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IRON FLAME

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PIATKUS

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PART ONE

In this, the 628th year of our Unification, it is hereby recorded that Aretia has been burned by dragon in accordance with the Treaty ending the separatist movement. Those who fled, survived, and those who did not remain entombed in her ruins.

—PUBLIC NOTICE 628.85
TRANSCRIBED BY CERELLA NIELWART



CHAPTER ONE

Revolution tastes oddly...sweet.

I stare at my older brother across a scarred wooden table in the enormous, busy kitchen of the fortress of Aretia and chew the honeyed biscuit he put on my plate. Damn, that's good. Really good.

Maybe it's just that I haven't eaten in three days, since a not-so-mythological being stabbed me in the side with a poisoned blade that should have killed me. It *would* have killed me if it hadn't been for Brennan, who won't stop smiling as I chew.

This might go down as the most surreal experience of my life. Brennan is alive. Venin, dark wielders I'd thought only existed in fables, are real. Brennan is alive. Aretia still stands, even though it was scorched after the Tyrrish rebellion six years ago. Brennan is *alive*. I have a new, three-inch scar on my abdomen, but I didn't die. Brennan. Is. Alive.

"The biscuits are good, right?" he asks, snagging one from the platter between us. "Kind of remind me of the ones that cook used to make when we were stationed in Calldyr, remember?"

I stare and chew.

He's just so...him. And yet he looks different from what I remember. His brownish-red curls are cropped close to his skull instead of waving over his forehead, and there's no lingering softness in the angles of his face, which now

has tiny lines at the edges of his eyes. But that smile? Those eyes? It's really him.

And his one condition being me eating something before he takes me to my dragons? It's the most Brennan move ever.

Not that Tairn ever waits for permission, which means—

"*I, too, think you need to eat something.*" Tairn's low, arrogant voice fills my head.

"*Yeah, yeah,*" I reply in kind, mentally reaching out for Andarna again as one of the kitchen workers hurries by, offering a quick smile to Brennan.

There's no response from Andarna, but I can feel the shimmering bond between us, though it's no longer golden like her scales. I can't quite get a mental picture, but my brain is still a little groggy. She's sleeping again, which isn't odd after she uses up all her energy to stop time, and after what happened in Resson, she probably needs to sleep for the next week or so.

"You've barely said a word, you know." Brennan tilts his head just like he used to when he was trying to solve a problem. "It's kind of creepy."

"Watching me *eat* is creepy," I counter after I swallow, my voice still a little hoarse.

"And?" He shrugs shamelessly, a dimple flashing in his cheek when he grins. It's the only boyish thing left about him. "A few days ago, I was pretty sure I'd never get to watch you do, well, *anything* again." He takes a huge bite. Guess his appetite is still the same, which is oddly comforting. "You're welcome, by the way, for the mending. Consider it a twenty-first-birthday present."

"Thank you." That's right. I slept right through my birthday. And I'm sure my lying in bed on the brink of death was more than enough drama for everyone in this castle, house, whatever it's called.

Xaden's cousin, Bodhi, strides into the kitchen, dressed in uniform, his arm in a sling and his cloud of black curls freshly trimmed.

"Lieutenant Colonel Aisereigh," Bodhi says, handing a folded missive to Brennan. "This just came in from Basgiath. The rider will be here until tonight if you want to reply." He offers me a smile, and I'm struck again at how closely he resembles a softer version of Xaden. With a nod to my brother, he turns and leaves.

Basgiath? Another rider here? How many are there? Exactly how big is this revolution?

Questions fire off in my head faster than I can find my tongue. "Wait. You're a lieutenant colonel? And who is Aisereigh?" I ask. Yeah, because *that* is the most important inquiry to make.

"I had to change my last name for obvious reasons." He glances at me and unfolds the missive, breaking a blue wax seal. "And you'd be amazed at how fast you get promoted when everyone above you continues to die," he says, then reads the letter and curses, shoving it into his pocket. "I have to go meet with

the Assembly now, but finish your biscuits and I'll meet you in the hall in half an hour and take you to your dragons." All traces of the dimple, of the laughing older brother are gone, and in their place is a man I barely recognize, an officer I don't know. Brennan may as well be a stranger.

Without waiting for me to respond, he scrapes his chair back and strides out of the kitchen.

Sipping my milk, I stare at the empty space my brother left across from me, chair still pulled out from the table as though he might return at any moment. I swallow the remaining biscuit stuck in the back of my throat and lift my chin, determined not to ever sit and wait on my brother to return again.

I push up from the table and head after him, out of the kitchen and down the long hall. He must have been in a hurry, because I can't see him anywhere.

