

# My Unintended

Throne of Fire

Book 4

Erin Duffin

## SOPHIA

I soaked a rag in water and handed it to the dying man. I thought his name was Tom, though I wasn't sure. There were so many, it was hard to keep track. Even now, I could feel the poison that was slowly working its way through my own body. I didn't have nearly the strength or endurance I had a week ago.

I didn't know if it was in the water we drank or the food we ate. Maybe it was the dust from the constant digging. I should have been digging too, as I wasn't as sick as I'd pretended to be in front of the guards. But once Gavin became too sick to work, I exaggerated my symptoms so that I could stay and keep an eye on him. After all, it was my fault he was here in the first place.

It's been weeks since we'd seen sunlight. I had barely glimpsed any of Ethiolan before our group was captured and brought here to work in the caves. Since then, I'd kept my eyes open every day for my chance to escape. If I could get out of this place and find where they took my son...

I never saw children in the caves. When we first entered the dark tunnels full of men and women digging like the slaves in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*—except, instead of loin cloths and turbans, it was blue jeans and ball caps—I was sure I would at least see a few bringing water or a crust of bread to the workers, but I only saw other prisoners and the guards. If there were no children here, then neither was my son.

If Jeremiah wasn't here, then I had no reason to be here either.

My plan was to fake my own death when Gavin died, hoping I would gain an opportunity to escape. I knew they burned the bodies because they burned everything. It was risky, but I couldn't waste what little time I had left here in the tunnels.

I froze when the door opened unexpectedly. Two guards entered, accompanied by a royal. These dragons were assholes, but I could never let them see just how scared I was. My fear was only masked by my anger. These were the dragons that were holding my son, who I knew in my heart I would recognize when I saw him. A small birthmark on his neck, just under his left ear, was all I needed to see. I told myself that a mother would know, though it had been two years since I'd last seen him.

The black-eyed royal looked around the room before stepping forward, while the two guards remained at the door. I knew that the royal was looking directly at me, so I forced my eyes up to meet his.

"What do you want now? You've already taken everyone who's strong enough to work." I knew none of them could understand me, but I felt better for running my mouth a little, even though I knew it was useless.

He studied me curiously for a minute, then said something in their language that I couldn't understand. Although, it sounded like it had a provocative edge to it.

There was something mysteriously feral about the people of this world. They all had strong features, angular jawlines, and hooded brows. They could pass for handsome, but they weren't human—Balaan had assured us of that. Yet, as much as they looked like us, it was their eyes that

showed their true nature. Their elongated slits resembled those of a snake, and much like snakes, they all looked alike. It was often difficult to tell one from the other unless I really forced myself to *look* at them. And any distinguishing features helped, such as a beard or a mustache.

Though, the taller one of the three that entered was unique in the fact that his eyes were almost a solid black, with a gold outline that marked off his elongated slits, making him seem more menacing. It was obvious that he was somehow different. Like the Alpha wolf in a pack, he knew his markings made him special. I could see it instantly in the way he stood with his chest puffed out, and the way the other two didn't move unless he moved, always keeping a respectable distance—but close enough to react if the royal was threatened. It was so natural for him, he didn't even notice that his shadows were watching us like we were the threat to *him*, instead of it being the other way around.

“We need more blankets and cots,” I informed him. Picking up a blanket, I tapped the closest cot to make my point. If anyone had the authority to grant such a request, it was him. He scrunched his brows and turned to the guards, speaking hurriedly, the sound of their language putting me on edge, angering me. A primal rage that had been my companion for the last two years bubbled to the surface, and I couldn't help but voice my thoughts. “You're evil brutes. You poison us, work us to death, and for what? So you can take over our homes and rule over us like we're some inferior species?”

The royal walked over to the table in the center of the chamber and picked up a piece of bread. He took a bite and made a face of displeasure. Quickly, he poured himself a glass of water and gulped it down greedily. “A little dry,” he said in English, “but definitely not poisoned.”

“If it's not the food, then explain why everyone here gets sick?” I demanded, holding back my surprise that he was able to communicate with me.

“Because Balaan's spell to change humans into dragons has backfired. You humans can't handle the transformation for long before your bodies give out.”

“We have no choice! If we don't become these monsters, we won't be strong enough to fight you.” What he said made sense. It wasn't natural for people to shapeshift. I could see how on a cellular level the process would wreak havoc on the delicate human system, but that didn't mean we could avoid the process. It was the only thing that would make us strong enough to fight them, our only hope of saving our loved ones. The only hope *I* had of getting my son back.

“What do we possess that is worth dying for?” he inquired.

“It's not what you possess, it's what you're trying to take. We'll fight you to the death to protect our families.”

“Where is your home?”

“Portland, Oregon.”

“In the Earth Realm?”

“Yes.”

“Why would we want any lands on Earth when we have our whole realm here?”

“How am I supposed to know what a crazed race of half-human, half-dragons want? I just know what was taken from me, and I intend to get him back.” The image of a dragon flying off into the night with my precious baby clutched in its massive claws clouded my vision.

“When has a dragon ever attacked a single person in the Earth Realm? If we were attacking humans, it would be all over the news.”

He had a point. But I knew what I saw. Just because the news wasn't reporting the dragon sightings, didn't mean they weren't happening. I wouldn't let anyone convince me that I was crazy ever again.

“How can you speak English?” I asked, trying to ferret out some answers. If his kind weren’t attacking my home, then how could he speak English so well?

“My companion was raised in the Earth Realm. When we entered the Desma, I learned English.”

“Why would she come back here?” There would be only one reason for them to go back and forth between worlds, and that would be to learn our languages and our ways so they could find the best means to overtake us. It was smart. Obviously, they were in this for the long haul. I wondered how many other spies they had. Would those spies return and teach what they learned to the dragons of this world like his companion did?

“After Balaan killed her entire family, she was needed here to help salvage our way of life. You see, Balaan killed every single dragon on her father’s side: her twin brother, siblings, parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles, all dead. An entire family line, gone. He killed my mother and attacked my sister. So, what is it that you think we took from you before you decided to become this abomination?”

