



# **The Black Flower**

**A Novel By**

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Where there is love, there is life.

--MAHATMA GHANDI

*Not so long ago, on what we now call the supercontinent Pangaea:*

## Prologue

Deep within the earth, Gaia lifted her head and laughed. For ten years, she'd screamed, gurgled, even screeched to express the agony that rippled through her ancient body day after day. But she had never laughed, because she never believed she could be free from the pain . . . until today.

Her crimson hand hovered above her abdomen, the intent firm in her mind. That alone was a heinous betrayal, but she hadn't been destroyed. Instead, she was rewarded. The raging and boiling of the soulpain lessened, as if the Veil was hiding from her like a frightened animal.

Her yellow eyes darted around the ancient cavern that served as her palace. She remained as she had been for centuries, alone, suffering, trapped by hopes and promises. No one had materialized to gasp at her impudence—that she would destroy the gate through which all life passed, cutting off the Living Earth from the World Beyond.

It had all gone so wrong. Instead of loving one another, the little ones had chosen war, with each wrongful death causing her terrible pain. What a monstrous lie it had turned out to be. She would participate no longer.

Intoxicated by the power of her decision, she readied herself to strike.

“Don't.” A warm voice echoed through the cavern.

Gaia sat up, searching the darkness for the smallest hint of his brilliance. It wasn't there.

“Why should I not? The others did. You did.”

“My body remains above, accomplishing my purpose. Only my spirit is gone. But Amar allows my return now, to plead with you. I still love you. We won’t be together if you do this.”

The soulpain surged back, making her growl. “And what will become of us? Will you hold me as I writhe like a worm? Watch the pain tear me apart? Open your luminous eyes. It was all a lie.”

“The lie is in your heart. You can persist. You must.”

“Then, help me persist. Show me your light, as you once did.” She reached for him.

“Warm my chilled flesh and numb my mind to this agony.”

“I cannot. My place is above now. It would be a violation.”

“A violation of a lie.” Gaia brought her hand back. She dug a fingernail into her red flesh. The soulpain retreated again as glowing orange blood oozed from the wound. “See? Nothing happens. Only that I have no pain.”

“You have not done it,” he said. “The sin is terrible but incomplete.”

“I am incomplete!” Gaia screamed. “I have been alone for a millennium, fighting in the dark, tearing my flesh on the rocks to endure! Yet you say persist. Have you, even for one day, known anguish as I have?”

He was silent. She began to shake. Star-like tears cascaded down her ruby cheeks. “You have not, but you would have me do it. You would have me go on . . . alone.”

More silence. The worst response he could have given.

“I will not.” She tore at her stomach, carving through flesh and sinew without wincing. When the opening was wide enough, she shoved her hand inside. Orange blood poured into her lap as her hand closed around the Veil. It singed her fingers, pulsing with power.

She sobbed. The weight of what she was about to do was crushing, but it wasn't her fault. The little ones were responsible. They had forgotten about her. Made her suffer for their selfishness. Now they would pay the price.

She crushed the Veil.

An explosion filled her belly, ejecting her hand and spilling a glorious prism of light into the void. For one spectacular moment, the ancient chasm was as bright as the surface world. Then the light subsided. The hole in her stomach began to heal and the cavern darkened once again.

She sat there, waiting quietly in the darkness for days. Her power remained intact. There was no consequence. No soulpain. No feeling at all. Just merciful emptiness. It strengthened her, giving her new purpose.

The Veil, normally rippling with energy, pulsed tamely within her like an ever-slowng heartbeat. It would be years before it collapsed fully but that didn't matter. The one thing she'd always had was time.

“What have you done?” he said.

“I am innocent.” She stood, heading into the cavern's tunnels. “The little ones did this. They forgot about me, and you, and all the other ancient truths. Observe the evidence. I go unpunished because the iniquity is theirs.”

“You go unpunished because even now I plead for you. A way is being made for me to come to you.”

She stiffened. “Why?”

“To fulfill your purpose. To love you, as I've always loved you. And to have you with me forever.”

“Lies!” The earth shook with her anger. “They are lies and I won’t have them, or you! I will have . . . *retribution*.” She smiled at the visions in her mind. “I will go to their world, hide there, and let my body consume their precious sphere. I will annihilate every one of them, from the least to the greatest. Then, once every last soul is mine, their true torment will begin.”

He was silent for a long time. “So be it. I will come to you through them. Through their weakness, I will fight and confound your plans until you have no strength left. You will feel the power of my hands and see the radiance of my face. Then, I will take you into my arms and our forever will begin.”

She shook her head, knowing the bitter truth. He was being deceived. She wouldn’t go back to suffering. She would fight with all she had.

“Have you forgotten what I am?” she said. “Where I came from? I am the First Among All, the Infinite Darkness. There’s no limit to my power, and whatever love I had for you won’t stop me from destroying you or anyone else who comes to defy me. This all started with me, and now, it ends with me.”

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Rul of Skarrendar slogged across an underground stream separating two caverns. The air was cool and stale, the only light coming from veins of glowing blue rock in the walls. His hands were scraped and his ankles sore from hours of stumbling in the dark, but he went on. An old friend was suffering and needed his help.

He pulled down his hood for warmth, but it did little good. The chilly water had soaked his robes. But after another ten minutes of walking, he was no longer cold. The cavern had grown unnaturally warm. Then he felt it, the power of the Dragon King, Malfieron.

