

AabiLynn's Dragon Rite  
#0  
Dragon's Brood  
Egg Hatchlings' Ritual

Kristie Lynn Higgins

Book One of the Series

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Book One

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AabiLynn (uh'bee'lin): woman of a sorrowful song

## Prologue

In an age of magic, the Stygian Legion moved against the land of Athenia during the first reign of men. The Stygian Legion was an army of warlocks under the command of King Viiss. King Viiss wanted to enter the land so he could steal a large jewel and open a doorway to the Void, a world of demons. They would have conquered Athenia if not for the dragons aligning with tribal men. Their combined forces of sorcery and steel repelled the advance of the Stygian Legion, and King Viiss returned to his kingdom defeated and empty-handed.

Now during the third reign of men and a time of peace, young humans were brought to the land of dragons within Athenia. The young humans participated in the first ceremonial acts of the Dragon Rite. Many went but few were chosen.

## Chapter One

### AabiLynn

The sun peeked over a grass-covered hill and brought morning to Thatchman's farm. There was a bit of a chill in the air as spring forced winter out. Thatchman harnessed his horse and prepared to continue plowing his field to make it ready for seed. He still had two days of work before he could sow. Thatchman finished buckling the last strap on the harness when he noticed dust rising in the distance. A group of riders approached his land, and he expected they would come. He went over to the hut that housed himself, his third wife, and his four children. Three were by his first wife who suddenly disappeared and the other child was by his second wife who passed on about five years prior in childbirth. Thatchman grabbed his spear and returned to his horse.

His third wife, Hellen-Mary, attended to the pigs along with his youngest and only daughter, Cara-AabiLynn. By tradition, women of the Northern Grass Plains Tribe carried their mother's name as their second name to honor the one who bore them, so Mary was the mother of Hellen and so on.

"Girl, bring the bucket of slop the rest of the way for me," Hellen ordered as she set the bucket down and leaned against the fence to rest her weary and very pregnant body.

Cara hobbled her nearly five-year-old body toward the only mother she ever knew. Cara had been born early which caused her left arm and leg to be stunted. Her leg, inches shorter than her other, caused her to limp but since she was born this way, she knew no different. Her arm bore the brunt of the deformity. It was about half the size of the other and appeared to others to be of little use. Cara hurried over to Hellen, grabbed the bucket handle with her strong hand, and lifted it into her arms with the help of her other hand. For a child her size, the bucket of yesterday's unwanted food was huge. Its water slushed about the bucket as she walked the last ten feet to the gate. Part of the slop splashed her brown dress which was already stained by a week's wearing. Hellen waddled over, holding her back and opened the gate to the pigpen. Cara entered and walked across the cool muddy ground to the trough, and then she lifted the bucket as high as she could and poured most of the slop into the trough while some of it spilled onto her bare feet. She started back with the bucket and fell as her shorter leg sunk too far into the mud. Cara didn't cry, but she got back to her feet and made her way to Hellen. Dark mud covered her face and along with nearly every inch of her front. Cara thought it would be fun to play in the mud, but she knew Hellen would disapprove.

"Look at you!" Hellen complained as she took her apron and wiped her dirt-stained face. Hellen questioned once she finished, "What am I going to do with you? You are nearly as useless as the old sow in there."

She motioned to the large female pig in the pen, and Cara turned and stared at the creature that was three times her size and what her father called infertile. She didn't understand why they considered the pig useless or what the word really meant.

"I am sorry, Hellen," Cara stated as she bowed her little head. "I am sorry I am useless."

The riders neared the farm, and the horses' hooves thundered across the dirt road. Hellen noticed the riders and straightened her dress and hair somewhat as Cara hid behind her. The lead rider halted his horse, and the four others with him also did so in turn until they stopped behind their leader. The five men with swords approached Thatchman on foot. All the riders were clad in leather from the band around their heads, to the vest that covered their bare chests, and to their pants and boots. Thatchman kept his spear at his side with the blunt end resting on the ground ready to use if the men decided to draw their swords.

"Bork," Thatchman cautiously spoke as if he greeted a wolf he'd surprised in the woods who may be hungry.

Bork was the leader of the Northern Grass Plains Tribe which Thatchman and his family belonged to. Most of the tribesmen raised horses, yaks, and/or sheep. Thatchman was one of a few farmers who tilled the land.

"Thatchman, you know why I am here?" Bork questioned.

He nodded, and then he replied, "You have come to collect."

Bork looked at Hellen and noticed the small child hiding behind her, and then he turned back to Thatchman and asked him, "Do you have the silver?"

