



CIDER  
FALLS  
SHIFTERS 6

# ANCIENT PROMISES

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

R.E. BUTLER

**Ancient Promises (Cider Falls Shifters  
Book Six)**

By R. E. Butler

## **Table of Contents**

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty.](#)

[Chapter Twenty-One](#)

[Excerpt from Lyric & The Cats](#)

[Other Books by R. E. Butler](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Copyright](#)

# Chapter One

*What if I just went to the bathroom and escaped through the window like someone trying to skip out on the bill?*

Diem smiled in what she hoped was an encouraging way as she listened to her date drone on about...something related to finances. *Why the heck did I agree to this date?*

Oh yeah, she was a sucker for a favor for a friend, and her friend Beth had suggested a dinner date with her cousin Markus.

*Maybe I could fake a heart attack. Is it the left arm or the right that tingles?*

“So how are your books looking?”

She blinked. Did she stroke out? Books?

“They’re...fine?”

“I mean, your bookstore’s accounting books. I can take a look at them after dinner.”

Oh, heck no he wasn’t coming back to her bookstore, which, since she lived on the second floor, doubled as her home. Besides, she was not even a little bit interested in him romantically.

“They’re great, actually, but thanks for the offer.”

*Run for the hills before he tries to follow you home!*

When the server appeared, Diem may have far too quickly said *no* to dessert, although what she wanted to say was *absolutely freaking not*. The date was a slow death, the

minutes ticking by in a way that made her envy people in comas.

When the date mercifully ended an eternity later and they parted ways in the restaurant's lot, she managed to avoid giving him a goodbye kiss by ducking into her car like she was being chased by something evil.

Yikes.

As she glanced in the rearview and saw him walking to his car, she breathed a sigh of relief. That was the last time she went on a blind date, especially one suggested by her friend at the discount stationary warehouse outside of Cider Falls.

Well, he *was* a nice guy, he was just not her truemate and that meant she wasn't interested in seeing him again or getting horizontal in any way, shape, or fashion.

She sent a text to her roommate, Arely.

*On my way. Picking up ice cream.*

*Uh oh. Bad date?*

*The worst. I'll share the gory details when I get home.*

*Grab me some mint chip, please.*

*You got it.*

Diem and Arely had only been living together for a little while. Arely had been roommates with Cymbre, who'd recently found her truemate. Diem lived above her bookstore in Cider Falls, a town that welcomed exiled shifters of the purebred and hybrid varieties, as well as their mates whether they were shifters or humans.

Diem was a hybrid, a cross between her wolf father and her lion mother, which made her a wolf in her shift with fur the burnished gold of a lion. She was exiled as a teenager, and her father had planned to exile himself too, but she refused to take him along with her. He had a business to run and a pack to be part of. They got together on birthdays and spoke often on the phone.

She'd found a pack of her own in Cider Falls, led by alpha Rehlik, who was now mated with a baby on the way.

When she reached the guard station at the main road into Cider Falls, she greeted her friends.

"Hi, Rare," she said. "Hey, Novak."

Novak leaned out of the guard shack. "Hey, Diem, heard you had a date. How'd it go?"

She made a face. "How the heck did you hear about that?"

"You know gossip in this town," he said with a shrug.

"It wasn't great, which is why I've got ice cream."

He popped the button to lift the gate. "Sorry to hear. Have fun."

Rare stepped out of the shack. "You got any extras for some hard-working schmoes?"

"I do, actually," she said, handing over two pints of ice cream. "You're on your own for utensils, though."

"You're awesome, thanks," Rare said, accepting the ice cream.

She waved and pulled away, heading to the bookstore. When she'd parked at the back of the store, she walked up the exterior stairs and unlocked the door.

The soft sounds of the television greeted her.

"Sorry about your date," Arely said from the couch.

"It's okay. Going on a blind date was a little out of my comfort zone, and I've decided to do that kind of thing more often."

"Blind dates?"

Diem shook her head. "Things that are out of my comfort zone. No more blind dates."

Arely followed her into the kitchen and grabbed bowls from the cabinet.

They made sundaes, Diem using cookie dough ice cream with hot fudge and peanuts, and Arely using mint chip with way more sprinkles than any person should ever use.

"Well, at least you know," Arely said.

"Know what?" Diem asked.

"That he's not your true mate, so you can check him off the list."

Diem plopped on the couch and toed off her shoes. "Good point. To finding our true mates," she said, lifting her bowl in the air like a glass to toast.

"To doing things that are out of our comfort zones," Arely said.

The bowls clinked together, and Diem smiled. The night might have sucked to begin with, but it was ending nicely. She



didn't *need* a male to make herself complete, she just *wanted* one. She hoped her truemate showed up soon so she could start the next chapter of her life.

\* \* \*

The following Monday, Diem picked up two grocery bags from the back of her car and carried them into the Cider Falls school's cafeteria. Arely was one of two school cooks and had asked Diem to help her shop for the week's breakfasts and lunches. The school, which was exclusive to the residents of Cider Falls, served pre-k through high school.

Arely took the bags and set them on the metal counter. "How many more are there?"

"Just a few more," Diem answered.

"You're a gem, thanks for helping me out."

"Happy to."

Diem hustled back out and grabbed two more bags, then returned two more times to get the boxes of fresh fruit and vegetables.

"That's it," she said, closing the back door.

"Cool, it went so much faster having an extra pair of hands."

Diem put several gallon jugs of milk into the walk-in fridge and asked where the other cook was. "Is Brenda off today?"

“She’s coming in late. The younger kids are doing a spring talent show and she volunteered to help out, so I’m on breakfast and lunch duty.”

“Do you want me to stick around?”

“No, I’ve got it. Don’t you need to head back to the store?”

“Yeah, but it’s not like people are waiting at the door for me to open.”

“Oh, well, if you want, you could run to the office and give the credit card receipt to Isak,” Arely said, gesturing to the long receipt from the store.

“Sure.” Diem hadn’t been inside the school in a long while, so she took her time wandering to the office. The school wasn’t large since there weren’t a lot of students, with one teacher often teaching multiple grades.

She paused when she reached the library. The door was closed, the room dark.

Gripping the handle, she opened it and stepped into the dark room. She inhaled and smiled. Was there any better smell on earth than a library?

“Are you lost?”

Diem nearly fell over as she spun to face whoever was talking.

“Oh, hi, Isak,” she said to the dean of the school, pressing her hand to her pounding heart. “Not lost, just wondering why the library is dark. Is the librarian not here yet?”

Isak leaned against the doorjamb and crossed his arms. He was a black panther and had been in Cider Falls for several years. “We haven’t ever really had a librarian. We’ve had people over the years come in and help out, but mostly the teachers handle it. Why? You looking for a second job?”

“Oh no,” she said. “I mean, I’d love to help out, but not in a job kind of way. I would be happy to dedicate some volunteer hours, though.”

“Really?” He straightened, looking surprised.

“Sure.”

“Come on in the office, let’s chat.”

She followed him out, pulling the door shut.

By the time she left his office a half hour later, she had the log-in information for the library computer and a swipe card so she could get into the school without having to be buzzed in. She committed to a few hours on Wednesdays, Thursdays, and Fridays, and planned to keep the bookstore closed until after twelve when she’d be able to get back to work. The teachers were going to be told about Diem’s new volunteer position and the hours the library would be staffed.

“Hey, that’s great,” Arely said when Diem stopped by the cafeteria to share the news. “You’ll fit right in.”

“I’m glad to help.”

Diem said goodbye to her friend and headed back to the bookstore. She’d noticed, after a second pass through the library, that there weren’t many new release books for the kids. After finding out from Isak the ages and reading levels of the

kids in the school, she planned to spend the afternoon finding books that she could take to the library to stock the shelves.

Shopping for books was one of her favorite pastimes, along with reading and talking about them.

“I just hope my true mate loves to read too,” she said to herself as she walked into the bookstore and flipped the sign from closed to open. She’d gone with Arely to the grocery store and walked out with a new purpose. She couldn’t wait to see the kids in the library.

## Chapter Two

Eivross Danforth watched from the corner of the throne room as his brother, Zihndyr, stared at a screen with a map.

It wasn't a throne room so much as an office that his brother had taken over after killing their father, who had been the king of their dragon nest. But Zihndyr liked the sound of *throne room* better, so that's what everyone called it.

"How big is the territory?" Zihndyr asked, swiveling back and forth in the high-backed leather chair.

"Just one square mile," Lanius said.

"And how many dragons are there?" Zihndyr turned and faced Eivross, who was the captain of the guard.

"Twenty-two," he answered.

"Then it will be easy enough to take them out."

"There's no reason to go after them," Eivross said, knowing he risked infuriating his brother and his hair-trigger, usually-kills-quickly, temper.

"Their resources are worth it," Zihndyr said, his eyes narrowing.

"Resources or the king's daughter?" Eivross asked. He was really one of the few who could get away with talking to his brother like this, questioning his authority or decisions. But it was a tightrope no matter how you looked at it.

Zihndyr let out a low growl, his eyes flashing to the yellow-gold of his dragon. "Do you have something to say?"

Eivross straightened and pushed away from the wall. “Clear out,” he said to everyone in the room. There was a heartbeat where they waited for Zihndyr to agree or not, and when he waved his hand, they split like their tails were on fire.

“Speak,” his brother said.

“You have a mate. You don’t need to kill King Lindra and take his daughter as a second mate. Their territory has no real value.” Eivross walked over to the screen and pointed to the other nest’s territory.

Both nests called the Smokey Mountains home, with several miles and treacherous terrain separating them. Their own nest neared fifty, and while Lindra’s nest was far smaller, there were zero reasons to take it over. Except that Zihndyr had set his sights on the king’s daughter because his own mate, Osteria, had failed to give him any children in the last two years of their mating.

“I’ve heard their treasure is worth more than ours. Lindra’s hoard is jewels.”

Dragons hoarded treasure; it was in their nature. But each dragon hoarded something precious to them, and it could be anything. Their mother, Emelda, had hoarded silver spoons. When she’d passed away when Eivross was eleven, her treasure had been several thousand spoons, all perfectly polished and shiny. He’d saved a handful of her favorites, but his own treasure wasn’t spoons.

“Your treasure isn’t jewels,” he pointed out.

“No, but there’s nothing wrong with having more treasure.” Zihndyr’s gaze narrowed further. “Stop questioning me. Gather the guards.”

“If you want to have a child, spend more time with your mate instead of your side-pieces and maybe she’ll get pregnant. It’s not worth killing dragons to take a female who may or may not want to be with you, just so you can have another woman to bed.”

In a heartbeat, Eivross was against the wall with Zihndyr’s arm across his throat, pressing hard.

Eivross was older than Zihndyr, stronger and faster, but his brother was vicious and didn’t hold family in any kind of esteem.

He’d killed their father for his throne, after all. And then their uncle, who was the rightful heir. Eivross had seen Zihndyr begin to pick off the staff who were loyal to their father, so he’d pledged fealty to his bloodthirsty brother to save their lives. And his own.

And he hated every second.

Zihndyr pressed his arm a little harder against Eivross’s throat and then took a step back. Eivross gasped in a breath, his dragon pacing in his mind. He didn’t think his dragon had ever gotten over him not avenging their father’s death, among other things.

Like how he would never take a mate. Because Zihndyr had gotten his current mate by killing her true mate. His brother wasn’t above killing innocents to get what he wanted, and Eivross didn’t trust him.

He stared at his brother. Once upon a time they’d been friends, but Eivross wasn’t sure he even thought of him as a brother anymore.

“I’m not going to help you do this,” Eivross said. His dragon sat up in his mind, letting out a grunt of agreement.

His brother waved a dismissive hand in his direction and Eivross stalked away. His brother couldn’t really be reasoned with. Not in any meaningful way. Once he set his mind on something, he went after it until it was his. Or destroyed.

Something had to change. Eivross couldn’t stand looking at himself in the mirror. He might not be part of Zihndyr’s plotting and conquering, but as the captain of the guard, he was ultimately responsible for every loss of life.

This was no way for a dragon to live.

\* \* \*

In his room, Eivross closed the door and breathed a sigh of relief. Just being away from his brother helped ease the tension, the knot in his gut that made him want to crawl into a hole and never come out.

He walked to the bookshelf where he kept some of his treasure, running his fingertip gently along the edge of the wooden shelf and staring at the book spines until his eyes watered and everything went hazy. He blinked and inhaled sharply, taking a step back, and then another, before he turned and dropped to his knees at the storage ottoman at the end of the bed. He lifted the lid and pulled out one of his mom’s spoons. The heavy silver spoon had a dragon-shaped handle with real ruby eyes.



He leaned against the end of the bed and tilted the spoon back and forth, remembering the happier times of their youth, when their mom was alive and their dad hadn't been so caught up in grief that he didn't realize his youngest son had gotten tangled up in a greedy web of power, looking for ways to rise swiftly within the nest.

Eivross had buried himself in school after his mom passed away, practically living in the nest's library, often falling asleep with his head on an open book. Even he'd been in the dark about just how power-hungry and crazy his brother had gotten. The day his brother had killed their father still haunted him.

His brother used that day, and the threat of hurting others in the nest, to keep Eivross in line. But he was damn tired of it. Tired of worrying about making a misstep that might see someone else pay the price. Wondering every night as he went to sleep if it would be his last.

He rested his head back on the bed and closed his eyes.

He needed to make a decision and soon, or he was going to wither away into a husk and never be free.

\* \* \*

The following morning, Eivross approached the throne room and heard his brother pacing inside and the soft murmurs of males speaking.

He walked into the room, his mind set to his purpose and his dragon ready to defend himself if the need arose.

Quickly cataloging the males in the room, he counted six, including Zihndyr. While Eivross had friends in the nest, he didn't have a horde of males at his beck and call to take out those who came against him.

“What are you doing here?” Zihndyr asked. “I didn't call for you.”

“I know. I want to leave the nest.”

Zihndyr looked up from the desk where he'd been staring at the map of the mountains once more and let out a soft warning growl. “Leave for a while, or leave forever?”

Steeling himself, Eivross said, “Forever. You once offered me exile when I told you I didn't agree with your tactics in taking over the farm below the mountains from those humans. I didn't take exile then...I want to take it now.”

“Oh?” He settled back in the chair looking very relaxed, but Eivross knew it was a show. His brother never relaxed.

“I'm not going to watch you destroy a nest to take a female, nor will I help you in any way.” In fact, Eivross had plans to go to the other nest and alert them of the coming war.

“Where will you go?” Zihndyr sneered.

With the Federal Shifter Alliance governing shifters in the States, Eivross would have to join up with a shifter group or start his own nest. He almost said he'd join up with Lindra's nest and help defend them, but that was a sure way to meet his maker at the hands of his murderous brother.

“I'll figure it out.”

“Fine. I'll exile you tonight before dinner. Pack your things.”

Eivross spun and headed out of the throne room. He was surprised that his brother had agreed so easily, but he wasn't going to look a gift horse in the mouth.

He was nearly finished packing anyway. The moment he was exiled, he'd go to the other nest and tell them what was coming, and then he'd find a place to live, far from the mountains.

His brother could do all the damage he wanted, but Eivross wouldn't be part of it. Not anymore.

Heading to his room on the second floor, he pondered the future.

So long as his treasure came with him, he didn't really care about anything else, and the majority of his treasure was safe in a portable storage unit that he could have delivered wherever he set up his future home.

"You're really leaving?" A soft voice reached his ears.

Eivross stopped and turned, smiling at Bennie, one of the elder females in the nest.

"You've got ears like a bat, Bennie," he said with a smile.

"I can't help it. So you're getting out finally?"

"Finally?"

"You should have left after your father died."

"I should have done a lot of things."

She pshawed. "You saved your life and all of ours. Your brother was in a rampage and you did what you had to so that

you could mitigate the bloodshed. But I will miss you terribly.”

“I’ll miss you too. You could come with me.”

“I’m too old to start over. But you can name your first child after me.”

“That’s not going to happen.” He let out a little snarl. As if he’d name a child Benatrice.

“My name’s nice,” she protested.

“It’s just a little old-fashioned for me, but it’s a perfect name for you,” he said, putting a comforting hand on her shoulder. “You’ve always been so kind to me. Honestly, I won’t ever take a mate, not as long as Zihndyr is in power. She’d be a target. You saw what he did to Clarins to secure Dhianna as his mate.”

“A male needs a female,” she said.

“I’ll be fine. I’ve got my treasure.”

She nodded and gave him a quick hug. He’d known her his whole life. She’d been his mother’s attendant and then a servant in his father’s household. When Zihndyr took over, he’d killed several house servants, believing them to be loyal to his father. Eivross had stepped in and saved their lives. He had no regrets about that, but he did regret that he’d been unable to stop his brother in the first place.

As he walked away, she said, “Have you ever heard of Cider Falls?”

He turned. “No.”

“It’s in Kentucky. The alpha’s name...starts with an R, but I don’t remember what it is. They’re exile friendly.”

“Thanks, Bennie. I’ll check it out.”

She smiled and walked away, and Eivross continued his walk to his room. He didn’t have a lot of things to pack, just clothes and toiletries. The only thing he cared about was his treasure, which his brother didn’t care about because it had no real monetary value. Well, some of the pieces did, but not enough to warrant Zihndyr taking a second look.

In a few hours he’d be marked for exile by a local witch with a magical brand and have seventy-two hours to register somewhere or start his own nest, or face imprisonment by the FSA. Hard pass on that.

Maybe Cider Falls was worth a look. If not, he’d start his own nest, somewhere his brother wouldn’t find him.

But he’d still never take a mate.

He never wanted to lose another person he loved again.

## Chapter Three

Wednesday morning, Diem carried one of four boxes into the school library. It was her first morning volunteering, and she was thrilled that the books she'd ordered had shown up Tuesday evening. She set the box on one of the tables and went back for the others.

“Morning,” Isak said, stepping out of the office as she made her fourth pass with the last box.

“Morning,” she said. She put the box on her hip. “I’ve got new books for the kids, so this morning I’m going to add them to the catalog with barcodes and put them on a shelf by the door. The first class coming in is during second period, so I have some time.”

“You’ll stay through lunch?” he asked.

“Yep. I’ll leave around noon.”

“I’ll leave you to it. Call the office if you need anything.”

She tilted her head. “Isn’t there usually a secretary at that desk?”

“Yeah, it was Marcy, but she’s pregnant and her mate wanted her to stay home and rest since her last pregnancy was apparently a difficult one. So I’m answering the phones.”

“Will you keep the job open for her?”

“She won’t be back; she already told me that she’s going to stay home for a few years. I’ve got a job posting ready to go live this morning on a shifter school job website, but since

we're a hybrid-friendly school, it's hard to say if anyone will apply."

She recalled when the Cider Falls Garage put a job posting online for a receptionist and it brought a villain into their midst by the name of Vega, who'd almost killed her friend Cymbre before he was taken out by her mate and their people were imprisoned by the FSA.

"Good luck," she said. "I'm off to get some work done in the library."

"If I didn't say so Monday, thank you for everything, Diem. You should let me pay you, by the way."

"I'm happy to volunteer my time. Sharing my love of reading with kids is reward enough, but you could always buy me lunch."

"You've got it." He smiled and turned into the office, and she continued on her way to the library.

She grabbed a letter opener from the tiny office in the library and opened the first box, checking that the contents matched the order form.

It was tedious work to log the new books into the system, assign and print bar codes, and attach them with tape, but by the time second period rolled around and Autumn came in with her first through third grade combined class and Diem got to see all those excited faces? It was worth the boring work.

"I think you might like this one," she said, handing one of the brand-new books to a girl named Sadie. "It's got a dragon and a fairy princess battling an evil ogre."

The girl's eyes went wide as she took the book. "Are there really dragons?"

"I suppose so, but I've never met one," Diem said. "Do you think there are?"

Sadie hugged the book to her chest. "Oh yes, definitely. A dragon shifter would be so cool to see. He could be green or maybe blue." She tapped her fingers on the book cover, which had a large green dragon flashing fangs and spewing fire. "I can't wait to read this!"

"Enjoy, kiddo," Diem said.

Autumn came up. "The kids were so excited to come here this morning. They watched the clock like hawks and counted down the minutes."

"I love hearing that."

"Thanks for volunteering your time," she said, then left after a young boy asked her for help.

Diem surveyed the library with a sense of pride as four young children, arms loaded with books, chatted happily and headed to the desk to check out.

"On my way," Diem said. "It's a great day for books."

\* \* \*

Diem walked into the bookstore a little after twelve and switched the sign to say she was open. She'd been on her feet for over five hours, but she was happier than she'd been in a long while. She loved the bookstore, but working with the kids



in the library had filled her with joy too. Tomorrow would be even better, she was sure. She couldn't wait to see which kids had read books overnight and would want to return them and check out more.

Rolling her neck with a sigh, she headed up the interior stairs and dropped her purse on the couch, then changed into leggings and a tunic, pairing the outfit with her favorite comfy pair of tennis shoes.

