

The Price *of* Honor

Dragon Riders of Osnen Prequels 1

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Lailani walked barefoot across the sand, watching the waves crash upon the shore. She loved the sound the water made. It was soothing, peaceful. Grit gathered between her toes, but she didn't mind. It wasn't often that she could go without shoes, and she enjoyed the moment of freedom.

Ahead, a jagged rock formation protruded up from the smooth sand, revealing a sea cave. The waves lapped at its base, feeding a small pool. Lailani paused to look at the water, judging the level of the tide. It was low, which was what she'd hoped for. The sky was clear, and the sun shone brightly on the water's surface.

It was a beautiful day for a ride.

Lailani stepped through the pool and looked into the dark entrance of the cave that was carved into the rock. She didn't know how long it had existed on the island, but she knew Daigo was glad it did. He'd called it home for as long as she'd been alive. She entered the cave and picked up a loose stone from the floor, then tapped it against the wall.

The sound echoed into the darkness until it eventually faded. She waited for a moment, then repeated the tapping. Daigo stirred in the darkness. She could hear his wings stretching and the scrape of his talons on the stone floor as he approached.

You're late.

His words resonated within her mind.

Sorry, she replied. I had to finish my chores first.

Daigo was her father's dragon, but she spent the most time with him. Her father's arthritis had debilitated him, and since he could no longer ride, she took it upon herself to ensure the dragon left his cave each day.

Completing your duties is important. It teaches responsibility.

That's what father always says.

You would do well to take his lessons to heart. He's a wise man.

Doesn't your name mean wise?

Daigo chortled. *It means enlightenment, but close enough.*

They walked side by side, away from the cave and onto the beach. Daigo's massive claws left deep impressions in the sand, and they quickly filled with water. His scales were a vibrant cobalt hue, and when the light hit them at just the right angle, they seemed to glow with fluorescent rainbows. She hadn't seen many dragons in her short lifespan, but she believed he was the most regal of them all.

Lailani often dreamed of becoming a Dragon Guard, but it was forbidden to her. It wasn't her father that forbade her, but the law of the land. Only men could bond with dragons. She didn't think it was fair, but as long as she had Daigo's companionship, she was happy. While dragons

could only bond with one person, they could communicate with any human they chose, and Lailani counted it a great honor that Daigo allowed her to ride on his back, let alone speak to her.

Where should we fly today?

I was thinking about that before you arrived, and I know just the place.

Lailani waited for him to continue, but he said nothing.

Well?

Patience, small one. Climb on and I'll show you. It's a surprise.

A grin spread across her lips as she grabbed onto his shoulder and climbed up onto his back. She sat between his shoulder blades and pressed her knees tightly against the base of his neck.

I'm ready.

Daigo lowered himself like a cat about to pounce, then leaped into the air. He flapped his powerful wings, lifting them steadily higher until they were soaring over the Sea of Colisle. Lailani looked back and saw the shore growing smaller. They lived on the Perched Cay, just one of a few islands that were clustered together several miles from the mainland. She could see them all from her vantage point, and the view was breathtaking.

Lailani turned her attention forward and tried to guess where Daigo was taking her. She spotted a thick mist hanging over the water below.

What's that? she asked.

The Mists of Mourning. Never go there.

Why not?

It is where the dead go to find rest.

Lailani shrank back, tracing a warding symbol in the air. She wanted nothing to do with the spirits of the dead. They flew along the mist line and continued further out to sea. There was nothing but water in every direction, and it stretched as far as she could see.

I think this is the farthest I've been from home.

How does that make you feel? Daigo asked.

I'm not sure. I like seeing new places, but there's something comforting about the familiar.

You have lived your entire life on the Perched Cay, but it is only a sliver of the world. There are a great many things to see outside of the island. Your father and I used to travel all over the mainland.

What was it like?

If we were bonded, I could show you my memories and let you experience them for yourself. Alas, words will have to do. Those days were good. We had many adventures and fought many enemies together.

My father's sword rests beside the hearth in our house.

And his armor?

He keeps it in his room, though I doubt he could still fit into it. I think he used to be smaller back then.

He was, Daigo said. Time and food tend to make humans plump.

Lailani giggled in response. They spent hours gliding over the sea, and Daigo related stories of her father's days at the Terranese school, including how the two of them had met. She knew the story of how her father had bonded with Daigo, but it never grew old no matter how many times she heard it. They were heading home as he related the tale, and she listened intently despite knowing it so well.

Your father was a quiet man. He joined the school to learn the ways of war so that he could earn the money needed to take care of his parents. They suffered from the same illness that he has now, and they weren't able to harvest their crops. He was strong and stubborn, and once he was admitted as a student, he had trouble matching with a dragon.

Until he found you, Lailani said.

Yes. I saw past his rough exterior and knew that bonding with him would be good for both of us. He was about to be forced from the school when I offered to bond with him. He agreed, and over time, he proved me right.

That he wasn't so rough?

Indeed. He may seem that way, but deep down, he has a soft heart.

She knew that was true. Her father often went out of his way to help others in need, even if it meant he would go without. As the Perched Cay came into view, Lailani spotted a group of dark clouds traveling swiftly across the sky.

Do you see that? she asked.

I see them.

Them?

Dragons with their riders. Five of them.

Excitement flashed through her. She leaned forward, squinting to make out their details. They were still too far away, but she saw they were descending. They broke formation, and each dragon wheeled down toward a different island.

What do you suppose they are doing?

We shall find out soon enough.

Daigo began his own descent to the island, and they landed gently on the beach. Lailani leaped off the dragon's back and sprinted across the sand, stopping momentarily to wave at the dragon.

Thank you for the flight! I'll let you know what I find out!

Very good, little one.

She ran as fast as she could, weaving between trees and rocks, excitement driving her onward even as her lungs burned within her chest. The jungle opened up to a large flat field where the

town was located. The dragon she'd seen was on the outskirts, but she noticed a crowd had gathered in the center of town.

Her father was there, as were her friends Kalea and Huou. She joined the two men. They smiled at her, sharing her excitement at the visitor.

“What did I miss?” Lailani asked.

“Nothing. He just got here.”

Lailani peered through the press of bodies and got a glimpse of the rider. He was wearing a full suit of armor, his helmet tucked under his arm. The mask of the helmet was painted with a demonic face, its eyes burning with anger. His black boots gleamed with fresh polish, and a sword was strapped to his waist. The man's air of importance intrigued Lailani.

“Citizens of the Perched Cay, I come bearing a message from the emperor!”

Conversations died, and the man swept his gaze across the crowd.

“War is coming. The Rourans have crossed the border, killing and destroying all in their path. The emperor is calling all retired riders back into service, effective immediately. You will have the rest of the day to settle your affairs, and you are to report to the school in the morning. If you are unfit for battle, you must send your son in your place. If you do not have a son, then you will report regardless.”

Lailani's heart dropped into her stomach. Her father couldn't fight. He could barely walk most days. And she was his only child. A lump formed in her throat and she looked at her friends. Their expressions were serious.

“What will my father do?” she asked. “He can't go to war.”

“Neither can ours,” Huou said.

“Looks like we'll be going in their place,” Kalea added, sharing a look with Huou.

Her father and Daigo were all the family she had. If they were gone, she would have nobody, especially if her friends had to leave. There had to be another option, a way to keep her father from going.

Lailani's world was crashing around her.