

The Darkest Drae

Bonus Chapter

Lord Irrik

~ The First Meeting ~

Irrik: The First Meeting
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For readers of The Darkest Drae series, we hope you enjoy the insight into Lord Broody-pants' mind.

WARNNG: Bonus chapter contains spoilers of Blood Oath and Shadow Wings (books one and two in the series). Proceed if you dare – or if you’re a rebel.

The First Meeting

Irrik pulled on a black aketon, cinching the straps tight, so the garment fit snug against his body. He hated the way the wind pulled at loose clothing when he ran. Not that he planned to run.

The king had finally caught wind of the rebel movement in Verald. *Idiot*. By his command, Irrik was to make a round through the kingdom tonight after curfew—which really meant *Find the rebels and bring them to me, so I can torture them*.

Irrik crossed the room to pick up his boots, but he didn't put them on there. Nor did he sit on the couch nearest the wardrobe. Instead, he returned to his bed on the opposite side of the chamber and slowly laced each one up. These were the types of games the king and Irrik played. Obedience to the oath was necessary, but there was a measure of freedom in the interpretation of Irdelron's commands. Besides, if Irrik waited long enough to leave, he was certain to miss most of the drunkards as they staggered home, cutting too close to curfew. Then he wouldn't need to haul all of them to the castle to face, what would likely be, their death.

The rebels weren't usually stupid enough to break curfew. At least not the ones who knew anything.

This most recent group of dissidents had eluded the king's ground spies for months, longer than any previous revolutionaries. Their stealth thus far had even him briefly believing the rebels might have a chance to dethrone Irdelron.

But that was absurd—for one *very good* reason.

Him.

No one could overthrow the house of Ir without defeating *the king's invincible Drae*. Which was exactly why Irdelron kept Irrik imprisoned with a blood oath.

The loathing he had for the king was second only to Irrik's self-hatred. A century of murder, torture, and brutality. A lifetime with *minimal* control and almost none over his own life. He was one hundred and nine, and if he'd once believed the morality of the nine-year-old version of himself, that time had long passed. The blackness of his soul was warranted. Perhaps his soul couldn't be anything else after betraying his people and the ones he was meant to protect—the shame would be with him for eternity. Or until Irdelron chose to slay or free him, which Irrik knew would never happen.

At age nine, he'd sealed his fate and that of his people by speaking the binding words of a blood oath to Irdelron. Innocent he'd been. Naïve, certainly. Neither excuse offered a measure of relief.

He heard the shuffling footsteps outside his door a moment before the knock of Irdelron's lackey.

"Enter," he said.

A page poked his head in, his eyes wide with fright, face pale. "The k-king requests a report as s-soon as you have finished patrolling."

Irrik growled under his breath. The king wasn't requesting a report. He was checking to see if Irrik had left. "Tell Irdelron I'm leaving now."

"Y-yes, Lord Irrik!" The young boy bobbed his head frantically and closed the door. The people were more afraid of him than the king. Foolish ignorance when Irrik's will wasn't his own.

After locking the door, he strode to the windows covering the west wall of his room. Two of the windows were set in the stone wall, but the center pane swung out on hinges large enough for three men to walk through. He unlatched the left side and pushed the thick framed glass out into the night.

The air was several degrees cooler than it would be closer to the ground, but still warm. The climate of Verald was becoming warmer and warmer as the dearth continued—almost like the very seasons were protesting the king’s rule. And perhaps they were in an indirect way. The land-healers, the Phaetyn, disappeared at the same time as the Drae. While the two species were natural enemies, Irrik highly doubted their extinction was coincidence. Without the Phaetyn to rejuvenate the nutrients in the land, the humans struggled. The plants, like the land—and hence the people were sickly and starving.

“And that’s how rebels are made,” he muttered to himself.

Irrik walked to the edge of the short terrace, and took a deep breath, inhaling the coming moment with pleasure. This was one of the only times he felt a modicum of freedom. Then he stepped out into thin air.

Despite the ridiculous stories he’d heard the Veraldian mothers telling their offspring, shifting was not instantaneous. But the promise of *reward* made the muscle spasms and torque of his bones worth it. The pain was excruciating but brief, lasting fractions of a second. And after?

Irrik unfurled his powerful wings and let the draft of air lift him. His dark heart twinged with something akin to happiness, and he pumped his wings and sniffed the dry air.

