

# CHAPTER 61

## Cleod

Kicce's muted steps were the rhythm beneath the familiar melody of the gelding's swaying stride. Cleod's body rolled with the motion as his gaze swept the perimeter of the camp. From the clustered wagons came the sound of laughter and low chatter. Fire flickered. Occasionally, a mule or an ox blew a heavy breath.

The moon was bright above and a soft glow from the west marked the position of Melbis just over the rise. There was no breeze. Sweat pooled on his lower back with none of the pleasant comfort of the poit.

Nothing moved in the mostly dead grass of the plains or in the sparse trees by the dried up creek to the south. From the far side of the perimeter came a rumbling curse followed by a heavy belch. Cleod smiled. If Jordin made it through watch without falling off his horse, it would be through simple luck. Nae was little better off. Only this close to Melbis would Kilras allow such slack behavior. The city guard was legendary for their efficiency. To set watch at all was nearly redundant.

Nae and Jordin must have caused Kilras some rare irritation for him to insist that they take shifts on the first night in town. That he had also ordered Cleod to ride was in line with the kindness Cleod had come to respect from the Dorn. After the last few weeks, there was little chance Cleod would find sleep easily, and rather than listen to him toss and curse all night, Kilras had given him a duty to perform—with two slack partners to make sure he was triply alert. Cleod smiled and reined Kicce back the way they had just come. It was good to be understood.

And it was good to be alone in the night with sound carrying far and the scent of dust on the air. A shooting star crossed the upper edge of his vision, falling toward the thin line of trees. His breath pushed in and out. As the physical relaxation bought with time in the poit had faded, the pressure of his thoughts crept back. His encounter with Wern and the sense of being watched in town had not helped.

Kicce picked his way through the shadowed darkness, moonlight glinting off the polished buckles of his bridle. The quiet surrounded them as they moved farther from camp. There was no scent of water in the air even as they drew close to the creek, but still Kicce tensed under him and took a single shortened step.

Cleod's hand was on his sword before the horse's hoof hit the ground. In the deeper shadow of an old oak stood a small figure. He blinked, and it was gone. If it had not been for the subtle change in Kicce's action, he would not have believed he had seen anything at

all. No sound was out of place. No shadow had a wrong edge. But Kicce, so steady and unflappable, shifted again. Whatever lurked in the trees was no figment.

Cleod hooked a leg over the saddle and slid to the ground, his sword in hand the way breath filled his lungs, natural and without thought. Moonlight splayed lines of shade over the ground as he moved between the trees. There was no sound but the soft fall of each foot. But something moved within the air, like a half-recognized thought or a memory on the verge of recall.

Gweld beckoned, old habit tickling. He pushed it back as he had in town. Not safe. To use the skill so soon on the heels of his break in control at the Seebo, was to risk Overlash on a scale he was ill-prepared to endure. But the ability was always there, haunting his senses, even if the regular training needed to control it had long since been abandoned.

To his right, a shift in the air flickered a blade of grass. No breeze. No breath. He took a step back and pivoted left, away from the whispering foliage. The shape he had seen from Kicce's back was a shadow within shadow before him. He froze, not startled but tense, ready.

"Let yourself be seen," he said.

The words drifted into the night. For a moment, nothing changed.

She stepped toward him, and his mind skittered like a stone on ice. He jerked in a breath. No. Of all his tumbling thoughts it was the only one that found form. He raised the sword between them as his stomach cramped.

"No. She's dead." It was a trick. Or a vision brought on by all he had seen these last weeks and the glimpse of the stranger in town. The stranger who stood before him.

She raised a hand, and he caught a flash on her finger. Quartz in moonlight. His arms lost their strength, and the sword slanted down, slack in his grasp. Another step and she placed her finger over his lips, and she was a stranger no more.

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Her touch was a whisper. She, the impossible made flesh.  
 “Hello, Cleod,” she said.  
 “*Leiel!*” he said. His stomach clenched and he fought down the urge to double over around it. Instead, he took a step back. Dark hair piled high. A face not pretty, but intense and striking. As certain and fierce as the day he had last seen her.

