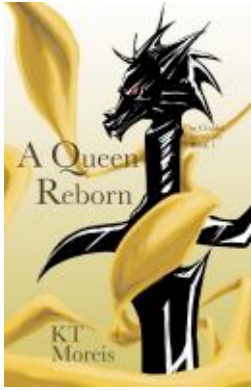




The Citadel
Chronicles
Book 1

A Queen Reborn

K.F.
Moreis



Fugitives from the Citadel, Claire, a Soul Host, and her Guardian, Cole, find themselves on Earth's Wild West frontier. With their days of running behind them, they settle down to live happily ever after running a saloon... Then the soul of the assassinated Queen of the Dragons emerges in Claire's body, causing trouble and nearly killing Cole. But when the Director of the Citadel tracks them down, things really get out of control.

The Citadel Chronicles

Book One

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“I am NOT delicate!” Claire screamed, throwing a vase of flowers at the wall. Unfortunately, Cole had chosen that very moment to come into the room. Ducking the missile avoided a concussion, but there was still a shower of water and bits of porcelain.

“Hey! I kind of had THAT figured out a long time ago,” Cole said and quickly closed the door to keep any more outbursts from disturbing their guests. Blood began to ooze from several small cuts, and there were more little pieces of glass lodging themselves in skin and clothing. “That really stings, Claire. I suppose I should be glad you aren’t having target practice with those nice little throwing daggers—” Cole never regretted anything more than those words the minute they were spoken.

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First Edition

In 1851, Edgar “Sully” Sullison’s dreams of heading west to make his fortune in gold were crushed by a short-tempered stagecoach driver. Instead of the gold fields, Sullison was unceremoniously dropped off at an untended stage stop with just his luggage and a deck of cards.

Without enough money to buy passage on another coach, he was stuck in the middle of nowhere, in danger of losing his golden dream. But fortune smiled down and much to his relief, he was not alone for long. The stop was a popular place for settlers heading west, to restock water barrels at the river and rest up before striking out past the sheltering hills and into the desert.

Even though the settlers had little money, they were willing to gamble with Sully for food, allowing him to win his daily bread and an occasional drink of something other than river water. He even managed to collect a few pieces of furniture left behind when overloaded wagons were made lighter in order to save the oxen.

Stagecoach passengers, however, usually carried money and he was more than happy to relieve them of it at every opportunity. Fortunately for Sully, those opportunities were frequent. It didn’t take long for him to decide the place had enough potential to realize a new dream. Staking his claim to some land and using his formidable card playing skills, he gained enough capital to build a small, but well stocked trading post.

In short order the post expanded and included such amenities as rooms for rent and a small eating house where travelers could get a hot meal. Eventually, Sully was able to convince a blacksmith to set up shop, turning an untended stagecoach waypoint into a full-fledged town christened Sullisburg after it’s very first, albeit unintentional, citizen.

Nestled snugly at the foot of a low rise of hills, Sullisburg enjoyed a consistent supply of fresh water from the Little Lesser

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River. Over the hill to the north was a vast desert; a rolling landscape dotted with sage, Joshua trees, and saguaro. The occasional stone outcropping gave some visual relief, as did the higher hills in the distance.

If it hadn't been for the river and the regular visits from the stage line, Sullisburg would have died out. But word of the new town spread and soon more tradesmen and their families rolled in and declared Sullisburg home.

Three years after opening his trading post, Sully sold it and moved to a much larger building. Instead of another store, he opened Sully's Place, an establishment that offered everything from sweet-voiced singers and good food, to gambling and rooms for rent. Publicly, Sully piously stated that he did not run a brothel. In truth, it was his new wife, Lucinda, who operated that aspect of the business.

His new establishment included a nicely appointed apartment for himself and Lucinda, where they would retire after long hours working downstairs.

One evening, Edgar Sullison sat down at his favorite gaming table, and grinned a shark's smile to the fresh-faced young man who took one of the chairs opposite him. Sully knew the fellow had arrived in town that morning and had been seen wandering the streets, but no one could get him talking. Folks got curious and tongues got wagged, but conjecture is all they had. While newcomers weren't exactly unusual, this particular stranger garnered some earnest attention by the mere fact that no one could learn anything more about him than his name.