The intricate carpet muffles my footsteps along the wide, high-arched hallway as I come to— *Whoa*. The sweeping, polished double staircases with their detailed banisters rise three—no, four—more floors above me.

I'd been too focused on my brother to pay attention earlier, but now I blatantly gawk at the architecture of the enormous space. Each landing is slightly offset from the one below, as though the staircase climbs toward the very mountain this fortress is carved into. The morning light streams in from dozens of small windows that provide the only decoration on the five-story wall above the massive double doors of the fortress's entrance. They seem to form a pattern, but I'm too close to see the whole of it.

There's no perspective, which pretty much feels like a metaphor for my entire life right now.

Two guards watch every step I take but make no move to stop me when I pass by. At least that means I'm not a prisoner.

I continue to stride through the main hall of the house, eventually picking up the sound of voices from a room across the way, where one of two large, ornate doors is pitched open. As I approach, I immediately recognize Brennan's voice, and my chest tightens at the familiar timbre.

"That's not going to work." Brennan's deep voice echoes. "Next suggestion."

I make it through the massive foyer, ignoring what look to be two other wings off to the left and right. This place is astounding. Half palace, half home, but entirely a fortress. The thick stone walls are what saved it from its supposed demise six years ago. From what I've read, Riorson House has never been breached by any army, even during the three sieges that I know of.

Stone doesn't burn. That's what Xaden told me. The city—now reduced to a town—has been silently, covertly rebuilding for years right under General Melgren's nose. The relics, magical marks the children of the executed rebellion officers carry, somehow mask them from Melgren's signet when they're in groups

of three or more. He can't see the outcome of any battle they're present for, so he's never been able to "see" them organizing to fight here.

There are certain aspects of Riorson House, from its defensible position carved into the mountainside to its cobblestone floors and steel-enforced double doors in the entryway, that remind me of Basgiath, the war college I've called home since my mother was stationed there as its commanding general. But that's where the similarities end. There's actual art on the walls here, not just busts of war heroes displayed on stands, and I'm pretty sure that's an authentic Poromish tapestry hanging across the hall from where Bodhi and Imogen stand in the open doorway.

Imogen puts her finger to her lips, then motions at me to join in the empty place between her and Bodhi. I take it, noticing Imogen's half-shaved hair has been recently dyed a brighter pink while I've been resting. Clearly she's comfortable here. Bodhi, too. The only signs that either has been in a battle are the sling cradling Bodhi's fractured arm and a split in Imogen's lip.

"Someone has to state the obvious," an older man with an eyepatch and a hawkish nose says from the far end of a table that consumes the length of the two-story room. Tufts of thinning gray hair frame the deep lines in his lightly tanned, weathered skin, his jowls hanging down like a wildebeest. He leans back in his chair, placing a thick hand on his rounded belly.

The table could easily accommodate thirty people, but only five sit along one side, all dressed in rider black, perched slightly ahead of the door, at an angle where they'd have to turn fully to see us—which they don't. Brennan paces in front of the table but not at an angle he can easily spot us, either.

My heart lurches into my throat, and I realize it's going to take some time to get used to seeing Brennan alive. He's somehow exactly the same as I remember—and yet different. But here he is—living, breathing, currently glaring at a map of the Continent on the long wall, the map's size only rivaled by the one in the Battle Brief lecture hall at Basgiath.

And standing in front of that map, one arm leaning against a massive chair as he stares down the table at its occupants, is Xaden.

He looks good, even with bruises marring the tawny-brown skin under his eyes from lack of sleep. The high slopes of his cheeks, the dark eyes that usually soften whenever they meet mine, the scar that bisects his brow and ends beneath his eye, the swirling, shimmering relic that ends at his jaw, and the carved lines of the mouth I know as well as my own all add up to make him physically fucking perfect to me, and that's just his face. His body? Somehow even better, and the way he uses it when he has me in his arms—

Nope. I shake my head and cut off my thoughts right there. Xaden may be gorgeous, and powerful, and terrifyingly lethal—which shouldn't be the turn-

on it is—but I can't trust him to tell me the truth about...well, anything. Which really *hurts*, considering how pathetically in love with him I am.

"And what is the obvious thing you need to state, Major Ferris?" Xaden asks, his tone completely, utterly bored.

"It's an Assembly meeting," Bodhi whispers to me. "Only a quorum of five is required to call a vote, since all seven are almost never here at one time, and four votes carry a motion."

I file that information away. "Are we allowed to listen?"

"Meetings are open to whoever wants to attend," Imogen replies just as quietly.

"And we're attending...in the hallway?" I ask.

"Yes," Imogen answers with no other explanation.

