

Dragon Red, Dragon Blue

by Ruby

*“Dragon Red Dragon Blue
Tell me a riddle I’ll ask one too
Dragon Red Dragon Blue
I am the fire inside of you.”*
-14th century children’s rhyme (France.)

The older figure read to the younger one.

*“...Naked and perfumed I went to my lover
Naked and perfumed did I find heaven in their embrace
Naked and perfumed did our bodies delight the stars who watched our coupling
Naked and perfumed they wrapped the blanket around my shoulders
Ah love! Sweet love! How you bedevil me like the fragrance of a beloved’s perfume...”*

The reciter looked up from his book. Many Fathers placed the book down.

“Your mind is a million miles away, My Lord.”

Conqueror looked out the window into the strange haze of the permanent heat and marshy sea that souped around the ruins of the Hairless’ city.

“Forgive me, Many Fathers, I am not in the mood for love poetry it seems.”

“Humph! A consort has taken to calling you a worthless brute again, and you will only be able to dry her tears with a rope of the finest crystals pulled from the deepest chamber.”

Conqueror chuffed. “I am no brute, and Starfire likes to play many games, but that is not one of them. She’s always very clear on telling me exactly what she wants.”

Many Fathers grinned. “That, I have no trouble believing.” He became more serious. “She would make a good mate. I know you are in no hurry to choose, but...others are not so patient. You have rivals, My Lord.”

Many Fathers tolerated his refusal to choose a mate and establish a keeping place with her, as a young man enjoying the youth and privilege of being from an old, powerful family. But there was an increasing worry that the prince was more interested in translating the old books of the Hairless than in building his own base of power.

Many Fathers continued. “Starfire comes from a powerful family, it would be a good alliance.”

Conqueror grimaced. “Alliance, like we are two armies entering an uneasy truce instead of spending the rest of our lives together. Forgive me, Many Fathers, if I don’t eagerly rush towards such a prospect.”

Many Fathers looked at Conqueror kindly. He considered Conqueror almost his own son. He had raised him since boyhood, when his parents had left on a military campaign and never returned. And when the great storms had come from their world’s star going nova, he had carried the terrified young boy onto the

ships that held the other survivors, and they piloted for any new world that looked habitable.

The world of the Hairless had called to them. The temperature was close to their own world and most of the original inhabitants were long dead. The Hairless had ruined it for themselves by pouring enough poisons into it that the temperature had turned boiling and freezing by turns. Their crops had died and their cisterns had dried up and they had taken to killing each other for what was left.

A handful of them remained, scattered like seeds in various places. They did not not attack or approach the newcomers, but mostly kept to their hiding places and small settlements. The ruins of their cities became home to Conqueror's people. And a few of the hairless would come to work as servants, or live off their castoffs at the edge of the city, past the sea walls.

The Hairless were pitied mostly. They tended to be small, with hair only at the top of their heads in abundance. They did not have fangs or claws like Conqueror, nor the fine coat of silken golden fur that covered most of his body. His hair was a tumble of black mane that fell down his back, making a striking contrast with his eyes the color of sea glass. He cut a dashing figure, and Many Fathers had not been surprised at the fights among consorts to be taken to his bedchamber.

But he had not chosen a mate from any of them. Nor from the daughters of the other powerful families. And there was growing unhappiness at that state of affairs that threatened the stability of their new society. Many Fathers decided he would have to bring up the subject of choosing a mate again, when a Hairless servant walked in.

"Ah Asha, I was wondering where you went. Please bring us something to drink and seed-bread," Many Fathers asked her with the crisp politeness of someone who knows they will be obeyed.

"Yes My Lord." Asha dipped slightly.

Conqueror took notice of her as she walked to pick up the empty tray off of Many Father's table. She was a medium-sized woman with auburn hair and skin with a ruddy tint to it. Her eyes were black, no, very dark brown Conqueror decided. Like the color of the leather of the books of the Hairless. The books they could no longer read, as the ways of reading and writing had been lost to them, for many generations. She noticed Conqueror looking at her.

"Is there anything the First Prince wishes me to bring?"

"No, that will be fine... Wait, see if there are any of those things called blackberries left. I liked those very much."

"Yes My Lord." And with another dip, she walked to the door.

Conqueror watched her walk away, her strange, hairless limbs covered by the simple shift dress of a servant. Hairless servants of her standing were permitted no jewelry and their hair kept simple, in a braid down the back. She had only been with Many Fathers for half a year. After a year, if she was found a good servant she would be granted a gold bracelet to mark her acceptance into the household of a great family. Everyone knew their place in Conqueror's world. From a servant's bracelet to the necklace he wore that identified him as First Prince, there were markers everywhere that told you who you were and how you would expect to be treated.

He was thinking of what the gold cuff would look like against her delicate wrist when he realized Many Fathers had been speaking, for some time.

"...you are not just a nobleman, you are the First Prince, the most likely king, and a leader needs to show his people..." Many Fathers noticed Conqueror's attention had been elsewhere.

He sighed. "If I may distract you from fantasies of Hairless serving girls, may I remind you that you have an important role to fill in this community?"

