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The Dragon Con

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Chapter One

“Dear mother in heaven,” I said as I went deeper into the darkness. “I miss you, but please don’t let me join you tonight.” I could see nothing as I wandered around the cave dressed in Sparrowville’s finest.

Six months ago my biggest problem was facing the fact that greasy-faced Tommy Jackson would be my future husband. My only other option was farmer Travis, who happened to be a good forty years my senior. Then the rumors started trickling in.

A beast had crawled out of a cave somewhere in the south. It raided sheep, burnt down farms, and threatened the lives of villagers. According to the rumors, the only way to rid oneself of the creature was to give it a sacrifice of gold and blood. That’s where I come in.

*Scrape!*

I whipped around in the direction of the sound, fearing that I had come face-to-face with the monster. In my hands I held my father’s finest dagger, his second sacrifice to the beast. Each villager was forced to sacrifice something. For most, it was a small bag of coins or a bracelet, but for my father, it was his only child. Since, heaven knows, the only way to ensure that you get rid of a bloodthirsty beast is to sacrifice the town’s only virgin above the age of twelve to it.

*Swoosh!*

I felt a gust of wind whiz by me on the right. I spun around to face the creature, this time moving a little too fast. I tripped over my own dress and fell backward. My dagger slipped from my fingers and scattered away with a loud *clank*, alerting the beast to my location. My heart stopped as I looked up to see a pair of blood-red eyes glowing in the dark.

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I slowly moved into a crouching position as I felt around for my weapon, eyes never leaving the beast. The monster leapt from the ceiling and flew at me before I had a chance to find my blade. I somersaulted to get away and then surged forward hoping there wasn't a dead end ahead, but I never got the chance to find out. I tripped on a small stalagmite and found myself kissing the cave floor. I tried to scurry away but I was too slow. The red-eyed demon caught me.

Pain, blood, and the crunching of my bones against the creature's fangs are what I expected, but not what happened. Instead of a massive beast, the creature was about the size of a fat golden retriever and was currently in the process of turning my back into its bed. I tried to free myself from the cuddle monster, but it would have none of it. Cuddles was preparing for a nap and I would just have to wait.

"I doubt we'll get much gold," echoed a familiar male voice from somewhere behind me. "But we should get a few good lambs out of the deal. That will at least feed us until we get to the next town."

Cuddles restricted my movement just enough so that I couldn't see who was approaching, but since they brought a torch I could finally see what the creature was. Curled up with a blissful smile on his face was a small dragon with a collar on it. In the dim light I could just barely make out the fire symbol on its tag, the logo of the finest acting troupe in the kingdom. This dragon posed no more a threat than the pet dragons found in every rich man's house.

"Um, Kam," said a second male voice from behind me. "There's a girl."

"I can see that, Wallace."

"Our dragon is sleeping on it, Kam."

"Can you please call off your guard dragon?" I asked the strangers.

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“Do you think they misunderstood our blood sacrifice suggestion?” the one that I assumed was Wallace said as they came around into my view.

“You!” I said pointing a finger at them. “It was due to your wild tales that I got sent here in the first place!” About a week ago, these men had stopped by my uncle’s Inn, claiming to be escapee’s from the last town torn apart by the beast. It was them that put the idea of a blood sacrifice into the head of the town elders.

“When we said blood sacrifice we didn’t mean a girl!” Kam said as he crouched on his heels. “While you make a rather beautiful virgin sacrifice, you cause us quite the headache. We can’t have you running along and telling everyone that the nameless beast is nothing more than two men and a stage dragon putting on a good show.”

“What are you going to with me?” I asked as I did my best to cover up the fear in my voice.

“We have two options. We either have to kill you, or sell you into slavery. You decide,” Said Wallace. He acted as if my choices were on the same level as choosing chocolate or vanilla cake at a birthday party.

“Let’s not get too hasty,” I said with a nervous look as Kam picked up the dagger I had lost.

“Do you have any other ideas?” Wallace said as he petted the sleeping beast on my back.

“How about an addition to your act?” I asked.

“And what could you possibly add to our show?” Kam asked doubtfully.

“A young village girl escapes the destruction of her town with the beast at her heels,” I said with a dramatic wave of my hands. “If you two continue to spread the fear personally,

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someone is going to connect the dots. Plus, people are more likely to believe an innocent girl than you two fools.”

Kam rose as he pondered my offer. My heart thudded in my ears as I crossed my fingers in hopes that he would accept it. He whistled, and the dragon sprung from my back.

“Welcome to the Dragon con,” Wallace said with a smile as he reached out a hand to help me up.

Dear mother in heaven, I’ve become a con-woman. I know it’s not what you wished for me, but at least it’s better than becoming the next Mrs. Greasy-faced Jackson.