“I hear you, mortal.” The dragon’s voice rolled through the cavern, echoing off every wall. “This is no place for men right now. And even if it were, I am in no state to help you. Leave now and you will live.”

Rul couldn’t believe the Dragon King didn’t recognize him. The agony in his mind must have been immense. However, if Malfieron was close enough to hear him, Rul was close enough to help. He reached out with his magic, allowing the visions that plagued the Dragon King to pour into him. The dark cave vanished, replaced with horrific images and sounds: mountains of bodies, clouds of disease raining fire and sulfur, and the screams of millions. Worse than all the rest were the glimpses of the Red Woman. The malice in her eyes made him shudder.

It was the future. Rul had been seeing the same visions for a long time. They were horrific enough to cripple any being unfamiliar with them, even the mighty Dragon King. It was why he was there. The Sights, where his visions of the future originated, had always guided him down the best path toward his lifelong goal: stopping Gaia.

A relieved sigh echoed through the cavern. “Rul. It’s you.”

“Your Grace,” he said, bowing.

A pair of brilliant blue lights appeared several hundred feet away. Rul headed forward until he stood before the old dragon. In the dark, nothing but his eyes could be seen. The two cerulean orbs hovered thirty feet above the ground, their serpentine pupils focused on him.

“My everlasting thanks, wizard.”

“No thanks are necessary, My King. I couldn’t let the leader of the world suffer so indignantly.”

“You knew I was having these visions, which means you have seen them too. Who is she? This Red Woman?”

“She’s the end, Your Grace. The end of everything.”

The Dragon King was silent, his eyes studying Rul, his voice flat and emotionless as always. “Why wait so long to tell me?”

Rul tapped his head. “The Sights told me to wait.”

“But the world is still so young. Why would the end come now?”

“I’m not sure. It’s unlike any vision I’ve had before. There’s too much to see. I’ll need time to sift through it all. The only thing I know for certain is that it won’t happen soon. We have a little over a century.”

The Dragon King’s eyes moved back and forth thoughtfully. “It falls to us then? The burden of stopping her?”

Rul hesitated. He’d dreaded this moment. “We must sacrifice, old friend. A terrible, horrible sacrifice.”

“Of?”

“The things we love most. It is our burden—you and I—because of our ability to see the future.” He grimaced, pained by what he saw in his mind’s eye. “The Sights have shown me a plan. If we follow it perfectly, the Red Woman will be stopped.”

“Then follow it we will,” Malfieron said, rising. “With the might of the dragons behind us. Such a burden couldn’t be in more capable hands than ours.”

Before Rul could respond, a familiar image invaded his mind—a girl and a boy holding hands as they stood atop a great mountain. The hellish future he’d seen surged through the land beneath them. The boy and girl embraced each other, then jumped off the mountain. A radiant light pierced the sky, the Red Woman vanished, and the world returned to normal.

Rul had seen it a thousand times but it still tore at his heart. It wasn't fair. So much had gone wrong, and it fell on two children to fix it, to sacrifice themselves for everyone. Rul was glad he wouldn't have to see it.

“Your capable hands, Your Grace. Just yours. I will be dead.”

“Dead?” Malfieron asked, a hint of alarm in his voice.

“Yes. I have to die or the plan will fail. But I consider myself fortunate in this. The things it requires of you are far worse.”



*One hundred years later . . .*

## Chapter 1

Amiria gazed up into the gleaming silver eyes of the man standing in front of her. She knew she was gawking but couldn't stop. He was the first dragon she'd ever seen.

"Your purpose here?" he asked.

He had no scales, horns, fangs, or even a tail. He looked like a god posing as human, barely able to conceal his glory. He was seven feet tall, with a thick muscular body and a face that was almost too beautiful. He wore a full suit of polished plate mail, minus the helmet, and a maroon tabard over it.

The Dragon King really had trapped his entire race in human bodies. But why?

"*Girl*," the guard said. "Tell me your purpose or you will not get in." He waved behind her. "We have to keep the line moving."

"Oh, right. Sorry." She tapped the enormous parcel strapped to her back. "Delivery."

"Delivery." He scribbled on the scroll dangling from his hand. "And your name?"

"What's with all the questions?" she asked. "You didn't ask the last guy all these questions."

"He was a citizen. He passes through this gate many times each week and I am familiar with him. I know nothing about you, foreigner."

"Oh, I see. You don't like foreigners."

He scowled at her, clearly frustrated, but quickly regained his composure. He leaned down so their faces were inches apart. "I do not like exasperating female wastes, regardless of where they hail from."

Amiria stared back at him, her face as hard as stone. Nothing frightened her, and she wouldn't let anyone, even a dragon, think otherwise.

The dragon snorted in amusement. "My likes have nothing to do with it, waste. When the Dragon King disappeared, the Lord-Governor Margarrus instituted this system to track all visitors entering the city. If you wish to enter Kago, I need your purpose and name."

"Fine. My name's Amiria. And put 'the Great and Powerful' next to it."

"Amiria." He wrote on the scroll. "Difficult blonde waste female visiting for delivery." He pointed at a scrawny youth nearby. "The boy there will stable your horse. You pay when you leave."

Midnight, the enormous black horse beside her, whinnied and threw his head.

"Don't be a baby." Amiria led him to the boy. "I'll come check on you later."

