



Dragons Don't Cry

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF FANG CHRONICLES

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Chapter One

Hera's Curse

One hundred thousand years I curse your kind

Each century you will find

One human woman, not your mate

This curse is now your fate

I looked at Hera, my mother, goddess of marriage. She stood covered in blood, her anger burned, uncaring that she'd killed so many. "Mother, you've had your vengeance, you must not curse the ones who remain for a hundred thousand years."

A crack of lightning, followed by a boom of thunder, lit up the skies. "After what Drakon did to your sister, you still have sympathy for their kind?"

Her voice cut like ice and her words left me ashamed. I too could never forgive him, but for his deeds, the dragons suffered almost complete annihilation and only four males remained. "Not him, but the others, yes. I have no understanding why Eileithyia loved him, but the female dragons had nothing to do with it. They were innocent, mother."

"No dragon is innocent and Drakon should have kept to his own kind. He killed my daughter and his brethren will pay." She looked at me—rage mixed with undeniable sorrow. "My brother Zeus leaves a way out. His legacy is not only for humans."

I sensed her calming, though thunder continued to roar and lightning to strike around us. "How shall that work, mother?"

She turned away and spoke into the wind, but I heard each word. "Humans were originally created with four legs, four arms, and a head with two faces. Fearing their power, my father split them apart, condemning them to spend their lives in search of their other half. Dragons have two parts—

one beast, the other man, split into two halves. From the day he is born he quests for his soul mate. If a dragon finds his true mate, the curse shall lift for that dragon, but he will only have that chance once every one hundred years.”

My mother left me in the middle of the violent storm. I stood against the elements thinking on her words, wrapping my mind around her curse. Turning, I faced the lightning and swore that I, Angelos, daughter of Hera, granddaughter of Zeus, would watch over the four remaining dragons. They were not at fault for Drakon’s evil deed. I could not do much, for I had not half the power as my mother, but I would bide my time and allow my powers to grow. One day, maybe, I could help lift the curse.

Bastian

Cold air ruffled my wings, lifting me higher, carrying me farther from home. Pain lanced deep throughout my body, pulling a roar from my chest, up my throat, and out. Black smoke mixed with fire spewed a hundred feet in front of me. The agony spread from my center—from my heart to every fragment of my soul.

She was dead.

Gone.

Not my mate, but still a part of me.

The best part.

Fuck the curse. Fuck my life. I never wanted the claiming again, couldn’t bear the mental anguish or the beginning of another loss. I roared with every part of me, but no one heard.

No one to care.

It was roar or cry.

And dragons don’t cry.

Thirty-two years later...

Public Notice:

Females between the ages of seventeen and twenty-one it is hereby ordered and decreed, you will register for the claiming. To defy the order is death.

Acasia

“So what you’re saying is the dragon eats his bride?” This entire conversation was ridiculous. The claiming practice barbaric and my best girlfriends insane.

“No,” Julia said softly. She was the shyest of our group and rarely spoke up. Her voice trembled and I had to lean in to hear the soft words, “I don’t think he eats her; I think he loves her.”

Loud unladylike snorts followed this revelation. Even I joined in. I couldn’t keep quiet, and looked at Julia with disgust. “He’s an animal. Who the hell would want his love? Someday our people will fight back. If he truly holds the magic we once possessed, it’s retrievable. His bride needs to grow a set of balls and do her duty to humans if she’s not eaten right away.”

“Does everyone have their dress?” Chersa changed the subject. She was the peacekeeper among us with a good heart, even if her mind focused on appearance more than it should.

I was the nerdy one of the group. While the other four dreamed of men and a knight to take them away on his white horse, I dreamed of facts and figures, equations, or anything mathematical.

I couldn’t help mumbling my reply, “My mom gave me hers.”

“But that’s bad luck.” This came from Sarora, the outspoken of our lot, after a loud gasp.

I continued mumbling, which was very unlike me, but I had refused to go with my mother to buy the stupid dress. There was a reason for my madness and I shared it with my friends. “I consider it bad luck to be chosen, so I’m thinking my mother’s dress will give me exactly what I need.”

My girlfriends looked around the teahouse to be sure I wasn’t

overheard. I spoke treason. We, the claiming brides, were revered and praised for our sacrifice. Thousands of years ago, our great, great many times over grandfathers reached a tentative peace with the dragons and agreed to the claiming once every twenty-five years. Four dragons, four claimings, four each century. No one had bothered to renegotiate in all these years. Before and after claimings, the dragons stayed in their realm and we stayed in ours. Of course, we couldn't cross into their realm, not without the magic the dragons stole then hoarded. That was if the legends were true. I just wasn't as sure as everyone else. I blamed it on my reasoning ability that went along with my mathematical mind.

