

THORNS and FLAMES

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*“You think this is where it ends,
but endings are only the beginning
of what was already set in motion.”*

For my grandmother,
Vera,
who always knew that my words
weren't meant to stay silent.

-DISCLAIMER-

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All names, places, events and magic contained within this book are born of imagination and exist solely as part of a constructed world.

The laws of this world do not exist beyond the pages you are currently holding. Dragons do not exist, shadows cannot think and magic... is only a story.

At least, that is what they say.

Kingdom of Baelor



CHAPTER ONE

Vaera

I wake to the sound of wind rushing through the trees, the leaves dancing against one another before slowly settling into silence. A shadow darts past my bedroom window. A familiar, comforting sensation fills my body and brings a smile to my face.

Vaja.

I open my eyes slowly, allowing them to adjust to the sunlight little by little. I watch as sunbeams illuminate my room like thousands of tiny dancers.

I sit up and stretch out, preparing every muscle for the start of the day. Only then do I notice how messy my room looks. All my pillows are stacked on top of one another. I often wonder how I manage to sleep comfortably on a pile like that.

On the other side of the room several mismatched shoes are scattered across the floor. I'm fairly certain there are more left shoes than right ones.

On the wall various clothes hang from hooks, mostly the clothes I wear when helping father work the land. I force myself to stand and shuffle toward the clothes hanging on the wall, considering what to wear. The wooden floor creaks beneath my feet. I take a pair of black trousers and a shirt in a similar color from the hooks. After finding a matching pair of leather boots, I pull them on.

I study my reflection in the mirror and wonder what kind of dreams I must have had last night. My hair looks as though I've been hiking through a storm. I run my fingers through it, working out the knots. My black hair has grown so long it nearly reaches the waistband of my trousers. I tie it back into a ponytail so it won't bother me today.

I step closer to the mirror and notice my blue eyes seem even lighter in the sunlight. Father often tells me how similar my eyes are to mother's. A feeling of longing rises within me, making me feel slightly nauseous.

I step through my bedroom door, which lets out a hellish creak and immediately find myself in the kitchen. Father is no longer here. He is probably already working in the fields.

On days like today, father is at his least pleasant because we have to take our vegetables to the market. He's not a man of many words and doesn't enjoy being around people. He much prefers

staying on the farm, where he can do what he loves most: growing vegetables in peace and quiet.

According to the villagers, I take after my father in character and my mother in appearance. I cannot judge the latter, since my mother left when I was three years old. Father never told me the full story and probably never will. We do not speak of her. It's a subject that causes him too much pain and I don't want to make him relive that loss over and over again by bringing it up.

I take a bite of the jam sandwich father has left for me on the table. My gaze drifts to the beautiful flower he has placed in a small vase beside my plate. It is a deep red poppy. Poppies do not survive long after being picked. To me, it has always felt a little like killing a flower when it is plucked. Despite this thought, I accept it as a loving gesture from my father.

I take the poppy in my hand, and it feels as though it briefly comes back to life.

"I'll take good care of your family," I promise the flower as I place it back in the vase.

I shake my head.

"Good thing no one hears me talking to flowers, or they'd have proof that I really am crazy."

I laugh while stepping outside.

I walk through the front door and close my eyes as the sun warms my skin. I breathe deeply through my nose and take in the scent of the flowers currently in bloom. I catch the earthy

fragrance of the trees that encircle our garden, forming a natural wall around it.

I let out a content sigh.

My gaze immediately falls on the shutters beside the windows of our house. Father has painted them a fresh, cheerful green once more. The kind of green that perfectly captures spring. A warm feeling fills me every time I look at our little house. The small white cottage with its green shutters isn't large and not everyone would want to live here, but it is home.

My home, where I was born and raised.

Where my father taught me how to keep nature in balance.

I walk along the path leading from our house to the horse stables. Thousands of flowers in every color imaginable line the path. I let my hand glide as gently as possible through the blossoms and breathe in the scent they release. I smile at them, as though they know I am wishing them a good morning.

For a moment, it feels as though the flowers bloom more vibrantly.

Both stables are empty and the cart is already gone. Father has taken Rubia to pull the cart to the fields so he can load it for the market.

I notice that Gambler has once again opened his stall by himself and is grazing in the meadow at the edge of the forest.

