

A Friend

[Millicent]

Leon led me back the way he had come, past the waterfall room, which is called a "terrarium," into a dark hallway that I had somehow missed the night before. He presses his hand onto a small panel in the wall igniting more of those green-fire torches, illuminating the corridor before us. As we make our way through the doorway, the hallway opens up into another grand chamber, not quite as big as the last, but sufficiently big enough to hold one of the largest collections of books I had ever seen in one place.

"Why are there so many books?" I ask, honestly curious.

"For enjoyment," he replies as if the answer is obvious. "Don't you like to read?"

"No," I admitted. "I've never had enough time to learn how."

He stopped abruptly, holding out a hand. "You don't know how to read?"

"No," I shake my head. "Why would I need to? Only merchants and lords need letters written on a page. I am just a maid. What need do I have of books when all I'm expected to do is clean?"

He looks at me for a long time. There is something in his eyes that I can't quite read. Pity? No, it goes deeper than that.

"Can you read?" I look up at him expectantly. He is, after all, a servant as well.

He nods, "Yes. I started reading when I was very small. My favorite things to read are adventure stories."

"Stories," my voice lifts as I grow excited. "Do you mean the ones you can hear from a storyteller?" I inquire, confused. "But they don't need books to tell stories. They recite their tales from memory, beating the rhythm with their staff."

"Trust me," he insists, nodding his head vigorously as if that alone could convince me of his wisdom, "Books are better."

"But how can they be?" I respond, a bit offended. "How can anything compare to a story acted out in front of you? I feel like I'm right in the middle of the action I..."

"How long do their stories last?" he queries. "One hour, two? Half a day? A book can provide weeks, if not years of entertainment," he explains, his eyes alight with joy. "I have books on my shelf that I've had since I was a small child." He sighs, connecting with a pleasant memory, "you could say that books touch you for a lifetime. How can a storyteller compare?"

I shrug. "I don't know, that might be true for you," I agree, conceding to his logic, "but I do know that when they speak, I am completely in the world of their words and that, that feels like a treasure."

He stops arguing at that moment and just nods, gently nudging me along. I could tell he was disappointed by the way he looked down as we walked through this room with too many books. I think he had been expecting me to be impressed with this place, but I had somehow failed a test.

We turn the corner and the castle ends abruptly. The floor disappears, dropping off a cliff. Gasping, I step back. Leon continues to move forward, unphased.

"Leon, stop!" I shout, worried. "The floor is missing!"

He stops a few feet ahead of me, standing in the middle of a cloud, and laughs.

"How are you...?"

"It's okay," he grins, jumping up and down. "You will be safe. Just walk out here and I'll show you."

"NO!" I shout stubbornly. "I am not. I will not. You cannot make me!"

"Don't you trust me?" his eyes are wide with false shock.

"NOOOOOOO." I shake my head again. "I don't even know you!"

"But you can see I'm unharmed. It's perfectly safe." His grin widens, amused at my fear. "Come on, I promise it's safe. If anything were to happen to you, Prince Primus would make sure I suffered."

"Come on," he holds out his hand. "I'll help you make the first step."

Hesitantly, I step forward. As soon as our fingers touch, he gets a firm hold and yanks me off of my feet. I land headfirst into his solid chest.

"Ouch!" I rub my sore nose. "Why did you do that?"

"Look" he points below.

I am standing on air.

"How is this...?"

"...possible?" he finishes for me, leading me down the hall. "Dragons are strange creatures. They like to stay close to the elements and hate feeling like they are trapped inside of something artificial. Prince Primus can control the element of Earth, which is why so much of this place is grown directly from the hillside, rather than pieced together like most homes. This corridor leading to his private chambers is made entirely of polished quartz crystal, completely devoid of any impurities. It was grown specifically into this shape for this purpose. He wanted it to be so that it would feel like one is walking on air when traveling from the guest rooms to the inner chambers."

Leon continues to explain how this hallway, and much of the rest of the castle, was grown into this shape, using as much of the natural hillside as possible, only bringing in outside materials when necessary. Apparently, the prince was a bit of an artist, as he designed and created this entire castle himself using his skills.

