

First Chosen by the Dragon, Dreams Beyond Broken Wings — 21

8-10 minutes

Jan 20, 2026 [Draven's POV] I cannot shake the memory of her beneath me. The packed earth of the training yard. Her body pinned under mine. Those fierce blue eyes staring up without flinching. And then—impossibly—her fist connecting solidly with my jaw. No one has managed that in years. The sting has long faded, but the impression lingers like a brand. “You’re brooding again,” Khaira observes through our bond. “It’s becoming tedious.” “I don’t brood. I contemplate strategically.” “Is that what humans are calling it now? How wonderfully dignified.” I ignore her. The reports on my desk blur together while my mind replays the fight. Her footwork. Her instincts. The way she moved—refined, precise, undeniably house-trained despite every denial. Rogues don’t fight like that. Wanderers don’t develop that kind of muscle memory through roadside lessons. She’s lying about her past. I’ve known it from the beginning. What troubles me now is how little I care about uncovering the truth. “Because you care about other things instead,” Khaira supplies unhelpfully. “Interesting things. Soft things. Things with silver hair and—” “Enough.” “I was going to say ‘fierce determination.’ Your mind went somewhere else entirely. How telling.” What an insufferable creature. Evening brings restlessness I can’t contain. I find myself walking toward the dragon roosts without consciously deciding to go there. The cliff path winds upward through salt-heavy air. Then I see her. Evelyn stands at the overlook, frozen in place. Her attention fixes entirely on Khaira’s massive form where my dragon rests on the rocky outcrop above. She doesn’t notice me watching at first. Her expression steals the breath from my lungs. Pure longing. Raw, desperate yearning that speaks of dreams denied and hopes buried deep. Her hand reaches upward toward Khaira—not in fear, but in desire. Like she’s reaching for something she’s been denied her entire life. “She feels right,” Khaira murmurs. “I’ve told you this before. You should listen.” My dragon does something unexpected then. She rumbles softly—a sound of welcome, of recognition—and leans her massive head closer to the small woman standing below. Khaira hasn’t done that for anyone since Lyanna. My chest tightens painfully and the memories, the grief I’ve carried for four years rises like bile. I lost my love. My partner. I spent two years hunting her killers through every territory that would have me. I cannot feel this way again. I refuse to. Yet I stand in shadows, watching a houseless wanderer reach for my dragon with all the longing in her soul, and something cracks in the wall around my heart. “You can’t control everything,” Khaira says gently. “Some things simply happen.” “Nothing simply happens. Everything is a choice.” “Then

choose wisely. But don't choose fear." I retreat before Evelyn notices my presence. Cowardice, perhaps. Or self-preservation. The distinction blurs more each day. The next morning brings training and I observe from shadows as Xavier runs the tournament candidates through drills. Then Venna strides onto the field. She walks with predatory purpose, dark hair swept back severely. Her gaze locks onto Evelyn with barely concealed hatred. "I challenge the houseless woman to formal combat," Venna announces, voice carrying across the yard. "Let her prove she deserves to compete in our tournament, to stand among us—or crawl back to whatever gutter she came from." The trainees fall silent instantly and tension crackles through the air like lightning before a storm. I see Evelyn's jaw sets as defiance rises in her posture. She's going to accept the challenge. "Denied." The word leaves my mouth before I fully decide to speak it. Everyone turns—including Venna, whose shock flickers before she masks it with composure.

"My lord." She recovers quickly, though barely. "Our laws clearly state—"
"I said no." I step forward, holding her gaze. "She hasn't completed basic training. A formal challenge now from a dragon rider and warrior like you would be slaughter, not a test." The excuse is thin. Pathetically so. Every person in this yard knows it and Venna's eyes narrow with sudden, dangerous understanding. She's served me long enough to recognize when I'm protecting something. Something I shouldn't protect. "As you command, my lord." Her bow holds perfect courtesy and barely contained fury. "I withdraw my challenge. For now." She sweeps off the field and training resumes, but the damage is done as whispers spread like fire. I watch the rest of the session without intervening further and when it ends, I retreat to my study, hoping distance will provide clarity. It doesn't. The door opens without a knock before Venna enters, closing it firmly behind her. "You stopped me." Her voice is quiet but cuts like a blade. "You've never interfered with challenges before. Not once in four years." I have no answer that doesn't damn me. So I say nothing. "She's a stranger, weird and hiding something," Venna continues, stepping closer. "I've told you this from the beginning." "I'm aware of your concerns." "Are you? Because now I know you see it too—you just don't care." She stops before my desk, eyes burning. "That's far more dangerous than whatever she's hiding." "Careful, Venna." "What is it about her that makes you forget everything?" Her composure cracks. "Your duty? Your judgment? Everything you learned after Lyanna?" The name hits like a physical blow and I feel my jaw tighten against the pain. "Don't," I warned her. "Don't you dare to use her name to manipulate me." "I'm not manipulating. I'm trying to save you from a catastrophic mistake." She leans forward. "That woman will destroy everything you've built. And you'll let her because she makes you feel something again?" "You presume too much." "Do I?" Her laugh holds no humor. "I've watched you for years, Draven. I know what your interest looks like... I know what your protection means." Silence stretches between us. She's right—about all of it. I hate

that she's right. "After the tournament," Venna says finally, voice hardening with resolve. "I will challenge her properly. She'll have completed enough training by then. You won't be able to deny me without revealing exactly why you want to protect her." She turns toward the door, pausing at the threshold. "Ask yourself something, my lord. Is she worth destroying everything you've built? Everything we've sacrificed together?" Her eyes meet mine one final time. "Because that's exactly what will happen if you don't wake up." The door clicks shut behind her and I stand alone in my study, her words echoing through silence. Outside, Khaira circles the cliffs, but even my dragon offers no comfort now. Venna isn't wrong. Evelyn is hiding something significant. Her presence threatens stability and my interest in her defies logic and self-preservation both. None of that changes the fact that I stopped Venna's challenge without thinking. Protected a stranger over my own captain. Revealed a weakness I've hidden for years. *www.novelsworm.com* "She matters to you," Khaira murmurs. "Whether you admit it or not." "She shouldn't." "And yet she does. That's not a weakness, Draven. That's being alive." I pour wine I don't intend to drink. The tournament approaches. Venna's challenge awaits. And somewhere in this compound, a woman with fierce eyes and too many secrets sleeps beneath my roof. I've made my choice without realizing I was choosing. Now I'll live with the consequences. 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 — 22

Jan 20, 2026 [Evelyn's POV] The hall hums with voices and clattering plates, the sharp scent of roasted meat thick in the air. Lanternlight warms the stone walls, softening edges that never truly soften. I slide onto the bench beside Mira, my shoulders finally easing for the first time since selections ended, tension draining from muscles that have been tight for days. "We did it," Finn says, lifting his cup. His grin is wide and unguarded, bright with disbelief and relief. "All of us. I still keep expecting someone to tell me it was a mistake." Dorian knocks his knuckles on the table, the sound sharp against the wood. "Roster-bound," he says, shaking his head. "I won't believe it until they put my name in ink." Mira laughs, breathless and bright, her eyes shining. "Believe it. We earned it. Every bruise, every night we thought we'd fail—it