The morning had sped by, but the afternoon was surely going to crawl since she was doing her annual spring cleaning, a much-dreaded task that involved pulling books from shelves, dusting, and returning them to the correct order, not to mention climbing up and down a ladder to make sure the tops of the shelves and all the knickknacks she had for sale were clean too.

Her wolf paced in her mind, letting out its lion-ish growl. Blond like a lion, her wolf couldn't howl like a purebred wolf.

Damn, she hated that term—*purebred*.

Even thinking it made her skin crawl.

Her father's pack had tossed the term around like a volleyball, using it to slap those who weren't fully wolf. She'd lived her whole life on the outside of things. Part of the pack but not part of it, everyone wondering if she'd look like a wolf or some crazy combination of wolf and lion.

She was lucky, she supposed, that she hadn't been born a few decades ago, when she might have been slaughtered at birth, and even her biological mother might have been killed as well for cavorting with a non-lion.

She couldn't even say that she'd ever really lived in *fear* of being killed for being a hybrid, but she'd certainly felt the disdain from the purebred wolves.

She'd decided she'd had enough of being on the outside and never really being part of things and accepted exile from her alpha. She'd originally planned to go to Florida, where a large commune of hybrids and exiles lived and worked together, but then someone in the pack told her about Cider Falls and Alpha Rehlik, a purebred wolf who'd been exiled and started the pack to give all exiles a safe place to live.

It seemed like a lifetime ago, but it had only been a few years.

She'd come to Cider Falls with a suitcase and no clue what she wanted to do with her life. After interviewing with Rehlik that first day she'd arrived in town, he'd given her the only available place at the time—the apartment over what had once been a toy store. She'd found a box of children's books in the storage room and asked if she could open the store, suggesting a bookstore that could also double as a toy and gift shop, and he'd been happy to help her get things going. It had taken her a full year to get the shop to where she wanted it, and she was super proud of herself for all she'd accomplished since then, including a monthly book club and summer reading challenge for the town kids.

Someone opened the door and set off the little bell.

She peeked around the register. “Oh, hi, Jewel,” she said, greeting the former FSA Hunter, whose job had been to find and capture exiles who didn't register with a new group within seventy-two hours of exile. She was now mated to

Trace, Rehlik's number two in the pack, and worked with the security team.

"I need a favor," Jewel said, leaning on the counter and smiling.

"Name it," Diem said.

"I need a dress for a date tonight. It's very special."

"Oooh," Diem said, setting down the trinket she'd been rubbing with a polishing cloth and rising to her feet. Along with books and gifts, she also kept a selection of boutique clothes in the back of the store for people in town who needed special outfits. "Special like romantic, or special like sexy?"

"Romantic-special, I guess," Jewel said. She lowered her voice even though they were alone. "I'm pregnant."

"Oh! Yay!" Diem hurried around the counter and hugged her friend. "I'm so happy for you!"

"Thanks!" Jewel laughed and hugged her back. "You and Shelley are the only ones who know, so mum's the word until after my date with Trace tonight."

"On my honor," Diem said, twisting an invisible key over her lips and tossing it over her shoulder. "Now, what's on the schedule for the date? Dinner? Dancing? Movie? Sexy romp in a field on a blanket?"

Jewel's brows rose. "I like that blanket idea. But I think it's too wet outside for a romp in the field after the rain we got last night. So just dinner out. I made a reservation at Trace's favorite place."

"Perfect. So you're due when?"

"I'm two months' along, so November."

“Very cool.” She led her to the room with the clothing.

“I’m really curious what our baby will end up being, since Trace is a hybrid hyena-warlock and I’m a purebred bear.”

“A bear with hyena coloring, or a warlock with a bear roar?” Diem offered. She pulled a rack forward that contained a selection of dresses in Jewel’s size, ranging from classic tank dresses to Diem’s favorite fifties style pinup dresses with belted waists and flared skirts.

“Whatever combination our child is, I’m just thankful to live in a place where I don’t have to worry about them being branded as an exile and forced away.”

Diem glanced at the brand on Jewel’s wrist, which matched hers. “I feel the same way. It’s nice to know that we can be with our mates and our children without them facing that in the future.”

“I think this dark green dress is perfect, but do you have a wrap for it? It might get chilly tonight.” Jewel took a dress off the rack and held it up to herself, looking at a full-length mirror.

“You bet.”

A half-hour later, Jewel left with the dress, wrap, and a pearl headband in a garment bag and promised to send a text to Diem to let her know how the night went. She was sure it would be amazing no matter the setting, since Jewel and Trace were having a baby together and he’d be just as excited as her.

Someday, Diem would be sharing the news of a child with her true mate, but she had to find him first. As she pulled the door closed and waved at her friend once more, she rubbed

the space over her heart where her wolf let out a curious and rather sad howl-growl.

Someday couldn't come fast enough.

## Chapter Four

The witch walked into the backyard of the king's home where Eivross waited with his brother and a contingent of guards and the elder dragons. She had long auburn hair and tired eyes, but she smiled and gave a slight bow to Zihndyr, who was standing on the back porch, above everyone else.

"I'm Freida," she said. "Who is the exile?"

"My brother," Zihndyr said. "Or he *was* my brother, but now he will be a stranger forever."

She made a small sound in the back of her throat and turned to face them. Pulling a short metal brand from a bag on her hip, she walked to Eivross and said, "Hello. Hold out your wrist, please."

He rolled his sleeve up and held out his wrist.

She waved her fingers over the brand at the end of the short pole and spoke a spell, which turned the brand bright red like it had been sitting in a fire for a while. The magic in the spell would make the scar permanent. No matter how many times he shifted into his dragon, the scar would never go away, always a reminder that he was no longer welcome in the place of his ancestors.

"This cannot be undone," she said, taking his wrist gently in her free hand. "What is done today is forever."

"If you come into my territory," Zihndyr called loudly, "I'll see to your death myself."

Eivross knew his brother was posturing and also most likely pissed that he was leaving rather than toeing the line and helping him take out the other dragon king. But he also knew his brother was crazy times ten, and would definitely carry out his threat if Eivross came into town.

He'd had more than enough of living under the shadow of the threat of death and ruin from his unhinged brother.

Plus, his dragon was supremely happy to be leaving too.

He could feel something coming, better things on the horizon.

"I understand," he said, both to his brother and the witch.

He didn't watch her press the brand into his skin; he kept solid eye contact with his brother to show him he had no regrets. While the brand hurt like a bitch and felt like she was pressing a hot poker right against the bones in his wrist, he didn't flinch. She eased the brand from his skin and moved away, disappearing around the corner of the house, taking her lavender scent with her.

"You have one hour," Zihndyr said. He paused for a moment, and Eivross thought he might say something else, but instead he simply turned and walked into the house.

Eivross looked at the males who he'd considered friends once upon a time. "I don't need the hour." He stripped, tucked his clothes into the crossbody bag with the last of the treasures he'd kept in his room, and strapped it across his chest. Looking to the sky, he let out a sharp call from his dragon and changed forms.

His dragon was dark jade green and his wings were a deep forest green that allowed him to blend into the woods, if you could overlook the fact he was the size of a city bus.

The males around him hustled for cover as he flapped his wings and took to the air. He turned in a lazy circle over the king's house, which he'd called home his entire life, and then with a sharp cry, he cut an arc in the sky, blasted out his fire, and headed toward Cider Falls.

\* \* \*

The trip took several hours because he'd had to first detour to the other nest to warn the king that he was a target. But King Lindra hadn't believed him, had said that their people lived in harmony sharing the mountain, each nest in its own territory, and while Zihndyr was a male not to be trifled with, no king in his right mind would take over a territory just to take a second mate. Eivross had assured Lindra that he'd seen the map with their territory marked and that his brother was coming for him, for his daughter, but he'd been dismissed and sent off. It bothered him on several levels, but he couldn't force the male to believe him. Hopefully, no one died in the coming scuffle, but he wasn't sure the male would be that lucky.

He hadn't been in a hurry to get to Cider Falls after that trip. He'd been disappointed that Lindra hadn't taken up arms and prepared his people to defend themselves. But the closer he got to Cider Falls, the more his dragon pushed him to move faster. It was as if his dragon, who'd been sullen at leaving the nest, was very much interested in where they were headed.



Shrugging off the curious chirps from his beast, he flew forward, watching below as the scenery zipped by. He'd seen an aerial view of Cider Falls and knew what to look for, circling over a bar co-owned by the alpha. He wasn't supposed to go there, but instead was meant to check in at the guard station and be escorted into town.

He swooped low and looked for the guards, finding a small building with wooden gates closing off the entrance and exit to town through one of two main roads. The other road was blocked off, which forced people to go into town through one road for safety purposes.

Eivross had reached out to Alpha Rehlik ahead of coming to town and was assured he'd be welcomed and allowed to join after a short getting-to-know-him period of twenty-four hours. He was sure they had already run a background check on him through the FSA to find out if he was a criminal, but all they'd see was that he was a dragon in good standing in his nest and was now an exile.

He landed on a stretch of road within eyesight of the guard shack, shifting as he went so he didn't take out any of the nearby buildings. He grabbed jeans from his crossbody bag and pulled them on before the males in the guard shack reached him.

Once his lower half was covered, he took out the rest of his clothes and dressed.

"I'm Eivross Danforth," he said, buttoning his shirt and mentally hissing when the sleeve caught the edge of the brand. "Rehlik is expecting me."

"Nice to meet you," one of the two males said, extending his hand. Eivross shook it, and then the other

male's. "I'm Weston, head of the security team. This is Novak."

"Welcome," Novak said. "Rehlik's waiting for you in his office in the bar. I'll take you."

"Thanks," Eivross said.

"So you're a dragon, huh?" Weston said. "That's pretty cool. I've never met one of your people before."

"We tend to stick to our nest," he said.

"But you chose exile, so you must have had a good reason for it. The good thing about Cider Falls is there's a mix of purebreds, hybrids, and humans, and Rehlik's a great alpha. You won't find any people hating on purebreds *or* hybrids, or caring if someone is mated to a different shifter type," Weston said.

"That's good news," Eivross said. "But I'm not looking for a mate. I just want to live my life in peace and quiet." *Without worrying about war breaking out or being killed in my sleep.*

"I get that," Novak said.

"What are you both, if you don't mind me asking."

"I'm a gorilla-hound," Novak said.

"I'm a black bear," Weston answered. "We've both been in Cider Falls for a while. It's a great place."

Eivross stopped suddenly as they passed through a stretch of woods and reached another road. He could see the bar across the street, a gazebo partially blocking the view.

"You okay?" Novak asked.

He opened his mouth to respond, but nothing came out but a call from his dragon.

He spun with a snarl and strode away from the male, who called after him.

Something was calling to his dragon, and he felt compelled to follow the feeling. His heart pounded, his vision tunneling as he followed the source of the feeling to a white two-story building with black shutters, window boxes of flowers, and a porch. A sign hung over the door that read *Cider Falls Bookstore*.

He leaped up the stairs, entirely baffled as to why he needed to go to the bookstore but unable to stop himself from following the pull of whatever—or whoever—was calling to him.

As he reached for the door, his dragon burst from him so fast that he nearly passed out. His shift exploded, shredding his clothes and sending his bag flying. The door ripped off the hinges as he ducked away from the building so he didn't destroy it, thrashing with the power of the shift. He heard things crashing behind him, but he was overcome with his dragon and couldn't do anything but lift his head to the sky and let out a sharp call.

*Shit.*

He'd just let out a mating call, declaring that his dragon had found his other half, the sound loud and echoing in the sky.

Lowering his head, he let out an exhausted groan and slumped to the street, the crunch of something metal under his belly.

A car, maybe.

His vision faded as exhaustion took over.

The very last thing he saw was a beautiful female in the ruined doorway of the bookstore, looking bewildered.

“My door!”

## Chapter Five

Diem was placing the order for the book club's May selection, a historical romance about a pirate and a princess, which looked to be good fun. The females who came to the book club each month got several weeks to read the book and then they'd meet once a month to chat about it. Jynx had suggested dressing up and having a party, and Diem had been all for it. She had a perfect frock coat to wear to dress up as a pirate, and she'd find a drink recipe that would harken to scoundrels and swashbucklers.

Her heart clenched suddenly, her wolf letting out a curious sound in her head, the mix of wolf and lion coming out like a barking growl. She gasped and clutched her chest, wondering if she was suddenly having a panic attack for no reason.

She gasped again as the pain abruptly sharpened, driving the breath from her lungs.

Taking a few steps away from the desk, she made her way to the front door to go see Shelley, the pack medic, for help. Surely she could figure out why Diem's heart was racing and felt like it was going to pound out of her chest.

A male appeared at the glass front door. He was tall and broad-shouldered, with dark hair and bright blue eyes. He grasped the handle and then ripped it off as he shifted.

Into a freaking dragon!

She stood immobile, watching his clothes shred and giving her a tantalizing view of his ripped body, which then

morphed into an enormous dragon. She'd never seen anything like it.

One moment she had a door, and then there was a dragon.

He let out a call that echoed in her heart. Even though she didn't speak dragon—hell, she'd never even met one—she knew exactly what the call meant: mate.

Her wolf let out an answering growling howl and she nearly dropped to her knees as the realization that she was in the presence of her truemate became clear.

But the only thing she could think to say in such a profound moment was, “My door!”

The dragon slumped to the street, crushing something with a metallic creak, and sighed, eyes closing and wings lowering.

Her heart went out to the dragon, especially since they were mates. She hurried from the store, stepping around the broken door.

“Careful, Diem, he's a stranger,” Weston called to her. People flooded the street at the sound of the destruction, including Rehlik and Trace, who'd been in the bar.

She rested her hand gently on the dragon's snout. “Who is he?”

“His name is Eivross Danforth,” Rehlik said as he joined her. “What the hell happened?”

She hummed. The dragon opened his eyes for a brief moment and then closed them again. “He shifted.”

“I know, but why?”

“Because he’s my true mate.”

\* \* \*

Eivross’s head pounded and his mouth was dry. Everything ached, from the top of his head to his feet. Or his tail? Wait, was he still in his shift?

He opened his eyes and found himself staring up at a ceiling. Something soft was under him, a bed or couch perhaps. He blinked to clear his vision and sat up slowly, groaning at his aching head.

He was in an office and picked up the faint scent of liquor and fried food. The bar, maybe. A stack of clothing was folded neatly on the floor, along with a pair of boots. He glanced down and realized he was naked and covered from the waist down with a blanket.

He puzzled over what had happened as he donned the sweats and t-shirt. The door creaked when it opened as he was putting on the boots.

A large male walked in.

“Oh, you’re up, that’s good. I’m Rehlik, alpha of Cider Falls.” He stopped next to the couch and extended his hand.

Eivross finished putting on the boots and then shook the alpha’s hand, allowing himself to be pulled to his feet. The abrupt change of location caused his head to swim, and he groaned internally until the lightheadedness went away.

“I’m Eivross,” he said. “What happened?”

“What do you remember?”

“Meeting the guards and walking to the bar. Then...”  
His mind went blank as he thought over what had happened. He’d been speaking to Weston and Novak, and then his dragon had gone berserk.

Had he hurt someone?

No...he didn’t think so.

“So, you caused some damage,” Rehlik said as they walked through the bar. He held the front door open, and they walked out into the sunshine.

“I apologize, I don’t know what came over me.”

“It’s quite all right. My mate’s glad the gazebo survived. She loves that freaking thing.”

Something caught his dragon’s attention again, and his senses lit up like a Christmas tree.

“What the hell?” he muttered, walking away from the bar.

Rehlik grabbed his arm and pulled him to a stop. “Hold up, man. First, you need to tell me what’s going on with you. Then I’ll let you speak to Diem.”

Eivross could feel his beast stirring within him. An image flashed through his mind, of a beautiful female with dark hair.

His dragon exhaled a purr, stretching under his skin and wanting to be free.

“What’s Diem?”

“You mean who,” Rehlik said.



“I don’t know what happened,” he said, but he already felt an inkling of truth coming to his mind. He surveyed the scene before him—several vehicles were crushed flat, a few trees had been taken out at the root, but the gazebo was still standing.

As was the female he’d seen before everything went black.

He knew right then why he’d shifted into his dragon without warning; the pull to his beast had been like nothing he’d ever experienced in his life, and there was really only one reason for it. He’d come into his truemate’s presence.

The one thing he’d never wanted to happen because of how dangerous his brother was, had inexplicably happened mere minutes after he’d walked into town. What the hell were the odds?

She looked delicious. Like a goddess deserving of worship.

His dragon crooned in his head, wanting to get close. Demanding he close the distance between them, draw her into his arms and possibly sling her over his shoulder, then depart to a more private place.

But he couldn’t do that.

Not now, not ever.

\* \* \*

Uh, okay. She hadn’t really gotten the most detailed look at Eivross in his human form before he’d shifted, but he was

positively dreamy. He'd been a glorious dragon, all dark green like the woods with huge wings, but as a human? Holy crap on a cracker. Along with all the drool-worthiness of broad shoulders, smoldering eyes, and dark hair, she bet he had a six-pack too, or maybe one of those coveted eight-packs she read about in romance novels.

Yummy.

He stood with Rehlik in the street. Rehlik was speaking to him, but he was staring at her like she was the best thing he'd ever seen in his life.

All he had to do was cross the street and maybe toss her over his shoulder and hustle up the steps to her bedroom.

She cringed. She was getting *way* ahead of herself. What if he didn't remember her?

Well, he shifted into his dragon in front of her bookstore, so she had a feeling he'd remember her.

He spoke to Rehlik while staring at her, and then to her surprise, he turned and walked back into the bar.

Not toward her, but away.

What the hell?

\* \* \*

"Let's go back in the bar," Eivross said, turning away. It was the most difficult thing he'd ever done in his life, but he had no choice.

"Don't you want to speak with her?" Rehlik asked.

Eivross left the alpha and walked inside the bar, not relaxing until Rehlik followed him inside and the door shut, enclosing them in the dark, empty bar.

“No.” He turned to face the alpha. “I’ll pay for the damages my shift caused, just let me know how much.” He had cash on hand, but he’d have to sell some of his prized treasures to get enough to replace the cars. While he didn’t like parting with his treasures, it was a good reason.

“I’m not really worried about that, but I also won’t argue with you,” Rehlik said. He sat on a stool at the counter. “Now tell me why you don’t want to meet Diem.”

Eivross took a seat on another stool. “I’d rather talk about coming to Cider Falls, if that’s all the same to you.”

Rehlik was quiet for a moment and then cleared his throat. “A male is entitled to his secrets, but only up to a point. I won’t force you to speak to Diem, but I would strongly suggest you do. Nothing good comes from making females wait, and I definitely speak from experience. I can set you up as a roommate with one of the unmated males. I don’t have anything that you could have for yourself right now, but we’re always renovating the old homes that were here when I took over, so something might come available at some point. Diem lives above the bookstore.”

That she lived above a bookstore made his hoarding instincts go crazy. But he filed that information away for later. He didn’t want to think about the alluring female or the fact that she lived above a place with so much treasure.

“I’d appreciate a place to stay. Did the box with my things arrive?” When he’d opted to exile from the nest, he’d

reached out to Rehlik and introduced himself, then asked about sending a box of belongings ahead.

“They’re in the office for you. Is that all you have, just the one box?”

“Yes, as far as clothing goes. I do have a portable storage unit that I had delivered to a facility in Harburg.”

“All right, so that’s out of the way. Tell me your story, and then I’ll tell you about living in Cider Falls.”

## Chapter Six

Rehlik listened to the dragon's story, one of significant loss and self-preservation. He was clearly strong-willed and loyal, choosing to stay with his psychotic brother in order to keep a watchful eye over the nest. The male had intervened on others' behalf with his brother over the years, but still grieved being unable to save their father.

"I've never met a dragon," Rehlik said, leaning back in the desk chair. "And we've never had one in our ranks before. That's not to say you aren't welcome, because I've made a policy of welcoming exiles. There aren't a whole hell of a lot of places for our kind to go as it is." In fact, there were shockingly few exile-friendly towns in the states, including one in Pennsylvania and a very large commune-type in Florida. He'd toyed over the years with sending some of his people to start another exile-friendly town somewhere else to make it easier for exiles to find a safe haven, but in the long run he'd opted to post on social media and online that Cider Falls was open for any exiled shifters, whether they were hybrids or purebreds, so long as they had good intentions.

They'd nearly been taken over by a whackjob recently, so he was a little leery of letting in just anyone. But Eivross was a male who'd just bared his soul to Rehlik. Except for one thing...that Diem was his truemate.

"I'm grateful for the opportunity to stay here," Eivross said. He looked uncomfortable, and Rehlik bet it was because he knew his truemate was across the street.

“Our process for membership in the pack is pretty straightforward. I already ran a background check on you, through human channels as well as through the FSA. Your records are clear. I did *not* reach out to your brother, because I only have to let the FSA know where you are and that you’re part of us. Which you are.”