I looked at my friends sitting around me experiencing the same level of terror I was. It was possible that after tomorrow, I would never see one of them again. I'd been depressed since the decree to register as a claiming bride. At this moment, I didn't know if I would survive the wait.

I noisily slammed my teacup on the counter. "I say we purchase a bottle of wine and chase away our nerves."

"We can't drink before the claiming," Julia interjected, completely shocked.

I gave her my best *be serious* look. "Is that written anywhere in the rules? Have you ever heard it said for that matter?"

"I'm with Acasia. Let's party." Chersa stood up.

This is why I liked her so much. The girl knew when it was time to cut loose. Chersa and I led the way. I purchased the first bottle. She purchased the second. Instead of stopping at that bottle of wine, we drank five or six. Things got a little blurry after the third, so we stopped counting, but didn't stop drinking. We laughed, we cried, we talked... well... they talked about their imaginary future husbands. I'd decided to stay single and never procreate. I did not want a daughter of mine going through this.

The following morning, I was willing to take fifty percent of the blame for us standing hungover and miserable while we waited for the beast. My

mother's earlier scolding didn't help my aching head.

The weather was cool, too cool for our flimsy white dresses that proclaimed us virgins. After the age of twenty-one and the beast flying away with his bride, we were fair game. I knew half the girls present would waste no time dispensing their hymens. If you were born in a year that made you a claiming bride, no man or boy would touch you. It would mean death to his entire family. I saw the men salivating while thinking of the parties that night and their chance to take us to bed. They ogled our indecent attire hoping to get lucky. Men never changed.

I wanted to throw up and it wasn't just the wine still floating through my bloodstream. This year there were twenty-nine brides. Not good odds for me or my friends. I shivered again. We were all bare beneath our white flowing gowns. The remainder of the town waited for the dragon in coats and wraps. Life was completely unfair.

I heard his bellow before I saw him. The roar carried high above the mountains down into the valley where we stood. The flap of his wings was loud and nerve-racking as he drew closer to the clearing. Smoke and fire came into view first.

Yeah right, a dragon loved his chosen—not! This red creature was a demon. Its fifty-foot wingspan held my gaze. Large talons on the tips of his wings matched the size of the claws on each appendage. Heat radiated above us as he swooped around in a circle. He looked to have metal plates covering his flesh, or was it even flesh? I'd give him points for lethal grace. Every inch of him cried warrior, top of the food chain, dominant species. The townspeople prostrated themselves. We, in our white dresses, stood tall, though my knees knocked together and I knew the others were as terrified as I was. We clasped hands. Julia and Chersa on either side of me. I couldn't tell where my shaking stopped and theirs began.

He landed, tucking his wings in tight to his body, his tail swinging around and settling in front of his forelegs. He had talons on his tail too.

Three to be exact, three deadly spikes. His roar shook the ground, and we cringed. The pulsing waves of magic made it difficult to stand. I'd never felt magic, but something inborn, deep inside of me, knew it for what it was. I looked sideways at Chersa. Her head tipped downward, tears streaming from her eyes.

This was so wrong, but gods, this beast was incredible. Pee your knickers, dead faint, amazing. I couldn't look away. No human woman could physically mate with this thing, so I knew the legend was a lie. I could only hope the sacrifice of the claimed was quick and she didn't live with her terror for long. I continued staring, the magic swirling around me, heating my body.

He went up high on his back legs, his wings spread, creating a gulf of wind that blew our gowns around us. My hair slapped my face, obscuring my vision. I didn't move, though I stopped trembling. The hands holding mine shook harder. My friends. This beast might take one of my friends. Anger flashed through my brain. He would scare her to death—no need to burn her alive or bite off her head. The one he chose would fall dead at his feet.

His hulking shadow fell over us.

"Please," Julia whispered.

She wasn't asking him to take her. I knew she pled for the terror to end.

"Come forward, Acasia," the husky whisper startled me. "Come." It was an order.

My fingers released those of my friends, my legs moved without me giving them leave. I was drawn to the dragon—reeled in by an invisible cord I was unable to break.

"No," Chersa's voice rang out.

"Silence," the beast commanded.

The virgin sacrificial unchosen brides went to their knees as one unit—but not me. I continued walking, a moth attracted to light, a honeybee searching for nectar. He was it. This dragon. This beast. This monster. He was mine.

I was but a small insect beneath his enormous body. His magic compelled me. I didn't stop walking closer until a great pressure surrounded me. A single claw moved the hair on my face aside and I gazed into his ruby eyes. Blood red crystals... all-knowing. His other forward appendage came out and enveloped me.

“Sleep, female.”

My world went dark.