Abomination? That was a bit harsh. To what lengths would he go to get back his loved ones? I was sure he hadn’t lost a child. There would’ve been something in his eyes, a sort of kinship. I would’ve recognized that sort of loss. The fact that he didn’t see it in me told me his losses paled in comparison. “I’m just trying to protect my family.”

“So are we!” he retorted, then calmly added, “Just know that as your body starts to fail you, it is the doing of Balaan and his crazy ‘purest’ delusions. You are just experiments to him. What he’s doing, he only does because he worships the dark dragon Apophis, who believed that dragons should shed their human forms. He wants us to live like animals in caves, unable to speak.”

“Your lies won’t change my mind. I know what I’ve seen. Just because it’s not on the news doesn’t mean it’s not happening. Balaan is the only one we can turn to when dragons attack and nobody believes us.”

A sour, acidic taste rose up my throat. I sucked in a breath, trying to breathe through the pain, but it persisted. I reached for the cot to steady myself so I didn’t fall over the man who was lying there, watching my exchange with the royal. For some strange reason, the royal reached out like he was trying to help me, but I didn’t want anything from him. I didn’t want to give him any way to soften my feelings for his side. I pulled away from his outstretched hand, giving him a clear sign of my distrust.

“How did you get this way?” He actually sounded concerned for me.

“Wouldn’t you like to know,” I retorted.

I don’t know why my words affected him, but he sucked in a sharp breath, as if they were profound.

“Come with me,” he ordered. Something blurred in front of me, and then someone grabbed me. Looking down I found his hand on my arm, I didn’t have time to react to unnatural speed, before he started pulling me with him toward the door where his guards were waiting. He was so strong, the effort I put into reaching for cot frames and digging in my heels went unnoticed. What could he possibly want with me? Nothing good, I was sure.

“Gavin!” I cried out, extending my arm toward my brother only a few cots away.

“Sophia?” Gavin croaked out.

The royal stopped, and I knew instantly that I’d made yet another mistake. I should’ve never let him know about Gavin, but my brother was my safe haven. My fear was overriding my common sense.

“Who is he?” the royal demanded.

“My brother.” I should have never put Gavin on this royal’s radar.

The royal then said something to his guard and pointed at Gavin. They spoke for a moment before the guard went over to retrieve Gavin from his cot. Before I could protest, we were in the tunnels, walking briskly to the front of the prison. I tried to pay attention to where we were going, but the royal kept talking to his guard, their conversation was distracting. I could tell from their tone that one guard wasn’t happy with what he was doing, though it seemed there was little he could do to stop him. I knew that couldn’t be good for us.

We rounded a corner and came to an abrupt halt. The guards instantly fell silent, and the royal who had his hand on my arm tightened his hold. Ahead of us, another black-eyed royal with a booming voice was approaching with his own guard in tow.

My royal’s features hardened into that of a defiant teenager pretending to be respectful. They met in the middle of the tunnel. The older one was clearly this one’s father, which would mean that he would have more authority over this place. I wondered if my royal would get into trouble for pulling us out of the prison. It was clear the father was asking about Gavin and I being out with him.

My royal laughed and dropped my arm, only to sling his around my waist and jerk me into his side. He then grabbed my face, forcing me to look at the other royal in a “look at what I found” move. My body stiffened in protest, but if I had to endure this too in order to escape and save my son, I would. I swallowed hard. This would be the hardest thing I’d had to do yet, allowing this beast to take my body while I waited for my opportunity to escape. The idea of it was repulsive. I tried to breathe evenly, but the longer they stood there talking about me, the harder it was to remain calm.

The hitch came when the father pointed at Gavin. The royal that was hanging onto me lazily looked over at Gavin. His features became dark, and his tone dropped to something more sinister. As he spoke, the father pondered what he’d said, then laughed and slapped my royal on the shoulder.

“What are you—” I tried to ask.

Suddenly, the royal’s hand was on my throat, squeezing my airway. I couldn’t breathe. I grabbed at his wrist, clawing at his strong hand, but it was no use. I might as well have been clawing at stone.

“Do yourself a favor and remain silent.”

My royal then loosened his grip on my neck, allowing me to breathe—although, he still held enough pressure so that I felt the threat. I dared not to speak again. Once he had me under control, he turned his attention back to his father. They had another brief exchange before parting ways. Once his father was out of sight, my royal’s demeanor changed drastically. He let go of my throat but kept his arm around my waist. There was a new sense of urgency in his movements, and I had trouble keeping up with his quick pace.

We emerged from the tunnels moments later. I threw my hands up over my face at the sun’s brightness. It had been weeks since I’d seen the light of day. I knew my predicament was dire but feeling the sun on my face gave me hope. I was above ground now. That was one step closer to escape, and one step closer to finding my son.

While my eyes worked to adjust, the royal transformed into a dragon and grabbed me up in his enormous paw. I was reminded that freedom was not as close as the sunlight. I fought the tears that threatened to fall at the thought of what was to come next. I needed to stay focused. Jeremiah was depending on me to be strong.

He flew directly to the dark stone castle at the top of the mountain, where tall dark spires stuck up like sharp spikes reaching for the sky. As if the top of the soaring butte wasn't close enough to the heavens, the castle reached higher, grasping for the promised land. He landed on the balcony of one of the towers and released me before returning to his human form. As soon as I took a step toward the door, his hand was on my arm, pulling me back.

"Don't even think about it."

"Please, don't do this. Please." I wasn't sure why I was begging, because I knew in my heart it wouldn't make a bit of difference. But my fear was overruling my resolve to be brave.

He opened the door to the balcony and we entered an opulent bedroom, with rich okra walls and dark wood trim. There were two couches on either side of the fireplace, a huge bed, and three other doors. There was a slim chance I could make it to one of the doors if he was distracted, but that only gave me a thirty-three percent chance that it would be the door to the main hall.

"I don't intend to hurt you, I just need information." I caught the distinction. He didn't *intend* to hurt me, but that didn't mean he wasn't going to. He wanted information from me. Did that mean he was going to use Gavin as a means to make me talk?

He led me over to one of the couches and ordered, "Sit."

