

Kingdom of Cinders Bonus Chapter

By Deborah Grace White

Timeline: Chapter Twenty-Six

Dannsair

Dannsair faced south west, her gaze resting on the point where the gently seething ocean met the sky. She knew the humans believed there was no other land out there, but she'd never been convinced of that. Not even before the mysterious arrival of Rekavidur.

Still, although her eyes could see much further than any human's, she beheld nothing but water.

Curling her tail around her taloned feet, she locked her limbs in place, settling in to wait. She was amused by her own impatience. Anyone would take her for a mortal human, with how eagerly she awaited sunset. But she really had taken a liking to Penny, and she was intensely curious to hear about the much-anticipated second ball.

Sunset was still a long way off, however, and Penny was unlikely to be asleep, with her mind vulnerable enough for Dannsair to breach it, until many hours after the sun went down. The afternoon wore away neither quickly nor slowly, time moving at the speed it always did. Through the hours, Dannsair waited on the clifftop, as motionless as the stone statues of dragons that graced the entrance to the castle in Entolia's nearby capital. With no need to exhale either magic or flame, she even closed off the breathing reflex, allowing her body to become utterly still.

Her eyes remained on the water, but her thoughts drifted to her meeting with Penny in that moonlit field in Bansford. The girl had been just as Dannsair had expected, with one exception. It had been hard to gauge her magic accurately across their dream connection. Seeing her in person, however, had prompted a rare flash of genuine surprise. The young Bansfordian's magic truly was strong. Perhaps the strongest Dannsair had come across in a human. And it was raw, untrained. A very good thing that Penny had such a pure heart.

A good thing for the other humans around her, that was. The strength of the humans' magic had been growing in a steady rhythm over the generations, but there were still none who could come close to possessing the measure of power that could threaten a dragon.

But they might one day. The humans still had no concept of that, of course. They measured their lives in years, and thought absurdly little of the future they considered distant. But the dragons all understood that as paltry as human magic might now appear, in a scant dozen generations, there was no telling what it might be capable of.

Most of the dragons took the view that it was therefore all the more important that the agreement between humans and dragons—that neither would use magic on the other, either to help or hinder—be honored. If the others in her colony knew of Dannsair's decision to enter Bansford in

contravention of the elders' ban, she would most likely be reprimanded. If her actions in enchanting Penny's dancing slippers became known...well, she honestly wasn't sure what kind of sanction she might face.

But she felt no qualms of conscience. The decision hadn't been made lightly, and she would do it again. She and Reka had discussed it extensively both before and since. If anyone made an accusation against her, or against Reka for what he'd done in Albury and Listernia, well... they would be ready with their response. She hoped it wouldn't come to that anytime soon, however. She and Reka had barely scratched the surface with their investigation. She was hoping to possess a great deal more information before the matter came to a head within the colony.

Her mind turned for a moment to the yellow dragon. In the first sign of movement her body had shown in hours, her thin lips curved into a smile. He had certainly been an unexpected arrival into her existence. And how quickly he had changed things. The gnawing suspicion that had simmered within her for decades would likely have continued to glow for decades more before she acted on it, if she ever did. But within mere months of Reka appearing, she had not only spoken her thoughts aloud, but begun to investigate their origins.

Not that it had taken months for the two dragons to each recognize the other as their pair. Most dragons knew instantly upon meeting, and it had been so for Dannsair and Reka. She could well remember the thread of magic that had stretched between them when first she laid eyes on Reka, the strand seeking a like spirit and, upon finding it, twining fast around it. And the heartsong that had followed soon after when they had confirmed that each had chosen immortality over reproduction, and that a pairing between them was therefore possible.

Dannsair's choice of immortality had been made well before Reka's arrival. And no matter how their magic might have wished to entwine, had Reka chosen instead to surrender his immortality in order to one day pass his magic to offspring, neither of them would have considered pairing.

Unions between mortal and immortal dragons always led only to death and destruction. Every dragon in Dannsair's colony was trained in that reality from birth. And from what Reka had told her, the dragons of his own colony had learned the truth of the old teaching from bitter experience, an experience that scarred the human population of his land as well as the dragons.

Happily, none of that had been of relevance for them. Reka had also already chosen immortality—and what a tale he'd had to tell of that decision—and there was therefore no barrier to their union. The decision to pair was irrevocable, and Dannsair no more doubted his loyalty to her than she doubted her own spirit.

The fact that he was as interested as she was in discovering the truth of what was happening in Solstice was simply a bonus.

