

The Dragon Prince

[Primus]

The wench was tied to the wagon in the exact location I had requested. They had even trussed her up, making sure she was tied securely so that she would have no chance of escaping. Good. I guess I do not have to take back my good favor from the village for something as stupid as misunderstanding my directions. I' d rather not waste a valuable resource just to prove that I can as a way to save face.

The town of Crimson provides my castle with the fine fabrics and spices we need to run a household worthy of a Dragon Prince. Without them, I' d have to go further afield to find the goods that I need, and it would be... inconvenient.

Reaching down with one of my foreclaws, I scoop up the wagon and take flight once again. I can hear the wench screaming, which is how I know she is still alive. Flight can be terrifying for the wingless. I expect a few screams of surprise, but she doesn' t stop. She just keeps going, a long loud bellow that resonates and scratches the inside of my eardrums in the most peculiarly painful and irritating way. I take a few deep breaths to steady my nerves, hoping that she would stop. But she doesn' t, not even to catch her breath.

Thankfully it is a short journey from where I received her to the castle gates. If I had to listen to her scream for much longer, I' d have thrown her into the sea and let my brother deal with her. I didn' t even need a maid this badly. I only asked for her to give me a reason to be benevolent. I would have never let the town starve. The problem was that they asked me directly, using formal channels. Unfortunately, that meant that all of the kingdom knew of their request for aid, and as they were under my care and protection, that left me no choice. A dragon always keeps his word but never does a favor. There is always a cost.

Which is how I got stuck with this whining, sniveling, shrew of a woman.

I toss the wagon a bit harder than I had intended and it goes skidding, crashing into the wall. I hear a loud smack, and then silence.

Finally, blessed silence.

As I reshape myself, I place a finger in my left ear to stop the ringing. Wow, that woman could yell.

My scales retract into fine armor. My green hair is braided back and hidden behind my horned helm. Standing taller than most human men, I tower over the wagon, looking down at the frail figure tied to its bed. The landing, or her fear, has knocked her unconscious and so she doesn't notice me standing there, staring down at her. Using one of my razor-sharp nails, I cut the ropes that bind her, watching as the color returns to her hands and feet. She has the most beautiful brown skin, dark like mahogany or rich loamy soil. Her hair, a dandelion fluff fans out around her in a downy pillow that reaches her waist. Her features are strong and sharp, pronounced in the way of one who has not had a decent meal in years. Despite her gaunt frame, she still has full lips, like ripe fruit, her body gently curved beneath long loose, simple skirts that were clean but spare.

I wonder what color her eyes are.

As my gaze wanders back to her face I find out the answer as two golden brown eyes, the color of wheat, open wide with fear and shock. She begins to open her mouth...

"SILENCE," I bellow, using my most authoritative voice.

She closes her mouth. Blinking up at me she skitters to the edge of the wagon, moving as far away from me as possible, holding up her hands as she notices that the bindings are gone. I take a step back to give her the illusion of safety.

"Descend from the cart, wench," I demand.

She doesn't move from her corner, her whole body shaking in fear.

"I have no use for a frightened servant," I explain. "If you don't get down I'll..."

"Will you eat me?" she finally speaks. Her voice is hoarse from all the screaming, but I can hear a crystalline musicality to it. She looks up at me bravely now, finding whatever is left of her courage. "Are you the dragon?"

"I am Primus," I state simply, "And you are now a guest in my home."

"Guest?" She raises an eyebrow. "Is that what you call your food these days?"

Insolent wench. She has no idea how lucky she is. If she had spoken that way to my father, or any of my siblings, she'd already be broken and lying at the foot of this mountain.

"I wouldn't speak to me like that," I warn her, all warmth gone from my voice.

"Why ever not?" she puffs herself up bravely, challenging me as she steps out of the cart. "If you wanted to kill me you would have done it already."

"Maybe I have other plans for you." I take a step forward, placing a great deal of promised pain into every movement. She takes a step back, her legs shaking almost imperceivably. "Maybe I don't eat underfed food, and I want to fatten you up first," I sneer.

We walk together, me leading as she takes another step back, her body hitting the wall of the castle, her hands reaching back to find the slick, sharp stones. "Or maybe I just don't think you are worth the effort." I grin, my fangs elongating below my lip. I stand even closer, deep within her personal space, the pointed nose guard on my helm almost touching her face, as I bend down and ask, "But what does any of that matter to you, maid, as you are now mine to do with as I wish? You are a trophy, a prize, an item that I have collected to add to my horde. The only value you have is that which I assign you. Your village gave you away to pay off their debt."

Pinching her chin between my fingers, I lift her face to mine and explain. "You belong to me. Until you die or I grow bored."

Her eyes scream disagreement at my words, but her mouth is smart enough to stay closed.

"How old are you, girl?"

She has grown quiet, still. She tries to look away, to cast her eyes down, but I force her to look at me when she answers, "19, I think."

"You think?"

"Nobody knows. I don't even know. My memories started when I entered the village twelve years ago."

I can tell by the steady pace of her heartbeat that she isn't lying.

"Are you a virgin?" I ask bluntly. I needed to know I wasn't taking her from loved ones or children.

She doesn't answer. Maybe she doesn't understand what I'm asking. Sometimes the very young or inexperienced can be confused about such things. "Have you ever lain with a man or woman in the way one does when..."

She doesn't let me finish before answering, "not by choice."

I try to control my anger as I grip her chin tighter. She whimpers, and I loosen my grip slightly.

"So you have already..."

"Not by choice!" she screams at me now, tears running down her eyes. "I had no choice about what others did to me. I had to obey, and if I didn't, they took what they wanted anyway."

"I see." I sigh. "I should throw you from this tower now, let your bones decorate my hillside for the disrespect your village has shown me by sending me an ...impure offering. I prefer my belongings to be untouched. However," I pause, trying to figure out a way to keep this poor child from being returned, "Rather than punish your village by sending you back in pieces, I'll have to find a way for you to balance the debt."

"How?" Blinking up at me she is shaking noticeably now.

"You, my little beauty, will serve under me. Personally."