

DRAGONIS EX MACHINA

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"WE go on foot from here, Prince Darville," Lord Krej, my father's cousin, announced to me. A placid smile creased his broad face but did not reach his deep blue eyes.

He maintained the masked expression he wore at court.

Gratefully, I dismounted. After three days on steed back, hunting a rogue spotted saber, I needed to feel the Kardia beneath my feet for a time.

Eliminating an animal that had developed a taste for human flesh did not necessarily favor the Crown Prince and the First Lord of the Council of Provinces. But I had taken Krej up on his offer of adventure for many reasons.

Our six guards dismounted with me. We'd left behind the pack of nobles and retainers a day and a half ago. Knowing Krej's need to preen before an audience made that decision suspect.

I left the heavily jeweled ceremonial sword my father insisted I carry as suitable to a knight of my station in the saddle sheath. For this adventure I wanted something sturdier, stronger, more keen. Krej had too many secrets to trust him with only a useless weapon in my hand.

Instead, I belted on a serviceable blade I'd purloined from the palace armory.

"You three remain with the steeds," Krej ordered the guards. "Make camp."

They set about their business with unquestioning efficiency.

I needed to know what my cousin plotted. He'd not reveal himself in front of men sworn to my father. For that reason alone I did not question why the horses needed more than one guard, two at the most.

"You other three." Krej pointed to the remaining guards.

"Rest your steeds an hour, then return to the rest of the party. Send them home or bring them here. Whatever they choose." He shrugged as if disgusted with the lack of status among his cronies.

I suspected the nobles who had ridden out with us from the capital felt more loyalty to the king than to me and my father. Possibly more loyalty to my cousin than to the kingdom of Coron.

Why else had they feasted on Krej's bounty the last night we were all together? Krej had wounded the deer, then run it nearly to death. While it lay panting in terror, he had cut out its living heart out of it. His mad laughter as he performed the hideous deed still haunted me.

I'd caught a whiff of something strange in those terrible moments. Something worse than the smell of fear and sweat and blood and offal.

What?

I had not eaten any of the deer that night. But the nobles had. Nearly all of them had become sluggish and sick the next day. We left them behind.

Only Krej and I remained to hunt the elusive spotted saber cat. Reputedly, the beast had savaged one of Krej's villages, killing a child. I added a stout dagger to my sword belt.

Whether out of fear of the cat or of Krej, I could not tell at that moment.

While my steed stood between me and Krej, I checked my boot knives and the blades in the wrist sheaths.

The gang of city boys I had run with as an adolescent had taught me to fight for survival. I needed to wade into this fray with intent rather than honor. Rumors in the capital claimed Krej knew nothing of honor in any of his dealings.

I slung a pack of provisions over my shoulder and stepped toward the path Krej indicated.

"We won't be gone long enough to need those," Krej said, pointing to my pack. He snarled again. His teeth gleamed in the winter sunlight like the predatory animal we hunted.

"The cat is that close?" I asked. The tracks we'd been following for days did not look like tracks to me. I bent and placed my dominant left hand atop a clear print. It was nearly as broad as a palm. Stray leaves and twigs as well as dust had blown across it. It was not fresh. Still, I needed to keep up the pretense of ignorance and wits dulled by cold, if Krej were ever to reveal his plans to me. He loved to boast, but would not take unreasonable chances with a man equal to him in strength and intelligence.

In a fight I had the advantage of longer reach and greater agility, as well as youthful strength. My left-handed dominance often proved awkward to right-handed men. Krej had brute strength, but his broad shoulders and sturdy legs.

He flung a cloak made from the pelt of a spotted saber cat around his shoulders. A cloak I had not seen before. A cloak that would earn admiration and gasps of awe from the court. A man as vain as Krej could not resist wearing the garment before the audience he so craved.

The fog-hazed colors glistened in the weak sunlight, nearly rippling with life and movement.