This high, he could see most of Verald, the very borders of this kingdom melting into a blurry haze in the heat of the summer sun. The smells of humans mixed together into a cloying odor. To discern the stench of brew from sweat or lust was hard without landing, which he didn’t

plan to do. The humans hated him and rightly so. Irrik set houses aflame, killed, destroyed . . . *He* wreaked havoc upon the kingdom under Irdelron's order. These people shouldn't have to see him any more than he was compelled. His only defiance was his limited measure of mercy.

He surveyed the kingdom below. The wealthy houses in the Money Coil were less likely to be housing the rebellion leaders. There was no reason for them to rise up when they had sufficient amounts of food. This left the ring of houses outside the Coil, the Inbetween, or the very outer the Penny Wheel. But *most* rebels came from the Inbetween. They wanted more, could see it, and they weren't so exhausted from merely surviving. Only the poorest in the kingdom stayed in the Wheel.

The tip the king received from house Tal said the rebels were meeting in Harvest Zone Seven, but that could have been a decoy. The conspirators could be gathering in any of the twelve harvest zones. *That* was what differentiated these rebels from those before them. Whoever was leading the revolt thought more than two or three steps ahead—their intelligence made him admire his adversary.

Irrik took another deep breath, scenting the air. Brew was the strongest smell by far tonight; humans drowning their lost hopes and dreams in liquor that gave temporary reprieve, only to heap insult to injury the next day. Irrik knew the truth of that better than anyone.

The tales mothers wove to scare their children with were mostly laughable. But the stories got something right; the night was his lover. In the midst of midnight's silken caress, he was invisible—but for his orange fire; a predator without equal. The twin moons were his mother and father, and the stars his dead kin. The endless black connecting them all was a warm and beautiful version of what his soul might have been.

The sun, however, could shrivel up like the wasted land of Verald and die.

Irrik blinked as a slight figure scurried along in the shadows of Harvest Zone Six, far too conscious of keeping to the shadows of the buildings. This was the same human he'd seen last night, dancing on the dangerous side of curfew, just as they were now.

He recalled the speed. Slightly too fast.

The person's stride was overly long for a child, yet they were old enough to know to use the shadows for cover. If only the human realized how guilty that made them look from above.

With the night cloaking Irrik, he circled lower so as not to lose his prey. For prey the person had now become. No one would break curfew for something they didn't wish to hide: an affair, trading on the black market, stealing, *or* a rebel meeting.

Perhaps this was the break Irrik had been waiting for. In times like these, flying through inky skies late at night, Irrik's hope that if he crushed the rebellion, a reprieve from Irdelron's service could be negotiated seemed almost plausible. Just a few days. Enough time to find a Phaetyn and free himself from this cursed bond to the twisted king. A wishful, improbable thought, but it was the sole spark that kept him from relinquishing to the empty, black madness that crept on the edges of his sanity. Would this ever be over? Would he only ever nurse that spark in the darkness of night? Would it be better to stop hoping?

And what if he did? Drae were invincible to all but one thing. Phaetyn blood. So his only hope came back to betraying the scurrying fool below in a feeble attempt to win his freedom. Irrik pushed away his guilt, and let his decades of lies take reign. The fool on the ground had caused his own death by breaking the rules.

The human could have avoided this.

Such fabrications gave Irrik the strength to do what was needed. Later on ... *that* was when he'd admit the truth.

Irrik bellowed and shot a bright stream of orange flame into the sky as the human reached the town square. The fire signaled the king's ground force, but he wouldn't leave the human to their clutches. He'd take the fool himself, if only so the human wasn't tortured more than he would be in the clutches of Irdelron.

Diving vertically, Irrik closed the empty space in seconds. He shifted as he reached the tops of the buildings, just before impact. Silently, in his human form, Irrik dropped into a crouch in the shadows on the opposite side of the alley to the . . .

To the . . .

Shock battered him as he rose. With no one else near, his senses were overwhelmed with the heady scent. *Her* scent.

This was no boy.

Irrik rubbed his hand over his nose, but the fragrance remained. Cinnamon tossed over molten flame. An overpowering perfume that made his chest tighten.

Through his flustered barrage of thoughts, Irrik latched onto one part with all-consuming agitation. *Molten flame*. He hadn't experienced that smell since nine years of age . . . when his kin were living.

She smelled like Drae. That was . . . that was *impossible*.