His brows rose. “It’s that simple?”

“I’m not interested in making anyone jump through hoops to be part of things. The only real thing we need to do is find work for you in town.” He opened the file he’d created when the male reached out, which now contained his records. “You were a protector in your nest?”

“Yes. When I came of age, I was trained by the guards and joined the ranks of protectors for the nest. When my father was killed, I was away from the nest on a mission with several other protectors. I believe my brother engineered it that way so my father was left exposed to the numbers he’d gathered secretly to his side.”

Rehlik shook his head. “Your brother sounds like an asshole, not to mention that he’s got some serious issues since he killed your father to take over.” He mused on the thought that a male could kill his father. Not because the father was evil, but only because a son wanted to take over.

Zihndyr was not a male that Rehlik ever wanted to meet, thank you very much. He could stay the hell in Tennessee.

“He’s definitely an asshole,” Eivross said.

“I’m going to reach out to Breaker. He’s got an empty room in his house and has had roommates in the past. He’s also part of our security team, so he can show you the ropes as

well as give you a roof over your head. After I get Breaker over here to meet you and take you to his place to get you settled in, I'll set up a meeting with the other security team members so everyone can meet you and you can start work, most likely tomorrow."

Rehlik rose to his feet, and Eivross followed suit. They shook hands, and then Rehlik walked out with him to the main bar, where he poured them sodas, and then called Breaker.

"Yeah, boss?" Breaker said when he answered on the second ring.

Rehlik stepped back into his office to explain the situation.

"Oh sure, I don't mind. I'm off today so I can show him around town. Want me to come to the bar?"

"That would be perfect."

"How's Weylyn doing?"

Rehlik couldn't help but smile at the mention of his mate, who was currently very pregnant and due at the end of April. "Counting the days."

"I'm happy for you both," Breaker said. "I'll be over to the bar in a few."

Rehlik ended the call and then dialed his sweetheart.

"Are you psychic? I was just thinking about you," she said.

"Good things, I hope."

"Of course," she said, her musical laugh making his heart clench. Damn, he loved her. "I was also thinking about

strawberry pie.”

She'd had some interesting cravings lately; apparently today she wanted pie. “I'm waiting for Breaker to come grab the new pack member, Eivross, and then I'll pick up some pie for you and come for a visit.”

She let out a soft purr that made parts south stir. “You can work from home today.” It wasn't really a question, and he wasn't about to turn her down.

“One hundred percent.”

“The new guy is nice?”

“Except for shifting in the middle of town? Yes.”

“Oh, is that what that noise was?” she asked. “I thought I was dreaming it.”

“Nope. We had a dragon for a little while.”

“That's cool.”

He'd tell her all about the new guy when he got home. For now, he had to wait for Breaker. “I'll see you in a little while.”

“I can't wait.”

Ending the call, he walked out into the bar and found Eivross hunched over like a heavy weight was on his shoulders. Mate-denial could do that to a male.

“Do you want to talk about Diem?”

“No.”

“All right. Breaker is on his way. He'll show you around. We'll probably meet around dinnertime with the



security team so you can get to know everyone. I'll reach out to Breaker when I have things set up."

He nodded. "Thank you for your hospitality."

"You're welcome. I hope you figure things out."

"There isn't anything to figure out. I'm not anyone's mate."

Rehlik didn't say anything to that, because what the hell could he say anyway? It might seem crazy to him that Eivross would deny having a mate, but he clearly had his reasons, whatever they might be. It wasn't really Rehlik's place to try to push people together, and hell, they'd had a similar situation recently between Cymbre and Ivar, but they'd ended up together.

Hopefully whatever Eivross had against being with his truemate would end so they could be together. Because there was nothing better than finding the other half of your heart.

\* \* \*

Diem didn't really know what to do. She'd been speaking with Jair about the damage to the door when she saw Eivross come out of the bar. She'd been elated at first, but then he purposely walked away from her without coming to even say hello, and she'd known in her gut that something was wrong. A text from Rehlik a few moments later told her the ache in her stomach was on to something: *He doesn't want to see you, Diem, I'm sorry. I'm not sure what's going on with him, but he may just*

*need some time to come to terms with being exiled and in a new place.*

She'd stared at the text until her vision blurred as her eyes filled with tears, and then she closed the message and put her phone in the pocket of her dress.

"I'm sorry, Jair, what did you say?"

"Whoa, you okay?" he asked, his brows furrowing.

A tear escaped and she brushed it away with shaking fingers. "I'm fine, I promise. What's up with the door?"

"Aside from it being entirely ripped off the hinges?" he asked with a grin.

"Yeah."

"Well, the whole door frame needs to be replaced, along with the door. The glass didn't shatter, which is a miracle, but there's a huge crack in the center, so it's trash. I'll grab my dad and we'll run up to the home improvement store and get what we need to fix it. We should be able to get the repairs done today."

"Oh, that's awesome, thanks."

"Well, we don't want to leave you without a door." He finished taking measurements. "I'll be back in an hour or so."

"Thanks, Jair."

"You bet."

After he walked away, she stood alone in the bookstore, next to the ruins of the front door. She stared at the bar across the street, her wolf wanting her to go and confront the male who was her truemate and find out what his problem was, but

she couldn't. Because people always left. Her mom had taken one look at her upon her birth and dropped her off with her father.

Diem believed in happily ever afters, but not really for herself.

So while she was devastated that Eivross didn't want anything to do with her, she actually wasn't surprised. He'd have left her eventually, she was sure, because that's what she expected of people who were supposed to love her.

Her dad had never left her, but she'd been forced to leave him through the exile. So even someone who *did* love her and want to be with her hadn't been able to.

It was a sad and sucky situation.

She lifted the large pieces of the broken door frame and tossed them out onto the pile on the porch for Jair and Veron to discard, and then she grabbed the broom and dustpan to clean up. Fortunately, nothing but the door and frame had been damaged, but it was still a mess that needed attention.

The beautiful hardwood floor was covered with dust and debris.

It took her only a few minutes to sweep the floor clean.

So much for finding something to do to occupy herself.

She was staring out the giant hole in the front of the store when she saw Breaker drive up and stop in front of the bar.

He got out and went into the bar, walking out a few moments later with Eivross, who was carrying a large box. He

set the box in the back of the truck, then got into the passenger seat.

He didn't even look her way. Her wolf let out a mournful cry in her head and her eyes stung, but she refused to cry. She didn't know what his problem was, but she wasn't going to let it eat her alive.

Turning from the opening, she busied herself by checking her email to see if there were any sales from her online bookstore, where she sold old, out-of-print books. One book had been sold overnight, so she reached out to the buyer and got ready to ship it.

She did *not* let her mind stray to that dragon.

Much.

It was going to be a damn long day.

## Chapter Seven

Thursday afternoon, Eivross parked in front of the bar and turned off the engine of the loaner car he'd gotten from the Cider Falls Garage. The twin lions who ran the garage were kind enough to give him the car, but he wouldn't have minded walking since the town wasn't that large. He stifled a yawn and rolled his shoulders as he got out, purposely ignoring the urge to look at the bookstore across the street.

His dragon insisted he run his ass right over there and speak to the alluring female that called to the center of his heart, but he refused. He'd made a vow to never take a mate and he was going to stand by that. No way would he risk endangering anyone's life, let alone someone who would be so precious to him.

Snarling at the train of thought that refused to leave him entirely, he stalked into the bar to meet with Rehlik and his number-two male, Trace, finding them at the long counter.

"How did things go yesterday?" Rehlik asked after shaking Eivross's hand.

"Good, thanks. Breaker is a good male."

"He is," Trace said, shaking his hand. "I heard you got a car from the twins."

"I'd like to buy a car, but they told me not to worry about it for now." He sat on one of the stools and shook his head when Trace offered him a drink.

Rehlik took a drink and set the glass down. "Weston said that you're a good fit for the security team, and the fact that

you can shift into a dragon is pretty damn amazing. He spoke to you yesterday about performing night patrols?”

“Yes,” Eivross said with a nod. He could partially shift, allowing only his wings out, which enabled him to fly. His dragon senses would be heightened as well, including sharper eyesight and hearing. He’d be able to rise above the treetops and search the distance for danger, as well as speeding along the town’s territory lines.

“You don’t mind the night shift?” Trace asked. “We try to only ask unmated males to work the night shift so they’re not away from their mates.”

Narrowing his eyes, he said, “I’m unmated.”

Trace’s brows rose and he glanced at Rehlik, who shrugged. The pause that followed was significant and uncomfortable, but Eivross refused to break it. He wasn’t going to claim that female as his mate because she’d never be safe. He was and would remain an unmated male.

“Right,” Rehlik said finally. “At any rate, I wanted to let you know that you’re officially a part of Cider Falls. We don’t have a joining ceremony for new members. Just don’t be an asshole and you’ll get along fine.”

“I think I can manage,” he said, dryly.

“That’s all we really wanted to talk to you about,” Rehlik said. “You’re part of our pack now, and that means we’ll all be watching out for each other.”

“I understand. I’ll do my job to the best of my abilities.”

The males nodded and each shook his hand again.

“I’m going to return to Breaker’s house and rest until my shift tonight.” He rose from the stool and said goodbye.

“Sleep well,” Rehlik said.

Eivross turned and headed out of the bar, squinting at the bright spring sunshine. His gaze immediately strayed to the bookstore across the street, and it was then that he realized there was a tarp blocking the front door.

It should have been fixed yesterday.

His dragon let out an unhappy chirp.

He let out his dragon a little to enhance his eyesight and saw a sign taped across the tarp that read “Closed for renovations.”

Spinning, he returned to the bar, the door slamming against the wall with force. Rehlik and Trace both looked at him in surprise.

“Why isn’t the bookstore’s door fixed?” he demanded.

Rehlik’s gaze narrowed, and for a heartbeat, Eivross wanted to lower his head and bare his neck to the male in deference to his authority, but he was too keyed up with sudden worry for Diem to do so. His fingers dug into the wood of the door as he stared at the two males and waited for an answer.

Trace coughed to clear his throat. “I heard from Veron that the size of the door is unique and they couldn’t use a stock door, so one had to be ordered. It will take a week to get here.”

“So she’s unprotected? That’s ridiculous.”

Rehlik gave him a long look. “First of all, she’s perfectly safe and also capable of protecting herself. And second, I’m

not really sure why you care.”

He stared at the alpha.

“It’s not right to leave her unprotected.”

“It’s not really up to you,” Rehlik said.

His eye ticked. Now was *not* the time to point out anything like that.

“I’ll stand guard.” He turned and stalked toward the front door.

Rehlik was in front of him in a heartbeat, a growl rumbling in his chest. “Now wait a damn minute. You said she’s not your mate and you’re not going to claim her. You’re new to town and you don’t have any authority to say who you will or won’t be guarding.”

Eivross wanted to protest, but he wasn’t sure what to say that wouldn’t make him sound like an asshole or an idiot, or both.

Trace appeared next to them. “If he wants to stand guard at the bookstore, which *is* filled with valuable items, then I don’t see why we don’t let him. He can fly his rounds at night but stand guard as well.”

Rehlik frowned, but then nodded. “It’s up to Diem. You have to speak with her and get her approval, since you’ve done nothing remotely close to starting a conversation with her. If she doesn’t want you guarding her, then you won’t be, period.”

Well, he’d just see about that.

He might not be planning to claim her as his mate, but he would certainly see to it that she was safe until the front



door was replaced. It was the least he could do, all things considered.

“I’ll speak to her,” Eivross said.

“Good luck,” Rehlik said, stepping aside.

Eivross left the bar and crossed the street to the bookstore. He pulled aside the tarp and stepped inside.

So. Many. Books.

His dragon wanted to explore and find more treasures. But then he smelled something wonderful and knew it was her.

“What are you doing here?”

\* \* \*

Diem felt Eivross enter the bookstore before she heard the swish of the tarp being pulled aside. Her heart pounded in her chest, her stomach filling with butterflies. She’d never felt so nervous in her entire life, and that included when she’d faced her former alpha for her exile.

Swallowing hard, she took in a few slow breaths to calm herself down, which did nothing but bring in the faint scent of him, all masculine and spicy.

Even though she didn’t feel confident, she still lifted her head high and strode out to the main room from the storage room where she’d been checking inventory to keep herself busy.

Oh, he was sexier than she remembered.

Shaking the unwanted thought from her mind, she watched him for a moment, realizing he looked utterly enraptured as he looked around the bookstore.

Did he like books?

Instead of asking him, she started off with an aggressive question, so he'd know for sure she wasn't happy with him. "What are you doing here?"

He turned slowly, his broad shoulders twisting as he moved, his whole body tensing, muscles rippling under the tight shirt he wore.

For a moment she wondered if he'd come to talk to her about the fact they were true mates. Even now her wolf was howling, and the part of her that was lion was purring, excitement lighting her up from the inside out.

But as he settled the full weight of his gaze on her, she didn't feel any kind of touchy-feely warmth emanating from him, just a strange disdain that she couldn't really figure out.

Why didn't he want to be with her?

"I was told to let you know that I'll be standing guard."

"What? Why?"

"You don't have a front door."

"I know."

One brow arched. "It's not safe for you to be in a place that's not secure."

"First of all, my apartment is upstairs and that door locks just fine." She folded her arms over her chest. "And secondly, why do you care?"

His eyes widened in surprise, then narrowed. “Because I’m part of the security team.”

She tilted her head and stared at him. Oh, it would have been so easy to run across the room and jump into his arms, find out how soft his lips were and how strong his hold was. But she was one hundred percent sure he wouldn’t hold her and she’d wind up on her butt on the floor.

She didn’t know what his deal was, and she truly didn’t care.

“You haven’t even introduced yourself. What makes you think I’d want you in my business for any reason? You’re a stranger.”

His lips pursed, and then he said, “My name is Eivross Danforth.”

He spoke so woodenly, like every word out of his mouth was pulled with pliers. What was so wrong with her that he couldn’t even be nice? She was a nice girl. He’d be lucky to call her his mate.

“You can’t be in here. I’m sure I can’t stop you from guarding my store, but I don’t want you in the building.”

Although it was the last thing she wanted to do, she forced herself to turn from him and go back to the storage room. She pressed her back against the wall and closed her eyes. A few moments later, there was a soft, sad trill, which she bet was from his dragon. Heavy footsteps sounded, and then the tarp was pulled aside as he left.

She breathed out a sigh of relief and sadness twined together.

This was not how she pictured meeting her true mate. They were supposed to rush into each other's arms on sight and get right to the loving. She'd dreamed of how it would go and in none of her fantasies had she ever imagined her true mate not wanting her.

The thought made her eyes sting, but she ignored it and got back to work. The books weren't going to inventory themselves, after all.

She picked up a book from a box that had been delivered the day before and looked at the cover, which depicted a skull covered with roses and thorny vines. Flipping to the back, she read the description, which detailed a story of betrayal. She was certain it ended in a happily ever after, but she was sure the angst was high.

It made her think about other books she'd read about betrayal, so she pulled a notepad from the counter and began to sketch out a new table set up. She'd put it right in the center of the bookstore, with a sign that read, "Romance novels with betrayal as a trope." If Eivross came into the bookstore again, he'd see it and know the display was aimed at him.

If he didn't want her, that was fine. Her beasts would get over it, eventually.

It hurt like hell right now to be rejected by her mate, but in the end, she was a survivor and she was going to move on without him.

Like her favorite fantasy novel series, she was definitely a badass babe who wasn't going to fall into a weepy puddle because her mate didn't want her. She was going to pick up the pieces of her broken heart and mend them herself.

And she wasn't going to tell her dad, either.

Because it would be just like him to come to Cider Falls to defend her honor.

She'd defend her *own* honor, thank you very much.

And Eivross could take a hike.

## Chapter Eight

Three hellishly long days later, Eivross was standing guard at the bookstore during the day when a panel truck finally pulled to a stop in front of the building. His dragon was constantly furious, pushing him to claim the beautiful female just inside, but he refused.

Didn't his dragon understand that Zihndyr would always be a threat, no matter how much time had passed? Eivross didn't trust his brother as far as he could throw him. Zihndyr held grudges like it was his life's mission, and it would be just like him to come after Eivross and anyone he held dear just to fuck with him for messing up his plans to take out the other dragon nest.

He briefly wondered if Zihndyr had gone through with his plan or had shelved it, but it was highly likely that the plan had continued on and Eivross's departure hadn't put a halt to anything. When they were younger, they'd been in line at an ice cream truck, and Zihndyr had exclaimed how he'd wanted a particular ice cream bar covered with pink and white crumbs. The boy in front of them had requested one, and when he and his brother reached the front line, they were told it had been the last one.

Zihndyr had stalked over to the boy, small claws erupting from his fingertips in his rage, and attacked, ripping the frozen treat from his hand and slashing him repeatedly. But he hadn't stopped there. He'd gone after the boy again and again, furious that he'd been denied what he saw as rightfully his. The boy's family had to leave the nest in order to get any

peace and let their child heal, because even back then, Zihndyr had been so uncontrollable that their father couldn't change his behavior.

Little had changed in the years since. Most likely at this point, Zihndyr had found a new second-in-command and attacked the other nest, stealing that female from her father and forcing her into a mating.

His stomach hurt just thinking about it.

But he wouldn't have been able to stop it, just delay it a while. Because once his brother set his eyes on something, he got it, one way or another.

"Hi there," one of the males said as he got out of the panel truck. "You're the new guy? I'm Jair, and this is my dad, Veron. We're here to put the door on."

"I'm Eivross," he said, rocking back on his heels. "That's excellent news. I'll let Diem know."

Just saying her name made his dragon purr.

Foolish creature. He could only love her from afar, never in reality. No matter how much her scent made him weak in the knees, or how much he longed to hear her cries of pleasure.

"It'll take us a few hours," Veron said.

"Of course."

Eivross ducked into the store and found Diem lugging a box that looked heavy across the room. He rushed over and took it from her, smiling internally at the way her beast purred when their hands brushed.

"What do you think you're doing?" she asked, irritated.

“Helping you.” He stared down at her, cataloging her lush, petite frame and the way her eyes were banked with heat, like she was constantly turned on and hated every second of it. “Where does this go?”

She let out an annoyed sigh. “On the counter.”

He carried the box over and set it down. “What’s it for?”

Instead of answering his question, she asked another one. “Why are you in here?”

She elbowed him out of the way. He was seriously amused by her behavior, but also saddened. She shouldn’t be annoyed with him; she should feel safe and cared for. But he couldn’t explain that to her without admitting he wasn’t sure he could keep her safe from his brother, and that he’d rather her be mad at him than dead.

“The males showed up with your new door.”

Her brows rose. “Oh really? That’s awesome. It means you get to leave.”

Hard pass. He’d always patrol her home and make sure she was safe from afar. “When they’re finished.”

She gave him another long look. “Why did you shift the other day and take the door off in the first place?”

It was extremely tempting to tell her the truth, to lay his soul bare right then and there, but he knew he couldn’t do that. She’d counter that she could keep herself safe from his brother, but she didn’t know just how dangerous he was. Besides, he *might* believe her and mate her, and then she would end up on the business end of Zihndyr’s claws.

“I’m not sure.”



She grunted in annoyance, then walked around to the other side of the computer. He peeked into the box and saw a collection of different books. He didn't want her to ask another probing question about his behavior, so he left her to whatever she was doing and walked through the rows of bookshelves, his dragon adoring that she owned a place like this. What were the odds that he treasured books and his truemate was a bookstore owner?

His senses were alive, not only with the knowledge that his truemate was so close, but also being around the books. He could smell the fresh ink and paper of the new books, and the musty tang and rot of the older ones. He loved old books. They were often the most valuable, and his dragon coveted valuable things.

*Just not his truemate.*

He sniffed at the wayward thought.

He *did* value her. That was exactly why he couldn't and wouldn't claim her.

Something caught his attention and he inhaled, sorting through the various scents until he pinpointed what it was.

Turning down another row, he found what he was looking for on the bottom shelf of the historical section. The old book had a wooden cover that was cracked with age, the edges of the pages painted gold and marked with ink to resemble a map.

The entire book was filled with maps, in fact.

*Courses for Sailing Around the World, 8th Edition.*

The title was carved into the wooden cover with a skilled hand.

His dragon trilled as he pulled the book from the bottom shelf and opened it ever so carefully.

Inhaling, he picked up the scents of salt and sea, the weathered pages marked with ink and pencil by some old sailor.

What a treasure!

He strode to the counter where Diem was wrapping a book in bubble wrap.

He set the book of maps on the counter, his dragon practically purring at having a bookish treasure so close to his truemate. What a boon!

“How much is this book?”

\* \* \*

Where the hell was he going?

She tried to ignore him as he headed toward the shelves, but he smelled too good. His presence was making her beasts go crazy.

She purposely tried to put him out of her mind and turned her attention to the books she was prepping to ship the following day from an online order.