Midnight narrowed his bulbous brown eyes as if he didn't believe her.

"What? I will. Probably."

He reluctantly went with the stable boy as Amiria entered the city. Kago was one of the oldest, grandest cities in the world. An expanse of tall stone buildings climbed the hill as far as Amiria could see. There were big ones squeezed together on each block with smaller ones built on top of them. Stone walkways connected the upper buildings so frequently it was almost like the city had two levels. Billowy columns of steam rose into the air between many of the buildings.

Both dragons and humans walked the streets in numbers too great to count. Every one of them seemed to be in a hurry. Few even bothered to look at her.

It had taken Amiria nine months to get there, making her pilgrimage longer than any before it, but that had been her plan all along. This was where she'd find the man she was going to marry.

But first, she *really* needed a bath.

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Teverock was lost in a strange forest. The sky was pitch-black, but the trees provided ample light. They were tall, wispy, and made of chalky stone. The light came from their leaves which glowed orange and fell constantly, like embers falling near a great fire. There were crumbling stone walls, cracked pillars, and ruined canals. The place felt primordial.

Before he could move, a girl appeared from behind one of the trees. Her arms and legs were muscular, her skin the color of sand. Her hair was a mass of tangled blonde curls that fell to her waist, with black gems and strands of gold woven into it. Her eyes were greener than grass. She wore a moonlight silver dress and her bare feet caressed the ground as she walked.

Teverock couldn't take his eyes off her, a strange feeling stirring within him. But when she spotted him, he knew the feeling wasn't shared. Her lips curled into a sneer.

She sprinted toward him, teeth bared, hands out, growling ferociously. Teverock had no time to flee. He brought his hands up to defend himself, but she knocked them aside, driving her forearm into his chest. The air burst from his lungs as she shoved him into one of the trees. She pinned him there, a hand on his throat, the other on his left arm. Burning pain erupted wherever she touched him.

Teverock's heart pounded. Her eyes were like a ravenous beast's. He wanted to look away, but she held his head straight by the jaw. As they stared at one another, her face softened. The wild look in her eyes was replaced by one of affection. She let him go and stepped back to observe him better.

That was when he noticed the blood. His skin was flayed where she had touched him, as if her palms were made of sandstone. For some reason, this didn't alarm him. The strange feeling returned, and this time, a name came with it. Love. He loved her.

She placed her hands on his chest, delicately this time, and leaned her body against his. She kissed him—the deep, passionate kiss of a lover. There was blood and pain. Her lips were as coarse as her hands. He kissed her back, too much in love to care.

When they finally came apart, his blood was all over her nose and mouth. She noticed it too. Tears filled her eyes. “I'm a monster.”

“No,” Teverock said. “You're perfect.”

Her fury returned. “Liar!”

She hurled him into the air as if he weighed nothing. He landed on his back with a painful scream. She was on him in seconds, pinning his arms to the ground and burying her lips into his once more. He kissed her back just as hard. His lips were on fire, but he didn't care. Kissing her was worth the pain.

As they kissed, a warm, tingling sensation filled Teverock's body. It started in his stomach, then spread to his fingers and toes. He noticed the garden had become very bright.

The girl gasped, scrambling away from him.

Teverock looked down and discovered that he was the source of the light. His whole body had become luminously yellow, like a slightly tamer version of the sun. Strange pulses of

white light shot out from him every few seconds. His brightness consumed the entire garden, eliminating even the smallest shadows. He stood.

The girl sighed with relief and put her arms around him once more. She had changed, too, and was now unaffected by the light. In fact, it seemed to disappear on her skin. Her face was dark red, her eyes yellow, her expression so intensely sorrowful it broke his heart.

“You came back.” Her voice was hoarse, as if she’d been screaming for centuries. “Promise me you’ll never leave again.”

Teverock wrapped his arms around her, hoping he’d never let go. “I promise.”

Teverock opened his eyes, finding himself not in the ancient garden but in his room, lying in his bed. Sunbeams dove through cracks in his shutters. Birds chirped their morning songs outside. It had been a dream. The same dream for three nights in a row.

Teverock leapt out of bed. It had to mean something. It was time to see if he could find out what.

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“... and then I promise I’ll never leave her again! The detail is incredible and it’s the same way every time!”

Nakura stroked his wiry gray beard as he listened to his adopted human son. Teverock had run out of his room minutes earlier and now sat across from him at their kitchen table, his black hair wild from sleep, his brown eyes wide with excitement. Nakura kept calm, showing no emotion as a dragon should. He didn’t want Teverock to know how much the dream disturbed him.

“I would not worry over it, boy. Dreams hold little significance for humans.”

“But the same dream over and over again? That has to mean something.”

“It means I was right.” They both turned to see Voric, Nakura’s natural-born son, standing in the doorway eating an apple. He was tall even by dragon standards, with ruffled blonde hair that covered the tops of his ears. His eyes were sapphire blue, like Nakura’s. He had a prominent brow, high cheekbones, and a deep cleft in his chin. He wore a sleeveless gray jerkin, tan canvas trousers, and a pair of old sandals. Spiraling black tattoos covered his chest and shoulders, as they did on every dragon.

He sat down next to Teverock. “You’re a loon. I’ve said it for years and I think it’s best if we all just came to terms with it.”

Voric laughed, amused at his own joke. Nakura chastised him immediately. “Voric.”

Voric’s grin vanished. “I’m sorry, Father.”

