

A Kingdom Restored Bonus Scene

By Deborah Grace White

Timeline: during Chapter Twenty-Six

Sage

Sage's thoughts flew as rapidly as the dragon who held her in its talons, speeding over the surface of the water far below. Too many thoughts whizzed by for her to be able to latch on to any single one. She knew, in a detached way, that she might well be hurrying to her death. But she found that no particular emotion attached itself to the thought—it was just one of the many dramatic realities her life had descended into.

Her mother's face flashed before her eyes, and some emotion threatened to leak in after all. The look on the older mermaid's features when she'd seen the dragon Elddreki seize Sage was something she'd never forget.

What had gone through her mother's thoughts in that moment? Had she regretted the hurt she'd caused her daughter with her deception? Or did she still hold to the view that she was not to blame—that she'd merely been following the directions of the leaders to whom they all owed absolute loyalty and obedience?

For a moment, Sage let herself feel her grief, grappling with the reality that she may never know the answer to that question. If the dragons were truly on their way, neither of her parents would live to see the sunset. Not to mention her sister. A shudder went over Sage at the thought of the eleven-year-old. It was horrible to think of Serena being killed, her life ended in violence before it had well begun.

She should have tried harder to reach them, to convince them of the truth. Maybe if she hadn't been so unwilling to forgive, they might have been hiding in relative safety right now, on Vazula or somewhere in the deeps.

With an effort, she banished these thoughts from her mind. There was nothing to be gained from regret, and she couldn't afford the distraction with what they were about to dive into.

By the time the dragon began to descend, Sage was itching to get into the water and back to the triple kingdoms. And in spite of everything, the moment she hit the water, she felt her whole body relax. The experience of gaining legs had been fascinating, of course, but her tail was so much more familiar, so much more comfortable. She felt confident again, once more master of herself.

Ridding herself rapidly of the bulky human coverings, she gave her tail a reassuring flick. Coral-colored scales flashed before her eyes as she flipped around, searching at once for the chained Record Master. He was sinking steadily downward, and Merletta had already begun to pursue him.

Sage approved wholeheartedly of Merletta's refusal to free the merman from his chains. The two of them had no great difficulty in pulling him through the water behind them as they moved over the Center, then on toward Tilssted.

Even though she knew she should be thinking about more important things, at least half Sage's mind was focused on Emil, desperate to get back to him before it was over for them all.

Was this how Merletta had felt for so long, trying to live her life underwater with Heath far away and out of her reach?

It was enough to drive Sage to distraction, but she supposed Merletta was stronger, more purposeful. She always had been.

The unflattering comparison brought Sage's thoughts inevitably back to the words Heath claimed to have overheard Emil saying to her mother. Heath said Emil had called her strong. Too strong to let herself get killed so easily.

Well, she didn't know how much her strength or otherwise had to do with it, but she was still alive for the moment. And, she added fiercely to herself, she had no intention of dying before she could confront Emil. Had he really said those things? Did he really believe them?

Her tension rose unbearably as they bore down on the embattled city. When she heard that familiar voice, raised commandingly above the din, Sage couldn't hold in the gasp that ripped from her.

"Emil!"

She surged forward more quickly, forgetting all about the Record Master whom Merletta now dragged alone.

"Emil!"

The second time, her cry reached him. Her eyes were riveted to his form, so she saw the moment he heard her. His head shot up, some strange mixture of joy and fear crossing his face as his eyes found her.

"Sage!" The sound was almost strangled, no hint of the calm command she'd heard in his voice a moment earlier. Emil surged up through the water with tense strokes, closing the distance between them.

"Sage, what are you doing here?" he demanded, his pale face devoid of color. "You're supposed to be safe on land. Why would you come back here?"

"The dragons are on their way," Sage said curtly. "Did you think I'd stay away and leave you all to die?"

