

Son of None
A Throne of Fire Story

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Part 1

Jase flew up over the ridge where Balaan had taken refuge from the future that lay before him. From here Balaan could see the ocean and a vast freedom that could never be his. If he looked behind him he could see far below a tower that stood up above the tree line. A tower in the middle of the woods, surrounded by a tall wall, a tower where he was supposed to be this very moment, to live out the rest of his life.

"Father says if you don't show up for your apprenticeship today then he will send the guard out after you," Jase informed him once he'd returned to his mortal form.

"Let him, I don't care if I die, I can't live the rest of my life behind that wall.

"You are a descendent of the Great Apophis, his power runs in our blood. You have a calling to fulfill, just as those of our family have done for centuries."

"Apophis has been long dead-" A sharp pain gripped his heart as if Jase had reached threw his chest and was now squeezing the life out of him. The pain drove him to his knees and cut off his retort.

"Never speak ill of the Great Apophis," Jase scolded.

Balaan would have loved to return to his dragon form full time but after all this time and so many failed attempts how could he possibly hope for that existence?

He would have gladly ran away, and abandon his duties completely but on this island there was nowhere he couldn't be found. As he lay on the ground trying to catch his breath he knew he was defeated. Jase had received far more training in the arts of spells and casting. There would be nothing he could throw at Jase that would not cause serious negative consequences for himself. The best spells he knew he'd learned from Jase.

"I relent," Balaan panted. The pain didn't subside instantly.

"Will you fulfill your duty?"

"Yes, I swear it by Apophis."

Finally Jase let him go. Balaan struggled to his feet hunching over as his muscles protested. Jase clasped his shoulder in a brotherly fashion.

"I wish it had not come to that."

Balaan didn't answer, and it took all his willpower not to shake Jase's hand from his shoulder

"Come little brother, I'll see you to Balak then I can report the good news to father. All is well once again."

All was not well, but there was nothing Balaan could do about it. Three days prior he'd publically renounced his relationship to Lord Enzo, his father, effectively severing his ties to his royal blood line. He would now live out the rest of his life behind the walls of the keep with the Sons of None, the order of mages, who like himself, were all the denounced descendants of the Lords before them. He wouldn't ever take a companion or father any children, there would be no trace that he'd ever lived.

Once they landed Balaan walked briskly next to Jase toward the tall wall that held the order of the Mage's apart from the rest of the colony. Once Balaan passed through the door he was not likely to see anyone on this side of the wall ever again unless he was called up by the Lord for a matter. He knew from the few times a member of the order had been called to his father's palace that the Mage's were all old, if any of them were young like him they were not allowed out. He heard it was because they were still in training, what he did know was he would

never see his father again, and if he ever saw Jase again, it would be when they were both too old to recognize each other.

Every dragon on the other side of the wall was the last son of the Lord that ruled before his father. They were all Balaan's uncles. The last descendants trained in the deeper teachings of Apophis. It was supposed to be a position of honor, but Balaan saw it as a place to push off anyone who might try to claim the throne from the true successor. The rest of Balaan's life would be spent learning spells that didn't do anyone any good. They would never return to their true dragon forms, never regain their immortality. If it could have been done, it would have been done by now. Centuries of Mages could not pull it off, why did any of them still hold out hope?

There was no escape- he knew he'd tried. He'd flown for a day and half nonstop only to reach the protective barrier that hid their home from the outside world. What world that was he couldn't say for sure? He was told it was a land called Ethiolan. A land his ancestors fled to escape the oppression of a regime that refused to pursue their true forms. Instead they sought power to rule over the dragons of Ethiolan pushing their elitist agenda while denouncing Apophis and his followers. Balaan's ancestors had no choice but to flee, and raise these walls of protection in order to live in peace.

Balaan was about to put himself behind another wall, this one more visible than the one out at sea.

Time had chipped away the tall gray walls, ivy grew rampant climbing to the top. There were places where the roots had burrowed into the mortar causing some stones to topple off the top. The stones still lay where they landed, it seemed there was never any effort to clean up or maintain the wall. It had an ominous feel that solidified Balaan's apprehension about joining the Sons of None.

Jase marched up to a solid wooden door in the center of the wall, large black hinges covered in green moss gave the door a slimy look. The morning dew still covered the land scape and the great wall was no exception. The Dew was so thick that trails of water dripped from the stone's rough edges. The years of dripping had created a small trickle of water all around the wall like a mini moat, where bugs and algae thrived. The scene gave another small warning that this was not the place to be.

He hated Jase for being the one to enforce this life upon him. His duty. The idea was laughable. This was not his duty to live a life of solitude behind a dingy gray wall, he knew what it really was. A division of power. He knew the lord didn't want anyone contesting his authority or his line of succession even if that came from his own son. Balaan was simply an expendable member of the line, like a wart that needed to be burned off. It wasn't his fault that female dragons usually produced six children in their lives. It was his father's choice to reproduce when his mother came into her estrus, he could have locked her away until her symptoms passed. His other siblings had been given the opportunity to join the guard but he had to join the Sons of None just because he'd been unlucky enough to be the last son born.

Jase lifted the heavy iron knocker and banged it against the door. They waited in silence for several minutes before a slit in the door opened, and an old man's face appeared. His long heavy beard bushed out making his face twice as wide.

"The greetings of Apophis upon you this day." Jase said in a formal tone.

"May Apophis bless your path," the old dragon said. "What do you seek of the Sons?"

"I've come to deliver Balaan, the last son of Lord Enzo, is given to your service."

The old dragon looked at Balaan for the first time. "Please thank Lord Enzo on behalf of the Sons of None for this generous sacrifice he's made."

Sacrifice. The word was another slap in the face. Balaan knew his father couldn't wait to be rid of him. He'd only interacted with his father on a few occasions. His mother had been upset when he denounced the family, but she knew he had no choice in the matter.

"We expected you days ago," the old dragon said to Balaan.

"There were a few matters Balaan had to attend to for Lord Enzo before he could be released." Jase said before Balaan could answer for himself.

The old dragon opened the door then stepped aside to allow Balaan entrance. Jase stood watching him go. He didn't say goodbye or offer any sort of indication that they would see each other again. As soon as Balaan passed through the archway, the old dragon slammed the door behind him with a finality that shouted Balaan would never see the light of day again. He spun back to watch the dragon slide the heavy lock into place. Just like that Balaan was committed to the Sons of None.

"Come on." The old mage said. They cross the small green courtyard toward a weathered stone tower, which was the single structure within the wall that was to house the male population of the order. Balaan figured there were probably no more than a dozen dragons here all related to him. All distant uncles.

Once they reached the door of the tower the old dragon stopped and drew a small knife from inside his robes. He asked Balaan for his hand then drew a small amount of his blood. He then told Balaan to press his bleeding palm to the door, while he said a spell, Balaan was not familiar with.

"You will now have access to this door."

Balaan didn't say anything. He didn't feel grateful for the knowledge nor did he want to offend the dragon, and suffer some consequence he would not find in his favor.

"One of those are ya?" The old dragon asked. All formality stripped from his voice. "I was just like you when I first got here."

"How is that?" Balaan asked.

