

Desma

Throne of Fire
Book 2

Erin Duffin

Copyright 2018 by Erin Duffin

All rights are reserved. No part of this work may be reproduced in any fashion without the prior written permission of the copyright owner of this book, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review. All trademarks are the property of their respective companies.

The Heir of Bluescale is a work of fiction. Characters, names, places brands, media, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or have been used fictitiously and should not be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

This book is licensed for your personal enjoyment only and may not be resold. The scanning, uploading and distribution of this book via the internet or via any other means without the permission of the publisher is illegal and punishable by law. Please purchase only authorized electronic editions, and do not participate in or encourage electronic piracy of copyrighted materials. Thank you for respecting the hard work of this author.

Dedication

This book is dedicated to my husband, who makes me brave and has always encouraged me. None of this would be possible without him.

Chapter 1

The Desma was the dragon's sacred spell that bound two dragons together as lifelong companions. The exchanging of hearts insured that each partner in the union understood the other, as well as themselves. They received all of their companion's memories, giving the other a full understanding of their strengths and weaknesses, their hopes and dreams, their joys and their sorrows. It was not a process that one took lightly.

When Zane Blackhorn made the choice to enter into the Desma with Paige, the Queen of Bluescale—something she desperately needed to save her life from Heartsbane poisoning—he'd done so in order to control her, to punish her for the wrongs he felt she'd caused him.

He lay on the floor of a hidden room in Bluescale Castle where he'd just entered the Desma with Paige, writhing in a pain that was not his own. His chest was still split wide open as he relived every moment of her short life.

How many sorrows could one girl accumulate in eighteen short years? How about two years? In the short time since her parents' death, she had hundreds of injustices inflicted upon her that caused her great sorrow. None of which Zane was prepared for.

Sixteen years of relatively happy memories washed over him like a healing fire. Her happy childhood, loved and protected by strong dragon parents, surrounded by her siblings. A twin brother she was inseparable from, and other siblings who she looked up to.

Then came the day that everything changed. Zane screeched in agony as he relived her family's deaths, when she went from fun-loving sister to overprotective mother in the blink of an eye. She and her kid brother, Dean, were the only survivors that day. The horrific guilt she felt over not trying to stop her mother's death was unbearable.

The deaths of her family, and her twin, were only one aspect of her pain. It was acute but understandable. Tragic, yes, but she knew they'd all lived their lives, knowing the risks. It was the family she was sent to live with after her parents died that caused her sorrows, ones that Zane could scarcely comprehend.

The big fancy house she and Dean were sent to only looked safe. Owen and Tina Luntz were portrayed as upstanding members of the community, but they had a less than legal means of making money than the public knew. Owen himself loved extravagance and power more than most, and so did his many associates.

The memories hit Zane hard, with agonizing aftershocks and new facets to the word pain.

A week after moving into their new home, Paige received her first beating when she refused to sell drugs for Owen. The threats started with the violence. In the beginning, he was careful never to leave bruises, such as twisting her arm up behind her back until she screamed, or pulling her hair so hard it felt like her skin was separating from her skull.

“Do you want Dean to be left alone with me when I plant drugs on you, then call the cops to have you arrested? Or when I call them and tell them that you're stealing from me. Don't test me, Paige. You don't want me for an enemy.”

It didn't take her long to become terrified of Owen's proclamations. One day she came home to find police cars in the drive and uniformed officers in the house. She thought that she'd been granted a

reprieve, that Owen's illegal activities had been discovered, but they were there on another type of business. Drugs were strewn out across the counter with stacks of money.

"This your new girl?" one of the cops asked, his eyes lingering on her body, making her skin crawl.

"Yes," he told the cop, then he turned to Paige and said, "Paige, get ready. I want Officer Teller to drive you in today. It'll be good if you're seen with him."

A young man who looked to be in his mid-twenties stepped forward to say hello to Paige. She hated him instantly—she hated all of them.

"I have homework." Owen's eyes cut to her. She could feel his wrath being held back by the smallest degree. "I can do it when I get back."

She felt shame every time she handed off the product to people she knew but never dreamed would use the loathsome substance. She realized that she was nothing but a sheltered, naive kid. She felt so far removed from the princess her parents always taught her to be. The girl they claimed she really was died with them, and she had no idea what was left behind.

The first time she was mugged, the attacker took all the money and drugs she was delivering for Owen. She had to take a week off school to recover when Owen didn't believe her story. By then, he knew she was too terrified to confide in anyone about what was going on. She learned fast that he was exceptionally good at covering his tracks, paying people off or spinning stories that made everything someone else's fault, thereby averting any trouble for himself.

The day after she confided in her social worker about the truth of Owen's business, Owen made good on his promise to plant drugs on her. Teller was the cop who arrested her. She spent a terrifying night in jail, trying to avoid the other criminals as her mind raced about what Owen would do to Dean.

Owen actually bailed her out, and when it was her day to appear in court, he pleaded to the judge on her behalf, telling the man in the black robe how tragic Paige's life was, that she was just having a hard time dealing with the deaths of her family. Paige was furious that Owen would use her family to further his endeavors. The tears of rage she cried that day were misconstrued as grief and the judge let her off with a warning but gave Owen praises for his selfless sacrifice in his efforts to help the troubled girl.

Once they were in the parking garage, Owen slammed her up against a cement pillar, his arm an immovable bar across her chest, pinning her in place. "You stupid little whore, I warned you not to cross me. You've just been branded as troubled. Next is delinquent. Once that happens, you'll never see Dean again. It'll be easy for me to get a restraining order to keep you apart."

