

Fire Bearer

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Never meddle in the affairs of dragons for humans are crunchy. And taste good with ketchup.

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1 - Chapter One

Time passes by us, as it often does; swift on its course, it runs onward forever. There are very few races who don't feel the touch of Time's waters as she rushes by. The gryphon and the sphinx, few though they are, finding their homes among rocky crag and desert sun, are as far from Time's river as the east is from the west. Elves live in their forests, far from Time's rushing consequences, and the dragons living in the mountains are from her splashing streams.

Though they continue long into the ages, seeing mortal kingdoms come and go, though they are mighty and deadly, the dragons have a pestilence among them. It is a disease that has cursed them for eons, since the first king of the dragons insulted a great sorceress. From that time and onward, the dragons have been unable to bear female offspring. At first, they worried not, for their race stretches its claws far into the fabric of time, making them hard to displace and uproot.

Slowly, slowly, the number of their females began to wither and die. The cries of outrage that came from the dragons sparked wars and terrors. Sorceresses were killed, witches were hunted. Magic quickly became a practice for men alone; the women were often killed far before they could complete any training.

For nearly three hundred years, the dragons had no off-spring; no small ones were born to them. As by chance, however, a dragon became enamored with a princess who was offered up to him as a way of placating his temper. He took her to his caves, observed her and watched her. He gifted her with treasures he had collected over the years, priceless riches beyond imagining. He grew to love her and used his magic to shed his dragon form and take on a human one. He lay with her and she bore for him a male child who was capable of shifting his form from human to dragon and back again. News of this birth spread and the dragons began to steal princesses away, using them to breed their children and to keep their race alive.

Four years after this discovery was made, the first princess was found to be pregnant with a female child. Great anticipation clutched at the dragons and they waited with trepidation for the pregnancy to come to term and the child to be born. Once nine months had passed, the princess went into labor. Hours later, the human dragon went to his peers, carrying a bundle in his arms. He knelt with them and pulled back the blanket, revealing the child to be dead.

And thus continued the race of the dragons.

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I sat, silent, beside my younger half-sister, Holly. We sat together in the high eastern tower, staring over

the towns and cities at the eastern mountains as they towered above the lands, their spires piercing the clouds and the sky. From time to time, a dark speck would launch itself across the sky, a dragon taking wing or landing.

“Why do you continue to sit here everyday?” I asked my half-sister.

As she did every time I, or anyone, asked a question, Holly remained silent, staring at the mountains, a mournful look in her eyes.

“Why do you watch those mountains? Are you so scarred from being with the dragons?”

Holly turned her blank, blue eyes to me, and then turned back to the window.

I stood with a sigh and dusted off my skirts. “Well, I need to get back now. I have etiquette classes.” I gave Holly a rueful smile. “You know how much I hate those classes, but the teacher said if I missed another, he would report it to our brother.” I leaned over and kissed Holly on the cheek. “I’ll see you another time, Holly.”

I departed from the room, walking gracefully down the stairs and the halls, as befitting of the Princess of the Eastern Lands. As I neared my lesson rooms, I saw my brother approaching. He was a tall man, though only just a man at nineteen. His hard jaw was set and his blue eyes - our father's eyes - were glowering at the world. He stopped just short of me, running a hand through his thick red hair.

“Where were you?” he demanded, his tone sharp.

“With Holly,” I replied, watching his jaw tighten.

“I don't like you seeing her,” he snarled, turning to walk at my side. “She was gone so long; we can only assume it was because she was plotting some sort of treason.”

I held back a contemptuous noise that was threatening to break out of me. Cavan had become so paranoid since ascending the throne after our father when the king died of grief over the loss of his second wife. Everything was about treason now. You could hardly breathe without being accused of treason against the crown.

But people had cause to talk. Cavan had broken so many treaties with the fae folk since ascending the throne. He closed down the weapons and materials trade between the humans and the elves. Magical pets, such as winged horses, were forbidden. Soldiers had orders to kill nymphs and dryads on sight. So much had changed, and no one could speak of it.

“I don't think the dragons would rise up against you, Cavan,” I told him, tucking a loose strand of blonde hair behind my ears. I had my mother's hair, while Cavan and Holly both had father's deep red flames.