Conqueror got up from his reclining couch and paced.

"I know, I know. The mate I chose must be one that will build alliances instead of break them. They must show that this world is our new home for good, and that it is a good place for the children of our most noble to grow and thrive in."

He looked at Many Fathers ruefully. "You read me poems of love and then act surprised that I cannot be

enthused for choosing a mate based on every calculation except that of love.”

Many Fathers countered. “Love is beautiful, but it is passionate, foolish, apt to fade after the initial fancy. Your mate is with you for the rest of your lives. Besides,” Many Fathers considered his next words carefully, “it is not unheard of for either mate to keep a... companion, or to spend a season with someone who has caught their eye. So you may get your fill of love poems and moonlight promises and then the bitter tears of love’s end, but not threaten something as vital as your connection to your mate.”

“What if I want to love my mate passionately?” Conqueror stated right back to Many Father’s shocked expression. “What if I want to do more than sense when they are near or in danger? What if I wish to do more than deposit a child in their belly, as though I was simply burying a rind-melon to keep through the dry months?”

“That is not the way of our people,” Many Fathers was firm. “We are more... pragmatic.”

“What if I chose not to be so... pragmatic?” Conqueror asked.

“I should have expected that reading all those Hairless books would put a lot of dangerous nonsense in your head.” Many Fathers gestured outside the window. “Look at where all that passionate love got them. Their world is uninhabitable to them and most of them are gone. The few that remain live almost as animals, and the rest serve us to escape that fate. It seems that being a little more careful in choosing who and what causes they pledged their love to might have spared them this result.”

Conqueror knew to drop the argument. He smiled. “I know you’re trying to spare me being sent to the silver fire for failing to live up to my duties as First Prince.”

Many Father’s eyes darkened. “Don’t ever joke about that My Lord. It is a terrible fate I could not bear to see befall you.” His further words were stopped by hearing Asha’s approach.

Asha returned with a full tray. She bowed her head and placed it on a table by the reclining couch. Conqueror watched her place a bowl of blackberries next to the pitcher of petal wine. He wondered what it would like to eat them from her fingers. If she’d tremble at having his fangs so close. She poured two cups of the wine neatly, she knew he was watching her but her hands did not shake. She did not look up or meet his eyes when she gave the cups to him and Many Fathers.

“Will that be all, My Lord?” Asha asked Many Fathers.

“For now. I’ll send for you if we require anything else.”

“Yes My Lord.”

As she turned to go, Conqueror said, “Thank you Asha, for remembering the blackberries.”

Asha’s skin turned a deeper shade of rose. “Thank you, First Prince.” And she walked through the door.

Many Fathers did not miss the course of his thoughts and shook his head.

“Debasement is a serious crime, My Lord.”

Conqueror’s eyebrows went up, “I see nothing debasing about finding out what it would be like to kiss her. Isn’t the First Prince given more leeway than most on these matters?”

“The First Prince is given less,” Many Fathers said tartly. “If it were to be known you had lain with a Hairless over Starfire, it wouldn’t just be a grievous insult to Starfire. It would be an insult upon her entire family, one they would feel duty bound to repay in full.”

Conqueror sighed and drank from his cup. “I would not start a war for a passing fancy. But I am in no hurry to mate with Starfire in view of the Priestesses of the Citadel. With my roar signalling to all assembled that a new heir has been conceived.”

Many Fathers knew he would not choose Starfire. But he hoped he would choose someone, soon. He looked out the window at a ruined tower of metal that scratched the throbbing sky with its twisted spires.

After sharing a drink with Many Fathers, Conqueror returned to his chambers. Starfire was stretched across the bed, reading a tele-scroll from a friend. She flicked it off as he entered. He took a chair by the window. Starfire got up and walked towards him.

"My Lord looks tired," she said, gently pushing a strand of hair out of his face.

"It's nothing. Many Fathers was in a lecturing mood."

Starfire chuckled. "I can make my lord forget about lectures."

Starfire tossed her head, her gunmetal-colored hair streaming over her shoulders as she straddled him in his chair. Her fur was a shade of opal. She was tall, as women of their kind were. And like he, she was dressed in little more than the jewelry of their rank. Ropes of rose quartz beads he'd presented her as a gift swam around her neck. A gold link chain was around her hips, a sign she was consort to a First Prince.

She was desire incarnate and she knew it. She also knew he was tiring of her and did not intend to give up lightly. She would argue that the cooling of his ardor was the perfect time to make her his mate. She would sweeten the offer by saying she wouldn't mind him taking another consort. And she wouldn't, with the First Prince's heir in her womb and a queen's collar of ruby-flowers around her neck, her position would be secure.

She did not intend to leave like the other consorts, with a cache of precious stones and a place to live in one of the more fashionable keeping places. She was going to be queen. She had made love to Conqueror that first night, not with the timidity of a shy girl from a noble family who had won a place in the First Prince's bed, but with the passion and fierceness of one who knows she is being taken by a future king, and who intended to be along for every step of the way.

Starfire braced her hands on either side of the chair and rode him hard, her pulsing hips making him forget serving girls, for the moment, as he revelled in the splendor of her body.