Sully figured he had an easy mark in the reticent stranger, even if he had to give up a hand or two to get information. When the cards were shuffled, two others tried to join the game, but Sully waved them off. He had a feeling he'd learn nothing at a crowded table.

"Well now, since I don't play cards with strangers, maybe we should introduce ourselves. My name's Edgar, but everyone here calls me Sully."

"Cole," the stranger said in a quiet voice.

"Pleased to meet you, Cole. Let's play cards."

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The first hand went to Sully, then the second. Finally, on the third hand, Cole took back what had been lost and a little extra to go with it. Back and forth the money went, with Sully winning less and less, and the stranger silently easing the saloon owner out of his comfort zone.

It was late and Sully was in deep. Sweat began beading on his forehead and he found it difficult to concentrate on anything but the pile of money in the center of the table. Cole seemed curiously relaxed, silent and unwilling to participate in the usual polite banter. Sully stared, trying to gauge the age of his opponent, but found himself at a loss. Even though his adversary looked no more than 20 years, he played as though he'd been at the table for twice Sully's lifetime.

When the stakes reached epic proportions, a hush fell over the establishment as all eyes watched the young man take everything their beloved founder had, including the saloon.

Loyalty to Sully notwithstanding, the game was declared fair by all who watched. The new owner took the offered deed, tucking it away inside a vest pocket. Then, in a gesture of good will, Cole walked up to the barkeep and ordered drinks for the house. "The good stuff, please, Frank."

Looks were exchanged by a few of the regulars as Cole left the saloon. Four of them thought they could persuade the young fellow to reconsider his winnings and followed him into the dimly lit nighttime street. When they felt the time was right, they made their move as one on the hapless soul.

Onlookers say it was over quickly, but they didn't expect it to end the way it did. Instead of retrieving the deed and delivering it to the saloon, the attackers were the ones who were soundly beaten and delivered to the sheriff's office.

News of the failed attempt to return ownership traveled quickly, and Sully left town before daylight reached the weathervane on the top of the bank building. He took his best horse and left his wife to fend for herself.

Lucinda decided that her first order of business was to apply her wiles to the new owner and convince the young man that she would

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be more than happy to continue running the saloon. She even offered to share her apartment with the new owner.

Her suggestion was gently, but firmly, refused.

Upon taking ownership of the saloon, Cole had Sully's apartment cleaned out, and despite Lucinda's protests, most of the items were sold to pay off debts. Lucinda remained in residence at the saloon, but now she was in a smaller room across the hall. Adding to the newly displaced woman's dismay, the new owner introduced everyone to a charming brunette named Claire. While outwardly friendly to the newcomers, in private Lucinda nursed a deep resentment toward both of them.

Claire and Cole stepped in to their new lives as business owners by making drastic changes to the way the saloon was operated. Claire was adamant that there would be no prostitution, and while a few rooms were to remain available for rent, the rest were to be used as apartments for the employees.

Over the next year business boomed and Cole bought the old hotel next door. Walls were torn down, doubling the size of the saloon in order to accommodate the growth. Upstairs, the rooms for overnight guests were furnished with the bare essentials, while the apartments for the permanent residents were cozy and comfortable.

At one end of the upstairs hallway, next to the back stairwell, was a small room containing a copper tub, a bench, and some hooks on the wall. It was Claire's idea to install the tub room and charge two bits for hot water. Soap was extra, of course. The idea turned out to be quite popular with guests and residents alike.

This turn of events was met with the full approval of Stella, the woman in charge of the kitchen and making sure the rented rooms were in order. To her delight, she was assigned two helpers and between the three of them, they kept the place clean and the customers well fed. Claire's Saloon quickly gained a much better reputation and business continued to prosper.

Four years later, the original incident had died out to the status of legend and the owners had earned the respect of most the citizens of Sullisburg. There were those who still considered the saloon to be

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little more than the average den of iniquity, with Claire and Cole fairing no better.

But Miss Claire ran a clean and fair business, and when things got out of hand, it was Cole who stepped in and restored order. Even though most men were head and shoulders taller, none of them were faster or stronger, and fortunately, slower to anger.

On this particular evening, Cole leaned back and propped a pair of black boots on the table next to a half empty bottle of whiskey and a very empty glass. Carefully tipping the black wide-brimmed hat forward to block out light, Cole smiled and slipped into a light doze.