"Returning is the only option," Hawk Nose continues. "Not doing so risks everything we're building here. Search patrols will come, and we don't have enough riders—"

"It's a little hard to recruit while trying to stay undetectable," a petite woman with glossy black hair like a raven counters, the amber skin at the corners of her eyes crinkling as she glares down the table at the older man.

"Let's not get off topic, Trissa," Brennan says, rubbing the bridge of his nose. Our father's nose. Their resemblance is uncanny.

"No point increasing our numbers without a working forge to arm them with weapons." Hawk Nose's voice rises above the others. "We're still short a luminary, if you haven't noticed."

"And where are we in negotiations with Viscount Tecarus for his?" a large man asks in a calm, rumbling voice, his ebony hand tugging at his thick silver beard.

Viscount Tecarus? That isn't a noble family in any Navarrian records. We don't even have viscounts in our aristocracy.

"Still working on a diplomatic solution," Brennan answers.

"There's no solution. Tecarus isn't over the insult you delivered last summer." An older woman built like a battle-ax locks her gaze on Xaden, her blond hair brushing just past her square alabaster chin.

"I told you, the viscount was never going to give it to us in the first place," Xaden replies. "The man only *collects* things. He does not *trade* them."

"Well, he's definitely not going to *trade* with us now," she retorts, her gaze narrowing. "Especially if you won't even contemplate his latest offer."

"He can fuck right off with his *offer*," Xaden's voice is calm, but his eyes have a hard edge that dares anyone at the table to disagree. As if showing these people they aren't worth his time, he steps around the arm of the massive chair facing them and settles into it, stretching his long legs and resting his arms on the velvet armrests—like he doesn't have a care in the world.

The quiet that falls on the room is telling. Xaden commands as much respect from the Assembly of this revolution as he does at Basgiath. I don't recognize any of the other riders besides Brennan, but I'd bet Xaden is the most powerful in the room, given their silence.

"For now," Tairn reminds me with the arrogance only a hundred years of being one of the most formidable battle dragons on the Continent can provide. "*Instruct the humans to bring you up to the valley once the politics are finished.*"

"There had better be a solution. If we can't supply the drifts with enough weaponry to really fight in the next year, the tide will shift too far to ever hope of holding the venin advance at bay," Silver Beard notes. "This all will have been for nothing."

My stomach pitches. A year? We're *that* close to losing a war I knew nothing about a few days ago?

"As I said, I'm working on a diplomatic solution for the luminary"—Brennan's tone sharpens—"and we're so wildly off topic I'm not sure this is the same meeting."

"I vote we take Basgiath's luminary," Battle-Ax suggests. "If we're that close to losing this war, there's no other option."

Xaden shoots Brennan a look that I can't decipher, and I breathe deeply as it hits me—he probably knows my own brother better than I do.

And he kept him from me. Of all the secrets he hid, that's the one I can't quite swallow.

"*And what would you have done with the knowledge had he shared it?*" Tairn asks.

"*Stop bringing logic into an emotional argument.*" I fold my arms across my chest. It's my heart that won't fully let my head forgive Xaden.

"We've been over that," Brennan says with finality. "If we take Basgiath's forging device, Navarre can't replenish their stores at the outposts. Countless civilians will die if those wards fall. Do any of you want to be responsible for that?"

Silence reigns.

"Then we agree," Hawk Nose says. "Until we can supply the drifts, the cadets *have* to return."

Oh.

"They're talking about us," I whisper. That's why we're standing out of their direct sight.

Bodhi nods.

"You're uncharacteristically quiet, Suri," Brennan notes, glancing at the wide-shouldered brunette with olive skin and a single streak of silver in her hair, her nose twitching like a fox, sitting next to him.

"I say we send all but the two." Her nonchalance skates a chill down my spine as she drums her bony fingers on the table, a giant emerald ring catching the light. "Six cadets can lie as well as eight."

Eight.

Xaden, Garrick, Bodhi, Imogen, three marked ones I'd never gotten a chance to know before we were thrown into battle, and...me.

Nausea rises like a tide. The War Games. We're supposed to be finishing the last competition of the year between the wings of the Riders Quadrant at Basgiath, and instead, we entered deadly battle with an enemy I'd thought were only folklore last week, and now we're...well, we're here, in a city that isn't supposed to exist.

But not all of us.

My throat tightens, and I blink back the burn in my eyes. Soleil and Liam didn't survive.

Liam. Blond hair and sky-blue eyes fill my memory, and pain erupts behind my ribs. His boisterous laugh. His quick smile. His loyalty and kindness. It's all gone. *He's gone.*

All because he promised Xaden he'd guard me.

