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Bloodmaiden: A Fantasy Anthology

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BLOODMAIDEN:
A Fantasy Anthology

by

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BLOODMAIDEN

In Sulaimon, four kingdoms stretch to the four corners of that vast land, each ruled and guarded by four dragon dynasties.

To the East, across the feathery meadows, upon an island hovering not far from the coast lays the Zale Dynasty. Serpent-like dragons slither through pure ocean waters and fields, slipping so silently it looks like a gentle wind swaying the tall reeds. Raised facets glitter like sapphires and diamonds upon smooth, aqua-blue scales. They are the most playful of the dragon families, the gentlest dragon rulers. They catch fish and rabbits for the people of the island and protect them from sharks, wolves, and other fiercesome creatures. Serene by nature, the Zale dragons spend much time in meditation, studying peace and charity towards all. Thus they require from their human inhabitants the lightest of the required tributes. In exchange for care and protection, the Zale Dragons oblige only an annual feast which the people prepare and share with the dragons.

To the West, the treacherous, harshly windy Valther Mountains loom. On top stands the Gauthier Dynasty. Unlike the elegant Eastern palace clad in gold and light silks, the Gauthier Dragons live in a sturdy, stone fortress. They are the fiercest of the dynasties, a warring family. They do not war needlessly, though if the humans of their land were ever threatened, they would brutally defend them until death. Many a time their strength protects the people from wild mountain beasts. Thick, leathery, long wings battle snow and ice to find those humans who lose their way. The dragons also quarry great rocks, minerals, and precious gems which their human architects build with and the blacksmiths forge into great armor, weapons, all sorts of fine things. Thus, the tribute the Gauthier dragons require every year includes some of their blacksmiths' most excellently crafted armor, weaponry, and jewelry. The Gauthier dragons are great collectors, admiring the humans' ability to create such magnificent wonders despite their frailties.

Vardon lay to the South in a deep and evergreen valley. It is a place of farmers, and both the dragons and humans inhabiting that land possess a gift in making things grow. The dragons bear scales which, when rubbed into the earth, fertilize the dirt with rich nutrients, helping crops grow strong, lush, and full while endowing many people with healing powers. The tribute Vardenian dragons require is an annual portion of their people's bountiful harvest. They also commission a healer to annually travel abroad, representing Varden by healing any ill they come in contact with.

These three dynasties...

They all sound like something out of an ancient, oriental myth or fairy tale. The concept; one of humans and dragons helping and living in harmony with each other, without fear. To me, that's exactly what they are. A distant dream only read of, told of secretly, quietly yearned for.

I live in Tynan, the fourth dynasty, where the dragons do provide much protection, and there is much need of it. Our dynasty is set high in the northern mountains where wild animals and avalanches are ever constant. But the tribute they require in return is so horrible, no one speaks of it. I cannot even utter it here, now, on paper. In

fact, I will soon have to lay down the pen because my fingers tremble. Scrawling, nervous, illegible scribbles signify the last days of my life. The unspoken truth grows all the more real, close, and unbearably frightening.

For, you see, *I am the new Quelda of Tynan.*

* * *

I look up abruptly, pen clattering on the desk as someone knocks then peers inside. A man of my own Tynanian race—ice blue skin and hair reveal this. My skin is white, my hair gold, a rarity among our people and perhaps another reason why I sit in this room. Such features are considered a sign of greatest purity.

Lines of resolute sorrow, regret, and deepest apology etch the azure face. Longing, cerulean spheres reflect the color of my heart, frozen in fear.

"It is time, my lady Crisilin," he mutters shamefacedly, as if wishing to be suddenly rendered mute.

But I understand. He possesses no more choice than I.

"It's *My Quelda*," I correct kindly, then add, "I remind you only for your own sake. You know you'll be put to death if you use my own name now."

Quelda is a sacred title among the Tynanian Dragons. Bestowing it makes me "sacred" to them. I am no longer Crisilin. Uttering my true name is blasphemy unless used by the man who will soon be my husband, whom I will soon lie with. A man I do not even know, am totally unprepared to be with. At least he wouldn't be prepared either. Both the Quelda and her mate must be young virgins, and the Quelda herself must be her parents' firstborn. Our people marry at an early age. I never thought so before, but now it seems excessively early. Perhaps, just because it is I who now face such a marriage.

"I thank you for looking out for me," he says gently, torment still glinting in his eyes, "and I commend you for even having the ability to think of me, my Quelda. You are a brave child. If I did not have my own children to think of, I would take on your own bravery, call you by your rightful name, and risk death without fear."

"I know, Zephire." I place a hand on his shoulder, trying to comfort. After all, he's been a faithful servant in the seven days I've been cooped inside my new and lavish palace quarters. He has brought food, drink, books, paper, whatever I needed or wanted. Not that I've been allowed to eat or drink anything but bread and water. Part of some *purifying* ritual the Quelda must pass through.

