



FORGOTTEN KINGDOMS

OF
DRAGONS
&
DESIRE

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
G.K. DE ROSA

Of Dragons & Desire

FORGOTTEN KINGDOMS

G.K. DEROSA



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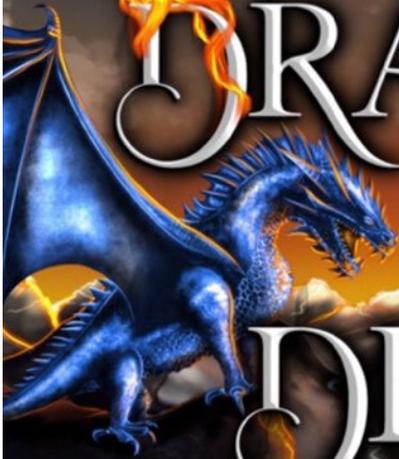
*To all my amazing Forgotten Kingdoms co-authors! It's been a
wild ride :)*

~ GK



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GK DE ROSA



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Introduction to Forgotten Kingdoms

Forgotten Kingdoms Series

Eight women.

One sacrifice to save their kingdoms.

A chance to reclaim the love they lost.

Collection notes:

Forgotten Kingdoms is a collection of full-length stand-alone fantasy romance novels with fated mates and a guaranteed happily ever after. With vampires, fae, shifters, and everything in between, each book features a unique heroine and her epic love story that can be read in any order. All relationship dynamics are strictly M/F.

Authors in this set include:

Chandelle LaVaun

G.K. DeRosa

Megan Montero

Jen L. Grey

Robin D. Mahle & Elle Madison

LJ Andrews

R.L. Caulder

M. Sinclair

FORGOTTEN KINGDOMS

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE



TERREA

(WORLD NAME)

TER-AY-YUH

HAVESTIA

(FESTIVAL WHEN THE VEIL
BETWEEN WORLDS OPENS)

HAV-EST-EE-UH

AELVARIA

EMBER
HADEON

EL-VAHR-EE-UH

EM-BURR
HAY-DEE-ON

DRACONIA

SAPHIRA
RYKER

DRAH-CONE-EE-UH

SA-FEE-RUH
RYE-KURR

ISRAMAYA

RHODELIA
VARAN

IS-RUH-MY-UH

ROW-DEL-EE-UH
VAIR-EN

ISRAMORTA

MORGANA
AVALON

IS-RUH-MOR-TUH

MOR-GAHN-UH
AV-UH-LAHN

MAGIARIA

ADIRA
KAGE

MAYJ-AIR-EE-UH

AH-DEER-UH
KAYJ

SEPEAZIA

STELLA
BRANDT

SEH-PEE-ZEE-UH

STEL-UH
BRANT

TALAMH

ALINA
KIERAN

TAL-AHV

AH-LEEN-UH
KEER-AN

VARGR

EVERA
AXEL

VAR-GUR

EH-VEER-UH
AX-EL

Prologue



Las Vegas, Present Time

Saphira

Even over the pounding bass, the whispers never stopped.

I clapped my hands over my ears and willed the dark voice away. It—no, she—had been with me for as long as I could remember. Even tonight as I weaved between the smattering of trees then through the mass of writhing bodies on the dancefloor at Sin Forest, the hottest night club on the Strip, I couldn't drown out the sound.

Most of the time they were only rough murmurs. A growly voice I couldn't quite place and yet recognized deep within the marrow of my bones.

Soon, Saphira. It's almost time.

I squeezed my eyes shut and willed that damned voice far down. Tonight, was supposed to be fun. It was my twenty-first birthday, Halloween, and I'd scored the highly coveted golden ticket and all-expense paid trip to Vegas to the super exclusive Portal Resort and Casino. It was *the* party of the year. Best of all, my two oldest friends, or rather, practically sisters would be here. If I could only find them in this insane crowd.

Stepping through the dark fog that must have been pumped through the vents of this place to give it that dark and creepy forest vibe, I passed a mirrored wall and snuck a quick glance at my retro costume. Xena Warrior Princess was an oldie but a goodie. Something about the sword across my back and the daggers strapped to my thighs just felt right. I'd considered

wearing a dark wig over my neon blue hair but had thankfully nixed the idea. I would've been a sweaty disaster wearing that thing. As I walked past the mirror, I wondered what costumes Rhode and Morgana would be wearing.

After another unsuccessful round skirting the packed, dark dancefloor, I shoved my way to the bar. Tossing my long blue locks over my shoulder, I magically managed to get the bartender's attention. Score one for my blindingly bright locks. It took endless maintenance but was totally worth it. A series of golden hoops were speared through the bartender's ears, the sparkling gold catching my eye.

"What can I get you, gorgeous?"

How about those sparkly trinkets?

"Shh!" I hissed at that damned intrusive voice. From the moment I could remember, I'd always had a penchant for all things sparkly.

The guy cocked a light brow. "Lady, the music is blasting in here, if I don't yell, you'd never hear me."

"Oh, sorry, right." I shook my head and pressed a finger to my ear. "My hearing is just really sensitive," I shouted lamely. Better that than admitting I heard voices in my mind. I pointed at a glowing neon blue drink a girl further down the bar was holding. "I'll take three of those and three shots, your choice."

"Sure, three Electric Waves and bartender's choice coming right up."

I scanned the dancefloor as I waited, but still no sign of the girls. Where were they? A second later, the bartender handed me the fancy cocktails and shots. "They match your hair."

Juggling the glasses, I took a big gulp of mine and muttered, "Yup." No shit, Captain Obvious. I dropped some cash on the bar and spied an empty high top just a few feet away and claimed the table. Reaching for my phone tucked inside my leather corset, I shot Rhode a quick message.

Me: Where are you guys?

Rhode: Just made it in the club. Sorry, we got stuck in an elevator.

Me: What?

Rhode: Long story, we'll tell you about it in person.

Me: Fine. I got drinks and a table to the right of the bar, next to that wall of mirrors.

Rhode: Okay, be there in a second.

A smile curled the corners of my lips. Rhode and I had met in high school and somehow, she'd convinced her foster parents to adopt me when I was sixteen. Her older sister Morgana was like the mom we never had and needed so damned badly. I'd spent the best two years of my life with them in that old house. Growing up in the system had been rough, and I'd never felt like part of a family until I moved in with them.

I tucked my phone between my breasts and when I glanced up, twin silver orbs stared down at me from the upper level. The hair on the back of my neck rose, and a ripple of goosebumps skated down my arms. What the hell?

That piercing gaze drilled into me, the assault more powerful than any police pat down. I was obsessed with shiny things, and sometimes, that got me into trouble. And those eyes, the way they glittered had desire unfurling in my core. To claim, to possess...

Mine. Mine. Mine.

The damned rough voice in my head clawed its way to the surface and for an instant, everything else disappeared. The music slowed, the pounding bass dissipated, and the crowd of bodies moved in slow motion. Shit, I'm losing my mind. Squeezing my eyes closed again, I drew in a deep breath and focused on stilling my thundering pulse.

I blinked quickly, looked up again and the smoldering silver orbs were gone. The music blared, and the mass of bodies picked up their frantic tempo once again. I pressed my hand to my chest and sucked in another breath. What the hell was in that drink?

Taking a measured sip to cool the sudden dryness in my throat, my gaze lifted to the level above. No glowing silver eyes, nothing weird. Except for the troop of aliens dressed in shimmering silver leotards.

Duh, Saphira. It's Halloween. Someone must have been wearing glowing contact lenses. That's totally a thing, right?

Over the rim of my glass, I spotted two familiar females making their way through the crowd. "Rhode! Morgana!" I jumped off the barstool and wrapped the girls in a hug. It had been nearly a year since I'd seen them last and somehow it felt like not a minute had passed.

Rhode motioned to my costume, a smile lighting up her face. "Xena Warrior Princess! Absolutely epic."

Morgana licked her finger and made a sizzling sound. "Smokin' hot. You look fantastic, birthday girl."

"I love that we all went retro tonight." I ran my hands over the pleather pieces of my skirt.

Apparently, I wasn't the only one that had gone for famous celebrities from the past. Rhode was channeling Madonna in that classic music video in a tight corset with cones on her breasts. While Morgana turned back time as Cher with a bodysuit made entirely out of mesh, sequins, and tiny strips of black material covered only by a leather jacket. I was definitely impressed by their commitment.

"Are we really surprised?" Morgana winked.

Not really. We'd always been obsessed with things of the past, from movies to music to TV, we loved anything retro. It was as if the present didn't quite appeal to us.

I pointed to the row of shots lined up next to the neon blue cocktails with little umbrellas in them. "Sit. Drink. Tell me how you got stuck in an elevator?"

Morgana's lips twisted. "Shots first. Trauma second."

Fine by me. We all reached for our shots and tossed them back in perfect sync. Rhode's face wrinkled up in a scowl, and she shook her head. "Okay, no more shots."

“Until we hit the next bar, right?” I swayed to the intoxicating beat of the music. I was just getting started.

Rhode pulled the Electric Wave toward her, and her eyes widened in delight. “Sure... oh, my God. Are these frozen margaritas?”

“Electric Waves.” I held up my drink, the brilliant blue aglow beneath the rainbow of lights overhead. “Cheers to us finally being together again.”

“Cheers and happy birthday!” Rhode leaned in, holding her glass up.

“Cheers to that and not taking another elevator ever again. Because that was an ordeal.”

“I can’t wait to hear this. Something tells me this story has...flavor.” I cackled and took a long sip of my drink.

“Go ahead, Mo.” Rhode waved her sister on to tell the whole story.

I could barely hear her over the pounding bass, but it was something about a naked shark and a T-Rex tail smacking everyone and Rhode’s epic nursing skills.

“I mean the triage in the elevator was pretty impressive,” said Morgana.

Rhode took another sip of her drink and gave her purse a pat. “And you judged me for my first aid kit. I warned you there’d be blood to clean up tonight.”

“You’re not making me want to go back out there.” I continued to sip my drink then hissed and pinched the bridge of my nose. “Ugh, brain freeze.”

Rhode snapped her fingers then pointed to her own lips. “Stick your tongue to the roof of your mouth.”

Hmm, weird, but... I did as instructed as often was the case when I was around these two. And it worked! “Nurse Rhode for the win.”

“Two for two.” She held two fingers up and stuck her tongue out at Morgana. “Guys, I really needed this break from

work. I'm so happy we're finally here."

"Yeah, let's not go even half as long without seeing you, Saphira." A rueful smile crossed her lips. "I won't stand for it."

I grinned at Morgana. "Yes, mom."

"I feel like Lady Tremaine sometimes with you two."

Rhode frowned and glanced up at me. "Does that make us Anastasia and Drizella?"

I snapped my fingers, imagining the wicked stepsisters. "Which one wears green and blue?"

"Drizella," Rhode and Morgana said in unison.

"Dibs." I chuckled and took another sip of my drink. Damn, this stuff was ah-mazing.

"I look good in pink and purple," said Rhode.

We all started chattering and reminiscing about the past, and again it felt like just yesterday we'd all been living under the same roof. Only we hadn't been, not for years. I'd been working part-time as a barista and taking classes at the local community college, and Rhode was a freaking nurse.

"I need a pet to pet," Morgana mumbled, drawing me from my thoughts. Pets were not a thing in the foster care system and a big no-no with our adoptive parents, but Morgana had always wanted one.

"Get a lizard that can sit on your shoulder all day at work like in that tv show." Rhode cupped her hands in front of her like she was holding something small.

"That's a great idea, sis."

"So clearly our love lives are going great." Rhode snickered and tapped my arm while waggling her eyebrows. "Let's hear who's been in your bed?"

As if on cue, a man with sandy blonde hair and brown eyes slid into the space between Rhode and I, resting his bony elbow on the table. "Are you looking for volunteers, Madonna?"

Rhode gave him a wide grin that sparked a twinkle in her pale blue eyes. She leaned forward like she was going to tell him a secret. “Pull your lip over your head and swallow it. Thanks. Have the night you deserve.”

A laugh burst from my mouth as the guy lingered there for the longest minute ever, and I nearly spat out a mouthful of blue alcohol. This night was going to be epic.

“That was fun,” Rhode deadpanned.

“Now I see why you suspected we’d need to clean up blood tonight.” Morgana smirked. “So Saphira are you dating anyone or is the field wide open and you’re just waiting to be caught?”

I rolled my eyes. “Yeah right. LA is like the land of vapid idiots in expensive sports cars.”

“I mean... you’re not wrong.” Morgana glanced at Rhode, but her eyes had gone glassy.

“Rhode?” She nudged her. “Dreaming again?”

Rhode pointed one finger at something over her sister’s shoulder. “Dibs.”

I glanced in the direction she pointed, and my eyes nearly popped out of my head. Damn. Morgana whistled under her breath. There was no doubt about it, the guy was gorgeous. With black pants and a cream loose blouse he looked like a pirate, the super sexy kind. Rhode didn’t even hide her interest. Hell, I wouldn’t have either.

The guy sauntered over and stopped right in front of her. With hair as dark as night and eyes burning an otherworldly amber glow, he leaned casually against the table and held out his pale hand. “Dance with me?”

Her head dipped, hiding her eyes behind a curtain of light gray hair, and shock curved my mouth into a capital O. I glanced at Morgana as the stranger led Rhode into the sultry shadows of the dancefloor.

I gulped down another long pull from the straw, irritation niggling at my insides. This was supposed to be our night

together. We barely saw each other anymore, not since I'd moved to Los Angeles when I'd turned eighteen and aged out of foster care. I caught a glimpse of a smiling Rhode and the hot pirate, and the annoyance vanished. The dude really was crazy hot. "I know we were supposed to be hanging out tonight, but even I would ditch us for that."

Rhode's older sister took a sip and shrugged, her long black hair cascading over her shoulders. "We need a little of that ourselves."

"Tell me about it."

Morgana groaned, her eyes going glossy. "I might have possibly seen the most beautiful guy ever just outside the elevator."

I leaned in, taking another slurp of my drink. "Tell me more."

"It was only for a second but dark hair and piercing blue eyes. He was there one minute and gone the next. If ever there was a guy to get my interest tonight... it'd be him."

I glanced around the club, hazarding a quick peek at the upper levels. I was so not looking for glowing silver eye guy, I was totally looking for Morgana's dude. "So where is he?"

"I have no idea, but I'd love to find out."

"Same, sister, but mother nature calls." I dropped my empty glass onto the table and shot her a grin. "When I get back from the bathroom the hunt begins."

"Do you want me to go with you?"

I shook my head. "Those damn lines are always too long. Keep an eye on Rhode with that potential stalker, I'll be right back."

"Okay, but if you're not back in like ten minutes I'm going in after you."

I gave her a dramatic eyeroll before sauntering away. "Yes, mom," I called out over my shoulder.

Pushing my way through the crowd, I searched for the restroom sign. Dammit, I really had to pee now. “Excuse me.” *Out of my way!* I slipped past a couple making out, and an arm weaved around my waist, tugging me against a hard body.

My head swiveled around to find some tatted-up blonde guy. He nuzzled my ear and the scent of vodka hung in the air between us. “Let go, asshole,” I hissed.

His arm only tightened around my waist, pressing into my bladder. “Come on Xena, it’s just one dance.” He rubbed against me, his arousal grossly apparent against my ass.

I was about a second away from unleashing the plastic dagger at my thigh. “Let go of me you dickhead, or I’ll drive this fake blade through your eyeball.”

His arm suddenly fell away, and a satisfied smile curled my lips. Until I heard the scream. Whipping around, I caught the blonde guy flying half-way across the room. He landed on top of a crowd of partygoers who lifted him high in the air, pumping their arms to the beat.

“Humans.” The deep hiss pivoted my attention to the towering male who’d suddenly appeared beside me. A snarl carved into his wide jaw as he scrutinized me from head to toe. The high collar and leather breastplate across his thick chest did nothing to hide his muscled form beneath. Gold-plated shoulder armor had my twitchy fingers reaching for the shiny, scaled metal.

“Excuse me?” I squeezed out.

He ran his hand through his wild midnight locks, drawing my attention to his eyes. A brilliant silver. “Nothing, never mind. I’ve come to collect you, princess.”

The man’s huge hand wrapped around my upper arm, and he toted me through the mess of bodies. I jerked and wiggled, but his hold was relentless. What the hell was going on tonight? Was it a full moon or something?

“Um, I think you have me confused with someone else,” I yelled over the music. “My name’s not Princess.” I glanced at

my costume, and I wanted to smack myself. Oh, right, Xena, the Warrior Princess. This guy's got jokes.

When we finally reached the edge of the dancefloor, he whirled around, and his icy silver gaze landed on my neck. His eyes narrowed, and he ran his finger down the column of my throat, lingering on a patch of tawny skin, a mark I'd had since birth. Every nerve ending on my body lit up. My gaze lifted to the same spot on his throat, and the gilded swirls peeking over the top of his high collar. His lip curled into a snarl, and he let out a grunt. "No, I am not mistaken, Princess Saphira. I've come to take you home."

"Why are you calling me that? And wait, how do you know my name?"

"I know many things about you, princess, but now is not the time. We must go before The Veil closes."

"The what?"

Trust him. That voice surged to the surface, as if this night wasn't turning out to be crazy enough. *Go with him.*

I couldn't just go with him. What about Morgana and Rhode?

All the air punched from my lungs as he scooped me into his arms. The intoxicating scent of musky sandalwood invaded my nostrils, and like magic, the tension in my muscles seeped away. There was no fight, no flight.

"Hey!" I squealed. "You can't just do that. And what about my friends? They're going to be looking for me."

"You'll see them again soon enough." His dark gaze locked on mine, and I couldn't take him in fast enough. The fine arch of his brow, the thick stubble along his jawline, the slight bend in the bridge of his nose, as if it had been broken and not quite healed right.

My brows slammed together, and I forced my eyes away from his. What was this sorcery? I should've been screaming, fighting, doing anything to get away from this man. But every bone in my body recognized his.

Which was absolutely insane.

As was how fast we were suddenly moving. The mosaic of metallic gold from the front lobby blurred by in a twinkle of lights. He turned the corner toward the archways that led to the elevator banks. I'd been walking through the labyrinth earlier, lost within the glittering hallways.

A gilded mirror stood between the men's and women's bathroom, and I suddenly remembered how badly I had to pee. "I have to—"

The rest of my sentence died on my tongue as my kidnapper snapped his fingers and shimmering silver flames sparked to life on his fingertips. I gasped, all the air squeezing from my lungs. He tossed the building flames at the mirror and our reflections disappeared, replaced by a vortex of whirling light.

"What in the world?"

"We're going home, princess."

Before I could get another word out, he leapt into the flames and my screams were swallowed up by the swirling abyss.

One

SAPHIRA



Kingdom of Fuoco, Isle of Draconia, Terrea

My boots hit the hard-packed sand, and my knees wobbled for an instant before my body hurtled forward. My arms shot out in a desperate attempt to brace myself for the fall, but my head spun so badly, I had no idea which direction was up or down.

Welcome home, Saphira. That familiar voice swam through my mind.

An iron band laced around my waist, suspending me in mid-air when I wavered. My shoulder blades smacked into a firm block of muscle, the heat radiating from his form my only clue it belonged to a man and not the side of the jagged cliff of the mountains surrounding us.

“Breathe slowly. The dizziness should wear off in a moment.” Warm breath blazed across the shell of my ear, and a shudder surged down my spine.

Ignoring the freakish sensation, I cocked my head at my captor. “What in the hell just happened? Where are we?” I wrapped my fingers around his massive, tattooed forearm and tried to pry myself free from his hold. Like last time, I accomplished nothing but extreme irritation. On both our parts.

“If I let you go, you’ll fall, princess.”

“Then let me fall!” I speared my elbow into his stomach and bit out a squeal. *Mother Terrea, that hurt.*

Mother Terrea? Where the goddess had that come from?

Goddess?

Nausea roiled around in my gut, and I leaned back against the stranger. I was losing my mind. No, it was that drink! I'd been drugged. That would explain the incomprehensible lusty sensations toward this mountain of a man holding me captive.

"If you hurt me, I'll hunt you down and stab you with my dagger," I muttered. Was I slurring? The arid sand beneath my feet shot up over my head. The endless blue blurred, and I squeezed my eyes closed. "Oh, no, I think I'm going to be sick." I hunched over and blue liquid spewed from my lips, and all over my captor's shiny leather boots.

A growl of irritation rumbled low in his chest, vibrating my entire backside. He never let go though. His firm hold held me up as I spilled the contents of my belly all over the dry, cracked earth. Strong fingers banded around my hair, keeping the loose strands out of my face.

When I had nothing left, I spat out the foul taste in my mouth and wiped the saliva from my chin. Damn you, Rhode and Morgana... I never should've ordered those shots.

Shit, Rhode and Morgana must be so worried about me.

"Better?" he whispered.

I blinked quickly and forced my eyes to focus on the foreign land sprawling around me. This was definitely not Las Vegas. Although the arid landscape did share a slight resemblance to the desert. But just beyond the flat stretch of land, lay a monstrous mountain range dotted with pools of bright orange and crimson molten lava. Jagged, dusky mountains rose like giants from the land, their peaks lost in the sulfurous clouds. Molten rivers cascaded from the heights, carving sinuous paths through the barren, blackened plains below. *Toto, we're definitely not in Kansas anymore.* "My stomach yes, the rest of me, no."

He loosened his death grip, and I sank onto the hardpacked earth. To my surprise, he crouched down beside me, piercing silver eyes scrutinizing. I kept my eyes down, pinned to the

splatter of blue alcohol across his leather boots. He couldn't be happy about that.

"I demand you take me back. Immediately."

"Oh, you demand, do you?" A stupid smirk stretched across his handsome face.

"Will you just tell me where we are? And who the hell you are for that matter? And also, why am I speaking funny?"

His head cocked to the side, dark tangles of hair settling on his forehead. "You don't know?"

"Um, no. How the hell would I?"

"All in due time I suppose, princess." He eyed me again, as if he were assessing something, but for the life of me I couldn't figure out what. My sanity, maybe? Because I was fairly certain I'd lost it on that rollercoaster ride of lights. He snuck a hand beneath his leather breastplate and revealed what looked like a flask from like cave man times. Uncorking it, he handed it to me. "Take small sips. We must move soon."

The *hell no* sat poised on my lips, but truthfully, I *was* parched. I was also about a second away from ripping off this costume. The fake pleather corset was digging into my ribs and sweat pooled between my boobs, the thick fabric and my skin. My fingers wrapped around the suede pouch, and I gulped down a long chug.

"I said small sips," he growled.

"I'm thirsty, okay? Time travel or whatever the hell just happened takes its toll on a girl."

The hint of a smile twitched at the corner of his lips. "I'd prefer it if you didn't vomit all over my shoes again."

"Sorry," I murmured around the tip of the kidney-shaped container.

"Finish up so we can go. We must reach Flintguard Fortress before nightfall."

"Or what? A big bad monster is going to eat us?"

“No, the desert raukids prefer to consume your soul and leave the husk of your body intact for the bralicans to devour. It’s a symbiotic relationship, if you will.”

I was fairly certain my eyes were about to pop out of my head. “You’re screwing with me, right?”

“I do not screw with women. I bed them well and thoroughly.” A glint of mischief lit up the somber gray of his irises until they smoldered a fiery silver.

I swallowed hard to moisten my once again parched throat.

“Are you quite finished with my waterskin?”

I glanced down at the leathery flask clutched between my fingers. I took another long pull before handing it back to him.

Once he sheathed it beneath his breastplate, he rose and offered me a hand. “It’s time to go, princess.”

“I need to go home...”

“Well, that’s not happening. The Veil that separates us from Earth is closed. It only opens once every fifty years, and our window just ended.”

I stared, jaw unhinged, as I tried to process his words. Veil? Earth? What?

“Now, please, come with me.”

