

Things Change

Loki shifted to relieve the faint ache in his hip. Though he walked without the limp he'd feared he would carry for life, the joint still bothered him at times. Especially in the cold, and cold was exactly what he had at that moment. Deep, bitter, bone-chilling cold. The kind that froze the sap in the trees and caused them crack open. The kind that froze spit before hit the ground. Loki tugged the heavy, fur-lined cloak tighter around himself. Leaning up against Merru would have offered a considerable amount of warmth. The dragon never noticed heat or cold and during weather like this, seemed to be stoked by internal fires that kept even his hide warm to the touch.

Unfortunately, cuddling close to the dragon wasn't an option as Loki stared at the night-darkened grasslands east of the Taragen, the capital of Calladar. Not even the moon graced the star-speckled, velvety blackness that slowly moved by overhead as they waited for the marauders that had drawn the pair out into the frozen night.

Wolves, that had gotten too bold for their own good, were decimating the large sheep herds of Calladar. The white animals with their black faces were prized for the warmth and softness of the wool that grew twice as thick as that on sheep elsewhere. Probably because of the Fate-forsaken winters in Calladar. Even the lower legs of the sheep had a thick mat of wool.

Loki checked the light bending weave he had set around himself and the huge golden dragon that crouched several feet away. The weave remained steady, not that he expected anything less. He'd learned it with mischief in mind then honed it on the battlefield years before. Even so, it never hurt to remain vigilant.

Merru rolled one big blue eye in his direction. *"There's vigilant and then there's obsessive."*

Though a smile tugged at his lips, Loki ignored the needling from his dragon. At one time, losing control of the weave would have meant death. The danger of that time had ingrained the need to be absolutely sure of his weaves, their placement, and their tie-offs. It wasn't something he'd been able to shake after the Shadow War ended. None of them who had been through that war could. Merru knew that and understood. Not that it stopped the dragon from poking fun at his rider, but if ever he sensed it bothered Loki, Merru would stop immediately. No bond was closer than that between a dragon and rider.

Shifting again, Loki sighed and swept the grassland with his bond-enhanced sight, keeping a close eye on the band of stubby pines that grew to the north. Literally, one eye. Serena, with the help of young Lenya's new weave, had managed to restore the structure of the eye that had been taken by a Shadow Dragon claw, but not the sight. It no longer bothered him. In the years since that battle, he'd grown used to it. And where he might only have the vision in one eye, Merru had two good eyes and no sight was sharper than a dragon's.

A frigid breeze cut across the open land, carrying the scent of the sheep, the snapping of the tightly secured tent of the shepherds, and smoke from the tiny fire within the tent. The shepherds had tried everything they could think of to dissuade the wolves before presenting their problem to the Head of the Council of Nine who had, in turn, presented it to the Calladaran dragonhold. No one could surpass Loki in light bending. And so he sat, freezing his shadow-blasted rear off in the middle of the night, doing his best to ward off the bitter cold, while a massive herd of a thousand or so sheep grazed and slept within easy distance of him and his weave-cloaked dragon.

Several hours crawled by with only the quiet, sleepy bleats of the sheep and the occasional comment from Merru to break the monotony. During the entire time, the dragon never twitched a muscle as he waited with the patience of his kind. The same patience that had made it possible for the dragon to hang around the sheep for the past three weeks during the day so the animals would

become accustomed to him in the hopes they wouldn't be terrified when it came time to protect them.

Dawn was only a couple of hours away when several large, dark shapes slipped from the small forest of wind-twisted pines and moved like shadows toward the herd. Loki counted eleven. A large pack to have so many capable hunters. More than twice the size of southern wolves, the back of one of these would reach Loki's waist if it were standing next to him.

Merru shifted, planting his back feet and flexing his talons into the frozen earth for better grip. Wings slightly spread, his rear wiggled like a cat that was preparing to pounce. Loki saw the plan form in the dragon's mind and chuckled quietly. These wolves were about to get the surprise of their lives.

Several woolly heads snapped up in the herd, uneasy bleats drifting on the air. The wolves were just beginning to split into three groups when Merru moved.

