

ANDREW Q. GORDON



ASHES OF LIFE

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Love's Landscapes

An M/M Romance series

ASHES OF LIFE

By Andrew Q. Gordon

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love's Landscapes* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

What Is Love's Landscapes?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love's Landscapes*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

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Photo Description

A bird, the size of an eagle with feathers the color of fire is about to land on the leather glove of a warrior. Flames drip from his tail and the bearded, brown-haired man stares straight ahead. His eyes show his amusement, or is it more? Dressed in the armor of his profession, the man is a professional soldier, or royal guard.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I never knew the day I rescued the injured phoenix that it would create such a large change in my normal run of the mill guardsman's life. After all how was I supposed to know he was a mage shifter and I was to become his warrior to own.

Sincerely,

Ilona

Story Info

Genre: fantasy

Tags: swords and sorcery, shifter non-wolf/cat, mythical creatures, mage, bonded

Word Count: 27,324

Dedication

As always – to Mike and 'lil q. Forever will never be long enough.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Tali for the great beta comments, to Julie and Lorraine for your editing skills, and to Lily for the awesome cover art.

Special thanks to the M/M Romance moderators and volunteers. This is an amazing event and I'm still in awe at the work you've done to make this so happen.

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“This is great, Thane,” Brill said as he pulled his mount next to mine. “I don’t know how you managed to order the great weather for our day off, but you’re amazing.”

“Don’t thank me, thank Genznor.” I invoked the warrior god, hoping it would give me the courage to do what needed to be done.

Our horses matched their owners, in color and personality. Rain had Brill’s tawny hair, and while sleek and fit, she liked her sweets and was shameless in her pursuit of them. My stallion, Thunder, was a deep, rich brown, strong, muscular, and edgy when left idle for too long.

“I’ll let you say the prayers. The gods long ago gave up on a rogue like me.” Brill nudged his horse and the mare trotted happily along.

Thunder chafed that I held him back, but if I gave him his head, he’d run until he was too tired to carry me home. Besides, Rain would never keep up, even *if* she felt like running. More likely she’d stop after a few strides and sniff around for something to eat. And Brill would let her.

I wouldn’t say Brill was lazy, and he certainly wasn’t fat, but lately he seemed to get more exercise at the warehouses than on the practice field. It was that conduct that prompted the ride. Arranging for us both to be free had taken some effort, but I think the captain appreciated I wasn’t going to let my best friend compromise my unit.

“Brill, we need to talk.”

“I know what you’re going to say. I need to stop visiting the brothels.”

“Not exactly.” It wasn’t, at least not entirely. “I doubt anyone would care if you spent more time at weapons practice and less screwing the... the...”

“You can say whores, Thane. They aren’t ashamed of what they do.”

“This isn’t about morals. No one cares if you’re chaste or not. But I expect you to train hard—*every* day. I brought you with me after my promotion because I wanted someone I could trust as my corporal. You’re supposed to

lead by example. The men need to see you putting forth an effort at weapons practice to show them it matters.”

“What I do at the brothel *is* very good exercise. You’d understand if you’d accept some of the offers you get. There’s nothing wrong with saying yes to a man who puts a bit of steel in your sword. And don’t even try to say no one wants you because of the scar. I’ve heard so many women say how sexy it makes you look that I’m seriously thinking of getting one myself.”

Brill’s humor endeared him to our men. I had their respect—at least I thought I did—but Brill was their friend, the guy who made them laugh, who understood them. Those weren’t bad virtues, but he could be all those things and still get them to train hard.

“Who I sleep with is my concern, but that type of exercise is not going to help you swing a sword if you’re called on to defend the king or his family. Every time you brush off practice, or give it less than your all, the men become a tiny bit less interested in their conditioning and skill. Being a royal guard is an honor and a privilege. Selecting you required I put my ass on the line and—”

“I know one sergeant, two corporals, and at least half a dozen soldiers who would enjoy seeing your ass. If you’d let me fix—”

“Corporal Brill!” I rarely yelled, but when I did, Brill knew to be afraid. “My personal life is not the reason for this conversation. What you do on your off hours is not my concern. But as my corporal and second-in-command, I expect more from you than any other soldier. If you can’t promise me you’re willing to try, I’ll accept your resignation and do my best to see you transferred to a unit of your liking.”

“Thane...” The expression on his face tugged at my emotions.

When we were kids, Brill’s father was an abusive, drunken arse. His mother used to send him to our house to hide when his father was on a rampage. Suddenly I saw that scared kid again. I didn’t enjoy reining him in, but I needed to stop making allowances for things I shouldn’t.

“I don’t mean to be harsh, but I have a responsibility to the king and the other soldiers in our unit.”

“I’m sorry.” He looked contrite, even for him. “I guess I’ve been enjoying my good fortune so much I forgot being a royal guard isn’t as exciting and desirable as we imagined as kids.”

“Yes it is.” I smiled, hoping it would lighten his mood. “How is guarding the king and his family *not* exciting and desirable? The training and work might not be as easy as we thought, but I can’t think of a better job for a commoner.”

I could see him trying to think of another job he’d rather have. The fact he couldn’t come up with one on the spot should have been proof enough I was right, but Brill could be stubborn. Right then, however, I needed him to agree, not be pigheaded.

“My point is I need your help. I don’t want to break your spirit because your ability to relate to our men is a strength I value. But you’re part of the command now. You need to carry yourself like a corporal and show the men you’re not asking them to do anything you won’t do yourself.”

“That’s fair.” He flashed me the rakish smile he used to such effect with the women. It might have had the same effect on me if he wasn’t my best friend.

“Excellent.” I rubbed Thunder’s shoulder. “Now that we’ve settled that, how about we enjoy the weather?”

I didn’t wait for Brill’s answer to give Thunder his head. Free of my control, my mount did what he’d been itching to do since we left the castle—run. I leaned forward and held on as Thunder raced the wind. The feel of his powerful muscles tensing and contracting as he stretched out his gait always gave me a thrill.

It reminded me of that brief time when I was little. Too young for obligations and free to play all day. Thunder ran for the pleasure of the effort and made no apologies. I admired his pluck and laughed to show my support.

When he’d run long enough, I tried to slow him. My heart skipped with a twist of fear when Thunder ignored my attempts. I pulled harder, but he continued to run like the Hounds of Delmor chased us. I’d seen him spooked before, but this wasn’t a panicked, all-out dash. Determined, for sure, but Thunder wasn’t running scared.

I, on the other hand, felt more than a moment of terror. I’d watched men thrown and trampled when they couldn’t control their horses. Thunder had never given me even a hint of disobedience, which left me baffled. More, I had no idea how to stop him.

My alarm grew as we approached a tree line. I yanked on the reins with as much force as I dared to prevent us from galloping headlong through the

woods. Getting thrown at this speed would hurt, but I had more chance of surviving a fall than a mad dash through the forest.

The trees drew steadily closer. My mind raced for a solution that didn't end with me injured or dead. A hundred yards from the woods, Thunder slowed to an easy canter. Breathing hard, he came to a stop and his ears flattened. He started to look around, slightly skittish. Fear gripped me. He looked as confused as I felt.

I set my hand on my sword, more to calm myself. Whatever had taken control of Thunder wouldn't fear a bit of steel.

Turning in the saddle, I hoped to see Brill but found only open fields behind us. Unless he'd pushed Rain, she'd be happy trotting along. Thunder and I were alone, and I didn't like the odds.

My superiors had cited my ability to remain calm under stress. That meant I owed my position to my skills as an actor because I was one loud noise away from soiling my britches. As I scanned our surroundings, the heavy blanket of silence that shrouded the area threatened to suffocate me. The absence of the normal buzz and song from the forest proved as unnerving as any unexplained sounds.

I nudged Thunder to the left, hoping to leave before trouble found us. Another mad dash would kill him. I braced myself for the expected struggle to control his instinct to flee. Instead, he refused to leave. He stared at the trees and resisted all attempts to draw him away.

Rather than risk injuring him, I jumped down, hoping to lead him back. The forest gave me the creeps, especially since it had such a grip on Thunder.

"Help me."

My sword practically drew itself, I had it out so fast. Standing protectively in front of Thunder, I twisted, trying to locate the source of the cry.

"Help me, Thane, son of Margret and Jelcob."

I suddenly wished for the silence that merely unnerved me. When I looked at Thunder, he stared at me, as if waiting for me to act.

"Great Genznor, what's going on?"

"Prayers to the warrior god are unnecessary. I mean you no harm."

"Right. You possess my horse to bring me here, you remain unseen, and the forest itself is afraid of you, but I'm supposed to draw comfort from your words

that your intentions are peaceful.” I let out a nervous laugh. “Now I’m arguing with a voice in my head.”

Thunder used his nose to nudge me forward.

“Stop that!” I don’t know whom I meant it for, Thunder or the voice.

“Your friend knows my words are honest. I need your help.”

I scanned the trees again, hoping to catch a glimpse of whatever was there. “If you possess the ability to bring me here against my will, it eludes me why you need the help of a mere guard.”

“Please, help me.” The calm voice now contained a hint of desperation. *“I’ve spent the last of my energy to bring you here. Please, do not abandon me.”*

The plea tugged at my heart. Thunder pushed me again, this time with more force, and my legs started to move. I tried to stop, but Thunder prodded me onward.

“Please, Thane.” The voice sounded thin, tired, and desperate.

Cursing myself for a fool, I stepped forward. Thunder clearly trusted this... this... whatever it was. Not that he couldn’t be fooled, but he believed I needed to help.

“How? I don’t even know where to go... or who to look for.” I couldn’t believe I was agreeing to help.

“Let your friend guide you.”

He sounded relieved, almost excited. I remained cautious, but I sheathed my sword and mounted. I considered the wisdom of doing anything an unseen being who could talk to me over a distance—there was nothing wise about it, I decided. And yet, after another futile search of the trees, I let Thunder carry me into the unknown.

Thunder picked his way between the trees without a path to guide us. For his part, it didn’t slow his progress. I wanted to be surprised, but I remembered what brought us here and shook my head. If I survived, I was going to speak to the king’s mage about how to prevent this from happening in the future.

It didn’t take long for me to realize we’d never find our way out. If whatever guided Thunder abandoned us, it might be a while before we made it home. I tried to get some bearing. Finding north would have helped, but the trees had become denser as we walked.

The place felt old. While on campaigns I'd heard about "ancient" forests from the mages who travelled with us, but always thought that was just wizard's gibberish. Now I understood and knew to be afraid.

Usually the mages' stories involved fighting a spirit or sentinel. Granted, the embattled wizards usually wanted to take something from the forest, but what if whomever I was helping had a guard?

Lost in my thoughts, it took me a moment to realize we'd stopped. I couldn't locate anything specific that marked we'd arrived, but Thunder didn't act confused; we were here.

"Hello?"

"I am here."

I spun in a circle. "Where?"

Thunder started to paw the dirt in the space between two trees. Upon further inspection, I noticed something odd. Everywhere I looked the ground was covered by trees, leaves, bushes, weeds, something. Everywhere except that space. It was a six-by-six foot square of bare earth.

"There?" The question wasn't meant for anyone, but Thunder nodded his head.

"Yes."

I took a step back. "What are you?"

"I can't tell you."

"Can't or won't?"

"Can't."

I put another pace between the barren patch and myself. Though far from a scholar, I'd read enough to know that the list of beings that could survive being buried for any length of time was short—and generally not friendly. Faeries, imps, demons, powerful spirits, and maybe a dragon—though the affected area appeared too small to house a dragon.

"Why are you here?"

"I can't answer that either."

No surprise. My brain told me to mount up and leave. Find my way out—somehow—and warn the king. But Thunder kept pulling away clumps of dirt.

“How do I know you’re not something foul and dangerous that’s been locked away to protect the world?”

“You don’t.”

If the stakes weren’t so dire, I’d have laughed at his honesty. He didn’t *feel* evil. But what if I released a demon of Delmor or an evil spirit? I’d be responsible for untold suffering.

On the other hand, if I walked away, I could be leaving an innocent faerie or benevolent spirit trapped.

The decision should have been easy. As an officer, my duty was to kingdom first. The interests of an individual, other than the king, could never be placed above that of the kingdom. Yet I hadn’t left.

“I need more information.” I stepped closer to Thunder. “I will tell the king’s mage of your plight and lead him here.”

“I understand.” His voice sounded sad, not angry. *“But save your efforts. Once you leave, you will not be able to find me again.”*

“Why not?” I might not be a skilled tracker, but I was reasonably sure I could mark my path well enough to retrace.

“I... suffice it to say, when you leave, even if you find your way back to this exact spot, I will not be here any longer.”

I didn’t understand, but I recognized the hand of magic. Whatever fate brought me to this place left to me the decision of whether to free him or not. Unfortunately for him, duty outweighed compassion.

“I’m sorry.” A cold chill turned my flesh bumpy under my armor. “Were the peril to myself only, I’d take the chance and free you. But as a king’s soldier, I can’t risk the entire kingdom for one person’s life. I’m truly sorry.”

“Wisdom, duty, compassion. I hope your king values you as much as you deserve.” The response confused me. I expected a desperate plea or at least some attempt to sway me, not resignation.

When I felt my resolve weaken, I realized his answer might be part of the deception. Knowing there was no good way to resolve the problem, I decided to leave before I did something foolish.

Thunder moved as I tried to mount and then he pawed at the dirt again. I tried again, and he nearly pushed me over and then trotted around the trees to

stand on the other side of the dirt patch. Using a hoof to pull more dirt away, he looked up at me expectantly.

I'd had Thunder since I joined the cavalry, and in the six years we'd been partners, he'd never done this before. His prior owner, an ex-cavalry officer who retired and raised horses for the king's horsemen, gave me a good price for Thunder because he couldn't find another buyer. I was the first—and only—interested buyer Thunder would let mount him. Most of the others he'd either tried to bite or had bitten. He and I, however, formed a bond almost immediately.

Since that time, Thunder had saved my life several times, once at great risk to himself. To say I owed him wasn't a stretch.

“Okay, Thunder, what's going on?”

Pulling another couple piles of dirt back, he bobbed his head up and down. He'd clearly made his decision but that only stiffened my resolve.

“I have done nothing to control your horse.”

“Forgive me if I don't believe you.”

“I realize you have no reason to trust me, but it is still the truth.”

My indecision continued so I stepped onto the dirt, keeping my gaze on Thunder. Call it hubris, but if something possessed him, I'd know it.

Thunder met my stare without blinking, like he knew it was a test and was determined to pass. I put my hands on both sides of his head. When he licked me, I knew.

“I told you I didn't lie.”

“So why not tell me who and what you are and why you're there?” I didn't like mysteries like this, but I knew I'd have to walk home unless I freed “him.” “You're rather selective in what you share.”

“It's not by choice.”

Thunder snorted and kicked up some more dirt.

“Fine.” I said it as much for myself as for Thunder. Shaking my head, I pulled off my forearm guard and knelt. Using the curved metal, I scooped as much soil as I could and pushed it to the side.

Contact with the ground cleared up one mystery. The dirt was bone dry and brittle. It felt like scorched earth. Fire had killed everything in this patch but not any of the surrounding area. Another mystery I couldn't solve.

I dug with a fury. The longer I remained, the less safe I felt. I ignored my misgivings. Having decided on my course, I worked to complete the task. Thunder helped by pulling the dirt back to make my digging easier.