I would’ve refused him, but my head still spun, and I wasn’t entirely certain I’d be able to stand without his assistance. Closing my hand around his beastly palm, I gave my wobbly legs a try. He hauled me up before I could get my feet out from under me, and I stumbled right into that unyielding chest again.

“Oomph,” I muttered, my mouth pressed to the soft leathers.

“Will you be able to walk, or must I carry you?”

“I’m perfectly capable of walking.” Pressing my palms to his rigid torso, I extricated myself from his hold. Bracing my knees, I somehow managed to remain upright. Thank, *Mother Terrea*. “Who is Mother Terrea?” I blurted.

My sullen companion was already a few steps ahead of me, leading us deeper into the wasteland and in the opposite direction of the towering mountain range. At least, our trek would be a flat one.

“And how long exactly do we have to walk?”

“So many questions.” Though I couldn’t see his face as he marched in front of me, I could practically feel the eye roll.

I lengthened my strides in an attempt to catch up with his ridiculously long ones. “At least tell me your name.”

He blew out a breath, and wisps of silver smoke swirled in the air. *What the...?* I squeezed my eyes shut, then rubbed them until they hurt. How long had I been awake for? Sleep deprivation, that must be it. It had been almost midnight in Vegas and here, the blazing sun still sat full over the horizon.

“I’m not sure that’s wise.”

“Why not? Are you like a faery king and if you tell me your real name I’ll have some crazy power over you?”

A full-on laugh tumbled from his lips, shaking his barrel chest. The unexpected warm sound was like a heated caress. It was so startling my stomach clenched. “Is that the nonsense they teach you in the human world?”

“The human world?” I blurted.

“Yes, princess, the hell hole I just rescued you from.” His eyes lanced into mine.

“Rescued? So you’re like my knight in shining armor? I hate to break it to you, buddy, but you’re about twenty-one years too late. Had I known all of this awaited me,” – I threw my hands into the air, palms up and twirled around dramatically – “I would’ve run away a long time ago, like when I was eleven and Mr. Smith thought it would be fun to use my arm to put out his cigarettes, or at thirteen with Mr. Chandler who got his rocks off by watching me sleep at night.”

Darkness curtained his brilliant eyes, and the clench of his jaw sharpened. A tendon fluttered beneath the scruffy surface

but not a single syllable came out.

Mother T, what was wrong with me spilling all my dark secrets to a stranger?

I gritted my teeth and quickened my pace, so I moved a few strides ahead of him. *Great plan, Saphira. You have no idea where you're going.* That voice was much too clear this time. I clapped my hands over my ears. *Shut up*, I shot back.

“I didn’t say anything.” Big, tall, and broody behind me grumbled.

Shift, did I say that out loud?

Shift?

What in all the worlds was happening to me?

“How much longer?” I asked again. The plastic daggers were digging into my thighs, and I was scared if I made one wrong move, I’d impale my precious baby-making organ. Not that I particularly wanted kids, but I’d at least like the option.

“It’s about half a day’s trek to the fortress.”

Well, that sounded foreboding. “And whose fortress is this exactly?”

“The king’s.”

“Of course, it is.” My eyes rolled so far back I was certain only the whites showed. “And why are you taking me there again?”

“To deliver you to the king’s son, your betrothed.”

Two

SAPHIRA



“Say what now?” I wrapped my hand around the big brute’s forearm, and I still couldn’t get my fingers to touch.

He stopped, but I doubted it had anything to do with me jerking his arm. I was probably nothing more than an annoying fly to him.

“Say that part again about the king, only slower.”

“You, Saphira Highborne, are betrothed to the king’s son. I was sent to procure you from the human world and bring you safely back to Flintguard Fortress.”

“Where we’ll all live happily ever after?” An insane laugh burst from my lips. “What kind of sick joke is this?”

“I’m afraid it’s no joke, Saphira.”

“Who? I mean how? How can I be betrothed to someone I’ve never even met?”

“You have met,” he mumbled. “This betrothal has been planned for decades.”

“By whom?”

He shook his head, lips pressing into a firm line. “You’ll understand everything soon enough.”

Goddess, this made no sense. “Tell me your damned name so I can at least yell at you properly!” Heat surged in my gut, and it had nothing to do with the infuriatingly handsome man glaring down at me. Fire singed my veins, tightening around my lungs and a tremor of rage shook my entire body.

“Relax, Saphira,” he whispered. “Just let her out.”

“Let who out?” I shrieked.

His dark brows slammed together, and he stepped closer. His strong hands framed my face, and my breath hitched at the oddly familiar touch. “You really don’t remember?”

“No, you ash-hole, I don’t!” I clapped my hand over my mouth, eyes gone wide. What was happening with my tongue? It just kept spilling out weird words.

His eyes closed, but his lids fluttered, dark lashes fanning the soft skin beneath. There was something so familiar about his expression, the line between his brows, the frustrated set of his jaw. His eyes snapped open, and I diverted my gaze. The last thing I needed was for this guy to think I was checking him out.

Which I so wasn’t. I was scoping out the enemy. The first chance I got I’d make a run for it, to that swirling light, merry-go-round, time travel thing. Sure, my life had started like crap in the “human world”, but I’d made things work in the end. I was taking classes at LA City College, and my life was on a decent track. I sure as hell didn’t need whatever *this* was.

“You know, I never asked to be saved,” I gritted out. “I figured out a way to survive on my own, despite my shitty start.”

“I’m sure you did.”

A sharp squeal sent my head tipping skyward.

“Get down!” Big, dark and broody slammed into me, and I hit the earth with a smack. *Mother T*, this man was as solid as a California redwood. I could barely drag in a breath with his enormous body smothering me.

Another shriek just overhead stilled my uncomfortable squirming. A shadow blotted out the clear blue sky, and massive feathered wings blanketed everything.

“What the isles are those things?” Their wingspan stretched wider than my first car.

“Eglids. Blasted winged scavengers.”

“What do they want?”

“To eat us.”

The remaining air fled my lungs. “Are you kidding me, right now?”

“They must have a nest nearby.” His gaze flickered over my head to the mountain range running to our left. “It looks like the entire flock has come out to warn us away.”

“Mission accomplished.” I drew in a breath, willing my lungs to inflate beneath the mass of male pinning me to the ground. “So now what?” I rasped out.

One of the oversized birds dived, and his entire body tensed above me. The thunderous flapping of wings echoed just over my head. From the corner of my eye, I caught a glimpse of the creature as he divebombed us. Claws and teeth like a freaking mountain lion and an owl-like head that turned at an unnatural angle. He stretched out its talons, and a shrill cry rang out.

“Stay down!” My kidnapper leapt up and drew one of the swords strapped across his back.

I sucked in a breath of blessed air and craned my neck to see the gleaming blade cut across the creature’s torso. Blood spurted the earth, painting the cracked sand in a riot of crimson. The warm liquid splattered my back, and a bout of nausea crawled up my throat. *Oh, yuck.*

More screams echoed from above, and a dark cloud moved over us.

This couldn’t be good.

Birds shot down from the sky, one after another, their beady eyes focused on my sword-wielding escort. I reached for one of the plastic daggers strapped to my thigh and flung it at the closest creature.

The fake blade hit it right between its eyes, but it barely flinched. I did however succeed in pissing it off. The freaky bird swung left, abandoning his big target for me and let out a sharp squawk.

“Saphira, move!”

I darted right, and the hiss of his blade passed just over my head and sank into the eglid’s belly. Tall, dark and murderous jerked the sword out and spun around in time to sink it into the next winged monster.

He reached behind his back, drew the second sword and handed it to me. “Take this.”

“Nah, I’m good.” I stared at the massive broadsword and took a step back.

“Saphira, if you value your life as much as I do, you’ll do as I say. Right. Now.”

I swallowed past the lump in my throat, and my hand closed around the gilded hilt. The flicker of rubies caught my eye, and saliva pooled in my mouth. *Shiny*. Shaking my head out, I focused on the feel of the weapon clenched in my palm. “I have no idea how to use this thing.”

“Yes, you do. Trust me.” The hard set of his jaw softened for an instant. Ghostly fingers danced across that face, tangling through that dark wild hair. *My fingers?* “Saphira, focus!”

I blinked quickly, chasing away the odd images. “You know, it would be easier to trust you if I at least knew your goddess damned name!”

A pair of eglids hurtled toward us and he raised his sword, a dark glint in his eye. “It’s Ryker, now swing that damned sword, princess!”

Ryker. I rolled the name around in my mouth, felt it on my tongue.

“Now!”

I arced the sword over my head and brought it down with all the force I could muster. I caught the animal on the wing, opening up a deep gash along the bone. It slammed to the ground and rolled. Ryker was on it in an instant and delivered a fatal blow.

Holy, *Mother*.

“All right,” Ryker growled. “I’m done fooling around with these beasts. I don’t care what Abba said.” Silver flames ignited across his eyes, and his pupils thinned to narrow slits. “Get behind me.”

I clutched the sword and moved behind his broad back. Heat emanated from his body, the temperature so high I could feel it even standing a foot behind him. Shimmery silver scales rippled across his exposed forearms, and a gasp escaped my clenched lips.

Ryker snapped his fingers and flames danced across his fingertips. *What in Terrea?* Silver fire? He brought his hands together, and a fireball formed between his palms. He tossed one, then another rapid fire into the flock of attacking eglids.

I stared, mouth agape as each missile hit its mark. Screams and the scent of burnt flesh and feathers filled the air. The noxious odor reached my nostrils, and I held my breath until the birds began to retreat.

Their massive wings beat out a thundering rhythm as they turned toward the mountains and disappeared within the tall crags. I scanned the peaks as they disappeared, my eyes focusing on the rivers of lava carving a trail down the hilltops. Once they were gone, I released the breath I’d been holding.

Ryker spun around, his pupils still sharper than diamonds. Sweat beaded along his brow and deep crimson splattered his torn leathers. His breastplate was ripped in half, claw marks raking across his stacked abs. “Were you harmed, princess?”

“No, I’m fine,” I huffed out, forcing my gaze away from his sculpted torso. “Now are you going to tell me what the hell that was about? And why you held out on me with that wicked firepower?”

“Not here.” He eyed the eglid bodies littering the bloodied ground. “The bralicans will be here shortly for the carcasses, and I’m in no mood to take on a hungry pack.”

“Can we at least walk and talk?”

“Fine, if you think you can handle doing both at the same time.”

Ash-hole. “I’m not sure if you missed it, but as it turns out I’m kind of a badass with a sword.”

Ryker laughed, a thundering belly laugh that shook the flat planes of his stomach. “Fifty years in the human world has affected you more than I’d imagined.”

“Excuse me?”

He shook his head and let out another exasperated sigh, like I was the one that just kidnapped him and brought him to some crazy alternate universe. “Follow me, princess.”

Three

SAPHIRA



I dipped beneath the tangle of emerald-hued vines and eyed the murky cave. Phosphorescent moss climbed up the walls, casting an ethereal light across the rock. I ducked under the stalactites that hung like shimmering chandeliers, and my brow shot up into a suspicious arch. “You want me to sleep in there, with you?”

“I know it’s not ideal, princess, but I didn’t realize how slow you’d be. And you seem... *tired*. I’d hoped to reach the fortress before nightfall but at this rate, it’s highly unlikely. Continuing on would be unnecessarily risky.”

“Slow?” Out of that entire monologue it was the one part I chose to focus on. I jabbed my finger into his annoyingly firm chest and glared up at the bastard. “Maybe I’d move faster if you simply answered my questions. We’ve been walking for hours, and I still don’t understand any of this.” If I wasn’t so freaking lost, I would’ve tried to make a run for it. But honestly, where would I go?

“It’s not my place to explain this to you, Saphira. In fact, I’m not permitted to.” His huge hand closed around my finger, and heat singed my skin. He held on for an endless minute, silver orbs locked on mine. Something stirred in my core.

Something ancient and dormant. Something I was certain I wanted no part of.

Ryker released me and crossed the dark threshold of the cave. I remained rooted to the spot, my eyes on the raging ball of fire sinking into the horizon.

Trust him, Saphira.

With every second I spent in this strange new land *her* voice became more insistent. A court-mandated psychologist had diagnosed me with schizophrenia when I was twelve. I'd taken the meds for a few days before tossing them all in the trash. Not only did her voice never go away, but the pills also made me feel like absolute garbage.

Either I was really losing my mind, or the voice was real. And why wouldn't it be since I just stepped through a portal and landed in a whole other world with creatures that should only exist in dark fairytales and an insufferable escort who can wield fire?

"*You* trust him," I muttered through clenched teeth.

"Talking to yourself again, princess?" Ryker whirled around, dark brows furrowed.

"Guess I have to since you won't provide any decent conversation."

He motioned to the cave and dipped into an exaggerated bow. "The cavern is clear; it's safe for you to enter."

This guy's mood swings were making my head spin. One minute he was all growly and the next he was a freaking chivalrous knight.

I eyed the dark hole carved into the cliffside. We'd followed the mountain range throughout our trek with no end in sight. Not that Ryker had actually explained where we were going, other than referencing Flintguard Fortress. Were we headed east, west, south? Hell? It all looked the same to me. "Do we really have to sleep in there?" I couldn't help my whiny tone. I *was* exhausted after the never-ending hike. My body was not built like his.

"Yes." Unlike my whiny one, his tone brooked no argument. He handed me the waterskin and if I hadn't been so thirsty, I would've told him to shove it up his ass.

I trudged past him, too tired to debate the merits of this cave anyway. I'd lost track of time by now, but I was fairly certain I'd been up for close to twenty-four hours by now.

Moving to the furthest corner of the cavern, I sank to the ground and leaned against the rocky wall. Heat from the stone warmed my sore shoulder blades, sinking into my weary muscles. I took a long gulp of water and set down the odd container.

Ryker appeared beside me a moment later with an armful of dried twigs and desiccated foliage. He folded down beside me and gathered it into a pile. Then he snapped his fingers and the silver flames reappeared.

My eyes widened at the brilliant sparks. Like hundreds of shiny diamonds flickering in the darkness. They crawled off his hand and caught on the dried greenery, and a few moments later, the dank cave was filled with the vivid light.

“Can you please tell me how you did that?”

The hint of a smile curved his lips, and my heart flipped at the gorgeous sight. Good goddess, why did this beast of a man have to be so attractive?

“I’d hoped you’d remember by now.” His gaze cast down to the quivering flames. “The prophecy wasn’t clear about what would happen once you returned. I’d rather consult the priestess before saying too much.”

“This isn’t fair,” I growled. “I think I’ve been more than understanding. Talk about a leap of faith. I let you take me away from my friends, away from my home, and all I’m asking for are some answers.”

His eyes met mine, the icy silver thawing a fraction. “You’re right.” Then his jaw hardened, and the cool mask slipped back on. “But that doesn’t change anything. My task was to retrieve you from that wretched hotel in the human world and deliver you to the king. I will see it through.”

“Do you always do exactly as you’re told?”

A glint of mischief ignited in his eyes.

“I didn’t think so.” I crossed my arms over my chest and gave him my best pouty lip. “Just explain *something*.”

“We are currently in Terrea, a pocket realm of Earth, separated by The Veil. Terrea used to be a part of the human world but was separated five thousand years ago to allow humans freedom to live without magic and to keep the fragile peace that existed between our people. This is the land of Draconia, your home, and this more specifically, is the Kingdom of Fuoco.”

Mind. Blown.

“I told you it was a lot to explain.”

I must have been making my what the eff is going on here face.

“I’ll give you a minute to process. I need to get this armor off.” He rose, removed his swords from their sheaths, then started to unlatch leather ties and fasteners.

I tried to concentrate on his insane monologue, but my focus kept shifting to the inches of exposed flesh he uncovered as his shoulder plates were removed, then the shredded leather breastplate, and the cream tunic beneath.

My gaze lingered on the golden swirls hidden beneath the high collar I’d noticed earlier at the club. A silver dragon tattoo was inked onto the column of his throat. Flames surrounded the incredibly lifelike creature which bobbed with every swallow.

Then my traitorous gaze trailed past his neck and down his chest to the silver whorls covering his torso. Some were barely perceptible beneath the layer of blood and grime. Three deep slashes bisected his abs, and I hissed out a breath.

“You’re bleeding.”

He shook his head. “It’s nothing. I just have to clean the wounds, and they’ll heal before daybreak.”

Of course they would because apparently, I’ve been dropped into a land of magic and mystical creatures.

“Hand me the waterskin.”

I reached for the container I’d rested against the wall and handed it over. “What’s this thing made of anyway?” Anything

to distract my attention from the water pouring over his carved abdomen.

“Lamb skin.”

“Like bah, bah?”

He smirked. “Yes. When our worlds split, we kept some domesticated Earth animals we found useful.”

“Interesting. What else?”

“Horses, cows, chickens. All the main ones that provide food and other necessities.” He let out a hiss as he rotated and attempted to pour the water down his back.

I glanced up, my eyes fixed on a gash across his muscled shoulders. “Do you need help?” I was pretty tall, and I’d still have to stand on my tiptoes just to reach, but I was fairly certain I could pull it off.

Ryker eyed me for a long moment before he finally gritted out, “Yes, if you wouldn’t mind.” I slowly rose, every single one of my muscles protesting the movement, and crossed the minute space between us. Rising to my tiptoes, I took the waterskin and gently dribbled water over the wound.

Bracing one hand against his back, my fingers flexed over his warm skin. His muscles strained beneath my touch. I could practically feel his breath quicken with each inhale and exhale of his powerful ribcage. The silence thickened between us, and my own breaths mirrored his rapid pace as I tended to the gash.

Once I’d cleared most of the dirt out, I released him and took a step back. The tension in the small cave dissipated, and I inhaled a breath not tainted with his musky, sandalwood scent.

“Better?” Goddess, what was that raspy edge to my tone?

“Yes, thank you.” His eyes darted between mine and the ground. “I’d offer you my cloak to sleep on, but it’s covered in blood.”

I waved a nonchalant hand. “No worries, I’m sure the floor will be super comfy.”

“And I don’t have food because I hadn’t planned on staying out all night.”

“Not hungry,” I mumbled. Honestly, I was so exhausted I was pretty sure I could curl onto a rock and pass out comfortably.

“Fine. Sleep well, princess. I will keep watch.”

I folded my hands under my head and tucked my knees into my chest with my back against the wall. “You’re not going to sleep?” A yawn escaped before I could smother it.

“No, someone needs to watch for wild animals.”

“You can wake me up in a few hours if you want to switch.” I needed my escort in tiptop form if today was any indication of what we’d encounter on our way to the fortress tomorrow.

“I’ll be fine, princess. Your betrothed will want you well rested for your return.” A hint of bitterness laced his tone.

I gulped as memories from our scant conversation bubbled to the surface. I’d been in the middle of laying into him when those creatures attacked. I opened my mouth to ask about a million questions but before I got one out, Ryker shook his head.

“Tomorrow, Saphira. I will explain what I can tomorrow. Right now, you must rest because we will be on our way at first light.”

I muttered a string of curses as he backed out of the cave like a big, hulking coward. I could have sworn I’d heard a wicked laugh as he retreated, but I could’ve imagined it. At this point, I was practically delirious.

There was no other explanation. Why else would I be allowing a perfect stranger to force me across a foreign land to present me to my *betrothed*?

I certainly must have been hallucinating because at some point in the night, I dreamt the hard ground beneath me was replaced by a warm body. I’d had one of the best nights of sleep ever in that damp, dark cave.

Four

SAPHIRA



The savory scent of roasted meat pried my heavy lids open. Scanning the dim cave, memories of the crazy day assaulted my hazy mind. I'd been abducted by some sort of caveman warrior and brought "home" to meet my betrothed. Just another Tuesday.

Approaching footsteps dissipated the remaining fog of sleep, and I jolted upright, smacking my shoulder blades against the mossy, roughhewn rock of the cave wall. "Son of a beraatch," I gritted out. What the blazes is a beraatch?

Ryker marched in, cupping something in his big hands and wearing only soft low-slung leathers. My eyes raked over his torso, not only was all the blood and grime gone, but not a single scratch or bruise remained. "Wow," I murmured.

"You haven't even tasted it yet." He crouched down beside me, and my nostrils flared as I caught a glimpse of the charred meat in his hands.

"I was talking about your magical healing..."

He smirked. "I told you."

"Yeah, but I didn't really believe you. That wound on your back was pretty nasty."

Ryker shrugged like a gash across the impossibly wide span of his shoulders was no big deal. He held up a chunk of dark meat and brought it to my lips. My stomach growled at the enticing scent. "Eat. It's daybreak, and it's time for us to move."

His monosyllabic conversations were starting to grate on my nerves. “You promised you’d explain things to me today.”

“And I will, once you’ve eaten, and we’re on our way.”

“I don’t suppose there’s a shower tucked away in this cave somewhere, is there?”

“I’m afraid not.” He shoved the hunk of meat to my mouth, and my lips parted.

The charred, gamey flavor danced over my tongue. I waited a long minute before tearing into it with my teeth. It was a little tough, but surprisingly tasty. “What is it?” I mumbled around a mouthful.

“Venis.”

“Like bambi?” My stomach soured.

“A distant relative. Like I told you last night, we kept some earth creatures and some mingled with native varieties. The venis are one of those such animals.”

“Gotcha.”

Ryker offered another bite, and I took it hesitantly. It was no cheeseburger, but I was pretty damned hungry. He watched me as I chewed, an expectant expression etched into his handsome face. “It was your favorite,” he muttered under his breath.

I wouldn’t have even caught it if I hadn’t been staring at his lips. “What do you mean *was*?”

He huffed out a breath and dragged his hand through his wild, dark hair. “I told you I came to the human world to bring you home. You were born here, Saphira. Or at least your soul was.” He squeezed his eyes shut as if it were painful to even look at me. “You’ve been gone for fifty long years, and now it is finally time for your return.”

“Um, I may not be great at math, but I literally just turned twenty-one. How could I have been gone for fifty years? And if I was, how old does that make you?”

“The body you currently reside in is only twenty-one years old, but the real you is ninety-one. You were twenty years old when you were taken from us.” A grim line slashes across his lips and that tendon in his jaw ticks. “I am ninety-five, quite young for our kind.”

“Our kind?” There were so many questions that popped up from that explanation, but my brain couldn’t quite process. It was easier to latch onto the last part.

He nodded. “I don’t want to overwhelm you with too much at once, Saphira. Abba warned us your memories could be compromised. It’s best to allow them to rise to the surface on their own.”

“This is insane, Ryker. All of it.” I threw my hands up and paced a tight circle, nearly tripping over my plastic daggers. Goddess, I was still wearing this stupid costume.

His gaze dropped to the cold embers from last night’s fire. “I know, and I’m sorry,” he muttered. “I promise everything will become clearer once we’re back at the fortress. We can consult Abba and surely, she’ll have some answers for you.”

“Who’s this Abba you keep referring to?”

“She’s the great priestess of Mother Terrea, our goddess.”

I wanted to scream. None of this made any sense! “What?” I barked. “Can you speak in English, please?”

“But why? You’ve been doing so well with Draconian.”

“What the actual eff?”

“Saphira, we’ve been speaking in our mother tongue since we arrived in Terrea.”

Mind. Blown. Again. I was pretty sure my brain was going to explode any second now, tiny bits of my skull splattering across this dark cave. “Are you serious right now?”

“No, I was teasing you.” The bastard actually smiled, and that one look did illegal things to my insides. “But whenever I’ve thrown in Draconian words you do seem to understand them.”

I crouched down and picked up my daggers, fitting them into the sheaths. “Let’s just get out of here. The sooner we reach this fortress the better.”

He nodded and rose, reaching for the discarded strappings of his armor. I marched toward the mouth of the cave, needing to keep myself distracted. The last thing I needed was to ogle the big, frustrating idiot as he dressed.