Gambler has always been a stubborn stallion. He has a heart of gold, but he insists on doing things his own way. I never have to

search for long whenever I lose track of him for the umpteenth time. Whenever possible, he follows Vaja wherever she goes.

CHAPTER TWO

Vaera

I walk through the gate which Gambler has mysteriously opened. The meadow is enclosed by a wooden fence, with loose planks hanging here and there. On one side of the meadow lie our fields, where the vegetables are grown. On the other side, our land is bordered by the King's Forest. It's a vast forest that separates our province from the neighboring one and the domain of the High Court.

The warmth I felt when I woke up this morning grows stronger with every step I take. The closer I get to Vaja, the more energy flows through my body. I open all my senses and let the warmth that flows between Vaja and me dance through my body.

I admire her black scales and the way they are covered in a blue

glow, intensified by the sunlight.

She lies peacefully asleep beside the spot where Gambler is grazing. Vaja's long tail is draped around her body and her long neck curves so that her snout rests against her belly. In this position, the horns on her head protect her most vulnerable parts from danger. Just like the spines that run from her head to the tip of her tail.

When Gambler notices me, Vaja wakes as well. My heart leaps when Vaja's beautiful golden eyes meet mine. She stands up, towering over our house. In fact, she is probably twice its height. She stretches her wings and then folds them so they rest against her sides. What a beautiful creature, this dragon of mine.

Vaja was born five years ago from an egg my mother gave me. The only thing father is willing to tell me is that my mother gave me this egg on the day she left. Father thought it was some kind of toy until it changed color twelve years later.

Vaja hatched from the egg on my fifteenth birthday and was then as big as a puppy. Because dragons are kept only by nobility or royal blood, father believed we should give her to the duke or our queen.

The moment father tried to take Vaja away, something inside me broke loose. I was unconscious for two days. I don't remember exactly what happened then, but since that day it seemed as though flowers and trees had grown across our land where there'd been none before.

The day I awoke, I could somehow hear Vaja's voice in my head and she could hear mine as well. Father told me that during the two days I slept, Vaja never left my side. He was only allowed to come close to take care of me.

After that, father decided not to try to capture her again, because he did not know whether I would survive or not.

Because Vaja wanted to protect me so strongly, my father decided that we would take care of her and keep her a secret.

At first, it wasn't difficult to hide her. The villagers never came as far as our farm and Vaja wasn't very large.

Soon, however, we noticed that this would not remain easy, as she grew bigger and bigger every month. She usually stayed in the meadow or at the edge of the forest, where she could remain out of sight.

For the past few weeks, it seems as though Vaja has stopped growing. According to the information I've gathered from various books, she would now be fully grown and about one or two feet taller than the average dragon.

I tumble out of my thoughts when a furry muzzle brushes against my hand. Gambler nudges me gently and I rub him under his chin and along his neck.

Gambler's black mane contrasts with his light brown coat. His winter coat has slowly disappeared, his strong muscles visible again.

Gambler was born shortly before Vaja hatched, so they grew up together. To an outsider, it must be a very strange sight to see a

giant dragon playing with a horse, but in my life, it is something that makes me truly happy.

Vaja comes closer and lowers her head. I reach her snout with my hand. A warm sensation slides down my spine and Vaja's voice enters my head.

'Good morning, little one.'

'Good morning,' I look up at her and smile, *'I heard that you went flying this morning. How did it go?'*

'If you want to ask me if a human saw me? No, they did not,' Vaja's facial expression goes from happy to irritated in one second.

I immediately feel guilty for asking such an enormous, beautiful, magical creature to keep herself hidden from the outside world. Vaja must've felt the guilt creeping up my body and softly bumps my forehead with her snout

'No one saw me. I'm being very careful. Our secret is safe.'

With Gambler and Vaja following me I walk back toward the stables, where I find Gambler's gear. I put the saddle on his back and make sure it's tight enough. I don't want to end up on the ground after a few strides. I take his bridle in my hands, but decide to leave the bit out. That way it's more comfortable for him and I feel more free.

Vaja's excitement flows through our bond. Since they were little, Vaja and Gambler used to race each other to see who's faster. When Vaja was smaller, it was exciting to see who would win but now that she's as tall as a large tree, he doesn't stand a

chance.

