

First Chosen by the Dragon

8-9 minutes

Dreams Beyond Broken Wings — 41

[Evelyn's POV] I make it through the hall alive. That's the thought hammering through me as I clear the side door and press my back flat against stone in the service corridor. The linens are crushed against my chest, fingers locked around them, and my heart slams so hard I can feel it in my teeth. I didn't look. Didn't check whether golden hair turned in my direction, whether sharp blue eyes tracked my path across the far end of that room. I kept my head down, dark braid swinging against my cheek, and I moved—fast, controlled, a servant who belongs to the background. Every step braced for the strike that would end the pretense. It didn't come. And the absence of catastrophe feels almost worse, because now I don't know. Did Cassandra see me? Did those calculating eyes catalog the servant with the wrong walk, or did the dark hair and lowered face buy me one more day? Through the bond, Aspis erupts. Protective fury crashes through me like a wave hitting a sea wall, flooding my veins with heat that isn't mine. The dragon felt everything—the fear, the proximity, the predator at that table wearing diplomatic silk. "I felt her," Aspis snarls. "The one who hunts you. And you walked through that room like prey offering yourself to the jaw." "I had no choice. They needed servers for dinner, and refusing would have raised questions." I push off the wall and start moving, legs unsteady. "It's done. I got through." "Your heart is trying to crack your ribs. Come to me—underground, where she cannot reach you." "And then what? You burn down the great hall during a diplomatic dinner?" I take the stairs two at a time. "That would certainly solve the identity problem." I don't go to Aspis. I need Draven—someone who thinks in strategy instead of fire. The passage to his study is second nature, and I'm through the hidden door before my pulse settles. He's standing over the desk with maps beneath his hands, candlelight cutting hard shadows across his face. He looks up—not startled, never startled—and his eyes read me in a single sweep. Whatever he sees makes his body lock into that dangerous stillness. "I crossed the hall during dinner service," I say, closing the door and leaning against it. "Everyone was there. Fifteen feet from me. I don't know if anybody saw me." His jaw tightens. "You were supposed to stay in the inner corridors." "The kitchen was short-staffed. Refusing would have raised exactly the kind of questions I can't afford." I press my palms against my eyes. "I need to leave the compound. Tonight. Eastern passage through the cliffs—fishing villages where I can disappear—" "And the patrols?" Draven cuts across me, low and flat. "My sweeps cover that

coastline every four hours. Their warriors have been mapping terrain since arrival. You'd be spotted within a mile." "The mountain route. Northern caves—" "Evelyn." My name like a door closing—firm, final, not unkind. "Aspis can't be moved. Three weeks ago she fit through the connecting passages. Now her wingspan exceeds seven feet, and the narrowest tunnel to the northern exit is less than five. You leave, you leave without your dragon." "I know what happens." Bond-sickness. Fever, disorientation, the unraveling of every nerve the bond has woven into me. "I know." Silence settles between us, heavy with everywhere I can't go. Through the bond, Aspis listens—fury banked to embers, still throwing heat against my ribs. "So I stay," I say, and the words taste like iron. "Same halls as them, one wrong corridor from everything ending." "You stay visible," Draven says, and I stare because that sounds like the opposite of a plan.

He straightens from the desk. "Hiding creates absence, and absence creates questions. The delegations are trained to notice a servant disappearing from rotations during a diplomatic visit." "You want me to keep carrying linens past the people who can and will raise questions we can't afford to answer?" I bristle. "I want you shifted to inner compound duty." He doesn't bite back. "Archives under Corwin, supply management in the lower stores—areas the delegation has no reason to access. Different shift rotations. You'll exist in the records but stay invisible to anyone who doesn't know where to look." He studies me with attention that feels different from tactical assessment. "The hair helps." My hand goes to the braid. The weight still feels wrong—too dark, heavy with someone else's color. Every reflection catches me off guard, the stranger staring back dropping my stomach before memory catches up. Dark brown-black painted over silver-white in Sera's quarters night before the delegation arrived, the color that marks Mintian nobility stripped away in a basin of dark liquid. "You dyed it before they arrived," he says. Not a question. "The night before. Sera helped. The silver-white marks—" I stop. The sentence almost finished itself: every daughter of the Blue Dragon house. The truth still coiled inside my chest like a second heartbeat. "It marks where I come from. The dark hides that." Draven doesn't push on the unfinished sentence. He crosses the space between us, three strides closing the distance until candlelight catches in the dark of his eyes, until I can see the tension in his jaw, the scar curving beneath his left ear. He studies my face. Not the way he did when I first arrived—wary, cataloging threats. This is slower, deliberate, his gaze moving across my features with something like discovery. www.nóvélWOR.com I feel his attention tracing my jawline, the place where dark strands fall against my cheekbone. "You look like a different person," he says. His voice has dropped into that low register, the one that lives beneath his ribs, the one reserved for when the world narrows to the two of us. "That's the point." His gaze doesn't move. It stays on my face with a weight that presses against my skin like warm stone, like the mark on my chest when it pulses in the dark. The air thickens until silence hums with a frequency only we

can hear. Through the bond, Aspis goes quiet—not calm, watchful, the way a predator stills when the wind shifts. Draven looks away. Controlled, deliberate—a decision. He turns back to the maps, and the moment folds shut like a book closed mid-sentence. “I’ll speak with Corwin tonight. New rotation at dawn. Stay out of the western wing—that’s where the delegations are quartered.” Level, professional, and it costs him. I hear it in the roughness at the edges, the consonants cutting sharper than necessary. “Understood.” I leave through the service passage, and cool stone dark closes around me. My hands have stopped shaking. The plan is thin—shift changes, restricted corridors, dye and borrowed anonymity—but it’s structure, something to lean against when the ground tilts. His gaze follows me through the dark like a hand pressed to the small of my back. I feel it between my shoulder blades, along the nape of my neck, against the mark burning beneath my shirt. www.NoV@l@orM.Com He looked at me, and something about the looking changed—the dark hair, the sharpened angles, the woman staring back from beneath features he thought he knew. I press my palm to the mark on my chest, and its heat answers. Steady, certain, a burning that has nothing to do with magic and everything to do with the man who put it there. 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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9-11 minutes

Dreams Beyond Broken Wings — 42

[Draven’s POV] I make them wait until morning. Not long enough to insult—I am not a man who trades in petty provocations when larger ones serve better—but long enough to establish the rhythm. They arrived at dusk, took dinner with Theron while I reviewed patrol rotations two floors above, and spent their first night in the western wing without their host crossing their threshold. By the time I walk into the council chamber at half past eight, the Mintian delegation has had exactly enough time to sleep, dress, and wonder why the Lord of the Black Dragon compound considers border maps more interesting than their company. Not enough time to explore. Not enough time to map the corridors I don’t want them mapping. “You’re performing again,” Khaira observes through the bond, dry as sun-bleached bone. “The brooding entrance, the calculated delay. One day you’ll simply walk into a room like a normal

