

A TYRANT WILL FALL.
AN OUTCAST WILL RISE.



BRIGHT STAR



ERIN SWAN

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A TOM DOHERTY ASSOCIATES BOOK
NEW YORK

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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The Choosing

Andra shrank deeper into the alcove, biting her lip as the young, sandy-haired man beside her peered out from their hiding place, his blue eyes alight, cheeks flushed. Her heart hammered in her ears, but not with the same excitement so clear on his face. She swallowed hard, trying to keep the anxiety from her voice as she spoke.

“Talias,” she whispered as quietly as she could, “we shouldn’t be here. I could get in serious trouble for this. We *both* could.” She added the last part in the hopes that it might frighten him into changing his mind about the scheme, but they both knew that Andra’s punishment would be much greater than the kitchen boy’s if they were caught.

Still, Talias seemed unfazed. He looked at her with a mischievous quirk at the corner of his lips that made her stomach lurch. “Have I ever led you astray, Andra?” he asked. “Besides, I know you’re just as curious as I am. There must be a reason they keep everyone out of the arena during the Choosing.”

“Exactly,” Andra hissed. “There *must* be a reason, so why are we breaking the law and hiding behind this statue to watch?”

The young man was spared from a reply as a rumbling sound echoed through the great space before them. Andra forgot her nerves, curiosity overtaking her, and peered out from around the marble statue at the large indoor arena. The open, dirt-floored space was large enough to put some town squares to shame, and steep benches lined the walls, though they were empty for now.

At the center of the arena stood a tall man in the blue-striped robes of a judge, his long brown hair tied with a cord at the nape of his neck. Those cold eyes that made Andra cringe were now looking down on a dozen twelve-year-old boys, all of whom were shifting and bouncing in their well-polished boots.

Andra saw why. Directly across from where she hid, a pair of enormous wooden doors were being hauled open by a half dozen thick-armed men. As the gap widened, a reptilian head appeared, blue scales glittering with the sunlight that streamed in from outside. Andra’s breath caught, but not with fear. Awe filled her as the dragon slowly stepped through the open doorway, sharp azure eyes measuring the twelve boys before her.

“She’s beautiful,” Andra whispered.

Talias exhaled slowly. “‘Terrifying’ is more accurate.”

The young girl looked at him, brow furrowing. “We’ve seen dozens of dragons, Talias,” she said. “Surely you’re not scared of this one.”

“This is different,” her companion answered. “That’s no Paired dragon, Andra. She doesn’t have a Rider. That’s a *wild* dragon.”

Andra knew this, of course. Paired dragons didn’t breed; nesting would take them from their Riders for weeks on end, and that was something no Paired dragon would stand for. All the eggs for the annual Pairing came from wild females, who willingly gave their children to be partnered with human and elven Riders. It was something that the dragons had done for the better part of a thou-

sand years—excluding the few hundred years of war that had briefly wiped Riders from the land—honoring the pact that had been forged among dragons, elves, and humans so long ago.

Each year, the humans and elves selected a few of their own to meet with the wild female who would give her eggs to the Pairing. Exactly what happened in that meeting, Andra wasn't sure, and neither was Talias. And that was how he'd persuaded her to crouch in this corner, behind the statue of the Guardians, and spy on the proceedings. She knew the moment he'd suggested the idea that it was a bad one, but she'd had a hard time saying no to the handsome kitchen boy from the day she arrived at the Hall of Riders as a child. And her own curiosity had pressed her into finally agreeing to follow him into the arena.

The two hidden figures watched as the great sapphire dragon stepped up to the collection of boys and Judge Dusan, the master of the Hall. Even from this distance, Andra could see some of the boys cringe backward nervously, and she suppressed a small laugh. These twelve were supposed to be some of the most promising young men that the land of Paerolia had to offer. Though she knew most of them were the sons of high-ranking officials, or even judges, they were thoroughly trained and tested before being selected for the Pairings. They included boys of both human and elven blood, as well as some of mixed races, and they all would have been exposed to dragons many times before this moment. And yet, she could still see a few shaking in their shiny boots.

Judge Dusan's voice reached her ears, speaking aloud to the dragon, as propriety demanded. "Welcome, once again, to the Hall of Riders, Ena. It is a great pleasure to see you once more." He gave a deep bow, and the dragon inclined her head politely.

Andra knew that Ena must be replying to the greeting, but the dragon spoke only into the judge's mind, and the girl felt a pang of envy. What must it be like to have a dragon speak to your mind? Most people in the Hall had experienced it at least once. Even Talias

had spoken to dragons during his service. But not Andra. It was forbidden.

