

P R E Q U E L N O V E L L A

THE DRAGORI SERIES

PRINCE OF FLAMES

B E N A L D E R S O N

PRINCE OF FLAMES

BEN ALDERSON



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For the readers

DRAGORI SERIES

Out Now

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Cloaked in Shadow #1

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Part I

My hand runs through mother's hair as if it was made of silk. Golden strands fall gently onto her blood-red gown as others catch in the bone comb. I always loved her hair. Like a halo, it surrounds her heart-shaped face. It was the colour of sun and honey. Unlike mine and fathers which was brown as the most potent ales.

I stand behind mother as she sits, gazing into the gilded mirror on her dresser while I brush her hair. For as long as I can remember mother had tasked me with this. It was our special time, away from the kingdom in the confines of her room.

I am fascinated with her. Her beauty and poise. Her silver eyes gaze into mine, shining like pearls of light. I can see why the kingdom loves her. Her beauty inspires art; her aura inspires admiration. I am proud that she is mine in blood, but I share her as the mother of the people.

"I heard father has called for musicians from Eldnol to visit this evening," I say, plaiting a strand of her hair and spinning it around a pin to keep it in place. "Knowing him, it will be some sombre tunes that evoke tears rather than dance."

Mothers laugh chimes like the sweetest of bells. "You know your father has an eclectic taste in music."

"Tonight is your night mother; his tastes should not be of importance," I reply.

"You will learn when you grow, that nothing truly belongs to you as a royal. I share this day with the many who celebrate my name."

Mother always has a way of showing her selflessness.

"But it is your birthday," I say, "A day which you get what you wish for and more."

She turned in her seat, ivory dress wrinkling at her waist. "Let us not worry about such idle things, my dear boy. For I do not."

I sigh and smile. "Will you dance with father tonight?"

I remember last year, how ethereal they looked in each other's embrace. Even now I remember the warm pulse of my heart as I watched my parents dance. Love. That is what it was. What it is.

"Father loves you dearly," I added, resting my idle hands upon mother's strong shoulders.

"Does he?" She replies in jest, "Well I am the luckiest lady alive."

"I love you too!" I smile, chin raised high.

Mother's mouth opens in shock, putting a bare hand above her heart. "See, did I not tell you I am the luckiest lady alive?"

I lean forward and place a light kiss on her rosy cheek, "I love you mother."

Her pearly smile lights up the parlour room, "And I you, my petal."

*

Thinking about her causes my heart to erupt in flames of pain.

I sit in her seat, in her room which has remained untouched since that fateful night. I wish she were here now. How different would it be if she didn't die? Would father spare me more warmth, would he spend longer than seconds looking at me?

I keep my hands curled on her dresser as I stare at myself, fighting against my desire to burn the entire place down. Not that it would matter to anyone but me. Father wouldn't notice, he hasn't walked this part of the palace in years.

This room is the only place I allow for my emotions to slip. My safe space.

Dust layers the oak cabinets and the four-poster bed. Even now the sheets are ruffled and twisted, just as it was after mother's final nap before her birthday festivities. I remember the days that followed, how I practically fought the maids from her room, panicked that they would erase her existence with their brooms and dusters.

It was an accident, they told me. A cruel trick of fate. What if the storm had not rolled in. If the ground was dry and the elks were not startled, then the crash would never have happened.

I close my eyes hard, trying not to see images of scattered wood and fire.

Why did you take her? I pray my question to the Goddess who still does not answer me.

The flame of the candle beside me flickers in response to the beast that stirs within me. Could I have saved her? Stopped the fire from devouring her? Questions I ask every time I step into her room.

I looked up into my reflection again, wishing it was hers that looked back.

"Father plans another feast this eve," I begin, "The entire palace is riddled with elves. How odd that the man who spares me no mind decides to throw me a feast in celebration of my birth. It is all fake; a show for everyone but me."

Even now I can hear the faint patter of feet as guards mix with maids and cleaners beyond this quarter. In only a matter of moments, I would be needed in the main hall where father will parade me like an animal.

"This palace is riddled with secrets mother. You would be horrified if you saw what is kept within the walls of your home."

I closed my eyes, battling the image of the bloodied Morthi elf in the prisons far beneath me. "I cannot help but feel that if you were here this war that is looming would never happen. Never. Father seems to think the Morthi are working against us. And it scares me. I will not admit it to anyone but you."

As I speak, I can almost feel her presence beside me.

"I just wish you were here," I whisper.

I wait in the silence for a moment, as I do every time I visit. For a sign. A feeling that mother is listening. Ghosts and spirits are part of horror stories, thought by many to be bad omens. But for me, if it meant seeing her again, I would happily stare into the face of one.

