuss it with you."

Cook smiled. "Well, it is about time. It has been so quiet since the King has been gone. It will be nice to have a gathering. Too much time has passed since the Great Hall was filled with guests." Smoothing her apron, she caught her breath and asked tentatively, "Will Shadikar be here?"

"Of course. What would the Faery Council be without its favorite young wizard?" Ygayla said.

Laughing, Prince Nicholas remarked, "He is hardly that young."

"Compared to Brenainn he is."

"Compared to Brenainn, everyone is young," the Prince responded.

Ygayla laughed. "True. He still has more knowledge of magic than all of the other wizards put together. I must admit, I have a soft spot for him. His animals love him so much."

Cook turned around and smiled, wiping her hands on her apron. Self-consciously, she tucked her wild red hair behind her pointed ears. "I shall have some ideas for her. Of course, I must make my apple cakes and lots of pies."

Nicholas, meanwhile, had been busily finishing off his breakfast. Sopping up the remainder of the juices on his plate with bread, he stuffed the last bit of sausage and bread into his mouth as he stood up, ready to go. Swallowing quickly, he said to Ygayla, "I shall go and see to the horses. Are you joining us, LaLa?" His efforts to hide a smirk failed miserably.

Ygayla turned pink and gave Nicholas a withering look. "Very funny. After our last outing, I think I'll stay behind."

"Well, how was I to know that your horse wanted to roll? You weren't paying attention. He did paw the water first. You should have pulled his head up." It was all the Prince could do to keep from bursting out laughing at the memory of YGayla's horse dunking her in the river.

"You forget that I am not the horsewoman your mother is. Anyway, it is of no

matter. With Draigo back, I want to get some things sorted. We are all about to be very busy.”

“Suit yourself. If you rode more often, you would get better,” Nicholas stated.

Ygayla was halfway out of the kitchen. “You have much more to worry about than whether or not I go for a ride. Maybe next week,” she called back over her shoulder as she disappeared down the hall.

Cook fussed over Nicholas and packed a satchel with some oatcakes, fruit, and cheese for the ride. “You’ll be needing this, I’m sure, Prince Nicholas. There is enough there for the three of you.” She then handed him a flagon full of blackberry juice. Kissing her on the cheek, Nicholas waved as he left the kitchen, leaving Cook bustling about getting the Queen’s tea ready.

The Prince felt a dark undercurrent beginning to pulse through his body as he headed for the stables. He couldn’t shake the heaviness he felt. He found Lon first and shared with him the little he knew.

“It must be serious if they have called the Council to order,” Lon said.

“At this point, I’m not sure. We must be on guard. Lon, will you get out Sable and have Ralf get out Shemara, please? The Queen wants to go for a ride.”

“Why, right away, Prince Nicholas. I am sure they all could use a nice gallop. It’s a lovely day for it.” Lon looked pleased. The Prince rode daily, but the Queen hadn’t been out since midsummer.

Mirraz had heard Nicholas’ voice and was already snorting, pushing heavily against the gate. It wasn’t that Lon couldn’t handle him, but Nicholas preferred to groom and saddle his own stallion, feeling that it kept the bond between them strong.

“Good morning, Raz,” the Prince said as Mirraz stuck his head out through the upper part of his stall and whinnied. Automatically, Nicholas rubbed the space between the stallion’s large brown eyes and ruffled his forelock. Mirraz tossed his head and nickered affectionately, then started pawing the ground. “Easy there, fella,” Nicholas murmured as he lifted the halter off its hook and slipped it on. The proud stallion pranced as he was led down the breezeway out into the sun and tethered for grooming.

Mirraz was from the North, one of an ancient lineage of fighting horses bred for strength and endurance. A deep bay, he had two white front feet and a wide blaze that ran from his eyes to his nostrils. He was well-muscled with a proud-set head, and easily two hands taller than the other horses. Spirited, he needed a strong rider. He had come to the castle when Nicholas was sixteen and ready for a challenge. The pairing had proved to be a good fit and they had become inseparable. No one else would dare to ride the fiery stallion if they valued their life.

The King had taught Nicholas that a good horse under you could mean the difference between survival and death. Close attention to a horse's needs was always of the utmost importance. This was a fact that Nicholas took to heart, but his deep love for this horse was what bonded them together, and he needed no prodding with regard to the stallion's care.

