

Chapter 28

Leiel

At a distance, she kept pace with Cleod, paralleling his trip back to the caravan camp. Watching, she pulled her heightened senses close, containing the expansion of her presence with the same care she maintained when she confronted Councils. The trail to Melbis and the recent near-encounter in town had shown her how bright her connection with Cleod remained.

His ride back to the caravan was slowed by the horse he led. The air hung flat and unmoving, even the dust kicked up by the mounts fell straight back to the ground. A still night, moonlit, dry and heavy. She was too far away to hear the complaints lofted by the young scout, now slung belly-down across the second horse's saddle, whom Cleod had retrieved from Dorein's brothel. Periodically, Cleod turned in his saddle to speak to the other man.

What was she doing? What good could rise from placing herself this close to the caravan, to Cleod? His presence beat, moth wings against lamp glass, at the surface of her awareness. The churning disquiet within him was a beacon to the too-sure worry in her heart. Each passing hour intensified her certainty—Shaa's presence had pierced the time-forged barrier inside him. Old anger, old promises called. Shaa. Leiel herself. He would step back into a fight he could never win.

Unless she stopped him.

Old gods, was it arrogance to think she could? She shook her head.

When he rode into the camp, she slipped south into the forest bordering the small, vital springs that had likely drawn Kilras to this location. Moonlight cast cold shadows through the trees, the chill tone of the light a stark contrast to the dry burn of the air.

The undergrowth waved and cracked, brittle around her as she moved among the trees. At the edge of the woods, she stopped, her gaze on the far circle of wagons, and waited. Each of her heartbeats was a drum in her chest, calling forth, marking time. How many times through the years had she considered what it would be like to meet him again? How many times had she rolled in her head the words that she would speak—explanations to draw forth understanding and reconciliation? But such fancies had always been just and only that. This moment before her was real.

What could she gain by speaking to him? Was trust even possible after what had happened on the Spur, after the loss and pain she had wrought in his life? Knowledge, not pride, drove that last thought. She had mattered to Cleod, and she mattered still. She had Kilras's written words through the years to assure her of that. And she had Cleod's response to her presence on the trail, and just this day in the city. The caring that had been born between them so many years ago in a sunlit schoolyard lingered. What possibility lived in that connection? The idea that he would again take up his sword against a Draigon stopped her cold.

She shivered as though she stood in savage wind atop Cyunant's mountain. Cleod would face Shaa. That truth, so beyond doubt that she had followed him without hesitation, tore through her. She could leave this place now and let him do as he would—or she could step forward and offer him knowledge—and with it a different choice.

Too soon for the decision that needed making, three men on horseback left the camp to ride sentry. Their circuit brought them close to where she waited, a still-carved shadow under the spreading boughs of an oak.

The half-drunk young scout passed, and even the awkward shying of his horse did not alert him to her presence. Kilras must not be expecting any trouble. Such slack attention was not something she expected he usually allowed. Or else he counted overly on Cleod's presence in the trio.

She assessed her old friend as he rode slowly toward the treeline and nodded to herself. In that reliance on Cleod, Kilras's judgement was clearly sound—except perhaps this night. This night, *her* choice—long since made if she were honest—tested all certainties.

The grey gelding carried Cleod close, then tensed and took a shortened pace, bringing his rider to alertness. Options remained for a moment more: to stay and follow through, try to reach him—or to walk away and let *his* choices unfold, unfronted.

The look on his face at the Seebo. His cries as the memory of his battle with Shaa pulled him under. The scars buried beneath his clothing that stiffened both his movements and his will. The hollow sense of him as he turned his sword in the firelight. Yes, she had a choice. And it was made, this night, *to try*. Despite the odds, and the turmoil in her belly, she must.

He halted the big grey horse and scanned the woods. Like a blow, his gaze landed on her shape in the low light. He drew a breath and swung his leg over the saddle horn and dropped to the ground, sliding his sword from its scabbard as his feet touched the earth.

Color rippled at the edges of her senses as Gweld flickered at the edge of *his* mind, demanding he call it into action. Gweld and the unnecessary pain it brought

him. Anger rippled across her belly at the thought of what had been done to him by the Enclaves—and what that might mean this night.