The sun disappeared below the ocean in a blaze as potent as any dragon flame, and in time the stars began to appear. They wheeled overhead, moving in a slow rhythm that Dannsair tracked with unblinking eyes. The moon was a mere sliver, and the darkness faced little obstruction as it settled over the land like a blanket.

Was Penny still dancing with her prince? Or had she by now sought her bed? Dannsair pondered her human friend's situation. It would certainly breathe change into the stunted kingdom of Bamsford if the future monarch married an enchantress of such power. Of any power, really. But the good that Penny might do with a heart as pure as hers and a crown on her head could hardly be measured.

When Dannelsair thought that Penny might conceivably have found sleep, she closed her eyes, blocking out the star-strewn sky from her vision. She reached out intangibly. She didn't need to think hard about what she was doing—the tendril of magic she was sending out came not from her mind, but from her heart. It wasn't unlike the one that was now tangled permanently with Reka's spirit thread. If she followed that thread along its length she could sense Reka even now. She didn't attempt to do so, instead focusing on the thread of her friendship with Penny, a much less potent form of a similar magic.

The trouble was, unlike her thread with Reka, the one with Penny always disappeared into a murky distance. It was as though Dannelsair's own magic knew something was at the other end, but couldn't properly reach it. Only when Penny's mind was lulled in the openness of sleep could Dannelsair catch a glimpse of the other magic-user's end of the line.

Reka claimed that she should be able to see Penny all the time, not just visit her in dreams. He claimed that she should be able to see many things from afar, not just locate the signature of other magic-imbued creatures. If she didn't trust him so implicitly, Dannelsair would struggle to believe his talk of farsight, the gift that all dragons were supposedly born with.

As far as she was aware, no dragon in her colony had ever been born with it. And yet...it made sense of her experiences with Penny. When her magic disappeared into the murkiness, she sometimes felt a stiffness within herself, as though her faculties were attempting to use a skill they should have, but which was blocked. And the fact that Reka's own farsight hadn't been working since he arrived on Solstice suggested that it wasn't just a difference between the dragons of the two lands.

If Reka was right, something was interfering with it. And the various instances of concealment magic that he'd so far encountered—although each far stronger than they should have been—had still not been enough to explain the continent-wide blockage.

Just as they had no explanation for what made her different, for why she seemed to be able to sense the blockage, to identify and even partially use a skill that none of the other dragons appeared even to know about.

Dannelsair cast her magic out from herself, sending it in the general direction of Bannford as she attempted to locate Penny's signature. To her confusion, she couldn't find it. She tried several times, always with the same result.

In the night's second infinitesimal movement, Dannelsair frowned. She'd never had this problem before. Her mind flew back to the first time she'd located Penny. It was years before she'd met Reka, and heard his explanation of those threads of her magic that sought so relentlessly to reach out, to find something at the other end. She'd heard nothing of farsight then, and she hadn't been trying to *see* anything at all. She'd just been casting her thoughts over Bannford, contemplating the prohibition of magic, wondering about those humans who might be caught there in a prison not of their making.

She couldn't precisely explain what she'd sensed. It had just seemed to her that Bannford was a wide, barren desert, hostile and dry. And then, in the midst of the desert, she'd sensed spots of life, little oases. She'd been drawn to one of especial lushness, her magic latching on to it like a curious explorer. When she followed that thread, she'd found...Penny.

It seemed clear now why Penny's spot of life had stood out so much more than the others. Dannelsair had little doubt that Penny was the most powerful magic-user in Bannford.

So why was her oasis proving so difficult to locate now? As a test, Dannelsair turned her attention to the thread she shared with Reka, following it back to the realm of the dragons. She

couldn't see him precisely, but she could tell where he was, and that he was engaged in some activity that brought peace rather than tension. He was fine, and their connection remained untouched.

She tried again with Penny's thread, focusing not on the physical direction, or on the strength of Penny's magic, but on Penny herself. Her pure heart, and cheerfulness of spirit.

Ah. There she was. Dannsair sped along the connection, entering Penny's dream with the same abruptness she always did.

"Penny," she said, as the girl's form solidified before her. "I've found you. I had difficulty locating your signature. I don't know why. I never have before."

Penny blinked back at her, looking anything but cheerful in spirit. She looked dull, almost lifeless.

"I imagine it was because I'm not at home," she replied, her voice toneless. "I'm not even in Bansford. Harry, Al, and I crossed the border into Listernia about an hour before dawn."

Dannsair considered this information. "You've only just fallen asleep, then. That must be why you look such a mess."

Silence.

Dannsair cast her mind over the facts so far ascertained. "With the superior senses of my kind," she commented, "I deduce that the ball did not go well."