School was a nightmare. Her grades had slipped because she didn't have time to do her homework with the long hours that Owen forced her to work. Owen had transferred her to a new school as soon as she moved in with him. She wasn't allowed to have any friends. Owen saw to it that she was alienated from every tie to her past, even forcing her to break up with the boy she was dating at the time.

She worked hard to keep as much of the bad stuff from Dean as she could. Owen used him against her at every turn when he wanted to make a point. Like the time Dean had dared to back talk Owen and defend Paige. Owen made Dean watch while he hit Paige repeatedly as part of his punishment.

There was the first time a man wanted more than the drugs she was forced to sell. The fear that overtook her as a knife pressed against her skin. The ferocity with which she fought, not caring when the knife sliced into her arm and leg. Part of her wanted to die anyway. She didn't understand how it happened, but suddenly, she found the knife in her hand and her would-be attacker on the ground, bleeding.

"You're late. Where have you been?" Owen asked, not taking his eyes off the game when she walked in the door.

"I was attacked. Some guy tried to rape me." She was limping from where the knife had gone into her leg and held her bleeding arm.

Owen was off the couch in an instant. "Where's my money?"

"I...I don't know," Paige said, backing away. She had dropped her bag in the scuffle. He smacked her twice across the face.

"You better go find it, and don't even think about walking back into this house without it." He grabbed her arm, opened the door and shoved her outside, slamming the door behind her.

There was no one to save her, no one who cared if she screamed or cried. She was alone. More alone than Zane had ever felt in his whole life. Day after day, there was no one to stop any of the bad things that happened to her; no one ever came to her rescue. She was trapped.

When she tried to break free of Owen's rule over her, he'd discovered her plan. If she had known how high the consequences were, she would have rethought her actions. But by the time she had discovered Owen's punishment, it was too late.

Zane understood now why her eyes looked sad whenever someone told her she was beautiful or complimented her appearance in any way. They were the things that made her valuable to Owen, the things he used against her. She wanted to be ugly or disfigured in some way. She wished that the man with the knife had cut her face instead. She hated every aspect of herself. Until this moment, Zane had no idea what true misery and hopelessness felt like. Never had he felt shame or humiliation at the depths that Paige had felt them.

Zane rolled on the floor, writhing with the pain of her past. It was a pain he relished. There was so much here he could use against her. She would pay for the rest of her life. He could already see how he would break her. It wouldn't take long for him to twist her past in a way to bind her to his will. It was going to be so easy.

He of all people was probably the best candidate to control her. Since she had come home to Ethiolan, to Bluescale Castle after her long years in hiding, he'd been there. Strangely, he was a sudden constant in her life who didn't seem to want anything more from her than comradery and friendship. She liked that he was betrothed to another, as she wasn't ready to be attracted to anyone, nor did she want anyone to be attracted to her. He'd been a safe friend to have since she could see with her Yellowback power how much he loved Lavender.

The fact that Zane had saved her life within an hour of their first meeting won him a special place in her heart. It was the first time someone she was not related to had helped her. Then, when he'd stepped in, sounding genuinely upset when he saw the guards hurting her, she thought she'd finally found an ally. But she hadn't felt safe at the time and she didn't want to put him in any more danger by being around her, so she pushed him away with her vicious glare and fled through the Bluescale waterway.

Over the following days she started to trust him, thinking of him as a friend. He was the first friend she had in such a long time. She started to feel like she had someone on her side that would listen to her and help her adjust to her new position as queen, which was so far removed from her life in the other realm that she felt like everything she did was wrong. It had meant more than he could have ever known. When he had backed her on her decisions, not knowing that everything she'd done up to this point was an effort to overcompensate for the inadequacies she felt encompassed her existence.

It had been his kindness toward Dean that had truly endeared him to her. She felt like Zane would never use her love for Dean as a weapon against her. The few times Zane had beseeched her to consider Dean in her decisions had not been to coerce her into doing something immoral or illegal.

The last thing he felt from her was overwhelming gratitude that *he* was willing to save her life. A friend, someone she could trust around Dean, and who over time might be able to get over his love's betrayal and the pain of his heartbreak to find peace with her. Her hope for a better future shined brightly in her memory.

It was a hope he was going to shred with delight.

By now, she would know his heart.

She would know that there was no hope for her future because he still loved Lavender. As much as she had hurt him, he couldn't help himself; he loved her more than fire. He would never be able to love Paige, and he was going to make sure she knew it every day. He ached for Lavender. As ridiculous as it was, he wanted her back.

As soon as he came out of the Desma and transformed back to his mortal form, he felt a hand on his chest, then a shooting pain rip through his heart. His eyes sprang open to see Paige. Her eyes were full of rage as she squeezed his heart, trying to kill him. He roared in pain, and as he did, she screamed. She released his heart to clutch at her own chest. She bent over her knees until her forehead touched the floor. They both lay there panting.

As the pain subsided, Zane started to laugh at her. "You are stuck with me now. You can't kill me unless you are willing to die too. At least not until after we finish the Desma, *Princess*." Zane then blew some healing fire into his hand and pressed it against his open wound, protecting the heart that gave him power over her.

"Don't do this." It was a cross between a warning and a plea.

"You took her from me. I have nothing left. What else am I supposed to do?"

"Nothing left? You don't know what it feels like to have nothing left!" She snatched up his hand that was on the floor between them. Before he could register what she intended to do, the ring on his hand was pulled off his finger. "I'm going to take everything from you, Zane. I'm the queen here. Never forget that you are nothing in *my* kingdom."

His precious ring that Lavender had given him, the one that meant so much to him because of their love, was ripped away, the way Lavender's loyalty had been. "No," he protested, rage for Paige boiling in his head as his hand flashed out to grab at her.

