

The Prince and the Blood-Red Beast

By Breanna Moore

Today was the boy's tenth birthday.

Gazing through the small window of the enclosed carriage that he was riding in as it bumped and rattled across the uneven roadways, he could barely see the faint silhouette of the castle that stood proud and tall at the edge of the horizon. His home.

The boy wasn't just any boy, of course. He was a Prince of the kingdom, which made this birthday that much more important.

Not that the boy had ever felt very important within the first decade of his life. He was the fourth born child of the royal family, with only one sibling that was younger than he. His eldest brother was his father the King's heir and stood to inherit the throne one day. His older sisters, the twin Princesses, were the darlings of the kingdom and were constantly being doted upon. His younger brother was the adored baby of the royal family and still remained in his mothers arms at almost all times.

The boy may have been a Prince, but he was a second son. He stood to inherit nothing and was neither doted upon nor adored. The boy simply existed like a ghost within the castle walls.

Easily overlooked, easily ignored.

All the more reason for him to attempt the mad endeavor that he had his heart set upon.

The King and Queen sat upon the carriage bench on the opposite side of him, looking at him with an expression of pride that he scarcely ever received from them. He avoided looking at his parents, instead keeping his focus on the castle in the horizon that was fading even further from view.

“Are you nervous?” asked his mother, the Queen. Without turning to face her, the boy simply shrugged in response. He could have told her that he was, in fact, a little nervous. He could have told her what he planned to do, what it was exactly that he had his sights set upon. But he didn’t tell her anything. Why should he when her love and appreciation always felt conditional, like it had to be earned?

If he pulled off what he planned to do, no one could underestimate or ignore him ever again.

“Come on, son. Don’t be so dour,” the King said, the tone of his voice trying to sound encouraging. “It’s your tenth birthday! This will be one of the biggest days of your entire life.”

The boy said nothing, still refusing to tear his gaze away from the window.

Indeed, in this royal family, tenth birthdays were incredibly special. On a child’s tenth birthday, they were taken to the Inferno Mountains, the home of the dragons, where they would be left alone within the mountain range to find a dragon willing to bond with them and accept them as their rider. Once the young prince or princess claimed a dragon of their own, they would have to fly it back to the castle, for the carriage would not be returning for them.

Normally, with the way this tradition usually went, a child did not do the choosing themselves as to what dragon they wanted, for at the end of the day, it was the dragon that made the decision to bond. If no dragon showed an interest in a child, the prince or princess would simply have to make their way back to the castle dragonless, but that has only ever happened a rare couple of times throughout the kingdom's history. It was more common for a dragon to kill someone whom it did not want to be approached by, which even then had only happened to a select few members of the royal family in the past.

However, the boy had already made up his mind as to what dragon he wanted to bond with. If his parents knew of his intentions, they would surely deem him mad.

There was one dragon that was rather infamous among his family. It was feared by his siblings, his parents, his grandparents, and all of the ones that came before them, for this dragon was said to be one of the most vicious and fearsome creatures to ever exist. The beast was described to have scales the color of blood, with large black horns adorning its head and fierce red eyes. It had never accepted a rider. Anyone who had dared to approach the dragon had either fled in terror or was killed and likely devoured.

This was the only dragon the boy wanted.

He understood how great the risk was that he was taking in pursuing this dragon and this dragon alone. There were only two possible outcomes as to what could happen, the first being the blood-red beast would accept him and he would become the rider of one of the most feared dragons to ever exist. The other outcome, the one that was truly more likely to occur, would be the creature would kill him. He knew this, but it did not change his mind. All he could think about was the look that would be on everyone's faces if he flew that beast back home. No one could see him as secondary or insignificant or inconsequential ever again. He would go down in history as the first ever rider of the feared creature. His life could be changed forever, and it was thoughts like those that fueled his determination even further.

He would bond with this dragon, or he would die trying.