I paced just outside the entrance, trying to process the little Ryker had told me. I thought back to my life in the human world, bouncing around from foster homes until I finally met Rhode and Morgana. Gods, they must be so worried about me. Those two years living with them had been the best in my life. If I was being honest with myself, I’d never truly felt at home anywhere. I’d always just chalked it up to being an orphan, but what if Ryker was right and there was more?

My sullen companion emerged from the cave, back in his leathers and shiny armor. “Ready?”

“Do I really have a choice in the matter?”

He shook his head, eyes chasing to the parched ground between us.

“Then let’s go.”



The morning trek was ten times worse than yesterday’s hike. With the sun high in the sky, the vicious rays drilled into my back, scorching my skin. Sweat and dirt caked my flesh, and I sure as hell hoped they had showers at flipping Flintguard Fortress. On the bright side, we managed to avoid the eglids and bralicans.

My grumpy escort hadn’t spoken more than a string of words all morning, and to be honest, I was in no mood for idle chitchat. If he couldn’t explain what the hell I was doing here, I didn’t care to speak to him anyway.

All morning we walked parallel to the towering mountain range, the Agrabi Mountains, according to my taciturn guide,

and we were finally reaching the end. My sore muscles and blistered feet couldn't take much more of this torture.

"Are we there yet?" I muttered.

"Almost."

"How much farther?" Yes, I was whining. I was totally okay with that.

Ryker stopped and pointed in the opposite direction of the mountain range. "That's where we're going. Only about five hectares away."

If I squinted, I could just make out blue along the horizon. "What in the realms is a hectarie?"

He squeezed his eyes closed, and a vein popped in his forehead. "It's similar to a human mile, only a few dozen yards less."

"Okay." Five miles, I could do that. I gritted my teeth and forced my battered feet forward. Thank the goddess, I'd opted for the badass boots instead of the sexy stilettos when I'd chosen this costume.

I fixed my gaze to the spot he'd pointed. "Is that the ocean?"

"The Sea of Speranza."

"That's a beautiful name. The Sea of Hope?" The translation happened instantaneously in my mind. Now that I was aware of it, I could totally feel it occurring.

"That's right." He smiled, a true genuine smile that lit up the silver in his unique irises. Gods, he was beautiful when the permanent scowl lifted. "On the other side of the Agrabi Mountains lies the Sea of Lacrime."

"The Sea of Tears," I repeated.

Ryker nodded. "According to legend, when Draconia rose from beneath the sea, all of its residents were one, residing in harmony. Then somehow, we managed to anger Mother Terrea, the goddess, and she punished us with the great peaks

of Agrabi. They separated families and friends, and hence the name.”

“That’s so sad.”

He shrugged. “It was a very long time ago, Saphira. Well before our time or even our great grandparents.”

Holy shift. How had I not thought of this before? “I have family here?” Real, honest to goodness, blood relatives?

“You do.”

Excitement rushed my veins, and my heart sputtered out a happy beat. Every step didn’t feel quite so painful anymore. “And they’ll be at the fortress?”

“I’m sure they’ll show up soon enough.” A hint of darkness settled over his features.

“What—?”

Ryker cut me off, his hand wrapping around my forearm. “Come, quick, this way.”

My head whipped back and forth as I surveyed the land, then the sky for an attack. The blue above was clear and I couldn’t make out anything around us. He jerked me closer to the cliffside, practically dragging me.

“Where are we going?” I hissed out.

“I want to show you something.”

My heart smacked against my ribs as relief rounded my shoulders. “Geez, I thought we were under attack or something.”

He led me to a small niche on the side of the mountain and stopped. “This is it.”

I peered into the narrow opening. “Another cave?”

“No this.” He marched into the crevice, and I trailed after him. Hidden behind an outcropping of rocks, was a large wooden crate, long enough for the hulking Ryker to stretch out on. “Help me drag it out.”

I wrapped my hands around the wood planks and pushed, but it was Ryker doing all the heavy lifting. Once we got it out of the hidden nook, he ticked his chin up to the cliffside. I stared for an incredibly long minute until a series of ropes and pulleys, hidden within the rough terrain finally caught my eye.

“Is this like a medieval elevator?”

“Exactly.” He began to connect the wooden contraption to the ropes as I watched skeptically.

“There’s no way in hell I’m going up in that, by the way.”

“Then you’re going to miss the most beautiful view you’ve ever laid your eyes on.”

“Thanks, but that’s a hard pass for me.” I was not a fan of heights. The girls had begged me to ride the Big Apple roller coaster when we were planning our trip to Vegas, but I’d flat out refused.

Ryker finished tying up the flimsy contraption and gazed up at me. “If you come, I’ll answer one question. Anything you want.” He quirked a wicked brow.

Oh, this ash-hole wasn’t playing fair. “Fine,” I gritted out, crossing my arms over my chest. “If I die in this thing, you’ll have to deal with the king and my *betrothed*.” I hissed out the last word, earning a smirk from the broody bastard.

“If anything happened to you, I’d be quick to join you in the afterlife, trust me, princess.” His heated gaze bored into me, and for a second, my lungs forgot how to function. He held out his hand, and my fingers wrapped around his like they recognized every contour of his palm.

I stepped into the wooden basket and Ryker moved in beside me. Now inside the thing, I realized I’d underestimated its size. Or maybe it was Ryker’s. His huge, muscled form surrounded me, emanating a heat that had fire scorching my veins once again. He reached around me to grab hold of the rope and his bare arm brushed my shoulder. Tiny zaps of electricity danced across my flesh.

“Sorry,” he muttered. Then he heaved on the rope and lifted us off the ground.

My hands shot out to the handrails as the basket teetered a few feet off the earth. With another powerful pull, we were climbing up the side of the mountain.

Good goddess, how strong was this man?

Another heave, and I stumbled, my back pinned to his front. His free hand settled along my stomach, steadying me. Only his touch had the complete opposite effect. A raging storm brewed at each point of contact, each finger pressed against my aching flesh.

“Are you okay?” His warm breath skimmed the shell of my ear, and a shudder raced up my spine.

“Not a fan of heights,” I rasped out.

A chuckle vibrated his entire chest, shaking my body. “You’re kidding me.”

“What’s so funny?” I snapped and lurched forward, nearly keeling over the side. That steel band around my waist laced tighter, so that my body was completely flush against him.

“No more sudden movements like that, princess. I’d rather not have to jump after you.”

“Why would you do something so stupid?” I cocked my head over my shoulder to glare up at him.

“Because it’s my job to protect you.”

“So you’d die for me?” My eyes narrowed as I regarded him.

“Is that your one question?” A sinful glimmer lit up his irises, the sparkle more beautiful than the finest gemstone.

“No, of course not.”

“Good.” His hold around my waist loosened a notch. “If I let go of you, will you be able to stay in the basket? We’ll move more quickly if I can use both arms to haul us up.”

Hell, no. “Sure.” I reached for the sides of the crate, and my fingers dug into the worn wood.

“We’re almost there.”

I hazarded a glance down, and my heart catapulted up my throat. We were already at least fifty feet up. Forcing my gaze from the ground and the vivid image of my body splattered against the rocky floor, I glanced straight ahead. My breath hitched.

Verdant green lands extended out to the sea, dotted in rolling hills and forests. Beyond that, crystal clear azure waters stretched for miles and still further than that, another island, bathed in a riot of colors from the white-capped mountain tops and forests of turquoise to deep crimson hills. “It’s beautiful,” I stammered. As we cleared the peak, I glanced over my shoulder beyond the towering crags to the sea behind us. “Draconia is an island.”

“It is.” He pointed along the jagged coast. “There are four kingdoms, Fuoco, Terre, Eyre, and Aquos.” His arm encircled my shoulders, and he pivoted me to the right. Taking my hand and extending my pointer finger, he traced a path in the air. A fissure ran across the earth, ending in a massive pit in the ground. “That is the Great Rift. It serves as the natural border between the kingdoms of Terre and Eyre. It was formed at the same time as the mountain range, according to legend.”

“Interesting.” I stood on my tiptoes as if somehow, I could see more with those few extra inches. “What about all that land beyond the sea?”

“The realm of Terrea is made up of nine separate islands governed by eight independent species.” He hitched the rope over a hook at the top of the peak and tied an expert knot. Releasing his hold, he pivoted his gaze back to me.

“Species?”

He nodded, lips flattening out.

Another secret I couldn’t yet know. “What about the ninth island?”

He pointed to the right, and I could just make out a tall structure jutting from the verdant island in the center. “That’s the Sacred Mountain, and the home to the Sacred Temple to Mother Terrea. It’s forbidden for most, only royals may enter

and for us, the request must be approved by Abba. As a result, each continent has its one temple where all inhabitants may pray to the goddess.”

“So we’re royal?”

“I already told you that, *princess*.”

“I thought you were messing with me,” I grumbled. Scanning the islands surrounding Draconia, I committed each to memory. Something told me they were important, there was something significant about the number eight that I couldn’t quite grasp but I needed to know more about.

Ryker’s gaze circled the island before returning to meet my eyes. “This is your home. What do you think?”

“I guess I expected to feel something. Recognize something at least.”

He nodded, a hint of disappointment touching his lips. “I’m sure it’ll come with time.” He inhaled a deep breath, nostrils flaring, and a smile stretched across his face.

“You love it here?”

“I love what this island represents, what it could become again one day.”

My brows knitted as I regarded him. Talk about a convoluted answer. “What does that mean?”

“Is that your question?”

“No!”

“Then get to it, your betrothed awaits.” He pointed past the surrounding peaks, and I squinted to focus on a sprawling edifice perched along the sea. “That is Flintguard Fortress.”

My heart stumbled as I sought to make out the details at this distance. “It’s huge.”

“Like many things belonging to those of our kind.” He smirked, a hint of mischief sparking within those smoldering silver orbs.

I choked on a laugh. Did he seriously just make a dick joke?

“Come on, princess, ask.”

Mother T, this wasn't fair. Just one question? I had about a zillion. My brain buzzed with so many options, I couldn't pick, so again, they latched onto the most recent topic of discussion.

“You said my body is new, but my soul was born here, so do I know my betrothed? Do I like him?”

A swirl of irritation tightened his jaw. “That's two questions, Saphira.”

“Do I like him?” I amended. Obviously if I liked him, I had to know him.

That tendon in his jaw fluttered again, and the silence lengthened between us. I was certain he wasn't going to answer me when his mouth finally began to form words. “Rhyland is a good, strong man, and he'll make an excellent king.”

Rhyland? I waited for the hint of recognition, but it never came.

“He's very taken by you...” He paused, those glistening eyes raking over me. “And yes, you *like* him too.”

“Just like?”

“Saphira...,” he growled. “I believe I've more than held up my side of the deal.”

He had. In fact, bringing me up here seemed like an entirely selfless act. What did he have to gain from showing me this magnificent sight?

A frustrated breath fled his lips, and piercing eyes met mine. “This betrothal was planned the day you were born. It is the right thing for both your families and for the entire realm.”

I nodded and gulped down the knot in my throat. “Okay, I'm ready to go to Flintguard Fortress now.”

Five

SAPHIRA



An enormous castle loomed ahead, built from the rocky crags jutting out from the embrace of the Sea of Speranza. Conical spires rose majestically into the sky and capped the immense structure tinged in gold. The shimmering spires and turrets glistened beneath the setting sun setting the entire fortress ablaze.

Mother T, it was breathtaking.

A seemingly endless, stone bridge connected the keep to the mainland of the Kingdom of Fuoco, or fire, in Draconian. Two immense dragons carved in shimmering white limestone stood at the foot of the passageway, a snarl etched into their monstrous jaws. My escort had been a smidgeon chattier along the remainder of the trip and had allowed more bits of information to slip. I was finally starting to put together pieces of the puzzle.

The land of Draconia was divided into four kingdoms: Fuoco, Terre, Eyre and Aquos as he mentioned earlier. Apparently, each territory was ruled by a royal family, and my betrothed, Rhyland, was the prince of the Kingdom of Fuoco. Which made me the future princess... which was just insane.

A sharp screech echoed across the sky, and Ryker's body slammed into me. It didn't startle me quite as much this time. After repeated attempts at saving my life throughout our journey, I'd become oddly accustomed to the maneuver.

His heat bored into my back, warm breath rasping against my ear.

“Another eglid?” I panted, his immense weight squeezing the air from my lungs.

“Kind of.” He lifted his chin from the back of my head, and I followed his line of sight.

A tawny eglid sailed in the sky just over our heads, its feathered wings flapping like mad. A ground-shaking roar froze the remaining air in my lungs. I pivoted my gaze past the freaky bird to the enormous emerald beast chasing it.

I squeezed my eyes shut, blinking rapidly because surely I’d lost my ever-loving mind. Because that looked like a flying, fire-breathing, fucking dragon.

The enormous monster flapped its wings, the scintillating scales shimmering beneath the sunlight. Its massive maw opened, revealing two rows of jagged teeth and another growl shook the ground beneath us.

With another powerful thrust of its wings, its reptilian neck extended, and it snapped its gigantic jaw. The giant beast swallowed the eglid in one bite.

A gasp escaped my lips.

“Well, I guess the dracon is out of the bag,” Ryker muttered against my neck.

I shoved the big brute off me and rolled onto my side. I would’ve run but some deep buried part of me flared to life. *Never run from a predator.*

“What the actual fuck, Ryker?” I barked.

“My, my, princess. What a mouth.” The ash-hole actually smirked at me.

“You know what?” I leapt to my feet and jabbed my finger into his chest. Even beneath the breastplate, I could feel the unyielding muscle beneath. *Focus, dammit.* “This mouth refuses to remain shut for a minute longer. I’ve been nothing but patient with you. I need answers now.”

“You’re not scared?” His gaze flickered between the dragon swooping overhead and me.

Right, I should've been terrified, hiding behind my protector, but... I wasn't. I shook my head, only anger emerging as I scanned the well of overwhelming emotions.

“Then answers you shall have.” He let out a whistle and thunder cracked across the sky. My gaze lifted beyond the castle to the monstrous wings beating the air into a frenzy. Holy shift. Not one, but six dragons flew toward us. “The royal guard.”

As if those three words answered everything.

The colossal beasts hovered over us before slowly descending to the cracked earth. One by one they stood single file, their long necks bowed, and keen eyes fixed to the ground.

“At ease,” Ryker muttered.

A thick golden haze blanketed the half-dozen reptilian beasts and dark shadows crawled beneath the shimmery fog. Limbs jerked and muttered growls filled the air.

“What’s happening?” I blurted.

“You’ll see.”

A few seconds later, the glittering mist dissipated revealing six very naked males. Yards of tanned, tattooed skin and carved abs filled my vision. Heat scorched my cheeks, and my eyes darted to meet Ryker’s.

“This cannot be real.”

“It is, princess. They are dracon, and so are you.”

My jaw unhinged, much like the dragon’s I just saw devour that eglid, and I was fairly certain someone would have to scrape it off the sandy floor. “No...,” I murmured.

Ryker’s head dipped, and he took a step closer. His hands fastened around my shoulders and piercing silver irises met mine. Something fluttered deep in my core, a mad pounding of wings. His pupils elongated and flames danced over the dark, narrow slits. Silver scales rippled over his forearms, and I leapt back, jerking free of his hold.

Just let go, Saphira. Free me. That voice was back, louder and more insistent than ever before.

“It’s all right, princess.” Ryker’s hands raised, palms up. “I’m sure she’ll emerge once you’ve settled in.”

“She?” I snapped.

“Yes. Beneath that soft, fragile human flesh lies a fierce beast, one who shares your mind, body and soul.”

Yup, my head was officially going to explode. I stared at Ryker, wide-eyed, my gaze flickering between his eyes and the silver plates across his forearms. “So you’re a dragon too?”

“We are dracon. Within each one of us, a powerful dragon resides. We are merely the soft, outer shell.”

“Dragon, dracon, potato, potatoe.”

“Such silly human expressions you’ve picked up, Saphira.” His lip twitched as he regarded me. “There’s more...”

“Of course, there is.”

“Royal dracon are gifted with special powers from Mother Terrea herself. Each of the four bloodlines draw power from the elements: fire, earth, air and water - Fuoco, Terre, Eyre and Aquos.”

“The four kingdoms?”

He nodded. “Very good, you were paying attention. And that power is fortified by unique gemstones. Ours is ruby, yours is jade, while the dracon of Eyre hoard blue tourmaline, and in Aquos, turquoise.”

“Okay, and when you say power, what does that mean?”

A smile flickered across his sculpted jaw, and he snapped his fingers. Silver dragonfire appeared across his fingertips, and I sucked in a breath. It danced across his palm, then he tossed it into the other hand, like a freaking baseball. Just like I’d seen him do when the eglids attacked.

“Whoa,” I muttered.

“Once your dragon is unleashed, you’ll have power over the earth and land and everything that grows within it.”

“No shit.” That sounded amazing and completely unreal.

“Princess...” he growled.

“Oops, sorry.” Since I couldn’t even summon my own dragon yet, let alone my special earth powers, I refocused on the naked guards, keeping my eyes up. “So everyone in Draconia can become a dragon?” I wanted to smack myself when I heard the name out loud. *Duh, dracon, Draconia.* Made perfect sense.

“In theory.” Ryker’s jaw ticked, his tell already clear in the insane twenty-four hours we’d spent together.

“What does that mean?”

“All royals and those with a high percentage of royal blood running through their veins—” He raised his hand, and the intense silver of his eyes turned glossy. It wasn’t the first time in our travels that my guide had mentally checked out on me. What was that about? As I waited, I hazarded a quick peek at the dragon guards. Their expressions were hard, lips in a tight line as if carved from stone.

I wiggled my fingers at them, wondering if it was like the Queen’s Guard at Buckingham Palace who weren’t allowed to crack a smile. I waved again. Nothing. They didn’t even glance in my direction.

“The royal guard does not speak to the royals unless directly addressed.” Ryker was suddenly beside me, the warmth from his arm seeping into my shoulder. “Come, we’ve been summoned by the king.”

Anxiety twisted my insides. *Breathe, just breathe, Saphira.* The internal pep talk didn’t do much to calm my nerves.

Ryker’s hand settled on the small of my back, and the mad dragon wings battering my insides subsided. With a gentle push, he guided me through the mass of naked males. They closed in around us as my escort led me between the snarling stone dragons and across the footbridge toward the great fortress.

My pulse pounded more quickly with every step across the rocky terrain. I tried to distract myself by focusing on the bare, tight ass of the guard in front of us. The muscles beneath his dark chocolate skin strained and flexed with each movement of his powerful legs.

“I wouldn’t ogle the guards in front of your future mate,” Ryker hissed, jerking my attention away from the male.

“I—I wasn’t,” I snapped.

He clucked his teeth, and irritation radiated from his massive form.

“Are they always naked?”

“Ah, I’d forgotten about those delicate human sensibilities. The bare form isn’t something dracons are skittish about.”

“I’m not skittish,” I growled. “In California, we just don’t walk around with our junk hanging out for shits and giggles.”

His lips curled into a scowl. Now that I knew how much human curse words annoyed him, I couldn’t help but let them loose at every opportunity.

“Once we enter the fortress, their guard uniforms will reappear.”

“How?”

“Magic, of course.”

“Of course.” I threw him my most dramatic eye roll. “So is that true for anyone in the fortress? Any dracon that shifts to human will magically appear with clothes on?”

He nodded.

“And what do you do about clothes if you’re outside somewhere?”

“Suck it up. Isn’t that a human phrase?” He smirked.

“You’re so proud of yourself for that one, aren’t you?”

“I am.” Ryker grinned again, and goddess, damn it, why did that smile look so good on him?

I'd been so caught up in our banter, I nearly missed it when we crossed beneath the imposing stone archway. More dragons perched atop the highest turrets of the fortress, their keen eyes fixed on us as we approached.

“Do dragons eat other dragons in human form?”

He cocked his head, brows furrowed.

“Like would one of these dragons eat me?”

“You? Never. You are the heir's betrothed. The Fuoco dracon live to serve you.”

I couldn't help but catch onto the subtlety of his reply. “What about the dragons from the other kingdoms?”

His lips pinched, and he didn't need to say more. A question burned at the tip of my tongue since seeing those silver scales ripple over his arms.

“If you can't answer that, then tell me why you didn't change into a dragon on our journey here? Why'd you fight those creatures instead of just eating them? Why'd you force me to trek across the barren wasteland when we could have just flown?”

He paused beneath the towering stone entryway, and the guards halted around us. Then he lifted three fingers and eyed me. “That's three additional questions, Saphira. Perhaps I would be better served to answer the first one instead.”

I stood on my tiptoes and tried to channel my inner dragon. Which I only partially believed actually existed. “So do it, then.”

Ryker shook his head and loosed an exasperated breath. “I told you, with your lack of memories, I didn't want to frighten you. And if you think you can just ride my dracon without any prior experience, you're thoroughly mistaken. You would've been in far more danger atop my beast than beneath me when the eglids attacked.”

Somehow, I didn't buy it. There was something about the tight set of his jaw, and the way his eyes drifted away from mine as he spoke that had *lie* written all over it.

The sharp keening sound of massive iron doors straining buried the bothersome thoughts. I glanced up as the doors opened, revealing a row of royal guards in deep red uniforms.

The sea of crimson parted and a stout, barrel-chested male with a silver crown of rubies nestled in auburn hair appeared. A long, straight nose jutted over a heavily mustached upper lip which was twisted into a sneer.

“Welcome to Flintguard Fortress, Princess Saphira Highborne.”

Six

SAPHIRA



“Bow,” Ryker whisper-hissed.

“Huh?”

“Bow to King Kiran.” He lowered his gaze to the gray stone floor, his entire body nearly folding in half.

I dipped my head to my chin and sketched a lame bow that felt more like an asinine version of a ballet *plié*. From the corner of my eye, I caught the faint twitch of Ryker’s lips. That ash-hole was laughing at me. Maybe he should’ve spent more time preparing me for this meeting with the king on our endless journey instead of being so tight-lipped about everything.

“A pleasure to finally meet you.” The king’s voice boomed across the immense entryway. Soaring rafters loomed behind him, the ceiling so high it reached for the heavens, easily accommodating a dragon or two. Torches lined the roughhewn stone walls bathing the enormous space in a golden glow. I stole a quick glance at the tapestries bearing intricate images of heroic warriors and mythical creatures along the walls before returning my gaze to the king. “Please, come in. We have much to discuss.” He stepped back and the guards folded in around him.

“Perhaps you can allow Saphira a moment to freshen up,” said Ryker. He stood tall again, so I followed his lead, straightening. It suddenly occurred to me I’d never asked my escort if he was one of the royal guards. He kept saying it was

his job to protect me, so he must have been, right? “We ran into a flock of eglids as I mentioned last night.”

“Yes, yes, the girl can change into something more suitable to meet her betrothed.” The king’s icy gaze raked over my scandalous outfit, and heat burned across my cheeks. “I hate to prolong this since you are already a day late.”

“It’ll only be a few hours longer,” Ryker gritted out.

“And you’re certain you weren’t spotted by our friends along the border?”

“Positive.”

The king released a frustrated sigh. “Fine, escort the princess to her chambers. Lumia and Arissa are waiting to assist.” His cold eyes tapered at the edges as they scrutinized every inch of me. “Once you’ve left her to the handmaids, I need a full report, Ryker.”

“Of course.” He dipped his chin once again.

The king spun on his heel, and a dozen footsteps echoed behind him as he marched down the long corridor with the royal guard flanking him.

Ryker’s hand settled on my lower back as soon as the king and his entourage disappeared. “Come, I’ll show you to your chambers.”

I followed my escort along a wide corridor, flickering torches illuminating the walls. More tapestries and vivid paintings decorated the stone interior and provided breaks between the barred windows. The fortress sure lived up to its foreboding name.

“So the king...” I mumbled.

“Yes, he’s... interesting.”

“Is my *betrothed* like him?” I couldn’t even believe I’d gotten my mouth to form the dreaded word.

“An ass?” Ryker’s eyes glinted with amusement beneath the torchlight.