Every portion of my being froze. Krej did not need to hunt a cat that preyed upon villages. He had already killed the beast.

Surreptitiously, I fished a talisman from my pack and stuffed it into my pocket. I remembered clearly my friends warning me that the magic in the amulet would not act until I kissed it and placed it in a pouch around my neck. I had kept the thing only to please my friends. At the time I had scoffed. I did not need magical protection. I was a prince and a trained warrior.

Now I was not so certain.

Krej's cloak covered most of his magician-red hair.

Another rumor I needed to verify. Krej reputedly used magic to ensure the cooperation of the twelve lords on the Council of Provinces, and to coerce wealthy merchants to guarantee their debts. Debts he rarely, if ever, repaid.

Kings and their families were not allowed to possess magic in Coronnan.

In his youth Krej had studied at the University of Magicians. He'd inherited his talent from his outland mother. Neither of his two older brothers showed signs of magic.

Five strong men had stood between Krej and the throne—my father, myself, Krej's father, and his two older brothers. He'd been allowed his magic.

But then, quite unexpectedly, all within the space of a few months, Krej's father and his two older brothers had died of disease or accident.

Only two lives, mine and my father's, now stood between Krej and the throne.

Krej had renounced his magic and assumed his new responsibilities as lord of Faerlan, my cousin to the king, and leader of the Council of Provinces.

My magician friends questioned the accidents and suggested poison instead of disease.

the death of Krej's relatives. I had not the courage to question until I saw what Krej did to the deer, and heard what he'd done to one of his peasants.

Had he really forsaken the practice of magic? I knew he could not get rid of his talent—even if bedding his new bride before he achieved master magician status was supposed to rob him of his powers.

I left my own cloak of wolf fur and oiled wool open across my left shoulder, keeping my sword arm free.

We stepped off the caravan road onto a steep trail leading up the mountain. The protective charm bounced reassuringly in my pocket.

Not once did Krej pause to inspect the tracks I discerned occasionally along the trail. He did not bend to sniff the spoor. I knew he no longer hunted.

I worried that he no longer *pretended* to hunt.

But I had to know what he was up to. For my father's safety and that of our kingdom.

Two days before we began the hunt, word had reached me that one of Krej's villagers had tried to run away. Krej had run the man to death—never even trying to capture him, just watching him running and running until he could run no farther. When the man finally lay on the ground gasping for air, too spent to move aught but his lungs, and those only painfully, Krej dismounted and kicked the man in the groin and the chest until he died.

The villager had fared little better than the deer. And Krej had laughed as he murdered the man. I could only wonder what cruelty on Krej's part had driven the commoner to run away.

Now I paced warily behind the most powerful lord in the land. The higher we climbed, the colder the air became. I smelled snow. The tree canopy obscured the sun. By the time we cleared the upland forest and moved onto the open slope of the mountain, clouds blocked the noon light and a fierce wind howled. I wanted to draw my cloak closer about me. But I needed my sword arm free.

Finally, I stopped. A broad ledge, about ten paces deep, cut across an open curve of the mountain. Above us, the mountain soared to uncounted heights now lost in clouds. Below us, an old landslide dropped sharply to a stony valley. I did not want to be caught out in the open on that ledge.

"Why have you lured me here, Lord Krej?" I drawled the title with contempt, all pretense gone.

I fought the urge to pace. My habits demanded movement. I thought better while moving. Now, as I looked around, I realized we had been following the cliff edge for some time. My sense of space had been tricked by a gentler, rolling slope to my right. Now that it climbed thousands of feet, in a single glance I felt the danger of the drop to my left much more keenly. My safety depended upon staying away from the edge of the cliff. I glanced nervously toward the valley below, a long, long way below me.

I held my breath. I often dreamed of flying with dragons. The reality of the danger now came sidle closer to the solid security of the mountain.