It was a very short doze that ended with a hard blow to both feet, nearly upending both the chair and its occupant. Claire's voice, normally soft and melodious, pinned the ears back of every person in the saloon.

"KEEP YOUR FILTHY BOOTS OFF THE TABLE! HAVE YOU NO MANNERS?"

There were a few seconds of silence before every customer in the saloon stood and beat feet to the door, leaving upturned glasses and half-played games in their wake. Cole tipped back the hat and looked at the only person brave enough to do what she just did.

"Claire," Cole's voice was soft but dangerous, like a velvet-covered sword, "what the hell do you think you're doing?"

"I was just clearing the table, darling." was the saucy reply.

Looking around the suddenly empty room, Cole sighed, took off the hat and toyed with the brim. "Woman, you didn't just clear the table, you cleared the whole damn place. Now who am I gonna play cards with tonight?"

Claire picked up the discarded hat, flicked some lint off the brim then set it on her own head before leaning down to kiss Cole. "You've played enough cards for one day. Why don't you play with me now?" Strong hands found the buttons at the front of Claire's snug-fitting gown and popped two of them open.

"Much better..." the rest was lost in a long, lingering kiss. The spell was broken by someone coughing politely somewhere behind the bar.

“Oops, we forgot something,” Claire said with a smile. Grabbing the gaping front of her dress, she turned to the red-faced barkeep. “Sorry, Frank. We’ve all had a long day. Its closing time, so why don’t you head on home and I’ll get things cleaned up in here.”

“Yes, Miss Claire,” Frank said, pulling the apron over his balding head. He gave his handlebar mustache a twist, pulled on his coat and hat and stepped into the cool night air.

“G’night, Miss Claire,” Stella called from the door leading to the kitchen. “Almost all the rooms are full. I’m putting the kitchen to bed, then I’m doing the same for me so as I can get a good start in the morning.”

Claire looked over at the sweet black face of the maid. “That’s an excellent idea, honey. Get some good rest. We had a full house tonight.” She turned to Cole, “I’m going to close up before I come to bed.”

“Want some help, or can I just watch?”

Claire’s answer was to throw a cleaning cloth at Cole. “You can help, thank you. It will make closing go a lot quicker,” she said, letting go of the front of her dress.

“It won’t if you do that again,” Cole whispered, going over for another kiss.

Claire laughed and stepped away. “Get busy, you.” She set the hat on the cleanest table and got to work. She closed the doors and shutters, securing them against the quiet night and the steady dust-laden breeze. Cole carefully poured the half full glasses of whiskey back into the bottles behind the counter, saving a couple for later.

“Oh, honey, don’t drink that. I’ve got something special for us up in the room.”

Cole shrugged, downed the two drinks that had been set aside, and grinned. Claire laughed and shook her head. “You’re ridiculous, you know that Cole Gleason?”

“It’s one of my many fine qualities, or so I’ve heard.”

“And here I thought it was your golden hair. Or your blue eyes. Maybe those long lashes, or the way you kiss.” Claire turned and wagged a finger, “Oh, don’t think I haven’t heard the girls talking, you beast.”

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“I may flirt, but nothing more. You’re all I want behind closed doors.”

“You say the nicest things...” Claire said, rolling her eyes.

“What?”

“Nothing.” She finished pushing in the chairs around the tables as Cole wiped out the last glass and put it back on one of the shelves behind the bar. Lost in thought, Claire didn’t hear the footsteps behind her, and let out a small shriek as she was whirled around and thrown over a shoulder before being carted upstairs. “Don’t you dare kick our door open,” she whispered hoarsely, “you’ll wake everyone up and we’ll have to open the bar just to make them all happy.”

“Aw, Claire...”

“No! Lordy, this is killing my innards. Either put me down, or open the door and throw me on the bed.”

As a compromise, Cole kicked the door closed just hard enough to make it latch, but not come off the hinges. Claire landed with a gentle “oomph” on the bed and Cole on top of her. There was silence as kisses deepened and hands rushed to undo laces and buttons.

“Wait!” Claire gasped, “I want to take a bath first.”

“The water will take an eternity to heat up, woman. Besides, I like you gritty.”

“Cole...” Claire whispered, giving her lover another kiss.

Drake Vendt stood preening in front of the large mirror, holding his shoulders back and adjusting his Council robes to camouflage his lanky frame. It was his right of office to command respect and awe, but he felt that people could not take him seriously if he looked like a destitute middle-aged man who couldn't afford to feed himself. After giving his reflection a final nod of approval, he drew the drape over the mirror and took a seat at his desk.

