

First Chosen by the Dragon

8-10 minutes

Dreams Beyond Broken Wings — 11

Jan 20, 2026 [Evelyn's POV] *Ww.noVêL@rmm.coM* When the footsteps grow louder, Draven's expression shifts from interrogation to something colder—calculation. Before I can react, his hand closes around my wrist. His grip is warm, firm, and he pulls me forward without warning. "Come with me. Now." I don't resist. I can't afford to. We move through a side passage, his longer strides forcing me to nearly run to keep pace. The corridors twist and climb until we reach a heavy oak door. He pushes it open and pulls me inside. His chambers. The realization settles like ice water in my veins. The room matches the man—sparse but commanding. Stone walls rise to vaulted ceilings. Weapons hang in careful rows, each blade positioned with military precision. A massive window dominates the far wall. Through it, I see the dragon roosts carved into the cliffside below. Khaira's dark form moves among them, scales catching torchlight like scattered stars. I stand near the door, heart pounding, acutely aware of how alone we are. How vulnerable I am. A houseless nobody in the private chambers of the most powerful man in this territory. He releases my wrist and moves toward the window. His back to me. A gesture of either trust or dismissal. "You caught that blade today without thinking." His voice is low, almost conversational. "Perfect grip. Perfect stance." I force my voice steady. "Instinct. Nothing more." "Instinct." He turns slowly, moonlight catching half his features in silver. His eyes find mine and hold them. "Sera says you move like you're constantly assessing threats. Every doorway. Every shadow." My pulse quickens, but I keep my expression neutral. "Survival teaches awareness, my lord." "Does it?" He begins walking toward me. Slow. Deliberate. Each step closing the distance between us. "Survival teaches desperation. Clumsiness. Fear." He stops an arm's length away. Close enough that I catch the scent of leather and smoke clinging to his clothes. "You don't move like someone desperate. You move like someone trained." I swallow hard, fighting the urge to step back. "I've told you the truth. I'm no one important." "You've told me nothing." His voice drops, soft as velvet and twice as dangerous. "Every answer you give is wrapped in careful evasion." His gaze travels over my face—my eyes, my lips, the tension in my jaw. Reading me like a map he intends to memorize. "I could have you thrown out tonight." The words are almost gentle. "No shelter. No protection. Just you and the wilderness and whatever you're running from." My throat tightens. He's right. I have nothing here—no allies, no standing, no leverage. They took me in when they could have killed me. And now I'm standing in his chambers, being circled

like prey. “Why haven’t you?” The question escapes before I can stop it. Something flickers in his expression. Interest, perhaps. Or amusement. “Because you intrigue me.” He moves past me toward a side table, pouring wine into a single goblet. The casualness feels deliberate. Theatrical. “You need shelter. Protection. A place where no one asks questions about your past.” He turns, swirling the wine, watching me over the rim. “I could provide those things.” “In exchange for what?” “Your honesty.” His eyes hold mine with unsettling intensity. “Your loyalty. Perhaps... other considerations.” The implication hangs in the air between us. My skin heats—not from desire, but from the familiar burn of humiliation. Of being weighed and measured like goods for sale. I force myself to breathe. To stay calm. To remember that I am a guest in his house and my survival depends on his favor. “Other considerations.” I keep my voice carefully flat. “What kind, exactly?” He sets down the goblet and moves closer. Close enough that I feel the heat radiating from his body. See the light flickering in his onyx eyes and how short dark curls fall on his forehead. “Some women would welcome such an arrangement.” His voice is silk sliding over steel. “Comfortable quarters. The lord’s protection. His... attention.” My hands curl into fists at my sides. I hold them there, trembling with the effort of staying still. “I’m grateful for your hospitality, my lord.” The words taste like ash. “But I came here seeking work. Nothing more.” “Did you?” He reaches out, fingers brushing a strand of hair from my face.

“Such restraint,” he murmurs. “Such careful control. But I see the anger underneath. The pride you’re trying so hard to swallow.” My jaw aches from clenching. He’s testing me. I know he’s testing me. And I’m failing. “Tell me what you really think.” His voice drops to a whisper when he leaned to my ear. “Of my offer. Of standing here, being examined like livestock.” The fury rises before I can stop it. Hot and bitter and absolutely beyond my control. “I think you’re cruel.” The words burst free like water through a broken dam. “I think you’re arrogant and sadistic and enjoy watching desperate people squirm.” His eyebrows rise, but I can’t stop now. Can’t swallow the rage anymore. *wWw.nOv@IWorm.cóm* “You took me in, and I’m grateful. But if you think I’ll repay that kindness with my body...” My voice cracks. “I’d rather face whatever’s hunting me. I’d rather die in the wilderness than debase myself for a roof.” Silence stretches between us. My chest heaves. My hands shake. I’ve ruined everything. I’ve just screamed at a lord in his own chambers, a man who holds my life in his hands. But instead of fury, I see something else cross his features. Surprise flickers across his face—real and unguarded. Then, slowly, something else replaces it. Something that looks almost like respect. “That,” he says quietly, “was what I needed to see.” I stare at him, chest still heaving, fists trembling at my sides. “What?” “Most people reveal themselves when offered power or pleasure.” He steps back, giving me space to breathe. “You revealed principles.” “It was another test...” The realization hits like a blow. “Everything is a test here.” His voice loses some of its edge. “Remember that.” I want to scream at him again. Instead, I force my

breathing to steady and my hands to unclench. That arrogant...“Am I dismissed, my lord?”“Not yet.” He moves to the window, presenting his back. “Until you prove your loyalty, you’ll be watched constantly. Every movement. Every conversation.”“I’m already being watched.”“More closely now.” He glances over his shoulder. “If I hear even a whisper of betrayal, your punishment will be swift. And final.”“I understand.”“Do you?” Something almost like warmth flickers in his dark eyes. “I wonder.”www.Novelworm.com He turns back to the dragon roosts below. Moonlight traces the strong line of his jaw, the tension in his shoulders.“You’re dismissed. Find your own way back to the servants’ quarters.” I reach for the door, then pause.“My lord.” He doesn’t turn. “I am what I say I am. No one important. No one dangerous. I am not a threat.”“Perhaps.” His voice is soft. Almost gentle. “But we both know that’s not entirely true.” I close the door behind me and walk into the shadows, hands still trembling. In my mind, Aspis stirs with warmth. “You did well. You showed him strength without revealing the whole truth.”“I don’t want to suffer anymore. To bend under someone else’s foot.” The vulnerability comes out before I decide to voice it. But there’s steel behind it, determination.www.Novelworm.com They won’t squash me anymore. Nobody will. He wasn’t offended by my strength, wasn’t intimidated by it—so if he, a lord, doesn’t punish me for speaking my mind, how could anyone else dare?“Good,” I hear a smile in Aspis’ voice. “That’s the spirit. Just remember to pick your battles. We have a lot of them going forward.” Cedella is a passionate storyteller known for her bold romantic and spicy novels that keep readers hooked from the very first chapter. With a flair for crafting emotionally intense plots and unforgettable characters, she blends love, desire, and drama into every story she writes. Cedella’s storytelling style is immersive and addictive—perfect for fans of heated romances and heart-pounding twists.

First Chosen by the Dragon

7-9 minutes

Dreams Beyond Broken Wings — 12

Jan 20, 2026 The door to my room closes behind me, and I finally let myself break. My back slides down the rough wood until I’m sitting on the cold stone floor. The trembling I’ve been suppressing since Draven’s chambers finally takes hold, shaking my entire body like leaves in a storm. I did everything right. I scrubbed floors until my hands cracked and bled. I smiled at the servants who ignored me completely. I made myself small and useful and invisible. And still—the coldness. The suspicion. The way people look through me like I’m not even there. Different house. Same rejection. The irony isn’t lost on me. I ran halfway across the realm to