all paid off." I lift my cup with them, the metal warm in my palm. "To surviving then," I say, and mean far more than just tonight. www.loveaworm.com "To thriving," Finn corrects, leaning in to clink his cup against mine. "And to not getting cut tomorrow for something stupid." Laughter rolls around us, easy and loud, and my chest loosens in response. For a moment, I let myself feel it—the relief, the pride, the fragile joy of belonging right here, right now. Mira leans closer, her smile turning sharp with curiosity. "Did you see him during your spar?" I choke on a sip, coughing into my fist. "See who?" I ask, even though my pulse already knows the answer. She smirks, eyes dancing. "Don't insult me. You know exactly who." Dorian snorts into his drink. "Draven." "Ah-h." Finn's brows lift in quiet understanding. "That explains it." Heat crawls up my neck, spreading fast. "I was focused on my footing," I say too quickly, voice tight. "That's all." Mira's smile turns wicked as she tilts her head. "He looked at you like he wanted to kill you." She pauses just long enough to make it hurt, then adds, softer and amused, "Or kiss you." I cough again, harder this time, my face burning. "That's absurd. Completely absurd." "Is it?" Mira asks gently. "Because you felt it. We all did." I press my cup to my lips to hide my face, but my heart betrays me anyway, skidding and racing like a startled animal. I've felt it—the way the room tightens when Draven enters, the way my skin remembers his hands correcting my stance, firm and precise, lingering just long enough to unsettle me. Finn watches me over the rim of his cup, eyes thoughtful. "You could do worse," he says carefully. "Finn," Mira warns, shooting him a look. "I'm just saying," he replies with a shrug. "Stranger things have happened." I push back from the table, standing before my thoughts spiral further. "Walk with me?" I ask, needing air, distance, anything. "Of course," Mira says, rising immediately with concern flickering beneath her teasing. The night air cools my flushed skin as we leave the hall, the noise fading behind us. Footsteps echo on stone, steady and grounding. Somewhere above, a dragon rumbles low, the sound vibrating through bone and memory alike. We walk in companionable silence until my curiosity pricks too sharply to ignore, curling in my chest like an unanswered question. "I've been wondering," I say carefully. "Why is this the High House of the Black Dragon? It isn't only because of Draven's, it's the old name and I didn't see any other black dragons. I thought rare breeds only appear in times of great need but your House doesn't seem to struggle." Mira slows, lanternlight catching a shadow that crosses her face. The shift is subtle but unmistakable, as if I've brushed against something old and dangerous. "They do," she says. "Everywhere else." She exhales slowly before continuing. "Our territory is different. Black dragons appear in our nests more often than anywhere in the known lands. No one knows why." www.loveaworm.com I glance at her, unease stirring. "That's... really unusual." "Yes, and it's exactly why other houses hate us," she replies, jaw tightening. "They call it unfair. Unnatural. Once even accused of stealing rare eggs from other nests. What a morrons." She gestures toward the darkness beyond the walls. "They've coveted our nests for generations. Border wars. Raids. Constant fighting. Envy dressed up as justice."

A chill slides down my spine. "All of it... because of dragons?" "Power," Mira corrects softly. "Dragons are only the shape it takes." We walk again, boots scraping stone, the sound suddenly too loud in my ears. Mira's voice drops, careful and weighted. "Four years ago, the House of the Blue Dragon ambushed a convoy on disputed territory." My heart stutters violently, a sharp, disorienting jolt that steals my breath. "Lyanna," Mira continues, unaware, "Draven's consort, was traveling with them." The world tilts. My blood turns to ice, flooding my veins with a cold so deep it aches. [www.nove\(w\)orm.com](http://www.nove(w)orm.com) "They killed everyone," Mira says quietly. "Left no survivors." [www.nove\(w\)orm.com](http://www.nove(w)orm.com) I stop walking, my body refusing to move even as my mind screams at me to stay calm. Mira turns, concern sharpening. "Evelyn?" "I'm fine," I say automatically, forcing my feet to move again, forcing air into lungs that feel locked. "Please, just... Keep going." She watches me closely but continues anyway. "After her death, Lord Draven lost himself completely. He spent two years hunting down everyone responsible. Nearly died in the process." I nod because I must nod. Because if I don't, I'll shatter right here. My house. My family. The High House of the Blue Dragon. "That's why Venna thinks she has a claim to him," Mira adds. "She was there through his darkest years. She thinks she's earned the right to stand beside him." I manage a thin smile, my face stiff. "People think many things..." Mira studies me, her voice softer now. "And that's why she sees you as a threat." "Me?" The word comes out hollow, almost unreal. "Not because of what you've done," Mira says gently, "but because of how he looks at you. Like he's finally seeing someone again." My chest tightens painfully, breath catching as the night presses in around us. I know in my mind that I shouldn't feel joyful about that—Draven's attention is making my life more difficult, while I just wanted to disappear in the crowd. But there's something inside me, in my chest, that betrays my common sense. That craves it. That wants to challenge him. Wants his attention focused on me. I still can't pinpoint what and why, but I can't just ignore his existence even if I wanted to. And I don't. We reach the turn toward the quarters, lanternlight pooling at our feet. "I should go," I say quietly. "Thank you. For telling me." She hesitates, eyes searching my face. "Evelyn... are you sure you're all right?" I smile because it's easier than the truth. "I will be." Mira nods, though her gaze lingers, unconvinced. I walk alone after that, each step echoing too loudly in the silence. Lyanna. Blue Dragon. Ambush. My house. My family. The realization hits with a sickening force. If Draven ever learns who I am, he won't see a sparring partner or a curiosity, or a woman who makes his pulse quicken. He'll see justice. I reach my door with trembling hands, the quiet inside pressing in as soon as I close it behind me. I lean against the wood, heart hammering, skin cold despite the warmth. His hands correcting my stance. His eyes on me in the yard. The way my thoughts and will betrays me every time. I press a fist to my mouth, stifling the sound that tries to escape. After Kael, I swore I'd never be foolish again. Never trust my heart. Never let it lead me into danger. And yet something about Draven draws me in, even now, even knowing this truth. I slide down the door, breath shaking, dread curling tight in my chest. If he ever discovers who I truly am, he

won't cast me out. He'll kill me himself and consider it justice. 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 — 23

Jan 20, 2026
The Solstice celebration fills the great hall until the stone itself seems to pulse with sound. Firelight crawls along the beams and banners, spilling over long tables heavy with food and polished goblets. Music rolls through the space in steady waves, loud enough to drown thought if I let it. I stand near the edge of it all, half-hidden beside a pillar, trying to look like I belong. The dress I'm wearing is borrowed, pale fabric catching the torchlight every time I shift my weight. It feels too soft against my skin, too exposed, like armor made of silk. Everyone here moves with confidence. They laugh loudly, gesture freely, and lean into one another as if this place has always been theirs. I keep my hands folded, reminding myself to breathe, reminding myself that drawing attention is dangerous. Draven stands at the center of the hall, exactly where he should be. His posture is unyielding, shoulders squared, expression carved from control. Lords and captains approach him in turns, offering praise and congratulations that he accepts with brief nods and measured words. I shouldn't be watching him. I know that the moment I start counting his glances, I've already lost something I can't afford to lose. Still, every time his attention drifts across the room, my pulse jumps even when his eyes don't land on me. It feels like being weighed without being acknowledged. www.NoVeLwOrM.com I edge closer to the pillar, letting the shadow cut me in half. The stone is cool against my back, grounding me, reminding me that I'm still here and still breathing. "Trying to vanish already?" www.NoVeLwOrM.com Riven's voice startles me, and I turn too quickly, heart leaping into my throat. He stands in front of me with that easy smile that makes people relax before they realize they've done it. His posture is casual, but his eyes miss nothing. "I just needed a moment," I say, forcing my voice steady. "Understandable," he replies, glancing toward the crowded tables. "These celebrations can feel like a siege if you don't know the rules." "I don't," I admit quietly, because there's no point pretending otherwise. His gaze lingers, curious rather than suspicious. Then

he offers his hand, palm up, waiting without pressure. "Dance with me," he says. "Before the music changes again." My first instinct is to refuse. Stepping into the open feels like inviting every gaze in the room to dissect me. But refusing would draw attention too, and something stubborn in me refuses to retreat again. I place my hand in his, Riven's grip is warm and confident as he leads me toward the open space near the hearth. The musicians adjust seamlessly, slowing their rhythm, and suddenly we're moving together beneath the firelight. I expect my feet to betray me but they don't. My body remembers rhythm the same way it remembers balance in a fight. Step, turn, shift. Riven leads smoothly, but I follow without panic, letting instinct guide me instead of fear. Firelight blurs at the edges of my vision. The noise of the hall fades, replaced by the steady cadence of movement and breath. For a brief moment, I forget where I am. He spins me, skirts flaring around my legs, and something loosens in my chest. A laugh slips out before I can stop it, quick and surprised, like it doesn't belong to me anymore. When the music ends, applause ripples through the hall. I step back, breath controlled, cheeks warm, forcing my expression into composure. Riven bows with exaggerated flair, clearly enjoying himself. "See?" he murmurs. "Not so dangerous." I retreat before I can say something foolish, moving back toward the shadows. That's when I feel it, heavy and unmistakable. The weight of attention presses against my skin. I don't need to look to know Draven has been watching, the awareness follows me like heat even as I turn away, and I slip out while the noise swells again, heart pounding harder than the music ever did. Outside, the night air hits cold and clean, stealing the breath from my lungs. I follow the stone path down toward the beach, drawn by the sound of the sea. The moon hangs low, casting silver across the water and sand. I stop near the tide line and wrap my arms around myself as the wind tugs at my borrowed dress. The surf breathes in and out, steady and patient, as if counting time. "You left the celebration." www.MovEtoWork.com Draven's voice comes from behind me, low and controlled. I turn slowly to face him, forcing myself not to flinch.