Gavin was brought in and placed on the couch next to me. I grabbed his hand as he sagged back. Of course, he pulled his hand from mine almost as fast as I'd reached for him. He was angry with me for getting him into this mess, and I couldn't blame him. He had every right to hate me. When Jeremiah was taken, I was a mad woman driven by one objective: getting my son back. I didn't care about who I put in harms' way in the process, and Gavin was a casualty of my drive. I pushed him into joining Balaan, guilted him into this position. I couldn't say that I hated myself for it, though. I was here in Ethiolan, the land of the dragons, and only a few steps away from finding my son.

There was only one guard now, as the other was nowhere in sight. The remaining guard and the royal talked for several minutes before the guard left the room. I watched him go, leaving through a door on my left.

Now I knew the exit.

The royal started to pace while rubbing his chest and muttering something to himself. He was distracted, but not the right kind of distracted I needed. If Gavin or I tried to make a move now, he would stop us for sure.

Someone spoke from behind us, causing me to jump. I turned to see the second guard holding a length of heavy chain. *There went my escape plan.* The heavy chains were clamped to my ankle, then secured to the sofa, and there we sat—for hours. With no idea as to what was going on, I couldn't even begin to formulate a plan. I'd only been prepared for one of two fates. It turned out there was nothing happening except me, sitting on the edge of my seat while Gavin slept. A guard was posted to watch over us, but there was nowhere for us to go. The chains were too thick and heavy. I eventually fell asleep as well, the quell around my neck making sleep effortless.

Later that day, the royal took us on a long flight to another castle.

The black dragon flew so fast, I had to keep my eyes shut against the wind.

When we landed, I didn't have time to gain my bearings or get a glimpse of my new surroundings before he ushered us into a small windowless room. The wall in here were covered in wood and the furnishings had a westered hand-crafted feel. There were bunk beds in the corners and two chairs against the wall. It looked like this was where a guard would catch a nap, rather than a place to keep prisoners.

It was clear by now that he had no interest in having his way with me.

Gavin, looked extremely pale. I'd never in all my life seen him look so weak. He'd always been my strong big brother. I wanted to go over and feel his forehead and push his hair out of his eyes, but I knew he would reject my efforts.

"What do you think is happening?" I asked, mostly to get him to talk. I was worried the trip had been hard on him, and I could assess a good deal about his condition from his speech pattern and the tone of his voice.

"They're probably deciding who gets to kill us." He rolled onto his side, closing his eyes.

"That royal said he didn't intend to hurt us, that he only wants information."

"And you believe that? These are the dragons who took Jeremiah."

"I know, but—"

"Leave me alone. I want to sleep."

I looked down at my hands, feeling useless.

Hours later, a guard brought in fresh clothes for both Gavin and I. He handed both of us a plain shirt and pants, then pointed to the door where a bath adjoined our cell.

"Are you freshening up for your royal?" Gavin asked from his bed.

"No, I just want to get clean." It had been a long time since I'd been able to wash properly. Normally, I was allowed to bathe every three days in the prison if I was well enough to work. Once I went to the sick chamber, that all changed. Now that I had clean clothes to change into, I was anxious to be clean as well.

"It's smart. If I were you, I'd put out for him too."

"How could you say that?"

"That's how we got into this mess in the first place. Might as well come full circle. At least you have the energy to take a bath." He closed his eyes again, cutting off any retort I might have. I looked down at my hands, covered in dirt, and my nails caked with grime. I was sure I had smudges on my face, and my hair hung in an oily, dust-matted nest along my back. As much I would have liked to take a bath, the guilt I felt over Gavin's predicament prevented me. I knew it was silly for both of us to suffer, but my self-imposed punishments were the only way I could show Gavin that he wasn't alone in this.

## WEST

“I’m out,” I declared as I grabbed my dice from the table. I pressed the hard edges into my palm—not painfully, just enough to have the assurance of holding something solid.

“I knew you weren’t long for this round,” Kam gloated, his black eyes dancing in the torchlight as he scooped up his winnings from the table.

He was right, I never should have started the game, but I’d been desperate for a distraction. The queen and king had disappeared days ago, and the prince’s body had been found less than a day after they’d vanished. Receiving word that the king had escaped and made his way back to Blackhorn was a relief, but the queen was not with him. I respected the king, he saved my queen’s life, but he was not nearly as important as she was.

I’d been working double shifts since their disappearance. I should be asleep right now, but the prince’s death had my mind turning up old memories that made sleeping undesirable. I threw myself into a chair in the corner of the common room of the guard’s quarters, where the walls were constructed of thick stone. At one time, they’d been covered in the same white plaster that shimmered in the light as the castle. But over the years, the plaster had been chipped, either by accident in rough house play, drunken brawls, or because some greedy spark thought they could scrape enough ore from it to purchase a pint at the pub.

The chair was solid and strong under my weight. New furnishings never seemed to be an issue with Byran having a passion for woodworking. He’d even taken to teaching his craft to any of the guard who were interested. There was a stack of books on the table and I grabbed the top one, hoping I could distract myself in some way.

The door to the guard station banged open and I jumped. “The King is back!” Race shouted before running back out. Now the real news would come. He would be able to tell us if the queen had been killed as well. Cold dread coursed through me like a river in the dead of winter, running over a stone. If the queen could not be saved, then what hope did we have? I gathered my belt and slapped it on as I headed for the door with the other members of the guard, all anxious for the same thing: news regarding the queen. I hoped that he would have a plan to get her back. If he escaped, then that meant we could get her back too. At least, that was what I hoped for.

*If she’s not already dead.*

We assembled on the lawn in front of the station house. While we waited for the king to land, I turned inward as the excitement and dread built in the crowd that was gathered. I learned to do this during the weeks that Balaan’s men terrorized my family. If I went deep enough within my own head, I couldn’t feel the pain from the cuts, or hear my sister’s screams and my mother’s sobs. I could even block out the smell of my father’s rotting corpse. Mastering this over time helped when those around me shuffled from side to side and talked to their neighbors, unable to restrain their excitement with silence.