He lingers a few moments more, eyes yet glittering with sorrowful tears. Nothing I can say will erase nor even ease their pain. How desperately he wants to freeze this moment so we don't have to continue to the next. I would wish this myself, save I care too much to get him into trouble. I remind him quietly, "It is time, my servant Zephire."

He takes a deep breath, grants a solitary nod of forced resolution, then turns and walks silently down the hallway. I follow on noiseless, bare feet.

We wind up and down the familiar corridors. Our path reveals the first stop. The room teems with mounds of straw and the spinet, a small, piano-like instrument which can spin fibers into cloth. This is one of the powers granted by the dragons to the Quelda alone. Spinning straw into gold—so she may bless the Tynanian Dynasty with great riches. I wish this was all their tribute required.

The Quelda is to spin straw into gold an hour every day for the duration of her reign. When the last of the straw is spun, her rule ends. The straw always lasts for about nine to twelve months, depending.

I enter the room and start playing a melancholy tune which cranks the straw into gold. My fingers shake again. I am not just spinning straw into gold. I craft the fibers of the gown that will bear me to my death. I would say my funeral, but nothing will remain save perhaps a few shreds of gold stained with red...

The hour, which usually drags by, flees like a half-dead vapor this evening. The marriage so rapidly careening towards my present will start the beginning of my life's end, and with a complete stranger. I wonder if I will even like him, if I will be able to love him. If we'll grow so overwhelmed with fear and loneliness as the end draws nigh that, even if we don't love each other as man and wife, we'll cling to each other. Hold each other with a specialness only born through the warped, sacred tradition...

The door opens slowly with a gentle creak, as if the person tries to break the hard news softly, wishing for the coming truth not to be as greatly as I. It's as if the door's faint groaning shares my agony and horror. As if the person's slow movements mean to soothe, grant me a few more precious moments.

I abruptly cease playing, stand, and look up as the person enters. A long, grey cape and hood conceal her entire body. She is my aunt, Simone, the tallest servant in the palace. None of the other women come close to her six feet and two inches. She cannot reveal herself during the ceremony. I must see no one's eyes from the gold-spinning until when I meet my husband. She cannot speak either, but she lowers the hooded head in what I understand as a nod. I nod back and follow her from the room.

We traverse several corridors. I glance out the arched windows we pass. It is a black night, as is every night on this mountain. The blackness always seems appropriate but now more than ever. However, tonight, the bright, white stars shine uncommonly in the blackness, reflecting what should be a glorious, pure experience yet mocking with almost tangible laughter.

We enter a room where several concealed, women servants cluster around a circular, ivory pool of water. They all nod to it. I step in. Cold waves shock my feet, traveling immediately throughout the rest of my body, providing no comfort from the frigid wind blowing through the open window. The Quelda must learn to be strong and to suffer trials with humility and meekness. I frown anyway. Why should I want to be humble for those who landed me here?

I mean the dragons, of course. The servant women have little more freedom than I and no more say. So I obey as they begin their series of nods and hand motions and other silent commands. The loose robe and gown slips from my body. I am certain not to touch the cloth into the water, lest it should need to be purified all over again. This is a process I hear takes hours. I wonder if the women would really take the time to perform the purifying ritual all over again for some simple and harmless mistake. Would they choose to get themselves in trouble with the dragons for some fault of mine just to suspend my life a few hours more? Because the Quelda is sacred; she cannot be punished.

I don't try anything though. I allow them to scrub every inch of my body, the water wafting a scent of many different flowers and minerals, stirring memories of running through fields, collecting stones, weaving flowery necklaces with...

No. He is as dead to me now as I am to the outside world. I must focus only on the task at hand and the other who will soon be my only "he". I must numb myself to all else. There is only to shun or to shudder oneself into a depthless, black hole...

I wonder how exactly the servants purify the water, if they host any real magic properties or if it's all just part of the ritual. I conclude on the latter. The dragons wouldn't risk giving us magic anymore.

At last, scrubbed raw and unable to control my extreme shivering, I am given a nod to come out of the tub. Stepping carefully onto the towel laid on the floor—my feet must not touch anything until my husband removes the satin slippers now slipped on my feet—several women step forward to dry then clad me in the appropriate clothes. Another gown, pure white silk, another robe of the same. Both richly embroidered, yet beyond that, simple and not very warm. Perhaps the dragons don't wish to waste any of their gold on too lavish a wardrobe. After all, the dress is a nightdress, not a wedding gown, but it's white, so I suppose it serves both purposes. The lack of undergarments is strange, but maybe this is to encourage the marriage's only purpose, serving as a constant, uncomfortable reminder.

