

THE DRAGON'S SACRIFICE

CHAPTER ONE

SHE SHIFTED THE basket on her hip, adjusted her grip until the woven reeds rested more comfortably against her side as she reached high overhead to grab for the gunayn fruit hanging from the branches. The fiery colored berries thrived well in the midwinter season, were favorites of the children seeking something sweeter during the long winter months. Too sweet for her, but then again, the fruits that grew during the colder seasons were slim and any bit of sugar was appreciated when it grew too chill outside and only dried stores remained to see out the winter.

Ciandra stretched her fingers further, standing on the small hilltop on the banks of Traimktor, the Hidden Lake, her footing precarious though she'd never fallen—

The eye blinked, its red so close to the fruits that she'd not noticed the difference until she was too close and the creature nearly atop her, or she atop it. Her lips opened on a scream and she stumbled back, lost her grip on the basket, her footing on the slope. The head above her reared away, the tree shaking with the creature's movements.

She fell.

Her foot caught in a tree root, ankle twisting as she tried to turn, reach for the ground, catch her descent even as she slipped further, the freezing waters of the lake reaching for her the closer she drew to its bank, the cliff that dropped into its depths.

Darkness be merciful.

So long as she fought free of the waves, could fight her way back to the beach, she would be fine.

Night let her be fine.

Someone would search for her, save her, so long as she didn't drown nor freeze in the cold air around her.

So long as the—Mother Night, what was it?

Her body stilled, stilled as much as possible given how she was crashing over the grass in her tumble away from the monster.

Its head was as large as her body was long. The teeth were the size of her forearm and she hadn't been able to see over the crest of its great snout to the rest of the body beyond her view. No creature was that large. The only ones that were, were nothing but myth. Stories. Tales told to frighten children. Lies.

Dragon.

It huffed and warm steam fell over her before she broke the thin layer of ice in the water and the face blinked from view when she closed her eyes and prayed.

Move.

She knew she needed to move, needed to kick her legs, pull with her arms, the ice closing over her head as she slipped deeper into the waters and the light dimmed the further she fell. The skirt around her legs dragged her down, the layers of leggings and under-wraps she wore too heavy to fight against. Her fingers spasmed in the deep. She reached upwards but there was nothing to grab. No garnet eyed fruits to clutch at.

She sucked in a breath of water, choked.

The cold turned to heat around her.

Darkness closed around her and she stopped struggling, drifting in the waves.



SHE WOKE WARM and wet on the banks of the lake. A tree, the whole of it wedged into the sandy ground of the shore, was burning brightly in the darkening night around her. The dead branches, leafless since the start of the fall, glowed brightly in shades of red and gold, white tipped sparks drifting down from the highest heights of the wood, shifting in the gentle breeze swirling over the lake's beach. The fire kept her warm from the front.

The heat at her back...

Steam, a warm gust of air, breathed over her neck, sent a chill down her spine.

She didn't turn.

A heavy weight pushed against her spine and buttocks, large enough that she felt the touch down her entire body, was practically rolled forward from where she rested on her side.

Would it push her further if she didn't obey the silent will of the beast? Did it require seeing her face before opening its maw and swallowing her whole?

It pushed her again.

Her toes curled in her shoe, one boot only, her other foot bare but for the coarse stocking she could feel clinging wetly to her skin. But her muscles reacted to her will, not frozen by the ice around her, warmed by breath and tree.

How fast would she need to be to outrace a beast three-times as large as any horse she'd seen?

Damnit.

She was an elf. She wouldn't die on her back or side or stomach. She wouldn't suffer the placid meal of a myth come to life!

It pushed at her spine and she turned with the shifting, rolled further away, towards the heat of the fire and the light blindness that would strike when she opened her eyes and ran towards the hope it provided.

If she reached the trees, she would be safe.

Her people lived in the trees.

Surely the monster wouldn't chase her there.

That it could hide so seamlessly within the dead branches of the forest, that she'd not seen it even though she'd been atop the beast's position in her hunt for fruit...

She couldn't think it.

Fear it.

She needed to run.

Ciandra scrambled at the ground, the frozen sands beneath her palms cutting at her skin and biting through the ripped and tattered cloth of her skirt. She gained her feet, managed to stumble away from the creature at her back, run to the burning tree.

Don't look behind. Never look behind.

The dragon roared and she fell, her hands clutching at her ears, the sound so loud, Blessed Night, so loud that she couldn't hear, not the crackle of the tree on fire, nor the water's bleating against the shore.

She hung her head, shaking it to clear the ringing from her ears, refusing to look upright and witness death stalking nearer, the heat of the body beside her engulfing her once more, hotter than before.

The weight of its head drew closer and she flinched at the breath that ghosted over her face, her chest, wavered like a snake preparing to strike.

Even with her hands covering her ears, the next roar rocked her on her knees, deafened her further. She cried out.

The creature's movements stilled, fell away.