"I do not," he replied.

"That is a problem," Bork stated. "I cannot give you any more time." He scanned the area around the hut, pen, and field but saw no one else there. Bork said, "I shall have to take from you something of equal value." He looked at the distant hill and then to the roads winding behind the farm, and then he questioned, "What of your sons? Where are they? They usually work the farm with you," Bork spoke, and then he stated, "I could take one of them as a soldier for a year."

"They are not here," Thatchman said, and then he added, "They are visiting my brother."

"Convenient, I would say," Bork muttered, and then he stated, "Your crop is a season away." He looked at the pen, and then he questioned, "What of your pigs?"

Thatchman replied, "I have four young ones and one large one."

The day before, Thatchman sent the piglets' mother with his sons as they headed for his brother's farm a couple of valleys away. He wouldn't give up a fertile sow, not for a gambling debt.

Bork walked over, looked over the feeding beasts, and then he said, thinking the sow was the piglets' mother, "I shall take the large one for payment."

"One moment, my lord," Hellen spoke as she walked over to her husband and whispered into his ear.

Thatchman's eyes lit up as if he had never even thought of such an ingenious idea, and then he said, "Bork, why not take my daughter, Cara."

"Your daughter?" Bork uttered as he turned and looked at the young girl. "Would you not prefer to give me your pig?"

Cara ran over to Hellen and hid behind her again.

Bork looked her over a second time before she hid herself, and then he stated, "She is too young to give to one of my older sons or soldiers."

"Take her as a slave," Thatchman said. "She is a hard worker."

"And deformed," one of the other riders exclaimed.

"He is right," Bork stated. "She shall be limited to what she can do and unsightly to give as a wife even to one of my slaves."

"You could always make her a breeder when she comes of age," Hellen spoke, then turned, and positioned herself so that Cara stood in front of her.

"Breeder?" Bork questioned, and then he asked, "She is the fair AabiLynn's daughter, is she not?"

"Yes," Thatchman replied. "She is my beloved's child."

Hellen glared at her husband when he mentioned the wife before her, and then she squeezed Cara's shoulders, taking out her jealousy of the dead woman on the child.

Bork peered at the girl, not as she was but as she would be. In the Northern Grass Plains Tribe's tradition, male owners slept with their breeders to create slaves with no inherent rights. Bork had wanted Thatchman's wife AabiLynn when she first appeared in their territory, but she married Thatchman instead. It created much strife between the two men until AabiLynn died.

"AabiLynn's child," Bork muttered to himself, and then he thought maybe Cara might turn out to be as beautiful as her mother. "Are you sure you want to give up AabiLynn's child? She is your daughter."

Thatchman glanced at his wife, and then he answered, "I am sure."

Bork turned to one of his riders and told him, "Grab the child, and let us take her back to the plains."

The rider nodded, and then he went over and scooped up the child as she attempted to flee from

him, limping as fast as her little legs would allow her. She kicked and beat at him with her arms and legs, and then she turned to her father and Hellen and screamed for them.

“Hellen! Hellen, help me!” Cara cried out. “Help me, Hellen! Hellen!” She managed to free herself of the rider and drop down to the ground, and then she ran to her shouting, “Hellen! Hellen!”

Cara fell down as she overstepped her stride but quickly got back up and continued for the woman as she cried, “Hellen! Hellen!”

The woman turned from her and headed for the hut, allowing the child’s pleas to fall on indifferent ears.

Cara cried all the more, “Hellen! Don't go, Hellen!” She fell again and this time Cara didn't get up as she shrieked, “Mamma! Mamma!”

Hellen paused in her tracks as the maternal words left the child’s lips and rattled her very core. Never once had Cara called her mother. Hellen had never taught her that name but insisted that Cara call her Hellen. It allowed her to place some distance between herself and the other woman’s child. Thatchman’s sons were old enough that they easily called her Hellen. Cara must have picked up the word from the nearby farmer’s children as she watched them play. Hellen started to turn toward the child, but then she realized Thatchman had already given her to Bork. Whatever feelings might have been sparked by the child’s utterance was now too late. There was nothing she could do about the debt or the payment; it had been completed. She placed a hand on her belly. She might just be too emotional because of her own coming baby. Hellen continued walking to the hut as a tear streaked down her cheek. She wiped it away as she wiped the memory and the name of the child from her mind. Hellen placed a hand on her belly again. She would soon have a baby of her own to replace any emptiness caused by the forgotten one’s departure.