Cavan grumbled to himself, turning away from me. “Everyone is rising against me, Aza,” he said, using the name I preferred. Azaphora wasn't a name I appreciated; the meaning was incriminating in times like these. “I can trust no one.”

I placed a hand on his shoulder and he jumped. “You can trust me, Cavan,” I told him quietly.

“Go to your lessons,” he said, his voice cold and closed, pulling away from me.

I watched him leave before I entered the room we had stopped in front of. Another boring etiquette lesson stretched on endlessly until I wanted to pull my nails out of my fingers. I took dinner with the etiquette teacher since he insisted that I prove to him that I could eat a full course meal with the proper utensils. When the dinner finally ended, I politely excused myself and went to my rooms.

Sitting hard on one of my many divans, I watched the sky behind the eastern mountains darken as the sun sank behind me, in the west. The mountains at night were always somewhat lit, glowing with dragon fire and dragon magic. They were beautiful, and I could understand why Holly enjoyed looking at them so much. But, for Holly, they were more than beautiful. They contained something that was quite obviously extremely important. Holly was only so single minded when something important consumed her.

I stood and moved to a large wardrobe, pulling out a small bag, a smile tugging at my lips. I had a driving need welling inside me to discover why Holly watched the dragon's mountains so intently. I couldn't resist a good mystery.

Placing some of my least obtrusive clothing in the bag, as well as an old magic book, I changed into a simple frock and slipped out of my room. I went to the gardens, walking through them as if I was merely taking a late night stroll. I passed several courtiers before coming to my private little grotto. I had played in this place since I was a child; it had been the first thing I had shown Holly when she had been old enough to walk.

Slipping behind a bush, I crouched and hobbled further back into the child-sized space. Reaching out in the dark, my fingers brushed first a stone wall and then cold air. With a victorious smile, I slipped into the hole, crouching as I walked along, through the wall. On the other side, I came out on the edge of a sheer cliff. Carefully, I sidled around until I found the place I used to climb down when I snuck into the village.

After a few more moments, I was on the ground. I glanced about and then dashed into the nearby forest. When I could no longer see the spires of the palace rising above the trees of the forest, I collapsed in a heap on the ground, under a tree. I curled about my bag, closed my eyes, and fell asleep.

2 - Chapter Two

Walking, walking, walking. All I had done since the sun thought it smart to rise about the horizon was walk. My feet ached and I was covered in grime and sweat. As a princess, this wasn't something I was really used to. When I had been younger, I had learned the basics in sword-fighting and gotten sweaty; I had gardened with some of the yardsmen. But I hadn't done things like that in ages. And it was taking its toll.

Sometime earlier, as it was about midday, I had used my magic book to cast a small spell to limit my walking distance. Crossing over hundreds of miles wasn't my idea of an ideal experience, so I shortened the trip with a simple ten-league stride spell, or something of a similar kind. I came upon a town rather close to the foot of the dragon's mountains and canceled the spell, interested in purchasing something to eat. In my haste to depart the night before, I had forgotten to pack anything to eat. Somehow, though, that didn't surprise me.

I walked by lush farmland as I approached the village, my stomach screaming at me in outrage that I had forgotten it. I smiled as I passed the cows and sheep. I had always liked animals, even if my brother thought that animals were just stupid beasts. Taking in stray cats and dogs had been a favorite pass-time of mine before my parents passed away.

As I moved closer to the village, I began to hear two men arguing. Curious, I slowed as I passed by them. They stood in a field, both dressed in finery I wouldn't have expected to see on farmers. One, the taller, wore fine purples and blues to match his blue-black hair. I could make out glittering silver embroidery on the hems of his clothes as well. The other wore greens, a light green tunic and deep green pants which tucked into tall leather boots. His brown hair flowed passed his shoulders in waves. Both looked very angry as they stood, yelling at each other, over the corpse of a cow.

I approached, somewhat quietly, tugging on my blonde braid as it flopped over my shoulder. They didn't notice me at all; they just continued to shout at each other.

"Uh... excuse me," I ventured, leaning myself a bit closer to them to try and catch their attention.

They ignored me.

