

Celestial Dragon
Opening Scene

By Ciara Gold

One

Bastian Province of Satobik, 3015 AD

“Kemios? Delt? Are you here?”

Chelian Kar’s voice echoed in the empty hallway. Neither greeter answered her summons. She searched the corridor for some sign of their presence.

The incessant knocking at the front doors gained volume. Chelian Kar stood in indecision. Where were the greeters? She crept toward the door, her fingers clutching her long skirt.

Again, someone pounded on the heavy metal doors, rattling the casing with their insistent bid for admittance. Chelian’s eyes scanned the hall, seeking someone other than herself to answer the summons. No one emerged from the shadows. Did she dare break the law to admit the unexpected visitor? Before her courage fled, she grasped the door handle and pulled the door wide. Having done so, she took five steps back to insure an appropriate distance from the caller and dropped her gaze to the floor.

A gentle breeze swept through the opened door, bringing with it the heady smell of *bennetor* blooms, *milimem* sprouts, and an unidentifiable scent unique to the visitor. Curious, she studied a pair of large boots, noting the strange design tooled in the *truscan* skins. A stranger called upon them, one not of their province.

She murmured formal words of greeting.
“Welcome to Kel.”

“*Fa teares Bande Kar?*” a male voice asked, the sound deep and rich.

Chelian’s head snapped up. He spoke Fendabor, a dialect used by the ancients. Had he even understood her? Their eyes met. Realizing her mistake, she averted her gaze.

With less confidence, she repeated the welcome in Fendabor and asked, “Do you wish an audience with Sire Kar?”

“If it pleases you, yea. I have a matter of grave importance to discuss.”

He seemed unperturbed by her presence. Questions ran rampant inside her head. Who was this stranger? By law, he had the authority to demand a different greeter, one who was not Deliphit. She kept her eyes trained to the floor and allowed him entrance, all the while wishing she could lift her gaze to study the man more closely.

“May I have your name so I may announce your presence?”

“I am known by Fen Dane Charst. I give you leave to call me Fen Dane.”

Fen? Her eyes widened. He proclaimed the title of prince. Turning, she felt him fall into step behind her. Too close. The man flaunted protocol in more ways than one.

She stumbled. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw him reach for her elbow. A bolt of static electricity shot from his fingertips to her skin. She yanked her elbow out of his reach before his fingers could come in contact with her person and whirled to face him. While her skin tingled from the impact of the electric current, his move to touch her seared her with longing. No one willingly touched a Deliphit.

She hid her confusion behind angry words. “Have

you no respect for the law? You can't touch me. Even to look upon me invites censure. You'll get us both in trouble. Please observe protocol and kindly fall into step at least five paces behind me until I see you safely delivered."

He pushed the hood of his cloak from his head. Deep *ebonharde* eyes captured hers before she realized her own egress from the rules. His rich, dark hair with highlights of *nezarine* indicated his Fastian heritage. The heavy cloak he wore covered his large frame, masking the details of his build, but for Chelian, his face proved arresting enough. She turned away lest he accuse her of breaking Bastian law.

"I believe there has been some misunderstanding." His rich voice halted her steps.

"How so?"

"I am familiar with some of your laws and customs, but not all. You must apprise me of these rules you allude to. I cannot understand why 'tis not allowed to look upon such beauty."

She peered over her shoulder but kept her eyes carefully downcast. "Can't you see I'm Deliphit?"

"'Tis a term I am unfamiliar with."

Though it sounded sincere enough, Chelian found his admission difficult to believe. "Just keep well behind me. You need not know more."

She proceeded to lead him to her father, turning down a hall to stop before a set of double doors. Relieved that he'd stopped far behind her as requested, she tapped on one of the metal doors. At the sound of her father's voice, she swept through the portal and quickly announced Fen Dane's request for an audience.

"A stranger?" Her father turned accusing eyes toward her, his large frame more intimidating for the guilt she experienced. By the volume of papers scattered about, she'd interrupted his preparations for a meeting with the Council. He slammed his hands on the desk. "By

what breach do you escort this man?"

"Forgive my slight, Father, but by grace, I couldn't leave him unattended when no greeter answered his summons."

Her father sighed. "The greeters are occupied unloading a shipment of *truscal*. The animals proved difficult to manage."

"Thank you for the explanation, Father. It relieves my mind to know I had just cause for acting against protocol."