Even with his help, however, I didn't know how I'd clear the entire area. Using a shovel would have taken some time, and I didn't have even that.

"Move to your left and forward." He sounded tired yet excited. *"There is a door in the center of the box. You need only clear enough to pull it open."*

I moved where he suggested and renewed my efforts. "Are you going to be okay?"

"I'll be fine once I'm free."

Perhaps he'd been entombed for so long and there had been other failed attempts to free him, but I expected a bit more enthusiasm. "How long have you been imprisoned?"

"When I'm free, I'll answer all your questions."

The way he said it rekindled my fears. If freeing him were a mistake, I wouldn't live long enough to regret my decision. I sent a silent prayer to Genznor to strike me dead rather than let me release something evil. The fact I was allowed to keep digging didn't calm me. Our gods rarely answered our prayers directly.

I'd made it about a forearm's length down when I struck something hard. Another two shovelfuls revealed the top of a metal vault. I shifted my efforts to the left, and within a couple minutes, I'd found a handle. Clearing the door took substantially longer.

Despite the cool weather, I was sweating heavily by the time I pulled on the handle. It didn't move. Silently cursing my stupidity, I reached into my saddlebag for the length of rope I always carried.

Tightening the knot around the pommel of my saddle, my heart beat faster. In a few moments I'd find out what had been trapped inside. I'd probably be dead before I realized my mistake, but I tried to squash such thoughts. If I had any doubts, I needed to leave the door closed.

My fingers wrapped around the dirty metal hook. I planted my feet wide enough to give me a sound base and urged Thunder forward. The rope pulled taut. I worried it would snap when the door didn't budge.

I pulled harder and was rewarded by the sound of metal grating on metal. The door inched upward until finally the vault opened with a whoosh. Foul air,

thick with the smell of sulfur and acrid smoke, rushed from the tomb as fresh air filled the now exposed room. I stood frozen as a dread filled me that I'd unleashed an imprisoned demon.

Covered in feathers the color of fire, a bird cleared the gap. Its body resembled a large eagle, except he had long tail feathers that dripped fire. The meager sunlight that slipped through the trees reflected off the creature in a rainbow of colors. His eyes, however, held my attention. Surrounding the pupils, a rich yellow iris seemed to shift hues like pools of molten amber. The white around the edges was slightly bloodshot and appeared more human than avian.

“A phoenix.”

My fear changed to awe when he stared at me. *“I claim you, Thane, of the house of Jelcob.”*

The voice was faint, barely a whisper, and the words seemed to take everything he had left. Without warning, the phoenix burst into flames and his ashes rained into the hole.

I sat backward and nearly fell over. Only Thunder's impatient movements prevented me from rushing to the side of the vault to peer inside. I quickly untied the rope and pushed him. Satisfied he could flee if necessary, I cautiously moved to the open crypt.

Of all the magical creatures I'd read about, phoenixes were the most rare. Wise and powerful, the legends held they taught the first wizards and healers. Whether that was true, phoenixes were sought after and revered, even by kings and queens. Despite their lofty status, I'd never read anything to suggest they claimed humans.

A flash of light from below forced me to cover my eyes. When I opened them, he hovered over the opening again. This time his movements were fluid and graceful. His feathers shimmered now, bathing the forest floor in a faint red-orange glow. When our gazes met, I noticed his eyes had not changed.

“I am Eraq and I have waited centuries for you, Thane.”

Thunder cleared the tree line, and Eraq peered skyward. For a moment, I thought he'd launch himself from my arm, but he flexed his claws into the thick leather glove he had magically provided and remained still.

“It has been centuries since I've seen the sky.”

I'd avoided asking too much because I still hadn't wrapped my mind around what he meant when he claimed me. The inequity of our respective powers left me uneasy. But I needed to know more before I could assess my position.

"What happened that you ended up imprisoned?"

"I was defeated. And since my enemy could not kill me, he confined me to that cage."

"Great Genznor! That's... that's..."

"The price of my failure."

I tried not to react visibly and kept my eyes focused on the fields in front of us. Iraq's terse answer reminded me of how the nobility treated soldiers, even royal guards, when they addressed their "betters."

"Your friend approaches."

I didn't realize I'd gotten so lost in thought, but when I looked up, I saw Brill riding hard. Suddenly he sat up, and I knew he'd seen Iraq. Rain used his distraction to slow down.

"Poor Brill, he's going to have to fight with her all the way home." I smiled at the image.

"The two are well-suited."

I glanced over. Iraq shifted his attention from Brill back to me. His eyes twinkled, and I thought he winked. While it amused me to see his expression, I also began to wonder how much he knew about my life.

Iraq cocked his head to the side. Had he read my thoughts, or was my card face really as bad as Brill claimed?

Rain trotted up to our position, ending my speculation. "Genznor's gonads, Thane, where did you find a phoenix?"

"Colorfully irreverent friend you have."

"His name is Iraq and I... um..."

"Thane rescued me."

Brill wasn't often at a loss for words, but when he was, he made the most ridiculous faces. "Close your mouth, Brill, it's not your best look."

He shut his mouth, but the usual twisted grin didn't appear. Whatever else he might be thinking, he took the situation seriously. "This is incredible. How—"

“Let’s get moving. I’ll explain as we ride.” I should have said, “...explain as much as I *can*,” but I decided it was best to leave out how few details I had prior to opening the vault.

“Are we taking him to the palace? I mean, he doesn’t need us to get somewhere so I assume he wants to come with us.”

There were times when Brill surprised me. His live-for-the-fun-of-it mentality often masked his intelligence. I knew better, but I still bought into the masquerade, only to be smacked on the nose with the truth.

“I um... well, that is...”

“Thane and I never discussed my plans, other than to leave the forest.”

“What forest?”

“That one.” I twisted in the saddle as I pointed behind me and nearly dropped Eraq. The tree line we’d just passed was gone. All of it. No ancient forest, no dense leaf cover blocking the sky, no unnaturally quiet woods. None of it was where it should have been, only a few minutes walk behind us. When I swept my gaze back, Eraq was staring forward. “How’s that possible?”

He never took his focus from the open fields in front of us. *“I’ll explain when we get to the king’s mage.”*

Brill slapped both hands on his thighs. “Guess that answers my question. Shall we get started?”

From the way he looked at me, I knew Brill hadn’t missed my discomfort. Maybe he’d suggested we leave so he could get home, but more likely he was trying to get back so we could speak to Mage Nalor. Assuming the king’s mage would speak to a mere guardsman.

Rain followed Thunder without incident, not that I’d have noticed if she stopped. I deserved answers, but Eraq refused all my attempts to start a conversation. His recalcitrance stood fast even in the face of Brill’s gregarious nature. The lack of answers caused me to brood, and finally we all stopped talking.

Even though Eraq was leagues above me and didn’t owe me an explanation, he had promised me answers. Moreover, the closer to the palace we rode, the more I started to worry. Sure, Eraq appeared to be a phoenix, a race considered friendly, even protective of men, but what if I was wrong? What if he’d deceived me?

My position would gain me admittance inside the palace walls, and no one would challenge a royal guardsman bearing a phoenix. If anything, they'd clear a path right to the king. History would remember me as a fool, if Eraq had deceived me.

The outskirts of Caliphid ended the time for debate. I decided at a minimum I'd take Eraq to Mage Nalor first. He would know if deception was involved. And if *he* couldn't tell, then it didn't matter what I did.

Eraq's presence caused a stir among the people. We'd barely cleared the outer ring of homes and already a crowd began lining our route. I didn't blame them for wanting to see something as rare and beautiful as Eraq, but the growing crowd made the journey more difficult. Fortunately, before Thunder got spooked, I heard someone tell the crowd to make way.

Twice more, I heard the command before I saw Sergeant Kemp and a squad of my fellow guards riding our way. Natural curiosity to get closer to a phoenix quickly gave way in the face of a dozen mounted soldiers.

"Sergeant Thane," Kemp called out, smiling as he neared. "Aren't you content being the youngest sergeant in the guard? Do you have plans to make captain before your next birthday?"

"Captain?" Brill moved up to my side. "You're thinking too low, first sergeant. Thane has his sights set on a barony, at least."

Kemp's jovial mood evaporated. "Guard your tongue, corporal."

The rebuke caused Brill to recoil and drained the smile from his lips. "What?"

"Thane riding into the city with a phoenix on his arm has upset the king."

I didn't know what I'd done to draw the ire of the king. "Am I under arrest?"

"No, but tread carefully lest you give him reason. Something has him on edge. When he received word of your return, it required Nalor's words to calm him."

"Foolish king."

I nearly laughed as my friend searched the area for the man who dared insult the king. Holding my arm out, I motioned toward Eraq. "He said it."

Kemp was a king's man. He'd take an arrow for him or the prince without a second thought. But he closed his mouth without commenting.

“Why is the king vexed with me for bringing Eraq to the palace?” It made no sense. Not when history was full of examples of phoenixes helping humans.

“As often as not, the arrival of a phoenix portends the ascension of a new royal house.” Kemp nodded at the explanation. *“You may assure your king I am not here to replace him or his heirs.”*

“Do you vouch that he and his family are safe?”

“No. I simply state that I am not an instrument of dynastic change. At least not for his line.”

“Now you understand why the king is agitated.” Kemp turned and motioned to his men.

The troops formed around us, and for a moment it felt like more than merely an escort. I reminded myself that this was how I'd been trained to guard people entering the palace. Unsettling to me or not, the king showed Eraq the courtesy he deserved. The extra horses, however, kept people back, letting us make better time to the palace.

We rode up to Nalor's tower. I never understood why wizards liked towers, but the stories usually involved the mages living in one. Nalor was no exception.

The turret was easily the tallest part of the palace, soaring over two hundred feet above ground. Legends said a mighty wizard raised the tower overnight, but having seen it up close, the granite blocks and mortar looked the same as the ones that made up the rest of the palace.

Six guards standing outside the tower door meant King Lethral was inside. As the junior sergeant, my assignments generally involved other members of the royal house. I'd only been in Lethral's presence twice. Once when I swore my oath to him and his family, and the other when he went to visit his uncle's estate. The duke lived two days ride south and west, and since I'd come from the cavalry, I'd been assigned the advance patrol. On that trip, I learned the king was intelligent, practical, cared about the people, and didn't like soldiers or nobles who mistreated his subjects. He also had a temper and didn't suffer fools in his presence.

Thunder came to a stop, and I wished I could have kept riding back to the barracks. The king had come to meet Eraq, so unless he flew in on his own, I knew I had to stay.

“Corporal Brill,” Kemp said as he dismounted. “Take Sergeant Thane’s horse, and see that he’s properly groomed.”

Brill’s mouth opened, but thankfully he didn’t speak right away. Instead, his gaze shifted to me. Technically, Kemp didn’t outrank me, and couldn’t order my junior officer around in my presence. But even a fool knew he acted upon orders of our captain. Barely noticeable, my nod served to make Kemp’s orders mine. Brill snapped to attention, saluted his superior, and reached for my reins.

Eraq chose that moment to push off my arm and take flight.

“You must attend the king with me.”

With my fleeting hope I could leave dashed, I dismounted. The cool day turned out not cold enough as I felt my pulse race and I started to sweat. I’d done nothing wrong, but I didn’t want to face my king.

“You have nothing to fear. I will not let anyone harm you.”

The sound of fluttering wings alerted me that Eraq was coming back. I held out the glove and he resumed his perch. Kemp’s squad formed up around me, and he led the way into the tower. My duties had never required I go beyond ground level, so I raised an eyebrow when Kemp walked toward the stairs.

“You men stay here.” He pointed toward either side of the opening and then looked at me. “You two follow me.”

When my foot made the first step, I realized something. “Kemp, how did you know where I was?”

“Nalor alerted the king that someone released the phoenix. King Lethral ordered me to find the pho—Eraq and bring him here.”

I tried to make sense of the explanation, but I was missing some key piece of information. Nalor had to have known about Eraq, but if he did, why did he leave him there? We reached the second story, and Kemp stepped into the room first.

Nalor and Lethral stood over the only piece of furniture in the room, a large oak table. The king pointed to a spot, and they spoke in muted voices. Nalor put his hand to his lips, paused a moment, and then nodded.

Neither Kemp nor I made a sound, but they turned as if expecting us. Lethral’s gaze went immediately to Eraq, and I couldn’t tell if I saw anger or awe in his eyes. At forty-two, the weight of ruling had turned some of his chestnut hair gray and added more than a wrinkle or two to his face. The king’s

left hand rested on the pommel of his sword, and his armor sparkled as if it had recently been shined.

He walked toward us, his back straight from his years as a soldier, followed closely by Nalor. I attempted to kneel without dislodging Eraq and resembled a drunken courtesan instead of a soldier.

“Stop with that foolishness, Sergeant.” The king waved his hand as he spoke. “You’re a royal guard. If I made you genuflect every time I entered a room, your knees would give out in a season.”

“As you wish, Your Majesty.” I stared straight ahead, as we’d been trained. It didn’t matter; the king had already turned his attention to Eraq.

“I wish the circumstances of our meeting were different, but I welcome you to Galth.” Lethral surprised me by bowing his head slightly.

“Unfortunately there could be no other set of events under which we could meet, Your Majesty.”

“He didn’t have to meet you at all,” Nalor said. Anyone else and the king would have rebuked them for speaking out of turn, but the mage had served Galth since before Lethral’s great-grandfather.

I’d never seen Nalor wear the robes traditionally associated with his craft until today. In truth, when first I met the mage, I thought him a minor nobleman—a handsome, *young* noble—working in the palace. His golden hair, with no hint of gray, and youthful face masked his true age.

Dressed in a gray robe cinched at the waist by a silver cord, he looked like the powerful wizard his reputation suggested. The plain white pendant on Nalor’s chest changed colors whenever it focused on Eraq.

“So he’s who you thought he would be?” Lethral sounded relieved, though still cautious.

The wizard nodded and kept staring at Eraq. I felt an urge to protect him, as ridiculous as my efforts would prove. Eraq didn’t appear fazed by the attention, so I tried to relax.

Eventually Nalor blinked and shifted his attention to me. After a brief moment of scrutiny, the wizard’s eyes went wide. “Is this...?”

“I claimed him.”

“Does he know what that means?” Nalor’s expression made plain he knew the answer.

“Not yet. I came here first lest you send the army to find me.”

The king's mage frowned and shook his head. “Will you ever change?”

Eraq ruffled his feathers and flexed his wings. A squawk, the first audible sound I'd heard from his mouth, filled the room. *“Do not presume to judge me. Would you have preferred I left you waiting and guessing?”*

Nalor squinted, and my defensive instincts returned. Before he spoke, the king laid a hand on the older man's shoulder.

“No, you did right to come here without delay.” He turned toward Nalor and waited until the mage met his gaze. “The uncertainty would only have created needless tension.”

I wanted to ask what they were talking about, but a guard didn't speak in the king's presence unless spoken to first. My situation, however, threatened my conditioning.

“Sergeant?” The king glanced toward Kemp.

“Thane, Your Majesty.”

“My apologies, Sergeant Thane. I should remember your name, but I fear it escaped me.” He didn't let me tell him it was of no matter. “I know you have many questions, but I must impose on you a bit further and ask you to retire to your quarters while Nalor, Eraq, and I discuss matters of national security.”