man.” “Normal men don’t rule territories.” “Normal men don’t spend twenty minutes choosing which reports to carry as props, either. And yet here we are.” The council chamber fills with grey morning light through arrow-slit windows, cutting stone into thin blades of illumination. My advisors line the eastern wall—Theron with his diplomatic smile in place, Corwin with his ledger, two senior warriors flanking the door. I hear them before I see them. Measured footsteps, expensive fabric, and beneath it the particular silence of people trained to enter rooms the way soldiers enter battlefields—assessing, cataloguing, noting exits. Cassandra comes first. She crosses the threshold with the unhurried confidence of someone who has never once doubted her welcome, and extends her hand with an elegance so practiced it borders on art. [www.NoVell\(wo\)Rm.Com](http://www.NoVell(wo)Rm.Com) “Lord Draven. The House of the Blue Dragon is honoured by your hospitality, and grateful for the welcome your steward extended in your absence last evening.” Warmth calibrated to the degree—gracious enough to charm, pointed enough to register that she noticed my absence and filed it. I take her hand. Brief, formal, correct pressure. “Lady Cassandra. Mintia’s reputation precedes you, as always. I trust the western wing met your standards.” I release her fingers and study her face—golden hair caught in a low knot, sharp blue eyes that calculate even as they sparkle, a jaw angled like a blade point. Something about the bones beneath that polished surface nags at me. A half-familiar architecture I can’t place, like a word dissolving on the tip of my tongue. The shape of her jaw. The set of her cheekbones. I have seen those angles recently, in different light, on a different face. I dismiss it. I’ve been spending too much time studying one woman’s features by candlelight, finding echoes of her everywhere. Pattern recognition overfiring, producing false positives. “Interesting,” Khaira murmurs. “You noticed something.” “I noticed expensive perfume and a politician’s handshake. Nothing remarkable.” “Liar.” But I ignore her. Behind Cassandra stands a man whose stillness reads as something other than patience. Kael Varenthis—tall, broad-shouldered, carrying himself with the quiet economy of a fighter who doesn’t advertise. His eyes sweep the room the way mine did, looking for exits and weapons, checking distances. He’s competent and dangerous. Great. We sit. Theron handles the opening courtesies—trade agreements, border markers requiring re-survey after winter storms, the bureaucratic scaffolding that keeps the Alliance functional. Cassandra performs beautifully: twenty minutes on tariff adjustments with genuine command of the figures, breeding records exchanged as standard practice, detailed questions about Khaira’s latest cycle that I deflect with practised precision. Every question earns something, even my refusals to answer. Nothing about the exchange feels wasted. Then the current shifts. “I wanted to raise a matter outside our standard agenda, if you’ll permit it.” Cassandra folds her hands on the table—a gesture of openness that is itself a kind of armor. “The question of border security.” “How your House manages displaced persons through your territory—refugees from the minor houses, asylum seekers from the neutral territories. It’s become a significant concern across the Alliance, and Mintia believes a coordinated approach serves everyone’s

interests.” She sounds perfectly distant. “We manage our borders according to our own protocols,” I say evenly. “Coordination implies oversight, and I don’t recall the Alliance charter granting Mintia authority over Black Dragon territorial policy.”

“Not authority. Partnership.” The smile doesn’t waver. “We’ve found that deserters from minor houses have been seeking shelter in rival territories with increasing frequency. Disrupting governance, creating diplomatic complications.” She waves her hand dismissively. “Several houses have reported arrivals claiming refugee status who turned out to be something else entirely—agents, provocateurs, individuals with reasons to disappear that had nothing to do with persecution. A growing problem across the Alliance, wouldn’t you say?” She tilts her head a fraction, and morning light catches her jawline at an angle that sends that nagging recognition flaring through my chest—a shape I know, a structure I’ve traced without touching. The question sits between us like a knife balanced on its point. Too specific to be casual. Too casually delivered to be anything but rehearsed. She isn’t asking about policy. She’s asking whether anyone notable has walked through my gates and failed to walk out again. *www.novelworm.com* “I’d say it depends on the house,” I answer, matching her calibrated ease. “We’ve had the occasional displaced rider seek passage. Standard processing, identity verification. Nothing that warrants a dedicated Alliance framework.” *www.novelworm.com* “No arrivals that struck you as unusual? From the neutral territories, perhaps?” Kael speaks for the first time, his voice carrying surgical precision. “Individuals whose backgrounds didn’t quite align with their stated histories?” “Unusual arrivals are rather common in a territory bordered by three neutral regions and two disputed coastlines.” I look at him pointedly. “Specificity would help, Lord Kael. Unless the question is intentionally broad.” Something passes between Cassandra and Kael—brief, practiced, choreography established long before they entered this room. She takes the thread back smoothly. “Forgive the generality. We’re casting a wide net, I’m afraid. Shall we return to the breeding records? I believe there were questions about the coastal roost expansions your house proposed last season.” The pivot is seamless. A lesser man might believe the border discussion was a tangent—idle curiosity, the kind that fills empty summit hours. I am not a lesser man. Every question she asked was a probe, and every answer I gave was a wall she’ll spend the rest of her visit trying to see over. *www.novelworm.com* The session concludes with handshakes and pleasantries. I watch Cassandra’s retreating back—the composed shoulders, the way she turns to address Kael, and that jawline. That damned jawline. “You felt it,” Khaira says. “Something about the woman. Your pulse shifted three times, and never during the trade discussions.” “She’s a skilled diplomat hiding an agenda. My pulse shifted because I was reading a threat.” “I said nothing about her jawline. You volunteered that. How telling.” I close the door. The chamber empties until only Corwin remains, his ledger balanced on one palm, his expression carrying

the particular neutrality he maintains when he suspects I'm about to complicate his afternoon. "The breeding records are in order," he begins. "Lady Cassandra's requests were standard, though her questions about roost expansion were more detailed than—" "The Blue Dragon's delegation didn't come for trade negotiations." I brace both hands against the table and look at the man who has served this House longer than I've led it. "They're hunting. They won't stop—won't negotiate, won't be reasoned with, won't accept any answer except the one they came for." My voice is more steady than my hands. "Whatever they're looking for, they consider it theirs. Their possession. Their runaway prize." "And they'll burn through every diplomatic courtesy, every protocol, every polite fiction we maintain, until they drag it back to Mintia in chains." My voice steels. Corwin's pen stops moving. He meets my eyes over the ledger, and in the silence between us, the weight of what I've said—and everything I haven't—settles like stone dust in still air.

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8-10 minutes

Dreams Beyond Broken Wings — 43

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[Evelyn's POV]The routine becomes a second skin within three days. Archives at dawn under Corwin's supervision—shelving census records, transcribing border treaties, filing correspondence untouched for decades. The old archivist values silence over conversation and competence over charm. I give him both, and he rewards me with indifference so thorough it borders on kindness. Inner wall patrols after dusk—quiet circuits along corridors the delegation has no reason to walk. Between both, the visits underground. Aspis is the size of a pony now. The growth happened in four days, her body absorbing my stress through the bond like fuel poured on a forge. The chamber that once held her comfortably has become a cage she can barely turn inside. Her wings press against opposite walls when she stretches, white scales scraping stone. When she lifts her head, her horns graze the ceiling. "I can feel the rock above me," she says through the bond as I crouch beside her on the third night, pressing my hands against her flank. "Every hour, it gets closer. Or I get bigger. The result is the same." "We'll move you to the sea caves again." I promise her. I just

need to coordinate with Draven—the delegation’s patrol patterns overlap with the eastern tunnels, and we can’t risk the passage until their sentries rotate off the cliffside watch.” I stroke the ridge above her eye, feeling muscle bunch beneath scales that radiate heat like sun-warmed stone. “Two more days. Can you hold?” “I can hold. But the holding is becoming its own kind of breaking.” Her amber eyes find mine, enormous now, flecked with gold. “You’re afraid. I taste it constantly—copper and cold water. Your fear feeds my growth, and my growth feeds your fear. We are a circle eating itself.” “That’s a charming image.” I lean my forehead against her snout, and her breath washes over me—warm, steady, smelling of stone dust and something sweeter. “I’m managing the fear. It’s everything around the fear that’s harder.” “The man helps. When you’re near him, the copper taste fades.” She nudges me gently, nearly knocking me sideways with a head now larger than my torso. “Go to him more often. For my sake, if not yours.” “Your sake. Right. How selfless of you.” I chuckle. And I can’t prove it, but I think Aspis smiles. “I am a paragon of generosity.” I leave her with a promise to return at dawn and climb back through the passage with stone dust on my knees.

