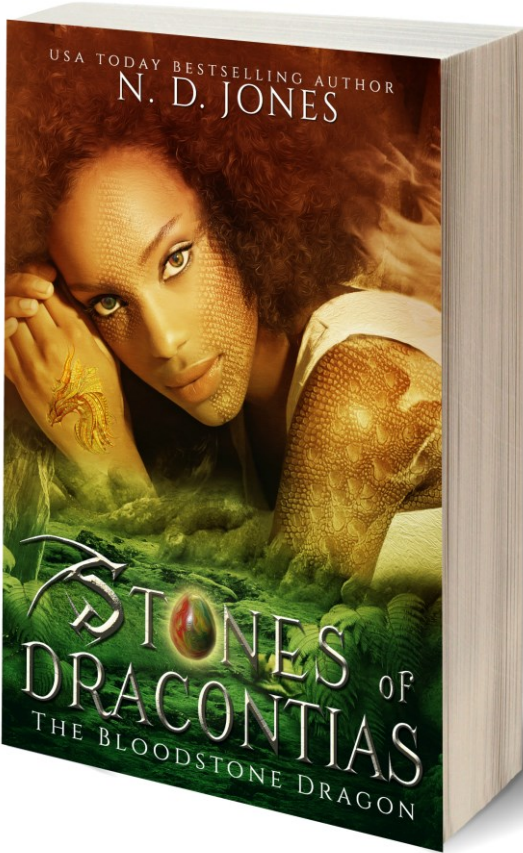


USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
N. D. JONES



STONES OF
DRACONTIAS
THE BLOODSTONE DRAGON

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N.D. Jones



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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to Helen and Stanley Jenkins. The best in-laws
a girl could have.

This is an original character concept art of Kya, the Bloodstone Dragon, and Armstrong Knight.



CHAPTER ONE



Sixty-Seven Years Ago

KYA FLEW BESIDE her oldest sister. Ledisi, a mature green dragon with random specks of gold, contrasted to Kya, a gold dragon who'd inherited her father's coloring over most of her body. Ledisi set a moderate pace, for which the young dragon was grateful. She wasn't yet used to long flights from their island home and to the large populated land of humans. When she'd been a small Dracontias, her four legs good for running around their forest home and not yet capable of flight, she'd flown to places like China, New Zealand and Ethiopia carried in the protective tail of one of her parents.

Now, size and age meant Kya could no longer rely on her parents to ferry her about. Although, with how fatigued she felt a mere two thousand miles from Buto, Kya wouldn't mind taking hold of her sister's tail and allowing Ledisi to tug Kya along in her wake.

She inched closer to her sister, near enough to share the draft of air Ledisi's magic created.

"Tired already, little Bloodstone?" An array of green scales, with a smooth surface and oblong shape arranged in rows along the length of her dorsal, were beautiful in their unmarred perfection. The overlapped scales fluttered up, a sail opening to the wind currents. Purple wisps of magic drifted from the slots in Ledisi's scales. The drafts of Amethyst magic floated to and under Kya, supporting her Bloodstone magic. *"I will always be there for you, little Bloodstone, even when you grow to maturity and choose a mate."*

Kya had no interest in choosing a mate, and she disliked how all Dracontias now referred to her by the name of the stone in her skull. She'd reached her scale year three months ago, which coincided with the first of these flights with her eldest sister.

For a Dracontias, Kya was still quite young. Years from maturity but no longer a babe in need of watching and coddling. After the Fire of Nyah ritual, her father, ruler of Buto, had anointed her with the title of the Bloodstone Dragon.

Foregoing shame in exchange for a sister's comfort, Kya settled her smaller dragon's body against Ledisi's. Soul Stone Dragon, her sister was known throughout Buto. Her Amethyst healing magic reduced fear and anxiety, protected against psychic attack and promoted trust. She bestowed her purple healing on those worthy of her gift, as was the ancient way of Dracontias.

“In the sky, away from Buto and Father, call me Kya.”

“It’s an honor to serve as the Bloodstone Dragon. There hasn’t been a Dracontias born with the Bloodstone in a thousand years. Your gem is rare and a powerful healing stone.”