He appeared suddenly, setting a book down on the counter and startling her.

“How much is this book?”

She looked down at the book, which she didn't really ever remember seeing before, and then looked up at him.

He was far too good-looking, and he smelled too good.

Damn it.

She reached for the book, and his fingers tightened on it for a heartbeat before he released it. *Interesting.*

The book was old with a wood cover, which was unique.

There wasn't a price tag on it; one of her friends had probably shelved it thinking it had been ready to go.

"I'd have to research the book to find a price. I probably got it from an estate sale, but I don't remember it." She turned to the computer and put the information in, starting with a random search.

He was suddenly behind her, looking over her shoulder, radiating all kinds of heat and making her whole body flush.

Holy crap, he needed to back up and give her some space or she was going to combust.

She straightened her shoulders and ignored how good he smelled and how much she liked his nearness, reminding her beasts that *he* was the one who didn't want *her*.

"Here," she said, clicking on a link to a rare bookstore she liked to peruse in her free time looking for old books. "The seventh edition is worth a few hundred dollars, and while they don't have an eighth edition listed, generally the later versions aren't as costly as the earlier ones."

She turned slowly, giving him time to back away from her, but he didn't.

He stared down at her, his eyes darkening and the scent of his arousal becoming like a living thing she could touch and caress.

She swallowed hard. He was so very close to her.

“I could let you have the book for two hundred, if that seems fair.”

A soft trill sounded in his chest, and she figured it for his dragon. It was a sweet sound and made her beasts sit up in her head. She was unable to stop the purr that rumbled in her own chest, her lion coming to the forefront.

He touched her jaw, tracing the curve with his fingertips so lightly that it made goosebumps erupt over her arms.

“You are so very beautiful, Diem,” he said with a husky tone, his eyes flashing to a yellowish-gold. “So tempting.”

He pressed his lips to hers and the world dropped away.

She didn't hear the males putting the new door up, or the cars that passed on the street outside. She only heard the sound of her heart pounding in her ears and her beasts purring and howling in happiness in her head.

He licked at her lips with a growl, and she opened her mouth. He plunged his tongue inside, sliding it along hers and rocking her to the core. He tasted like dark chocolate and wine, like a decadent night filled with carnal things.

She didn't know what to do with her hands, so she gripped the front of his shirt and pulled him a little closer.

His arms went around her and he pulled her even closer, their bodies bumping as the kiss deepened.

A sharp call sounded from somewhere in the distance and Eivross stiffened, breaking the kiss with a snarl.

The call sounded again, but it was different this time, like it had come from another source.

And then two calls came at the same time.

“What the heck is that?” Diem asked.

Eivross shook his head and took a step away, turning toward the front door. “Dragons.”

## Chapter Nine

Dragons?

Diem followed Eivross out the doorway, stepping over tools and materials, and apologizing to Veron and Jair.

“Did you guys hear that too?” Jair asked.

“Eivross said it’s dragons,” Diem said. They walked into the middle of the deserted street and looked up. In the distance were two dark shapes, soaring in the sky.

“Do you know who they are?” she asked.

Eivross was silent as he stared with a furrowed brow. Shaking his head as another set of calls echoed, he said, “I don’t know who they are, but I know what those calls mean.”

“What?”

He lowered his gaze and stared earnestly at her.

“They’re mating calls. Those are females and they’re answering a call.”

Diem frowned. “I don’t understand. Who called them?” When he didn’t answer but continued to stare at her, she put two and two together quickly. “You called them?”

He shook his head furiously. “Not intentionally. When I came to town and shifted unexpectedly, my dragon let out a call. They must be answering what they thought was a mating call.”

She took a step back. “Let me get this straight. You shifted in the street and took off my door because I’m your

truemate, but those females think the sound your dragon made was you *asking* for a mate?"

"Diem," he said, reaching for her.

She took a larger step back and put her hands up. "Nope. Your dragon doesn't want me so he called for dragon females? That's...really fucked up."

She turned and walked away, too shocked to cry.

"You okay, hon?" Veron asked as she made her way into the store.

"Yeah. Don't let him in here again. Please."

"You got it," Jair said.

She walked to the counter and sniffed. She couldn't stop hearing her beasts' unhappy growls in her head, which coupled with the sound of the dragon females drawing closer with their happy-sounding calls, was going to drive her insane.

Of course he'd want to be with his own kind. He probably knew she was a hybrid, and since he was a purebred his dragon sent out a call.

It was utter bullshit of course. She was a good female. A great one.

But deep in her heart she wasn't surprised. People left, it's just what happened to her. She wasn't one of those females who was going to get a happily ever after. Eivross knew they were truemates but wasn't going to claim her, which meant he wouldn't be sticking around. She'd rather have never met him than hold him for just a heartbeat in her arms and lose him forever.

She picked up the old book he'd wanted to buy and shoved it on a shelf under the counter. She looked around at the store, thinking she could work to busy herself so she didn't think about the happy meetup her truemate was going to have with one of the females coming to town, but she couldn't see past the tears that suddenly blurred her vision.

It was one thing for Eivross to not want her as his truemate. It was an entirely different thing for him to call for a mate right in front of her, a hell she didn't want to witness.

Turning from the work to be done, she left the shop and went up into her apartment.

Her phone buzzed, and she saw it was Arely.

"Are you okay?" her friend asked. "I was emptying the cafeteria trash when I heard dragon calls."

Diem walked all the way to her bedroom and flopped on the bed. In a rush, she told Arely about the events of the afternoon, from the kiss to the confrontation in the street.

Another dragon call sounded overhead. They were so close!

Any minute now, Eivross would take one of those females as his mate and she'd have to see the couple around town.

"You're truemates, though."

"I guess it doesn't matter," Diem said.

"I'm sorry, babe. Do you want me to come kick his ass?"

She laughed, which made tears slip from her eyes. She brushed at them with shaking fingers.



“No, it’ll be okay. This is so unfair.”

“I’m sorry your truemate is such an ass.”

“Me too.”

“I’ll be home soon, and we can go do something and get out of town.”

“Yeah, sure.”

“Diem, it’ll be okay. You’re a strong and independent female. Don’t get down about this.”

“Talk to me when your truemate doesn’t want you.”

Arely grunted. “You’re right, that was a shitty thing for me to say.”

“No, I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have said that.”

“You’re allowed to be pissed. I’ll be home in a little bit. Be strong.”

“See you,” Diem said.

The call ended, and she stared at the ceiling. She heard a rush of wind outside, the trees rustling loudly. Two dragon calls sounded, one a little higher than the other, and her heart clenched.

One of those females was going to get Diem’s happily ever after.

Life was *not* fair.

\* \* \*

This was so fucking not happening right now. He had not just shared an amazing kiss with his mate, even though it was honestly the very last thing he should have done, and then been interrupted by not just one dragon calling for a mate, but two.

He'd shifted into his dragon form days earlier, and he hadn't realized the call would go out like that.

His dragon wasn't calling for just any mate when he'd shifted, he'd been calling for Diem. He'd known it at the time, but he realized the call could have sounded like he was seeking a mate, not that he'd found one.

"Who the hell are those dragons?" Rehlik demanded as he joined him in the street, along with Trace and Novak.

"I don't know. I don't recognize their calls."

"Did you bring them here?" Trace asked.

"No. Well, yes, apparently, but not intentionally."

When the males pressed him for more details, he explained what he thought had happened.

"So you found your truemate and your dragon let out a call that those females interpreted as you *needing* a truemate, not finding one?" Rehlik asked.

"I believe so. I didn't know it was possible, and I certainly didn't do it intentionally."

"So send them on their way," Rehlik said. He leveled a long look at Eivross. "Unless you're planning to take one of them as a mate. In which case, you can pack your shit up and vacate Cider Falls. I won't put Diem through that."

Eivross shook his head. How the hell had things gone sideways so fast?

“I don’t want those females. I’ll send them away.”

“You need to fix this mess,” Rehlik said.

“I will.”

“No, I mean with Diem. I can hear her crying.”

Eivross rubbed the space over his heart, his dragon letting out a sad trill. “I can too. I’ll fix it, I swear.”

He didn’t know what he’d do, but he wouldn’t put Diem through this.

What he could do, however, was meet those females in the sky and send them on their way.

He stripped swiftly. “Back up unless you want to duck my tail.”

He shifted into his dragon form and took to the sky, heading for the females who were circling above. Dragons could communicate through calls and clicks in their dragon form, and he was thankful for that.

*What are you doing here?* he asked.

One of the females was a rusty red color, the other was a pale green. The red one called, *We’re answering your call, fierce male. We heard your call from our nest in Florida.*

*We’re sorry it took so long to get here,* the green one said.

*You shouldn’t have come. I have no need of a mate.*

*You called for one,* the green one pointed out. *Our dragons answered the call. You need to choose one of us.*

He let out a blast of fire followed by an angry roar. *I have a mate! I don't need either of you. Be gone!*

The females hovered in the air, their wings flapping slowly to keep them aloft. Below them on the street, a crowd had gathered. Somewhere on the second floor of the bookstore, Diem was crying.

*You're not mated, you don't smell like a female,* the red one said. *Choose one of us or face the wrath of our king.*

Well, that was just the icing on the cake.

With another roar and blast of fire, he shouted at them, *I have a female, my true mate. I will have no dragon female, and I will not entertain this any longer. Leave now or face my wrath.*

He inhaled deeply, ready to blast them with his fire, just enough to singe a tail or wing, not enough to truly harm them.

They let out shrill, angry calls and both sent out blasts of fire toward him, but he only felt the heat.

*You'll be sorry,* the green one said.

*I'm only sorry you came all this way for nothing. Go home and don't come back.*

The females glared at him and then wheeled around in the air, letting out annoyed calls as they headed away. He followed from a distance, ensuring they didn't turn back. It was only when he lost sight of them after a long while that he felt like he could return to Cider Falls.

He shifted as he landed and grabbed his jeans from the sidewalk.

“Well?” Rehlik asked.

“They’re from a nest in Florida. They said they misinterpreted my call and came here.”

Rehlik growled. “Why won’t you claim Diem?”

Eivross buttoned his jeans and tugged his shirt over his head. “That wouldn’t have stopped those females from coming here.”

“I didn’t say it would. I asked why you won’t claim your truemate. Do you know how many males in town would kill for a chance to have their truemate?”

Novak nodded as he folded his arms.

“I can’t.”

“Can’t or won’t?” Trace asked.

Eivross glanced at the second floor of the bookstore and his heart clenched. “My brother is dangerous.”

“Dangerous how?” Novak asked.

He told the males the highlights of his brother’s insanity. “It’s why I left,” he said. “I didn’t want to be party to any more loss of life, not when the reason for attacking the nest was because he wanted to take the king’s daughter as a mate.”

“But he’s not here,” Rehlik said. “You don’t even know if he knows where you are right now.”

“Well, he could find out if he was watching the FSA registry,” Trace said. “There’s no way for us to know who’s accessed your file in their database.”

“I wouldn’t put it past him to check up on me, to find out where I was just so he had the information.” Eivross looked at the males. “When he killed our father, and our uncle, he told

me that he was going to be king no matter what. I'm eldest, I should have been next in line for the throne. He started killing the people in the nest he believed were loyal to our father and uncle, all the while daring me to come against him. I pledged my fealty to him, and promised him I didn't want to be king." Eivross sighed and rubbed at his temple. "I went on a date with a female dragon after things had settled. My car was run off the road on the way home. She was attacked while I was held back by a handful of masked males. She survived, but not without scars. I confronted Zihndyr, but he claimed innocence. I knew it was him, though. He was proving that he would take out anyone I was close to."

There was silence as he finished speaking.

"You won't claim her because you think your brother will come for her?" Trace asked quietly.

"I won't put my truemate in danger. What kind of male would I be?"

"This half-assed protective thing you're doing isn't going to work for the long term. I don't believe you can keep her safe by not mating her, and I'm not going to let you drive her insane by being close to her but not claiming her," Rehlik said.

"I know it's not fair to her," Eivross said. He ached to claim her. Ached to the very center of his being to hold her in his arms again.

"Will those females come back?" Novak asked.

"I told them I had a mate and not to return."

"Good," he said, nodding.

Rehlik put his hand on his shoulder. “You need to figure things out, because that female in there is hurting and it’s definitely not the way a male of worth should behave.”

Eivross nodded. The males dispersed, leaving him alone in the street. He turned his attention to the living quarters above the bookstore. He couldn’t hear her crying anymore, but that didn’t mean she wasn’t still hurt. In fact, his dragon was very certain he’d broken her heart, and that wasn’t something he could live with.

He toyed for a heartbeat with leaving, walking away from Cider Falls and Diem forever and finding some remote mountain to live out the rest of his life alone. But even though the idea was appealing in some ways, because it would ensure she’d be safe forever, he couldn’t leave.

He wouldn’t.

## Chapter Ten

Zihndyr stared at the goblet of wine, the base a wrought iron design meant to mimic a dragon's paw, claws curled around the glass. The female he'd mated when he took over the nest from his father, and also his uncle, was seated a few spaces from him at the massive dining table. Her head was bowed and her plate untouched.

He could scent her unhappiness in the air.

It had everything to do with the other female across the table, who he'd claimed as his second-mate, an ancient right given to king dragons to ensure their family line continued for eons.

Neither female was happy. His original mate, Dhianna, because he had taken numerous lovers over the years, and now his second mate, Eloise, because he'd killed her father when he failed to turn over her and his territory to him.

Well, it wasn't his responsibility to keep his females happy. They were supposed to keep *him* happy.

The dining doors swung open and his new second-in-command, Arthur, appeared. "There's someone to see you in the throne room."

"I don't have any appointments."

"It's a female from a nest in Florida. She has news of your brother."

He let out a low growl, the metal creaking as he squeezed and then released.



Shoving back from the table, he stood and nodded to his mates. They ignored him, sniffing unhappily.

He should make a decree that females had to smile around him or face punishment. A few nights in the basement prison would change their demeanor.

Striding out of the room, he said, “What kind of news?”

“She wouldn’t say, she only wanted to speak with you.”

He’d had one of his people watching the FSA database to see where his brother landed after leaving. He’d immediately gone to an exile-friendly town in Kentucky called Cider Falls, which meant he wasn’t king or alpha, and was instead under the thumb of another male. Which Zihndyr didn’t mind. He’d mostly been watching to see if his brother created a new nest, which he of course would have to take over and destroy if it got too big. He would not tolerate his brother having any power.

The female was pacing in the throne room, a mass of golden curls falling down her back. She was pretty but not beautiful, and a little skinny for his tastes.

“What brings you here, female?” he asked as he took his seat on the ostentatious throne.

She curtsied. “My name is Antina, my lord. I was in my home nest in Florida when my dragon was awakened by a mating call. I rushed to the location and found your brother, Eivross, living among hybrids and exiles.”

“And?”

She blinked rapidly a few times. “He said he has a mate, but she’s not been claimed in the way of our people. I believe

he's lying, and I thought you should know."

Zihndyr hummed for a moment. "He's no longer part of my nest. What did you think I would do with this information?"

"There's a dragon making false calls. My king is furious."

He knew of the Florida king. He was an old male with no real teeth, not a real threat to any other nest.

"Then have your king deal with him. He's not my concern any longer."

"My king thought since he was your brother..." Her voice trailed off.

"Again, I say that he's no longer my problem. If your king wishes to avenge your honor, then so be it. You may leave now."

"But—" she protested.

He waved his hand and the guards joined them, each grabbing one of her arms and pulling her away.

Zihndyr mused on the information once the irritating female was gone.

So his brother had found his mate but hadn't claimed her? That was interesting.

Maybe he *had* gotten under his brother's skin after all. He chuckled.

It was time for a family reunion.

\* \* \*

Diem hadn't meant to fall asleep, but she'd been so exhausted from the lack of sleep over the last few nights, now coupled with the emotional drain of finding out that Eivross's dragon had put out a mating call.

She woke slowly, the ceiling the first thing she saw.

Her beasts let out a little purr and she sat up, finding Eivross standing in the doorway.

"What are you doing here?" she asked.

"I sent those females away."

That was good news, but it didn't change anything.

She repeated herself, and he sighed.

"I came to see if you were okay."

She swung her legs around and stared at the floor. "Of course I'm not okay! Your dragon isn't happy and put out a freaking mating call! You need to leave."

She pushed up to stand, but he was in front of her suddenly, cupping her face and staring down at her. His eyes had gone all-dragon, yellow-gold with elongated pupils.

A metallic sheen appeared on his cheeks like scales.

Her wolf and lion liked how close he was, liked his hands on her, touching her so gently like she was glass and might shatter.

"The call was for you."

"What?"

He bent and kissed her, crashing against her lips with a ferocious intensity. She gasped, and he plunged his tongue into her mouth. The sweet and romantic kiss in the bookstore didn't hold a candle to this kiss, filled with possession and laced with heat.

She grabbed his wrists and squeezed, letting herself go into the kiss.

He nipped at her bottom lip, sucking on it for a moment before he let out a low, deep growl that made her body light up.

She leaned back and he followed, putting a knee between her thighs and pressing against her lightly. She arched up at the pressure; she'd been strung tight with need since he came to town.

She wanted to ask him about the females, about his dragon call, but then he pushed her shirt and bra up, freeing her breasts, and lowered his head.

The moment he closed his lips around her nipple and sucked, every thought disappeared.

She wiggled free from her top and bra, then reached for his shirt. She tugged it up his back, and he let go of her nipple and jerked it over his head.

He had the best body she'd ever seen. Thick muscles, broad shoulders, and a dark happy trail that led to what she was sure would be the source of a lot of pleasure.

"Like what you see, female?" he asked with a low voice, cupping her breast and thumbing her nipple. He lowered his head and kissed the other as she moaned *yes*.

He kissed down the center of her body, stopping only long enough to undo her pants and shove them down her legs. He kissed as he went, until her whole body was bared and he stared at her like he was starving and she was an all-you-can-eat buffet.

He pulled her to a seated position, then settled on his back, crooking his finger at her. Excitement pulsed through her as she climbed slowly up him, kissing his abdomen and enjoying the way the muscles twitched as she touched them. He was positively the sexiest male she'd ever met in her life, and that she was here with him now was heaven.

She settled her knees above his shoulders and propped herself up on the headboard. He hooked his hands around her thighs, and his eyes flashed to the dragon, a rumbling, trilling purr coming from somewhere deep inside him.

She sifted her fingers through his soft hair and watched as he inhaled slowly, then swiped his tongue up her folds.

Ah, hell, that felt good!

She let her head drop back and wiggled her thighs a little farther apart as he nuzzled her, his tongue flicking over her clit and delving into her center. He slid his hands up and down the back of her thighs, cupping her butt, and then slipped a hand between her thighs. He probed her with one finger as he lazily sucked her clit, and she hissed as he found a place inside her that made her stomach clench.

He growled softly, adding a second finger, his tongue vibrating slightly with the sound.

She let herself go into his touch, closing her eyes and focusing on everything he did. His tongue made circles around

her clit while his fingers pumped in and out of her, rubbing her inner walls. Her toes curled and her fingers gripped the headboard as heat filled her. She groaned as she came, feeling the rush of pleasure that made everything go white-hot within her.

“Ah, oh, Eivross,” she moaned, biting her lip.

She dropped her head to watch as he lapped at her, his eyes that beautiful yellow-gold of his dragon.

In a heartbeat he was behind her, an arm hooked on her shoulder and his chest pressed to her back. His zipper lowered, the sound loud in the quiet of the room with only her panting as she soared through the waves of her climax.

He pressed his cock against her pussy and pushed slowly, his thick head breaching her. She pushed back against him and rested her hand on top of his on her shoulder. He linked their fingers and pressed his head against hers as he slid all the way home inside her.

He panted, his dragon snarling, as he flexed his hips and pulled from her depths before plunging in again.

His fingers dug into her shoulder as he moved, slowly at first, then gaining speed. He held her close, his dragon’s growl rumbling in his chest as he took her harder and harder, his hips crashing against her, his cock sliding in and out. She rested her head back on his shoulder, gripping the headboard.

Then she leaned forward and pushed back, spreading her thighs to widen her stance, tilting her hips back to meet him. The angle made something light up inside her as he plunged in, and she gasped, clenching her teeth.

“Fuck, yes,” he snarled, slamming his hips against her.

She felt the tingle of orgasm riding her and she could think of nothing but how sweet it would be for them both to come together again.

Dropping her hand to her pussy, she pressed her palm to her clit and spread her fingers on either side of his cock, feeling the slick, hard length as he moved. He let out a deep snarl, moving impossibly faster, and then he pressed his teeth to her shoulder hard enough to bruise but not mark.

The climax struck hard, locking her up in a spiral of pleasure, her wolf and lion roaring and howling together. He followed her, his dragon letting out a call as his cock thickened and the heat of his come filled her. He grasped the headboard as he shuddered, kissing the place on his shoulder where he bruised her.

