

Chapter Four



As Leo and his companions rode north, the rain began, and the rolling green landscape gave way to increasingly taller hills. Their horses went at full gallop, eating up the miles before the rain could turn the dirt road into a sea of mud.

By the time they passed the second beacon, the rain was pounding on them. Their uniforms were drenched, their hair plastered to their heads. The hills had become mountains, and flocks of sheep huddled in the narrow glens where a few trees could give them shelter.

Thunder clapped overhead, and Leo spotted the first flash of lightning to the west. *Good.* He was going to need all the power he could get. Normal people didn't stand a chance against the winged creatures that breathed fire. People like his father.

Leo had heard the story many times over a campfire. His father's last battle had been against the Norveshki. Cedric had plowed through a dozen of their fierce warriors, but when a dragon had attacked, all his bravery and expertise had been in vain.

Another flash of lightning, this one a little closer. Leo would need to break off from the group soon. As they

neared the village, a mountain loomed to the right, topped with craggy cliffs and a beacon tower. It was Mount Baedan, which the village was named after. He spotted a cliff that overlooked the village. That was the perfect place.

“My lord.” Nevis drew his attention to a horseman charging toward them. A scout.

Leo and his companions slowed to a stop. “Report,” he said, loud enough to be heard over the pouring rain.

The scout bowed his head, causing a puddle of rain to slosh off the brim of his cap onto his chest. “Four dragons from Norveshka have attacked the village of Mount Baedan.”

“No warriors?” Leo asked.

“None, my lord. Just the dragons. They swooped into the valley and set the village ablaze to force the people from their homes. While the villagers ran to a nearby cave, two of the dragons captured two small children and flew away.”

Leo stiffened, his hands tightening on the reins, as the men around him cursed under their breaths. Ten years ago, the dragons had started snatching sheep. Now they were nabbing small children.

He glanced westward, hoping to see another flash of lightning streak across the sky. He needed the power now.

“The rain put out the fires,” the scout continued. “The villagers are starting to leave the cave. A group of men rode out, hoping to rescue the two children.”

Leo swallowed hard as bile rose up his throat. The rescue attempt would be in vain. Men on horseback could not cross the mountains as fast as a dragon could fly.

Thunder cracked overhead so loud, the men flinched.

“Ride on to the village,” Leo shouted at them. “The last two dragons could still be close by. I’ll take care of them. You protect the people.” He turned his horse and started up the slope of Mount Baedan.

Higher and higher his horse climbed, but eventually the path became too muddy. Leo dismounted and patted the horse, the quilted material now drenched through.

“Go join the others.” He gave the horse a slap on the rump, and it started down the mountain.

Leo abandoned the muddy path that snaked back and forth up the mountainside. Instead, he scrambled straight up the rocky slope. He was halfway up when a bolt of lightning shot from the sky and struck the ground thirty yards away, blasting a boulder into bits.

Yes! The lightning had found him and was zeroing in. Energy from the blast rolled toward him, seeking him out in waves he couldn’t see, but could feel. His skin tingled. His hair, which had been plastered to his head, now crackled as it lifted into the air.

Thunder boomed overhead, sending another wave of energy toward him. It slithered under his damp clothes, giving him a slight shock. Then an increase in power. And speed. He charged up the mountainside faster than any human could go.

Anticipation swelled inside him as he reached the first set of cliffs. Another lightning bolt ripped through the sky, this one hitting only fifteen yards away. It blasted through the rocks, causing the cliff to crumble away. As the ledge beneath his feet trembled, he ran and leaped.

He landed on the next cliff six feet away as thunder cracked and the first cliff tumbled down the mountainside. More energy surged into him, and he scrambled higher up the mountain. Faster. In a race against the next strike.

He reached the highest cliff. Nearby on the mountain summit, the beacon tower stood, deserted in the storm, its flame long smothered by the rain. The village lay nestled in the valley far below. He spotted houses built of stone with their thatched roofs burned away. The chapel of Enlightenment partially destroyed. The village lookout tower

stood as high as the chapel bell tower and was manned by a lone villager. No doubt, he was keeping an eye out for the last two dragons.

Nevis and his troop arrived, and the villagers poured from their homes to welcome them. Leo winced at the sight of small children running about. *Dammit, Nevis, get them back into the cave.*

A rumbling noise echoed through the valley, sounding much like thunder, but Leo knew better. It was the beating of dragon wings. The last two dragons had waited for the people to reappear.

