

The Heir of Bluescale

Throne of Fire

Book 1

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Chapter 1

Zane sat in his mortal form in one of the ballrooms at Blackhorn Castle, going over yet another round of details surrounding his upcoming Desma. “Let me see the budget now that we have added the eternal flames as part of the lights.” Zane sighed, knowing the extravagant addition was going to add to their almost ten thousand pounds of gold and twenty thousand pounds of silver already going into the reception. In a few months, he and the love of his life were to enter the Desama—the joining of dragon hearts that bound companions together for the rest of their days. The finalizing of these small details were the least of his worries, but Lavender Greenwing, his betrothed, was too excited to allow even the smallest detail to be left to the planners.

Kohen, the head planner, turned to his assistant to request the new totals. Zane watched as she quickly riffled through a stack of papers on the desk. Her nervous, sweaty hands, made her movements awkward and stilted, causing her to knock a large stack to the floor. Papers spread out with an annoying hiss, and the girl instantly dropped to the floor to gather the fallen sheets; her whole body vibrating now as she fumbled to hastily clean up the mess.

“Please, sir, we are very sorry. We beg for your kind mercy,” Kohen pleaded with him.

Zane dragged his hand down his face, annoyed that the staff was yet again treating him like a tyrant. He’d grown so self-conscious of the downcast eyes and shaking bodies that served him. He often felt guilty for making the smallest request of the terrified staff. In the beginning, he let them go, dismissing several staffers, only to discover that it didn’t help. Anyone who came under his employ soon started acting like he’d beat them all on a regular basis without provocation. Though he’d never laid a hand on any of them, only twice in the last two years had he raised his voice at all. He couldn’t understand it. Just trying to talk to them only seemed to hurt the situation rather than make it better.

“How many children should we have?” Zane asked as a distraction, reaching up to play with a stray wisp of golden hair that was floating around Lavender’s angular cheekbone.

“Once we produce an heir, we won’t need any more,” Lavender replied. He felt his face fall slightly as she reached for his hand. “Oh, don’t frown, darling. I worry that Balaan would turn our family into a target. I can’t bear the thought of losing anyone I love as much as you or our future children.” Her eyes watered with the force of her emotions. “I couldn’t stand for our children to grow up like you did without one of their parents. If it weren’t for this war, I would give you as many as I could produce.” For a dragon, that was usually a maximum of six since they only reproduced once every nine years, which was the slight drawback to the blessing of taking their dragon forms.

Zane’s mother had been killed when he was just a boy of five. He still remembered her last screech as she sacrificed herself so he and his sister could escape Balaan’s forces. The memory always made him shudder, once from childhood fears, now from grown-up anger.

“We are going to stop Balaan and win this war. Then you and I will have the life we’ve dreamt about, without fear of losing those we love,” Zane swore to her.

“I know—” The door banged open and Ryder burst in with a look of utter horror on his face. Zane and Lavender rose to their feet instantly, frightened of what Ryder had to say.

“He’s dead, and now we’re all going to die,” his stepbrother declared, tugging on his wild hair as his orange eyes stared back at them in horror.

“What? Who’s dead?” Lavender asked. But Zane didn’t need to hear Ryder utter the name, Theo Bluescale. The old dragon had been in poor health for almost a year. Dragons from every kingdom had sent their best sorcerers to help, but in the end, death took everyone.

Zane wrapped his arm around his love’s slender shoulders and pulled her to him, calculating how much time they would have together. He looked around, wondering what all their planning was for if they were both doomed. Her tears fell on his shirt as despair overcame her.

The war started almost thirty years ago, raging throughout Ethiolan, decimating the seven kingdoms of the realm. The dragons of Ethiolan, like him, were fighting to maintain their way of life, and the magical abilities that had been passed down from one generation to the next; a gift from the Great God of Fire to protect their race. The histories didn’t really matter to Zane. What he cared about was now, and the life that he knew. And what he knew was that an evil force moved against all his kind, targeting royals like himself. Zane was the first son of King Titus Blackhorn, the next in line to rule the Blackhorn kingdom.

The royals—the realms strongest dragons—were born with added powers beyond those of the regular, common dragons, but those powers were also their greatest weakness. One dragon from each of the royal lines were required to continue the spell that gave all of their kind the ability to take on strong dragon forms, such as to breathe fire, and enjoy an extended life span. Without the spell, they would be thrust into a life of being trapped in their mortal forms, frail and weak, and unable to defend themselves from the smallest attack. The idea sickened Zane.

Without the blood of all seven royals, there would be no way to expel their enemy or to save the realm. When the three moons of their realm aligned in seven months, there would be no hope of renewing their powers. Thousands would die, and thousands more would be enslaved.

Theo Bluescale had been the last of his line. For years, Balaan had been targeting the royal Bluescale line, and now he’d finally succeeded in eradicating them completely.

What are we going to do? Zane wondered.

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The question played on a silent loop in Zane’s mind for a solid month as he sank further into despair. Each day when the sun set, he found he couldn’t sleep, fearing he wouldn’t wake again, that the darkness of the night would smother him.

“You need to eat,” Lavender admonished him, not bothering to keep the annoyed edge from her tone.

“What’s the point?” He looked at the cold roast on his plate, and couldn’t muster any enthusiasm for his once favorite meal. The expertly prepared food was right in front of him, but he didn’t take in the fine aroma, nor did he anticipate the texture of the sauce on his tongue. Nothing about the meal stirred his hunger.

