

Chapter One

This is a fool's quest, and well you know it.

Stefan Baudin grimaced as the rough edge of his brother's voice drifted through his mind and grated on his nerves. For once, he wished Nikolai would let up on the old argument. *You don't have to agree. You don't even have to like it*, he growled through their internal connection. He and his twin had used mind-speak for as long as he could remember, though it didn't work with others. Yet another mystery to solve. One of hundreds. Questions such as: Did their mother live? Were they the last of their kind? Could they have children? If he and Niko didn't father children, would their race die out?

He shook his head in frustration. *We must have answers. We never found our Mother. Never found the men who tried to kill Father.* They never found anyone at all.

Niko remained silent, leaving Stefan to wonder if this conversation, like so many before, was finished.

Stefan stepped out of the stables into the downpour. Thunder rumbled through the thick gray clouds, scattering the village peasants in all directions. He tightened his grip on the reins as Omen, his black destrier, danced at the sound. He swung into the saddle, leather creaking beneath him as he adjusted his cloak and pulled the hood low.

I ride north, he said. *The man I spoke with came from that direction. He has heard rumors of the Caeli kingdom, but could not confirm its existence.*

Still Niko was silent.

I tell you out of courtesy, brother. I don't need your approval. Damn it to hell. He didn't understand Niko's anger in this. His refusal to see the merit in searching for their mother.

Need I remind you that Father died of a broken heart? Niko's voice snapped through his thoughts like lightning. *Leave her be. Just as she left us.*

Stefan clicked his tongue, starting his horse at a gentle trot through the mud-slicked streets of the hamlet. Few faces peered through the dirty windows as he passed. He nodded to those he saw and urged Omen faster down the lane.

Need I remind you that it was Father's dying request that we find her? That we both vowed to him we would find what became of Mother?

He felt more than heard Niko's sigh of resignation.

Be careful, Stefan. I do not sense good tidings on your journey, Niko said.

I will, he replied.

Good tidings or bad, Stefan would see this through. Something pushed him in this quest. It was less about his promise to his father and more about his need to know the truth. Unless Niko had a specific premonition, he would continue on this path.

Stefan left the village behind and followed the dirt road into the forest. The smell of rotting vegetables, horse manure, and waste gave way to more earthy scents of decaying leaves, clean rain, and fresh plant growth. Two, maybe three more days of travel lay before him. He would climb higher into the Albu Mountains in search of the woman that had willingly walked out of their lives when they were but five years of age.

Perhaps Niko was right and this was a fool's quest.

Stefan reached up and fingered the metal locket that lay at his throat. Though he wore leather gloves, he mentally traced the etched whirls and the letters E and F. Etienne and Felicia. A man who loved their mother until his dying breath and a woman of mystery who left those she loved behind.

Who was she? What did she know of Stefan and Nikolai's abilities? Did she yet live, or had she died years before as their father had? Who were their people? And perhaps the one question that he both feared and yearned to know the answer to: Why had she left them all behind?

Stefan resolved to know the answers to his questions. And perhaps, in doing so, he would bring both himself and his brother peace at long last.

Lightning flickered across the night sky, revealing the village of Sarkany in flashes of white. Stefan sat atop his destrier under the shade of a tree, watching for life below. Rain fell in sheets, washing away the dirt and refuse. It poured onto the leaves, trickling drops of cool water down his face. Rare few were out in the miserable weather. The rest would be tucked into their cottages, sitting before a fire with a cup of ale and perhaps a tale.

Flicking the reins, he headed for the sleepy village. The homes were simple, made of wood with thatched roofs. Golden candlelight peeked between shutters closed for the evening. The

streets were muddy and pot-holed. He let Omen lead, allowing the stallion to pick his own path to avoid injury. More than one person peered out their window, then quickly closed the shutters when they saw him ride past.

Not many strangers came through here, then.

Stefan rode on, seeking an inn. A warm meal and fine ale called to him on this night. Another night of sleep in the rain held no pleasure. Bawdy laughter rang out, only to be drowned again as lightning flashed across the sky and thunder rumbled in its wake. He turned Omen and followed the laughter down a side street, near the other edge of town. There he found a two-story inn with the shutters wide and two smoking chimneys. A crudely painted wooden sign said Sarkany Inn, with what appeared to be a flying serpent carved just below. Rain poured off the roof in torrents, splashing down to leave a river running in front of the building, but not even that could deter him. He guided Omen to a stable in the side yard and dismounted. A boy rushed to him, hand already out for a copper coin.