A blue ribbon ties back my curls. My aunt leads me from the room. We climb a stair and walk noiselessly down another hall. A silence, not like peace but like death, breathes loudly in the complete hush. I can almost hear it, as though the dragons lurk invisibly, tormenting with cold, piercing breath. We reach the end of the hall and the arched, red doors accented elaborately with gold carvings. Before them stands one of the dragon's priests in white robes and the humbly lowered, balding head hiding behind his hood.

My aunt turns and slips so quietly down the corridor, I don't notice until I turn and see her gliding around the corner at the hall's far end. I turn back to the priest. He waits a bit, as if assuring we are alone. Then he lights the incense, showering me with white rose petals, sprinkling me with sweet waters, blessing my purity. Another priest somewhere does the same to my husband even now. My heart beats faster as he slides too quickly through the rituals joining us in that perfect union.

At last, he steps aside, holding his hand toward the doors.

Sickness swirls in my stomach along with fear. The doors loom large and red like a wall of blood or fire. I don't know what I fear more, what the ceremony signifies—the beginning of freedom's end, of my life as I know it, of my childhood—or the ceremony itself. Now, in this moment, the fear of the former passes away as the latter looms closer, so close it is now, my dreadful, terrifying, unknown now.

I realize why this part is the hardest. I must open the door. I must reach out and grab the cold handle granting my right of passage into the life I must both face and hate. I suddenly feel small, shy, and weak, as though the blood-red door and its brightness grow, its fire ensnaring, consuming me with hopelessness. I feel so alone and suddenly yearn for the young man I will meet on the other side. All I want is someone to cling to.

I suddenly want him to at least like me, be kind to me, hold me, love me even, just as much as I suddenly want to do all these things to him. I suddenly realize why this part is hardest for the Quelda yet also the easiest. Because all I want is to run away from that door, yet knowing I can't, open it and run to him...

I reach out, clutch the handle firmly, pull, and slip through. The door echoes loneliness as it shuts. I stand in the final stretch, the hall with the blood-red carpet. Red is not a very pure color. Perhaps it is meant to encourage the passion which cannot exist between two people who don't even know each other. Fear even now encourages some sort of passion.

I force myself to walk down the hall, heart pounding; panic grip so hard it grows difficult to breathe, to even see. I need to hold onto someone—something.

I reach the final red and golden door.

Stumbling to a stop, I grasp the handle and take in a last, deep breath. This is it. This is where I lose my childhood. Where I must become someone else, where my now must transform. Where I must struggle to survive, hold on to what will remain of myself. Where I must hope my soon-to-be-known husband will show gentleness, kindness and mercy towards me. Share my fear, hope, longing...

I open the door. He sits on the edge of the bed, swinging his legs and wringing his hands. A small connection races between us, his fright an instant part of mine. My first, small sign of hope. The second comes as he stands to face me, the light of the fireplace illuminating his face, his handsome curls, his sparkling but troubled eyes. I gasp, the sickness in my stomach changing to that of relief, wonder, horror as I breathe;

"Chalom."

* * *

"Crisilin," he breathes as I sit beside him, my legs too awed to continue standing. His face reflects the same wonder and horror. He traces my jaw ever so tenderly as if I am some spirit who might vanish if he dares touch me too harshly. An inner torment coupled with relief shines in wondering eyes. Ahh, Chalom. My best friend. More than that—my betrothed from birth.

Yes, it may seem strange that our people would dare place hope in betrothals which might be broken if their son or daughter is chosen. Indeed, many no longer practice this custom because seeing such sacred promises shattered is like snapping the few threads of hope yet binding the fragile fragments of their hearts.

As he cups my face in both hands, drawing closer until our bodies press close, the fear of my slipping between his fingers slowly melts from his eyes. My tears come. I shudder from the deepest wells of my heart to the tips of my delicate fingers which grasp his loose shirt, clutching him tight. I shake with a swell of uncontrollable emotions forcibly controlled for too long. I bury myself closely in his chest. Maybe if we can become one just long enough, I can sink into him, find escape from this torture. Why, must the dragon's curse mar all things beautiful? He is the only man I ever thought I could love. Yet his fate is now sworn to mine, bound. As the sobs come, softly at first, he wraps me in his arms. Then the torrents release more ardently.

Only after they quiet does he speak softly, "When I heard you were to become the next Quelda, I entreated the dragons to allow me to become your husband. I said we were already betrothed before, that I already loved you with a pure love. They gave me trials to pass through, trial after trial which I thought would never end. But finally I passed, and they appointed me the Quelda's husband. But as I sat waiting for you, I was afraid it wouldn't really be you. The thought was partly selfish because I didn't really want you to have to suffer the same fate, but I didn't want to go through the rest of my life, however short, without you..."

I tremble within the comforting cage of his arms. The more he speaks, the more I understand; he makes this choice for me. Shivers grip. I cannot stop them anymore than I can stop the rest of this catapulting fate. But revolted as I am, I can only love him more and cannot scold him. Is this not what I wanted, to be held in the arms of someone who

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