"This side of the castle," Leon explains, "is for the Prince and his family. Only the prince, his personal guests, and his private staff are allowed beyond the library."

"Library?"

"The room with all the books," he sighs. "It's a shame you cannot read. Can you at least spell your name?" Then he stops, his cheeks flushed, "What is your name, by the way?"

"Millicent, and yes," I say proudly. "I know how to sign and read my name."

He watches me for a moment and then nods, not saying anything more.

We walk in silence for several more minutes, passing closed doors and open hallways, stopping before a stone door decorated with gold filigree that, Leon explained, had been grown rather than constructed, into the shape of vines. He pauses, looking at me expectantly.

"Place your hand on the door like this," he demonstrates, placing his hand on the center of the door before removing it. I placed my hand where he had placed his just a moment ago and my hand grew warm, then hot, before I pulled away.

"What the .."

"This door will now only open for you," he explained. "It will only open to your touch. Anyone else would need to have your permission before entering."

"Even him?" I wonder.

He looks at me for a moment, as if making a decision, and then confirms. "Yes, even him. This is your safe place," then his voice changes, growing a bit more firm, and commanding, "For now at least. I wouldn't push your luck with him, however. He is, after all, a dragon. He created all of this with his magic and skill from his imagination," Leon waves his hands around to emphasize his point. "There is nothing in this castle that could keep him out for long. However, I think, as long as you do as he needs, he will honor your need for space."

"Can I go in?" I ask, unsure.

"Of course," he gestures towards the room in front of him. "This is for you."

I step inside and pause in the entryway, stunned. This room is bigger than even the biggest merchant's house in town. It is spacious and open, overlooking the valley from tall windows that span the entire distance from my floor to the peaked roof. It was round, like a traditional tower, but spacious, having a fire pit of its own in the center, a large bed to the right, and a bathing pool full of warm, soapy water to the right. Near the window, a table with fresh fruit and cheeses has been laid out, along with thick cream and fine bread and pastries. It was easily more food that I could eat in a week, and far finer than anything I had been allowed before.

Leon enters the room behind me. I turn to him in fear.

"Will I be punished for being here?"

He looks at me quizzically. "Whatever for?"

"This must be a mistake," I explain. "This is not the room for a servant. It is the room of a fine lord or lady. Maybe even a princess. This cannot be for me." I begin to head back towards the door. "I don't want to be punished. I'll just..."

A firm, warm hand grabs my upper arm, stopping me.

I look up to see Leon's warm hazel eyes looking down at me again with that expression I cannot read. The one that is deeper than pity.

"You will not be punished," he explains, patiently. "This is your room," he sighs. "You'll find, given time, that the Prince is very generous to those in his care."

He lets me go as he heads towards the door.

"Leon," I call after him. He pauses.

I wrap my arms around him, giving him a big hug. "Thank you," I almost weep. "Thank you for explaining all of this to me, for showing me this place and helping me know what to do and where to go. I..." swallow my tears. I continue. "I was so alone. I am glad to have met you." I take a step back. "Are there any more servants in this wing?"

"No," he explains. "It's just the two of us."

I pause, not wanting to overstep. "Do you think, maybe, we can be friends?"

He grins again, that same warm smile he gave me this morning. "I will do my best to be your friend. If you will have me."

I nod, pleased.

"Good." he nods back. "Now that we have that settled, I have one final message for you, from our Prince."

I blink at him expectantly.

"You have the day to rest and recover," he motions towards the bath and the food. "But you are expected to dine this evening with Prince Primus when he returns from attending to some important business."

As he walks out of the room, I ask, "Do I have a choice."

He pauses, not looking back, and replies. "You do," he confirms. "But I wouldn't try to get on his bad side if I were you."

"Will I see you again?"

"Perhaps," he admits honestly. "But not today. I have other business to attend."

And with that, I was left alone in a room more grand than any I had ever been allowed to clean, thinking of the boy with brown hair, a warm smile, and hazel eyes.

"Leon," I smile, my fingertips brushing my lips.