During their coupling, he picked her up and carried her to his bed. She screamed his name as he drove into her, and after her climax, he withdrew to spend his on her breasts. His climax looked like milky seed pearls scattered over her beads and Starfire looked at him with eyes white hot with heat.

"My Lord, it would be better to deposit such a gift in my womb and let me give you the tribute of a son."

Conqueror felt his lust slipping away. "You never forget your plans to build a keeping place with me and rule with me by your side, do you?"

Starfire's eyes narrowed. "My Lord would do well to remember there are other powerful families who think their sons could make a far better First Prince." She stood, and walked to the bathing pool, in the recess of the floor.

She stepped in and continued. "I am from an old and mighty family, we would be a fine match."

Conqueror was in no mood to watch her bathe, and he reached for his cloak. He was going to The Beneath.

The Beneath was the name given to the reach that stretched far below the ruined city. How old it was, no one could say, and it was a peculiar place that seemed to stretch before the time of the Hairless. The consorts had delighted at the crystals that had been found, clinging to walls of some caves like milk-flowers. Great quantities of them had been ported up to make baubles, and parts of their communication devices

But of the treasures The Beneath held, Conqueror was most taken by the books. There were caverns full of them, written in the strange languages of the Hairless. He and Many Fathers had only begun to translate a mere fraction of them.

He walked down, down to the strange chambers full of books and to the places where rotted away ropes had once been bridges, which were the only thing that kept him from tumbling into the unfathomable darkness.

He walked closer to a chamber that seemed to hold the most books. A sound reached his ears. Someone was there. He crept closer on silent feet, and looked into the space. Asha was sitting on a thick table with a book, open on her lap. She was clearly reading it, her face flickering with the currents of pleasure the words on the page were giving her.

Conqueror took a step closer and knocked over a pile of books. Asha looked up with alarm.

She was frightened, "Mm.. My Lord, I didn't hear you approach. I did not think it wrong to be here - your

people have said nothing about it being off limits to us.”

Conqueror realized she didn't want him to know she could read. Reading was not forbidden to the Hairless, as most of them did not have the ability anyway. But discussions of perhaps reintroducing it to the Hairless, had been repeatedly shot down in council talks. It was likely Asha had been there, refilling Many Father's cups during them and feared she was doing something she should not.

Conqueror didn't close the distance between them. “Please don't be afraid, you've done nothing wrong. You can read?”

Asha looked down, “Yes, My Lord. After a fever took my village I walked to this city to find the others of my kind who live on the borderlands. There was an old woman there who I cooked for. She knew how and gave me the secret of the words. At least in this tongue, there are many others I do not know.”

Conqueror tried to hide his excitement. “I am glad you know any. If I could ask a favor of you, would you help me read and translate the books in the language you do know?”

Asha did not hide her surprise. “Yes, My Lord.”

She began to read aloud from the book she was holding and Conqueror was transfixed by her voice. It was the sound of smoke rolling over a silver bell. *“Come unto these yellow sands, And then take hands: Curtsies when you have, and kiss'd...”*

Conqueror sat stone still as the song of the spirit she read flowed over him. His mind uncurled images of shimmering seas and Asha dancing like a nymph on the silver shore...

“Do you believe in the power of words?” he asked her when she finished.

Asha looked at the book carefully. She met his eyes for the first time. “Yes, My Lord.”

“So do I. I do hope you will continue to read to me.”

“Whatever My Lord wishes.” Asha smiled and Conqueror felt a forbidden desire tickle in his belly. He turned his thoughts back to the books and they spent the rest of the afternoon reading.

Their days began to be shaped by their meetings in The Beneath. Asha would read him plays about princes who tried to avenge their fathers' death, and who were consumed by the violence they started. She would read about people falling in and out of love, while pretending to be who they were not, in an enchanted wood. She read poems of sorrow, and poems of joy.

And Conqueror fell a little bit more in love with her with every word she read. And he could catch her looking at him sometimes, when he was busy translating a page into his language. Only to look up and find her back with her attention fixed to her book.

It was a moon's turn when Asha found the book bound in red. Her eyes lit up. “I know this one! It was the one the woman taught me to read from. It was too precious to take with me.”

Conqueror looked at the title on the spine. He carefully read “Dragon Red, Dragon Blue: Songs for the End of the World by Brigit O'Donnell.”

Asha held the book to her chest. “She was a writer. The old woman told me she wrote it when our world was beginning to be lost. She wrote it so we could remember, as a place for safekeeping who we were, if even one of us survived.”

Her eyes became gentle, “I always loved this passage best.” And she leafed through the book until she found it.

Asha's read from the old book, the smoke at the edges of her voice making Conqueror shiver in his bones. She read, her voice building with the power of the words.