"Don't touch me!" she shrieked as she struggled to free herself.

"Give me back my ring," he growled, dragging her toward him.

"No!"

Just as he was about to retrieve the ring, she threw it. With a flick of her wrist and a flourish of her fingers, the ring flew across the room, bouncing a few times on the floor before he heard a small plop as it landed in the water. "For every wrong you inflict on me, I will return it tenfold," she vowed.

For a moment, his grip on her tightened with fury. The small noise of the ring hitting the water seemed deafening to Zane's mind, shattering something that felt so terribly wrong for a moment he was lost. A wave of dizziness swirled, causing his head to throb. He forced his eyes closed. Even laying on the floor, he felt like the room was spinning, like he was going to slide across the floor down some steep angle.

His mind went blank, unable to comprehend anything but the spinning sensation. Then slowly, a feeling started to invade his incoherent mind. A terrible swirl of wrongness circled his head, leaving him feeling sick. He had the impression that he had just experienced something traumatizing but couldn't grasp the events of the most recent moments of his life. He knew in his core that he didn't want to face what had happened, that he should keep his eyes closed and the realm at bay for as long as possible.

Somewhere in the recesses of his mind, he knew something awful was done to him. In the same moment, he knew that he had done something just as damaging to someone else, though he couldn't recall what any of it was. It was just a feeling that turned his stomach, and a fear that made him want to shrink away from the realm.

A hard smack landed on his face, jarring him away from the dizzying wave his mind was trying to reconstruct. A primal instinct for self-preservation took hold of him, and in a blindingly fast move, he subdued his attacker, pinning them under him while he held them still. His eyes focused on his foe and was confused to find a young girl staring up at him, breathing erratically.

He looked into her eyes, surprised to see them shift from blue to yellow. He watched her closely. For a moment, the sight of her filled him with fury. His tight grip on her arms increased until she squirmed, and he roared his rage in her face.

"Please, Zane, don't do this in front of Dean." She whispered the request so softly, he wasn't sure he had heard her at first. Then, her eyes shifted to a spot just over his left shoulder. He turned to see a young boy standing with wide blue eyes, watching his every move. The boy looked confused and afraid. "Let me take him out of here, please. I promise I'll return to finish the Desma."

Her words confused him. Why was she talking about the Desma? He was going to enter the Desma with... As he continued to look down at her, the fear he had felt moments ago returned, along with the sickening feeling of wrongness.

In spite of the disorientated feeling that gripped him, he released her, shifting his weight away so he was no longer straddling her, but sitting on the floor next to her. She sprang to her feet, escaping him as quickly as possible. As he looked up at her, he noticed that her eyes were sparking with a charged hatred. Her jaw was set in a defiant clench, while her furious breath came in short, fast bursts.

The sickening sensation was starting to pass as Zane began to piece together the events that led him to this moment. The girl started to look familiar to him, though before he regained his right mind, the girl was already slipping away.

“Thank you for saving my life,” she deadpanned before turning away from him, holding her hand out to the boy she called Dean. Was she serious. Did he really save her life? She didn’t seem grateful. Was she being sarcastic?

“Paige, is Zane okay?” The boy asked, looking back over his shoulder, meeting Zane’s eyes with concern.

“He’s as healthy as I am. He’ll be fine,” she said in the same dull voice. “I’m going to take you to Ash, then I’m going to come back here and talk to Zane.”

“Why can’t I stay?”

“Because Zane and I have to finish the Desma alone or I might get sick again. It won’t take long.”

“Will Zane move in with us now that you’re companions?”

“No, he’ll stay in his room.”

“Why?”

“It’s complicated, sweetie,”

“But you’re married,” Dean protested. Zane didn’t hear Paige’s response over the sound of the stone door sliding aside to let them out, leaving him alone.

Her words to the boy brought back flashes of memories. He looked down at his chest to see the scar, proof of the Desma. Pressing his fingers to the ridge that now marred his chest, he felt sick for a whole new reason as an acute awareness entered his mind with the return of his memories.

Lavender in bed, with Ryder standing half naked next to her. The rage that consumed him. His flight to Paige’s room, then the attack. His overwhelming hatred, and the Desma. He was now tied to Paige in the most intimate way two dragons could be tied.

Horror paralyzed him for a long time as the realities of what that meant tried to drown him. She would know he hadn’t saved her out of friendship, compassion, or even some self-serving gain he plotted to extract from her. She would know he did it to punish her, but for what? Saving his life? Had that really been his thinking at the time? He could hardly remember his reasons for his vendetta against her now; he only knew that at the time, his anger had seemed so justified.

Paige already felt the hatred he held for her, the pain he wanted her to feel, and the rage that should have been directed anywhere but at her. She knew he intended to make every day of her life miserable, to use the secrets he knew she kept against her. But there was no misery he would ever wish on her that could compare to what she had already survived.

Suddenly, he wanted to take it back, to cut his heart out of her, but it was too late. The Desma was final, and there was no reversing the process. He could never take back what he had felt or his reasons for saving her life. He could never hide any of it from her.

Zane didn’t want her to return. He didn’t want to face the next part of the ritual; the part Hudson had salivated over. He didn’t want any part of it after what he had seen in her memories. He was afraid to touch her and knowing what she must think of him now made everything worse.

Though without the final step of the Desma—the physical joining of their mortal forms— their hearts would never fully bond with their bodies. If one of them died before the Desma was complete, they would both die. Their lives were too vulnerable to allow for such a risk to the other. With Paige an active target of Balaan, her life was always in the balance.