When Hellen ignored her pleads, Cara turned to Thatchman and called out to him, “Daddy! Daddy!”

“Quiet, child!” Thatchman scolded her. “You are no longer mine.” He turned from her and walked away as he mumbled, “You were never mine.”

As both of her parents abandoned her to her fate, Cara lifted her tiny hands and wept into them. The rider easily picked up the child and carried her to his horse, and then he, Bork, and the other riders headed back toward the plains. Cara cried herself asleep and slept the whole way back to Bork’s abode.



## Chapter Two

### Journey To Firedrake

Seven years later...

Darkness covered the land like a blanket of nighttime fancy, and the smell of horses and leather permeated the air as Cara held onto the back of her adopted father's waist. She leaned the side of her head against Bork's strong back as they rode on his horse. He was warm and comforting against the cool air. Cara was still sleepy as they had rose hours before she normally did so they could take this important trek. Sleep and dreams lingered with her as night and a young girl's fantasy remained a few moments more.

They left the plains with three other riders, heading for a great destination. All was grand in Cara's world. She had people who cared for her and a special place she belonged. She couldn't ask for anything more.

Bork steered his horse up a hill, and she held on tightly so not to fall off on the incline. The moon had long since gone, and the land waited for the sun to make its appearance. Cara glanced back at the three riders following them. One of the boys was Bork's son, Turk, the brother she never had. Thatchman's sons had mostly ignored her existence, but not Turk. He always noticed her, always knew where she was. Here with Bork and his family, she had found a place to belong, a place where she was needed and cared for.

Twilight broke at their backs as a red-orange light burned across the grasslands. A horse neighed, and a few flying birds greeted the morning, and all was grand in Cara's world. She had people who cared for her and a special place she belonged.

She squeezed Bork's waist as if giving him a hug and then turned her head so she could view the lands on their right side as they sped by. She overheard Bork speaking to the boys before they left his hut. He told them of the place they were going, that it was important, and they had to do well or was it, it was important that they do well at the place they were going?

A golden wren flew overhead, and Cara turned her head to follow the beautiful bird in its flight as it sparkled in the sunlight. She thought when it came time for her to select a totem animal, as those in Bork's family had, she might pick the golden wren. It was free to go where it willed, but the females still had a family they returned to and cared for. The time of naming a totem animal was also the time she was given new clothes like the leather the riders wore. She was ready to burn her dingy tunic in a fire. She had seen other children use the fire to burn their old clothes when they came of age. At that time, she could...

Cara caught a glimpse of Turk eyeing her, and she sleepily and bashfully hid her face in Bork's back. She smiled, knowing Turk was with them too, and it warmed her heart to know Turk was thinking about her. Cara adored him as an older brother.

She turned her head and looked again to the left side as they rode on. The plains were so different than the lands around the farm she once called home. An incidental tear trickled down her cheek as the day started to break up the dreams night allowed, and she quickly wiped it away before anyone saw. She was to never speak unless spoken to, and she was never to cry. Those were the rules ingrained in her since arriving at Bork's hut, and Bork's wife was the one who fiercely taught her these simple rules. The rising sun finished burning the sky, and the blueness of the day appeared over them and with night gone, so were dreams and a young girl's fantasy. Cara would have to face reality until the sunset again and she was able to close her eyes.

All was grand in Cara's world, but it all vanished back into her mind. She had people who cared for her and a special place she belonged, but those ideas and sentiments were only in her head. She, after all, was only a slave, someone they would sometimes refer to as a breeder. Cara was more alone with Bork and his son than she had ever been with her father, her brothers, and Hellen. She had no rights as a human, no one she could emotionally depend on and though she had a place she

belonged, she wasn't loved.

The riders moved on as did the morning, and the harsh reality of her existence smacked her again like one of the slaps Bork's wife would frequently give her. This was the world Cara lived in but not the one she wanted to linger in. The time she spent in her perfect world was far too short.

She was barefoot and wore a sackcloth tunic, and no totem animal decorated any part of her clothing. Cara was an object to own and order about and nothing more. She thought of Bork as her adopted father, but the only thing he adopted was a harsh tone and leering eyes that seemed to want something from her. Turk was still the brother she never had for he was neither a brother to her nor a friend only her constant tormentor. This was the reality of Cara's life, a reality she wished was a nightmare and the imaginary world she envisioned was the real one. She believed there had to be more in this world than pain and hardship. Those would be bearable if she had joy and love but without joy and love, pain and hardship were becoming more intolerable with each grim day.

Days later...