“...I want to be surrounded by beautiful things as the world ends. I want shells in my hair and thick chains like dragon scale, shimmering with jewels like stars' tears. I want to laugh while running away, dropping jewels in the mud. I want to whore myself for a mug of ale and steal the man's purse. I want to dance away from the fires they set to burn me. I want to make love to pilgrims, in the tall grass beside ruined cathedrals. I want to knot my hair into braids, tied with green velvet ribbons. I want to wear it loose around my shoulders. I want to kiss the blade of the sword and throw it into the river. Let the foolish nymphs of the

water use it for a mirror. I want to live forever. I want to die, and my bones be set with rubies. I want to cut god's beard off. I want to sell the devil's horns for a basket of figs. I want to be seen. I want to know."

Her breath caught at the end of the passage, and she looked at him. She had read a favorite passage aloud, and it felt like an incantation. To something dangerous. And wonderful. She put the book down. She knew she should leave.

Conqueror looked at her. He had to have her. If he was burned in the silver fire for it, it made no difference. He had to feel her against him. Had to feel that wonderful mouth that spoke words into images on his skin. He closed the distance between them.

Asha looked at him, her dark eyes shimmering like a lake at night. "My lord, we should be returning..." She trailed off, as the pads of his fingers traced a cheek. She wanted him too much to stop this. She brushed her fingers around his remarkable mouth. They both leaned in for a kiss, and a new fire consumed them, gladly.

He slipped his cloak from his shoulders and wore little else, underneath it, save the gold chain of the First Prince and a midnight blue sash, knotted around his hips. She slipped her dress off in one motion and he picked her up and carried her to the wall, kissing her, and pressing his sex into her belly as she rubbed against it in response.

He had her against the wall of the chamber. Her legs were wrapped tightly around his hips and her hands buried in his mane. He thrust with a near religious frenzy, worshipping her body with every stroke. She cried out in pleasure, begging him not to stop, bucking her own hips against his, in response. They kissed like they were drowning and the only air was in each other's mouths. He could feel her climax building. He felt his own twining around it, in response. He trembled at the wonder of it. He wanted to give her pleasure, not just take it from her. Not like it had been with Starfire. And the others. Beautiful consorts and noble women who he took their bodies for his own pleasure, his skill as a lover giving them pleasure in return as an afterthought. No, he wanted to bring Asha every ounce of pleasure he was capable of. His hips stilled. He could feel her heartbeat from his head pressed against her chest. He knew.

He had to mount her like a lion. She was his mate.

It was forbidden to do so with the Hairless but he did not care. He was dizzy with love. Love, not lust. Not the lusts of the consort whose pleasure was undeniable but who loved the crystal beads and gold chains more than him. But Asha...his Asha..

"My lord..," Asha said in an almost disappointed tone as he released her for a moment. But her eyes went wide as he spread his cape on the ground. She remembered overhearing a scribe describe the ritual of joining that the First Prince was expected to do when he chose his mate. How the hall of the Citadel would be filled with banners of ochre and gold and he would mate his chosen queen to the approval of the city's powerful. She was being chosen. She had to stop this.

"My lord it is f-"

Conqueror held out his hand to her. "You are my mate, my love, my heart's twin. I don't give a damn about rules written by people who never saw the way light pools in your eyes. It's like a flame in the greatest darkness. Come here."

Asha went to him, her own desire smothering all common sense. Kneeling before her, he kissed and suckled her nipples into a leather stiffness. She moaned, she needed him inside her, again. She got down onto all fours.

"You are my flesh made whole." He purred into her ear as he pulled her hips to his and took her, again.

Asha gasped in sudden pleasure, and grabbed the cape with hands clenched into claws. Their rhythm started again, and with it, the tempo of their lovemaking changed. It was no longer the desperate heat of a tryst, but the claiming of one partner for the other.

Conqueror felt his climax beginning to spark. He leaned his torso over Asha's sweating, straining back and gently gripped the spot between her neck and shoulder with his teeth. Asha cried out, not in pain or horror, but with delight and quickened the flexing of her lower back and hips. They were so close now, she and her love.

Love. A near god from another world. And all he wanted right now was her. She would give him that. She would give everything. And with that choice made, she began to feel his climax, and had only a moment to consider the wonder of it, before her orgasm tore a scream out of her, and a roar flooded her ears.

Two roars surged in the echoing darkness of the chamber. Her own blood was rushing in her ears and Conqueror's cry. He reared his head back and roared again as his seed shot from his sex and filled Asha, like the stars he could see behind his closed eyelids. He thrust once, twice more then released her hips. He gently turned her over and began to lave her body with his tongue. Asha could have wept for the tenderness of it.

He drew the cape around them and they drifted off to sleep. Before dreams took her, she heard him whisper in her ear.

"You are the mother of heaven."

Neither noticed the figure approaching.

She was a small, Hairless, black woman. She walked with a careful step because her outer garment was a strange robe of many pockets, each filled with a small bottle. She watched the couple tenderly, for a moment. Then from one pocket, she drew out a bottle of red with a thin neck. She pulled out the stopper and there was a sigh like the rustling of wings. And the smell of flowers and smoke filled the space. She walked counterclockwise around the couple, spilling drops of it on the ground. The drops sparked and glowed where they fell, and a strange mist rose and wove itself over the sleeping couple.



The woman whispered quietly, so as not to wake them, "Claw of crimson, tooth of sapphire, give me what I most desire... Let union come from these two souls, let them be greater together than alone they could ever be."

