

## Chapter 5

Josse sat huddled on her ledge, arms wrapped tightly around her knees and her back up against the cliff. She was shaking, but after what she'd been through, who could blame her?

"I... I can't..." she mumbled to herself as she climbed unsteadily to her feet. "Sorry Lindy..."

The broken princess didn't even stop to look down, diving straight off the ledge. Or she tried to, anyway. She actually rebounded off an invisible barrier at the edge.

Runes inscribed into the rock flickered into life briefly, glowing for a second or two before fading back to invisibility.

As if the dragon would let his food escape that easily; the barrier had been there since the beginning. Besides, even if she did manage to kill herself, he'd added another layer of runes the previous night, while the princess had been unconscious. The body may die, but there would be no escape for her soul.

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The dragon lay in a stupor in his lair. After it had become clear he could never replicate the miracle of healing, he had switched plans. To keep the priest on the mountain would be against the terms of the Pact, and he still intended to fulfil its letter, if not its spirit. Besides, the thought of a bunch of religious fanatics charging up his mountain was rather horrifying. That being the case, he'd simply stockpiled.

The priest hadn't been particularly willing, but the dragon was nothing if not reasonable. Who would ever dare accuse him of being unwilling to compromise? Once it became clear the mind of the princess was at risk of breaking, he'd simply cast a spell of sleep over her, intending to leave her unaware of just how many times she'd died and been healed. It wasn't his fault that the healing had reversed his draconic magic. At least he'd tried, and everyone had to give him credit for that.

The priest, for some reason, hadn't given him credit for that. So he'd followed up by threatening to burn down everything related to Sulltheria that he could find, from grandest cathedral to smallest cairn.

It had been enough to build up more meat than he normally ate in a year before the priest had collapsed from exhaustion. The freshness would suffer, but beggars couldn't be choosers, and there was a lot that could be done with time-stopped storage. It would suffice until he found a better solution.

Or, it *should* have.

Given the way the news of 'resurrection' had raised his hopes of an unlimited princess supply, only to have them dashed when it turned out it could only be done at the whim of some god, he could be excused dipping into the stash for a bit of comfort food. And humans were so small, particularly since the princess wasn't yet fully grown, so who could blame him if he took a second? Or a third?

By midnight, he'd emptied his entire supply, and he'd been in a food coma ever since.

That left a number of problems. He really needed to pay a visit to the new regent before someone talked to the high priest and she discovered the wedding story had been complete bunkum. Of course, it would have made sense to do that while dropping the damn priest off, but he'd wanted to

rush back to his comfort food. It was easy to justify to himself by saying he needed to bring the princess—no, queen now—over to meet her regent, and that he'd needed to create the soul trap. At least he'd managed to complete that final part before gorging himself into a stupor.

Cursing his lack of self control, the dragon made an attempt to lift himself onto his feet, but his legs buckled beneath him and sent his bulk crashing back to the cavern floor.

"I'm sure it won't hurt if I sleep for a few days..." he muttered to himself, the draconic snoring starting up mere seconds later.

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Father Serrell stared out of the window of a carriage as it trundled through the streets of the capital. Having been unceremoniously deposited in the front plaza of his cathedral by the dragon, he'd wanted to rush immediately to the palace, but as ever, the spirit was more willing than the flesh. Still utterly exhausted from the repeated miracles, and then subjected once more to dragon-flight, he was in no condition to stand, let alone travel.

Despite his insistence he be brought back to the palace, his attendants had carried him to his chambers, wasting precious time.

They had, at least, prepared a carriage, and the moment he was capable, he'd stumbled into it. His old bones cried out for rest, for sleep, but in this the spirit won out. There was no way he could sleep. Every time he closed his eyes, he saw the face of the poor girl, as clearly as if she was still there in front of him. The horror in her eyes as she realised what the dragon intended. The last, desperate words she'd mouthed as a claw punctured her torso. 'Help me.'

He didn't know how he could, but he was damn well going to try. A part of him wished he'd called down the wrath of his god there and then, but gods were inscrutable almost by definition. Sulltheria wasn't as quick to anger as some other members of his pantheon, tending more towards grace and mercy than blood and fury, and he didn't know if Sulltheria would actually be enraged sufficiently by the dragon's actions to kill him outright. If not, the dragon would assuredly punish the attempt. Alone, on the dragon's territory, was not the place to roll the dice.

And so, after his tired bones had been rattled around by a carriage built in a society that hadn't quite got around to inventing suspension, he unsteadily climbed out, where he found himself staring into the completely inappropriately beaming face of the kingdom's new regent.

"So? How did it go? Tell me everything!" she demanded before he'd even finished climbing the two steps down from the carriage.

He froze at the incongruity. Was this regent *happy* about the situation of her 'queen'? But as he stared at her—wearing an ill-fitting dress that obviously didn't belong to her, flanked by uncertain-looking knights and one rather weary official—it became obvious that wasn't the case. He remembered the brief glimpse he'd had of a confused maid on his last palace visit and put two and two together.