After what felt like an eternity, the enclosed carriage came to a halt. A few moments went by before the carriage door was opened by one of the knights that had followed on horseback to escort the members of the royal family. The King stepped out first, extending a hand to assist the Queen as she carefully took the small steps down. The boy followed, his ocean-blue gaze now fixated on what lay ahead of him.

The Inferno Mountains, in all of their magnificence, loomed over him. They stretched on for as far as the eye could see, well at least, as far as the boy could see from where he stood.

There was a gap in between the two nearest mountains with what appeared to be a narrow footpath into the mountain range. Though the passage was severely overgrown by bushes and weeds, the boy knew that this was the same path that the ones that had come here before him had walked. His mouth was suddenly dry and he swallowed hard, the significance of this moment finally beginning to weigh down upon him.

“Remember son, do not try to rush through this. Let them come to you,” said the King. He smiled down at the boy. “I look forward to seeing you return home on dragonback.”

The Queen wrapped her arms around her son, causing him to tense under her touch. He wasn't sure if he could recall the last time that he felt his mother's warm embrace.

“Be careful in there,” she told him. The boy looked down at the ground, not meeting his mother's eyes, and nodded.

After those final farewells, the boy watched as the King and Queen boarded the enclosed carriage once more and began the journey back to the castle, leaving him entirely alone on the outskirts of the Infernos.

The boy turned his back on his parents as they departed, turning the whole of his attention towards the mountains in front of him. With a deep breath and a few muttered words of encouragement to himself, he stepped forward.

As he trekked through the narrow pathway, small branches and twisting vines snagging on his arms and legs as he pushed through them, an amalgamation of uncertainty and determination roiled in the boy's stomach. He was nervous, and with the blood-red dragon being the only prize he sought, he had every reason to be. However, his courage and resolve overpowered any lingering thoughts of doubt or fear.

He could do this. By the long forgotten Gods, he *would* do this.

The boy pushed onward, weaving in between the towering mountains until he reached the end of the footpath where the passage opened up into the astoundingly massive valley that resided in the center of the range. The valley floor was mostly covered in trees. In some areas the trees were packed together rather densely, like that of a typical forest, while in other areas the trees were more scattered, likely from dragons traversing the valley's base.

At the northern end of the valley lay a large lake that shimmered under the sunlight. A small waterfall spilled from the mountains above into the lake below, spraying droplets of water that glistened like little diamonds as they plummeted down.

The boy's gaze immediately landed on the northernmost peak of the beautiful and vast valley, where the largest mountain throughout all of the Infernos stood tall in all of its majesty. The huge mountain, called The Dragon Tooth, loomed high above the rest of the mountainous range. It was there, within a cave on the highest mountain, where the largest living dragon resided. The boy might have been mad, but he was no fool. The legendary beast that lived within The Dragon Tooth was one he would never dare to approach.

Sticking close to the edge of the valley, where the green grass converted into reddish-brown rock, the boy began his search for the blood-red dragon. He walked for hours on end, occasionally watching the sky whenever a dragon flew overhead and hoping to see if it was the one he was looking for, but it never was.

At one point, a dragon that was not the color of blood tried to approach him. It crept out from a large gap in the mountains, with scales the color of sapphires and elegant silver horns, and observed him with much interest. If he would have approached the blue beast, he would have had a dragon right then and there that he could fly back to the castle on. But this was not the prize he was after. The boy looked at the creature, whose beauty reminded him much of his older brother's dragon back at home, before walking on.

By the time the sun had sunken low enough in the sky to where the mountains cast vast shadows across the valley, he was exhausted. The fine leather boots he wore did nothing to prevent his feet from becoming extremely sore. The summer heat had beaten down upon him all day, sapping the energy from him quicker than he would have liked. He was grateful that his mother had at least taken the time to tie back his white shoulder-length hair before leaving the comfort of the castle, otherwise the pale strands would have been constantly sticking to his sweaty neck.