escape being invisible, only to become invisible all over again. Truly, I have a remarkable gift for suffering. I press my palms against my eyes, trying to stop the tears. They come anyway, hot and bitter, streaking down my cheeks in relentless streams. What is wrong with me? The question echoes through my mind like a curse. I've asked it a thousand times before. In Mintia, huddled in corners after Cassandra's cruelties. In my parents' presence, searching their faces for any sign of love. There must be something fundamentally broken inside me. Something that makes people instinctively turn away. Some flaw I cannot see but everyone else recognizes instantly. Memories surface unbidden, each one a blade. Cassandra's laughter rings through my skull. The way she'd smile while destroying me, that sweet veneer hiding venom underneath. Her cruelty was always precise and calculated. "You're worthless. No one will ever want you." She wrote those words on scraps of paper and left them in my room. Under my pillow. Inside my boots. Everywhere I turned, reminders of my inadequacy awaited me. Mother's voice joins the chorus. Cold. Distant. Speaking to me only when necessary, like addressing a troublesome servant rather than a daughter. "We only needed one daughter to rule." W(w)w.noveworm.com Father's disappointment follows close behind. The way he'd look at Cassandra with pride and at me with barely concealed disgust. Like my very existence offended him deeply. "You're uncontrollable. A monster." And Kael. The cruelest cut of all. I thought he was kind. I thought his gentle words meant something real. I built dreams around his soft smiles and careful attention, constructing entire futures in my foolish mind. "I felt sorry for you, Evelyn. That's all it ever was." Pity. Not love. Not even friendship. Just pity dressed up pretty enough to fool a desperate girl starving for any scraps of affection. I pull my knees to my chest and bury my face against them. The sobs come harder now, ugly and raw and impossible to contain. Here in the darkness, I can finally admit the truth I've been running from. w(w).noveworm.com I am alone. Completely, utterly alone. And perhaps I deserve to be. Perhaps everyone who rejected me saw something I cannot. Some fundamental unworthiness written into my very bones. The thought hurts worse than anything Draven said tonight. Worse than his implications about my body. Worse than his threats and his circling. Because what if they're all right? What if I am broken beyond repair? I don't know how long I sit there, crying into my knees like a child. Long enough for my tears to dry. Long enough for the trembling to fade into exhaustion. Eventually, I force myself to move. The floorboards creak as I crawl toward my hiding spot. My fingers find the loose board and pry it up carefully, reaching into the hollow space beneath. Warmth floods through me the moment my hands touch the egg. I pull it out carefully, cradling it against my chest. The shell pulses with gentle heat, chasing away the cold that's settled deep into my bones. "I felt your pain," Aspis whispers through our bond. "Every tear. Every memory. I was with you through all of it." "Then you know how pathetic I am." My voice cracks. "Crying on the floor like a child because strangers don't like me."

“You are not pathetic. You are wounded. It’s different.” “Is it?” I press my cheek against the warm shell. “Because from where I’m sitting, they feel exactly the same.” “Wounds heal. Weakness does not change. You have survived things that would have destroyed weaker souls entirely.” “Survived.” I laugh bitterly. “I ran away. That’s not surviving.” “Running toward something is not the same as running away from something. You ran toward me. Toward us. Toward freedom.” The words settle into my chest, warm as the egg against my skin. “There is nothing wrong with you.” Aspis’s voice turns fierce, burning through my despair like fire. “Listen to me carefully, Evelyn.” I fall silent, clutching the egg tighter against my heart. “Your family twisted love into a weapon. They trained you to believe rejection was your fault. That their cruelty somehow reflected your worth.” “Maybe it did...” “It did not.” The force of her conviction pulses through our bond. “Their hatred says everything about them and nothing about you.” “You don’t know that.” “I know you. I have touched your soul. I have felt the depths of your heart.” Warmth floods through me, gentle and fierce at once. “You are not broken, Evelyn. You are waiting.” “Waiting for what?” “To become what you were meant to be.” The words hang in the darkness between us, heavy with promise. “And what am I meant to be?” “Something they never expected. Something they cannot control or contain.” Aspis’s presence wraps around my consciousness like an embrace. “You have survived poison disguised as love. Cruelty masked as care. That takes strength.” I press my lips against the warm shell, tears still streaming. “I don’t feel strong. I feel broken.” “Broken things can be reforged. Made stronger than before.” Her voice softens. “And you will not face that forging alone. I will be with you when it happens.” “Promise?” “Always. When I hatch, we will show them all. Your family. This house. Everyone who ever looked at you and saw nothing.” “What if they’re right about me?” “They are not.” Absolute certainty. “And when the time comes, you will prove it.” I close my eyes, letting her warmth chase away the last shadows. The memories still hurt. They probably always will. But sitting here, holding my dragon against my chest, I feel something I haven’t felt in years. Hope. “Thank you, Aspis.” “Thank me by surviving. By becoming who you truly are.” “I’ll try.” “You will do more than try. You will succeed.” A pause. “Now rest. Tomorrow brings new challenges.”

www.novels.com I curl around the egg, letting its warmth sink into my bones. The floor is cold and hard, but I don’t move to my bed. Here, holding my future against my heart, I finally feel safe.

Cedella is a passionate storyteller known for her bold romantic and spicy novels that keep readers hooked from the very first chapter. With a flair for crafting emotionally intense plots and unforgettable characters, she blends love, desire, and drama into every story she writes. Cedella’s storytelling style is immersive and addictive—perfect for fans of heated romances and heart-pounding twists

First Chosen by the Dragon

Dreams Beyond Broken Wings — Timothy Campbell 14

Jan 21, 2026[Evelyn's POV]They've found me.www.movielworm.comThe stone walls of Blue Dragon's fortress press in around me, cold and terribly familiar. Torchlight flickers across ancient stone, casting shadows that writhe like living things hungry for blood. Father stands to my left, arms crossed, face carved from ice. Mother flanks my right, her grip bruising my shoulders. And before me... Cassandra. My sister's copper hair gleams in the firelight. Her smile stretches wide, predatory, satisfied beyond measure. "Did you really think you could escape us?" she whispers. I try to run. My legs won't move. Try to scream. No sound emerges. Cassandra draws a blade from her belt. The steel catches light, glinting like a hungry eye. "We've been waiting for this," Father says. His voice holds no anger. Just cold satisfaction. "You've embarrassed this family for the last time." "Hold her steady," Cassandra commands. Mother's fingers dig deeper into my flesh and I feel her breath against my ear, hot and terrible. "This is what happens to daughters who forget their place." The first cut comes across my forearm. Shallow. Deliberate. Designed to maximize pain while minimizing damage. Cassandra watches my face as she drags the blade through skin, savoring every flinch. "Does it hurt?" She tilts her head. "Good. We're just getting started." Blood runs warm down my arm and I finally find my voice, but all that emerges is a whimper. "Please..." "Please?" Cassandra laughs. "Did you say please when you stole my dragon? Did you beg before you ran like the coward you are?" Another cut. Deeper this time. My vision blurs with tears. "Father, please...!" "Your father can't help you." His voice is ice. "He never wanted to." Mother's grip tightens as Cassandra carves a line across my shoulder. The pain is exquisite, endless. "This is only the beginning," Cassandra promises. "We have all night. All week. However long it takes to make you understand." "Understand what?" "That you were never meant to escape." She raises the blade again. "That you belong to us. Forever." The final blow descends and I wake screaming. My body jolts upright, drenched in cold sweat. My heart slams against my ribs so violently I think it might shatter them completely. I can't breathe. Can't think. Can't do anything but gasp desperately for air that won't come. The room spins around me. Walls closing in. Shadows reaching. I have to get out. My legs tangle in blankets as I stumble toward the door. I fall, catch myself, keep moving. The corridor stretches before me, dark and endless. Air. I need air. The nightmare's images brand themselves behind my eyes. Cassandra's blade. Father's cold approval. Mother's grip pinning me down. They're coming. They found me. They're here—I collapse against the wall, sliding down to the cold stone floor. My hands claw desperately at my throat, trying to tear away the invisible weight

crushing my chest into nothing. “Can’t breathe,” I gasp. “Can’t... can’t...” The world narrows to a tunnel of panic and my vision start darkens at the edges. “Evelyn.” The voice reaches me through the roaring in my ears. Distant. Commanding. “Evelyn, look at me.” I force my eyes to focus and I see Sera crouches before me, her sharp features softened by concern. “You’re safe,” she says firmly. “You’re in Black Dragon territory. No one from your past can hurt you here.” “They found me...” I choke out. “They were... She had a knife...” “It was a dream. Just a dream.” Her hand closes around mine, warm and steady. “Feel my grip? This is real. Focus on this.” I cling to her fingers like a drowning woman clutching a lifeline. The pressure anchors me slightly to reality. “I can’t breathe...”

“Yes, you can. You’re breathing right now. Listen to my voice.” Sera’s tone remains calm, unhurried. “We’re going to count together. In for four. Out for four.” “I can’t...” “You can. One, two, three, four—breathe in.” I try, but the air comes in ragged gulps. “Good. Now out. One, two, three, four.” We repeat the pattern. Again. Again. Slowly, the vice around my chest loosens. Sera produces a cup of cold water from somewhere. “Drink. Small sips only.” The cold liquid slides down my throat, shocking me further into reality. My hands tremble so badly that water spills over the rim. “Easy.” Sera steadies the cup. “There’s no rush. Take your time.” I don’t know how long we sit there. Long enough for my heartbeat to slow. For the trembling to fade to occasional shivers. For the nightmare’s grip to finally release. “Better?” Sera asks quietly when my breathing finally steadies. I nod weakly, not trusting my voice yet. “Good.” She settles beside me against the wall. “Now tell me what happened.” “It was just a nightmare...” “That wasn’t ‘just’ anything.” Her eyes hold mine. “I’ve seen battle-hardened warriors have these... bouts of fear. What you experienced was something deeper.” I look away. “You wouldn’t understand anyway.” “Try me.” The words stick in my throat. But Sera’s patience doesn’t waver. “My family,” I finally whisper. “In the dream, they found me. They... hurt me.” “Your family wanted to hurt you?” “They wanted me dead.” The truth spills out before I can stop it. “They planned it. Discussed it like they were planning a dinner menu.” “Why would your own family want you dead?” “Because I was inconvenient. Because my sister wanted everything I had. Because...” My voice cracks. “Because they never loved me at all.” Sera absorbs this in silence. No judgment. No pity. Just quiet attention. “So you ran,” she says finally. “I ran. And they’re... They’re dead, but if they weren’t, they’d probably still be looking for me. The nightmare felt so real... like they were actually here.” “They’re not. I would know if strangers entered our territory. Even dead ones.” Sera’s voice carries absolute certainty. “You’re safe within these walls.” “Am I? Everyone here watches me like I’m a threat. Everyone except...” I stop myself. “Except?” “Nothing. It doesn’t matter.” Sera studies me for a long moment. Then she rises, extending her hand. “Come. You shouldn’t sit on a cold stone all night.” I let her pull me up. My legs feel weak, but they hold. “Evelyn.” She pauses. “If you want this house to trust you,