He stepped forward again, then stopped and spoke into the night. “Let yourself be seen.”

A heartbeat more, indecision lingered, then she braced her mind and stepped into the silver moonlight.

The struggle that erupted through every part of him flared across her senses. Her stomach roiled to see the wild flurry of emotions that crossed his face and blazed into her Gweld-tinted vision.

“No,” he said, his voice hoarse and thick in her ears. “She’s dead.”

The pain of his tone seared her mind, and she surrendered to a yearning that she had not admitted, until this moment, gnawed at her heart—to touch, to reassure. She reached forward the hand that bore her ring and placed a finger upon his lips.

His skin was cool under her touch. How was that possible in all this heat? Or was it her, the Dragon heat so much a part of her now that every human contact seemed chill by comparison?

Wide-eyed, he stared at her, every line of his body alive with the tension of disbelief. A dozen explanations might be offered, a hundred words be spoken. She chose the simplest. “Hello, Cleod.”

“*Leiel?*” A tremor ran through his body, then another, so violent the force of it shimmered pale light into her awareness. His voice broke. “You...you can’t be here.”

She wanted to pull him into her arms and prove to him that she was real, breathing, alive before him. But the stiffness of his jaw spoke of more than shock. It marked a level of rage she had no way to measure—had never dreamed to encounter in him.

“How could you do this?” he demanded. “How—you died on that mountain. I nearly died on that mountain. Part of me—old gods defend—*most of me did.*”

What could she say to that? “Old gods, in truth.” She tried a smile, saw the familiarity of the expression awaken something in him that she recognized from their youth. Humor, kindness—then a shudder racked him and washed any trace of comfort under, drowned in a rising column of anger.

She started to speak, but he cut her off. “Why aren’t you a ghost?”

Despite the ache burning through her, his question tugged amusement into her heart. She pressed a smile into her voice. “I am a ghost, Cleod.” The flatness of his expression announced that the tactic failed utterly. A chill slipped up her spine. Was she so wrong about him?

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

His face twisted, dark and menacing in a way she had never seen. Wind on high, how could she reach him? “There is so much you don’t know.” The words seemed frail, useless as soon as they left her lips.

“You survived?” His face shifted again, a tangle of emotions rolling across it as he struggled to make sense of her presence. Her chest ached at the confusion, the pain.

“Was it Tray?” he demanded. “Did he save you?”

That caught her aback. Tray? The other Draighil? Cleod feared she had been saved—but by another—and that Trayor had never told the truth? Her heart jerked in her chest as he demanded, “*Where have you been?*”

She shook her head, tears gathering in her eyes. Because the reality... What had she done this night by stepping out of the shadows? “No,” she said, and raised a hand to touch him again, but stopped short of contact. “No, Cleod, no one saved me. I told you then—that was not what I was in need of.” Tears gathered in her throat. She swallowed them. “Old gods—I am so sorry.”

“*Where have you been?*”

She met his gaze, spoke truth she knew would shatter. “With the Draigon.”

He caught her shoulder, shaking his head, words of denial and fury spilling forth as though with them he could hold back the fact of her survival and all that it meant. As though through will alone he could force a new truth into being, something wrong and dire, but not so vile it would further feed the rage building within him.

She spoke softly, touched him, half in attempt to comfort and half in pleading.

But he recoiled, this time, from contact, as though all she now was transferred through her hand and into a hard reality he would do anything to deny. “What are you?”

How she answered that, how she tried to explain would be everything, shape all. “I’m a myth” she said, and more words came, hot and pitched for comfort. She reached—spoke to all of him—the boy she had known, the Draighil she had watched him become, the man in Kilras’s many stories who healed and grew and cared again. But each phrase she uttered struck hollow, found no hold within him. The shock of her standing still before him rocked loose too many moorings, battered at a foundation of self so fractured by pain and loss that determination alone held it together.