"What's the good of you dying, too?" Emil demanded. "I can't protect you, Sage, not if there's a horde of angry dragons on the way. How could you throw yourself back into danger?"

"How could *I*?" Frustration rose up in Sage, and her usual restraint fled her. "How could *you*, Emil! How could you treat me like I'm some breakable, fragile shell, pushing me out of the way at every turn until I despair of you even respecting me, let alone something more, and then go and call me smart, and strong, and capable to my mother? You've never said anything like that to me! What am I supposed to conclude, when you talk to her like that, make it sound like you want me near you, when all *I've* ever gotten from you, in spite of giving you every encouragement, is polite protection?"

The words were pouring out now, and even while some part of Sage was horrified by the knowledge that they could never be put back where they came from, she felt mostly relief. She'd wanted to say these things for so long—it wasn't the time to hold back, not with the future so uncertain.

“No one asked you to protect me!” she went on. “If I’m far away in the land of the humans, I might be safe from the dragons, at least for today. But I won’t be with you, Emil, and I for one am done being too afraid to say what I want. I want to be with you! So you need to decide, Emil. Do you want me protected out of some need for your pride to prove you can keep me safe, or do you want me actually *with* you? Because we’ve reached the end of the current, now, and we can’t have both. It’s one or the other.”

By the end of this impassioned outburst, Emil looked absolutely stunned. He was staring at her like he’d never seen her before, and as Sage’s rush of frustration ebbed, she started to feel the telltale touch of embarrassment creeping in.

Then, so abruptly she didn’t see it coming, he pulled her into his arms and kissed her. Not the chaste kiss of a relieved friend, or the tentative touch of someone still exploring their feelings. He kissed her thoroughly and properly, as if chaos wasn’t erupting all around them, as if they were the only two in the ocean.

After a moment that was much too brief, Emil pulled back, leaving Sage blinking stupidly.

“I choose to be with you,” Emil said, his voice calm and deep. “It seems I should have chosen that from the start.” He ran two fingers down the side of her face. “I never meant to insult you, Sage, or to make you feel weak. I just couldn’t bear the thought of anything happening to you. It was never about my pride—it was always about you.”

He gave her a rueful smile. “I’m sorry I left you in so much doubt as to my motivations. I suppose I’m not good at talking about what’s in my heart.”

Sage’s own heart was racing erratically, and she could barely keep a grin from her face. “Neither am I, if I’m honest. But we can work on that.”

Emil’s face turned grave. “I wish we had more time,” he said. “But we can’t promise each other tomorrow.”

With a lurch of the heart, Sage realized he was right. Somehow, in his arms, she’d momentarily forgotten about the battle around them and the death speeding toward them.

“I need to find my family,” she said suddenly. “If I have little time left, I want to spend it with them. I need to make it right before the end.”

Emil nodded, when suddenly a voice from the crowd caught Sage’s attention, as someone recognized the Record Master.

Sage surged forward, anger racing through her at the memory of the merman’s crimes. She was aware of Emil following her, but she kept her eyes on the speaker.

“He doesn’t deserve the title!” she cried. “He’s the one who revealed himself near the dragon colony, and he’s the reason they’re coming this very day. He even has a plan to flee to a safe location, but he only intends to take a select few with him. The rest of us are expendable.”

Not many of the fleeing merpeople seemed to heed her words, but no one raced forward to help the captured Record Master, either. Satisfied that the guards had him in hand, Sage turned back to Emil.

“Your family,” he said, before she could speak. “We’ll find them.” He took her hand, squeezing it with reassuring pressure. “And we won’t let ourselves be separated—live or die, we’re in it together now.”

Sage nodded, a lump rising in her throat that was half sorrow, half gratitude. It was heartbreaking for her world to come together just as everything was coming to an end. But on the

other hand, a day, an hour, a minute with Emil was better than nothing at all. And who could say for certain they wouldn't have longer? They weren't dead yet.

With his hand still firm in hers, she couldn't help but hope.