

Chapter 2

The eyes of the dragon snapped open, the beast jerked into wakefulness by a distant, out-of-place noise.

If dragons were such terrifying beings—able to single-handedly ravage human armies, with flames that could melt through walls and magical barriers alike, and wings that could carry them to unassailable heights—why did this one feel the need to make a deal with its food?

The answer was simple: sleep. However powerful dragons were, they bled and died like any other being of flesh. However unassailable they were in the air, they needed to land to rest.

Even caught unconscious and unaware, it was difficult for a mere human to slay a dragon, but it was not impossible. Dragons were solitary creatures, slow to mature and slower to breed, and it took only a single lucky attacker to slay them. Many a dragon had met their demise waking up in their own lair with a spear through their heart, with the result that their numbers had dwindled. Only a few had survived the spread of human civilization.

And so this dragon had made the Pact. The mountain would be guarded by humans, and his lair left unmolested. They would guarantee him a certain level of sustenance, and in return, he wouldn't do anything that might encourage the aforementioned spear-wielders to try their luck. At least, not *within* the kingdom. What he did outside it was his own business.

That didn't mean he let his guard down completely, of course. Trusting purely in *humans* to guard him as he slept was not something he could ever do. His lair was protected by magical wards and mundane traps alike, and, in his fear, he slept lightly, waking at any suspicious sound.

And it was such a sound that had woken him. A human voice, but one lacking in words.

It took him a few moments more to place the noise, but once he did, he burst from his cave in a fit of flaming fury, diving towards the outcropping on which he'd left his princess.

"What in the hells are you doing?" he roared, the air pressure briefly blasting the waterfall into a fine mist.

Josse—who had taken advantage of the broken stake and her unguarded prison to free herself of not only her bonds, but also her clothes—ignored him, moaning loudly as she caressed her own breast with one hand, the other teasing an even more intimate area.

"I asked you a *question*!" he roared, reaching out, shoving Josse and pinning the princess to the cliff face.

Her arms trapped and unable to continue her self-ministrations, the princess took a few laboured breaths before looking up at the dragon with eyes of defiance. "Pissing in your food," she spat.

"You lost your political game, and so you take your frustration out on *me*?" laughed the dragon. "Too bad. The stench of man is still not on you, and you will not find one out here."

"It's still not a very 'pure' thing to do, though," answered Josse, smirking. "And if it didn't bother you, you wouldn't have rushed out here so quickly."

The dragon remained silent, still holding Josse up against the cliff.

"So, now what? Are you going to eat me now, or hold me here until I'm clean enough for you? Or rip my arms off, I guess."

The dragon still did not speak, but his facial expression radiated a distinct air of grumpiness.

"But it's nothing to do with cleanliness, is it?" asked Josse, who'd had time to think since being taken. "You could disembowel me easily enough if that's all that bothered you. This delay is all about Emperor Raimbaud of Iwearis."

At the mention of that name, the dragon's grip tightened, crushing the air out of Josse's chest. A claw tore into her shoulder, blood running down her arm. Nevertheless, Josse grinned, knowing she'd struck gold. Her guess was correct. However much the dragon desired to eat her, he wouldn't consume her for days. For now, she was safe.

Three centuries earlier, the empire of Iwearis had been the greatest power on the continent. They had been the first to make the Pact, and with their pseudo-tame dragon, they'd declared war upon and decimated the surrounding territories. By the end of the campaign, Iwearis had a national army that could easily match that of everyone else put together.

That being the case, why did they still need the dragon? What if he ever decided that he no longer needed the Pact?

And so the one whom history had granted the moniker of 'Last Emperor' had ensured the next sacrifice carried a carefully prepared gift. An ingested, sealed pouch of magical poison, supposedly strong enough to slay even a dragon. The dragon had fed, and his internal fires had broken down the pouch and released its deadly payload.