"Wanting to be anywhere else but right here. Only accepting this duty because the alternative is death. We all know the feeling."

"Are you going to tell me I'll get used to it? That I'll even learn to tolerate or even like this place."

"I'm not going to tell you anything of the sort. You have to make your own decisions about how you feel. But it won't be what you're expecting."

Inside the tower were the other mages, all standing in a circle in long yellow robes, with their hoods drawn up so Balaan couldn't see their faces. At the far end of the room stood a platform where one hooded figure stood with a long table behind him. It was made of thick unfinished wood. Balaan was escorted toward the platform. Two dragons at the edge of the room holding a box that had large handles on either side, one dragon held each of the handles and carried the heavy box, matching Balaan's approach so that they arrived at the front of the room at the same time.

"Balaan, Son of None, you have denounced your father and chosen a life of service to the Mages," the dragon on the platform said loudly. "We are the direct line of Apophis, his blood gives us power, his life gives us hope, his teachings give us knowledge. Our order is devoted to learning the secrets that were kept from even Apophis. We pledge our lives to learning and progressing where those before us have led. Their learning did not end with their death just as your learning will not end with yours. Balaan, Son of None, do you pledge your life to this pursuit to building upon the teachings of those who went before you?"

"Yes."

"Balaan, Son of None, do you pledge to keep the secrets of our order."

“Yes.”

“Even upon the pain of death and the loss of all that you are? Do you pledge to put the order above any other? To protect the knowledge and people here before any other even the Lord himself?”

This was not a hard promise for Balaan to make, he’d been turned out by his family, he didn’t belong anywhere else. His own father the *Lord* had turned his back on him. “Yes.”

“Balaan, Son of None, do you pledge your soul to the Great Apophis?”

“Yes,” it was hard for Balaan not to roll his eyes or sigh to heavily at this ridiculous ceremony. They knew he had no choice in being here. They knew it was this or death. So they had to know he would say whatever it took to remain in the disgusting tower. At this point he’d pledge his life to Winifred herself if he thought it would move things along. The thought of the old Mage’s reaction if he mentioned Apophis’ enemy made Balaan bite his tongue because he almost burst out laughing.

“Step forward and choose your teacher.”

The two mages with the wooden box mounted the platform and placed the box on the table. As Balaan approached the old mage stepped aside, so Balaan could see that the box held seven pouches. They were all different in their appearance; one looked like it was made of gold itself, while another looked like it’d been hand sewn from the scraps of a dead warrior’s tunic. One looked mystical, promising the stars if Balaan touched it. There were others of varying appeal, seven in total, but it was the warrior’s pouch that kept drawing Balaan’s attention. There was something about the tattered dirty pouch that intrigued him even more than the one that was made of gold. He reached for it expecting something incredible to happen, but there was nothing but the feel of brittle fabric under his fingers. Through the fabric he could feel something hard. It would not surprise him to see a plain gray stone pulled from the pouch.

“Simon’s teachings have been chosen,”

A small wave of something undefinable passed quietly through the other mage’s, but Balaan was left to wonder if the teachings of Simon were a good thing or a bad thing. Knowing his luck he’d picked the dumbest mage that had ever lived.

The mage instructed Balaan to open the pouch and dump the contents of it out on a white cloth that was resting on the table. Two strange green stones, that looked like ocean water had somehow been frozen in a hard sphere tumbled unceremoniously from the pouch. The mage then asked for Balaan’s hands. He took each one in turn and drew a sharp dagger across his palms. The mage then picked up the stones one at a time with a pair of tongs so he would not touch the stones himself, and placed one in each of Balaan’s palms. Then he took a strip of cloth and placed the center of it across the back of Balaan’s hand.

“We are given one birth.” The mage then placed one end of the strip over the stone. “We are given one death.” He then placed the other strip across the first. He tied the strips together, pressing the knot tight against the back of Balaan’s hand securing the stone painfully against the cut on his palm. The mage repeated the process with another cloth on his other hand. Once he was finished the mage put Balaan’s palms together in prayer.

Then he started to chant a prayer to Apophis as he did, he placed one hand on Balaan’s right shoulder the other pressed against his hand. Then the other Mages came over doing the same until they were all touching his shoulder or upper arm, and their hands were on either side of his until they were all pressing his palms together.

His palms started to burn as he felt the stones press against the cuts as if they were being pushed inside his body upon protest. He was being forced to consume the teaching of Simon literally. He would have pulled his hands apart but the other mages were too powerful for him to fight. Once the stones were inside his body, he felt an odd wave of energy crawl slowly

up his arm. It felt like a spider was slowly walking along its web delicately placing one skinny leg in front of the other until it reached the prey that had been caught. Once the energy reached his mind, he could no longer contain the pain and a horrific cry was ripped from him.

Soon he was consumed by the life of Simon, a life that were not his, flashed before his eyes. Knowledge he did not earn flooded his mind. The over whelming on slot of information plunged him into a world so dark he could scarcely comprehend his own existence.

Part 2

When Balaan woke he was in a room he'd never been in before but he knew it well. It was slightly different from his memories, the mantle which had been covered in books was now lined with bottles of herbs. The table under the window used to be in front of the fireplace. The chairs that had once been next to the bed were by the window. All the same elements were there but they just weren't how he remembered them. He stood with his back to the window wondering if he should walk out the door and alert anyone that he was awake.

He raised his hand to his forehead and noticed that the strips of fabric were still there. He wondered if he should remove them to see if his hand was severely scarred. As he thought about the possibility, he had a sudden flash of memory of already removing the bandages to find his hands were perfectly intact. He reached for the loose ends for the cloth in an attempt to untie the knot that held it in place.

"I don't think you should do that," the voice more than the words stopped him. He looked over to a chair by the window to see a young female leaning over the arm to look back at him.

"Who are you?" Balaan demanded, instantly he regretted his tone, but he was shocked to see a girl let alone one in his room. Was this his room?

"Francis," that was it, just her name, she didn't tell him what she was doing in his room or ask him his name in return.

"What are you doing here?"

"I live here," again she didn't elaborate on her statement. Was that right? Was she allowed to live amongst the mages? He'd thought that they were not allowed to take a companion or have children. This girl had to be here for a reason. Was she a slave? She didn't seem like a slave she hadn't asked him if he needed anything, she didn't bow, she was holding a book so she knew how to read. No, she definitely was not a slave.

"You're a female."

She smiled. "When you were asleep I thought you looked smarter than this."

"I-"

"Very well," she stood then crossed the room to hold her hand out to him. He hesitated not sure if he should take it. It seemed like a test, like she probably wasn't real. She was too pretty to be real. Her gray eyes danced with mischief, and the dimples on her cheek deepened as he procrastinated touching her. After a few short seconds she reached out and took his hand.

As she led him out in the hall another memory flashed in his mind as they passed a statue of Apophis. A memory of Simon hiding a book in a secret compartment, as if the memory belonged to him, as if he was the one who'd hidden a very special book that held secret spells that Simon had been working on. Theories came to him as if they were his own thoughts, imaginings of the possibilities of things he never dreamed of were suddenly known. He wanted to stop and check to see if the book was still there, but he knew it should be kept secret. If Simon hadn't shown it to the rest of the order then he didn't want to prematurely expose the precious knowledge before he had a chance to explore it for himself. Having Simon's memories he suddenly felt more alive than he had in a long time. He looked upon the statue of Apophis with new respect and reverence.