On the fourth day, everything nearly ends in the archives. I’m shelving census records—routine work, the kind that lets my hands move while my mind maps escape routes—when Cassandra’s voice reaches me through the corridor outside. My body recognizes her before my brain does. Every muscle locks rigid, fingers frozen on a leather-bound ledger, breath stopping mid-draw. I drop behind the nearest shelf. My hip catches a filing crate, and I bite down hard enough to taste blood. I press myself flat against the wood with my hands shaking so badly I have to grip my own wrists. “Evelyn.” Aspis surges through the bond like a wave breaking against rock. “Your heart—what’s happening?” “She’s here. The archives. She’s coming into the archives.” The door groans open. Two sets of footsteps—the guide’s heavy boots and something lighter, more deliberate. Through the gap between shelves, I watch my sister walk into the archive chamber. Cassandra wears a blue traveling coat trimmed with silver, golden hair caught in a braid over one shoulder. She moves through the stacks with mild curiosity—eyes sweeping book spines, fingers trailing along shelf edges. The performance is flawless, casual enough to fool anyone who hasn’t spent eighteen years learning the difference between Cassandra browsing and Cassandra hunting. When she browses, her gaze drifts. When she hunts, it lands—sharp, deliberate—on every doorway, every shadow that might contain what she’s looking for. Her gaze is landing now. On the empty desk where I was sitting thirty seconds ago, the chair pushed back at an angle that says someone left in a hurry.

“The compound’s historical records are quite extensive,” the guide explains. “Lord Draven’s grandfather commissioned the archive expansion during the Third Alliance Reformation. Documents dating back nearly four centuries.” “Impressive,” Cassandra says, and her voice

slides through me like a blade drawn slowly from a sheath. “Your lord values preservation. Tell me—I’ve heard the most fascinating rumour since arriving.” She turns fully towards the man. “Something about a recent tournament? A remarkable nobody who defeated your best warrior in single combat, if the stories are to be believed.” The guide straightens with visible pride. “You’ve heard about the marking tournament. Yes, my lady. A newcomer challenged and won the senior position through the ancient rites. Quite unprecedented. Lord Draven awarded his personal mark.” “His personal mark.” Cassandra’s eyebrows lift—surprise perfectly calibrated. “To a complete stranger? Extraordinary. And this woman—is she from an allied house? Someone with that skill must have a notable lineage.” “Her background isn’t widely discussed, my lady. Houseless, as I understand it, though the circumstances are a matter for Lord Draven’s counsel.” His enthusiasm dies down a little now that Cassandra starts prodding. “Of course.” Cassandra traces a finger along a shelf edge. “Still, I’d very much like to meet her. A woman capable of defeating an elite warrior—that’s the kind of person one remembers. Perhaps you could arrange an introduction? Purely social. Warrior to warrior.” “I can certainly make the inquiry, my lady. Though she’s been assigned to inner compound duties, so her schedule may—” She cuts him off mid sentence. “No rush at all. I’m here for several more days.” Cassandra smiles—warm on the surface, surgical underneath. “These things have a way of working themselves out.” They move toward the door. Cassandra pauses at the threshold, and for one suspended heartbeat her gaze sweeps the room a final time—over the shelf I’m crouching behind, lingering on the abandoned desk—and then she turns into the corridor. The sound of her footsteps recedes like a tide pulling back from shore. WWW.nóvEIIWorm.čOml don’t move for ten minutes. I count each one—sixty seconds measured against the hammering in my chest, repeated ten times while the archive settles into silence. My hands won’t stop shaking. I press them flat against the cold stone and feel the tremors travel through my wrists, my forearms, until my whole body vibrates with the aftershock. “I’m here,” Aspis says, steady as bedrock, and the bond floods with warmth so fierce it borders on pain. “She didn’t see you. Breathe, Evelyn. Match my rhythm. In—hold—out.” I try. I match her breathing—the slow expansion of dragon lungs, the measured release—and the shaking dampens to a tremor I can almost hide. But the question is already burrowing into me, settling behind my ribs where the fear lives. Cassandra asked about the tournament winner with the precision of a woman who already knows the answer. She looked at my desk with disinterest that had already catalogued every detail. She smiled at the doorway the way she used to smile at me before saying something designed to leave a scar. Did she see me at the dinner? That night in the great hall—fifteen feet of crowded space, dark-dyed hair, head down. Did she clock the weight shift on my right leg, the old injury she gave me when we were twelve? Did she already know, standing in this archive, that the remarkable nobody is the sister she’s been hunting across the continent? I press my forehead to cold stone and let Aspis hold me through the bond, and the not-knowing burns worse than any answer ever

could. 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 — 44

[Cassandra's POV]The servant crossed the great hall at half past eight, carrying emptied wine goblets toward the service corridor. Dark hair. Head down. The stride of someone trained to be invisible—except her right leg catches weight differently than her left, a fractional hitch that pulls the hip inward before correcting. **www.novëIWoRm.com** noticed it automatically, had filed before the conscious mind decides whether the information matters. I replay the moment three times before sleep, lying in the guest chambers with the western sea wind rattling the shutters. The walk. The weight shift. The particular angle of the jaw beneath dark-dyed hair—a jawline I've studied since childhood, the way you study a lock you intend to pick. It looked like Evelyn. Moved like Evelyn. That slight favouring of the right leg, the old injury from the sparring yard when we were twelve and I proved a point she refused to learn—a signature written in bone. You can dye hair. You can change your posture, your name. You cannot change the way a healed fracture distributes weight across a joint. But then the story fractures, and the pieces refuse to fit. "Tell me about this tournament again," I say to Maren the next morning, standing at the window while my advisor sorts through briefing documents. "The one where an outsider defeated their senior warrior." Maren is efficient, discreet, and possesses the extraordinary gift of being forgettable—the kind of woman who disappears in a crowd while memorizing everything the crowd says. "The marking tournament, my lady." Maren doesn't look up from her papers. "Held roughly four months ago. A houseless woman challenged for position through ancient rites—single combat, witnessed by the full house garrison." She turns the page and continues. "She defeated the senior warrior, a woman named Venna, in what multiple sources describe as an extraordinary display. Speed beyond normal training. Reflexes that several witnesses compared to bonded-level performance." "Bonded-level," I repeat, letting the words sit in my mouth like something sour. "And Lord Draven awarded his personal mark to this woman. A houseless nobody who appeared from nowhere and fights like a dragon rider." "That's the account, my lady. Draven's

mark is not given lightly—it signifies personal loyalty, a direct oath between warrior and lord. In this house’s history, fewer than a dozen have carried it.” She replies, her voice monotonous. I turn from the window. “The servant at dinner—dark hair, right leg injury, working the main hall during the reception. And the tournament winner—bonded-level speed, personal mark from the lord, no known lineage. You’re suggesting these could be the same person?” “I’m not suggesting anything, my lady. I’m presenting the information as gathered.” She still doesn’t look up. “Good. Because they can’t be the same person.” I cross to the desk and sit, folding my hands. “I know my sister, Maren. Every load-bearing wall, every structural weakness, every point where pressure produces collapse.” My voice carries the knowledge that I know in my bones. “Evelyn is soft. She cried when Father raised his voice. She flinched when I walked into a room. The idea that she could defeat an elite warrior in single combat is absurd.” Maren sets down her papers and meets my eyes with careful neutrality. “Then the resemblance at dinner is coincidence?” “Or it’s not coincidence, and Evelyn is here—but she’s exactly what she appears to be. A servant. Scrubbing floors, carrying trays, surviving on scraps of someone else’s mercy.” I lean back. “That version makes sense. That is the Evelyn I know—running, hiding, attaching herself to whoever offers protection.” “And if you’re wrong?” The question hangs between us. I let it hang for precisely the length of time that communicates, I’ve considered it and dismissed it. [www.NoVellw\(0\)rM.c0m](http://www.NoVellw(0)rM.c0m) Then I smile. “I didn’t survive this long by ignoring loose threads. Start pulling—quietly. I want the compound layout mapped in detail. I want every piece of available intelligence on the tournament winner. And I want a list of every new arrival in this household within the past year, cross-referenced against the timeline we need.”