"So did you, my lord," I reply, because the truth feels safer than silence. He stops a few steps away, close enough that I can feel his presence without him touching me. Moonlight sharpens his features, making him look less human and more like something carved from shadow and stone. www.MovEtoWork.com "I wanted air," I say. "The hall is... overwhelming." "It's meant to be," he answers, and nothing in his tone suggests apology. Silence stretches between us, thick and uneasy, as the surf rolls in and out, filling the gaps neither of us does. "I wanted to thank you," I say finally. "For letting me compete. For letting me stay." His expression doesn't soften. If anything, it grows colder. "You earned the chance," he says. "Gratitude isn't required." The words sting more than I expect. I turn my gaze back to the water, jaw tightening as I swallow the response rising in my throat. "I know you don't trust me," I say. "I don't expect you to. I just wanted you to hear it." The wind pulls my hair loose, brushing it across my cheek.

I let it be. “You danced well,” he says suddenly, and the shift catches me off guard. I blink. “Your brother is a good lead,” I answer carefully. “He always is,” Draven replies, and the silence returns heavier than before. “Evelyn,” he says, and my shoulders tense instinctively. “There’s something you should know.” Fear flickers through me before I can stop it. I brace myself anyway. “Venna has requested the right to challenge you after the tournament,” he continues. “To test your worthiness.” The words hit like ice in my chest. For a moment, the sound of the sea disappears. “And you agreed,” I say carefully, already knowing the answer. “I did.” My hands curl into fists at my sides. “Why?” “Because weaklings have no place in my circle,” he says flatly. “If you can’t defend yourself against one challenger, you don’t deserve to stand among us.” Fear claws up my spine, sharp and cold, but it doesn’t stay long. Something else settles in its place, heavier and steadier. “And if I lose,” I say, forcing my voice even, “I leave.” “Yes,” he answers without hesitation. “And if I win,” I press, refusing to look away. “Then you silence her,” he says. “And anyone else who doubts you.” I nod once, jaw set. “I won’t back down.” “I wouldn’t respect you if you did.” For a moment, something dangerous hangs between us, unspoken and charged. Then he steps back, deliberately creating distance. “Prove her wrong,” he says quietly, “or leave my grounds.” I don’t answer. I don’t look away either. When he turns and walks back toward the path, I stay where I am, the sound of the sea swallowing his footsteps as the weight of what’s coming settles fully into my chest.

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First Chosen by the Dragon

8-10 minutes

Dreams Beyond Broken Wings — 24

www.NovélwOrM.com

Jan 21, 2026 “First trial begins now,” Xavier announces. “Reach the finish point by sunset. Anyone who doesn’t complete the course is eliminated.” Dawn breaks cold and unforgiving over the cliffs. The Coastal Gauntlet sprawls before us—treacherous rock faces plunging toward churning waters, narrow ledges where one wrong step means death. Sea caves yawn dark beneath the morning light. Mira appears at my shoulder. “The underwater passages are the worst,” she whispers. “Some caves flood at high tide. Others have

currents that pull you toward the rocks.” “How do I know which ones are safe?” I ask. “You don’t. Not unless you’ve trained here your whole life.” “Wonderful,” I mutter. “Any other comforting advice?” “Stay focused. Trust your instincts. And don’t panic—panic kills faster than the water ever could.” “That’s very reassuring, Mira.” “I never claimed to be reassuring. Just honest.” She squeezes my arm briefly. “You’ll make it through this. I believe that.” Finn leans closer from my other side. “The siren caves are halfway through. Whatever you do, don’t stop swimming when you hear them sing.” “Sirens?” My stomach drops. “I only heard briefly about them.” “Their songs are hypnotic,” he explains quietly. “They’ll lure you off course. People have drowned following those melodies into the deep.” “How do I resist them?” “Focus on something real. Pain works—bite your tongue if you must. Just keep moving no matter what you hear.” “Has anyone survived by giving in?” “No one who gave in has ever come back.” His expression darkens considerably. “Don’t be the first to try.” “Any other deadly surprises I should know about?” “Probably. You’ll discover those yourself.” “You’re both terrible at encouragement.” “We’re excellent at honesty.” He clasps my shoulder firmly. “Good luck, Evelyn. We’ll see you at the finish.” “And if you don’t?” “Then we’ll drink to your memory.” His smile turns grim. “But I’d rather drink with you alive.” Xavier blows his horn. Competitors surge forward. I throw myself into the gauntlet immediately. My fingers scrape raw against stone as I scramble up the first rock face. The others pull ahead—they know this terrain intimately, every handhold memorized. I navigate blind. My muscles scream as I haul myself onto a narrow ledge. Below, waves crash against jagged rocks with enough force to shatter bone. One slip and I’m finished. “Keep moving,” I mutter. “Don’t think about falling.” The path narrows until I’m pressing my body flat against the cliff face. Wind tears at my clothes, salt spray stinging my eyes constantly. Hours blur together. I scale cliffs that seem endless. I leap across gaps that should be impossible. My technique is solid, but unfamiliarity costs precious time at every turn. Then I reach the submerged cavern network. Dark water swallows me whole. The cold drives air from my lungs. I kick hard, following the dim glow of phosphorescent algae marking the passage ahead. That’s when I hear it. The singing. Ethereal voices drift through the water, beautiful beyond description. They wrap around my consciousness like silk, urging me to stop. To listen. To follow their haunting melodies deeper into darkness. “No,” I think fiercely. “Keep swimming.” My lungs burn. The song grows louder, more insistent. Every instinct screams at me to turn toward those impossible voices. I bite my tongue hard enough to taste blood. The pain cuts through the fog, sharp and clarifying. I force myself to focus on the burning instead. Pain is real. Pain keeps me moving forward. I block out everything else and kick harder. I surface gasping in a pocket of air, chest heaving. The singing fades behind me, disappointed and hungry. The final stretch tests every limit I have. My arms shake as I climb the last cliff. My legs threaten to buckle with each desperate step. When I finally cross the finish line, the sun hangs low. I collapse onto solid ground. “You made it,” Dorian says,

appearing with a waterskin. "I wasn't certain you would." "Neither was I," I admit, accepting the water. "How did I place?" "Near the bottom. But not last." "Small victories," I manage. "Who finished last?"

"Marcus." His face goes pale. "He didn't finish at all." "What happened to him?" I ask warily, unsure I want to hear the answer. "They found his body below the siren caves. Lungs full of seawater." He sounds subdued. I almost reach out to take his hand, to comfort him somehow, but don't. "The sirens got him?" "No one knows for certain. Could've been exhaustion. Could've been the song. Either way, he's gone now." He sits down beside me, as if boneless. "He was stronger than me," I say quietly. "If they could take him..." "They could take anyone. That's why we train so hard for this." "Did anyone see what happened?" "No. He just never surfaced. Patrol found him washed up at low tide." "Did you know him well?" "We trained together for two years. He was good. Better than most." Dorian's voice goes hollow. "Doesn't matter now." "It matters to someone," I say quietly. "Someone somewhere will miss him." "Perhaps. But the gauntlet moves forward regardless." Mira finds me as darkness falls. "You survived. That's what matters." "Barely," I say. "Tomorrow will be worse, won't it?" "Different. Not necessarily worse." She studies my face carefully. "Get some rest." "Did you know Marcus?" "Well enough." Her voice catches slightly. "He was kind. Didn't deserve what happened to him." "None of us deserve to die in those caves." "No. But the gauntlet doesn't care what we deserve. Only what we can endure." She says it like it's mantra, a fact. "Is it always like this? Someone dying?" "Not always. But often enough." Her voice softens. "We honor them by continuing." That night, I wait until the compound falls silent. I pry up the floorboard and lift the dragon egg carefully into my arms. Its warmth pulses against my chest, stronger than before. The shell feels thinner—fragile. Like something waiting desperately to break free. "I almost didn't make it today," I whisper. "But you did." Aspis's voice fills my mind, fierce and proud. "The trials push you, and I feel everything. Every fear. Every triumph." "The sirens nearly had me. Their song was so beautiful." "Yet you resisted. You chose to survive when others couldn't." "There's still two more trials. And after that—Venna's challenge." I press my cheek against the warm shell. "A seasoned warrior who wants me dead. The odds feel impossible." "Nothing is impossible." Her conviction burns through our bond like fire. "We grow stronger together. Soon we'll truly be together." "Soon? What does that mean exactly?" "I feel myself changing. Pressing against these walls that contain me." Warmth floods through me. "When I hatch, everything changes for us both." "What if it's not enough? What if I fail before that happens?" "You won't fail, Evelyn." "How can you be so certain?" "Because I know you. I've touched your soul. You survived your family's hatred for years." My eyes fill with tears that I don't allow to fall. "You survived the gauntlet today. You'll survive Venna too." I close my eyes, letting her presence chase away the shadows. Marcus haunts me—another