Frances stopped at a door pressing her back against it to block him. Her mischievous smile was infectious. "Are you ready to see it now, it must be so different from what you remember?"

"What's different?" He asked unsure if he should be as excited as she was.

"The Refuge." She said as if it was supposed to mean something to him.

"What's the refuge?"

"That's right, no other has ever chosen Simon's teachings. Simon must have lived before The Refuge came to be," she was even more excited now. "Just wait until you see."

Instead of giving any more information she opened the door to reveal a sight so strange that Balaan had to blink several times before he actually believed what he saw. The door that was supposed to open to another interior of the tower magically opened to the outside. There was no other way to describe it. Balaan knew he was three stories up in the tower. He knew the door in the hall should have opened to a room or a flight of stairs, but this was something so strange, he never dreamed this sort of magic could exist. He felt like he was transported to another place entirely. Instead of stone walls there was a wide grass field. Instead of a room there were buildings. Dozens of them, there was a large outdoor village inside the tower. He knew the Sons of None, were powerful but he never dreamed anything like this was possible.

"What is this?" Balaan asked stepping through the door drawn to the beauty and wonder of what lay before him.

"The Sons of None, are descendants of the most powerful dragon to ever live, the Lords are foolish to think they can cast you off with so little regard." She sounded genuinely offended on his behalf.

As they crossed the field heading toward the village several dragons male and female could be seen going about the streets. Some of them stopped to greet Balaan while others didn't seem to notice him at all.

"There are other females here?"

"Yes many," Frances took him all over the village.

As Frances showed him around, he started to realize that his life was not over. Tucked away behind an ordinary door was a reprieve from what he thought was little better than a death sentence.

This new town that existed parallel to the colony truly was a refuge. Balaan could see now that the Sons of None used their magic not to benefit the Lord of the land, but to create a life for themselves and their families. Stone houses of varying size were all well-kept with burst of color from various flowers growing in window boxes and decorative pots. The village was so pleasing that Balaan had to wonder if he was still somehow dreaming all this.

"Is everyone a descendent of the Sons of None?"

"No, there are also refugees like myself."

"Refugees?"

"Those of us who were cast out of the colony for one reason or another. When I was young I accidentally consumed some blaze ropes. When the madness set in my father led me into the woods and bound me to a tree. He left me there to die. Our family was poor and they would never be able to afford the life time of care needed for my new illness."

"The Sons of None saved you?"

"Yes, someone heard me screaming and they came to investigate."

"You're allowed to leave here?"

"It's not something that is encouraged nor do many of us want to. But when it is necessary," she gave a half shrug as if she never really considered leaving the magical village.

After what seemed like a leisurely tour of the town, Francis changed her pace abruptly and led Balaan toward the center of the village at a determined gate.

"Where are we going?" Balaan asked.

"Mordechai is waiting for you."

"Mordechai?"

"Yes he's the leader."

"I thought Balak was the oldest Son of None here."

"Mordechai is much older; no one knows how old he is. He's just always been here and he always will be." She sounded happy but there was a glazed unfocused glint in her eyes for a moment Balaan wondered if she still suffered, just slightly, from the effects of the blaze ropes. Though after hearing that she'd consumed the poisonous plant he was surprised to see her so alert.

He took her hand this time noticing how soft it felt against his skin, how her delicate fingers curled around his. It was the first time he'd ever allowed himself to touch a female so affectionately. Growing up knowing it was his destiny to become a Son of None, there was no point in getting close to another, only to have to leave them or die. Francis was opening his world to new possibilities, a whole new future he'd never dreamed was suddenly staring him in the face. She was looking up at him with eyes that were fully alert and locked on his. He acted on some impulse that had been buried deep in his heart. It was combined with a new unfamiliar joy and a sudden burst of hope causing him to act as he'd never done before in his life.

He kissed her.

She froze, shocked by his sudden display of affection. He realized it was unwarranted, and most likely unwanted so he pulled away. "I'm sorry I don't know what came over me, I've never done that before."

"Kiss a girl?"

"No. Yes. I mean no I've never kissed a girl before, but also I'm sorry I didn't intend to be so forward. It's just that I was overcome by all this and you're so beautiful, I just--"

"You think I'm beautiful?"

"I know, you get that all the time."

She stared up at him for a moment before a lovely heart stopping smile spread across her face. She gripped his hand tightly then turned and started pulling him with her. "We don't want to keep Mordechai waiting." A worried tone entered her voice and Balaan felt the pulse in her thumb that was beating against his flesh quicken.

They found Mordechai in the center of the village. A busy square where dragons had set up carts and stands, to sell kitchen items, shoes, clothing, and toys for the children that were running around. He was speaking with the other members of the Sons of None, when they saw Balaan approach their conversations stopped and they all turned their attention to him.

Balaan froze the moment his eyes landed on Mordechai, he knew him instantly from Simon's memories. It was the same dragon, though he looked a few years older than the way Simon remembered him from hundreds of years ago.

"How is this possible?" Balaan blurted out as he approached the old dragon. His eyes still held the light of youth, and his body still looked strong like he was in his prime rather than one who should have expired centuries before.

"Look around my young friend; nothing is impossible to a Son of None. If you desire anything badly enough you can will it into existence."

"Can you teach me?"

"Your greatest desire is to live forever?"

“No,” Balaan admitted slightly shocked to realize that though he didn’t want to die, he didn’t want to live forever either.

“Then this is not something I can teach you.”

Everyone laughed, leaving Balaan unsure if he’d just made a fool of himself or if it was simply humorous for him to realize he didn’t desire immortality. Not in his mortal form anyway.

“Francis says you are the leader here. Did you create this place?”

“With the help of my brothers. It takes a great deal of magic to keep our secret, and to keep those who dwell here safe. Your teachings will begin tomorrow. Use today to get acquainted with your new home. Soon we will take the time to speak more privately.”
Something in Mordechai’s eyes flashed in a dark way that pulled memories of his time with Simon to Balaan’s mind. They had often disagreed on the way they’d approached the teachings of Apophis.

It was weeks before Balaan found the free time to retrieve the book from Simon’s hiding place in his memories. If he didn’t have Simon’s memories he would not have been able to read the book. It was written in a language he was not familiar with. He knew Simon had been on the verge of creating a spell that would give him powers beyond anything the members of the order could imagine. He wasn’t exactly sure what the spell would do, but he knew Simon had been excited about the potential.

One night Balaan was in his room studying when a knock disrupted him.

“Brother Balaan, I hope I’m not disturbing you,” Mordechai said.

“Not at all, I was studying the ancient texts. How can I help you?”

“I was wondering if you found Simon’s sacred book yet.”

“No, when I looked in the place where I remembered he’d hid it, it was not there.”

“That’s a shame, I wonder what happened to it?” Mordechai said eyeing him with a look that said he knew Balaan was lying. An uneasiness flooded Balaan as he thought of handing the book over. There was something in his mind that demanded that he keep the book for himself. He would have to take precautions if he was going to keep the book a secret.