"The time has come, dear cousin," Krej replied with a sneer— all trace of his condescension vanished—"to end the charade of your father's reign over Coronnan. To end the de Draconis line and the myth of your dragon protectors."

"So soon?" My thoughts whirled. I lifted one eyebrow in an attempt to stall for time.

have no son or grandson to succeed you. Only five daughters. I would think you would not
off at least one to get a male heir before attempting to displace

the de Draconis line, a line of kings born of legend and worshiped along with
dragons." I kept my tone emotionless. "You should have put aside your wife years
You'd suffer a lot less frustration with a younger woman capable of producing a son."

The longed-for son must be the only reason he had waited nearly fifteen years to eliminate
the last two men who stood between him and the throne. Fifteen years while he lulled F
and me with false words of loyalty and honor and—choke—love.

I clasped my hands behind my back instead of pacing. If only I dared move, I might
my blood from freezing.

A piercing screech sounded above. I looked up. Saw nothing but a bright flash
dismissed it as the wind and storm.

Krej recoiled from the noise, shifting uneasily closer to the upper slope of the mountain.

No one had seen a dragon in generations. They truly were myths. My sword was the
reality, the only rescue I trusted.

I shifted my hands to the hilt of my weapon.

Krej swallowed deeply. Then he seemed to shrug off whatever had frightened him
turned his piercing blue eyes on me.

I could not move. He seemed to drive a spear through my will with those eyes.

"Only I know how to tap Coronnan's greatness." Krej's voice took on the rhythm of a chant.
He began to draw arcane symbols in the air. Red fire would follow his gestures, leaving
sigils in plain sight if I had enough magical talent to read them.

I struggled to free myself from his thrall. Sweat broke out on my back and brow despite
freezing wind.

"Your oath of loyalty . . ." I tried to stall while I fought for control of my sword arm.
could speak, his spell over me was not complete.

"Loyalty to Coronnan is loyalty to me. Only I can bring our land into its true greatness."
Krej replied in song.

His words chilled me more than the rising wind.

He blinked.

The thrall cracked. I reached for my sword. My cloak tangled around the hilt.

In a flash and a whirl of spotted fur cloak, Krej was behind me—between me and
return path.

Uphill, the faint trail narrowed sharply beneath an overhang and disappeared. Legend
claimed that only dragons could climb higher upon the mountain.

No place to run.

I stepped forward. I needed to pressure Krej into keeping his distance.

He laughed and held his ground. I still could not get the sword free. He took up his
again.

A flicker of movement caught my eye. A small brindled brown cat stalked us. It could
help me and might hinder me in my escape.

The cat had to be Krej's familiar. Why else would it be out in this weather?

Even a dragon would not be caught out in the blizzard to come.

The sharp smell that had haunted me since hunting the deer wafted across my senses and
An instant of dizziness and blurred vision.

(Tambootie.) The word came into my head without prompting.

Poison.

Dragon salad.

The tool of rogue magicians.

"The de Draconis line is weak, Prince Darville," Krej continued in song. "You waste
your time with women and drink; your father dreams away his days and nights with
of past glories. I shall not allow you to taint the throne when your father dies." The
grabbed his cloak. Lifted it. It did not swirl as mine had to block his eyes or hands.

I flung off my cloak rather than fight it. My sword came easily to my hand now. The
picked up my garment and flung it in my face. I ducked it and lunged toward Krej.

He wasn't there.

I whirled. He faced me from the path above me. I plunged toward him. The sharp ridge
the mountain on my right became an overhang. The path narrowed further.

Again Krej eluded me. Another giggle sounded that bordered on insanity.

My sword met only air.

He danced around me quickly. I barely saw him move.

The first flakes of snow rode the back of the wind. They whipped past us to plow
themselves against the slope. They showed no interest in melting.

I had to end this soon. I circled my blade, seeking an opening, a moment of distraction.

"Have you noticed, Prince Darville, how pale and ill your father has become of late?"

I had.