Leo ripped off his gloves and threw them down, along with his bow and quiver. Then he drew his sword and pointed it to the sky. “*Now!*”

Lightning broke through the dark clouds, racing toward him. He widened his stance and braced for impact. It struck his sword, fracturing so that a dozen smaller streaks shot off in a circle around him.

The major portion of the lightning sizzled down his sword, eager to reach his flesh. It hit his bare hand and jolted him so hard he fell to his knees and dropped the sword. The dozen fractured shards rebounded, drawn to him like a magnet. They pounded into him, jerking him back and forth. Thunder cracked over him so loud his ears rang.

Power surged through him, so fierce and scorching he thought his skin would melt, his guts would boil, and his head burst like a kernel of corn dropped into a fire. Pain and power, power and pain, he could no longer tell the difference. He only knew he wanted it, wanted to drink it in, soak it up, and claim it all.

The fiery torture eased to a warm, buzzing sensation, and he found himself on all fours, gasping for air. How many times had he endured this? And it still hurt like hell. He rested back on his knees and splayed his hands in front

of him. Sparks skittered around his fingers like a host of fireflies.

Good, but not enough. The Beast wanted more.

He grabbed his sword and hefted himself to his feet. "More, dammit!" He lifted his sword in the air.

Lightning struck again, driving him to his knees and knocking the sword from his grip. He cried out as both pain and power ripped through him. Nevis was right. Someday he would explode.

Thunder cracked around him as if he'd become the center of the storm. His ears grew numb, only hearing the buzz of energy pulsing around him. This time, when he examined his hands, streaks shot out a few yards. Not enough to kill a dragon.

He fumbled for his sword once again. Nevis's question reverberated in his head, bouncing off the inside of his skull. *Do you enjoy courting death?* Over the years, he'd found he could take in more power each time, but what was the limit? How would he know when it was too much?

He stumbled to his feet and slowly lifted the sword. When he had the weapon only waist-high, the lightning streaked toward him. Like a desperate lover, it pounced, not even waiting till he was fully cocked. It struck hard, flinging him through the air into the wall behind him. His head cracked against stone, and he crumpled into a heap.

Rain splattered on his face, keeping him conscious. The pain was merely the price he paid for the ability to protect his people. The pain would be fleeting.

The power he could keep for months.

He rose to his feet. If he were normal, he'd have suffered a concussion and some broken bones. Hell, if he were normal, he'd be dead. But instead, he swelled with strength and power. Tiny streaks of lightning swirled around him so fast, he appeared to glow.

He strode to the edge of the cliff to see what was hap-

pening. The dragons were flying low, probably to avoid the lightning. They swooped down at the screaming villagers, herding them away from the cave. Making them easy to prey upon.

With the superfast speed he now possessed, Leo pulled a length of coiled rope from his sword belt and tied one end loosely to a tree deeply rooted in the rock wall of the cliff. The other end, he tied to one of his metal arrows. He grabbed his metal bow, nocked the arrow, and imbued them with some of his energy. Now, when he shot the arrow, it would fly faster and farther.

He aimed for the lookout tower and let the arrow fly. It whistled through the air and struck the top wooden beam of the tower, embedded deep. Continuing at his fast speed, Leo tightened the rope, tossed his bow and quiver over his shoulder, sheathed his sword, then looped the sword belt over the rope. He ran to the cliff's edge and pushed off.

Hanging on to the belt, he careened down the length of the rope. Just before crashing into the tower, he swung his legs up and over the top beam and landed on the top platform. The lone villager gaped at him.

"Go!" he shouted. With lightning sizzling around him like a golden nimbus, he didn't need to speak twice.

The villager scrambled down the ladder, yelling that the Beast had arrived.

After dropping his sword belt on the platform, Leo quickly readied another arrow and pivoted, searching for the dragons. Even though it was possible for him to simply shoot a lightning bolt from his hand, he'd learned from experience that raw power didn't always go exactly where he wanted it to go. Since there was a chance of hitting innocent bystanders or setting their homes on fire, he preferred to use a metal arrow imbued with his power so he could control the force and trajectory.

There, through a steady sheet of rain, a pair of red,

glowing eyes was glaring at him. The dragon was perched on the bell tower of the chapel. It sat up, expanding its chest, a sure sign it was about to breathe fire.

Leo released enough energy to make sparks pop and crackle around the metal arrow. When he shot it, the arrow would fly with enough speed and power that it would actually pierce the dragon's scaly skin and release an electric shock wave through the creature's body.