Balaan knew he shouldn’t have lied to Mordechai about not having the book, but he really just wasn’t ready to share it with anyone just yet. There were still many things that Simon had theorized, intriguing spells Balaan wanted to explore for himself.

He settled into his life as a Son of None. Learning new spells and teachings that Simon had known. There was an open flow of knowledge between him and the other brethren in the order, and he was really starting to feel like he was thriving in this new community.

Kissing Frances had not been the mistake he originally thought. They became companions less than a year from that kiss. He adored her, she filled him with such joy he never knew his world would one day be this happy.

They were not without their trials. Francis still suffered some effects from her encounter with the blaze ropes. Most of the time she would simply lose focus like the day in the village, but there were other times when her episodes were more severe. When Balaan would find her wandering in the woods chasing some lost treasure she swore was buried close by, he would coax her home with promises to return in the morning.

“Darling come home, I’ll buy you a hundred sugi.”

“You can’t buy them, you have to find them. They are lost.”

“Are they dragons?”

“No, they’re the stones. The magic stones. The stones you need.”

“Can we come back when there is more light? It will be dark soon.”

Years tripped by and Francis came into her estrus. Balaan was so excited to be a father, to bring another life into the love he and Francis shared, it only seemed right. Though as her pregnancy progressed, her episodes increased, to the point Balaan had to keep a near constant eye on her.

The others in the order didn't want to do anything about it just yet, they were afraid a potion or a spell would disrupt her pregnancy. Balaan paid less attention to his duties with the Sons of None, which he saw obvious annoyance with, especially from Mordechai. He could tell Mordechai still wanted his book, though he hadn't asked about it in over a year, he still berated Balaan with pointed questions regarding its content. To try to alleviate the tension he decided to hire someone to keep an eye on Frances while he was attending to his duties.

A frantic knock on the laboratory door disrupted the entire order one afternoon. Balaan was disturbed to see Francis' caretaker ushered into the room, he put down the ladle he was using to transfer a measured amount of liquefied gold to the potion he was working on.

"Forgive me-" Macy, Frances' care taker, started.

"Did you look in all the places I showed you?" Balaan asked. Knowing there was only one reason for Macy to be interrupting him.

"Yes."

"The edge of the brook, at the waterfall, near the gnarled tree?"

"And the mill and the Forever Gardens."

"I'll find her," Balaan tore out of the laboratory, as soon as he was out in the open he took on his dragon form so he could search for her by flying to each of her favorite locations himself. Balaan felt like he was running out of options when he remembered once he'd found her near an odd rock formation digging in the dirt saying that she finally found her sugi stones.

"Darling what are you doing here?" he asked when he finally found her. He dropped to his knees next to her. She was covered in dirt, her fingers were caked and her nails were broken. She'd been digging bear handed for a long time. She had a hole a foot in diameter and almost two feet deep. He knew when she was in this state-of-mind it was best to draw her away slowly. "Can I help you?"

"Look," she thrust some purple stones into his hand. He looked them over sensing they held some sort of power, but he'd never seen them and neither had Simon.

"These are very interesting, what are they?"

"These are the sugi stones. Balaan, you must hide them, keep them safe like you do your book."

He was confused she was looking right at him with clear eyes, saying his name as if she was aware he was there and she was actually talking to him.

"You mean the way I keep you safe?"

"Please," she took the stones from his hand and placed them in his shirt pocket. "Don't let him find them."

"I promise I'll never tell another soul about them."

This pledge reassured her; she then set about filling in the hole. She didn't stop until it was covered with dry leaves and sticks so it looked like the ground had not been disturbed. She looked up at Balaan, squinting her eyes against the sun as she said. "Can we go home now?"

She threw her arms around his neck and kissed him. "I love you."

"I love you too." He said sincerely, despite her erratic behavior and being more unpredictable than usual.

That night while Frances slept, he poured over Simon's book searching for an obscure entry he remembered. Simon had the ghost of a theory involving powerful stones and Francis' Sugi had given him an idea.

"Take in the power of the stones and the energy will then bend to the will of the bearer."

Balaan jumped up excited, he wanted to wake Francis but he knew she needed her sleep so he forced himself to focus on other things. He couldn't wait to experiment with the stones she'd given him, so he crept out of their home in the village and went to the tower. There was another laboratory in the basement of the tower, it was not as nice as the one in the village but he feared one of the brethren would be working on a late night project and would want to know what he was up to. This was between him and Simon.

The tower laboratory was dingy and covered in dust. The decay of ill-use was prevalent everywhere. Balaan spent more than half the night simply cleaning, prepping and locating supplies before he could even start to test the theories in Simon's book. Having already taken in Simon's memories Balaan figured that he would have to push the stones into his body the way Simon's stones had been pushed into him.

He considered the number of stones Francis had given him and the places of the body that held the most power. He made a sketch in Simon's book. For the first time in the years he'd possessed the book he made an addition to what Simon himself had written.

He then indicated on his diagram where the stone should be inserted. The hands the feet the head and his chest next to his heart, were the most powerful places he wanted to use. This pattern would use all six stones that Frances had given him. He worried about her reaction if she asked to see them and he was not able to produce one for her to see. He reasoned that the spell would still work with five stones, although it would not be as powerful as it could be with all the stones. There was a chance that Frances would not remember giving him the stones and never ask to see them again. In the end he decided to use all the stones and address Frances if the issue ever came up.

The process of taking on the stones was just as painful as the day he joined the Sons of None, and Simon's stones were forced into his palms. This time he didn't have a group of well-trained mages executing the spell it was just him in the dingy underground laboratory in an empty tower. He started with the stones in his feet, cutting a slit in his skin large enough for the stone to be inserted then pressing the stone inside. He tried to go through the process as quickly as he could, anxious to be able to sooth the wound with healing fire.

Once he had taken on all the stones he was exhausted and in a near state of delirium. He could feel the waves of unconsciousness trying to consume him. But he wasn't finished; there was another element of the spell that needed to be completed before he let the stones take over completely. He could already feel their power coursing through his body trying to overcome his very nature. As he searched Simon's book for the spell he needed his eyes were blurry and sweat dripped from his whole body. His hands shook violently as he grappled for the control he needed to turn the pages.

Finally he found what he was looking for, he wiped the sweat from his eyes then pulled the text closer to his face. As he recited the words his body felt like it was going to shake itself into another creature entirely. He would no longer be mortal or a dragon but some other thing all together. He knew at this point he couldn't stop, that the consequences for not completing the spell would be more undesirable than the finished product, whatever that would be.

He saw things that no sane dragon should see, visions of the future and the past. Dragons that once lived visited him; some tormented him while other seemed to encourage him. Through it all he continued to fight for the sight needed to read the text and finish the

spell. After he uttered the last word he fell to the floor no longer able to fight against the forces that were converging on him. The energy from the stones was exploding in his system causing him to convulse.

Without warning the havoc executed on his body ceased. He was left in a heap on the floor too weak to move and too tired to stay awake.