"Have you also noticed how the Council of Provinces listens to you less and less and
your father not at all?" Again he giggled.

I'd heard a man giggle like that once before. A condemned rogue magician who had eaten
of the Tambootie tree to enhance his magic.

The poison in the tree sap had rotted his mind.

And I knew then, with desperate clarity, that Krej, too, had eaten of the tree of magic
enhance his powers.

Logic and argument meant nothing to him. Only power.

"Your father is weak," Krej cackled. "Growing weaker. At my command. He does not
Coronnan. I do!" Krej punctuated the air with another sigil, larger and more intense than
previous gesture.

"You lie!" I snarled. I flipped one of my wrist blades at Krej's eyes. He ducked it easily.

Fear began to knot in my gut. "My father rules with the aid of the Council of Provinces
said it quietly, logically, to reassure myself more than to convince Krej.

"And who leads the Council of Provinces, eh? Who makes decisions when your father
too sick or weak to choose aught but which tunic to wear?" Krej smiled, showing his teeth
feral expression. The cat that watched us mimicked him.

I tried to run, to just plow through Krej and get back to the bottom of the hill and the ground
who would witness my cousin's treason.

My feet refused to move. They felt frozen to the ground.

"The Council listens to me. They respect me," I asserted as I struggled to free my arms. Doubt crept into me along with the cold wind. Did the twelve lords of Coronnan truly listen to my advice, or did they just smile and nod and then go about their business as if I did not exist?

"But you are rarely in the capital, Prince Darville," Krej said through his gloating smile. His teeth remained clenched and his eyes glittered with malice, not mirth. "I see to that. I will find you where you will dissipate yourself with wild escapades with your band of street boys, women, and drink."

I tried to lift my sword. It seemed to weigh more than I did. My arms bunched and muscles strained, but still it would not move.

"Calm down, boy," Krej laughed again. Insanity shone in his deep-set eyes. "This will hurt a bit. And Coronnan will profit from my rule in ways you cannot yet imagine."

A sharp screech above the rolling clouds sounded again. Not the wind. A dragon?

"You are supposed to help me. Protect me!" I called back to the creature who patrolled the skies.

I thought I caught a glimpse of a translucent wing amidst the snow. Could a creature as large as a dragon do anything on this narrow mountain ledge?

The location for this confrontation had been chosen well.

My enemy began dancing in place while he drew more sigils in the air. I could see them now. I had no defense against the pulsing red and green magic. Soon they must lock tight circles around me. I had to break free before he closed the spell.

If only I could move.

The dragon screeched again.

Suddenly the cat leaped to Krej's back. The creature's claws dug deep. Its teeth sought a great vein in his neck. Single-minded fury drove it.

Something deep within me knew the creature attacked its master at the prompting of the dragon.

The thrall that glued my arms to my sides faded.

I lifted my sword and freed the remaining wrist blade.

Krej batted away the cat like some annoying insect.

It twisted, reached out, and landed perfectly balanced. Like all of its kind, it prepared for a new attack almost before its paws touched the ground.

I lunged for my cousin. I hit an invisible wall. The shock vibrated up my arm to my shoulder. Hot pain lanced through to my heart.

Krej laughed loud and long.

A fresh wave of snow rushed toward us. I could not see my enemy through it. It must have met the same barrier as my sword, and it fell in a circle around me. A small circle—barely a pace in circumference—remained clear of the white stuff. The wind seemed not to penetrate the barrier either.

I was almost warm.

The cat leaped again to the magician's back. It slammed into a similar barrier and fell to the ground, stunned. It lay motionless. Confusion showed in its yellow eyes.

I lunged again. Once more I hit the invisible wall. This time with more force. My sword blazed golden fire. Heat lashed my hand. I dropped the weapon from nerveless fingers.

entire body trembled with the force of the magic.

Hot tingles became jolts, anchoring me in place. No matter how hard I tried, I could not move so much as a muscle even to blink my eyes.