I barely suppressed a gasp. Didn't peasants get their heads chopped off for disrespecting the king? I may not have been the biggest fan of my broody escort, but I didn't want to see that beautiful head lobbed off his shoulders.

"No, he's not like King Kiran, not in the ways that matter."

I released a breath and searched my memory for my fiancé's name. Ryker had mentioned it, but with everything that had happened in the last twenty-four hours, it had slipped my mind.

"Prince...?"

"Prince Rhyland Ashborne."

"Oh, right." Rhyland. Rhyland. The name rolled around in my thoughts, but nothing familiar surged to the surface. Not like with Ryker. I glanced at my guide from the corner of my eye. His entire demeanor had changed since we set foot inside the castle. "Thanks for hooking me up with a shower and change of clothes by the way."

He nodded, eyes fixed straight ahead. "It's the least you deserve after the long journey." After a few more turns down a maze of corridors, Ryker stopped in front of double doors. The wood was so dark, it was practically black. And the strangest thing was, it seemed to be its natural color. I'd never seen a tree of that shade in the human world.

Before I could ask about it, the doors parted, and a slim female appeared. "Welcome, princess Saphira." She dipped into a bow as did a second woman, standing just behind her. "And pr—"

Ryker cleared his throat, stopping the girl midsentence. "Saphira, this is Arissa and Lumia. They have both been trusted handmaidens to the royal family for decades. They will take good care of you."

Decades? The Arissa girl who opened the door looked younger than me. Lumia on the other hand, with her light gray hair bound in a tight bun could be my grandmother. So how old was she? Two hundred? A thousand? I'd have to ask as soon as I had a moment alone with them.

I felt the absence of Ryker's warmth the moment he stepped back. I swung my head over my shoulder as a burst of panic tightened my chest. "You're leaving?"

"Yes, you must be bathed and dressed, and I must speak to the king."

"Will you be back? You know, for when I meet my betrothed?"

His Adam's apple bobbed, bringing the dragon tattoo to life along his throat. "Surely, the girls can call a guard to escort you to the great hall for the official introduction." His jaw clenched, and that tendon spiderwebbed beneath the thick stubble.

Mother, I didn't want to beg here, but he was the only person I knew in this place, and there was something about his presence that stilled the raging storm. "I'd appreciate it if you came along." I shrugged. "You know, so you can keep my crass human tongue in check."

A chuckle burst from his lips, the warm sound stoking a burgeoning fire in my core. An odd purring sound rumbled low in my belly, and I startled at the sound. Ryker's eyes darted to my exposed navel, then rose to meet mine.

"What was that?" I squealed.

He squeezed his eyes closed for an instant before shaking his head. "You must be hungry." Ticking his head at Lumia, he said, "Call down to the kitchens and have a plate made up for the princess. She can eat while you dress her."

"Yes, of course." Lumia darted further into the chamber and Arissa scurried behind her, leaving me at the threshold with Ryker.

I leaned on the doorframe and met a pair of piercing silver irises. "You know, in the human world, women are perfectly capable of dressing themselves."

"You haven't seen Draconian attire. It can be quite cumbersome to fasten alone."

Interesting. “So no more Xena Warrior Princess?” I ran my hand over my grimy leather corset top.

“I must say I will be sorry to see it go, princess.” A full smile appeared, revealing a hidden dimple buried beneath the thick layer of dark scruff along his jaw. “You humans have such colorful traditions.”

“Are you telling me you don’t celebrate Halloween? I will *not* survive here.”

“It’s called Havestia, Saphira, a sacred day where the kingdoms pay tribute to Mother Terrea. And no, we do not dress up in costumes and parade around in scantily clad clothes.”

I eyed Ryker’s torn leathers and armored shoulder plates. Why would they when their everyday clothes were already crazy enough?

“Princess, your bath is ready!” One of the girls called from inside the chamber.

Ryker dragged his hand through his ruffled hair, and a dark tumble fell across his forehead. My fingers itched to sweep the errant lock behind his ear. How odd. I fisted my hands at my sides and glanced up at him. “Well, thanks for getting me here safely.”

“Of course, princess. I’ll return for you shortly then.” He nodded and spun around. My eyes trailed his broad form down the corridor until the echo of his footfalls completely fell away.

A strange emptiness filled my chest as I turned to my chamber. I palmed the vacant spot below my breastbone as I scanned my new bedroom. The chamber’s walls were draped in rich, crimson damask fabric, a shade reminiscent of sparkling garnets, and embroidered with intricate patterns of dragons. Gold trimmings glisten like the scales of a the winged-beast, adding a touch of regal splendor to the room. My twitchy fingers longed to pocket all the glittering embellishments.

A magnificent four-poster bed took center stage, its wooden frame carved with scenes of snarling dragons soaring over the sea. The canopy was draped with sheer, golden silk that shimmers like sunlight on water, casting an enchanting, warm glow throughout the room. Across from the bed, stood a wall of windows, framed by heavy garnet and gold draperies, offering a breathtaking view of the Sea of Speranza. The waters sparkled like a treasure trove, stretching to the horizon where they met the sky. A small seating area by the window featured plush, garnet cushions, providing a perfect spot to enjoy the azure expanse below. Not a bad view to wake up to.

“Princess, the bath will get cold.” Lumia poked her head from a door across the room.

“Right, sorry, coming.” I crossed the vast space and found both women perched around a giant clawfoot tub. Arissa poured another bucket of scalding water into the giant basin.

You’ve got to be kidding me. No running water?

Lumia moved behind me and got to work on the laces of my pleather bodice.

“Oh, that’s okay, I can do it.” There were hidden snaps beneath. The ties were just for show. I jerked the ends of the fake leather, and the top came off. Arissa’s jaw almost hit the floor. Covering my boobs with one arm, I made quick work of the miniskirt, fighting off Lumia’s attempts at helping, and jumped into the tub.

Both women watched me as I sank beneath the water. I groaned as the warmth enveloped me, washing away the dirt and insanity from the last twenty-four hours. When I emerged, two pairs of curious eyes lanced over me.

Lumia cradled a bottle of sweet smelling something, and Arissa held a comb in her hand. “Let me wash your hair, princess.” The older woman kneeled at the foot of the tub.

“Oh, I can wash my own hair.”

“But then what will we do?” Her face pinched, deepening the lines across her forehead.

“It’s our honor to care for the future queen of Fuoco,” said Arissa. “Please, let us.”

Her eyes glistened, lips screwed into a pout, and I just couldn’t say no. “Um, okay.”

“You simply lie back and relax.” Lumia poured the fragrant shampoo into her hand, and Arissa placed a rolled-up towel on the edge of the basin. I lay my head against the soft pillow, and a soft sigh escaped as strong fingers dug into my hair.

Oh, goddess, yes, now this I could get used to.

The women pampered me for what had to have been over an hour, scrubbing my body from head to toe and dousing me with sweet fragrances. By the time I stood in front of the full-length, gilded mirror, I barely recognized myself.

A soft, gauzy cream fabric was wrapped around my waist, crossed over my breasts and tied back behind my neck. It was the softest material I’d ever felt, like silk but more lightweight and curved to every inch of my body. The intricate twists left my belly exposed before the skirt flowed down my waist, hugging my hips and falling about mid-thigh.

My long blue locks cascaded over my bare shoulders, more lustrous and shiny than I’d ever seen them. Lumia had dabbed pale pink tint on my lips and dark kohl lined my eyes, bringing out the bright blue.

I looked beautiful. “You ladies are miracle workers.”

“Miracle workers?” asked Lumia, glancing back and forth between Arissa and me.

“Oh, never mind. I only meant to say you’ve done an incredible job making me beautiful.”

“Oh, princess, but you *are* beautiful.” They smiled, a hint of crimson coating the young girl’s cheeks. Which reminded me.

“How old are you, Arissa?”

Her cheeks burned brighter before she answered. “I’ll be seventy-five upon the next full moons.”

Seventy-five... oh, right. So way younger than my supposed ninety-one according to Ryker. Wait a second... “Moons?”

“Yes, my princess. The two moons over Terrea, the blue and the white?”

I nodded numbly. Okay, this was just information overload. I couldn't right now. Maybe Ryker had been right not sharing everything all at once.

As if my thoughts had summoned him, two loud knocks thundered at the door of my chamber. I moved toward the entry, but Arissa darted in front of me.

She opened the door, and my heart kicked at my ribs.

Ryker filled the doorway, his worn leather and armor replaced with a high-collared crimson jacket and fitted pants. A faint dusting of stubble still lined his jaw, but it had been neatly trimmed, and his unruly hair gelled back with the exception of one rogue lock which refused to be tamed.

When I finally reached those eyes, the weight of his gaze pummeled into me. Those smoldering irises razed over me, setting every inch of exposed skin aflame. He cleared his throat, the silver dragon bobbing along his neck. “You certainly clean up well, princess.” His lips slid into a tight line.

“Another humanism you picked up?”

“Mmm.” His head dipped, and once I was freed from that intense stare, I could breathe again.

Taking a step closer, a curtain of musky, sandalwood closed in around me. I breathed him in, and the tightness in my chest began to dissipate. “I'm finally going to get all the answers now, right?”

He offered his arm and motioned toward the door. “Yes, now come, it's time to meet your future mate.”

Seven

SAPHIRA



The guards' heavy footfalls thundered around us, echoing the mad thumps of my heart as we approached the gilded doors of the throne room. My legs slowed, but a firm grasp around my arm coaxed me forward. My knees wobbled and if it weren't for the mountain of a man at my side, I would've crumpled to the floor. Oh goddess, I was going to be sick. My stomach churned, acid eating away at my gut with each step closer. I couldn't do this. My betrothed? Seriously? I was twenty-one, not ninety-one, despite what Ryker claimed.

I halted a few steps away from the gold inlaid double doors and spun at Ryker. "I can't do this."

He twisted to the two guards flanking us. "Give us a minute, please."

The males separated, each taking a spot by the double doors.

Searing eyes met mine as Ryker's hands clamped around my trembling fingers. The massive ruby encrusted in a gold ring around his middle finger caught my eye. Even through the panic, my greedy inner beast latched onto the shimmery jewel. "You can and you will, Saphira." Ryker's voice drew my gaze back to his. "Because I've never met anyone stronger or more determined, and you are doing this for the good of our kingdom and the survival of our kind."

His words hit me like a sledgehammer. Multiple parts of his monologue actually. "You know me? From before?"

His head dipped, the slight movement barely perceptible.

I was strong? Mother Terrea, I didn't feel strong.

“Our people need you, Saphira. They need this betrothal. Trust me when I say no one could ever force this upon you. You made the difficult decision and agreed to the pairing for the good of all.”

Trust him, Saphira. That familiar voice stirred in my mind.

So you're telling me I'm supposed to marry a guy I've never met? Great, now I'm talking back to the voices in my head.

Everything will unfold as it is meant to.

Holy shift, she answered me.

“Saphira....” Warm hands closed around my bare shoulders. My gaze lifted to meet smoldering silver orbs, a storm of emotions brewing beneath the glistening surface. “Are you ready?”

As insane as the past two days had been, I couldn't deny the tiny part deep within my soul that felt right being here. Besides the growly voice in my head. I drew in a steady breath and nodded.

Ryker's hands slipped from my shoulders, and he straightened, adjusting the high collar of his jacket. He offered his arm, and I easily weaved mine through it. Something about it felt so comfortable, so right.

“Promise me that after this is over,” I whispered, “you'll tell me how we know each other.”

His chin dipped to his chest, and darkness flashed across his handsome face. “I promise to tell you what I can,” he muttered.

It wasn't quite what I'd asked, but I'd take it for now.

“Open the doors,” Ryker called out.

The guards moved to our sides, and the massive, gilded doors swung open. A gust of icy air blasted over me, and a tremor raced up my spine. My grumpy escort held me closer, and his warmth seeped into my side.

Tracing the ruby runner that led to a raised dais, I hazarded a glance up. Three imposing ornate thrones sat at the center, the one in the middle markedly higher than the ones on either side. It's a colossal seat of ebony wood adorned with intricate, gold filigree. I focused on the encrusted crimson jewels, the elaborate dragon heads carved onto the arm rests, anything but the daunting figures seated upon the upholstered crimson cushions.

Massive, dragon-carved pillars rise to the ceiling, their stone surfaces adorned with gleaming garnets and gold leaf. Enormous tapestries depicting grand battles and the legendary dragon kings hang from the walls, recounting the realm's epic history. History I have no memories of.

“Just breathe,” Ryker whispered.

Shit. I hadn't even noticed I'd stopped. I stared at the marble floors etched with dragon motifs for a second longer, then I forced my lungs to inflate before I passed out and slowly met the eyes of the male seated to the right of the king. Warm golden irises met mine, and a soft smile parted fine lips. Dark chestnut hair was perfectly gelled back, calling attention to the straight line of his nose and high cheekbones. A sculpted, wide jaw, clean-shaven of course, and a kind smile completed the surprisingly handsome face of the man I assumed was my betrothed.

I was so relieved he wasn't a troll that my shoulders rolled forward, and Ryker's hold on my arm grew more rigid. Poor guy probably thought I was about to faint.

Ryker was right; I did like him. *Rhyland*.

Just one look, and I knew.

As if my betrothed felt it too, his stiff posture softened a touch with each step closer. He slid to the end of the throne, a nervous energy bouncing his leg.

“Welcome, Princess Saphira.” The king rose as we approached the dais and Rhyland practically leapt from the high-backed chair. On the opposite side of the king, the queen slowly stood. Every slight movement screamed regal. Not that

I'd spent much time with royalty during my years in the foster system, but the queen looked like she just stepped out of a fairytale with brilliant auburn hair braided into an elaborate chignon. A delicate crown sat atop her head, the sparkling rubies a perfect match to her husband's. And that dress... the emerald, green fabric was embroidered with gold lace and dozens of rubies sewn right into the material. It flared from her hips, its circumference so wide, she stood at least a yard away from the king.

The tubby royal motioned to his wife. "May I present my queen, Aisling Ashborne."

I sketched another bow, teetering on the high heels Arissa forced my weary feet into.

"Yes, welcome to your new home, Saphira." The prince offered a reassuring smile, and the mad vibrations in my chest began to subside.

I dropped into a curtsy, following Ryker's lead as the king and queen's gazes lanced over me.

"Thank you, brother, for safely delivering my future queen." Rhyland's words jerked my head back up. My eyes darted between the prince and my broody escort. *Brother?* My pulse stammered out an erratic rhythm. It could just be a term of endearment, right?

I stared at the prince then the man at my side for a long minute. Similar nose. Same wide jaw and sculpted cheekbones. Nearly identical smiles—when Ryker actually smiled. Ridiculously handsome faces. *Mother f—Terrea!*

"Why didn't you tell me?" I hissed under my breath.

Ryker's eyes tapered at the edges, but he didn't so much as turn to look at me. "You never asked."

Never asked? If we hadn't been in front of the king and queen (his goddess damned parents!), I would've slugged him.

Rhyland held out his hand, and I placed my palm in his. He dipped his head, and soft lips brushed the top of my hand. Then warm golden eyes fixed on mine. "I suppose I should reintroduce myself, although it seems silly since we've known

each other our whole lives. I am Rhyland Ashborne, and I am honored to become your future mate.”

Our whole lives?

It was definitely time for answers.

Ryker cleared his throat, and I tugged my hand free of his brother’s hold. “Rhyland, as I already told you she doesn’t remember any of it.”

“It is very strange,” said the queen. “Abba never mentioned any of that in the prophecy.”

My hand shot up without my approval. “I’m sorry, but you all really need to explain this prophecy stuff to me.”

The king and queen exchanged a troubled glance, and even Rhyland’s earnest smile fell.

“I told you,” Ryker muttered.

King Kiran’s mouth twisted as if he’d swallowed a sour lemon before the expressionless mask slid back on. “Abba will be joining us shortly, and I’m certain she can provide us with the answers we need.” The king ticked his head at one of the guards. “Go see what is taking the priestess so long.” He dropped back into the throne, and the queen delicately perched beside him, leaving Rhyland, Ryker and I standing at the foot of the dais.

An uncomfortable tension lingered between the three of us, one that felt oddly familiar and yet completely foreign.

Goddess, I wanted just one minute alone with my sullen escort. How could he not tell me I was betrothed to his brother? Mother T, if Rhyland was a prince, then so was Ryker. I’d been a complete brat to the freaking dragon prince!

Footsteps echoed across the stone, and a guard appeared in the doorway with a beautiful, lithe woman trailing a few steps behind. The tall, willowy figure emerged from behind the towering dragon, revealing chalky, pale skin and long purple hair pulled into a winding braid that reached past her waist. Brilliant lavender eyes locked on me from across the room.

“Saphira, thank Mother Terrea!” The woman crossed the sprawling space between us and wrapped her hands around mine. “We have awaited your return for fifty long years. Finally, our sacrifice has been fulfilled.” Her tone held an ethereal quality, a kind of melodic tune tingeing her words.

Wait, sacrifice?

Images of blood and fire swam through my mind. A sprawling sacred tree with flowing branches. A hum of voices echoed across my skull, ricocheting like a maddening ping pong ball. I clapped my hands over my ears, despite knowing full well the noise was coming from inside my head.

“Saphira?” Ryker’s arms snaked around me, and the edges of my vision darkened.

A voice slithered through my subconscious, not the familiar growly one, but one I somehow recognized, nonetheless. I squeezed my eyes closed, willing the eerie whispers away.

On the night The Veil shall Open

Nightmares claim thy sacred tokens.

But magic stolen comes with a cost,

For by His hands blood will be lost.

My fingers clench around the jade-encrusted handles of my daggers as the battle explodes around us.

Bound in war, triumph is hopeless,

Thy future lies In death and darkness.

Yet on the Eve thy battle ends,

Eight fierce souls will make amends.

The sacred tree and eight familiar women chanting together, blood swirling in a murky pool beneath our feet.

Hand in hand they shall unite,

A pact in blood, heiress to fight.

When gifted power pays sacrifice,

Mother Terrea shall repay the price.

Blessed be her soul reborn,

Seek from where the Earth was torn.

Flashes of Rhode, Morgana and me. My first day of high school, my horrible foster parents, twenty-one years in the human world...

In fifty years eight heiress will return,

To bring peace to all lands that burn.

The lines of fate have been spoken,

On the night The Veil shall reopen.

The words replayed on a loop, the timbre growing more insistent with each repetition. I finally forced my eyes open, and Abba stood in front of me, lips curved into a knowing smile. Her hands were pressed to either side of my head. If it weren't for Ryker's strong arms trapping me against his chest I would've leapt away from that creepy grin.

"Now do you remember the prophecy?" she purred, releasing me.

"Something like that." The tumble of words swam across my mind. "But what does it mean?"

"Guards!" Ryker snapped his fingers and five guards shuffled four chairs and a table into the middle of the great room. Then he turned to me as they assembled the makeshift seating area. "This might take a while." He pulled out the chair to his right and motioned to the plush damask cushion. "Sit, please."

Rhyland took the upholstered chair beside me, and Abba folded into the one across the table.

The priestess's eyes met mine, and she drew in a slow breath. "Now to begin the tale. Fifty years ago, a power-hungry vampire named Valandril traveled to the Sacred Temple of Mother Terrea on the night of Havestia. He stole the sacrificial offerings of power from each of the continents. It gave him immense power, but it also turned him into a demon.

His intention was to slip through the Veil into Earth and enslave all humans. This action caused a terrible war between the eight continents. Despite the Veil eventually closing and his attempts thwarted, the war lasted for two weeks. In the process, half of the vampire kingdom was turned into demons, and this darkness spread toward the other continents.”

She paused, and I drew in a breath, trying to sort through all that insane information.

“Mother Terrea decreed that one female from each continent would have to sacrifice not only her power but her very life to defeat Valandril. Then in return, these brave women would be reborn and given a second chance at life once the Veil reopened. Thus, these girls were reincarnated on Earth with no memory of their first life. The prophecy stated on the night of Havestia, fifty years later, each kingdom was to retrieve their sacrificial offering from Earth and return her home. Only this act would finally bring peace and balance to the chaos that was left after Valandril was defeated.”

I swallowed hard and twined my fingers together in my lap. This was just insane. And yet a part of me accepted it as truth. Maybe a tiny, deep buried part did remember.

I swung my gaze at Ryker a long moment later. “Why didn’t you just tell me?”

“I advised him not to,” Abba interjected.

“Why?”

“I wanted to assess your mental state before the truth was revealed.”

“And?” I sure as shit felt like I was going crazy.

“Your memories seem to be repressed, but I have no doubt they will return in due time.”

“Wonderful.” The king clapped and marched down the dais. “Then it’s time to proceed with the mating ceremony.”

Eight

SAPHIRA



“Right now?” Ryker and I blurted in unison.

My escort, the freaking *other* prince, leapt to his feet. “Saphira has only just arrived, my king. Give the girl a moment to get her bearings. As Abba said, her memories have yet to return.”

Yes, all that. I glanced back and forth between Ryker and his father.

King Kiran speared his *son* with a glare, flames flickering through deep amber irises. They were a similar hue to Rhyland’s but held none of the warmth. “You have no say in the matter, Ryker.” His gaze pivoted to the priestess. The woman watched me from the corner of her eye as if I were the most fascinating thing to walk this strange land. “Abba, should the proceedings impede her mental state?”

Vibrant lavender orbs slid over me, and a wry smile curled the corner of her thin lips. “No, I do not believe so.”

“Then there is no reason to postpone,” the king announced.

“Rhyland, do something,” Ryker gritted out. “Saphira is exhausted. She’s been through quite an ordeal in the past thirty-six odd hours. Is the alliance so important you cannot even give your future mate a day to rest?”

The males stood on either side of me, towering over each other.

“She may rest all she’d like once the ceremony is over.”

“Doubtful,” Ryker snarled. “You know very well what will happen once the bond is formed. There won’t be any sleep in the bridal chamber.” His lips twisted in disgust, genuine horror stretched across his features, like sleeping with me would be the most vile thing in the world.

“I can control my dracon, brother.” Rhyland stood tall, throwing his shoulders back.

Why did I suddenly feel like a doggie chew toy?

Ryker stepped around me and jabbed a finger into the prince’s chest. “You have no idea what the bond will do to you.”

“And you do?” Rhyland scoffed.

“Guys, enough,” I snapped. “I’m standing right here. Don’t I get a say in this?”

“Not generally, my dear,” the priestess interjected. She’d watched the entire exchange so silently I’d nearly forgotten she was here.

“Mardor, go fetch the officiant.” The king motioned to the guard beside him. “It is time.”

“Yes, your highness.” One of the big dragon guards darted off the dais and raced across the massive chamber.

All eyes trailed the sentinel, except for Ryker’s. They’d gone glassy again, his expression vacant. What was he doing? A moment later, he blinked quickly, and the bright silver flared anew. He stomped toward the dais, leaving me beside the empty table. “Father, the alliance with Terre means everything, does it not?”

“Yes, of course, Ryker.”

“Then why would you pass up the opportunity to flaunt it to the rest of Draconia? It would be the perfect occasion to invite the royal families. Send word of the ceremony today and let us celebrate tomorrow.”

“You know very well why I dare not risk the wait,” the king whispered. But somehow, I caught every word. In fact, if I closed my eyes and focused, I could hear the queen

straightening the ruffles of her dress, the king's teeth grinding, and most of all the mad pounding of Ryker's heart.

"This evening, then. At the very least, invite the citizens of our kingdom. They will rejoice in this happy occasion and perhaps, it will quell the unrest."

Rhyland approached the dais and stood beside his brother. "I have to agree with Ryker on this point, Father. The commoners will cherish the opportunity to attend a royal mating ceremony. It could be worth the extra half-day to provide a distraction."

The king huffed out a breath and spun at his wife. "Do you see how they treat me, Aisling? Like they already rule the kingdom."