Out of her peripheral vision, Chelian noted her father's nod of agreement. "Allow the man to enter, then take yourself off to your room. We no longer require your presence."

"*Tens er del, Sire.*" Fen Dane continued to speak Fendabor. His commanding tone made Chelian hesitate.

"Can't the man speak Fastian?"

From hooded lashes, she peered at Fen Dane. Did he truly not speak Fastian, or did he toy with her? "*Nock*, Father. I don't believe he can. He sends you greetings. Should I stay and translate for you?"

"*Self*. It appears you will have to stay after all." Bände pointed a beefy finger toward the corner of the room. "Sit in that far chair. I give you leave to lift your head. My hearing isn't strong enough to hear your words if you talk to the floor."

Chelian smiled, grateful for the opportunity to be useful. She turned to Fen Dane and gave the proper introductions. "I present to you Fen Dane Charst."

"A king's son?" Her father's bald head snapped around, and he stared at the prince.

"Yea," Fen Dane answered when she'd translated but failed to elaborate.

"Fen Dane, I present to you my father, Sire Bände Kar, high chancellor of the home-unit of Kel and noble second son of King Vem from the province of Bastia."

As per custom, the man lifted his hand, palm

turned out. Her father fit his large palm to the man's, welcoming him to Kel. Once done, Fen Dane removed his heavy cloak.

Nothing could have prepared Chelian for the magnificent creature hidden behind the folds of cloth. The form-fitting material that molded itself to his legs and body defined every curve and muscle. Black, *truscan* boots hugged his shins. A finely woven tunic draped over his shoulders like moonlight over *cerubic* fields. The garment, cinched at the waist with a heavy belt, fit his muscular frame with simplistic opulence. Bare flesh exposed between a low vee of *darsk* fabric beckoned her to touch his lightly furred chest.

In all her days, she'd never seen such a costume. From where did he come? Even the way he wore his long hair differed from the men of her father's acquaintance. Pulled back, it lay tight against his scalp, fastened by a string wound many times around its thickness. The style accentuated his sharp facial planes.

"My daughter seems to have lost her concentration."

The rebuke hinted at her father's amusement but caused Chelian to frown as she realized Fen Dane had made a comment she'd failed to interpret. Returning her focus to the conversation, she began to translate the dialogue between both men.

"As customary," Bande said, "I give you the hospitality of my home-unit, Kel, for the duration of ten *datons*. I assume this to be enough time to conclude whatever business brings you to our doors."

"Yea. 'Tis more than enough time, for I believe you will be very interested in what I have to discuss."

"By your manner, dress, and speech, I assume you're from a distant province and not a local home-unit."

"True. I've traveled far for this meeting. In return for your hospitality, I would offer you a gift, a sample of

my purpose in seeking you out.”

Fen Dane reached into the bag draped across his shoulder. He withdrew an object wrapped in thin tissue and set it upon the desk. He unveiled the gift, but Chelian became more interested in watching his tapered fingers than discovering the prize hidden within.

Bande leaned forward and, with a gentle touch, removed the wrapping from the object still cradled in Fen Dane’s palm. A glitter of light caught Chelian’s eye, and she tore her gaze from the man’s hands to risk a glance at her father. Bande’s pale eyes grew wide, arrested on the gift. Chelian’s gaze swung back toward the object.

She gasped.

Before them rested the largest zeel crystal she’d ever seen. Its iridescent facets gleamed beneath the artificial lighting. Chelian restrained her urge to rise for a closer look.

Fen Dane smiled. “The stone is yours, Sire Kar.”

Bande swallowed, clearly affected by the magnitude of the gift. “Your kindness is overwhelming. What do you seek in return?”

“What I seek is of a delicate nature. Before I make my request, I would have you know the extent of wealth I would bestow upon you in trade.”

Bande fastened his eyes upon the stone.

“Proceed, Fen Dane. You’ve most certainly aroused my curiosity.”

“I am prepared to offer you a cargo-hold full of these crystals.”

The words seemed to bait Bande’s greed, and Chelian saw her father’s eyes glisten. What did Kel possess that could possibly be worth the amount Fen Dane proposed?

“And in return?”

Fen Dane smiled. “Tis a small request, but one that might meet with opposition. Know that I do not make this appeal lightly. In return for listening, I will gift you

with another stone. Both stones are yours whether you accept my terms of trade or not.”