And her hands sketched sigils in the air only she could see and she walked away as the mist faded.

Asha's hand went to her stomach as she slept.

The next day, Conqueror sent Starfire away. She knew he was beyond arguing with, and she would not give him the show of tears he was no doubt expecting. He gave her beautiful boxes of jewels and crystals. He told her of a place across the city where a fine apartment was waiting for her. Starfire looked at him, coolly.

"My Lord is generous." She walked to the wardrobe and slipped her cloak over her shoulders.

She paused by the door to his chambers. "My Lord will come to regret not making me his queen." She said it with a matter-of-fact, even temperedness that made Conqueror uneasy.

Conqueror watched her go from the window, as she was helped onto a fine white horse, and accompanied to her new living place. She did not look up to see if he was watching her.

Conqueror soon forgot her warning, as a wave of happiness passed over his heart. *Asha.* He smiled and returned that feeling. She was in Many Father's chambers, carefully dusting his study.

They had to be careful. Conqueror wanted to make love to her right now, to see how the sun played in her auburn hair. But he banked that desire, for now. He dutifully attended the meeting of the council. It was being decided whether or not to completely demolish the ruins of the old city and rebuild, in the style of their homeworld.

Conqueror would be sorry to see some of the buildings go, but so long as their plans did not include The Beneath, he was not inclined to argue much. He took a midday meal of bread and plum broth with Many Fathers and he mentioned to him, as Asha took the tray away, that he would be spending a few hours in The Beneath, to search for more books. The tremble in Asha's fingers nearly undid him with desire, but

Many Fathers was lost in the maps spread out before him and merely nodded.

The Beneath became their secret place, over the course of that season. They would read to each other, trying to find the most erotic poems, or the silliest, and they would explore and swim in the pools of the Falls.

And they would make love. He would kneel in the chamber where the winds blew like wild horses, and revel in the crimson streams of her hair as she rode him until she cried out his name. He would stand, making love to her breasts as she knelt before him, moaning as he came on her glistening skin. And he would have her like a lion, feeling every ounce of her pleasure, as it doubled its own. He loved their differences, his clawed hands gripping her flanks as he took her, the ruddy skin of her body against the golden fur of his own.

He knew nothing more than the heaven of being in her arms in those days. And did not care to know anything different.

But in an apartment across the city, Starfire began to play her hand.

Her apartment was in the keeping place of Finder. She had wasted no time charming herself into his bed. His mate knew better than to cross her, and had decided to visit her family in their keeping place, until this passion had exhausted itself.

Starfire smiled at Finder as he got up to pour himself something to drink. "My lord exhausts me, I think I will not be able to walk for the rest of the night."

Finder smirked, "What do you want Starfire? And please don't waste my time by telling me "only my undying love," or some other drivel you picked up from a Hairless poem."

Starfire paused, and then smiled. "I see my lord and I understand each other. I want to be queen and bear the heir of the First Prince."

Finder took a sip of his drink and smiled drily. "It seems Conqueror has decided very clearly that you will not be doing either of those things."

"He can only decide that if he is still the First Prince."

Finder's look became guarded. "You're talking treason, Starfire. You're talking about plunging our people into civil war."

"Not if he is removed for violating some of our most sacred laws."

"Such as?" Finder was watching her closely now.

Starfire smiled like the burn from touching ice. "He is debasing himself with a Hairless."

Finder's eyebrows went up. "That's a bold charge to make of a First Prince. You had better be sure of it."

"I will be. If I have him removed, you are the most likely candidate to become our new leader."

Finder laughed, "...and in gratitude for giving me this boon, all you ask for is me to make you my queen."

Starfire stood up and walked toward him, "Your mate has yet to bring you children. You can separate from her on those grounds. I know you don't love me, you just love bending me over every piece of furniture in this room."

She slipped her hands around his waist, and began to stroke his hips. "Why shouldn't we make this new world ours?"

Finder noticed the clear arousal that flared in Starfire's eyes whenever she talked about power. That was what she really loved. She was a dangerous woman. But a woman who could get things done. And he did want to rule.

He pulled her into a rough embrace. "You had better be sure of what you're charging him with." And with that, he pulled her back towards the bed.

Asha knelt over the basin and was sick, again. She had been feeling increasingly strange these past few

weeks, and she was frightened.

She washed her face and walked back into Many Father's chambers. She dutifully began to pick up the empty bowls from his lunch and put them on the tray. *Perhaps some fresh air would help*, she thought.

After returning the dishes to the kitchen, she slipped out to walk the streets around the tower. She did not notice the man following her. He was an agent of Starfire's. And when she rounded a corner, he pushed her into an alley and pressed a gel capsule to her nose. Bursting it with a claw, an emerald liquid soaked into the skin, there. Within moments, she was unconscious. The man bundled her into a piece of canvas and carried her to Finder's keeping place.

Asha awoke on a table. A healer was saying something to Starfire. "...I don't know how, but she is pregnant. I have no idea how long until she's ready to deliver."

"No matter, we just need her to get a little bigger first. It will disgust them more at the trial."