Since I broke Gambler in, we often race through the fields and today was no different. I put my left foot in the stirrup, pull myself up, swing my other leg over Gambler's back and sit down as gently as I possibly can.

Vaja, Gambler and I make it to the large field between our house and the field where my father is working.

'You have to wait until we've reached that tree over there and then you can start. Otherwise we never stand a chance,' I say.

She gives me a judging look.

'You two would not even stand a chance if that large goat underneath your bum got wings.'

It's like Gambler got the message. He tenses beneath me, like he's ready to fight. I give him a small squeeze with my calves and he takes off. Without any transition he goes from standing still to a gallop. A giant smile forms on my face when the wind rushes through my hair. Gambler goes faster with every heartbeat as we pass the tree I mentioned to Vaja.

I look over my shoulder and see how she gets ready to launch herself into the air. She dips slightly through her legs and plunges into the air with a few strong wingbeats. Her scales shine bright blue when the sun hits her. She's beautiful. Sometimes I think the gods made her on one of their better days.

It doesn't take long for her to fly directly above us. She adjusts her pace to stay with us for a few seconds before taking off to

the other side of the field in just a few wingbeats. When she reaches the end of the field she makes a steep turn upwards and flies toward the sky. It doesn't take long before she's out of sight. Gambler still pours every ounce of energy into galloping toward the treeline.

'Hi there,' a second later Vaja flies toward us like she's going to grab me out of the saddle.

She lifts herself up and one of her talons slightly touches my head.

'That was way too close!' I shout down our bond.

I watch her turn around and for a second it looks like she's laughing at me.

Gambler slows down as we reach the treeline. Vaja stays close, but flies higher up so she doesn't crash into the trees.

Gambler and I follow the path that leads to where father is loading all the vegetables he wants to sell onto the carriage.

Gambler halts close by. I take my feet out of the stirrups and lower myself to the ground. Gambler walks toward Rubia and starts grazing. Vaja lands a few feet away and walks over to the horses where she lays down in the shade of the trees. Vaja shoots me an angry glare while I wonder if all dragons are this lazy or if it's just this one. It seems like I can't quite keep my thoughts to myself instead of sending them through our bond. I send her a wink. She rolls her eyes before looking the other way.

"There you are! It took you long enough to get here and offer me some help," my father says with a smile while I walk toward him.

"I'm sorry, I was busy..."

"Busy playing with your two companions over there?" he says, interrupting me halfway through my sentence while nodding toward Vaja and Gambler.

"It's not playing. It's keeping them active and healthy," I say with a knowing smile.

I help load the vegetables onto the carriage until it almost overflows.

"Are you looking forward to going to the village?" I ask my father while we're walking toward the horses.

"I dislike it as much as you do my dear. We're lucky that it's just once a week that those madmen host a market. Besides, sometimes it's good to hear what's going on far away from us," he says.

He leads both horses to the carriage and fastens the straps around their chest. When everything's checked we start our trip to the village.

CHAPTER THREE

Vaera

As we make our way to the village, which takes us approximately one and a half hours to get there, I think about Vaja and how I try to keep her hidden in the safety of our home. Dragons are not supposed to stay hidden. They're supposed to flourish amongst each other and live a royal life around the castles of the leaders of our provinces, but Vaja always tells me that she would rather spend a hundred years by my side than spend one day without me.

I've always wondered where all of her loyalty comes from and why she would dedicate herself to me, a simple farmer's daughter.

She didn't grow up like the other dragons who live in our kingdom. Those are laid in the crib of their freshly born, bonded human before they hatch. Before their human turns one year old, they crawl out of their egg and grow up together. That way, the bond between a dragon and its rider grows incredibly strong. Around the age of twenty, a dragon is fully grown and can carry its rider with ease.

But for Vaja, it was different. My mother left her egg with us when I was three years old. For twelve years it seemed like her egg did not hold any life inside, but when I turned fifteen something changed. Her egg changed colors from a light green to the darkest of black with a blue glow and started warming up. A few hours later, cracks started to show and Vaja slowly made her way out of her egg.