Picking up the shiny plaque bearing the inscription: Drake Vendt, Citadel Director, he turned it over and over in his hands, watching the light flash off the well-polished surface. "Director," he murmured, "Director," then with a sharp shake of his head, set the plaque back down on the desk.

He held the highest office in the Citadel, outside the Supreme Council itself, and long felt he deserved a different title, one he believed was more fitting to his station. He had his heart set on Prefect, or Governor, but after an insultingly short deliberation, the members of the Supreme Council refused his petition. They believed such a title would be misleading; possibly giving those unfamiliar with the government of the Citadel the wrong impression. The Citadel was governed by a council comprised of representatives from several worlds. There was no Prefect or Governor, only the Supreme Council and that was not going to change. The Elders were adamant, so he settled for Director, but acted like a king.

His office was richly appointed with fine furnishings, exquisite artwork, and rare artifacts gleaned from worlds visited by Citadel emissaries. He was well aware that none of the treasures belonged to him personally, but it was that transitional quality that made him love each carefully selected item even more. The various Citadel museums got their share, but he made sure he had first refusal of the finer pieces. After all, he was the front man for the Citadel government, if

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he was going to deal with dignitaries and emissaries then by all the Gods, he should put the Citadel's best foot forward.

The room itself was large with vaulted ceilings, deep pile carpet over the stone floor, and plastered walls painted dark ochre. Dramatic lighting highlighted his favorite pieces, which is why the rich, heavy drapes over the large window behind his desk remained closed; outside light would have ruined the effect.

As Director, he was supposed to be available to anyone who needed Citadel assistance, but he assigned most of those mundane daily duties to his subordinates. The Council had made sure to appoint capable officers, and Director Vendt freely utilized their talents. He let his staff know he trusted them to make the right decisions, as well as not bother him with their petty, interdepartmental problems.

However, high-ranking dignitaries and other titled officials coming to petition the Council were ushered immediately into his office and given his full attention. When he wasn't entertaining those he deemed worthy enough to meet him in person, he took great pleasure in pouring over catalogs of recently acquired items that he could add to his private collection.

Despite the relative freedom he had as director, each week he found himself sitting through a briefing of the reports from the various departments that fell under his jurisdiction. With few exceptions, he found the task to be quite tedious.

One of those exceptions was the very one that gave him great pride and also caused him the most grief. It was, in his opinion, the most important department for the entire Citadel Government.

He called it the Host Program—it was his idea, his creation, and the reason he had been promoted to the position where he now held sway. Despite opposition from those who declared it barbaric and distasteful, it had become a very lucrative source of power for both the Citadel and Drake Vendt himself.

It was on the Host Program that he had built his own empire within the offices of the Citadel and no one questioned him or his tactics. He had proven his worth to the Council and they, in turn, gave him free reign, even if they did refuse his change in title.

All those years spent waiting, serving, and agreeing with fools finally got him where he was, and until the Supreme Council of Elders said otherwise, this was HIS office, and these were HIS things, and now someone was knocking on HIS door...

“Director Vendt?” Theo Caine stuck his head into the office and waited to be invited the rest of the way inside. Theo had been the brightest in his class and handpicked by Drake himself to be his assistant. He had proven to be trustworthy and indispensable, which surprised many people, considering his years counted less than thirty. Drake waved him in and pointed to one of the chairs directly across the desk.

“Ah, yes, Theo, right on time, as usual. What catastrophes need my immediate attention this week?”

Theo forced himself to look hard at the first report in front of him to keep his expression as neutral as possible, lest he insult his supervisor with a show of disrespect. He cleared his throat before speaking. “All is well with the High Council of Mages. They’re reporting no wars or famine, but they have had an influx of troll sightings on several worlds. We’ve been looking into that.”

“Trolls?” Drake asked, his eyebrow arching for his hairline.

“Actually, they’re mekdettes, sir, sort of a troll version of a rodent, only much, much larger.”

“Theo...?”

“They stand three *letas* at the shoulders. They eat rocks, and have a liking for the magic ones the mages place in their gardens.”

“Since when did trolls come back to the Mage Realm? I thought they were banished from there eons ago.”

