

Dinner Conversation

[Millicent]

It was several minutes before I was able to move from the spot where I watched Leon leave. When he had exited, there had been a door, with a typical handle carved of wood. As soon as he disappeared from sight and the door closed behind him, it melted into the wall, becoming stone. Stepping forward, I gently rubbed my hand to see if I could feel a seam or any other sign that a door had been here only moments before. It was no longer warm to my touch, only cold polished stone with not even the smallest blemish.

Remembering the trick from before, I placed my hand on the center of the door, waiting for it to warm to my touch and open outward as it had before. Patiently I stood, fear slowly bubbling up my body from my gut, as the stone remained cold, hardly even warming up to my body heat.

What had Leon said? That I was the only one who could enter. He didn't say anything about whether or not I could exit. He also hinted that I wasn't the only one who would be able to control the door.

"Damn you, Primus!" I screamed at the wall, hoping the beast would hear my shouts. "I am not going to let you trap me here!!!"

Pounding on the door for as long as I could manage, I screamed every obscenity I learned from the traders in town. Caravan leaders have delightfully imaginative vocabulary, especially when they feel they are being cheated. I already knew that I wouldn't be getting a fair deal in this arrangement, but what kind of personal servant couldn't leave their rooms? How was I supposed to "serve" this dragon if I could not even find him to serve him? Would I ever see another face again?

Hands bruised from pounding, I lie down on the floor in a resigned lump, the cold stone soothing my back as much as its existence is irritating to my mind. Straining to catch my breath, it felt like the walls were closing in on me, even though this room was bigger than even my imagination could produce. When I was new to Crimson, the orphan mistress would lock me in a dark cabinet whenever I didn't behave as desired--nevermind that I neither knew their rules nor understood them. I'd spend hours locked up, unable to eat or drink, unable to relieve myself.

While this isn't a cabinet, my vision began to darken as I remembered my previous mistreatment, my mind traveling down an unwanted path of other abuses, each one worse than the one before, each one relived in such vivid detail that my body reacted as if it were happening again. Pulling my legs into my chest, I rock back and forth, my face growing hot and wet as I scream.

A gentle knock sounds on the door. Night had fallen without me noticing, my cheek cold from the floor where I lay. Not remembering lying down, I realize I must have toppled over when I had fallen asleep.

"Young lady," a feminine voice speaks through the wall. "Primus sent us to prepare you for dinner. "May we enter?"

"Go away," I croak at the door, my voice long gone hoarse from screaming.

"But the prince insists and ..."

"I don't care!!" I scream back.

I could hear some voices mumbling outside the door. There is a shuffling of people moving aside, making room for another.

"Friend," a gentle, familiar voice speaks through the wall, muffled and soft through the layers of stone. "Please let us through."

"Leon?" I whimper, sitting up. "Why did you leave me here? Why am I trapped? The door won't open."

There is a pause before he responds. "Dragons are strange creatures," the other servants gasp as if he had said something terrible by questioning the ways of their master. "I hardly understand their reasons, and I've worked amongst them my entire life." I nod to myself, agreeing that this whole situation felt strange in many ways. I am starting to get tired of dragons and their "reasons."

"Now friend, I need you to let us in so that we can prepare you. These servants do not deserve to face Primus' wrath for just doing their duties. He would see your stubbornness as their failure."

Stunned by his words, I realize my behavior, while justified, could also hurt others. I never want to be the source of someone else's pain. Standing up, I use my dirty apron to clean my face and place a hand on the wall. It is still not responding to my touch. "How can I let you in if I cannot open the door?" I query, pounding on the wall with my fist to prove my point. "The wall is solid. I'd let you in if I could."

As if my admission was a key to unlocking my situation, the door simply disappeared. Standing in front of me are 4 maids, cleanly dressed, in crisp aprons, and one young man with brown hair and a bemused expression on his face, which quickly returns to his usual friendly smile when he notices me watching.

"Good, he says, as the maids rush in. "If you hurry, they should be able to get you..." he pauses, looking me up and down, "Presentable. The Prince prefers his guests to be clean and shining."

"Shining," I raise one eyebrow in question, "like a gem?"

"Exactly," his hands clap together as his smile widens. "Now you have the idea." He pats me on the shoulder. "If you would be so kind, please let these women do their jobs. I need to go back to mine, Primus will be waiting."

Hoping to see a friendly face at dinner I call after him as he strides quickly down the hall, "Will you be at dinner too?"

He turns briefly, shaking his head. "That wouldn't be appropriate," he states simply as he continues down the hall not bothering to look back. "But I promise I'll see you tomorrow for breakfast."

Smiling at the thought, I wave as I watch him walk away.

My good mood doesn't last long, however. As soon as Leon disappears from sight, the maids go straight to the business of making me "presentable" to dine with my beastly overlord. Stripping me quickly of my soiled clothing, they throw them into the fire pit in the center of the room. Protesting as I watch my clothing incinerate, one of the ladies shushes me.

"Master instructed us to dispose of your original clothing, Miss."

"But...but..." I stutter.

"New clothing has been provided for you. He expects you to have an appearance that meets a certain..." her lip curls a bit as she looks over at the firepit and then back to me, "standard."

She sets out a new gown on the surface of a nearby chaise. It is covered with some kind of cloth, hiding everything from view but the barest line of hem peeking out to reveal a touch of honey-colored velvet. One of the other maids brings over undergarments in several layers, including multiple petticoats and a restrictive-looking corset of apricot-colored silk. Each garment is exquisitely crafted, made by the finest most capable hands, ornamented with silk embroidery and gemstone beads. Even the petticoats have several rows of lace (an exorbitant expense as just a single ruffle could cost a wealthy merchant a year's earnings) that have been beaded with what looks like crystal as it shines in the torchlight.