What could I say? I didn't want to leave, and I certainly didn't want to put off finding out my role, but I couldn't refuse.

“Of course, Your Majesty.”

“I require him to stay.” Eraq's statement drew everyone's attention to him. *“I'm not yours to command, Lethral. Either he stays, or we both go.”*

The king's face turned red, but he controlled his outburst. Nalor, however, looked ready to attack.

“I'll go.” The words came out before I could think, but it de-escalated the tension. When Eraq turned to me, I tried to smile. “He is my king, and I've sworn an oath to obey him with my life, if necessary. There is no further need to discuss this.”

Lethral put his hand on my shoulder in a gesture too familiar for my station. I stole a quick glance at Kemp and saw the same stunned expression I knew I wore.

“Thank you, Sergeant Thane. You have my word that when we finish, someone will explain things to your satisfaction, even if that person is me.” He motioned toward the doorway, and Kemp bowed quickly. “Sergeant Kemp will escort you home.”

I bowed deeper than required to show my respect for his kindness and followed my mentor down the stairs. Neither of us spoke until we were outside. Kemp sent his soldiers back to the barracks and informed the guards on duty he'd see to their relief in a while. Without a word to me, he turned on his heel and headed toward the small house Brill and I shared.

The five-minute walk to my home proved awkward. I wanted to ask him something, anything, but Kemp didn't give me a chance. He stopped in front of my door, blocking my way inside. “Be careful, Thane.”

Kemp turned around but still didn't step aside. His lips were tight and his forehead furrowed. “Nalor sent the king an urgent summons, and I led the king to the tower. I couldn't hear much, but I know they were discussing Arbutis.”

My eyes opened wide at the mention of our northern neighbor.

Kemp nodded. “From what little I gleaned, the spell that confines the dragon to Arbutis's borders is gone. It appears your phoenix is somehow tied to the disappearance of our protection.”

“How's that—”

“I don't know, but if Eraq has drawn you into this, I fear for your safety.” He placed both hands on my shoulders. “I'm sure King Lethral asked you to leave so you didn't hear about your role in an offhand manner.”

The older veterans always spoke of their respect for the king in ways that went beyond duty. I never fully understood what they meant until today.

“If you report back to the king, please tell him I appreciate what he did for me.”

Kemp nodded and squeezed my shoulders before marching back to the tower. Alone, I stared at the door, trying to make sense of things. That I hadn't released a demon that would destroy Galth was the only positive thing I could find.

I entered the house and went straight to my small bedroom. Brill said we lived like the nobility, each having our own room, but then he spent most of his

money as soon as he got paid. If not for the quartermaster withholding enough to pay his rent, he'd probably spend that before he paid me.

Staring at the leather glove Eraq gave me, I experienced a moment of panic. What if it wouldn't come off? A small tug on the end dispelled my fear, and I set the glove on the floor.

Without thinking, I started to remove my armor and placed it on the stand my father built for me. His chest nearly burst when I had gotten my commission. He was so proud that he spent two weeks working on it nonstop. He also told anyone who'd listen about my promotion.

Drawing on his twenty plus years as a soldier, my father created my stand to resemble a person. Each piece had its own place, which made it easy to store and retrieve. After others saw mine, my father had orders for several more, and soon had enough work to hire my brother's oldest son as an assistant. With each order he made small improvements, but I turned down the offer for a newer one. This one would always be special.

"Thane?" Brill's anxious voice announced his arrival before he opened the door.

"In here." The door slammed shut as I answered, so I said it again. "In my room."

Brill appeared in my doorway as I pulled out an oilcloth to clean my dirty forearm bracer. "I stopped by the tower, but the guards said you'd left. Then Sergeant Kemp suggested I come back and check on you."

"I'm fine." I let habit take over and started to clean in earnest.

I didn't take my attention from my work as Brill walked into the room and leaned against the wall opposite me.

"You only focus like that when you're upset."

"That's not true." I fussed at a speck of dirt in a seam until it came out. "This helps me think."

"You must think a lot because you've got the cleanest armor in the guard."

He meant it to be funny, but that comment summed up a big part of our differences, I'd grown up and he was still a kid. "Sometimes."

"I'd ask if you want to talk about it, but I know you'll say no, so I'm going to stand here until you tell me what happened."

I glanced up from my work and smiled. Maybe he had grown up, and I'd never noticed. "I don't really know. King Lethral sent me home before I could find out anything."

"So Kemp sent me to find you for nothing?"

Placing the piece in its slot, I unstrapped the left guard from my arm. "No, he thinks I might be in danger."

"This would be a lot easier if you'd stop talking in riddles."

The cloth left a thin sheen as it moved across the metal. Rubbing it around, I almost forgot to answer. "If I knew why, I'd tell you, but Kemp was rather vague on the details."

Brill kept quiet as I finished. After I put the guard and the rag down, I looked at him and shrugged. "As I contemplated freeing whomever was trapped, I thought: if only the danger was to me and not the entire kingdom. Genznor apparently decided to take me up on my offer."

"You know I'll stand with you no matter what."

"I know you would, but I won't let you." No one else would pay for my mistake.

Brill pushed off the wall and stood in front of me. "I'm not asking for permission, I'm telling you what's going to happen. Whatever happens, we're in it together."

I knew I couldn't change his mind, but it also didn't need to be decided today. "Thank you."

"Good." He tapped his fist on the table a couple of times. "No one's beaten us yet when we stand together, and I don't see this being the first time."

I laughed at the absurdity of the statement. As kids, we'd stood back to back and did battle against the imaginary hordes of Delmor numerous times, armed with nothing more than sticks. Every time we proved victorious. "Exactly."

"Glad that's settled." He winked at me and made for the door. "How about once I get out of my armor, we go to the baths? I need to wash away the dirt from that ride."

Normally I'd not think anything of the question—we usually went there after practice or a hard day—but Brill was a terrible liar.

"What's going on?" I turned to my left and watched him squirm.

“Nothing.” He stared at his boots until the lingering silence proved too much and he met my gaze. “What?”

His reaction confirmed something was up. I also knew he'd tell me the truth if I just kept quiet.

“Seriously, nothing's going on, it's just I saw Jahvon heading over, and... well you know... he, um... well... he likes you *that* way. I didn't say anything to him, I swear to Genznor I didn't, but... you know.”

He shrugged and seemed to shrink into himself. After the way I blew up this morning, I suppose he expected me to get mad. “Thanks for thinking of me, Brill, but—”

“Before you say, ‘no,’ I'm not suggesting you do anything more than come with me. You're probably at least as dirty as I am, so a bath won't kill you.”

He was right. I could use a bath, and the hot water pool always helped me relax. When I didn't answer, Brill continued trying to convince me.

“I wasn't suggesting you disappear into a dark corner. Believe me when I say I speak for everyone else, we don't want to see you two doing whatever you two would do right there in the baths.”

“There will be at least a few who might enjoy the show.” Brill opened his mouth, but nothing intelligent came out. I stood up and put my arm around his shoulder. “Don't worry, I'm just coming to wash up.”

Clean and refreshed, I enjoyed the walk back to the house. Brill was a bit disappointed when we left that nothing had come of his matchmaking attempt. I'm not sure what he expected. Jahvon was a guard in another company. For anything more than a romp in the bed, I needed permission from his sergeant *and* our captain. Pleasant as it might be to spend the time alone with him, I wanted something a bit more permanent, and that required time and patience. My experience had been sex first rarely led to anything more in the future. If he wanted the same as I did, there would be time.

Half-listening to Brill's latest story as we turned onto our street, I stopped when I saw a tall man in a deep blue robe standing near our front door. It took a moment for Brill to realize I wasn't by his side. He turned toward me and then spun back toward where I was staring.

“Who's that?”

"I don't know." I had an idea who sent him, however, so I started walking again.

Brill's body tensed, and he assumed the point. I wanted to tell him not to worry, but he started walking faster.

"Can we help you?" Brill sounded about as friendly as an angry dog.

Our "guest" never looked at Brill, keeping his focus on me. The attention set my pulse racing. If my scarred face bothered him, it didn't register in his expression. A handsome face alone rarely had me this interested, but I couldn't deny my attraction. "I'm here to speak to Thane."

Sexy, yet manly, the voice suited him. It also reminded me of something I couldn't place. "Do I know you?"

"In a manner of speaking, yes. My name is Plym." He nodded his head slightly, and then motioned toward the door. "May we speak in private?"

Brill and I glanced at each other. Inside the palace grounds, Plym likely presented no threat to me, but his appearance took me by surprise.

"Did you want me to leave?" Brill really wanted to know if I felt safe.

"You may stay if you like, Corporal Brill." Plym reached into a pocket and pulled out two gold crowns. "Or I can give you some coins and you can go have a drink."

Even Brill could read between the lines. That much gold would buy drinks for an entire squad for two nights.

"I'll be fine." I tried to say it like I believed my words. Brill might not have believed me, but he accepted my decision.

The wizard held out the coins and placed them in Brill's hand. "Let me put my bag down, and I'll leave you two alone."

Plym and I stood outside as Brill practically ran in and out of the house. He mumbled something I didn't catch as he passed. From the corner of my eye, I saw him turn once before he disappeared into the crowd.

"I guess we should go inside." I pushed the door back so he could go first.

Plym entered and scanned the small living area. The room didn't have much in the way of furniture with an oak table and four chairs, a couple of smaller tables, and a shelf for our crockery. It had always been a source of pride that I

owned this home. It was my palace. Under the wizard's scrutiny, however, it felt small and simple. Hardly fit for someone like him.

Finally, he turned toward me. Instead of the look of disdain I expected, he seemed to approve. "Clean and tidy. Not at all what I expected from two soldiers."

"We pay Brill's cousin a few coppers each week, and she cleans up and does our laundry."

"Money well spent." His lips pulled back further and I could see his perfect, white teeth.

I'd heard men talk about a woman making them weak in the knees, but until that moment I'd never experienced it myself. Not that I was in danger of collapsing, but the rush of excitement made even my legs tingle.

Resisting the urge to pull out a chair for him, I kept my distance and pointed. "Have a seat, please. I need to put my things away."

I didn't wait for an answer, but I heard the chair being pulled back as I disappeared into my room. Tossing the small bag with my dirty clothes by the bed, I looked around for something to check my appearance. Brill and I shared a small mirror, hung in the space between our doors, but given my guest's location that wasn't an option. I gave up after a moment and made sure my tunic was on straight and pants were tucked properly into my boots.

Plym sat with his back to me, facing the door. His arm rested over the back of the chair, his legs stretched out. He turned his head when I entered, and his hair caught the light so that for an instant his hair seemed on fire. When I blinked, the effect was gone.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, but I wasn't expecting company." He didn't seem upset, so I continued. "Did Nalor send you?"

"Not exactly. I told him I'd come speak to you."

"You told him?" Who other than the king could tell Nalor what to do?

"It would probably be better if you sat down, Thane." He moved two long slender fingers, and the chair closest to him slid out enough for me to sit.

Had I selected a seat, it would have been one farther away. Plym's effect on me, while not unpleasant, still made me uncomfortable. Choosing a different chair, however, was no longer possible. Settling in, I sat straight and tried to dance between not staring at him and still looking at him when he spoke.

"I realize today has been a bit unsettling, and I'm going to apologize now because I'm going to add to the upheaval in your life." He sucked his bottom lip before the tip of his tongue brushed against the top one. "I know that isn't very helpful. Perhaps the best way to start is to show you something."

He stood up, and before I could react, a flash of light blinded me. When I opened my eyes, Plym was gone, replaced by a fiery presence I recognized.

"Eraq!"

I thought he winked at me, but a second flash blurred my vision. Plym stood looking down at me, a worried expression on his face.

"I'm sorry to deceive you, but there wasn't really a chance to explain."

He hadn't been lying when he said my life was going to get more complicated. "I don't understand."

"I know, so let me explain." Sitting again, he still looked concerned. "The gods gave my kind two shapes. A human one, so we could walk among you, and the phoenix, so we could teach and guide you."

"That doesn't make sense."

"Yes it does, just think about it." He smiled. "Would your king have rushed to meet me if I were just a wizard trying to get his attention?"

I thought to debate him, but the answer was obvious.

"My walk to your home did not require a squad of mounted men to clear a path. People stared at me while I waited, but can you imagine what would have happened if Eraq hovered by your door?"

I'd have never made it to my door, but he didn't need me to answer him. "Which form do you prefer?"

He laughed but didn't sound amused. "Depending on when you ask, you will get a different answer. There was a time when I would've said, without a moment's hesitation, my phoenix side, but here and now? I was forced to spend two centuries in that cage confined in my phoenix form. I'd like to spend a few decades like this before I change back again, if I could."

Neither of us spoke right away. I wanted to ask the obvious, but his last answer told me how he felt about his imprisonment. Not that I blamed him. Had it been me, I'd not want to discuss it either.

"Which brings us to what you really want to know—how I ended up trapped in that cage."

"I'd be lying if I said I don't want to press you for answers, but I'll understand if you don't want to talk about it right now."

"That's kind of you, but you have a right to answers."

Kemp's warning replayed in my head, but I remained silent. That question could wait until I had more information.

"I assume you are familiar with the situation in Arbutis?"

I nodded. Who in Galth wasn't?

"About two hundred years ago, I was the court mage to the king of Arbutis. The kingdom was well-run and prosperous, far more so than Galth or any of your other neighbors. It wasn't because we had better merchants and craftsmen, or more fertile fields, but rather, Arbutis was rich in precious metals and gems.

"Almost from its founding as a kingdom, the kings of Arbutis held title to the vast stretches of land where most of the gold, silver, rubies, emeralds, sapphires, and other valuable items were found. They used their wealth wisely, hiring the best soldiers and advisors. But more importantly, they didn't waste their wealth or manpower on useless wars. For generation after generation, Arbutis's kings were content with their reach and diverted their energies to defending the borders."

"My history books taught that Arbutis had conquered several smaller kingdoms to create their current boundaries." I realized after I spoke that Plym had lived during that time and knew them better than any tome I'd read.

"Certainly in the early years there was conflict, but that was centuries before I arrived. The kingdom I knew was a model of good government and wise rulers."

Plym's eyes didn't seem focused on anything in the room. I could hear his admiration for our conquered neighbor to the north.

"Did you know dragons were created by the gods to teach and guide humans?"

He punctuated his question by raising a blond eyebrow. I almost laughed at the absurdity of such an idea. "Dragons? The only ones I've ever heard about are never kindly disposed toward us."

"Yes, that is true now, but at first they were your guardians. There are some dragons that remember their true calling."

"I can't say I've met or even heard of a benevolent dragon."

“I’d be surprised if you had. Well before my time, the benevolent ones, as you called them, had taken to hiding themselves in order to survive. In addition to fighting their own kind who’d turned from the role set by the gods, the good dragons were painted with the same brush as the evil ones. Humans hunted all dragons because they couldn’t tell the difference.”

“Are there many left? Good dragons, I mean.”

“Some, but it’s hard to say how many.” Plym shrugged. “They’re able to hide, even from other dragons, so we only know the ones who choose to reveal themselves.”

“What about... you know, the bad ones?”