"I am not afraid of any dung smelling warlock," Barman said as he rode on horseback along with his two friends. He wore a brown leather vest over his young bare chest. He also wore leather pants and boots. A silver plains horse decorated the back of his vest, and his long black hair was held back out of his eyes with a leather band that also had the same silver plains horse decorating the front of it. The others wore similar attire, but a different totem animal decorated their clothing.

The Northern Grass Plains Tribe were led by chieftains, and Bork was chief of chieftains.

"Are you sure about that?" Turk questioned. He was the oldest of the three boys. He was sixteen and they were fifteen. A gold grass tiger adorned the back of his black vest and band. His hair was blond and flowed down his back. Turk said, "You have heard of the leviathans that those of the Stygian Legion ride. Do not tell me you are not afraid to face one of those malicious beasts. I know better. I have seen you face a hairless wolf pup when one happened upon our path. You nearly soiled yourself before you ran away from it. I laughed so hard as I watched the pup chase you that I nearly soiled myself."

"You cannot judge me for that," Barman insisted. "I was five at the time, had no weapon, and the pup was very hungry."

"I know," Turk chuckled. "It gnawed on my hand the whole way back to my hut."

"Whatever happened to it?" Barman questioned.

"I traded it for a dagger with one of my neighbors," Turk replied.

The riders had left the boundary of their home of the Northern Grass Plains days ago, and they had entered the Forest of Pinus. Less than an hour ago, they had left the Forest of Pinus and entered Wyvern the Dragonlands, and they had not seen a tree or shrub since doing so. They rode through a red and orange canyon as the sun broke at their backs. The third friend, Cyan, nudged his mare to catch up to the other two boys, and the mare whinnied. He wore light brown leather with a silver grass hawk as his totem animal. Ahead of them rode Bork with Cara as his passenger. His father was a large muscular man, and Turk was a slightly smaller version of him. Bork also led their pack horse.

"If I had a dragon under me, I would not be afraid to face a warlock or his leviathan," Barman insisted as he glanced back at the broadsword safely tucked in his bedroll. "I have my steel and the dragon its claws and magic."

"We are talking about leviathans," Turk said. "They are huge. I heard as big as a tower. Their hide is as black as the darkest pit, and they can swallow..." He looked at Cara, and then he continued, "They can swallow a girl whole."

Cara glanced back at the comment, but she said nothing at his teasing. She did look frightened as if his tale planted a deep rooting seed of fear within her.

Bork glanced back as the sun burned the horizon, and he barked, "We are late. Let us pick up the pace."

He kicked his horse, and it galloped off. Bork's leather was ashen in color, and it was marked by a totem of a great white grizzly bear. Turk and his friends followed closely behind Bork as the canyon path started to narrow, and the horses moved and formed a single file. Turk followed his father's pack horse, Barman him, and Cyan brought up the rear. Turk removed a bota filled with water and took a drink. He was hot and noticed he wasn't sweating. The dry air of the region consumed any moisture. Turk already missed his home and the cool breezes that would greet him of a morning. Here, the wind was harsh and filled with sand.

"Are you saying you would not be in the least bit afraid to face a leviathan?" Turk continued questioning his friend. "You know they bare their teeth right before they gobble you up. I believe they call it death's smile."

She glanced back at him again. Her light blue eyes looked a little more frightened. She noticed he saw her glance, and she bowed her head and turned back around. The trip so far had been long, and Cara wasn't used to riding on a horse. Her backend hurt, and she prayed for the trip to end.

The path through the canyon veered, and the sun moved to the left of them. The wind continued to harass them, and the sun beat down on them. Shade was a welcomed and yet fleeting friend.

"Why do you keep asking me about the leviathans?" Barman questioned, then he stared at her, and he asked, "Or are you trying to get a fear-filled response from someone else?" He noticed Turk's reaction to his inquiry, and Barman stated, "You are." He chuckled and said, "You do like to be a tyrant even when we are away from home. I pity any girl you take for your wife."

Turk ignored him, turned in his saddle, and asked his other friend, "What do you think, Cyan? What would you do if you faced a warlock and his leviathan?"

"I..." he started to answer when movement in the sky distracted him. Cyan shaded his eyes and glanced up, but whatever it had been had already flown away.

They heard a scream of a dragon in the distance and seconds later, a large green gold-speckled one flew over them a second time. Athenia Dragons had four legs, a pair of wings, and a tail, and their scaled hide came in an array of colors. The flying dragon returned and flew just above the canyon. The green dragon kicked up a torrent of wind through the path as its wings flapped to keep itself hovering above them. Sand flew up and blasted the faces of the group more than it had in the past. Bork halted his horse.