you need to start trusting us first.”The words hit harder than expected. “You’ve been watching me for days. Reporting everything to Lord Draven.”“Yes. Because that’s my duty.” She meets my eyes steadily. “But duty doesn’t preclude compassion.”I don’t know what to say. This is the first kindness anyone here has shown me.“Get some sleep,” Sera says. “Tomorrow will be demanding enough without exhaustion weighing you down.”She walks me to my door and waits until I step inside. Before she leaves, she glances back.“The nightmares may return. When they do, find me. You don’t have to suffer alone.”Then she’s gone, footsteps fading into darkness. I stand in my small room, still trembling. The egg’s warmth pulses beneath the floorboards. www.novellworm.com“Perhaps not everyone here is your enemy,” Aspis murmurs.“Perhaps,” I whisper back. But as I curl around my hidden dragon, I can’t shake one terrible truth. The nightmare wasn’t really about Cassandra finding me. It was about what she’ll do when she eventually does. And some part of me knows—that day is coming. Cedella is a passionate storyteller known for her bold romantic and spicy novels that keep readers hooked from the very first chapter. With a flair for crafting emotionally intense plots and unforgettable characters, she blends love, desire, and drama into every story she writes. Cedella’s storytelling style is immersive and addictive—perfect for fans of heated romances and heart-pounding twists.

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8-10 minutes

Dreams Beyond Broken Wings — 13

Jan 21, 2026[Draven’s POV]The council chamber smells of old parchment and older grievances. I settle into my chair, watching the elders file in with their ledgers and their endless opinions. Monthly meetings. The tedious cost of power no one warns you about. www.novellworm.comThe routine business flows past me in a blur. Border disputes, resource allocations, training schedules requiring my seal. I answer when required, approve what needs approving, sign where signatures are demanded. My mind drifts elsewhere. To a woman with fierce blue eyes who refused to cower. To questions about her mysterious past I cannot seem to stop asking, despite always getting identical answers.“—and that concludes standard matters.” Corwin’s voice pulls me back. “However, there is one additional topic the council wishes to raise.”Something in his tone makes my spine stiffen. I know that careful hesitation all too well.“Speak plainly, Corwin. I despise dancing around subjects.”The elders exchange weighted glances and Elder Maren, the eldest among them, clears her throat deliberately. “My lord, the matter concerns succession. And the question of a

consort.” “No.” “Lord Draven...” “I said no. This discussion is closed.” “With respect, my lord, it cannot remain closed forever.” Maren meets my gaze steadily. “The High House requires stability. An heir to secure our future against all threats.” “Our future is perfectly secure.” “She’s not wrong,” Khaira murmurs through our bond. “Though her timing is characteristically terrible.” “The High House will endure as it always has,” I say flatly. “It has been four years,” Elder Corwin adds gently. “Four years since Lady Lyanna—” www.NovelsForMe.com “Do not speak her name.” Silence falls like a blade across the chamber. The weight of it presses against my chest. Lyanna. My partner. My heart. The woman who made this cold fortress feel like home. Four years ago, enemies took her from me while I was too far away to protect her. I wasn’t there when she needed me most. Since that day, the hatred between our houses has turned from cold hostility to open bloodshed. I’ve killed more of our enemies in four years than my father in previous decades. It’s never enough to fill the void. “Grief cannot lead forever, my lord,” Maren says softly. “The living must continue living.” “I am living.” I insist stubbornly, pretending like nobody knows otherwise. “You are existing. There is a profound difference.” “She speaks the truth,” Khaira observes unhelpfully. “I think your dragon would agree with us,” Maren says. A hint of dry humor touches her lips. “Khaira has always been the wiser of you two.” Despite everything, I almost smile. “She certainly believes so.” “Because it’s true,” she agrees in my mind. “The High House of the Black Dragon needs an heir,” Corwin presses. “Enemy houses circle like vultures. They smell weakness where succession remains unclear.” “Let them circle. Let them come. I’ll add their bones to the cliffs.” “Bones don’t rule territories, my lord. Living heirs do.” “A colorful image, but impractical,” Maren adds. I rise from my chair, signaling the meeting’s end. “This discussion is finished.” The elders rise reluctantly. One by one, they file out—all except Maren, who remains seated with infuriating patience. “I said the meeting is finished.” “The meeting is. My counsel is not.” She waits until the door closes. “Sit, Draven. Please.” Something in her tone makes me pause. She’s known me since childhood, watched me grow from a reckless boy to whatever I am now. So I sit. “You believe I’m just being stubborn.” “I believe you’re being terrified. And I understand why.” “Terrified?” I raise an eyebrow. “Interesting choice of words.”

“Accurate ones. You fear loving again because love can be taken away.” “She fights unfairly,” Khaira observes. “Using your own heart against you.” “A consort isn’t always chosen through love,” Maren continues quietly. “Or through soulmate bonds the bards sing about. Sometimes she’s chosen from the strongest among us. The most worthy.” “Worthy.” The word tastes bitter on my tongue. “You mean politically convenient.” “I mean someone who can stand beside you. Someone strong enough to share your burdens. To rule if you fall in battle.” “And if such a woman doesn’t exist?” “She might exist closer than you realize.” Maren pauses meaningfully. “Love can grow where duty plants the seed.” “Lyanna and I—” www.NovelsForMe.com “Were fortunate. Blessed by the gods with both love and

suitability.” Her eyes hold ancient sadness. “Not everyone receives such gifts. Some must build what others are given freely.” “And if I refuse to build?” “Then this house dies with you. Your enemies win completely. Lyanna’s death becomes meaningless.” The words strike deeper than any blade could reach. I feel them in my very bones. “Consider it, my lord. That’s all I ask.” Maren rises slowly. “Consider the future beyond your grief. The House deserves that much from you.” She leaves without waiting for my response. Wise woman. She knows I have none. I remain in the empty chamber until shadows lengthen across the stone floor. Then I rise and make my way to the roosts. Khaira waits with patient understanding, her massive head turning as I approach. “Don’t say anything,” I warn her. “I wouldn’t dream of it.” “Liar.” “Perhaps. But a loving liar.” I climb onto her back, and we launch into the evening sky. The wind tears at my face, sharp and cold and clarifying. Below, my territory spreads like a dark tapestry. We fly the patrol route in silence. Khaira’s wings beat steady rhythms while I try to empty my mind of everything the elders said. I fail completely. Thoughts drift unwillingly to her. Evelyn. The houseless woman with fierce blue eyes who challenged me in dark corridors. “Interesting,” Khaira rumbles. “Your thoughts wander to her often lately.” “My thoughts wander everywhere. It means nothing.” “Does it? She stirs something in you. I feel it through our bond.” “She stirs suspicion. Nothing more.” www.Elworm.com “Suspicion doesn’t make your heart race when she defies you. Suspicion doesn’t keep you awake wondering about her.” I grip her scales harder, knowing she won’t feel it anyway. “Grant me a merciful silence, Khaira.” “I merely observe what you refuse to see, Draven.” My dragon rumbles with something dangerously close to laughter but mercifully holds her tongue. “You’ll thank me eventually.” “I sincerely doubt that.” We continue the patrol, but her words echo through my mind long after we land. What is it about Evelyn that haunts me so? She’s nobody—a houseless rogue with a suspicious past and convenient answers. Yet her defiance awakens something I buried with Lyanna. The way she meets my gaze without flinching. Chin lifted, refusing to cower even when wisdom demands submission. She fights like someone trained by a High House, yet claims to be nothing. There’s fire in her. A stubborn, reckless flame that should infuriate me but instead draws me closer. When she challenged me in that corridor, something long dormant stirred in my chest. I think of her fierce eyes, the way heat rises to her cheeks when anger overtakes caution. The graceful violence of her movements in the training yard. How she refused my crude test with dignity instead of desperation. She stood taller. And even when I finally sleep, I dream of fierce blue eyes and fire that refuses to die—and a woman whose secrets call to me louder than any warning. Cedella is a passionate storyteller known for her bold romantic and spicy novels that keep readers hooked from the very first chapter. With a flair for crafting emotionally intense plots and unforgettable characters, she blends love, desire, and drama into every story she writes. Cedella’s storytelling style is immersive and addictive—perfect for fans of heated romances and heart-pounding twists