"None of the eight are expendable, Suri." Silver Beard leans on the back two legs of his chair and examines the map behind Xaden.

"What do you propose, Felix?" Suri counters. "Running our own war college with all our spare time? Most of them haven't finished their education. They're of no use to us yet."

"As if any of you has a say in if we return," Xaden interrupts, earning everyone's attention. "We will take the advice of the Assembly, but it will be taken as only that—*advice.*"

"We cannot afford to risk your life—" Suri argues.

"My life is equal to any of theirs." Xaden gestures toward us.

Brennan's gaze meets mine, then widens.

Each head in the room turns toward us, and I fight the instinct to retreat as almost every set of eyes narrows on me.

Who do they see? Lilith's daughter? Or Brennan's sister?

I lift my chin because I'm both...and I feel like neither.

"Not every life," Suri says as she looks straight at me. *Ouch.* "How could you have stood there and let her overhear the conversation of the Assembly?"

"If you didn't want her to hear, you should have closed the door," Bodhi responds, stepping into the room.

"She cannot be trusted!" Anger might color her cheeks, but that's fear in Suri's eyes.

"Xaden has already taken responsibility for her." Imogen sidesteps, moving

slightly closer to me. "As brutal of a custom as it may be."

My gaze whips to meet Xaden's. What the hell is she talking about?

"I still don't understand that particular decision," Hawk Nose adds.

"Decision was simple. She's worth a dozen of me," Xaden says, and my breath catches at the intensity in his eyes. If I didn't know better, I'd think he means it. "And I'm not talking about her signet. I would have told her everything discussed here anyway, so an open door is a moot point."

A spark of hope flares to life in my chest. Maybe he really is done keeping secrets.

"She's General Sorrengail's daughter," Battle-Ax points out, frustration clear in her voice.

"And I'm the general's son," Brennan argues.

"And you've more than proven your loyalty over the last six years!" Battle-Ax shouts. "She hasn't!"

Anger heats my neck, flushing up to my face. They're talking about me like I'm not even here.

"She fought at our side at Resson." Bodhi tenses as his voice rises as well.

"She should be confined." Suri's face turns downright ruddy as she pushes away from the table and stands, her gaze jumping to the silver half of my hair that forms my coronet braid. "She can ruin us all with what she knows."

"Agreed." Hawk Nose joins her with palpable loathing aimed in my direction. "She's too dangerous not to keep prisoner."

The muscles of my stomach tense, but I mask my expression like I've seen Xaden do countless times and leave my hands at my sides, close to my sheathed daggers. My body might be frail, my joints undependable, but my aim with a knife is lethally accurate. There's no fucking way I'm going to let them cage me here.

I scan each of the Assembly members, assessing which is the biggest threat.

Brennan rises to his full height. "Knowing that she's bonded to Tairn, whose bonds get deeper with each rider and whose previous bond was already so strong that Naolin's death nearly killed him? Knowing we fear he'll die if she does now? That because of that, Riorson's life is tied to hers?" He nods toward Xaden.

Disappointment tastes bitter on my tongue. Is that all I am to him? Xaden's weakness?

"I alone am responsible for Violet." Xaden's voice lowers in pure malice. "And if I'm not enough, there are not one but *two* dragons who have already vouched for her integrity."

Enough is enough.

"*She* is standing right here," I snap, and an unflattering amount of satisfaction courses through me at the number of jaws that drop in front of me. "So stop talking *about* me and try talking *to* me."

A corner of Xaden's mouth rises, and the pride that flashes through his expression is unmistakable.

"What do you want from me?" I ask them, striding into the room. "Want me to walk Parapet and prove my bravery? Done. Want me to betray my kingdom by defending Poromish citizens? Done. Want me to keep his secrets?" I gesture toward Xaden with my left hand. "Done. I kept *every* secret."

"Except the one that mattered." Suri lifts an eyebrow. "We all know how you ended up in Athebyne."

Guilt clogs my throat.

"That was not—" Xaden starts, rising from his chair.

"Through no fault of her own." The man nearest us with the gray beard—Felix—stands, blocking Suri from my sight as he turns toward her. "No first-year could withstand a memory reader, especially one considered a friend." He pivots to face me. "But you have to know that you have enemies at Basgiath, now. Should you return, you must know that Aetos will not be among your friends. He will do everything he can to kill you for what you've seen."

"I know." The words are thick on my tongue.

Felix nods.

"We are done here," Xaden says, his gaze catching and holding Suri's and then Hawk Nose's, their shoulders drooping in defeat.

"I'll expect an update on Zolya in the morning," Brennan says. "Consider this Assembly meeting adjourned."