There was also the fact that not much was known about the effects the Heartsbane poisoning could still have on them. Who would ever be foolish enough to seek a cure for Heartsbane and not finish the Desma right away? Could the poisoned half of her heart take over Zane’s healthy one and kill her anyway? Could the same happen to him?

No, they wouldn't be able to wait. The Desma needed to be finished immediately.

Zane wanted to leave the hidden room where he waited, wishing there was some way around what was to come next. He knew Paige would be returning soon, but he didn't want to face her. He struggled to come up with a valid reason for his actions, but he had no clue as to what had driven his train of thought at the time. The only thing he could think of was that he wasn't in his right mind. After the shock of finding Lavender and Ryder in bed together, he'd gone mad. Would she accept that excuse?

Excuse. That's all it was, an excuse. Would she ever forgive him for giving in to his dark nature and wanting to hurt her? He couldn't see her ever forgiving him. Even though she understood the darkness that lived in him, would she accept that he'd used it to purposely hurt her?

Chapter 2

She was gone for more than an hour; no doubt she'd been bombarded with questions when she resurfaced. Zane was pacing the floor when he heard the soft ripple of water in the pool that stood in the back section of the room. The only way into this room was through a secret Bluescale waterway.

"Stop that." Her quiet voice sounded more like an apparition in the darkened room. The only light came from the dying fire and the hazy fires behind thick glass that ran along the wall above his head. Zane swung around just as she was climbing out of the water. A light steam rose off her clothes as she used her inner fire to dry herself. A moment later she discarded the thick belt that wrapped around her small waistline, she was calmly undoing the tie on her pants.

"Paige, wait, I can't..."

She stopped and glared at him her pants were hanging loosely on her hips and her shirt billowed around her small frame, revealing just the smallest hint of bare skin above her right hip.

"I'm sorry, Paige. I'm so sorry. I wasn't thinking straight. I don't want to hurt you anymore."

She regarded him with suspicious eyes for a moment before she spoke. "You're pathetic, you know that?" There was a cold, hard edge in her voice, one unlike he'd ever heard from her before. Shame washed over him. "I'm not sure how you're going to be king when you can't even stick to a decision."

"Paige, I was wrong. I'm sorry," he repeated, not knowing what else to say.

"You seem to be wrong about a lot of things." She stepped closer to him, only inches away. Her eyes were a hard, solid blue. "How much Lavender loved you, which turned out to be not that much, and your brother, stealing her away. Nice loyalty there. What happened? Did she figure out you'd never be able to satisfy her?"

"Paige, stop."

"Oh, what's the matter? Did I say something that upset the great, spoiled Lord Prince? I'm not surprised, because I see you. I see how you try to hide behind this nice guy front, but underneath, you're just a scared little spark who'll never become a flame. You can't even keep a lowly little duchess around. I guess there's really not much more to you than these fine clothes and fancy title." She grabbed his shirt, ripping the fabric open revealing more of his bare chest than the hole the healing fire left. She looked him up and down, sighing in disappointment. "Just as I thought, nothing here but a bit of pretty." She tapped his head. "I'm guessing there's nothing down here..." She tried to grab him.

His hand shot out, catching her wrist so he could pull her hand away. Logically, he knew why she was acting like this; she was furious that he had intended to hurt her. He understood her anger, but she had a skill for pushing buttons that rendered logic irrelevant.

"Maybe I can ask Lavender if she'll share Ryder."

Zane's hand tightened around her wrist. "I'm not going to do this, Paige." He looked down at her. Her chin came up as she clenched her jaw. Her shoulders were as straight as a Bluescale guard's.

Her free hand moved to slap his face, but he caught her other hand before she made contact.

"I'm glad you're fast. You'll be in and out before I can transform and claw your eyes out." She narrowed her eyes. "Ryder must know how to slow down, how to please a woman. I could close my eyes and pretend you're him."

He was having a hard time keeping calm, as every thought in his head was turning violent. He felt tremors of rage roll through him. He squeezed his eyes tight, then released her hands so he could take a step back.

"I wonder how they would feel if I asked to join them. Ryder could have us both in his arms. Can you picture that?"

He could picture it clearly, as if it were happening right in front of him. Ryder's hands on Paige's soft skin, his bright orange eyes dancing in the firelight, as Paige *and* Lavender... He shut the painful thought down before it could do any more damage than her words already had.

Paige opened her mouth, about to say something else that he didn't want to hear. Zane's hand flashed out and was around her arm. He pulled her close to him and clamped his other hand over her mouth. His move was almost violent as he glared down at her. He just wanted her to stop talking. He looked at her, hating her again, hating everyone. Lavender for betraying him. Ryder for taking his betrothed. Most of all, he hated himself for letting his darker nature take over. If he had only been able to control his temper, he wouldn't have taken on the Desma with Paige.

In that moment, the look she returned him was like a shot of ice water to his system. She looked triumphant. In that moment, he understood fully what she was doing. He probably understood it more than she did. She was trying to make him the enemy. She wanted him to be angry and violent so she wouldn't ever have to listen to his apology or forgive him. She would never be tempted to trust him again.

If he sealed his fate as her enemy, then she could close herself off to him, enduring their encounters only during her estrus. She could push him away forever and he would have no hope for redemption. In her mind, he would forever be one of her attackers.

His eyes grew wide with horror. He couldn't let her see him as one of those human men who had hurt her so monstrously, so he released her, wishing he could flee from her presence. As he let go of her, their eyes met, and for a fraction of a second, her face fell in shock. For a moment, she looked vulnerable. It was that expression that Zane held on to, fixing that look in his mind as his defense against her words which were sure to come again as he watched her take two full breaths. It was like he could see her thinking through her next attack, plotting against the enemy she now viewed him as.

