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Fell

THE HIGH PRIEST WAITED AT THE ALTAR.

I did not glance at the assembled guests as we strode down the center aisle. The king. The queen. The lord regent. Arkin and a handful of my warriors. A few nobles of the court. I did not look at any of them. My focus was on the woman at my side. A prize for the Borderlands.

My prize.

Not only was I marrying a stranger. I was marrying her sight unseen. She was covered from head to toe. Only her hand in mine was visible, and I gazed down at it curiously, the pads of my fingers rubbing against the soft skin, which was not the milk white that I had expected of one of the cosseted princesses of Penterra, whom I'd spied from a distance, but rather sun-kissed, almost . . . golden.

Her fingers were long and slender, the nails short, buffed to a healthy shine. Faint blue veins crisscrossed at her wrist and along the back of her hand. I tracked those veins, a strange awareness seizing me. My eyes began to ache as I scrutinized the meandering blue web . . . the faint rush of blood whispering beneath her skin. Not only could I hear it in my ears . . . I felt it, too.

Impossible. I blinked and swallowed thickly. I was not myself. Had not been since I'd arrived here. I was eager to take my bride and leave, return home, to a world of cool mists and fog-swathed hills, to the things I knew—starting with myself.

I stopped in front of the priest. Behind him loomed an altar, a



great monstrosity constructed of overlapping iridescent discs in an assortment of colors. Dragon scales. Most were shades of purple-winking onyx, but there were several bronze discs, and occasionally blue, green, and a pale gray. A few were even red. The rarest kind, I knew, as they came from fire-breathing dragons.

The dragon graveyards to the north had been picked clean of the scales a century ago. They fetched a hefty price, as they were used to build shields, armor, weaponry, or, in this case . . . altar displays.

The sight evoked a deep satisfaction in me. A dragon had killed my parents. Incinerated them so that not even a proper burial could be performed. At least that was the assumption. There had been no remains found in that den. I was saved by Balor the Butcher before I could be finished off, too.

I felt only grim approval as I gazed at what amounted to relics of a species that had taken everything from me. So many had perished in the Threshing. I could have easily been another, not even a footnote in history.

I was one of the fortunate ones. A survivor. My father, a widower and without issue, believed finding me was destiny. His and mine. That I was fated to be his son, his successor. A child strong enough to survive a dragon had to be the future leader of the Borderlands.

The priest began to speak over us, and I pulled my attention away from the ornate altar. My bride and I stood shoulder to shoulder. I tried to focus, but she proved too distracting, and I continued to slide glances at her, as though I could see beneath her shroud.

I might tower over her, but she wasn't short. She stood taller than most men. I wish I had paid closer attention when I'd observed the princesses in the Great Hall yesterday so that I might guess at which one hid beneath the bothersome veil. I knew they were all fair-haired with fine features. They had seemed delicate, as Arkin pointed out, but this woman's hand in mine felt sturdy. Strong but with a definite tremble. I could not stop myself from stroking the back of it once in a reassuring swipe. I might be known throughout the realm as the Beast, but I would not devour her.

I had no shortage of women in my life. There was nothing like

the blood-pumping exhilaration of surviving a battle, of emerging from the blood and fog and realizing you're not dead. There were plenty of sword maidens in my army eager to hit the furs following a fight. Of course, a gentle princess would know nothing of fucking like that. I would have to approach my wife with care.

True, this was no love match. It was not even a *like* match. It was an arrangement. An alliance to strengthen my position against the growing threats to Penterra. When war came—and it was coming—I wanted my voice heard. As son-in-law of the king, I was guaranteed that.

I realized that she was a pawn in all of this, and I would try to honor her as my wife and shield her from the harsh reality of life in the Borderlands, but if she ended up being as fragile as Arkin predicted . . . I winced. Well. War brought sacrifice. That was the nature of it.

The richly robed priest turned to accept a long rope of vines from one of his acolytes. He presented it to us. I stood uncertainly, and he indicated we should both present our arms to him.

My bride seemed to know the practice. Releasing my hand, she pushed back her loose sleeve to the elbow, stretching out her arm. Yet another custom I was not familiar with, and it only reinforced just how far apart and different the Borderlands were from this place . . . how far apart she and I were.

Our arms stretched out side by side. Hers slender and shorter. Mine thick, roped with sinew and pronounced veins and sprinkled with dark hair.

There was a flash of steel, and I tensed, ready to deflect, until I realized it was all part of the ceremony. The priest took a jeweled dagger from another one of his acolytes and positioned it over my palm, carving an X in the center. Instantly, blood swelled and puddled in the cup of my palm.

Turning, he did the same to the princess, cutting her tender skin. Blood sprang from the open wound, dark and viscous. My jaw clenched. I did not like anyone taking a blade to her, sanctioned ritual or no.



Not a movement or sound escaped her, though. Surprising. A pampered princess raised in the protection of this palace had likely never suffered a splinter.

Our hands were forced back together, slashed palms kissing, bleeding us. Warmth centered there, pulsing hotly where we joined, mingling. Energy spread up my arm and throughout the rest of me like tinder catching fire.

Did she feel it, too? This revitalizing heat?

A pervasive cold clung to the chapel. It was unusual this far south. I was accustomed to it in the Borderlands, but down here, it was all sunshine and balmy winds.

The wedding guests burrowed within ermine-trimmed cloaks, their hands encased in fur-lined kid gloves. Stone walls kept out the worst of the frigid air, but there was no hearth in which to light a fire in the chapel. The guests shivered, except for my warriors, who were well accustomed to the bitter winters of the north. Even our summers held a hint of a chill. Our hearths burned year-round. The perpetual damp clenched cold and hard around the bones. Fog flowed and ebbed over the hills, never vanishing entirely.

And yet now, in this moment, with her hand locked in mine, our arms aligned, our blood mingling, I felt only blistering heat.

The vine rope came next, wrapping around us, starting above the elbows and winding down to our fingers. The greenery twisted like a snake, holding us captive, binding us together. A tenuous chain, but it felt as solid as iron as the priest proclaimed the final vows, marrying us. Two strangers bound together for the rest of our lives.

Life had never seemed so long.