“Yes, you can. You’re breathing right now. Listen to my voice.” Sera’s tone remains calm, unhurried. “We’re going to count together. In for four. Out for four.” “I can’t...” “You can. One, two, three, four—breathe in.” I try, but the air comes in ragged gulps. “Good. Now out. One, two, three, four.” We repeat the pattern. Again. Again. Slowly, the vice around my chest loosens. Sera produces a cup of cold water from somewhere. “Drink. Small sips only.” The cold liquid slides down my throat, shocking me further into reality. My hands tremble so badly that water spills over the rim. “Easy.” Sera steadies the cup. “There’s no rush. Take your time.” I don’t know how long we sit there. Long enough for my heartbeat to slow. For the trembling to fade to occasional shivers. For the nightmare’s grip to finally release. “Better?” Sera asks quietly when my breathing finally steadies. I nod weakly, not trusting my voice yet. “Good.” She settles beside me against the wall. “Now tell me what happened.” “It was just a nightmare...” “That wasn’t ‘just’ anything.” Her eyes hold mine. “I’ve seen battle-hardened warriors have these... bouts of fear. What you experienced was something deeper.” I look away. “You wouldn’t understand anyway.” “Try me.” The words stick in my throat. But Sera’s patience doesn’t waver. “My family,” I finally whisper. “In the dream, they found me. They... hurt me.” “Your family wanted to hurt you?” “They wanted me dead.” The truth spills out before I can stop it. “They planned it. Discussed it like they were planning a dinner menu.” “Why would your own family want you dead?” “Because I was inconvenient. Because my sister wanted everything I had. Because...” My voice cracks. “Because they never loved me at all.” Sera absorbs this in silence. No judgment. No pity. Just quiet attention. “So you ran,” she says finally. “I ran. And they’re... They’re dead, but if they weren’t, they’d probably still be looking for me. The nightmare felt so real... like they were actually here.” “They’re not. I would know if strangers entered our territory. Even dead ones.” Sera’s voice carries absolute certainty. “You’re safe within these walls.” “Am I? Everyone here watches me like I’m a threat. Everyone except...” I stop myself. “Except?” “Nothing. It doesn’t matter.” Sera studies me for a long moment. Then she rises, extending her hand. “Come. You shouldn’t sit on a cold stone all night.” I let her pull me up. My legs feel weak, but they hold. “Evelyn.” She pauses. “If you want this house to trust you, you need to start trusting us first.” The words hit harder than expected. “You’ve been watching me for days. Reporting everything to Lord Draven.” “Yes. Because that’s my duty.” She meets my eyes steadily. “But duty doesn’t preclude compassion.” I don’t know what to say. This is the first kindness anyone here has shown me. “Get some sleep,” Sera says. “Tomorrow will be demanding enough without exhaustion weighing you down.” She walks me to my door and waits until I step inside. Before she leaves, she glances back. “The nightmares may return. When they do, find me. You don’t have to suffer alone.” Then she’s gone, footsteps fading into darkness. I stand in my small room, still trembling. The egg’s warmth pulses beneath the floorboards. “Perhaps not everyone here is your enemy,” Aspis murmurs. “Perhaps,” I whisper back. But as I curl around my hidden dragon, I can’t shake one terrible truth. The nightmare wasn’t really about Cassandra finding me. It was about what she’ll do when she eventually does. And some part of me knows—that day is coming.

First Chosen by the Dragon

Dreams Beyond Broken Wings — 15

Jan 20, 2026 Morning light filters through my narrow window, pale and unforgiving. I barely slept after the nightmare. Every time I closed my eyes, Cassandra's blade waited in the darkness, gleaming with cruel promise. A knock sounds at my door. I flinch before I can stop myself, heart lurching painfully. "Evelyn?" Sera's voice, calm and measured. "Are you awake?" I cross the room on unsteady legs and open the door. Sera stands in the corridor, dressed in simple clothing rather than her usual observer's garb. The change softens her sharp features. "I thought you might join me for tea this morning," she says. "My quarters are warmer than this drafty corner of the compound." The invitation catches me off guard. After last night's vulnerability, I expected distance. Not this unexpected gesture of kindness. "Why?" The question escapes before I can soften it. "Because you look like you haven't eaten in days, and tea helps most things." She tilts her head slightly. "Unless you'd prefer to spend the morning alone with your thoughts?" I consider refusing. Every instinct screams that this is a test—another way to extract information for Lord Draven. But I'm desperately tired of being alone. "I'll come," I say, surprising myself with the decision. Sera's quarters surprise me. Warm tapestries cover the stone walls, depicting dragons soaring over coastal cliffs. Dried herbs hang from ceiling beams, filling the air with pleasant fragrance. A small fire crackles in the hearth. She gestures toward a cushioned chair near the fire. "Sit. I'll prepare the tea." I settle into the chair, watching her move through the familiar ritual. The normalcy of it—kettle over flames, leaves measured into cups—soothes something raw inside me. "You handled last night poorly," Sera says without turning around. "But you survived it. That counts for something." "I fell apart in a corridor. That's hardly surviving." "You didn't hurt yourself. You didn't run into the night. You let someone help you." She pours steaming water into ceramic cups. "Many can't manage even that much." She brings the tea and settles across from me. The cup warms my cold fingers instantly. "Tell me about your family," Sera says. "The real version. Not the story you've been telling everyone here." My grip tightens on the cup. "I told you last night." "You told me fragments. Terror-soaked pieces that don't form a complete picture." Her eyes hold mine steadily. "If you want this house to trust you, start by trusting us with the truth." I stare into my tea, watching steam curl upward like escaping ghosts. "They hated me," I whisper. "My parents, my sister—they all hated me from the moment I was born. I never understood why." *wW.n©V@LWorM.coM* "Hatred rarely needs logic. What did they do to you?" "Everything." The memories surface like poison. "My sister once told our weapons master I'd stolen from the armory. She planted evidence in my quarters. I was locked in the cellars for three days without food." I swallow hard against the tightness in my throat. "When

I emerged, she was wearing my grandmother's pendant—the one thing I treasured. My sister claimed I'd given it to her as an apology. They always believed her over me." "But you trained anyway," Sera observes. "Your skills didn't develop from nothing." *www.NoVellw©m.Com* "In secret. At night. Whenever I could steal moments without being caught." I set down my cup before my trembling hands spilled it. "I worked twice as hard as anyone, and it was never enough." Sera sips her tea, letting silence stretch between us. "And the dragons? Your family refused to let you bond?" The question strikes too close to my hidden truth. "They said I was unworthy. That no dragon would ever choose someone like me." Bitterness floods my throat. "My sister received everything—the egg, the betrothal, our parents' love. I received only contempt." "Did you believe them?" Her question cuts deeper than she knows.

"Sometimes." The admission nearly chokes me. "When everyone tells you the same thing for years, believing otherwise becomes impossible." *www.NoVellw©m.Com* Sera sets down her cup and leans forward. Her expression shifts to something almost maternal. "Listen carefully, Evelyn. Such background changes how warriors carry themselves. Constant fear creates hesitation. It makes us second-guess instincts that should be automatic." "I'm not hesitant—" The protest sounds weak even to my own ears. "You are. I've watched you in the corridors. You move like someone waiting to be struck." She shakes her head slowly. "That conditioning doesn't disappear overnight." "So I'm damaged." The words taste bitter on my tongue. "I'm telling you that damage can be unlearned. The instincts your family broke can be rebuilt with time and effort." She pauses meaningfully. "Dragon or no dragon, skill matters. Plenty of riders prove their worth through combat long before they earn the right to seek an egg." "I'm just a houseless rogue scrubbing your floors." "You're a warrior pretending to be a servant. That catch in the training yard—" Sera's eyes sharpen. "You invested considerable time making yourself dangerous. Don't waste it hiding in the servants' quarters." "What are you suggesting?" I ask carefully. "Join the young riders in training. Prove yourself through strength rather than submission." She leans back. "It's the fastest way to earn standing in this High House. Show them what you're capable of." My pulse quickens at the suggestion. Training openly. Fighting without hiding. The thought terrifies me—and thrills me in equal measure. "Lord Draven watches me constantly. He'll think I'm positioning myself for something sinister." "Lord Draven respects competence above all else. Show him you're useful, and his suspicion will transform into interest." A knowing look crosses her face. "Besides, he's already interested. He simply doesn't know what to do about it yet." Heat crawls up my neck at her implication. I've felt his gaze following me through corridors. Seen how his eyes linger. But interest from Lord Draven is dangerous territory—a complication I cannot afford. "The other trainees will reject me." "Some will. Others won't." Sera rises to refill her cup. "You've spent your life earning love from people incapable of giving it. Perhaps it's time to stop seeking approval and start demanding respect." The words land heavily in my chest.