"Oh, I see, that was one hell of a guilt trip I laid on you." Her lips curled up in a vicious smile. "I'll bet you never expected to feel sorry for *me* when you hatched your little plan. The sad, sorry little prince can't handle the truth of someone else's pain."

He had to put a stop to her vitriol before she broke down his resolve and he was driven into a rage.

"You are right, I am the worst kind of pathetic. I hurt people and I don't even care until I see how it affects me. Like when I almost killed you. I didn't care until I thought you were gone. Even then I didn't think about you or your brother, or what I'd taken from him. I only thought about what I was capable of."

"I know." She walked around him slowly, her tone condescending. "Just like you didn't care that it was your own brother you were trying to kill."

"Oh, Paige, I'm sorry. How do I start to make amends to you?" He dropped to his knees before her. "Please, how do I make this right?" He reached out tentatively for her hand.

"You can't make this right. Don't you see? You've already ruined everything. I've seen you inside and out. I see why everyone at Blackhorn cowers before you, fearing your wrath. I hope you're not trying to delude yourself into thinking that what I did in a moment of desperation, and what you did in a fit of anger could ever turn into anything more than what we have this minute?"

She tried to pull her hand away, but Zane held on, pulling her closer. He wrapped his arms around her waist, pressing his head against her stomach. She stood rigidly against him, holding herself as aloof as possible.

"Paige, I know I didn't do this for the right reasons, but I don't want to be your enemy. Not anymore. Forgive me," he pleaded.

"Get off of me," she breathed in a harsh whisper. "I don't want your pity." She shoved him away then stepped back. As she did, she pulled her shirt over her head, revealing her beautiful petite figure. She was not as long and angular as Lavender; she had softer, more comforting curves. The memories of her being in his arms started to take on a whole new context in his mind. The time he carried her unconscious through the castle after she passed out from overexerting herself when she interrogated the assassin who had tried to kill her brother. He could feel with acute vividness her light touch, the way her arm fit perfectly around his neck, and her warm breath on his neck. The way she had clung to him in her sleep had been so sweet, but at the time, he had been too worried about her health and too in love with Lavender to realize the significance of the moment.

Of course, this too was a mockery of his carnal desires. First finding Lavender naked in bed with his brother after she'd always withheld her affections from him, making him wait until after their Desma. Now Paige, who had been wronged so many times, he couldn't in good conscious touch her in any way she would be uncomfortable with.

"Put your shirt on." He picked it up from the floor where she had thrown it, handing it back to her. He forced himself to only look at her eyes.

She was completely disarmed. She looked far too vulnerable as she took the garment back, hugging it to her chest. He had not taken the bait. He could see his calmness and refusal to embrace his dark nature had foiled her plans, and she didn't know what to do with him now. He caressed her cheek while she stood rigidly in the face of his affection. As he looked into her eyes, he felt a strange longing well up inside, making his heart skip erratically in his chest.

He knew she was pretty. He remembered all the comments her suitors had made about how beautiful she was. But now, it was like he was seeing that beauty for the first time. How had he spent day after day with her, never noticing that she truly was the most beautiful royal in the entire realm? How was it he had never seen her as anything more than a friend who had been useful in stopping Balaan? But suddenly now, now...

He wanted her.

Not only did he want her, he wanted her to want him in return.

Was it just the Desma that caused him to feel this way, knowing her as he did now? Knowing how strong and resilient she was? Knowing her more deeply than he'd ever known another living being? Was that the real magic of the Desma?

Whatever the reason, he wanted her.

Then came the realization of what would happen once they completed their Desma. She would separate herself from him as thoroughly as she could manage, and in a castle this size, he would go days or weeks without seeing her. He knew from her memories that she already had a plan in place for her less than desirable suiter, to keep him at bay as much as possible.

She would only need to be in his bed during her estrus, when she came into her fertile period. The estrus would not come until she was close to thirty, more than a decade from now. The idea of their relationship already being deteriorated to that reality turned his stomach, and clenched his heart.

How could he fix this? Apologizing wasn't working. Maybe she would forgive him in time, but how would he know if he never saw her? He had to keep her close so he could show her, prove to her, that he was sincere. But she would never accept his companionship, not after experiencing the rage he had held toward her.

Then an idea occurred to him, but he rejected it at once. It was a step in the wrong direction, and he had already made too many mistakes with her. He couldn't afford any more. But how else would she allow him to be around her so he could win her over?

He could see by the cold withdrawn look in her eyes, she wouldn't think any less of him than she did at that moment. So what if he swam at the bottom of the pit he had dug for a little while before he started to claw his way out?

"I'll finish this under one condition," he announced, gathering his courage to purposely add to her low opinion of him.

"Now you think you're going to hold my life over your head?" She jerked away from his touch. "Well then, *My King*, what is your request?"

"That you help me have my revenge on Ryder and Lavender."

"What would that entail?" she asked with narrowed, suspicious eyes.

"We make this look real. It will inflame them since it was something they were accusing me of anyway."

"No. I'm not going to be your fake companion."

"You are my real companion," he reminded her. "And Dean would be less confused."

“What?” Horror crossed her face, followed quickly with rage. “Absolutely not! I will not live with you.” Her arms constricted around her middle, pulling the shirt tighter to her body. “You’re a self-serving jackass.”

Zane shrugged. “Staff and guards talk. Everyone has to think it’s real or Ryder and Lavender will find out.”