“Discreetly?” [www.NoVellw\(0\)rM.c0m](http://www.NoVellw(0)rM.c0m) “As if your life depends on it, because our diplomatic position here certainly does.” Maren gathers her papers and leaves without another word. I sit with the silence and let my mind run its calculations—probability trees branching and pruning, the mathematics of identity and motive that Father taught me before I could ride. The courtyard calls me after midday. I walk the perimeter as if stretching my legs, eyes mapping defensive positions and patrol routes while my face projects pleasant curiosity. That’s when I see her—not Evelyn. The other thread. Venna stands at the edge of the training yard, watching junior warriors drill with the rigid attention of a commander forced to observe what she can no longer lead. Her spine is a blade. Her arms are crossed. Every line of her body speaks the language of a soldier displaced and refusing to accept it, holding formation because discipline is all she has left. I know that posture. I’ve manufactured it in others a dozen times—the coiled resentment of someone whose competence couldn’t prevent their replacement. Grief makes people unpredictable. Anger makes them sloppy. But resentment makes them precise, patient, and willing to act against their own interests as long as the action wounds the person they blame. I adjust my path. “Forgive the intrusion.” I stop beside

her at the railing, maintaining the exact distance that communicates respect between equals. “Lady Cassandra of House Mintia. I don’t believe we’ve been introduced, though I’ve heard your name spoken with considerable regard since arriving.” Venna’s eyes cut to me—dark, wary, trained. She sees a diplomat making courtyard conversation. She doesn’t see the architecture beneath it. “Venna. Senior warrior of this house.” A pause. Then, with a bitterness she can’t quite suppress: “Former senior warrior.” “Ah.” I let the syllable carry weight—recognition, understanding, the warmth of someone who comprehends what that correction costs. “Yes. I heard about the tournament. A remarkable outcome, by all accounts.” I watch the junior warriors execute a formation shift, giving Venna the courtesy of not looking at her while the wound breathes. “I understand you lost your position to an outsider. That must be difficult—truly difficult—for someone of your caliber.” Venna’s jaw tightens. She doesn’t respond immediately, and the silence tells me everything I need. A woman at peace with her circumstances would deflect or dismiss. Venna does neither. She stands there absorbing the words the way parched earth absorbs rain—desperately, involuntarily, hating the need even as it pulls the water down. [www.W.N\(O\)orM.co\(m\)](http://www.W.N(O)orM.co(m)) “Positions are earned,” she says finally, each word measured. “That is house law.” “Of course.” I incline my head with perfect grace. “House law is what separates civilization from chaos. I only meant that skill like yours doesn’t diminish because a single contest went badly. These things have a way of correcting themselves, in my experience. Talent and loyalty always surface eventually.” I offer a small, warm smile—the kind I’ve practiced until it reaches my eyes—and step away from the railing. “It was a pleasure, Venna. I hope we’ll have another opportunity to speak again.” I leave without looking back. The seed is planted, and seeds don’t need supervision—they need darkness and pressure and time, and Venna has all three in abundance. She won’t come to me today or tomorrow. But when the resentment reaches the point where silence becomes unbearable, she’ll remember the foreign diplomat who saw what her own lord apparently couldn’t—a warrior who deserved better. And then she’ll talk.

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7-9 minutes

Dreams Beyond Broken Wings — 45

[Evelyn's POV] Day six, and the bond is drowning me. Not the slow ache I've learned to carry like a second heartbeat—this is a flood, black water pouring through every seam in my composure. Aspis's distress hits in waves that buckle my knees at unexpected moments: shelving a ledger in the archives, standing still while a Blue Dragon's delegate passes close enough to brush my sleeve. Each time the panic crests, I grip whatever surface is nearest and ride it out, jaw locked, breath measured. She is chest-high now, bulky. Wings that stretched in the first hiding chamber now crumple against walls that were spacious weeks ago, folding at angles that spike pain through the bond. She snaps at shadows—not hunting. Flinching. The darkness that once cradled her has become a cage, and the cage shrinks by the hour. I feel her claws scraping stone in desperate drags, and when I close my eyes I see what she sees: raw grooves in the rock, streaked with blood where her claws have torn past the quick. "I can't breathe," she tells me on the sixth morning, and the words are small in a way that Aspis has never been small. "The walls are touching me, Evelyn. They're pressing in and I can't make them stop." "I know. Hold on. Just hold on a little longer." I beg her. "You keep saying that. How much longer is longer?" I don't answer, because the truth would break something in her that I can't afford to let break. Instead I press my forehead against the archive wall and breathe for both of us while the delegation's laughter drifts through the corridor outside like smoke from someone else's fire. Riven finds me at dusk. He appears in the service passage with salt on his boots and sand in his hair, carrying the energy of a man who has spent the afternoon crawling through sea caves. "Found something," he says, voice low enough that the stone swallows it. "Deeper in the network, past the tidal shelf. A chamber—triple the size of what she's in now. Natural arch open to the sky above the waterline, rock formations blocking any sightline from the compound." "How deep?" "Deep enough that the passage narrows before it opens. She'll fit, but barely." He meets my eyes. "It has to be tonight, Evelyn. If she stays where she is, she's going to hurt herself. Or worse—someone's going to hear her." He's right. I've known it for two days, and hearing it spoken aloud doesn't make it easier. It makes it real. We go at the darkest hour. The compound sleeps above us, and the three of us move through the tunnel network like a held breath. Riven scouts ahead, the lantern shuttered to a razor-thin line of amber. Draven and I flank Aspis, one hand each against her sides, guiding her through passages that were generous a month ago and now scrape her flanks with every step. *www.(n)ôveLworm.(c)ô(m)* She whimpers through the bond. Not a roar, not the furious defiance of the dragon who swore she'd burn compounds to ash before she'd be caged. A whimper—small and ashamed, the sound of a creature made less than she is by walls she cannot fight. It guts me more completely than any scream ever could. "I'm sorry," she whispers as her left wing catches a jutting rock and folds wrong, scales scraping stone like tearing silk. "I'm trying to be smaller." "Don't you dare apologize." My voice cracks. I press my palm flat against her neck, feeling the heat of her pulse beneath white scales. "You are exactly the size you're supposed to be. The world needs

to get bigger, not you.” Draven’s hand finds the same wing joint. He eases it forward with careful pressure, and Aspis leans into his touch with a trust that tightens something behind my sternum.

He hasn’t spoken since we entered the tunnels. His silence carries weight—the summit, the delegation, Cassandra’s hunting gaze, all of it pressing grooves into him I can see even in the dark. The passage narrows to its worst point, and Aspis crawls. Belly to stone, wings pinned, tail dragging. I crawl beside her with my shoulder against her ribs, feeling every scrape through the bond. Twenty feet. Thirty. Then Riven’s lantern flares ahead, and the passage opens. The chamber takes my breath. Vast dark water stretches to the far wall where stone curves into a natural arch, and through that arch—sky. Open sky, thick with stars, the western sea wind pouring through. The ceiling soars high enough that echoes take a full second to return, and the waterline catches starlight in rippling silver. Aspis doesn’t shriek the way she did when we found the first cave. She walks to the water’s edge with the slow dignity of a creature reclaiming something stolen, spreads her wings to their full span—tips trembling, white scales catching starlight—and breathes. One long, shuddering exhale that I feel in every cell, days of compression and fear pouring out in a single sound that fills the chamber and fades into dark water. The silence afterward is immense. My eyes sting, because I’ve been holding her pain for six days and didn’t realize how heavy it had gotten until this moment when it lifts and the absence nearly drops me to my knees. www.novelworm.com Draven stands beside me at the chamber’s edge. The exhaustion radiates off him—not the sharp fatigue of a sleepless night but something structural, the weariness of a man holding too many walls upright with his bare hands. “She’s okay,” I whisper. “For now.” He turns to look at me, and something in his expression is stripped bare—not wonder like the first cave, not the careful blankness he wears for the world. Weariness, bone-deep and undisguised, and beneath it a tenderness he is too tired to hide. It lives in the softening around his eyes, in the way his gaze traces my face as if memorizing it. www.novelworm.com I reach up and brush the stone dust from his jaw without thinking. My fingers find bone beneath warm skin, and the gesture is instinct—care without calculation, the kind of touch that happens before the mind can intervene. His hand catches mine. Holds it there, my palm against his jaw, fingers wrapped around my wrist where my pulse hammers. We’re inches apart, his breath warm on my fingers, the cave dark and vast around us and Aspis a white silhouette at the water’s edge with wings still spread like prayers. His thumb traces the inside of my wrist, slow and deliberate, following the vein where my heartbeat confesses everything my mouth won’t say. Riven’s boots echo from the passage—returning from his patrol sweep, steady and unhurried. We separate. His hand releases mine. My arm drops to my side. The distance falls between us like a curtain drawn across a lit window, and neither of us looks at the other as Riven’s lantern rounds the corner. www.novelworm.com “Passage is clear,” Riven

reports. “No activity above. We’ve got until dawn before the first patrols.” I nod, so does Draven. We begin the climb back through the tunnels in silence, and the ghost of his pulse against my palm stays with me all the way—steady, warm, and certain as a heartbeat I’m learning to trust more than my own. But trust can be easily broken. With all the secrets I harbor, there will come a day, and very soon, when that trust evaporates and it will be replaced by searing hatred. Would I still feel like this when that happens? 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 — 46