She's right. I've always approached belonging as something earned through making myself smaller. Invisible. It never worked. Not in Mintia. Not here. "When do training sessions begin?" The words leave my mouth before I can stop them. Sera's lips curve with satisfaction. "This afternoon. Lieutenant Xavier leads the drills. Be there early, and don't hold back." "And if I fail?" My voice comes out smaller than intended. "Then you'll fail where everyone can see, and we'll find another path." She meets my eyes. "But I don't think you'll fail. I think you've been waiting your entire life for permission to succeed." I finish my tea in silence. Through our bond, Aspis stirs with gentle warmth. But as I rise to leave, one question burns brighter than all the others. "Why help me at all?" I turn to face her. "You report to Lord Draven. I'm a stranger from enemy territory. What do you gain from any of this?" Sera's expression shifts—something ancient and sad flickering behind her eyes. "Because I was you once. Alone and broken, with nowhere left to run." Her voice drops to something almost gentle. "Someone in this house gave me a chance when I had nothing. I'm simply passing along the debt." She holds my gaze for a long moment. "Now go. Prove my investment wasn't wasted."

www.novelworm.com Cedella is a passionate storyteller known for her bold romantic and spicy novels that keep readers hooked from the very first chapter. With a flair for crafting emotionally intense plots and unforgettable characters, she blends love, desire, and drama into every story she writes. Cedella's storytelling style is immersive and addictive—perfect for fans of heated romances and heart-pounding twists.

First Chosen by the Dragon

10-13 minutes

Dreams Beyond Broken Wings — 16

Jan 20, 2026 The training yard sprawls before me, packed earth surrounded by weapon racks and practice dummies. Young riders move through drills under the watchful eye of a scarred veteran whose face looks carved from granite. Xavier barks commands with gruff efficiency that reminds me of the instructors back home—except these students actually seem to respect him rather than fear him. I hover at the edge, uncertain. Every trainee turns to stare as I approach. Their eyes hold the same suspicion I've grown accustomed to seeing everywhere in this compound. A houseless newcomer among house-born fighters. *www.novelworm.com* An outsider contaminating their ranks. My feet nearly turn me around but then a girl with clever eyes and dark hair offers a small nod of acknowledgment. The gesture is tiny, but it anchors me in place. *www.novelworm.com* "Form up!" Xavier's voice cuts across the yard. "Basic drills first, then sparring." I

find a spot at the back, hoping to observe before participating, when Xavier's scarred face swings toward me immediately. "You. Rogue. Front and center. You don't hide in my training yard." Heat floods my cheeks as I move forward. The other trainees part around me like water around a stone. We begin with forms I learned years ago in secret sessions, stealing time when Cassandra and my parents weren't watching. My body remembers before my mind catches up. Strike. Block. Pivot. Strike again. Xavier prowls among us, correcting stances and calling out mistakes. When he passes me, he pauses briefly. Says nothing. Moves on. During the water break, the dark-haired girl sidles up beside me. Her dark grey eyes assess me with open curiosity rather than hostility. "You're the wanderer everyone's been whispering about," she says. "I expected someone more... feral." The teasing tone catches me off guard. "Sorry to disappoint." "I didn't say I was disappointed." She grins. "I'm Mira. My older brother Aaron is Lord Draven's second-in-command, so I hear all the gossip." "What kind of gossip?" "The interesting kind. Like how you challenged our lord and lived to tell about it." Mira tilts her head. "That takes either courage or stupidity. I haven't decided which yet." "Most people assume stupidity." "Most people are boring. I prefer to reserve judgment until I have more evidence." She takes a long drink from her waterskin. "Where did you learn to fight like that? Your forms are textbook perfect." "Self-taught," I lie smoothly. "Liar," she replies just as smoothly. "But that's fine. We all have secrets worth keeping." I wanted to answer but Xavier's whistle summoned us back to practice and Mira winked before returning to her position. The afternoon progresses through increasingly complex drills. My muscles burn with familiar effort, and something loosens in my chest. This—movement, purpose, discipline—feels right in ways scrubbing floors never did. I hold my own against the other trainees. More than hold my own, actually. The brutal conditioning from Blue Dragon serves me well here. Surprised glances follow my movements. Whispers ripple through the ranks. Halfway through the session, the air changes. Conversations die. Bodies stiffen. I don't need to turn around to know who's arrived. The weight of his attention presses against my spine like a physical force. Draven stands at the edge of the training grounds, arms crossed, dark eyes tracking every movement on the field, and Khaira's massive form shadows the cliff behind him. "Lord Draven," Xavier acknowledges with a respectful nod. "Come to observe the trainees?" "Among other things." His gaze finds mine. It doesn't flicker. Doesn't rush. It settles, heavy and deliberate, like he's chosen this moment—and me—with purpose. I feel it in my chest, a sharp, unwanted awareness that tightens my breath. "Call for sparring partners, Xavier. I want to see what they've learned." Movement ripples across the field. Trainees shift, pair off, the familiar sounds of training filling the space again. I turn toward Mira, already stepping in her direction, grounding myself in routine. "Not her." The words cut cleanly through the noise. I stop. Draven steps onto the field. The ground might as well tilt beneath my feet. He moves with the same effortless authority he always does, presence alone enough to quiet the murmurs around us. Trainees instinctively retreat, forming a wide circle, giving him space. Giving us space. "The

rogue spars with me."My heart slams hard enough to hurt. Every instinct in me sharpens at once—fight, flight, something dangerously close to anticipation. I can feel the attention of everyone watching, but it's his awareness that weighs the most. Like I've been singled out. Like I've been chosen. Draven studies me as I approach, gaze slow, assessing. Not dismissive. Not indulgent. Focused. It makes my skin prickle, like he's seeing more than I've allowed anyone to see in a long time. "Let's see what you can really do," he says quietly. The distance between us is minimal now. Too little. I'm acutely aware of the height difference, the solid breadth of him, the way his presence crowds my space without him taking another step. My pulse betrays me, loud and insistent. "No holding back this time." Something about the way he says it coils low in my stomach. Not fear. Not entirely. A challenge, sharp and intimate, threaded with something that feels dangerously personal. Before I can settle my stance, before I can school my breathing, he moves. Fast. The world narrows to motion and instinct as I react, body answering before thought can interfere. And somewhere beneath the clash of training and expectation, beneath the rush of adrenaline, I'm painfully aware of one truth—He isn't just testing my skill. He's testing me. Fast. Impossibly fast. His fist cuts toward my face, and only instinct saves me from eating dirt.

I duck, spin, counter. He blocks easily and advances again. Every strike forces me backward. Every defensive move barely comes in time. He's stronger. More experienced. His movements carry the efficiency of someone who's spent years perfecting the art of combat. But I don't crumble. I slip past his next strike and land a glancing blow to his ribs—controlled, deliberate. Not enough to hurt. Just enough to remind him I'm still standing. His eyes flash. Sharp. Focused. Something dark stirs there. He presses harder. So do I. We move together now, no space wasted, bodies cutting through air in a brutal rhythm that feels uncomfortably intimate. Every near miss sparks awareness—of his reach, his strength, the heat radiating off him. I adapt on instinct alone. When he finally pins me—arm wrenched behind my back, his weight driving me into the packed earth—I suck in a breath I didn't realize I was holding. He's close. Too close. "Yield?" he murmurs, mouth near my ear. My pulse stutters. "Do I have a choice?" "Everyone has choices. Some are simply less pleasant than others." "Then I yield," I say, breathless. "For now." Something unreadable flickers across his face as he releases me. Before I can decide what it means, another presence enters the yard. The woman moves with predatory grace—tall, dark-haired, beautiful in the way a blade is beautiful. Trainees immediately step back in deference. Draven releases me fully and straightens as she approaches. "That's Venna," Mira whispers, appearing at my shoulder. "She leads Draven's elite guard. She's been positioning herself as his future consort for years." She stops herself, as if considering continuing her thought. "She was there through his darkest times. She believes that loyalty has earned her the right to stand beside him." "And?" "Anyone who catches his attention becomes her enemy. Fair warning." "I didn't

catch anyone's..." I started but couldn't finish as Venna's cold gaze found me. Her expression lingers and holds open disdain, and I realize she witnessed the entire sparring match. Draven exchanges brief words with her before departing. Khaira launches from the cliff, and together they disappear beyond the compound walls. The moment he's gone, Venna approaches. "So you're the stray Draven dragged in." She circles me slowly, the way a predator circles wounded prey. "You fight adequately for someone houseless. But adequate doesn't earn a place here—and it certainly doesn't earn his attention." "I'm not looking for anyone's attention," I reply steadily. "Just a place to belong." "Is that so?" Her smile cuts like a razor. "Then why does our lord spend his valuable time sparring with a nameless rogue? Why does he watch you when he should be attending to matters of actual importance?" "You'd have to ask him that." *www.novelsandworms.com* "I'm asking you." She stops directly before me, close enough that I feel the warmth of her breath on my face. "Stop drawing his eye, little stray. I've worked too long and sacrificed too much to let some nameless rogue steal what's mine." *www.novelsandworms.com* "I'm not stealing anything." "Not yet." Her voice drops to a dangerous whisper. "But I know the signs. And I'm warning you now—stay in your place. Scrub your floors. Be invisible." I'm so tired. So tired of people underestimating me, of shoving me face first in the dirt, because they said so. And I don't want to let someone like her put me down. Not now. Not again. "And if I don't?" Venna's smile sharpens into something terrifying. "Then we'll see how long that confidence lasts." She turns and strides away, leaving me standing in the center of the training yard with my heart pounding and my hands clenched into fists. Mira appears beside me again. "Well. That went about as expected." "Does she threaten everyone Lord Draven speaks to?" "Only the ones she considers actual threats." Mira's expression turns serious. "Which means she sees something in you worth worrying about." I stare after Venna's retreating figure, cold certainty settling into my bones. I came here hoping to disappear. To become someone new. Instead, I've apparently caught the attention of the most powerful man in this territory—and made an enemy of the woman who believes she owns him. And his little brother. And the most observant (and kind) woman under his control. Basically, everything I wanted to avoid. As I gather my things and leave the training yard, I can't shake one terrible truth. The dangers here multiply faster than I can count them. And somewhere in the distance, Cassandra still hunts for what I've stolen. I'm running out of places to hide.