“No. I will not let you suck me into your childish games.” She stepped closer, jabbing her finger into his chest as she drew a breath, preparing to let loose some vicious retaliation. Zane tried to prepare himself for what she could possibly say to hurt or anger him, but before she could let her verbal ammunition fly, she clutched her chest, gasping in pain.

“Paige, are you okay?” Zane reached out to steady her.

“Don’t touch me,” she said through gritted teeth as she sank to her knees.

“Don’t be difficult about this.” He crouched next to her. After a moment of hesitation, he put his hand on her back, trying to assess her health. Her eyes were squeezed tight as she took several long, slow breaths before she opened them to glare at him.

“You helped me out of spite, and when *you* decide ‘Oops! I shouldn’t take my anger out on her after all,’ you want me to help you get revenge on the ones you should really be mad at? You are a real piece of work.”

“I’m not the one on the floor clutching at my heart, so I think you *need* to accept my one little condition. Just think how much cheaper you are getting off than if you had exchanged hearts with Randy. I’m sure he would have demanded over half your gold stores at this point.”

“You want my gold now too?”

“No, I just want to pretend for as long as Lavender and Ryder are here.”

“Fine, that won’t be long.”

“It will, once you let the Queen of Greenwing know you have changed your mind about allowing Celia to come meet Dean.”

“Why?”

“Because the hell I had planned for you each day will now be theirs. Just like it should have been all along.”

She studied him for a long time, her hard features unrelenting. He could see how much she hated him in every fiery breath that caused her nostrils to flare. “Fine. For my life I’ll play your game.” Her features hardened as she glared at him. “Never mistake anything I do as reality. I will *never* love you.”

“As long as we understand each other,” Zane said grimly, knowing he had entered a battle with Paige where the weapons were words, and the fight was over his hopes for the future. He was sure there would be sacrifices, as he could already feel his pride on the line. He prayed there would be no bloodshed.

She nodded, and Zane took off his shirt.

She walked over to the bed, leaving her clothes on the floor just before she got under the covers. He took his place on the other side, then realized he didn’t know how to be with her. He rolled onto his side to face her. Propped up on his elbow, he made sure to keep the blankets over his waist.

“I will never hurt you.”

“What makes you think I’ll ever be foolish enough to let you?” She stared at the ceiling.

“This is the only time it has to be like this. Next time will be when you come to me.”

“I’ll never come to you,” she vowed.

He moved slowly, being as gentle as he could so she wouldn’t see an ounce of aggression in his movements. He softly touched her shoulder, but she didn’t turn to him, continuing her analysis of the ceiling. She had a hard look on her face. Her blue eyes were cold and vacant. He knew the look from her memories like she was looking out a window while refusing to see the monster on the other side.

Her memories flashed in his mind—a dark, dirty street where vicious hands grabbed her violently. Boney fingers jabbing into her soft skin, feeling like dull knives. The putrid smells that came from her attacker, the hot breath on her face.

Zane couldn’t be that monster. He had already done enough damage to her, and he just couldn’t do any more.

“Are you okay?” he asked when he saw a tear slip from her eye.

“Fine.” It was a dead, automatic response.

“It would be better if this was on your terms, so I think you need to take control.” He wiped a tear off her cheek with his thumb. Unwilling to move any closer than the arm’s length he was from her, she rolled away from his touch. He pulled his hand back to his side of the bed, his arm feeling heavy despite its emptiness.

She never turned back to him. Eventually, after a long silence, she whispered, “I hate you,” before she dressed. Her words stung, but he knew they were less true than if he had gone through with the act.

“No one can know this is undone,” Zane warned as he dressed.

Chapter 3

He followed her upstairs, wanting to talk to her, to reach out to her, but he knew she would have none of him. The sound of stone grinding against stone announced their return to reality. Together, they emerged from behind the tapestry that hid the secret room from the rest of the castle. They moved silently down the hall. Paige walked slowly, seeming to be deep in thought as they traveled from the nearly deserted area of the castle toward the more populated areas where most of the activity happened.

They rounded the corner to the main corridor and spotted his family—his father, brother, and future companion...well, ex-future companion—were standing in the corridor, demanding information on his whereabouts. Paige was walking slightly in front of him, but when she stopped, Zane closed the gap between them, taking her hand. She didn't resist or pull away, but she didn't return the light pressure he applied. He felt no reassurance from her.

"Zane, where have you been? Two of the Royals were injured in that explosion and you chose now to run off with your..." His father eyed their joined hands suspiciously. "Friend?"

"I never intended to worry anyone. Everything just happened so fast," Zane said, watching Ryder and Lavender's reactions closely. The sight of them standing so close together with their hands an inch apart, less than the reach of a finger, caused his anger to turn white hot. He wanted to rage at them again. How could they stand there as if nothing had happened? Acting like they were worried about him, like they were not the cause of him standing where he stood.

"Zane, about what happened earlier, it was all a big misunderstanding. Will you let me explain?" Lavender reached out, expecting him to return the move, but he felt sick at the thought of touching her. His hand tightened around Paige's, and Lavender's eyes zeroed in on his hand, though not the one that held Paige's. "Where is your ring?" she asked with a strained voice.

"Paige took it off," Zane said nonchalantly, then wondered why he suddenly didn't care about the ring that had been so precious to him only hours before. Then he grew angry as he realized her first priority was the stupid trinket that obviously meant more to her than he did.

"*You!* Give it back." she growled at Paige. Zane stepped forward, feeling suddenly protective of his new companion.

Paige looked back at Lavender with her Yellowback power. When her hand tightened around Zane's, he wondered what she was seeing in Lavender. "I left it behind. I'll go back for it when I have time," Paige said.

