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An Enemies To Lovers Dragon-Rider
Romantasy

Prologue

They bound us in fire. They never expected us to fall in love.

I was never meant to survive the Citadel duel.
The daughter of a traitor doesn't get second chances—
she gets fed to dragons.

But when the ancient Obsidian dragon, Aegis, chooses me... and him—the cold-blooded champion sworn to destroy my family—the Law itself fractures.

Now our souls are sealed by the Covenant.
Every breath he takes, I feel.
Every wound I suffer, he shares.
And every forbidden thought between us threatens to spark a war.

Because the bond is the one truth the Citadel has always feared:

when vengeance and mercy burn in the same heart, empires don't survive—they turn to ash.

He is my enemy. My protector. My ruin.
We were forged for war...

But the real battle is becoming the flame that remakes the world.

Chapter 1

The Duel

ANYA

Twilight bleeds across the Citadel like a wound.

Thin bands of red and gold drip along the horizon, carving harsh shadows across the high stone walls as the bells toll overhead—three slow, resonant chimes, each one sinking deeper into my chest.

The arena summons.

The summons to my execution.

My boots crunch softly on the gravel path leading toward the southern arena—the great circular coliseum carved into the cliff face itself, steep stands rising like teeth, banners snapping in the wind.

Every step feels heavier.

Not fear. Not exactly. Something colder. Sharper. A sense of inevitability.

The torches burn brighter than the moon tonight.

Their flames twist in the wind, crackling against the constant hum of the Citadel's ward lines. My

boots scrape against the stone with each step as I cross the narrow bridge toward the arena.

The whole path feels too quiet. Too exposed.

Every instinct scream at me to turn around—to hide—but it's too late for that.

The summons arrived. A formal duel challenge. The kind that ends careers. Or lives.

My breath fogs in the cold air. I walk alone.

The path is nearly empty—just a handful of Riders moving toward the arena to witness the spectacle. None look at me more than necessary. None speak.

But whispers rise anyway.

“That’s her?” “Korvax’s target?” “Xavian tried to intervene, I heard—”

They are quiet as I pass.

My palms sweat despite the cold.

The arena looms ahead: a wide stone archway, runes carved deep into the pillars. The glyphs glow faintly—stabilizers meant to keep the air clear and fresh, to absorb blood, and to keep spectators safe. Not combatants.

The air inside the entry corridor is cool and still, a whisper of incense clinging to the walls. My

footsteps echo as I descend the short flight of stairs toward the arena floor.

I hear voices before I see anyone.

“...doesn’t matter if she’s a Scholar—” “— Commander Korvax issued the challenge—” “— Corvan’s going to tear her apart—”

I force myself to walk slower, to breathe, to think, and to organize the chaos spiraling in my mind.

Why am I here? Why did I ever come to the Citadel?

I replay everything that brought me to this moment:

My father, the First Exile, pushing that forged identity slate into my hands.

His trembling voice when he said, *“You must enter the Citadel. You’re the only one who can uncover the truth.”*

I know the commanders suspect something.

My credentials are too clean. Too symmetrical. Too convenient.

Scholars don’t decode dead languages on sight. Scholars don’t analyze fracture patterns in collapsing wards like they’re children’s puzzles. Scholars don’t survive in war zones.

And scholars, sure as hell, don't make
Commanders look twice.

Not like he did. Xavian is watching me. Always
watching me.

I swallow hard, the memory surging unwelcome:

The ravine is burning around us.

The evacuation.

That alcove. The explosion. The dust. His hand
crushing my waist. His breath shuddering, warm
against my cheek. His lips...

Gods.

I shake myself; heat flushes up my neck.

There is no time for this.

But my thoughts betray me anyway.

The way Xavian looked at me in that collapsing
chamber—not like a scholar. Not like a threat.
Like a mistake he wanted to make again.

A dragon roars above me, snapping me back to
the present. Wings beat the air—massive,
thunderous. A burst of warm wind rushes down
as a copper-red blur arcs overhead.

Aegis. Lycan's dragon.

He circles the arena like a silent guardian, with dark obsidian scales and eyes glowing molten gold in the dark. He's watching.