competitor whose dreams ended in dark water. That could have been me. It nearly was. “Trust yourself,” Aspis murmurs gently. “And trust me.” I curl around the egg, exhaustion dragging me under. Tomorrow brings new dangers. Venna’s challenge looms beyond the tournament like a blade waiting to fall. But tonight, wrapped in my dragon’s warmth, I let myself believe survival is possible. 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 — 25

Jan 21, 2026 The second trial begins at dawn. “The Scale Hunt,” Xavier announces, his voice carrying across the assembled competitors. “Eight black dragon scales wait among the cliffs where wild wyverns nest. Khaira herself shed them and placed them in the rocks. Only eight of you will advance. The rest go home.” Eight scales. Fifteen remaining competitors. The math makes my stomach clench with dread. The coastal cliffs tower before us—sheer rock faces battered by relentless wind, narrow ledges overlooking deadly drops to the churning sea below. Wild wyverns circle the heights, smaller and more aggressive than true dragons, fiercely territorial over their nesting grounds. “Those things will tear your face off if you get too close,” Mira warns quietly beside me. “Watch for sudden dives. They aim for the eyes first.” “Lovely,” I mutter darkly. “Any other cheerful observations to share?” “Don’t fall. The rocks at the bottom are sharp.” “Your encouragement is truly unparalleled, Mira.” Xavier raises his horn. “Begin!” I throw myself at the cliff face, and something unexpected happens. My body remembers. Years of scaling Mintia’s mountain peaks flood back—secret training on cliff faces after Father banned me from official grounds. My fingers find holds the others miss. My balance on narrow ledges stays sure where others hesitate. The muscle memory I’d buried for survival now saves my life. I spot my first scale wedged in a crevice near a wyvern nest, black as midnight against the gray stone. My heart pounds as I begin my approach, mapping each handhold carefully. But another competitor reaches it first. He moves with home-territory confidence, a man who knows these cliffs like his own skin. His fingers close around the scale just as I reach the ledge. His grin is triumphant as he descends past me without a backwards glance. “Better luck elsewhere, houseless,” he calls over his shoulder. I bite back a curse and

keep climbing. Refusing to surrender, I push higher into more dangerous territory where the wyverns grow bolder. Their shrieks echo off the stone, territorial warnings that make my ears ring painfully. A shadow passes overhead. I look up just as talons rake the air inches from my face. I press myself flat against the rock, cheek scraping stone, heart hammering against my ribs. The wyvern wheels past, screaming its rage, close enough that I feel the wind from its wings against my exposed skin. "Not today," I whisper desperately. "Please, not today." The creature circles above, considering another attack. I hold my breath, muscles burning from the awkward position, until it finally loses interest and returns to its nest above. I resume climbing with shaking hands. Time slips away relentlessly. Below, I hear the horn sound—one scale claimed, then another. Desperation fuels my ascent into increasingly dangerous heights where fewer competitors dare to venture. Then I see it. A black scale sits abandoned on a narrow ledge above me, glinting dully in the morning light. Fresh scrapes mark the rock beside it. Someone was here moments ago. Someone dropped it. I haul myself onto the ledge and claim the scale with trembling fingers. Below, a competitor dangles from a lower outcrop, face pale with terror. Others pull him to safety. A wyvern attack must have made him panic. He fell, barely caught himself, and lost his prize in the chaos. His loss. My survival. The fifth horn sounds just as I begin my descent—the final scale claimed. I made it by seconds. Barely. My results are better than yesterday. My mountain experience showed in every confident movement, every sure-footed traverse. But finishing eighth out of eight isn't exactly impressive. It's surviving by the thinnest margin possible. The compound feels quieter as evening falls. Most competitors celebrate advancement or mourn elimination in equal measure. I find a quiet corner near the training yard and sit alone, examining the scrapes on my palms.

www.NoVeloWorm.com Riven finds me there. *www.NoVeloWorm.com* He doesn't ask questions. Doesn't demand explanations. He just settles onto the bench beside me, his presence warm and steady in the gathering darkness. "You climbed well today," he says finally. "Better than anyone expected. Where did a houseless rogue learn to scale cliffs like that?" *www.NoVeloWorm.com* I shrug, offering nothing. My secrets are the only things keeping me alive. He lets the silence stretch, comfortable with my refusal to answer. Most people push. Most people demand. Riven simply waits, patient as stone. "The mountains back home," I say eventually, surprising myself. "I used to climb them. Before everything fell apart."

"Must have been impressive mountains." "They were." My voice catches slightly. "I miss them sometimes. The solitude. The clarity." "You move like someone who trained for years. Not just casual climbing. Real training." "Does it matter where I learned?" "It might." His eyes meet mine, serious now. "You'll face Venna after this tournament ends." *www.NoVeloWorm.com* "I know." The words taste bitter on my tongue. "Everyone keeps reminding me." "She's killed challengers before, Evelyn. Made it look like accidents. Training mishaps. Equipment failures." His jaw tightens visibly. "She's good at making death

seem inevitable.”“Are you trying to frighten me?”“I’m trying to prepare you. There’s a difference.” He softens a bit.“Feels the same from where I’m sitting.”“It shouldn’t.” He leans closer, voice dropping low. “Whatever you’re hiding, whatever strength you haven’t shown yet—tomorrow would be a good time to find it.”I study his face in the fading light. “Why do you care what happens to me?”“Maybe I just don’t want to watch another good person die for Venna’s entertainment—least of all, in an official way.”“What do you mean?”“The training ‘mishaps’ are one thing.” Something dark passes through his expression. “But when it’s an official challenge, it’s different. She collects victories like trophies. Displays them proudly.”“And Draven allows this?”“The challenge is lawful. Ancient tradition. Even a High Lord can’t forbid what custom permits.” He shakes his head slowly. “But lawful doesn’t mean just.”“Nothing in this world seems just.”“No. But sometimes the unjust lose anyway.” His hand briefly covers mine on the bench. “You’ve survived things that should have broken you. I can see it in how you move, how you watch everyone constantly.”“You don’t know anything about what I’ve survived.”“I know enough.” He stands, looking down at me. “Rest tonight. Eat well. The final trial will test everything you have left.”“Any hints about what’s coming tomorrow?”“Territorial combat. Strategy, strength, and endurance combined. They’ll expect you to be exhausted by now.” His eyes are sympathetic, but I don’t feel the pity.“Because I am exhausted.” I agree.“Then don’t let them see it.” He offers something that might be a smile. “Surprise them tomorrow. Show them the woman who climbed those mountains back home.”He walks away into the gathering darkness, leaving me alone with the night and my scraped palms.The stars emerge slowly overhead. Somewhere in my hidden room, Aspis waits, her warmth calling to me through our bond. I should go to her. I should draw strength from her presence.Instead, I sit in the darkness, turning Riven’s words over in my mind.Whatever strength I haven’t shown yet.Tomorrow would be a good time to find it.I flex my fingers, feeling the sting of fresh wounds, and make myself a promise. Venna wants to see me broken. Wants to watch me fall and bleed.She’ll be disappointed.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