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First Chosen by the Dragon

Dreams Beyond Broken Wings — 17

Jan 21, 2026 Days blur into a rhythm I almost recognize as belonging. Training consumes my mornings now. Xavier's drills push my body to its limits, but the familiar burn feels cleaner than scrubbing floors ever did. The other trainees still watch me with suspicion but slowly, grudgingly, some of that suspicion begins to thaw. During water breaks, I drift toward the same small group. Mira's sharp wit draws me in first, but soon others join our corner of the training yard. "You're improving," Finn says, tossing me a waterskin. Sera's nephew shares her keen eyes but none of her severity. "Another week and you might actually be worth sparring against." "High praise from someone who tripped over his own feet yesterday," Mira shoots back. "That was strategy. I was lulling my opponent into false confidence." "You lulled yourself into the dirt." Dorian, the elder's quiet grandson, almost smiles. It's the most expression I've seen from him in days. "Where did you learn to fight?" Finn asks. "Your forms are almost too clean. Like you learned from a book instead of a battlefield." "Self-taught, mostly." The lie comes easier now. "Watching others. Practicing alone." "Must have been lonely," Mira observes. "It was." I don't have to fake the wistfulness. "But loneliness has its advantages. No distractions. No one to disappoint." "Sounds miserable," Finn declares. "Half the fun of learning is having someone to compete against." "The other half is winning," Dorian adds quietly. "See? Dorian understands." Finn drapes an arm around the quieter boy. "We've been competing since we could walk. His grandfather used to make us race for honey cakes." "You cheated," Dorian says flatly. "I improvised." Finn presses a hand to his chest in mock offense. "There's a difference." Mira rolls her eyes, grinning. "There really isn't." "Whose side are you on?" "The side that tells the truth." She nudges Dorian, and he huffs something that might be a laugh. I watch them, throat tight. This is what friendship looks like—teasing and trust woven together until they're indistinguishable. I've never had this. Back home, every interaction carried calculation. Every smile hid a blade. My sister collected allies like weapons. I collected bruises and learned to flinch at kindness. But here, three people argue about honey cakes like it matters. Like I matter. The realization aches sweet and terrifying. Mira catches my expression. Her teasing softens. "You'll fit in eventually. Just takes time." "How much time?" "Depends. Finn took three years to stop being annoying." "Still waiting," Dorian murmurs. Finn clutches his chest. "Lies and slander!" I laugh—a real laugh. Finn beams like he's won something precious. Movement draws my attention. Venna stands near the weapon racks. Her eyes meet mine briefly before sliding toward the training yard entrance. Her posture changes. Stiffens. I follow her gaze. Riven has just entered. He hasn't noticed Venna yet. But she watches him,

jaw tight, hands curling into fists. Then Riven looks up. Their eyes lock. Something charged and painful passes between them. Venna's chin lifts with cold defiance. Riven's expression hardens before he deliberately looks away. "She's watching you again," Mira murmurs. "Be careful." But I'm not sure Venna was watching me just now. "I'm not doing anything wrong." "Doesn't matter to her. Just—be careful." Xavier's whistle summons us back. Strike. Block. Pivot. Again. By evening, exhaustion weighs heavy on my limbs. I find a quiet corner of the courtyard where moonlight pools silver between shadows. Footsteps approach. I tense before recognizing Riven emerging from darkness. His demeanor has shifted since our first encounter. The cold suspicion has thawed into something warmer. He leans against the stone wall, a crooked smile playing on his lips. "You surprised me today," he says. "I didn't expect much from a rogue. I was wrong." "People usually are." I shrug, keeping my voice light despite the way my pulse quickens. Something about his easy confidence unsettles me—or maybe it's how different he seems from the threatening figure who cornered me days ago. "Wrong, or surprised?"

"Both." I allow myself a small smile. "Though I'm not sure which is worse." He laughs, the sound warm in the cool night air. "Being underestimated has advantages. Enemies never see you coming." "I'd prefer to avoid enemies entirely." "Wouldn't we all." He settles more comfortably against the wall, arms crossed. "So. The mysterious rogue who caught my brother's attention. What's your secret?" "No secret. Just trying to survive." "That's everyone's secret here." His eyes glint with amusement. "Be more specific." I find myself laughing despite my wariness. There's something disarming about him—the easy charm, the genuine curiosity in his gaze. It would be so simple to trust him. That's exactly why I shouldn't. "I don't think I have anything more interesting to offer." "Doubtful." He tilts his head, studying me with theatrical intensity. "Let me guess. You're actually a princess fleeing an arranged marriage to a horrible old lord." "Close." I match his playful tone. "I'm actually three children standing on each other's shoulders, pretending to be an adult." His startled laugh echoes across the courtyard, genuine and delighted. "That would explain the height." "I'm not that short." The protest comes out more indignant than intended. "You're not that tall either." His grin widens, eyes crinkling. "It's charming. Like an angry kitten pretending to be a wolf." "Did you just call me a kitten?" I narrow my eyes, but warmth spreads through my chest despite myself. "An angry one. Very important distinction." I shake my head, biting back a smile. This version of Riven is dangerous in an entirely different way than I expected. "You're different than I expected," I admit. "Different how?" "Less threatening. More human." His smile falters. The mask slips—underneath I see exhaustion, old wounds, something hollow. Then he blinks and the charm returns, but I've already glimpsed what lies beneath. "First impressions aren't always accurate. I judged you harshly. That wasn't fair." "You were protecting your home." He pauses. "Draven's the same way. We both learned early that strangers bring danger." "And

yet you're talking to me now. Alone. In the dark." "Maybe I'm reckless." His smile softens. "Or curious about the woman who landed a hit on my brother." "Is that rare?" "Exceedingly." He studies my face with sudden intensity. "Draven doesn't let people close. You got under his guard. That means something." "Good or bad?" "Depends who you ask." I think of Venna. That charged exchange I witnessed today. "Not everyone sees it as good," I say carefully. "I saw her watching you earlier. Something passed between you two." Riven's expression shifts. The playfulness drains away, replaced by something old and bitter. His jaw tightens. "Venna and I were together once." His voice is too casual, too controlled. "Before she decided my brother was a better path to power." "I'm sorry." "Don't be. She showed me who she really was." He pushes off from the wall. "Just—don't become her next target." "Getting late." His easy manner returns, deliberate now. "Rest. Tomorrow's drills will be brutal." He walks away, then pauses. "Evelyn? Watch yourself. Not everyone appreciates newcomers who shine too bright." He disappears into the shadows before I can respond. I wrap my arms around myself. I came here hoping to disappear. Instead, I keep finding myself pulled deeper into webs I don't understand. But I also have people who might actually care whether I survive. That has to count for something. Cedella is a passionate storyteller known for her bold romantic and spicy novels that keep readers hooked from the very first chapter. With a flair for crafting emotionally intense plots and unforgettable characters, she blends love, desire, and drama into every story she writes. Cedella's storytelling style is immersive and addictive—perfect for fans of heated romances and heart-pounding twists.

First Chosen by the Dragon

8-10 minutes

Dreams Beyond Broken Wings — 18

Jan 20, 2026 The morning brings unexpected orders when Xavier gathers our training group at dawn, his scarred face grim with purpose. "Border patrol," he announces. "You've trained long enough to see what we're actually protecting. Mira leads." My pulse quickens. Border patrol means leaving the compound—venturing into territory I've only glimpsed from windows and rooftops. Mira accepts the responsibility with a sharp nod. "Finn, Dorian, Evelyn—you're with me. We head for the eastern ridgeline." We set out as the sun breaks over the cliffs. The compound shrinks behind us, swallowed by ancient forests that cling to rocky soil with determination. "Stay close," Mira instructs. "The terrain gets treacherous. One wrong step and you're tumbling into the sea."

(0)r m.coM She wasn't exaggerating. The path winds through a landscape that steals my breath. Dramatic cliffs plunging toward churning waters, stone formations carved by centuries of wind. Dragon roosts dot the cliff sides, dark caves where I glimpse occasional gleams of scales. "Beautiful, isn't it?" Finn falls into step beside me. "I forget sometimes, living inside the walls. Then I come out here and remember why we fight to protect it." "It's incredible," I admit. "Nothing like the mountains near which I grew up."

"Different kind of beauty. Harder. Sharper." He grins. "Like the people here."