Part 3

When he woke he could no longer feel the power of the stones running through his body, he stretched and stood feeling slightly achy but nothing that reflected the convulsions and pains he endured the night before.

The night before!

He jumped up, gathered Simon's book and headed for home, he had to get back to Francis, she would be worried if he wasn't there for her. What if she had gone into labor while he was executing this spell?

As he walked he tried to search himself for any signs that the spell had done something, that he'd actually taken on their power. But he still didn't feel anything. In the hall of the tower he passed a mirror and paused for a moment to examine his reflection. There was nothing out of the ordinary other than a dragon that looked like he'd fallen into the brook then dragged himself up on shore.

He reached his home passing through the door and heading straight for the room he shared with Frances. The bed was empty, he called out to her but there was no response. He quickly hid Simon's book so he could start the search for her. She must have woken and been frightened when she found he was not there.

He ran out into the pathways that ran between the homes in Refuge. He would first head to Macy's to see if she was there. Then he'd go to the Forever Gardens, he mapped out his search pattern in his mind. Before he reached Macy's, Mordechai stepped out into his path.

"Ah, Balaan just the dragon I was looking for."

"Can this wait Francis is missing."

"That is what I came to tell you, she is not missing."

Instantly Balaan relaxed. "Thank you brother. Where is she?"

"She is with your father, Lord Enzo."

Dread consumed Balaan, followed by an intense confusion. "How is that possible?"

"I told him about your sweet companion and the joyous news that he was going to be a grandfather. After hearing that he insisted on a meeting. We couldn't find you but Francis was right where she was supposed to be.

"Why would you do that? You know-" Balaan cut himself off. Of course Mordechai knew as a Son of None, Balaan was not supposed to take a companion or have children.

"You should have just given me the book," Mordechai said.

In his rage, Balaan put up his best effort to inflict some sort of retaliation on Mordechai, but before he could get a spell to touch him, Mordechai had Balaan writhing on the ground in pain. Balaan should have known better, Mordechai had forgotten more about casting spells than Balaan had yet to learn.

"You can have the book," Balaan shouted.

"I want it now."

Mordechai released Balaan, allowing him to get up and return to his home to retrieve the book. There was a fury growing in Balaan the likes of which he'd never experienced before. Mordechai could have done this in a dozen different ways. Balaan would have handed the book over, he didn't need to bring about the death of a whole family simply to acquire it. Balaan knew that death was his inevitable short-term future. The Lord would never stand for this.

When Balaan arrived at the palace he knew he'd been expected. Jase himself was there to put the quell around his neck and escort him in. Silent thin lips and sad eyes told him that he knew Balaan's fate as well.

There was nothing to say they didn't really know each other anymore. Balaan didn't have the time to get to know him again, they were no longer brothers and they both knew it. Balaan didn't ask about Francis because he expected she was already dead. His heart was beating erratically in his chest as he climbed familiar steps leading to the Lord's throne room. Balaan didn't think of the Lord as his father, there had never really been a family here under this roof.

Jase opened the door and let Balaan step before the presence of the Lord, the place was just as Balaan remembered with marble floors and thick decorative paper on the walls, molding covered in gold trimmed the room. Two walls of floor to ceiling windows let in enough light that the room felt as bright and open as standing outside.

Balaan didn't care about any of his surroundings. He didn't care that his mother was standing next to his father with a look of anguish on her face. Or that all three of his brothers and both of his sisters stood in stoic silence. He only cared about one being, his sweet love, standing with her swollen belly next to a hulking guard that had a tight grip on her arm. Tears were falling from her eyes and she looked more frightened than Balaan had ever seen her. His heart broke just looking at her.

"Balaan I regret our meeting again had to be under such circumstances." The sound of his father's voice sent a chill down Balaan's spine.

Balaan gave him the smallest acknowledgement he could muster then turned his attention back to Francis. "Francis," Balaan called out to her trying to offer her the reassurance of his presence despite the distance between them. "Don't cry love, this will all be over soon." There was no point in Balaan trying to hide his affections from his father. Mordechai had already delivered every bit of damning information Lord Enzo would need to know.

"Balaan, take me home now. Please," she pleaded.

"Of course, darling, as soon as I finish speaking to Lord Enzo we'll go home." Home was a fantasy. He knew despite his desire to be there at that very moment, with Francis, that it was never going to happen. The two of them would never see the Refuge again nor would they ever share another sunset or a stroll through the Forever Gardens. The end of their lives was quickly approaching.

"Balaan what do you have to say for yourself? How did this relationship come to be?"

Balaan knew that despite Mordechai's betrayal that he couldn't let his father find out about the Refuge. There were too many innocent lives there, dragons who simply wanted to live in peace. They would have no clue what Mordechai had risked by telling Lord Enzo about his and Frances' relationship.

"The Sons of None, took her in as an act of compassion. As you can see she is troubled, when she was young she consumed blaze ropes. Every dragon knows the poison from the plant will destroy the mind of anyone who consumes it. The Sons did what they could for her but she has never been right. I took advantage of her and claimed her in secret for myself. When Mordechai found out he was furious. I know I acted against the order and the laws I swore to live by, but I- I just wanted someone to love me."

"How many other females do the Sons of None, have behind that wall?" Lord Enzo asked.

"None, Francis was found in the woods her father had tied her to a tree and left her to die when the madness became too great for her family to handle. The Sons managed to repair

part of her mind but she's very childlike. They found a use for her in cleaning the tower; it was a simple task that she could perform even in her limited state."

Balaan hated speaking about his love in such a way, but there were many people he was trying to protect, and this was the only viable story that was coming to mind. He never thought of Francis like this, only her most extreme episodes had she been reduced to such a description.

"I wish to say goodbye," Balaan said only looking at Francis.

Lord Enzo must have consented because the guard holding onto Francis' arm released her and they were able to close the distance between them. Once he had her in his arms, he pulled her against him, savoring the last time he would feel her in his arms. She buried her face in his chest and her arms were locked around his back. His vision started to blur as emotions he wasn't prepared for overtook him.

After a moment she looked up at him, "You smell different."

It was such a bizarre thing for her to say, but he could tell from the look in her eyes that she was completely lucid she knew the danger they were both in. "Do I now?"

"Balaan take me home, I want to go home. More than anything else I want to go home."

"Me too," he kissed her. One last kiss, one last whiff of her intoxicating floral sent. One more time he ran his fingers in her thick silken hair. She tensed in his arms. He pulled away to look at her eyes, pain stared back at him. She gasped then coughed. A trickle of blood came out of the corner of her mouth. He looked around to see a guard standing behind her with a bloody knife in his hand.

"You didn't have to kill her." Balaan shouted turning his eyes back to her. He lowered her to the ground cradling her in his arms. "Francis, No. Francis Please." His tears were falling freely now.

"Home," she whispered.

"Home of course we're home," he said looking into her dying eyes. "We're here by the fire. Look above the mantle there are the poppies you are growing for the baby's room. And next to the chair are the booties you are making out of that golden thread."

The converging guard cast a shadow on them and the room that had been too bright a moment ago dimmed.

"Yes, I see it," She smiled just before her eyes slid closed and Balaan pulled her close to weep in her hair. His whole body shook with a grief he thought would kill him before Lord Enzo had the chance.