Supported by Ledisi’s magic, the sisters cut through the air at an amazing quickness, now that her sister wasn’t moderating her speed to accommodate Kya.

“Your stone cleanses and purifies the blood.” Ledisi’s snout, cold to Kya’s hot, poked her in the neck, playing. *“Your stone also allows you to restore courage, strength, and creativity to those who’ve lost their way. Your magic has the wonderful power to renew love and friendship.”* Another playful poke. *“Would you rather be the Sunstone Dragon?”*

They approached the East Coast of the United States.

Gasira, Kya’s older and only brother, despite his ultraviolet green scales, the tip of his tail the only gold on his body, possessed a reddish-brown Dracontias healing stone. His stone had the dubious power of increasing one’s sexual energy. Older human males, invariably, prayed to the Sunstone Dragon to help them increase their vitality.

Kya and Ledisi glided to a halt miles above the country’s capital.

Her brother’s Sunstone helped to alleviate stress and fears. It also had the power to promote independence in the recipient of his healing magic. Despite the other properties of his Dracontias stone, Ledisi, Kya and the rest of the family took much pleasure in teasing Gasira.

“This is where we part.”

Kya knew, but she didn’t enjoy the thought. Ledisi would continue north to Canada, while she was expected to land, transform and then find a human who could broaden her understanding of them.

“Perhaps, this once, you’ll permit me to travel with you.”

Before she’d completed her sentence, Ledisi’s tail had snapped out and pushed against Kya’s side. Not hard and malicious but with enough force to remind the young dragon of her responsibility.

“The Fire of Nyah ritual,” Ledisi began, *“reminds us of our intention and purpose in life. We possess healing stones for a reason, Bloodstone Dragon. But how can we, who claim the sky and the ground, understand humans and their nature if we have never lived their experiences?”*

“We know their nature. They’re violent and selfish. They pray without thought. They offer only to receive. And they understand us even less than Father thinks we understand them.”

Kya would never utter such words of opposition in front of her parents. With Ledisi, however, there was no emotion or thought she couldn’t share freely with her eldest sister.

“Not all humans are as you describe. Don’t judge the many by the actions of the few. We heal the worthy. We cast off our hard dragon scales in exchange for soft human flesh to remind ourselves of the fragility of life.”

Ledisi sounded too much like their father. Of her siblings, only Gasira shared her skepticism of humans.

“Father is a wise dragon.” Ledisi reached out to Kya with her soothing magic. *“He doesn’t trust blindly. Our ability to transform is a secret no one beyond our island home is aware. Now that you’re of age, you must shift and learn how to walk among humans, your mind no longer in the clouds.”*

“I much prefer the safety of the sky than the dangers found on the ground of humans.”

Kya lowered her eyes to the bustling city below. Hundreds of feet in the air, she could see them, specks of entitlement and short lifespans. They were loud, smelled, and polluted the oceans from which she drank and the air she marveled in flying through.

“Meet me here in a week. Father will expect a report, and I don’t wish to lie to him again. You must shift this time. Find a human worthy of your trust and make a friend. Maybe you’ll find a diata in this City of Magnificent Intentions.”

A human as brave as a dragon? She doubted that but argued no more with her sister. Ledisi had indulged Kya’s bout of ideological rebellion, she wouldn’t repay her patience with obstinacy.

Kya watched her sister fly away, stunning green scales twinkling in the midday sun.

She flew toward Washington, D.C. The smell of garbage and sweat worsened the closer she drew to the ground. Landing with a soft thud, Kya glanced around. An alley, dirty and empty. She supposed it was a perfect location for her change. Private, if not sanitary. She could conjure human clothing after her transformation, although she didn’t relish the idea of confining her dragon’s soul in such a tiny form.

Despite the sun high in the sky, the alley held little light. A ten-foot locked metal fence lay at one end of the alley, behind Kya. The other end led to the street, where she could hear everything from disgruntled workers in the building across the street to rats scurrying in the sewers below.