Ciandra forced her eyes to open, her head to lift and look death in the face.

A bounty of reds and golds, molten scales that shifted in the light of the fire at its back, black one moment before lit by the spark of the conflagration burning merrily unawares.

It was beautiful, terrifyingly beautiful, this creature come to her woods.

She only wished she could have spared her family, her kin, its wrath, warned them of its presence, befriended the beast and calmed the raging fire in its ruby gemmed eyes before it killed her.

The head shifted to the side, moved until the red of its eye met the green of her own, her reflection oddly discolored in its gaze, warmed and heated until she looked a creature of the sunlight and not the Dark that she called Guardian and God.

A hiss escaped the beast. Garbled stops and slurs, a long bleat of sound that resembled more the crushing of water roiling over a waterfall than any creature's natural voice.

Ciandra flinched and the creature chuffed and drew further away.

It didn't strike against her.

She blinked.

The red orbed slit eye mimicked her gesture, its eyelid moving horizontally to cover the pupil rather than up and down like her own gaze.

Her breath sped.

She pulled her hands away from her ears, stopped when the beast made another chuffed sound she couldn't decipher.

Its head twisted on its reticulated neck, an elongated spine curling over the back of its head, hidden when she first spied it in her fall from the cliff.

The cliff!

She turned towards the lake, forgetting for a moment the creature before her to stare at the waters she'd fallen through, the lack of ice on its surface, the steam rising into the cold air around them, not boiling, but warm, as warm as the beast's breath.

"Did you rescue me?"

"Ciandra!"

"Cia? Where are you?"

"Ciandra! Answer us, girl!"

Her gaze moved from the dragon's face, the great head having shifted at the first call of her kin moving closer through the trees, the woods echoing their voices to aid in their search, her home coming to her aid as she knew it would if she'd but stumbled between the trunks.

But she'd not needed the woods to protect her from the creature crouching before her.

Legs, arms, bent beneath it, belly to the ground, only its head and neck mobile and searching the darkness for those crashing through the foliage, however large the search party was she couldn't tell as yet.

"You weren't going to hurt me, were you?"

Her soft voice drew the beast's attention. The head turned back to her, cocked though she couldn't tell if it was in understanding or confusion, agreement or contemplation as to why it hadn't eaten her yet and whether those coming would make the better meal.

The beast slunk forward until its chin rested on the ground in front of her, turned enough to the right that one eye was on her while the other was turned towards the trees.

She flinched at the cawing in her head, the screeching cries echoing within her mind, scratching at her consciousness. Her hand rose to her forehead, pressed against the pounding pain, felt for the bruise forming from her fall.

"Ciandra!"

The calls at her back grew louder.

The cackling of crows stilled in her mind.

She reached out her hand, her fingers curled at the puff of steam that she moved through to place her palm against his snout, the smooth, warm scales that covered his hide.

So soft.

So hard.

"Please," she stroked over the long muzzle as far as she could reach. "Please, you have to go before they find you."

Hers were not a people of open-mindedness. What they couldn't control, they killed. It was their way, her way, the Darkness' Way.

Yet this creature of fire and light, myth and legend...

It had saved her, hadn't it?

She wanted to believe that, and she didn't know why. "You have to go. Go before they find you here."

Gu-oo.

The sound echoed through her head, felled what little equilibrium she'd mustered after hearing its roar for the first time.

No, not an it.

The voice in her head, a voice so different than her own, so powerful, so male...

"Go. Run away. Get away from here."

Go.

She didn't think he understood what she was saying.

If he wouldn't leave to protect himself—

But the tree was still burning, a beacon calling her kin to them where they lingered on the banks of the water.

"Ciandra!"

She turned towards the voice rushing closer to her, the man breaking through the forest line and his feet slowing at the rising of the dragon's head, the hint of flame that spat from its, his, nostrils. "Oris don't. Stay aw—"

The dragon roared, this time flame spitting from his mouth in a long plume of fire that lit the night sky around them brighter than the first rising of the sun in the morning.

She looked at the beast, watched wings unfurl from his sides, greater and wider and more magnificent than she could have imagined.

Her breath caught, the heat of his roar drying the air in her lungs but she couldn't, wouldn't, look away.

He reared back, standing so that his forelegs could claw at the air as he pushed off from the beach and his wings caught the wind, drew him towards the clouds and far from the danger of her people and whatever weapons, whatever magic, that might be able to bring to bear against him.

She watched him fly.

Fly.

Flying higher and higher, high above the height of the greatest trees around her, soaring into the darkened clouds overhead, the blinding light of his fire dying to darkness, hiding him in the night while Oris finished his trek across the beach, threw his arms around her, the ground shaking gently as others of her kin ran to her side, yelled and roared at the beast whose magnificence they had no chance of matching, and she watched until she couldn't find any hint of the creature in the sky any longer before she turned into the hug holding her tight and shook to those seeking to ensure she was safe.