“The point is, I don’t want you to look gaunt and disgusting at our reception. I’ll be the crowned princess, and when that happens, I can’t have you looking like you’re not fit to lead this kingdom.”

“Princess?” Zane scoffed. “Of what? For how long? Don’t you see? Once the alignment has passed, Balaan is going to march in here and slaughter every one of us.” He leaned back in his chair, hating himself for snapping at her. He knew she was right. He couldn’t let everyone know he’d given up or that he was terrified, but he felt so helpless. He couldn’t offer his kingdom the symbol of hope they needed during this dark time. How could he stop any of this from happening? The only way would be if he could somehow reverse time, and that was impossible.

Two days after the King of Bluescale died, Balaan had offered terms of surrender to each of the six remaining kingdoms. Zane knew his father was contemplating the issue, but he disagreed. There was still six months until they lost their powers, and until that happened, Zane felt that the kingdoms should fight.

“Eat,” she said coldly, putting the force of her Greenwing power behind her single word.

Zane’s body complied instantly. He picked up his fork and shoveled a heaping load of cool roast into his mouth. The Greenwings’ gift, the command of speech, was highly useful in aiding a Greenwing into getting what they wanted. Lavender rarely used her gift on him, though, knowing how much he hated to be controlled like that. But he supposed she was desperate, just like he was. Like they all were. He still had no words of comfort to offer her because he couldn’t see any light through the blackness.

“You know I don’t like it when you try to manipulate me,” he said, just before he shoved another bite into his mouth. She looked away, as if she were bored. She didn’t even look guilty for her actions.

He wondered if he really looked so bad, that she was willing to gamble with using her power when she knew how angry it made him.

A knock on the door came as Zane shoved his fourth bite into his mouth. He watched as his guard opened the door, and after a moment of someone quietly conversing with Ezra, his personal guard, he stepped aside and escorted a small shaking girl into the room.

Her gray eyes were cast to the floor as she quickly dropped into a curtsy. “Please forgive the intrusion, My Prince, but the king has summoned you for an audience.”

“Go,” Lavender said quietly, releasing him from her control.

Zane rose to his feet, leaving nearly a full plate of food behind. “We’ll talk about this when I get back.” He gave her a pointed look, but she only batted her eyelashes at him innocently.

Blackhorn Castle sat at the peak of the highest mountain in Ethiolan, towering above the ridgeline like a massive black dragon’s claw, with its spiked spires silhouetted in the setting sun. It had stood for ten thousand years, and the idea that it wouldn’t even last another year made Zane’s heart sink. What would happen when Balaan overran their realm in six short months? Would he destroy the massive stone structure that had stood up to every storm Ethiolan had to offer?

Storms were brief, while wars were long.

So far, Blackhorn Castle had withstood the war; its opulent dark wood carvings of dragons lined the corridors. The same wood was used in the moldings along the walls and floors. Everything had been inlaid with gold trim, which was still in pristine condition. Zane was blessed to live in a fortified home that the enemy had yet to breach. The stories of what Balaan’s armies had done to outlying farms and hamlets turned Zane’s stomach. His own sister had been ambushed once on a flight home. All but one of her guards had died protecting her.

He stopped in front of the large double doors that served as the main entrance to his father’s office. The heavy doors were carved with an intricate depiction of the first Great War. The scene was of the Great Vitra, the first dual-natured dragon of all time, defeating Drago, the son of Apophis, the dragon of darkness. Two of the greatest enemies Ethiolan had ever known.

Flecks of gold accented Drago’s blood as it spilled over the rock carved into the foreground. The door was almost as old as Blackhorn Castle itself. The gold was seeping into the cracks in the grains of the wood, adding to the eeriness of the carved depiction of their once great victory.

Zane shuddered to think what scenes Balaan would have made of this war once he secured his victory. There had been little fighting in the last month. Zane knew it was because Balaan was

biding his time until the alignment, when Zane's kind would lose their ability to shift into their powerful dragon forms. From then on, it would be only too easy for Balaan to overrun their forces.

A guard knocked for him, and he soon found himself standing in his father's office, waiting. His father was looking out the window at the night sky, his hands clasped behind his back. It didn't seem like he'd heard Zane enter. In their mortal forms, they were practically equal in height and stature, though his father's age had given him a round belly and a long beard.

"Father?" Zane said stiffly. There'd always been a strange tension between them as Zane struggled to be both son and successor; two roles that never met, or lined up in any understandable way.

"I've decided to accept Balaan's terms." The simple words cut through Zane with a finality of death. He sank into the chair behind him as the room started to spin. "If we surrender and pledge our fealty to Balaan, he will spare our kingdom. I'm going to surrender to him. I've already thought about this for weeks, and discussed it with Uriel."

"What will become of the dragons? Of us? Should we surrender to him only to become his slaves?" He hated the fact that his father hadn't spoken to him about the decision, considering Zane was the next in line for the throne.

"It's better than death."

"Not to many."

Titus turned to face him, shouting, "What will you have us do?"

"There are still six months until the alignment! We have time to rid ourselves of Balaan in that time!"

"You think we can do in six months what we have not been able to do in thirty years?"

"All the kingdoms need to unite. There is no hope if we don't start working together. Old feuds must be put away. It is time for new alliances to form."

"You think after five hundred years, the Yellowbacks and the Greenwings will just start working together? Or that the Redblooms and the Orangeclaws will forget their mistrust? It has been three thousand years, and Whitetail still won't work with us."

"They have no choice! It's a matter of their survival."