The queen offered a plastic smile and patted her husband's hand. "I fear it will only get worse in the coming months, my dear. Soon Rhyland will be king, and you and I will no longer matter." She tossed a strange glance at Ryker before her expression returned to neutral.

Somehow, I doubted that.

"Very well, you've won." Kiran glanced at the ticking clock on the wall. "The ceremony will take place at eight o'clock sharp. Have everyone in the kingdom alerted but keep the news within our walls only. The attendees may gather in the courtyard around the fortress."

"Wonderful." The queen rose and glided toward me. "Now that we have more time, I can have one of my handmaidens fetch my mating ceremony dress. Would you like that, dear?"

Ryker rolled his eyes over his mother's head, and I barely contained a laugh. "Oh, that's not necessary. I could just wear this." I fingered the soft, light fabric of the gown. I could only imagine what the queen would put me in.

"Nonsense. If we're going through all the trouble of inviting the entire kingdom, we must have you at your most regal."

I dipped my head. "Sure, of course."

Before I finished the last syllable, Queen Aisling floated across the grand hall, likely to find some poor maid to find her old dress.

Rhyland stepped in front of me, and all thoughts of the queen and the dress vanished. His warm smile melted away the insecurities as his hands wrapped around mine. “I’m sorry for all of this. We’ve simply been waiting so long for your return.”

I bet. Fifty years is a long ass time to wait for your fiancée.

“I wish I could remember,” I mumbled.

“Uh, uh.” Ryker stepped between us and swatted his brother’s hands from mine. “You remember the royal protocol, don’t you, brother? No fraternizing with your betrothed before the ceremony.”

My mouth curved into a capital O. “What?”

“Only supervised visits until you’ve enacted the bond.”

“It’s an ancient, outdated rule and you know it, brother.”

“Still, we wouldn’t want to anger Mother Terrea, now, would we?”

Rhyland grunted and released my hands. “Fine. Will you escort Saphira back to her chamber, Ryker?”

He dipped his head into a slight bow. “It would be my honor, my future king.” He held his arm out, and I easily laced mine through it. It had become second nature in my short time here.

Before Ryker led me away, Rhyland leaned in and brushed a soft kiss to my cheek. It was quick and chaste, but still, delicate wings brushed against my ribs.

A growl vibrated my moody escort’s barrel chest, the sound so loud Rhyland staggered back a step.

“Ryker...” The fine line between the prince’s brows deepened.

“It’s fine, brother. I’m handling it.” He tugged me toward the door before I could say goodbye.

I canted my head over my shoulder and waggled my fingers at Rhyland. He stood as still as the towering pillars of stone circling the throne room, watching as his brother led me away.

As soon as the guards closed the doors behind us, I released a breath and sagged into Ryker. Then I remembered I was supposed to be pissed at the ash-hole for lying to me. I stopped mid-stride, wriggled out of his hold and glared up at the big fat liar. “Why didn’t you tell me who you were?”

“I already told you—”

“No, you didn’t. You gave me some lame ass excuse. And speaking of excuses, if you’re some badass fire-breathing dragon prince, why the hell didn’t you just scorch those eglids on our trek over here instead of putting both of us in danger if I’m so damned important?” Something just didn’t add up.

He gritted his teeth, molars gnashing. For some reason, I could hear everything Ryker did so clearly now.

“I don’t buy it, Ryker. Tell me the truth. After all the shit I’ve been through, you owe me that.”

“I was under orders, Saphira. That is all I can say.”

“Under orders not to shift into your dragon?”

“Not to fly too close to the Terre border.”

“Terre. That was the kingdom that was separated by the mountain range.” There was something else, something important about the neighboring lands. A faint memory flickered to life—me staring at those towering, molten peaks, standing beside another girl, the same vibrant blue hair cascading down her shoulders. I fought to hold onto the memories, but they vanished as quickly as they came.

“Yes, that’s right,” Ryker answered, drawing me from the vivid images.

“Where is my family?” The question popped out of its own accord. “Will they be here for the ceremony? You kind of blew right past that part earlier.” Goddess, so many years without a real family I still couldn’t wrap my head around the fact that I

actually had one. Wouldn't they want to see me after fifty years? And why didn't they come to get me instead of Ryker?

Ryker's hand closed around my upper arm, and he towed me to a glass door. Through the glass, the rolling waves of the Sea of Speranza stretched out to the horizon. He whipped the door open and shuffled me outside onto a small stone balcony. A warm breeze kicked up off the water, sending me staggering back a step and right into a pissed-off dragon or *drakon*, whatever.

"Hey, stop manhandling me." I spun around and pried his thick fingers off my arm.

"Do you want your question answered or not?" he barked. "I'm sure you've noticed we have very sensitive hearing."

I had actually. "Okay, so tell me about my family."

Ryker coaxed me to the very edge of the balcony, the whipping winds off the sea sending strands of blue hair across my face. He leaned in close until his breath mingled with the breeze, and I suddenly understood why he'd brought me out here.

"Our families are not exactly friends," he whispered.

"Then why are they marrying me off to Rhyland?" As a child when I imagined my parents, I always pretended something horrible had happened to them because why else would they ever abandon their daughter? Now, that I was finally going to meet them, I couldn't bear the thought of them not living up to the images I'd created.

The crease between his dark brows furrowed, and his gaze chased to the floor. "For the good of both our kingdoms, and all of Draconia."

"Why does me marrying Rhyland matter so much?"

"It will unite our kingdoms and finally bring the peace and stability that we've fought so hard for. The four realms of Draconia are very divided, and we hoped that by forging an alliance between the two strongest, the rest would follow peaceably."

All of this was so convoluted. I still felt like I was missing a big part of the story. “And that’s it? That’s the whole truth?”

Ryker loosed a frustrated breath and inched close once again. His warm breath skated over my ear, his torso brushed my shoulder and his hand swept away my wild strands of hair. I was suddenly acutely aware of each and every single point of contact. “The Highbornes, your family, and therefore you, are from Terre. I was told not to fly so that we wouldn’t be spotted.”

“Why not?”

He shook his head, lips pressed in a tight line. “I’ve already said too much.” His big hand wrapped around mine, and he hauled me through the door into the fortress before I could get another word out.

Once we were back inside, I adjusted my windblown hair and glared up at the big beast. “You know, I’m perfectly capable of walking by myself, you don’t need to drag me everywhere.” I rose to my tiptoes and whispered, “And if you think that conversation is over, it’s far from.”

“I’d expect nothing less from you, princess.” A smirk curled his lips, and heat ignited low in my belly. Damn him for being so unfairly attractive. “Now, let’s go, your handmaidens must be waiting with the queen’s gown by now.”

Ugh.

Nine

SAPHIRA



“Wow.” I stared at the voluminous gown splayed out atop my monstrous bed and didn’t immediately want to vomit. Shockingly. I’d been soaked yet again in the tub, drenched in sweet perfumes and oils, nails painted, eyebrows and everything else plucked in the past hour. While my handmaids made me picture perfect, the queen’s mating gown had apparently been delivered.

Stepping closer, I took in the embroidered pale blue corset and delicate gold lace, the sparkling jewels embedded within the brocade, then followed the fine fabric to the billowing skirt with soft gauzy layers. The sweetheart neckline dipped low, well below my cleavage, but the ornate, full-length sleeves and long, flowing cape gave it an elegant feel.

I’d never seen anything so beautiful in my life.

“You will look thoroughly regal,” Lumia whispered.

“Prince Rhyland won’t be able to keep his hands off you —” Arissa slapped her hand over her mouth when Lumia speared the young girl with a narrowed glare.

“Arissa,” she snapped. “That is no way to speak of your future king, or queen!”

“I beg your pardon, princess.” The girl dipped into a bow.

“No need to beg anything.” I shrugged and fingered the silky satin skirt. “You’re right, I am going to look amazing in this.” I couldn’t help the chuckle from slipping free.

The two females laughed softly. “The queen must think very highly of you to allow you to wear her mating gown,” said Arissa.

“The girl speaks the truth,” Lumia added as she carried the dress to the bright changing room. “Queen Aisling had always hoped for a daughter to pass it down to, but alas, Mother Terrea only blessed her with sons.”

I followed the older woman to the dressing area where she hung the gorgeous family heirloom. She heaved out a breath once it hung beside the floor-length golden mirrors. The dress probably weighed as much as she did. The sparkly jewels caught my eye, and lust sparked low in my belly. *Mine*. My twitchy fingers longed to pilfer each and every shimmering gem.

Curling my arms behind my back, I folded my hands to stave off the jitteriness.

“Are you nervous, my princess?” Lumia traced the movement.

A shit ton. “Maybe a little.”

“You shouldn’t be,” Lumia responded. “Prince Rhyland is a wonderful man, and he will make a most fearsome king. I raised the prince since he was only a boy. You could not ask for a more suitable mate.”

Warm reassurance kindled in my belly, the same feeling I had when Rhyland held my hands. I only wished I could remember him. I wished I could spend more than five minutes with the man in private. Mother T, I wished I could see my family. There were so many unanswered questions, and everything was moving so quickly.

Arissa began to loosen the ties of my dressing gown as I stood in front of the mirror. My hair seemed a brighter blue since I arrived, and my features somehow sharper too. I couldn’t explain it, but somehow, I felt different since setting foot on this foreign land.

My home.

“Tell me more about Draconia.”

“Of course, princess, what would you like to know?”

“Everything.”

Lumia stripped me of the dressing gown leaving me in only a light shift. “Well, you are familiar with the four kingdoms of Fuoco, Terre, Eyre, and Aquos, right?”

I nodded. “Yes, Ryker took me to the top of a cliff and showed me the territories.”

“Each is governed by one of the Royal families,” Arissa offered, “The Ashbornes of Fuoco, the Highbornes of Terre, the Skybornes of Eyre, and the Stormbornes of Aquos.”

My earlier conversation with Ryker flitted to the surface: fire, earth, air, and water. I couldn’t wait to figure out how to summon my dragon and use my special abilities. “Highbornes? That’s my family, right?”

Lumia threw the girl another glare, and her lips pressed into a tight line. “Yes, that’s correct,” she finally muttered.

Ryker’s words tossed around in my mind. He said our families weren’t exactly friends. “Do the royals not get along?”

Arissa scoffed. “They’re always fighting and bickering about something while the rest of us are tossed to the side. They hoard all the treasure and leave us powerless—”

“Arissa, mind your tongue!”

The girl gave me a sheepish smile. “Sorry, I apologize, my princess.”

“No, don’t be, please tell me what you mean.”

“She doesn’t mean anything, princess. The girl has rocks for brains.”

Arissa’s cheeks flamed, matching the bright hue of her plaited hair. “I only meant that we don’t have a say in the governing of our own lands.”

“Do you really believe anything is different for the citizens across the sea in Aelvaria or Isramaya?”

What? And who? My brows slammed together. “Excuse me?”

The old woman waved a nonchalant hand. “The neighboring isles, the land of the elves and vampires.”

Oh, right. That prophecy had something to do with some crazed vampire king, Valandril. I needed to catch up on Terrean history ASAP if I had any hope of survival.

“Then there’s Vargr, land of the wolves, Sepeazia, the isle of serpents, Magiaria, where the mages reside, Isramorta, the home of the demons and finally Talamh, fae territory.”

Damn, that’s a lot to remember. My thoughts flickered back to the priestess’s prophecy and the eight females who’d sacrificed their lives. Each came from one of those continents, myself included. It all seemed so oddly familiar...

“I hope your memories return soon.” Arissa offered me a smile as she and Lumia together held the gown for me to step into. Even with both carrying it, the strain on the older woman’s face was evident.

“I hope so too,” I muttered as I lifted one smooth, perfectly shaven leg into the satin folds.

“Either way, I’m certain your mating night with Prince Rhyland will be perfect.” Arissa clapped her hands and bounced on her toes.

A flare of heat burned my cheeks as bits and pieces of the brothers’ earlier conversation sailed through my mind. *You know very well what will happen once the bond is formed. There won’t be any sleep in the bridal chamber.*

I wasn’t a virgin or anything, but still the idea of sex with some guy I’d just met was a little daunting. Despite the instant connection I’d felt to Rhyland. One-night stands had never really been my thing. Bouncing around foster care hadn’t exactly instilled the most faith in humankind, which meant it took me a while to trust someone. I wasn’t letting anyone near my lady parts that I didn’t trust.

“What exactly happens on the mating night?” I couldn’t believe the words popped out.

Arissa giggled and Lumia took my hand, placing it between her wrinkled, rough ones. “My princess, have you never bedded a male? I can have the healer come and—”

“No, no, no!” My head whipped back and forth, almost violently. “I mean I know how to do it the human way. I’m just wondering how that may differ here, with *dracon*.” And thank the goddess being a virgin wasn’t part of the whole betrothal deal. I hadn’t even considered that. Wasn’t that the way it worked in fairy tales?

“Oh!” Lumia looked so relieved I felt bad for the woman. “The formal steps to the mating will be completed during the public ceremony, an exchange of vows, a bloodletting, anointing with oils, etcetera. The *act* itself remains the same. Once you are joined physically, the male bites the female on the royal mark and the bond will form. Then you must repeat the process in dracon form.”

“Wait, what royal mark?”

Lumia and Arissa’s brows furrowed as they regarded every inch of my exposed skin. “Well, that’s odd,” said Lumia as the corners of her eyes tapered, “all royal dracon are born with a mark of their bloodline. The Terrean line bear a symbol of a dracon entwined in ivy.”

She inched closer and tugged at the hem of my slip. “May I?”

The woman had already seen me completely naked twice in the basin. “Sure.”

She lifted my slip up to my breasts and peered at my bare skin, running her wrinkled fingers down my torso and pausing for a long moment at my hip bone.

I stared at my reflection in the mirror as she continued her careful perusal, searching for some hidden symbol. My mind flickered back to Ryker and the silver dragon tattoo along his throat. That had to be it. My finger lifted to my own throat, to the patch of tawny skin that had bothered me for as long as I could remember. No dragon though. “And those of the Fuoco line?” I asked. “What does it look like?”

“A dracon surrounded in flames,” Lumia answered.

“Strange, I didn’t notice one on Rhyland.” But I definitely had on Ryker.

“He bears his just above his hipbone.” She lowered my shift, frowning. “It’s typical for mates to form the symbols in the same spot.”

“Hmm.” I stared at my hipbone, willing the damned thing to appear. “So why don’t I have one?”

“It’s rare, but some royal marks do not emerge at birth. According to legend, the soul of the dracon in question is conflicted, which delays the appearance.”

“Or maybe it’s just because I was reincarnated on Earth in this body, right? That could have screwed up everything.”

Arissa and Lumia watched me with curious expressions. “Perhaps the priestess, Abba, can shed light on the situation,” said Lumia before glancing up at the clock on the wall. “Oh, dear, here we are chatting away and the time has nearly come and gone.”

“But don’t I have another hour before the ceremony?”

“Yes, but surely the king and queen will wish to parade the royal family around the courtyard before the ceremony.” Lumia got to work on the intricate laces along the back of the corset as Arissa searched the closet. The young girl emerged with a pair of silver heels covered in rhinestones. Or realms, maybe they were diamonds with the way my fidgety fingers reacted to the sight.

Once Lumia had me in the gorgeous gown, I teetered in front of the mirror on the high heels. An unfamiliar warmth filled my chest as I stared at the stranger in front of me. My brilliant neon blue hair fell in soft waves across my shoulders, resting on the ornate long sleeves of the gown. Teardrop jade earrings hung from my lobes, tinkling quietly with each breath.

“And the final touch.” Arissa stood on her tiptoes and placed a glittering tiara encrusted with jade gemstones atop my head. “It’s your birth stone, princess. Jade is to give you power

and strength. It is the source of your magic and the fuel for all royal dracon from Terre.”

Yes! Jade was the gemstone Ryker mentioned earlier.

I fingered the cool gems hanging from my earlobes and drew in a steadying breath. For the first time since I’d arrived in this strange land, I felt like the princess I was born to be.

Ten

SAPHIRA



Ryker filled the doorway, his Adam's apple bobbing along the column of his throat, awakening the silver dragon tattoo on his neck. The glimmer of his irises shone so brightly I could barely stand looking directly at them as he lingered in the doorway.

“So are you going to tell me I look nice or just keep staring?” The lighthearted banter did nothing to conceal the hitch in my voice. Mother T, when he looked at me like that my insides dissolved into a puddle.

“You—You look radiant, and regal, and like the perfect princess.” His eyes chased to the ground, and that tendon in his jaw flared to life. “Rhyland is a lucky man.”

Before arriving to Draconia, I was certain I would've never made out those final words, but with my newly enhanced hearing each one sent a stab of pain through my heart. What the realms?

Lumia placed a hand at the small of my back, urging me forward. But I couldn't move. My beautiful heels were planted to the spot, thick roots burrowed deep underground. As I stood there, frozen, I allowed myself a moment to take Ryker in. The broad cut of his shoulders beneath the deep crimson jacket that tapered to a narrow waist and powerful thighs. It reminded me of the uniform the guards wore, only with a sharper cut and finer material. Gold buttons ran down the front of the light coat, practically bursting from the strain of his muscled chest.

Images surged across my mind. My fingers dancing across a muscled torso, tracing carved peaks and valleys and moving lower, and lower still until they settled along a deep V.

A sharp gasp escaped my lips, and I squeezed my eyes closed, shaking my head.

When I slowly opened them, Ryker's musky, sandalwood scent surrounded me. "Are you all right, princess?" He was no longer at the door, but only a heartbeat away. If I leaned forward an inch, our noses would touch.

I nodded, then heaved in a breath. "I'm feeling a little faint. Maybe I should've eaten more today."

Ryker spun his concerned gaze toward Lumia. "Has she not eaten?"

"She did earlier, my prince, but in all the haste to prepare for the ceremony—"

He lifted his hand, cutting her off, and wrapped his free one around mine. "I will take her down to the kitchen."

"But Prince Ryker, I can have something sent up."

"No, there's no time. This will be faster." He tugged me through the doorway with Arissa and Lumia scurrying behind.

"Please, princess, be mindful of the gown when you eat," Lumia called out.

Oh, goddess, that would be the last thing I needed, to ruin Queen Aisling's magnificent gown. "Maybe I don't have to eat," I muttered as Ryker dragged me down the quiet hallways.

"Nonsense. We can't have you passing out in the middle of the ceremony. What kind of message would that send to our people? That our future queen is weak?" A nasty bite laced his tone.

"Trust me, ash-hole, I'm not weak." I chomped down on my bottom lip after the last word was out. *Shift*, I kept forgetting he wasn't just my broody kidnapper anymore. He was not only a prince, but also my future brother-in-law. I'd be tied to him as much as I would be to Rhyland.

His eyes widened, and he spun that piercing gaze on me. “You better learn to mind that tongue, Saphira. That feisty temper won’t do you any favors when it comes to dealing with the other royals.”

“Right.” I clenched my molars to keep from spewing out more colorful curses. Apparently, I was full of them. Besides, I needed more information about my parents out of Ryker. He seemed to be the only one somewhat willing to share. “So my family—”

He skewered me with a sidelong glance and pressed his finger to his lips. “Not now,” he hissed. We walked the rest of the way to the kitchens in an awkward silence.

We encountered a few royal guards along the way, each dipping their heads as we passed. One, a particularly tall blonde male stopped and fixed his gaze to Ryker’s. My escort’s eyes glazed over for an instant before clearing once again. Why does he keep doing that?

“Darrik,” Ryker gritted out, and the guard whirled around in the other direction.

I almost asked what that strange exchange was about, but I just didn’t have it in me to get into an argument with my moody bodyguard right now. When we finally reached the bowels of the fortress, the immense galley was humming with activity. The clang of pots and pans, knives cutting, cleavers chopping and cooks shouting echoed across the huge space.

Ryker released my hand at our approach, and I felt the loss of his touch so acutely it squeezed the air from my lungs. What in the four kingdoms? He let out a whistle, distracting me from my body’s weird meltdown, and a young girl in the corner slicing carrots dropped the knife and scurried over. “Yes, my prince, how can I serve you?”

“Caralina, some fresh bread and smoked venis for the future queen.”

“Yes, of course, milord.” She scampered off, disappearing into the hustle and bustle.

“All this is for the ceremony?” I asked.

“Mmm.” Ryker’s thick arms laced across his chest. “Surely, Father invited some of the Fuocan royals to celebrate after the ritual. It’s always necessary to keep your enemies close.”

“Enemies?”

“All the royals in each of the kingdoms are sneaky and conniving, but most of all power-hungry. Given the current situation, they are all too eager to step in at the first chance of usurping the throne.”

“Given what current situation?”

The sound of Ryker’s molars grinding sent a chill up my spine. Like nails on chalkboard. “The curse on the royals.”

“Mother T, if someone doesn’t tell me what in the world is going on here, I’m going to lose it, Ryker!”

A few of the kitchen staff whirled in my direction at the outburst. With their curious gazes burning into the side of my face, I plastered on a fake smile and did my best impression of a demure princess.

“Tell me,” I hissed.

“Ever since the sacrifice,” he whispered, “all those years ago, the royals have been unable to reproduce heirs that can summon their dracon spirit.”

“What?” I eyed the grumpy man, trying to process his words.

“Every child born since you sacrificed your life for this kingdom has been unable to ‘shift into a dragon’ as you say. According to the accounts, it’s as if they’re trapped somehow.”

That was exactly how I felt my whole life. Like I had this creature lurking just beneath my skin, stuck inside a skeletal cage.

“I don’t get it. What does that have to do with me?”

“According to a Draconian seer’s prophecy, you are the cure for the curse. The mating between the sacrificial female

and the Ashborne heir will bring about the end of the dark spell.”

Holy shift. The survival of an entire race is dependent on me mating with some dracon prince? No. No!

“In the last fifty years,” he continued, “the lesser dracon have grown in number and power. Though most were never powerful enough to summon their inner beasts, things are changing. The royals have long hoarded all the gemstones that source our power – the rubies, jade, blue tourmaline and turquoise. They’ve never allowed the commoners access to it. Now, with the royals unable to reproduce, the situation is quickly deteriorating. If you and Rhyland don’t consummate the bond and produce an heir blessed with the dracon spirit, not only will the Ashbornes lose power, but the entire system of dracon society will crumble.”

I eyed the cooks and maids running around the kitchens. Would that really be so bad? I guess the whole equality thing wasn’t big over here.

He followed my line of sight, and the hint of a smile curved his lips. “I know what you’re about to say, but there’s more to it than just equality for all. Royal dracon are the only ones who can harness the power of the elements, without us, there would be no balance and the rest wouldn’t survive.”

“Good goddess, Ryker, what more haven’t you told me?” Just when I thought I was starting to get a handle on things, I realized I knew absolutely nothing about anything.

The serving girl ran up with a platter of food, putting an abrupt end to our conversation. She offered it to me with a beaming smile. “Here you are, milady.”

I had to grit out a thank you instead of cursing her out for interrupting. Then I got a whiff of the savory meat and fresh bread, and my stomach growled. Okay, maybe I *was* hungry.

Ryker led me to a quiet nook, revealing a small table and two chairs. “Don’t tell anyone I let you eat down here. The king and queen would be appalled.” I found it odd that he hardly ever referred to his parents as Mom or Dad, always

only by their formal titles. He pulled out the old chair and I folded onto the worn wood, careful to spread out the long, flowing skirts of my gown to avoid wrinkling them.

“So how come you eat down here?” It was an easy leap as he led me straight to the discreet corner.

He shrugged. “It’s quiet.”

A laugh tumbled out. “It’s anything but.”

“Okay, maybe not today, but usually. Besides, there’s something about the clamor of the kitchen that I find soothing.”

“Such a strange prince.” I shot him a smirk as I took a bite of the sandwich I’d pieced together. “Are you going to tell me more about this power over the elements you were talking about?”