I'm not sure if that comforts me or terrifies me.

Far across the platform, I see silhouettes of other dragons perched on the higher ridges—massive shapes merging with the night. Their eyes glitter like distant stars. Their breaths release steam into the cold air.

The Citadel always looks beautiful at night. Tonight, it feels like a tomb.

I reach the final archway. The carved pillars rise like skeletal fingers around the arena entrance. Runes pulse along their surface, responding to the growing crowd inside. The low rumble of voices mixes with the scrape of metal and the growl of restless dragons.

A duel. Not training. Not discipline. A sanctioned duel. This is bad.

I clutch my arms around myself as I walk inside, the sound swallowing me immediately.

Because the announcement booms across the Arena—

“Combatants. Take your positions.”

My pulse spikes.

A tall Rider at the corridor exit stops me with a curt gesture.

“Apprentice Anya Valerius?”

“Yes.”

He studies me the way someone studies an unstable artifact. “Weapons?”

“No.”

He nods once. “Standard combat rule: unarmed defense only. Your opponent is permitted a training blade.”

Of course. I swallow. “Understood.”

He steps aside.

And I step out into the arena.

The world opens.

A circular battlefield, smoothed sand, faint scorch marks crisscrossing from past duels. High Stone stands above—only partially filled, but still too many eyes. Riders. Scholars. Archivists. Officers.

Overlooking the field from the elevated commander’s balcony—

Korvax. Still as a statue. Hands clasped behind his back.

A predator watching the stage he crafted.

And near him, slightly back, armored in black and silver—

Lycan.

His presence is a shock—calm, powerful, radiating an authority older than the Citadel itself. His expression reveals nothing, but his gaze sweeps the arena with a protector's instinct.

And beside him, perched on a ledge carved into the stone wall—Aegis. Not fully unfolded, but present. Watching. Eyes like smoldering embers fixed on everything.

A shiver rakes down my spine.

Aegis shouldn't be here. Dragons do not attend apprentice duels. But nothing about this duel is normal.

My gaze lifts higher—across the stands.

And freezes.

Xavian.

On the opposite balcony, leaning forward slightly, hands gripping the railing. The fading twilight paints the angles of his face in sharp lines. His jaw is clenched. His posture is electric.

He is not here as a commander. He is here as something else.

“He’s watching?” “For a scholar?” “That’s... unusual—”

My heart stumbles violently.

Xavian’s eyes lock onto mine. Not cold. Not distant. Focused. Alive.

And for a second—just one heart-stopping second—I feel something inside him snap taut, like a tether drawn too tight.

Then he straightens, his jaw locked, and looks away.

Because he can’t be seen caring.

Not here. Not now. Not for me.

My lungs finally release a breath.

A sharp scrape of metal draws my attention back to the entrance of the arena.

Corvan walks out, rolling his shoulders, gripping a training blade in one hand. The weapon glints beneath the torches—dull edge, but solid steel.

His smile spreads when he sees me.

“Well, rabbit,” he says loudly, so the entire arena hears. “I didn’t think you’d actually show.”

Murmurs ripple through the watchers.

I lift my chin.

“I follow orders.”

He laughs. “Good. Then follow this one—scream when it hurts. Makes it more entertaining.”

A few Riders chuckle.

My stomach twists, but I don’t look away.

Corvan tilts his head, examining me with open contempt.

“No armor. No blade. Just scholar robes.” He whistles softly. “This will be quick.”

Korvax’s voice booms from the balcony:

“Begin.”

Corvan lunges before the word finishes echoing.

I barely dodged the first strike.

His blade whistles past my face, cutting a line of cold air across my skin. Sand shifts under my feet as I pivot, hands up, heart pounding.

Corvan doesn’t give me a heartbeat to breathe. His next strike is faster—slashing down toward my ribs. I twist sideways, but the flat of the blade slams into my shoulder with bruising force.

Pain spikes. I hit the ground hard. Sand fills my mouth.

Corvan laughs above me. “Pathetic.”