"You are so young. Your optimism shadows your ignorance."

This was not a shock for Zane to hear; his father often brought up his youth when they disagreed on a topic. Though Zane thought his father should heed his opinion, because war was all he'd ever known. He didn't have to adapt to the atrocities that were reported. He was never shocked by the reports that came from the outer lands—sickened and saddened, yes, but never shocked. The destruction of another village never took his breath away or froze him when he heard about the horrors the innocent commoners suffered. All the reports did was fuel his anger and resolve to fight harder. There were times he hated his status as a royal. The title prevented him from joining the guard, from actually fighting.

A knock interrupted Zane's rebuttal. Uriel, his father's top advisor, entered the room before Titus could grant permission. He was an old dragon, long and thin. Everything about him was gray, from his hair and eyes, to the sickly look of his skin.

"Forgive the intrusion, Your Majesty, but an urgent message from Bluescale has just arrived," Uriel announced, shooting Zane a stern look.

Zane had never liked Uriel. He felt that his ideas were outdated, leading his father in the wrong direction when it came to the war. Not to mention that he'd always unnerved him. A vague chill always seemed to creep over Zane when he laid eyes on the dragon.

“A message from Bluescale?” His father sounded like he was inconvenienced by the message, but other than that, he didn’t really care about its contents. Zane was curious. He couldn’t imagine a reason for someone at Bluescale to be contacting them. What more was there to say?

The kingdom of Bluescale was still in the midst of the Kolyva, the forty-nine-day mourning period that all kingdoms honored. It took the soul forty-nine days to travel to the gates of the Land Beyond. During this time, they spent seven days communing with each of the Fire Gods. They had to account directly to the Gods, answering for their life’s decisions. At the end of the forty-nine days, the Gods decided the soul’s fate, either to pass through the gates to the Land Beyond, or to be cast out, where their soul would be forced to wander alone for all eternity.

Family members offered prayers and gifts to the Gods on the dragon’s behalf, to help sway the Gods to be forgiving and grant their loved one’s soul passage. No dragon would disrupt the Kolyva out of fear of being cursed by the Gods. Therefore, Bluescale wouldn’t have been invaded, to have their resources plundered. Not yet.

He knew his father was already planning an attack once the Kolyva ended, which was a wasted effort in Zane’s opinion. What good would more land or more gold do them if they were going to surrender to Balaan?

Zane waited, wanting to question Titus. But knowing his place as prince, it was best he held his silence. He knew that when his father sounded like he didn’t care about something, it was usually the opposite. Titus rarely showed any emotions other than anger or disapproval.

Zane sat on the edge of his chair, anxious to be handed the note. While his father read the message, his eyes bulged, and he stared at the few words for several minutes before he finally handed it over to Zane.

Zane rose and stepped forward to retrieve the strip of parchment that had been copied from the mirrored room. A room that housed hundreds of mirrors endowed with spells that connected them to other mirrors in the realm, giving them free communication with the other kingdoms.

*I urge you to make all haste to Bluescale and help me save our realm. I have recently learned of a saving grace, but I require the assistance of royal blood. As everything burns, so too shall Balaan.*

“Who sent this?” Zane asked.

“Maze, the Bluescale sorcerous,” Uriel sneered, as if Zane didn’t know who Maze was.

“What is this saving grace she speaks of?”

“I couldn’t begin to fathom, My Prince.” He sighed, but Zane couldn’t tell if it was out of aggravation or not.

“We will set out tonight, after we give the others a head start. I don’t want to arrive too far ahead of everyone. Let your guard know they will need to leave immediately,” Titus informed Zane.

## Chapter 2

The three moons of Ethiolan cast a hazy glow over the land. Zane and his father morphed into their dragon forms, thrusting out their great black wings and beating them against the wind to lift them into the sky. They could fly higher than any dragon could dream. Under normal circumstances, Zane would have enjoyed the opportunity to fly at top speed to a neighboring kingdom and escape the tensions of his home, but this was no pleasure trip.

He never feared attacks from Balaan or his men when he flew like this. The Blackhorn's power was the ability to fly faster and higher than any other dragon in the realm. He was in the most danger when he was in his mortal form on the ground. Though in his mortal form he could move just as fast, it required a conscious effort. And if he wasn't paying close enough attention, or his guard was down for any reason, then he could easily be attacked.

That is what happened to the Bluescale line. Since their power was not one that served them in any real attack, they had been by far the most logical line of dragons to pick off first. Their abilities served no advantage to them, unless they could force their opponents under water for any length of time.

The cryptic message from the sorcerous of the Bluescale kingdom promised *hope* as their payment for taking the risk to cross the dangerous open skies. Hope where there was none was a precious payment, and more valuable than gold at this point. With one royal line now extinct and their way of life hanging in the balance, hope was an offering they would risk any flight for.

*What did it mean?*

If the Bluescale sorcerous was offering them hope, did that mean she found a way around the loss of the royal line? The words of her message turned in his head as he flew. She had a saving grace. The possibilities flitted in Zane's mind as he tried to decipher the few words she'd sent.

As Zane and his father flew over the borders of the Bluescale kingdom, Zane saw a smattering of shadows move. But whether they were Bluescale guards or Balaan's spies, Zane couldn't tell from this height. He hoped they were guards. He didn't want Balaan knowing they were up to anything, that they had been offered hope.

They didn't slow or drop their elevation to see if the dragons below were friends or foes. Without a guard, they couldn't risk putting their own lives in danger. These days, it was a royal's first priority to keep themselves alive. Balaan's quiet retreat for the last month did not give Zane a feeling of security.