Unlike the information I got out of books, Vaja grew a lot faster than the other dragons. At the age of five, Vaja was fully grown. The bond between Vaja and me turned incredibly strong since I lost consciousness for a few days. It feels like she's a part of me that was missing. When I'm around her I feel whole, I feel complete. As long as she's close by, we can talk to each other through the bond.

Lately she spends most of her time trying to convince me to ride her. My father even managed to make a saddle that fits her perfectly, but for some reason I don't dare to try to just sit in the saddle. What if I'm not able to ride her? What if I insult her

by disturbing her during flying? What if I'm not worthy of even laying a hand on her beautiful body?

I snap back to reality and realize I've been stuck in my thoughts for the entire ride to the village.

We enter the village by riding through the old, wooden entrance gate. The weekly market is as busy as usual.

The main street is lined with stalls and carriages with all sorts of merchandise, from farmers to gold smiths.

A fresh, soft scent catches my attention. On my left is a stall with the most beautiful flowers in all sorts of colors. I jump off the carriage and take a bag of potatoes with me. My eye gets caught by a small rosebush with at least ten roses ready to bloom. Its roots are helplessly looking for a way to dig into the ground. A sad, pitiful feeling tightens my chest and I decide to exchange the bag of potatoes for the rosebush.

"You have an eye for nature's beauty," the old lady behind the stall says to me with a friendly smile.

I smile back at her and return to the spot my father chose to stall our vegetables. I help him unload our goods and we start trading all kinds of food for our vegetables.

A group of four girls walk past our stall watching me with disgusted eyes. I hear them whisper to each other. By the mean laughs on their faces I can make up that they weren't complimenting me. A blend of soft anger and quiet sadness creeps up my neck diverting my gaze toward the rosebush. I

swear I count ten more blossoms coming alive on the bush, it must be a very strong one.

I turn my face back to the crowd and see the girls walking away. I've never really known why no one liked me or why I don't have any friends, except for one person. I just assume it's because I'm a farmer's daughter who lives isolated on the edge of our province.

A large shadow passes over the marketplace and everyone looks up in amazement. A beautiful dragon flies overhead and a ticklish sensation fills my belly.

It's not Vaja. This one has a reddish glow covering its black scales and seems to be a little smaller than her.

I recognize the guy riding this beautiful winged creature. It's Darius, the son of the Duke of Nerija. Darius is known to be a townsman. He loves to be around his people and is appreciated by everyone. I must admit, he has something likeable about him.

Darius started visiting our stall on the market since we both were children and he still does so every week unless he has to attend some sort of meeting where the presence of the duke's son can't be missed.

Darius and I grew a friendship throughout his weekly visits. We created the habit of wandering around the village and talking about everything. Everything, except about the fact that I keep a huge dragon hidden for the whole world.

Zolas, Darius' dragon, lands in the middle of the town square, barely missing the roofs that cover the Duke's castle with its wings. Zolas sinks through his legs and Darius jumps down onto the ground. He taps the dragon's leg to thank him for the ride and it launches back into the sky again.

Darius makes his way toward the main street, his gaze enjoying all the fine merchandise of the market.

Many merchants try to bribe the duke's son with little tasters of their goods. Darius refuses the gestures of kindness with a friendly smile and walks straight over to our stall.

"Hi there," he says with the most friendly look on his face.

"That was quite an entrance, almost hitting your own house and half of the stalls on the market." I say while arranging the vegetables.

"Zolas knows what he's doing and besides, I couldn't resist visiting a particular pretty girl who trades the tastiest vegetables," Darius laughs warmly.

Is he flirting? No, a man doesn't flirt by talking about vegetables. I roll my eyes at him and load some more vegetables on the cart.

"What? Does it make you feel uncomfortable to be called pretty? Or is it that I call your vegetables the most tasty of the whole province?" He says while picking out some carrots and apples.

I take an apple before he can grab it and throw it toward his

head. He catches it faster than I can follow and looks from me to the apple in his hand before taking a bite.

"It's not because you're the duke's son that you don't have to trade something for our goods," I say teasingly.

"Walk with me and I'll give you something worth trading for," Darius says.

I look over to my father who gives me an approving look. Before we walk away Darius puts a satchel with gold coins in my father's hands and gives him a wink. I bump him in the side with my elbow.

"Now it looks like you've purchased me from my father, I'm not that kind of girl you know."