Irrik must be more tired than usual or finally going mad. His kind, the Drae, were dead. He'd watched them die one-by-one, the females herded away to suffer an unknown fate at the hands of the emperor.

Molten flame.

Her smell continued to assail him, and his heart raced and nostrils flared. He leaned forward as his throat worked, greedy for more. Her breaths were shallow, her heart fluttering in her chest,

the sweetest music. Masked by the shadows he pulled to him, Irrik inhaled deeply and grimaced. Man—a lot of them and brew. All over her petite, graceful frame. Such aromas didn't belong on her skin. Perhaps the waif worked at an inn; perhaps she was a whore. The very thought made him clench his fists, and he startled at the gesture. Decades had passed since he'd betrayed anger.

Irrik swallowed as the young woman's fragrance swirled around him, and he studied her—her luminous skin, her delicate frame. An impulsive need to see her safe surged from deep within. She would not be harmed. *He* would not harm her.

I'd rather die.

"Psst, you shouldn't be out here, mister."

She'd spoken. Irrik straightened. If the night could be an audible noise, her voice was it. The husky, innocent tones touched him in places he believed he'd lost as a boy, his sense of purpose, his childhood naivety, his . . . hope.

The waif was looking at him like he was insane.

"Well? What are you standing there for?" she demanded. "The King's Drae is out and the soldiers, too. You need to get on home before curfew."

Wait. She could *see* him. The young woman stared directly to where he'd stood. In the shadows. The molten fire aroma was growing stronger. But it couldn't be. Surely, after a century, it couldn't be true.

Catch up, Irrik. She's looking right at you.

"You see me?" he demanded, jolting when she rolled her eyes. Such beautiful eyes.

"Are you usually invisible?" she asked.

She was . . . being sarcastic. Either very brave or very, very unobservant. Irrik stepped out from the shadows of the building at his back and answered, "Yes."

Her heart stopped at his reply, and for a moment Irrik swore his stopped too.

A maelstrom of energy, rooted in a terror he'd never known before, roared from deep within. The onyx strands of his Drae energy thickened and surged toward the young woman, wrapping around her—cocooning her. Without conscious thought he was desperate to hide her, protect her, to cushion her from every fall.

When she squeaked, eyes wide, Irrik was ready to flatten the entire kingdom with his fire.

“Al’right. You take care now,” the woman croaked.

What?

Where did she think she was going? He blurred toward her, cutting off her escape. Her human-speed escape. No matter that the woman smelled of his kind, she was yet to transition to Drae. Which meant she was still young, not yet eighteen—for the females of his kind shifted when they were of mating age.

How could this be?

“You see me,” Irrik repeated, stalking closer, while simultaneously *afraid* to draw closer. His breaths grew shallow as he took her in, her luring scent driving him mad, compelling him to be nearer. This young woman could undo him. And he'd spent a long time ensuring he'd never be undone.

Great. She was frozen, her mouth ajar as she stared up at him, *through* him. Then her gaze dropped, lingering on his thighs and arms, on his jaw, and his mouth. A reaction he was accustomed to, but from her . . . Irrik wanted to glance down and check his aketon was still in place because an inferno of desire swept through him. He swallowed and, more to distract her attention from the changes below, asked, “What are you?”

The young woman frowned.

He wanted to hear her voice again, but in addition, the initial shock of meeting her was fading into cold dread. Irrik was here for a reason, *on the king's orders*. Orders he could only defy to a certain extent because of the blood oath. His mind reeled as he tried to see a way to get her out and still fulfil the oath.

“Let’s try a different question then,” he said. “Why are you out after curfew?”

As he spoke, he flicked a lock of dark hair out of his eye, halting when the waif before him flinched.

Part of him died. She thought him capable of striking her? He shook his head at his own stupidity. Of course she did. Why wouldn’t she? The woman recognized he was the *king’s Drae*. For how many years had he terrified her? Had he killed her family members? Her friends? Had his actions left her starving and cold and desperate?

“I’m sorry,” she stuttered. “I didn’t realize the time.”

A lie, but Irrik barely noticed it, no longer in complete control of his body. In a daze, he took one step toward her. The woman took three back before hitting the coarse stone wall.

“I won’t do it again,” she whispered, pressing back against the stone. “I promise.”

There weren’t many things Irrik needed. After a century of slavery, where nothing was his, he’d grown accustomed to what was necessary. He had to eat and drink. Sometimes, he slept.