The massive gold dragon launched himself over the herd of sheep, landing between them and the wolves with a roar that thundered through the freezing air. The pack skidded to halt and turned to flee in almost the same movement. Tails tucked, they sped back toward the trees. Merru charged after them, snapping at the rears of the trailing members and roaring again as they vanished among the stunted pines. Terrified bleats and the shouts of the shepherds as they stumbled from their tent filled the air.

Looking rather pleased with himself, Merru lumbered back as Loki got to his feet. The sheep had bolted in the other direction. The combination of wolves and roaring had been too much for them, even if they were used to Merru. Four of the shepherds chased after the herd while two others made quick work of the fire and tent. Loki dusted off his cloak and walked to meet the gold, allowing the weave to dissipate.

"I don't think those wolves will be hunting in this area for a while," Merru sent.

Loki pulled the catcher strap down from the saddle and began securing it. *“We can hope not. Winter may drive them back.”*

“If they persist, I will have to reduce the pack,” the dragon returned.

Loki sensed Merru’s distaste for such an action. The dragon didn’t like killing without good reason. As a predator himself, he understood the need to hunt for food. But he also understood that there were animals that shouldn’t be hunted. Like livestock, unless the owner of the stock had given permission which didn’t happen often.

“Let us hope then, that you have managed to scare some sense into them,” Loki sent as he settled into the saddle. *“They are not short of prey, even for this time of year. Just because the sheep are easier, doesn’t make the woolly little beasts a wolf buffet.”*

“If they do come back, I doubt it will be for some time. They are likely still running,” the dragon returned.

“I agree. The sheep are safe for now, if a bit disturbed.” Loki glanced at the herd that milled around in agitated confusion some distance off as the herders rounded them back up.

One of the shepherds, an older man with a thick, gray-streaked beard who was called Jackale, jogged across the grassland to them. Loki finished buckling the safety straps while he waited for the man to arrive.

Merru rumbled a greeting as Jackale drew close. The man smiled fondly at the dragon before turning his attention to Loki. “Thank you for your patience and persistence in this matter. I believe it will be a long while before the pack is brave enough to return.”

“You are most welcome, Jackale. If the pack returns, you only need to send a message and we will return to deal with it.” Loki glanced at the tree line. “However, Merru agrees they will be a long time in returning.”

Jackale bowed and backed away. “Again, my thanks.”

“May the Fates favor your day, Jackale,” Loki said.

Merru launched into the sky. As they gained altitude, Loki was surprised to see the image of Galdrilene form in the dragon's mind. *"Home?"*

"It has been a while since we've been there. I would like to bathe in the lake and I'm sure you would enjoy one of Marda's meals. Besides, Kellinar and Taela have returned from the hold in Haraban. And, we really have nowhere else we need to be now," the gold answered.

"Home it is, then," Loki returned ignoring the last comment and focusing instead on the anticipation of being home. It had been several months since he'd made it back to Galdrilene. And as many months since he'd seen Kellinar.

The Slide spun open and a moment later, they were soaring over the horseshoe-shaped caldera that was the dragonhold in Galdrilene. The torches, set by Fire mages, lined the inside walls of the hold, creating cozy light in the darkness before dawn there. Maybe he and Merru could catch a few hours of sleep in their lair before indulging in one of Marda's magnificent breakfasts.

Quiet rumbles of greetings issued from the few dragons that were awake when they landed. Loki removed the saddle from Merru and stowed it in the equipment cave while the gold waded into the icy water of the lake. Though the dragon was doing his best to be as quiet as possible, the sloshing of lake water was still quite audible.

Shaking his head in amusement over the gold's attempt to bathe in silence, Loki slipped into the hold and started for the stairs that would take him up to the lair he shared with Merru. The halls were empty, as expected given the early hour. Even so, he wasn't surprised when he topped the flight of stairs to the third floor of lairs and came face to face with the tiny woman who ran the dragon hold of Galdrilene and who, with her bondmate, led the dragon riders.

It really didn't surprise him to see her at this hour. Nydara would have let her know the minute they came through the Slide above Galdrilene. And like her predecessor, Emallya, she never let a rider arrive unmet.

“Maleena,” Loki said with a smile, “it’s good to see you.”

