

It wasn't too long before a small group of soldiers marched into the stadium. They had stopped in formation that looked small on the huge field. Seventy paces separated them from where Sogoth stood and the dragon lay.

One of the soldiers shouted in a voice that cracked with uncertainty, "Hold fast for the Most Honored Regent of Atani, Her Ladyship, Lilandra." The words barely carried across the vast field.

Sogoth did not see fit to acknowledge the announcement.

Her power was growing, he noticed with admiration. She took her time in crossing the field. Her dress was impeccable, her face a mix of a girlish pout and queenly disapproval. Surely, there was no man who would not melt at her every request. Except her brother.

"Lord Sogoth, you have disturbed the peace of Atani. I am their Regent, standing in place for their King. This disturbance will not be tolerated." She drew herself up to her full height and pulled her shoulders back. She closed the distance between them so her escorts could not hear what she did not want them to.

"My dear sister, it is good to see you as well." He approached her, but did not embrace her. Whatever emotion was between them did not permit that.

"Brother, why have you come?" Her tone had a mix of curiosity, exasperation, and wariness.

"To give you a gift." It was said simply as if there could be no other reason.

"Fine," she said cautiously, "What is the gift?"

"This!" He said as he swept his arm backward to the sleeping dragon as he allowed *Nascondersi* to dissipate. He took pride in her shocked expression. She was not easily ruffled, but a dragon pierced even her cool mask.

Lilandra was accustomed to being one step ahead of people, thus she hated losing control or being outmaneuvered. She needed to seize the advantage back from him.

"Sogoth, I have seen what you are capable of. Too often. This one though," she waved her hand at the dragon, "is simply your best one yet."

He shifted a little, and the slightest softening of his expression flashed for the briefest instant. There it was. Even he was not immune. So easy, she thought. Sprinkle a few compliments, lace it with awe, and male pride was hers to control.

"Whatever am I to do with this creature? Is it even alive?" She let a trace of girlish helplessness intrude.

"I assure you, it is very much alive, though a bit worse for our journey here. As for what you do with it. That, dear sister is up to you. Make him your royal pet, your official symbol."

"Sogoth, I do not want nor do I need a dragon." Sibling rivalries did not fade easily. "It is in the middle of our coliseum. We are to have games in two days. My people have come to rely on seeing me at the games. How can we have games with this in the field?"

"If you don't want him, fine. I merely thought that you might enjoy a gift that no one else has ever had. If it is that you fear my gift," his tone turned sinister, "perhaps I can help with that as well."

"My dear brother," her saccharine words dripped from her painted lips, "you chose your path to power, and I chose mine. Let us leave it at that until the final reckoning."

“Dear sister, why did you choose this soft Magic of Need? Why do you not use a true path of power?” He did not ask the last. He said it with authority that simply made anything he said a fact. “With enough power you could do anything, even control this beast.” He didn’t even attempt to hide his boasting tone.

He furthered his arrogant criticism. “You are the Regent of this land and still you could not stop even the most common of soldiers should he decide to have his way with you.”

“You have chosen your path, I have chosen mine. The softest silk is still stronger than the hardest steel. Brother, would even your most loyal of men come to your aid if he believed you could not strike him for his inaction? No brother, if they believed they would not be punished, they would stab you in back. Are you so sure of their fear of your power?” It was an argument they had had for countless years. Though neither would admit it, they each wondered if they had chosen the right path. They both also feared the day when their paths would bring them together as combatants.

“Sister, in the end we will see who has more control of their rabble. The dwarves’ dark cousins heed my call. With those goblins, I will build an army to cover all the known lands. As my strength grows, so will the dwarves’ respect for me. They will not intrude on a struggle of strength. It is their way; they respect strength. The elves surely will hide in their trees. In the end, it will be your army against mine. In the end, though, such pawns will matter not.”

He closed his eyes and rudely ignored her for a few minutes. Suddenly and simply, he disappeared from her vision. It was not just that she couldn’t see him. He was gone. She was glad her guards across the field could not see the astonished look on her face. She had heard about such a spell. It was *Situtum Domus*. It was a one-way escape spell. She knew the instant Sogoth vanished he appeared somewhere where he was safe. It took an amount of skill few wizards could claim. Lilandra was immeasurably glad he could only use such a spell to return to his home. It would not do to have him simply appear when and where he wished.

She quickly recovered herself; she too had power. She thought again about her position and plan. It was flawless. She thought to herself, *you see, dear brother, you only control through fear. My power comes from their love of me. I fill their need, and as long as there is pain, there is need.*