Lavender lunged at Paige with clawed hands but Zane caught one of her wrists and grabbed her waist in the same move to hold her back.

"What are you thinking?" He demanded. "You can't attack the queen of a neighboring kingdom.

"Yes, Baroness, remember your place," Paige chided.

"Do you have any idea what you've done? I need that ring back. Now!"

Zane felt suddenly afraid of Lavender, and more than anything, he wanted to protect Paige from his former betrothed. He couldn't find any justification for the fear he felt, since Lavender had never done anything that would inspire such a fierce reaction in him, but he couldn't shake the *need* to have Paige safely away from her.

"Why? What's so important about the ring?" Paige asked.

This is the time to ask about the importance of the ring? Zane thought.

"It's a family heirloom. But what would you know about that, you silly little spark." Lavender huffed, breathing heavily for a moment. "I demand—" she started in her command speak, but Zane's hand flew up to her mouth, stopping her words before she could use her power against Paige.

“Lavender, I understand your frustrations, but you must regain your composure,” his father scolded.

“Once you tell me why you *really* want that ring back, I’ll be happy to go and get it for you,” Paige countered. For a moment, Lavender stared back at her without speaking as rage and hatred distorted her features, turning her from the beauty Zane had once thought her to be to a hideous hag. Zane let her go and returned to Paige’s side, standing stiffly, ready to subdue Lavender again if needed.

“What is going on here?” his father demanded.

“Paige and I are now companions,” Zane declared, pulling his ripped shirt aside to reveal the scar as proof. “We just completed the Desma.”

“What?” Lavender shrieked.

Zane couldn’t believe how shrill her voice was; he had never heard her sound so irate. It made his skin crawl at the thought of what sort of retaliation she would try to exact over him and Paige. He sighed, wondering again why he was suddenly afraid of Lavender.

“You never loved me, not the way I wanted you to,” Lavender accused Zane, as if she were completely innocent.

“I loved you more than fire,” Zane’s shouted, though the words suddenly sounded false.

“More than fire,” Lavender mocked.

“If you would not have betrayed me—”

“Zane,” Paige said, putting her hand on his arm. Her grip was tight, a silent warning. He drew in a calming breath while he tried to make sense of what he was feeling. He realized that he couldn’t find a spark of the love for Lavender he had declared to Paige only hours before. What he felt now was a far cry from the declarations he had spouted in the past. The fire that once burned for Lavender was extinguished.

“How could you?” Ryder asked. “Did you even think of what Lavender would do?”

“I thought you would come up with a plan.”

“What are you talking about?” his father asked, confused by the venom in Zane’s voice.

“What about the other royals?” Titus asked.

“They can return home,” Paige declared.

“You can’t just dismiss them like that. You called them here with the promise that one of them would be elevated to the level of king. You have taken that opportunity away, and now every kingdom here will view that as an insult,” Titus huffed.

“He’s right. You have to make this right before you let them leave,” Lavender added gleefully.

“What would it take to make it right?” Zane asked, without looking at Paige.

“Grant them the Covenant of Aithne,” Lavender suggested. The malicious glint in her eyes told him she was taking pleasure in the outrageous requests the other royals could make.

“That’s a little extreme,” Titus said.

“I don’t think we need to extend any concessions of that level,” Zane said. Paige was quiet during the exchange, but she looked up at Zane with eyes that screamed at him of his betrayal and her anger. If he was still in the mindset to hurt her, the Covenant of Aithne would have been a good first step.

“Ezra,” Paige called out to Zane’s personal guard, who stood near his family. Zane was shocked that she would address Ezra. They had not been in the same room since Paige arrived at Bluescale and Ezra hit her when he didn’t realize that she was the queen. Zane had made sure to leave his guard at the door whenever he was with Paige, so she wouldn’t have to see them and be reminded of the violence they had inflicted upon her. “The king will be moving into my suite. Please bring his personal affects in the morning.”

Jaws dropped, but Paige didn’t bat an eye. “I’m sorry, but it’s been a long day.” She turned to Zane. “If you don’t mind, I’m going to check on Dean.” She stretched up on her toes to kiss his lips quickly. “I’ll wait for you in bed,” she said seductively in a fake whisper that was loud enough for the others to hear.

“Ezra, will you escort my queen to our chambers? I don’t want her wandering alone after today’s attack.” Ezra looked confused but stepped forward. “Stay safe,” Zane said, caressing her cheek.

Paige smiled, reached for his hand and kissed his knuckles, proving she was playing her part. “Don’t be long,” she said coyly before she walked away with Ezra. It frightened Zane, knowing this was an act. Maybe Paige should be the one he feared instead of Lavender. Paige had to be furious with him now that she had to deal with the repercussions of his actions with the other royals. He knew this could turn into

a political nightmare if it was not handled with just the right diplomacy. “How did this happen?” his father demanded, drawing his attention away from Paige.

Zane turned back to his family, realizing he couldn't stand the sight of them another minute. He had to escape. Without Paige, he didn't feel like he would be able to keep his cool for another second. “Paige was right, it's been a long day.”

“Zane, you can't just walk away from this.” His father spoke in a tone that said he didn't view Zane as an equal. The fact that Zane was a King now didn't matter; he felt Zane was still an ignorant child.

“We can discuss this further in the morning.” He turned before anyone could say anything else and walked away.

“What just happened?” Lavender demanded. Zane didn't stop to comfort her or try to help her understand the drastic change in their relationship. He was actually taking some pleasure in her obvious distress.