He was beginning to feel disheartened, for the boy had not come across the dragon that he had been endlessly hunting for all day. Another one of the beasts that lived within the Inferno Mountains had approached him at yet another point throughout the day, with green scales and beige horns. He acknowledged the dragon for only a moment before trekking on, still searching for the blood-red creature.

Marching forward, the boy didn't realize how late the day had gotten until the sky had started to shift from its usual light blue to shades of gold and pink. The day was nearing its end. He had not wanted to spend the night alone in the Infernos, but if he did not bond with a dragon before sundown, he wouldn't have a choice. Looking up, the boy realized he had walked the entirety of one side of the valley, for it was The Dragon Tooth that towered above him, reaching up so far that it seemed to pierce the sky.

He looked to his left, where a fissure so wide that a dragon could easily have fit through it was nestled in between The Dragon Tooth and the neighboring mountain. The boy wondered what he might find if he wandered into the rocky passageway. Maybe it would lead him to a secluded alcove where he could cut his losses and find shelter for the evening. Then, the following morning, he could resume his search.

The boy trudged into the fissure.

With the setting sun, the temperature had finally begun to cool off. The boy placed a hand upon the rocky wall, stopping for a short moment to lift his right foot off of the ground. His feet throbbed, and while his left foot strained even more with all of his body weight being supported by it alone, the slightest hint of relief that his right foot felt in that moment seemed worth it.

He was about to switch feet when an animalistic rumbling resounded through the fissure. The boy took a few additional steps further, peering further down the twisting pathway ahead of him, but could not see the source of the noise.

It was another dragon. It had to be.

A small seed of revived hope blossomed in his chest as the boy hurried further down the passage, closer and closer to the sound's origin. He rounded another corner of the winding fissure, then quickly came to a halt as he saw what lay before him, and genuinely grinned for what was likely the first time in many months.

The dragon was curled up at the dead end of the fissure, lightly snoring as it slept blissfully. It had deep crimson scales. Long, slightly curved black horns protruded from the back of the beast's head, with a line of black spikes trailing down the length of its spine, beginning just behind its head and ending at the tip of the creature's tail, which was also adorned with several long barbs that stuck out in various directions. Its dark red wings were tucked in against its body, gently shifting as the dragon continued to breathe deep.

The boy welcomed the sight of the blood-red beast before him.

Taking a few very careful steps, he crept closer to the slumbering creature he had been looking for. His search was over, but now came the truly difficult part: getting the dragon to accept him as its rider. Something that has never been done before with this particular beastie.

Even though his steps were light and made with caution, he still managed to awaken the impressive creature. It opened its eyes and lifted its great head off of the ground, peering down at him with a furious red gaze. To the boy, it felt like the dragon was staring into his very soul, passing judgement upon it. The dark red dragon growled so intensely that the ground beneath his feet vibrated from it.

The boy buried any hints of fear he might have felt in that moment. There was no need to waste his thoughts and energy on fearing what was about to happen, for he had found his prize, and he would either be leaving here with it, or his bones would remain here forever.

Standing tall, he stared down the beast. He would not show it any lick of fear.

The dragon snarled again, getting more and more agitated the longer the boy stood in its presence. It moved its massive head closer to him, its nostrils flaring as its mouth curled, revealing sharp, pointed fangs that could pierce through his body with ease.

Again, he made a great effort to not show the beast any fear. He reached out towards the dragon, the same kind of gesture one would give to any sort of unruly animal that they were trying to calm.

The blood-red dragon lunged towards the boy, jaws opened wide. He barely leapt out of the way in time, scrapping his hands and knees on the rocky, uneven ground.

The large creature rose to its feet, and when it did, it swung out its tail towards him. He hadn't even been able to stand up all the way when the spiny tail struck him, hitting him with such a force that he was sent flying back into the solid rock wall of the passage. The breath was knocked from his lungs immediately, leaving him gasping for air. As his body recovered from the impact, he realized he could not see as well as he once could. It was like someone had their hand over his eye, allowing him to only look out of one.