He aimed for the dragon's chest, but just as he let the arrow fly, the dragon pushed off, flying straight at him. Fire erupted from the dragon's mouth, forcing him to drop flat onto the platform. Flames shot over him, missing him by a few inches. Meanwhile, the arrow hit the dragon's hip.

Sparks spread from the arrow, jerking the dragon around in midair. It shrieked, then shot up into the sky and turned north toward Norveshka. Leo notched an arrow to shoot again, but screams below made him look down.

The second dragon had grabbed a child.

"Nevis!" Leo shouted. "Catch it!"

Nevis spurred his horse and galloped after the dragon. It was gaining altitude, now higher than the rooftops of the houses.

Leo sent a surge of energy into his bow and arrow and aimed, trying to keep a safe distance from the child. The arrow zipped through the air. Direct hit to the dragon's tail. Sparks exploded around the wound, racing up the dragon's body, and it jolted, bellowing in pain and dropping the child. A dress flapped in the wind. It was a little girl.

Nevis charged onward as she tumbled from the sky. Villagers screamed, then let loose a round of cheers as Nevis managed to catch her.

The dragon flew away, filling the sky with an angry roar.

Leo lowered his bow and arrow and watched through the rain as the villagers crowded around Nevis. The little

girl was safely deposited in the arms of her crying mother. Nevis glanced back at Leo and gave him a thumbs-up before being dragged off his horse by a swarm of happy villagers.

With a cheer, the villagers led Nevis and his men into the cave. Boys led the horses, including Leo's horse, to the stables. Women dashed into their homes to gather cups and jugs of beer and wine. A few men rushed into a nearby pen to slaughter a lamb. Leo wasn't sure if the village was celebrating the rescue of one child or drowning their sorrows for the two who were lost, but clearly they intended to partake of food and drink. And even more clearly, it was a celebration he could not attend.

He glanced at his hands. Sparks still shimmered around his fingers. One false move, and lightning would streak from his fingertips, possibly killing someone. He'd been in such a hurry he'd left his gloves on the cliff. With a sigh, he picked up his sword belt, then buckled it on.

The rain was still pelting him, so he climbed down the ladder to a second platform just below. Drops of rain leaked between the wooden planks overhead, and the wind blew more rain at him, but it was an improvement. He sat in the driest corner and rested his back against a wooden pillar. For a short while, because he had released so much energy, he would feel all right. But soon the pain would start again.

He spotted two men rolling a cask toward the cave. The villagers must have run out of beer. Sounds of laughter emanated from the cave. Soon he could smell the scent of a lamb roasting over a fire. His stomach grumbled. A quick search of his pockets came up empty.

With a sigh, he leaned his head against the pillar. Alone again. It was always this way. He was too damned dangerous to be near anyone. Even Nevis had learned to stay away from him when he had this much power.

He closed his eyes as a memory flitted across his mind. The first time lightning had found him, he'd been only five years old. One strike had sent him flying, and he'd crumpled onto the ground, twitching uncontrollably. His nanny had run to him. Calling out to him, she'd touched his face. Then a surge of energy had shot through her, and she'd collapsed beside him dead.

His first victim. Someone he'd dearly loved.

"I didn't mean to . . ." Leo whispered, the sound whisked away with the wind. "Forgive me."

Since then, everyone had known to keep their distance. And if a stranger didn't know, he soon learned when he heard the new name Leo had been given.

Never touch the Beast.

Never let the Beast touch you.

The rain continued to fall. The energy inside him spread throughout his body, expanding, rebelling against the narrow confines of his human shell, demanding to be released and used. *Not now*. He had to keep as much power as possible so it would be available whenever he needed it.

The sun lowered in the sky, and the wind became more chilled against his wet clothes. He welcomed the cold. It made it easier to deal with the energy boiling inside him, threatening to escape like steam from a kettle.

The strains of a pipe and fiddle came from the cave. The people were dancing, their music accentuating the thudding rhythm in his head. The energy kept expanding, pushing against the inner walls of his skull, pushing so hard he expected to hear the sound of bone cracking. He squeezed his eyes shut, gritting his teeth against the pain.

Sometimes he thought this was the worst part about his gift. The headaches would torture him until either he released some power or it managed to escape on its own.

"My lord?" a female voice spoke below.

He opened his eyes. On the ground by the ladder, a