“They were. The mekdettes were brought in to help clear some new ground. You know, breaking up the soil and reducing the size of larger rocks.”

“Then why are we ‘looking into’ this situation?”

“Evidently there has been some purposeful misinformation—”

“Lies,” Vendt cut in.

Theo nodded. “Yes. The importers assured the mages that the ones they brought in were sterile. They don’t live long—”

“Who don’t live long? The importers?”

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“No, sir, the mekdettes.”

“Troll rodents.”

Theo nodded.

“Why didn’t they just have the Geb Hesaii come help? I thought they were the stone experts.”

“The Geb Hesaii are the ones who suggested the mekdettes in the first place.”

“Sounds like trouble,” Drake said, shaking his head and sighing.

“The real trouble is someone spotted a breeding pair.”

“A ‘breeding pair’ of what?”

“Mekdettes, sir.”

“Oh, and how do they know it was a breeding pair they saw?”

Theo pulled his collar and cleared his throat, “Uh, sir, they were, uhh...breeding at the time.”

“Who was breeding at the time? The mekdettes, or the people making the report on the mekdettes?” Drake asked, winking.

“No, just the mekdettes.” Theo was finding it difficult to keep his voice even and calm at his boss’ embarrassing attempt at humor.

Drake’s eyes narrowed for a moment then he shrugged. “I see.”

“Evidently they, uh, the mekdettes, I mean, are quite, um, enthusiastic in their mating. Some magic pest-repelling statuary was smashed and several gardens were destroyed.”

Drake shook his head. “This is exactly why I don’t trust magic. People who use it, or worse, those who live by it, are insane. They should give up their ridiculous notions of magical pest repellent rocks, and just use the lovely devices we have here. They work well in our gardens.”

It was the same old argument, and one that Theo was wearying of having. “The mages would rather not have anything to do with technology of that type, sir. They’re still not on good terms with the Council of Engineers.”

“Grand. I suppose they expect me to come in and smooth things out between the two councils?”

Holding his tongue, Theo silently counted to five before responding, “It’s an ongoing issue, one that we believe the two factions are rather enjoying.” With a nod from Vendt, Theo picked up

another report and continued with the briefing. “The Council of Clerics have reported a larger than usual enrollment to their colleges.” He thumbed through several pages, “It appears to be pretty constant across the realm, all faiths. Interesting.”

“That’s good for us, isn’t it?” Vendt asked.

“I think it might be good for many people, as long as it isn’t a replay of the time when someone started the rumor about Clerics having access to some hallucinogenic potions. Theological colleges across all the Cleric worlds were bursting at their cornerstones until it became apparent those potions weren’t given out with daily meals.”

“Of course, of course, good for everyone, yes, indeed.”

“We’ve also received word concerning the birth of a Host. The child’s parents have been contacted by our clerics and compensation has begun. At three years of age, she already shows signs of strong abilities. Her parents have been introduced to the child that will replace her when she turns 13. It seems to be a good match, although the mother isn’t completely convinced. She is resisting.” Theo’s voice had an odd quality, one that Drake didn’t recognize.

“The clerics will do their duty and she will accept what is best for all involved. She is not the first to balk.” The Director’s voice drifted off, hanging in mid air for an uncomfortable moment before he continued. “Now, give me some news that isn’t in the standard reports, Theo. You know what I mean,” he said, lowering his voice and leaning toward the young man.

Theo pulled some papers from a large folder. “She’s still nowhere near the Citadel, or on any of the allied worlds.”

“We’ve known that for five years, Theo, when she disappeared with her...’passenger.’ I’m looking for new information.”

“Yes, well, in that case, I may finally have good news. We recently got word from one of our deep field sources. It seems Claire’s been living on a primitive world with which we have had little contact, and even fewer operatives. Communication is difficult at best, which is why it took so long to get a report.”

“I see.” Drake forced himself to breathe evenly, despite the hammering in his chest. “Theo, please don’t tell me the name of this primitive place is the one listed as the Earth-world.”

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“I’m sorry, sir, but it is Earth. Somewhere in the western section of a large landmass frequently referred to as the Western Frontier. Details are sketchy at best. But we know it’s listed under the heading of Very Primitive, sir. Marshal law, no electricity to speak of, and technology is, well, to risk repeating myself, this is a primitive world. There is, of course, great concern for her safety when the time comes.”

