

THE LOST ASHA CHAPTERS

Of NEW DRAGON CITY

Chapter Six

Asha

Asha licked her lips as she watched from the rooftop as the monster dashed across the square, diving into a nearby building. The sweetness from the fruit was still teasing her tongue in the most pleasant of ways and she couldn't help a small, pleased smile. She'd tried apples once before. On a journey out of the city they had discovered an entire orchard ripe with fruit. Asha has eaten so many apples, she'd gotten sick that night and her mother had scolded her for being greedy. Still, she secretly believed it had been worth it.

But she'd never found apples in the city. She wondered if she should fly down and look for more, now that the monster was gone.

Before she could make a move, her ears caught a thundering of wings beside her and a moment later her mother came down for a landing. She gave Asha a fierce look, her nostrils puffing out angry clouds of smoke. Asha cringed, dropping her head guiltily.

Uh, oh. Busted.

"What were you doing down there?" her mother demanded, shaking out her crimson wings as she stalked toward the young dragon. "You could have been killed!"

"I was hungry," Asha replied, a little sulkily. "They left food behind. Apples!"

"I don't care if they left a whole bleeding cow! It's dangerous, Asha! Did you see what the monsters did to your uncle earlier today? I'm not sure he'll ever fly right again!"

Asha frowned, feeling ashamed. Of course her mother was right. The monsters were dangerous. They'd been hunting dragons and killing them from day one. So many dragons had been lost in the first war. Blown to pieces by the monsters' deadly rocks. Even though there were

fewer of them now, they were just as violent. Killing without mercy. And for no reason, too! Unlike other animals, these monsters didn't even eat what they hunted. They left the dead dragons to rot away in the sun. Which didn't make any sense.

Her mind flashed to the monster she'd encountered down below. He'd been smaller than the normal ones. Maybe just a baby? When she first saw him, she'd been too frightened to move. She thought he'd pull out a rock stick and it would be all over.

Instead, he'd given her an apple.

A sweet, delicious apple.

"There's more of them this year," her mother said, pacing the rooftop worriedly. "There had be a hundred out there today. They're gone now, but who knows when they'll be back? We have to stay vigilant. We can't take any risks."

"Yes mother," Asha replied dutifully. "I promise I won't." Her voice cracked a little on the last part. She'd been foolish down there. Risking her life for an apple. But she'd show her mother she could do better. That she was worthy to be the daughter of a queen.

"What if they come back?" she asked worriedly. "What if they try to kill us all?"

Her mother smiled, lifting her wing and placing it over Asha's back, pulling her close. Asha snuggled against her, liking the warmth of her fire-filled belly.

"My sweet girl," her mother whispered. She kissed Asha's head with her warm snout. "There's no need to fear. I will protect you from the monsters. No matter what I have to do."

Chapter Nine

Asha

Asha was hungry. So very hungry.

The dragon paced the rooftop, looking down at the square below. Her mother had gone out hunting hours ago, promising to find food, but she hadn't yet come back. Asha hoped she'd be able to find something; it seemed every year there was less food to be had in the city and it was getting rather worrisome. In fact, some of the other dragons had started complaining that they should leave the city entirely and set up a new territory elsewhere. Others argued it would be too dangerous. Each dragon herd controlled a specific zone and no one was going to willingly invite others onto their hunting grounds.

In the end, her mother had made the decision that they would remain in the city—at least for now. And as she was their queen, she had the final say. But Asha knew the other dragons had started to whisper behind her back. To question her judgment as their children cried themselves to sleep with empty bellies. Which was dangerous. A herd divided, her mother would say, cannot stand strong.

And they needed to be strong; now more than ever.

Asha's stomach growled. She started licking her scales, attempting to distract herself with a quick cleaning. Trying to ignore the hunger crawling through belly like a thousand wiggly spiders. A bug flew by and she slurped it up with her tongue, crunching down on it and swallowing. Tasty, but ultimately unsatisfying.

She groaned, starting to feel a little stick to her stomach. *Come on, Mother*, she thought. *Please come back!* But the sky remained empty. Her mother remained gone.

Suddenly, Asha sat up straight, her nose catching the sudden scent of something in the air. Something that smelled delicious.

She lifted her nose to the sky, sniffing again. Excitement began to well in her empty stomach as she recognized the smell. Meat. Rotting, delicious meat! And close by, too! She lowered her nose to the building's edge. It was down there, in the square. She was sure of it.

She paced the building, wondering what she should do. Her mother had told her to remain here while she was gone, but she hadn't known there would be precious food down below. If Asha waited until she came back, some other creature could grab it and take it away.

Asha couldn't let that happen.

No, she thought, she'd quickly dive down and grab it. Scoop it up in her talons and bring it back to the safety of the rooftop. Then she'd wait for her mother to return and proudly show off the feast.

Oh Asha, she imagined her mother saying as she beamed with pride. My brave little hunter! We will all eat well tonight, thanks to you.

Heart pounding in excitement, Asha unfurled her wings. Then she pushed off on her back feet, launching herself into the sky. As she swept down toward the square, her eyes scanned the ground below, ensuring there were no lurking monsters.

But it was empty. Completely empty. Save for the delicious feast.

Asha reached the ground, skimming the earth until her nose led her to the prize. A huge, hunk of rotten beef, just lying there out in the open, with no one to claim it at all. Asha didn't understand why it was there, but she didn't really care. And her mouth watered as she pictured the juicy flesh sliding down her throat, filling her empty stomach.

She'd sleep so well tonight. So full. So satisfied. And her mother would be so proud.

She dropped down, reaching for the--

SNAP!

Asha screeched as something hard and heavy came down on her leg, hot pain shooting up her body like wildfire. Flapping her wings, she desperately tried to get airborne again, but she couldn't lift her body off the ground. Her leg, she realized in horror, was trapped in sharp jaws of metal, cutting into her leathery scales, blood gushing from the wound.

Oh no. No, no, no.

She let out another screech, this one more from fear than pain as she realized what had happened. How foolish she'd been to fall for it.

The monsters had caught her in their evil trap.

And when they came back, they would kill her.