He raises one of his thick eyebrows and gives me a look I can't quite decipher.

We continue walking side by side and pass the four girls that laughed at me earlier. Their faces turn all different shades of green while we walk past them. I can't say they're wrong for wanting Darius' attention. He's a handsome, tall guy with short dark hair and blue eyes. I glance a look at his body and see that he is more toned than last time I saw him. He's wearing black pants and leather boots, combined with a black shirt that accentuates his abs through his shirt, making it hard to look away from his muscular arms.

Darius leads the way to a small field cornered by four large oak trees. In the middle of the field is a pond filled with beautiful

fish. I crouch down next to the pond and lower my hand, almost touching the water. I'm amazed by how the fish circle each other without touching. Flowing in their own rhythm, without disturbing any balance.

"You have such a special way of connecting with nature. It's almost as if you can talk to them without saying a word," Darius says from the other side of the pond while watching me.

"Nature never ceases to amaze me. Everything is so balanced and peaceful. It's a lot different from how we behave as humans," I say looking up into his sparkly blue eyes. For a moment it seems like our gazes are locked and it's almost impossible to break loose from each other.

I stand up again and walk over to the bench on the side of the field. Darius follows me and sits down next to me, brushing my leg with his knee.

"I have to tell you something," he says more seriously than ever. I turn my body toward him and throw my hair over my shoulder to show I'm all ears.

"You know that every generation of dragonriders is obligated to join the Combat College, right? In a few weeks they will open the gates to a new load of trainees and I'll have to go as well."

I'm not surprised by the news he tells me, but for some reason a small ache forms in my chest, almost like something gets cut loose.

"That means that once I've entered the College, we will probably never see each other again," Darius turns his body toward me.

"Unless you're granted leave to come and visit your province, right?" I ask with more sadness than I intend to.

"True, but that'll just be for a few days and once our training is completed, they'll send me outside of the kingdom to help protect the Outside Lands," Darius says, escaping from my gaze. I figure out that what he's trying to say is that in a few months he'll leave and he'll never come back because he'll eventually die protecting other lands. I lay my hand on his arm and a warm sensation fills me.

"I dislike it as much as you do, but it's your duty. And I'm sure you'll kick some asses together with Zolas. Seeing how much you've trained the last couple of weeks, your opponents would be wise to think twice before crossing paths with you."

"You're right. Anyone would be crazy to even dare to look in my direction!" He lifts his arm and flexes his biceps. I roll my eyes again and laugh.

Darius takes a small, linen pouch out of one of the pockets of his pants.

"This is for you," he says before dropping it in my hands.

"Oh? What is it?" I mumble while taking in every detail of the little bag. It seems like it's handwoven, but this craftsmanship doesn't quite look like how we Nerijians would make it.

"The real gift is inside, you dummy. Go on and open it!" he

says, softly bumping his elbow in my side.

I look up at him and almost feel the excitement that is dancing in his eyes. I slowly undo the string that holds the top of the pouch closed. I glance a look inside and pour what's inside onto the palm of my hand.

Fifteen small, round seeds fill my hand. I have never seen this kind of seed before. They have a bright, yellow color. Almost as if the sun itself was poured into them.

"Oh my...", I stammer, "They're beautiful! They must've been produced somewhere else?"

"I bought them at a market in Rivla. My parents and I had to fly there for a first meeting at Combat College. Afterwards we went to the market and I saw a stall with the most beautiful, golden flowers. They reminded me of you, of your warmth and I thought it would be a nice parting gift. That way you can think of me every time they bloom." he says with a painful smile.

I yank him toward me and pull him into a hug.

"That is the sweetest gift anyone has ever given me. I will think of you in so many ways. I promise you I'll pray to Syllas everyday for your safety."

Darius looks down at me with a caring gaze and plants a kiss on my forehead.

"I'll always carry you in my heart, Vaera."

CHAPTER FOUR

Vaera

The smell of flowers surrounds me while I'm walking through the garden on the way to my father. It is the same day as every other day where nothing special happens, luckily. I'm not one for trying new things, let alone going on big adventures. I thrive best where I know my whereabouts and who I can rely on. I take in all the beauty that nature gifted me and stroll through our garden.

My father is already busy working on the fields, like always. Since my mother left, he prefers to hide himself among the vegetables on our land. Since then, he always kept more to himself.

