

## **The Dragon Queen**

Keara hated the color red. It has been her favorite color, when she was little. It was her mother's signature color, and Keara wanted to be exactly like her mother. When she was nine, red stopped being mother and became something twisted: scarlet speckled on floorboards, dripping from an armor-clad man's sword. He did not have the heart to kill a screaming, sobbing child.

He should have, Keara thought to herself. The very same man now lifted a crown of rubies, the same red as Keara's shimmering dress and the paint on her lips. He was to place it on her head, not his son's. His son, of course, did not mind. He was never meant to be a king. Not the way Keara was meant to be a queen. Keara winked at Adonis, knowing it would only cause whispers in court. But the young prince understood the message. He slipped through the crowds easily for the son of a king, but then, Adonis was more fit to be a spy than a ruler.

Keara, on the other hand, had a way of being noticed even when she wanted desperately not to be. She had only been able to escape her home for the meadow because everyone who lived there was dead or missing. Keara's father, loyal as could be, had not been seen for months. Her mother had died right with the baby in her belly, an infant Keara decided would be green to complement her red. But the time of hope and longing for a sibling that would ever get a chance to be born faded.

It was perhaps for Keara's noticeable nature that she caught the attention of a dragon in Talon's Meadow. It was a place other children were taught to fear and, consequently, hate, but Keara remembered a visit with her mother, back when she was three or so and less apt to talk and get them all caught. The

dragons of Talon's Meadow, and all others, were not to be interacted with. It went against the very principles of the Kingdom—the royal line of succession was determined by who slayed a dragon first. It was an old, brutal tradition. But the metal dragons never resented Keara's mother for her country—she was a Healer, after all, who cared for their young.

And when the old and wise dragon known only as Mother heard the slightest rustling of leaves, she noticed. She rose from her cave, hovering over the ground as to not wake her family, and spread her wings so that she could fly and follow the sound. She had poor eyesight, from age, but you could see the shine of black hair against the green and white of the meadow. The hair belonged to a girl who was desperately trying to tear a red ribbon from her head, sobbing all the while. The Mother Dragon landed softly, and she recognized the girl immediately, by her face and lack of fear. She was the daughter of a human healer who risked her life to treat the dragons. She had done everything she could to revive one of the Dragon mother's grandchildren, shot by a poisoned arrow. She hadn't succeeded, but the Elder of the dragons would be eternally grateful to the Healer and her husband, who kept the meadow barricaded by systematic felling of trees.

So it was that Keara was raised by dragons. It was strange, what living among dragons did to a human girl. She did not fear heights, of course, and her nature became fundamentally altered. She felt for these broken creatures who took her in. She got used to speaking through actions, emotions, and clicks of her tongue rather than words, but she still spoke aloud. Her eyes sharpened, turned into a piercing green like her Dragon mother's. See through love green. It was among the dragons that she formed the plan.

She was strong and quick and clever but moral, and she had justice in mind. She would bring the corpse of an already dying dragon to the palace, and she would become Queen. She would not be like the former monarchs, though, who hunted dragons for sport to practice for the crowning year—when the former ruler would give up their throne. She would not be like the current King, who killed families for showing dragons kindness, who resented his own son for being his compassionate self.

Of course, Keara had succeeded, from the intelligence and stubbornness of a traumatized girl who was raised by dragons, so the king, dressed in the scales of the dragon he had killed, placed the Ruby Crown upon her head, smiling.

His smile disappeared when the statue behind her crumbled. It was from the Old Age, as Keara had taken to calling it. The statue showed the first Dragonslayer king, sword raised mid-swing.

The Murderer King—or former King, since Keara was Queen—looked up, knowing the arrow came from above. The statue was ancient, and if shot from above by, say, a skilled marksman atop a dragon, it was bound to crumble.

Keara, on the other hand, did not flinch. She waved at Adonis and her dragon mother in the sky before smiling gently at the audience. She had no personal qualms with them, only their practices.

“The age of the Dragonslayers is over. I will rule as kindly as bravely as I can, but know this: if any citizens slaughter or hurt a dragon, they will face the wrath of the Dragon Queen.”