“Do not be sorry, son. Be obedient. We have the Law for a reason.”

Voric nodded stiffly, the emotion draining from his face. In the last few years, Voric had become lax with his emotions, behaving more like a human than a dragon. Nakura knew it was because of Teverock. Other dragons had started to notice, too. Nakura didn’t mind their disdainful looks, but he did mind the attention Voric was drawing.

Teverock let the awkwardness of his brother’s reprimand pass before pressing again.

“Are you sure, Father? About the dream?”

“I am sure, boy. Strange as it may seem, it is likely all a coincidence. Dreams are products of the subconscious. You probably read or saw something that stuck in your head, even if you do not remember it, and now your mind is bringing it back.”

“So, the same dream three nights in a row is just a coincidence? From my subconscious?”

“Se’tha,” Voric said. “It might be the girl thing.”

“Oh. Yeah.” He nodded thoughtfully. “It could be.”

“Girl thing?” Nakura asked. “What girl thing?”

“He’s a man now,” Voric said. “Well, close enough anyway. That’s what humans his age do, Father. They find girls to be with. Except he hasn’t.”

“Shut up, Voric.”

“No bickering.” Nakura leaned over and glanced out the window, looking at the sun to gauge the time. “You two had best hurry or you will be late for my pickup. Teverock, if it will ease your mind, I will go through some of my books while the two of you are gone. There are three chapters devoted to human dreams in Barley’s *Mystical Quandaries*. We can discuss it at length when you return.”

Teverock looked relieved. “Thank you, Father.”

“Thank me by dressing yourself quickly. You know how long it takes to get to the market.”

“Yes, Father.”

Teverock left the kitchen, heading back down the hall toward his room. The moment he was gone, Voric leapt around the table next to Nakura, his apple rolling across the kitchen floor.

“The dream, what does it really mean?”

“It is not a dream. He is looking through time and does not realize it. It would seem the Plan is in motion. Keep a sharp eye and a sharper mind. If anyone so much as stares at him too long, kill them.”

“Kill!?! Father, you can’t be serious!”

“Adalon,” Nakura said sternly, using Voric’s real name. “Control yourself.”

Voric recognized his outburst and his surprise vanished. Nakura grabbed his arm, ensuring he had his full attention. “It is most crucial now, my son. I know you do it for Teverock,

to make him feel comfortable, but you have gotten far too lax. You are a dragon, bound by the Law. If you do not control your mind, you will fall into the same trap our ancestors did.”

“I’m sorry, Father,” Voric said. “I will do better.”

“Good. I know my command sounds harsh, but we cannot afford to take any chances. This is bigger than any single life. Everything is at stake. You will not be held accountable for anything you do protecting Teverock. You are the Guardian, remember?”

“Yes, Father.”

Teverock’s door opened. Voric scooped up his apple and returned to his original spot as Teverock reentered the room dressed in a white collared shirt, dingy green leggings, and the same leather boots he wore every day.

“Let’s go, se’tha. We really will be late if we don’t hurry.”

“Yeah, I’m coming.”

“Be careful you two,” Nakura called after them.

“We will.” Teverock turned and waved. “Goodbye, Father.”

“Goodbye, boy.”

The front door opened and shut. The house was silent. Nakura’s body was heavy with guilt, but he kept his posture stiff. *Strong body, strong mind*, he reminded himself. No emotion, no weakness. Living above it all, as a dragon should.

He stared out the window at Kago, thinking about the life he’d had for the last twelve years. It would all be gone soon—the least of his coming sacrifices. Suddenly, Rul’s words came back to him.

*The things it requires of you are far worse.*

He closed his eyes. “You were right, wizard. You were absolutely right.”



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Voric observed his little brother as they made their way toward the market. They moved at a brisk pace, on sidewalks separated from the houses by long rows of flowers.

He knew the dream was still on Teverock's mind. His hands were in his pockets, and he was staring at the ground. Every time he spotted a loose rock on the sidewalk, he kicked it absentmindedly.

Voric had been keeping secrets from Teverock since their father brought him to Kago twelve years earlier. As they'd grown closer, the weight of those secrets had only gotten heavier.

"Why didn't you tell us about the dream?"

"I thought I just did."

"No, I mean why didn't you say anything the first night you had it? Why wait three days to tell us?"

"Oh, I don't know. It didn't seem worth worrying about until it started repeating."

"Well, it worries me. If it had been my dream, I would've told father immediately. Don't you trust us?"

"Of course I trust you. I just didn't think it was anything to fuss over. I'm not even really worried about it now, after what you said."

"The girl thing?"

"A beautiful girl, kissing . . . it makes perfect sense. Even when I sleep I can't get it out of my head."

Voric nodded. Even from a young age, Teverock had looked forward to having a family of his own. But for whatever reason, girls his age never seemed interested in him.

“Well, se’tha, if something bothers you, you can always come to me. It doesn’t matter how weird or insignificant it seems.”

Teverock raised a curious eyebrow. “Why are you so sentimental today? Did my dream bother you that much?”

Voric wanted to say yes. He wanted to spill every secret his father ever entrusted to him. It would be so liberating, and Teverock deserved to know the truth. But there was no telling how it would affect the Plan.

“I just want you to remember we’re here if you need us. We’re family.”

Teverock smiled. “I know, Voric. Thank you.”