This close to her, Irrik discovered he’d never known what need meant. He *needed* her. The tugging chasm of that need was boundless.

She screamed as he blurred across the remaining space, stopping before her. The woman raised an arm to protect herself, but he watched, head filled with her perfume, his eyes filled with the luster of her skin, and her beautiful features. She was perfection.

And fear struck Irrik. A fear that crumbled at the edges of the chasm she'd opened inside of him. He was enslaved . . . to another. Someone who would hurt her without even a thought—kill her even. And if that weren't enough, it felt as though the ground disappeared beneath him, if she knew Irrik, she would hate him.

Yet, he needed to protect her. To do that he needed answers, and she clearly wasn't willing to give them.

Slowly dropping her arm, the woman gazed upward, eyes wide with fear.

Irrik sucked in a breath, infusing it with onyx strands of his Drae energy, and exhaled. The droplets would take brief control of her mind, for a few hours—long enough to get her to safety.

“Last night you left The Crane's Nest after a meeting there. What was the meeting about, and where can I find the others who were there?” he asked.

“I was just visiting with my friend. She lives just up the road.”

Such an innocent answer. He wanted to laugh—until she inhaled deeply and leaned forward to touch him.

“Who is your friend?” Irrik snarled, harsher than he'd anticipated. He pushed her back. If she got too close, he wasn't sure if he'd be able to resist her pull.

“Why? You want to visit her, too?” she asked.

He furrowed his brow. Something was wrong. The humans under his thrall didn't usually ask questions. And the look in her violet eyes, such a beautiful color, was too focused. Too sentient. He eyed her and blew a second breath into her face.

She grimaced. “Can you stop that? It's kind of really, really strange.”

He jerked, eyes widening, and took a step back, almost stumbling with the shock. His mind raced as the pieces fell around him. There was only one person who could possibly be resistant to his breath.

The woman squeaked and let her face slacken. "I can take you to meet Sylva if you'd like?"

His thrall didn't work on her! "Stop pretending." He growled, his fear morphing into panic. "I can tell."

She laughed. *Laughed*. The warm rustle of fire on a cool desert night that made everything within him tighten. The meager hold he had over himself evaporated as the rest of the world disappeared. There was only her and him, in the darkness of night.

"You can see me. You're resistant to the droplets in my breath." He studied her, his gaze intense and penetrating. In a low voice, almost to himself, he murmured, "It can't be."

Time slowed as, with rapt attention, Irrik reached for her.

His hand trembled, and he moved in small increments, wanting to give her the freedom to pull away, but he was desperate to touch her. He didn't understand the burning urge; he'd lived a long time with only instincts to go by. He'd spent a century learning to control his every emotion, but Irrik seriously doubted stopping right now was option.

She was Drae

Her heady fragrance drove him wild.

The woman was resistant to his breath.

As his fingers touched the soft skin at her nape, he not only understood, he *knew*.

White-hot pain scorched through him, the searing fire burning away everything he'd once believed he wanted. He blinked and saw something new. Something bigger than him. Something more.

Her.

And the possibility of them.

Irrik ripped his hand away and stared at his arm. His onyx scales crawled up the back of his hands and wrists, pulsating with a vibrant lapis lazuli blue. And Irrik knew if he threw his head back and breathed flame at that moment, the color would be blue too.

Blue like her.

Blinking, he reined his Drae vision in, but he gaped. His onyx power danced and wound around the young woman and, finally, the meaning settled deep in his bones and in his soul. The strands of energy reached to the young woman who was kneeling on the ground and cradled her, attempting to draw her in, nearer to him where she belonged.

As she stood, her knees visibly shaking, Irrik drank in the sight of her, his chest rising and falling fast as his heart pounded with new purpose and new life.

For her.

His mate.



Everything I know is a lie.

I'm an ordinary mortal girl. Lord Irrik is a depraved dragon shifter. King Irdelron is an immortal tyrant.

In the disease ridden land of Verald, life is mapped out much like the established rings of our kingdom. Everyone has a role...

Me? I'll be uselessly serving potato stew for the rest of my life because I can't make anything grow.

But starvation brews rebellion.

When the king strikes, I'm captured by Lord Irrik. Instantly, I'm embroiled in a deadly game. One where I'm desperate to understand the rules.

Because nothing makes sense anymore.

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