A dracoman yelled down to them, "Are you Bork, chief of the chieftains of the Northern Grass Plains Tribe?" The dracoman wielded a large shield and spear, but he didn't sit on a saddle. It appeared that the dragon's body had swallowed part of his.

"Yes," Bork shouted back.

"Proceed with haste," the dracoman ordered them. "The birthing is about to begin."

"We shall," Bork yelled and muttered under his breath, "Blasted dracoman... We would have been there if he had not stopped us with his dragon's cyclone."

"I shall meet you there," the dracoman yelled, and then he turned his dragon and headed back.

## Chapter Three

### The Birthing

The group pressed on and the path ended at Firedrake, the north-east nests of the dragons. The large open area formed an enclosed half circle, and the caves laid beyond that. Some distance from the caves was a stable, and they quickly rode to the structure.

Bork dismounted his horse as Cara slid off behind him. He tied up his horse at the watering trough. Inside the stable, several horses and other riding animals could be heard moving about their stalls.

"Hurry, girl," he said. "We are late."

"Yes, master," Cara replied as she limped to their pack horse and started unloading the equipment. She was twelve now, and it was her first time leaving the tribal lands, so she peered around at the strange land of the dragons.

Bork brought his son and his two friends to participate in the Dragon Rite. She was there to prepare their meals while they stayed at Firedrake. The first few ceremonial acts would take about five fortnights.

The dracoman, who had spoken to them earlier, approached as he told them, "You must come now. The queen has already started her birthing pangs. Quickly, this way!"

Bork started after the dracoman, paused, and shouted, "Fetch the gifts, girl. The rest of our items you can unload later. We are late for the first act of the Dragon Rite. Turk, Barman, and Cyan, come with me. The queen shall soon lay her eggs if she has not already."

"Yes, father," Turk replied.

The three boys dismounted, removed their swords from their bedrolls, and followed Bork, and he led them toward the caves. Two large dragons guarded the entrance. They were tall, three horses high, and winged. One dragon was the color of bronze and the other was teal.

"I shall leave you here," the dracoman spoke. "I need to return to my patrol."

He walked off without another word.

The teal colored dragon carefully eyed the four of them, and then he said, "Dragon Elder Duran awaits you, Bork. You need to proceed with haste to the Ritual Room. The first act of the Dragon Rite is about to begin. It cannot be delayed."

"We shall hurry," Bork replied, and then he started in and paused. "Blasted! Where is that girl? We need the gifts. Useless girl! Turk, go see what is keeping her."

"Yes, father," Turk answered, and then he hurried back to their horses as the others continued into the cave.

At the stable...

Cara was having difficulty undoing the buckle to the pack. She finally unbuckled it and removed the wooden chest from the pack. She held the chest in her left hand and started toward the caves when something caught her eye in the sand. She reached down, picked up a bloodstone the size of a walnut, and examined it as she said, "This is pretty."

"What is taking you so long, wench?" Turk barked as he approached her from her blindside.

Startled by his sudden appearance, she looked up, saw his angry face, and clasped her hand around the bloodstone to hide it from him. If he found it, she wouldn't be allowed to keep it but that wasn't the only thing she feared from him. Trepidation ransacked her heart like one of the great tempest that ravaged her homeland, and she pleaded, "Forgive me, young master. I could not--"

He walked up and backhanded her as he yelled, "Do not give me excuses!"

She held her reddening face, but his reaction was mild compared to other times. The sting of the strike made her pause as fear of what he might do next whirled in her mind. Cara chose her next words carefully and made them few as she spoke, "Forgive me."

He grabbed the wrist of her stunted arm and jerked her toward him, and she nearly dropped the chest. She caught it with her right hand as he squeezed bruises that were already days old. The veins in his neck bulged with his targeted wrath as he started to yell, but then two dracomens walked by.

Turk leaned in close and whispered to her, "There is no forgiveness for you, wench. Now hurry, before my father yells at the both of us."

Once he released her, she ran as fast as she could. He jogged beside her, and they passed the two dragon guards. The dragons eyed them but said nothing. They proceeded further in, and Turk didn't let up on her.

"You are so worthless!" he yelled. "I do not understand why my father keeps you. You are slow, ugly, and incapable of doing any real work, and I am the one that has to hear it when you fail to do your duties. Wench, go faster."