"I don't know what the dragon has told you, but I suspect you've been deceived," he sighed.

The beaming expression of the ex-maid froze. "What?" she asked. "Weren't the dragon and the mistress getting married?"

The official—Steven, who'd rushed back after the previous day's events in the hopes of avoiding the kingdom falling into chaos—facepalmed. "I told you there was no way that was true," he muttered under his breath. Lindy had been all too happy to give him his old job back, being all too aware that she lacked any sort of ability to act as regent, but when it came to her mistress, her self-awareness fell apart.

"But the dragon *can't* lie! It's in the Pact!"

"To the ruler. Which isn't you."

"Then why did he want a priest?"

Everyone present turned to the priest in question, who had finally managed to climb back to ground level, but was finding the task of remaining upright somewhat taxing.

"To resurrect her after eating her, so that he could eat her again," he answered, then he fell over.

The minister paled. The knights stared. Lindy looked sick.

"He can't do that!" she exclaimed, ignoring the fallen priest. "It's... in the Pact?" she added, sounding uncertain.

"By the terms of the Pact, he must defend the monarch, yes," answered Steven. "And indeed, I suspect that right now, Josse will be the best defended person in the kingdom. There's nothing in the Pact about not eating her. Someone please carry Father Serrell to a guest room. We need to hear the full story, but the day has obviously taken its toll on him, too."

"No, we need to rescue Princess Josse at once!" exclaimed Lindy.

The knights looked at her like she'd gone mad.

"The chances of success would be... slim," pointed out Steven, doing his best to remain calm and collected.

"But the dragon has blatantly betrayed us!"

"Umm... Forgive me for speaking out of turn," interrupted one of the knights, while the other lifted Serrell, "but... *technically*, the dragon hasn't done anything to break the Pact. He even returned Father Serrell. And... we *need* him. Should we raid his lair, even should we emerge victorious with insignificant casualties, our neighbours would take the opportunity to invade. The kingdom's military is organised with the Pact in mind, and the Pact has made us many enemies."

"So, what, we should just abandon her?" shouted Lindy.

"I know this isn't what you want to hear, but pragmatically, it's not a bad option," affirmed Steven. "After your spot of regicide, the kingdom should have fallen into chaos. There would have been a civil war for certain, probably with five or six sides, as various powers tried to seize the throne. The declaration of the dragon that you're in charge is the only reason we have any sort of semblance of stability right now. What's one life compared to the lives that would be lost in a war?"

Lindy considered that, but really, out of all the points her advisors had made, there was only one that really mattered.

"Right. As you said, *I'm* in charge, and I say we can't leave Josse in that condition."

Steven sighed.

"I'm not sure that using authority granted to you by the dragon to attack the dragon makes sense," muttered the knight, but Lindy ignored him.

"Let me gather up some people and see if we can think up a way to get our queen back that doesn't result in the kingdom ending up a thin layer of ash," conceded Steven.

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Josse clenched her teeth in her effort to not make a sound as another orgasm rolled over her body. After failing to kill herself, she could at least do as much as possible to spoil her taste.

She sure as hell didn't consider herself pure or naïve any more, and while there was little she could do about her royalty, at least one aspect of her virginity could go. Anything was better than waiting for old age to toughen up her meat.

Yes, the dragon had made a not-so-veiled threat about what he would do to Lindy, but on reflection, Josse had decided that since he was still giving lip service to the Pact, it was an acceptable risk. Not only had she not had any evidence the dragon was telling the truth, but even if he was, taking an action that would seriously damage the kingdom would be against the agreement, and after forcibly installing Lindy as regent, taking action against her would be sure to plunge the kingdom into chaos.

Thankfully, her efforts to keep quiet as she soured her taste seemed to be bearing fruit. Little did she know that the dragon—stomach stuffed and mind dulled—would have slept through cymbals clanging inches from his ears. She could have moaned all that she liked.

Nevertheless, the vindictive act was unlikely to actually achieve anything. It was hardly a means of escape. She'd still be stuck here, waiting until the dragon needed to restock his larder. What were the chances of him finding a tastier meal elsewhere? It wasn't as if there were any men around for her to do the deed with.

The imprisoned queen wished she'd never mentioned the miracles of healing and resurrection. It had been done in an act of desperation, to preserve her life and to get back at her brother, but it had only made her situation worse. Death would be preferable to whatever *this* was.

And she believed death was still an option; she knew nothing of the soul trap. She could bite her tongue. Find a jagged piece of rock on the cliff-face and slice open her veins. But unlike jumping off the cliff, they were... uncertain. She wasn't *sure* she would die. Even the attempt at jumping off the cliff had been an emotional act, not something planned. Now that she'd calmed down a little, it wasn't an attempt she was sure she'd be able to repeat.

"Sulltheria... Why did you let Serrell bring me back?" she muttered. "For what reason do you want me stuck here?"