Voric was grateful when Teverock’s attention drifted back to the rocks on the sidewalk. Suddenly he found himself looking forward to the Red Woman’s arrival, terrible as it would be. There’d be no more secrets then. No more half-truths. No more convincing loved ones to ignore dreams about creatures that wanted them dead.

Hoping to distract himself from his frustration, Voric joined his brother in kicking the next stray rock he came across. It whistled like an arrow, curving left and slicing into the flowers. Dozens of petals flew into the air. Voric gaped at the large gash he’d created in the perfect flowerbed.

“Oops.”

Teverock laughed. “You are a walking disaster.”

“If you had the power of a dragon boiling under your skin, you’d have trouble controlling it, too.”

“Probably.” Teverock knelt over the flowers. “Maybe I can push these together so it doesn’t look . . . aghh! Snake!”

Voric lunged between Teverock and the flowerbed. He spotted the serpent immediately, beneath the torn canopy of white and red perennials. It was black, its body as big around as a man's arm.

Voric was surprised. He'd seen small snakes out by the wall, but it seemed impossible for one this big to get so far into the city without being spotted.

"That's quite the serpent," Voric said.

"Yeah, but why isn't it moving?"

Teverock was right. The snake had been motionless the entire time. Voric inched forward with Teverock crowding behind him until they were just a foot from the shadowy coil. It still didn't move. Was it sick? Or dead?

He kicked the flowers.

"What are you doing!?" Teverock hissed.

The snake didn't react. Voric sniffed the air, smelling no trace of a living creature. He knelt and moved the flowers aside. It wasn't a snake at all. It was a vine, half buried in the dirt, weaving between the stems of the flowers.

"Whoa."

"Let me see," Teverock moved around him. "What on earth? Is that a vine?"

"I think so. But I've never seen a vine like that."

"Me neither. Tiamat's Breath look at that thing. Look at the flowers on it."

Voric followed Teverock's pointed finger to the strange blossoms. They were about four inches in diameter, velvety black, growing randomly across the surface of the vine. Each one had four petals with a smear of gold at its tip, and a bright golden pistil. They were quite beautiful, more so than the perennials above them.

Voric kept his shock hidden. His father had said the earth itself would give a sign when the end was near. “When you see the Black Flowers,” he had said. “You will know the Red Woman’s time has come.”

*Kill him.*

Voric inhaled sharply. It was a voice, right in his ear. His eyes darted around, but he and Teverock were alone on the street.

*You heard me. Kill Teverock. Kill him right now. Hurry.*

The voice was in his head. He looked at Teverock, who was still examining the vine. A voice in his head wanted him to kill his little brother. Voric had no idea how to react. He felt helpless and fearful.

*Yes. Hurry. Smash him into the ground. Break his neck. Cover your hands in blood once more. It’s what you want. You know it is.*

Beads of sweat formed on Voric’s brow. It was madness. There was no other explanation for a murderous voice inside his head. But how? Dragons were above things like disease and madness. Was it the years of being so lax with his emotions? Ignoring the Law and the traditions of his people? Was he destined for the Pit like his older brother, Nirrix?

Voric’s hands quivered, aching to follow the voice’s command. He jerked them into his pockets.

“What kind is it?” Voric asked, hoping to distract himself.

“I have no idea. I’ve never seen a vine like this. And those flowers . . .”

*Kill him, you fool. Now.*

“You’re kidding, right? I’ve seen you read at least two books about plants this year. Something like this would have to be in a book.”

“Not in the ones I’ve read.”

Voric waited for the devilish voice to return but his head remained silent. He hoped it was gone for good.

“Look at the way it coils around the flowers,” Teverock said. “It’s almost like a parasite. What could that mean?”

Voric was glad he could tell the truth for once. “Nothing good.”

## Chapter 2

Keldir sat stiffly in his chair. He was in the kitchen of his family’s small cottage, his mother nearby preparing supper, an open book on the table before him. His learning that afternoon had been simple—read a few chapters from one of his father’s books. He’d done well until his mother started cooking. Five plump pheasants turned on a spit in the hearth. They filled the room with appetizing pops and sizzles. Roasted pheasant, boiled potatoes, and a simmering venison stew. It was enough to distract any hungry dragon, especially a young one.

“May I be done?” he asked.

His mother, Epithera, stopped stirring the stew to gaze expectantly at him. “Are you finished, Keldir?”

His eyes moved to the book on the table. “I cannot concentrate, Mother.”

“This is your only lesson today. You will do nothing else until you finish. Come now, child. It is almost done.”

Keldir stared at the book, feeling the contempt he wasn't supposed to show. The paragraphs were like little, inky blockades between him and his dinner. Learning was hard enough when he wasn't hungry because it was so boring. But his parents always insisted on it. "It would not do for a dragon to be brought up any other way," they always said.

More sizzles issued as the pheasants rained their juices on the orange coals beneath them, luring Keldir's gaze back to the kitchen. His mother stepped in front of the hearth, blocking his view. Her kind features hardened.

"Yes, mother," he said stiffly.

Epithera nodded. "Good boy."

Keldir placed his hands on the open page, moving them until he found where he'd left off, and read aloud. "*After the Long Age of Dissolution came the Short Age of Blood, starting with what we now call the Long War. There was no kingdom or province that did not participate. The battle raged for two centuries. Dragons killed yurrye, yurrye killed fenir—immortals killed immortals for reasons none can remember. Even now, we still look upon those years with shame.*"

Keldir looked up to see if his mother was paying attention. The roasting birds and boiling pots sat neglected behind her. She motioned for him to continue.