"Yes, young master," Cara said as she hurried even more to the point of almost falling over in her awkward gimp. She never understood the rage he had toward her. He never treated the other slaves as he did her. She wondered why she was any different. Maybe it was Bork's wife who influenced her son's wrath.

They hustled through a tunnel, and the air cooled the deeper they went. Wooden torches along the walls lit the way. He moved in behind her and watched as she rushed in her graceless gait. They were moving too slow and this enraged him even more.

"Look at her," he muttered to himself as his anger turned to loathing. Look how weak she was. His tribe was a proud tribe and a race of warriors. He didn't understand why her parents allowed her to live or his father. Even if she was a girl, she represented his tribe. How could they show their faces with such weakness at their side? When he became the tribal leader, all of that would change. No feebleness would be allowed.

Upon entering the large cavern of the Ritual Room, Turk removed his sword's scabbard from his belt and tripped her with it. She fell sprawl out, and the lid of the wooden chest came open, its contents spilled out, and three marbles made of gold clanged to the stone floor. Everyone in the room turned at the sound.

Three candidates from each of the other four tribes were assembled along with Bork, Barman, and Cyan. The other candidates were about the same age as Turk and his friends. The chief of the chieftains of each tribe or the second highest ranking chieftain was there. There were also four Venetian Red Scribes to record the event, and Dragon Elder Duran and two other dragon elders waited patiently.

Stalagmites and stalactites filled the Ritual Room that was not only lit by torches but by several basket-shaped cast iron fire stands. The stone path led down into a white sandy area. The sand had phosphorescent microbes living in it and anywhere where darkness prevailed, the sand glowed a light green.

"Blasted girl!" Bork blurted, embarrassed by her.

Barman and Cyan snickered as Turk came their way with a big grin on his face. He was pleased that his intention just to trip her up had also caused her great embarrassment. His father will be furious with her, and maybe his father would pay less attention to her. Turk's mother had whispered many things to Turk about this slave, and it had infuriated him since he was a boy, so he mistreated her for it.

Cara looked around at the many male faces staring at her, and her face flushed as she quickly picked up the gold marbles and placed them back in the chest. She hurried to Bork, and the sand was cold to her bare feet.

"Take them to the elder," Bork ordered.

She turned and timidly approached the large yellow dragon. She had never met a dragon before, and she had never met anything so big. He looked as if he could swallow her whole if he so chose to.

"Are these the gifts?" Dragon Elder Duran questioned her as he stared at the wooden chest.

She couldn't look him directly in the face, and she nodded. The dragon smelled of earth, and his feet were as large as her body.

Dragon Elder Duran motioned beside himself with his head as he instructed her, "Place them into the Bestowal Basin. It is located on the raised area known as the Middle Ground."

She searched the area he motioned to and saw a shallow silver bowl on a stalagmite that had been cut into a pedestal. The Bestowal Basin was positioned halfway between the Ritual Room and the Quickening Chamber where the dragon queen paced. There were also several dragons standing guard over their queen within the Quickening Chamber. Cara moved from the Ritual Room toward the center of the great cave to the point the dragon had motioned to. The Middle Ground consisted of a circular dark gray stone platform that had three steps going up to it. The stone was big enough that several dragons could stand on it. She moved up the steps to the pedestal as the dragon came up behind her. The Bestowal Basin was so large that both of her arms would only encompass half of it. She was barely tall enough to look inside. She got on her tippy toes and saw twelve gifts within. There were three rubies, three silver coins, three diamonds, and three emeralds. She placed in the three gold marbles, and the bloodstone she had been holding in the same hand also fell in, so Cara reached in and retrieved it. She started back to her master.

Dragon Elder Duran saw the glint of red before she scooped it out of the basin. He knew how some humans liked to take things that didn't belong to them, and he couldn't allow her to steal one of the gifts, so he said, "Wait, child. What did you retrieve from the Bestowal Basin? I do not think it belongs to you."

She tilted her head as if she didn't understand his question, so he rephrased it by saying, "What are you holding in your hand?"

"My hand?" She paused, opened her palm, and showed it to him, and then she replied, "Only this."

He noticed what he thought was a ruby, and Dragon Elder Duran warned her, "All gifts are to go in. You may not remove them once they have gone into the Bestowal Basin. You must return the gem."

She would have argued that it wasn't part of the gifts or a gem, but she was too afraid to do so. She quickly turned, went back up to the pedestal, dropped the bloodstone in, and rushed back to her master.

Bork leaned down to her and whispered, "Girl, did the elder catch you stealing?"

"No, master. I—"

"Quiet..." he ordered, then straightened, and said, "Blasted girl... I shall deal with you later."