The blow he expected never came. When he opened his eyes he was shocked to see that he was in fact in the home he and Francis shared. He was holding her body in front of the fireplace with the poppies on the mantle. He stayed there for a long time unable to move, unable to let Francis go.

After a time a rage so great consumed him, he could no longer see straight. He would have revenge on Mordechai and Lord Enzo for this. As he laid Francis's poppies on her body, he made her a promise that the injustice showed to her that day would be repaid.

Part 4

Balaan wandered after he laid Francis to rest. The places he could wander were suddenly limitless. He figured out that his stones had worked; they were how he escaped his death in the palace. Anywhere he desired to be, he would simply appear there in the blink of an eye. He could close his eyes in one place and open them again in another.

Balaan reappeared in yet another world, he knew it was not his own because the trees were different than any he'd ever seen. They grew taller than any tree he'd ever known, their long green leaves had silver under bellies so when the branches swayed in the breeze there was a shimmer that danced across his view. Strange orange flowers blossomed at the foot of the trees; some were standing up open to the sun, while others were dropping down to the ground as if they were catching a bug that had skittered by.

He walked into the woods thinking about Francis and how she would have been fascinated by the various plants and birds he saw. There were great orange birds with long tails that floated a foot or more below the branches they were sitting on. Even the air smelled different. There was a combination of pine and salt mixed with the fragrant flora that was overpowering in its sweetness.

He wandered for several hours popping from one area of the forest to the next, over a river and around a lake, until he finally found some signs of life. He came upon an altar of sorts, rather a collection of altars. There were seven in total set in a circular pattern. Each altar was a basin, with a golden dragon base. The layout of the points were enormous, the basins were far larger than any basin he'd ever used in casting. As he approached one of the altars a shadow passed over head then a moment later there were three dragon's blocking his passage to the basin. One of the dragons returned to his mortal form and ordered Balaan to halt.

"What business do you have with the Royal Paragoda?" The dragon asked, he spoke the ancient language of Winnifred. Balaan only knew the language so well through his memories of Simon studying her spells in a hope to unravel her powers. Simon had been the type to know and study his enemies even if those enemies were long dead. So he'd finally found Ethiolan.

"What is this place?"

"Are you serious? What are you? An ignorant Dyad straight out of the Barlock?"

"What's a Dyad?" Balaan didn't want to expose more of his ignorance about this world by asking what the Barlock was also.

"I guess you are, with your unnatural eyes. You definitely don't belong around here. So why don't you fly back to Dyad before you get into trouble." Balaan had discovered that after he escaped Lord Enzo his eyes had changed to purple, the same brilliant color as the sugi stones that now lived in his body.

"I'll leave, as soon as you tell me what this place is." Balaan could feel the energy of his surroundings, there was great magic here and he wanted to know what it was used for.

"Blazes, you Dyad are sparks."

Balaan closed his hand into a tight fist as he called on the magic needed to cast the spell that would incapacitate the dragons before they could kill him. He could have easily removed himself from this location but he felt like he needed this information. He opened his hand toward the first dragon and released a charge of energy that manifested itself in a bright blue ark, carried through the air to collide with the dragon on his right. He quickly repeated the spell to incapacitate the dragon on his left. As the guard in front of him was transforming to his

dragon form to attack, Balaan froze the power he was drawing preventing him from making the change.

“Now,” Balaan said annoyed that he had to resort to these tactics this early into his visit to this world. “Let’s start over. What is this place?”

“The Paragoda.”

“What is this place used for?”

“It’s where we cast the spell that gives us the ability to take our dragon forms. Every hundred years at the alignment the blood of the royals is used –“

Balaan silenced the guard. There was something about this that didn’t make since. He knew that his people had fled Ethiolan to escape the dragons that valued their own personal prestige more than the pursuit of returning to their true and natural forms. He knew they had abandoned the teachings of Apophis in favor of Winnifred. But even followers of Winnifred would recognize the power in this place and know that it was for more than just releasing their dragon forms. He could work with this, if he could figure out what this spell was really doing, then he could use that as a way to grant him access to these dragons. He could possibly use the power to return home and avenge Frances’ murder.

As he was contemplating the possibilities of this knowledge, something strong grabbed him from behind. As he vainly struggled against the immovable force a large white dragon appeared. His paw securely around Balaan’s middle and squeezing. Stealing his breath.

He escaped the dragon blinking out of his grasp and then as far from the area as he could without leaving Ethiolan. There was still much about this world he wanted to know and the site used for the Paragoda.

He sought out the city of Dyad, that he’d been accused of coming from. It didn’t take him long to learn how to gain status and acceptance in this alternative society. He entered the fights at the Barloc as an unknown but it didn’t take him long to gain a reputation as a fierce fighter. He relished the fights. They were the outlet he needed to take out his anger and grief. The fact that every night his revenge was aimed at the wrong dragon plagued him, and he still tried to come up with a way to get back at his father and Mordechai. Over the course of a few short years he’d gained a substantial following of fans, even some of the royals had sought an audience with him. Though there were many in the city that didn’t like him because of his unique power and shunned him on suspicion of being a follower of Apophis. He never admitted to any dragon that he was, and that was how he’d gained his power. He knew to admit such a thing would mean his death.

He’d received an invitation to meet the King of Bluescale, he was always eager to meet the royals, knowing that there must be some powerful magic they were keeping for themselves. He never passed up the opportunity for a meeting to gain some sliver of information that could help him take down Mordechai, so far the most valuable connection he had was an overly enthusiastic prince who didn’t have the knowledge he was seeking.

He’d been asked to fly over instead of using his gift to teleport directly to the castle. Since he wanted to build a valuable alliance with this kingdom he felt obliged to heed their request. It was just before dark when he crossed over the boarder of the Bluescale territory, and felt the familiar distortion in the air, that could only mean one thing. Someone was casting a spell. From the feel of the energy pulsating around him he could tell something powerful was being created.

Balaan landed in the woods several yards from the caster. He heard the chants that marked something familiar, curious he stepped closer, daring to venture out into the open. The

caster turned his blue eyes on Balaan but didn't stop his spell. Balaan waited knowing not to interrupt. When the caster finished Balaan dared to speak to him.

"You are a follower of Apophis?"

"I'm a follower of power," he said. He was several years older than Balaan.

"What sort of spell is that?"

"Hopefully it will be the answer to a problem that has been plaguing me for some time now."

Balaan disliked this dragon's evasiveness and the glint in his piercing blue eyes was making Balaan more than a little uncomfortable.

"Perhaps you would like to stay and see what my spell can do?"

"It's getting late I really should be moving on," Balaan said.

The dragon reached for a pouch at his belt. "I'll give you this if you stay, I could use some assistance with the next part."

Balaan opened the pouch and found it was full of gold. He was ahead of schedule and he figured if he really needed to, he could teleport part of the way. Gold was always needed in Ethiolan, and Balaan was developing an appetite for the finer things Dyad had to offer.

"I think I can stay for a bit," Balaan said.

"Excellent, if you don't mind just stand right there for a moment. I'm expecting my brother."

"Who is your brother?" Balaan asked.