Asha tried to move but her limbs were tied down.

"Where am I? Let me go!" Her mind swam. She ached for Conqueror. She was about to reach out for him with their bond when she clamped down on her mind, hard. She would not put him in danger.

Starfire smirked, "Untie her." The healer undid her bonds. "Congratulations Asha, you are going to be a mother."

Asha's hands instinctively went to her stomach. "I will not let you harm this child."

"Oh no my dear, I wouldn't dream of it. You and your child are very important to me. I will see to it that you are taken care of." Starfire gestured to a guard at the door to bring Asha with them.

Asha shook her arm loose, "I will walk under my own power." And she held her head up as she was led to the small room with a window barred in white-steel. There was a bed and chair and not much else in it.

"You will stay here." Starfire said, "You will be fed well, and if you desire something to occupy yourself, I will have it brought in."

Asha looked at Starfire "What do you want? Do you want my child?"

"Why would I want a filthy little half breed? I want to rule this new world and I will." And without another word she walked out of the room, and Asha could hear the door being locked, behind her.

Asha endured the next three moons as best she could. She had let herself weep until sleep took her, the first night. But after that, she knew she must give her child every chance to live. She dutifully ate the fine meals they cooked for her. And she asked for books, and they were brought to her.

She wanted so badly to reach out to Conqueror, to let him know she had not left him willingly. But she would not lead him into any danger she could avoid. She wished he knew about their child.

Three and a half moons. It had been three and a half moons since she'd vanished and Conqueror was losing hope. He had found no trace of her, and their bond was dreadfully silent on her end. It likely meant... no, he refused to accept that possibility.

He would keep looking for her.

He spent another night of restless sleep and awoke to shouts outside his chamber.

Many Fathers' voice was raised, "How dare you! The First Prince is not to be brought in chains, like some common murderer!"

Conqueror was barely on his feet when the Citadel's officers burst in with their weapons aimed. Part of him wanted to charge them, uselessly, and let them end his life, rather than be without Asha. But he stood there as they bound him in chains and brought him to the Citadel.

The heads of the most powerful families of their city sat at the table in the main room of the building. Conqueror noticed Starfire standing behind Finder. Conqueror had underestimated her and was about to

pay dearly for it. He had no heart to hate her with, and wearily watched The Speaker take her place in front of the table.

“We are gathered here today in sorrow. For a First Prince has done something beyond all reason or forgiveness. A charge has been made of debasement.”

There were murmurs in the crowd, packed into the gallery to watch the unfolding trial.

Many Fathers stood up, “I am the advocate for the First Prince, and I demand proof be shown for this disgusting charge.”

Conqueror did not miss Starfire’s pleased expression, as officers opened a door behind the table and brought a figure in.

Asha.

He could not help it. He felt the male pride in seeing Asha with a big belly and her breasts swollen with milk. *Milk for our child. Our child. The child we made together. She carries my child, and she is the most powerful person in this room, and you are terrified because you know it, too.*

Many Fathers took in the situation with a glance. He whispered into Conqueror’s ear “Deny it. Deny it’s yours. Say this a plot to discredit you and she is a whore who is trying to claim the dishwasher’s son is actually the First Prince’s. Buy yourself some time!”

The Speaker addressed Conqueror. “Do you deny you have lain with this Hairless, and have wasted your seed?”

The chains strained against him as he stood to speak.. “She is my mate. She is my queen. And whether we build our keeping place in this life or the next, that will not change. She is the mother of my child, and I will see you all damned before I deny her.”

The crowd erupted into shouts.

Many Fathers looked crestfallen, but not surprised. He knew Conqueror would not betray his woman. Even if she were one of the Hairless.

The Speaker ordered the crowd to silence, and faced Conqueror, squarely. “You are to be stripped of rank, and for the crime of breeding with a Hairless, you both will be sent to the silver fire.”

Asha looked frightened then and tried to hold herself still. Conqueror radiated out waves of comfort along their bond. And she returned them, at last letting go of her blocking of it. It didn’t matter anymore, and she felt that whatever came, she had the love that radiated between them.

They were placed into a small cell, to be sent to the silver fire the following morning. The moment the cell door was locked, Conqueror swept Asha into a passionate kiss.

“I could strangle you Asha! For not letting me find you before this!”

Asha laughed and stroked his chest. “My lord wanted to rescue me like a hero from a book we read. I thought I could protect you. I thought I could find a way to prevent... all this.”

Conqueror’s hands went to the gentle swell of her stomach. “A child...,” he said softly in wonder.

“Yes.” She said tenderly. “A child I hoped would live.” She could feel the tears coming. “I am so sorry m-”

His voice was firm. “We will find a way through this, we are not meant to die like this.”

Asha smiled helplessly at him. She would not weep and plead for mercy that was not coming. She rested her head on Conqueror’s chest, and he placed a protective hand over their child.

They somehow dozed, and awoke in the middle of the night to a familiar voice, at the door to the cell.

Many Fathers hissed, “Hurry! I only have enough to pay off one guard and you will only have moments to run.”