Besides the faint dreams of honey hair and silver eyes, I almost forget what she looked like after these years. Paintings of her have been removed from the palace walls, lost in the archives. All but the one I keep stored in my study, in a place I know father would not visit.

Standing from the stool, I push it beneath the dresser and reach my hand for the single candle lit on a stand beside me.

Closing my fist, I pull the heat from the flame, and it dies instantly.

Darkness covers me. I don't need light to make my way from the room. I took careful steps towards the door and pulled it open. As I step into the hallway, I am no longer the prince that mourns his mother. I am stone, fire and strength.

Part II

Alina, father's commander, greets me at the door to his study.

"You're late," She spits, keeping her stern gaze burning into me.

"What a way to speak to the birthday boy!" I reply in jest, dismissing her comment with a wave of the hand.

Alina muffles a comment under her breath.

I lean forward with a smile, "Now, now. For once let us try and enjoy each other's company this evening. I would not want to ruin all of Dalior's hard work."

Alina answered by knocking thrice on the door to his study. She paid me no mind as I passed into the room, leaving her to guard the dark of the corridor. Alina entered my life not long after mothers passing. Quickly she seemed to fill the hole in father's life, which I was at first thankful for. Now, she is nothing more than a thorn in my side.

The room was shrouded in the smoke of incense, so intense it made my eyes sting. Even after I leave the smell will linger on my clothes and hair.

As usual, Dalior, King of Thessolina, was laid out on his chair. It was not uncommon to see him doing, well, nothing.

"You request my presence," I said, standing above him with my hands pinned behind my back.

He barely looked up at me from the bowl of grapes before him, "Yes, well I wanted to be sure I see you first. Would not want the

prince strolling in when the feast has finished.”

“Since when did you care what I did and how I did it?” I could not hide the annoyance in my voice.

Like lightning he sprang forward, his face twisted in rage. I stumbled back in shock, surprised by the outburst. “You best mind that tongue of yours boy, before it gets removed. You forget who it is you speak to and on an evening like this, you would do good to remember.”

I lower my head, biting the tongue he just threatened. I cannot give into him because I am worried that another word would result in flames. *He cannot see them.*

“Now, my boy, tonight is a significant evening for more than one reason. It is imperative that you stay quiet and smile. You never know, you may learn something new tonight.” All rage plastered across his face melted into nothingness. He tilted his sharp face to the side and released a soft sigh.

“May I ask the reason of tonight’s festivities. I find it strange that I know nothing of the events and reasoning behind it. You had never shown much interest in previous birthday’s I just assumed you forgot when they were.”

Dalior pinched his brows, causing wrinkles across his aged face. “The moon has passed eighteen times; it is not a celebration to be missed.”

“Just...” He almost shouted again, but quickly calmed himself, “Just do as I say and let us move forward.” His cold hands reached for my own, grasping them tightly. “I want to show you I still care.”

Even now as he holds me, I feel he is more a stranger than ever before, “In the face of these recent attacks, I will keep quiet. I suppose our guests deserve the calm before the storm.”

Mention of war had been passed around flippantly over the past months between my father and the close counsel of guards. Keeping the knowledge of the Morthi attacks had been exhausting, especially when we still did not understand the reason behind them. Or at least I believe we do not know.

“Then you are smarter than I previously believed,” Dalior smiled, “Now make yourself scarce. I will call you into the grand hall when the time is right.”

That was it. As simple as swatting a fly my father dismisses me.

I feel my nails digging into my palms, but I do not release them. In fact, I only pinch harder when Alina greets me with a smile as I leave. It is clear she heard the entire conversation. I do not feed into her bait. I keep my head high and walk away without a comment.

Part III

“You’d think King Dalior would want his son in the hall at the beginning of the feast. Since all this extravagance is for you,” Fadine mumbled from beside me as we wait in the small room behind the dais.

“Come on Fadine; you know my father as well as I do.”

“Selfish?”

“Well, yes.”

“Over the top?”

“And that.”

“Infatuated with attention, good or bad.”

I laughed, “Do not let him hear you. Treason and all that.”

Fadine had been my closest friend since we were younglings. Fadine, although now a guard of Olderim and the closest to Alina's position as commander, was brought up by my mother's lady in waiting. We have always been together since we both were without siblings. It did not feel like that though, in truth I believed her to be my sister. A better, kinder version of myself.

Before the Bonecold took Fadine's mother, she had been like my own. Raising me alongside Fadine in the years my father was both physically and mentally absent. When her mother died, I was there for her as she was for me. That was what our friendship had grown from, respect and understanding.