I scramble up just as he brings the blade down again. I dodge—barely—and his sword sinks into sand where my skull had been.

Instinct kicks in.

My father's training. The drills he taught me in the ravine. The footwork we practiced on uneven ground.

I pivot low, sweeping his knee with my leg.

He stumbles.

Surprise flickers across his face.

I press the advantage—rising fast, moving inside his guard, striking the heel of my palm toward his jaw.

He jerks back. Not enough.

My hit glances off his chin.

A clean blow. Not strong. Not decisive.

But enough to make the spectators murmur.

Enough to make Xavian jerk forward slightly on the balcony, as if surprised, I even landed a strike.

Corvan touches his jaw with the back of his gloved hand.

Then smile slowly.

“Oh, I’m going to enjoy this.”

He attacks again—faster, stronger. His blade slashes in an arc toward my side. I block with my forearm—pain flaring hot. His elbow drives into my ribs. I gasp. My vision blurs. He sweeps my legs.

I hit the ground again.

Sand sprays.

Corvan plants his boot on my stomach, leaning his weight forward.

“Stay down,” he murmurs. “You’re not built for this, little scholar.”

Rage sparks through me—not loud. Not explosive.

Quiet. Burning.

I grab his ankle and twist with everything I have.

He slips.

I roll away, scrambling to my feet, breath ragged.

The arena lights blur into streaks.

Corvan snarls, dusting sand off his blade.

“You just don’t know when to die.”

A voice from the stands barks, “Enough!”

Xavian.

Everyone stills.

Corvan's lip curls. "Commander, with respect—she's still standing."

Xavian's hands grip the railing until his knuckles turn white.

"This duel was not meant to be lethal," he says, voice sharp.

Corvan shrugs. "I can't help it if she's fragile."

A murmur of dark agreement from some Riders.

Korvax's voice cuts through the arena:

"Continue."

Xavian turns sharply toward him. "Sir—"

"Commander," Korvax says with a thin smile, "I believe you're confusing your responsibilities."

Lycan shifts beside him, his gaze sharply unreadable.

Xavian freezes.

Corvan steps forward.

And I prepare to fight.

He comes at me in a tight arc—no wasted motion. Blade is swinging low toward my hip. I pivot back, but not fast enough. The flat of the steel slams into the side of my thigh.

Pain explodes down my leg.

I stagger.

He doesn't let up.

The next strike comes faster. I duck under it and feel the rush of air ruffle my hair. Sand shifts under my boots. My knee nearly buckles.

I force it to hold.

I've trained on worse surfaces. My father made sure of that.

“Feet first,” he used to say in the ravine. “You see the ground before you see the enemy. You live by where you stand.”

So, I stop looking at the sword for a heartbeat and start watching Corvan's feet.

He favors his right leg. Pushes off it harder. His stance is textbook but aggressive, leaning just slightly forward. Overconfident.

He swings again. I dodge left, then step into him instead of away.

His balance falters.

I twist, slamming my shoulder into his chest, feeling the impact all the way to my spine. It hurts me almost as much as it hurts him—but he still stumbles back two steps.

The crowd murmurs.

Above, Xavian's posture shifts—just a fraction. His hand, gripping the railing, relaxes then tightens again.

Corvan laughs, breathless. “Oh, rabbit has teeth.”

He charges.

I see the pattern now—where his weight goes, where his hips turn, where his gaze tilts half a heartbeat before the blade follows. He's trained. Vicious. Strong.

But predictable.

Strike to the ribs. I block with my elbow. Pain flares. Knee toward my stomach. I pivot, absorbing the blow on my hip. Backhand slash to the jaw. I drop, and the steel sings over my head.

My lungs scream. My muscles shake. My vision narrows.

But I'm still standing.

“Stop playing with her!” someone shouts from the stands.

Corvan's jaw tenses.

He glances up, arrogance stinging at the implication. Then his eyes cut back to me—colder, sharper. The air changes.

Playtime is over. He feints left. I move to counter.

The real strike comes from the right.

The blade slams into my side, just below the ribs. Dull edge or not, it hits like a hammer. My breath leaves me in a ragged sound I don't recognize as my own.