He tilted her head and kissed her lips, then down her neck to the juncture of her shoulder, before dropping to the bed with a satisfied groan. He tugged her hand and gave her a dreamy, satisfied smile that made her feel warm from the inside out.

Settling in his embrace, she rested her head over his heart and listened to the mixture of his pounding heart and dragon trill, a sound she didn't think she'd ever get tired of.

In the silence that followed, she said what had been on her mind since his blunt teeth had bruised her shoulder.

“You didn't mark me,” she said softly.

“I wouldn't without talking to you about it first,” he said, rubbing his hand up and down her back. “I had to do something, so I bit your shoulder without letting my fangs out. Does it hurt? I didn't want to hurt you.”

She assured him it didn't hurt, and with her fast healing, it would likely be gone in a few hours.

"We need to talk anyway," he said.

She tilted her head up and watched as he hooked an arm behind his head and looked first at the ceiling and then at her.

"I know," she said. She closed her eyes, lulled by the sound of his beating heart, and then she drifted off to sleep, feeling, for the first time in her life, entirely safe and cared for.



## Chapter Eleven

Eivross woke slowly, disoriented. He opened his eyes and found the room dark. It took only a moment for him to recall that he and Diem had made love and fallen asleep tangled together.

They'd both clearly been exhausted from keeping each other at arm's length since he'd arrived in town. It was only now, that he'd been with her, that he realized what an idiot he'd been.

Even though they'd made love, he hadn't mated her fully, which involved marking her arm with one of his dragon's claws. He didn't want to do that without telling her first, because he was pretty sure that wolves bit on the neck, which was a far cry from a deep cut on the arm.

Plus, he needed to tell her everything.

Why he'd kept his distance, and why he worried—even now—that he wouldn't be able to keep her safe.

The others in town believed Cider Falls was a safe haven, and it appeared to be. But if his brother came for him and Diem was hurt in the process?

He mentally shook himself out of that train of thought.

He was the eldest son of a fierce dragon, who'd been taken out by a madman. But Eivross had only toed the line with his brother to save the nest and those who'd been with his father for decades. He would forever regret not challenging Zihndyr in the beginning and taking him out, but he knew that

his brother would never have fought fair. Considering he and his allies had attacked their father out of the blue while Eivross had been away from the nest.

Perhaps Rehlik and the others were right, that it was safe in Cider Falls and Eivross could rest easy with Diem and find peace. But he couldn't stop the worry that crept at the corners of his mind.

He rubbed his eyes with his free hand, recalling that the last thing he'd said to Diem was they needed to talk, and then he didn't remember anything else. Except feeling the happiness that being with her had brought to him and his dragon.

His dragon made a distressed sound in his head, and he realized the reason he'd woke: something had pulled him from sleep. But what?

He eased his arm from underneath Diem and sat up slowly so he didn't wake her. Swinging his legs around, he yawned and looked for his phone, which he didn't see, meaning he'd left it in his pocket. He grabbed his jeans and found his phone.

And then he heard it.

In the distance, the echo of a dragon's call.

It wasn't the mating call of a female, like the ones who'd appeared earlier, but the warning call of a male.

And he knew exactly who the male was.

Shit.

\* \* \*

Diem woke suddenly, her heart pounding and her gaze pinging wildly around the dark room. She pressed her hand to her chest, wondering what had woken her so suddenly. It was a bad-dream sort of vibe, but she didn't actually remember dreaming about anything, good or bad.

She inhaled and exhaled a few times, rolling her neck and trying to calm her flying pulse.

It was then that she realized she was alone.

She looked to the side where Eivross had lain next to her, a comforting arm around her shoulder, but he was gone.

Touching the space, she found it cold, and her beasts let out a worried sound.

“Eivross?” she called.

Something in the pit of her stomach told her that it was foolish to call for him, because she'd expected this...expected him to leave. That's what people did.

Even though she'd known they had lots to talk about, she'd still fallen asleep with the foolish hope that he'd be there when she woke.

Muttering under her breath, she grabbed her clothes and dressed, then turned on the bedroom light. She searched for a note from him, even though she was certain she wouldn't find one.

He'd gotten what he wanted from her and taken off, just like she'd expected. Was this a worse hell than what had been before, when he hadn't spoken a word to her, just been an

annoying presence in the bookstore, guarding but never speaking?

Yes. Yes, it was worse. By leaps and bounds because she'd started to fall for him while they'd been in the throes of passion.

There was no note, and her phone didn't reveal any texts or calls.

He'd simply left her in the middle of the night.

Stalking out to the front room, she checked everywhere just to be sure, because her foolish heart wouldn't allow her to simply assume he hadn't left her a note. He hadn't even used her eyeliner to scrawl a note on the mirror.

Her eyes stung with tears but she refused to cry, and not just because it would be admitting that he'd fooled her. She'd been so overwhelmed when he'd come to her bedroom hours earlier, and she'd wanted him so much.

Who was she kidding? She'd never have been able to turn him down, no matter how much time she'd had to think. Her beasts craved the attention of their mate, and the part of her that knew *everyone left*, wasn't yelling as loud as the part of her that wanted to know what it was like to love her true mate, and to be loved back.

Sighing, she sat on the couch.

"What's wrong, babe?" Arely asked, her voice low.

"I..." Diem started to say what had happened, but grief rose up inside her and she just started to cry.

Arely sat on the couch and put her arm around Diem. "I got home late from the bar and I knew there was a male here,

but I didn't hear you talking, so I figured you were asleep. What happened?"

"I don't know. He's gone."

"Shit. Did he leave a note?"

Diem shook her head.

"That asshole!"

She smiled, which only made more tears spill onto her cheeks.

They were both quiet, Arely's comforting arm around Diem, both of their beasts growling unhappily.

The silence was shattered by a roar.

Diem straightened and went to the window, peering up into the dark sky. She couldn't see anything, but she could hear an answering roar.

There were dragons in the sky. If one of them was Eivross, who were the others?

\* \* \*

Eivross raced outside and looked into the sky. He didn't see anything in the darkness, but he could hear the distant flapping of wings. A warning roar was emitted, followed by the sound of a blast of fire, a traditional notification from dragons.

If Cider Falls was dragon territory, a guard would fly up to meet the dragons, ensuring they had good intentions or were expected. But Cider Falls wasn't dragon territory, and no matter how fierce Rehlik and his people were, dragons were

simply larger and more dangerous. The damage a lone dragon could wreak on a town like this one would be immeasurable, not to mention the loss of life that could follow in the wake of the battle that would surely come if the shifters raised arms against them.

*Fuck fuck fuck.*

He glanced at the second-story window where Diem was sleeping.

He'd meant to tell her everything—why he'd stayed away from her originally but hadn't been able to leave her unprotected, why he worried about his crazy brother, and why he'd eventually decided he could be with her if she'd have him.

Then he'd fucking fallen asleep like an asshole and not told her a single damn thing.

A roar sounded again, even closer.

He knew exactly who it was: Zihndyr.

Footsteps sounded nearby and he spun, facing Trace and his mate, Jewel.

“What the hell is going on?” Trace demanded.

“We were patrolling when we heard the dragons and we came to find you. Are you okay?” Jewel asked.

“It's my brother,” Eivross said. “I have to go meet him. Tell Diem I'll return.”

“Be careful!” Jewel called.

Eivross moved away from them and called for his dragon as he stripped. Then he took a running start and leaped

into the air as first his wings came out, lifting him into the air. When he'd cleared the buildings, he let his shift come over him entirely and flapped his broad wings.

Now in his dragon form, he could see more clearly in the dark and headed in the direction of the coming dragons. There were six, flying like geese in a V-formation, with his brother in the lead.

Eivross knew it was Zihndyr because of the call that sounded once Eivross took to the sky.

Racing toward the group, Eivross tried to meet them as far from Cider Falls as he could.

He had just reached the outskirts of the town when the group stopped, a few yards separating them.

*Hello, brother,* Zihndyr said through the clicks and calls of his dragon.

*Why are you here?*

*Is that any way to greet your family?* There was a sneer to Zihndyr's tone, which put Eivross on edge.

*Hello. Now, why are you here? And how did you even know where I was?*

*I know everything.*

Coldness filled Eivross. What did that even mean?

*I came to meet this supposed mate of yours.* His brother inhaled loudly, his dragon's wings dancing in the air. *Funny, you don't smell mated.*

How the hell could he possibly know about Diem?

His mind worked fast. *You can't come into town like this, it's not proper. You need to speak with the alpha. You can't simply show up with an army and make demands, not in a place where you have no authority.*

Zihndyr bellowed out a warning roar and punctuated it with fire.

*You will not tell me what I can and can't do, brother. I'll meet this alpha of yours, whether he wishes to meet with me or not.*

Before Eivross could get another word out, Zihndyr suddenly banked to the right and dove downward, the males with him following suit. Eivross snarled and dove, trying to beat him, but he couldn't. Zihndyr and the others shifted to their winged forms just a few feet above the street, rocking parked cars on their tires and knocking into the trees with their wings.

Eivross shifted and dropped to his feet.

"Trace, I'm sorry," Eivross said as he met with the second-in-command of the pack.

"What are you sorry for, brother?" Zihndyr said, his voice all sugar and sweetness. But Eivross knew that underneath the faux kindness was a monster. "And this is no alpha wolf. Where is the male who dares to rule a dragon?"

"I'm right here," Rehlik said, striding forward, his eyes glowing with the amber of his beast.



## Chapter Twelve

Diem heard the dragons before she saw them, the flapping of their wings like a battering ram against the building.

“What in the actual hell?” Arely said, peering out the window. “I can’t see anything, it’s too dark.”

Diem’s heart dropped into her stomach as she saw a handful of males emerge from the sky in what Eivross had said was the dragons’ winged form, illuminated by the street lamps. She didn’t see Eivross until a moment later when he dove between the advancing males and Trace and Jewel.

“I...need to go out there,” Diem said.

“What? Why the hell would you do that? They’re dragons.”

“I know, but Eivross is there.”

Diem realized he *hadn’t* left her. He hadn’t gotten what he wanted and taken off—he’d gone to confront the dragons. She bet her favorite book that one of those dragons was his brother.

She hustled to the bedroom and dressed as quickly as she could. “You stay here,” Diem said. “It’s not safe for you out there.”

“How is it safe for you?” Arely asked.

“Because Eivross is out there. He won’t let anything happen to me.”

Arely frowned. “Are you sure? You were just crying that he left.”

“Because I thought he left *me*. But he clearly left to meet his brother, and now look at him! He’s in a defensive posture between the dragons and our people. That’s a male who has protection on his mind, not leaving.”

Arely hummed. “Just be careful. I can’t run the bookstore if something happens to you.”

“I promise,” Diem said.

She hopped through the front room, pulling her sandals on, then raced from the apartment through the exterior door and nearly ran into Eivross. He put up a bracing hand and brought her against his side.

“You should have stayed in bed,” he whispered, but she heard the relieved trill of his dragon.

“How could I when you left without a note?”

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay,” she said. She cleared her throat and cast a wary look toward the intimidating group of dragon males, now in their human forms. They’d dressed in trousers and nothing else, and with their wings extended underneath the golden glow of the street lamps, they looked like angels.

Pissed-off ones.

A male in the center of the group folded his arms and gave her a calculating look, then tilted his head toward Rehlik who was standing on Eivross’s other side.

“I’m Zihndyr, Eivross’s brother. You’re the alpha of this place?”

Diem didn’t particularly like how Zihndyr said the word alpha, like he was placing air quotes around the word.

“I am,” Rehlik said, his voice low and dangerous.

She’d heard of Rehlik’s fighting skills, and frankly he was alpha because he was such a badass. Maybe the dragons were enormous in their shifts, but in their human forms, none of the males were as big as Eivross *or* Rehlik.

“What’s your business here?” Rehlik asked.

“I had a very distressing visit from a dragon female, who accused my brother of saying he had a mate when he wasn’t mated. I came to see for myself.” Zihndyr sniffed and looked at her. “This is her?”

Eivross’s arm tightened around her.

“What’s he talking about?” Diem asked.

“One of the females must have gone to him after I sent them away.”

Zihndyr leveled a very serious look at Diem, which made her skin crawl. “I suppose she’s lovely, for a non-dragon. I don’t understand why you wouldn’t pick one of the females who came for you when your dragon called instead of this one, who appears to be far more breakable than a dragon female.”

Diem’s wolf did *not* like being called breakable.

She leaned forward, wanting to give him a couple swipes with her claws, but Eivross leaned back against her and prevented her from moving.

“Plus,” his brother continued, “she’s clearly a half-breed, which is definitely beyond the brother of a king.”

“Oh, fuck you and the wings that brought you here,” Diem said.

The other dragons snarled and a few spewed fire, which made Diem immediately want to take a step back, but she held her ground. Wasn't she a kickass female?

Hell yes, she was.

Zihndyr hummed, the creepy look in his eyes intensifying. "Maybe she *is* worthwhile as a mate. I've tired of mine, and the new one is causing a ruckus in the house." He moved so fast that Diem couldn't even track him. One moment he was a few yards from them, the next he was right in her personal space and lifting her hand to kiss it.

She tried to pull from his grasp as Eivross put his hands on his brother and shoved, but Zihndyr had a tight grip and her knuckles cracked. She let out a gasp as a frisson of pain wove up her arm.

"I think I'll throw my hat in the ring."

"Hat? What hat? And what ring are you talking about?" Diem demanded. Eivross finally managed to push his brother away, then cupped her hand and looked at her.

"Are you okay?"

Before she could answer, Zihndyr said, "I think I'll take you for a mate. My brother doesn't have the balls to take you for a proper mate, so I will."

"The hell you will!"

Rehlik moved between them and let out a deep growl. "You will not threaten my pack members. You have overstayed your welcome. Leave now, or we'll make you leave."

“You can try,” Zihndyr said, crossing his arms and planting his feet.

Trace strode forward, purple lighting crackling over his fingers as he tapped into his warlock power. “You heard our alpha.”

The power emanating from Trace made the hair on Diem’s arms rise.

Zihndyr looked like he was going to argue, but instead he bowed toward Diem. “Be prepared, female. One way or another, you’ll be mine.”

He rose into the sky with a few powerful flaps of his wings, his males following.

The light from Trace’s power ebbed swiftly.

Diem pushed from Eivross’s arms.

“What the hell?” she demanded.

He faced her slowly. “What?”

“You didn’t mate me properly so your brother thinks I’m fair game? Why didn’t you?”

He pointed upward. “Did you not see what just happened? My brother is crazy. He’s a dangerous, murderous lunatic who’s now set his sights on you.”

“He just wants to fuck me, not kill me.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about. I knew I should have left town the moment I knew you were my true mate.”

She gasped, her eyes stinging. “Fuck. You.”

Spinning on her heels, she stalked away, climbing the stairs to her apartment, then slamming and locking the door.

\* \* \*

“Dick move,” Jewel said.

Eivross hung his head. “It’s the truth. I knew being near her was going to be my undoing and I stayed anyway. Now her life is in danger, and possibly the entire pack is at risk.”

“We’ll keep everyone safe,” Rehlik said.

“You can’t possibly,” Eivross said. “The only way to keep everyone safe is for me to deal with him myself.”

Jewel stepped up, letting out her bear enough to change the tenor of her voice. “Listen up, you jackass. There’s a female in that apartment who cares about you. You ignored her, then put her in danger by not mating her properly. To top it all off, you actually just told her it would have been better if you’d left the moment you met her. Your brother might be dangerous, but you’re about to lose your mate. And Diem’s a sweet and loyal female who would do anything for you. You need to fix what you’ve done first, and then you can meet with our people and figure out how to keep your brother from destroying the town. He can’t just come in here and try to take you out to get to your mate. That’s *not* going to happen.”

He stared at the fierce female for a long moment, then sighed.

She was right on several levels, but Eivross couldn’t get past putting Diem in danger. It would be better to ensure

Zihndyr never showed up again, than to simply mate her in truth and hope that he honored it. There was no telling what Zihndyr would do to get to Diem, just to fuck with him.

“I need time to think.”

“I don’t know how much you have,” Rehlik said.

Eivross nodded and walked away, heading away from the bookstore toward the bar, where he skirted past the building and strode into the woods.

His thoughts swirled as he thought about the events of the past weeks. When he’d left the nest, he thought he’d made a clean break. He’d never anticipated finding his truemate in a random exile-friendly town, or that his dragon would let out a call meant for *her* that inadvertently led to his brother coming to fuck things up.

What if he’d simply mated her properly from day one?

What if he’d turned on his ass and left the moment he’d shifted?

His dragon let out a loud and unholy roar of rage and hurt. He felt him wanting to shift, felt the press of claws and fangs.

He fell to his knees against a tree and ground his teeth together, trying to stave off the shift. He didn’t know what his dragon wanted to come out for, but it was either to get to Diem or to kill his brother, and right now he didn’t need to do either; he needed time to think and plan.

He fought his dragon, pushing at the beast within him.

*No, damn it! No!*

## Chapter Thirteen

Diem heard a roar that made the windows rattle and her heart clench. She knew it was Eivross, and his dragon sounded heartbroken.

But also close, which meant he hadn't actually left town.

She sat up on the bed where she'd collapsed after the altercation on the street. Her beasts wanted her to go to him, but the independent female who was still pissed didn't want to.

He'd said some hurtful things.

But now he sounded so sad and angry at the same time.

Her heart clenched tightly again, and she gasped, rubbing her chest.

"Ah, damn it."

She slid into her sandals and got up, grabbing her phone and trudging out of the bedroom. The family room was empty; Arely had gone back to bed after Diem promised she was fine.

She left the apartment and walked down the outside stairs, stopping at the landing and closing her eyes. Searching her feelings for that part of her that felt connected to Eivross even though they weren't fully mated yet, she crossed the street, passed the bar, and went into the woods.

The darkness closed around her once she walked a few feet into the woods. She looked over her shoulder and saw the streetlights, but they didn't offer any illumination where she was. And that was okay, because she could see fairly well in the darkness with the moon offering some light. But more than



that was that she could actually feel where Eivross was, like they were mystically tethered together.

Then she heard an anguished groan and knew it was him.

Hurrying forward, she dodged trees and jumped over a rock, then slowed as she saw him. He was hunched over and leaning against a tree.

Instantly she felt compassion for him.

She'd been so pissed. So very, very pissed at everything that had happened since he'd come into town. But this was a male at war with himself, and he was suffering.

How would she feel if she had a crazy relative who'd come calling and intended to try to steal him from her? She'd probably go buckass crazy and go on the warpath to take him out. And she might—*might*—decide that it would have been better for him if she'd never met him.

But that's not what happened. Their roles weren't reversed, and she wasn't the only one hurting right now.

She lowered to her knees in front of him and cupped his face.

His face was slick with sweat, his eyes the yellow gold of his dragon, and a sheen of scales glittered on his cheek.

A trill sounded, soft and sad, and her heart cracked.

“I'm so pissed at you.”

He chuckled and then winced, resting his head on the tree. “I'm sorry. I...shouldn't have said such a shitty thing.”

“So you're *not* sorry we met?”

“No. How could I be? You’re the most important female on the planet. I should have done so many things differently.”

“Like what?” she asked. She moved her hands to his shoulders, aware that his wings trembled when she touched him.

“You want a list?”

“Yep, in the form of an apology.”

He groaned and closed his eyes for a moment, then said, “I should have mated you the moment I came to town. I should have romanced you and let you know how important you are to me. If I’d done that, then when those females showed up, you would have been mated properly, marked with my claws, both of us scenting of each other and the bond between us. But I didn’t. I fucked up.”

“Why didn’t you?”

“I was worried about Zihndyr. He’s dangerous.”

“Aren’t you?”

“What?”

“I mean, you’re a dragon. You’re his older brother. Aren’t you also dangerous?”

“I thought about taking him out over the years, but I was never able to really get close enough to do anything. He has too many males loyal to him, too many who would take me out to save him.” He leveled a long look at her. “How could I keep you safe if I couldn’t even keep my father safe?”

“Can’t we keep each other safe?”

“You’re not a dragon, Diem. What good is your shift against a dragon?”

“I don’t know, I’m pretty feisty.”

“And beautiful. And...forgiving?” he asked hopefully.

“Nice try.”

He inhaled sharply.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

“My dragon won’t settle down. He wants to come out.”

“To go after your brother?”

“To get to you.”

“But I’m here.”

“We’re not mated.”

She arched a brow. “Your dragon is going to do something about that?”

“Take the roof off the apartment and carry you off into the darkness to mate you properly.” He gripped her upper arm suddenly, and she felt the press of his claws. “Make you come, over and over and mark your arm so everyone knows you’re mine.”

Wolves and lions both marked their mates, but only the males, but since she wasn’t a purebred, she could do what she wanted. And she definitely wanted him to wear her marks too.