“I’m more concerned with what she’s carrying. Have the clerics involved determined when emergence will occur?” Drake asked, toying with a Mezian ceremonial dagger he used to open documents and clean under his finger nails. A dark look passed over Theo’s face, but it was gone before Drake could notice it.

Theo cleared his throat. “No. We are still in the dark about how this particular situation will play out, since as far as we know, it’s never been done before. Several of the clerics believe she will be killed during emergence due to lack of an appropriate vessel and proper assistance. There are those who surmise she will simply cease to be who she is and become the necessary vessel; and others are certain she will die, even if she was under their care for the event.”

“So I’ve heard,” Drake said, “but I wish we knew for certain. We can’t even ask the Dragon allies lest the opposing parties find out what we’ve done and war breaks out again. Damn Dragons and their inability to keep a secret. They have to tell it all and philosophize over it for years.” He jabbed the dagger back into its holder and pointed a finger at Theo. “Have you ever seen a Draconian debate?”

“I’ve never had the pleasure, sir,” Theo said, a half smile playing at the corners of his mouth.

“Pleasure? There is no pleasure in watching some verbose megalomaniac spout theories and conjecture on any given subject, including whether or not one should use the greeting ‘good morning’.” He shook his head. “Years, Theo, years spent wittering away on such topics.”

“They can afford it, sir. They live for eons.”

Drake ran a hand through his graying hair, sighing. “And yet, despite all that time to learn differently, they still act like a bunch of jackasses. Especially when it comes to matters of state.” He leaned

forward, pressing his hands on the polished surface of his desk. “It would have been easier if they had come to a decision on a Soul Host before it reached the critical point and we had to step in to fix it.”

“Maybe we should have left them to their own devices. I believe Draconians have a different method of dealing with a soul.”

Director Vendt shook his head. “We have proven that my, I mean, our methods are the best and most efficient. Their arcane theories would never have worked, at least not in time. However, had it been anyone else, we wouldn’t have become involved, but Sabine was, and still is, too important to us to just let her go. I’m sure she was, and still is, important to them as well.” Drake sighed and rolled his neck to work out the kinks. He sat up abruptly, hands gripping the edge of his desk.

“What if Sabine has already emerged, Theo? We could be too late.”

“I doubt that, sir. Our clerics feel strongly that the re-emergence of Sabine’s soul could very well send ripples throughout the universe, making it difficult to miss. Unfortunately, since we lost contact with our Earth-world operatives and communication with Earth is so sporadic, our chances of finding out ahead of time are slim. We may learn of the event along with every other living being on the material plane.”

“Oh, the hell. The damnable hell.” Drake stood up and went to the window where he peered through the drapes. Three stories below him, a small inner courtyard radiated beauty and peace. A peace he really wished he felt right now. “Does anyone else know where she is?”

“If by ‘anyone’ you mean the Council, then no, I don’t believe so, sir.”

“Good. Let’s keep it that way. I don’t need to tell you what a disaster that would be to have leagues of the Draconians marching onto some primitive world and wreaking more havoc than they have here.” He turned to Theo. “If only she hadn’t run when she did,” he said, pinching the drapes closed again. “She never disappeared so completely with a soul before, we’ve always been able to keep tabs on her and bring her back when it was time.”

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“Maybe because she didn’t know the transfer had been done,” Theo ventured.

Drake gave his assistant a dark look. “It was too easy for her to get so far without us finding her.”

“I’m sure luck had a lot to do with it. Sabine had just been assassinated and everything was in chaos. It would have been a perfect opportunity to slip away unnoticed.”

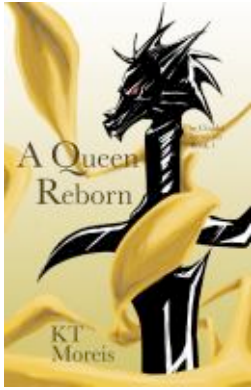
“Yes, yes, I know. I remember that night all too well.” Drake paused. “I’ve never seen anything like that, and I hope never to again.”

The two men were silent for a moment, lost in their thoughts. Finally, the Director spoke. “She’s not alone, is she?” His voice held equal amounts of concern and dread.

“No.” Theo looked uncomfortable.

Again Drake closed his eyes and willed himself to remain calm. “Oh, let me guess, she’s with her Guardian, Cole.”

“Of course.”



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