She watched silently, her green eyes riveted on the sleek, scaled shape before her as Ena turned her attention to the boys chosen for the Pairing. Andra saw some of the boys flinch and recoil, and she heard Talias snort with amusement.

“What’s so funny?” she whispered.

“She probably just touched their minds to speak to them,” he said. “I think that one on the end there may have soiled his britches.”

Andra gave a small smile and shook her head, turning her attention back to the dragon. The wild creature was closing her shining eyes, and the girl thought she heard a deep, thrumming sound coming from the scaled throat. Suddenly, a warm presence pressed itself against Andra’s mind, and she gasped. Instinctively, she began to pull away, putting up the walls to protect her thoughts as she had been taught since childhood.

But there was something so gentle, so reassuring about the presence that she stopped. After a pause, Andra lowered the walls around her mind and let the presence in. It was like sinking into warm water after a hard day of work. The dragon’s mind enveloped Andra’s like an invisible embrace, and she felt joy swell inside her at the touch, her eyes closing as she savored this strange and wonderful contact.

Then, as abruptly as it had come, the touch was gone. Andra opened her eyes and looked at Talias, a smile on her lips. But the look on the servant boy’s face was far different. His eyes were wide, his face pale, making the freckles stand out on his skin.

“Are you all right?” Andra asked quietly.

Talias looked at her. “Did you not *feel* that?” he whispered tensely.

She nodded, smiling again at the thought of the mental embrace. “Yes. It felt . . . beautiful.”

Her friend gave her an incredulous look, but any reply he might have given was interrupted by a shout from Judge Dusan.

"Three?" he asked loudly. "When I was a boy, there were at least six Riders chosen every year! And yet, each year, we see fewer and fewer Pairings!"

Andra heard Ena give a low growl in her throat as she made some silent reply to the judge. The lanky man let out a huff, but gave a small bow. "Of course. My apologies, Ena. So you will bring the three eggs, then?" A pause as he listened to the dragon's silent reply; then he nodded. "Yes, one month's time. We will ensure the Hall is prepared for the Pairing."

With that, the dragon turned, narrowly missing the line of boys with her long tail, and lumbered back out the open doors. Andra leaned around the large statue, straining to watch through the doorway as Ena spread her brilliant blue wings and, after several laborious beats, took to the sky.

Talias's hand abruptly seized her arm, yanking her back behind the statue. She suddenly found herself pulled close to him, her chest pressed against his, one of his arms tight around her waist. Her heart stuttered at his closeness, the warmth of his arm around her obvious through the thin brown wool of her dress. But he wasn't looking at her. He was peering carefully around the statue, watching as Dusan and the twelve boys filed past. He had pulled her back behind the statue just in time to keep her from being seen.

When the candidates and the judge had exited the arena, Talias let out a heavy sigh, and he finally looked down at her. His blue eyes caught her pale green ones, and he seemed to realize just how close he held her. There was a brief pause, and Andra thought she heard his breath catch for a moment. Then he smiled, relaxed and easygoing once again, as he always was. He gave her short brown hair a playful tug, and the arm around her back fell away.

"Come on," he said with a smirk. "We need to hurry before

anyone notices we're missing. They'll be starting the Riders' banquet soon."

Andra swallowed hard and stepped back, nodding in agreement, and Talias turned away, by all appearances unaffected by the moment that had passed between them. She fought back the disappointment, the lingering hope that he would have kissed her in that moment, and followed him as he hurried to the doors that connected the arena to the rest of the Hall of Riders. The kitchen boy cracked the doors, checking the hallway for any passersby, and Andra glanced back at the statue that had hidden them.

It was beautiful, carved of sparkling white marble. At the center was the great dragon, Oriens, his wings outstretched over the two figures beside him. The stories said that his scales had been as golden as the sunrise, and his children had been the first dragons Paired with Riders in three centuries. To one side was the shape of an elven man with a slim build and pointed ears, his smooth face carved into a serious expression. Caelum, prince of the elves and general of the elven armies at the end of the War of Races. To the other side of the dragon stood the marble shape of a woman.

Andra knew the stories about her—Eliana of the Two-Bloods, the first halfblood to be born in three hundred years, in a time when humans and elves were still at war, Oriens's Rider. The girl stared for a moment at the graceful, shining face of the long-dead woman, a strange feeling of longing in her chest. To be a Rider . . .

"Let's go."

Andra jerked her attention away from the statue and back to the doors, where Talias was hurrying through into the empty hallway. She followed quickly behind him, and they made their way briskly to the kitchen. As they stepped into the Hall's enormous kitchen, the cacophony washed over Andra, breaking the spell that seemed to have been lingering over her mind from Ena's touch.