“There are a few left, and they’re among the strongest, most deadly of their kind.” Plym stood and moved to the window. He stared out, his hands behind his back. “The dragon wars are too long and complicated for me to recount in full, but they were a brutal affair. First the traitors turned on those who tried to protect humans. Some of the good ones changed sides, and that’s when humans began to kill any dragon they could find.

“The evil ones banded together to resist the human wizards and armies, but that alliance proved short-lived. After a few successes, the dragons turned on each other, unwilling to share power. Finally, all that remained were the strongest, most powerful of their kind. Zuran was one of those survivors.”

“Zuran? Is that the dragon that rules Arbutis now?”

“Yes.” He turned to face me. “Zuran isn’t just powerful and evil, he’s cunning and devious. Unlike most of the other dragons that viewed humans with nothing but contempt, Zuran raised an army of men to help him.”

“I thought he conquered Arbutis alone.” No one ever spoke of anyone other than the dragon living in Arbutis anymore.

“Oh no, he had help. Brigands, bandits, criminals for sure, but his real strength came from within. There were more than a few noblemen who believed the king held Arbutis back from its true destiny—to conquer and rule the continent.”

I don’t think I could have spoken if it meant my life. Plym’s story challenged a number of truths that everyone knew.

“Your king was equally surprised when I told him the truth. The reason so little is known is because Zuran’s plan was decades in the making. He and the

human wizards he'd recruited spent years planning this attack. They traveled the borders of Arbutis, placing markers along the boundaries of the kingdom. On the day he attacked, a barrier went up around the kingdom. No one could get in to aid Arbutis, and no one could get out.

"Zuran attacked the palace while his army scoured the land, killing any who stood with the king. While the king's mages fought Zuran's, I took my true form and fought Zuran. I lost, and with my defeat, Arbutis quickly fell."

A tear slowly made its way down Plym's cheek. I wanted to leap up and wipe it away and tell Plym it wasn't his fault, but I held back. Would he appreciate my efforts or find them insulting? Failing to see a clear sign either way, I opted to remain seated.

"Somehow, Zuran learned my true nature. When I rose to meet him, he didn't seem surprised as I'd expected. Instead of taking a moment to reassess the situation, I attacked. Arbutis paid dearly for my folly."

"What else could you have done if there was no way in or out?"

"I could have taken the king and his family into hiding and protected them. Eventually, help would have arrived."

"Everyone can be a brilliant general if they view the battle after it's over."

"And damned is the general who falls into the trap laid by his enemy to the ruin of his kingdom."

The way Plym looked away and slowly shook his head told me nothing I said would ease his guilt. I decided to try anyway. "Your intentions were honorable, and none could question your bravery."

"My sin was pride, not cowardice. When Zuran engaged his spell, I had time to call for help. Instead, I wanted to show everyone that I was powerful—powerful enough to deal with one dragon."

"Still, everyone makes mistakes."

"This is not the same!" Plym turned toward me. "Name one other person whose mistake destroyed an entire kingdom."

Pushing the seat back, I rose and went to the window. "In my studies, I once read something I think you need to hear. 'The past is gone and we cannot change it. Dwell on it overmuch and not only won't you learn from it, you doom yourself to worse mistakes in the future.' Those words have helped me on more than one occasion. Maybe they will help you as well."

Plym didn't answer me, and I feared I'd offended him. Who was I—a mere guard—to lecture one of his kind?

Finally, he smiled. “You are a man of many surprises, Sergeant Thane. I met Mage Kuhn many centuries after he wrote that passage. Clearly you learned his lesson better than I.”

He took my left hand in his and a tingle spread throughout my body. I quickly turned to avoid embarrassing myself. Any thought of him and me together needed to be stamped out before it could take seed.

“You're wrong, Thane.” He squeezed my hand once. “I haven't read your thoughts, but you wear your emotions proudly. It is I who am not worthy of you.”

Plym raised his hand and brought my fingers to his lips and kissed them gently. A rush of heat radiated from my hand. When he let go, I felt empty again.

“There's more to my crime than just overconfidence and hubris.” He took a deep breath but didn't turn away this time. “There was someone, a prince, the youngest son of the king. He was handsome, smart, athletic, and charming when he wanted. Prince Telicon was also all that his father was not—prideful, uncaring of those beneath him, and arrogant. Despite his character flaws, I saw only the superficial. When he learned of my interest, he would flirt with me in private and ask for favors that I was eager to provide. But he was the prince of Arbutis and required someone of equal stature. To him, I was barely more than a servant.

“Two hundred years have given me time to reflect on much. My two greatest sins that day were trying to impress someone not worthy of my affections, and forgetting those I was supposed to protect couldn't rise from the ashes of their death.”

There were many questions I wanted to ask, but none more than about this man who captured Plym's interest. That, however, was the one question I couldn't ask. The silence dragged on until I couldn't hold my tongue any longer.

“How did you end up in a prison in a forest in central Galth?”

The corners of his lips curved upward enough to be noticeable. “I didn't, but you knew there was something strange about the forest.”

He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. I couldn't tell if I'd irritated an old wound or helped him find closure. I'd hoped the latter, but his emotions were hard to read.

"As I mentioned, Zuran learned my true nature before the war. Since a phoenix is nearly impossible to kill permanently, he needed to find a way to stop me from rising from my ashes and resuming the fight.

"Not that this excuses my actions, but dragons were not known for their planning. Typically, they used brute force to achieve their goals. I had no inkling that he'd put such thought into his preparation that he'd planned to deal with my rebirth."

Words of reassurance weren't going to help, so I tentatively reached for his hand. When he didn't pull away, I rubbed the top slowly with my thumb. He rewarded me with a small smile.

"My death was painful, but quick. He gathered my ashes and put them in the vault his followers had prepared. Part of Zuran's preparation included digging a hole just outside his magical barrier. Once my remains were sealed inside, he sent my crypt to the waiting grave. By the time I returned from the dead, I was buried and alone."

"How could that be? I found you in the middle of Galth, not near the border with Arbutis."

Plym didn't try to break our contact. If anything, his grip tightened when I shifted my fingers.

"The vault resisted all my efforts to escape. Each attempt to break the spell only strengthened my restraints. But I quickly learned I could do certain things to affect my surroundings. My first endeavor was to wrestle control of his barrier. Unfortunately, I couldn't bring it down, so I did the next best thing—I made it permanent."

"But that trapped everyone inside as well."

"Yes and no. In theory, my actions could have sentenced everyone inside Arbutis to a desolate existence, but in practice I did not. Immediately following his attack, other dragons, phoenixes, and wizards spent years trying to pierce the shield without success. Ironically, Zuran didn't realize *he* was trapped for decades."

"In time, I made contact with Olearn, an ancient dragon, who tried to help me. Together we learned much about my prison, but he couldn't free me."

“How was I able to free you? I’m no wizard.”

“And that was the key.” Plym placed his free hand over mine and let his long fingers trace an invisible pattern over and over. “Remember, I said Zuran was cunning. Only a non-wizard human could open the hatch and break the spell. It had to be someone who asked for nothing in return, who knew nothing about me, or why I was imprisoned.”

“Basically, you needed to find a fool.”

“No, just a very special person.” He squeezed my hand and stared at me. “I needed someone who was compassionate, yet cautious, and willing to trust. That’s why I used Thunder to reach you. He trusted me because he knew who and what I was. No phoenix has ever willingly harmed an innocent creature, human or animal. Once he believed in my rescue, he convinced you to do what I could not.”

“That explains why me, but not how. You said your crypt was located at the border of Galth and Arbutis. That’s almost two hundred and fifty miles north of here.”

“With Oleard’s help, I learned how to bring people to me. It was very draining, and I could only keep them there for short periods of time. That part, however, proved to be the easier half of the task. You were the first person who agreed to try to free me.”

Again Kemp’s warning came to mind. “And because of that, I’m now yours to command?”

“Command you?” He looked confused and worried. “No. Why would you think that?”

“You said you claimed me.”

“Ah, that.” The confusion disappeared, but the thin smile did nothing to dispel his concern. “No, I am not your master. I claimed you so no one else could.”

Dusk had settled around the city when I heard Brill’s voice. I continued the inspection of my armor as I waited for him to come inside.

The door swung open with a thud, followed quickly by a curse. “Thane!”

True to his routine, the door slammed shut just as I was about to answer.

“Thane!”

“I’m in my room.” I’m not sure why I bothered; the first place he always checked when he returned home was my room.

“What’re you doing?”

I glanced over at my doorway. He looked remarkably sober for someone who had two gold crowns to spend on ale and whiskey.

“Making sure my armor doesn’t need mending.”

“Why? So you heard already?”

“That the king intends to take the army north?” When Brill nodded, I shook my head and returned to my inspection. “Not exactly, but I assumed that’s what he would do.”

“He is.” Brill sounded excited. I didn’t share his feelings. “Word spread that all units are being called up. I even heard that he’s put out a call for mercs from as far south as Harben.”

“I’d not put much faith in rumors, Brill.” I tugged at a loose leather strap and worked the knot a bit tighter. “I think we’re on our own for this fight.”

“That wizard must have told you more than you’re letting on.”

“He told me a lot, but he didn’t share any of the king’s plans.” Plym didn’t need to spell it out. Zuran needed to be confronted before he had time to attack.

Pulling the chair from the wall, Brill spun it around and sat with his arms on the seat back. “Are you going to share or do I have to beg?”

A smile I didn’t want forced its way onto my lips. Brill begging for something was the stuff of epic tales. But he deserved to know what to expect.

“His name is Plym, and he was the King’s Mage of Arbutis.”

Brill listened to my story like I had the talent of a bard. Remarkably, he only interrupted me once and that was to clarify a word. If he noticed I left out huge pieces—like the fact Plym was really Eraq—he didn’t question me.

“Plym said he’d return tonight after he finished with the king.”

“Why?” Brill played the fool often enough that when he turned serious, it set me back.

“Why what?”

“Why is he coming here? Shouldn't he be staying with Nalor or something?”

“Um... well, I... um...” I could feel my cheeks get hot, and Brill opened his eyes wide.

“Are you serious? Him?”

I tried to meet his gaze but quickly turned away. My thumb worried a ding in my forearm bracer, and I decided to own my decision. Looking up, I stared at my friend and nodded. “Yes, him. Before you say anything else, I can't totally explain why. Can anyone say why they find someone else attractive?”

“No, no, it's not that. I mean, I get you like smart men and he's very good-looking.” I raised an eyebrow and he scowled at me. “Please, I don't need to be attracted to men to know which ones are good-looking. I need to know my competition for the ladies when I'm out, don't I?”

His earnest expression that accompanied his explanation made me laugh. Not a begrudged little chuckle, but a deep, full-belly laugh that erased some of my worries. “I have to admit, I've never thought of it like that, but it makes sense.”

“Good, because I've had to listen to your opinion on women more than enough times.”

He smiled, but his eyes dared me to make a comment. I chose to be quiet—this time.

“Anyway, I'm just a bit surprised. I mean today you were flirting with Jahvon—”

“I wasn't flirting with him!”

“And now you're all doe-eyed over a wizard you've just met.”

“What happened to my needing to say yes to a man who puts a bit of steel in my sword?”

He stared at me, smiled, and then laughed. “Are you suggesting you listened to me?”

“Of course not, but the result is the same.” I stood and put the guard in its place. I kept my back to him and tested some of the joints on my shoulder guard. “It seemed right.”

“I assume that he is interested *that way*?”

“He said yes when I asked him to spend the night.”

“Right, but does he know...” Brill rolled his hand over.

“He kissed me good-bye before he left. I’m confident we’re thinking the same.”

“Did you want me to find somewhere to sleep tonight?”

“What?” I turned as I realized what he meant. “Of course not. This is your home. I’d never ask you to leave.”

“I know you wouldn’t. That’s why I’m asking.” The loopy grin returned. “If what people say is true, I’m going to need my sleep. I don’t need you two keeping me awake.”

I laughed before I plucked my helmet from the round top. Retaking my seat, I continued with my review. “I can’t promise you that *won’t* happen, but my expectations are that we’ll probably just fall asleep together.”

Brill raised an eyebrow. “Is that what you think?”

“It’s all I want.” I couldn’t afford to make too much of a connection.

Neither of us spoke, and when I finished with my armor, I pulled a key from inside my tunic. I could feel Brill watching as I moved to the small chest at the foot of my bed. In the waning light, I found the small packet of papers.

Taking a deep breath, I exhaled slowly and held out the folded sheets. “Here.”

Brill reached out and tentatively accepted what I offered. “What’s this?”

“My father taught me early on that a soldier’s life is unpredictable, so I should make plans for the worst. I had a barrister draw up a will. If I die, I left any money to my parents and I left you the house.”

“Why are you telling me this now? We’ve been to battle before.”

Rather than meet his questioning gaze, I focused on the other contents of the chest. “I should take these things to my parents’ house at first light.”

“Thane, stop it.” He grabbed my arm, but I shook my head and refused to turn around. “What’s going on? You’ve never done this before. Is there something you’re not telling me?”

“Yes, there are things I’ve not told you and I won’t. I can’t. But they don’t concern me.” I licked my lips slowly and swallowed. “Kemp was right. I’m

caught up in whatever Eraq started. I don't know how or why—other than I opened his cage and let him out. Something big is going to happen in Arbutis. Something the bards will sing about for centuries. And I'm going to be at the center of it."

"Horse dung!" He grabbed my hand and slapped the papers in my palm. "I don't want your house, your money, or anything else except for my friend to come home. We've been through worse, we'll get through this too."

"When we joined the army, our first sergeant told me that real soldiers could tell on the eve of battle if they were going to survive or not. He said he'd never thought his time was up and he'd never died. I laughed and told him he was crazy. The night before the battle of Selandis, when he promoted me to corporal, he told me to make sure the men got home. He died that day from an arrow that slipped through the shield wall."

"That's an old wives' tale. No one can tell."

"I used to think that way too. But I never thought I was going to die, not even when I got this." I touched the rough skin on my cheek and followed the scar up and over my right eye. "I feel my fate, Brill. I'm going to die in this war."

"Stop it, Thane! Just stop it!" He pushed me with both hands, and I thought he was going to punch me. I stared at him, resigned to take whatever he wanted to give me. "Why are you doing this?"

The beginnings of tears formed at the corner of his eyes. "Because I have to. Eraq claimed me when I freed him."

"What in the unholy depths of Delmor does that mean?"

Even mad, his colorful vocabulary made me smile. "If you invoke Omora, you'll have completed the board."

"Stop trying to divert me." Despite his attempts, he couldn't hold back a small grin. "Besides, you know I never swear by the mother goddess. I'm too afraid of her."

"I don't know what it means." I paused to make sure I didn't give away Plym's secret by mistake. "The only clear statements I got from Plym were that I'm not Eraq's servant, but I have to be there when Eraq challenges the dragon."

"They expect you to fight a dragon?"

Shaking my head, I picked up Eraq's leather glove and put it on. "No. I need to take him to the fight."

"That makes no sense."

"Someone has to do it." I flexed my fingers and listened to the leather creak. "And don't ask why me. When I freed him, that act removed the barrier. If anyone has to go, it should be me."

Brill clenched his hands and moved closer. He grabbed my shoulders and pulled me into a bear hug. Shocked, it took me a moment before I wrapped my arms around his back.