As the wind slipped under his wings, each beat was marred by an instinctual panic and a feeling of apprehension, as his fears of what could stop him from learning Maze's secret plagued his thoughts.

Once Bluescale Castle came into view, which sat on the edge of a high cliff overlooking the Daphnia Sea, the scent of the ocean filled his nostrils. Waterways led into and ran throughout the castle that only the Bluescales could traverse. Though the existence of the fascinating underwater tunnels were well known, only true Bluescales would ever dare to enter them, since it would mean certain death to anyone who couldn't breathe under water.

The mystery of the waterways, not to mention the rumors of vast gold stores, fascinated many, including Zane. He could remember as a boy, standing on the edge of a waterway and looking into the deceptively welcoming pool, wondering just how dangerous it really was, until the Bluescale prince himself grabbed him by the hand and sternly warned him away from the edge.

The waterways were still a curiosity for him, but he was old enough now to know better than to get too close to the edge of that particular fascination.

From this altitude, he could see that seven shrines were lit for the Kolyva. As he began his decent, he started to make out the prayers that emanated from the Kolyva circle, where deep voices were chanting praises to Ember, the Mother of Fire, pleading with her to allow King Theo's soul to pass through to the Land Beyond.

They landed in the dark shadows behind some trees, just inside the castle walls, transforming to their mortal forms as soon as their paws hit the soft grass. They peered around a tree to see Maximus, the Redblood King, and his daughter, crossing the field toward the castle, still in their dragon forms. They were escorted by a number of the Bluescale guards, as well as their own.

The Bluescales stood out with their blue and silver tabards bearing the crest of their castle—two dragons with joined tails over water. The Redblood guard wore tabards of red and gold with two dragons fighting, with Redblood the obvious victor since the Redbloods' royal power was their fighting skills.

Zane's guard would arrive within the hour since there was no way for the common guard to keep up with a Blackhorn. They had to either give their guard enough of a head start to arrive before them, or they had to go without their guard, arriving ahead of them as they were doing now.

Zane and his father hailed the escorts and joined the Redbloods entering the castle. They both had the same jewel red eyes, like smoldering embers, and thick hair. Lilly was one of the rarer royals since she was an anomaly. She had inherited her father's royal powers instead of her mother's, which was the more traditional occurrence.

"It's not every day we arrive before a Blackhorn," Lilly Redblood said, clasping her hand over her heart in a formal greeting. Zane and his father returned the gesture.

"We must have gotten the message last," Titus said, turning to march toward the castle entrance.

"What do you think it means?" Zane asked the tall red-eyed dragon, who was just a few years older than himself. Lilly was not beautiful in a traditional way. She was almost as tall as her father, though not nearly as muscled. She'd always exuded confidence and an easy comradery that invited others to be around her.

"I think Maze drained Theo's blood and is keeping the last of the Bluescale power in the vault. I'll bet she's come up with some insane way to use it at the alignment." Lilly's voice was hushed, as if speaking a truth too ghastly for polite company.

"Lilly, don't be morbid," Maximus chided, his red eyes flashing with disapproval. "We are a civilized race. We don't drain the blood from our kind to keep for later use."

"We would if he was dual-natured," she said in a matter-of-fact tone, unfazed by his look.

"Why don't we just go in and see what it is then?" Maximus turned to join Titus, throwing back his broad shoulders as he walked. With his long torso erect, he stood at his full height as he barreled through the halls like he was king of this castle instead of another.

"So, what do you think?" Lilly asked Zane as they walked together.

"I suppose it would have to be a blood supply of some kind, though I'm not sure Maze would have drained King Theo."

"What else could it be? All the other Bluescales are dead."

"I don't know." Zane shrugged, though his mind was racing with curiosity as the mystery consumed his thoughts.



They followed the escorts that led them through the sparkling white-walled castle. Like most castles in Ethiolan, the center was the oldest part of the structure, built before they had the ability to transform into dragons. The old sections were smaller, only accommodating dragons in their mortal forms. The newer sections that were added were large enough for a dragon to walk through the halls without destroying the structure with its massive size.

The stones had been washed by the salt in the air. He heard that the walls got their shine from ground-up shells found by royals as they swam along the sea floor. The effect was most stunning in the daylight when the sun reflected off the waterways and sprang up on the walls to dance in shimmering bands of silver and gold. Accented with lush green foliage and beautiful tapestries, Bluescale achieved a look that combined exquisite royal opulence with an earthy feel.

Another unique quality of Bluescale was the silver accents. Where most castles were covered in floor-to-ceiling gold, Bluescale had hardly any gold in sight. Zane knew they were the wealthiest kingdom, but unlike his castle home, he hardly saw any of the ore that dragons loved so much and used to show others their superiority.

Gold was power, and every dragon knew that from the moment they were born. They were drawn to it, comforted by the feel of it against their scales. Their realm was bought and sold in grams, ounces, and pounds of gold. Silver and precious gems as well, but it was always gold that dragons valued most. It was used in almost every spell ever cast, and the best foods were the ones that shone with the inviting ore.

They were led to the lower chambers of the castle, leaving behind the white shimmering walls for ones of rough cut stone. Only torches lit the way now, as a single waterway ran the center of the wide hall they were walking down. Small foot bridges for guards to cross from one side of the waterway to the other were spaced every fifty paces. After walking through the white, silver, and green halls, Zane thought these lower chambers seemed dreary. A feeling of unease crept over his body as he passed between shadows, feeling as though an attack was eminent. There were four doors that looked like they were made of heavy metal, with large locks hanging from strong levers to keep everyone out.