She leaned in to kiss him, but he pulled back. She instantly felt rejected, but then he cupped her face and said, “Sweet Diem, I’m so sorry. I’m so fucking sorry for everything. Will you please forgive me? Give me another chance to treat you like the queen you are.”

Okay, now her beasts were preening like peacocks.

Was it possible Eivross looked even sexier in the moonlight?

“I forgive you. I definitely want to start over too.”

He drew her close and kissed her, his fingers trailing down her throat with the gentlest of touches. She shivered and slipped her hands over his shoulders to touch his wings. She was fascinated by them. They were dark green like his dragon and warm to the touch, the membrane strong but pliable.

He let out a snarl as she slid her fingers along his back underneath the wings. He gripped her upper arms and pushed them back.

“Apparently my wings are an erogenous zone,” he said, his voice laced with humor.

He kissed her again. They both touched each other, hands roaming. He slipped a hand underneath her top, and she let out a little moan. She pulled away from him and rose to her knees, pushing her pants down her legs. He followed suit, freeing himself from the confines of his jeans. She’d only gotten one leg out of her pants when he jerked her close with a low growl and she parted her legs to straddle him.

She pressed her forehead to his as she panted, watching as he fisted his length and then stroked her already-soaked folds.

Gasping as he fit himself against her entrance, she dropped her head back as she slowly sank down on him, his thick length filling her, stretching her.

His dragon trilled out a purr and her beasts answered, the purring growl that was the mixture of the two.

He leaned back against the trunk and curled his wings around her. She dug her feet into the ground and lifted herself until he was nearly out of her, just the thick head inside, and then she lowered herself.

The next time she lifted herself, he gripped her thighs, helping her to lift and lower herself. She reached a hand to the tree trunk as her claws came out, sinking them into the bark and using it for leverage as she moved faster on him.

Their bodies sang together, their panting breaths mingling in the quiet night.

He pressed his thumb to her clit, and she gasped.

Her claws raked down the bark as she threw back her head and let herself go into the pleasure that filled her.

“Come for me,” he whispered harshly.

She closed her eyes as warmth spread through her. She pressed her claws into the tree and laid her other hand over his, pressing against their hands as she moved on him.

She moved his fingers just slightly to the side and her thighs tightened as her stomach clenched and heat filled her.

Just. Like. That.

She shouted his name as she came, riding him through her pleasure until he roared his completion. She felt only a brief moment of pain in the midst of all the pleasure as he scored her arm with his claws, but it faded fast.

Her fangs punched from her gums, and she didn't even process what her thoughts were as she sank them into his neck.

He growled and wrapped his arms around her, holding her tightly against him as she let out a soft mewl of completion and carefully pulled her fangs from him.

She extracted her claws from the tree and then rested her head on his shoulder and tried to catch her breath. She reveled in the feeling of complete happiness in being fully mated. She could feel a connection to him in her heart now, a blissful awareness of just how much this male meant to her.

She didn't love him. Not yet.

But she was falling hard for him.

How could she not? He'd tried to keep his distance to keep her safe, fighting his dragon every step of the way. She liked that he cared about her safety, even if she'd misunderstood his motives from day one.

"Was that your wolf or your lion?" he asked, his wings opening and letting in the cool night air.

"Both," she said, snuggling in his embrace. "I hope that was okay."

"Definitely." He kissed her temple and sighed. "I feel so connected to you."

"Me too." She didn't want to move, but there was a stick digging into her calf and she'd lost the one sandal she hadn't taken off.

She sat up, his cock slipping from her and making her groan at the loss. She moved off him, using the tree for leverage as she rose to her feet. She saw the trunk that she'd shredded with her claws.

He grinned as he stood and tugged his pants up. “That’s fucking awesome.”

“I’ve never had my beasts so reactive before. It’s cool as hell.” She looked at the already scarring mark of his claws on her arm, thrilled to be his marked mate.

They dressed quickly, then he took her hand and they walked back to the bookstore.

“What now?” she asked.

He opened the door to the apartment. “I want to tell you everything. And then I want to know everything about you.”

She glanced at the decorative clock on the family room wall. “How about you first and then we can talk about me over breakfast since it’s pretty late. There’s a great diner in town.”

He hesitated. “We can just go to sleep.”

“Hell no, I don’t want to wait another second to hear your history. We’ve wasted enough time not talking to each other.”

He nodded. “So, my brother was always a loose cannon...”

## Chapter Fourteen

“Maybe we could go out to dinner tonight,” Eivross said to Diem as he tucked into a large platter of waffles topped with fresh blueberries the next morning.

“Sure. What did you have in mind?”

“Do you have a favorite place? I just don’t like seafood, but if you do, I’m sure I could find something to eat.”

“It’s no bother; I like fried catfish, but that’s only when I can have fresh cornbread and a baked potato. I rarely ever get seafood when I’m out to eat.”

He watched as she cut up a ham and cheese omelet and took a bite. She looked worn out but so beautiful he couldn’t really believe he wasn’t dreaming.

How had he not managed to forever fuck things up between them?

Because she was gracious and forgiving, for one. But also because he’d finally seen the light. Yes, Zihndyr was dangerous, but so was Eivross. And so were the people who called Cider Falls home. He wasn’t about to let his brother hurt her or anyone else.

If Zihndyr came back to cause trouble, Eivross would put him down for good.

Truthfully, though, he hoped that his brother’s behavior was just sour grapes and he was posturing for no reason other than to cause trouble.



He wasn't sure he had that kind of luck, but hope sprang eternal.

“Okay, well, there's a really good Italian place nearby if you're in the mood for pasta,” she said. “And kind of in the same vein but a little different is a woodfired pizza place in Venire, which is about thirty minutes from here. The first time I ate there, it made me want to get an outdoor pizza oven so I could make my own.”

He hummed. “That sounds really great. I've never had woodfired pizza.”

“It's a casual place, so we don't have to dress up. Then maybe we can come back to town and grab a drink at the bar.”

He nodded and stabbed a large piece of waffle. “So tell me your story, Diem.”

“First,” she said, “we should talk about living arrangements.”

“Right, we both have roommates. But you're the only one with a real place. I'm just living with Breaker because he's a nice male and was happy to open his home to a stranger.”

“Arelly won't mind moving out, but I'm not sure there's a place for her that's open right now. I haven't talked to her since everything blew up last night.”

“She works at the school?” he asked.

“Yep.”

She told him about volunteering at the library and donating books.

His dragon was intrigued. He'd grown up loving libraries, and whenever he'd traveled, he liked to check out the

local ones.

“Oh, I forgot about that book you were interested in,” she said.

“The map one?”

“Yeah, why did you want it? Do you like old maps?”

He hadn't told her about his treasure. As a bookseller, she would understand. If she volunteered at a children's school library, then surely she loved books as well.

“I like old books. Any books really, but old ones are my favorite. The older the better. I...have a storage unit.”

She frowned. “A storage unit of what?”

“Books.” He paused and then said, “They're my treasure.” At her curious look, he explained, “All dragons are hoarders, but each dragon's treasure is unique. My father collected watercolor paintings. He didn't care if the artist was famous or not, he simply loved them.” Eivross had managed to tuck one away before Zihndyr set the collection on fire after their father's death. The last painting was among the books in the unit.

“That's neat. How old are dragons when they start to hoard?”

“Around the time we shift. I was able to get my wings when I was thirteen, which is pretty early, but my full shift didn't come until I was sixteen. I was out with my father and saw a bookstore and couldn't help myself. My father said he knew that my hoarding was going to require a very large library, but we never had a chance to build one together.

Zihndyr killed him a few years later, and I hadn't quite filled up the library in my room yet."

"I'm sorry you lost your father," she said. She reached across the table and gave his hand a squeeze.

She was such a kind and compassionate female.

"But anyway," he said, "my dragon smelled the old book when I was in your store and I had to find it. I would definitely like to buy it."

"You can just have it."

"Absolutely not," he said, shaking his head. "I won't make you lose money."

"I won't. I'm pretty sure the book came in from an estate sale. Realtors in the area know that I will buy books that don't get sold in estate sales, and most people don't care about the books their relatives have saved over the years. I like old recipe books. I do sell books online, and people will ask me to look out for certain types of books, but mostly I stock what the people in town like, which are true crime, cozy mysteries, and romances."

He put down his fork and took a sip of coffee. "Now, tell me the rest of your story. When we sat down you were talking about your father and then we got distracted."

As she continued on in telling the story of her life, he marveled at the life she'd had. Even though she'd been abandoned by her mother for being a hybrid, she had a wonderful father who was willing to give up everything so she wouldn't be alone.

“Why didn’t you want your dad to come with you? Weren’t you worried about being on your own?”

“I told him not to. He has a business and I didn’t want to take that from him since he gets such joy from it. I was nervous, but I also just felt in my bones that Cider Falls was the right place for me. Speaking of my dad, we can video chat with him soon so I can introduce you two.”

“I’d love to speak with him.”

When they’d finished eating, he paid the bill and held her hand as they walked outside. He couldn’t touch her enough, couldn’t get close enough to her. She was addictive on a hundred different levels.

He opened her car door and helped her inside, then went around to the other side.

“Can I ask you something?” he asked.

“You can ask me anything.”

He backed out of the parking spot and turned toward Cider Falls. “I was wondering if the reason you thought I was going to leave is because of what happened with your mom.”

She hummed. “Yeah. Even though my dad never left me, I’ve battled with being left behind all my life. It’s a special kind of hell to know your mother doesn’t want you, and I grew up not trusting that anyone would stay with me. Even what happened with my dad fed into that fear, like he said he’d come with me, and I didn’t truly want him to, but it was a reinforcement of *I don’t get to stay with people I love.*”

“I’m sorry I caused you so much pain,” he said.

He’d like to go back in time and kick his own ass.

“It’s really okay, Eivross,” she said. “I know that you were trying to keep me safe.”

“And I promise to do my best.”

“I think too, that I need to promise that I’m not going to think you’re leaving.”

“You don’t think I will still, right? We’re marked and fully mated.”

She touched the mark his claws had made on her upper arm. It had scarred as it healed and left three thin stripes. She loved it. “No, I know you’re with me for good.”

“Definitely. You’re well and truly stuck with me.”

“Good. That’s just how I want it,” she said.

They returned to her home, and while she found Arely doing laundry in the little closet off the kitchen and wanted to speak with her, he headed down to the bookstore, which now had an installed front door.

He thought about his hoard of books in the storage unit as he wandered the rows between shelves, and the kids at the town school with the outdated library and no one to run it. It was wonderful that his sweetheart was there a few days a week, but it wasn’t the same as having someone knowledgeable about books there full time.

He wasn’t a librarian, but he did know books. And he could always pursue a degree.

His dragon let out a satisfied rumble at the thought of being surrounded by books all the time and helping others find treasures.

But first he needed to talk to Diem. And also Rehlik.

Because he couldn't just quit his security job and take another, even if it was the best idea he'd ever had.

Well, the second best.

The first best idea ever was coming to Cider Falls and finding Diem. That was hands down the best idea of his life.

## Chapter Fifteen

Diem lifted her slice of pizza and took a bite. She couldn't get over how good woodfired pizza was.

"Imagine dragon fire woodfired pizza," she said. "That would be a pretty good marketing gimmick."

Eivross's eyes glinted with humor as he finished his slice. "It would definitely be, but I'd be more worried about setting the building on fire. It's hard to pinpoint flames like that."

"Did you ever accidentally set anything on fire?"

"Definitely when I was younger. It's really easy to do. The fire is unpredictable when a dragon is young, even once he or she comes into their shift. When I was fourteen, I was angry at a bad grade in school and my dragon just went off and I singed the teacher's eyebrows."

"Holy crap!" She covered her mouth to stifle her laugh.

"He was fine," he said, waving a hand dismissively. "They grew back. Not well, mind you, but they did grow back." He leaned forward conspiratorially. "He never gave me a bad grade again, though, and he kept his distance. I did apologize, more than once, but I can laugh about it now."

"I accidentally clawed a girl in the pack," Diem said. "We were out on a walking trail and there was a place where the trail was really narrow and there was a pretty far drop. I slipped on some rocks and reached out for help, but in my panic my claws came out and sank into my friend's arm."

“Did you still fall?”

“No, thankfully. Her older brother was with us and he grabbed both of us. Fortunately she was old enough to shift and heal the wound, otherwise she would probably have hated me forever.”

“Was that before you knew if you’d be a full wolf or not?”

“Even without my lion fur color, I would still have been exiled once I could shift, because hybrids aren’t welcome in my original pack.”

“They let you stay for a while, though.”

“Yeah, until I was eighteen. They could have made me leave right away after I shifted, so I was always grateful they let me have two more years with my dad.”

“Speaking of your dad, we need to video chat with him. I’d like him to know I have honorable intentions with you.”

She arched a brow. “Oh yeah?”

“Hell, yes,” he said emphatically as he lifted a piece of pizza. “I want to marry you and start a family.” He frowned. “Crap, I didn’t even ask what you’d like for our future.” He put down the pizza and took her hand. “Tell me.”

She hummed with a chuckle and gave his hand a squeeze. “I want that too. And my dad will love you.”

“I wonder what a hybrid and a dragon’s offspring will look like,” he mused as he released his hold on her hand and picked up the pizza.

She reached for her third piece. “I don’t know, but they’ll be hybrids. Maybe dragons with wolf or lion coloring. I



suppose it depends on whether the dragon is more dominant than the wolf and lion.”

“Whatever they can or can’t shift into, I’m thankful we live in Cider Falls where they can grow up without worrying about being exiled,” he said.

“Me too.”

They finished eating, both too full to have dessert, and headed out into the cool spring night. “I have an idea,” he said.

“A sexy one?”

He grabbed the door of her car and chuckled. “I’m always thinking sexy thoughts about you, sweetheart, but I was actually wondering if you’d like to see my treasure.”

“Really? I’d love to. Where is it?”

“In a storage facility not too far from here.”

“Do dragons normally show people their treasures?”

“Only their mates. And their parents when they first get started.”

She went onto her toes and kissed him. “I’d love to see it.”

He nodded with a smile and helped her into the car, then went to the driver’s side and got in.

“You’re only the second person to see my treasure. The first was my dad, and that was only when he helped me start the treasure in a cedar chest at the foot of my bed.”

“How long did it take to outgrow the chest?”

“A few months. I’m pretty picky about what I add to my treasure. My dragon likes old books.”

“Why do you suppose that is?”

“I don’t know,” he said, shrugging. “I’ve always kind of thought it must be because dragons are always seen in literature as ancient, and even though we’re not immortal, there’s something *forever* about a dragon and their treasure.”

“That’s really cool.”

He smiled broadly and winked at her, then turned his attention back to the road. “We could have children who are wolves or lions who hoard. That would be pretty neat too.”

“I feel like a hoarder sometimes. I love to go to estate sales and thrift stores to find books. It makes me sad to see old books in used bookstores.”

“Sad?”

“Yeah, like I might find a book that’s really worn, the cover could be falling off it, the pages could be dogeared or have writing on them. And someone donates it or sells it. A book so well loved is a treasure.”

He took her hand and brought it to his lips. “I couldn’t agree more.”

They reached the storage facility. There was a large three-story building with units, and then a section behind the building for the portable storage pods like the one Eivross had.

“I’ve had the storage pod for a few years in a facility away from the nest,” he said as he entered the code to open the tall metal gates at the entrance. “I had bookshelves in my room but outgrew them pretty quickly, so I got a storage unit and began filling it up. Then I moved everything into a portable unit so I could have it delivered to the house and add more to

it and go through what I had, and then have it picked up and stored.”

“Sounds like a good idea,” she said.

“Most dragons like to have their treasure nearby and accessible to them at all times. I kept my favorite books in my room, and I packed them up when I left. So the bulk of my treasure is here.”

“Do you have valuable books? Or are they just valuable in a sentimental way?”

“Both,” he said.

He pulled through the open gates and paused, waiting for the gates to close behind them, then he continued through, passing the facility’s office building and driving down a long row of units. He turned a corner and headed down another row before stopping.

“My most valuable books are first editions of classics, but my favorites, the ones that my dragon values the most, are ones that have personal meaning to me. Like the first book my father gave to me.”

“That’s really neat.”

They got out and walked to the red door of a portable unit. There was a keypad and a padlock. “I like the extra security,” he said. “I had the keypad installed after I purchased the unit.”

“Smart.”

“Well, the place is secure, and so was where I had it before, but it’s nice to know that no one can get inside the unit without me.” He pulled a key from inside his wallet and

unlocked the heavy-duty padlock, then typed a code into the keypad. He bent and hauled the door upward, the clacking of the sections as it opened echoing in the quiet night.

She let out a gasp.

It looked like a library. The unit was filled with floor-to-ceiling wooden shelves that had padded rods across each shelf to keep the books in place during travel. She stepped inside and turned on her phone's flashlight, illuminating the space.

"If I was going to spend time in here with my books," he said, joining her and adding his phone's light, "I'd normally bring a few lanterns or battery-powered shop lights, but I didn't think about coming here until we were already at dinner."

"It's okay, this is amazing," she said.

"I sold a few books to pay for the damage when I first came here," he said.

"You did?" she turned to face him.

With a nod, he said, "I didn't have enough cash in my bank account to cover everything, and I have a few brokers I've used over the years who will buy and sell antique books for me. They always move fast."

"You had books that were rare enough to pay for thousands of dollars' worth of damage? That's pretty impressive."

He looked really pleased she said that, but she did think it was true. Her entire bookstore wouldn't have paid for all the damage.

“To be fair, the vehicles had insurance and they just asked me to pay for the deductible, but the door was pretty pricey. I definitely didn’t want them sparing any expense when it came to your safety.”

“You’re adorable.”

He grinned down at her.

“Yes. Yes, he is,” a masculine voice said from outside the unit.

He spun with a snarl, dropping his phone.

“What are you doing here, Zihndyr?”

## Chapter Sixteen

Eivross loved seeing Diem in the storage unit with his treasures. Hell, she was now his most valuable treasure. Watching her eyes light up as she looked at the books made him fall in love with her a little bit more. He couldn't believe he actually had a true mate who loved books as much as he did.

He thought once more about his idea of working at the school library. He'd done a few online searches and knew the path to becoming a school librarian wasn't an easy one, but for the first time in his life, he felt like he had a purpose. Before he met Diem, he'd been captain of the guard of a nest run by a power-hungry mad hatter and wondering every day if it would be *the day* his brother would actually snap and kill him and the whole damn nest.

Now, he had Diem. His main purpose in life was making her happy and keeping her safe. But being able to share a love of books with kids? Now that was something he could definitely get on board with.

He was about to tell her that he wanted to meet with the principal and discuss the library when a voice he'd hoped to never hear again pierced the silence.

"What are you doing here?" Eivross demanded, spinning with his claws and fangs at the ready. "How did you even find me?"

"I know everything, big brother," Zihndyr said.

His brother was wearing all black and was in his human form. Males dropped next to him, all dressed similarly, all

looking ready for war.

Eivross looked at his phone as he grabbed it off the ground, wondering if it was tracked.

“No, of course not.” Zihndyr waved a hand as if he’d read his mind. “I had spies watching the town. You’re so dramatic; as if I’d resort to doing a phone track when you could just as easily disable it. It was far more fun for me to watch you from a distance with my spies. I knew it was just a matter of time before you left the town, thinking you were safe to do so.”

Eivross gave Diem a gentle push to move her behind him and stepped out of the unit. “What do you want?”

“Her.” Zihndyr pointed a clawed finger at Diem.

She let out a disgusted snort. “We’re mated now. You’re here for nothing.”

A creepy smile flashed across Zihndyr’s face. “Didn’t he tell you?” His brother took a step forward, scales flashing on his cheeks.

Eivross stepped to the side to block him from getting closer to her. “She knows everything.”

“I doubt that,” he said with a dark laugh. “What I mean is that perhaps you didn’t tell her that for our people, the mating mark is only good as long as the male who gave it is still breathing.”

Eivross’s claws lengthened, his dragon writhing in his head at the threat.

“News flash, asshole,” she said, her voice low with her beasts, “I don’t care what you think about our mating, but I

would never choose you. I would never go along with whatever insanity you're planning. You need to fuck all the way off."

"You'll learn," Zihndyr said. "You'll learn and you'll obey. One way or another."

Eivross let out a deep roar and ripped his shirt off, letting his wings out. "This ends now!" He spun and reached for a hidden section of the unit, where he kept a stash of weapons, pulling a sword from its sheath.

"Run," he said to Diem. "Don't try to help me, just get to safety."

He leaped away from the unit and slashed at his brother, who took to the sky with a cackle. "You're just delaying the inevitable," Zihndyr called, pulling a sword from a sheath between his wings. "You'll never defeat me. I'll keep coming until I kill you and take your mate."

Eivross roared and flapped his wings, drawing close to his brother, their swords clashing with a loud clang. He dodged and fought, knowing that he had no choice but to defeat his brother. Diem's life was on the line, and nothing was more important than her.