He loosed a frustrated breath. “Maybe Rhyland should be the one to tell you. I shouldn’t have told you any of it. He’s your mate, not me.” His expression shuttered, sharp lines cutting into his handsome face.

He didn’t say another word for the rest of the meal despite my best efforts.

This man’s mercurial moods were giving me whiplash.

When I’d scarfed down the last bite, he offered me his arm, still without a word, and led me back through the winding corridors.

The hustle and bustle of the kitchens carried through to the grand hall as massive banquet tables were set up throughout the chamber. Brilliant flower arrangements, gilded candelabras flickering with candlelight, and gold platters and cutlery adorned every inch of the tables.

“How did they put this together in such short notice?” I blurted.

“Never underestimate the queen. She never does anything unless it is grand.”

I could only imagine what her mating ceremony must have been like. “So that’s why the rush with the mating ceremony? So that I can pop out babies that can turn into dragons?” I whispered as Ryker led me through the frenzy of servants and guards.

“Essentially, yes,” he gritted out.

Was it my imagination or did he always get all growly when I mentioned the betrothal?

He has his reasons. That familiar voice echoed in my mind.

Are you ever going to come out and play? I shot back. *Or are you stuck too?* I couldn’t believe I was talking to my dragon.

In due time. With that, I felt her presence recede to the dark corners where she permanently resided.

When we reached the throne room, all the clatter fell away, and my gaze landed on the man perched on the smaller throne atop the dais. My heart gave out a staggered beat. Rhyland shot to his feet as Ryker escorted me across the threshold.

“Princess Saphira, you are truly a magnificent sight.” He marched toward me, looking pretty splendid himself in the same deep crimson hue as his brother. The high-collared satin jacket clung to his broad form and despite the puffy sleeves and white silk sash tied around his neck, he still looked incredibly manly.

My pulse escalated with each step closer as I scrutinized the man I was supposed to marry—mate, whatever. It was the strangest thing. When Ryker had told me I was betrothed, the idea of being tied to a stranger had my stomach in knots and my inner independent woman raging. But after only a few hours of having met him, I couldn’t deny the connection.

“Hello, my princess.” Rhyland beamed when he closed the distance between us and offered me his hand.

I tried to wriggle free of Ryker’s hold, but it only tightened, and a faint growl ricocheted between the three of us.

“Ryker,” Rhyland snarled.

His brother’s eyes narrowed, and his pupils thinned to reptilian slits.

My hidden dragon suddenly surged to the surface. Sharp claws raked at my insides, and I keeled over at the intense pain. A scream ripped through my lips.

“Saphira!” Ryker’s arms were around me, holding me up as my knees wobbled. “Call the healer!”

The moment his warm body enveloped mine the pain receded. A strange vibration reverberated across my chest, then skipped through every part of my being. “I’m okay. I don’t need a healer.” I glanced up at Ryker and smoldering silver orbs locked on mine.

“Are you sure? If you’re not well enough to go through with the ceremony—”

“She said she’s fine,” Rhyland interjected. “Now kindly take your hands off my mate.” A spark lit up my betrothed’s golden irises.

Ryker stepped back, clearing his throat and crushed his arms against his chest. Rhyland’s hands closed around mine, and he offered a reassuring smile. “Are you all right?”

I nodded.

“Good, because I cannot wait to make you mine.”

Eleven

SAPHIRA



Thousands of curious gazes bored into me as we circled the courtyard for the hundredth time. Exotic, lush greenery served as a canopy from the harsh rays of the sun, and a cool breeze lifted off the sea. Otherwise, I would've been roasting in this humongous gown. Only a few dozen royal Fuocan families were admitted entrance within the fortress walls, but just beyond, the lesser dragon climbed the gray stone ramparts just to get a glimpse at the future queen. Me.

Rhyland walked by my side, our arms elegantly intertwined. Though I hadn't particularly enjoyed the hour-long stroll, or being paraded in front of all the royals, at least I'd gotten a chance to speak to my betrothed.

In short, whispered exchanges.

With my sullen, surly escort on my other side, of course. Ryker was not only a prince, but also the head of the royal Fuocan guard, the prince commander, which meant according to my fiancé, he would also double as my personal bodyguard.

That explained why he'd come to collect me from that party in Vegas.

Behind us, the king and queen marched, along with the entire retinue of guards with swords drawn at the ready. Why the high security for a stroll around the inner courtyard?

Rhyland's gaze lifted to the soaring stone walls to the line of citizens walking along the narrow ridge. "They seem as enthralled with you as I am." His words derailed my thoughts,

and with that warm smile, a mad flutter of butterflies raged in my gut. “We’ve all been waiting so long for your return.”

“I can’t believe you waited fifty years, honestly.”

Ryker’s eyes flickered toward us, the motion so quick if I hadn’t been so strangely attuned to him I never would’ve noticed it.

“Fifty years isn’t that long when you consider the typical lifetime of a dragon.” He nudged his elbow into my side in a playful move I hadn’t expected from the prince. “And anyway, you were well worth the wait.”

Ryker grunted, and this time I couldn’t ignore the blatant rudeness.

I spun at the grumpy dragon, eyes narrowed. “If you have something to say, just say it.” A swirl of irritation scratched just beneath my skin. Something flared to life in my core, that familiar presence.

“Nothing at all, princess.” Ryker’s mouth split into a practiced smile.

“Future queen,” Rhyland corrected.

Another deep grunt pursed my future brother-in-law’s lips, and he lengthened his stride, moving beside one of the guards, possibly the same blonde male from earlier.

“I don’t think your brother approves of me.” I eyed Rhyland to see if I could detect the forthcoming lie.

Something unreadable flashed across those golden irises. “Why would you say that?”

I shrugged. “Just a feeling, I guess.”

“Nonsense. You and Ryker were quite close before...”

“We were?” My voice hitched a few notches, and heat flushed my cheeks for some ungodly reason.

“Yes, despite our families’ differences, you’d agreed to the betrothal under the condition that you and I got to know each other first. Given all the rules of accompanied visits and what not, Ryker was frequently at your side.” His brows knitted,

and again something dark loomed just beneath the surface of those glistening orbs. “My brother is not the easiest male to contend with, and yet somehow after an initial rough patch, you managed to wrap him around your little finger.”

A rueful laugh tumbled out. “Somehow, I doubt that.”

“I swear it. Don’t underestimate your strength, my princess. What you did to save Draconia, to save all of Terrea was beyond heroic. The people, both royals and commoners alike, look to you as a savior.”

Whoa. “I wish I could remember.” I couldn’t imagine being strong enough to give up my own life, even if it were to save an entire realm. “Tell me about us,” I blurted. “Had I managed to wrap *you* around my little finger?” I shot him a cheeky smile.

“Every single finger, Saphira Highborne. I was truly blessed by Mother Terrea the day our mating was arranged.”

Warmth spread from my navel and rose all the way up to the tips of my ears. But the mention of my full name triggered thoughts of my earlier conversation with Ryker, dousing the warm and fuzzies. “Why isn’t my family here?”

Rhyland’s lips flattened into a thin line.

“Please, tell me. Are they dead? Did something happen? Why wouldn’t they be here to greet me if I’ve been gone for fifty years?”

His mouth twisted, a hint of what I could’ve sworn was regret streaking across those bright eyes. “They don’t know you’ve returned,” he exhaled on a breath.

“Get down!” A sharp cry ricocheted through the air, then a series of explosions rocked the quiet courtyard.

“Protect the royals!” Shouts echoed across the air.

“Go! Go!”

A massive body pummeled into me, and I hit the ground, all the air siphoning from my lungs. Despite not being able to breathe, my first thought was *shit, my dress!* The second was the overwhelming heat pressed into my back. Fiery heat

scorched my veins, rushing through every inch of me. I didn't need to turn my head to understand who'd used his body as a shield to protect my own; I could already smell Ryker's familiar scent blanketing me.

What I didn't expect was the blazing inferno...

"Stay down." Ryker's warm breath skated over the shell of my ear, and a ripple of goosebumps cascaded down my arm. Goddess, first I'm hot, now I'm cold. What is going on?

A tremor shook the earth beneath me, shaking my stomach so hard I was sure I'd vomit.

"Close the gates!" Ryker roared.

Another explosion rang out at a distance, and more screams filled the air.

"What's happening?" I cried out through the chaos. I couldn't see a damn thing from beneath Ryker's big arm. I didn't even know where Rhyland was. One second he was beside me, and the next all hell broke loose and he was gone.

Had one of the other guards gotten him to safety? Or was he flattened to the ground just a few feet away beneath some other burly beast?

A ground-shaking roar echoed overhead, and instantly I recognized the sound. *Dracon*. Another growl shot out from a distance and yet another boomed from the opposite direction. The thunderous roars drowned out the mad thumping of my heart.

"We have to move now!" Ryker's arm came around my waist and easily hauled me to my feet. With his broad chest covering my back, he rushed me across the garden. The scent of burned flesh reached my nostrils an instant before my gaze landed on the corpses. Guards in crimson uniforms, servants I'd seen racing around the fortress earlier, along with half a dozen other bodies I didn't recognize. Judging by their haggard appearances and roughhewn tunics, I'd guess they were the Fuocan citizens who'd come to catch a glimpse of their new princess.

Guilt speared into my chest as Ryker led me over the charred bodies.

“What happened?” I repeated.

“I don’t know,” he gritted out, his body a flesh and blood shield across my own. “And now is not the time to waste on guesses.” He rushed me down a stone pathway toward the back of the sprawling fortress.

I hazarded a quick glance to my left and right, searching for Rhyland and the king and queen. “Where is everyone else?”

“It’s protocol for all royals to be split up for safety. Once the threat has passed, we’ll all be reunited.”

“Is Rhyland okay?” I should have asked about the king and queen but in that moment, he was the only one I cared about. If this prophecy or whatever was true, we needed this mating to happen to save all of draconkind.

“He was fine last I saw. Darrik, my second, took him to the eastern safehouse. He’s had many decades of practice guarding your betrothed so no need to worry, princess.”

I released the breath I hadn’t realized I’d been holding. I found it strange that Ryker wouldn’t be Rhyland’s personal bodyguard. If he was the commander of the royal guard, shouldn’t the best guard the future king? I put off the question for now because I didn’t feel like getting my head bitten off.

“What about all the other Fuocan people?” There had been dozens of them, and so many women and children. “Will the guards protect them?”

“There are only so many guards, princess.” He hurried me through the mounting chaos.

“But the poor children...”

Ryker speared me with that smoldering gaze, a turmoil of emotions glistening within the silver pools. “Saphira, right now, you’re the only one that matters.”

I gritted my teeth to avoid saying something I’d regret later. I’d only been here for a few days, and already I realized

that was exactly what was wrong with Draconian society.

“That way.” Ryker pointed over my shoulder to a cluster of bushes at the end of the pathway. Weaving my way around the verdant hedge, I found at least a dozen gray stone steps leading beneath the fortress.

“Secret entrance?” I asked.

“Something like that.” Once we were below ground, Ryker peeled his body off mine and took the lead, his hand still encircling my wrist. The overwhelming heat from a few seconds ago subsided, and a strange chill emerged from the vacant depths.

We reached a giant metal door secured by a cast iron drop bar thicker than Ryker’s bicep.

“Now what?” I spun at my bodyguard.

“Watch and see.” The glimmer of a smirk brightened his silver irises. “*Apritek*.”

The massive bar squealed in protest before sliding over, and the door creaked open.

Twelve

SAPHIRA



“Whoa, what kind of crazy magic was that?” I stared at the foot of the entrance beneath the fortress.

“Barrier spell.” Ryker motioned for me to enter the dark passageway, but my feet were rooted to the spot. “It responds only to certain voices. Mages can be quite useful sometimes.”

“Like witches?” I asked and took a wary step.

“Yes, something like that.” He stepped around me, his chest brushing my bare shoulder blade, and tiny zaps of electricity pricked my skin. I gasped at the intense sensation, my hand clapping over my heart. It was like a direct hit to my sputtering organ.

An odd rumble vibrated Ryker’s chest, but he said nothing about my reaction or the strange electric pulse. Had he really not felt that?

He exhaled sharply, and a wave of silver dragonfire pursed his lips before catching on each of the torches along the wall. The brilliant light illuminated the murky space, revealing a narrow passageway that opened up into another chamber.

“What is this place?” I took a cautious step forward, teetering on my heels. Murky stone walls surrounded in us darkness, the pungent, earthy scent invading my sensitive nostrils.

“The western safehouse. It was built for emergencies such as these.”

“Does this happen often?” Whatever the hell *this* was.

The line between his dark brows deepened. “It never used to.” He released a frustrated sigh and took the lead down the illuminated corridor. “You remember the vampire king, Valandril, Abba mentioned?”

“Sort of.” The last few days had all been a bit much.

“During the war, all our defenses were fortified. Once the sacrifice was made, things began to settle, until more recently.”

I followed him down the hallway until we reached the musty chamber at the end. It was larger than I’d expected for a room deep beneath the earth, complete with soaring ceilings so high a full size dracon could fit. A few, antique chairs and a small crushed-velvet settee surrounded a sooty hearth. Dust motes and glistening cobwebs blanketed every corner of the chamber.

“Remember what I told you about the royal dracon not being able to reproduce heirs with a dracon spirit?”

I nodded.

“A few of the lesser dracon have banded together in an effort to overthrow the royals. They believe that without the ability to summon their inner beasts, they no longer deserve to rule. They claim Mother Terrea has punished us, and now it’s their time to rise.” He shrugged. “Maybe it’s not so far from the truth...”

“So these rebels attacked the fortress?”

His head dipped. “That’s my best guess. They’ve been quiet for a few weeks now. Everyone was anxiously awaiting your arrival. I suppose we all hoped it would quell the unrest, but apparently not.”

I ran my finger over a sooty table, kicking up the fine powder and the earthy smell made my nose twitch.

“The western safehouse hasn’t been in use for a while, given your absence.” His light eyes chased to the ground, tracing a vein of black across the dark stone.

I moved around the antique table to the cushioned crimson settee, eyeing the musty fabric before picking up the heavy skirts of my gown. *My gown!* “Is my dress ruined?” I spun at Ryker, genuine fear, ten times more powerful than what I’d felt huddled beneath my bodyguard’s imposing form a few minutes ago, tightening my lungs.

An unexpected laugh bubbled from his clenched lips. “Yes, you’ll make a fine princess.”

“Ryker!” I jabbed my fist into his rock-hard stomach and immediately regretted it. “This is your mother’s mating gown. If I ruined it, I’d feel terrible. For her. Not me.”

The smirk lingered on his lips, and goddess dammit, my heart flip-flopped at the sight. I blamed it on the overwhelming physical similarities between the brothers. My stupid heart apparently couldn’t tell the difference between the hot-as-sin siblings.

Ryker took a step closer and dropped his gaze from my eyes to my lips, then traveled lower, down the scandalous neckline, over the corseted bustier and finally down the flowing, satin skirts. I felt each and every second of his heated gaze.

“You still look like a gift from the goddess herself.” He inched closer, and his thumb brushed my cheek. His eyes locked on mine, and heat ignited low in my core. His tongue jutted out and wetted his lower lip until it glistened beneath the dragonlight.

Goddess, I wanted to taste that lip, to nibble on its pillowy softness.

Oh, my gods! Where did that come from?

Ryker popped his thumb in his mouth, wetting it, then dragged it across my cheek once again. “Got it.”

“Huh?” I swallowed hard.

“You’re perfect now. There was just a little something...”

“Oh!” I sprang back, embarrassment tingeing my cheeks. Running my hands across the billowing folds of my gown, I

drew in a steadying breath. *Good goddess, get a hold of yourself, Saphira!* “How much longer do we have to stay down here?”

“Until they sound the bell. Once the fortress has been secured, the bell guard will climb the tower to announce the threat has passed.”

Those luminescent irises were still fixed on me, and I was finding it harder and harder to draw in a full breath. Each inhale was tainted with Ryker’s spicy, sandalwood scent and it was messing with my mind. “And how long does that usually take?”

Ryker stepped closer, his dark brows drawing together as he continued his careful scrutiny. “Why? Am I making you nervous?” The corner of his lip kicked up into a wicked grin.

“No,” I squeaked. *Squeaked!* I took another step back, and Ryker mirrored the movement until I hit the back of the settee. “I’m just not a fan of dark and murky dungeons.”

“Really? The Saphira I remember loved getting into a little mischief in the dark.” His jaw snapped shut, eyes widening as if someone else had taken over his tongue.

The expression was pure, unadulterated terror. And it looked good on him. It was open and honest, unlike the hard mask I was certain the younger prince typically wore.

I took my opening. “Rhyland said we were close... before.”

One brow quirked up into an incredulous arc. “He did?”

“Is it not true?”

He shook his head. “No, it is. I just didn’t think my brother had realized.”

“How would he not? I thought I’d come here to get to know the prince better and spend time with him before the official betrothal?”

“That’s true, but the Rhyland from fifty years ago was a different man than the one you met today.” He motioned toward the settee, and I folded onto the soft cushion. Ryker

perched on the edge of the pillow beside me, his shoulders stiff. “Back then, he was obsessed with learning everything he could about becoming king. He followed father around everywhere like a little lamb, to all the council meetings, war room discussions, even to visit the furthest outskirts of our lands. It didn’t leave much time to spend with you.”

“So, you did?”

He nodded, his gaze dipping to the minute space between our thighs. “It was my duty.”

The silence lengthened between us, those words lingering in the air with so much weight, and yet, I had no idea why. There was something I was still missing here; I was certain of it. I pivoted toward him, my leg brushing his and even through the layers of silk, that warmth invaded my system.

“Is it normal to be so hot?” I blurted.

Another chuckle escaped Ryker’s clenched lips, the warm sound filling the vacant hole in my chest. “Dracon do run warmer than most.”

“But it’s mostly when I touch you.”

His eyes lanced into mine, a storm of emotions brewing just beneath the silver surface. “You didn’t feel it with Rhyland?”

I slowly shook my head. “Am I supposed to?”

“Goddess, no.” A wry smile curled the corner of his mouth. He leaned closer, excitement filling his eyes. “Have you tried to summon your dracon form?”

“I’ve been a little busy with wedding, I mean mating, preparations and all.”

“Let’s try it.”

“Right here? Now?” I eyed my mercurial bodyguard then stared up at the rafters. Sure, the room was big but these dracon were huge. I could take out the whole damned chamber.

“Females are typically smaller than male dracon. You’ll be safe, I swear.” His hands closed around mine, and excitement rippled between us. For some insane reason, I’d trusted this man from the moment I met him. Why stop now?

“Okay...” I murmured. A mixture of exhilaration and terror tangled in my gut. “Now what?”

Ryker helped me to my feet and with his hands wrapped tight around mine, he whispered, “Now take off your clothes.”

Thirteen

SAPHIRA



My heart catapulted up my throat, and all the moisture evaporated from my mouth. “Ex-squeeze me?” I rasped out.

His feral grin softened, and an unguarded moment passed between us. “I’ll turn around to give you some privacy, but my presence could help coax your dracon out.”

“I bet that’s what you say to all the girls.” A nervous giggle tittered out.

“Only one so far.” The confession was whispered, so quiet that again, I was fairly certain had I not been blessed with this new supernatural hearing I wouldn’t have made out the words.

Ryker squeezed my hands before letting them fall between us. “You can do this, Saphira. I have faith that the goddess has much more in store for you.” With a final reassuring smile, he spun around.

“You must have a lot of faith in my contortionist abilities, too, if you think I can get out of this dress by myself.”

He whirled back, a wild grin stretching across his scruffy jawline. He took a step closer, and his eyes sparkled with mischief. That burning gaze raked over me, like thousands of fingertips caressing every inch of skin. Raising his hands, he whispered, “May I?”

My head bounced up and down before I lost my nerve.

Ryker crept around me, his footsteps so soft I could barely make them out over the thunderous pounding of my pulse. His fingers latched onto the intricate laces, and his warm breath

spilled across my neck. A shudder raced up my spine as that heat blossomed in my core.

“I apologize, this is more difficult than I imagined.” A rough edge laced his tone, and goddess, it only heightened the dragonfly wings battering my belly.

“Told you.”

His calloused fingers brushed my sensitive flesh as he undid lace after lace. Each touch sent tingles up and down my spine. Mother T, this was not normal. Sure, it had been a while since I’d gotten some, but no male had ever had this effect on me.

It was nothing like the familiarity I felt with Rhyland.

“Almost,” he whispered, his voice so jagged another tremor roared through my body. He must have felt it; it would’ve been impossible not to have. My shoulders shook so violently, the elaborate sleeves of my gown slid down to my elbows. With the corset half undone, my breasts sprang free, the cool air slamming into my heated body.

My arms curled around my bare chest. Ryker towered over me, so much so that if he merely glanced over my head, he’d see every inch of my exposed breasts.

“Just one more.” He dropped to his knees behind me, one hand settling on my hip. My damned traitorous body leaned into his touch as he unlaced the final tie. “There.” He slowly rose, his fingers digging into my waist for support. As he stood, something hard brushed against my ass.

He leapt back, a hiss cutting through the thick silence. That damned heat kindled low in my belly, and if I hadn’t been practically naked, there would’ve been nothing that could’ve stopped me from turning around.

But I was bare from the waist up.

And I was betrothed.

To his brother.

Clearing my throat, I forced out a quick, “Thank you.”

“Of course.” He paused, the crinkle of clothes being adjusted ringing out in the silence. “I’ll turn around now, and then I can try to talk you through it.”

Through it? It took a second to clear my lusty thoughts before I remembered what we were trying to do in the first place. Right, summon my dracon. That was why I was getting naked with the other prince. No other reason.

I clenched my thighs together to extinguish the building heat, then cast a nervous glance over my shoulder. Ryker’s broad back was to me, his eyes fixed on the dark stone wall. I slipped the long skirts down my legs, and the fine fabric fell to the floor with a soft *whoosh*. “Okay, now what do I do?”

“Focus within. The magic that controls our dracon exists deep within our souls. You must call to her and summon her forth.”

Sure, easy peasy.

You with me, girl?

I searched for that voice that had accompanied me my whole life. Even pills had never sent her away. Something stirred at the core of my being. It was faint, like the kiss of butterfly wings. I tried to latch onto the sensation, but it was so weak it slipped through my fingertips.

“It’s not working,” I grumbled.

“Saphira, most dracon emerge in adolescence. Your beast has been kept bound for years in the human world; you must give her time. Try to draw from the power of the jade gemstone, it should amplify your abilities.”

“Fine,” I growled and refocused again, fingering the jade teardrop earrings. My thoughts flickered to the times I’ve felt her most clearly, which usually involved either me being in danger or Ryker’s proximity. Since it seemed like the guards had eliminated the threat outside, I concentrated on the male standing a few feet behind me.

My nostrils flared, and I inhaled his musky scent. Squeezing my eyes closed, I pictured Ryker, those brilliant silver irises, the strong set of his jaw, the powerful frame of his

body that protected me over and over again. A vibration filled my chest, a strange, soft purr. Something flared to life beneath my skin, a weird undercurrent of energy.

“Come closer,” I whispered. The overwhelming urge to touch him consumed my being.

A choked, strangled rumble drifted from Ryker’s direction. But still, I could feel him move closer. His back hit mine, the fine fabric of his jacket brushing my bare skin.

“Do you feel anything?” he murmured.

“I feel something all right.” A rush of heat singed my veins as his fiery warmth seeped into me. Within seconds, I was too hot again, every cell, every nerve alight and blazing. With our shoulder blades touching, he wrapped a big finger around my pinky. The faint touch sent fire screaming across my flesh.

I chomped down on my lower lip to keep from crying out.

Ryker’s hand closed around mine, first one and then the other. The heat intensified and a massive head butted against the inside of my ribcage. Oh, goddess. Claws tore at my gut, fissures racing across my bones. Pain, blazing pain soared through my body. It felt like I was being torn apart from the inside out.

I couldn’t keep the scream from tearing through my clenched lips.