"Ross the King of Bluescale," the dragon said.

"He invited me to the castle, I was on my way there."

"I know," the dragon's brilliant blue eyes danced in the fire light as he worked over his potion.

The dragon's attitude was making Balaan feel uneasy about lingering, despite the bag of gold. He felt he had waited patiently long enough and was about to tell the dragon he was leaving, when he saw another dragon step out into the clearing. Finally the brother had arrived. Balaan stood up straighter expecting the King to greet him. But the King gave him a cursory glance before his brother called his attention.

"Ross I was worried you wouldn't come." The follower of Apophis said.

"We are brothers are we not?"

"Yes, but I was beginning to fear that you do not trust me."

"What grounds have you given for me not to trust you?" Ross asked

"Perhaps, I simply have a guilty conscience."

"Theo, you are too hard on yourself. What have you done that would cause this feeling?"

"You are the first born, the King. I must admit I have coveted what is yours." Theo then unleashed his spell on the unsuspecting Ross. The spell was powerful. A black charge of energy slammed into Ross in the form of an enormous shadow, it engulfed him. Balaan could just make out the features of a dragon in the darkness. As the shadow dragon reared its hideous head it let out a deafening shriek, then it attacked Ross. The king had little time to realize what was happening, he was only able to release a single cry for help before he fell silent.

As fast as the shadow dragon appeared it disappeared, flying into the night sky, leaving the clearing silent. The calls of the night could not be heard, the chirping of the crickets stopped. Nothing scurried or slithered. The dragon's spell had affected everything in the area. Balaan believed that every living thing surrounding the shadow dragon would have been sucked of its life to feed the spell, perhaps even the trees themselves had ceased to breathe.

The terrified scream of Prince Theo drew attention and soon guards were flooding into the clearing, in a rush to aid their King. The follower of Apophis looked around wildly as if he was shocked by what happened.

“There,” he shouted and pointed at Balaan. “That dragon killed the King.” The dragons surged in Balaan’s direction. He blinked out of sight of the clearing just far enough away that he could still hear the follower of Apophis declare an oath of vengeance on him for killing his brother.

After that, Balaan was forced to leave Ethiolan, the two times that he ran into dragon’s in the world, after Theo killed his brother, it was obvious that word of his supposed guilt had spread throughout the whole realm. His purple eyes were easily identified, he was never given the chance to explain his side before the attacks would start.

Part 5

For a time Balaan became a nomad, traveling from one world to the next, visiting some again and again. Throughout his wanderings he never found a place that suited him the way his home did. He thought he could tolerate Ethiolan if more dragons followed Apophis. He knew those were few and far between in that world. Once again he was a true Son of None. He had no home, no family, no one that gave him hope for the future. He ached for Francis every day.

There were worlds full of people and some void of any living thing. One world he found was a bustle of activity. There were people everywhere he turned. He could hardly walk down the street without bumping into someone. Men and women rushed about in a fanatic state as if the world would end if they didn't accomplish their task. He spent a long time in this world; he learned it was a place called earth. With a simple language spell he was able to communicate with them. He learned the city he was in was called New York. He was fascinated by this world but it still wasn't quite what he was looking for. The biggest issue was that they didn't have any dragons. After a while he moved on and sought a new world.

Eventually he ended up in a world where he found the strangest statues peppered throughout the land. Gargoyles with their mortal bodies, long tails, and great wings, were carved out of the same grey stone. Though when Balaan looked around he couldn't find the source of the stones, there was no quarry where the ore was mined. The statues were everywhere, in completely random places as if they had just blinked into existence the way Balaan traveled around. As Balaan continued to explore this world he found some of the creatures the statues had been molded after. As he followed them around he tried to eavesdrop on their conversations and learn more about them, but they were a silent group. He figured they had a telepathic way of communicating. He didn't want to step out in front of creatures he couldn't understand so he moved on to another part of the world where he found another race.

These new creatures looked like they were half bird half mortal with red and black feathers covering their bodies. They stood upright like a mortal but they could fly if they stretched out their arms which doubled as wings. He remembered this creature from Simon's learning. They were harpies. A powerful race that dated back to the time of Apophis himself, he recalled the legends of Apophis taming the queen of the harpies to help in his fight against the witches that had turned their race into weak mortals. Some of them had sharp beaks on their faces while others had none; some of them had eyes like a bird of prey that seemed to see everything. Then there were those that had ordinary mortal eyes.

As Balaan observed these creatures he found they spoke Winnifred's language just like the dragons of Ethiolan. He thought it was odd that they should speak the same language even though he had not seen any harpies during his travels in that world.

He decided he would try to approach these harpies, to see if they knew of other dragons in this world. If they spoke the same language there had to be more dragons. He found a small group of three on a white sand beach preening their feathers. They wore no garments since their bodies were covered in feathers.

"Pardon the intrusion," Balaan said formally to get their attention.

"What is this?" One of the harpies said tilting her head like a bird, while one started to circle him, her movements fluid and shifting as she looked him up and down.

"Such interesting eyes," the third one said.

The one with the beak reached out and scratched his arm with her talon-sharp nails. He jerked back as his blood spilled out, sparkling gold in the bright sunlight.

“A dragon.” One screeched.

Balaan was about to blink out of the situation that was not going at all as he’d planned. When he tried to access his power he found it was gone. Then when he tried to transform into his dragon he found he was not able to do that either. The scratch started to burn with an intense fire that traveled up his arm. He became disorientated and it took all his will power to remain standing.

In a matter of seconds the harpies had him bound. He couldn’t believe the power of these creatures. They stripped his powers before he’d noticed they were casting a spell, and without the use of a quell. Now he was being carried off completely at their mercy.

They flew over the trees toward a mountain. Balaan watched the tree tops thin then disappear completely. A massive barren landscape stretched for miles all around the base of the mountain. The ground was littered with the stone statues thick at the tree line then thinning as they approached the mountain.

Built into the side of the mountain was an enormous ancient sculpture of a harpy, she was perched on the entrance to a cave that was flanked by two other massively carved harpies. The carvings were weathered by the wind, and chipped from the freeze and thaw of ice. The height of them was so great that they made the opening to the cave look small, although when the harpies flew through with him in tow, they all three entered at the same time with their wings fully outstretched.

Inside there were more statues, they lined every hall, wing to wing as if they were a great stone army ready to come to life and fight to defend the harpies. Their hideous faces frozen in a state of rage, promising that their wrath would be severe if they woke. He feared the faces of these statues would haunt him if he lived long enough to escape this place.

“What do you want?” Balaan asked, as he was dragged down a long hall lit with candles that hung from the ceiling in heavy metal chandeliers.

“Stop,” he shouted when they entered another hall that seemed to be a throne room, the old stone floors were faded and chipped. He was dragged before a throne where a harpy sat with hawk eyes and a sharp beak.

“Silence before the Great Kelpie,” one of the harpies said.

“Oh Great Kelpie we have brought you a dragon,” the one with a girl face said in her sweet voice.

The harpy on the throne rose and approached Balaan, he still vainly struggled to free himself by blinking or taking on his dragon form, but he still wasn’t capable of doing either. She walked up to him and took his arm in her clawed hand, pulling the bloody gash close to her beak. She sniffed his blood then Balaan watched as her gray slimy tongue slid over his exposed blood lapping up a small amount.