"Don't be scared, Brill. You're a good man and a damn good soldier. You don't need me anymore."

I heard him sniff and when he stepped back, he turned and brought his hand to his eyes. "I refuse to accept you aren't coming back. Do you understand? I won't hear anymore talk like that."

"Fair enough." I still planned to take the chest to my parents in the morning.

The soft tap on my shoulder caused me to sit up in bed. Out of instinct, I reached for a weapon I didn't have.

Plym stepped back a pace, holding his hands up. "I'm sorry, Thane. The meeting went longer than I expected. Your king had many questions."

I'd gone to bed when he never arrived. "I assumed you'd been held up. It's hard to compete with the king."

"Trust me, this is where I wanted to be. Lethral must've noticed, because he asked if I had somewhere to go."

"I hope you didn't tell him where you were going." I don't know why it bothered me that the king might know.

"Of course I did." Plym untied the rope around his waist. "But before you get upset, remember I was in phoenix form. They've never met Plym—yet. I told them I was responsible for protecting you since you freed me."

"Protect me?" I sat up and the blankets slid down. The cool air on my skin caused me to shiver. "From what?"

"Your king is protective of you. He asked the same question." He chuckled as he coiled the cord and set it on the table. "There is no danger, but it was a good excuse to let me leave."

“However you managed it, I’m glad you made it.” I stretched and remembered I bolted the door before going to bed. “Did Brill let you inside?”

“No.” He sat on the chair closest to the bed to pull off his boots. “It’s been so long since I’ve had to do this, I missed it.”

After a brief struggle, the left boot came free. “Almost. As to how I got here, unless a place is magically sealed, I can come and go as I wish.”

When the right boot rested beside the left, Plym stood up and looked around. “I hope this isn’t too forward to ask, but are you wearing anything under those blankets?”

In the dim light coming from one of the two moons, I couldn’t see his face, but from his voice, he seemed embarrassed. “No, I didn’t expect you when it got late so I went to bed like I always do. I’ll put something on.”

I started to pull the sheets back but stopped as he pulled the robe over his head.

“You can if you like, but don’t do it on my account. I only asked so I’d know if I need to fetch something to sleep in. The robe is a bother.”

Even in the faint light, I could see his flawless skin and whipcord-tight body. If I pulled the blanket back, my arousal would be impossible to miss. “Maybe I ought to find something. I...”

Plym stepped closer, lifted the corner of the covers and slid next to me. “I’m in the same state as you, Thane. Wearing clothing won’t hide that.”

He put a hand on my chest and I nearly jumped out of the bed. “Sorry. I’m... I didn’t expect that.”

“Are you sure this is what you want?” I could hear a note of uncertainty in his voice. “I can easily revert to my other form and sleep on the stand.”

“No, please don’t. I’m sure this is what I want, but I just want to sleep next to you. I know how that makes me sound, but—”

He put a finger against my lip. “Shhh. That sounds perfect.”

We both settled back against my pillow, and he tentatively placed his hand on my chest again. This time I didn’t pull away, but I shook at the feel of his warm fingers against my skin. I reached over to touch him and felt clumsy as my calloused hand landed on his shoulder. He stopped me from pulling back by grabbing my wrist.

“Would you hold me, please?”

My voice failed me. This amazing man—beautiful, smart, and beyond powerful—was asking me to hold him. In the absence of words, I raised my arm to invite him closer.

The warmth of his body felt good against me. I wrapped my arm around his torso and pulled gently. When he snuggled closer, my erection pressed against the cleft of his buttocks.

“Sorry.” I tried to move back but he moved with me.

“It’s okay, Thane. If we switched positions, you’d feel me just as excited.” He guided my hand down to his groin and laid the flat of my hand against his hard penis. “Being the vain sort that I am, if I didn’t excite you I’d be disappointed.”

“How could anyone not desire to be where I am right now? With all that you are, I don’t know why you’d want to be with me.”

“There are many kinds of beauty, Thane.” Together, we moved my arm back to his chest and I pulled us closer. “Not only are you handsome and strong, you have the most beautiful soul of any man who has ever desired me. You offer me your comfort and ask nothing in return. You could ask for the stars and I’d try to give them to you, but instead you question your worth to be near me.”

“I question my position because other than the strength of my sword arm and my skill with weapons, what more do I have to offer you? And in truth, you have no need of those services.”

“You are correct, I don’t need your sword or shield to protect me.” Before I could stop him, he rolled over and faced me. “May I kiss you?”

Again I lost the ability to speak, but I managed a nod. He brought his lips against mine and softly kissed me. Not a lust-filled, lip-crushing kiss, but a calm and passionate one.

I felt his hand cup the side of my face as his tongue touched my lips, seeking entrance. Opening my mouth, I let him in. His tongue felt hot against mine and he tasted like honey mead and sweet fruit. When he inched back, I felt the loss acutely.

“That was wonderful.” He smiled and placed his head against mine. “You pour yourself into your kiss.”

Unsure where to put my free hand, I placed it on his hip and slowly began to knead the tight muscles beneath the smooth skin. His body felt like warm ivory, if such a thing existed. I wanted to kiss him again but feared I couldn't control myself.

“You offer me that which I desire most—someone who sees me, not what I can do for them. That is a rare and precious gift. One I do not have the power to repay.”

Plym angled his head to bring his lips against mine. Our second kiss was as wonderful as the first. After what he'd said, my self-doubt shriveled and disappeared into the background of my thoughts.

The kiss continued until we both needed air. Plym playfully nipped at my nose and turned around to snuggle next to me again. I understood his need better and happily pulled him tight. Wrapped together, even our breathing was in sync. I felt at peace. My desire for him remained, visible and undeniable against him, but it didn't overwhelm my control. I hadn't the experience that many men had, but I knew Plym wouldn't disappear at first light, never to come back. That thought satisfied me more than any physical act could have. I kissed the back of his head and hugged a little tighter, feeling giddy for my good fortune.

Lost in thought, the rhythmic beat of his heart under my hand began to lull me into sleep. The first time he moved, it didn't register, but I didn't miss it when Plym continued to wiggle his taut butt against my hard cock.

“Thane?” His voice was so faint, I wasn't sure he meant for me to hear it.

“Yes?”

“Would you think less of me if I said I want to feel you inside me right now?”

My dick twitched, answering for me before I could find the words. When Plym pressed himself tighter still, I thrust up just enough to acknowledge his movement.

“No, never. But you don't need to do this for me.”

“I wish I could say I was being selfless and offering myself to repay your kindness, but I can't.” He guided my hand to his large, very hard penis. Pulling back his foreskin gently, my hand came away wet and sticky from the fluid he'd leaked already. “This close is not enough, I need more. I want to feel your heat inside and out.”

The entire time he spoke, he ground himself against me, catching my erection between his cheeks and then releasing it. I could feel the pre-cum seeping from under my foreskin, leaving little trails on his smooth skin. I wanted him as much as he seemed to want me.

Having had no expectations, I had nothing close by to lubricate Plym for my entry. The closest oil was in the kitchen, and I didn't want to break contact to retrieve it.

For a moment, I considered using just the natural fluid I'd already created but quickly dismissed that notion. I wasn't the largest man I knew, but I was substantial enough that I feared hurting Plym.

"I need to—"

Plym's hand rose over his body and held a small vial. "Magic has its uses in situations like this."

My hand shook as I accepted the small ceramic bottle. It took an effort to remove the stopper without spilling the contents on us. I stuck my finger in the opening and tilted the bottle. Running my finger slowly between his cheeks, I gently inserted the tip of my finger inside his trembling body.

I quickly removed it and reapplied more oil. This time, once I found his entrance, I inched my finger forward until I couldn't go any farther. Plym's sudden intake of breath when I withdrew my finger left little doubt what he wanted. Another dip into the vial and I added a second finger. His body clamped tight around my fingers and I kept still.

"Are you sure you want to continue?" I whispered in his ear. I didn't want to stop, but I didn't want to hurt him either. "I'm bigger than two fingers."

"Never more sure of anything, Thane." He reached across our bodies, put his hand on my butt and pulled gently. "Just go slow and I'll be fine."

"I promise, but if you need me to slow down, just say so."

I dribbled a small amount of the slippery substance in my palm and grabbed my cock. I'd rarely felt myself this hard before. Recapping the vial, I passed it to Plym. I wrapped my hand around Plym's equally rigid cock and started to grind slowly against his small, but muscular ass.

Plym pressed back against me and moaned softly. It sounded like my name, which made my heart skip a beat. Sliding my hips down, I positioned myself and gently pressed forward. After wiggling around, I lodged myself at his opening and pushed the tiniest bit inside.

Fighting the desire to bury myself deep inside him, I took a deep breath and gently stroked him. When I felt him move back, I slowly pushed upward. When both of us moved at the same time, it caused more of me to enter than I intended. The head of my cock slipped past his ring and I heard the sharp intake of breath.

“If I said it’s been a couple hundred years since I’ve done this, would you think I was lying?” he whispered.

I started to laugh, but with every chuckle my body moved and I heard Plym grunt. “I’m sorry. Do you want me to pull out?”

“No, don’t.” He clenched his muscles tighter for emphasis.

“I won’t.” I moved my oily hand slowly up and down his hardness and nibbled his earlobe. “But I don’t want to hurt you.”

“You aren’t.”

Before I could answer, he arched his back, forcing himself down my entire length. A soft groan escaped his lips as he inched his body as tightly as he could against mine. “Don’t move for a moment. Let my body adjust to you.”

I stayed as still as I could. I’d even stopped stroking his cock as I waited. “You feel so good.” I kissed the tip of his ear and smelled the lavender and spice scent in his hair.

The heat from being held tight inside Plym radiated outward until my body was covered in a thin sheen of sweat. Although he was slim and lean, his muscles moving around me felt anything but weak.

I remained still until he moved his body. Taking that as a sign to take things to the next level, I pulled back a fraction and thrust forward. Instead of a grunt, my act evoked a moan that spurred me on. With each movement, I lengthened my strokes until I was almost pulling out entirely before plunging all the way back in.

Plym moved with me, pushing back to meet my thrusts, urging me on in a husky voice. I slid my arms under his and put my hands on his shoulders to pull him down as I pushed up. Sweat matted the hair on my chest, and I could feel the moisture on his body.

The friction, heat, and sexual tension between us brought me to the edge of climax too soon. “I’m so close.”

“Don’t stop, Thane. Give me all of you. Please don’t stop.” He squeezed his muscles around my cock, and I felt myself tip over the edge. His calls to keep

going encouraged me, and I increased my tempo until I feared I might hurt him. Instead of a cry to stop, he begged me to go harder still.

The end came in an explosive and consuming final thrust. I muffled my cry by kissing Plym's damp blond hair as I continued to drive in and out of his amazing body. Plym could have burst into flames in my arms, and I wouldn't have been able to stop. All my senses protested from the overload of feelings, but I kept going. The last contraction left me spent, but happy. He wrapped his hands over mine and kept us pressed together.

It took several deep breaths to recover, and even then my heart was pounding hard enough that Plym must have felt it. In my hypersensitive state, I tried not to move, and each time either of us did, I jumped.

"Sensitive?" Plym wiggled and laughed when I twitched. "Sorry, but that was amazing, and I'm still a bit giddy."

I tried to move my hand, but his grip felt like a vice. "I need to take care of you."

"Not right now. I'm happy just lying here like this. We can take care of me later."

That didn't sound fair. "I don't feel right leaving you like this."

"By 'like this' do you mean unbelievably happy and content?"

The way Plym held onto my arms matched the sincerity I heard in his words, but it felt wrong. "It makes me feel so selfish."

He raised my hand to his lips. "Believe me when I say you gave me exactly what I wanted. And now, more than finding release, I *need* to be held just like this. Connected and together."

I thought back to the men I'd been with, and how most got up and left after they'd ejaculated. Being used like that always tasted bitter and left me feeling cheap and undesirable. "I understand."

Plym twisted his head enough that I could see his smile. I raised my head and kissed him before he lay back on my pillow. "Thank you."

Knowing I'd made him happy more than eased the guilt I felt for not helping him finish; it made my heart skip a beat. It also scared me.

To my knowledge, Plym—*Eraq*—was one of the most powerful wizards alive. Yet he had exposed his weakness and vulnerability, and if I failed him, I feared what might happen. Not to me, but to him and those who would come to

depend on him. I had no intentions of using him or turning him away, but I didn't know that I could be what he needed. I could only be myself, and I worried that wouldn't be enough.

Plym flexed his butt muscles and squeezed my still hard cock inside him. "You've gotten quiet. Are you okay?"

"Yes," I lied. He needed my strength, not my insecurities. "I'm just not sure I can stay inside you all night."

His laugh made me smile. "I don't need all night, Thane. Ideally, I'd love to fall asleep like this, but even a little longer would be wonderful."

"If I stay here too much longer, I can't promise to just stay still."

"Unless there's some reason I should be afraid of that, it sounds rather nice to me. Wake me if I fall asleep. I don't want to miss even a little bit."

He snuggled back and let out a content sigh. My hopes of not getting attached seemed a fantasy, but I wasn't unhappy. Instead, I kissed his head and closed my eyes. He was too special to let go, and I was prepared to see it as far as we could go together. Even if it broke my heart.

We crested the ridge, and the desolation of Arbutis stretched before us. The land leading up to the border had been burned away for a hundred yards or more in all directions. The king, his generals, and advisors decided to camp here and wait.

With Eraq perched on my hand, the king and other important people were frequent companions the entire ride. Not that anyone included me in the discussions, but I still listened. Based on information collected from the scouts, we knew Zuran and his army marched toward us. The king decided to use the empty wasteland to meet the enemy.

I rested my hand on my knee, and Eraq landed on the leather glove. We sat quietly under a tree while soldiers worked feverishly to set up camp. Having campaigned enough, I knew all hands were needed, so I chafed at being ordered to the side.

Before we started north, I was relieved of my command and given a new assignment: guard Eraq. The futility of trying to protect one as powerful as a phoenix seemed lost on everyone except myself. Even Eraq approved.

I'd been daydreaming when two soldiers, both of whom had to be teenagers, approached and saluted me.

“Sir,” the shorter of the two said. “We’ve been assigned to set up your tent. Where would you like it?”

His smile was too friendly, and I noticed Eraq’s feathers stand up.

“You have nothing to worry about, Eraq.” My words had no effect.

He squawked loudly and our tent appeared, fully erect, in the space to our right. A pop of flames jumped from his head, and he finally settled down. “*You two are not needed. You may go now.*”

The young soldiers stared wide-eyed at me, stealing furtive glances at the angry phoenix. I stood and felt Eraq’s talon’s dig into the glove. Bringing my right hand up, I saluted the pair.

“You two are dismissed.” I waited until they walked off before I turned to Eraq. “Was that necessary?”

The fiery feathers lay flat on his back again, and I noted a twinkle in his eye when he turned to meet my gaze. “*It irritated me, so why prolong my discomfort?*”

I chuckled and opened the flap. “That has a certain logic to it.”

“*So glad you agree.*” He leapt from my arm and flew into our tent. There had been grumbling among the senior officers that the quartermaster assigned me a tent larger than all but the lord marshal of his majesty’s army. Eraq stared a hole in a few commanders and reminded them the tent was for him, not me.