“Saphira!” Ryker spun around, his massive arms enveloping me from behind. “Are you okay?”

“It hurts,” I whimpered. “It fucking hurts so bad.”

His hold tightened, that fiery warmth blanketing me in a tangle of pleasure and pain. “Just let go. Let her out.”

“I can’t!” I spun around and met molten silver irises, and pupils so narrow they were nearly completely consumed by the mystical glow. I was so swept up in the moment I completely forgot I was naked. My bare breasts pressed against the soft lapel of his jacket, the chilly gold buttons brushing my skin and sending tingles across my arms.

Ryker swallowed hard, his Adam's apple jogging along the column of his throat. The dragon tattoo swirled to life, dancing along his skin. He kept his eyes pinned to mine, but I could almost feel his desperate struggle.

Something prickled my throat, and my fingers danced up my neck to that tawny patch of skin I was certain I'd been born with. His eyes traced the movement, and those pupils pulsed.

The fire began to recede, that presence sinking deep below the surface once again. I heaved in a breath, and my chest rubbed against his, sending shocks of energy through my peaked nipples and straight to the apex of my thighs.

I squirmed uncomfortably, and Ryker's hungry gaze dipped to my mouth. I lost all control of my wits and my body. My hips rocked toward his, meeting a thick erection. *Mother T.* I gasped as I struggled for control over my traitorous body.

Ryker's lips parted, and my head tilted dangerously close to that mouth. To the mouth that seemed so damned familiar. The perfect cupid's bow, the soft pillowy bottom. I drew in a haggard breath as his lips inched closer.

Electricity crackled in the minute space between us. His mouth was only a heartbeat away, that tongue gliding over his bottom lip. Goddess, I wanted to capture it and claim it as mine.

Mine. That familiar voice echoed through my mind. There she was.

A violent urge compelled me forward, and my lips brushed Ryker's, the contact so faint I could have imagined it.

The shrill bong of a bell shattered the tense moment, and Ryker leapt back with a growl. My entire body sagged forward at the loss of his. I managed to straighten before toppling right down to the floor.

"It's safe," he rasped out.

I stared at him wide-eyed, a lusty haze still clouding my brain. Safe? What? "Huh?"

Ryker dropped to his knees and tugged my discarded gown up my bare legs.

Oh goddess, I was naked. How the hell did I forget again?

“The bell,” he murmured as he stared up at me for a long second. “It’s time to join the others.”

“Oh, right.” Like my freaking fiancé. I gulped and spun around, giving Ryker access to my back. He slowly stood and began to cinch the ties along my corset.

They were the longest five minutes of my life.

Fourteen

SAPHIRA



Oh, my gods, I couldn't do this.

Ryker marched me toward the throne room along with two guards we'd picked up once we'd emerged from the saferoom beneath the fortress. Saferoom, my ass. Only dangerous, super risky things had happened down there.

My bodyguard felt so stiff beside me, I was impressed he was able to move his legs into the semblance of a march. Tension radiated from the rigid set of his shoulders, the hard clench of his jaw, his free hand balled into a fist.

He might as well have worn a sign saying *I almost snagged a princess in the dark dungeon*. And goddess, did I want to be snagged and claimed and ruined by this man.

I gritted my teeth and lengthened my stride to keep up with Ryker's. It was a mistake, that was all. A heated moment after the spike of adrenaline from the attack. It didn't mean anything. I barely knew this man, and there was no logical reason for the instant attraction. It was only lust, that was it.

Ryker was hot. So what?

Rhyland was also incredibly good looking. And yet, somehow, he didn't make my blood sing. Not in the same way as his brother, not even close. Brother. Brother. Brother!

Oh, shift, how was this happening? I blamed my stupid dragon. If she'd only emerged like she was supposed to, none of this would've happened.

The vast hallway was quickly coming to an end, the gilded double doors of the throne room looming ever closer. I couldn't do this. I couldn't face Rhyland and the king and queen after what almost happened.

I stopped midstride, jerking Ryker back with me.

He loomed over me, the soft, smiling, unguarded male from the safehouse gone. The hard mask was back in place, the tendon clenching like mad in his jaw. "What?" he finally gritted out.

I ticked my head at the two guards a few steps ahead of us.

He spun on them, the move so fast, it kicked up a breeze ruffling my hair. "Leave us," he snarled. The two males lumbered down the hall and waited in front of the entrance to the throne room.

"I can't do this," I hissed.

His expression softened, and he released a frustrated breath. "Can't do what exactly?"

Face my betrothed, your brother, after what we almost did. After all the things I wanted to do. I kept those traitorous thoughts to myself and stiffened my upper lip. "They can't expect me to go through with the ceremony so soon after the attack, can they?"

He rolled his eyes and huffed out another breath, setting his unruly hair tumbling forward. "The ceremony won't happen today."

A wave of hope so strong it nearly bowled me over kindled in my chest. "How do you know?"

"It just won't."

"Because of the attack?"

A grunt vibrated his throat. "No, Father would make sure the ceremony took place even if an entire war had taken place in the courtyard."

"Then how?"

His hands closed around my shoulders, warm, calloused fingers digging into my skin through the fine material of his mother's gown. He dipped his head and whispered, "Do you trust me?"

Goddess, it was stupid, but I did. My head dipped slowly.

"Then come and trust me when I say it won't happen today." Ryker offered his arm, and I weaved mine through his, warily. He tugged me forward, and the guards at the end of the corridor opened the doors to the grand hall.

The doors parted, and a pair of golden irises found mine from the center of the room. Rhyland raced toward me, a layer of soot blanketing his handsome face. A line of crimson bisected his brow, and blood dribbled down his temple.

"Thank the goddess you're safe!" he cried as he enveloped me in his arms.

My gut clenched at the wound so close to his eye. "You're hurt?" The hitch in my tone was entirely authentic. I *had* really been worried about him.

"It's nothing, just a scratch." He squeezed me tight against his firm chest, and my body easily sank in.

Behind me, Ryker cleared his throat, clucking his tongue. "Decorum, brother." He extended his hand between us, creating some space.

The elder prince spun at his sibling, venom in those brilliant orbs. "Mother Terrea, she could have been killed, Ryker. Fuck decorum for a moment."

"Rhyland!" Queen Aisling cried out from the dais. "That vile human vocabulary is not fit for a future king."

"I'm tired of all of this, mother," he shouted and dragged his hand through his dirt-encrusted hair. He pivoted to me and lowered his gaze. "I apologize, Saphira."

Damn, if he only knew I had a mouth like a sailor back at home. Since I arrived here, it seems even the way I spoke had changed. What was up with that? "It's fine," I murmured and squeezed his outstretched hand.

The king stalked toward us, his silver, ruby-tipped crown hanging lopsided on his mop of auburn hair. “Forget the public ceremony. We proceed with the mating now.”

“But Father—” Ryker’s growl was dismissed with the wave of a bejeweled hand. The king wore more ruby rings than the queen.

“This is not up for discussion. We tried to do something to make the people happy and you saw what happened.” The king motioned through the window to the guards traipsing through the gardens, helping the wounded and gathering bodies.

My throat closed at the sight of a big guard with a child in his arms. The little boy’s head rested on the guard’s shoulder as he cradled his injured arm.

“How many were wounded?” I blurted. “Or killed?”

Rhyland and the king exchanged a glance. “Let’s not discuss the somber details right now,” my fiancé answered. “We should focus on the future, on all the happiness our mating will bring to our kingdom.”

Ryker scoffed, and his brother countered with a scathing glare.

I opened my mouth to object, but my tongue was tied into a knot. How could we possibly celebrate with warm bodies lying just outside these walls? “This isn’t right,” I finally managed.

“Please, Saphira.” Rhyland took my hands and squeezed them within his own. “I’ve waited so long to make you mine. I want this not only for the good of our kingdom, but for us. This union will strengthen the bonds of this family and pave the way for a better future. It can never start if we don’t take this first step.” He lowered his voice and dipped his eyes to mine. “I know what happened today was frightening, and I understand that all of this is new to you. But trust me when I say that you wanted this as much as I do. You are a strong, fierce female, and you’d do anything for your people. This is

what is best for all of us.” The sincerity in Rhyland’s expression had my heart in a vice grip.

I wanted to believe him and a part of me did. Buried deep within this human shell, I could feel glimpses of my old self. But still, something about this just felt wrong.

“Please.” He lifted my hand to his lips and brushed a chaste kiss. “I promise to spend the rest of my days making you happy, to become a king you will be proud of, and to restore this kingdom to all its glory.”

Those golden irises pulsed, warmth and sincerity oozing from their glittering depths. It wasn’t just a strange connection to Ryker, I felt something with Rhyland too. Indecision streaked through my insides, battling a war between my heart and mind.

“Call the officiant,” the king bellowed at one of the guards.

“She didn’t agree,” Ryker barked and whirled at his father.

Kiran’s cold gaze cast over me. He inched closer and took my hand from his son’s, wrapping it in his big paws. “She will agree because she was born for this, and despite her muddled memories, Princess Saphira Highborne will do what is right for our kingdom, just like she did fifty years ago.”

The king’s words hit me like an arrow to the heart. Despite all my misgivings, I knew he was right. If I’d gone through such great lengths to save our people then, why would I deny them this? Until that encounter with Ryker in the saferoom, I was all in, wasn’t I?

I couldn’t forsake my duty for a few moments of weakness.

“Okay,” I murmured.

Kiran’s lips stretched into a satisfied grin. “That’s a good princess.”

“You won’t regret this, Saphira.” Rhyland rewarded me with a beaming smile. “I swear it to you. We will be happy together.”

Ryker grumbled a curse and marched toward the dais without sparing me a glance. Guilt speared my heart, the pain so acute I sucked in a lungful of air to keep from keeling over.

Trust him. That growly voice echoed through my mind, and I nearly jumped out of my skin. *Who? Trust who?* I shot back.

The presence receded to the dark corners of my psyche, leaving me alone and more confused than ever. Goddess, how could I be so fickle? One minute I could see myself with Rhyland, a queen at his side and the other, well, Ryker consumed my every waking thought. Which was insane because it had only been a few days since I met him.

I had to know more about our past. That must be the key. Whatever I was missing happened back then. It was the only logical answer.

The smack of approaching footfalls sent my heart ratcheting up my throat. A guard appeared at the doorway with an older, silver-haired female. Crimson flowing robes extended to the floor, swishing with each step closer.

The two dracon dipped into a bow as they approached the king on the dais.

“My apologies, my king,” said the woman, “but there are a multitude of people in need of final blessings.” She eyed the window along the far wall. “Can this not wait a few hours?”

“No,” Kiran snarled. “We’ve waited long enough. The rebels cannot believe they hold the power to thwart our plans, or else they will truly win.”

“But the sick and dying—”

“Can wait!” He dragged the officiant toward the dais. “You will perform the mating ceremony immediately. The faster you complete the vows, the quicker you can help the good citizens of Fuoco.”

“Rhyland,” I whispered. “This just isn’t right.” Without the officiant’s final blessings, Mother Terrea wouldn’t welcome the souls of the departed. Whoa, how did I know that?

“I’m sorry, Saphira, but my father is right. Our mating must be completed under the eyes of Mother Terrea. The sooner we show the rebels that their treachery will not stop us, the safer everyone will be.” He offered me his arm and lifted his gaze to the dais.

The reluctant officiant stood before a newly erected altar, mixing fragrant oils over a small flame.

I weaved my arm through Rhyland’s and caught a glimpse of Ryker from across the hall. His eyes were glazed over, dark brows furrowed in concentration. He stared in my direction with an unseeing gaze.

Rhyland tugged me forward, and I teetered on my heels for only an instant before following him down the aisle. This was happening. I couldn’t believe this was really happening. A wave of nausea churned in my gut, and that faint presence stirred.

When we reached the altar, the king and queen each sat in their respective thrones along the dais. Both watched the silver-haired female expectantly as she unsheathed a dagger from her long robes.

“Let us begin,” she murmured, holding the obsidian blade high in the air.

A mad pounding of footfalls echoed just beyond the doors of the throne room. I spun toward the sound as cries rang out. “Stop! Halt! By order of King Kiran!”

More shouts seeped through the door, and the king let out a hiss before spinning on the officiant. “Continue the ritual!”

Ryker darted by, his dark form skirting across my peripheral vision.

“Just keep your eyes on me, princess.” Rhyland tightened his hold on my arm as the woman began murmuring in a foreign tongue.

The throne room doors whipped open, the thick metal slamming against the walls. I spun around as half a dozen dracon in a wave of deep green uniforms stormed in.

“Stop the ceremony at once!”

Fifteen

SAPHIRA



A towering male with hair the brilliant blue of the Sea of Speranza barreled by the royal guards, shoving them out of his way. A beard of a similar hue outlined his mouth, the points of the mustache curled at the ends giving the illusion of a permanent smirk. Behind him, a troop of half a dozen dracon circled, eyeing the king's guards.

“What in all the realms do you think you're doing, Kiran?” the male growled, waving a glimmering sword. His sharp gaze darted between Rhyland and me before settling unmercifully on the king.

Ryker moved beside the angry intruder and placed a placating hand on his shoulder. “Calm down, King Highborne.”

“Don't you dare touch me, boy!”

Highborne? My chest tightened as I focused on the tall male jabbing his sword at the circle of guards. *Dad?*

One of the guards in green moved between Ryker and the big male. “Everyone needs to calm down. This is a friendly, diplomatic visit.”

“Stand down,” Ryker growled at his men, and the crimson guards lowered their weapons.

“We apologize, Prince Commander.” One of the red-coated guards dipped his head. “We told the king's emissary to wait with King Highborne in the grand foyer, but they refused. We didn't want to raise a sword—”

“No, of course not,” Ryker cut in. “King Highborne is practically family.”

With a frustrated grunt, the newly arrived king slanted his narrowed gaze at me, and the murderous expression softened for an instant before whirling back to the furious male on the throne. “Answer me, damn it, Kiran. What do you think you are doing?” He stalked toward the dais, his boots slapping the marble floor in time with my racing pulse. When he finally reached us, his light eyes locked on mine. “Saphira?”

My head bounced up and down, emotion tightening my throat. I could barely breathe as I took in the imposing royal with hair as blue as mine. He yanked me out of Rhyland’s hold and crushed me to his chest. “My darling, I cannot believe you’ve finally been returned to us.”

“Father?” I stammered.

“Yes, of course it’s me.” He swept a curly tendril behind my ear as a tear glistened down his cheek.

“She has no memories of the past,” Ryker whispered to the intru—my father. He’d somehow appeared at my side, his warmth another layer of protection in the chaos.

“What?” my father hissed. He turned his glare to the king once again. “This only makes this situation more despicable, Kiran.”

“Relax, Sebastian. There has been no ill intent here.” Ryker’s father slid to the edge of the throne, a bored expression on his face. “I sent a flyer to Terre as soon as my son rescued your daughter. I assumed you’d decided against the trip.”

“Are you out of your mind?” my father growled. The term still felt strange on my tongue. “Did you really believe I wouldn’t attend my only child’s mating ceremony?”

“Well, given your health—”

“Bite your tongue,” he hissed. “I’ve been losing my mind for the past three days when Bartus, here, returned from the human world without her.” He ticked his head at the blonde male beside him.

My family *had* come for me. My heart felt so full I was certain it would bust right out of my ribcage. Bits and pieces began coming together as I watched the kings' heated exchange. Kiran didn't want my father to know I'd returned. That was why Ryker hadn't flown by the border and why the Ashbornes were in such a hurry to complete the ceremony. Goddess, if it hadn't been for the attack on the fortress, I would've been mated to Rhyland by now.

"Again, Highborne, I apologize for the misunderstanding." Kiran offered my father a sleezy smile.

"There was no misunderstanding here." He tucked me under his arm and held me tight against his chest. "You attempted to coerce my daughter into a rushed mating with your son."

"A mating both of our families had long agreed upon," Kiran shouted.

"That was before..." My father's voice hitched, and something deep inside of me ached.

Kiran marched down the dais, his full cheeks flushed in crimson. "What are you saying, Highborne? You no longer agree to the terms of the betrothal?"

Father's weary gaze darted from me, to Rhyland, then back to the king. "I don't know," he finally gritted out. "I cannot promise my daughter to a man I cannot trust."

"But I didn't—" Rhyland stammered.

My father raised his hand, stopping him mid-sentence. "I am speaking of your father, boy. Although, truth be told, you could have put a stop to this yourself."

Rhyland's eyes cast down to the floor, a shade of pink tingeing his cheeks.

And the only one who had tried to halt this had been Ryker.

My eyes flickered to his. He stood an arm's length away, both muscled arms pinned against his chest. He'd promised

me the ceremony wouldn't occur today, and somehow, it hadn't.

Could he have had something to do with getting my father here?

I watched him from the corner of my eye as the kings continued to battle it out. I was suddenly exhausted. The adrenaline buzz from earlier had completely dissipated, and the emotional reaction to seeing my father was the nail in the coffin.

“Please, Highborne, don't be so irrational.”

Bits of the heated conversation interrupted my musings.

“At least stay the night. You, the princess, and your men will be our guests. Once we've had time to discuss the situation, we'll arrange for a safe escort outside the fortress.”

Father's chest heaved. “I don't need your men. I heard of today's disaster with the rebels. I'm perfectly capable of bringing Saphira home safely.”

“She cannot summon her dracon.”

The king's words cut through the air, stilling my father's tongue.

“What?” He pivoted his attention back to me. “Is that true, Saphira?”

I nodded slowly. “Unfortunately.”

“Abba is certain it's only a matter of time,” Ryker interjected.

But was it? He'd seen my failed attempt up close and personal. Heat rushed up my neck at the heated memories. How was I supposed to produce a shifting heir, if I couldn't even get my own dracon to emerge?

“Trekking through Fuoco at night will be perilous for the girl,” Kiran continued. “Stay the night, and I am certain we'll all see things more clearly in the morning.”

Father heaved out a frustrated sigh. “What do you think, my darling?”

It had taken Ryker and I two days to cross the barren lands. A night's rest in a real bed sounded like heaven right now.

“We'll leave tomorrow.” Besides, I had about a million questions for my father. Finally, I'd get all the answers I needed.

He pressed a quick kiss to my forehead and squeezed me tight against him. “Very well, as you say, princess.” He pivoted to the king with a sneer on his lips. “Fine, we will stay the night, but first thing tomorrow we return to Terre.”

“And the betrothal?” Kiran's eyes were wide.

“For now, it is postponed.”

My shoulders sagged, relief racing through my body like a cool stream flowing through Terre's parched desert and washing away the chaos of the day. “Thank you, Father,” I whispered into his tunic.

He patted my back, and I melted into his embrace. “I'm here now, Saphira, you have nothing more to fear.”



I watched my father, who I still couldn't believe was real, and his royal emissary, Bartus, as they ate heaping forkfuls of our grand post-mating ceremony banquet. Arissa and Lumia had set up the spread in the sitting chamber beside my own. There was so much food, I only hoped it didn't go to waste. I nibbled on a few bites, but my stomach was tied in knots with excitement. Every bite only took away from a question I could be asking about my life.

I'd hoped to have private time with my dad, but I'd learned that Bartus wasn't only the Terren emissary, but also my father's best friend. Apparently, they were inseparable.

Father raised a fork at me, smiling as he chewed. “Your mother and sister are going to be so thrilled when we return tomorrow.”

Bartus's eyes widened, and he coughed and spluttered on the bite of roast venis.

“A sister? I have a sister?”

“My king—” Bartus interrupted but father only waved a dismissive hand.

“I cannot believe you do not remember any of it, my child. Serenity will be most hurt. Not only is she your sister, but she is also your twin.”

“No way.” And I thought my heart couldn’t possibly grow any fuller. Also, why hadn’t anyone mentioned her before? “Tell me everything about her and my mother.”

“Sebastian,” Bartus gritted out. “It is very late, my king, and I am sorry to say it is well past time for us to retire.”

“No, please, I just need to know about my family.”

The blonde male pivoted his gaze to my direction, something unreadable streaking through his pale green eyes. “There will be plenty of time to discuss all of this tomorrow on our journey to Terre, but right now, your father must rest. I am afraid it is necessary for his health.”

Fear lanced through my chest. His health? My thoughts flickered back to King Kiran’s earlier words. He’d mentioned his health too.

“Is something wrong?” I stared up at the strapping male sitting beside me. He was built like a freaking ox. He probably could’ve given Ryker a run for his money in his heyday.

“No, of course not, my darling. Bartus is simply being a worrier.” He offered me a reassuring smile. “But perhaps he is right. Tomorrow, I will tell you everything there is to know about your incredible mother, my beloved mate, Dalilah. She’s missed you so much.” He reached for my cheek, cupping it tenderly. “We all have.”

Bartus rose and urged my dad to stand. “Come, I will walk you to your chambers.”

I shot up, squeezed between the two males and wrapped my arms around my dad’s neck. “Goodnight, Dad. Thank you for coming to my rescue.”

A smile slid across his face, deepening the wrinkles around his mouth. “You’re my baby girl, Saphie, I will always come for you.”

My throat tightened, overwhelming emotion threatening to pull me under. I stiffened my upper lip and took a step back. Bartus ushered my father toward a door in the back of the chamber. There were two others just like it, one that led to my bedroom, and another for my father’s emissary, with this sitting room between the three.

I stood perfectly still watching my dad until he disappeared through the door. I memorized the broad set of his shoulders, the stiff, proud stride, the echo of his boots on the stone floor.

I didn’t think I’d ever been happier.

Sixteen

SAPHIRA



“Good morning, princess!” Lumia’s cheerful voice forced my heavy eyelids to slowly lift.

She drew the weighty garnet and gold curtains open, and blinding light flooded the opulent room. I rolled over and squeezed my eyes closed. “It’s too early,” I mumbled. After Vegas and then days of sleeping on the road, the full night on the comfy mattress had been heavenly.

Arissa pulled the blanket down, exposing my silky nightgown. “Your father’s emissary, Bartus, has been asking to see you for the past hour. You must dress and meet him right away.”

“Yes, you are fortunate we allowed you the extra hour of rest,” Lumia added. “The man has been insufferable.”

With a grunt, I slid to the edge of the bed, a yawn escaping. “All right, all right, I’m getting up.” The idea of finally getting to spend time with my dad had the sleepy haze quickly fading. “What about my father?”

The females exchanged an unsettling glance. “I haven’t seen him yet this morning, princess,” Lumia finally answered, dipping her gaze.

There was something odd about their exchange, something that had me jumping out of bed. “Okay, let’s get this moving then.”

“I’ve already drawn your bath.” Lumia signaled over her shoulder to the bathroom.

Baths took forever. Couldn't they get a damned shower in this place? "I think I'll be fine without one this morning." I'd taken three yesterday after all, the final one right before bed to get the remaining soot off from the attack.

Lumia gasped. Actually, gasped at the notion. I waved a dismissive hand. "I promise I'll take one later. If Bartus has been waiting for an hour, it must be something important."

"As you wish, princess." She dipped into a bow and disappeared into the closet, reappearing a moment later with an armful of glittering gowns.

Once I'd been dressed, primped and powdered, Lumia escorted me to the sitting room where Dad, Bartus and I had eaten dinner the night before. I perched on the end of the chair in front of the hearth, a nervous flutter beating at my insides as I waited.

I didn't want to admit it last night because I'd been so happy to finally meet my father, but something *had* seemed off. Despite the soft mattress and silky sheets, niggling fears had plagued my sleep all night.

When the door creaked open, I leapt out of my chair, my heart jumping along with my feet. Bartus appeared in the doorway, wearing the same deep green uniform of the day before. He dipped his head as he approached. "Thank you for meeting with me, princess."

"What's this about? And where is my father?" That looming anxiety surged, tenfold.

He ticked his head at the upholstered crimson chairs surrounding the hearth. "Please, sit down. There's much I must tell you."