He eyed the lad, then dug in his leather pouch for the coin. Before he placed it in the boy's hand, he said, "Give him extra oats. He's come far this day."

The boy nodded and led Omen away.

Stefan returned to the front of the inn. The scent of fresh bread wafted out as the door opened and a man stepped out, drawing his cloak about his shoulders and ducking into the rain. Stefan strode to the wooden door and entered the inn.

He wiped his boots on the rug and removed his cloak, shaking the rain from it while he took in the common area. To his surprise, a few dozen people took their meals and shared ale at the tables within. Booths lined the wall to the right, and a cheery fire sparked and snapped in the hearth to the left near the stairs. A bar ran the length of the back wall. Men and a few women laughed and drank, ate and threw dice as they passed away the evening out of the rain. The aroma of baked bread met with the smell of stew, and more than a few patrons sampled each. Smoke drifted from the hearth to sting his eyes and mix with the raucous noise of men making merry.

He spotted a table in the back near the stairs and threaded through the crowd of chairs. When at last he reached the table, he was pleased to find two of the chairs in the shadows and selected the one that put his back to the wall. Tossing his cloak over the other, he settled into the wooden chair and called a barmaid to him.

She sauntered toward him with an extra swing in her hips. “What will you have?” she asked.

Stefan sprawled back in his chair and regarded her. Long, white-blonde hair hung to her waist in a multitude of braids and accentuated her lithe form. Thick lashes framed eyes of dark honey. Her lips were a bit thin, her nose a touch too long, but she made an attractive, and familiar, package. “Your finest ale, a good meal, and a room for the eve,” he said through a throat suddenly thick.

She winked at him and he watched her take in the fine cut of his tunic and the quality wool weave.

“You have the money to pay?” she asked.

Stefan nodded and watched her leave to gather his meal. He rubbed his eyes, drawing his hands over his face, and looked again. Goddess, she could be Melisende. The barmaid had the same hair and figure, same tilt of her chin and small nose, but her eyes were wrong.

He scrubbed a hand through his hair, unable to keep his eyes off the woman. Once, he considered marrying the fair Melisende, but that dream was long dead and so was she. Stefan reached for his cloak. His hand stilled over the wool. He needed information, not to run from a ghost. Stefan’s gaze swept the room. Perhaps feminine company was overdue.

In the months since he’d left Semar, he’d been sorely lacking in his usual partnerships. He never spent more than a few hours with a woman, and never the night, for he’d had his coin pouch liberated one too many times by dropping his guard. Speaking of that... He untied the leather pouch from his belt, removed a silver coin for the barmaid, and stuffed the pouch into the top of his boot.

The barmaid returned, setting the tankard of ale and a plate of cooked chicken before him.

“And the room?” he asked.

She slipped a key from her apron pocket and placed it on the table, making sure to intentionally brush her fingers against his.

Stefan nodded and set the silver coin on the table. She bent to take it, showing an ample amount of bosom, but he held the coin in place with his finger. “Perhaps you could join me? I am new to these parts and would know more about the people who live here,” he said.

The barmaid grinned and moved closer. Stefan took her cue and pulled her down onto his lap. She tucked the coin into the top of her chemise and wiggled a little for him. His breath stilled in his lungs. *Not Melisende*, he told himself.

“What would ye know?” she asked.

Stefan chose his words carefully. “Sarkany? Doesn’t that mean dragon?”

She shrugged and took a sip of his ale.

He tried again. “Isn’t that the lore in these parts? That once there were a great people who could shift from human to dragon form?”

“Aye. Long ago, when the Tyrnalianians claimed this land.”

“What do you suppose happened to them?”

She ate a piece of chicken and shrugged. “Likely killed.”

“Ah, but they must have been amazing creatures. Did your mother raise you on tales of them?”

She quit chewing and turned to regard him closely. “Don’t all mothers?”

“I wouldn’t know.”

She must have heard something in his voice, because she didn’t ask for more details. Or didn’t care. He took a sip of ale, noting that half the tankard was gone. Thirsty wench. “Tell me a tale, then. One your mother told you. I would hear a good one before I retire for the eve.”

The woman wiggled on his lap again and finished off the ale. “Oh, you can’t be thinking of retiring too soon. A lady would think you didn’t enjoy her company.”