The council members push in their chairs and file past the three of us once we step out of the way. Imogen and Bodhi stay at my sides.

Eventually, Xaden starts to walk out but pauses in front of me. "We'll head up to the valley. Meet us when you're done."

"I'll go with you now." This is the last place on the Continent I want to be left behind.

"Stay and talk to your brother," he says quietly. "Who knows when you'll get another chance."

I glance past Bodhi to see Brennan standing in the middle of the room, waiting for me. Brennan, who always took the time to help wrap my knees when I was a child. Brennan, who wrote the book that helped me through my first year. Brennan...who I've missed for six years.

"Go," Xaden urges. "We won't leave without you, and we're not going to let the Assembly dictate what we do. The eight of us will decide what to do together." He gives me a long look that makes my traitorous heart clench, and then he walks away. Bodhi and Imogen follow.

Which leaves me to turn toward my brother, armed with six years of questions.

It is the valley above Riorson House, heated by natural thermal energy, that is its greatest asset. For there lie the original hatching grounds of the Dubhmadinn Line, from which two of the greatest dragons of our time—Codagh and Tairn—descend.

—COLONEL KAORI'S FIELD GUIDE TO DRAGONKIND



CHAPTER TWO

I shut the tall door behind me before moving toward Brennan. *This* meeting is definitely not open to the public.

“Did you eat enough?” He rests on the edge of the table like he used to when we were kids. The move is so...him, and as for the question, I ignore it entirely.

“So this is where you’ve been the last six years?” My voice threatens to break. I’m so glad he’s alive. That’s all that should matter. But I can’t forget the years he’s let me grieve for him, either.

“Yes.” His shoulders drop. “I’m sorry I let you believe I was dead. It was the only way.”

Cue awkward silence. What am I supposed to say to that? *It’s all right, but not really?* There’s so much I want to say to him, so much I need to ask, but suddenly the years we’ve been apart feel...defining. Neither of us is the same person.

“You look different.” He smiles, but it’s sad. “Not in a bad way. Just...different.”

“I was fourteen the last time you saw me.” I grimace. “I think I’m still the same height. I used to hope I’d get a last-minute growth spurt, but alas, here I am.”

“Here you are.” He nods slowly. “I always pictured you in scribe colors, but you look good in black. Gods...” He sighs. “The relief I felt when I heard you’d survived Threshing is indescribable.”

"You knew?" My eyes flare. He has sources at Basgiath.

"I knew. And then Riorson showed up with you stabbed and dying." He looks away and clears his throat, then takes a deep breath before continuing. "I'm so damned glad you're healed, that you've made it through your first year." The relief in his eyes takes some of the sting out of my anger.

"Mira helped." That's putting it mildly.

"The armor?" he guesses correctly. There's something to be said for the delicate weight of my dragon-scale armor under my flight leathers.

I nod. "She had it made. She gave me your book, too. The one you wrote for her."

"I hope it was useful."

I think back to the naive, sheltered girl who crossed the parapet, and everything she survived in the crucible of her first year to forge me into the woman I am now. "It was."

His smile falters, and he glances out the window. "How is Mira?"

"Speaking from experience, I'm sure she'd be a lot better if she knew you're alive." There's no point mincing words if we only have a short time.

He flinches. "Guess I deserve that."

And I guess that answers *that* question. Mira doesn't know. But she should.

"How exactly *are* you alive, Brennan?" I shift my weight to one leg, crossing my arms. "Where is Marbh? What are you doing here? Why didn't you come home?"

"One at a time." He holds up his hands like he's under attack, and I glimpse a rune-shaped scar on his palm before he grips the edge of the table. "Naolin... He was —" His jaw flexes.

"Tairn's previous rider," I suggest slowly, wondering if he was more than that to Brennan. "He was the siphon who died trying to save you, according to Professor Kaori." My heart sinks. "*I'm sorry your rider died saving my brother.*"

"*We will no longer speak of the one who came before.*" Tairn's voice is rough.

A corner of Brennan's mouth lifts. "I miss Kaori. He's a good man." He sighs, lifting his head to hold my gaze. "Naolin didn't fail, but it cost him *everything*. I woke up on a cliffside not far from here. Marbh had been wounded, but he was alive, too, and the other dragons..." His amber-colored eyes meet mine. "There are other dragons here, and they saved us, hid us in the network of caves within the valley, then later with the civilians who survived the city being scorched."

My brow furrows as I try to make sense of his words. "Where is Marbh now?"

"He's been in the valley with the others for days, keeping watch on your Andarna with Tairn, Sgaeyl, and — since you woke up — Riorson."

"That's where Xaden has been? Guarding Andarna?" That makes me a little