*"But then, one of the Ancient Titans took pity on us. Tiamat, the First Dragon, returned from below and stopped our senseless fighting. She gave the dragons her Law, taught us restraint from our baser instincts and emotions, and through us, showed the entire world what it could become. Before she left us, Tiamat bequeathed her powerful Spirit to a single dragon, and the line of the Dragon King was born. Each new Dragon King, chosen by the previous one, had a solemn duty to uphold the Law and share it with others. This changed everything for everyone,*

*but none more so than the humans. They had been living in caves, so primitive they thought us gods and monsters, but because of the Law, we took pity on them. We taught them all we could, and in just one short millennia, they established their own great kingdom on the Living Earth, rivaling even the dragons in strength. Then, Abaero Corderin came to power. This human king was a mighty warrior loved by his people. But in his old age, he grew envious of our immortality, and his jealousy drove him to madness. Corderin rallied a massive army and attacked the immortal kingdoms without warning. Hundreds of thousands died in the first month alone.”*

Keldir stood. “Okay. I am done.”

“Are you? I do not recall that chapter being so short, and I have read that book over two hundred times.”

“Mother . . .” he said, on the verge of whining.

Epithera grabbed a ladle, filled it with broth from the stew pot, and brought it to her lips.

“Mmm. Oh, that’s heavenly.”

Keldir threw himself into the chair. “*Before all hope was lost, the Dragon King rallied the immortals against Corderin. They pushed his forces back until the Mad King barricaded himself inside his castle. He remained there an entire year until the Dragon King’s own son, the Elder Prince Nirrix, committed a horrific act which broke Corderin’s ranks, allowing the Empire’s forces to storm the castle. After ten years of nightmarish conflict and substantial loss of life, the Corderin War was over. The beloved Elder Prince was imprisoned for war crimes. Humankind was left in shambles, having no government to speak of and no country to call home. The yurrye withdrew into their great city, and the fenir, disgusted by the war, left the common earth altogether. But the Corderin War had its greatest effect on the one person it shouldn’t have—the Dragon King himself.”*

Keldir's interest quickly overwhelmed his hunger. This was something he'd been curious about for a long time.

*“Driven mad by the war, King Malfieron became obsessed with the Practice of Remission from Tiamat's Law, commanding mercy toward the humans. He used his god-like power to force his own people to take human forms and combined the dragon empire with the shattered empire of men, forming the Draco-Redon Empire. The Dragon King then locked himself away on the highest floors of the White Tower, never to be seen again. The Younger Prince Adalon also disappeared. It was the ultimate betrayal. Outraged, we adopted a new name for ourselves. We are no longer dragons. We are the kavul.”*

Kavul. He'd heard his parents say the word long ago, with much disgust and anger. “What does it mean?” he asked.

“It is the old tongue. It means captive.”

Keldir glanced at his mother's neck, at the spiraling black tattoos that bound her true form, creeping out from under her collar. Keldir was born after the Confinement, but even before his parents told him about his true nature, he'd always instinctively known he was supposed to be something else.

“Why did he do it to us, mother?”

“He said it was the only way to mend the world. He said we would be stronger for it. I used to believe him, but that was a hundred years ago. Now, I am not sure. I never thought he would abandon us the way he did.” Tears appeared in her eyes, but she quickly blinked them away.



Keldir tried to imagine how his mother felt. He never ached for his true body the way his parents seemed to. Was being a dragon truly so wonderful? Or was it the betrayal of their king that disheartened them?

Either way, Keldir knew who was to blame. The humans. If they hadn't been such jealous, vile creatures, the Corderin War would never have happened. The dragons would still be free and his parents wouldn't be sad. The Dragon King should've punished them, but instead, he punished his own people. Keldir couldn't understand why. Why force the dragons to care for their enemies? Why make them take a similar form? Not even his father, who'd been a close friend of the Dragon King, had been able to figure that out.

“Mother?”

His voice drew Epithera back. “You are done for today, child. Go find your father and we will have dinner. He should be on his way back by now.”

Keldir nodded obediently and rose from the table. He walked through the cottage and stepped through the front door onto the porch. An endless wall of pine and spruce trees greeted him. The aroma of pheasant was replaced by the crisp smell of coniferous forest. A cool breeze prickled his skin. In Kamora there was no such thing as warm, even during summer.

Keldir filled his lungs and bellowed, “Father! Dinner is ready!”

Nothing but the sound of wind and rustling branches answered him.

“Father!” Keldir yelled louder.

Still no response. His father always answered if he was within earshot. Keldir stepped off the porch onto the grassy clearing. He sniffed the air, catching his father's scent. He was north. Two, maybe three miles.

Keldir took off toward the smell. He ran with a speed and agility no human could match, bounding around trees like a deer. He covered the first mile in just four minutes. But as he drew closer, he noticed something odd about his father's scent. It smelled stale . . . rotten even.

He also noticed peculiarities in the forest. All around Keldir, birds chirped, branches creaked, and wind whistled. Ahead, it was completely silent. The forest even looked darker than it should have. The sun was out and there wasn't a cloud in the sky, but there was a notable dimness, like a shadow, cast on everything half a mile in front of him.