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[Draven’s POV] The summit enters its second week the way a wound enters infection—slowly, then with unmistakable heat. Trade arbitration collapses on day eight when Stormreach resurrects a three-year-old grain tariff dispute. Ashenvale retaliates with a grievance over breeding territory. By midday, Duskborne and Thornwall have joined opposite sides of an argument that has nothing to do with either of them. I sit at the head of the council table and let it happen—stalemate is a tool, and occupied delegations don’t wander. Every hour delegations spend mediating agricultural rights is an hour they’re not mapping my corridors. Theron manages the sessions with characteristic patience. I attend when protocol demands, disappear when it doesn’t, and leave the delegations to circle while Sera’s network does the quieter work. Sera finds me in the war room after the evening session. She carries no documents—her reports live in her memory and die when she finishes speaking. “Cassandra’s senior advisor,” she says without preamble, closing the door. “Daran. He’s been asking targeted questions outside the formal sessions—about the tournament winner. Where she came from, her fighting style, who vouched for her entry.” The cold that moves through my chest is precise and surgical. “Most sources gave nothing useful. But one name keeps appearing.” She pauses. “Venna.” I don’t move. The stillness is automatic, the same reflex that keeps a commander’s face unreadable while the battle map rearranges beneath his hands. “What has she told him?” “Nothing classified, that’s the problem. Evelyn’s performance, her technique, the fact that she arrived without

house affiliation.” Sera’s jaw tightens. “She answered as any senior warrior might with a visiting delegate. Venna isn’t feeding intelligence. She’s simply not refusing to discuss something.” “Venna doesn’t do anything simply.” “No. And Daran didn’t choose her at random—he approached her specifically, multiple times, in informal settings. The pattern is Cassandra’s. Isolate the person with the grievance, let them talk, build a picture from fragments they don’t realize they’re providing.” I stand at the window. Cassandra doesn’t need Venna to betray secrets — she needs her to confirm suspicions. Every casual detail she shares is another thread woven into the tapestry she’s been assembling since the first night, looking for whatever it is she’s looking for. “How much time do we have?” “She may already have enough. But acting during a summit she requested violates Alliance protocol.” Sera straightens. “We need the summit closed. Every additional day is another thread she pulls until the cloth comes apart.” “Agreed. I’ll speak with Theron tonight.” She leaves. I stand at the window until the torches burn low, then take the passage to the sea caves—the way I’ve taken it every night for three weeks. The route is automatic. Hidden door behind the weapons rack, stone steps worn smooth, salt-sharp air rising as the tunnel opens into the chamber where waves fill the dark like breathing. *www.mdv@lw(0)Rm.com* Aspis is curled at the water’s edge, white scales catching the faint luminescence of sea-growth, wings folded against a body that grows faster than the space can contain. She lifts her head when I enter, golden eyes tracking me with ancient patience. I check her wing growth—measuring span against the cave’s width, calculating timelines, telling myself this is a strategic assessment. Evelyn isn’t here. She’s been coming earlier, adjusting her schedule to avoid the overlap that’s grown less accidental with each passing week. The cave smells of salt and stone and the faintest trace of pine—her scent, still warm on the rocks where she sat. *www.nó@lwořm.COM*

I climb back alone. The passage deposits me in the corridor outside my chambers, and I stop. Hand on the door. I don’t open it. The compound is silent, and I stand in the hallway like a man who has forgotten where he lives because the geography of his days has shifted so completely that home no longer means these rooms. Every morning I count hours until I can return to the caves. I tell myself it’s the dragon—the strategic asset. But Aspis was sleeping when I arrived tonight, and I still stayed. Sat at the water’s edge where Evelyn sits, in the warmth her body left on the stone, and watched the tide until its rhythm replaced my own thoughts. The axis of my days has shifted without my permission, and the honest, unbearable truth is that it has nothing to do with the dragon. “You could simply admit it,” Khaira murmurs through the bond, and her voice carries none of its usual amusement. Just the quiet patience of a creature who knows her rider better than he knows himself. “Naming a thing doesn’t make it more real. It only makes it yours.” Maybe she’s right. Maybe she’s been right for weeks, with her insufferable silences and the way she watches me descend those tunnels

without mockery anymore—as though my feelings have grown past the point where humor can contain them. There is something settling into my bones, heavy as iron and warm as blood, that I am not ready to name. But refusing hasn't made it quieter. It has only made the ache more specific, until standing in an empty corridor I can feel the exact distance between this hallway and the cave where she sits, and it pulls at me like gravity. I open the door. Close it. Stand in the dark and breathe. Then I send for Theron. He arrives within the quarter hour, carrying the summit ledger. Neither of us sits. "I want the summit resolved within three days. Accelerated schedule—consolidate remaining disputes into two sessions, priority items only, everything else deferred to correspondence." "Three days is aggressive. Stormreach and Ashenvale are still entrenched on the tariff question—" "Offer concessions on the coastal routes. Thessaly's been angling for expanded access for two years—give her a provisional agreement contingent on good-faith arbitration, and she'll pull Duskborne out of the dispute. Stormreach follows once they lose their coalition." He recalculates. "Workable. You'll take a minor loss on the coastal terms." "I'm aware." The loss is acceptable. The alternative is not. "One condition. When the summit closes, the Mintian delegation departs within the week. Full withdrawal—no lingering advisors, no courtesy stays. Formal escort to the border." Theron doesn't ask why. He knows why, just not the full story. But he agrees with me with even his limited information. "I'll draft the accelerated schedule tonight. Cassandra won't appreciate the compressed timeline." "Cassandra's preferences are not my concern. Her departure is." He nods, tucks the ledger under his arm, and leaves. The door closes. Somewhere beneath these stones a white dragon breathes in a cave carved by tide, and I will give this summit three more days. Then Cassandra and every question she carries leave my territory, and the woman I'm protecting stays, and I will go on telling myself the ache in my chest is strategy—anything but the word Khaira already knows, the word settling into my bones, quiet and patient and certain as the tide. 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