After being escorted past two closed vaulted doors, they finally stopped at the last door on the right. The side of the room they entered in had a long wooden table that held a chest and a set of scales, most likely used as a work station to weigh gold. Any sense of foreboding slipped away when he turned to see the large chamber was half full of gold. The mounds went as high as the ceiling, in a room that could easily house ten full-sized dragons. It was more gold than Zane had ever seen in one place at one time, and he wondered if the other two chambers he'd passed could possibly hold mountains of gold too.

Zane knew the Bluescales were the wealthiest family, a fact he never really considered to be impressive. He was a wealthy royal too, after all. That was until he walked into this one vault and saw for himself how his family's gold stores—which were massive in their own right—looked like a spoonful of sugar placed next to a bucket of sand in comparison.

For them to be escorted here was a sign of faith and trust. One dragon never revealed their gold to another unless they trusted them or wanted to build a relationship. Gold could so easily change hands if a civil war ever broke out, and had in the past. Bluescale was vulnerable without a royal to rule and lay claim to these stores, so Maze must be confident in her promise for hope.

Maze stood in the chamber, looking both nervous and excited. The elusive thing Zane had been missing for the past month was evident in her dancing eyes. Even her greeting held the enthusiasm that had escaped Zane as of late.

“Well, what’s the news?” Maximus Redblood asked as he entered the room, not bothering to greet the hostess of the meeting.

“We are still waiting on one more royal before we can start,” she said, pulling her long gray hair to the side. Her long green robe held hundreds of small trinkets and gems, all hanging from thin strings. As she moved, the little bobbles swung with her, clattering off each other, sounding as if the robe could chant spells for the sage.

Zane waited next to his father at the large table in the lowest chamber of the now extinct royal family of Bluescale Castle. He was not sure who else they were waiting on, but he hoped they would hurry because Maze was not giving any clue to how she planned on stopping Balaan.

Zane looked over at Maximus Redblood, who was an imposing figure in his mortal form, and an even bigger dragon. He was tapping his finger on the table in an annoying way that made the time pass even slower. The constant thumping grated on Zane’s nerves. No one seemed to be in a talking mood, and the tension grew heavier with each tap.

Finally, they heard footsteps as someone else approached the chamber. Maze stood to greet the newcomer, Sandra Greenwing. She ruled the kingdom across the sea, alone now with the recent death of her companion. She stood rigidly, emitting grace and poise, though Zane guessed she felt anything but.

She looked around at the others when she entered, then took the seat Maze offered her. No one spoke, but all eyes turned to Maze. Nervously, she cleared her throat, rolling a small wand between her palms, her rings clicking on the wood as it passed.

“We are here tonight, not to hash out the Bluescale gold or decide who will run the kingdom until our inevitable demise. We are here to restore hope to our whole race and the entire realm.” Maze looked around as if expecting questions, but everyone was silent as they waited for her to continue. “Years ago, Theo Bluescale devised a plan to fake his oldest son’s death, along with the death of his daughter-in-law and their son.” She took a deep breath. “They are all still alive and living in another realm, the Earth realm.”

“That was twenty years ago,” his father scoffed.

“How could they have known their line was going to be attacked so long ago?” Maximus asked.

“A seer very close to the Bluescales saw the coming destruction and warned them,” Maze stated simply.

She waited for the shock of the royal families to die down before she continued. “Using ancient forms of blood magic, they were masked in their mortal forms so they could blend in undetected with the humans. There, they have been protected from the evils of Balaan. With any luck, Prince Kaison and Princess Aminah will have produced two more dragons. I expect we’ll receive five dragons. In addition to the original three that left Ethiolan, we should also receive a twelve and three-year-old. I pray that one or both of the new children will be males.

Zane could see hope lighting the eyes of everyone at the table, and he could feel it stirring in his chest. There were more Bluescales, which meant more royal blood to maintain the balance of power.

“How do we get them back?” Titus asked eagerly, the first bit of life returning to his voice since he received word of Theo’s death.

Maze lifted the lid of the ornate chest that sat on the table and pulled out three vials filled with a gold liquid—dragon blood. The light that touched the vials glistened and danced. The hopes of their entire world rested in three breakable tubes held in the hands of one dragon.

“I have prepared a place in the next chamber to perform the spell,” Maze murmured quietly. Zane felt better as he watched her place the vials back in the safety of the chest.

The chest was carried into the next chamber by a member of the Bluescale royal guard. Everyone else followed silently, carrying heavy lumps of hope and anticipation as delicately as the guard carried the chest. Even Greenwing had a soft smile touching her otherwise tight lips.

There were already several members of the guard stationed in the room, many of them wearing the same look of anticipation that Zane felt. The floor of the adjoining chamber had been cleared of gold, and only a small amount was piled in the corners to make space for a large circle carved into the floor.

“The spell was cast so that any member of the Bluescale family could call their blood relatives home. We also included a fail-safe so that if needed, we could use three other royals to accomplish the same effect. King Theo had finally consented to bring his son back a week before he died, but I was not able to prepare the spell in time. Which is why I have gathered you all together tonight.”

Maze stepped to the circle, then indicated where each of the royals must stand before informing them of their function in the spell.

“Each member from the royal families must take their dragon form and stand at each point.”

“Are you sure about this, My Queen?” Greenwing’s advisor asked when Sandra Greenwing was the first to step forward.