Panic threatened to choke the breath from me.

With one last singsong stream of words and a wave of Krej's hand, the magic shot from his fingers into my eyes. It penetrated every hidden corner of my being.

I could do nothing to stop it.

The spell was complete.

My skin itched. I could not scratch it. Golden fur sprouted from my arms and legs. The torment of raw skin beneath the new growth increased. The hair bristled and stood on end. My ears stretched upward. I think I screamed at the pain. My own howl sounded strange, more intense and primitive than a human throat could utter. Tiny sounds pricked my hearing: rustling, shifting under

Krej's feet; the wind sighing on several levels beneath the roar through the tops of the trees; the cat sobbing.

How? What?

My nose found new smells in the snow, the soil, Krej's sweat.

Confusion muddled my thoughts.

Above us the dragon cried in anguish that echoed my own. The sound threatened to shatter my hearing.

Krej reeled away, hands clapped to his head, nearly doubled over in pain.

I wriggled and swayed, trying to break free.

Neither the dragon nor I could stop the transformation. I had only Krej and the little cat as witness to who I had been.

I think I sobbed.

My face ached sharply. I sensed my nose elongating into a muzzle. My jaw receded. I smelled my own fear, the pain in the cat, and triumph in my enemy.

Then my joints began to crack and bend at odd angles. I cried out at the pain. I collapsed. My clothing fell away, including the useless good luck charm in my pocket. Not even my magic could hold me upright any more. Fire seemed to engulf me. The noises erupting from my throat sounded more like the howl of a wounded animal than a man.

Horror choked off the sounds. My heart beat wildly, and I despaired that I would never see my father again. I wanted to cry and could not.

As I lay there, rolling about on the ground like Krej's wounded deer, my limbs contracted and bent. My bones grew heavy and dense.

Language deserted me.

My hands became paws without the useful thumb to grasp a weapon.

I had only instincts and anger left.

I panicked. I growled and leaped again. And bounced against the wall.

I opened my mouth, baring my fangs. I could not allow this man to corner me. I lunged forward, lunged . . .

Krej shoved me backward with another wave of his hand.

I scabbled for purchase. The unaccustomed shortness of my legs skewed my balance. I slipped on loose rocks. Clothing tangled around my feet. I rolled sideways. Krej reached a grasping fist for me.

I shied away from his touch.

The wind caught me.

Suddenly I flew. Only air stood between me and the bottom of the cliff.

Stargods help me!

I cringed and flailed for purchase before the collision with rocks and ground that would crush my bones and rip my flesh.

My hands/paws scabbled against the rocks. After too many rapid heartbeats my claws found purchase on a protruding boulder.

The dragon above cried her mournful anguish.

Krej roared with laughter in answer. "No need to explain your transformation by a magician now," he chortled. "I'll discredit the University of Magicians another way. But I have to forgo the pleasure of leashing you and keeping you subservient at my side."

The cat roused enough to scramble to the cliff edge and look over at me. It extended a paw as if offering me a hand up.

I had nothing to grip with. No help. Nothing between me and a very painful death at the bottom of a long fall.

"I think I will tell the court that you chased the spotted saber cat too vigorously and forced your death. Wild and drunk as always. But they will find no body if they bother to search when the storm passes. Who will give the body of a dead wolf a second look?" He flicked his fingers in dismissal. "You will rot in this forgotten valley, as you justly deserve. And your father will crumble in his grief. I'll rule all of Coronnan uncontested before spring! I won't even have to kill the king. He'll just wither away to dust of his own volition."

He stomped about in his mad glee.

I lost my fragile hold. Fell. The ground rushed upward. No exultation. Only heart-stopping fear.

Then I crumpled on the stony valley several dragon lengths below.

A moment of shock. No breath. No thought.

"And now, just for fun, you shall join the princely wolf, cat. You deserve punishment for my wounds," Krej sneered above me. How did his words come to me so clearly?