“Your generosity is unheard of.” Bande’s cautious reply did not match the gleam in his eye. “Tell me from whence you hail.”

“’Tis a small province across the Dragon Craters.”

Bande’s gaze caressed the stone with a possessiveness Chelian found distasteful. Preoccupied with the zeal crystal, he reacted slowly to Fen Dane’s comment. “It’s impossible. You couldn’t have traversed across the craters. The dangers are too immense.”

“’Tis impolite to contradict my claim.” Fen Dane’s eyes narrowed at Bande’s careless remark.

“I meant no disrespect. Your bold claim surprised me. I apologize if I offended you.”

“You may make amends by offering me an official introduction to your daughter.”

At this, Chelian faltered over the translation. She would have to explain her position in this house, or Fen Dane would continue to break rules through ignorance of Bastian laws.

Bande frowned. “My daughter, Chelian.” He shrugged with indifference. “She can’t greet you formally, and you wouldn’t want her to.”

“I find fault with your assumption. I would very much like for her to greet me. I will consider it a slight if she refuses.” Fen Dane’s *ebonharde* eyes darkened with interest. Chelian squirmed beneath his intense regard.

“*Nock*. She can’t. It’s forbidden.”

“You will explain.”

“She is Deliphit.”

Fen Dane stared at her, his expression full of inquiry. Bande’s simple declaration should have been enough. How could this man not know what it meant for her to be Deliphit? He’d made mention of his unfamiliarity of the term, yet she found his lack of knowledge unbelievable.

“You don’t understand?” Bande asked.

“Nay. I need further explanation.”

“A recessive gene makes an appearance every third or fourth generation. As she is my only child, we deal with the full ramifications of her affliction.”

“I still do not fully understand. I see no signs of the deformity of which you speak.”

Though she continued to translate, Chelian could not bear to be a third party to the discussion any longer. She interrupted her father, holding up her hand for permission to speak freely. At Bande’s nod, she began. “Can’t you see? I’m different. My *silveresk* hair and *nezarine* eyes mark me as Deliphit. Only three of us exist in Kel, and I’m one.”

“This does not explain the prejudice toward you. Why does this difference set you apart from the others?”

Chelian shifted her gaze to the opposite wall, trying to collect her thoughts. She didn’t want to verbalize all it meant to be Deliphit. It was complicated, and for some reason, she didn’t like the idea of this man thinking poorly of her. For once, she wanted someone willing to connect with her on both a physical and emotional level. Fen Dane had been willing to touch her to save her from falling. No other would have dared.

In halting Fendabor, Bande elaborated. “She has a sickness within her. She has supernatural powers I’ll not discuss. All you need know is that a Deliphit’s touch carries a poison, an evil that has destroyed past civilizations. To my utter shame and mortification, my own daughter bears this mark.”

Humiliation was second nature to Chelian, but to have her weakness exposed to this stranger caused a rare pain to rage through her veins. Her spine straightened, a gesture meant to indicate she didn’t care what either man thought of her. She felt Fen Dane studying her but kept her gaze averted. Let him wonder. No doubt he too would now persecute her for being

different.

“I do not fear her touch.” Fen Dane’s quiet words caused a shiver to run along her spine.

“Fear it or not,” Bande said, “it’s against the law to touch the woman while she resides within the House of Kel. For that matter, it’s against the law for anyone to touch her while she resides within the Bastian Province.”

Fen Dane stood and leaned his massive frame over Bande’s desk. “Then would it be within my rights to touch her should she no longer live within such perimeters?”

Chelian balked at interpreting the words. She sensed an underlying danger to herself. Fen Dane turned his head her way and gave her a gentle smile. Mollified by his easy manner, she quietly put the question to her father.

“*Selt*,” Bande replied. “But Chelian has never had cause to venture beyond these walls.”

A dramatic pause had Chelian sitting on the edge of her seat. Fen Dane’s finger reached out to stroke the crystal.

“A cargo-hold full of zeel crystal in exchange for twenty unmarried women of childbearing years. The transaction to be completed six *datons* from now.”

Chelian froze. The words became difficult to form, but she managed to stumble through them.

Bande’s ruddy complexion paled. “You barter in slaves?”

“Nay. I barter in mates. Each woman selected will be bound for life to a mate of superior breeding and intellect.”

Her father’s eyes narrowed, and he scratched his balding pate. “What of your own women? Can’t you find mates within your own house?”

