The Marked Scales

CHAPTER ONE

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Chapter 1

BOUND BY MEMORY

DAY 1

Tharos slowed at a window along the corridor, his skin still releasing electrical discharges left over from his training, heat and energy bleeding off in faint pulses. The vast landscape of Drakenfell stretched out before him, a constant reminder of the power and beauty of his home. He sighed, his breath fogging the glass before fading.

Leaning closer, he studied his iridescent eyes as their colors shifted.

Today, they shimmered with violet and blue, storm-cool hues that matched the calmer pace of his breath. On other days, they had shown copper, amber, green, or even silver. He had never understood why they changed. No one else had eyes like his. No one.

His claws brushed the mark on his front leg. As a child, his mother had nuzzled it softly every night before bed, a small ritual of comfort. To others, it was just a mark, but up close, the imprint of a tiny human hand told a different story—a secret his mother had always insisted was important.

Aric's hand.

What was his mother thinking when she allowed Aric to touch his egg? A human! Humans were the reason why his father had died.

Molten lava wound through the dark terrain below like veins of glowing gold, catching his attention. Too bright. Like the blade that had ended his father's life nearly ten years ago.

He had staggered back, eyes fixed on the sword lodged in Elderon's chest. The sight hollowed him out. He collapsed onto his forelegs, his frame trembling as the world around him blurred. A raw, primal scream tore from his chest. Lightning crackled around him, mirroring the chaos in his heart.

The blade throbbed with a cruel glow. Twisting engravings pulsed along the steel, burning with magic. Coldly gleaming, the large sapphire in the pommel resembled a heartless eye watching over the devastation.

There was no mistaking the sapphire. No mistaking the engravings. This was King Dorian's weapon. The realization struck like fire, feeding the fury already tearing through him.

When he returned home, rage and grief churned inside him. His mother touched the mark on his leg, whispering it was now more important than ever. She pressed her snout gently to his head and retreated into the depths of the fortress for the *Nimorath*, leaving no space for his questions.

Tharos knew, even then, that she had no choice. Tradition demanded she face her grief immediately to honor his father by retreating into isolation.

For days, a heavy silence hung over her quarters. The ancient laws dictated that no light be lit and no voice be raised until her memory and rage had run their course. Tharos was left entirely to his own devices, a child forced to cope with a gaping void in his chest and a growing anger alone. Sleep became rare. More than once, his unchecked lightning scorched the stone walls of his chambers when the nightmares overtook him, and servants began avoiding the corridors whenever his grief echoed through the halls.

By the time the ritual finally released her and she emerged—stronger and more resolute in her duty—part of him resented the very traditions she served. They had forced her into silence, leaving a six-year-old hatchling alone to navigate the storm inside his own head.

But nothing burned hotter than the image of King Dorian's blade buried in his father's chest. The human king had died in the battle too, but for Tharos, it had never been enough.

And still—no matter how certain he was that King Dorian was responsible for his father's death—whenever his anger reached the boiling point, another memory rose. When he and Aric locked eyes across the hall at the Nexus, moments before darkness and chaos erupted, a tall, familiar figure had been standing beside him, but Tharos had not been able to make him out clearly.

After the scream had torn from his throat, he thought he heard someone call his name, but he couldn't tell where it had come from. What was the meaning of this?

The Lightning Cliffs drew his gaze, their jagged peaks slicing into the stormy sky in the distance. Metallic surfaces gleamed dully in the intermittent light of lightning strikes. Above, dark clouds churned with electric energy, sending bolts of lightning crashing into the peaks.

The urge to be back there pressed in. Training there helped him bring the anger under control.

But his mother had summoned him. Her message had been brief but insistent. She needed to see him, and it could not wait. Tharos had cut his training short, his thoughts filled with concern and a sense of duty. He knew better than to question her urgency; his mother was not one to call him back lightly. It likely concerned yesterday's incident.

Walking back from the Lightning Cliffs, a suffocating heat had suddenly flared deep in his chest—not the clean, sharp crackle of static, but a thick, oily warmth. It rose rapidly, a strange tingle scorching the back of his throat. He had opened his jaws to clear it, expecting the usual spark of blue lightning.

Instead, a plume of searing, orange flame roared from his mouth.

The heat shocked him, forcing him to stumble back against the stone as his heart hammered against his ribs. He had stared, paralyzed, at the black, smoldering patch on the dirt. Flames. Real, suffocating fire.

How could there be fire? He was a lightning dragon. His body wasn't built to harbor heat like that; it was supposed to bleed off electrical currents. The wrongness of it left a sickening, bitter taste on his tongue, a terrifying indicator that something inside his biology was breaking.

That wasn't his element. It shouldn't be. The memory of it made his throat tighten all over again in the quiet corridor.

It is time. Your mother is awaiting you.

