
Chapter 1

The sky smoked. When first I noticed it, I thought someone had built a fire to ward off the chill of early spring. Sometimes Elder Tarhe, my uncle, built a big bonfire in the village square. Fiddler Halen would play lively tunes while the young people danced, and all the villagers would share food, wine and conversation.

And Nevin would bring me sweet cake from his mother, then flirt with me all night. I giggled to think of it. All the girls giggled at him. The only reason he paid me any attention was because his family was our nearest neighbor and we'd grown up making mischief together.

I glanced at the sun—too early for a bonfire, but I'd missed lunch and my afternoon chores. Father would take a switch to me, for sure. I was forever running off to the hills. He was never truly angry with me, but if I skipped my chores, I supposed I deserved every stroke.

After a long winter cooped up inside our cottage with my three siblings—one a baby who could never seem to stop crying—I couldn't help myself. The call of freedom was irresistible.

I ran down the hill, making my way through the woods. I

glanced up and saw a dragon flying over the trees—a dragon! And not just one dragon, but two or three. Or four! Dragons were in our stories, but I'd never seen one. The adults in the village spoke as if they were real, but I'd always suspected they were something of a story to scare young children into obedience.

In the stories, dragons were ridden by Dragon Masters, terrible warriors who burned villages to the ground and had the right to claim any unmarried woman in the kingdom.

I ran toward home, the smell of smoke increasing as I neared. Fear clogged my throat, and tears flew off my cheeks. A roar grew louder and louder, like a mad lion chasing me, except that it was closing in from every direction. I wasn't sure if my lungs were burning because I was running so fast or because of all the smoke.

The fire chased me from behind, and the heat sizzled on my skin. I burst from the woods, but instead of finding safety, I saw there was no escape. The woods surrounding our farm burned with high, towering flames. Thick, black smoke cast across the sky in streaks. The trees cracked and burned, spreading fire from one to another too quickly.

I spun in a circle, then dropped to my knees when I saw our barn and home roaring with fire. I wiped my eyes frantically so I could see to find signs of my family. I got up and sprinted toward our cottage, turning in circles as I ran, searching for my mother and father and siblings—and for a way out of the fire surrounding me.

Just when I'd almost reached our cottage, a smoke-blackened dragon swooped down. The ground shook as the huge beast thudded to the ground, knocking me off balance.

I scurried back as quickly as I could. A man atop the dragon held his hand toward me, and I shook my head. I looked back at my cottage, and it was a glowing orange and black skeleton of falling beams and climbing flames. There was nothing inside

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except fire and coals—though my worst fear was my baby brother and my mother were but coals in the burning cottage.

I tried to get up, to run, but I ended up on my knees again. I kept replaying the day, trying to figure out some way I could change some small element and cause what had passed to not happen. If I hadn't gone into the woods... if I hadn't climbed the hill... if I had come home earlier... if I'd insisted on a family picnic by the creek...

The barn burned furiously, and I wondered how many horses had died. None rode around. There was no life, not a single sign of it. No father, no mother, no sister, no brothers.

I looked toward the village, but I could see nothing but burning shrubbery and grass. Fallen tree limbs blocked the path to town, and the fire was a large circle around me, closing in so fast that I'd burn alive in minutes.

The dragonhead—larger than my torso—nudged me and I screamed. I jumped up and ran toward the forest, but I quickly stopped, as I could not run into the fire.

An instant later, the Dragon Master flipped me over his shoulder and carried me to his dragon.

I screamed and kicked, fighting with everything I had to get away. I could hardly hear my screams, the fire roared so loud. He shoved me over the saddle. I kicked and fought, but I started to fall off. When he mounted the dragon in front of me and the dragon lumbered off the ground and into the air, I righted myself and grabbed on to the Dragon Master out of some instinct for self-preservation.

As the ground receded, I searched the land for signs of family, of villagers, of horses... anything or anyone. There were a few people running around the village square, some racing for the hills. Even a couple horses pulling carts raced their way westward through town.