Asha and Conqueror rushed to the door, where the guard was smugly pouring the gold chains from one hand to another. Many Fathers handed them a small basket of food, and pressed them out the door and into the hallway. The guard followed and showed them a door that led to a small terrace behind the Citadel.

The guard disappeared into the night.

Many Fathers looked at Conqueror with sorrow and with pride. "We will never see each other again. Go, take your woman and your child and live. You will have to leave the city. Perhaps you will find safety in the wild lands. I wish you both a long life."

Conqueror clasped Many Fathers' shoulder. "Thank you. A better father I could not have asked for." He took Asha's hand and they fled into the darkness, Many Fathers watching them go.

They had only made it a few blocks when the sound of sirens filled the air.

"They've discovered our escape." Conqueror knew they would not make the border of the city in time.

Asha thought quickly, "The Beneath! We have only to make it there, and we will be safe, for now."

They slipped behind a ruined building, Conqueror remembered it as having an entrance to The Beneath, and they carefully made their way down a ladder of what had been the basement, into a waiting maze of tunnels and chambers.

They found a dry chamber, and Conqueror spread his cloak on the ground. They curled up against each other, and fell into a deep sleep.

When they awoke, a fire had been started in a brazier, and someone was sitting in a chair, watching them. She was a Hairless woman, her skin dark black, and her clothes a motley collection of patches.

Conqueror spoke first, "Who are you?"

The woman answered with a musical lilt to her voice. "I am the guardian of this place, I have been called by many names, but for now, all that matters is that you are welcome here, until your child is born."

Asha's arms crossed in front of her belly. "What do you want with our child?"

Only to see it born. A marvelous child it will be, too." She looked into the distance at something only she could see. "Rest now, I will bring you something to eat and drink later."

Conqueror did not know if he should trust her, but reasoned she had had plenty of time while they slept to have alerted someone on the surface to their presence. He had to keep his family safe.

He nodded. "Thank you very much for your kindness."

The woman smiled and walked away. He drew Asha into his arms.

"I would have had it so that you were in my tower, attendants waiting on your every need. The finest healers to tend you and keep you in perfect comfort."

Asha smiled. "I am happy in this place of rocks and rags because you are here. I feared I would never know the feel of your arms again." Asha's eyes grew hazy with desire.

Conqueror felt his need to respond to her, "Is it safe to do this?"

Asha leaned back gently on the tattered quilts pulling Conqueror with her. "You could never hurt me, My Lord."

Conqueror covered her mouth with his and made them one as the embers in the brazier cast gentle shadows over their bodies. And the rock took their cries and kept it hidden from those who would destroy them.

And the days unfolded into Conqueror reading to her and going for walks along the safer paths, neither wanted to risk the rope bridges that hung over yawning chasms.

And Guardian, as they'd taken to calling the woman, would appear with food and drink. She would not answer any of their questions, but there was a kindness that radiated from her, and they let it be.

It was the night of no moon when Asha went into labor. Asha screamed, and she saw in Conqueror's agonized expression that he was feeling every inch of her labor pains.

"Oh my love, I am sorry...", Asha gasped.

Conqueror took her hand. "Don't. If I could take this from you I would. But now we must make sure our child arrives into this world safely."

Asha had it in her for a short bark of laughter at the idea of their child safe in any part of this world. In fact, their present situation was proof of that. She was on a thin blanket next to a small fire. Her dress was balled up under her head for a pillow, as her naked body sweated and strained against the life, struggling to be born. Guardian appeared at the chamber entrance with a bowl and clean cloths.

She bathed Asha and then pulled another bottle out from another pocket. This one was shaped like a faceted gemstone and filled with a liquid the color of crushed sapphires.



"It will soothe the both of you." Guardian said. And she handed it to Conqueror.

Conqueror drank from it. It tasted of ashes of stars and cold mist, but he felt some of the terror ebb from his heart.

Guardian then pressed the bottle to Asha's lips. After Asha drank, she poured some on Asha's belly and rubbed her hand in soothing circles.

"Everything in its own time." She placed the bottle back in her pocket.

Guardian looked at Conqueror. "It won't be long now. Help her.."

He knelt before Asha to help deliver their child. His mind completely blotted out anything but the task before him.

"Almost there Asha! Just push once more.."

Asha closed her eyes. *My child will live.* And with a terrible scream she pushed. She heard a small, strange cry. She saw Conqueror wrapping a small, squirming thing in a tatter, torn from his cape. He placed the bundle gently in her arms and went back to deliver the afterbirth.

Asha stared in amazement. A child. A son. A son with eyes the color of sea glass and ruddy skin. A child with a faint speckling of fur, and a muzzle like this father.

He was perfect.

Asha wept with happiness. Conqueror crept to her side, his eyes wide with wonder.

She smiled. "Look at what we have made my lord, my love, a child of both worlds."

Conqueror looked at the tiny, helpless being in Asha's arms. He felt small, a supplicant before something far grander than himself.

Guardian watched them, tenderly. And wished their future was not going to be what the waters of the river with no name had shown her. But there was time to mourn for that, later. She put a kettle over the fire to boil for tea.