While two maids scrub every surface of my body, another two wait near the fire pit, still blazing with the remnants of my previous life, now reduced to ember edged scraps. In the hands of one maid is a brush, in the other, a large drying cloth so thick and long that I can tell they were not made for a body of my size.

I let them attend to me, brushing my body until it is raw, massaging and polishing me with oils and lotions until it is gleaming. That part I could bear. It was the way that they ripped through the tangled snarls of my hair that made my eyes water as clumps of yellow fluff littered the floor by my feet. Just as I was about to bed that they cut it all off, they declared themselves finished with detangling, and began messaging sweet scented oils on my scalp, slowly working their way down to the tips of each strand so that it began to curl gently around my elbows like spun gold. Slowly they began to twist, braiding my hair tightly before trapping it within a massive net of diamonds and gold lined in deep red satin. As they adjusted the back of my gown, another maid applied sparkling colored mud to my eyes, cheeks, and lips. With all of the petticoats and the fine velvet dress, I stand before the firelight shining like another bauble in the dragon's horde.

Feeling resigned, and looking nothing like myself, I followed the maids out of the room and back down the crystal corridor to the main hall.

We walk in absolute silence, not even the smallest bit of chatter between the four women walking in perfect sync two-by-two, their feet rising and falling at the same time. Perfectly balanced like a matched set, they are all around the same size and height, and their faces are similar in expression and appearance. As I watch them continue down the hall, I feel a weird shiver run down my spine. There was something too perfect about the way they march, the way they all move in the same way, the way that they refer to Primus as "Master."

"But what else could they be?" I wonder silently as we progress towards the main hall. "They must be human because they aren't dragons."

The main room was grand on the night I arrived, but as I enter now, I find myself perplexed. Chandeliers made of crystal light the room with an eerie green sparkle, the grand flames dancing along the fixtures within. At the table, tall tapers glimmer, highlighting the decadent arrangement of food. The fire burning in the central fire pit casts the rest of the room in a muted orange glow.

All the splendor of this room, however, is nothing compared to the lord of the manor himself, Prince Primus. Sitting at the head of the table, his appearance as otherworldly as a body carved of emerald.

Tonight his armor has been replaced with a jacket made of similar material, a dragon scale in shades of green and blue. Over this he wears a cape, much like the one he was wearing when I first encountered him, crafted of that strange membranous fabric. His pants were a tight leather and were topped with leather boots that had large claw-like spurs at the ankles made of some kind of bone, jutting out and to the side, pointing back towards his heels. His helm is gone, and his face, glistening with a pearlescent sheen, was made of hard, sharp lines--chiseled like the stone that made up his keep and probably just as cold. His hair is free of his braid, lying gently over his shoulders in soft, greenish-blue waves. Two long, curled horns grow from his hairline, just above his temples, and in each ear, harshly pointed skyward, is a long earring with a small claw.

None of these features, however, are as spectacular as his eyes. His eyes contain all the colors of earth--soil and sand, dappled leaves and lavender, rubies, emeralds and fine sapphires. They change as he watches me approach the table, blending and shifting between hues, never the same color from one second to the next.

I must have been standing there, for some time, because the next thing I know, I'm taking a step back as he stands, the legs of his throne-like chair scraping on the floor. I look down at my hands as I take a deep breath so I am not captured again by his gaze.

"Girl," he almost shouts at me. "You took long enough. Sit."

"My name is not 'Girl,' " I huff, "and I took as long as I needed." I take the seat the furthest away from him, not quite far enough away that I could not see his contemptuous sneer.

Servants seem to materialize from nowhere bringing food and drink to each of us. I refuse the wine, preferring to keep my mind sharp as I sit across from such a deadly predator. Just because the food on our table has been cooked, doesn't mean he won't change his mind about having me on the menu.

"If I cannot call you girl," he inquires, "What can I call you?"

"Millicent." I tell him plainly. "Millicent Walker."

He laughs. "That's a terrible name. I refuse to call you that."

Even though I had never really cared one way or another about my name, something in his dismissal made me bristle. "It is the only name I have. It was given to me by the orphanage."

He hasn't stopped laughing. "You must have something else I can call you."

"No." My face is growing red. I take a big gulp of water. "No, there is not."

"How about Amber?" he suggests. "Or Topaz. Both are names that are better suited."

"That makes me sound like a trophy," my lungs are constricted by the corset, making it harder for me to really shout. "I am a person, not a thing!"

"Are you sure?" He cocks an eyebrow. "You look like a jewel. A beautiful, shining jewel. You are too fine a creature for my ill, stupid name like Millicent."

"Was that a compliment?" I ask, a bit taken aback. "It sounds like you just said I am beautiful."

He takes a bite of his food, dripping with juices, and I look away as he answers through bites of flesh. "It is not a compliment. Compliments are pretty lies. I only speak the truth."

Trying not to choke, I take a long swig of my water, wishing I had not refused the wine. My face is hot, my thoughts caught between anger and... appreciation. No one had ever found me beautiful before, not with my overly dark skin and unfortunate mess of hair.

"Truth?" I cough, trying to swallow, "I am certain you lie. I am no beauty. I never have been and never will be."

He stares at me, silent, steam rising from his nostrils in slow, white tendrils. His fingernails extend into claws as he grasps the end of the table. "I will kill whoever told you such a foul lie."

"Then you'd have to kill the entire village," I joke.

"Done," his voice is flat. Final.

"Done?" I squeak. "You mean...?"

"Yes," his eyes catch mine again and I find myself stunned into silence.