The telepathic voice of his companion, Snow, snapped him out of the memory. Tharos blinked, the phantom taste of ash still lingering in his mouth as he looked down at the small black cat.

"Yes, it's time," he said, a rare smile breaking through.

With a final glance at the horizon, Tharos turned and made his way to the Great Hall. The corridors of the fortress were quiet, most of the inhabitants still asleep. His claws clicked softly against the stone floors as he moved with a determined stride. Snow trotted silently ahead of him.

Tharos?

Yes?

Please try to listen to your mother today, whatever topic she is chooses. Without getting angry and storming out!

Snow, you know I can't promise anything...

He stopped so suddenly that Tharos nearly stumbled, his claws scraping the stone. A gust of cool air funneled through the corridor, brushing against his wings as he flared them for balance.

"What is going on with you?" he huffed. "Do you want to get crushed?"

Instead of answering, Snow simply turned toward him. His tail dropped, and his eyes turned bright green, a rare sign of utter seriousness. Besides telepathy, even Snow didn't know what else he was capable of.

And every time his eyes changed like this, Tharos feared something else might awaken.

Seeming satisfied that Tharos was listening, he continued. *You know that I'm always there for you, and that I understand you. But today is different. First of all, I think whatever your mother wants to talk about is very important. And second, don't forget that she's grieving. It has only been two days since we lost Vireya.*

Of course he was right, and guilt washed over Tharos. Vireya might have been bonded to his mother, but she had always been there whenever he needed her. There had been something extraordinary about her, something ancient and deeply magical. And Snow mourned her just as deeply.

Tharos didn't usually admit it when Snow was right. But this time, it was different.

I'm sorry, Snow. I really am. I promise, I will listen and... try to stay as calm as possible. But please, can you stop looking at me like that? It's getting under my skin.

Good! Snow blinked, and his eyes turned blue again. *Better?*

Yes, thank you.

Okay, let's go.

With this, Snow turned around and led the way once again.



Aric stood in the training yard of Kawashehar's fortress, the fresh breeze from the river mingling with the scent of sweat and steel. Clad in lightweight armor, he set his hand on the hilt of his sword, ready to face the day's challenges. Around him, targets were set at varying distances, some stationary, others moving unpredictably to mimic the flight patterns of dragons.

His instructor, a seasoned warrior with numerous dragon battles behind him, barked commands. "Focus on the wings first. A grounded dragon is easier to deal with." Aric released a deep breath to steady his nerves. He switched to his bow and drew it back, aiming at a distant moving target designed to resemble a dragon's wing. The arrow flew true, striking the target with a satisfying thud.

Lowering the weapon, Aric scanned the skyline, half-expecting to see the jagged silhouette of a real dragon breaking through the clouds.

Nothing. Just the sun and the distant haze above Kawashehar's walls.

Even with the protection spells humming over the city, the scars of the war were everywhere. From the training yard, he could see the scorched masonry of the upper barracks and the jagged claw marks gouged into the stone—constant reminders that the threat had never truly disappeared.

The armistice declared a few months ago wasn't peace. It was a pause. It had taken a decade of burned villages and devastating losses for his uncle, King Alden, and the Dragon Queen, Valara, to finally agree to a ceasefire. Neither side trusted the other; it was simply a matter of mutual survival. But the silence that followed wasn't comforting. Everyone in the yard knew it was only a matter of time before the treaty shattered.

Caught in his thoughts a fraction too long, Aric barely registered the swift movement to his right—until pain exploded in his side. The impact sent him sprawling, his bow slipping from his grip. His heartbeat pounded in his ears, louder than the gasps from the other trainees. He had been careless.

"Aric!" Rhenar's voice cut through the yard like a blade. "You think a dragon will wait while you hesitate? That it will give you a moment to gather your thoughts before it burns you alive?"

Master Rhenar loomed over him, broad-shouldered and imposing. Deep scars crossed his weathered face, and his stormy gray eyes fixed on Aric with unwavering intensity.

Aric scrambled to his feet, wincing as he straightened. "Sorry, Master Rhenar. I won't let it happen again."

Rhenar's stern expression softened slightly, but his voice remained firm. "You need to stay present, Aric. Daydreaming won't keep you or your comrades safe. **Understand**?"

"Yes, Master. I'll do better."

"Good. Now take your stance again."

Despite the instructor's imposing exterior, his grueling methods were fair, and there was no arguing with a living legend. The training was relentless, built on the belief that only the most disciplined warriors would ever survive a dragon. But Aric knew the master's severity was simply his way of trying to give them all a fighting chance.

Aric's best friend, Joran, appeared next to him. "Are you okay?" he asked. The crooked grin he flashed looked more like a challenge than concern.

Aric managed a quick nod.

"You'd better be," Joran muttered. "Because I'm not dragging your sorry tail through the rest of training."