He pressed on in spite of his growing dread. Within minutes, he was in the middle of the silence. Even the pine needles didn't crunch under his feet. He could no longer see the sky, and anything more than a hundred feet away was shrouded in blackness.

"Father! Faaaather!"

The forest seemed to swallow his words. He moved faster, hoping to outrun his ever-increasing sense of dread. Then, something tripped him.

Keldir screamed and hit the ground rolling. The world spun around him so violently he shut his eyes to keep from getting sick. When he finally stopped, he was on his belly in the dirt, breathing hard.

"Ow," he said quietly. He pushed himself up, his forearms and knees burning. Numerous cuts and scrapes covered them, but many were already starting to heal. Even trapped in a human body, being a dragon came with many advantages. As the pain faded, Keldir turned to see what had tripped him.

A long black snake lay between two trees twenty feet behind him. Keldir drew a sharp breath of surprise. He'd never seen a snake in Kamora. His mother said the cold kept them away.

But as he stared, he realized it wasn't a snake. He got up and moved closer. It was a bizarre black vine of some kind. It grew straight out of the ground, looping and twisting across the forest floor. Gorgeous black and gold flowers bloomed across its surface.

Keldir grew anxious. The vine, though motionless, seemed like it might suddenly come to life. He backed away, never taking his eyes off it. What was that thing? His father would know. His father knew everything about the forest.

“Father, I fell! I am okay though! I am coming!”

Keldir took off again. He noticed a dense brushy thicket in the distance. His father's scent was coming from the other side. He slowed dramatically, almost tiptoeing. His heart was practically in his throat.

He hesitated near the edge. “Father?”

There was no answer, but something moved inside the thicket. Something big and slow. It didn't sound like an animal.

“Boy . . . is that you?”

“Father,” Keldir said, relieved.

He vaulted into the thicket, but what he saw on the other side froze him mid-step. His father lay in the middle of a small clearing. His eyes were milk-white, his skin ashen gray, his tongue swollen and bulging from his mouth.

“Boy . . . help me.”

Keldir screamed in terror as his father shoved himself up on all fours like a dog. His arms shook as he crawled toward him. “Help me, boy! They killed me!”

Screaming, Keldir ran back into the woods. His dead father didn't follow, but the darkness did. Through panicked tears, he watched it swallow the trees behind him. No matter how fast he ran.

It didn't take him long to get back to the cottage.

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Epithera burst through her front door, following the screams of her son. Darkness had consumed the forest around the cottage. The sky was black, the sun eclipsed with only a faint, fiery ring visible. Keldir stumbled out of the woods, looking absolutely terrified.

"What is it, child?" Epithera wrapped her arms around him. "What is wrong?"

"It's F-Father!"

"Your father? What about him?"

"He's—he's there!" He buried his face in her dress and pointed.

Epithera saw a shadow moving beyond the tree line. It was a towering figure, thirty feet or more, wrapped in something like a wispy blue fog. It had deep red skin, burning yellow eyes, and was staring right at them.

"Come!" Epithera took Keldir by the arm and ran around the cottage, but the forest there was just as dark, with more shadows moving beyond the tree line. She sensed something ancient, full of malice and rage, all around them.

She took several deep breaths and knelt before her son. "Keldir, you have to do something for me, something important. You need to be brave and do exactly as I say, understand?"

"Yes ma'am!" Keldir said.

“Good, listen carefully. I am going to break your seal. Once you are in your real body, fly south to the Painted Mountains. Go until you are directly over them, then fly east until you see a cave—a great hole in the earth unlike any other. Dive in and start walking. The dragons deep inside will come find you. You will be safe.”

“B-Break my seal? F-Fly? But, Mother, I . . . I don’t know how!”

“Yes, you do, Keldir. It is in your blood.”

“But Mother, the Dragon King—”

“The Dragon King is gone, child. He doesn’t care about us. We are on our own now. You have to survive. For your father.”

Keldir sobbed but nodded obediently. Epithera grabbed his tunic and tore it open at the neck, revealing the dark black lines tattooed over his chest. They were words, written in the Old Tongue, so small and compressed they looked like lines from far away. They spiraled into an uneven circle around his heart. In that circle were the primary incantations of the Confinement, along with instructions for how to break it.

Epithera had noticed this decades earlier while examining the lines on Ramothkirm’s chest. It always perplexed her. If the Dragon King didn’t want them breaking their seals, why leave instructions on how to do so? Now, the why no longer mattered. She had a way to save her son.

She gripped the invisible seal, gasping as its power surged through her. Breaking it would be costly.

“Mother?”

“Yes, child?”

“Will I die?”

Epithera shook her head. “No, son, you will feel more alive than ever. You will feel the power of our people in every part of you. You will understand everything we have tried to teach you about your heritage. Now, hold still.”

Epithera focused her attention back on the seal. She took a deep breath and tensed her arms.

“Mother?” she heard him say again.

“What is it, Keldir?”

“Will you die?”

Tears pooled in her eyes. She could no longer hold them back. She smiled at her son. “This is not the end, Keldir. Your father and I will be waiting for you. In the Warmth.”

She tore the invisible seal apart, and a blinding golden light enveloped them.

### Chapter 3

After half an hour of bathing in cold water, the sun felt amazing on Amiria’s skin. The owner of the bath house had apologized profusely, saying that the steam pipes which heated their water had broken the day before. She stood on the sidewalk, shivering, but no longer smelling like her horse.