Mira leads us higher, following trails that seem carved into the rock itself. The air thins and cools. Below, the sea stretches endlessly, dark and glittering under pale sunlight. We reach a lookout point where the view spans in every direction. Mira calls a halt, consulting marks carved into the stone. "Patrol checkpoint," she explains. "We wait here for the next group to confirm the route is clear, then continue to the secondary position." "How long?" Dorian asks. "However long it takes. Patience is part of the job." I settle against a sun-warmed boulder, letting my muscles rest. The exertion feels good but when voices echo from the path below Mira straightens, hand moving to her weapon before recognition relaxes her stance. "Riven's patrol," she says. "Perfect timing." The group that crests the ridge is smaller than ours—four warriors moving with practiced efficiency. Riven leads them, his dark hair windswept, easy smile already forming when he spots us. "Mira. Fancy meeting you here." He exchanges information with her in quick, efficient phrases—clear routes, no disturbances, standard observations. Then his attention shifts to me and, as we all move through the tree line, for now having matching routes, we fall in one step with each other. I move toward a secondary overlook, his patrol continues ahead, leaving us in relative privacy. "So," he begins, voice casual. "I've been curious about your life before you stumbled into our territory. What was it like, wherever you came from?" The question is gentle. Not probing—just genuinely curious. "Difficult," I say vaguely. "Lonely. Not much worth remembering, honestly." "Nothing at all? No happy memories hiding in there somewhere?" "I'd rather focus on what comes next than dwell on what's behind me." "Fair enough. The past can be a heavy thing to carry around." He accepts my evasion without pressing. "Some burdens are better left at the door." "What about you?" I turn the question around. "What's it like, growing up in a place like this? Being the high lord's brother?" Riven laughs softly. "You want the honest version or the polished one?" "Honest. I've had enough polished lies to last several lifetimes." "Honest it is, then." He gazes out over the cliffs, expression thoughtful. "Growing up in Draven's shadow was... educational. He was always the heir, the important one. I was the spare—the backup plan nobody expected to need." "That sounds difficult. Did you resent him for it?" "Never him. He didn't choose to be born first any more than I chose to be born second." His voice carries no bitterness. Just

acceptance. “But others made comparisons?” “Constantly. The whispers, the measuring looks. ‘Why can’t you be more like your brother?’ I heard that so often I started believing it myself for a while.” His voice carries no bitterness. Just acceptance of facts long since processed and filed away. “Eventually I stopped trying to compete,” he continues. “Found my own path. My own purpose. I’m not the heir, and that’s fine now. I can serve the house in other ways.” “Without constantly measuring yourself against an impossible standard,” I finish. “Exactly. You understand.” “That takes wisdom,” I say quietly. “Most people never stop competing.”

“Most people never realize the competition was rigged from the start.” He turns to face me. “You understand that, don’t you? Being measured against someone else’s impossible expectations?” The question strikes closer to the truth than he knows. I think of Cassandra—golden, perfect Cassandra—and all the ways I failed to measure up. “More than you realize,” I admit. “I thought so. There’s something in your eyes—a recognition. Like you’ve been where I’ve been, just in different places with different faces.” The vulnerability, the honesty, the excitement of understanding gleams in his eyes and I nod. “Different faces, same wounds.” “Exactly.” We stand in comfortable silence, watching waves crash against the rocks far below. The wind carries salt and something cleaner—possibility, maybe. Fresh starts. “I hope you make the tournament,” Riven says finally. “The selection trials are coming up. You should compete.” “And everyone would accept it?” “They might. Draven’s been known to bend rules for exceptional circumstances.” He smiles warmly. “And you’re definitely exceptional.” “You barely know me.” “I’ve watched you train. I know enough. You’re different from the others—there’s something fierce underneath all that careful control.” That piques my interest and I look at him more closely. “Different how?” “Hungry. Not for power or glory, but for something more important...” He considers his words carefully. “Belonging, maybe. A place where you actually fit.” “Instead of just surviving,” I murmur. “Exactly. You want to live, not just exist.” The assessment cuts close to bone and I look away, throat tight, before any tear could drop from my eyes. “I’d like to see what you can really do,” Riven continues. “When you’re not holding back. When you’re not afraid of standing out. I think you’d surprise everyone.” “Including myself?” “Especially yourself.” His warmth feels genuine. After a lifetime of cruelty, kindness still catches me off guard. “Thank you,” I manage. “That means more than you know.” “I mean every word. Don’t forget it.” “Riven!” One of his patrol calls from ahead. “We need to move!” He sighs. “Duty calls, as always. But think about what I said. The tournament could be your chance to prove you belong here—really belong, not just as a tolerated trainee.” “I’ll think about it. I promise.” He clasps my shoulder briefly, then jogs to rejoin his group. I watch him go, something warm settling in my chest. Maybe he’s right. Maybe I’ve been so focused on hiding that I forgot what it means to actually live. “Evelyn!” Mira’s voice

cuts through my thoughts. “We’re moving!” I turn back toward my group—and freeze. Unease prickles at my neck. The instinctive awareness of being watched that years of survival have sharpened into something nearly supernatural. My eyes scan the ridgeline automatically. Shadows between rocks. Dense brush clinging to cliffsides. A thousand places where someone could hide and observe without being seen. Nothing moves. Nothing seems wrong. But the feeling doesn’t fade. “Coming!” I call back, forcing my legs to move. As I rejoin my patrol, I cast one more glance over my shoulder but the ridgeline remains empty, silent and innocent. Yet the sensation of eyes on my back follows me like a ghost. Someone is watching. I’m certain of it. I just can’t prove it—yet.

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First Chosen by the Dragon

8-10 minutes

Dreams Beyond Broken Wings — 19

Jan 20, 2026 [Draven’s POV] The patrol returns at dusk, and I stand at my study window with a stack of supply manifests spread across my desk, pretending to read while my attention fixes on the figures emerging from the tree line below. Boots strike stone, armor shifts, voices overlap in familiar cadence. Another completed sweep. Another day without incident. I track them automatically, counting, assessing posture and pace, habit ingrained too deeply to ignore. My gaze catches on two figures lingering near the courtyard fountain, set apart from the rest by nothing more than choice. Riven stands close to Evelyn, his posture easy in a way that has always irritated me. He says something I can’t hear, and she laughs—soft, unguarded, the sound carrying through the cooling air. It isn’t loud, isn’t meant for an audience, which somehow makes it worse. His hand brushes her arm briefly as he gestures. Familiar. Casual. She doesn’t pull away. Something tight coils low in my chest. Not jealousy, I tell myself immediately, irritation snapping sharp at the thought. Vigilance. Riven has always been reckless with affection, too quick to offer warmth to anyone who looks like they might need it. He collects broken things and convinces himself they’re his responsibility. That instinct has nearly killed him before. “You’re not fooling anyone,” Khaira rumbles through our bond, her tone thick with amusement. “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I reply, even as my fingers tighten against the stone windowsill. “Of course you don’t. That’s why you’re gripping it hard

enough to crack the wood." I release my grip at once, jaw tightening. "I heard that." "Good. You were meant to." Her satisfaction bleeds through the bond. "Denial doesn't suit you, Draven. Neither does the jealousy you're pretending isn't consuming you right now." "Neither does your unsolicited commentary," I answer flatly. "Yet here we are." Below, Riven laughs again, touches Evelynn's shoulder before turning toward the barracks. She watches him go for a moment longer than necessary, expression unreadable, before turning away with a faint smile. I tell myself I'm cataloguing behavior, assessing potential vulnerabilities. Nothing more. A knock cuts through my thoughts. Venna enters without waiting for permission, posture rigid, dark hair pulled back with military severity. She wastes no time. "My lord. I have my report on the houseless woman." "Proceed." I turn from the window, forcibly severing my attention from the courtyard below. "Her combat skills are adequate. Better than adequate, actually," Venna says, displeasure threading her voice. "But her background remains suspicious, and her loyalties entirely unclear." "Tell me something I don't already know." "She's dangerous." Venna steps closer, lowering her voice. "I don't know what she wants, but she wants something from us. And your brother seems quite taken with her." My expression remains carefully neutral. "Riven befriends everyone he crosses paths with. It means nothing." "Does it?" Venna's eyes sharpen. "Because from what I've observed, you seem quite taken with her as well, my lord." "Careful." "I've served you faithfully for years," she replies evenly. "I've earned the right to speak when I see a threat to this house." "She's hiding something," Venna continues. "Let me investigate her properly. Let me dig into where she came from, who trained her—" "Don't." The word lands with finality. "Stand down. At least for now." "My lord—" "I said I'll think about it." I meet her gaze until she looks away first. "That will be all." Venna bows stiffly and withdraws, frustration barely contained. The door closes, and silence settles over the study, heavy and unwelcome. I should return to my work. Council matters wait. Borders don't secure themselves. Instead, restlessness pushes me from my chair. I tell myself I'm verifying a potential threat as I leave the tower. Duty requires vigilance. Nothing more. "Keep telling yourself that," Khaira murmurs. The training yard lies mostly empty in the fading light. Torches haven't yet been lit. One figure moves alone near the weapons rack, blade flashing in controlled arcs. Evelynn. She practices with fierce concentration, movements economical, precise. Every strike flows into the next without hesitation, her body remembering what her mouth refuses to admit.