Our bond is good and very important to me. I know he would go to the ends of the world for me, but sometimes it feels like I lost a part of my father along with my mother. And for him, I think he lost a piece of himself when he saw my mother walking away and never to return.

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Vaja is nowhere to be seen when I reach the field where she usually is, together with Gambler. I suppose she went hunting and hasn't returned yet.

The tall trees surrounding our grounds look very calm and make a soft, whistling sound while the sun dances through the bright green leaves. Its soft touch on my skin, like an embrace of warmth.

I walk over to my father and place the flower that I picked along the way behind his ear and give him a peck on one of his dirty, sweaty cheeks.

"Busy as usual?" I ask.

"Of course my dear. What else am I supposed to do?" He says while smiling at me.

"Well, there are so many things you could do. Like... take a day of rest? You work so much," I tilt my head and raise an eyebrow.

"The field is not going to maintain itself, is it?" He says while placing his hand on my right shoulder.

“No, but I could help you. That would simplify a lot for you.” I say while plucking some weed from in between the radishes so that the sun can reach their pinkish bellies.

My father places both hands on my shoulders and a pitiful look crosses his face. My gaze diverts to the sky for just a moment. The blue sky made space for dark clouds.

“You’ve done enough already. Way more than you’ll ever understand.” My brows furrow and confusion strangles my mind.

My father always says things like this, like I somehow had a hand in the flourishing of our fields many years ago.

I remember that when my mother left, our harvest grew exponentially. The same happened when Vaja hatched and my father tried to take her away, which caused my unconsciousness for two days.

I’ve always believed it was because my father spent more time on the fields back then, to cope with the emotions he felt. But somehow my father keeps thanking me for it.

“Never mind, my dear,” he says while waving his hand like he wants to scare away the subject of our conversation. He must’ve noticed the confused look on my face.

“Sometimes you’re a funny old man, you know that right?” I ask jokingly.

“Old? You should watch what you say, little lady,” a mischievous look sparks in his eyes.

Before I can anticipate or even prepare myself for what's coming, a smudge of dirt covers my shirt. My father starts laughing loudly, his hands covered in mud. I reach down to the ground and grab a handful of mud and leaves. Ready to throw the mess back at him, a large shadow covers the ground underneath us.

I look up and to my surprise it's not Vaja who flies overhead but a slightly smaller dragon. The dragon is flanked by four others, all a similar size but one.

My hands shake and my knees weaken. The mud that I was holding falls onto the ground. The color drains from my face. Where is Vaja? Is she safe? What is happening? Who are they?

All five dragons circle in the sky above and start descending toward us one by one. Each of them lands gracefully on the field in front of us and places themselves in a V-shaped set up.

When the last dragon descends, a knot forms in my stomach. I recognize the dragon with the red glow, it's Zolas. A combination of warmth and guilt grows inside as its rider comes into sight. I recognize his muscled silhouette along with his piercing blue eyes, even though he's too far away to even be able to make up the color of them.

My whole body tenses up while the five dragons dip their shoulders and their riders dismount. The riders stride toward my father and me, keeping the V-shaped arrangement while they're closing in on us.

In front walks a tall woman with hair as white as snow, plaited into a crown on her head. She's wearing black riding gear with golden details and a golden breastplate which looks to be made of tiny dragon scales. She is the queen of our kingdom.

She's flanked by two men, one looks a few years older than me and the other one, who I immediately recognize as Darius' father, our duke.

The young man has light brown, shoulder length hair. Half of it up in a bun. His perfectly shaped jawline is highlighted by the sun and reflects the stern look on his face. He is very tall, at least a head taller than me. His shirt accentuates his immensely muscular arms and body. He must be our prince.

Behind the prince walks Darius. His usually friendly face turned into an emotionless facade. He's wearing his usual black outfit, only this time he is wearing two silver swords at his back. I've never seen him carrying weapons before.

As the group comes closer, my father moves in front of me as if he wants to protect me.

"Father, what do we do?" I ask him while my hands tremble.

"We listen to what they have to say, let me handle this," he says with a sharp edge to his voice.

I try to steady myself, but slightly lose balance.

The group halts about five feet of distance from where my father and I stand. They move from the V-shaped set up to a