There was no true humor in Penny's laugh. "You could say that."

"I did say it," Dannsair pointed out, wondering what exactly had made the young human's mind so disordered. "But why have you fled across the border, when you refused to do so all this time? Was your magic exposed?"

"Not my magic," said Penny, a thick and distasteful signature leaking from her with the words. "Just my inadequacy. Even without my magic in the equation, I wasn't good enough for the prince."

Dannsair leaned away from the human, her senses seared by what the girl was exuding. "The bitterness emanating from you is so potent it makes proximity to you unpleasant," she informed Penny.

"I'm sorry," Penny declared emotionally. "I don't want to be bitter. But I've lost everything."

"Demonstrably false," said Dannsair, trying to have patience with her friend's uncharacteristic lapse into the melodrama favored by so many humans. "You have loyal companions, do you not? You have your life. And you have your magic. Now that you are not in Bansford, you can even use it without fear."

"Yes, I suppose so," said Penny, with no real enthusiasm. "But all I want is to sleep."

"Very well, then," said Dannsair. Here at least she might be able to help. She poured her magic along the thread between them, hoping it would still work even from such a distance. "Sleep."

She felt Penny's mind sinking back into oblivion, and withdrew from their connection. For several long minutes she sat on the clifftop, still motionless, still thinking.

First, her thoughts explored the new experience of her own magic. After some cogitation, she thought she understood why Penny had been difficult to find due to her new location. In Bansford, the powerful enchantress stood out like a beacon in an otherwise dark and magic-less expanse. In

Listernia, or any of the other kingdoms in Solstice, magic was a little more common. Dragons still flew over, at the very least, and shed their magic. And there were enchanters running about, and artifacts in use. Penny hadn't stood out as much, and Dannelsair had needed to rely not on her conspicuousness, but on the specific connection that had been cultivated between them.

Satisfied on that point, she turned her mind to her friend's dilemma. Penny was in a sad state, that much was not in dispute. And in addition to a general sense of goodwill toward the young enchantress, Dannelsair was becoming more and more tickled by the idea of the girl entering the Bansfordian royal family, and thereby drastically changing the kingdom's future.

She was invested enough in the outcome of Penny's adventure to wish to help. And although most dragons would find her interest incomprehensible, she knew one who would understand it completely.

Snapping her wings out with a suddenness that startled a nearby fox, she took to the air. It was a simple matter to follow the thread back to its point of connection, and in a short time she was alighting beside Reka in the realm of her kind. Her pair was not asleep—he emerged at her approach, but he seemed to have been exploring the bottom of the lake that dominated the colony's land.

Dannelsair shook her head indulgently. Reka and his fixation on underwater observation.

"Greetings, My Heartsong," he said lightly, as she joined him.

Dannelsair's lips curved into a thin smile. "Is it normal for the dragons of your colony to be so whimsical?"

"Of course not," Reka replied calmly. "My oddities arise from having so often shunned the company of my own kind for that of frivolous humans."

Dannelsair studied him. "You miss your humans, don't you?"

Reka gave a gravelly laugh. "I have been parted from them for a mere year. Perhaps in ten more I will truly feel their lack." He smiled. "But by that time I hope to have traveled back to my native land with you, so you can meet my colony as I have met yours."

Dannelsair inclined her head. "I await it with anticipation."

Her pair leaned into her, clearly sensing her distraction. "What is on your mind, Dannelsair?"

"Penny, the enchantress from Bansford," she said. "She is in distress, and I wish to aid her."

Reka inquired took a moment to examine their surroundings carefully before replying, presumably checking to make sure they were truly alone.

"By way of further magic?"

Dannelsair shook her head. "I don't think that's necessary at this time. She is just feeling particularly friendless, and may need assistance to meet her basic needs."

"A serious situation for a frail human," Reka said solemnly. "How shall we assist her?"

Dannelsair felt a pleasant twang, like the thread between them had been plucked, and was emitting a sweet note. It was indeed a source of delight to be not alone in her endeavors.

"Let us start by bearing her and her companion to humans who will be more inclined to show them kindness than those they left behind in Bansford," she said, her thoughts flying instantly to the Entolian princesses. The oldest one in particular had caught her interest the last few times they'd interacted. Dannelsair had the sense that Princess Zinnia was one to watch. In her own way, the Entolian girl had begun to intrigue Dannelsair quite as much as Penny did.

“As always, I am with you,” said Reka simply.

With a glow of heart that went beyond either smiles or words, Dannelsair leaned forward and rubbed her neck along Reka’s, their scales making a musical tinkling with the motion.

Reka was with her. May it be ever so.