“A true dragon,” she looked him in the eye for a moment. “Take him to the drawing room.” She then turned to look up, “Guard bring Sarah to the drawing room.” Balaan followed her gaze shocked to see several of the winged creatures perched in the rafters. Dark shadows with glowing eyes, their long tails hanging down and sweeping from side to side. Two of them flew down at the Kelpie’s request and left by a side door.

The harpies pulled Balaan in the opposite direction down a narrow set of stairs travelling down into the mountain until they reached a large cavern. Ten or more doors were placed around the walls. The harpies led Balaan into one of the doors. The room was bare except for a wooden cross section that stood in the center of the room. Leather straps hung off the thick wood. The smell in the room was putrid causing Balaan’s stomach to heave. There were stains on the walls in ominous patterns that echoed the violence that had taken place here.

He was strapped to the cross beams, his arms and legs spread out and bound to the wood with the leather straps. Another Harpy entered the room carrying a glass bowl she placed the bowl on the floor just under his left arm. Another harpy then cut his arm so the blood would drip into the bowl.

Balaan was not going to allow this to happen. He had to do something, he started to chant a spell that would hopefully grant him the opportunity to escape. One of the harpies grabbed her stomach as he muttered his spell that would grant him control of her body.

"This one thinks he knows how to use our powers against us. The arrogance of Winifred I see," she said smiling at him with innocent features masking her true hideous nature. Then she waved her hand toward him and he was hit with a force so powerful he lost consciousness for a time. When he woke, he was no longer bleeding from just his arm, but his mouth was full of the taste of blood. He was dizzy and the room was growing dim as some of the candles that had been lit burned to the end of their wick. There was now a statue of a harpy in the center of the room. His arm was still bleeding but he no longer had the strength to try and fight against the harpies.

The great Kelpie was busy starting a fire on the stone floor in the center of the room, she was just adding a small log to her kindling when the gargoyles entered. One carried a large basin, followed by another who carried a base for the basin, and a third that had an array of herbs used in potions. The harpy ignored them, forcing the gargoyles to wait, holding the heavy basin and base while she stoked up the fire to her liking. After several minutes she had the fire burning with small a bed of coals, she ordered them to assemble the basin for her. Balaan noted the strength of the gray winged creatures, an asset which obviously did little good against the harpies since they gargoyles were the ones in servitude.

"If you kill me there will be no more of my blood." Balaan said hoping it would save his life.

"Silence follower of Winnifred."

"I would never follow that vile little witch," Balaan spat.

"You use her spells you are one of her dragons. If you don't follow her who do you follow?"

"I follow the teachings of the great Apophis."

The harpy laughed. "Apophis was nothing. He couldn't cast a single spell. All his magic was the work of Sarah.

"Apophis was the one who gave us back the ability to turn into dragons after the witches cursed us into these mortal forms."

"Apophis was never able to take on the dragon form. His son, the son he bore with Sara was able to become a dragon but not Apophis himself."

"That's a lie."

"Should you like to ask Sara herself?" she pulled a glass ladle from a table that had been brought in with other various tools and laid out for her spell. She scooped some of Balaan's blood from the glass bowl under his bleeding arm then walked back over to her basin over the fire and poured it in. She added some herbs then she charged her spell drawing energy from the room. Balaan could feel his own body reacting to the spell. His heart rate increased and he felt sweat start to drip off his brow.

Balaan estimated it took her hours to brew her potion, the whole time he kept slipping in and out of consciousness. Each time he woke he tried to convince the harpy to let him go.

"If my blood is so rare you better make sure I don't die."

"Are you rare?"

"To you, I am."

"I never said you were rare." Short exchanges, where Balaan neither learned any viable knowledge nor gained any clues on how to escape were the extent of their conversations.

When the harpy's potion was finished, she spooned it into the gaping mouth of the harpy statue. Balaan watched as the statue slowly changed from stone to feather, from gray to red and black, from stillness to motion, and then from silence to speaking.

"Who has called me from my sleep?"

It was I, The Great Kelpie. Oh wise one, the first of our kind, please accept my gift of this dragon."

"A dragon?"

"Yes, My Queen he claims to be a follower of Apophis."

"Does he think that will win him any favors, Apophis cursed us all. He is to be despised for his ambitions and false promises."

"Apophis was a great leader," Balaan objected.

"Apophis was a fool, always trying to be something he wasn't. His son, now there was a true leader with great power. My boy." She held her arms like she was holding an infant as if she could really conjure her baby boy. "Do you know where Apophison got his power?" She walked up close to where Balaan was leaning on his restraints. "He got it from me. You dragons possess no power of your own."

"We must hold some power you needed my blood to wake you."

"I didn't say your blood wasn't useful, but if it weren't for us you wouldn't be able to cast any spells at all." The Great Kelpie said.

"Drain his blood and preserve it," Sara said.

"You don't want to do that," Balaan said. He couldn't let that happen, he couldn't leave this life knowing he'd failed Francis. He hadn't been able to save her; he couldn't die without avenging her.

Sara's hawk eyes studied him, she was the most bird like and the most mortal all at the same time. As she tilted her head, she looked at him as if he was a mouse scurrying through a field and she was ravenous.

"I'm a direct descendant of Apophis which means I'm a descendent of Apophison, your boy," Balaan could see he had her attention. "If you want more dragon's I can get you more dragons. All the dragon blood you could ever want."

"How is that possible? The dragons have been lost for eons," The Great Kelpie said.

"They are not lost, only hidden. I found them. A whole world filled with them."

"Where?"

"In a place called Ethiolan. I can help you get them."

"Ethiolan," Sara was definitely intrigued.

"If you help me do one thing first."

"Get me the dragons of Ethiolan and you will have this thing you desire. First you need to prove to me that you really have found Ethiolan."

"I can take you there."

"Can you take an army?"

"No just one other."

"Very well, heal him. Make him fit for this task."

"Sara, do you not wish to rest first? You've been –"

"If I wished to be questioned, I would ask."

Balaan and Sara stood at the summit of a tall mountain overlooking a large Ethiolan city. Dragons could easily be seen transforming and taking flight, the most natural thing in the world

and he was going to hand it over to Sara so that he could have his revenge on Mordechai and Lord Enzo. It seemed like a fair trade. These dragons were just as corrupt as Lord Enzo and deserved to suffer for their hypocrisy.

“Where is the source of their power?” Sara asked.

“It is guarded, we won’t be able to stay long,” Balaan warned.

“I can see to the guard.”

Balaan took Sara to the Paragoda, the golden dragons holding up their basins glistened in the late afternoon sun. The power that resonated here instantly started to vibrate throughout Balaan’s body. He could tell Sara was drinking in the feeling as well for a moment she closed her eyes and spread her wings as if she were going to take flight.

When she opened her eyes she looked around to examine the Paragoda in more detail. Balaan could tell she was assessing the same information he had on his first time to this mystical place. She soon threw back her head and laughed. “Oh Winifred you crafty witch,” then she looked at Balaan. “We have a deal.”