Chapter Two

Acasia

I noticed two things at once. Cold stone beneath my body and a loud clicking noise.

Click. Click. Click.

My foggy brain quickly noticed something else.

The smell.

Putrid, death. It was horrible and I couldn't figure out why I hadn't noticed it immediately.

Click. Click. Click.

I wiped my hair from my face and nose wishing I'd left the strands to filter the odor. The smell fully entered my nostrils, almost knocking me over. Hell, I was lying down so that wasn't true. Puke. That was it, I needed to puke.

Click. Click. Click.

What the hell? The noise rang through my aching head. I made it to my knees and forearms. Maybe I could avoid some of my vomit. My stomach rumbled, intestines rebelling. I spewed. Oh god, the smell of putrid wine mixed with the odor of death landed between my hands, splattering my skin and the white gown that hung from my body sweeping the floor.

Click. Click. Click.

"Oh, gods, stop that infernal noise." Did I speak aloud?

Click. Click. Click.

Whatever it was, when my guts finished decorating the floor, I would personally see it stopped. I pushed off, rolling sideways, missing some of my puke. Okay, not all of it. The warm wetness slid against my skin soaking through the dress.

I opened my eyes.

The beast stood over me. I moved my head a fraction and saw his hulking claws on either side of my body.

Click. Click. Click.

The middle talon hit the stone floor... in what, impatience? Did he need his food alive in order to enjoy it?

“Please kill me and get it over with. I cannot take the smell or that sound any longer.” Even my voice was defeated. This had to end now. I just prayed he’d eat me headfirst so my nose and ears no longer worked. I waited.

Click. Click...

“Oh, fuck no.” I somehow managed to launch myself at the offending nail. It was bigger than the upper portion of my body, but I landed on it with one goal... make that infernal racket stop.

I felt his leg shift beneath me, but the claw I held didn’t move. A talon from his opposite appendage pushed, rolling me sideways, but I held tight. He lowered his head and one red eye gazed directly into mine.

“Stupid human female named Acasia. Beg for your life.” The gruff voice sounded in my head.

My stomach rolled again, but I managed to speak. “Why should I beg when I can no longer take the smell? Dying would be a blessing.” A low groan left my mouth.

“Humph.” The sound thundered through the room.

A dragon humphed me, the ass.

“What about the smell do you find displeasing?” he demanded, his voice rupturing every brain cell I possessed.

Was he serious? I couldn’t release his claw because he might continue the racket that drove me crazy. More than anything, I wanted to plug my nose. I looked away from his gaze, twisting so I could see what caused the repulsive odor. I also didn’t release his claw, because, for some strange reason, touching him calmed me.

What I saw turned my stomach upside down again and I swallowed back

the bile in my throat. Partially devoured carcasses littered the floor—a leg here, thigh there—all in various stages of decay. Oh my gods, I was losing it again. I tried pushing away, but didn't make it. More chunky vomit spewed from my stomach and landed on his talon and foot, or arm, whatever the hell it was.

When the heaving stopped, I finally answered, "Death, I smell death."

"Humph. You smell of vomit and fermented drink. I don't believe you are one to speak."

"Gods, do it. Just do it, you hulking jerk."

"Do what, human female named Acasia?"

"Kill me, please." It came out on a shriek.

"You humans are strange." This time, his other talon shoved me farther away, moving me from his barf-covered claw.

A deer hoof attached to a partial leg rested two inches in front of my face. I managed to scramble to my feet. I saw the dragon lift his middle claw.

Oh, no he wouldn't. "If you do that, I'll puke on your other foot."

His face changed, his broad mouth widened, and I almost expected to see a dragon laugh. Of course, that's not what happened. His long neck lifted, his head went back, and fire ejected from his mouth on a roar that made me cover my ears.

I looked up. The tower was taller than anything I'd ever seen with blue skies peeking between great columns toward the top. The dragon fire rose and shot out the openings. Black soot covered the ceiling of the tower, and I realized his releasing fire was a common occurrence. I lowered my head and looked into his red eyes again. Smoke came from his nostrils, and for a few moments, the smell of death receded, replaced with lingering smolder. It was an improvement.

"You have one last chance to beg for your life." His jaw didn't move, but his grumbling voice threaded through my mind. Now, it was deep and husky like when he called my name while I waited with my claiming sisters.

Where my bravado came from, I don't know. "I will not beg. Eat me."

He reared up on his hind legs, his wings spreading out. I didn't move, waiting for death—embracing it. The air moved when his wings flapped. For ten seconds he hovered and then he rose until he rested on a ledge hundreds of feet up.

He peered over his shoulder and said, "I will eat you tomorrow." With a last look at where I stood, he went over the side, out of my view. His roar thundered through the air and he was gone.