

Chapter One

Forty years ago ...

KING RIUNO, THE KING of Lamaira, stood in the Royal Garden of Castle Lamai, hiding inside a grove of trees that kept him hidden from view from anyone else who might be in the Garden. It was cool and shady inside, which was nice, because today was easily the hottest day of the summer and Riuno would have been sweating hard otherwise.

Today, Riuno probably should have been back in the Castle, discussing trade relations with countries like Hasfar and the Rameen Empire with his advisers, or perhaps listening to his Minister of the Border update him on the progress of the border wall in the west. Or maybe discuss with his Minister of the Public how to more efficiently direct tax revenue.

Riuno fully intended to do all of that, because he knew that it was his duty as King of Lamaira to focus on those important matters, but first, he wanted to have a little bit of fun before getting into the drudgery of the day.

Where is she? Riuno thought. If she doesn't show up soon ...

But then Riuno heard light footsteps as they walked across the soft, neatly-trimmed grass of the Garden. He knew those footsteps anywhere, because he had spent many a day listening to those footsteps as they walked across the Garden lawn. He savored the sound, because he knew who they belonged to and what their presence here meant.

Yet Riuno did not let the good feelings he was experiencing distract him. He tightened his grip on the tree that he stood by, waiting for just the right moment to reveal himself to his lover, who sounded like she was making her way there.

Then he heard her voice whisper, as sweetly and softly as a cool breeze on a hot summer's day, "Riuno? Where are you?"

Riuno smiled before jumping out of his hiding place and landing in front of her. He held up his hands and shouted, "Boo!" startling the woman before him, who jumped backwards in shock, her hand on her chest and her expression as startled as a deer.

The woman standing before him had skin as pale as snow, with long dark hair that was as beautiful as midnight. But right now, she looked terrified, causing Riuno to laugh.

"Ha!" Riuno said. He pointed at her face. "Got you. You should see the look on your face. It's priceless."

The woman's beautiful face quickly turned from surprised to annoyance. "Riuno, you know I don't like it when you jump me like that. You know how strong I am. I could have reacted instinctively and broken your neck without even thinking about it. How would you feel then?"

Riuno shook his head. "Not very much, because I would be dead, but come on, you have to admit that it was a great prank. Better than the gag necklace I gave you that one time, right?"

Despite herself, the woman—whose name was Tananeen—smiled. "Or the time you and I scared that nasty old man who was being mean to the kids. He must have lost half of what little life he had left when he heard the growl of a dragon come from the throat of a young woman like myself."

Riuno chuckled at that. "Oh, yeah. I remember that. Or what about the time we took that bread, stuffed it with sand, and gave it to Sir Renas? He still doesn't accept any bread I offer to him, even if it doesn't have any sand in it."

Tananeen laughed, which made Riuno smile even more. "Yes, that was certainly amusing. Perhaps I was a little too hasty before. I should have been less offended by your prank and more amused."

"No, it's all right," said Riuno, waving off her apology. "But anyway, come in here with me. I don't want anyone seeing us together, because we're technically not supposed to be seeing each other."

Tananeen nodded and followed Riuno into the grove of trees where he had been hiding just moments before. As soon as they were hidden from view, Riuno took Tananeen into his arms and held her close as he could. She hugged him even more tightly, but not tightly enough to harm him with her immense strength.

"We never get to do this enough," said Riuno with a sigh. "One of the perils of being the King of Lamaira, I suppose."

Tananeen nodded again, her head rested against his chest. "Yes. But you know what your people would do if they know you and I were seeing each other. They would be angry, maybe even angry enough to kill me."

"That's because my people are foolish and narrow-minded," said Riuno as he ran his fingers through her beautiful hair. "They don't understand the bond between us. Maybe you are not entirely human, but I know that you are far more human than some of the other woman that my father has attempted to convince me to marry."

Tananeen chuckled. "And you are far braver and nobler than any of the Dracone males I've known. My mother has never understood why I don't seek a mate among my people, but then, she doesn't think very highly of humans in general. 'Weak and scrawny little things that need to wear the ores of the earth to protect themselves in combat,' she always says."

"You don't believe that, do you?" said Riuno, looking down at Tananeen with a questioning look.

Tananeen looked up at Riuno. Her green eyes were beautiful; they looked human, but behind them, Riuno saw a fire that existed in no ordinary human. It was a fire to match the fire in his own body, a fire he felt for her anytime he saw her or thought about her, a fire which would have made him fight for her life if she was ever in danger.

"I used to, before I met you," said Tananeen. She stroked his beard. "But then I learned that humans, while not as strong as my people, have the kind of fortitude and mental strength that I don't always see among Dracones. It's the kind of strength that helped you humans survive the earliest days of Creation, despite being surrounded by beings you cannot hope to match in terms of strength."