I entered behind him and was greeted by a pair of arms pulling me into a kiss. My initial surprise made for an awkward moment, but I quickly recovered. The frustration of riding all day with him inches from me evaporated the instant his tongue touched my lips, forcing them apart.

“What was that for?” Not that I minded, but he hadn’t surprised me like that before.

“Just making sure I still had your interest.” He winked and kissed me again.

When we broke for air, he waved at the door. I’d learned the first night that was how he sealed our tent from unwanted guests. He took my hand and led us to the back of the tent.

“I know you miss your command, and I’m sorry I made the king assign you to me. I just wanted the chance to spend time with you, even if it is in that other form.”

"I do miss it, but I want to be with you. There will be other commands."

Plym guided me to the bed he magically created every night, and I sat on the edge to take off my boots. While I struggled with my footwear, he filled an oversized basin with a pitcher that shouldn't have had a tenth of the water needed for the job. He carried it over and began to wash my feet.

"You shouldn't do that." My protest didn't stop him.

"Why? Because you're not good enough?" He kept his gaze down, focused on his work. "Or are you going to say I'm too important?"

I'd learned the first night we were together in my house how much Plym valued me. "No. But it's something I can easily do myself."

"I could do it with a wave of my hand, but this feels more intimate." His fingers massaged the ball of my foot. "I like feeling your body react to my touch. To know it's my fingers that make you shiver, my body that makes you hard, and my soul that makes you want me."

He ran his hands up my britches, and the fabric strained under my state of arousal. Our gazes met, and I saw in his eyes the mirror to my own emotions. I wanted to taste his flesh, smell his scent, and plunge into him until we were so close we could be one person.

But more than take him physically, I wanted to hold him and keep him safe. An impossible wish given what awaited us.

Plym placed his hands on my knees and started to move his fingers up my legs. My plan to pull him up for a kiss died when I heard a voice from the front of the tent.

"Lord Eraq? The king commands your presence."

Rolling his eyes, Plym gently squeezed my thighs. "Oh bother."

I didn't recognize the voice, but I knew the type. "Excuse his choice of words. I'm certain Lethral never commanded your presence."

Laughing, Plym stood and stroked my face. "Lethral has been a most gracious ruler in our meetings. I do not hold the jealousy of his pages against him."

"Lord Eraq! The king—"

"I'll be there in a moment, child. Cease your yammering, or I'll see you never speak again!" Plym shrugged. "I didn't say I had to put up with zealots."

“Be kind. If he’s able to grow a beard, I’d be surprised.” I reached for my boots. “Give me a moment and I’ll be ready.”

“No, that’s not necessary.” Plym waved his hand lazily over the basin and it elongated into an oversized tub full of steaming water. “I had plans to join you, but please enjoy a bath. I’ll be back in time for dinner.”

Before I could answer, he changed forms with a small flash and flew toward the front. “*The tent is sealed to all but me. No one will disturb you.*”

I debated following him but decided it would not be a good impression to chase after my charge. Eraq would make up some excuse that he ordered me to stay here, or something similar, wherein I couldn’t be faulted.

Feeling dusty and tired, I stripped off my remaining clothes and stepped into the enormous copper tub. The water felt warm, but not hot. Perfect for washing and relaxing. The morning after our first night together, Plym created this same tub so we could clean up from the night’s activities. That water stayed the same temperature our entire, protracted bath. I’d no doubt this would do the same.

A twinge of guilt stung me as I sank to my neck in the relaxing water. No one, not even the king, would enjoy such a treat while on campaign. I couldn’t even salve my conscience by saying my task earned me such a reward. Guarding Eraq was anything but a chore. Every day since we’d left Caliphid, Eraq had pampered me: bath, the best food in camp, and a soft bed.

Each night Plym would share my bed, his warm body pressed tight against me. He always offered himself to me, asking me, as if there was any doubt I would desire to be inside him again.

Sitting up, I applied the soap he left to the coarse cloth and quietly washed myself. I wanted to make the night special for Plym. Especially since it would likely be our last. Getting clean would be the first step.

A light feathery touch running down my cheek woke me. After almost two weeks of Plym’s presence, I no longer jumped out of my skin at the contact.

“Done already?” I asked lazily.

Laughter greeted my question. “*I’ve been gone nearly three hours. It’s a good thing I put a spell on the water or else you’d look like a walking wrinkle.*”

I twisted my head just in time to see him revert to his human form. He was beautiful as a phoenix, but I still found his human half more desirable. I never tired of staring at his lithe body and the graceful, yet powerful, way he moved.

“Move forward, please,” he said as he walked toward me.

I raised an eyebrow but did as he asked. Plym had always positioned himself in such a way that I held him, never the reverse. He stepped into the warm water, slid his long legs around me, and wrapped his arms across my midsection.

“I love how your body feels. I wanted to experience it from this position.” He began to rub soap across my back. “The way your muscles move under my hands makes me want to... well, you know what it does to me.”

“Mhmm. I do. But your touch does the same to me.” I closed my eyes and let his hands move back and forth. When he stopped, he scooped water with his hands and poured it over my body. Clean, I stood up. “Change positions with me.”

“Why? I was happy this way.” Despite his protest, he let me pull him to his feet. We stepped closer so we could switch places, and I stole a kiss before we settled down.

“I want to return the favor.” Picking up the cloth, I held my hand out for the soap he still held. I started with his back, and when I gently raised an arm, he laughed.

“You know I don’t require a bath, right? Whenever I shift to my phoenix form, dirt, grit, odor, everything is burned away.”

“Humor me.” I continued my ministrations. “You’re not the only one who likes running his hands over skin and muscle.”

Plym let me finish, then swiveled so we faced each other. “I brought food back with me. It’s on the table up front if you’re hungry.”

“You waited ’til now to tell me that?”

“I was distracted.” His apology didn’t sound remorseful in the least. “But I made sure it stayed warm.”

The little things he did for me with his magic only added to my deepening attachment. I felt like the center of his world. That his waking time was devoted to making me happy—which he did. A dopey smile spread across my face.

“You treat me like the king.”

“Oh no.” He maintained a serious expression for less than a heartbeat. “He doesn’t warrant anything close to this.”

I almost asked, “why,” but I knew better. “I don’t want to be a king, anyway. I prefer being your guard.”

My deprecating humor didn’t get a smile like I’d hoped. Instead, Plym’s expression turned serious and his eyes focused on something far away. “Did I say something wrong?”

“What? No, of course not, Thane. I’m glad you’re my guard. There’s no one who could make me feel safer than you.” Despite his smile, he still looked pensive. He didn’t give me a chance to comment. “Come, let’s eat. Eraq might not need food, but I do.”

Water evaporated from his skin when he stepped out of the tub. A towel and his dark blue robe were resting on the chair. Neither had been there when he joined me, but nothing that happened in his presence surprised me anymore. He handed me the towel before he pulled on his robe. The way he walked away while I got dressed told me something just happened. Did he know about my premonition?

I lingered by the tub, taking extra time to dry off. Our night was meant to be special, not ruined by discontent. Still trying to find the right words, I put on my pants and then stepped into my boots.

My shod foot hit the ground harder than I expected, and I glanced at the front of our tent. Plym never reacted to the noise. He merely sat at the table, slowly putting items on our plates. The deep breath I took to settle myself did nothing to help, so I let it out. My gut told me not to say anything, but I was still his guard and I had a duty to perform. Blood rushed to my head and I could feel the disquiet throughout my body.

Stopping before the table, I bowed my head and avoided his eyes. “Have I offended you?”

“What?” He looked up, almost surprised to see me. “Thane, what are you talking about? No, you’ve not offended me. Why would you ask that?”

The urgent note in his voice only confused me more. “I... it just seems I did something while we were in the bath to upset you. We were joking and suddenly you got very distant.”

From the confused look on his face, I realized how pathetic I must have sounded. In the middle of a war, one that nearly claimed his life two centuries ago, I questioned his feelings for me.

I decided to leave, but he left his seat and stood in front of me faster than I thought possible. “Thane, no, no, no. You’ve done nothing wrong. I’m so sorry. It was something you said that... oh!”

He grabbed my hands and gently tugged me closer. “Please, sit with me. You haven’t eaten since lunch. I promise nothing has changed between us.”

Although he didn’t say it, I heard the word “yet” at the end of his sentence. He guided me to a seat and then moved a chair closer.

“I’m so sorry for my reaction. Will you let me explain?”

I nodded because I didn’t trust my voice. Plym slid one of the two plates he’d prepared closer to me.

“Tomorrow Zuran and his forces should be here. If not tomorrow, then the next day for sure.” He handed me a wedge of cheese and motioned for me to eat. It might have been a piece of tree bark for all I noticed the taste. “This is more than a bit personal for me. Not only did he imprison me for two centuries, he destroyed Arbutis.

“But none of that explains my reaction moments ago.” Poking at his food with his fork, he appeared as interested in eating as I felt. Plym exhaled and shook his head. “I fear my selfish nature has needlessly put you in the path of danger. When you said you preferred to be my guard, I realized what I’d done. Had I said nothing, another would have been assigned to protect me, and you would be protecting the king.”

“Who better to guard you than me?” I tried to make a joke, but his explanation touched a little too close to the truth.

“Someone I don’t have feelings for.” Plym met my gaze for the barest instant. The sadness in his eyes tugged at my heart as he turned away. “I came to you at your house the night after being freed because I was so lonely for human contact, I wanted to burn away and never be reborn. Not the crass physical coupling that feels good in the moment but leaves you empty when it’s over, but true meaningful contact. I wanted to be held, to feel the warmth of someone’s body next to mine. And when it was over, I’d planned to return to my old life.

“I didn’t expect more than a night from you, but you were so kind and gentle, yet strong and masculine, that I needed more. You gave all of yourself to me without asking for anything in return. I repaid that generosity by taking you for myself with no regard for the consequences. Being with the king will be far safer than being at my side when the battle begins.”

“Plym.” I twisted in my seat and took his hands in mine. Any thought of telling him my expectations for the coming battle was pushed aside. “I’m a soldier, it’s what I’ve always been. Fighting for my king and my country is all I know. With you or with the king, my life is always in danger. The difference is, being with you allowed me to see what it’s like to be cherished.

“You say you took from me and gave nothing in return, but that isn’t true. You’ve given me more than any man I’ve known. I don’t want gold or riches or even power. You want me above anything else. What more can you give me than everything you are?”

A tear rolled down my cheek, and I struggled not to turn away. My desire to ease his conscience might have succeeded, but at what cost? When the battle ended, and he was alone again, he would blame himself all the more for my death. Plym reached up and wiped it away. His smile consumed his entire face and his eyes radiated his true feelings.

The whispered words of thanks made my hypocrisy complete. He leaned closer and kissed me briefly on the lips. I wondered if he knew I was saying my good-bye.

He pulled me to my feet, and without a word, led me to our bed. Still without speaking, he took off his robe. He pulled my shirt over my head and continued undressing me until I was naked. I closed my eyes as he used his hands and tongue to breathe fire into my body.

He stopped, and I felt his presence over me. I found his face inches above mine when I opened my eyes.

“I want to be inside you, Thane.” He kissed me gently and pulled back. “Will you let me?”

The question surprised me. Every night he came to me, he’d only asked for me to penetrate him. I’d asked several times if he wanted to reverse roles, and he always rejected the suggestion without a thought.

“Thane?” I saw concern etched in his face. “You don’t have to if you don’t want to.”

“Of course I want you.” I pulled him down, pressing our bodies together. I nuzzled his neck, using my beard to make him squirm. Moving my lips to his ear, I added, “Are you sure it’s what you want?”

“Very much so.” He raised his head. “I’ve taken so much already, I didn’t want to ask you to give me more until I was sure you knew my true feelings.”

"I know," I whispered. "Whatever I have that you desire, I give you freely and with all that I am."

I nearly said all my heart, but such a declaration seemed unfair given what the future held.

Plym kissed me again, but this time with the passion and intensity that made my body tingle. No man's lips ever affected me so deeply or left me so satisfied. If we did nothing more than explore each other's mouths, I'd not complain. But knowing what he wanted made fulfilling that need my only thought.

"You will be my first," Plym whispered when we broke our kiss. My eyes opened wider. Looking amused, he smiled and nodded. "Indeed."

"I'm... I don't know what to say."

"You said enough when you said yes." He rolled to the side, and I could hear him uncap the vial of lubricant. I nearly jumped when I felt the cool substance applied to my body as he gradually worked his finger inside me. "You're so tense. Have you let another man inside you before?"

I wished I could have said no but I answered honestly. "Yes."

"Good," he said as he removed his finger to get more oil. "I want you to enjoy this, and knowing how good it will feel should help you relax."

A low growl emanated from my mouth as he worked to prepare me. It might not be my first, but it could have been the way it felt. My reaction seemed to feed his movements, and soon I was begging for him to use more than fingers. I tried to roll over, but he stopped me.

"I want to see your face, Thane. Watch you react to me. Be able to kiss you as I move inside you."

The intimacy he suggested gave me pause. I wanted it, craved it really, but it scared me to leave that as his last memory of us. When I saw my indecision reflected back to me from Plym's face, it made my decision easy.

"Take me." I adjusted my position to give him what he asked. "I want to look in your eyes as I become your first."

"My only," he whispered.

I felt him nudge himself into my body. He felt hot, not a painful burning hot, but a fiery warmth that made my toes curl. Little by little, he eased himself

deeper until I felt his body press against mine. His eyes rolled back slightly as he pushed the last bit of himself forward.

Plym opened his eyes, and when I met his gaze, I'd never felt more desired in my life. I'd become his focus, his need, and one with his being. Though I knew the consequences, I didn't try to stop him.

"You feel so amazing, Thane." He crushed his lips to mine, and his tongue forced its way inside my mouth.

Slowly he stirred, and the heat inside me grew. I'd never been as connected to anyone the way he and I were at that moment. Each movement caused my senses to scream, and I gripped the bedding in both hands. My voice deserted me, replaced by guttural sounds that were swallowed by Plym's greedy mouth.

Time ceased to register as I lost myself in the moment. Plym's body aroused a cascading rush of feelings from places inside me I didn't know existed. Following a spurt of hard, fast thrusts, Plym slowed and devoured my tongue with his. Another couple of strokes and he stopped.

"Thane, I'm so close."

"Don't stop, please." The idea he would stop caused me to clamp hard on the rock-hard cock buried inside me. "I want it, want all of you."

"If you let me, I will truly claim you." Whatever he meant to convey with his words never registered. My desire drowned out all ability to think.

"Claim me," I snarled, wrapping my legs around his narrow waist. "Make me yours."

My need propelled him back into motion, and he began to pound me with renewed vigor. A hedonistic shout that would alert the camp began to build inside me. Plym covered my mouth with his, and with three more thrusts, I felt him ejaculate.

From the first squirt, it felt like liquid metal coursed into my body. I thought I might burst into flames and my ashes scatter in the winds.

We screamed into our kiss, keeping our passion from the rest of the camp. Spasms wracked Plym's body, and when they stopped, he collapsed onto me. As our bodies met, I realized that at some point, I'd covered us both in my seed.

Our lips met for a brief kiss. He raised his head slightly so I could see his face, and I repeated a word that I heard in my head. "Mine."

An hour after dawn, trumpets announced Zuran's arrival. Some on their side had seemed surprised to find our troops in formation and ready to meet them, but that quickly faded when Zuran arrived.

