

## Seraphina

Synopsis: Zayden was forced by the greed of an emperor to chart unexplored territory. He was tasked with navigation, and security. What he found was horror and the kind of love anyone would die for.

Dedication; To my wife. Ana, my drive, my person, my love. Thank you for allowing me to experience the love these characters feel everyday of my life. Te amo!

They were all dead, and, somehow, that didn't matter. Zayden had warned them all about this. Greed, hubris, pride, death, and in the midst of it all love.

That was the thing Zayden had not foreseen.

Seraphina. The priestess of Joya.

Even with all the death and destruction, Zayden's heart could only fear for her safety.

The first morning Zayden had ever set his eyes upon her he'd felt an unknown, and unwarranted, flutter in his heart. The kind that comes from missing a step as you are descending. His breath had instantly cut, and he'd had to look away before anyone could see the effect she'd had on him.

Zayden had known many women, and he'd even thought he'd loved a few, but in that moment, he realized how sorely he was mistaken.

She was a foot shorter than he, wearing the gray robes and veil of a priestess, but her eyes. Large, brown, and doe like. They seemed to see him. Really see him. With a depth and tenderness, he'd never known.

Zayden had lived thirty three years. He was a head taller than most men, and his skin, in contrast to theirs, was bronze. Hard lean muscle, built from years of training and hardship, lay beneath it.

Seraphina, it turned out, was the same age. With fair skin, long dark brown hair, and a smile that could make the worst sinner confess their darkest truths.

“Blessings on you, brother.”

Those had been her very first words to him. Words he’d answered with a nervous laugh, and stumbling words. Like a nervous adolescent. She’d smiled and pretended not to notice, but it had done little to salve his embarrassment.

Three weeks ago, the asinine emperor of Cenati had demanded Zayden be brought to him.

He’d been pulled from his home while he slept, strapped onto an alpha dragon’s saddle, and flown northward to Cenati itself.

The emperor at least had the mock courtesy of pretending to be surprised at the mistreatment he’d received at the hands of his riders, but after a life lived on the fringes of society Zayden was accustomed to Grengs, and their false courtesy.

*A Galant mission to ensure the future prosperity of the empire.* That's what the self-righteous cunt of an emperor had dared to call it.

His grandfather had conquered all the known world and, the pompous prick, who'd never even been outside his capital, had decided he would one up him by conquering the unknown parts as well.

"Respectfully," Zayden had managed with convincing courtesy. "The lands of Old Axtlan are uncharted for a reason. They are filled with demons, and things that only their makers can comprehend."

That had only served to further encourage the heavy set piece of dragon dung with imperial regalia.

*What could be more glorious than exploring and mapping those lands yourself?*

"Her."

That was his answer now, but he hadn't known it then.

Zayden had been forced into this because of his Orders familiarity with the lands bordering the empire. With him the emperor sent one of his most trusted generals, a half dozen

scribes and astronomers, and a priestess of the goddess Joya. Her role was to ensure the blessing and success of their mission.

So, they'd set off. On the backs of beta dragons, whose miniature size made them slightly larger than horses and forced them to rest frequently. They didn't fly for glory, nor the feigned greatness of the idiot emperor. Zayden had a new purpose. Ensuring Seraphina's safe return.

The dragons managed to cross the Joya River at its narrowest expanse and made the journey through the mountains beneath the shadow of Turos, the father of all mountains. That was where the world ended. Beyond they would only witness terror and death.

"Do you think we will find anything?" Seraphina had asked him on the first night. The light of their fire burned low against the darkness. There was something glistening in her eye when she spoke to him. Something Zayden thought he recognized but told himself he was being foolish.

"I've been this way before, priestess."

"Please call me, Seraphina."

That made his pulse quicken.

“Seraphina. The world goes on endlessly in desert and canyon, but by no means does that mean the land is vacant. Wraiths walk in daylight and far worse things wander at night. Seeking retribution for some past wrongs no one will ever set right.”

Seraphina was uneasy in her seat and whispered a prayer of protection for them.

“I believe in Joya, as much as any man,” Zayden had told her. “But in case she doesn’t dare to wander west of Tueros. I’ll look out for you.”

That had brought a smile to her face. “And I will be praying for you, Mister...”

“Zayden.”

“It’s wonderful to meet you, Zayden.”

With that, Seraphina had kissed his forehead, as was the custom of her order, and left him to the silence of his watch, and the silent desire in his soul.

The inept general, and his scribes, had not trusted his word and insisted on wearing plate and chainmail. Zayden had worn the traditional Sombrero of the frontier along with a blue poncho emblazoned with his orders sigil. He remained fresh, and protected from the sun, while the imperial half wits roasted themselves in their shiny armor. Which reflected the light of the sun like a beacon announcing their arrival to the monsters all around.

Even so, they'd been fortunate, their dragons stout, and had made it three days into the *Land of the Old Ones* without seeing a thing besides dirt and landscapes. Zayden had made it a habit to set up his tent next to Seraphina's and looked forward to the small talks they shared which blossomed easily into deeper conversations.