For three weeks, the dragon was not seen, and the fickle people praised their emperor for freeing them from the evil beast, uncaring that it was an earlier emperor that had deliberately brought him into their lands. Alas for the Last Emperor, he had underestimated the vitality of the dragon, and the wards of healing and protection that the distrustful beast had inscribed upon his home. He was not dead, only resting, and once he recovered, he sought his revenge.

The emperor and his line ended that night, as did the capital and all who dwelt within. With such a crippling blow, the oversized empire failed to hold itself together, and splintered into the set of kingdoms that mostly remained today.

The dragon had formed a new Pact with one of those splinters, but he had learnt from his mistake. His new Pact explicitly ruled out his aid for offensive wars. He also began taking a few additional precautions under the guise of cleanliness.

Mastering his anger before he crushed his gourmet meal, the dragon withdrew from Josse, who fell to the ground, gasping, as she desperately tried to recover from her suffocation.

"You are correct. I *can* just disembowel you," he growled, raising a claw.

"You wouldn't... dare. You need me... to survive... for long enough... to be certain... I'm clear of poison," she panted, feeling her act of defiance would have more credibility if she wasn't on all fours, too winded to stand. A small part of her mind was once again impressed she'd managed not to wet herself.

The pair remained in silence for a few seconds more, at something of an impasse.

"We have priests in Cruithia that are masters of healing," commented Josse, having used those few seconds to run her brain at full throttle, and come up with an idea that stood a chance of winning the dragon over. "Capable of regrowing limbs in a matter of minutes. Sulltheria's high priest is even rumoured to be capable of resurrecting the recently dead. If you aid me in taking back the throne..."

The dragon remained frozen for a few seconds more, the implied offer a deep temptation, before he took back off without another word.

"Is that a yes?" shouted Josse after him, but there came no response.

The new King Doran sat alone in his office, signing one corrupt writ after another as the anger festered inside him. Every one of his co-conspirators had kept meticulous records, evidence that they now held over his head in blackmail. He'd made himself their pawn, and couldn't see a single thing he could do about it.

And yet he still failed to comprehend why he had been passed over in favour of his sister.

A knock came from outside. "Come in," sighed Doran, expecting another conspirator with yet another demand. He was thus rather surprised when the prime minister entered, an elderly man by the name of Steven, who hadn't been involved in the conspiracy to frame his sister at all.

"So, how is our new puppet king?" he asked. "I've heard on the grapevine that I'm about to be replaced by Minister Folcard. Did you agree that with him before you murdered your father, I wonder, or is it a request he only made recently?"

Doran's eyes widened in shock, the accusation catching him completely by surprise. No—it wasn't even an accusation. Just a simple statement, made with as little fanfare as a comment about the weather.

"I... I have no idea what you're talking about..." he stammered.

"Oh, come now. Anyone personally acquainted with the royal family knows what really happened, and anyone who wasn't doesn't really care, as long as there's *someone* on the throne keeping up appearances. Besides, if you really wanted to deny it, that wasn't at all the way to go about it. Confusion and anger should have preceded your denial."

"So I suppose now you're going to blackmail me too?" sighed the resigned king.

"Blackmail? Not at all. I actually came to tender my resignation. I know which way the wind is blowing. Best to leave on my own terms than to wait until the castle's on fire with me still in it."

"Why would the castle be on fire? The dragon won't..."

"I meant metaphorically," sighed the kingdom's prime minister. "But if a spot of blackmail would make you feel any better, I wouldn't say no to some travel expenses."

The king tossed him a gold coin. "Resignation accepted," he muttered. "Good luck out there."

"Hah. That almost sounded like you meant it. In that case, good luck with your coronation tomorrow, too," smirked the former prime minister, turning and leaving the room, carefully closing the door on the way out, where he politely nodded to the page boy waiting patiently outside.

The page boy who, up until recently, had served the previous king.