Fen Dane pushed the zeel crystal closer to Bande. Its numerous facets reflected beams of light, bringing Bande’s attention once again to the promised wealth.

Fen Dane shrugged. "My reasons remain my own. You need not concern yourself with details. The women will be well cared for. And you, Sire, will be wealthy beyond your wildest imagination."

Her father inhaled deeply, a harsh rattle in the quiet room. The crystal seemed to mesmerize him, and Bande's eyes gleamed. "*Selt*. I'll see it done."

"And Chelian?" The man persisted.

"What of her?"

She perched straighter in her chair. *Selt*. *What of me?*

"I would take her personally for my mate."

Chelian jumped to her feet. "*Nock!* I won't translate such a request for you."

Fen Dane gave her a gentle smile. "'Tis of no concern. I no longer need you to interpret my words."

Her brow wrinkled in dismay. She must have misunderstood. He turned his head toward her father and asked the question again in perfectly vocalized Fastian.

"Sire Kar, I humbly request your daughter for my mate."

Chelian's shocked gaze bore into Fen Dane's turned head. His attention remained trained on her father. She failed to consider the consequences of addressing the man directly.

"You had no need of me in the first place, Fen Dane. Why have you practiced such deceit?"

He turned his head slowly, and his eyes darkened with anger. "You risk much in calling me deceitful."

"Do you deny perpetuating our assumption you spoke only Fendabor?"

"Chelian," Bande said sternly, "you overstep your authority in taking this man to task. And I believe we've more serious things to discuss."

Chelian balked. Serious indeed, but as far as she was concerned, there needn't be any discussion. Surely Bande would decline the offer without further

deliberation.

“He has no knowledge of our laws,” she said, “or he wouldn’t ask this question. Deliphits don’t mate.” Her temper surged forward, and she knew her outburst must sound childish.

“Chelian.” Her father’s eyes narrowed in warning. “You may be excused. I don’t require your input into this matter.”

“Father?”

“Go. Before you force me to assign retribution.”

Her lips compressed into a flat line. She lifted her eyes toward Fen Dane, communicating silently her thoughts about the situation. She shouldn’t have to suffer the indignation because Fen Dane had sparked her temper. With regal bearing, she turned and walked toward the door.

“Do you leave without bidding a proper parting?” The deep bass of Fen Dane’s voice halted her.

He baited her!

Her head swiveled in his direction. “I can’t give proper parting. Such would require us to touch, and since it’s not allowed, I see no reason to intone the words.”

“Don’t be surly,” Bande ordered. “Give the man his due.”

She tried not to roll her eyes. “I bid you pleasant thoughts as you journey forth.”

Fen Dane walked toward her, stopping just shy of the required five stones to incline his head. “And I bid you the same, fair maiden.”

His gaze caressed her, touching her as no other had. She lowered her head. Without another word, she swept through the portal. The metal door shut with a resonating thud.

She lifted her head as she walked, a habit she practiced when no longer in the presence of others. Her heart raced with anger. How dare a stranger invade her

sheltered world with nonsense of mating. Her feet pounded the *netrant* floor, matching her heart rate beat for beat. Was he truly a prince? He'd misled her once already, making her believe the only tongue he spoke was Fendabor. She shouldn't have been so gullible. She slowed her harried pace when she neared her suite. Fortunately, no one tarried in the halls. She wasn't in the mood to play the invisible Deliphit.

Alone in her rooms, she gave vent to the fury Fen Dane had invoked. A crystal figurine sailed through the air to fracture into a thousand shards. She stared at the mess she'd created. Her impetuous act did little to relieve her anxiety. She grabbed Bertil, crushing the *terrin* doll against her breast. With a soft cry, she plopped down upon her bed.

"How dare he!"

Bertil was the favorite of her *terrin* collection. Its placid features gave her comfort.

"If only you could talk, you could advise me what to do – what to make of this prince. He wants to mate with me." She set Bertil down and jumped up to pace. "He can't. It's forbidden. No man can ever have me. It's written in the *Bastian Book of Law*. A Deliphit may not mate. Otherwise, the weakness might be passed on to a resulting child. I wouldn't wish this affliction upon anyone."

She paused and turned her attention to Bertil once more.

"He almost touched me," she whispered. "I've not felt a human's touch since the change possessed me." She sank down upon the bed again, her confusion more pronounced in the aftermath of memory. "He wanted to touch me, Bertil. No one *wants* to touch a Deliphit. The thought won't leave my mind. I should be content with my life, pleased with all I have. What's wrong with me?"