I watch from the shadows longer than intended, tracking balance, timing, the way she anticipates imaginary counters. She's good—too good—and then I see the flaw. "Your footwork is sloppy on the left," I say. She spins instantly, blade raised before recognition settles her shoulders. Her chin lifts, defiance slipping into place. "Then perhaps my lord can show me how to fix it." The challenge should irritate me. It doesn't. I cross the distance between us, circling her stance with deliberate slowness, aware of how closely she watches

me in return. “Your weight shifts too early on the pivot,” I explain. “Here.” I move behind her before reconsideration intervenes, hands settling on her hips to adjust the angle. Heat flares beneath my palms through thin fabric, immediate and undeniable. Her breath catches, sharp and involuntary, and the awareness of it lands far too deeply. The contact is brief. Necessary. I step back at once. “Better,” I say evenly. “Again.” She moves. I correct. She adapts without complaint. We fall into a rhythm that requires fewer words, tension threading each adjustment as proximity and restraint blur together. I’m acutely aware of her breathing, of the way she stiffens when I step too close, of how carefully she refuses to step away.

www.novelworm.com “Your guard drops after the third strike,” I note. “Anticipate the counter.” “Like this?” Her voice is steady. Her breath isn’t. “Higher. An enemy will exploit any gap you give them.” “You speak from experience?” “I have the scars to prove it.” I demonstrate. She mirrors me, nearly perfect. “Again,” I command. “Faster. Don’t think.” “Is that how you fight?” “Thinking gets you killed. Instinct keeps you breathing.” “Comforting philosophy.” “I never claimed to be comforting.” A hint of a smile tugs at her mouth. I notice. I shouldn’t. We train until torchlight replaces dusk. Sweat darkens her collar, silver hair escaping its braid, cheeks flushed with exertion. She looks like a warrior who has earned her place—strong in a way that has nothing to do with softness. “Enough,” I finally say. “You’ll exhaust yourself before dawn.” She lowers her blade, breathing hard. “Thank you. For the instruction.” “Don’t thank me yet. Tomorrow I’ll find new flaws.” “I look forward to it, my lord.” The title sounds different when she says it. Less formal. Almost deliberate. “You’re more than you pretend to be,” I say quietly. “I haven’t decided if that’s dangerous.” She holds my gaze without flinching. “Maybe it’s both.” The honesty lands harder than expected. “Get some rest,” I manage. “Training resumes at dawn.” She bows and walks away. I watch until she disappears through the archway, pulse slow to settle, aware of an inconvenient truth I refuse to name. She’s a mystery I should solve. A threat I should eliminate. Instead, I realize I went looking for her long before I admitted it—to confirm my suspicions, I told myself. To observe. To assess. The lie sits poorly. I remain in the torchlit yard long after she’s gone, knowing only one thing for certain: whatever she is, and whatever she’s hiding, she’s already altered the balance in ways I do not yet understand.

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First Chosen by the Dragon

7-9 minutes

Dreams Beyond Broken Wings — 20

Jan 20, 2026[Evelyn's POV]The morning sun blazes across the training yard as Sera gathers us together. Her sharp gaze sweeps over the assembled trainees with unusual gravity. "Listen carefully," she announces. "The Solstice tournament approaches. Three stages. The winner earns Junior Rider rank and the right to seek a dragon egg from the sea nests." My pulse quickens instantly. A dragon egg. The words echo through my mind while my hidden secret burns in my memory. I already have an egg. Aspis waits beneath my floorboards, growing stronger each day. His warmth pulses against my consciousness even now. But winning this tournament would give me legitimate standing. I could claim I found the egg during the sanctioned search. Present my own dragon without suspicion. Finally belong here properly. "Lord Draven himself will select participants today," Sera continues. "He'll test each of you personally. Only the worthy will compete." Murmurs ripple through the crowd and Mira catches my eye, her expression tight with anticipation. I see Finn bounce on his heels beside Dorian, barely containing his excitement. The air sharpens when Draven enters the yard. His presence commands immediate attention. Dark hair catches the sunlight as he surveys us with calculating eyes. Khaira circles overhead, casting massive shadows across the packed earth. The dragon's presence adds weight to the moment. "Form a line," he orders. "One at a time. Show me what you're worth." Xavier calls names. One by one, trainees step forward to face their lord in combat. Most last mere seconds. Draven moves with devastating efficiency, dismantling their defenses before they can mount proper attacks. He shows no mercy and the line shortens rapidly. My heart hammers as my turn approaches, sweat dampens my palms despite the cool morning air. Mira steps forward. She fights well, better than most, but Draven still overwhelms her within a minute. Yet he nods approvingly. "Acceptable. You'll compete." www.noVelworm.com Relief floods Mira's face as she steps aside and catches my eye and gives me an encouraging nod. "Evelyn." My name cuts through the tension and I force myself forward, meeting Draven's dark gaze without flinching. Something flickers in his expression. Recognition. Challenge. Heat. "Let's see if last night's training stuck," he said quietly when I approached him. "Don't disappoint me." "I don't intend to, my lord." He attacks without warning. I dodge right, barely avoiding the strike meant for my ribs. My body moves before thought catches up. Duck under his arm. Pivot. Counter. He blocks easily and presses forward. His speed is terrifying up close. I'm outmatched in raw power—that much is obvious. Every blow he lands rattles through my bones. His strength seems inexhaustible. But I'm faster. More unpredictable. Years of secret training taught me to fight smarter, not harder. Cassandra never learned that lesson. I slip through gaps in his offense. Strike where he doesn't expect. Keep moving constantly, never giving him a stationary target. Our dance intensifies. The crowd falls silent, watching with held breath as Draven's lips curve slightly. He's enjoying this. Testing me properly for the first time. I feint left, then spin right. His

arm extends a fraction too far—and I seize the opening instantly, letting my fist connect solidly with his jaw. The impact travels up my arm and his head snaps to the side slightly. Gasps erupt from the watching trainees, even Xavier’s scarred face shows shock as the yard falls utterly silent. But Draven recovers instantly and before I can celebrate my small victory, he’s on me—arms locked around my waist, momentum carrying us both to the ground. I land hard on packed earth, his weight pressing me down completely as his face hovers inches from mine.

“Impressive,” he murmurs, dark eyes burning into mine. “Very impressive.” Heat floods through my veins at his proximity. His body radiates warmth where it pins me to the dirt and I can’t breathe properly. “Do I pass?” I manage, voice rougher than intended. His smile sends fire racing through my blood. Slow. Satisfied. Almost predatory. It transforms his severe features entirely. www.NoVèLW@rM.Com “You’ll compete in the tournament.” He rises, extending a hand to pull me up. “Don’t make me regret it.” www.NoVèLW@rM.com “I won’t, my lord.” From the sidelines, I catch Venna’s expression. Cold fury twists her beautiful features as she watches our exchange. Her hatred burns like ice across my skin. I’ve made an enemy more dangerous than I realized. Her hands clench at her sides. Sparrings continue as Draven finishes his selections while I stand apart, trying to calm my racing heart. Mira reaches me first, eyes bright with excitement. “That was incredible! You actually hit him! Again!” “It wasn’t that impressive.” “No one’s landed a hit on him in years,” Riven interrupts, appearing at Mira’s shoulder. His grin stretches wide. “And certainly no one did that twice! Truly. I’ve watched him train for my entire life.” “You’re exaggerating,” I protest weakly. “I’m really not.” Riven’s hand clasps my shoulder warmly. “You made that look effortless. Where did you learn to move like that?” “Everywhere. Nowhere.” I shrug awkwardly. “Survival teaches hard lessons.” “Some survival,” Mira laughs. “Remind me not to pick fights with wandering rogues.” “I’ll remember that,” I manage, finally allowing myself a small smile. Behind Riven, movement catches my attention and I see Draven approaches his brother, expression unreadable. Their eyes meet and something silent passes between them—tension I can’t identify, but Riven’s smile fades slightly. “Congratulations on your selection,” Draven says flatly. His gaze flicks between Riven and me with dangerous intensity. “She fought well.” Riven’s voice carries careful neutrality. “She did.” Draven’s attention fixes on me. “Report to Xavier for tournament preparation. Dawn tomorrow.” He strides away without another word just as Khaira launches from the nearby cliff, circling overhead before they both disappear beyond the compound walls. I stare after them, confusion churning in my gut. The tension between them was palpable. www.NoVèLW@rM.cOm “What was that about?” I ask quietly. Mira and Riven exchange loaded glances. Neither answers immediately. “Nothing you need to worry about,” Riven finally says. The easiness has returned to his voice, but something hollow lurks beneath. “Brother politics. Complicated stuff.” “Very complicated,” Mira agrees. “Focus on the

tournament instead. We have bigger concerns.”They’re hiding something. Both of them. But I have enough secrets of my own without collecting others. Venna’s cold gaze burns against my back as I leave the training yard, but I don’t turn around. I know what awaits me there. Hatred. Challenge. Conflict. The tournament will test more than just my fighting skills. It will test whether I can survive the enemies I’m accumulating here. But for the first time in my life, I have something worth fighting for. A place. A purpose. A future I’m choosing for myself. I won’t let anyone take that away from me. Not Venna. Not Cassandra. Not anyone.

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