Those personally acquainted with the royal family were not limited to high ranked ministers, after all, even if Doran was the sort of person not to spare a thought for servants as long as their jobs kept being done. In this sort of coup, replacing the serving staff should have been one of his first acts, yet they'd been ignored. Doran and his clique struggled to see mere servants as real people, treating them as if they had as much will of their own as the paintings that decorated the palace hallways.

The coronation of King Doran was due to end in a massive banquet at the palace, prepared by the royal chefs, served by the royal servants, and every one of his co-conspirators would be there.

Steven had decided he'd rather not attend; he had a suspicion the food wouldn't be to his taste. But servants weren't great at seeing the big picture; he had little doubt they would seek to avenge Princess Josse, but he doubted very much if they'd thought about what would happen afterwards. Doran had no explicit heir. With him dead, along with the bulk of the government, the fight over the empty throne would be messy. Never mind the castle; the former prime minister expected the entire capital to be on fire by the weekend.

Sure enough, in the bowels of the castle, a young maid was standing in a kitchen with fists clenched, her red face nothing to do with the nearby fire.

"The *gall* to blame my lady. The *sheer audacity!*" she spat.

"We *know!*" yelled a chef, bustling past her. "Will you please shut up already!"

"No! I will *not* shut up! Not until that murderer gets what's coming to him!"

The chef spared a glance, where the young commoner girl was fingering a knife with a dangerous glint in her eye. In retrospect, he decided, when she'd demanded that the king himself be poisoned with a mere paralytic rather than anything fatal in exchange for her help in the plan, he probably should have made the effort to work around her absence, but he hadn't known at the time about the guards who would flip to their side after the ministers pillaged the treasury. It was almost enough to make him feel sorry for their new king.

Almost.

Back in his lair, an angry dragon pored over dense tomes. They'd been authored for human hands, not the claws of a dragon, and even turning the pages was a difficult task, but he persevered. After all, the desperate princess had given him an idea. Helping her regain the throne in exchange for periodic tastes of her flesh was an interesting offer, but not one he could trust. Even if she wanted to stick to any terms they agreed upon, which was doubtful in itself, a queen would be expected to leave heirs. The meat would soon become soured. Not to mention the risk that she'd end up assassinated with as little warning as her father.

But what if he took matters into his own claws? Found his own way to regenerate her flesh here, on his mountain?

The Pact would still be necessary; he needed a place to sleep in relative safety. But perhaps if he didn't demand the full quantity of sacrifice the Pact entitled him to, the humans would become even more favourably disposed towards him. It seemed an all around win. The humans would be happy—maybe not the princess, but at least she'd be alive to be unhappy—and he'd be more secure. And to top it all off, he'd have an unlimited supply of what he anticipated to be the best meat he'd ever tasted. The smell alone was enough to make him drool, and it had taken every ounce of self-control to not gobble her up each time he saw her.

It was an outcome he'd be prepared to kill for. Or *not* kill for, as the case may be.

Alas, the simple fact was that magic wasn't great at healing. There were spells that could increase a body's natural recovery speed, but they couldn't make a body do something it normally wouldn't. Cast on himself, he could regrow a limb within a few hours, but on a mere human with a severed arm, it would have no more effect than staunching the bleeding and sealing the wound.

The sort of healing he needed was relegated to the realm of miracles, and dragons were not known for their religious fervour. The princess had mentioned priests capable of such feats, but 'borrowing' a human without permission would be very much against the terms of the Pact, and the dragon intended to fulfil its word if not its spirit. To do otherwise risked his safe and stable existence.

Still, the dragon knew the princess had been sacrificed under false pretences. He had no interest in human politics, but setting up the Pact had forced him to learn nonetheless, and he knew that the new king would find himself in a precarious situation as he solidified his grip on power. Having a dragon shout to the citizenry that he had usurped the throne and sacrificed the innocent wouldn't help the stability of his rule. Perhaps the king could be persuaded to grant him the use of the high priest the princess had mentioned in exchange for the dragon keeping the information to himself? It wouldn't even need to be for long; once he'd observed the effect, how hard could it be to copy?