Stefan tucked a blonde braid behind her ear, letting his finger linger on her skin. Her breathing increased. “Would I ask for a tale if I held no interest?”

She grinned. “Let me fetch more ale for you, sir. Then I shall tell you a tale of the dragon people.” She popped off his lap and returned to the bar.

Stefan finished his meal and was pleased with the fine quality. In truth, it was one of the better meals he’d consumed since he left Semar. Most days, his fare consisted of dried bits of meat and nuts when he could find them.

He glanced up and found the barmaid leaning across the bar, speaking with the barkeep. The man’s graying hair touched only the sides of his head above his ears, his scalp clearly visible on top. His mustache hung down in long stretches on either side of his mouth, and his eyes looked far too small for his face. He pressed his belly against the bar and flicked a glance Stefan’s way before replying to the maid.

Stefan was glad to have tucked his coin into his boot. Once he was in his room, he'd find a place to hide it for the night. The barkeep poured more ale in Stefan's tankard and spoke another word to the woman.

She turned back to Stefan with a too-bright smile upon her face.

Stefan grinned back, knowing she thought to rob him and would likely try to seduce him. Of course, that had been his plan for her as well.

She settled into his lap and offered the mug of ale to his lips. "Drink up, handsome. I fear I took most of your last ale."

"So you did. Would you have me pay for this one as well?" he asked, wanting to know how far she planned to take her plot for his money.

She surprised him when she shook her head. "Nay. The barkeep says this one is free."

He looked into her eyes, wondering if she spoke true. Unlikely. He took a deep drink of the ale and settled in to hear her tale.

"My mother always said the dragon people were here first. That they came before the Tyrnalian. They called this land home and often took flight in the skies, whether day or night."

"Indeed?" This ale had a slightly different flavor. More honeyed than the last batch. He took another drink.

She nodded. "I heard some say there are drawings of the dragons in the caves along the mountains, though none I know have seen them."

She seemed to take a moment to collect her thoughts.

Stefan swallowed more ale. This was far better than the last tankard. Perhaps that was the bottom of the barrel and this was the fresh. "Tell me more." He blinked as her image blurred.

"Mother said it was the war with the Tyrnalian that made the people leave their land. That they retreated up into the mountains to start anew."

He took another sip, only to realize that the tankard was empty. Stefan put it on the table, only to miss the edge and have the wooden mug fall to the floor.

"Oh. Clumsy, are you? Or perhaps just more tired than you thought. You said you traveled far?"

Stefan nodded and the room spun. Why couldn't he bring her image into focus? He gripped the edge of the table to keep his seat and let out a slow breath. Something was wrong. The edges of his vision darkened. Something was very wrong. He turned his head to the woman to get her

help and saw the satisfaction in her eyes. He pushed to his feet, dumping her off his lap and onto the floor.

She squealed in surprise, but Stefan didn't wait.

He grabbed the key off the table and stumbled to the stairs. He would blockade himself in the room until this passed. Drugged. By a wench. It was the only explanation. By sheer force of will, he kept the darkness at bay until he reached the room. He didn't rest until the door was closed, locked behind him, and the wardrobe was pushed in front of it. Let her come through that! He staggered to the straw mattress on the bed and fell onto it just as his senses failed.

When next he woke, the room was dark. His eyes felt gritty and his mouth dry. Stefan swallowed, forcing saliva down his throat. In that moment, he realized that he wasn't alone in the room. His nose alerted him first with the revolting scent of a man who hadn't bathed in a month, and then his eyes picked up a shadow and then another hovering above him.

"He's awake!" someone said.

A hand latched onto Stefan's wrist, attempting to hold it in place. Another grabbed for his other arm and someone held his leg down.

Stefan fought to throw his attackers off. If he could just make his feet, he could defeat them with ease. No man was a match for his fighting skills.

"Hold him!" a man growled. "I have the chains ready."

Chains? Stefan fought harder. Chains wouldn't hold him, but they would slow down his fight. It was time to show these assailants who they tangled with. Stefan called to his dragon, glorying in the feel of magic coursing through his blood.

"Shite! He's changing. Quick!"

Three bodies fell upon him. Two from the right and one from the left. As one, they captured his arms and held them still.

Stefan fought like the beast he was, bucking his body in an attempt to dislodge them. His arms rippled with scales, his chest contorting.

"Now. Do it now!"