She should shift now, but something kept her from doing so. Instead, she settled behind a dumpster, her four legs tucked under her, her snout to the disgusting ground. Kya would rest for a few minutes, shift and then go in search of a creature more mythical than dragons—an honorable human.

“Please, let me go.”

Kya awoke at the soft, desperate plea. She hadn’t meant to fall asleep. The sun, once warm and bright, had given way to a crescent moon.

“Please, please, let me go.”

A woman. Young.

“Now why would we do something like that?”

A man’s voice, deep and confident. He smelled of alcohol. Lots of it.

“You’re so pretty. We like pretty, sweet things. Don’t we, Ron?”

“Yeah, yeah, we do.”

Two males and one crying female.

Kya heard clothes rip and more crying. She didn’t understand the context of the human interaction. What she did comprehend, however, was the woman’s fear. The singular scent, above all the others, had Kya’s scales rising and anger flaring.

“Hold her down for me. Yeah, Ronny boy, just like that.” The man’s voice lowered, but Kya could still hear every cruel word. “Don’t fight, girlie, or Ron here will cut that pretty face of yours. Just stay still. I promise, you’ll enjoy it.”

Kya may have been a dragon and spent little time around humans, but she wasn’t naïve to what transpired between males and females regardless of the species. She didn’t know the human word for what the men wanted to do the female, and it didn’t matter.

Her whimpers and frightened pleas did.

She stood, silent and lethal.

Two men, one woman indeed. All three on the ground. Her hands were held over her head, trapped at the wrist by one of the men. The other man knelt between her spread legs, his knees holding them open and his fingers working to push his pants below his waist.

Kya would kill him first. She'd never had a taste for human blood and flesh. Today, though, she'd make an exception.

The door from the building to her left slammed open. Kya watched as a man burst from the bar and into the alley.

"I knew it, you pieces of shit."

The enraged man flung himself at the man who hovered over the woman, kicking him in the face and sending the shocked man backward.

"What in the—"

Fists connected with the male still holding the woman down. Kya heard breaking, probably the man's nose, which bled blood fire down his face.

"You think you can come to this neighborhood and hurt our women?"

More punches, vicious blows which had the bleeding man falling onto his back, hands and arms doing little to ward off the bigger man's attack.

From her spot near the dumpster, Kya did nothing as the man, the diata, dismantled the two men, thrashing them with his hands, feet and words. Clutching her ripped shirt with trembling hands, the human female ran through the open door. A minute later, she returned with three men.

"All right, Knight. We got this, man. Jesus, the Secret Service won't accept your application if you get arrested." He pushed the woman's savior toward the mouth of the alley. "Go, we got this. You don't need to be here when the cops arrive."

The man, Knight, pulled his shirt over his head and handed it to the woman. The blood of the men, writhing on the alley floor, speckled the sleeve of the garment. The woman didn't seem to care, for she tugged it on without haste.

"Go," the man said again, his finger gesturing in the direction of the street.

Knight went, his boots hitting the pavement as he ran, back bare and glistening with sweat.

To her surprise, Kya not only found herself not minding the human's sweaty scent but taking to the sky in noiseless pursuit of the diata.



Armstrong grimaced when the hot water from the shower hit his cut and bleeding knuckles. He'd have to ice his fists before he turned in for the night. Closing his eyes and shifting fully under the spray of water, Armstrong fought to regulate his breathing and calm his anger.

When he'd seen those men tonight, first one and then the other, approach the young woman who sat at a corner table, he knew they were up to no good. Sure, the girl, maybe nineteen, if a day, shouldn't have been in the bar in that part of DC and by herself. Far too pretty and innocent for the local flavor, the girl stood out the minute she stepped into the joint.

Armstrong didn't know if she'd been given bad directions, someone was playing a joke on her, or whether she was one of those females who got off on living dangerously and testing boundaries. He hadn't known her story, and he hadn't cared. From his perch at the bar, he'd seen her reject, with a definitive shake of her head, the tall blond guy with a bad haircut and even worse taste in clothing. She'd given his friend, who'd approached a few minutes after the first, the same rigorous head shake.

The men had left the girl alone after that, or so Armstrong had thought. In the men's room, he'd overheard the assholes and hadn't liked a damn thing they'd said. So, he'd watched them watch her for over an hour.