Syllabary, one of the Venetian Red Scribes, stepped forward and said, "Now that we have all gathered, please follow me. The dragon queen is this way in the Quickening Chamber."

He and the other scribes wore scarlet robes embroidered with gold. They held a Convey Scroll and Blazing Quill, and a leather satchel rested at their side. They walked up a ramp of rock to a raised area ten feet up from the ground called the Observers Dais just beside the Middle Ground. From this advantage point, they could see everything within the Ritual Room, the Quickening Chamber, and especially the Middle Ground. The Venetian Red Scribes went and stood on top where they could witness the Dragon Rite, but they were still out of the way. The dragon elders joined them on the Observers Dais and stood behind the Venetian Red Scribes near the back wall. The four Venetian Red Scribes formed a line close to the edge of the Observers Dais, facing the Middle Ground and once they were all in position, they began.

"Expositus!" the scribes shouted.

Each of their scrolls magically lifted from their hands, unrolled, and hovered in front of them. The Convey Scrolls were created from the bark of a Floating Tree of Amber and endowed with magic. Whatever the scribe wrote on it would be there one moment, and then it would be whisked away to their Chronicle Tome located in the Scribe Hall in the Capital of Athenia. Their accounts would remain

in the Tome that not even fire could destroy. The Blazing Quill was also magical and never ran out of ink, and it was made from a sphinx feather and glowed when in use. They started writing their account of the first ceremonial act, and the blazing light from their quills lit their faces.

The area filled with the noise of the candidates and their patrons as they all walked to a connecting cavern called the Quickening Chamber. There, the dragon queen labored in the middle of laying her first egg. She was three times the size of a dragon elder who was twice the size of an average Athenia Dragon. The dragon queen grunted and growled with her pain-filled efforts. Her vocal exertion frightened a few of the candidates as they formed a line nearly shoulder to shoulder so that they could watch. For most, this was their first time participating in the Dragon Rite. They quieted and watched the dragon queen.

The Quickening Chamber was very warm as steam from small pools of hot springs mixed with the cold air of the caves. The dragon queen continued to labor in the birthing and soon produced her first egg. The egg popped out covered in a yellowish-green substance that slid down its surface until it collected in a small pool surrounding the egg and seemed to keep it from rolling around. The first egg was massive, as tall as a boy, and it was murky-black. It was so black that it looked like to Cara as if it consisted of the Void itself.

“Dragon Elder Duran—” Syllabary began as he stepped back from the line of scribes to the back wall where the dragons stood. His Convey Scroll followed him as he moved, and it floated behind him. Syllabary leaned to the yellow dragon and said, “—that egg is unusually large.”

“It is,” Dragon Elder Duran replied. “I have never seen one its size before. Maybe it is a good sign. Let us hope our queen can lay a female egg among this clutch. We are in need of a young queen. As the smallest of all the dragon nests, we have only one queen, and she is nearing the time when she shall stop laying.”

“What about the other nests?” Syllabary inquired as he took up writing again with his Blazing Quill. “Can they give you one of their queens?”

“At the moment, they have none to spare. Perhaps when the beginning of this Dragon Rite is complete and there are no females among the hatchlings, you can go to the other nests and see if you can find a queen for us.”

“Maybe I shall. I could use a journey and see country that has some green in its hue. Though as much as I would like to go, let us pray your queen produces an heir.”

Next, the dragon queen laid an egg that was half the size of the first and copper in color. The third egg was the same size as the second and purple. The fourth egg was the same and light blue. The dragon queen paced the area as her labor pains increased.

“Maybe there is another large egg,” Syllabary stated.

“Perhaps,” Dragon Elder Duran said. “Or perhaps it is something else.”

With great difficulty, the dragon queen finally laid the last egg. It was small, very small. The egg was the size of a melon and pale in color.

“This is vexing,” Syllabary said as he stopped writing. “Is something wrong with the egg?” He moved, walked down the rocky ramp as his scroll followed, walked around the Middle Ground to the Quickening Chamber, and drew near the dragon queen first and once there, he rubbed her nose. He did this to make sure she wouldn’t act violently toward him when he approached her brood. Syllabary then examined each of the eggs and came to the smallest one. He spoke, “It has a crack. The small egg may never hatch.”

“Perhaps...” Dragon Elder Duran began. He had followed Syllabary and also looked over the clutch. Duran said, “There are no spots on any of the shells. The eggs are all male. Let us begin the first act of the Dragon Rite.” He turned to the boys gathered and commanded them, “Candidates select an egg.”