"Damn it, Nagash, the blasted animal is mine! I caught it!" the brown haired man roared.

The black haired man, Nagash, looked bored as he replied, "Yes. And then it got away and I killed it, Jonah. Stop doging about it."

I frowned. *Why are they arguing about who got to keep a dead cow?* I wondered to myself, watching them go back and forth a bit more.

Finally, annoyed at the fact that they were ignoring me, a princess, I placed my hands on a cocked hip

and shouted, rather loudly over them, "Excuse me!"

They stopped and turned to me.

"What?" they both demanded. Jonah glowered at Nagash (I suppose for saying the same as he), who ignored him completely as he focused on me.

"Why, in the name of all holy things, are you arguing over a dead cow?" I asked, giving them a bewildered look. "Just split the animal down the middle and be done with it before the flies and vultures get at it."

"Half a cow is hardly a sufficient meal," Jonah growled, sounding petulant and grumpy. I noticed that he had dimples. It made him look adorable. Then his words registered.

"Hardly sufficient?" I demanded. I shook a finger at him. "Half a cow can feed at least six people!"

Nagash arched an eyebrow and then threw back his head, laughing, as Jonah looked at me, obviously annoyed.

"Stupid human," Jonah growled. A sudden feeling of apprehensiveness bloomed in my stomach, dropping like a rock to the bottom and making me nauseas. Jonah turned to Nagash. "She thinks we're humans."

That, to me, sounded rather dumb. "Well, you certainly look like humans," I pointed out.

Nagash, finally done laughing (not that I would particularly mind if he continued laughing as long as the laughter wasn't directed at me), smiled at me. The smile was hardly warm and didn't reach his blue eyes. "Never meddle in the affairs of Dragons," he said to me. I immediately backed up a step. "For you are crunchy," he added, almost thoughtfully, "and taste good with ketchup."

I swallowed hard. "Dragons," I said weakly. "You're both dragons."

Nagash shot me a look. "We aren't dragons," he snapped. "We are Dragons. Damnable creatures you've become not to recognize the difference."

I couldn't hear a difference. "Oh. I, uh, see," I lied.

"Liar," Nagash said quickly, advancing on me. "I rather don't like when people interrupt a meal, insult me, and then lie to me," he growled.

I laughed nervously, stepping backwards each time he stepped forward. "I wasn't aware I insulted you," I said, trying to muster as much courage as I could.

He chuckled. Again, laughing at me. I really didn't appreciate that, but I really wasn't in a position that would allow me to point that out. "You called me a dragon, little human," he said. "A very large insult, I must say. Don't you concur, Jonah?"

Jonah froze in place, his hands hovering above the corpse of the cow. "Er, yes. Of course I agree, my Lord."

I frowned, and then suddenly realized that I was on familiar ground. "Wait a moment!" I said quickly, holding up a hand as if that would stop the Dragon Nagash's advance. "You called him 'my Lord' and yet you fought with him?" I asked.

Jonah looked slightly distressed as Nagash's eyes turned calculating on me. "Yes..." he replied hesitantly.

"Well, that's obscene!" I exclaimed. "If he truly is your Lord, than surely you would yield the cow to him and not horde it for yourself."

Nagash's lips twisted into a smile. "How right she is, Jonah."

Jonah looked sullen and annoyed. "Very well. I'll go find another lunch." A ripple flowed over his skin as he shifted from human to Dragon. I stared at him as he transformed. Scales blossomed over the rippling skin, greener than the grass on which we stood. His body contorted and twisted gracefully as his face elongated into a snout and his arms shortened. His legs became thick and powerful and he sprouted a tail nearly as long as he. Wings, large membranous things with claws on the ends, stretched above us as he leaped into the air. With a powerful downward thrust of his wings, he was gone.

Nagash turned back to me, gracing me with the same smile that he had given Jonah. "I commend you, Princess, on your ability to send a Dragon to the sky," he said smoothly.

"Well, it wasn't really me," I said, tugging my braid. "It was more you and me reminding him about you, since you are his lord and all, and I figured that would strike him and..." I trailed off, frowned, and then looked up at him. "What position do you hold, exactly, as his Lord?"