So familiar. So real he did not know whether or not he hoped he was dreaming. He shuddered. He choked out broken words. “You...you can’t be here.”

He stood shaking in the moonshadows cast by the thicket of trees. She was before him, looking up at him with the wide eyes he had for so long only remembered in his dreams. “How could you do this? How? You died on that mountain. I nearly died on that mountain. Part of me—old gods defend—*most of me did.*”

“Old gods, in truth,” she said. She smiled as a quiet step brought her close to him again, and though it held sadness, there was in it a trace of the wild grin he had so loved.

Small. She was so much smaller than he. He had forgotten that. What else did he not recall properly? Her very death? How much of what he thought he knew was wrong? Desperately, he wanted to touch her, but he was frozen between elation and shaking rage. Every fiber of him seemed to burn and tremble. The full breath he wanted to draw jerked in his throat. He whispered, “Why aren’t you a ghost?”

“I am a ghost, Cleod.”

He took another step back, shaking his head, staring at her. “Riddles? You offer me riddles? After all these years—”

“There is so much you don’t know,” she said. Her voice so quiet, so very familiar, and so long missed.

“You survived?” He tried to make sense of her presence before him and the seeming lack of age in her face. “They never told me...” A thought stopped him. “Was it Tray? Did he save you? *Where have you been?*”

She shook her head, and the moonlight glinted off the tears that rimmed her eyes. “No,” she said, and raised a hand as though to touch him, but stopped. “No, no one saved me. I told you then—that was not what I was in need of. Old gods—I am so sorry.”

“*Where have you been?*” he demanded again, fury lacing his voice though he tried to contain it.

Her gaze held his, and she spoke the impossible with gentle conviction. “With the Dragon,” she said.

“No,” he snapped, shaking his head. “No. Was it Tray?” Reaching out, he grasped her shoulder. “Is it Tray? He saved you, and you’ve been with him?”

“With the Dragon,” she whispered again, reaching up to wrap her fingers around his wrist, and he felt a strength in her grip that could never have belonged to the girl he had known. Her touch shocked through him and he jerked away.

“What are you?” he asked, though he feared her reply with every part of his soul.

“I am a myth,” she said. “I am so sorry, Cleod. The Enclave—it owned all you were then. You were *so much* what you had become—so much an Ehlewer, a Draighil. You believed *everything* the Enclave asked you to, because you needed to. You needed to be what you were then. The man you were was not someone who could ever hear what I was to become. What I *wanted* to become. Even now, if I tell you everything, you are still enough *that man* to raise hands against me and try to strike me down.”

“I tried to save you.” He did not understand how she was here before him. How she still wore her youth like the first blossom of spring wore sunlight. An answer formed in his mind at her words, one too terrible for him to allow it to reach fruition. Yet it could be only that. Only the most horrific of all things he could imagine. His stomach churned. “I am no longer Draighil,” he whispered, as though speaking the words as truth would make them so.

“You are forever Draighil. You chose to be that. You cannot unchoose it.”

“What are *you*, Leiel?” he demanded, though his Draighil-trained awareness already knew. No. No. The word tripped again and again through his mind. “What did you choose all those years ago that you can stand here now as the girl I knew?”

“Not that girl. It has been so long since I was the girl you knew. And that day on the mountain—you never knew the person I was in that moment. No one did. You could never have imagined it. If you had, you would have cut me down as you intended to cut down the one you named enemy for my sake.”

“*What are you?*” he shouted, the demand ripped from the core of him with a desperation born of undesired revulsion. He felt the weight of the sword in his hand.

“What *I* chose to be,” she replied, looking up at him. The few steps between them were suddenly too far and too close at once. “Draigfen, Cleod. I am Draigfen.”

With the passing of a dire instant far removed from any fraction of his control, the fury washed over him like fire once had, burning him more deeply and scarring him more completely than his encounter with Shaa had ever done. Gweld snapped live. Action. Reaction. He exploded into motion, his long restrained reflexes made crisp by frenzy, so strikingly fast as to not even blur. But his blow never landed. She was gone faster than anyone could be gone. In her place, a wave of heat left the grass coal bright and smoldering.