But none looked like my family.

Suddenly, the air ripped and we were thrust into silence and

whiteness. My insides felt like they'd just been ripped in too. The air was thin, and it was as if we'd traveled into another world. A few seconds later, the air ripped again, and we landed on a farm where it was hot... as hot as the fire had been, though the only fire was the yellow of the distant sun.

The air was too thick to breathe. There was no greenery, only dry dirt and rocks and a large, stone house of such grandeur I'd never imagined.

The Dragon Master pulled me off the saddle.

I dropped to the ground and threw up.

As I heaved and retched until I was vomiting saliva, the Dragon Master took the dragon to the largest barn I'd ever seen. My first instinct was to run and hide in the forest, but the ground was flat and empty dirt for miles and miles. Mountains scattered across the horizon, so far away it would take me days to reach them.

There was no hiding—no escaping—in this hot, dry land.

I wanted water.

I retched some more until the Dragon Master hooked a hand under my armpit and dragged me up to standing. "What is your name?" he asked. His voice was gruff, like the rough edge of a brick.

I stared at him, swallowing, my stomach still convulsing and tears running down my cheeks.

He half-escorted, half-dragged me to a bench in front of the enormous stone house. "Sit down," he said. "You are shaking."

I glanced down at my body, and I was shaking—huge and visibly. My lips shook and my teeth chattered, even though I was hot, not cold.

And then I thought of my family, of my village, and a high, keening cry threaded out from deep within my chest. Pain crushed my lungs and I could hardly draw breath. I clutched my arms around my torso and dropped to the ground.

I rocked and cried, maybe for minutes, maybe for hours, until

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I gradually became aware of a woman speaking and pressing a cup to my lips.

I was parched, but I could not stop sobbing to drink what she offered. The Dragon Master grabbed my hair and pulled my head back. The woman pinched my nose shut and poured a foul-tasting liquid into my throat. I spit up as much as I drank, but minutes later, everything went fuzzy and I sank into white oblivion.

I SLEPT IN A LARGE BED. I woke often to a young girl bathing me with cool water and oftentimes fanning me. It was hot—ever so hot. Every time I woke, she pressed a cup to my mouth and forced me to drink water, and since I always seemed to be parched, I did so greedily. And then I would reach for the teacup, the one full of awful-tasting liquid that would send me back to griefless oblivion.

Sleeping and waking, sleeping and waking. Days passed like this, maybe weeks—I had no idea how many.

And then the girl started withholding the precious tea. She'd force me to eat some cool soup first, or a piece of bread, or a hunk of cheese.

I saw no one but her until the day she refused me any tea. It was when I threw the soup across the room in defiance that the Dragon Master appeared.

The girl jumped up and gasped, "Master Gresham! I'm sorry, she—"

He gave her a look and she sat back down, eyes cast down to the floor.

"Bring us more soup," he said. "And bread."

She glanced at me worriedly, then rushed from the room.

I glared at him, trying to summon the will to be angry with him and to fight him, but I'd never felt so weak in my life. He

picked up the bowl and I cringed, thinking he meant to throw it at me.

I held my breath as he walked toward me. I braced myself for a blow, but he set the broken pieces on the table. He picked up the glass of water and pressed it to my lips. I wasn't thirsty anymore, but I drank obediently.

My stomach twisted so much I nearly threw up the water. His face was hard and weathered, but he seemed to only be of thirty-some years. His hair was jet black and curly, and his eyes were a startling soft blue. I took comfort in their gaze for a moment, and then I remembered who he was.

"What did our village ever do to you?" I asked. My voice was emptied of emotion, but only because I had not the energy to allow myself to feel the pain that threatened to break inside me.

Master Gresham frowned at me.

With one eye fixed on the doorway, I braced myself for his wrath—and tried to figure out how I would escape past him and out the door.

He calmly watched me. "Where would you go?" he asked.

I glanced out the window and longed for the mountains. I could survive there, I knew—I just didn't know if I could get there.