Bork leaned to his son and told him, “Remember the plan and act with your head. If you do this, then maybe at least one of you can become a dracoman.”

“Yes, father.”

The majority of the boys, including Turk, rushed to the large murky-black egg.

His two friends followed, and Turk turned to them and ordered them, “Choose a different egg. If we spread out, then maybe at least one of us shall bring honor to our tribe.”

They did as he told them. Barman went and stood by the purple egg, and Cyan went and stood by the light blue one. Out of the fifteen candidates, six stood around the large murky-black egg. Three candidates stood around the copper, three around the purple, and three around the light blue one. None stood by the small damaged pale egg. The boys started stroking their selected eggs and talking to them.

The girl asked Bork, “Master, what happens if no one chooses the small egg?”

“I do not know. Now be quiet, girl,” Bork snapped, and then he stated in a low voice, “What a waste? One less egg for the Rite. What a useless thing?”

Cara stared up at him as she saw the disgusted look on Bork’s face he had given her many times but this time, the look was directed at the egg.

Dragon Elder Duran heard her question, and he answered her, “It shall be cast out if it is not chosen. It is the rule of the Dragon Rite. It shall be abandoned to another fate.”

“Cast out?” she exclaimed under her breath. “Abandoned to another fate?”

Cara didn't understand why they would abandon a baby because it was too small and may be damaged. She glanced at her stunted left arm and leg. Was the egg considered useless like her? Did the world also consider this tiny egg unworthy of care and love? She wondered if they would get rid of him because he was different just as her parents had gotten rid of her. Cara had been cast out from her family, and she had been abandoned to a horrible fate. No other living thing should have to go through what she had. Cara felt a twinge of compassion within her heart. All of her life she had been the abjected one. She never let it show, but Bork and his family’s harsh words and cruel actions towards her hurt her deeply. Someone needed to protect the egg from the same kind of tormenting rejection.

“Are all candidates set on their choice?” Duran questioned.

“We are,” they all answered.

“It is a pity,” Duran stated as he looked over the small egg. “We have not had a rejected egg in nearly a hundred years. It shall need to be removed. Call forth the Relegator,” he ordered.

One of the dragons, who stood guard within the Quickening Chamber, walked to one of the connecting tunnels and screamed a dragon call and after some time, a large man entered who wore a black leather mask to conceal his face. He was bare-chested and larger than Bork. The Relegator wielded a large weapon. The weapon was made of steel, long, and had what looked like a mallet’s head at one end and two spear-like projections at the other end.

“Which one?” the Relegator questioned.

“The small pale one,” Dragon Elder Duran answered.

The Relegator approached the egg, then paused, and glanced at the dragon queen. The dragon queen nodded to him, and the Relegator proceeded towards the egg as he gripped his weapon tightly. He had a wildness in his eyes as if he would break open the egg and eat it. The Relegator lifted the mallet end of the weapon as he drew closer to the egg.

Cara watched in horror. They were going to hurt the egg. She feared he was going to smash the baby dragon. Was the egg so worthless in the others’ eyes that they would allow it to be killed? She frantically glanced around at the boys, wondering if none of them would select it. She took a couple of steps forward. It might be small and appear to be damaged but that didn't mean it was worthless or useless. Small didn't mean he couldn't fly.

She realized the boys were too busy cooing their eggs to notice the monster of a man who was going to destroy the rejected one. Cara took a few more steps forward. The Relegator was only a few paces away from the egg as he stomped across the ground in his slow but determined stride.

Someone had to save the egg. Maybe its mother would. Cara looked at the dragon queen, but the female dragon made no movement to save her own child. The dragon queen actually turned her



back on the small egg and focused her attention on the other eggs. The dragon queen turned her back on her child just as Hellen had turned her back on her. Cara wondered if the dragon queen was like her father and Hellen. Would the dragon queen simply watch as her child was..?

No! Cara screamed within her mind. Someone had to stop him! Don't let the baby dragon die because it was unwanted. Tears welled in her light blue eyes as she whispered, "Someone... save the baby dragon. Someone must save him."

Dragon Elder Duran noticed she moved towards the egg and turned in her direction as the Relegator stood over the pale egg and lifted his weapon above his head.

"Don't let him," Cara continued to whisper. "Don't let him hurt him." Tears streamed down her face and before she knew what she was doing, Cara had limped over to the egg and gently covered it with her body, closed her eyes, and screamed out, "Do not kill it! Don't hurt this baby!"

The End- [Next Click Here DR1](#)

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