“F-finally,” she said as warmth returned to her body.

When the shivering stopped, she adjusted the parcel on her back and headed deeper into the city. Her plan was to find the part with the most people. There she would buy lodgings and begin hunting for a suitable husband.

After forty minutes of walking, Amiria found herself on the edge of Kago's crowded market. The streets were much wider and lined with fewer buildings, housing numerous wooden stalls, carts, and portable shops. Both humans and dragons peddled wares from them, buying and selling to each other without much reservation. Amiria was amazed at how well they seemed to get along, considering everything she had heard about the city's racial tensions.

The dragons were reserved and emotionless compared to the humans, never smiling or laughing or getting upset. She would see hints of emotion—wet eyes, the beginnings of a sneer or smile—but these things quickly vanished.

She walked until she came to a large intersection. Four roads converged around a raised platform five hundred feet long. The platform was filled with podiums and booths, each with a small crowd around it. The people inside the booths were shouting city-wide announcements, news, and differing philosophies on the state of the Draco-Redon Empire.

Amiria saw she had to cross the square to continue through the market and was about to do so when something amazing caught her eye. It was a tower, in the center of the city, so tall it appeared to touch the sky. Amiria wondered how she hadn't noticed it earlier.

It was smooth like ceramic and white as sun-bleached bone, wider at the bottom but narrowing at the top, like a gleaming fang. The top held the building's only visible windows and balconies. A few misty clouds hung just above them. The White Tower—she'd finally seen it.

This was why Kago was famous. Not because of its immense market or enormous population. Because of this incredible building and its one infamous resident.

The legendary Dragon King, Malfieron.

“Alms, little one?” someone said.

Amiria turned and saw a dragon woman holding out an open palm. She had short pale hair and bright pink eyes. She was clothed in faded black robes but didn't look like a beggar.

“What?” Amiria asked.

“Forgive my presumption. I saw your fine clothes and thought you might have coin to share. Could you spare anything for these poor, cursed souls?”

Amiria followed her gaze to a large group of women off the platform about fifty feet away, huddled together on the steps of an apothecary. There were at least forty of them, all wearing gray gowns, with ash rubbed on their cheeks and foreheads. Many looked despondent, their eyes hollow.

Amiria noticed five other dragons, dressed similarly to Pink Eyes, standing on all sides of the women. They too were asking for money from the crowd but also appeared to be keeping people away.

Pity overwhelmed her. Amiria took a golden ter from her purse and handed it to Pink Eyes. “What’s wrong with them?”

“They are stricken with the Ash Plague. It has ravaged the women of Kago for two months. Their babies are born gray and lifeless, crumbling in the arms of their mothers like ash, thus the name. The alchemists are not sure how it spreads, so we keep them isolated.”

One of the women began crying silently. Amiria grimaced. “Here.” She reached into her purse with both hands, grabbing as many ters as she could hold, and gave them to the dragon.

“May Tiamat bless you, little one. You have a generous spirit.”

“Not as generous as yours,” Amiria said. “I couldn't tend to these women. A birth plague is too much to risk for me.”



“No risk for me, little one. The plague does not affect dragons. Though many suspect it came from one.”

Her gaze drifted upward. Amiria followed it to the White Tower. The Dragon King? Was that who she meant?

“Thank you again, little one,” Pink Eyes said. “I am sure your kindness will find its way back to you.”

Amiria nodded, taking a final glance at the women before leaving. She crossed the platform and headed back to the market proper. The plagued women remained on her mind. She imagined herself sitting on the steps with them, unable to leave, thinking only of the baby she had lost. It could just as easily have been her. Especially since she’d touched the hand of a dragon who’d been caring for them. Her sympathy gave way to paranoia.

Amiria found a small fountain and washed her hands just to be safe. As she dried herself with her cloak, she realized she was being watched. Ahead, in the sea of people, a boy her age was staring at her like he’d seen a ghost. He was taller than her, thin but not scrawny, with tawny skin. He had thick, curtained black hair that hung to the top of his neck and dark brown eyes, typical of most humans. His outfit was simple, and there were several paper-wrapped books in his arms.

Had he not been looking at her, she wouldn’t have thought him anything special. But he *was* looking at her. Not in passing like those in the crowd, not even a little longer like some of the men. With familiarity.

Whoever he was, he knew her.

When the shock wore off, Amiria ducked into the crowd, staying low and out of sight. She dove into a nearby alley, sliding the parcel off her back along with her cloak and laying them

behind some moldy crates. From there, she followed the alleys until she came out one block behind her mysterious observer.

She couldn't see the boy, but she did spot some beggars crouched against a wall close to where he'd been standing. Passing a fruit stand, Amiria quietly lifted a burlap tarp from the merchant's belongings and draped it over herself. She sat next to the beggars, watching through a tear in the fabric.

She spotted the boy. He was actively searching for her, walking around and standing on his toes to see through the crowd. "Wait!" he yelled. "Come back!"

Amiria's heart pounded. Did he really know who she was?

"Teverock, what're you doing?"

A dragon stepped out of the crowd, grabbing the boy's shoulder. He had blonde hair, blue eyes, and was one of the most gorgeous creatures Amiria had ever seen.

"Voric! Voric, I think I'm losing my mind!"

"What are you talking about?"

"I swear I just saw . . . Voric? Voric, are you okay?"