He roared in triumph as his dragon took hold and the shift began in earnest.

But it was too late.

An iron shackle snapped around his wrist.

Stefan felt as if he'd been punched in the gut. His magic shrank back and his breath rushed from his lungs.

He heard the *snick* of the second shackle, and the remaining magic evaporated as if it had never been. Worse than that, deep in his brain, the place where he always connected to his brother stretched to the point of breaking. As the feeling became uncomfortable, it snapped.

Stefan roared in agony as his insides shredded and he knew no more.

The morning broke cool, as it always did at this time of summer in the mountains. The scent of earth mixed with the heady aroma of blooming flowers and the subtle greenery of the garden. Isabela Florin took a deep breath, letting it soothe her soul, and stepped through the double doors into the garden. Above, the morning light pushed against the dirty glass of the conservatory, trying to break through and illuminate the decaying world within.

On bare feet, she stepped past the marble fountain that no longer bubbled, its water long dried up. Pink blooms fought through dead plants for what sunlight they could find. Wrought iron chairs with dirty cushions sat haphazardly, and a matching table lay on its side. All around her, life fought with death, each trying to prove its superiority. Instead, it appeared that the garden sat on a precipice of decision, with only a gentle push needed to either fall into death or come back to life.

A feeling Isabela knew down to the marrow of her bones.

She walked around the fountain to a path near overgrown with plants, pushing past the green fronds in search of a hidden treasure. At the back of the conservatory, in a small hamlet of life, lay a tiny fountain surrounded by flowers. Water trickled over rocks from a statue of a young girl holding a jug and fell into a pool no wider than three feet across. Moss and fern filled in the space between flowers and on the right, a marble angel gazed into the pool.

Isabela traced a cool marble wing, smiling at the image the angel made. She sank down beside the garden and took in the tranquility of the space. This was where she came when thoughts of Lucius tormented her. The angel—no, the entire space—was in memory of him. She'd loved her brother fiercely and wished daily that he were once again with her. But fate had ripped him away, leaving her with just his memory and parents who—

“Isabela!” her mother shouted from the door.

Isabela closed her eyes briefly, then traced the angel wing once more. How her mother knew when she came here for solace was anyone’s guess. She gained her feet, dusted off her long skirt, and pushed back through the foliage.

Her mother stood in the doorway, hands on her ample hips. A once-beautiful woman, her mother often tucked her long black hair, now streaked with gray, up into a bun. Brown eyes flashed and her thin lips twisted as she took in Isabela’s appearance.

Like most of their kind, Isabela’s family had black hair with fair skin. Caelians traditionally had dark brown or black eyes. Rare few were born with anything else. Isabela was one of them. The goddesses had blessed her with vibrant violet eyes, a shade which had not been seen among their people in generations. Much like their blonde-haired queen. Yet another thing to anger her mother.

“In the garden again. Haven’t I told you to stay out? There is too much else to do than waste time among the flowers,” her mother said as Isabela passed.

Once, her mother had spent hours daily tending this garden. No longer.

“Your father calls for you and you keep him waiting. Lucius would never have been so disrespectful.”

“Yes, mother,” Isabela said, biting down on her tongue to keep from lashing out. No good ever came of it.

She walked under the archway into the dining area, then down the hall, knowing she would find her father in his library. He was rarely anywhere else. Their home was a fine one, with carved arches held by pillars at the entrances of the open rooms, large windows, and well-made furnishings. The affluence was not gaudy, but refined.

Pausing before the wooden door to the library, she tapped it twice.

“Just go in, girl,” her mother huffed from behind her. “You will do anything to drag your feet.”

Isabela opened the door and stepped into the space. Leather-bound books on shelves reached for the ceiling and lined three walls. Her father stood at the window across the room, gazing out over the view of the mountains. She didn’t wonder what he thought of. It was always the same.

“You called for me, Father?”

He dragged his gaze away from the window, the light of morning glinting gold on his silver hair. “Hmmm? Oh. Yes, Isabela.” He flicked a glance to her mother, who came to stand beside him. Her mother’s chin lifted, and Isabela knew whatever they had to say was both not her father’s idea and didn’t bode well for her.

“Your mother and I would speak to you of your prospects.”

Isabela swallowed. “Prospects,” she said carefully.

“Your marriage prospects,” her mother snapped. “Or what few you can find. I swear you are slow compared to Lucius.”