The king landed first, a black shadow appearing in the form of a dragon. Then, as my mind struggled to catch up with the immense speed of his landing, he was suddenly in his mortal form. His back was to the assembled guard, and I could just barely make out the form of another person with him. After a moment, I realized it was a female with long yellow hair, much like his former betrothed. At first, I thought it might be her, but the way he marched her straight to the guard station as he called for Hudson told me that she was not a royal. He held her head down, her long yellow locks hiding her features.



She must have been an Apophis-made dragon. I could only assume the king thought she had information on the queen. If this prisoner knew something about the queen, then could I allow myself to hope that she might be returned to us?

Logan landed with another prisoner, this one a male who was obviously weak and barely standing. He didn't look like he would last much longer. I'd seen Balaan's dragons in this stage several times and knew by the way he listed to the side and stumbled as he tried to walk alongside Logan, he had only a few days of life remaining. Logan followed the king into the guard house, where they remained for several long minutes, leaving us to wait.

"He didn't look like a dragon who has lost his companion," I heard Aitana say from behind me.

"You think the queen is alive?" Maric asked.

"I'd bet my life on it."

"You can't tell from looking at him," Judson growled.

"I've seen enough dragons who have lost their companions to know what one in mourning looks like. That was not our king," Aitana huffed.

"The prince is dead, so even if the queen is alive, he's still in mourning," Maric disputed.

"The prince was not his companion," she countered, though her voice was now void of optimism as we were reminded of the tragedy that was too fresh in our hearts.

Once the prisoners were deposited with Hudson, the king marched over to us with Logan at his heels. He looked awful. There were dark circles under his eyes, as if he hadn't slept in days. It was a bad sign. He must have been worried about the queen. As he drew closer, I noted there was a haunted look about him that made me dread what he was going to say. Aitana had been wrong, the queen was dead. I balled my hand into a tight fist, trying to steel myself for the announcement.

We'd lost the Bluescales once already, and I wasn't sure I could relive those days after King Theo's death. During those days, I envied my sister's lost mind. She had no idea that everyone around her was contemplating the reality of a fate worse than death. To become a slave of Balaan's or die... The two realities were already pressing on my consciousness as I watched the king survey the guard like he was about to ask us all to fall on our own swords.

"The Queen is alive," he announced. I felt the shift in those around me who had all been anxiously awaiting to hear those words, just as I was. I felt a shift in my own body as well and inhaled deeply. "She is currently a prisoner of Balaan's, and we are going to do everything in our power to get her back.

"I have two Apophis-made dragons who I think we can get some useful information from. I would like to ask for volunteers who are willing to exchange hearts with Balaan's dragons. If we can learn everything they know, then I think we can gain enough information to help us stop Balaan."

He looked us all over, then scrubbed his hands down his face. "This is purely a volunteer mission. I know this is a lot to ask, but I feel the benefits will be worth the sacrifice. There will be—" The king looked at me. "West?"

In a blur of movement, he was standing in front of me, his hand on my shoulder. "Are you sure about this?"

For a second, I was confused by his words, and then I realized that my hand was raised. I'd already volunteered. "Yes... Yes, My King."

His fingers dug into my shoulder, and I felt the desperation and relief transfer from him to me, as if he could fuel my emotions with just a touch.

Others volunteered too, about ten of us in total.

I was grateful I had the night shift because I wouldn't have been able to sleep. At least I had my work to divert my mind from dwelling on the possibilities that were to come.

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The next morning, I stood with the other volunteers. I was curious as to why there were so many of us, but I was sure the king had his reasons. As I stood with members of the guard I'd served with for years, dragons that I trusted with my life, I felt like we were preparing to enter a mission more dangerous than anything we had ever attempted before. Ever since the king's hand landed on my shoulder the night before, I'd felt anxious.

"What are we going to do with these dragons when we are done with them?" Roy asked, looking down the hall to where we knew the Apophis-made dragons were being held.

"I'm going to show her the bed where my companion used to sleep before Balaan's men killed her," Allen divulged.

"I don't think that's the king's intention here," I surmised.

"What the king intends and what will happen are not exactly the same now, are they. He knows how our people have been treated. I'll bet he just feels guilty that he lost the last Bluescale. He's willing to do anything to get her back so he's not blamed for her death."

"What would you do with her?" Roy questioned.

"That will be up to the king," I replied.

When the king showed up with Logan at his side, the conversation came to an abrupt halt.

"This is not a mission for vengeance," the king started, his face more serious than I'd ever seen it. "The sole purpose here is to gather information from two of Balaan's soldiers. Ultimately, their fate will be in your hands since you will have firsthand knowledge of their crimes. If you find they are useful to us, and we need to keep them close at hand for some skill or continued information they can provide us, then you may find yourself personally responsible for them while we find a way to deal with the situation."

We all nodded our understanding. This mission could turn out to be more involved than getting the information and relaying it to Alva's team. The idea hadn't occurred to me, but it sounded like the king was expecting something important to come from this endeavor.

"I want to know how Balaan is creating these dragons. I want every detail of his operation that you will learn from these prisoners. I want to know how he's moving his forces between this realm and the next."

Again, we all nodded our understanding.

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The king's interrogation was strange. He asked questions about our feelings on right and wrong, justice versus revenge. Could we separate an individual from the cause they represented? I wasn't sure about his motivation, but I answered each question as honestly as possible.

"Now, I don't know what these two have done to our people. They may not have had the chance to do anything too gruesome, but they are Balaan's, and we all know what his dragons have been known to do to our kind. I can tell you that once you have their memories, you will not be able to unsee any of their lives. This could possibly alter your perception of this war. It could possibly alter your loyalty to the realm."

I understood that the king was trying to scare us into backing out, but I knew that nothing

the Apophis-made dragon showed me would shake my loyalty to my realm or lessen my hatred for Balaan. Unless she knew how to turn back time and bring my father back from the dead and restore my sister's mind, she had nothing to tempt me.

The king started dismissing the other guards. For the males, it was down to Roy and myself. "Bring Sophia out," the king ordered Byran.