I slam into the sand, knees first. The impact jolts pain all the way up my spine. For a moment all I hear is my heartbeat, pounding in my ears.

The arena blurs.

Corvan's boots appear in front of me.

“Stay down,” he says again. “You’re embarrassing yourself.”

I force my hands into the sand. Grit grinds into my scraped palms.

“Not... done,” I wheeze.

He snorts. “You should be.”

I push to my feet anyway.

My side screams. Every breath cuts like broken glass.

The stands have gone strangely quiet. Not silent. Just... waiting.

On the balcony, Aegis shifts his colossal weight, claws scraping stone with a sound that makes the air vibrate.

Lycan's face is unreadable. Korvax's eyes gleam.

Xavian looks like someone pulled all the color out of his world and left only sharp edges.

Corvan rolls his neck, smirking.

“Fine,” he says. “One more round.”

He's faster this time.

Blow after blow rains down, the blade a constant silver flash in the corner of my vision. I dodge what I can. Block what I can't. Every hit adds another flare of pain. My arms go numb. My legs feel like wet stone.

I duck under one strike and step in close, ramming my knee into his thigh.

He grunts.

My fist slams into his ribs. He hisses.

For a moment—just a moment—our faces are inches apart. His eyes are bright with exertion and something like hatred.

“You don’t know when to quit,” he breathes.

“You don’t know... when to shut up,” I answer.

Then I drive my forehead into his nose.

There’s a loud crack. He swears, stumbling back, hand flying to his face.

Blood flows between his fingers.

The arena erupts.

Shouts. Gasps. Laughter—some surprised, some cruel, some delighted.

On the balcony, Xavian’s hand flies to his mouth.

Lycan’s eyes widen.

Even Korvax’s composure fractures for a heartbeat.

Corvan staggers, blinking, nose streaming crimson.

“You,” he snarls, voice thick. “Little—”

He doesn’t finish the sentence. He lunges.

This time there is no measured attack, no half-playful cruelty.

This is clean, focused fury.

His blade whistles toward my shoulder. I twist, but the tip clips my collarbone. Pain flares white-hot.

He follows with a kick to my stomach.

Air rushes out of me. I fold over.

The sand rushes toward my face.

I taste grit and copper.

“Get up!” someone shouts from the stands.

I don’t know who. I don’t look.

I plant one hand in the sand and push.

My body protests. My lungs wheeze. Dark spots drift at the edges of my vision.

But I stand. Barely.

Corvan stares at me like I’ve done something deeply offensive.

“Why won’t you fall?” he demands.

Because I promised my father I’d survive.

Because the Exiles didn’t rip our lives apart just so I could die in a rigged duel. “Bad... manners,” I croak.

Corvan bares his teeth.

He glances up, just briefly, to the balcony where Korvax stands.

I follow his gaze. Korvax meets his eyes.

And nods.

Small. Almost imperceptible.

Permission.

My blood turns to ice.

Corvan's expression changes.

No more arrogance. No more showmanship.

Just intent. Cold. Final.

He tightens his grip on the training blade.

And I realize—

He's not just trying to beat me anymore.

He's going to try to break me.

Completely.

The worst part?

The rules are on my side. The duel is “non-lethal.” If I fall unconscious, it ends.

But Korvax just gave his nephew permission to make sure I don't get back up.

Even if it means skirting the edge of those rules so closely, they might as well not exist.

Corvan rolls his shoulders.

“Last chance, rabbit,” he says.

I steady my stance despite the trembling in my legs.

“No,” I whisper. “Yours.”

He smiles. And charges.

I step back. Again. Again.

Drawing him out. Letting him chase.

His blade whistles past my face, my ribs, and my arm, missing by inches because I refuse to stand still. Each miss drags him another step, another twist, another pivot.

We circle.

The arena sand tears under our boots.

I can feel the eyes of everyone watching—burning on my skin.

Korvax. Lycan. Aegis.

Xavian.

The thought flickers and nearly shatters my focus.

He lunges—bare hands now, more dangerous than before. His first punch drives into my already bruised ribs. I choke on a cry. The second slams across my jaw.