She gazed into Bertil's vacant eyes. "*Selt*. I'm cursed. Invisible to my people, I yearn to belong, to feel

the touch of another. Touching? I dare not hope for such. No. It's not possible. The man can't be allowed to break the law."

She pictured Fen Dane's fingers as they poised a hair's width from her elbow. What would it have felt like? *Fen Dane*. An important sounding name for an arrogant man.

"Look at me, Bertil. I forget how he deceived me into thinking he didn't understand Fastian. The man isn't to be trusted. He must never have the opportunity to touch me. Of this I'm sure. Prince or no, he'll not have me for a mate."

A light rap sounded upon her door. She had no idea how long she'd sat curled on her bed with Bertil for company. Never could she remember being so idle. She opened the door and stepped back.

"Sire Kar wishes an audience." Kemios stood stiff and unyielding.

Chelian smiled. The young greeter took pride in his job, following the dictates of the law to the last letter. And therein lay the difficulty and confusion she'd experienced by Fen Dane's bold request. The law had been ingrained into her since birth, and though she entertained a secret desire for a different existence, she dared not go against the fabric of society.

"Does he still entertain his guest?"

"*Nock*. Fen Dane has been shown to his quarters."

The stiff set of her jaw relaxed. She had no wish to see Fen Dane again while her thoughts eddied in a quagmire of confusion.

"You may tell Bande Kar I will attend him shortly."

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Dane followed the servant down a long hall to a set of rooms. The ceiling rose high above him, giving the appearance of grandeur. Yet, by no means could he compare the home-unit of Kel with that of his own home.

The servant escorted him to his room and left him

alone with instructions on how to reach the Hall of Welcome for the evening festivities. No one bothered to ask how he'd arrived or what baggage he could expect. They must have assumed he'd traveled by foot or by *hersia*, a beast of burden they'd tamed for travel. He chuckled. They had no idea just how far he'd traversed to accomplish his goal.

Twenty females. A noble goal for me to undertake. Added to the others he'd gathered from nearby provinces, he would journey home with ninety as prospective mates. The Verside would be well pleased. The group of men had waited a lifetime for the pleasure of female companionship. Exiled from their home, the Verside had carved a new life for themselves on a desolate planet, one devoid of women. And now, twenty *yons* later, Fen Dane would have his revenge on those who had thought to crush the Verside.

The power of the Burdven Empire had escalated since then, and he would need his wits to lead the fight against their tyranny. For this purpose, until now he'd claimed women only for his men and not for himself. The Verside needed to feel immortal, as if they fought for more than just revenge. They needed to leave Pelicosia secure in the hands of mates and children, a permanent tribute to their lives. 'Twas needful if he planned to lead an army of two hundred against an empire of thousands.

He collapsed upon the bed, weary from the day's events. His hand grazed the coverlet, an intricate weave of brilliant hues. *Nezarine* threads dominated the pattern, reminding him of a pair of eyes a similar color, the shade of Selinian crystal moors on his own home planet.

Chelian.

The daughter of a noble, yet they treated her as an outcast. Her regal bearing despite her bent head intrigued him. Beneath layers of translucent fabric, her body promised to be a supple blending of gentle curves. A pert nose, high cheekbones, and a pair of exotically

tilted eyes made her outshine the other women in beauty, but beauty alone hadn't swayed him from his need to remain unmated.

He stared at the ceiling and closed his eyes against bright lights that burned from an unknown power source. *Mintored* crystals offered subdued illumination for his people, something he'd taken for granted. Would Chelian be impressed with his home, with Pelicosia, or would she miss the opulence and strict protocol of the Bastian Province? Would she miss her father?

Chelian.

His blood stirred. Yea, he wanted her – needed her. He hadn't meant to take a mate, had purposely declined any propositions from the other women.

Until Chelian.

She alone had the power to claim his interest. His fingers still tingled with sensation, branded by the promise of sexual and spiritual fulfillment: *the spark of awareness*. The surge of electrical current flowed between couples destined to become one. No power proved greater in choosing a mate.

He could not dispel the craving he'd experienced from that one moment when the spark had arced between them. Even now, the blood pounded in his veins, and his mind filled with images of her beauty. With his attention snared by images of Chelian, not even Bastian law could prevent him from claiming her for his own.