"What is your name?"

"Lali." My voice sounded strange to me; different. It was hollow and low, a little gruff. I cleared my throat.

"You know the tradition?" he asked.

I shook my head; I had no idea what he was referring to.

"Dragon Masters are granted rights to any unmarried woman. I will train you, and then I will sell you. A woman trained by a Dragon Master will be bought into a rich house. Or I may decide to keep you," he said.

He seemed to be waiting for my gratitude.

"You will want for nothing," he explained, as if I were slow to understand.

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“Except my family!”

He frowned, and he had a terrible frown. I kept my eyes defiant, but inside my stomach quaked.

“There will be no more tea,” he said. “It has been one month, and you must accept your new life. You may wander the house as you like and come to the table for meals, but I must claim you before I leave for battle in two days. I can’t have someone else claiming you, and I’ll need the connection.”

“The connection?”

He ignored my question and threw a pile of clothes at me. “Get dressed. You’ll have a hot, meat-filled stew when the sun sets.”

A WHOLE MONTH since my village had burned. I could hardly believe it. A whole month I’d subsisted on soup and water, while I’d disappeared into the tea. I craved the tea with my whole being, if only to ease the grief I felt.

I still felt nauseous from my attempt to eat solid food at dinner, but Master Gresham had forced it into me. He’d scolded me when I’d tried to refuse, but he hadn’t been cruel.

After dinner, I’d been escorted to his bedroom and dressed in a white nightgown by his mother. She was neither kind nor unkind, although she did not speak with me. I sat on the bed and waited, knowing my duty, but fearing it with every fiber of my being.

The window was open and the breeze was cool. Nights brought a chill, even though the days were unbearably hot. Every small sound made me jump. I kept telling myself that I could’ve been burned alive in the fire, or kidnapped by a man far worse than Master Gresham. My uncle, the town elder, had married my aunt after he’d captured her from a battle many years ago.

She seemed happy enough; I'd never imagined she'd gone through the grief and fear I felt now.

If she'd survived this, if she'd become happy, then perhaps I could be happy as well. The Dragon Master seemed rich enough to keep me well fed and protected, and although he'd threatened to punish me, he'd been kinder than many men I'd known in my village.

But when he entered, fear returned anew. He was bigger than any of the men I'd known in my village: he was taller, thicker, stronger. With the way his boots clomped as he entered the bedroom, he could've been a giant straight out of a fairy tale.

Those soft, blue eyes looked down at me, and they twinkled.

I was taken aback. This was my new life, my duty, but it was not one I'd chosen—and I wasn't about to pretend that I was gracing his bed for any reason other than duty and obedience.

I frowned back.

He sighed. "Come. Let me see this prize I have claimed."

I stood in front of him, trying to maintain my defiant attitude as I fought the fear within.

"Take off your clothes."

I glanced at the flame of the oil lamp and wished he'd put it out first. Unfortunately, I wasn't sure how much that would help; a full moon streamed its light through the window, and the room was lit almost as brightly as day. I crossed my arms across my chest and hugged myself.

He reached out and tugged my arms down.

I jumped back. "Don't touch me!"

He stepped away. I warily watched him as he poured wine into glass.

"No," I said.

His eyes narrowed. He took a step toward me, and I lost all nerve. I backed into the nightstand and the washbasin crashed to the floor.

I refused to cry. My stomach shook within my torso. I tried to

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slow my breathing, but he seemed three times as big as me as he approached.

“Drink this. It will calm you.”

I wanted to refuse, but I knew he was right. I had to do this, and the more I numbed myself, the better. I took the glass and swallowed the wine in one gulp.

“More please,” I said.

He took the glass and filled it again, then handed it to me.

I drank it and asked for more again.

This time, he took the glass and set it on the nightstand. “Enough,” he said. “Remove your clothes.”

I tried to get my trembling fingers to unbutton my dress, but they could not. I whimpered and turned away from him. I wanted to run away, but if I ran forward, I’d run into a wall. I turned back to him helplessly.