"Unfortunately, not all humans have that strength," said Riuno with a sigh. "Many humans are cowardly and easily frightened. They put on a show of strength, but cower at the slightest sign of danger. I feel nothing but pity for those fools, especially because I rule over a good chunk of them."

"But who cares about the cowards and deceivers?" said Tananeen. "What matters is that we're together and that we will always be together no matter what happens."

With that, Tananeen kissed Riuno. Riuno returned the kiss, which was warm and firm. But, despite how enjoyable it was, Riuno sensed a tenseness in Tananeen's lips and her body. He usually paid no attention to it, because their frequent trysts were always a little tense due to the fact that they were not

supposed to be together. That actually added to the excitement of their secret meetings, but this tenseness, he could tell, was not due to excitement.

Pulling away from Tananeen, Riuno looked in her eyes and said, "What's the matter?"

Tananeen looked at Riuno in confusion. "What do you mean?"

"You seem worried about something," said Riuno. "I felt it in your body. Is something worrying you? Did you hear about some bad news that is making you worry for the future—*our* future, I should say?"

Tananeen looked away from Riuno, which was not a good sign. "I would say that it's nothing, but I know that you know me well enough by now to know when I'm lying. But I still don't want to talk about this with you, because if I do, I fear that you will be just as worried as I am, and I don't want you to worry about anything that you can't do anything about."

"I understand, Tana, but I want to share your burden with you, whatever it is," said Riuno. "We're lovers—and if it were acceptable to the people of Lamaira, we'd be spouses—and lovers share their worries and burdens with each other, no matter how heavy they may be."

Thankfully, Tananeen looked at Riuno again. Her eyes were full of worry, but that hardly detracted from their beauty. "I was talking with my mother a few weeks ago. She told me that she did not really approve of my relationship with you, that she wished I would pick out a handsome mate from among my people instead, and to forget about humanity."

Riuno rolled his eyes. "Doesn't your mother always say that? Honestly, I feel like I could make you the Queen of Lamaira, give you a castle of gold and a city of silver to rule over, and your mother would still insist that you marry another Dracone who lives in dirt and squalor and sees you as nothing more than a way to continue his own lineage. She's ridiculous."

"I know, but she's still my mother and I know that she only wants what's best for me, even if I don't always agree with it," said Tananeen. "But this time was a little different. She told me that, while she didn't really approve of our relationship, that she believed it might work out for the better in the end."

Riuno raised an eyebrow. "Really? Are you sure this is your mother we're talking about or is this a mimic who has taken her place? Because your mother has never approved of our relationship before."

"She told me that she senses an ancient evil rising," said Tananeen. "A deep evil, one that has been locked away for centuries. She says it's an evil that humans and Dracones once worked together to stop a long time ago, but now it is rising again and the only way to stop it is for humans and Dracones to work together again."

"Again?" Riuno said. "When have humans and Dracones ever worked together? We've always hated each other, even before my father drove your people out of Lamaira. And what is this 'ancient evil' she speaks of?"

"I don't know," said Tananeen, shaking her head. She held Riuno tighter, like she wanted him to protect her. "She just said that if you and I marry, then the humans and Dracones might stand a chance against this evil. She didn't say when or where it would rise, but she did say that to combat it, the combined might of humanity and the Dracones would be necessary to ensure the survival of both of our peoples."

"That's an odd thing for your human-hating mother to say," said Riuno. "In fact, I'd say that confirms my earlier theory that that wasn't your mother at all, but instead some malicious mimic who took

your mother's form in order to confuse and frighten you, though for what reason, I cannot say.”

Tananeen pushed him a little. “Stop that. My mother hasn't been replaced by any mimics. I don't think that anyone could mimic my mother very convincingly anyway, at least if they hoped to fool me.”

“It was just a joke,” said Riuno. “But I do find your mother's words curious nonetheless. And you know, I actually agree that we humans and Dracones would be better together. At least, I think you and I would be better together.”

Tananeen smiled despite herself. “I know. But I'm still worried about what my mother said. Despite her prejudices, she is a wise woman and leader of my people. She knows more about the past than anyone and her ability to predict the future before it happens is almost uncanny.”

“Well, I'm surprised that she did not see our love blooming, then, if her ability to predict the future is so good,” said Riuno. “Anyway, I still have some time before I need to return to my kingly duties. Why don't we spend that time doing a little less talking? We can worry about this 'ancient evil' later.”

“All right,” said Tananeen. She wrapped her arms around his neck and leaned in for another kiss.

Soon they both forgot about their worries and fears, for they were consumed by their passion for each other, a passion that overrode everything else at the moment. And when they stopped and went their separate ways for the day, Riuno soon forgot about what Tananeen's mother had said as the day's work consumed his focus, although deep in the back of his mind he worried about what Tananeen's mother's warning was and hoped that this ancient evil, whatever it was, would not rise during his reign at least.