At first glance, the wretched girl Byran marched out was nothing of note. Her long yellow hair hung in limp, dirty clumps, her clothing the color of dirt. It was not until Byran stopped and she stood at her full height, raising her head in wicked defiance that I saw her. Even now, at the hands of her enemies, she was foolish enough to think she had some sort of power left to her. Her eyes landed on me briefly before they took in the rest of her surroundings. There was something calculating in her eyes that gave me pause. Beneath the filth was a young woman who possessed the beauty of a goddess. I'd only seen a few women who could compare to her. Any male would want her. Her clothing was loose, but it didn't take much of an imagination to see that her figure would be just as worthy of worship as her beauty.

I looked away. It would do no good to allow myself to desire her, as she was a follower of Balaan's. No good could come from her. There was something my grandmother told me once when I was a young man that came to mind now: "A beautiful female is a fine thing to have, but be warned. The more beautiful she is, the more secrets she will keep."

If more beauty was the equivalent to more secrets, then this girl could know where the queen was being held. She could know so many secrets, ones Balaan himself may not even know she knew. Her beauty was probably the reason Balaan had recruited her in the first place, intending to use her as a spy to seduce unsuspecting members of our realm. I took another long look at her. The way she'd chosen to remain in those filthy garments, despite the fact that she'd been provided with the means to clean herself, must be a ploy to garner sympathy from unsuspecting guards in an effort to facilitate her escape. Perhaps she was an assassin who could seduce her way into protected places and kill with precision. The possibilities of what this Apophis-made dragon could know were endless.

I looked back to the king. He was smart to have chosen her for this endeavor. I saw the wisdom in his choices. This idea, which had sounded so desperate last night that I'd spent all night contemplating my decision, was now solidifying as a possible reality that could garner a true advantage in this war.

The king quickly dismissed Roy and turned to me.

"Are you sure about this? I don't know if exchanging hearts with her will poison yours. I don't know what sort of arrangement will result from this, but I believe this girl holds secrets that are vital to our side."

This was my last chance to back out. Although, it was not something I needed to consider. I saw the opportunity here, so I told the king, "I never intended to take a companion. I'm doing this for the queen, which is worth any sacrifice."

"Would you like to ask her any question before we proceed? You may find she has done some very terrible things. You may not want to take that into your heart and mind."

"No, sir. I have prepared myself for the worst. Anything less than what I've seen or can imagine will be bearable." Anything less than a coldhearted assassin would be a surprise.

The king had the girl sit, her insolence stubbornly upheld like a pouty child. She yanked her arm free of Byran's hold and plopped down in defiance, glaring at us all.

"West, come guard your charge. Byran, go get the male." The king ran his hand down his face. "What do you think?" he asked Logan.

“I think you’ve lost your mind. Are you sure you would be doing this if Paige were here?”

“I don’t know,” the king replied.

If the queen was standing here, safe, I was sure the answer would still be yes. Whether the queen was safe or not, Balaan would still be terrorizing our realm. The war would still be raging, and we would still need this information.

I took my post watching over the girl until the time came that I would take her secrets from her. I could feel her eyes on me, but after watching her dramatics in taking her seat, I didn’t look at her.

She exchanged words with the king before the male was brought out. I noticed she was more subdued around the male, who was in bad shape. He wouldn’t survive much longer. She cared for him. She reached for him, only to be rejected. They must have been related, because I couldn’t picture any male of her kind pulling away when she tried to show any amount of affection. I was grateful that I would have all her tricks and secrets to keep me from becoming prey to her seductions.

As the king questioned the male, I could tell he was growing annoyed with the asset. I noted the way the king forced his tone into controlled evenness. There was something about the male’s responses that were angering the king.

“West, take her back to the holding room. I’ll let you know when I’m ready for her.”

“Yes, My King.” I took half a step toward the girl as the king spoke in Balaan’s language to her. She didn’t protest when I put my hand on her arm to pull her to her feet, which surprised me, seeing as how she’d acted with Byran. I escorted her back down the hall. She was a mild prisoner until I heard the male’s voice rise up. Whatever he’d said turned my docile prisoner into a wild, angry beast. She thrashed against me, bucking and fighting to get free. I wrapped my arms around her waist, pinning her arms to her sides, and she threw her head back to bash me in the face. I had to lean back so she didn’t collide with my nose. I nearly dropped her, and had to reposition my hold. She kicked with both her feet off the ground, using my hold to her advantage. This was getting us nowhere. Dropping her, she scrambled off like a scared child to the corner, saying something I couldn’t understand while raising her hands with her palms out in an effort to keep me at bay.

I watched her closely as I caught my breath. This was the creature I would soon be exchanging hearts with. Was this part of her act? Fight viciously, then play the wounded animal? She could play all she wanted to; I would not fall for such tricks. I stood back, watching, waiting to see what she would do next, but I didn’t get any closer to her. I was sure it was what she wanted, for me to take pity on her and come to her aid.

She would strike then.

I heard the king inform Aitana, “He has not attacked the women of Ethiolan, but he is manipulating his sister. You heard the order I gave West, but he told her West intended to kill her. If he is willing to inflict that sort of pain on his own sister, I’m not sure what else you will find.”

Comprehension made me question my analysis of her. I could understand her sudden reaction, and I wondered what her brother was thinking? I would never tell Lenore that someone intended to harm her when I knew they had no intention of such an act. What did it say for their relationship that he would make her think I was trying to kill her? I didn’t like the feeling of compassion the knowledge brought.

“Aitana, you don’t have to do this,” the king advised.

Aitana held up her hand up to silence him. “My King, I want to do this.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. Besides, it seems we will gain more from him than we will from the girl.”

Maybe she was right.

I started to feel apprehensive about the girl. What if she found a way to invoke my sympathies toward her? Would I be able to withstand her games once I was put over her full-time?

I reminded myself that I would know her every tactic. I would see the tricks she had played on the dragons of my realm. This here could be a trick that she and her brother played before. Was the king falling for their game?

“My King, Aitana and I know what we are getting into here. The queen would do it herself if she thought it would help our cause,” I assured him, as well as myself. With the queen missing, this was our best hope at getting her back.