Nagash's smile grew. "I am Nagash of aelle Bastkarwa, wyvern of the gold and silver dragons, Keeper of Fire and Ice."

I frowned, scrunching up my nose, not sure if I was supposed to understand any of what he just said.

With a frustrated sigh, he barked, "I'm the bloody king of the Dragons, you thick-headed princess!"

My eyes widened. "Oh," I managed. Suddenly, things weren't looking so great. I had insulted the king of the Dragons, it appeared.

He approached me, his smile still on his face. His blue eyes sparkled at me, laughing at some joke only he knew. I had the sinking suspicion that the joke was on me.

"As you have insulted me, my dear Princess, you must make amends. As you are a princess, and I currently have no princess of my own, I shall take you back to my caves," he said, his skin rippling as he shifted his own form.

Jonah's transformation had been shocking and beautiful to watch, as I had never seen a Dragon change from his human form to his Dragon form. But where Jonah's transformation was beautiful, Nagash's stole my breath. His body changed as if it flowed like water, his skin vanishing under deep blue scales. When he stood before me, completely transformed, he was huge. We were near a tree and, when he lifted his head to its full length in a stretch, he easily reached above it.

With a strange look that I assumed was his way of smiling, he bent his face so that it fell level with mine. "What is your name, Princess?" he asked me.

"Azaphora," I replied, starting to shake. His head alone had to be as long as I was tall. "But everyone calls me Aza because I don't really like-

"Azaphora. It suits you." Suddenly, he lunged forward and I was caught in his claws. When I finally gained my bearings, I was hundreds of feet above the ground and pressed up against a rather dead cow.

I did the only thing I could think of.

I fainted.

3 - Chapter Three

When I finally came to, I was resting on a bed much smaller than what I was used to, covered by threadbare sheets. My braid had been taken out and my hair spread about me like a blonde halo. I quickly sat, my fingers automatically redoing the braid as I looked around, trying to figure out where I was.

The first thing I noticed was the smell of fire and metal, and that strange static smell one often notices right before a rainstorm. I looked around, rubbing grit from my eyes. A glowing ball of light sat inside a jar beside me on a table. I frowned at it, and then realized the light was a wisp, one of the willow-o-the-wisp, that leads travelers through bogs. I shuddered and turned away, looking at the smooth walls of the cave I was in. They were decorated with pretty fabrics, red silks and satins mixed with oranges and yellows.

To my left, I noticed a glass door, the evening sun shining through it, partially hidden by more sheets of silk. The glass door, I saw, opened onto a veranda that would give a wonderful view of the countryside. Water bubbled softly from another room, the sound of a flowing stream. A dresser and mirror, covered in grime, were propped against the wall to my left as well and, across from my bed, was another small door and several shelves, presumably for books.

A scratching noise from behind the door had me frozen and staring in that direction, watching the door critically.

“Please?” I heard a voice ask quietly. I sounded as if it belonged to a young boy. “I’m much smaller than you. I can go see.”

I frowned at the comment wondering who was speaking and to whom.

After a moment's silence, another voice replied, “Very well. But if she is not awake, do not wake her.”

I nearly fainted again when I recognized that voice. Nagash, the king of Dragons, had spoken last.

Slowly, the door was pushed open and a small, silver Dragon head poked itself into my room. The brilliant green eyes widened when they noticed me and the little Dragon retreated immediately. He didn't waste time being quiet as he exclaimed, “Nagash, Nagash, she's awake! She's awake!”

“I'm sure the entire mountain is awake now, thanks to your yelling,” Nagash's voice replied as he pushed the door open and stepped in, looking very human and very attractive. His dark blue tunic and trousers complimented his eyes wonderfully, I thought in the back of my mind. Then I thought how stupid I was for thinking a Dragon was attractive, especially since that Dragon probably wanted to eat me.

“Hello,” I ventured, tugging my braid.

"Hello," he said as he approached.

"Hello!" the little Dragon shouted as he rushed by Nagash and up to my bed. He was much smaller than Nagash had been in his Dragon form. This Dragon was about the size of a small pony. He brought his snout level with my face. "I'm Anash, Nagash's little brother and it's nice to meet you, Miss Princess. Is Nagash going to be your Dragon? Are you going to be his Princess? Are you going to have my brother's babies?"

