

The Dragon and The Rose

(excerpt from chapter 11)

"I depart today for Jarrow," Branoc said casually then waited for her reaction. None came other than the slight narrowing of her eyes. "I did not wish to leave until I knew you had fully recuperated from your excitement of last evening."

This comment managed to initiate a response. Fascinated he watched the delicate blush that spread upward from beneath the neckline of her tunic. The warm hue colored her throat and cheeks and he wondered if the same enticing glow kissed her breasts.

With a measured intake of breath, Martanzia recaptured her composure and looked him straight in the eyes. "I am quite recovered thank you. All effects from my excitement, as you put it, were completely superficial. The entire episode is all but forgotten."

"I was not referring to your being stranded by the tide nor the cuts and bruises upon your arms," he said.

"Nor was I," she replied hotly. The glint of anger flashed in her eyes.

He studied her more closely. Was she remembering the stolen kisses they had shared? The impassioned embraces and bold yet fleeting touches. Was she angry with herself for feeling out of control and drunk with wanting? Good, because that was exactly how he felt. "You would be wise to cease your explorations of unfamiliar territory," he warned.

Her blush deepened. "But how else does one learn of the many wonders of life?" she asked, assuming an exaggerated picture of innocence.

"How else indeed. If you seek personal experience, I will be at your service upon my return."

Her eyes widened at his innuendo. Then an expression of thoughtfulness sharpened her features. "How long will you be gone?" she asked.

"Three or four days." Would she miss him? Only a look of contemplation and calculation flittered across her features.

"Do not attempt to run off in my absence," he said, trying to squelch any wayward plans she may be considering. "The entire garrison has been instructed to look after you. And upon my return," he added cheerfully, "there will be mountains of new documents awaiting your translation."

She stiffened. "Is that where lies your concern?" she asked. "Pity you cannot just preserve my head and hands and do away with the rest of me. It would no doubt be much less troublesome for you." Arms folded across her chest she turned her back to him.

"Less troublesome to be sure," he agreed, easing closer. "But in truth there are other parts of you that I find much more intriguing than the ones you mention."

"You are dangerously impertinent today," Tanzia accused over her shoulder. "Is there anything else you wanted before you take your leave?"

A sea of intimate thoughts fought for expression upon his tongue. He longed to tell her that he worried night and day over her safety and comfort, and that she inspired him to dream of a future that held more for him than soldiering and growing old alone. But those were life altering words, once spoken never to be recalled. And there was no place in his life for a woman.

"Take care in my absence," he said quietly.

Her shoulders relaxed but she did not turn to look at him.

"If you need counsel," he added, "seek out the old Druid." By the Faith, why did he place Martanzia into Morcar's custody? Since coming to this North Country words and ideas seemed to spring forth from his mouth without waiting for direction from his brain. On the other hand, though he did not personally trust the old sorcerer, he somehow knew the conjurer would protect Martanzia at all costs.

As he waited for a response, he wondered if it was hotheaded pride or cold courage that kept Martanzia's back so straight and her shoulders so squared. He suspected she had championed her own causes for much too long, making her headstrong and independent. He yearned to relieve her of that burden, but as a soldier he had duties that transcended personal needs and emotions.

She peeked at him over one shoulder then quickly glanced away. The gesture set into motion her long tresses. He was secretly pleased that she refused to contain the shining wealth of hair. He enjoyed watching it tumble and sway with abandon and he enjoyed the come-hither-look it imparted to her otherwise chaste appearance. Besides, he doubted her hair could be bound into submission any more readily than her willful disposition.

He reached toward her silky locks then balled his hand into a fist and slowly lowered his arm back to his side. He should turn and walk away before it was too late, before he followed through with the fanciful idea of kissing Martanzia farewell.

A painfully jagged breath hovered in his chest. How did a man of reason deal with the troubled times, a delusional Druid priest, and a girl that so tested a man's self-control and trust? More questions that knew no answers. No doubt concentrating on his military obligations would be a better use of his time and energy. Besides, he meant nothing to Martanzia. Just now, she had all but dismissed him, as if he were a mere thrall living only to do her bidding.

A cold loneliness settled over him. Then he bristled as a rush of male pride replaced his sentimentality and uncertainty. This was his castle, damn it, not hers. He was in charge here and he would not be made to feel otherwise.

Grabbing Martanzia, he spun her around to face him, and before she could protest lowered his mouth to capture hers. To his surprise, she wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him back. With warm lips parted she enticed him to a more intimate sharing. God above how he wanted to taste all the sweetness she offered. But Martanzia was a young lady of breeding and destined for a nunnery, surely she did not know what heathen longings she kindled in his belly and what pagan thoughts she inspired in his mind.

They intertwined so perfectly, and although layers of fabric separated their bodies and true desires, the softness of her breasts was remarkably evident and he remembered laying his hand upon her there. That mind altering experience had nearly been both their undoing. Last night it had taken all of the resolve he possessed to keep from picking her up and carrying her away to his room to satisfy her curiosity and his need.

At the recollection, the embers of need flamed anew and he transferred his weight to one leg trying to alleviate the hurtful pleasure that laid low his ability to think clearly. The maneuver drew Martanzia closer transporting him to a new plateau of desire. She sighed and the tremulous sound reverberated against his mouth. Did Martanzia want him as much as he wanted her? Yes. He could feel it in her touch. That bit of knowledge pleased him beyond measure even as it brought him to his senses.

He pried her arms loose from around his neck, eased her away from his body, and held her at bay. There was a hunger in Martanzia's eyes and a quickening of her breath and she leaned forward as if to recapture his mouth. Reluctantly he released his hold on her and took a step back.

"Would it disturb you overmuch," she asked, "if I were not here to vex you and disrupt your camp?"

The question took him by surprise. "More than you might know, lady," he admitted under his breath. "More than you might know."