“You think she would?”

“Blazes, that’s all you need hear?” Logan murmured.

“Yes, sir, I think she would. If this helps us get her back, then I’m willing to risk everything for the last Bluescale,” I avowed.

“Would you feel the same if Dean were alive and Paige was standing here with me?”

“Yes, because Balaan would still be coming after them, and we would need to stop him,” I said without hesitation.

My queen was important to our survival, and that meant that Balaan would continue to pursue her. Something would have to be done eventually to turn the tables in this war. This was the best way to learn Balaan's secrets.

“He’s right, sir,” Aitana affirmed.

“What do you think?” the king asked Logan.

“This is insane, but you have two candidates who are just as crazy as you are, so what do I know?”

“It will render the best tactical advantage. More kingdoms should undertake the practice,” Hudson stated.

“If you two are sure that you’re willing to do this, then let’s get it over with and see what we can learn.” The king sighed heavily.

I motioned for the girl to stand and pointed to her brother. She stood, eyeing me with suspicion and mistrust. I wasn't sure what the two had planned for an escape attempt, but I was sure they were working in tandem. The male telling her that I intended to kill her had to be part of their plan somehow.

As she got closer to the male, I took her arm, preventing her from getting too close. I didn't want any physical contact between them. She would not be given the opportunity to create another distraction.

We left the guard house and headed for the great cathedral that stood on the far side of the Bluescale grounds. Farther inland, on the same side as the town. The cathedral sat high over the port town, and could be seen from almost every corner. It was the first thing returning ships saw when they entered the port. Positioned so that it drew the eye before Bluescale Castle, it never took away from the awe of the castle. They stood together, one more appealing than the next, though it was hard to say which one was more beautiful.

The girl kept pace with me easily, though there were a few times I had to give her a stern pull when her gaze became consumed with her brother’s slow stride. I couldn't allow her to try to escape under my watch. With Hudson and the king both present, I couldn't afford such a catastrophe, so I tightened my grip on her arm, making sure she was securely with me.

I took a deep breath as I cleared the threshold of the cathedral. The sacred Desma was not

anything I had ever considered entering, but using it as a means to end this war, to learn Balaan's secrets, seemed like a valid reason to undertake the otherwise sacred oath.

The girl looked around, awestruck by the grandeur of the cathedral. Her pace slowed as her head swiveled in every direction. I hated that she was so dirty, her filth defiling this sacred place.

I dreaded the idea of finishing the Desma with her. Perhaps I could drop her in the sea on the way out to the prison, which would at least wash her filth away. Perhaps a stop at the pub before would help as well. I was grateful knowing that within the hour, I could be rid of her. I would have all her knowledge, rendering her useless.

## SOPHIA

**The** cathedral was by far one of the grandest structures I'd ever been in. The ceilings soared high above me, and there was gold everywhere I looked. The place was overwhelming in its beauty. If I wasn't more concerned about my situation, I would have loved to spend some time in here, taking in all the details that I couldn't process at this time. I could fill a sketchbook just trying to capture one aspect of the structure's beauty.

The guard that had a firm grip on my arm didn't look around at all, keeping his eyes forward as he marched me to the front of the pews. He was military through and through. He gave the black-eyed royal his full attention and moved quickly whenever the man spoke. I knew he wouldn't kill me unless the royal ordered him to, which I hoped wasn't the case. But this was a cathedral, so perhaps they were going to sacrifice us to some god?

The thought was nearly paralyzing. What if that's what they had brought us here for? What if our blood would soon cover the floor of this building? Did they think it would please their god? Gavin was right, they wanted to kill me.

When we stopped at the front of the cathedral, I turned to the royal. "What's going on? What is this place?"

"You and West will be exchanging hearts." His black eyes bored into mine with a finality that would not be deterred.

"What is that supposed to mean?" I demanded, as the reality of losing my life hit me. I had failed Jeremiah; I would never find him or avenge him. Everything I'd done in the last two years had been a waste.

"It is the marriage ritual of the dragons."

Gavin snorted, as if he thought it was funny. Not funny, as it was a good joke, but funny that I could somehow lead him to yet another horrible situation. He was only here because he tried to help me find Jeremiah. How could I ever apologize for this? Now he was going to be married off to a stranger who thought he was a despicable man when he'd only ever tried to help me. I looked at the dragon standing next to me. Soon, I would belong to him, and he didn't look like the type who would listen to my side and set me free. I doubted there would be anything I could do to free Gavin and myself from this situation.

"You can't do that," I said.

"We can, and we will," the royal countered.

"You can't force me to marry him."

"This is a means to an end. You have information I want," the royal informed me. "You will take your dragon form. You will then cut open your chest, cut your heart in two, and give half to West."

He was serious. He meant it, literally. This wasn't some metaphor for the bonding of two dragons.

How could he expect me to slice open my chest and cut out half of a major organ that kept me alive? It was my heart! The more I thought about it, the crazier it sounded. No, I couldn't do it. There was no way I was going to be able to go through with any of this.

"If you tell me everything, from the moment you learned about dragons, everything about how Balaan changed you, and everything you know or suspect about his plans, then I'll forego this process," the royal offered.

For a moment, I was taken aback, and then I realized he was probably playing mind games with me. There was no way he was going to let me go or listen to what I had to say. He was just as bad as the rest of them, wanting to take everything from us, and for what? More gold, more land, more of whatever they felt they needed? “All you dragons are the same. You think you can just take what you want from people because you’re more powerful than they are. I was fooled by your kind once, and I will not allow it to happen again.”

“Our kind have done nothing to you!” he protested, genuine anger entering his voice for the first time.

“You don’t know what was done to me.”

He looked at me for a long moment, then turned to West, relaying something to him. My guard replied, but didn’t look at me. The royal then turned to an old woman who’d been waiting when we entered the cathedral she sprang into action, becoming more agile than her weathered look gave her credit for. Her long gray braids swung as she stepped forward.

The royal said something that had the guards in the room nodding in understanding. He then stepped over to Gavin and spoke to him after removing the quell from around his neck, but Gavin was so ill he could barely focus. I wanted to go to him, but West had a firm grip on my arm, and I feared what would happen to me if I tried to free myself.