And he was Draighil. Draighil still, despite time and friendship and new vocation. As some part of her had become Draigon the moment she met Gahree at the old mill, he had encompassed the soul of a Draigon slayer the day he joined the Ehlewer Enclave. She smelled it, like heady wine, the blooded determination within him. The soul-forged focus and hate. And the skill to back all the violence that such indoctrination called forth. Draighil to the bone. Memory seared through her, of the

idea that came to her that long-ago day at the pond when he told her of his plans for his life: *Being a Draighil was being something different for always.*

She had known it then. But she had grown up, gained knowledge, sought to become wise. And in doing so, unlearned the thing the child she had been had understood completely. Had she held to that youthful awareness of truth, would she have assessed him differently this night?

“What are *you*, Leiel?” he demanded, the battle within him etched in the stiffness of his stance. “What did you choose all those years ago that you can stand here now as the girl I knew?”

“Not that girl,” she said. “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.

She took in the reflexive tightening of his fingers on the hilt of his sword. “What I chose to be,” she replied, looking up at him. “Draigfen, Cleod. I am Draigfen.” And watched Gweld erupted and claimed him.

No thought drove the action that flooded him. Violence bloomed beyond control, hot and vile, into the space between them. She snapped into Gweld and moved the way only Draigfen moved, with scorching speed that outpaced human response, left behind heat and ash and burnt air. He followed, screaming his anger, half entranced, sword in motion. Gweld spiraled around him in a riot of color, into the space her mind occupied until it threatened to merge completely with her senses. She sucked breath, retreating. Old gods, how unprepared she was for the reach and depth of his trained skill! His lack of recent practice saved her. That and her own knowledge. He advanced, seeking her death, and she cried out against the very thought of it, “*Idodben, Cleod!*”

He stumbled to a halt as the old command ripped into his mind, quenched the fury and unfurling violence, and dropped him to his knees.

Trembling, she looked down at him, her breath heaving in her chest as though she were the one who had just attacked. As though the very air were elixir enough to squelch the fire blazing through every nerve. The scent of ground charred by her motion chased each indrawn breath, and she stared down at him, horror billowing inside her like the smoke of a newly lit fire.

He raised his head and met her gaze and she saw that he *knew*. His awareness flickered, tested, then reached out and batted against hers. And he recoiled as the truth poured into him, pooling behind his eyes. She trembled to watch it take hold, crack open inside him, and sunder everything he had built of himself, everything that had come to matter.

He closed his eyes against it, against her.

What had she done? Every moment with him awakened new danger, new pain. “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, Cleod. 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.*”

His gaze found hers again, and he shook his head, over and over, short, quick, desperate. “No,” he said.

“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.”

He shook his head, the battle within him rattling the barrier of his contained will until she could almost hear it.

“What are you?” he whispered.

One last chance. One last moment to reach him. “Let it be, Cleod. Nothing can now change what I have become.” As she spoke, something flicked the edge of her mind, too fleeting and faint for her to bring into focus. “There can be nothing between us but what there has already been.”

The failure was utter. Like blood and shattered bone, the colors of battle erupted again across her vision, swirling like a cyclone around them and hurling hope into the night.

She took a step back, then another. Too late, too much, all the long-suppressed hate and self-loathing within him. Like a red sunrise signaled storms to sailors, Gweld ripped apart the air between them, reaching, demanding, snatching at her as though it held intent to snare her soul.

The struggle to even draw breath racked his body as his fingers twisted tight against the hilt of the sword and he pushed to his feet. “*Tell me.*”

Truth then. Only brutal truth. And all the raw damage it would lay at their feet. “*Draigfen,*” she said, the words soft as she could utter them. “Just *Draigon*, Cleod.” The gentle tone reached nothing within him. She stared into his twisting face. Red light spilled across her senses as the force of his anger triggered a reaction so fierce that it hurled her into full Gweld vision, a firestorm of color and emotion that threatened to strip all focus from her mind. Wind and wings, what had the Ehlewer wrought across his soul to awaken such violence as this? The question flashed through her mind in the space of a heartbeat.

His gaze was fire. Torn from the depths of his rage, a single word escaped him. “*Run.*”

Fight or flee? Kill or hold to hope?

She pivoted and bolted into the forest.