“What choice do we have?” she quipped.

“What if it’s a trap?” His words reminded Zane that many of the royals were losing faith in each other—accusing one another of all sorts of things from simple cowardice to outright consorting with Balaan. “Then you tell my children that even in the end, in the face of everything, I never lost hope,” Sandra stated.

Titus, Maximus, and Sandra all took their dragon forms, taking up most of the free space. True to their family names, each dragon bore the scales of their different colors. Zane’s family was black as the darkest night with sleek scales. They were not a breed full of spikes and long curled horns. Instead, they were smooth, with short black horns around their angled bone frill, which helped to disperse the air around them while in flight. They were designed for speed. Their tails held the only spikes on their bodies. They were so sharp, that when coupled with the Blackhorn’s extreme speed, they could cut through almost any material. Their scales absorbed the light, and in the dim light from the chamber, Titus’s dragon form seemed to make the room darker.

Redbloods had hard spikes running down the length of their backs to the end of their tails. They were known for having distinctive curling horns at the top of their heads, with long narrow faces. They only looked wide because of an extra patch of spiked skin that jutted out from behind their powerful jaws.

Greenwings had the look of brilliant emeralds in their scales with round, plump bodies that made them slow in the air. Though, with their deafening screech, they could render an enemy stunned long enough to escape an attack. They lacked sharp defensive spikes since they rarely fought due to their power. Instead, they bore long pliable skin that distracted an attacker from their true body shape.

The other royal dragon races all bore unique shapes and qualities as well. Orangeclaws were venomous; a single bite could kill another dragon. Yellowbacks could sense the personalities of others, and knew just by looking at someone if they were trustworthy, or what sort of mood they were in. Whitetails had stealth, including the ability to turn invisible.

Standing at their appointed marks, the three dragons watched as Maze started the spell. Zane stood just outside of the circle, close to his father's side, though his head didn't reach his father's shoulder.

Maze poured each vile into a shallow basin and mixed in some herbs. She then went over to the fire where a small vat of gold was melting over the flames. Using thick, heavy tongs, she lifted the blazing hot canister off the fire and poured the gold in with the other ingredients. She then recited a spell from a scroll in a language Zane had never heard before. When she finished her words, she poured the contents of the basin into the grooves that were carved in the center of the circle. The gold liquid spread quickly, as if it had a purpose, filling in the carved-out notches that formed a strange symbol. Once it covered the symbol, it stopped moving.

She walked around the symbol, chanting the words from the scroll. Zane began to feel uneasy when a wind started to blow inside the underground chamber. The blood on the floor started to swirl again, and this time it rose off the floor.

Maze signaled the three dragons to start their part. They all took a breath, then released great flames to trap the blood in a crystal form. The heat from the dragon fire was so intense, everyone in their mortal form had to back away to the cooler corners of the chamber.

After the fires stopped, the crystallized blood hovered in the air for a moment, then slammed against the stone floor, shattering it into a blinding light. Reflexively, Zane's hand came up to shield his eyes. A moment later, his eyes started to adjust as some of the light started to die off. He could just start to make out the figure of a mortal. As more of the light faded, he saw a second figure standing with the first. Once the light was completely gone and the chamber was returned to its dim torch light, the assemblage was able to behold the results of Maze's spell.

His heart lurched, and an audible gasp was heard as everyone took in the two figures.

## Chapter 3

Zane's heart plummeted as he realized something had gone horribly wrong. Standing between the three dragons was a young, dark-haired girl, and a small boy.

The girl had a wild look to her, with dark mahogany hair cut in short, choppy layers. It stood up in uneven tufts on the top of her head. She was unlike anything else he'd seen before. Her clothes were also strange. Her legs were covered in a blue material that clung to her slight form. She had boots that came up to her calves and a fitted red jacket that was zipped almost to her neck. She looked older than twelve, but younger than Zane.

Next to her was a male child in blue pants, but his shoes were very different. They were black with multi-colored lines. When the boy moved, little lights blinked. He wore a jacket with a hood, though his was black, and he was far older than three. There was no way Aminah would have been able to produce children this old in the twenty years she was gone.

After his cursory glance at their clothes, he focused on their faces, their eyes more specifically. They both had brown eyes—not the blue that would be the mark of a Bluescale, but brown like a human. *Not* the eyes of a royal. Their eyes were strange in another fashion because they were round in the center, not the elongated slits of a dragon's eyes.

Everyone in the room looked at the two children, shocked by what the spell had produced. Where was Kaison Bluescale and Aminah, his companion? Their son Aranzo should have been a grown man about Zane's age. No, something had gone terribly wrong.

The girl looked around the room, her eyes wide with fear. With a shaking hand, she reached out for the boy. Saying something to him in a language Zane didn't understand, the boy obediently looked at her and took the hand she held out to him.

Once she had the boy's hand in hers, she bent down and pulled a small knife from her boot. Zane was curious about these strange children, so he moved closer to get a better look. These were the first humans he'd ever seen. After hearing stories about them growing up, he was fascinated.

Although the girl held a knife, she was not freighting or viewed as a threat to anyone in the room. She was simply scared as anyone else would be. They had pulled these poor kids from some place into a room with enormous dragons and armed guards. She had a right to be scared, though what use her small knife would be against even one of the enormous dragons in the room, Zane couldn't fathom.