Eeerily, I heard the whoosh of air as he kicked out at the tiny creature that had tried to help me.

No sound of a heavy boot connecting with a furred body. Only the thump as Krej lost his balance and fell on his butt. Another time I might have laughed.

He picked himself up, cursing. "You shall pay for this, cat. I shall find you again and make certain you pay!"

The faint sound of tiny paws scampering over the edge of the cliff drifted toward me.

Krej's shouts followed the cat all the way down the cliff. Eventually his noise faded. I must have retreated from the storm.

The storm that would kill me.

Chill invaded my limbs.

Darkness crowded my vision.

Snow built up around me. My body warmth kept the flakes at bay for a time, but chilled even more, the snow would cling and bury me. No one would find me until spring.

I could not even tremble in fear or shake with the endless pain. Each breath became an agony.

But I had to live. I had to stop Krej and his plans to rule Coronnan.

The cat crept closer to me, nose working.

I breathed. Snow moved in a different pattern in front of my nose.

The cat jumped back. Hissed. Crept forward once more.

I live, I tried to tell it. *Get help*.

My mind spun and drifted. Each time I blinked seemed to send me away for longer and longer.

Darkness calmed me. I welcomed death. Anything to relieve me of the pain and the cold.

Some time later, when hours and minutes had no meaning

anymore, I felt someone digging the snow away from my body. Someone breathed a gentle warmth across me. It eased one discomfort. Magnified others.

I looked up into the swirling circles of dragon eyes. The nearly invisible creature towered above me. I had to concentrate to see it. Very difficult. My hurts demanded my attention. Yet the dragon drew my gaze, challenged me to look closer. Each hair of its fur was a threat of crystal. Or an icicle.

Easier to look around it than at it.

It spread its all color/no color wings to shelter me from the snow and wind. A long horn growing out of its forehead provided its primary tool to remove the accumulating insulating snow from around me. Once more it blew a warming breath over my fur.

I watched the snow turn to steam around me.

Why did it protect me? My wolf body should have been a tempting meal for the predator.

You will be safe now, my prince, the dragon spoke directly into my mind. A feminine voice. A mother's concern for a pup. *Breve-Ian will guard you. Remember this day, remember me.*

Then the dragon launched herself into the sky. The downward thrust of her wings brought more warm air around me. I lost sight of her within an eye blink. Obscured by snow and her own camouflage.

A woman appeared out of the storm. She must be the Brevelan the dragon had called for me. A thick coat of oiled wool covered her from crown to toe. Within the shadows of her hair I detected a wisp of red hair and deep blue eyes. Krej's eyes.

I recoiled in fear, baring my teeth and growling.

She crouched before me, murmuring soothing words.

A sense of comfort and safety washed over me.

The brindled brown cat jumped from the woman's arms and pressed her nose against mine. I blinked in surprise.

"Golden-brown eyes to match his fur," Brevelan said quietly-"Why?" she asked, looking up into the air. "Why did you bring me out in this storm to save a wolf? You should have

eaten him."

I cringed away from the dragon's roaring reply.

The woman sank to her knees and covered her ears.

"All right!" she shouted back to the dragon. But it sounded more like a protest acceptance.

A braver person than I to question a dragon.

"This is going to hurt, golden wolf," Brevelan murmured.

Her words invaded my mind, and I did not fear her or the pain I knew must come. Somehow she would make it all better.

Gently, agonizing inch by agonizing inch, she rolled me onto a blanket she had spread on the ground.

I tried not to cry out. A noble man did not show his pain. But I was no longer a man; no peasant, or prince. Pitiful whimpers escaped me.

Pain robbed me of breath. I went to a place deep within the core of me, beyond thought. I was still conscious, I think, aware and yet. . . .

Then—wrenching pain. Brevelan grunted and pulled with all of her might on one foot. She had planted her tiny foot on my shoulder joint.