“And good to see you, Loki. You’ve been gone from home longer than I expected,” she said as she fell in beside him.

He sensed the unasked question tacked to the end of her comment. “I know. It wasn’t that I didn’t want to return, it just seemed that things needed to be settled first.”

“And have they been settled to your liking?”

“Not really, but then I didn’t expect they would be.” He sighed at glanced Maleena to find her violet eyes watching him. “I understand where she is coming from. The fact she can never produce heirs with me has weighed heavy on Kalila’s mind this last year. Even though there is no guarantee an heir would be chosen by the dragons to succeed her, she feels she has a duty to her people to at least provide the option.”

Maleena nodded and turned her gaze to watch where they were going. “She is a good queen and has always put Markene before herself. Though I have to admit, in this one instance, I wish she could have found a shred of selfishness.” Maleena gave him a sympathetic look. “You two have been through so much together and I know her feelings for you haven’t changed.”

Loki tried to tamp down the ache walking away from Kalila had created. “No, they haven’t changed. Nor have my feelings for her. I suspect I will always love her to some extent. Still, our separation was a mutual agreement and there are no hard feelings between us. I respect her station and if this is something she feels needs to be done, then it does. Besides, taking away the possibility of ever having children is a lot to ask of a person, man or woman. I have Merru to fill that space. With him, I feel nothing is lacking in my life. Kalila doesn’t have that bond to soften the blow.”

“You are good man Loki,” Maleena said as they paused outside the door to his lair. “Grab a nap and then come down to breakfast. Marda is going to be thrilled to see you.”

A thread of unease worked its way through Loki. It was something in her tone and expression. He paused in the act of reaching for the door's latch. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing is wrong exactly." Maleena sighed and shook her head. "It's just that Marda grows old. She already had grandchildren when we first arrived. I'm not sure how much longer she will be in charge of the hold's day to day runnings. For now, she still oversees every meal. Is the first one up in the morning and the last to bed at night. But I can see it wears on her in a way it never used to."

Loki stared at Maleena as he tried to imagine the Galdrilene kitchen without Marda running it. Tried to imagine Galdrilene at all without her. Although the plump woman wasn't bonded to a dragon, wasn't even a mage, it somehow never occurred to him that Marda would change. That one day, in the not so distant future, someone else would have to fill Marda's shoes.

"Who..." He cleared his throat. "Who will take over her duties?"

"I'm not certain." Maleena chuckled. "Honestly, she would probably knock us both over the head with that wooden spoon of hers if she even heard us discussing it. Like I said, the work seems to tire her in a way it never did before, but she won't be ready to step down anytime soon. She's far too stubborn for that. I do believe she will choose her own replacement when she is ready."

"I wonder who she will choose." Loki ran several possibilities through his mind.

"She has a granddaughter who is a few years older than me who I believe she is training for the job," Maleena said. "I didn't mean to worry you. It was simply something I was thinking about as I fell asleep and I suppose the thought remained upon waking."

"It will be strange the day Marda is no longer in charge of the kitchens and all of the servants. I wonder what she will do when she retires," Loki mused.

Maleena smiled. "I don't expect she will completely retire even after she retires. I wouldn't be surprised if she chooses to live out her days here in the hold, cuddling babies, insisting people eat, and likely directing whomever she chooses to take over her duties."

Loki chuckled. "You're probably right."

"Get your nap, Loki," Maleena said and walked down the hall toward the lair she shared with Mckale and their dragons.

Loki lifted the latch on the door and stepped into the room he hadn't seen in months. Everything was exactly as he'd left it. After unlacing his boots, he kicked them off and stumbled into bed. It was entirely possible he would sleep right through the morning meal. That was okay, the mid-day meal was just as good.

As he crawled under the covers and let himself relax into the comfortable bed, he heard Merru land on the ledge outside and walk into the cave on the otherside of the stone wall. It wasn't long before the dragon settled down with a happy sigh, his great golden head resting in the doorway between Loki's room and the cave.

Sleep pulled Loki under so thoroughly, he didn't even notice the sun rising over the rim of the caldera or the call for the morning meal. The outlying holds in the various nations were all comfortable, but none were as good as home.