Isabela straightened her spine, standing taller under her mother’s disdainful eye. “What of them?” Her voice was strained, her throat tight with the anger she held in check.

“It is well past time you found your mate, Isabela.” Her father frowned. Then his gaze sought the window. “Your brother would have mated and blessed me with a grandson to carry on our line.”

“Yet he is dead,” her mother hissed. “So the duty falls to you. Do you think you can find yourself a mate? Your father grows old. I would see that his line continues, even if it must continue through you.”

Isabela pressed her lips together. *Even if it must continue through you.* The day they’d received the news of Lucius’s death, everything changed. Her mother turned her anger upon her daily, while her father seemed to forget she existed. *Why did you leave me, Lucius?* she thought, then released a slow breath.

A mate. Nothing could be further from her goals. Was this what they truly wanted? What of the Guard? “But I—”

“We would hear no arguments, child,” her mother said. “You will find a mate at once.”

Isabela flicked a gaze to her father, who no longer participated in the conversation. His eyes were once more on the mountain, as if he looked for his son to return at any moment. But they all knew he wasn’t coming back. Slain in battle during the last human war. She touched the gold ring suspended from a chain beneath her chemise, the proof of his death. He never parted from it willingly.

She swallowed again and lifted her chin, eyes focused on her father. He wanted his son back, not a daughter who still lived. Once, he had taken her everywhere with him. Doting on his youngest and allowing her to train with Lucius in the ways of battle. What would it take to gain

his notice again? To show herself worthy of his affections? She doubted a mate was the answer. No, her father would continue to stare out the window were she to bring a mate home, though it would undoubtedly please her mother.

“Yes, Mother,” Isabela said.

“What of one of the men from the palace guard you so enjoy spending time with?” her mother asked.

She held her snort back. Mother made it sound like she went to the Guard like a child would join friends for a game. Apparently, her status as a member of the Guard meant little. Which meant she must reach higher. She would gain their respect. Force them to take notice of the daughter who still lived instead of the son who would never return.

“I shall begin looking for a mate, if that is your wish,” she lied.

Her mother smiled, brightening her stern countenance. Her father waved his hand and never turned his gaze from the mountains. Did he even hear what they discussed?

“It may take time to find someone willing to deal with your fanciful tendencies,” her mother said, “but you have a fine form and will one day find a man who will appreciate your looks. I want you to make certain that man is from a good family. I will not have a grandchild born of a shopkeeper’s loins. Do you understand?”

Isabela nodded and clenched her fists. She did. She understood it would be impossible to please her mother, who would find fault in any mate Isabela brought home. If only she could turn her father’s eye back upon her. *Aid me in my quest, Lucius.*

“Then go. I would hear of your mate prospects this evening at supper. Do not disappoint us, Isabela. We must retain our status as one of Caeli’s top families.”

Biting back her angry reply, Isabela said, “Yes, Mother.” She quit the room quickly, hoping to avoid any further conversation.

She stalked up the stairs to her bedroom. A four-poster bed sat in the center of the room, its posts finely carved. To the right, a vanity made from the white trunks of the poplar trees sat in the corner, with a thickly padded stool before it. On the left stood her wardrobe, packed tight with glittering gowns and extravagant day dresses that she never wore.

She passed by it and quickly untied the laces at the sides of her simple linen dress, tossing it over her head to land in a heap on the floor. Clad in only her short chemise, she knelt beside the bed and pulled the box from underneath. Lifting the lid, she removed a pair of leather breeches, a

black leather jerkin bearing the Caeli insignia, boots, and finally her dagger. The steel tip glinted in the sunlight from the nearby window, making the blade gleam all the way down to the leather-wrapped hilt. She dressed quickly, tucking her chemise into her breeches, and slid the dagger into the sheath sewn to the breeches at the back of her waist. She removed the necklace with Lucius's ring and tucked it gently into the box. Isabela straightened her shoulders, feeling once more confident and in control, and left for the palace.

Her cheeks flushed as she thought back over the conversation with her parents. Why couldn't they see her for the woman she was? Why must every conversation begin and end with how she couldn't compare to the mighty Lucius? She straightened her shoulders as she strode through the streets of Caeli. If she didn't love her brother so, she could hate him. A warrior who brought honor to their family, led his warriors into battle with no fear, and was loved by all. The favored son of the Florin family.

Somehow I will prove to them I am worthy of the Florin name.