Jan 20, 2026 Sleep refuses to come. I stare at the ceiling while the compound settles into quiet around me. Tomorrow brings the final trial. Tomorrow decides everything I've fought for these past weeks. The egg pulses beneath the floorboards, its warmth calling through wood and stone. Something feels different tonight—the pull stronger than it's ever been. Urgent. Almost desperate. I press my hand against the wooden planks and feel heat seeping through, more intense than any night before. "It's time," Aspis's voice fills my mind, clear and certain. "Come to me." My heart slams against my ribs. I've waited weeks for these words. Dreamed of them during endless days of scrubbing floors and dodging hostile stares. Feared them during sleepless nights when discovery seemed inevitable. I swing my legs off the bed and pry up the floorboards. The shell feels impossibly thin beneath my fingertips, warmth radiating like a heartbeat growing stronger with each passing moment. No mistaking what this means. No denying it any longer. "The beach," I whisper through our bond. "Where exactly?" "A cove where cliffs hide the sand from view. Follow the servant's passage to the forgotten gate." I wrap the egg in dark cloth and steal through shadowed corridors. Guards patrol the main paths, their torchlight casting long shadows across stone walls, but I've learned this compound's secrets during my weeks here. Which floorboards creak. Which corners hide observers. Which routes the patrols avoid. The forgotten gate creaks softly beneath my hands, and beyond it, the beach stretches silver beneath the full moon. Salt wind catches my hair as I slip through, bare feet sinking into cool sand. The cove is exactly as she described—hidden, protected by towering cliffs on three sides. Moonlight spills across the sand like liquid silver, painting everything in shades of pearl and shadow. Waves whisper against the shore in rhythmic comfort. I feel safe here, embraced by stone and darkness and the endless murmur of the sea. I settle cross-legged on the sand and unwrap the egg carefully. My breath catches. wW(w).NôveLw(o)RM.Com The shell has changed completely. Where green scales once gleamed, now they seem translucent, light pulsing from within like a living heartbeat. Beautiful. Terrifying. The shell I've carried for months, green as mountain pine—now glowing like a paper lantern holding captive starlight. "Aspis?" My voice trembles. "I'm ready." Her voice carries something new. Anticipation. Relief. A hint of joy I've never heard before. "Are you?" I cradle the egg closer, feeling its heat against my chest. "Always." A crack appears. The sound splits the night—ice breaking, crystal shattering, something ancient finally awakening. Fractures spread across the shell in intricate patterns, each one glowing brighter until the egg becomes a constellation in my trembling hands. I can't breathe. Can't think. Can only watch as shell fragments fall away, scattering across moonlit sand like broken stars. A small creature emerges, wet and gleaming. ww(w).ño(v)elWorm.com And the world stops entirely. White. Scales shimmer pure, unmarked white, gleaming like moonstone in the silver light. Not

green—nothing like the green shell that deceived me for months. Not the dark scales of Aeloris sea dragons. Not mountain blue like my family’s ancestral beasts. White. I know the legends. Everyone knows them—whispered stories of dragons that appear only in times of great need, creatures most riders never see in a lifetime. Myths told to children, dismissed by scholars, coveted by the powerful. Wars have been fought over less. I just never believed I’d be holding one in my own two hands. “The shell was green,” I breathe, staring at the impossible creature before me. “How—” “Shells lie.” Aspis lifts her head, golden eyes meeting mine with ancient knowing. Far older than any hatchling should be. Far wiser than her tiny form suggests. “I chose you before you ever touched my egg. I felt your pain across mountains and seas, and I came.” “But a white dragon—they’ll know. They’ll ask questions. They’ll demand answers about where you came from, what you are, how I—”

“Yes. They will.” The simplicity of it grounds me. She knows. She’s always known what this would mean, what danger it would bring. And she chose me anyway. Aspis climbs into my lap, her scales cool and smooth against my bare skin. She presses her small body against my chest, and I feel her heartbeat syncing with mine—two rhythms becoming one. The bond snaps fully into place. Not connection—transformation. Power floods through me like nothing I’ve ever felt, like lightning channeled through my veins. Raw strength pours into my limbs until my muscles ache with the force of it. My senses sharpen beyond anything natural—I hear waves crashing against rocks I can’t see, smell salt and pine from miles distant, feel the vibration of crabs burrowing beneath sand ten feet away. The world expands around me, vast and overwhelming in its sudden clarity. I gasp, clutching her tighter. Too much. It’s all too much, rushing in at once like a dam breaking, and I’m going to shatter beneath the weight of it—“Breathe with me.” Her voice anchors me through the chaos. I force myself to match her rhythm—slow, steady, ancient as tides pulling at the shore. The overwhelming flood recedes slightly. Still immense, still terrifying, but no longer drowning me. The moonlight seems brighter now. Different. Wrong somehow, though I can’t explain why. I look up at the silver glow bathing the beach, and the light... responds. Bends toward me like a living thing recognizing its master after a long absence. I raise my hand without thinking. Light coalesces in my palm. Bright. Warm. Impossible. Moonlight pools between my fingers like water, like silk, like nothing that should exist in any world I know. I turn my hand, and the light turns with it, obedient and eager. “What is this?” My voice shakes with wonder and fear. “What am I doing?” “What white dragons give their riders. What you were always meant to have.” I stare at the light cupped in my hand, tears streaming down my face. All those years believing I was worthless. All those years my family convinced me no dragon would ever choose someone broken like me. All those nights crying alone in my chambers, believing their poison. They were wrong. They were always, always wrong. “We need to hide this.” I’m thinking clearly now despite the tears, despite the wonder threatening to overwhelm me. “A

white dragon in enemy territory—Draven will—”“Yes.” Aspis presses closer against my heart. “But not tonight. Tonight, we have this moment. Just us.” I hold her close, watching moonlight dance between my fingers, feeling power hum through my veins like music. Tomorrow brings the final trial. Tomorrow brings danger and questions and consequences I can’t predict. But right now, in this hidden cove beneath a silver moon, I am finally complete. I’m still trembling with new power, watching light bend and twist at my will like an obedient thing, when a voice cuts through the darkness behind me. “That’s not a sea dragon.” I spin toward the sound, heart stopping cold in my chest. Draven stands at the cove’s edge, silhouetted against moonlit cliffs. His dragon Khaira looms behind him, ancient eyes gleaming with something that might be recognition. Or hunger. Or both. He’s seen everything. 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 — 27

Jan 20, 2026 [Draven’s POV] I stare at Evelyn huddled in the moonlight, unable to process what I’m seeing. She cradles a hatchling whose pale scales catch the silver light like moonstone, gleaming impossibly bright against the dark sand. That’s not a sea dragon. Not even close to any breed native to Aeloris. Every dragon I’ve encountered pales against what sits before me. The creature is white. Pure, unmarked white. The rarest of all dragonkind—creatures most riders only know from ancient texts and half-believed legends whispered through countless generations. The implications crash over me like a wave breaking against the cliffs. She smuggled this egg from somewhere else entirely. Brought it into my territory under my very nose. The crime is punishable by death under every house law I know. “Where did you get this?” My voice comes out harsher than I intend, sharp as a blade in the quiet night. “Answer me now, Evelyn.” She clutches the hatchling tighter against her chest, clearly expecting execution. Her whole body trembles with fear, yet she doesn’t release the small creature. “It’s mine.” Her chin lifts with fragile defiance. “It was always mine. From the very beginning, this dragon belonged to me.” “That’s not an answer. I need specifics, not sentiments. Where did you acquire a white dragon egg? They don’t simply appear in the wild.” She hesitates, and I watch her weighing options. Fear flickers across her features,

followed by something harder—determination settling like armor. “I’m from a small settlement on the neutral territories,” she begins, voice shaking but steady. “A place with no house loyalty, no powerful connections. Just people surviving together.” “Go on. I want the full story, not fragments.” “I found the egg myself. In the wild, in a cave no one else dared to enter. The mountains there are dangerous—most people avoid them entirely.” “And yet you didn’t.” “I had nothing to lose.” Her jaw tightens with visible emotion. “But when word spread about what I’d found, the elders decided differently. A white dragon was too valuable for someone like me.” “Someone like you?” “A nobody. An orphan with no family, no status, no connections worth mentioning.” Her voice turns bitter with old pain. “They wanted to use it for political leverage—to trade it to a major house for protection and resources they desperately needed.” Her words carry the bitter taste of betrayal. I know that flavor intimately. “They were going to give it to someone more ‘suitable,’” she continues, hands tightening around the hatchling. “Someone with connections. Someone with status. Someone who mattered to them.” “And you disagreed with their assessment.” “I took back what was rightfully mine and ran.” Her eyes meet mine, blazing with fierce defiance despite her tears. “I refused to let them steal what I’d claimed. What had already chosen me before anyone else even knew it existed.” “She speaks truth,” Khaira rumbles in my mind, her ancient voice weighted with absolute certainty. “The bond is genuine—older than any theft could ever be. I can feel it resonating between them like a chord struck true.” I kneel beside Evelyn, studying the hatchling more closely. The creature’s golden eyes meet mine without fear, steady and knowing in ways that unnerve me. “This bond was not forced or manufactured,” Khaira continues. “It was born of mutual choice. The dragon claimed her long before she ever touched the shell.” The hatchling tilts its head, regarding me with intelligence far beyond its size. Its scales shimmer in the moonlight, casting prismatic shadows across the sand. “A white dragon,” I murmur, still struggling to accept what’s before me. “Do you understand what this means? Do you comprehend even a fraction of the magnitude of what you’ve brought into my territory?” “I understand enough.” www.novelworm.com “Houses have gone to war over far less than this. Entire territories have been destroyed for possessing one of these creatures. People have murdered their own blood relatives for the chance to claim them.” “I know what white dragons mean to the powerful.” Her voice cracks slightly. “That’s exactly why I ran. Why I keep running.”