Lon and Ralf worked efficiently, grooming and saddling the two mares. Just as all three were tacked and ready to go, the Queen and Aubriana entered the courtyard.

"Good morning," the Queen offered in greeting.

Lon and Ralf both bowed. "Good morning, your majesty. Turning to the princess, they said "Princess Aubriana, it is a beautiful day for a ride." Aubriana shyly smiled at Lon and Ralf and playfully punched her brother in the shoulder.

Nicholas spoke under his breath to the Queen. "Mother, I am glad you wanted to go for a ride. I hear Draigo has brought good news."

"Yes," she answered, keeping her voice low. "At least some of it is good. Your father is well. It is such a relief to know they are both safe. Your Aunt seems to have slipped deeper into the dark arts and has joined ranks with the powerful wizard Malleus. The giants who guard the mines seem to be under her spell as well. They are gentle creatures left to their own ways, but easily influenced if someone has a mind to do it."

"Ygayla said you have called the Faery Council to order. Is it that serious, then?" Nicholas asked.

"At this point I am not sure. My guides tell me to be on guard, that there is darkness on its way from beyond our borders." As if to magnify the information, a shadow crossed over them. Both looked up to see a small black gryphon gliding over their heads above the cobbled courtyard. Nicholas quickly drew an arrow but before he could release it, the Queen placed her hand on his arm. "Wait, son."

Irritated, Nicholas said, "Mother, that creature belongs to Ludgorn. He can intend nothing but harm by being here."

"Since when do we destroy a living creature out of fear?" she asked. They both watched as the gryphon crested the first hill past the stables and disappeared from sight.

"We have no reason to fear any man or beast."

"A black gryphon can be nothing but a harbinger of evil." Nicholas insisted.

"And what would killing him do except antagonize?"

Anger flashing in his eyes, Nicholas returned the arrow to its quiver and the bow to his shoulder. If he had been here alone, the gryphon would be dead.

“We do not yet know if Ludgorn has any intentions beyond those we are already aware of. He has left us in peace for many years.” In an effort to lighten the suddenly dark mood, the Queen said, “I would love to see Celestia. How about a gallop to the chapel?”

The Prince had taken umbrage at her interference, but tried to hide it. He was a man now and didn't want anyone telling him what to do. Swallowing his anger, he masked his true feelings, smiled and said “Of course, Mother.”

Nicholas handed Mirraz off to Lon and took the reins of the Queen's black mare, Sable. As he led her to the steps, the Queen mounted the fidgeting mare and settled into her saddle, checking the horse. Ralf gave Aubriana a hand up and she hit the saddle with the same confidence. An accomplished rider from a young age, she took command of the reins, all traces of shyness gone. She was in her element astride a horse. She was about to come of age and the ceremony for her Faery Court tattoos was only a month away.

Aubriana had a mischievous look in her eyes and Nicholas did have to admit it was nice to see his mother happy again and his sister in high spirits. As soon as Aubriana was mounted, she turned Shemara towards the forest track and took off. Wheeling Sable away from the mounting block, the Queen took off right behind her. Lon had his hands full containing the stallion. Mirraz did not like being left behind. The Prince expertly swung into the saddle from the ground, keeping his touch light but firm on the bit as he contained the excited horse. “Be watchful, Lon. We are on the edge of something. I can feel it. Expect trouble and be prepared.” Mirraz reared out of frustration.

“After we have gone, Lon, find Brimlee and take Ralf and see if you can find the gryphon in the woods and capture it. Be watchful, Lon. We are on the edge of something. I can feel it. Expect trouble and be prepared.”

Lon nodded. “I'll find Brimlee, and the three of us will take a good look around.”

“Good. I'll check in with you when I get back.”

Draigo's return signaled a palpable shift from their bucolic existence. Prince Nicholas allowed himself a brief moment to be thankful his father was safe. He had hoped that the news from the Outerlands wouldn't be so dire after all, but the black gryphon had left the chill of a shadow across that hope. The Prince turned the eager stallion toward the forest trail. No spur was required. He simply let Mirraz have his head as he galloped in earnest pursuit of the disappearing mares.

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Roosting high in a cedar tree overlooking the scene below, the black gryphon sat quietly as he watched the Prince riding off. Gryphon eyes were sharp, but these eyes were sharper. For they were the eyes of a force more menacing than a mere creature. What devilry was at work here as the eyes of a wizard looked out from the body of a gryphon, missing nothing? They followed the lively party as it disappeared into the forest.