The lone roar that filled the air caused my heart to skip a beat. When three other distinct voices answered it, the dread from our side could be felt in waves.

Zuran emerged from the forest, felling trees by the dozen as he moved. The dark green, almost black, scales on his body reflected odd bits of the rising sun. A row of horns rose and fell from his forehead and down his back. Three large spikes, each longer than me, twitched on the end of his tail. He called out a second time, revealing a mouthful of curved teeth.

Following on his heels, three smaller forms emerged in his wake. Not as dark as Zuran, the trio of dragons arrayed themselves on either side of their master. When Zuran's third scream filled the morning air, they joined him. How in Genznor's name could someone as small as Eraq fight even the least of them, let alone Zuran?

Eraq looked unfazed and answered the call with a cry that sounded like a victory horn. "*Steady, warriors of Galth! We are not alone this day!*"

In response to his call, the ground shook and a deafening rumble erupted on either side of our army. To my left, an enormous golden dragon, easily bigger than Zuran, appeared from nowhere and thumped his tail on the ground. A second dragon, this one pinkish red, pounded the ground to my right.

Eraq cried out again, and his allies did the same.

"*Zuran won't have the advantage this time.*" I knew Eraq spoke only to me.

These new additions stiffened the resolve of our side. And why not? If size mattered, the gold dragon was enormous. "Who are they?"

"*On the left is Oleard. He might be the oldest living dragon left. Even Zuran fears him.*"

I watched Oleard glare across the wasteland. To my eye, it felt personal.

"*The red dragon is Belar.*" I followed his gaze toward my right. Belar was smaller than Zuran but significantly bigger than the other three. "*He's been one of the fiercest foes of those who turned their back on the gods.*"

Despite the addition of our new allies, my sense of finality never changed. If anything, I felt my end more clearly than ever. When I woke that morning, I tried to convince myself it was the normal fear all soldiers feel on the eve of battle. Especially given the fight ahead. But it wasn't.

I'd known fear. In fact, I'd felt it standing on the hill, holding Eraq. This was different. It didn't grip me like fear. My palms didn't sweat. I didn't wonder what we'd face. Strangely, it gave me a sense of peace. I'd made arrangements and said my goodbyes. All but one.

"Eraq?" The intense focus I saw when he turned to face me changed my plans. I couldn't tell him. "Thank you for last night. It was wonderful."

His expression changed, but it was still intense. *"You're welcome, Thane. I... you are the most amazing man I've ever met. I hope we'll see more of each other after today."*

My resolve nearly vanished. I chose my words carefully, so I didn't lie to him. "I'd like that very much."

He extended his wing and let it brush my face. *"You're allowed to be scared. We all are."*

"I know." As a corporal, I used to drill it into new recruits that fear was normal and acceptable. Letting it control you wasn't. "It is a part of me, but it doesn't rule me. I will do whatever is needed."

"I'm not overconfident this time, Thane. Our plans are sound and well thought out. We'll get through this. Trust me."

I tried to agree, but I'd lied too much already. "I trust you, Eraq."

We fell into the easy silence of two people who knew each other well enough that words weren't needed.

Zuran's hyperaggressive posture faded once Oleard and Belar revealed themselves, but he hadn't retreated. I wasn't privy to the counsel of our leaders, but even I knew Zuran plotted something.

My skin prickled, and Eraq's feathers stood on edge. He squawked, and the dragons roared. A pair of wizards nearby fainted, and others groaned. A moment later the feeling passed; all but Eraq's ruffled feathers.

A shout went up and Zuran's army surged across the divide. Zuran remained still, but the other three took to the air and hovered above the soldiers charging toward Galth.

Oleard and Belar launched skyward, heading toward the trio of smaller dragons. I noticed two packs of our wizards break off from the main group.

I'd studied enough history to know mages targeted each other at the start of a battle. They would fight until one side prevailed or the battle ended. Typically

the main battle was decided before the wizards finished, making it doubly dangerous for the wizards on the losing side.

Although I watched the battle unfold, I couldn't follow much of it. The dragons soared across the sky, chasing each other with magic and fire. To my untrained eye, nothing happened, but whenever a dragon reacted, the wizards on either side started to work feverishly. Much like the wizards' duel, this fight seemed a draw.

Zuran seemed like he waited for something. Eraq flexed his talons several times, and I expected him to leap skyward at any time. Despite his focus on Zuran, Eraq continually scanned the area, as if he expected something or someone.

The sound of steel on steel drew my attention to the fight below. Against just the soldiers in Zuran's forces, our side had a big advantage that quickly became evident. Like a wave against a brick wall, the enemy broke against our position.

My heart beat faster watching the superior tactics of our side. Two reserve elements from Galth moved around the flanks to box in our enemy even as the centerline held firm.

With my focus on the battle, I let out a yelp of surprise when Eraq pushed off from my arm. I looked up to see Zuran had joined the battle. Eraq flew directly toward his foe, and the two screamed their hatred at each other. Before they could engage, my attention was diverted by Belar's scream of pain.

I turned in time to see him hurl a motionless dragon toward the rear of Zuran's forces. He wobbled and started to plummet. Oleard roared and swatted the two dragons he'd been fighting, knocking one to the ground and sending the other off in the other direction. He snapped his wings wide, and moving faster than I'd have believed, he settled under his fallen friend.

The body of the red dragon hit Oleard with enough force that I could hear a grunt. He managed to slow his descent, but he hit the ground hard. The impact left him dazed and exposed. Taking full advantage of the moment, the dragon Oleard had knocked down hobbled closer and belched a huge blast of fire at him and the injured Belar.

Oleard staggered again but kept his feet. He engaged the fire-spewing dragon with an even bigger, hotter blast. The smaller dragon shrieked in agony as his body burned into a pile of ashes.

With a final puff of flames, Oleard tore his focus from his dead foe and scanned the horizon for the last of Zuran's minions. I searched the sky as well and screamed a warning when I saw the last of the three dragons in a power dive toward Oleard's head. I wanted to close my eyes to avoid seeing his death, but I refused to let him die without a witness.

An instant before impact, Eraq soared across like a fiery missile. His body struck the dragon with such force that he pushed the creature a dozen yards past Oleard. When he emerged on the other side of the dragon, I realized he'd used his body like a blade. The dead dragon fell to the ground as Eraq made a wobbly turn.

Zuran suddenly appeared above the injured Belar and Oleard. When Zuran extended his claws to squeeze the golden dragon's head, Oleard disappeared in a flash of light. When I could see again, Nalor stood in place of the huge dragon. On the ground, well out of Zuran's reach, Nalor laid a hand on Belar's unconscious form. Zuran overshot the pair, and Belar shifted into a young red-haired man.

Having landed behind enemy lines, Nalor began an elaborate dance. The air shimmered around him and Belar, stopping a company of Zuran's soldiers from reaching them. I heard the king's trumpet and saw Lethral's guard leading a push to reach the downed dragons. Kemp led the charge, and my chest swelled with pride to see Brill on his left flank, keeping the men in formation.

Watching my best friend lead our men, I lost track of other aspects of the battle until I heard my death approach. Zuran had pulled out of his dive and flapped furiously toward me.

"I might not be able to kill that irksome phoenix, but I can easily kill his friend." He banked his wings, and the wind buffeted me. Small eddies of wind whipped dirt and debris that momentarily blinded me.

Knowing my death would come, I didn't back down. Instead, I drew my sword. A meaningless gesture, given the dragon hovered well beyond my reach.

"You're a fool, Zuran. Your dragons are dead, and the king will soon rescue Belar, freeing Oleard to kill you. If Eraq doesn't get you first."

"If it is my fate to die, I will be sure to take you with me, little man."

"I don't fear you, dragon." I watched him draw a breath and knew I'd run out of time. Shifting my feet, I held my sword ready. No one would say I died as anything but a king's soldier.

Staring into the maw of death, I saw a tiny spark ignite the gas coming from inside the dragon. My teachers were wrong; dragon fire had nothing to do with magic.

Flames rushed toward me, expanding as they consumed the air between us. I closed my eyes and recited the last prayer to Genznor. Hopefully, he'd find me worthy of his blessings.

The heat struck an instant before the flames. Like being stabbed a thousand times all at once, my body seized with pain. A healer once said you could only feel pain in one area at a time. He was wrong—I felt pain everywhere. The scream of agony that would have sent shivers down the spine of even the most hardened veteran didn't have time to leave my throat before the fire consumed me.

Genznor was merciful, however, and my end came swiftly. White light filled my mind, and I let death take me to my next life. As I died, I let my last thought be of the one I loved.

“Good-bye, Plym. I'm sorry.”

“Thane?”

I searched for the voice, but found nothing—only white. The priests who taught that a paradise awaited us after death were wrong. No paradise and no burning fires of Delmor. There was nothing.

Then again, maybe it was just my afterlife. Genznor must have found me unworthy.

“Thane!”

The voice belonged to someone in pain. Dead and unworthy, I doubted I could do anything for him, but I resolved to try.

“Are you hurt?”

“Thane! Do you hear me?”

“I can hear you, but I can't see you. Do you need help?”

“Thane, open your eyes, please.” I felt something wet land on my cheek. I raised my hand, and to my shock, my face felt real. *“Thane!”*

A pair of warm hands squeezed my fingers, and I felt someone's head on my chest. The scent of lavender and spice filled my nose. “Plym?”

“Yes, Thane. I’m here.” This time he spoke out loud.

“Are you dead, too?”

The weight lifted from my chest. “We’re not dead. I’ve come to take you home.”

The truth struck me like a slap. I tried to pull away, but the grip held firm. “That’s impossible.”

I didn’t expect Genznor would welcome me, but I didn’t expect to be cast into the pits of Delmor. I tried again to move away, but my tormentor wouldn’t let go.

“Thane, you’re not dead. Please believe me. But time is short. I need you to look at me, so I can guide you.”

“I died. Zuran burned me to hurt the one I love. Now you torment me by claiming to be him? Do your worst, but I’ll not give you the satisfaction of doing what you want.”

“Thane, you stupid, pigheaded man.” I felt someone press their mouth to mine, and a tongue seek to part my lips. I resisted for a moment, until the taste of honey and apples pried my eyes open.

Plym pulled back, laughing hysterically for a heartbeat, before he rushed back to kiss me again. This time, my tongue met his and I knew beyond a doubt who I kissed.

Too soon, he pulled away. “Time is so short. Do you trust me?”

“With my life. But I don’t understand.”

“I’ll explain all once I bring you back, but you must do as I say and not ask any more questions. Can you do that?”

I wasn’t sure I could, but I nodded.

“I am about to be reborn, and you are coming with me. Take my hands and think only of yourself as you were before Zuran burned you.”

“How?”

“No questions. Remember that moment. Please!”

The pain in his voice compelled my obedience. I pictured myself standing on the barren hill, sword raised, daring Zuran to kill me to buy Eraq and Olearn time. The dragon fire flared around me again. I shut my eyes and tried to

scream. Plym placed his lips over mine and pulled me into an embrace as the flames consumed me again.

In my mind I saw the two of us, our arms wrapped around each other, trying to get closer than close. I dared not open my eyes for fear Plym would be gone, replaced by some demon from Delmor sent to torment me.

A cool breeze touched my cheek and I heard someone clear his throat.

"I am loath to interrupt, but I fear I must." Nalor's voice sounded strained and weak. "Quentin is close to death and beyond my skills to heal. He needs Eraq, or I fear he might not survive."

I finally opened my eyes, and we were back on the hill where I'd died. I realized now that whatever else happened, I had died. The young mage with fiery red hair I saw Belar transform into lay still on the ground by Nalor's feet. His pale skin shouted death loudly enough, even before I saw the burns and wounds on his chest.

"I don't wish to let you go for a second, but Quentin..." Plym stepped back but still held me by the arms.

"Go, I'll be here. I promise."

Eraq appeared in the space where Plym had stood before I blinked. He floated over and lay atop Quentin's bare chest. A jealous rage filled me, and I felt my hands clench.

"Easy, child." Nalor put his hand on my shoulder and squeezed. "My son's wounds are grievous, and he is close to death. Only the healing fire of a phoenix can save him. Eraq loves only you. You know this in your heart. He does only what he must and no more."

I heard the words and repeated them without speaking. He did? Did I know it? I wanted that, but it wasn't possible, despite his words. He couldn't love a mere man.

"You own my heart already, beloved. Be at peace a moment longer. Quentin's wounds are grave, but he is strong and his will to live is great. Once I'm finished, I promise to answer every question."

Eraq's flames engulfed the beautiful man beneath him. I knew Eraq loved only me, but it took an effort to stave off the feelings of inadequacy. Unable to watch, I went to survey the battlefield. Nalor accompanied me to the edge of the hill.

Glancing below, I saw the forces of Galth routing our enemy across a field littered with dead. The two unburned dragon carcasses lay where I remembered they'd fallen. Peering down, I found Zuran.

"Your goal of distracting him worked." He squeezed my shoulder again, and I wondered at the familiarity of the gesture. "The king's men reached Quentin and myself just before Zuran belched his fire at you. When he tried to flee, he turned into my waiting grasp."

Zuran's head lay yards away from his massive body. I looked to Nalor for an answer.

"I severed his head from his neck with my bite." Nalor spit over the hilltop. "He killed my wife, she who gave birth to Quentin. I swore to avenge her and I have. I made Eraq promise not to kill him in exchange for my help."

"How is it I lived? I should be dead."

"You should, but you are not." Nalor smiled. "They will sing of you for centuries to come, Thane the Dragon's bane. Standing up to the mighty Zuran with only a piece of cold steel."

"I died. I felt it."

"Clearly not." Nalor arched an eyebrow. "I'll say no more. That is for you and Plym to discuss. Suffice it to say, I'm pleased you made it and thank you for your help. Now, if you'll excuse me, I must find the king and see to his needs."

Nalor bowed deeply, and his robe swept the ground as he spun on his heel. Left alone, I returned my gaze to the remains of the battle. For an instant, I felt the urge to fly down from my perch and search for Brill.

"You can, you know." Plym slid his arms around my waist and pulled me tight.

"Find Brill?"

"Well, yes, but I meant fly down."

I felt a moment of panic. "I thought you couldn't read my thoughts?"

"I can now." He kissed the back of my neck. "At least, until I teach you to control your thoughts."

"Is Brill okay?"

"Close your eyes, beloved." He took my hand, and I did as he asked.

An image of the field below formed in my mind, and the land whizzed past. The dying and wounded called out, tugging at my heart.

“That, too, will need to be controlled.”

An instant later, I saw Brill cleaning a wound on Rain's left shoulder. It was shallow, and it was mostly the smell of her blood that spooked the mare. He looked exhausted but appeared uninjured.

“Open your eyes.”

When I did, we were a dozen yards from my friend. Still holding hands, we approached Brill and the others in his group. When people noticed us, a cheer began that soon grew as soldiers flocked to our position.

I disengaged my hand as Brill ran up and pulled me into a huge hug that swept me off the ground. Another cheer, louder than the first, swept across the field.

“You stupid, incredibly brave, fool of a man.” Brill buried his head against my neck and squeezed. I felt Plym's emotions, and they mirrored mine when I saw him hugging Quentin.

“Only you have my heart like that, Plym. No one else will. I swear.”