The soap stung his bruised fists. They throbbed, but it was a good kind of pain. The kind that came with the satisfaction of being in the right place at the right time and doing the right thing. Hell, he knew, this close to his interview with the US Secret Service, he didn't need to do anything stupid that would ruin his chances. He'd been keeping his nose clean for the last six months. No fights. Hardly any drinking. And damn near no women. He liked all three too much, according to his brother Isaiah, the owner of Knight Life Bar.

Isaiah had been right when he'd told Armstrong to disappear. The cops would have a lot of questions. His older brother, a smooth talker from way back, could handle DCPD. The man could talk his way out of damn near anything, which had saved their asses over the years. Isaiah had kept them in school, off the streets, and out of jail when too many neighborhood guys had taken the wrong path to manhood. The cradle to prison pipeline in his neighborhood was all too real.

He toweled off. Armstrong contemplated shaving, then decided against it. The bathroom mirror, thanks to his broken exhaust, had steamed over and the bathroom was too muggy for anything more than a quick brush of the teeth. Two minutes later, he strolled buck naked across the cool wood of his living room floor and into his kitchen. Snatching the black kitchen towel from the oven door handle, Armstrong opened the freezer and shoveled a handful of ice into the towel.

It was a little after one in the morning, maybe he'd catch an old western on television while he iced down his knuckles. Either the action would keep him awake long enough to do both hands or the corny dialogue would put him to sleep.

He grabbed a can of soda from the frig, turned off the kitchen light, and made his way to the living room. He stopped. Blinked. Rubbed his eyes. Blinked again.

What in the hell?

Grape can of soda, ice, and towel were dropped from his hands. Armstrong was also sure his mouth hung open. He couldn't feel his fingers or toes. And his brain, something was wrong with his brain because all he could think about was he stood in front of a dragon buck naked.

Not that there was an actual dragon in his home, one who'd entered his apartment and he hadn't heard a thing. Not that a hungry-looking dragon stared at Armstrong from a crouched position beside his couch. No, none of that registered with him. Instead, his stupid brain thought about post-shower shrinkage and first impressions.

More out of embarrassment than modesty, Armstrong covered himself with all he had. His hands.

The dragon didn't move. It only watched him. He didn't know what to do. Armstrong figured if the creature had intended to eat or kill him, it would've gobbled him up already. That was his human brain

rationalizing an absurd situation. He had no idea how dragons thought. They were majestic beasts he'd admired his entire life.

The world knew little about them, except they always seemed to be part of human history. Where dinosaurs had died out, leaving behind fossils to mark their time there, the dragons remained.

They flew, healed, and disappeared. No one knew where they went when they weren't answering the prayers of humans or flying away from cameras.

From the little he could see of the dragon, with no light on in the living room, Armstrong could hazard a guess as to which dragon had invaded his home with its scaly presence. The youngest dragon among the ones humans had cataloged over the years. Until tonight, he'd never seen it alone. Normally, the dragon flew beside much larger dragons. Its family, he assumed. Not that there was anything small about the reptile.

Why haven't you screamed or run away in terror?

"Did you just speak in my mind?" He shook his head, then smacked his forehead. Twice.

That's quite unnecessary. Your brain's function is at it should be. Otherwise, I wouldn't be able to communicate with you telepathically.

"This isn't happening. Dragons aren't telepaths." He glanced around his apartment. No broken glass. How in the hell had the dragon gotten in there? "I'm dreaming. That must be it."

I thought you would be more intelligent than this. Thus far, you've proven to be quite a disappointment. And why are you not screaming? Do I not frighten you?

Without thinking, Armstrong lowered his hands and took three steps into the living room. "Are you the cute gold dragon I've seen on TV?"

A huge head rose, the crown skimming the ceiling. Two rows of sharp, white teeth glistened, forked tongue hissed and eyes dilated.

I am the Bloodstone Dragon, and you will show me the proper respect. Dragons are not cute, Knight.

"How do you know my name?"

Why have you not run? Do you possess no sense of self-preservation?