\* \* \*

Diem moved slowly to the entrance of the unit and looked up. She could see the spark as the two swords stuck, but she couldn't tell who was who up in the dark sky. Her beasts let out a warning in her head, and she had only a heartbeat to see



that the handful of males remaining on the ground had turned their attention from the battle in the sky to her.

*Oh shit.*

She was not a fighter. Not really. Her dad had taught her to defend herself when she was younger and to hunt in her shift, but she'd never really had to fight. She hadn't even thrown a punch in her life.

There was no way she could fight off so many males.

The only thing she could do was outsmart them.

Leaning back, she leaped up and grabbed the edge of the door, slamming it down to the ground. Then she stripped and shifted as fast as she could, pushing her beasts to the forefront. Ducking into the shelves, she backed into a hiding spot and stared at the door. It was dark inside the unit, but her phone had fallen face down so the flashlight illuminated a little space.

The door opened abruptly, slamming up and rattling the entire unit.

“Come out, come out,” one of the males said. The others chuckled.

“You can't hide in here for long,” another one called.

She crouched, her muscles twitching as she readied herself.

A dragon cry sounded above them, as if one of the males was hurt. Was Eivross okay? She needed to get free of these males and help him.

Somehow.

Waiting until most of the males were inside the unit and looking for her, she sprang forward, slashing her claws along the backs of their knees until she was safely out of the unit, twisting upward and catching the door with her teeth so she could use her body weight to close the door. Two males lunged through the lowering door and grabbed her, one at her back legs and one around her neck.

She let out a furious roar, a combination of her wolf and lion, and clawed the nearest male, her claws sinking into his leg as he howled and released her. The door slid upward again, and she kicked back at the male holding her, slamming herself against the door with her shoulder, bending the metal slats and freezing it in place. The males inside shouted angrily and beat on the door, but it wouldn't open more than it had already, leaving about a foot of open space.

They would get through it, but maybe not before she could figure out how to help her mate.

She was dragged backward by her tail. She tried to sink her claws into the concrete but couldn't get purchase. The male pulled her toward him, his claws digging into her hips and jerking her against him.

Wings flapped and she felt herself being lifted off the ground.

Holy shit!

She kicked and arched against him, managing to bite his forearm hard enough so he loosened his grip. She landed on the concrete and rolled out of reach.

“Bitch!”

She looked up at the sky and saw the darker shadows of her mate and his brother as they fought, the moonlight shining on their wings.

Glancing at the male cradling his arm and two other males struggling to get underneath the opening of the unit's door, she made a quick decision. She reached into the very deepest part of herself and raised her head, letting out the loudest howl and roar combination to call for help. They were pretty far from Cider Falls, but it was the only thing she could think to do.

Hopefully someone would hear their call.

## Chapter Seventeen

Eivross heard Diem's howl, but it wasn't quite a wolf howl, more a roar combined with a howl, deep and threatening. He glanced down to see she'd shifted and was battling a male, another one on the ground bleeding from an obvious wound in his leg. He wasn't sure where the others were.

"Fuck!" Zihndyr's sword sliced through Eivross's arm and he dropped his sword. Pressing his wings to his back, he dove for it, catching it as it tumbled to the ground. He shouldn't have gotten distracted, but he had to make sure his mate was safe.

He heard a distant train horn.

Eivross faced his brother once more, blood dripping down his arm, his dragon furious that they had to defend themselves this way. "You should have left me alone," he said.

"You'll never be free," Zihndyr said, brandishing the sword. "Look at her down there, fighting for her life. You'll never be able to keep her safe. But don't worry, brother. I will definitely keep her safe."

Eivross roared in fury. "I should have killed you when you murdered my father."

"Our father," Zihndyr said.

"He was no father of yours," Eivross countered. "You kill and you take. You're no brother of mine, no king of honor."

The train horn blew again.

Eivross tossed his sword toward his brother, just off to the side enough to make him flinch and lose his balance. He shot forward and caught his brother around his waist with both arms, flapping his wings as fast as he could and driving his brother through the air, away from the storage facility.

Zihndyr dropped his sword, trying to get free from Eivross's grip. He dug his claws into his sides until Zihndyr howled and hot blood poured over Eivross's fingers. The train horn blew again, a light shining in the darkness as the sound of the train pounding on the tracks grew louder.

*Stay safe until I get back, Diem.*

Driving his brother forward, he flew down the tracks right into the oncoming train.

\* \* \*

Fiona Harper put her car's window down when she reached the train crossing with the gates lowered, the red lights blinking. She loved to hear trains and hoped it had a lot of cars so she could enjoy it.

"You could have gone the other way and we wouldn't be stuck here," her sister, Bella, said irritably.

"What's got you in such a hurry to get back to work?"

They both worked at their parents' bar, Club 1818, in Fremont. She waitressed and bartended, but it wasn't her life's work. Her parents were alphas of their wolf pack and wanted her to take over the bar when they retired at some point in the

future, but her favorite thing to do was teach the preschoolers at their pack school.

“Because Dad said we needed to hurry back since we’ve got to do inventory.”

“Which I hate, and so do you, and that’s also why I took this way. Because even without a train it would take longer.”

“I could just tell Dad that you’re a slacker.”

“I work harder than you, Bells.”

“Bitch!”

They both laughed.

In between the train whistles, Fiona swore she heard something else, like a desperate howl.

Her heart panged. “Did you hear that?”

“The train? Yeah, I know you love trains, you goofball.”

“No, a howl.” She leaned out of the window and closed her eyes, tapping into her wolf. She heard the sound again. It was definitely a feminine howl, but there was something else in the howl, like a big cat.

She put the car in park and opened the door.

“Fi! What are you doing?”

“Someone’s in trouble.”

She stripped at the side of the road, tossing her clothes onto the seat. “Drive home and tell Dad I went to help someone.”

“Fi!”

She shifted and shook herself out, then darted across the train tracks as the train barreled down toward the crossing. Something screeched overhead, but she didn't spare a glance upward, focusing on the feeling of a wolf in danger.

She had no idea if it was one of her pack members who had called for help, but a wolf was in trouble, and she was going to answer the call.

\* \* \*

Diem backed away from the male. He'd chased her through the open section of the facility. She couldn't freaking shake him. No matter how fast she ran or which direction she went, he would simply fly overhead and cut her off.

He was taunting her, and she was getting tired, her wolf and lion anxious, but her body quickly running out of steam.

"Zihndyr promised you'd be fun for the whole nest, by the way," he taunted as he stalked toward her.

Another male joined him, having wiggled his way out from under the partially open door of the unit. That meant the others would soon be there, except for the one that she'd managed to take out with her claws to his leg. At least he wasn't going anywhere.

She growled, her hackles rising.

Looking wildly around, she huffed out a breath.

"He's definitely dead, you know," the new male said. "Zihndyr is the best fighter in our nest. Eivross the traitor is dead. If you're lucky, our king will give you an hour to grieve

before he takes you as his third mate. Then you'll spend the rest of your life on your knees."

"Or your back," the first male said, chuckling.

She bared her fangs. *You can go to hell.*

With a last burst of energy, she raced away from the males, heading toward the gates at the entrance. If only she had wings, she could fly over the damn things. The males' wings flapped loudly behind her. They were gaining on her!

She skidded to a halt at the gates and let out a panicked howl.

Where was Eivross? There was no way he was dead, she was sure of it.

She backed up a few paces and looked at the gate, but there was no way to climb it.

The males reached her and she spun, her back to the gate, and flashed her fangs.

"Pretty little thing," one of the males said.

"Won't be that way for long."

A shadow soared overhead, and Diem looked up, surprised to see the furry white underbelly of a large wolf as it cleared the gate and landed on one of the males, jaws snapping around his neck and head shaking hard to break it.

What the hell?

Diem snapped to action, jumping at the other male, who was staring in slack-jawed shock as his friend died on the ground. She knocked the male down and he landed hard, his fists beating on her sides. She sank her fangs into his shoulder



and dug her claws into his stomach, raking downward as hard as she could.

He screamed and thrashed.

The other wolf lifted its head and howled.

The male under Diem went still with a groan and she let go, moving off and staring at the petite timber wolf who'd come to her rescue. It was a female, that much she was sure, but where had she come from, and more importantly, why?

The female sat on her haunches and howled again.

"I fucking heard you the first time," a male said irritably from the other side of the gate.

Diem turned and saw a large black SUV at the gate, waiting, while a male in a blue jumpsuit opened the gate for the other male, wearing a black suit. The others getting out of the SUV were dressed similarly.

"You're just lucky we were in the area when we heard the other female's howl," he said. "Now, what the hell is going on here?"

Someone landed right in front of Diem, and she startled backward, nearly going ass over teakettle. Then she realized it was Eivross.

He was bleeding from claw and sword marks on his body, one of his wings hanging at an odd angle.

"My name is Eivross Danforth. These dragon males attacked my mate and me tonight when we came to the storage unit." He moved back and knelt next to Diem, putting an arm loosely on her back. "I don't know who this other wolf is."

“It’s Fiona Cartwright, daughter of the Fremont pack alphas. We’re FSA Hunters. Her sister called her father and he called me, since I’m part of his pack. We’d heard your mate howling for help and were on the way to investigate when we got the alpha’s call that Fiona was possibly in danger.”

“There were other males,” Eivross said. “But their king is dead.”

One of the other Hunters stepped forward. “King? As in dragon king? Who was it and how did he die?”

“He was my brother, Zihndyr, and I killed him by dropping him in front of a train. He threatened my mate’s life and my own.” He let out a low growl. “I was acting in defense of my mate.”

The first male held up his hands. “Don’t worry about it, we know all about that fucking dragon king.” To the other Hunters, he said, “You guys spread out and find the other dragons. Then we need statements from everyone. Fi, your dad is going to shit a brick when he finds out you came here to help a stranger.”

The female sat on her hind legs and let out a whine.

The male rolled his eyes. “Look innocent all you like, it’s not going to work. Now, are you hurt?”

She shook her head.

“Good. Bella took the car to the bar, but your dad is on the way here to pick you up.”

Another vehicle appeared and Diem let out a sigh of relief at seeing Rehlik, Trace, and Novak get out. She was thankful it wasn’t just her and Eivross alone with the Hunters.

Although she hadn't had any bad dealings with them herself, she'd heard horror stories over the years about how they treated hybrids and exiles.

“I'm Rehlik, alpha of these two,” he said as he and the others came into the facility. “Is everyone all right?”

## Chapter Eighteen

Eivross wanted to get Diem home and put the entire night behind them, but they were stuck until she could shift back and give her statement to the FSA. He'd given his own statement three different times, including once for Rehlik. The FSA was nothing if not thorough.

The strange female wolf who'd shown up and helped save Diem had left already. Once she'd been able to shift back to her human form, she gave a statement and left with her father, who was apparently the alpha of their wolf pack. Eivross hadn't wanted to leave Diem's side, but he had thanked the female after she was in her human shift again.

"How did you know where we were?" Eivross asked Rehlik.

"I had a vision that you guys were in trouble," Trace said. "It was just a flash in my mind, but I saw dragons and wolves."

"I had Arely use the friend finder app on her phone to locate Diem," Rehlik said.

"That's amazing," Eivross said. "Why did you have a vision? Does that happen a lot?"

"Not really," he said. "But my warlock side has been on high alert since your brother threatened you and Diem, so I think I was just sensitive to the danger."

"I'm thankful you're all here," Eivross said. He looked at Rehlik. "Do you know the Fremont pack?"

“Only by reputation. They’re purebred and have the traditional purebred mindset of not liking hybrids or exiles.”

Trace folded his arms and stared at the Hunters who were standing in a group and speaking quietly. A large van drove up slowly and parked behind the SUV, another group of Hunters getting out.

“Ah, they’re here to process the dragons,” Trace said. “I texted Jewel and she said that they’ll take them all to the Hunters’ facility, where they’ll be locked up until their hearing.”

“What happens at the hearing?” Eivross asked.

“After what you all experienced, they’ll be charged with assault and attempted murder. Jewel thinks they won’t get out of FSA prison for a decade at least.”

Eivross hummed. “Do you really think so?”

“Jewel does. She was a Hunter before she came to Cider Falls and has family high up in the organization. Not that she’s in touch with them any longer of course, that ship sailed when she and I met.” Trace shook his head. “Anyway, it’s against FSA rules to go after someone who’s mated for the sole purpose of separating them. The fact that Zihndyr made threats publicly that he was going to kill you and take Diem for his third mate means you had every right to kill him to keep her safe, and yourself too.”

Eivross scratched Diem behind the ears, and she let out a soft whine. He didn’t really care what the punishment would have been, he’d have killed a hundred dragons to make sure she was safe.

Rehlik gripped his shoulder for a moment. “Are you all right?”

“I’m fine. My injuries have healed.”

“No, I mean are you *all right*?” He gave Eivross a sincere look, one laced with the knowledge of someone who’d gone up against his own family to save himself.

Blowing out a breath, Eivross scrubbed a hand through his hair and shrugged. “I think so? I mean, I did the right thing and I have no regrets. He was never going to leave us alone, and he would have kept coming with more and more males until he destroyed me, and others.” He was grieving the loss of his brother, but not the brother that he’d killed tonight—the one from his childhood, before the need for power had corrupted him. That male hadn’t existed for a long time, though. The crazed dragon that Eivross threw into the path of the oncoming train had been evil all the way to the center of his being.

“What’s going to happen to the dragon nest?” Novak asked.

“I don’t know,” Eivross said. “Someone will most likely rise up and take over. But I’m not sure how they’ll know about Zihndyr’s death and the capture of his cronies.”

“The FSA will go to the nest and tell them,” Rehlik said. “With their alpha out of the picture, they’ll have to choose someone else to lead within a few days or risk being forced to join up with another nest or be exiled.”

Eivross wondered about Benatrice, and the others who’d been loyal to his father, and made a mental note to reach out

and ensure they were safe. With his brother out of the picture, he could contact them without worrying about him retaliating.

Diem whined loudly and stood, shaking herself out.

“I think she’s ready to shift now,” Eivross said. He had a set of clothes tucked under his arm courtesy of Rehlik, who apparently always kept spare clothes in his vehicle for just such an emergency.

They walked away, ducking behind a row of units. She shifted and leaped into his arms with a sob. He held her tightly, his own eyes stinging with tears. Nothing had ever felt as good as holding his mate in his arms after such a terrifying night.

“I’m so sorry you were hurt,” he whispered hoarsely.

“I was so scared,” she said. She pushed back enough to look at him. “But so relieved you’re okay. Are you really okay?”

He nodded, kneading her back gently, his dragon trilling in relief that she was finally back to human so they could talk.

“I’ve got mixed emotions about it all, but mainly? I’m thankful you’re safe now and we don’t have to worry about my brother or the nest again.”

She leaned in and hugged him again, her arms around his neck and her body plastered to him. They stood in the shadows of the row of storage units for several minutes. He knew they would both need time to heal emotionally from what they’d endured, but they were together and safe and that’s what mattered.

She slipped from his arms and dressed in the clothing he’d been given.

“You know what’s weird?” she said as they walked to his storage unit so she could show him how she’d dented the door to keep the males inside. Which was the smartest thing he’d ever heard in his life.

“I can’t imagine just one thing being weird about tonight, but go ahead,” he said.

She chuckled. “That female showing up out of nowhere. I honestly don’t know if I would have been able to hold off the males for long. There were two of them who came after me, taunting me, and it was just a matter of time before the others got free of the unit.”

They stopped at the unit. The door was dented from where she’d thrown herself against it and bent it just enough to prevent it from opening fully. The Hunters had opened the door fully to take out the males, then put the door back down as far as it would go.

“Your stuff isn’t safe here,” she said. “Not with the door like that.”

He moved to the door and pressed his foot against the handle on the bottom slat. With a grunt, he forced the door down, the metal screeching until it stopped on the concrete.

“I think it’ll be okay for now,” he said. “I’ll call and have it delivered somewhere in town. I’ll just need a place to put everything.”

“Arelly is going to move out,” she said. “I want to offer the spare bedroom for your books, but I’m not sure they’ll all fit.”

“I’ll make it work,” he said. He stared at the door to his treasure and then he turned to face her. “You’re my treasure,



Diem. You're the only person on the planet that I care about."

She smiled. "You're my treasure too."

He kissed her gently and pulled her in close for another hug. He didn't think he'd ever get tired of holding her. Especially not when he'd come so close to losing her.

"So I had an idea," he said, putting his arm around her and walking her back toward the gate so she could give her statement to the Hunters.

"A sexy one, I hope? I'd like to put tonight behind us."

"Oh, definitely," he said with a chuckle. "But actually, I was thinking that I could help out at the school library. Maybe full time if they need it. And I could get a library science degree too."

She stopped walking, and he looked down at her. Her eyes were wide.

"Really? You want to be the pack school's librarian?"

He let go of her and rocked back on his heels. "Are you surprised? I love books. Not as much as I love you, of course."

She leaned away a little. "What?"

"What?" he asked.

"What did you just say?"

"Oh, yeah," he said, pulling her close so fast her breath gusted from her lips. "I love you, Diem. From the bottom of your wolfy toes to the top of your lioness head, and every part in between. You're my treasure and my mate, and the epicenter of my universe."

"Epicenter," she said, grinning. "I like that."

“And?” he prompted.

“And I’m pretty damn happy.”

He grunted. She giggled. “And I love you too!”

They kissed again, but this time the kiss had even more meaning. They loved each other, fought to get back to each other, and nothing on this earth was going to tear them apart.

“You could definitely be the school librarian,” she said when the kiss ended. “I love helping, but it’s too much for one person to do part time, plus I’m not really trained for it. I know Isak would love to have you on staff. We can meet with him.”

“Not today,” he said, knowing it was well after midnight and already Monday. “Maybe Tuesday or Wednesday. We need time to rest and recuperate and get to know each other.”

“Perfect. I’ll keep the shop closed too. Just you and me for a few days sounds like a wonderful idea.”

“And sexy too.” He wiggled his brows, and she chuckled.

After she gave her statement, he took her home to Cider Falls, following behind the other pack members’ vehicles as they left the storage facility. It had been a hell of a night, but out of the ashes of the terror had come a sweet peace knowing that they were safe now. He didn’t have to wonder if his brother would come for him; Zihndyr was nothing but a terrible memory.

Eivross thought he couldn’t be with Diem because it would put her in harm’s way, and he’d been right. But being with her was the best thing that had ever happened to him, and

he would go against anyone who came after them. No matter what, he would ensure that Diem had a sweet life.

She leaned against his shoulder and yawned.

“Sleepy?” he asked.

“I wasn’t. I think I’m just crashing from the stress.”

“We’ll be home soon.”

“This was a really great first date.”

He snorted.

“Well, I mean, aside from you nearly dying and me nearly becoming some kind of house whore for your brother and his cronies. But before that? Seeing your treasure and spending the evening talking? I loved every second of it.”

“Me too.”

“And I’m really glad that we’re together.”

“You forgive me? For everything?”

“One hundred percent. But I do reserve the right to bring it up occasionally. I’ll say, *remember when you wouldn’t claim me because you were a little bitch?*”

“Damn, that’s cold.” He barked out a laugh and kissed the top of her head.

“I promise not to do it. Too much.”

He’d take it, though.

He didn’t mind a little teasing to have Diem in his arms. And he certainly wouldn’t be making a mistake like that again.

“You’re well and truly mine,” he said.

Her answer was a soft, sighing snore and it made him smile.

“We’ll talk tomorrow,” he promised with a low voice. And they would. About their mating and the future, about a house filled with kids with her beauty and fierceness.

He was the luckiest dragon on the planet.

## Chapter Nineteen

Tuesday afternoon, Diem shaded her eyes as she watched the truck unload the portable storage unit in the yard behind the bookstore. It slid off the trailer with a thud, dust and debris fluffing up around it.

Eivross spoke to Dillon and Novak about his job with the security team. He and Diem were meeting with Isak later that afternoon at the school, but he wanted to make sure the security team wouldn't be caught off guard with him leaving his position so soon after taking it.

Last night, they met with Rehlik at the bar's office to discuss their plans for the future and he'd been happy to know that the school was going to have a librarian, even offering financial aid to Eivross for college courses if he needed it. He didn't, however, because he had in his hoard a good number of valuable books that he was willing to part with.

"You look so serious," he said as he joined her.

"I was just thinking about your books."

"What about them?"

"Well, they're important to you, right?"

"Sure." He stared at the storage unit for a moment, then looked at her. "Why?"

"I was just thinking that you're selling some of your treasure to pay for your degree, and I was wondering if your dragon was mad about that."

“Hell, no,” he said. “The cool thing about selling some of the treasure is that I get to find new treasure.”

“What do you mean?”

He hooked an arm around her waist and drew her close. His eyes flashed to his dragon’s for a moment as a soft trill rumbled in his chest. She loved seeing his dragon like this, when they were close and he couldn’t keep his hands off her.