“Yet you came here. Into the territory of a house known for ruthlessness.” “Does it matter where I came from?” Tears streak her cheeks now, silver tracks gleaming in the moonlight. “The egg chose me. I chose it. We belong to each other in ways your laws and traditions cannot intervene with.” “My laws exist for reasons.” “And I’ve broken them. I know that perfectly well.” She swallows hard, the hatchling pressing closer against her chest. “Please—let me just be no one a little longer.” The plea strikes something in my chest I’d rather not examine.

She's asking for time. For mercy. For the chance to remain invisible in a world that would destroy her for what she possesses. "She deserves that chance," Khaira murmurs through our bond with unusual gentleness. "She has fought harder than most to simply survive another day. Do not crush that spirit now—not when she's come so far." I should press harder. Every instinct honed by years of leadership demands I extract more information. Her story has gaps—convenient omissions that my tactical mind catalogs automatically. The neutral territories. A convenient origin impossible to verify quickly. No names, no specific locations, nothing I can confirm before tomorrow's dawn. She could be lying. Could be a spy sent to infiltrate my house with a weapon of unimaginable value. Could be the opening move in a carefully orchestrated plan to destroy everything I've built from the ground up. But Khaira senses truth, and my dragon's instincts have rarely failed in matters this significant. Instead of pressing, I find myself saying words that surprise us both. "The tournament continues tomorrow." I rise to my feet, looking down at her huddled form. "The final trial decides everything for the competitors." "I know. I've prepared for it." "Win, and we'll discuss what comes next. Your dragon, your secrets, your future—all of it. We'll find a way forward together." Her eyes widen with shock. "You're not going to kill me? Not going to announce what I've brought here?" "That depends entirely on your performance tomorrow." "And if I lose?" I hold her gaze, making certain she understands every word. "Lose, and you'll be dead by the next sunrise. Not by my hand necessarily—but Venna will ensure you don't survive to see another day." She absorbs this with the same fierce determination I've come to expect. No pleading. No bargaining. Just acceptance of the stakes. "Then I won't lose." "See that you don't." I turn toward the cliffs where Khaira waits, her massive form silhouetted against the stars. "Hide that creature well tonight. Tell no one what happened here." "Wait." Her voice stops me mid-step. "Why are you helping me? You have every reason to expose this. To use it against me." I pause, considering the question more carefully than she might expect. "Perhaps I'm tired of watching people destroy beautiful things simply because they can't possess them themselves." I glance back at her over my shoulder, meeting those fierce blue eyes. "Perhaps I see something worth protecting in you." "That's not an answer either." Despite everything, I almost smile. "No. It isn't." I motion her to follow me together with her impossible dragon, walking toward Khaira with questions burning in my chest. Tomorrow will bring answers—or it will bring death. Either way, the waiting ends soon.

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First Chosen by the Dragon

Dreams Beyond Broken Wings — 28

Jan 21, 2026[Evelyn's POV]The morning sun blazes across the arena as I step onto the packed earth. Aspis hums through our bond from Draven's quarters, her warmth pulsing through my veins. "I feel your heartbeat," she whispers. "It races like thunder. Breathe, Evelyn. Slow and steady." "I'm trying," I respond silently. "Everything feels different today. My body doesn't feel like my own anymore. There's so much power coiling through my muscles. It's almost overwhelming." "It is yours. The strength flowing through you—that is my gift. You will learn to control it in time." "What if I can't? What if I hurt someone badly out there? What if they see what I've become?" The panic seeps into my inner voice. "You won't hurt anyone who doesn't deserve it. Trust yourself. Trust what we share together." Her voice soothes my hysteria. I flex my fingers, marveling at the unfamiliar strength. My senses have sharpened overnight—colors brighter, sounds crisper. "Territorial Combat," Xavier announces, his voice carrying across the assembled crowd. "Defend your ground. Capture others. The top three competitors earn Junior Rider status and the right to seek dragon eggs from our mountain nests." Three spots. Eight competitors. Five of us won't advance. "You look different today, houseless." The voice comes from my left. The man who snatched Khaira's scale on the cliffs smirks at me with familiar arrogance. "Sleep well? You'll need all your strength for what's coming." "Well enough. You look nervous though. Afraid I might actually challenge you today?" "Challenge me?" He laughs. "I've trained on this ground for years. You're nothing but a lucky survivor. Today that luck runs dry, houseless." "Then prove it when the horn sounds. Show everyone what home-territory advantage really means." "Bold words from someone who scraped through every trial by the skin of her teeth." The self-assured look on his face makes him almost ugly. "Keep talking. We'll see who's still standing when the dust settles." "His taunts mean nothing," Aspis murmurs through our bond. "Focus on what you feel inside. The power is yours now." "I know. I just hate his smug face so much." "Then wipe that expression away. Show him what we've become together." Xavier raises his horn. "Begin!" The sound pierces the morning air. I move before thought can slow me down, legs carrying me toward the eastern wall with surprising speed. The arena sprawls before us—stone walls, elevated platforms, narrow passages. The first competitor finds me near the stone arch—a woman with braided dark hair and a confident stance. "Surrender now," she calls out. "Save yourself the humiliation of losing publicly." "I don't think so. You'll have to earn this victory." Her sword whistles through air where my throat was a heartbeat before. I duck and counter with instinct I didn't know I possessed, my fist connecting with her solar plexus. She doubles over with a grunt. "Yield," I demand, blade at her throat. "Say it now." "I yield." Her eyes widen with shock.

“How did you move so fast? That’s not possible.” “Apparently I’m full of surprises. Better luck next time.” *Ww(w).novelwOrM.(c)om* The horn sounds her elimination as I move deeper into the maze. “What’s happening?” Aspis asks through our bond. “I feel your adrenaline surging through the connection.” “One down. Four remain. Including the arrogant one from the cliffs.” I inform her, while keeping track for myself. “Be careful. Don’t let anger make you reckless out there.” There’s more worry in her voice than my family showed me ever. “I won’t be reckless. But I’m going to enjoy beating him.” I find the second competitor near the northern wall— younger than me, moving cautiously with his weapon raised. “You’re the houseless one,” he says, circling warily. “They say you barely survived the gauntlet yesterday. That you’re hiding something.” “They say a lot of things. Most of it wrong. Are we going to fight or trade gossip?” “I don’t want to fight you,” he admits, grip tightening on his sword. “I just need to place in the top three. My family expects me to advance.” “Then yield now. Walk away with your dignity. There’s no shame in knowing when you’re outmatched.” *wWw.noV@lWOrM.côm* He shakes his head firmly. “I can’t. Not without trying first.” “Then we fight. No hard feelings either way.” “No hard feelings,” he agrees grimly, and attacks. The fight lasts less than a minute. He’s skilled but predictable, and he yields with pride.