I snapped my fangs. Bit only air.

Grind. Twist. Wrench.

My shoulder popped into place. Dull ache replaced sharp pain.

I retreated once more to that place where pain and memory of treachery could not reach me.

In later days I would remember what I saw on that long lonely trek. But I did not remember anything.

I think Brevelan and the cat dragged me some distance out of the valley, and up a hillside three. They paused often whenever a rocky overhang or the spreading branches of a tree offered a semblance of shelter. The woman's teeth chattered. She and the cat clung to each other for warmth. Once they even curled around me on the ground throwing a second blanket over all of us.

Perhaps we slept, tangled together for warmth and comfort.

Eventually we reached level ground. A tingle of magic rippled over me as we passed a clearing. As a wolf, I had no problem crossing the invisible barrier. Was it like the one I had been built to imprison me before working his evil spell? Would the barrier be so accepting if I had walked upright as a man?

I might never know. Only the cat had seen my transformation. Brevelan saw me only as a wounded golden wolf. A new pet to gather close to her heart.

Across a snowy field stood a hut. It looked almost as if it grew out of the land, the walls nearly reaching the ground, weathered plank walls, a rough chimney spouting a trickle of smoke like steam rising from a dragon's breath.

That memory seemed very far away, though I knew it had happened only hours ago.

A little more fuss, and Brevelan dragged me inside. Heat from the glowing coals in the hearth blasted me. I jolted out of my reverie back into reality. The pains seemed worse as the warmth rooted out the numbing chill.

I think I whimpered again.

Immediately Brevelan crouched beside me. She stroked my ears and spoke in soothing tones. The words passed beyond my ability to understand.

The pains eased to a tolerable level.

I think in that moment I fell in love with Brevelan of the magic clearing.

She placed a bowl of fragrant broth before me. I studied it for long moments wondering how to drink it. I could not grasp the bowl with wolfen paws even if one of them were broken or sprained and the other immobile from the dislocation.

The cat appeared before me. She bent to the bowl and lapped a few drops of nourishment. My wolf instincts took over. My tongue darted out, curled, captured a moisture, drew it back into my mouth.

Wonderful flavors and healing warmth coursed through me. I lay back exhausted after a few mouthfuls. But the broth had already worked wonders on my body and my spirit.

My Brevelan held my face in her hands. She looked directly into my eyes. "Who are you that a dragon called me out into a storm to rescue you?"

I stared back at her, wishing her to read my mind, challenging her to read the memories.

Eventually she looked away and shook her head.

"Now for the hard part, wolf. Don't snap at me because it hurts." Brevelan glared into my eyes.

I accepted her words for truth and gritted my teeth. A tiny growl escaped me with the thought.

She was right. It did hurt. She splinted a break or two and bound my ribs so tightly I could barely breathe. She draped wet bandages around my shoulder and chest. As they dried, they hardened. I could not move that limb if I wanted to.

Once more I went into that place beyond pain. I wished only for the release of death. A prod to my mind broke my trance.

Remember. A voice came to me from a far distance.

Remember what?

Pain still existed within me. Much of it oozed out of me with a few more tonguefuls of broth.

Brevelan dragged me closer to the hearth and rolled me onto a dry blanket. She sat at my head, stroking my fur. Each time her hand touched my fur, I grew sleepier and more in love. She sang to me. The cat joined us, adding her rhythmic purr to my lady's song.

Blue light engulfed us, shutting out the storm, shutting out the pain. My world shrank to my hut, my lady, and her song.

Perhaps I drowsed. I awoke hungry again. The broth had cooled. I lapped it up anyway.

Full tummy. Warmth. A lady to love. Safety.

What about tomorrow? Would I remember who I was? I must remember that I was betrayed. The dragon had commanded it.

Tomorrow.

What is tomorrow?

I knew only now.

Warm.
Safe.
Not hungry.