He learned she'd been forced into the church by her jealous stepmother who plotted to rob her of her inheritance. While also finding himself sharing that he'd lost parents at fourteen on a doomed settlement expedition. Each night their tents seemed to plant themselves closer than the night before.

Zayden could feel her closeness. Smell her unique scent wafting in through his open tent. It was intoxicating. Unbearably so.

The following morning they'd awoken to find one of the scribes, Oldar, the fat one, was gone from his tent. His dragon and belongings remained unmolested, and the astronomers who'd shared the night watch claimed to have seen nothing. Even so the man was gone. Missing. No blood or remains to send back to his wife.

Seraphina prayed over his items, and they'd decide to leave his tent as it was to serve as a memorial for him.

Foolish, but, though Zayden would have found it irritating and needless, coming from Seraphina, he could see the merits of her logic.

The general, Liam, a pompous ass who angled his nose skyward every time he spoke to him, ordered Zayden to fly ahead and inform them of any trouble. That would have been wise, had it meant he would actually have time to warn them. With the things that lived in these lands it was a safe bet to assume he would not. Additionally, it would separate him from Seraphina, and that was unacceptable.

The following night was uneventful. The scribes had started drafting a map they hoped to present to the emperor, but with the sunrise there came an eerie and unnatural mist. A fog so dense it blotted the sun, and demons began emerging from its depth.

Four men died instantly, and another one leapt upon his dragon and flew away back towards the mountains. Seraphina dropped to her knees and prayed. Her voice striking at the creatures like a hammer against an anvil.

Zayden drew his sword and began circling her as she prayed. His movements in sync with her voice. Every thrust of his weapon was a prayer out of Seraphina's mouth, and every block was a curse against the demons.

Before long, the fog faded, and the only people in sight were Zayden and Seraphina. They found Liam, sheltering beneath the corpse of his dragon, and the last of the scribes was laying wide eyed and muttering the same phrase repeatedly.

“Not the fog. I hate the fog. Not the fog. I hate the fog. Not the fog.”

The man screamed when Seraphina tried to rouse him.

“He’s traumatized,” Liam stated. “His mind is broken over his fear of the mist.”

“We all have our phobias,” Seraphina had offered, sweetly.

Even so, they couldn’t take him with them, and the man would scream anytime they touched him.

As they’d walked away, mounting the last of their dragons Seraphina had held Zayden’s hand, seeking comfort in his touch. Zayden’s heart had leapt and been eager to reciprocate her affection.

The quest was done. There was little doubt about it, but their last dragon had perished under all their combined weight. Forced to camp once more, Zayden had decided there was little point in hiding his desire. As the priestess attempted to erect their tent he’d circled around her, spun her by her waist, and planted a kiss firmly on her lips.

For a moment he feared she'd pull away. Reject his advance and break what little remained of his heart. Instead, she'd cupped his head in her hands and kissed him back eagerly. Like a dying man reaching for life. General Liam, had scoffed, and stomped away, but none of it mattered. Only her. Only Seraphina.

Inside their shared tent Zayden hugged her close to him that night. Her hair had been freed and lay sprawled against his arm drowning him in her intoxicating scent.

He had to feel her. He had to have her.

“Zayden,” Seraphina whispered. “I am a priestess. This is wrong. I should be ashamed, but the thought of pushing you away is too much for me to bear.”

“For as long as my heart continues beating,” Zayden offered in response. “It is yours. Tell me to leave and I will. It will destroy me, but I will die by your command.”

She'd contemplated that for a moment.

“I love you, Zayden.”

“And I love you, Seraphina. With all the strength of my soul.”

In the still darkness of the uncharted lands, Zayden took a step he'd never feared until that moment. He kissed her again. Wrapping her in his embrace and pulling her close once more. Each caress felt like a match igniting one right after the other until they were both consumed the by fire of their passion.

He unlaced her clothing, and she fumbled at his, and suddenly they found themselves naked as the day of their birth and tangled together. Their love burning against the cold of the night.

For the first time in millennia life flourished in a human womb on the western side of Tuross.

Seraphina's head rested on his chest and Zayden could feel their hearts beating in unison. As one. From that moment onward.

Sleep found them, but their peace was shattered with a sudden scream that cracked like a whip through the night.

Zayden rose to see Liam, the whites of his eyes bulging, as his mind was enslaved by the creature on his neck. Thick black tendrils like tentacles wrapped themselves around his neck and sunk deep into the base of his skull. The man that had been Liam swung his sword against Seraphina, and Zayden had just enough time to react.

Catching his wrist and twisting as he spun to build momentum. The steel slashed Liam's neck severing the man's spine and splitting the creature on his neck in two.

They dressed, but their escape would be fruitless. They'd been surrounded as they slept. Zayden knew the only way to spend his final moments was with Seraphina held between his arms.

That was how it all unfolded. A tale of doom. A tale of greed. A tale of love.

Lands

of old

Axtian