“You fought well.” I extend my hand towards him. He grabs it and hauls himself up. “Not well enough.” He smiles. As he promised. No hard feelings. The horn sounds his elimination. *wWw.noV@lWOrM.côm* “Two down,” I tell Aspis silently. “I feel your confidence growing. Good. Channel it into your movements.” Horns sound across the arena—one elimination, then another. The competition is thinning fast. The arrogant man stands on the elevated platform at the heart of the arena, arms crossed, smirk firmly in place. He’s already claimed a spot among the final competitors. “Finally!” He spreads his arms wide as I approach. “I was beginning to think you’d run away like a coward. Wouldn’t blame you, really.” “I’m still here. Still standing. Still fighting.” “Not for long.” He draws his blade with practiced ease. “You got lucky on the cliffs. Lucky in the gauntlet. Today that luck dies permanently.” “Does it? Funny—I was thinking the exact same thing about you.” “Big talk from a houseless nobody. Let’s see if you can back it up.” He jerks his chin, a challenge, a ‘try me.’ So I do. “Then stop talking and fight.” He lunges without warning—fast, brutal, confident. The strike should have opened my shoulder. But I’m not where he expects me to be. “Now,” Aspis whispers, and I reach for the light instinctively. Sunlight curls around my arms like living armor, bright and blinding. He stumbles back with a cry, throwing up his hand to shield his eyes from the impossible glow. “What the—” His confident smirk vanishes completely. “What are you? What kind of trick is this?” “No trick. Just me. Just what I’ve become.” I answer with movement—faster than should be humanly possible. My blade finds openings he didn’t know existed. “Stay still!” he snarls, fear replacing arrogance. “How are you doing this? It’s not natural!” “Nothing about this place is natural. Haven’t you noticed?” He tries to rally, swinging his sword in a

desperate arc. But I'm already inside his guard. Each strike lands harder than the last. He crashes to his knees, blade clattering across the platform. Blood streams from his split lip. "Yield," I demand. My voice sounds strange—resonant with power I'm still learning to control. "I yield." The words come out broken, humiliated. "I yield, damn you. Are you satisfied now?" "Not particularly. But it'll do." Silence crashes over the arena. I stand over my defeated opponent, chest heaving, the light slowly fading from my arms. The crowd stares in disbelief. Draven's voice cuts through the quiet. "The tournament concludes. Evelyn claims first place." Stunned silence stretches uncomfortably. Then someone claps—a single pair of hands, then another. Reluctant approval rippling through the crowd. "How did she do that?" someone whispers loudly. "She was barely surviving yesterday. What changed?" "Did you see the light around her arms? That's impossible. That's not natural." "She's hiding something. Has to be. Nobody changes like that overnight." "They wonder," Aspis says through our bond. "Let them. Mystery protects us both." "Venna doesn't wonder. She calculates. I can see it in her eyes." "That one is dangerous. More dangerous than anyone you faced today. Be careful, Evelyn." "I know. I can feel her hatred burning from here." I look around subtly, trying to spot her. I force myself to stand tall despite trembling legs. Victory tastes strange—half triumph, half terror at what I've revealed. Across the arena, Venna watches with narrowed eyes. Her cold smile spreads slowly, deliberately, like a predator spotting prey. The tournament is over. But watching that smile, I understand with sudden clarity—the real fight hasn't even begun.

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First Chosen by the Dragon

8-10 minutes

Dreams Beyond Broken Wings — 29

Jan 21, 2026
The courtyard transforms into something sacred as twilight descends. Torches flicker along ancient stone walls, casting shadows across gathered faces. The marking ceremony awaits. "You did well today," Mira says, squeezing my arm warmly. "Better than well. You were absolutely magnificent out there in the arena." "Thanks to luck and desperation," I reply, scanning the crowd carefully. "Mostly desperation, if I'm being completely honest about things." "Don't diminish what you accomplished," Finn adds,

appearing at my other side with a grin. “Half these people couldn’t believe their eyes watching you. You’ve earned your place here fairly.” “Have I though?” I gesture toward where Venna stands among senior warriors. “She doesn’t seem convinced at all. Look at how she’s watching me—like prey she’s already caught.” “Venna’s always planning something terrible,” Mira admits quietly, glancing over nervously. “But the tournament is over now. Even she has to accept the results eventually, doesn’t she?” “She won’t.” My voice comes out steadier than I feel inside. “Draven warned me this was coming. After the ceremony, she’ll invoke her right to challenge me formally.” Mira’s face pales visibly at my words. “He told you beforehand? And you still competed anyway, knowing what awaited you?” “What choice did I have? Run away and prove I’m the coward she thinks I am? I’d rather fight.” “Steady,” Aspis murmurs through our bond, her voice warm and reassuring in my mind. “Your heart races too fast. Remember what we practiced together. Breathe slowly and deeply.” “I’m trying,” I respond silently. “It’s harder when she’s staring at me like that constantly.” “Then don’t look at her. Focus on me instead. On our connection. On what we share together.” Finn’s expression grows deadly serious now. “I’ve known Venna longer than either of you. She doesn’t fight fair—never has. I’ve seen what she does to rivals who embarrass her publicly.” “What does she do to them?” I ask, though I already suspect the answer. “They disappear. Or wish they had afterward.” He meets my eyes with grim intensity. “Whatever happens tonight, don’t hold back. She certainly won’t show any restraint.” “I understand. Thank you for the warning, Finn.” Draven emerges from the main hall, his presence commanding immediate attention from everyone gathered. The crowd parts before him like water. Khaira’s shadow passes overhead, the great black dragon settling on the rooftop. Our eyes meet briefly across the courtyard. He knows what I’m hiding in his quarters right now. He knows exactly what I am. The only question remaining is whether I’m worth the considerable risk of keeping. “Tonight we gather to welcome those who proved themselves worthy,” Draven announces formally. “The marking ceremony begins now.” My heart hammers against my ribs painfully. This is the moment everything changes forever. “She’s moving,” Aspis warns urgently. “I feel your tension spiking through our bond. The challenge comes now, exactly as we expected.” “I know. I’m as ready as I’ll ever be.” “Are you truly ready?” “No. But I’ll pretend convincingly enough.” Venna breaks from the crowd, boots striking stone with deliberate menacing purpose. Firelight transforms her smile into something cruel and sharp. “Wait.” Her voice cuts through ceremonial silence like a blade. “Before we proceed, I invoke the ancient right of challenge against this outsider.” Shocked murmurs ripple through the assembly. Warriors exchange startled glances, hands drifting toward sword hilts instinctively. “The houseless woman has not proven herself worthy to stand among us,” Venna declares loudly. “I challenge her to single combat—let her defend her place or be cast out as the pretender she truly is.” I force my breathing to stay even and controlled. This was always coming inevitably. Draven warned me clearly. I prepared mentally for this exact moment. It

doesn't get any easier, though. "The challenge is valid under our laws," Draven announces coldly. "Combat will proceed as tradition demands." "This is wrong, brother," Riven protests, stepping forward boldly. Gratitude warms my chest, even if I know it's fruitless. "She won the tournament by your own judgment—" Draven silences him with a single sharp look. "She earned her place in the tournament. Now she earns her place in this house through blood. That is our way." "www.ovelworm.c@M" "But she already proved her worth out there! Why must she face death again after everything?"

"Enough." Draven's command allows no argument whatsoever. "The challenge stands as spoken." "Traditions can be wrong," Riven mutters bitterly, but steps back reluctantly, knowing further protest is useless. I search Draven's face for any sign of concern. Nothing shows—but I remember what he said on the beach that night. Win, and we'll discuss what comes next. Lose, and you'll be dead by sunrise. He's not testing me to discover my secret anymore. He already knows everything. This is about whether I deserve to keep breathing. www.NoVel(w)orm.c@m Venna draws her blade with a predator's satisfied smile. "Don't worry, little stray. I'll make it quick for you." "How generous of you," I reply, finding my voice. "Should I thank you for such unexpected kindness?" "You should thank me for ending your pathetic existence cleanly. Others wouldn't be this merciful toward a houseless pretender." "Mercy? Is that what you call hunting the weak? I thought warriors preferred worthy opponents instead." There's an edge to my smile that seems to piss her off. Her eyes narrow dangerously at my words. "Careful with that sharp tongue. You won't need it much longer anyway." "Big words from someone Draven had to stop the first time around. Couldn't handle me without his permission back then?" Gasps ripple through the watching crowd. Venna's jaw tightens with barely contained fury at the insult. "Good," Aspis growls fiercely. "Make her angry. Angry opponents make fatal mistakes." The crowd presses back urgently, forming a wide ring around us. No one will intervene now. This is Aeloris—blood and steel and ancient tradition. I reach for my bond, deep inside where Aspis waits for me. Her presence surges forward immediately, strength flooding through my veins like molten silver fire. "Let them see," she whispers fiercely. "What we are together. What we've become." Moonlight responds to my desperate call, coiling around my hands like living silver light. Torchlight dims as something brighter awakens—pale luminescence gathering at my fingertips. Venna's confident stride falters noticeably. Her eyes widen at the glow building around me. "What kind of trick is this?" she demands sharply. "What secrets have you been hiding from us?" "No tricks. Just truth you weren't expecting to find tonight." "You think parlor magic will save you? Light doesn't stop sharp steel, girl." She spits. I smile even wider. "Then come find out if that's all this truly is. I'm waiting right here for you." I draw my blade smoothly, feeling its weight settle perfectly in my grip. Power thrums through every fiber. I am no longer the desperate survivor scraping through trials by luck. "Trust yourself," Aspis murmurs encouragingly. "Trust