A laugh nearly escaped Aric despite himself. Joran smirked before straightening as Master Rhenar resumed pacing.

Rhenar's sharp gaze swept over the trainees like a predator assessing its prey. The yard was silent, the only sounds the rustling wind and the distant clang of metal from another part of the fortress.

One by one, the trainees straightened beneath his stare. They all knew what awaited them. Weeks of preparation for the monthly trial led to this moment. Anticipation hung over the yard, but every attempt had taught them the same brutal lesson: no amount of training ever truly prepared them for what was coming.

Rhenar stroked his grizzled, silver-streaked beard once before stopping in front of the group.

His voice rang out, firm and unyielding.

"Enough warm-up. It's time for the Last Fight."

A ripple of tension passed through the trainees, some readjusting their weapons, others exhaling slowly to steady themselves.

It was designed to mirror real encounters with dragons in the field, where hesitation and mistakes had deadly consequences. No one could complete their training until they could make it through unscathed. This was the threshold—the final challenge before they were allowed to take on their first assignments.

Aric secured his gauntlets, anticipation thrumming through his veins. He was ready. Ready to finally leave the capital.

"I swear, it gets harder every time," one of the trainees muttered, rolling his shoulders as if bracing for a blow.

"Maybe he doesn't want us to leave," another added, eyeing Rhenar warily.

Joran flashed her a quick wink. "Or maybe he just doesn't want you to leave, Aelis."

Aelis scoffed, but Aric caught the faint smirk tugging at her lips.

Joran nudged Aric as they moved into formation. "Stay sharp. You know Rhenar always has something new up his sleeve." Aric reset his hold on his weapon. He caught Joran's grin and, for the first time, let his own show. "Then maybe we should try something new too."

Rhenar gave no warning.

With a deep boom, the training yard transformed.

Flaming obstacles shot up from the ground, metal structures groaned as they shifted into new formations, and mechanical wings snapped open on moving targets above. The battlefield seemed alive.

The trainees sprang into action.

Instinct took over. Aric vaulted forward, weaving through a sudden labyrinth of erupting, flame-spitting pillars. The air crackled with blistering heat. He kept low, dodging a searing blast from one of the rotating cannons. The ground shook beneath his feet, but he did not slow.

Ahead of him, Aelis flipped over a low barrier with effortless agility, her braid whipping behind her. "Move faster!" she threw over her shoul-

der as she leaped across a gap. A mechanical wing swooped down toward her, but she rolled under it just in time.

To Aric's left, another trainee yelped as a burst of flame singed his shoulder. He staggered, losing his rhythm, and the next obstacle struck him square in the chest. A crack of arcane energy signaled the failure, and the boy was instantly yanked from the simulation in a shimmer of displaced magic.

Aric's chest tightened. The lineup was already shrinking, and the simulation was only getting faster. If they lost too many bodies, the final stage would be impossible.

Blinding dust swirled into the air as an artificial gale slammed into the yard. Aric shielded his eyes, leaning hard into the pressure as he fought for every single step.

"Aric! Incoming!" Joran's voice cut through the roar from the side.

He spun just as a mechanical dragon head lunged from the wall, metal jaws snapping open. Aric ducked under the strike and slashed upward, his blade connecting with a shower of sparks. The construct recoiled, gears grinding loudly as it reset for another attack.

"Nice!" Joran called, vaulting over a shattered pillar. Behind him, two more cracks of arcane energy echoed through the gale. Two more classmates vanished into thin air.

The pressure mounted. The line was breaking.

Pushing ahead, breath sharp, legs burning, he lunged toward the center platform. The simulation was saving its worst for the end; the heat intensified to a suffocating bake, and rotating wings overhead cast frantic, slashing shadows across the ground.

He leaped onto the platform, only to freeze as a massive silhouette dropped from above.

A colossal training dragon, constructed of metal plates, gears, and flickering flames, descended with a roaring hiss. Its wings spread wide, casting the entire platform in shadow. Aric's breath caught.

The dragon's head slammed down like a falling anvil. Aric dove, rolling hard across the stone as a wave of artificial heat scorched the air just above his neck. He scrambled up, blade raised, but the construct's tail was already whipping toward him in a brutal arc. He braced his sword to deflect the blow, but the sheer force rattled his teeth and sent him skidding backward across the slick platform.

"On your left!" Joran's shout cut through the grinding of gears. Aric threw himself aside a heartbeat before the dragon's claws gouged deep, explosive trenches into the stone where he had just been standing.

Before the construct could reset, Joran sprinted up the rear ramp, his dual blades flashing in the firelight. With a fierce yell, he leaped directly onto the dragon's back, his weapons scraping a blinding shower of sparks against the metal scales as he fought for purchase. The construct reared, shaking violently to throw him off. Joran held on for a breath, just long enough to drive both blades into a joint between metal plates, before being flung clear.