Starfire tapped her fingers impatiently, on her glass. "You still haven't found them?"

"It's only been one moon, Starfire. Maybe they're being sheltered by another family"

They were standing on the balcony of Finder's tower, the city stretched out beneath them.

Starfire took a sip from her glass. "They wouldn't dare, not after finding out he got one of the Hairless pregnant."

She wondered where they could be. They had not been spotted leaving the city, and Finder's agents had found no trace of them in the wilds. She shook her head, Conqueror would be miserable without his

precious books, in the wastelands...

Her eyes lit up with a malevolent force. "I know where they are."

"Where?"

"The Beneath. He loved that disgusting place, and there's plenty of space to hide."

Finder looked relieved, "You are probably right, Starfire. And now I believe our business is at an end."

"What are you talking about?" She asked, the challenge clear in her voice.

"Thanks to you I will be First Prince, but I have no intention to make you my queen."

Starfire turned on him in a fury, "Is that so? And how do you plan to get rid of me?"

Finder grinned, "By telling people you left to your death in grief, for betraying your lover, of course."

Starfire had only time for her eyes to get wide, before Finder neatly picked her up and hurled her over the balcony, and into the waiting darkness.

Finder wasted no time. He threw his cloak on and called for his guards.

In The Beneath, Conqueror was reading a story to Asha and their child. It was a story about a young boy who received a mysterious gift of money, one that let him leave the poverty of his home, and seek his fortune. They both looked up, as Guardian ran into the chamber.

"They've come for you! Quickly now, follow me!"

Conqueror and Asha followed Guardian through tunnel after tunnel. They could hear the voice of the crowd getting closer. Finder's guards had combined with a force from the Citadel, and it looked like a dozen others had joined the fray to take part in the hunt.

Conqueror stopped. "It's me they want. I will lead them away from you."

"No!" Asha cried.

Conqueror touched her face, gently, "I will lead them away, and then I will rejoin you. Whatever happens you will live. Our son will live."

He kissed her, and Asha clung to him for a moment. and then followed Guardian. Her child was tightly held in her arms.

Conqueror let himself be spotted by Finder and led them toward the falls. He roared, as the bolts from their weapons pierced him, and Asha felt his pain, and then the silence of their bond. Guardian had brought them to the Abyss.

Guardian pulled out a third bottle from her robe. This one was in the shape of a glass for keeping time. The liquid inside was a gritty purple. She smeared a dab from it on Asha's forehead, and on the head of her child. She pointed toward the swirling darkness.



"Through there you will go, and you will not come back. That is the everywhen and my magics can only take you one way."

Asha looked at her. "Why are you helping us? And why should I believe there's something down there besides endless darkness?"

Guardian looked at her child. "I believe a child from the future can save a terrible past. I have to believe that. I know Time is a river with no name. From the sands of that river did I learn to live past my years, so I could wait for this child of love and time, the child of the red and blue heart to come. Now go."

Asha looked into her son's eyes. She did not know if Guardian was telling her the truth, that something was waiting on the other side of that darkness, but she would not let them be captured alive here. She leapt into the dark mist.

It was like falling and being pulled apart, and then she was lying still on something solid, and the darkness cleared.

It was an alley behind a building. Buildings that looked like the ruins in the city. Only these still stood proud and tall. It was bitterly cold. A Hairless woman approached her, wrapped in several layers.

"Hello? Didn't see you there. Do you need help?" At Asha's silence, the woman went on, "My name is Anna." She walked up close enough to see the child in Asha's arms, and her eyes widened.

Asha looked up at the woman called Anna.

"This is my son. And we are lost."

Anna knelt down and held the baby Asha put in her arms. Asha could feel the cold take her and she had no will to fight it. She could not live without Conqueror, out of time, in this piece of the past. She sensed the kindness in Anna.

"Tell your people you found him wrapped in rags. Tell your people you found him abandoned."

She wept then, for her child, for her dead love, and a little for herself. She was lost in time, but her child need not suffer the same fate.

Anna shook her head, "Come with me, we can take care of both .."

"No." Asha said, pulling herself back into some form of control. "He will be safe with you, he will never be safe with me."

"Please, at least come with me for the night."

"No." Asha bent down and kissed her son goodbye. "Farewell little one, we loved you very much, but now I must find your father."

Asha wrapped a dirty blanket from a trash can around her shoulders and walked away. Anna watched her go, but could feel the cold starting to bite through her layers of clothing, and she hurried to the nearest tunnel entrance and went Below, with the child.

Asha walked down to the river that ran like a black ribbon, through the city. She filled her pockets with stones and leapt in.

There was another kind of darkness, and a bitter cold, and then, there was stillness. And then a strange thread of warmth, pulling her towards something that had never been and always was. She was in Conqueror's arms again, in the private eternity their love made.

They watched over their son, and wished they could let him know in this life of their love for him, but it was not yet time for that. And so they would come to him in dreams, forgotten in the morning. Or they would be a soft breeze, on a warm summer night. And one night, in spring, when he had grown to a beautiful adulthood, they came as a mist that covered the park he loved to wander.

But that is another story.

END