what we share. I cannot fight for you—but I can give you strength.”“And no,” I say quietly, meeting Venna’s predator gaze with my own steady stare. “You won’t make this quick.”The words carry certainty I didn’t know I possessed. Moonlight coils tighter, brighter, promising violence.Venna’s smile sharpens with anticipation. Her blade rises into guard. Her weight shifts forward, ready to strike.I mirror her stance perfectly, letting instinct merge with borrowed strength. Whatever comes next, I won’t face it alone anymore.The courtyard falls utterly silent around us. Two women face each other in flickering torchlight, blades gleaming.And somewhere in Draven’s quarters, hidden and waiting, a white dragon purrs with fierce anticipation—feeling everything I feel, sharing every heartbeat, bound to me in ways no one here truly understands.Not yet. But soon they will.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 — 30

Jan 20, 2026Venna strikes first. Her blade cuts through air where my throat was a heartbeat before. I twist away on pure instinct, feeling steel whisper past my skin.She follows with a savage downward slash. I catch it on my blade—the impact shudders through my arms, nearly buckling my knees. Before I can recover, she spins and drives her elbow into my ribs.Pain explodes through my side. I stumble backward, gasping, tasting copper.“Too slow, little stray.” Venna advances with predator grace. “Your tournament tricks won’t save you against a real warrior.”I circle away, buying precious seconds to breathe. She’s faster than anyone I faced in the trials. Every movement flows like water—economical, deadly, perfected through years of training.“She’s testing you,” Aspis whispers urgently. “Looking for weaknesses. Don’t give her any.”Venna lunges again. I parry desperately—once, twice, three times. Each clash drives me backward. My arms scream with effort. Her technique is flawless, her strength overwhelming. www.welldorm.com“I watched your tournament fights,” she says, pressing relentlessly. “Sloppy footwork. Overextended lunges. You survived on luck and strange tricks.”“Luck got me this far,” I manage between ragged breaths. “How far has your perfect technique gotten you?”Her eyes narrow. She feints left, then drives her blade toward my heart with killing speed. I throw myself sideways—too slow. Steel bites my

shoulder, drawing a hot line of blood. The crowd gasps. I clamp down on the cry building in my throat. "First blood," Venna announces coldly. "Much more to come." "Reach for me," Aspis urges. "Let our connection strengthen you." I pull desperately on our bond. Power floods through me like liquid moonlight, dulling the shoulder pain, sharpening my senses. Light gathers at my fingertips—pale silver, strange and beautiful. Venna's confident stride falters. "That light again. What sorcery is this, houseless?" "No sorcery. Just something you never expected from someone like me." "The color is wrong," someone in the crowd murmurs. "Bond-light is gold or red. What makes hers silver like that?" "Impossible," another whispers. "Unless—no, that's just a legend." I don't have time to wonder what they mean. Venna attacks with renewed fury, blade singing through torchlight. But now I can track her movements—anticipate where she'll strike before she commits. I catch her blade on mine and shove. She staggers back a single step, surprise flickering across her features. "Lucky," she snarls. "Prove it." She comes at me again—a whirlwind of steel and rage. I block the first strike. Deflect the second. The third catches my forearm, drawing another line of blood. But I'm still standing. Still fighting. I thrust my palm forward, releasing blinding luminescence directly into her face. Venna staggers backward with a curse, eyes streaming. Now I drive forward before she can recover. My blade slashes across her thigh—a deep cut that sprays crimson across the stones. She twists away with a howl of pain, but I'm already following—pressing every advantage. Our blades crash together. Once. Twice. She blocks my strikes desperately now, all grace abandoned. Blood runs down her leg, pooling beneath her boots. Her movements slow. "What are you?" she demands, circling like a wounded predator. "No unbonded warrior moves like this!" "Maybe I'm exactly what you feared from the beginning." I press forward. "Someone worthy of standing among you." "Liar!" She lunges with killing intent, blade aimed at my heart. Time stretches impossibly. I see every detail—her extended arm, her exposed flank, the desperate fury in her eyes. Moonlight coils around my forearm like living armor. Her blade deflects harmlessly against the silver glow. I spin inside her guard, driving my elbow into her wounded thigh. Venna screams. Her leg buckles. She crashes to one knee. I kick the blade from her hand. It clatters across stone, impossibly loud in the sudden silence. Before she can rise, I'm behind her. My blade presses against her throat. Silver light dances along the steel—a promise of violence barely contained. "Yield," I command quietly. The courtyard holds its breath. Every eye watches. Torchlight flickers across frozen faces.

"This isn't possible," Venna whispers hoarsely. "You're nothing. Nobody. How could you defeat me?" "I trained in the shadows while you trained in the sunlight." I let the blade kiss her skin just enough to draw a bead of blood. "I learned to survive when dying was easier. That's how I beat you." "The light, that silver... It's not natural." "Yield, Venna. Or don't yield and die here. I won't ask again." Silence stretches between us. Her muscles coil, calculating whether

she can somehow escape. I let more light gather along my blade. Silver luminescence intensifies, casting strange shadows across her face. "I yield," she grinds out bitterly. "Are you satisfied now, houseless?" "What I wanted was to be left alone." I lower my blade slowly. "You chose this fight. Remember that." "The challenge is satisfied!" Draven's voice rings across the courtyard. "Evelyn has earned her place through blood and steel!" Venna stumbles away, hand pressed to her bleeding thigh. "This isn't over," she hisses. "You've made a dangerous enemy tonight." "I already had plenty. One more won't change anything." She stalks toward the healers without looking back. The crowd parts silently before her. "You did it," Aspis breathes, exhaustion threading through our bond. "We did it together." "Barely. I felt how much that cost you." "Worth every moment. You're alive. That's what matters." Draven approaches as warriors offer grudging congratulations. Something fierce burns in his dark eyes—pride, maybe, or something more complicated. "The marking ceremony continues," he announces. "Evelyn, step forward." I walk toward him on trembling legs. Blood drips from my shoulder and forearm. Every muscle aches. But I'm alive. "By blood spilled and victory claimed," Draven intones, "I mark you as one of us." He places his palm over my heart. Heat blooms beneath his touch—not just power transferring, but something deeper that makes my breath catch. "Do you accept this mark willingly?" "I accept," I whisper. "Willingly and completely." "Then you are bound to this house." His voice drops lower, intimate. "Bound to me." "Is that supposed to frighten me?" "It should." Something dangerous flickers in his gaze. "Many find that burden too heavy." "I've carried heavier." Our eyes meet and hold. His breath catches almost imperceptibly while mine stops entirely. The moment stretches, charged with unspoken words. "Welcome home," he says quietly, voice pitched for my ears alone. "Evelyn." The way he speaks my name sends warmth cascading through me, chasing away the cold of blood loss and exhaustion. The ceremony ends with murmured blessings I barely hear. Later, I slip away to breathe. Night air cools my flushed skin while healers finish binding my wounds. I have a home now. A place where I belong. The thought feels strange and fragile, like something that might shatter if I hold it too tightly. But I know this isn't over. Somewhere beyond these walls, Cassandra plots her revenge. Questions about my strange silver light will surface soon. And Venna's hatred will fester into something far more dangerous. But when Cassandra finds me—and she will find me—I'll be ready. For now, though, I allow myself this single moment of peace. In my mind, Aspis purrs contentedly. For the first time in my life, I'm exactly where I'm supposed to be.

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