In a quick motion, he divested me of my dress. “You’ll do as you’re told,” he said. He pushed me forward and his hand slapped my bottom.

The spank shocked me; I’d had no time to prepare. I burst into tears and backed away from him again, but he grabbed my arm before I could step on the sharp pieces from the broken washbasin on the floor.

My bottom stung, tingled, and itched. Tears flooded my eyes, and I tried to blink them away and compose myself. Not that it would make much difference, but I feared him forcing me more than I feared our mating.

“Obey me,” he said, “and I will be gentle with you. Disobey me, and my correction will be swift and painful.”

I rubbed my bottom, blinking tears away. I sat on the bed, watching him warily.

“Stand up. I’ll have a look at you now.”

The air had chilled as soon as the sunset, and my skin was covered with goosebumps. I shivered as I stood, and I wrapped my arms around my chest.

“Drop your arms.”

“I’m cold,” I complained. I braced myself for another spank, but he didn’t respond.

He walked around me, not touching me, but his presence grazed ever so lightly across my skin, and I forgot my fear and hatred of him. He stopped in front of me, and I guessed his gaze was locked onto my breasts. I stared at his boots, feeling both ashamed and embarrassed.

“Look at me,” he said.

When I did, he was looking at my face with those soft blue eyes of his, not at my breasts. I crossed my arms over my chest and glared back at him.

He held open a robe.

“You need to eat more. And you’ll have a proper bath first.”

I put my hands into the arms of the robe, and he pushed it over my shoulders. He reached over my shoulders and closed the robe, and I sucked in a breath. For a moment, his hands hovered in front of my chest. I ducked out from under his arms and darted to the window.

As soon as I saw the mountains lit under the stars, I longed for home. Grief overwhelmed me again, and I closed my eyes. Sadness and longing flooded my chest, and I thought I’d burst from the pain. I bowed my head, and tears dripped down my face.

The door closed, and I was left alone.

I CRIED as the young girl filled a bath for me, pitcher by pitcher. It took her nearly an hour; when she was done, she helped me stand as if I were feeble and old—and I was surprised I felt both. The time I’d spent in bed had weakened my limbs, and already exhaustion pleaded with me to sleep.

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“May I have a little tea? Not enough to put me to sleep, but just a sip to relax me?” I wanted only the numbing of my pain.

Her eyes darted fearfully toward the door and she gave a quick jerk of her head.

“What’s your name?” I tried.

“Cassandra.” Her voice was smooth and low for her age. She sounded more assured than she looked.

I worried why she seemed so fearful. “Is Master Gresham a cruel master?”

She pulled back in surprise. “No, he is kind to me. Mother is angry with me ever since—” she suddenly stopped her sentence. She closed her mouth and picked up a pitcher. “Lean your head back, and I’ll wash your hair.”

As it turned out, I didn’t need the tea. The wine I’d drunk pulled me towards sleep, and I drifted off several times while Cassandra bathed me. When she was done, she dressed me in the nightgown, and I felt warm and comfortable. I crawled into bed and snuggled under the covers.

I woke when Master Gresham’s heavy form shook the mattress.

I blinked my eyes open and scooted as close to the edge of the bed as I could get.

“You may sleep tonight, Lali, but I must claim you on the morrow. How am I to watch over you while I’m off at battle if I don’t claim you?”

“Off murdering the rest of my village?” I mumbled.

He made a growling sound. “You are not the first woman to meet this end. It is the way of things. Accept it, and you will be happy.”

“It’s a barbaric southern tradition!”

He removed his boots and they loudly dropped to the floor. “It is a barbaric northern tradition as well.”

“I will never care for you,” I said. “I will hope for your death every time you ride off to battle.”

He said nothing at my words. He put his legs under the covers and lay back on the pillows. "It's not going to be pleasant for me, either. I don't want to hurt you."

I didn't respond.

"Rest well, Lali. We will do our duty tomorrow."