That's when the pain hit him.

When the dragon had lashed its tail at the boy, a point from one of the long barbs that decorated the end of that tail had dragged across his face. A huge gash ran from his forehead down through his left eye and halfway down his cheek, rendering that eye useless, though he was lucky the barb didn't do more damage than what it did. Blood covered nearly all of the left side of his face. The pain from the wound, especially when mixed with him being partially blinded, was extremely disorienting to the boy.

He wanted to cry and scream out from how badly the nasty cut hurt, but he willed himself not to. With one hand trying to cover the gash and staunch the bleeding, though it did nothing but make his hand slick with warm blood, he tried standing once more.

The crimson dragon did not grace him with enough time to regain his footing. It roared before swiping at him with its sharp talons, battering him across the ground. This time the boy couldn't help but cry out, for the beast's claw had carved a long, angry incision down his back. He ended up on his stomach after the vicious creature struck him the second time, with blood quickly soaking through the back of his charcoal tunic and one hand still protectively over whatever remained of his left eye.

This was it, the boy had convinced himself. He was going to die today, all because he strived to do something that had never been done before. Something that would have changed his life in ways other than just becoming a dragonrider like the rest of his bloodline.

Maybe he really was just a mad fool all along.

Then a different thought flitted across his mind.

If the blood-red dragon truly wanted to kill him, all it would have to do would be to simply rain fire down upon him. But the beast didn't do that. Instead, it swatted at him the way that a cat would toy with a mouse, with intrigue and interest.

It didn't want to kill him. Otherwise, it would have already.

Mustering up whatever last remaining bits of strength and energy he could find within himself, the boy finally stood up. He was in the most excruciating pain that he had ever experienced, thanks to the huge slash across his back and the one that marked his face, but his determination held out.

He would do this, or he would die.

The dark red beast roared again, spreading its massive wings wide as it looked down upon the ten year old boy who was covered in his own blood and staring back up at the creature defiantly. He pulled the bloodied hand away from his destroyed eye, trying not to wince at the sight of it. With both of his hands at his side and his chin held high, he stood before the dragon with everything that he was, utterly vulnerable and entirely at its mercy.

Brave was the boy when the huge creature brought its head down before him, its red eyes glaring at him with such intensity. He did not flinch when a small cloud of steam puffed from its nostrils as it sniffed him, still growling wearily. When the beast opened its jaws that were lined with fangs larger than most daggers, he did not falter, even as a faint orange glow began to rise from the back of its throat. He had already accepted his fate.

However, to his surprise, the dragon suddenly closed its powerful jaws. The growls and snarls ceased as the blood-red dragon looked down at him, its expression seemingly changed.

The boy drew in a long breath before reaching his hand, the one that wasn't completely covered in blood, towards the magnificent beast once more. He did so slowly with his palm facing out, trying not to hiss at the harsh pain the movement caused him. He was expecting for his arm to be ripped from his body, or for the dragon to change its mind and incinerate him anyway.

He did not expect the dragon to gently press the end of its snout into the underside of his hand.

Its crimson scales were smooth and warm to the touch. The boy could not tear his gaze away from where his hand rested on the tip of the creature's nose. For one sweet, blissful moment, he had forgotten the overwhelming pain he was in, the blood that covered him and the eye he could no longer use.

He had done it.

The blood-red beast hummed, and the boy smiled.

That smile became a grimace as the severe pain that he was in quickly made a resurgence. He nearly collapsed from it, if not for the dragon that refused to let him fall. With both hands braced upon the dragon's snout, holding himself up, he looked into the creature's red eyes.

He wasn't sure what it was exactly that had made this impressive beast choose him. Maybe it was his bravery, maybe it was his boldness, or maybe it was something more internal that he would never be able to pinpoint. No matter the reason, he had won over his prize.

"Hello, Malys," the boy spoke the name of the dragon, his voice straining from the amount of pain he was enduring. "I'm Rhaigan."