“The mind can tell, but it requires the heart to listen.” The anger drained away. *“But don't hold on too long, or even my mind won't understand.”*

Laughing, I stepped back. “You did well. I saw you lead the charge to free Nalor and his son.”

“I turned just in time to watch you taunt the dragon with your sword. Are you mad? You could... I thought you were dead.”

“I did, too.” I reached for Plym's hand and squeezed it tight when he laced our fingers together. “But clearly I'm not.”

Soldiers erected our tent while Plym spent the rest of the day with Nalor and the others trying to heal those injured who could be saved. I now thought of it as our tent. How could I do otherwise? Set next to the king's, ours looked almost identical, except it flew the flag of ancient Arbutis. Despite my confusion, I retired to the tent when Nalor insisted.

Without Plym, I had no tub and no bath, so I made do with washing my face in the basin the soldiers provided. The soldiers and servants who brought me things bowed when they entered and acted like I was important.

Alone, I had time to reflect on what had happened. By all that I knew to be true, I shouldn't have been standing in that tent. Zuran killed me, and yet, I was alive. At least, I thought I was.

I struggled to understand the impossible until my head ached. Nothing made sense, except that Kemp had been right; Eraq had drawn me into his fight.

That reminded me of what Nalor said. Eraq loved only me. I'd thought he had feelings for me before I died, but after he saved me, I knew the depths of those feelings. He did love me. And I loved him, but that scared me worse. He was eternal, and I would die in a blink of his eye. Was it right to stay, knowing the longer we were together, the greater his pain when I left? Or should I leave now while it was still new?

I'd managed to convince myself I needed to tell him good-bye. It might hurt at first, but staying would only be worse. Before I could gather my things, Plym walked into our tent.

The subtle droop in his shoulders and the way his feet shuffled convinced me to delay my departure. After what he'd been through, my decision could wait until the morning. Plym picked up a pewter goblet, filled it with watered wine, and drained it. He repeated the procedure again before he set the cup and pitcher back on the table.

"I owe you an explanation." His smile only partially masked a hint of fear. "I hope you can forgive me."

"Forgive you?" I shook my head. "I don't understand."

"I know you don't." He grabbed my hand in his and squeezed. "And that's my fault."

Plym guided us to a set of chairs. The battle between wanting to kiss him versus leaving before I became more attached threatened to make my head explode. Seeing his angst when our gazes met, I remembered that he could read my thoughts somehow.

"I can't help it. You're shouting them into my head."

"How do I stop it?"

"I'll teach you." He leaned in and gave me a gentle kiss. "But first I need to explain some things, I just don't know where to start."

"Start with what happened to me. I should... I died today."

“Yes, you did.” He paused, and if I didn’t know better, he seemed to blush. “Last night I left a part of myself inside you.”

It took a moment, but when I realized what he meant, I laughed. “I know, but what does *that* have to do with my not dying?”

“The part of me inside you connected us so that when Zuran killed you, I burst into flames and died as well. It was out of cycle for me, which is usually very disorienting, but this time I’d been prepared for the possibility. That enabled me to be clear-headed enough to guide you back.”

“Back from where? You said I died.”

“And you did.” Plym sucked his bottom lip and stared at the canvas wall of our tent. “Some things are difficult to put into words. The place you found yourself is where all phoenixes go before they are reborn.”

“Are you telling me I’m a... I’m like you?”

“No, you are not a phoenix, but you’re not entirely human any longer, either.”

The urge to stand and pace the tent would have overpowered me but for Plym’s presence. “Then what am I?”

“I told you last night, I’d never penetrated another man.” He waited until I nodded before he continued. “That’s because, much like today, it connects us to the one we share ourselves with. It is also how we begin the process of bonding ourselves to the one we want to spend our lives with.”

“Does bonded mean what I think it does?”

Plym’s lips tightened and he nodded once. “Yes.”

I tried to gauge if what he’d just told me had changed my feelings toward him. Apart from a bit of angst over the general idea, I decided it had no effect. I loved him before and that hadn’t changed. But being bonded to him, that wasn’t something I’d worked through yet. “Are we...?”

“Bonded?” He sought my answer with his eyes, and I nodded. “No, not yet. We’ve only begun the process. We can abandon it with no ill effects to either of us.”

A wave of angst struck, and I realized it came from Plym. “Plym, understand something, I love you, but being bonded is a big step. It’s... it’s...”

“It’s forever.” He smiled and stood up, pulling me with him. “As much as I want this to happen, I love you too much to ask you to agree to this until you’re

ready. You never make me wonder how you feel towards me, and my feelings toward you will not change. When you're ready, you'll tell me."

That he was willing to put my needs first, despite waiting centuries for the right person, nearly caused my emotions to overrule what I understood to be right. I knew my place in his heart. Time couldn't change that if we were truly meant for each other.

"Since nothing's changed, can we take a bath and then go to sleep? I'm tired and want nothing more than to be clean and feel you in my arms."

Plym winked at me and gestured toward an open space. The copper tub reappeared, as did the pitcher with an endless amount of water. I began to fill the tub, while he got undressed. By the time he was naked, I already strained the fabric of my loose-fitting britches.

He took the pitcher and continued to fill the tub while I quickly shucked my clothes. Once I was naked, we both climbed into the soothing water.

"There is one thing that is going to change." Plym sighed as he leaned back against me. "I'll be moving back to Arbutis to serve the new king."

I turned over the simple platinum band Nalor had given me and wondered if I was doing this the wrong way. Not *what* I was about to do, but *how*. Then again, I'd had that feeling more times than I could count in the last six months.

The sound of footsteps alerted me that I had company. I didn't need to look up to recognize Brill's tread. Studying the ring a moment longer, I wrapped my fingers around the band, looked up, and wished I hadn't.

Smirking, but dressed for the occasion, Brill led two royal guards, one male and one female, in his wake. The move to Arbutis had tamed his free spirit somewhat, but Brill threw himself into his new duties. In the process, he finally accepted what I'd known for twenty years—he was a natural leader. Pulling up a few steps away from me, he and his detail snapped to attention and they all saluted.

"Reporting as directed, *sir*." He wore a burnished ceremonial breastplate, inlaid with gold and silver in the insignia of Arbutis. The epaulettes that marked his new rank melded perfectly with his only slightly less unruly hair. Brill had even more women, and quite a few men, fawning whenever he walked past.

I acknowledged the trio and pointed to the other guards. "Can I ask you two to wait outside, please?"

Trained well, the pair snapped to attention again, bowed, spun on their heels, and walked out.

“Why do you do that?” I turned and motioned for him to follow me to the window. Below, I could see workers from all across the continent helping to repair two hundred years of Zuran’s neglect. At least the dragon left a bulging treasury to pay for the rebuilding.

“It’s my duty.” Brill stood a pace behind me, and I shook my head.

“Brill, we’ve known each other since before we could talk. I’m still Thane.

“Except when you’re in the presence of anyone else. Then you are the king and I must address you accordingly. Even though Eraq had you appointed king against your will, your chamberlain has been very persistent in reminding us of the proper decorum.” He moved closer and put his hand on the sill. “Nothing you say can change that. *Thane.*”

“He’s been reminding you of my tendency to be too informal, has he?”

“Every day, old friend.”

We stood, quietly staring out the window. With all the changes of the last six months, having Brill by my side kept me sane. I needed him to remain himself or else I might lose myself.

“How is recruitment for the guard coming, *Captain Brill?*” He balked at the appointment at first, but he agreed when I asked him to name who else I could trust more.

“Slowly. Plym screens every recruit before I can take them on.”

I heard his frustration but could only shrug. “He’s as protective as you.”

“Point taken.” Brill pointed toward the horizon at a familiar red form flying toward us. “They’re back.”

My smile gave me away. “I received word that their mission was a success and they’d be home today.”

“They’re making good headway rooting out Zuran’s supporters.” He paused as Belar landed in the courtyard. “Between those two, I’m surprised your enemies haven’t all fled into Galth, over the mountains, or across the sea.”

I chuckled. “Many have, but those that went south found a very angry Oleard waiting for them.”

Plym hopped off his back, looked up at our window, and waved. I opened my hand instinctively to look at the ring. My attention returned to him, even as my pulse quickened. I followed him until he reached the archway leading to my wing of the palace.

“So...” Brill’s voice forced me to turn in his direction. “Is everything set?”

“Yes.” I showed him the ring. “Nalor brought it this afternoon.”

He reached for the platinum band and gently lifted it from my palm. After he examined it from several angles, he handed it back. “Are *you* ready?”

I shook my head and smiled. “I don’t know that I’ll ever be totally ready, but I’m completely sure it’s the right decision.”

“It is.” He winked just as the door opened, and Plym entered the suite.

Without needing to see, I knew my smile was as wide as his. It had only been three days, but seeing him now reminded me how much I missed him.

“I’ll be outside.” Brill’s voice tore my focus from Plym long enough for me to nod.

They paused to shake hands before Brill left the room. Seeing them together and friendly, I thanked Genznor again. My hand flexed around the ring as Plym stopped barely an inch from me.

“Hi.” The playful lilt to his voice extended my smile.

“Hi.” While not original, it worked at the time. Especially when I inched closer and brought our lips together. The kiss might have lingered, or perhaps led to more, but I had other plans before the palace erupted with activity.

Squeezing the ring one last time, I sank to one knee.

Plym rolled his eyes and asked, “What are you doing?”

“You said you’d wait until I was ready.” I held up the ring, mindful of Nalor’s warning not to put it on Plym until he accepted. “I’m ready, Plym.”

“Is that...” He stared at the ring for a moment before he opened his eyes wider. “Where did you get that?”

My hand started to shake, but I kept it out, along with my offering. “Nalor made it for me with the requisite drops of blood forged into the metal.”

He carefully took it from my palm but didn’t slip it on his finger. After a brief examination, he looked at me and smiled. “Are you sure this is what you want? I can wait if you need time.”

Taking his hands in mine, careful not to make him drop the ring, I looked him in the eye and nodded. "I'm sure. When you first asked, I almost said yes because I knew I wanted it more than anything. But we'd only just met, and I was worried it was infatuation or hero worship. So soon after you saved me, I feared it might also be gratitude. For me to be your mate, I needed time to sort out some things."

"I understood." He gently tugged on my hand and I stood. Leaning closer, he brushed his lips against my forehead. "Bonding with your mate is forever, and in our case forever really means forever. With all that happened, you were right to take time to be sure."

"I'm glad you understood. I feared making you unhappy or disappointed."

"Had you left me to find your answers, that would have hurt me, but you did not. All I want is to be with you, and for that we don't need a formal bond."

Six months prior, I'd have wondered why we needed to be bonded at all, but I'd learned much in that time. "You're better at keeping your feelings in check."

"I've had a bit more time to work on my control." Plym winked and dipped his fingers into his right pocket. He removed his closed hand and held it out. Pulling back his fingers one at a time, he revealed a gold and silver ring. "But in truth, I merely hid my desire from you. If you knew how many times I've wanted to ask if you were ready."

I examined his ring closely. It was mostly silver with gold overlay. I turned the band side to side and noticed the gold had been woven in the image of a phoenix. "How long have you been carrying this?"

Plym's cheeks started to flush and he looked down. "Since the day we moved into the palace."

I almost laughed, but it made sense. "Thank you for giving me the time to reach my own decision. It's part of what I love about you."

"I'll confess it hasn't been easy, but I wanted you to be sure."

I gave him back his ring and picked up the one Nalor made for me. "What now?"

"Shouldn't we have a public ceremony?" He didn't sound happy with the idea. "You are the king; the people will want to share in your major events."

Plym's words reminded me of my duty, but I didn't care. "We can do something public, a wedding or ceremony, after we do this in private. It's not that I don't want everyone to know, but I don't want to share this moment with people I don't know."

The goofy grin on his face told me he agreed. "Are you saying you want to do it *this* moment?"

"Um..." I hadn't meant that, in fact I didn't have *any* plans beyond telling him I was ready. "Can we?"

"As I mentioned before, the process began that day on the battlefield. Today is easy by comparison."

"So I don't have to die again?"

Laughter echoed around our suite. "No, my love, not today."

Stepping to the side, Plym repositioned us so we stood directly in front of each other. "The process is simple. Beyond simple, really. The true magic of a bond comes from our hearts, not any spell or magecraft."

Positioning his ring between his thumb and first two fingers, Plym held it up. I took the hint and held mine the same.

"We just exchange rings and then we kiss. That's it."

"Kiss?" I raised an eyebrow and smirked. "Is that really a part of the ceremony, or did you add it because you want to kiss me?"

"We need to be touching for the bond to be created. I suppose there are other ways to do that, but this seems the most appropriate. But." He pulled back the hand with his ring. "Once complete, there will be fire involved. It is part of my essence, and it will engulf us both. I promise you it will not harm you in the least."

"I'm not worried." I gave him a small kiss. "You'd never suggest this if it would hurt me."

"Never." Plym extended his left hand, palm down. "You place your ring on my hand first."

I noticed his hand shook as much as mine as the ring neared his finger. Using my left hand, I steadied his and slid the band over the second knuckle and into place.

Plym's pale skin flushed, and his hand suddenly felt warmer. I worried he might burst into flames before we finished the ceremony. His smile never faded

as he guided his ring onto my finger. A tingling feeling started in my hand and spread rapidly throughout my body.

“Almost done, my love.” Plym took my hands in his and squeezed. “I knew the moment I laid eyes on you, I would be here one day. You complete me, Thane, son of Margret and Jelcob.”

My response was cut off when he pressed his lips to mine. They felt like liquid fire, but instead of pain, it felt comforting. The rush of heat spread outward and intensified when my mouth opened slightly.

Flames erupted around us the moment his tongue touched mine, and I felt our bodies become one. We flared once, and the fire slowly died away. We continued the kiss well beyond what the ceremony required. It didn't matter. I didn't want to kiss him because of the ceremony.

The air felt cool and refreshing when we stepped apart. “Are all bonds that intense?”

“I can't say for all, but fire is required when two phoenix bond.”

The words took a moment to register. “But you said—”

“When you asked before, you weren't, but for us to bond, there was no other way.”

“And if I never bonded with you?”

“You would have remained as you were, more than human.” He kissed me again. Hot, passionate, fiery even, but no flames. “There are no more changes in store, I promise. This was the last.”

“Is there anything else that *could* be changed?”

He untangled our hands and slipped his arms around me. Burying his head against my neck, he whispered, “Nothing I would ever wish to see happen.”

Closing my eyes, I hugged him tighter. “Neither would I.”

The End

Author Bio

Andrew Q. Gordon wrote his first story back when yellow legal pads and ballpoint pens were common and a Smith Corona correctable typewriter was considered high tech. Adapting to the times, he now writes with a shiny new MacBook that he sets on the same desk as his manual typewriter and vintage adding machine.

Long a fan of superheroes, wizards and sports, Andrew's works include high fantasy, paranormal spirits, magic as well as contemporary fiction. He is still trying to find the perfect story that will include all his favorites under one cover.

He currently lives in the Washington, D.C. area with his husband, their young daughter and dog. In addition to dodging some very self-important D.C. 'insiders', Andrew uses his commute to catch up on his reading. When not working or writing, he enjoys soccer, high fantasy, baseball and occasionally sleeping.

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