Stars burst behind my eyes.

The crowd roars—some in approval, some in outrage.

“Stop!” someone shouts. “The blade—”

“The duel isn’t over!” another counters.

My legs wobble.

I try to raise my arms to block another hit, but my body moves like wet cloth soaked in pain.

He keeps swinging.

One blow glances off my shoulder. Another catches my temple. The world tilts, edges blurring.

Up on the balcony, Xavian moves.

He’s no longer just gripping the railing.

He’s leaning forward, eyes wide, face carved in fury.

Lycan says something to him—too far for me to hear. The expression on the Wing Leaders face is grim, calculating.

Korvax watches silently. His hand rests lightly on the railing.

Not stopping. Not interfering. Sanctioning.

Corvan grabs the front of my tunic and yanks me forward until we're nose to nose.

"You should have fallen when I told you to," he snarls, blood from his broken nose dripping onto my collar.

I try to speak. No sound comes.

He shoves me back.

I stumble. Trip. Hit my knees.

The crowd noise swells into a single, chaotic roar. I can't tell if they're calling my name, his, or begging someone to stop this.

My lungs can't pull in enough air. Each breath tastes like rust and sand.

The world sways.

Corvan looks up—straight at the balcony.

At Korvax. And this time, it's not a question.

It's confirmation. Permission already given.

Korvax tips his head once.

A tiny nod.

My stomach lurches.

Corvan bends slowly and picks up the fallen training blade.

He weighs it in his hand, tests the grip, and points it toward the ground as if this is just another drill.

Xavian takes a step along the balcony, eyes blazing.

“Korvax,” he snaps. “This is enough.”

“The duel has not ended,” Korvax replies calmly.

“She’s barely conscious!”

“The rules are clear,” Korvax says. “The duel ends when one combatant is unable to continue. She is still standing.”

Technically. If you squint.

Xavian looks like he might leap off the balcony and cross the distance by force alone.

Lycan’s hand lands on his arm—holding him back, fingers digging into leather. His voice is low and urgent.

I can’t hear the words.

Just see the war in Xavian’s expression.

Duty versus instinct. Law versus conscience.

And in the middle of it—

Me.

But my body is done. There is nothing left to pull from.

I try anyway. My foot shifts. Too slow.

The blade slams into my side with a force that blows the breath from my lungs. Not a slice. A crushing impact. All the power he can muster, packed into one final, brutal strike.

Ribs crack. Something deep inside gives way.

I feel the moment the pain spikes white-hot—

Then everything tears.

Sound explodes—crowds, dragons, shouts, a roar like mountains breaking.

For a split second, I'm sure the sky has fallen.

The world tips. I am no longer standing on sand. I am falling through it.

I see the stands flicker in and out of focus. Faces blurred. Colors smeared.

Then—

One image sharpens.

Xavian.

On the balcony.

No longer controlled. No longer composed.

His mouth is moving—shouting something I can’t hear. His eyes are wildfire. His body is already turning as if to run, to descend, to reach me.

Beside him, Aegis moves too—muscles coiling, wings unfurling an inch as a growl rattles the arena, low and terrible.

Lycan’s hand clamps harder on the railing.

Korvax’s smile is thin and cold.

Sand rushes up to meet me.

My knees hit first. Then my hands. Then, finally, my face.

The world goes sideways.

The noise of the arena distorts, stretching and thinning like sound underwater.

Someone is screaming.

It might be me. It might be them.

I can’t tell anymore.

My vision narrows to a single strip of color—the dark line of Corvan’s boots approaching my fallen body, casting a long shadow over me.

The blade tilts up, catching the last of the light.

He's not done. Of course he isn't.

Rules say the duel ends when one combatant is unable to continue.

I can't move. I can't even lift my head.

I am, in every way that matters, done.

And Corvan is still advancing.

He raises the blade.

The last thing I see is the arc of steel beginning its descent.

The last thing I feel is the rough scrape of sand against my cheek.

The last thing I know is that somewhere above me, someone is shouting my name— “ANYA!”

—before the world finally, mercifully, goes black.