“I mean that my dragon is only really attached to a few of the books, the ones that have special meaning. Selling some of the others means I get to buy new books for college, and that’s as intriguing to my dragon as holding onto them.”

“I never thought of it like that.”

“I watched a show once about people who hoard things, and it sometimes seems like they’re indiscriminate about what they hoard, that it’s just *things* and nothing in particular. But I’ve always sold books to buy more books, so my dragon doesn’t mind.” He leaned down and brushed his lips against hers, eliciting a sigh that bubbled up deep within her.

*Was any female as loved as her?*

“Besides, sweet wolfy-lioness, you’re my greatest treasure, and I get you forever.”

She smiled so big her cheeks hurt.

“You’re the very sweetest male on the planet.”

“Just for you.”

Someone cleared their throat, and Eivross glanced over his shoulder. Diem peeked around him and saw the truck driver holding a tablet.

“Just need a signature,” he said.

“Of course,” Eivross said, letting go of his hold on Diem and signing the screen. “Thanks so much.”

“You bet. Have a good one.”

Dillon and Novak joined them.

“That’s really full of books, huh?” Dillon asked.

“Yep,” Eivross said. “Well, books and shelves. I don’t hoard anything but books.”

“I think my son might be part dragon. He buys comic books by the pound.”

Eivross’s eyes lit up. “He does? Hold on.”

He strode to the storage container and bent, grasping the handle and lifting. The door didn’t move for a long moment, and then it screeched in the rails as he lifted it.

“What’s he up to?” Dillon asked.

“I’m not sure.”

As Eivross disappeared into the storage unit, Diem turned to the males.

“Everything good with Eivross leaving the security team?”

“Oh sure,” Dillon said. “He offered to scout over the territory on the full moons when our people get together to shift and hunt.”

“That’s very cool.”

Eivross walked out of the storage unit carrying a small stack of books. When he neared them, she realized they were

comic books in plastic sleeves.

“What’s your son’s name?” Eivross asked as he came to a stop in front of them.

“Kevin,” Dillon said.

“Give these to him for me. And tell him he can come over and look through my storage unit at the comics I have anytime. I don’t have a big collection, just the ones that piqued my interest.”

Dillon’s eyes went wide as he accepted the books. “Holy crap, man, thank you so much. Kevin will be thrilled. What do I owe you?”

Eivross put his arm around Diem. “Not a thing.”

“What? No, let me pay you something.”

He hummed and glanced down at Diem. She smiled up at him encouragingly. “We could go on a double date sometime with you and Mona, that would be payment enough. I read in one of the books in my hoard that having couple friends was a good thing,” Eivross said.

“Mona would love that,” Dillon said. He patted the top comic. “And sincerely, thank you so much. We’ll set something up soon.”

“Sounds good,” Diem said.

Dillon smiled gratefully and walked away, leaving her and Eivross alone at the back of the bookstore with his treasure in a slightly damaged storage unit.

“Well, should we get started?” she asked, taking a step toward the unit so they could begin unloading the books and taking them up to the apartment.



“Hold up there, sweetheart,” he said, lifting her into his arms.

She giggled and grabbed his shoulders, holding herself close. “I thought you wanted to get the books out of the unit.”

“I do,” he said as he walked toward the outside stairs. “But it can wait. The important thing is that I’ve got my favorite treasure right here in my arms.”

“You’ve got the best ideas.”

She snuggled against him, resting her head on his shoulder as he carried her easily up the stairs and into the apartment.

He was right. Everything could wait until they were done enjoying each other. She didn’t care what happened outside of the apartment. She was with her mate.

## Chapter Twenty

“I’m a little nervous,” Eivross said as he and Diem parked in the school lot on Thursday morning. They’d spent the last three days making love and getting to know each other, plus unloading the contents of the ruined storage unit into the apartment, which now looked like it belonged on an episode of that hoarding show with all the boxes filled with books stacked up several feet in the air.

“Don’t be,” she said confidently. “He’s going to love the idea and he’ll also love having a full-time librarian.”

She pressed her ID badge against the touch pad, and the door unlocked with a loud click. A sliding window was next to another set of doors, and Diem explained that visitors had to check in with the office staff before being allowed inside. At the second set of doors, she unlocked it with her badge and he held it open for her, then followed her inside.

The main office had a counter that separated a small waiting area from the working space containing three desks. A few chairs were set against the wall opposite the counter, next to the sliding window. He liked that the building was secure and the pack kids would be safe inside.

“Isak?” she called.

“Just a sec,” a male said.

Eivross looked around the office. “There’s no office staff?”

“There usually is, but our secretary is home resting now that she’s pregnant,” Diem said. “He posted the job online, but

being that we're exile and hybrid friendly, it might not get filled."

"A job's a job, isn't it?" he asked.

"Yes and no," a male said as he walked into the office. "Hi, I'm Dean Frost, but you can call me Isak." He shook Eivross's hand and greeted Diem. "A human might take the job, but no way a purebred would unless they happened to also be exiled. I kind of doubt the job will get filled. I think I'm going to be principal and secretary this school year."

"Maybe someone new will come to town and they'll be dying to be a school secretary," Diem said.

"Well, you never know. Now, what can I do for you two?"

Isak led them into his office. He sat behind a large desk, and Eivross and Diem sat on chairs opposite him.

"Eivross is my mate," Diem said. "He's a dragon and part of the Cider Falls pack."

"I did hear the pack gossip that you'd found your mate. Welcome to town."

She smiled at Eivross, and he cleared his throat. "I'd like to ask if I could be the school librarian." He handed over a resume, which Diem had helped him create that morning. "You'll see from my history that I don't have a degree, but I did apply to the library sciences online program at Forest Hills College."

Isak looked over the resume and put it down. "Well, honestly this is amazing. I've been hoping for a school librarian for a long time. Since we're a pack school, we aren't

as bound to the regulations as the public human schools, so I do have the discretion to hire someone whether they have a degree or not.”

Diem stood and said, “I’m going to leave you two to the discussion. I’ll be in the library whenever you’re done.” She blew him a kiss and hurried from the office. He immediately wanted to follow, but he forced his dragon to focus on the principal.

“I’m very passionate about books. They’re my dragon’s treasure, but more than that, I love sharing books with others. I used to spend my free time in our nest’s library when I was younger. The elder dragons let me return books to their proper place and help people find books, and I also spent many years helping young dragons discover a love of books. I may not have the technical know-how of running a school library, but I can check books out with a computer, put them back on the shelves, and help kids find books.

“I did some research over the last few days, and a library assistant does all those things plus has a working knowledge of library procedures, which I do. I can work full or part time, whatever the school’s need is.”

Eivross blew out a breath when he’d finished speaking.

“That’s amazing,” Isak said. He picked up his phone and pressed on the screen a few times, then turned it around and handed it over to Eivross. “What you just said is basically the job post. Do you have a high school diploma or a GED?”

“Yes, I have a diploma from our nest school.”

“We’ll need to run a background check on you, a federal-level one because you’ll be working with kids.”

“That’s fine.”

“Then I’d like to offer you the job, pending the background check, which should only take a couple days. Now let’s talk salary.”

The two spent the next half hour discussing salary and benefits. Eivross used one of the office computers to fill out the background check online. Isak shook his hand.

“Welcome aboard, Eivross. I’ll give you a call when the background check comes back. In the meantime, you can come work in the library as a volunteer with Diem. Your salary will start when you’re official.”

Eivross’s mind spun as he thought about working in a library and helping kids find books to read. He couldn’t wait to greet the first class of kids and share his love of reading with them.

“Thanks so much,” Eivross said. “Aside from meeting Diem, this is the happiest day of my life.”

“I love to hear that,” Isak said. “Now how about a tour, and then I’ll take you to the library so you can see your mate.”

“Sounds good to me.”

His dragon let out a happy trill in his head.

Not only had he found his truemate in Cider Falls, but he’d found a purpose too. And it wasn’t just to make Diem deliriously happy. In a million years he never would have guessed that he’d be mated and making a life for himself in a hybrid- and exile-friendly town with a purebred wolf for an alpha.

Diem whooped a cheer when he gave her the good news, jumping into his arms and kissing him.

“I’m so happy!”

“I couldn’t tell,” he said with a laugh, giving her a little swing around in a circle. He set her gently on her feet. “I’ll start when the background check comes in.”

“You’re not a criminal, right?” she asked, giving him an exaggeratedly narrowed look.

“I swear.”

“Good.” She showed him around the library, which had a lot of bare shelves. When he asked her about the lack of books, she shrugged. “When they built the school, the library was filled with donated children’s books, but they never had someone actually take the job as librarian. There are people in town who step up to help out, mostly parents who want to be helpful to the school, but no one has done it full time. It just hasn’t been a priority.”

“It is now,” he said. “I’ll go through my collections. We definitely need more books for the older kids. In fact...” He tapped his chin. “I have at least one full set of encyclopedias, and I went through a spell where I collected biographies.”

“The library will be filled in no time,” she said.

They spent a few hours in the library. He used an old notepad he found in the desk to take notes on what needed to be done. A class came into the library, and he was introduced to the handful of children who were in the high school grades and their teacher, a male named Bart who was mated to a female named Maria who also worked in the school.

“We’re doing research on the life cycle of butterflies for science,” Bart said. “I don’t suppose you have any books on that?”

Eivross grinned. “I did see some excellent insect books, let’s go look.”

He winked at Diem and walked with the kids to the shelves.

“Now, what do you guys know about butterflies?”

## Chapter Twenty-One

The following week, Diem used a bath towel to line a box, setting a few glass baking dishes inside.

“That’s the last of the bathroom stuff,” Arely said as she walked into the kitchen. “My car is full. How’s it coming in here?”

“Awesome,” Diem said. “I’ve got this one cabinet to finish loading and that should be it. Oh, wait, I didn’t check the drawer under the stove.”

“On it.”

Arely stooped and pulled open the drawer which screeched a little when it was opened. “Just a cookie sheet. I have several, do you want it?”

“Sure.”

Arely shoved the drawer closed and stood. She helped Diem use kitchen towels to wrap up the baking dishes, everything from glass casseroles to pie plates.

When the last dish had been loaded, Diem held the box closed while Arely taped it up with clear packing tape. Then she wrote *kitchen* on the top and side in large block letters.

“I can’t believe you’re moving,” Diem said.

“I know, but you guys need your privacy. And I get my own place. I mean, I’ve loved living here, even though it wasn’t for a very long time, but I’ve never lived on my own in Cider Falls. First I was with Cymbre and then you.”



“I’m glad the house was available for you,” she said. “Otherwise, you’d have to keep putting up with me and Eivross.”

“We’re delightful,” her mate said as he walked into the kitchen.

“Uh, yeah, except when you two are getting busy. Then there’s not enough noise-canceling headphones in the world to stop what you two do.”

Diem’s cheeks heated, but she laughed. Having excellent hearing as a shifter meant you pretty much heard everything. “Sorry.”

“Hell, don’t apologize. If the shoe were on the other foot and I was the one moaning my mate’s name, I wouldn’t apologize.”

Diem laughed again and hugged her friend. “I’ve really loved having you here. I’m going to miss you.”

“I’ll miss you too. But we’ll still hang out.”

“Right, book club is coming up.”

“And we’re going to the bar on Friday too, plus the full moon is Saturday night.”

“Did I tell you my dad got permission from his alpha to join our pack for the full moon as a guest? Eivross invited him during our video chat the other day, and he was so excited.”

“Oh, I get to meet your dad? That’s so cool. How’s he like the idea of you being mated to a dragon?”

“He loves it. He’s always worried about my safety, but no one will mess with me with such a big, fierce mate.”

“That’s so awesome.” Arely sighed. “I hope I find my mate soon.”

“You will. And in the meantime, I can’t wait to shift and hunt with the pack.” While Eivross was too big in his shift to be in the woods, he would be flying overhead and keeping everyone safe.

“It’ll be a kicking weekend,” Arely said.

Eivross carried the box out to the truck he’d purchased over the weekend and set it in the back, along with the bedroom furniture he’d dismantled.

She and Eivross followed Arely to her new home on the other side of town in a small development. The house, which had just been finished and available for someone to move in, was an adorable two-bedroom with room to expand, flower beds filled with colorful flowers, and a large tree that had an old swing hanging from a low branch.

Once they’d unloaded all her things, Eivross left them alone in the house and she and Arely said goodbye. It wasn’t the sort of goodbye where you never saw the person again, because they had plans to see each other at the school and around town, plus their weekend plans, but it wasn’t the same as living together.

“I’m going to freaking miss you,” Diem said.

“Me too.”

“You’ve been a great roommate. I hope you enjoy your new house; it’s so cute. I love your yard too.”

The two friends walked to the front porch, arms over each other’s shoulders. “I can picture a kid playing there,”

Arely said, her voice going dreamy.

“I’ll be bringing my kids over to play too,” Diem promised. “They’ll need lots of time with their Aunt Arely.”

“And Aunt Diem and Uncle Eivross can make sure they love to read.”

“You bet,” Diem said.

They hugged once more. “See you tomorrow at the school,” Arely said. “I’m making chicken nuggets and mac and cheese.”

“I love your chicken nuggets!”

“I’ll be sure to save you two some.”

“You’re the best.”

“Thanks for helping me move. See ya!”

Diem got into Eivross’s truck, buckled up, then waved at her friend.

“Are you sad, sweetheart?”

“Not sad-sad, just a little sad. Does that make sense?”

“Yes, of course,” he said. He put his arm around her and drew her close, kissing the top of her head.

“Did I tell you that I heard from the dragons in the nest? The ones who were friends to me and worked for my father?”

“The ones you helped keep safe when your brother was on a rampage after he killed your dad?”

“Yep.”

“No! When did you hear from them?”

“When I was loading the bed into the truck,” he said. “Benatrice called me.”

“What’s going on with them? Are they all safe?”

He pulled away from the house and headed toward home. “The FSA showed up the day after Zihndyr died and gathered the whole nest together, explaining what had happened. They were given thirty-six hours to choose a new king, or the nest was going to be dismantled and they would have to join up with a new nest or become exiles.”

“Thirty-six hours isn’t much time to make such a monumental decision,” she mused.

“No, not really. But fortunately, the elder dragons, the ones from before my father’s generation, sought direction from the nest’s laws. Basically, since Zihndyr is dead and I’m exiled, there’s no one left in our family line to take over the nest. That means the line of succession moves to the oldest family in the nest and the most eligible male.”

“Who is it?”

“His name is Gregorie. He’s a few years younger than me and mated. His family is well respected; his grandfather is one of the elders and served on my father’s council. They swore Gregorie in after the nest voted unanimously to move the line of succession to his family.”

“That’s really great news. And he’s a good guy? Benatrice and your other friends will be well cared for with him as ruler?”

“I love that you care about my friends,” he said. “And yes, Gregorie and his mate are good people. They’ll rule fairly, and the nest won’t be doing horrible things under the

leadership of an insane male. And the female my brother stole from her father? She was returned to her family.”

“That’s good. Your brother was such an awful person.”

“Definitely.”

“Is her family still alive?”

Eivross hadn’t known exactly what happened to the other nest, but he had told her that a male dragon wouldn’t allow his daughter to be taken while he was still breathing.

“Her father was killed, but her mother managed to escape along with a younger sibling, and they were all reunited.”

“Some good definitely came from what we went through. A silver lining.”

“For sure you’re my silver lining.” He gave her one of his devastating smiles.

“I’m glad that she’s back with her family,” Diem said.

Eivross parked behind the bookstore and got out, coming around to her side to open her door. He offered his hand and she took it, allowing him to help her to her feet. She loved that he was a gentleman.

They walked up the stairs and into the apartment.

“Are you okay?” he asked, pulling her close.

“Of course. Why?”

“Your friend had to move out because of me.”

She grinned. “Because of the way you drive me wild in bed.”

“And the shower.”

“Fact.” She rested her head over his heart and sighed happily, enjoying the sound of the strong beat. “I lived alone until just a little while ago. It was fun to have her here with me, but she’s happy in her own place. And I get you.” She hugged him a little tighter.

His dragon let out a trill, and she smiled.

“I get you too, my sweet treasure.”

She lifted her head and went onto her toes for a kiss.

His dragon trilled again, and her wolf and lion let out a combined purr growl as contentment filled her.

“I came to Cider Falls with nothing but a suitcase,” she said when the kiss ended. “I’ve loved living here and being part of the pack, accepted by everyone, but I really wasn’t sure if I’d ever find my mate.”

He cupped her face. “It just took a stubborn dragon to come to his senses and leave his nest for you to find me.” He sighed happily. “I wanted a better life and I found it. With you.”

She grinned. “Careful. Saying sexy and sweet things like that will get you lots of pleasure.”

He lifted her into his arms and carried her into the bedroom, where they spent not nearly enough time driving each other wild before falling blissfully asleep, holding each other close.

There was honestly nothing better than having her mate’s arms around her while she drifted off, knowing that her

fierce dragon mate would always be there for her, no matter what.

\* \* \*

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She-wolf Lyric Gerrick knows her alpha wolf parents want her to settle down with a pack member and build a life in Kentucky, but her restless wolf isn't interested in anyone in Allen. After exhausting job options in Allen and the surrounding towns, she answers an ad for a teaching job at Ashland Elementary, a town in Indiana full of mountain lion shifters. Her parents happen to know someone in Ashland willing to let Lyric stay with them during the interview process. What she wants is to get the job. What she doesn't expect? To find not one mate, but two.

Mountain lion shifters Elliott and Evan Fallon have been working for the Ashland police department from the moment

they graduated from the police academy. They both love keeping the humans and shifters in the sleepy town of Ashland safe. When the daughter of their mother's old friend arrives in Ashland for a job interview, they know the moment they lay eyes on her that the delectable Lyric is the one female for them both.

Lyric's parents are not okay with her having two mates who are mountain lion shifters who'd like her to move to Ashland with them. Old wounds are exposed, and painful memories dredged up, but it's not Lyric, Elliott, and Evan's fight—it's their parents'. Can the blooming love between the wolf and mountain lion trio bring their two groups together, or will things be over before they start?

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\* \* \*

[Lyric wasn't one to go snooping](#), and she didn't really feel like she was snooping, but here she was, nonetheless, peeking around the edge of the barn and sorting through the scents on the air to pick up the one that was baffling her beast.

She saw another house nearby; it was a cute ranch with a big porch. A large oak tree shaded a portion of the house, the leaves rustling in the light breeze.

Her wolf encouraged her to keep exploring, to find the sweet and sultry scent that beckoned her and filled her mind with lustful thoughts.

Was she really following a person's scent? A male? What if she was following nothing at all but some weird mishmash of old scents?

Moving forward, she headed to the other house, the scent growing stronger as she neared it. There were two vehicles parked in front—a police squad car and a pickup truck. She briefly wondered if the house belonged to Callie's kids, but she didn't know enough about her mom's old friend to make that assumption. Her mother had said that the pride lived in a big house together, like a hotel of some kind, but Callie clearly didn't live there.

She could feel the heat coming off the squad car as she drew near to it.

Pausing, she closed her eyes and inhaled, touching her wolf and letting her have time to sort through the scents.

There it was—super strong now—the woods and fall, sunshine and honey.

Her body reacted swiftly, her stomach clenching and her wolf letting out a happy growl.

A door creaked and she opened her eyes to find two males staring at her from the open doorway.

Tall. Dark haired. Sexy as hell.

Was she drooling? She should be.

She'd never seen two more appealing males in her life.

They were identical in every way, except the one on the right's hair was a little longer, his eyes a little darker.

Sucking in a sharp breath, she tried to get her mouth to work so she could say something, but she didn't know what she was going to say anyway.

Um, hello, you're sexy as hell, can I park on your face for a while?

Her cheeks heated as some wicked scenarios played through her mind of her and the two males, rolling around in bed together.

“Hello,” the one on the left said. “You look lost, are you okay?”

Oh wow, he had a great voice. Sexy and deep, with just the hint of authority that told her he was a powerful shifter.

“I'm Lyric Gerrick. I...” She let her sentence die because she didn't know what to say.

The two left the doorway and stalked to her, their gaze intent, their irises bleeding to amber as their beasts surfaced.

Her wolf liked that a lot. A hell of a lot.

“I’m Elliott,” the one on the right said as he drew close to her. He was wearing shorts and nothing else, a fantastic set of abs visible and clearly in need of being kissed and licked.

“I’m Evan,” the other said. He was wearing a police uniform that did nothing to hide his broad shoulders and muscular frame.

“Lyric.” Ah shit, she was repeating herself.

Both males chuckled. “You’re the she-wolf from Allen, right? Our mom told us you were coming,” Elliott said. “But the question is, do you know why you’re here at our house and not at our parents’?”

\* \* \*

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R. E. Butler is a USA Today Best Selling Author of Paranormal Romance such as the Were Zoo and Cider Falls series. She lives on the water in New Jersey with her husband, kids, and two enormous, furry pups.

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