He screamed.

In less than a heartbeat, his vision spiked to a pinprick and he descended into the throes of Gweld. Around him, the air breathed heat into his senses, pounding like a drum beat over his skin. Everything was bright and clear and reflective. *Draigfen. Dragon. Shaa.*

His response was primed by too many years of training and even more of repressed regret. The sword sang in the air, the vibration of every movement driving up his arms like a hammer strike. The blow he had never landed in his youth sought completion. Never mind that he could see no enemy, that the only presence he could sense was the one he had for so long wished he could see again. *Ending* was demanded by every fiber of him. He had never had that—a conclusion that satisfied. If the intervening years had brought a semblance of peace, none existed in this moment. He sought flesh with steel, and slaughter was his goal. That his sword found no connection sent his mind stumbling.

*“Idodben, Cleod!”*

The Ehlewer command lurched through him. He came smashing back to conscious awareness of where he was, and it was like falling onto a scree field, so battered was his mind by the sudden disunion from the Gweld state. The ground came up to hit his knees and only his training contained the motion of the sword enough that he did not split himself open as he collapsed.

He raised his head to find Leiel standing over him. No monster, no fiery beast descending with wings folded to strike, to destroy him. Only the scent of charred earth filled his nostrils, a hint of smoke, and a *feeling* on the air of something larger settled into containment. Not just his own mind and violent talents, but another presence brought also under control and reined close.

The monster *was* here—had to be here. What else had snatched Leiel from him yet again...snatched her out of the way of the blow he had intended for her. He dragged in a breath and stared up at her. Had he tried to kill her? Kill the one person he had spent so many years wishing he could see again, speak to again? His Gweld-bent mind swam. He closed his eyes, and tried to think. What had happened? What had she said to him? What awareness did he now own that made him a danger to her?

“I must go,” she said. “The truth is too dangerous—for both of us. You know it already. It’s in the very air. Don’t look for me. As you loved me once, you cannot seek me out—as you cannot seek out the Draigon now marking the land. You would not survive it. Not this time. Please. I know you are Draighil still, whether you bear the title or not. No years will change that. But I have come to ask you—you abandoned that life—*don’t seek it again.*”

She brushed back her hair, a gesture too familiar, then shook her head, only to send the stray strands falling back over her eyes again. He tried to match the old ease of her actions to the knowledge now rising through his mind. Her words fell inside him, but did not take root, swept away by an understanding he did not want.

He shook his head, short sharp shakes of denial. “No,” he said, feeling the blood drain from his face.

“Please, Cleod,” she said again. “You were never meant to see me again. Or ever guess I lived. But I had to come—to ask you to put away these ideas. I am so sorry. You were my friend once. Please don’t go after the Draigon.”

Every bit of him trembled as he sought to contain the energy banked inside. “What are you?” he asked again, a whisper.

“Let it be. Nothing can now change what I have become. There can be nothing between us but what there has already been.”

She took a step back, then another, putting distance between them. It didn't matter. He knew now that he would never land a strike against her, never connect before she destroyed him. But he would try. He would tear himself to pieces trying, through no desire of his own. The skills were too ingrained, his control long since too blunted by drink and lack of use. Kilras had forged enough chains to hold his reactions through the daily storms of living—but what he faced in her was not a simple squall—it was every tempest ever conceived roused to boil within him. No restraints made to withstand the blows of mere words and vile memory could hold under the stress of the physical manifestation of a thing every part of him knew only how to hate.

“*Tell me*,” he gasped, the words choked from him in desperation. His fingers clenched white around the hilt of the sword, and he felt every muscle in his body tighten. Perception flickered and even the sound of his own breathing was thunder.

“*Draigfen*,” she said, the words soft, barely a breath on the breeze. “Just *Draigon*, Cleod.”

His mind rippled, expanding, shuddering. Inside him rose a scream, echoing, transcending.

“*Run*,” he said.