8-9 minutes

Dreams Beyond Broken Wings — 47

[Evelyn's POV] Day ten, and the compound has become a geography of avoidance—corridors mapped not by destination but by who might be walking them, every turn calculated against the probability of a face I can't afford to meet. I've memorized the delegation's patterns the way a hunted animal memorizes the predator's feeding schedule: Cassandra takes the western colonnade after breakfast, her advisors cluster in the council wing through midday, the warriors train in the secondary yard while ours hold the primary. A couple days of this, and my muscles have forgotten what it feels like to round a corner without bracing. The eastern service corridor is supposed to be safe. Supply route, lower stores access, no reason for any delegate to wander this far from the guest wing. www.novelworld.com I'm carrying a stack of ledgers Corwin needs returned to the archives, moving fast, head down, dark-dyed hair braided tight against my skull. I round the corner at the junction where the corridor meets the stairwell to the secondary hall. And Kael is standing three feet in front of me. He's alone—no escort, no delegation attaché, just a tall man in Mintian blue who has clearly taken a wrong turn, stopped at the junction as if deciding which passage to try. His head comes up at the sound of my boots, and his eyes find mine, and the world narrows to a pinhole. Recognition flickers across his face like a match struck in wind—catching, guttering, catching again. The dark hair throws him. The context is wrong, a servant in enemy colors carrying archive ledgers, nothing about this picture fits the girl he knew. But something deeper connects, something beneath logic in the architecture of memory: my jawline, the fierce blue of my eyes, the way I carry my weight—forward, balanced, the stance of a woman trained in a house where posture was armor. "Do I know you?" His voice is exactly as I remember it. Warm, careful, with that slight roughness at the edges that used to make my chest ache when I was younger and stupid enough to believe warmth meant safety. "No." I keep walking. One foot, then the next, ledgers pressed against my ribs like a shield. My pulse is a drum corps staging a full revolt, but my stride stays even, unhurried, a woman on an errand who doesn't have time for lost delegates. His hand catches my arm. The grip is light—instinct, not aggression, the reflexive reach of a man whose body recognized something his mind hasn't confirmed. His fingers close around my forearm, and the contact jolts through me with a force that has nothing to do with attraction and everything to do with the fact that this hand used to hold mine in gardens where we planned a future that never existed. "Wait." He turns me slightly, not forcefully, searching my face with an intensity that scrapes against every wall I've built. "You look like someone I—" "You're mistaken." I meet his eyes for exactly the length of time a confused servant would before pulling free—two seconds, maybe three, long enough to register polite dismissal, short enough to avoid the prolonged contact where recognition solidifies into certainty. Then I slide my arm from his grip, adjust the ledgers, and walk away. I don't run. Running is confirmation. Running is a woman with something to flee from, and I am no one, a servant carrying documents, forgettable. The first corner comes. I take it. The second corner comes. I take that too, turning into the narrow passage behind the inner

kitchens where steam and rendered fat fill the air, and my legs give out. I catch myself against the wall, ledgers sliding from my arms to scatter across the flagstones. The stone is warm from the ovens on the other side, and I press my forehead against it while my body shakes in waves I can't stop. "Evelyn." Aspis is there instantly, flooding the bond with heat and fury. "Who touched you? I felt his hand on your arm—I will find him, I will—" "Don't." I press harder into the stone. "It was Kael. He's one of the Mintian delegates, Aspis. You can't do anything. You can't even be seen."

"The one who—" She stops. She knows. "I don't need to be seen. I need to be near you." "I need Draven." I gather the ledgers from the floor, hands trembling badly enough that I drop two before managing a stable grip. "Stay in the caves. Stay hidden. I'll come tonight." I find him in the war room. The door is closed, and I don't knock—I push through and close it behind me, pressing my back against the wood because my spine needs something solid. He's standing at the map table with dispatch papers spread beneath his hands, candlelight cutting the planes of his face into sharp relief. His head comes up, eyes reading me the way they always do—one sweep, thorough as a blade, missing nothing. Whatever he finds drains the color from his expression. "One of the Mintian delegates stopped me in the corridor," I say, and my voice is steadier than my hands. "He thought he recognized me." Draven goes still. Not the controlled stillness of a commander processing information—something deeper, more animal, the absolute motionlessness of a predator registering a threat. "Did he?" "I don't think so. But he looked at me like—" The words catch in my throat. I can feel them there, sharp-edged and dangerous, the truth I can't speak in this room where Draven stands watching me with those dark eyes that see everything I show him and half of what I don't. I can't say it. Can't say like a man who used to love me, because that sentence contains a history I've never fully given him, and the fear in my chest isn't just about being discovered—it's about this man knowing exactly how deep the roots of my old life go, and who planted them. www.NoVeLWorm.com "Like he wasn't sure," I finish instead. "Which means he'll keep looking." Draven's gaze moves across my face, and I watch him read what lives beneath the words. Not the general anxiety of someone wearing a false identity who nearly got caught—he's seen that on me before, the night I crossed the great hall fifteen feet from Cassandra, and it looked different. This is sharper. More personal. A wound with a name he doesn't know. "Who is he?" He asks finally. Maybe it's something in my eyes, maybe the general tiredness of having all these questions and no answer. "Who is he to you?" www.NoVeLWorm.com I pause, looking for the right word, and can't find it. Relaying him our history wouldn't do, because Draven is smart enough to connect the dots. Explaining the difficult feelings I had and have for him—even worse. "I'm doing whatever I can to help you," he leans closer, more insistent. "I'm doing what you're asking. But what's so important about these people that you feel the need to hide from them? How do you know them?" He's

going too far. “Everyone in Mintia knows Blue Dragons. And they also know not to mess with them.” I deflect. Draven’s face is pinched—he’s thinking, recalculating, trying to find answers in the non-answers that I give him. Then he relaxes, as if understanding that he won’t gain any more information. “I see.” his voice drops, low and flat and edged with the quiet certainty of a man who has already calculated every variable and found only one answer. “If he’s not sure now, he’ll be sure by tomorrow. We need the delegation gone.”

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First Chosen by the Dragon

8-10 minutes

Dreams Beyond Broken Wings — 48

[Cassandra’s POV]The fire in my guest chambers has burned to embers by the time Kael finds me. I’m reviewing intelligence reports—pathetic scraps my advisor considers useful—when the knock comes. Two raps, a pause, a third. Kael’s pattern. I call him in without looking up. He enters and doesn’t sit. Kael always sits, always claims the most comfortable surface in any room with easy confidence. Tonight he stands just inside the door, one hand braced against the frame, jaw working like he’s chewing on something he can’t swallow. “What is it?” I ask, setting down the reports. “I saw someone today.” He pushes off the doorframe and paces toward the window. Stops and turns back. “In the eastern service corridor, near the secondary hall stairwell. A woman carrying ledgers—archive documents, I think.” “A servant.” I keep my voice flat. Let him unspool the thread himself. “And this is remarkable because?” “She wasn’t like the other servants here. The clothes were right, but the way she carried herself—posture, balance. Tall. Lean build, strong. Blue eyes.” He runs a hand through his hair—agitation, always easy to read. “Blue eyes like I’ve seen a thousand times before, Cassandra.” I set the reports aside. “Go on.” “She moved like Evelyn.” The name drops into the room like a blade. He stops pacing, and his expression cycles through confusion, then a tightening around his mouth. I recognize the ache he carried when my sister was someone he thought he loved. “The way she turned her shoulder when she brushed past me. I’ve seen that a thousand times. It’s how she dodged in training when Lord Aldric ran contact drills—that roll off the front foot, leading with the shoulder.” “Her hair?” I keep my voice

measured while every nerve sharpens. “Dark. Black, or close to it. But it looked wrong on her, like the color didn’t sit right against her skin.” He meets my eyes, and there it is—not just confusion, but something dangerously close to longing. The kind that curls under a man’s ribs and makes him stupid. “Dyed, maybe. I grabbed her arm, tried to get a closer look. She pulled away and told me I was mistaken. But her voice, Cassandra—” “What about her voice?” I probe, much like a parent trying to encourage their child to think for themselves. “Deeper than I remember. Harder. But the way she shaped the vowels—that’s Mintian highborn. You can train away an accent, but you can’t change how your mouth forms the sounds.” He sinks into the chair across from me. “I’ve been trying to convince myself it’s nothing. But I stood three feet from her, and every instinct I have says I just looked Evelyn in the face and she lied to me.” I watch him. The fire crackles. His shoulders are tight, and the longing in his expression is something I file away for future use. Useful, that he still feels this way. Slightly disgusting. “The woman at dinner,” I say slowly. “Last week. The dark-haired servant who crossed the hall during service.” “What about her?” “I noticed her too. Something familiar in her walk, the way she shifted weight on her right leg. I dismissed it.” I stand and move to the window where the compound stretches below, torchlit and sprawling. “The tournament winner couldn’t possibly be my pathetic sister. So if the servant resembled Evelyn, she was just that—a servant.” “But you’re not dismissing it now,” Kael says quietly. “Because you didn’t recognize a servant, Kael. The woman you saw was moving freely through restricted corridors—not working, not serving. She was carrying archive documents and walking like she owned the place.” I explain patiently, as if dealing with an especially inattentive child. www.move1orm.com “Your recognition wasn’t based on hair or context. It was based on her. The way she moves, the muscle memory of someone trained in our father’s house.” He nods, slow and heavy. www.networldrm.com “Dyed hair is a disguise.” The pieces click with the satisfying precision of a well-made lock. “Disguises mean someone is hiding. And people who hide in the heart of an enemy compound have very large secrets.” www.novelworldorm.com I let the silence stretch, let the recalibration complete. I’d dismissed the servant because I knew she was the one who won the tournament.