“I’ve heard rumours you know...” Fadine said, “Lots of them going around the ranks like rare fur in winter. Word is your guests are

in for a treat. Remember Dameaon, the guard who is with one of the kitchen's staff?"

"How could I forget," I replied. Dameaon was a name I had heard a lot in the recent weeks. Between the fights with his comrades and the mention of him fathering a child with one of the staff, his name ingrained into my brain.

"I'm not one for gossip, but I may have heard that your father has tampered with the food. With what, I am not sure. But even Micka from the stables told us about a large shipment arrived yesterday for tonight's feast. And King Dalior was there to collect it himself."

I rolled my eyes, "My father is many things, but clever is not one of them. I am sure it is nothing more than gossip to keep them busy in those kitchens."

Fadine raised her cuffed arms in protest, "Ask yourself this, why is it you are not tucking into the spread of food this evening?"

That did not make sense. Why would I not eat, during my celebration?

"Perhaps you are right, I am sure it is nothing," Fadine shifted on her feet and spared me a look. Her dark eyes suggested otherwise.

"Before I forget," She added, pulling something from her pocket, "Since it's your birthday, I wanted to give you something."

A folded piece of parchment rests in the palm of her hand. I take it from her, unravelling the folds until my eyes catch what was on it.

A drawing, filled with the brightest dyes and paints. A child, with golden eyes, stood beside a woman with silver. I cleared my throat, looking up at the ceiling to stop the tears.

"You did this?" I questioned, although I knew the answer. Fadine had always loved passing the time with paints in her hand.

"It is just something small." Fadine smiled.

I turned and hugged her, breathing in her familiar scent.

"Thank you," I murmured into her black hair.

"My pleasure, Prince Hadrian." She whispered in return.

Part IV

I moved in the shadows behind the dais, unseen by the many elves that sat at the long tables beyond it. I could see father standing ahead. The picture Fadine gave me was heavy in my breast pocket. Even now I wanted to pull it out and gaze upon it again. But I would not dare. I had to be strong.

“...but I must thank you first for accepting my invitation. It warms my heart to see so many of you here in my home.”

I watched my father address the crowds, my chest twanged in discomfort. His voice sound forced yet soft and gentle. He moved like a different person, smiling to the crowd who smiled back.

I kept in the dark until my name’s mention. Taking that as my cue, I took steps up onto the dais and walked to his side. I first thought he would introduce me, show me off to his adoring crowd. But he did not. Instead, I stood beside him, face straight and void of emotion.

“...I do hope you enjoy your stay here, no matter how short. Please, eat, drink and celebrate with us.”

Dalior finished his speech, clapping his hands together. The doors surrounding the room burst open, and I watched the kitchen staff race out, trays balanced in their hands.

While the crowd was distracted, I let my stare wonder at the unfamiliar faces. Each face was slack in awe as the food was brought out, all except one.

A boy, with hair of silver and sun-kissed skin, was looking towards where I stood. Our eyes caught for a moment before he looked away. The single second we held each other stare dragged into a million.

I kept looking his way, wondering what secrets and stories he kept. He did not look back, not until my father called for the feast to begin.

“Please, eat up before the food goes cold.”

"Why are we not joining the feast?" I whispered to my father, trying to keep my mouth straight. Occasionally I had to smile at someone who waved or bow my head in return. I could see so many looking at me, as many always did. But I did not care for their stares. I kept looking back to that one boy, hoping he would look back again.

“I am not hungry this evening,” Dalior replied, his jewelled hand clicking on the side of his throne.

“Maybe I will ask one of the guards to bring me a plate,” I rubbed my hand on my stomach, goading my father to give up his secrets. The smell of freshly baked buns glittered in sugar, and steamed fruits with cream made my mouth water.

"If you want to see the grand event, you would take my word and refuse the food."

It did not take long for me to see why.

I watched elves as they drop around the room. Some falling into half-finished plates and others tumbling from their seats onto the ground. I gasped, biting my lip to stifle the shout of shock that almost burst out.

“Keep calm, my son. Hold your *smile*.” Fathers voice was stern.

In a rush, I noticed a few remaining elves that were left standing. *What had he done? What was in that shipment?*

Guards, including Fadine, flooded into the hall and cleared the floor and tables of the many, unconscious elves. I tried to catch her eyes, but she wouldn't look my way. Not until she got to the doors, with a small elf in her arms.

She mouthed something to me, as we would do as younglings when we did not want to get caught. I had enough practice to match the shapes of her mouth to words.

Forbian.

Poison.

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