His only problem was that he didn't know where Paige's quarters had been moved to. He realized her little trick with a twinge of annoyance and a healthy dose of respect. He understood now why it had taken her so long to return to the hidden room. She had to secure new rooms for Dean and herself after the attack left her previous suite destroyed.

He decided to give her this night to adjust to their new arrangement, so he didn't inquire to any of the Bluescale guards where her rooms were. Instead, he returned to his rooms, where he started to gather his things.

While he packed, he started to plot. He needed Paige to forgive him; it was his first priority. They were going to be together for a long time, and he couldn't live his whole life with her mad at him. Not to mention his sudden attraction to her. It had to be the effects of the Desma because when he was with Lavender, he never felt this kind of attraction to her. He was also concerned about completing their Desma. He preferred it to be under the right circumstances, without tears or cold dead stares of endurance.

His first step was to never give into her verbal traps. He noted how she'd been thrown when he didn't return her aggression. He wouldn't give her any more reasons to hate him, or to make him hate her in return.

Second, he would try to win her forgiveness. Before he had made a mess of things, she held a sliver of hope for them. Now all he needed to do was remind her of that hope and reassure her that it was still possible.

Third, he needed to prove to her that he was a proper king that she could trust with her kingdom. He needed to anticipate her pursuits. He knew her memories would help him with this, though she hadn't had the time or the energy to develop a plan for the Bluescale kingdom. He knew she was focused on stopping Balaan. Tonight's attack would be one of her first priorities. He was sure he would find her at her old quarters in the morning or talking with Alva and her team.

Fourth, if he could find a way out of the mess he had created for her with the visiting suitors, that should help with his standing in her eyes; thereby proving his aptitude for his new position at Bluescale. Could he come up with a way to come to her rescue and protect her kingdom? There had to be a way to circumvent the necessity to enter the Covenant of Aithne. He imagined how grateful she would be, picturing her smiling at him while she thanked him for his wisdom and support. The only problem now was that he needed to come up with a really good idea in order to make the fantasy in his head a reality.

Lastly, he needed a reason to be near her, working with her on some project that would force them to spend time closely together while Ryder and Lavender weren't around. He didn't think he could tolerate the sight of them for very long anyway.

Now that she was well, there would be ceremonies that needed to take place to officially crown her as queen. Since they were companions, there would also be a reception held in honor of their Desma. Though, he didn't see Paige taking an active role in planning these events the way Lavender had. Titles just weren't important to her the way they were to other royals. He understood why now. She knew better than most how titles and wealth didn't define a person's character.

Zane had enjoyed watching her fluster the other royals like it was a game, but he knew now that everything she did was a test—a test of character, a test of trust, a test to see if they were a threat. Zane had

passed her test, but he did it thinking that she was just trying to upset the status quo, finding the game in her behavior. He had not truly understood what all her tests meant to her or how devastating it was for him to fail her now that he had come so far, after he had gotten so close. At this point, Ryder would have an easier time winning her forgiveness and friendship.

But he knew her now, as well as she knew herself. He could do this. He was confident in his chances for success. He went to bed feeling optimistic.

That night, Paige's nightmares were his, it was the worst night's sleep of his life. Over and over again he woke, shaking with fright and feelings of despair. After the fourth time of waking with those awful feelings, he got out of bed, needing to do something to push the horrors away. He didn't want to sleep another minute. He couldn't return to those events, as they felt they were all happening to him.

He dressed and readied himself for the day since Andreas, the third moon, was already gone. The dark hours were upon the land now, but in a few hours, the sun would start to rise. He wasn't sure what to do with this time, but he really felt the need to move, though he didn't want to be too far away from the castle, or Paige. He decided that instead of flying, he would go for a walk. There was nowhere in particular he wanted to be. Actually, what he really wanted was to talk to Paige, but she would still be asleep and he still didn't know where she was, so he just wandered the halls without purpose.

He found himself in the corridor he had not been in since the day Paige arrived from the Earth realm. The room where he killed Drake was just ahead. His heart quickened at the thought of that fight. He felt a strange excitement well up in his gut. His fingers tingled as he thought of that first night Paige had arrived and he realized that she was a true Bluescale, only to have her life threatened by the captain of the guard. As he thought of those events, a shiver ran down his spine, causing him to shudder. It was strange, since the thought of his fight with Drake hadn't brought on these types of feelings before.

He stopped at the door and turned the knob. He was not surprised to find it locked, assuming no one had been allowed in since the night Drake had died.

He turned away, ready to wander someplace else when he heard the door open. He spun around, surprised anyone was in there. He didn't know why this corridor was making him feel so uneasy. It must have been the nightmares and Paige's memories so fresh in his mind making him edgy.

"Sorry, I didn't think anyone was in there," Zane said, noticing it was one of Paige's guards. "Is the queen living here now?"

"Yes, sir. She expected you hours ago." He stepped aside, allowing Zane to enter. "She is in her parents' old room." He pointed to a door on the left side of a huge fireplace that occupied the back wall. "And the prince is in Aranzo's boyhood room." He pointed, indicating Dean's door just to the right of the fireplace.

The room was just as Zane remembered, with ornate furnishings covered in fine soft blues and creams. The gold trim shown more brightly than the first time he had been in this room only weeks ago. Though now, the paintings were missing. Paige had requested that the paintings of her family be brought to her other rooms, leaving the space above this mantle bare.

"I don't wish to disturb her." Zane backed away toward the front door. "Please, let her know I'll be back in a few hours if she wakes."

Before he could leave, he heard Paige scream. The sound shot through him as if some invisible spirit had reached through his chest to grip his heart. He looked around wildly, seeking what caused Paige to scream. He started toward her door, but the guard stopped him.

He drew back, shocked.