Because the alternative was absurd—my weak sister could not be the woman who defeated an elite warrior and earned a personal mark from the lord of this house. But if the servant and the tournament winner are the same person—if my useless sister somehow became a woman who breaks seasoned fighters—then something happened to Evelyn inside these walls that I don’t understand. And things I don’t understand are things I don’t control. “I’m done waiting,” I tell Kael. “The intelligence from our advisors is useless. Venna’s information is helpful but fragmented. I’m going to find Evelyn myself—follow her, corner her, look into her eyes and know.” “And if it’s really her?” Something raw lives in the question that I choose to ignore. www.networldrm.com “If it’s really her, then she transported a dragon egg across

Alliance territory into enemy lands.” I let the legal framework settle over the room like a net. “Smuggling a bonded artifact across sovereign borders. A violation punishable by death under the Dragon Accords.” Kael straightens. “You can’t claim the egg was yours. If anyone finds out you lost—” “I’m not claiming ownership.” My voice cuts clean through his objection. I barely suppress the urge to roll my eyes. “Smuggling doesn’t require ownership, Kael. It only requires proof of transport. The egg moved from Mintian territory across Alliance borders to Black Dragon land. Whoever carried it committed a capital offense. I don’t need to say it was mine.” I shrug. “I only need to prove she carried it.” The elegance of it settles over me. No exposure and no confession. Just the cold mechanics of law applied to a frightened girl who ran too far with something she should never have touched. I sit at the writing desk and pull out the coded cipher. Kael watches in silence as I compose the message—brief, precise, stripped of everything except what Father needs to know. ‘Found the lost property. Situation more complex than expected.’ I seal it with wax and hand it to Kael. “Send this tonight. Priority through the eastern relay.” “You’re not waiting for instructions?” “I don’t need his permission.” I meet his eyes with the steady certainty that has carried me through every training and combat and council chamber since I was old enough to understand that power belongs to whoever seizes it first. “But Father should know the hunt is over.” Kael takes the letter and pauses at the door. He looks like he wants to say something—about Evelyn, about the ghost of a girl he once claimed to love standing three feet away with ink-dark hair and a stranger’s coldness. I can see the words forming behind his teeth. “Don’t,” I say quietly. “Whatever you’re about to feel, don’t.” He closes his mouth, nods and then leaves. I stand at the window long after his footsteps fade, watching torchlight paint the compound in amber and shadow. Somewhere in these walls, my sister hides behind dyed hair and borrowed clothes, playing at being someone she was never meant to become. Something changed her—something I haven’t found yet. And I will find it, because Evelyn doesn’t get to become someone new. Not without my permission. Not without my knowledge. Not in a world where I decide who she’s allowed to be. The embers dim. I let them die. Because I simply don’t need the warmth. 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 — 49

[Evelyn's POV] Three days. The summit is supposed to end in three days, and I've been counting them the way a woman counts the last steps before a cliff edge—each one heavier, each one bringing a different kind of vertigo. Then Theron finds Draven in the council chamber at midmorning, and I watch the number change. “Cassandra has formally requested a three-day extension. She’s citing unresolved provisions in the coastal tariff framework and two outstanding arbitration clauses that she claims require additional sessions.” Theron sets the document on the table. I stand near the wall reviewing supply ledgers—visible enough to belong, invisible enough to listen. “The request is procedurally sound. She’s invoked the Continuation Clause under Article Nineteen of the Alliance Charter.” Draven reads without expression. His jaw works once, a subtle flex beneath the sharp line of his face, and that single movement tells me everything his silence won’t. “If I refuse the extension,” he says, voice flat and deliberate, “she frames it as hostility toward diplomatic resolution. Stormreach and Ashenvale back her—they’ve been angling for more time on their own disputes. Refusing Cassandra means refusing the coalition she’s assembled behind the request.” “Precisely.” Theron’s hands clasp behind his back. “A refusal at this stage reads as obstruction. She’s built the political architecture to ensure it.” “Of course she has. She’s been building it since she walked through my gates.” Draven sets the document down. “Accept the extension. Three days. Not a single hour more, and I want that language written into the formal response—hard terminus, no further renewals, departure preparations to begin concurrently with the remaining sessions.” “I’ll have it drafted within the hour.” Theron gathers the papers, nods, and leaves with the quiet efficiency of a man who knows when to stop asking questions. The door closes. Draven stands at the window, silhouetted against a sky bruised grey with approaching weather. “She’s buying time,” I say. Not a question. “She already has what she needs. The extension isn’t about tariffs—it’s about confirming what she suspects and building a case to act on it.” “I know.” His voice is quiet, which means it’s dangerous. “And I can’t stop her without handing her exactly the justification she’s looking for.” Six more days. The number sits in my chest like a stone swallowed whole. I take the passage to the sea caves after midday. Stone steps descending in darkness, salt air thickening with every turn, the tide pulsing through the rock beneath my feet. When the tunnel opens into the chamber, I stop. Aspis fills the space in a way she didn’t three weeks ago. Her body stretches along the water’s edge, white scales catching the blue-green light from the seaward arch, and her wings are enormous—folded tight but still pressing the cave walls on both sides, fifteen feet of membrane and bone that twitch with restless energy. She’s testing the boundaries, I can feel it through the bond—the itch of confinement, the urgent need to extend fully, to push past stone into open air. Her head swings toward me, golden eyes bright in the half-dark. “You’re growing too fast,” I tell her, sitting on the rocks near her forelimb. Her scales are warm beneath

my palm, thrumming with a pulse that mirrors mine. “This cave won’t hold you much longer. Another week, maybe two, and your wingspan will hit the walls even folded.” “Then perhaps the walls should move.” Her voice resonates through the bond, amused and unbothered by the logistics of secrecy. “Or perhaps we should stop pretending that walls are the answer.” “We don’t have a better answer yet.” “You keep counting days.” She lowers her massive head until her eye is level with my face, golden iris catching reflected sea light. “But the counting never ends. At some point, we must simply be what we are.” The words land deep in my chest and stay there, vibrating. I press my forehead against the warm ridge above her eye and breathe in salt and ozone and something ancient that belongs only to her. *www.novelworm.com*

She’s right. I’ve been counting since the egg first glowed in my hands—counting days until hatching, until discovery, until the summit ends, until Cassandra leaves. The numbers keep changing, but the truth beneath them doesn’t. We are what we are. Aspis shifts, and her wing-tip scrapes the cave wall like a blade across stone. She flexes, testing, and the membrane stretches taut—catches the seaward light and turns it luminous, veined with silver. The edge nearly reaches the opening where the cave meets open water, and I feel her hunger through the bond, the pull of wind and sky calling to muscles that have never known flight. “Soon,” I whisper, and she huffs warm air across my face that smells like lightning. I let myself think the unthinkable. What if we stopped hiding? Not through accident or someone else’s revelation—but deliberately. On our terms, with the narrative shaped before anyone else could shape it against us. The idea terrifies me. It also feels, for the first time in months, like the truth. I find Draven in his chambers after nightfall. Maps spread beneath his hands, patrol routes marked in his sharp handwriting. He looks up when I enter with an expression that softens for one second before discipline reasserts itself. “Aspis has a fifteen-foot wingspan,” I say without preamble. “She’s pressing the cave walls. In a few weeks, she won’t fit through the interior passages, and the seaward opening faces open water—any patrol ship, any fisherman with decent eyes, could spot her.” *www.novelworm.com* “I’m aware of the timeline.” He straightens, arms crossing. “Riven and I are already discussing deeper caves along the coast. There may be—” *www.novelworm.com* “There aren’t enough caves in the world, Draven.” The words come out edged with hours of sitting beside a dragon outgrowing her prison. “She’s growing faster than we can relocate her, and every move increases exposure.” “We’ve been reacting since the day she hatched—moving her, hiding her, praying no one looks in the right direction at the right time.” I step closer, pressing my palms flat against the maps. “What if we stopped reacting? What if we chose to reveal her ourselves—deliberately, publicly, on terms we control?” *www.novelworm.com* His face goes very still. Not anger—the held-breath stillness of a man hearing something he’s already thought and hoped no one would say aloud. “The political fallout would be catastrophic.” His voice drops, each word placed like a