The royal turned and said something once again to West, whose response to him was curt and clipped. He then relayed the message to me in English, telling me that if Gavin didn’t comply, my guard was to kill me.

“Please, don’t,” I begged. *Marry me or kill me.* It didn’t seem like it made a difference either way to West. When he was done here, he’d probably go about the rest of his day as if nothing had happened, as if he hadn’t just taken a life or gained a wife. He was a hollow void.

I wanted to shrink away from West, to run, but there was no escape. There were half a dozen guards who could take their dragon forms in an instant and take me down. There was no escaping what was about to happen.

I watched, both fascinated and horrified, as Gavin and his guard began talking in dragon tongue. After a few short words, Gavin and his guard both took their dragon forms, and then, shockingly, Gavin used his claw to cut a deep wound in his own chest. Blood trickled down the front of his brown scales, but it didn’t gush out as I’d expected it to. I couldn’t see his heart from where I stood next to West, yet I saw him draw his paw away as if he held something small and precious. He and his guard then pressed their paws into the other’s chest.

Less than a second after it was done, Gavin landed hard on all fours, as if he’d passed out. Was he dead? I stepped toward him, but West held me back. Everything was quiet. No one moved until Gavin’s guard started to snarl and paw at the floor, as if she were a mad dog.

When Gavin started to screech in pain, I struggled to break free from West, who quickly pulled me back. He gave me a stern head shake, reminding me that he had orders to kill me. The stone gray of his eyes said that he would do it too.

Taking in the scene in front of me, I watched as Gavin’s guard recovered first. When she returned to her mortal form, the older woman healed her wound. Several minutes later, when Gavin recovered from the process, the old woman rushed to place the quell back around his neck. I was mystified to see how good Gavin now looked, as the process should have been a devastating procedure. He just ripped his own heart from his chest, and he looked better than he had in weeks. It was impossible.

His guard approached him and smacked him hard across the face. I flinched at her sudden aggression, but the violent action didn’t seem to faze him; he accepted her reaction as if he’d



expected nothing less from her. The look of fear he tried to mask told me that he had expected worse. Would West hit me when this was all over too? Is that what it meant to be married to a dragon?

Creatures of violence.

The older woman quickly went to Gavin and healed his wound as his guard stared him down the way an alpha would a lesser member of its pack. After exchanging a few words with the royal, she stomped in our direction and said something to West. Giving up on trying to understand what they were saying to each other, I turned my focus to Gavin.

“Gavin,” I called out, needing to know if he was okay.

I was shocked by his refusal to acknowledge me, yet he carried on a conversation with the royal until West said something that drew a bitter retort from him. Gritting his teeth, he finally looked at me, but not with warmth or compassion. Instead, he made his way toward the door and was gone. I was suddenly desperate to know what West had said to drive him away. I felt sick, helpless, and more alone than I’d felt in a long time as I stared at the door Gavin exited without so much as a glance my way. There had to be a reason. Was his cruelty only to mask his kindness?

From there, I felt as if I were in a daze, and everything happened quickly. When West pulled me forward and removed my quell, I felt a sudden rush of energy that had been suppressed for so long. While I recovered from the sensation, he whispered something in my ear. I tried to ask the royal to interpret, but West turned to face the royal and said something over the top of me.

I was coached through the words in their language, words I was sure included “I do.” Once that was finished, West took his dragon form, and the royal instructed me to do the same. I knew what I was supposed to do now, but the idea of it was terrifying. I knew Gavin had just survived the same process, but that was like watching an Olympian do a back flip, then being asked to do the same without training.

My fear paralyzed me. I couldn’t do this. They didn’t know what they were asking.

“Sophia, I will force your transformation if I have to,” the royal threatened.

Of course, they could force me into my dragon form, then hold me down while they cut my chest open and took my heart. I took a deep breath, reminding myself of the number of guards in the room. I could do this with my head held high, as if I was in control, and prove to them that I wasn’t afraid, no matter how much I truly was.

Fight.

That was the only answer. Until I had my son back in my arms, there was no other option.

Once I took my dragon form, West approached me. I couldn’t help but shrink away from him. I might have been fighting, but I was still terrified, and that would probably take some time to master.

West placed his paw over his chest with one long claw over his heart, ready to cut. He waited for me to copy his movement, so I did. Every move he made, I copied. I was shocked that slicing my chest open didn’t hurt more, and even more shocked that I had such easy access to my heart, easily breaking away the half that was going to West, as if it was designed to be severed and shared with another.

I shoved my paw into his chest, trying to ignore how gross the whole process was, just as his paw passed through mine, holding the other half of his heart against mine for several moments. Again, I copied his movements, feeling when our hearts sealed together and started beating as one. I’d never felt anything like it. The feeling was one thing, but it was nothing compared to the visions that began to flash through my mind.

A world I had only dreamt of as a child, and learned about through Balaan, one straight off the pages of a fantasy fiction novel, unfolded in my mind. Where dragons flying through the air was commonplace. Knowing dragons were real was one thing, and even becoming one didn't compare to the world the way West knew it. I spent over a year with Balaan, helping him fight the dragons of Ethiolan, but I never spent much time around the people who transformed into dragons. I spent most of my time in the lab, helping Balaan in the only way I knew how. Yet seeing dragons the way West knew them was mind-blowing.

I tried to fight against the onslaught of information, but closing my eyes tight and shaking my head wasn't doing me any good. I tried to scream, thinking that I could startle myself back to reality. Nothing helped. My mind continued to fill with images and memories of West's life.

I watched him learn to fly. I felt the rush of the wind under his wings, and every breath that expanded in his lungs as the thrill and pride washed over him. I knew he was the youngest of his family, that his parents were simple farmers who couldn't afford much more than their small stone lodge. He knew his mother had been to the Sisters of Smothered Ash on more than one occasion to prevent any further pregnancies.