I stared at him as I tried to formulate a response to the last question. *Babies?! my abused mind demanded. Why is he asking about babies?!*

Nagash put a hand on Anash's head and pulled it from my face. "Forgive my younger brother. He has no tact, as he is so young. Anash," he said, turning to the younger Dragon, "go and find your friends to play with. Princess Azaphora and I have things we need to discuss."

Anash gave a Dragon pout, which consisted of dropping his head and letting small flames lick his lips. Nagash didn't seem perturbed by that. I was, but I tried not to let it show.

When Anash had left the room, Nagash turned to me, one eyebrow quirked. "Is something the matter?" he asked.

I shook my head. "Not particularly. I'm just not entirely used to be assaulted by a Dragon immediately after I wake," I replied.

"I would imagine." His tone was so dry, it was a desert.

There was momentarily silence as he watched me from where he sat at the edge of my bed and as I tried not to watch him. When the pregnant quietness began to claw at me, I asked, "What did your brother, Anash, mean?"

"By what?"

"Making babies," I replied, plucking at the threadbare sheets.

"He meant exactly that. Surely you've been educated on the subject of Dragons and how we reproduce," Nagash said, a sneering disbelief evident in his voice.

I made a funny, disgruntled noise. "Of course I have. You take princesses and make them bear your children. I suppose I never believed it."

"Why?"

"Because Dragons are big and scaly!" I exclaimed, turning to him. "And princesses aren't and I can't imagine it would be a pleasant experience!"

"Except now you see that we can change into a human form at will," Nagash said, his voice wandering as he turned away from me to examine the sheets on the wall.

I followed his gaze. "I'll hazard a guess that says you want me to have your children," I said quietly.

Nagash gave a cold, cruel laugh. "Hardly. I don't know your ancestry; the king of the Dragons can't just breed any human wench that he wants. I decided to bring you here so that I can have a princess to take care of these caves. They need cleaning and organizing and I don't have the time to do it."

"You're making me your slave?" I demanded, my violet eyes glaring daggers into his blue ones.

"Not a slave. I'm merely asking you to do some things for me," he replied, not affected at all by my glaring.

"I will do no such-"

"You will do as I say, Princess," he snarled, smoke curling about his lip. I froze, eyes wide, not saying anything. "You see, here your title means nothing."

I turned away, muttering, "Then why not get a normal serving girl instead of a princess who has never done any hard labor?"

"Because, my dear," he growled, turning me to face him, "a Dragon can only stand to be served by a Princess. You reek of gold and jewels, not the stench of pigs and waste." Giving me a cold smile, he brought my hand to his face, sniffing the one ring I brought with me.

I snatched my hand from his, curling it against my chest and covering the gold ring with my other hand. Holly had given me the ring before she had vanished; she had never asked for it back, so I continued to wear it.

He laughed another cold laugh.

"So I'm your servant," I snapped. "What rules must I follow?"

His cold blue eyes sneered at me. "They are simple rules, Princess. You are, obviously, to do as I say. You may wander where you will, but never enter another Dragon's caves without his permission, or the permission of his Princess. Never touch another Dragon's horde without his express permission. Doing so could get you killed. And I would hate to have to find another Princess. Your men are becoming quite skilled at keeping you from us. Lastly, do not let any knights into this cave, or into the mountain itself. Simple, no?"

"Simple," I agreed, turning my eyes from his to look at the colorful silken sheets hanging from the walls. I could sense his eyes turning from me and following my gaze. "I don't like those sheets," I said softly. "I don't like them at all."

"How ironic," Nagash said, just as quietly. "I despise them as well."

I didn't take my gaze from the sheets until I heard the door close and his massive Dragon footsteps vanished beyond my ability to detect. Curling up on my side, I buried my face in my arms and cried.

Holly, I cried out in my mind, what ever made you stare at this place like you did? It's horrible...I don't know how you could stand it... How can you stand to look at it so longingly? How...?

It was sometime later that I felt myself being moved about so I was tucked under the threadbare covers. A heavier comforter was placed on top of me after I had settled and, try as I might, I couldn't muster the strength to open my eyes and see who was being so nice to me.