stone. “A white dragon in the Black Dragon compound—every house would interpret it as a power play. Stormreach and Ashenvale would demand inspection rights. Duskborne would push for shared custody. And Mintia—”He stops. Resets. “Mintia would claim the dragon was stolen. Cassandra would ensure that narrative reached every council chamber before we could draw breath.”“I know the risks. I’ve catalogued them since the day Aspis hatched in my hands.” I hold his gaze across the desk, across the maps and all the careful strategy. “But the alternative is someone else announcing it for you. Discovery on their terms, their framing, their narrative. And if Cassandra is the one who makes that announcement—”I don’t finish. I don’t need to. His jaw tightens, and I see the calculation behind his dark eyes—every scenario branching, the mathematics of exposure weighed against the mathematics of control. Silence stretches between us. Aspis hums through the bond, distant but listening, her awareness wrapped around mine like a second pulse. Draven exhales slowly. His hands flatten on the desk, mirroring mine, and when he speaks, his voice carries the weight of a man who’s just accepted a door he can’t close again. “Not yet.” The words are quiet, almost gentle, as if he’s handling something fragile. “But soon.” 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 — 50

www.novell.com

[Cassandra’s POV] I am done guessing. The servant at the dinner—dark-haired, head down, weight shifting to favor her right leg. Kael’s encounter in the corridor, rattled by a name he couldn’t say. The tournament winner who defeated a senior warrior with bonded-level speed. Three threads, and I’ve spent days testing every alternative. The version where my pathetic sister isn’t hiding inside these walls doesn’t exist. But it’s Venna who pulls the cloth tight. I find her in the lower courtyard after the second bell, cleaning her blade with the rigid precision of a woman keeping her hands busy so they don’t curl into fists. She looks up when I approach, and the resentment in her eyes is so clean I almost admire her for it. “You carry yourself like someone who deserves better than this post,” I say, settling onto the stone bench beside the weapons rack. “I’ve seen how he reassigned you after the

tournament. A woman of your caliber, reduced to perimeter rotations. It must sting.” “I serve where I’m placed,” Venna replies, but the blade strokes sharpen. Steel rings against the whetstone. “My lord’s decisions are his own.” “Of course. But you’re a soldier who built her position through years of loyalty, and that position was handed to a stranger overnight. Any warrior would have questions.” I let the silence stretch, then add quietly, “I would.” Venna’s jaw flexes. Her hands slow on the blade. “What do you want to know, Lady Cassandra?” “The tournament winner. She moves through the compound at unusual hours, doesn’t she? Late at night, through the service corridors that connect to the private wing.” Her eyes flick up. For a moment I think she’ll deflect. But loyalty requires feeling protected in return, and this woman has been hollowed out by months of watching someone else stand where she used to stand. “Every night,” Venna says. The words come clipped, precise—delivered with righteous certainty. “After midnight. She uses the eastern service corridor behind the kitchens, the one that connects to the private wing stairwell. Same route every time, like she doesn’t expect to be watched.” “And the restricted areas near his quarters? I noticed new locks on the lower passages during the tour.” “Installed three months ago.” She explains coolly without looking up. “Reinforced iron, keyed to the lord and two others only. The sealed sections extend past his chambers into old storage vaults—spaces that haven’t been used in decades, suddenly off-limits to everyone.” Her blade stills. “Whatever he’s hiding down there, it’s growing. The seals have been expanded twice since I lost my position. Corridors that were accessible when I held senior rank are now locked behind iron I don’t have keys for.” “Growing,” I repeat softly. “I’ve said what I’ve said because this house deserves better than secrets eating it from the inside.” Venna sheathes her blade and stands, shoulders squared. “Use the information however you see fit, Lady Cassandra. I trust you’ll remember who provided it when the time comes.” “I always remember my allies,” I tell her, and mean every syllable. She walks away. The pattern completes itself. Every night. Service corridors. New locks expanding outward. Whatever Draven is hiding isn’t static—it’s growing, pressing against containment. I know what grows like that. The compound settles into sleep. I wait until the midnight bell, then dress in dark wool and soft-soled boots—no jewelry, no metal. The eastern service corridor is narrow and unlit, residual heat from banked ovens warming the stones. *www.NoVETWôrM.(c)©ml* I press into an alcove where shadow pools deepest, where the corridor bends and anyone passing must come within arm’s reach, and let my heartbeat drop into the patient rhythm of a hunter trained to outlast her prey.

She comes after the second quarter bell. Soft footsteps, careful but confident—the cadence of someone who’s walked this route so many times it lives in her muscles. Dark hair braided back. Head lowered. Moving through dimness like she belongs to it. I let her pass close. Close enough to catch the profile in thin light from the kitchen grates—her jaw sharper than I

remember, leaner, the softness carved away by something harder than hunger. She tilts her head to listen, chin angled left, ear turned toward the passage behind her. I know that gesture. I watched it across a thousand dinners, a thousand training sessions where my sister thought no one was paying attention. Three more steps. On the fourth, she shifts weight onto her right leg—that familiar hitch, the compensation pattern from the injury I gave her when we were twelve. She’s hidden it well, but compensation patterns don’t disappear. They settle into bone. I know this one the way I know my own handwriting, because I’m the one who wrote it into her body. The last shred of doubt burns away like paper touching flame.

www.novelworld.com It’s Evelyn. Alive, walking through our mortal enemy’s stronghold with the ease of a woman welcomed rather than imprisoned. Not cowering. Not scrubbing floors. Moving with purpose toward the private chambers of the most powerful lord in the western territories. Thriving. The word rises like bile. I don’t follow her. The pattern is confirmed. I return to my chambers, close the door, and sit in the high-backed chair by the dead fireplace without lighting a candle. The dark is better for this. For the contempt—the old familiar contempt that’s lived in me since my sister was born. But something colder has joined it, because the math has changed. If Evelyn really defeated an elite warrior with the speed that made Venna look outclassed, something transformed her. That girl does not defeat seasoned fighters or earn a lord’s personal mark—she’s not built for that, not worthy of that. The egg. It must have hatched. Whatever grew inside that stolen shell—the egg that was supposed to be mine, that Father promised to me—it bonded to her. Chose her. Poured its power into my sister’s undeserving body and made her into something she was never meant to become. That thought burns worse than everything combined. The dragon that should have been mine looked at Evelyn and decided she was worthy, and every impossible thing she’s accomplished flows from that single, unforgivable choice. I sit with it until the sky shifts from black to grey. Clarity joins the contempt—sharp enough to cut through sentiment. I cannot retrieve the dragon here, surrounded by Draven’s warriors. I cannot expose Evelyn without revealing the egg was mine, and admitting I lost a bonded egg carries its own death sentence. The weapon available to me is older than dragon law—the one I’ve wielded since childhood. Fear. Dominance. The certainty that I see her and nothing she builds will ever be safe from me.

www.novelworld.com Direct confrontation. Not to take—but to break. To remind her what she’s always been, crack her open, establish the hierarchy, and determine how deep this goes. The dragon’s nature. Its abilities. How much Draven knows. I’ll find her tomorrow in the corridors she thinks are safe, hidden by the fantasy that she could become someone new. She can’t. She never could.

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