"Do you want me to be afraid of you? Did you come here to scare me?"

You're a strange human. I don't pretend to understand why you don't react the way a normal human would.

"If I did, we wouldn't be having this nice conversation. To answer your question, I'm not afraid of you. You're big and have those scary ass teeth, and I should've beat feet to get the hell out of here." He shrugged. "I don't know how to explain it, but I know you won't hurt me."

The dragon lowered its head again, settling its face on the floor, its tail curled around what looked to be back legs.

Armstrong smiled and moved three steps closer. The dragon was trying to not break the cheap furniture he had in his home by making itself as small as possible. He wondered how long the dragon had been there, waiting for him to notice its presence and run away screaming.

"Are you male or female, Bloodstone Dragon?"

For the first time, serpent eyes took in the most obvious symbol of his gender. If the dragon had been a woman, gazing at him the way it was, he would cover himself again because the dragon didn't seem impressed.

Female, like the human you saved in the alley.

“Wait, you were there? I didn’t see you.”

You also didn’t see me until I made myself known. You aren’t very observant.

He was plenty observant, that’s how he’d known what the two assholes had in mind. A sexy woman had come up to him, asking Armstrong to buy her a drink. Five minutes of flirting were all it had taken for him to lose track of the men and their quarry. A few minutes more and the men would’ve raped the girl. Luckily, his big head had stepped in and reminded his little head that he was supposed to be keeping an eye on the young woman.

Returning to the mess he’d made on the floor, Armstrong retrieved the soda and scooped up the ice and hand towel. Dragon or not, he was thirsty and still needed to ice down his bruised knuckles. If she’d seen the fight, then she would understand.

He plopped onto the couch, the dragon’s head, even lowered, came nearly to the armrest.

The men wanted to hurt the female. I could smell her fear and their lust. The scent of both lingers, as does the sound of your fists beating them into bloody submission. I didn’t think I would find a diata. I’m glad I did.

“Diata? What does that mean?”

Brave as a dragon. You even roared when you saw the first man.

“Did I?”

He hadn’t known. Armstrong had seen only red when he’d come through the side door of the bar. The one guy was right there, so close to violating the girl that all he wanted to do was knock his goddamn teeth down his throat. He’d settled for introducing his heavy work boot to the man’s drunk face.

Yes, you sounded quite feral. Like a baby dragon. Diata indeed.

“Why are you here?”

My sister told me to find a human friend. Instead, I found a diata.

The dragon’s voice had a soothing effect, the longer she spoke in his mind. The few aches from the fight ebbed, and his fists no longer hurt. They tingled, but nothing more than that wispy sensation. Armstrong thought he saw red vapors rise from where the dragon laid on his floor.

“Is this a dream?”

No, Knight. I’m real. The next time I visit, however, I will seek permission before entering your home.

Armstrong was so tired, he could hardly keep his eyes open.

Sleep, diata, and let my magic take care of your wounds.

“Armstrong Knight. That’s my name. But I like the way diata sounds in my mind. You have a very nice voice, Bloodstone Dragon.”

He swore she laughed in his mind.

You’ve never known the touch of a dragon’s magic. I should’ve taken that into consideration before I used my healing powers. The first few times tend to produce a drugging effect, especially the first.

Heavy eyelids fluttered shut, grape soda and melting ice forgotten. But not the dragon. He could hear nothing, but Armstrong knew she was still there.

“What’s your name?”

I told you. I’m the Bloodstone Dragon.

“That’s a title. What’s your real name? Do dragons have real names?”

She didn’t answer, but she did shift on the floor.

With effort, Armstrong forced his eyes to part. She was gone. With a bolt, he sat up. Armstrong wanted to leap from the couch, run to the window and see where the dragon had gone. Instead, the magic that floated around Armstrong urged him into restful compliance.

Pulling his legs onto the couch, he reclined, feeling safe, courageous and strong. For the first time since deciding to apply for the Secret Service, Armstrong Knight didn’t fear the federal agency would pass over a black man because of his race. If they did, it would be their loss, not his.

He fell asleep, certain he’d heard a voice in his head say, *Kya*.