An early childhood trauma that shaped his life slammed into me. The memories came fast, filled with so much raw emotion, I could scarcely process it all. He was awoken in the middle of the night by a strange noise. The first thought that came to his fearful child mind was gargoyles attacking. The myth of gargoyles was only a tale of terror, a far cry from the reality that would alter his life. The chilling scream that came from his sister's room pulled West from his bed, driving him to the only sanctuary a child his age could go.

His parents' room was empty when he burst through the door. Not seeing the comfort and safety that should have been there, he turned back down the hall. When his sister screamed again, he called out for her. "Lenore!"

He was grabbed at the door, a shadow lunging from the darkness, latching onto his arm with a grip that threatened to break his small bones. West screamed in fright and pain.

A man standing near his sister's room said something, and the one holding West backhanded him across the face, then put his finger over his lips to convey to West that he wanted quiet. West tried to comply, but he was a child, and he didn't know how to stop his cries.

The man holding his sister grabbed her face and pinched her cheeks together while shoving a potion into her mouth, then tipping her head back so the liquid was forced down her throat, her neck constricting with each gulp. She tried to fight, but there was already a quell around her neck. When she started screaming, so did West. Lenore doubled over in pain as she clutched her stomach.

The utter terror and fury that pumped through his body pushed his dragon to the surface. He transformed in the doorway of his sister's room, snapping at the man holding him, and soon found his freedom. Unrestrained, he lunged at the man holding his sister, fully intending to kill him, but one of the men transformed into a dragon as well, his large claws raking across West's wings. His teeth dug into West's shoulder just as he raked the sharp talons of his paw down West's front leg. West screeched in pain.

I tried to escape the vision. I didn't want to see a child being tortured, dragon or not. The vision wouldn't stop, playing out in an unstoppable reel, as if my eyes were being forced to stay open. And it wasn't just my eyes. I heard everything West heard. I smelled the foul odor of the men and the sour stench of the potion his sister had been forced to drink. I felt every emotion as if they were my own.

"Please, let my boy live. I'll do anything," Iris, West's mother, pleaded from the corner. I knew her plea. Only a mother would understand it the way I did.

West was shoved into the cellar, where he landed hard on the dirt floor. The room turned pitch-black before he could turn around. The clang of the lock solidified his separation from his family. I felt the fear that raged in his little body as he pounded on the door until his fists were bruised and his voice was hoarse. He didn't stop until the lock turned over again and the door swung open. West had to jump to the side to make sure he wasn't hit, the light flooding in momentarily blinding him. He launched himself at the first person through the door, but was shoved into the cellar wall. He hit the hard stone surface with such force, his head snapped back and blood started to run down his neck from a cut the rough edges caused.

He started to cry, but one of the men grabbed him by the front of his shirt and smacked him across the face. At first, West cried harder as terror he'd never known before stole any ounce of pride or concept of self-preservation from him. Another slap landed on his cheek, then the man put his hand over West's mouth, pressing up against West's nose, cutting off his air. The man held him there until West passed out.

When West woke, there was a single light hanging from the ceiling and a mound covered with a blanket in the corner. He crawled over to the blanket and slowly lifted the corner, his heart racing. He knew it was something bad, something he didn't want to see, but a desperate compulsion to know what was under the blanket had taken hold of him.

It was his father.

West dropped to his knees to shake his father, desperately trying to wake him. I knew before West's young mind processed it that his father was dead. I felt the devastation that washed over him when he realized the truth of the situation. I could hardly breathe as his grief engulfed me, evoking a desperate screech from my dragon. I was appalled at the heartless act. It was cruelty the likes of which I had only seen when my precious Jeremiah had been taken from me.

There was no escaping West's memories. As much as I would have liked to end the visions right there, I couldn't. The rest of the attack drew out for days, with West locked in the cellar with his father's corpse.

West's futile cries of grief and anger were met with more acts of cruelty by one of the men who'd made it his mission to inflict as much pain on West as he could if West made even the smallest noise. By the end of the second day, West had more than a dozen cuts on his arms. Without his dragon's powers, he couldn't use healing fire to take the pain away.

The boy who was known as Westerly never came out of that cellar. The scared, crying boy stayed locked in that dark, smelly hole, pushed back to the deepest part of West's mind. After the attack, West never cried again. He rarely played games with the other children. He became a serious child who looked after his mother and sister as best he could.

The fallout from the attack was one he could scarcely comprehend at his young age. Both his mother and his sister gave birth to children. His sister Lenore was never the same either. Just after her baby was born, she dug up some Blaze Ropes from the forest floor. West had been with her when she went into the woods that day and didn't think anything of it, assuming that they would sell the roots to the healers in the castle. He knew they had to be careful with them because they were poisonous if eaten. Once Lenore had several roots in her basket, she sat down against a nearby tree.

West sat next to her, thinking they were resting for a bit before they went home.

"Do you think they will come back?" Lenore asked him.

"Yes."

"Me too." Passing him one of the roots, he looked it over, noting the small white roots that strung off the sides of the twisted stock. Mostly, he wanted a distraction from the conversation.

Lenore never spoke of the attack, and he liked it that way. Speaking of it made him uncomfortable. “I can’t do it. Tell Mama I’m sorry, but I tried. I just can’t live in a realm where they are.”

West turned just in time to see her shove a root into her mouth.

“Lenore, no!” he shouted as he lunged for her in an effort to try and pry the root away from her. But it was no use. She was twice his age, and much stronger than he was.

West ran for his mother when he realized he couldn’t stop her.

Lenore was never the same after that, her mind locked away. She regressed to the mentality of small child who played with dolls and had imaginary friends. She lived in a world where her father was still alive, where two sickly babies that didn’t live past their first year were never born.

Iris did her best to move on and give West the best life she could, but he always saw the strain she was under. He joined the Bluescale Guard as soon as he was old enough—both for the income, and his personal vendetta against Balaan.

West’s memories took me all the way up to the moment we exchanged hearts, to the feelings he had as he shoved his heart into my chest. I was a mission to him, a means to an end. My life meant nothing to him. All he cared about was getting his queen back and defeating Balaan.

One thing struck me just before the vision’s ceased—Aitana’s words to West. Words that would end my reason for living.