The boy's wide brown eyes were filled with wonder rather than fear, as the girl's were. As fascinating as they were, they were not his promised reprieve. Zane hated to see them after getting his hopes up. More Bluescales were out there somewhere, and to get these two instead was disheartening. If they had been the decedents of the Bluescale line, then the boy's eyes should have been a vibrant blue, the same as his father's. The girl should have had yellow eyes, the same as her mother, since royal children inherited their parents' abilities based on gender. Neither one of them had dragon eyes, not even the gray eyes of a commoner.

Another bad sign was their shock and fear over appearing in a room full of dragons. The Bluescales went into hiding many years ago, enough time to have children. Wouldn't those children know how to speak dragon tongue, knowing that one day they would be returning to their true home? Wouldn't they know about dragons? Even if their eyes only looked brown due to some type of glamour, they were too frightened, too unaware of their surroundings.

The girl blinked up at the dragons, like she didn't know if what she was seeing was real. The little boy said something about them. Zane only knew this because the boy pointed at Zane's

father. The girl snatched his hand away, saying something in their language, then took a step back, pulling the boy with her. Her knuckles were white around the handle of her knife. The little weapon was almost laughable to Zane, but if it made her feel safe, he didn't think they should try to take it from her.

"Please, don't be scared. You're safe here. My name is Maze." Maze spoke kindly, approaching the girl with caution. The girl looked for a moment like she might lower her weapon to accept Maze's outstretched hand, but then one of the guards spoke, and the girl's defenses were up again.

"This is impossible. What did you do wrong?" Drake, the commander of the Bluescale guard, said loudly. "We need to send them back immediately."

The girl looked at the guard, squinting as if she couldn't see him properly, then something flashed in her eyes that gave Zane pause. He wondered if she was as harmless as he'd thought.

Drake must have seen it too because he stepped in front of Zane, a move Zane was used to. How often in his life did guards place themselves between him and suspected danger?

When Drake stepped in front of him, the girl's eyes moved to Zane, taking him in with obvious distaste, and an equal amount of hatred she had for the guard. It was annoying. She was a stranger, and she looked at him like his staff did back at home. He was a royal, supposed to be loved by the people and viewed as a hope for their realm. What awfulness did others see when they looked at him?

He wasn't sure of his own motivation to move closer to her. Maybe he just didn't like the look on her face. Maybe it was a need to prove to her that he was better than she thought. He stepped around Drake and approached her with his hands up in an effort to show her he wouldn't hurt her.

She took a few more steps back, but now she'd practically trapped herself, cornered with a big heavy door behind her. Zane figured she felt desperate. There was no way she would be able to turn around and open the door before she was descended upon by the guards. They wouldn't be able to let her wander around the castle, and Zane watched as these facts registered in her eyes.

Zane crept closer, and so did the guard that was pressed up against his back. Her eyes darted between Zane and Drake.

"Don't hurt them," Maze pleaded. "Please, just give them some space."

"Zane, get away from her! She could hurt you. Let the guards do their job!" his father roared, having transformed back to his mortal form, just to yell at Zane. The boy's eyes widened when he heard one of the other dragons roar in protest, but the girl looked horrified by the sound. She said something to the boy, then let go of his hand before he turned and tried to open the door.

The boy said something to her as he struggled with the heavy door, but she yelled at him while she used the knife to keep the guard at bay.

"Let's give her a little space." Zane echoed Maze's words, thinking it would be best if the girl didn't feel so threatened. He signaled for the guard to step back, only Drake remained close to him.

He watched her hand holding the knife. She was slow in his eyes with untrained, stilted movements. It was clear she didn't have much experience with weapons or how to use them. Zane knew he could easily disarm her in a move so fast, she wouldn't know what was happening until she was looking at her empty hand. But he didn't want to take the knife from her. He wanted her to look at him as someone trustworthy, and put the knife away because she felt safe around him.

“Please, calm down. We don’t want to hurt you,” Zane said in a soothing voice he hoped she would find calming. “We just want to send you home.” Zane held his hand out to her and motioned for her to go back to the circle.

She looked at his outstretched hand, and something in her eyes wavered. Zane thought he might get her to cooperate.

“She speaks Balaan’s language. Don’t get near her, sir,” Drake warned.

The girl spat words at him, yelling and pointing with the small knife. She had a genuine hatred in her eyes for the commander of the guard. It was strange that she would have such a depth of emotion for a dragon she had never met. She was no longer undecided about taking Zane’s outstretched hand. Drake’s words had turned her moment of possibility of returning to the circle impossible.

Once the boy succeeded in opening the door, the girl reached up with her free hand and pulled a torch from the wall. She threw it at Drake, and as she did, a grinding sound distracted Zane as he watched a passageway open in the fireplace just beyond the flames. When Zane turned back, the girl was running with the boy, hand in hand. They ran out of the chamber toward a low wall, and Zane and the guards followed. As they ran, the girl said something to the boy, which sounded like a song—like a child’s nursery rhyme. The boy joined her in saying the rhyme. On the other side of the low wall was a Bluescale waterway. On the surface, it looked like a calm pool of water, but everyone knew that below the surface ran a strong current that would suck anyone into a long tunnel that only a Bluescale could survive. Anyone else would be forced into the tunnels full of rushing water until they drowned, and their bodies would be spit out into some tributary.

When they reached the edge of the wall, the girl lifted the boy up on the edge, saying something in a low, urgent tone to him. He looked at her apprehensively, but nodded.

She was about the climb up on the wall too. “No, you’ll drown!” Zane yelled as he rushed forward to stop them. The girl shoved the boy into the water, just as Zane’s hand circled around her wrist. All Zane could do was watch in horror as the boy’s little body disappeared into the deadly system of underwater tunnels.