The dragon staggered, gears grinding as the damage registered.

A narrow opening—brief, but real. Aric saw his chance. He sprinted forward and vaulted off a fallen pillar, driving his blade down toward the exposed joint.

But the dragon's wing snapped up, striking him midair.

Aric crashed onto the stone. Pain rippled through his ribs as he gasped, scrambling to keep his weapon in hand.

"Move!" Joran screamed, lunging to his feet.

Aric rolled just as the dragon's jaws snapped down where he had been. The metal fangs cracked stone.

His lungs burned. His vision swam.

Not now. Not when he was this close.

The dragon drew back for another strike, machinery whining as it charged a burst of flame.

Aric braced himself, and then the world lurched.

Beneath him, the ground split, a platform rising sharply like a lifting cliff. Aric stumbled as the sudden shift threw him backward. The dragon's flame missed him, hitting the stone wall behind and leaving scorched black streaks.

It wasn't over.

With the yard reconfiguring again, the Last Fight was entering its final stage.

Joran scrambled up the shifting terrain, vaulting onto the rising platform beside him. "We finish this together!" he called over the roar of moving metal.

Aric forced his breath steady. The dragon lunged again, this time sweeping its claws in a wide arc meant to take them both down.

Sliding low, Joran slashed at the underside of the claw mechanism. Sparks scattered. Aric leapt above the swipe, twisting midair and letting momentum carry his blade toward another vulnerable joint.

His blade connected, metal screamed, and the entire construct shuddered violently.

The dragon lurched, gears whining as systems began to fail. Joran landed beside Aric, both of them bracing as the massive construct staggered.

"Ready?" Joran shouted.

Aric nodded once. No more words needed.

They charged as one.

With matching precision, Joran struck low while Aric lunged high. Their blades found the last exposed joints. A blinding burst of sparks shot upward as the training dragon gave one final violent shudder.

Then the light in its eyes flickered out.

The system disengaged.

Silence fell over the yard.

The construct collapsed in a controlled descent, metal limbs locking into a safe position as the simulation ended. The last of the sparks faded.

Aric stood there, chest heaving, sweat sliding down his temples as the ground settled beneath him. Slowly, the rest of the yard reformed into its original shape.

A distant buzzing cut through his exhaustion—the sound of the other trainees beginning to cheer.

"We did it!" Joran laughed, breathless and triumphant.

Aric managed a grin, though fatigue pulled at every muscle. "Yeah. We did."

Master Rhenar approached with measured steps, arms crossed. His expression was unreadable.

Then, just barely, he gave a single, sharp jerk of his chin. "Well done."

Something eased inside Aric. Rhenar's approval was rare—but it was never given freely.

The moment passed quickly.

The other trainees gathered around, clapping them on the shoulders, relief and excitement buzzing through the group. One of them nudged Aelis. "You're up next for teaming with them."

Aelis snorted. "Over my dead body."

Joran slung an arm around Aric's shoulders. "I think I almost died three times today. That has to count for something."

This time, a laugh escaped Aric as he shook his head. "Come on. If you died, who would annoy me during morning drills?"

Joran gasped dramatically. "You wound me. Truly."

Aric rolled his eyes, but warmth filled him. The Last Fight was over. Today, they had won.

They brushed dust from their armor and wiped sweat from their faces, their smiles widening with the thrill of victory.

"This calls for a celebration," Joran declared, his voice full of enthusiasm.

Around them, the noise swelled—laughter and voices breaking through as the tension finally released. As the cheers rang through the training yard, Aric let the exhilaration wash over him. For the first time in

what felt like ages, he wasn't thinking about war, dragons, or the weight of expectations.

He was one step closer to leaving.



Want to know what happens next?

Tharos and Aric's story is only beginning.

The Marked Scales is coming soon, and since you're now part of my newsletter, you'll hear when there's news about the book.

Until then, keep an eye on your inbox. There's more from Nexsamarak on the way.

T. J. Whitewall

About the author

T. J. Whitewall's journey into fantasy began when her son wanted them to create a story together. He came to her with an idea for a lightning dragon, and that dragon became Tharos. From that first dragon, new characters appeared, ideas multiplied, and gradually, the lands of Nexsamarak began to take shape.

From the beginning, T. J. wanted the dragons to be characters in their own right, with lives and stories that existed independently of the humans. That vision has remained at the heart of her writing ever since.

A strategist by trade and a storyteller at heart, T. J. rarely sits down to write without coffee nearby. She loves following an idea to see where it leads, especially when one question leads to another and a story grows far beyond where it began.

Born and raised in Germany, she now lives in North Carolina with her husband, their son, and a cat named Snowflake who remains convinced he's the real main character.