He looked at the girl. Her smug eyes danced with challenge, and a slightly cocky smile played on her lips. Zane was suddenly in a rage. How could this girl send the boy into deadly waters like that while making it sound like a game?

She started to turn away from him, toward the waterway, but he gripped her tighter, preventing her from jumping to her death. She struggled to pull herself free, but Zane was much stronger than her. He reached for her hand that still held her knife and forced her to drop it. She lashed out with her foot and kicked him.

It was harder than he had ever been kicked just horsing around with his brother. His leg almost buckled and threatened to give out. They were already standing dangerously close to the water as he lost his balance. He felt himself start to pitch toward the liquid death trap, in danger of falling in.

But instead of helping him into the water, thereby freeing herself of him, she braced her feet against the stone ledge using her weight to counteract his fall. Thanks to her, he was able to right himself and regain his balance.

Then, just as fast, a flash of movement came out of his periphery. The girl cried out in pain as he was jostled from behind and pushed into the deadly water she’d just saved him from.

The instant the water washed over his face and closed off his airway, he knew he was going to die as the rush of water pulled him into one of the famed tunnels. In the blink of an eye, the light from the hall disappeared as he was plunged into darkness.

He tried to reach for the walls of the tunnel so he could find air in some pocket, but the current prevented him from finding anything on the smooth walls to hang onto. He knew he would not see the end of the tunnel.

The stories of the Bluescale waterways had always fascinated him, but now, he didn't even find the irony in his desire to one day find a way to explore the famed tunnels.

His chest started to burn for want of air.

He jerked in panic when something touched his arm. He tried to pull away from the unseen thing, but it only held onto him more tightly. He was losing the strength to shake it off. He'd never heard of creatures living in the waterways before. Just as he was about to black out, he felt something on his face. Something strong gripped his head while something else wound around his waist. Then something latched onto his lips, pressing tightly against his mouth, smothering him. He was in no position to fight the creature. Just as he was about to lose consciousness, he felt the most unexpected sensation.

Air!

It pushed into his lungs and he felt his mind wake in a rush of wonder. He reached up, putting his hand on the creature, and found the distinct features of a mortal form.

*The girl.*

He did the only thing he could do. He clung to her for dear life, pulling her tight against him as he desperately took the sweet oxygen she blew into his mouth. One breath wasn't enough. He had too much to live for. Being a prince, he would be king someday. He was in love with a gorgeous Greenwing baroness whom he adored. She always listened to his complaints and his dreams. She was the only one who never looked at him like he was a monster to be feared.

He couldn't lose all that.

He needed more air.

She pushed against him, trying to get away, but he refused to release his constricting grip in his effort to survive. Hungrily, he took more of her precious air. She struggled to free herself from him, but he only held her tighter. Crushing her to him with his superior strength, he moved one hand behind her head, forcing her face to his, her lips to his. He managed to extract another long breath from her.

She stopped fighting, and suddenly went limp in his arms. Even though he knew neither of them could have survived this journey, he had enough air and sense to realize he had just killed the girl in a vain effort to save himself.

He held her head against his shoulder, having time to feel ashamed before his desperate need for air returned, encroaching again on his life. Reflexively, his limbs twitched as his body struggled once again.

He knew that this time, there would be no reprieve.

Miraculously, the girl in his arms moved, and again her lips were on his, filling him with life. He wanted more, but he forced himself to be patient. She gave him another breath, and in that moment, he understood the spell had worked after all. It had brought back the true Bluescale royals, just not the ones they had been expecting.

This girl was an anomaly. He only knew three other anomalies amongst all the royals in the realm. Thank all-that-burned she was one as well, because she was saving his life.

Once he proved to her that he wouldn't try to kill her for the air she offered, she gave him air in regular intervals, only waiting a few seconds between breaths. The darkness disappeared in a rush of fire. Zane was looking behind him since the girl had positioned him with his back to the tunnel floor. She was stretched out with her chest against his and her feet bumping into his shins.



He saw the fire coming toward them. At first, he panicked, not understanding how flames could be coursing through the water like they were.

On instinct, he pulled her head down and dove for the darkness under the flames. His fears were unnecessary because the flames never touched them. They stayed safely behind a thick glass that allowed a dim light to create a hazy sight of the tunnel walls. He could now see the girl. When she wasn't breathing for him, she was watching the direction they were going with astute focus, like she was expecting something to change.

Twice the current from the tunnel stopped, and the girl was able to choose a direction to go. The first time she went right, the second she went left. She moved smoothly through the water with a grace that was not hindered by Zane's larger frame hanging onto her for dear life.

She took his hand, the one that was still holding her head with his fingers tangled in her short hair, and placed it around her waist with the other and indicated that he shouldn't let go. He nodded, then she gave him another breath.

When things did change, it happened quickly. Just after she blew a long breath into his lungs, she started to twist and spin in the water. Sometimes she kicked off the walls or slammed against them. It took Zane a moment to figure out that it wasn't enough that the Bluescale waterways were death traps, but they had also been rigged with booby traps.

He'd never heard of the traps before and figured they must be a closely guarded secret that only those who were supposed to be in the water knew about.

Finally, they were washed out into a pool of calm water. Zane kicked for the surface once he felt the current was gone. When his head broke free from the water, he immediately gulped in a lungful of precious air. He grabbed onto the side of the small pool, feeling winded, but he was alive.