Bartus folded down in a high-backed chair and heaved out a breath. I perched on the one across from him, literally and figuratively at the edge of my seat.

"Well?" I bit out.

"A lot has happened in the fifty years since your... sacrifice." He ran a shaky hand through his blonde locks. "Your father's health has been deteriorating since that day. The

sacrifice you made to save our people was an incredible one, but it wasn't without consequences.”

I swallowed hard, the twist of his lips only increasing the nervous energy soaring through me. “What happened?”

“You’ve now witnessed the rebel attacks. It isn’t happening only here in Fuoco. The same planned incidents have been occurring throughout Draconia. Some are more violent than others. Some more destructive...”

“What are you saying?”

Bartus shifted in his seat, lips slanting into a hard line. “A little less than a year ago, there was a siege on Mountainhelm Castle.”

“Mountainhelm?”

“Your home, princess.”

I nodded quickly.

“It was one of the first and most organized, and the rebels caught us completely off-guard. We suffered a great many losses that day—”

The door to the sleeping chamber across the room whipped open, and my father filled the entryway. His long, cerulean hair curtained the wild look in his eyes, but even after knowing the man for only a few hours, it was clear something was terribly wrong.

“Bartus!” he growled. “What are you doing with my future mate?” Fiery rage burned in his eyes as he stalked toward us.

Bartus shot up from his seat, hands up. “Sebastian, please, wait.”

“I’ve told you countless times, you will never have her. Dalilah is mine. She is my dracuori, my fated.”

Excuse me?

“Of course, she is, my king. But this—” Bartus motioned to me. I still barely clung onto the edge of the seat, that sense of foreboding unfurling like a poisonous snake. “This is not your Dalilah, this is your daughter, Saphira. Remember?”

His eyes tapered, the pupils narrowing to reptilian slits. “My daughter?”

Bartus nodded quickly.

“Then where is Dalilah?”

The royal emissary crept closer to my father, head bowed. Once he reached him, he placed a hand on his shoulder and squeezed. “Sebastian, my dear friend, she died nearly a year ago, remember?”

All the air squeezed out of my lungs, and I drew in a sharp breath. Pain lanced through my chest as I struggled to draw in sweet oxygen. No, it couldn't be. I'd never even had the chance to meet my mother, and now she was gone?

A sharp laugh broke through my impending meltdown, and I lifted my gaze to the towering man leaning on Bartus. “You silly, silly, man,” he whispered. “My Dalilah cannot be dead. Because if she were, I would no longer inhabit the mortal plane myself.” He patted the big male on the back. “Now, go find my future wife. I long to fill her belly with my seed.”

Oh, goddess. I cringed at the visual.

Two quick knocks at the door tore me away from the insanity spiraling in my mind. What was happening?

“Send whoever is at the door away, princess,” Bartus hissed. “No one can see him like this.”

Like this? What exactly was this? What in all the realms was wrong with my father?

“Saphira, now!”

My head bounced up and down as I spun toward the door. When I reached the dark timber, I paused and drew in a steadying breath. *Everything's fine. Everything's going to be just fine.* Opening the door a smidge, I peered through.

Ryker's massive frame filled the crack, the mask from yesterday firmly in place. “I was sent by the king to invite you and your father to breakfast.”

“Now's not a good time.”

He peered over my head, which was too easy for the enormous male. “Is something the matter?”

“No, my dad’s just tired. Maybe later?”

His head dipped. “I won’t be able to hold him off forever,” he whispered. “If Sebastian doesn’t come down, my father will come up to find him.”

“Can you at least try to stall?”

He heaved out an exasperated breath. “I’ll do my best.”

I reached for his hand, the need to touch him suddenly overwhelming. I half expected him to deny me the comforting touch. Instead, his hand closed around mine, and warmth blossomed in my chest. In the sea of crazy that I’d been dumped in, Ryker had become a steadying presence I’d come to count on. “Thank you.”

“Anything for you, princess.” A reassuring smile loosened the hard set of his jaw. “Just know that the king will not simply let this betrothal die. He’ll fight for the merging of our families until his last breath. Especially with the Imperia Trials nearly upon us.”

“The what?”

“I apologize, I keep forgetting... Every fifty years, the trials are held to choose one imperia, or sovereign, from the four kingdoms to rule over all of Draconia. Because of the sacrifice fifty years ago, the trials were not held. Another reason why the kingdom has fallen to ruin without a firm hand.”

“And who is chosen to compete in these trials?”

“Typically, the males of each ruling house of the four kingdoms.”

“Only the males?” My feminist human brain took great insult with this.

He nodded. “That’s always been the way.”

“But who would go from my family? It’s only me and my sister.”

Ryker's dark brows furrowed, the infallible mask faltering.
“Your sister?”

“Yes, Serenity, my twin. Thanks for leaving that little part out by the way—”

His chest heaved and darkness carved into his strong jaw, cutting me off midsentence.

“What?” I blurted.

“Saphira, Serenity died nearly a year ago.”

Seventeen

RYKER



I despised how powerless I felt in that moment. Saphira’s hopeful smile evaporated, darkness filling her brilliant azure orbs. I fisted my hands at my side to keep from pulling her into my arms. It was the very reason I’d kept the truth from her all this time. I’d hoped once she was reunited with her father, he’d share the terrible story with her. But if the rumors of his failing health were true, it would explain why he clearly hadn’t.

“What?” she murmured as she stepped out in the hall, closing the door behind her. “My father said—” Her jaw slammed shut and tears filled her eyes.

“I’m so sorry,” I whispered. Despite my best efforts, I reached for her, my fingers curling around hers. It was the smallest of gestures, the minimum reassurance I could offer. Taking her in my arms and holding her tight against me until I drowned all her pain was impossible right now. “Your sister died alongside your mother in that terrible siege, one of the first the rebels undertook.” *Your sister*. Memories of the past threatened to bubble to the surface, but I shoved them down before they pulled me under along with her.

“That must have been what Bartus was trying to tell me...” Her words fell away as the faint line between her brows crinkled.

“So it’s true then, your father’s mind isn’t—”

Saphira pressed her finger to my lip. And goddess, my tongue ached to taste it. With everything she was going

through right now, I was a damned bastard to even consider it, but after those heated moments in the safehouse, she was all I could think about.

It was wrong, so wrong.

“My father is just fine,” she snapped. “Don’t you dare say otherwise.”

“I would never.” I nodded slowly, and her finger fell away.

“Please, Ryker, tell me what happened to my sister and mother.”

I glanced down both sides of the hall, at the guards on each corner. “I can’t here.”

“Fine, I’ll go anywhere with you. I just have to know the truth.”

Goddess, I wished she were serious. If it were up to me, I’d sweep her into my arms and fly her across the Sea of Speranza to the Wildlands, far, far away from here. “Very well, I’ll take you up to my chambers, but it will have to be quick.” I called out to the guard at my far left. “Cas, tell my father that the Highborne king is still resting, and I will accompany him to the great hall once he is ready.”

The guard lowered his gaze into a sharp bow. “Yes, prince commander, right away.” As soon as his heavy footfalls fell away, I reached for Saphira’s hand once again. Her fingers entwined perfectly between mine as if only fifty seconds had passed between us instead of fifty long years.

I led her down the hallways, futile excitement building with each step closer to my chamber. I stuffed it far down, reminding myself for the umpteenth time nothing could ever happen again between us. Saphira was betrothed to my brother, the future king, and my father would see it happen or die trying. Whether King Sebastian agreed or not.

His failing health would only hasten the inevitable. If Father knew of the Highborne king’s deterioration, he’d jump on the chance to cement the alliance and rule both Terre and Fuoco. The Ashbornes would be invincible and finally, crush the year-long rebellion. Something I should have desired...

I hazarded a peek at Saphira as we crossed the quiet corridors in silence. Would her memories ever return? Would she realize she'd raced through these very halls in the cover of darkness to find solace in my arms?

We had committed treason. Over and over again.

And goddess, I was a mere second away from repeating those errors only a few hours ago. Still, the heated memories sent fire racing below my belt. My growing arousal pressed against the fine woolen fabric of my slacks. I shifted uncomfortably and forced the vivid images of her nude form to the farthest depths of my mind.

We could never be together.

My dracon growled his displeasure, the deep sound vibrating my chest. *She's not ours.* Saphira must have heard the rumble because her eager gaze whirled to meet mine.

"I'm so jealous that you can turn into a huge scary beast, and I can't."

I couldn't help the rueful smile from melting across my face. "You can, and you will. It's only a matter of time, I assure you." My dracon could sense her female, and she was restless to be freed. "I can feel her; she's nearly ready."

"You can?"

I nodded. "It's faint but her presence is there. If you decide to remain here longer, I'd like to summon my dracon to the surface. Perhaps, yours will emerge with a little coaxing. He can be quite convincing."

"I bet." A mischievous smile crossed her lips before retreating beneath the surface.

Goddess, I was relentless. Saphira just learned she'd lost not only her mother but also her twin sister. *Her gods damned sister.* Claiming her on every surface of my chamber should be the last thing on my mind, but from the moment I saw her in Las Vegas I felt that impossible connection...

When we finally reached the door to my wing of the fortress, I paused, fingers tightening around hers. "Promise me

that if any memories start to resurface, you'll tell me." Perhaps simply being in my chamber again will trigger something.

"Sure." She eyed me curiously.

I swung the door open, revealing the vast sitting room, my sanctuary from the oppressive weight of being born a royal. Saphira used to spend hours searching the towering bookshelves for ancient tomes on the origins of our people. She'd always been so interested in our kind; she truly was born to lead.

A massive hearth stood at the far end of the room, the flickering flames setting the limestone ablaze. Despite the balmy heat outside, a chill always remained in the immense fortress. I walked her to the small settee adjacent to the fireplace and settled in beside her. The Sea of Speranza rippled behind us, the crystalline waters a tranquil backdrop to this difficult conversation.

I knew I couldn't have my brother's betrothed, but I had no control over the animalistic cravings to be near her. I inched closer, my thigh nearly brushing hers. It was too close but somehow, never close enough for my dragon.

She cocked her head at me, then pivoted, twisting her legs into a pretzel on the small divan so she could face me. "So, tell me." Her soft, flowing dress skimmed up to her thighs, exposing her bare legs.

I swallowed hard and adjusted my tunic over my lap before she noticed my growing arousal. *Focus, Ryker.* You are about to break this female's heart, not jump into bed with her. I drew in a steady breath and took her hands in mine. They trembled at the touch. "Goddess, your family loved you, Saphira. When you made that sacrifice, Serenity nearly took her own life so she could follow you into the afterlife. And your mother, she was completely distraught for years. You've met your father, you can imagine his reaction. He wanted to burn down the entire realm and retrieve you from Earth right away despite Mother Terrea's wishes."

A slow, sad smile melted across her perfect lips.

“But they couldn’t, and they knew it well. So the years ground on, and every one that passed was harder than the next. Without an Imperia, the four kingdoms squabbled incessantly. Over basic supplies, over hordes of treasure, over the diminishing number of females. And as is frequently the case, it was the lesser castes, the commoners, that suffered the most. Then when the few remaining royal females stopped reproducing heirs that could access their dracon spirit, the reigning system began to collapse.”

“And that’s when they attacked?”

My head dipped to my chest. “It was a coordinated effort. They hit all four seats of power at once. Not that any kingdom would have come to the others’ rescue.” I shook my head as memories of that terrible day blasted to the surface. We had all lost so much. “If Father hadn’t been so paranoid and had the safehouses built, we would’ve died along with the majority of our royal guard.” I paused and fixed my eyes to Saphira. They were so full of pain it ate away at my insides. “Your parents had too much faith in their people. They never thought they would strike against them.”

“How did they die?” she whispered.

“Fighting.”

A sharp breath parted her lips, and she dropped her gaze to her clenched fingers. A long minute passed before her chin lifted, and those brilliant irises met mine. “Then so will I.”

I believed her. A tiny fissure raced across my heart. Saphira had always been brave with an indomitable spirit. I had no doubt this version would be the same.

“The thing is, Saphira—” Gods, I should tell her the truth.

She cut me off with a wave of her hand. “If I must marry Rhyland to save Draconia, then I will.” The fire in her eyes blazed so brightly I wished I could harness it as my own. I wished I could find the courage to tell her everything. “I’ll tell Father it’s what I want.” She nibbled on her lip, a hint of that resolve faltering. “Unless you think there’s another way?”

A hope I had no right to wish for kindled deep in my core. “The Imperia Trials.”

“I thought you said only males were allowed to enter the competition.”

“They have been historically, but with everything that has changed in the past fifty years, perhaps there is a way to convince the Imperia’s Council to amend the rules.” Goddess, I shouldn’t even tell her this. It was much too dangerous. But I couldn’t keep this from her if it meant there was even an ounce of hope— “You are the only surviving Highborne heir, and more than that, you were one of the sacrificial girls. You are a legend for the people, Saphira. Surely, they can make an exception.”

My feet began to move without my permission. I’d been meaning to return these to Saphira when the time was right, but somehow it had never seemed appropriate. I crossed the sitting area to the grand, mahogany desk in the corner. Rifling through the drawer, my hand settled on the cool gemstones inlaid within the fine metal. I pulled out the pair of daggers I’d kept hidden all these years, just waiting for her return.

I spun around and met Saphira’s expectant gaze. “These are yours.” I held up the matching blades, crafted from the finest steel in all of Draconia. A glimmering jade gemstone was encrusted within the grip, the perfect resting place for her thumb.

“They’re beautiful.” She darted toward me, her eyes twinkling with more light than the fine gems themselves. Her hands easily molded to the hilts as she took a jab at an invisible enemy. “Thank you for keeping these for me.”

“Of course, princess. Now, you are truly ready for the trials.” I threw her a playful wink.

She sheathed the blades, her expression turning pensive once again. “And what about my betrothal to Rhyland?”

My brother’s name on her lips sent a dagger through my heart. “You can still choose to mate with him, but only if you wish.” I clenched my teeth to keep from growling.

“And after I compete, then what?”

“If you compete, nothing. But if you win, you will rule over each of the kings of Draconia. You would have all the power, and you could finally restore peace to our lands.”

Eighteen

SAPHIRA



“But the seer’s prophecy? It said I had to mate with Rhyland for the royal dracon to begin producing shifting heirs.” My mind spun with all this new information. Could I really do it? Could I compete in the Imperia Trials, whatever the hell that meant, and actually win against seasoned male dracon?

Ryker shrugged, the excitement in his smoldering irises dissipating. “I don’t have an answer for that, Saphira, but perhaps with you as Imperia something could change. Prophecies are fickle, seers even more so.” He shook his head and loosed a frustrated breath. “It would be dangerous and incredibly risky for you to compete, assuming the Council even allowed it. You were once a formidable fighter. Trust me when I say you were never a typical princess sitting atop your throne nibbling on sweet confections. And of course, I would be by your side every step of the way.” He slid off the settee and kneeled before me.

My heart smashed against my ribs, something about the enormous dracon on his knees, doing unlawful things to my insides.

He raised his hand and that fiery gaze locked on mine. “I pledge my life and my sword to you, Princess Saphira Highborne, to protect you with my body and soul, to put your needs before my own and before all others. To do everything in my power to ensure that you become the next Imperia of Draconia. Should you choose to do so...”

Overwhelming emotion tightened my throat. I swallowed hard, pushing the tumultuous sensations down and drew in a

steadying breath before I slid to the floor beside Ryker and entangled my fingers through his. “I trust you with my life Prince Ryker Ashborne. I’ve known you for less than a week, and yet, I have complete faith in you. Maybe I’m stupid or completely naïve, but if you think I can do this, then I will.”

A heart-piercing smile flashed across his face, and he pressed a chaste kiss to the top of my hand. “I know you can.”

I slowly rose, my knees a bit wobbly from the intense moment, and pulled him up with me. Which was a feat in itself. The male was easily twice my size. “So now what?”

“Now, I train you so that you stand a chance in the trials.” A wicked gleam brightened his silver irises.

“And how are we going to do that?”

“Don’t worry, princess, I have a plan.”



“Yes, Father, I’m sure this is what I want.” I kept my eyes pinned straight ahead to the rolling waves of the sea. “Rhyland is a good man, and our betrothal will be for the good of all the people of Draconia.”

“Well, if you’re certain, my darling.” Dad beamed down at me, and for a second, I could pretend that all was right in the world. I needed to get Bartus alone to find out exactly what my father’s mental condition was and how far he’d deteriorated since my mother’s passing. “Rhyland seems like a good man, and I do remember how taken he was by you all those years ago.”

“Yes, I truly believe he is.”

Dad patted his jacket pocket and frowned. “Now, where is that thing?” He searched his inner pocket before patting down his pants. “Ah, here it is.” Dipping his hand in his pocket, he revealed a small gray pouch. “I wanted to give this to you yesterday, but somehow the day got away from me.” He took my hand and turned it, palm up, spilling the contents of the small sack onto my palm. A glittering silver necklace dripping

with jade gemstones filled my hand, the weight so substantial my greedy little fingers closed tight around it.

“It’s beautiful,” I whispered.

“It was your mother’s, and now, it is yours.” His eyes met mine, tears glistening in the deep blue. “May I?”

I nodded, my throat too tight to get a word out. I twirled around and my dad placed the heavy jewels across my neck. The click of the snap sent my heart kicking at my ribs. I fingered the cool gemstones before turning back to face my father.

It was insane, but somehow, I could feel her. My mom. Her smiling face, that contagious laughter. Dalilah. Goddess, I wished I’d been able to see her just one more time.

A sharp knock at the door put an abrupt end to the emotional moment. Clearing my throat, I blinked quickly, forcing back the unshed tears. With a quick glance at my father, I turned to the door and jerked it open.

Bartus stood in the hallway along with a whole retinue of crimson guards. “It’s time, princess.”

Father was at my side an instant later, weaving his arm through my own. “Let’s get this over with,” he whispered.

I cracked a smile as a Fuocan guard moved to either side of us with Bartus trailing faithfully behind. According to Ryker, Father’s troops had been sent to the staff quarters, and they’d meet us upon our departure.

I’d only had a few moments to explain the plan to Bartus earlier before King Kiran’s personal guards showed up to escort him to a diplomatic meeting of some sort. Thankfully, Father seemed back to his old self. In the short exchange I’d had with my dad, he seemed to fully trust his second in command. I only hoped he was right in the assessment of his character.

Bartus stepped in line with my father as we approached the doors to the banquet hall. Two more guards stood at the entrance, swords hanging casually at their hips. Why powerful dracon needed weapons was beyond me. Couldn’t they just

summon their inner beast and tear each other apart with their fangs and talons? These halls were large enough to accommodate at least two of the shifted creatures.

“How are you feeling, my king?” he whispered.

“Just fine as rain, Bartus.” He smacked the big male on the back.

I wondered how old he was. A few whispers of silver hair weaved through the blonde, much like my father’s brilliant blue mane. Maybe they were *really* old friends.

“If you start to feel *unwell*, I beg of you to make your exit in haste.”

“Don’t be such a worrier, old friend. My mind is clearer than it has been in a long while.” He wrapped his arm around my shoulders and tucked me into his side. “It must be the return of my dear daughter. I have a good feeling about our future.”

“Me too, Father.”

“Oh, Saphie, that sounds so formal. Do you not remember what you used to call me?”

My brows furrowed from the strain of dredging up the distant memories. Squeezing my eyes closed, my thoughts traveled back in time. Bubbling laughter and excited whispers echoed through my mind. Me... a much younger version of myself running through a fountain with Serenity. She looked like the current me, only not quite. Because this body wasn’t mine, only a new iteration. Had my twin survived, we would no longer be identical. The thought is oddly sobering.

A big, towering man lumbered toward us, his hearty laugh filling my chest with warmth.

“Tatá.” The foreign word burst from my lips, jerking me out of the vivid memory.

“That’s right!” My dad’s eyes shone with glee. “I knew you would remember.”

“I do, Tatá.” My mouth curled into a smile as I repeated the word.

The creak of the banquet doors opening sent the smile scurrying for cover. My father must have felt my unease because his arm tightened around me for an instant before he finally released his hold.

The king and queen of Fuoco sat on the opposite ends of the lengthy banquet table covered in an assortment of platters filled with roasted meats and colorful vegetables. My stomach growled at the savory scents filling the chamber then soured. Probably more leftovers from the mating ceremony that never happened.

But would... if I didn't convince the Imperia's Council to allow me to enter the trials.

My gaze flitted over the table, from the king and queen to Rhyland to the sovereign's right, and Ryker to his left. I forced my eyes past the younger prince's to focus on my off-again-on-again fiancé. Rhyland's eyes met mine, and a twinge of guilt roiled in my gut at keeping the truth from him.

My feelings for these two males were so damned confusing.

How could I be so certain one minute, and so utterly baffled the next?

Rhyland stood, a warm smile on his face. "We're so glad you've decided to meet with us today." He pulled the chair out beside him, and I compelled my legs forward.

"Yes," King Kiran interjected, "as my son said, we're very pleased you have reconsidered."

"I didn't reconsider anything," Tatá muttered as he folded his immense frame into a chair next to me. "You are fortunate my daughter is more forgiving than I am."

"We are all very pleased this discussion is taking place for the betterment of both our kingdoms and the people of all Draconia," said Bartus. I was starting to understand why Father had chosen him as the official Terren emissary. My dad didn't seem to have a diplomatic bone in his body. Or maybe there was some history between the two royals I wasn't aware of. Also, highly probable.

“Have a seat, Bartus,” Father hissed, “before you split your lips from kissing Kiran’s ass so hard.”

I barely suppressed the laugh from bubbling out, smothering it with my hand and a fake cough.

Bartus cleared his throat, cheeks rosy, and slipped into the seat beside my father.

King Kiran slid to the edge of the imposing wingback chair and propped his elbows on the table. “Sebastian, your emissary has insinuated that there is hope for the joining of our kingdoms after all?”

Father waved a nonchalant hand. “My daughter can speak for herself.” He cocked his head at me with a reassuring smile. “Saphira, go ahead.”

I glanced at Rhyland before my gaze darted across the table to Ryker. He gave a barely perceptible nod. “After giving it much thought, I’ve decided you’re all right. Tying myself to Rhyland will be the best for everyone. I agree to reinstate the betrothal—”

“Wonderful!” Kiran’s wild clapping interrupted me mid-sentence.

“Under two conditions,” I interjected.

The queen’s wide eyes pivoted to mine, a faint gasp parting her lips. She shifted in the high-backed chair and fingered the ruby necklace at her chest.

“Go on...,” Kiran snarled.

“I wish to compete in the Imperia Trials, and I want Ryker to train me.”

The queen blanched, a full gasp now escaping, and Kiran’s cheeks flared a deep crimson. “You cannot be serious. Females have never competed—”

“She’s not just a female,” my father barked. “Saphira is my daughter and my only living heir. She has as much right to represent our family as Rhyland or Ryker do.”

“But if Rhyland is to be her mate, what is the point?” the queen muttered.

I could feel my future fiancé’s gaze boring into the side of my face. I waited a long minute before turning to face him as our parents continued to squabble. “I need this, Rhyland,” I whispered. “I haven’t had any say in my future for decades. Everything has just *happened* to me. I want to be in control of at least some part of my destiny.”

“But that means we’ll be competing against each other.” His dark brows furrowed.

“You’ll be fighting against Ryker too, your own brother, and yet, no one seems to have issue with that.”

“That’s different. It’s the way it has always been.”

“And I’m asking for you to change that.” I reached for his hand beneath the table and squeezed. “Once the trials are over, and I’ve been given my chance, we can finally be betrothed.”

He watched me warily, the crease between his brows deepening. The future king was certainly not stupid. “I suppose, I simply don’t understand why you feel the necessity to do this. And why choose Ryker to train you for that matter?”

“The second question is easier than the first. You told me Ryker and I were close before, and to be honest, besides you, he’s the only one in Draconia I really trust to teach me. I’ve seen him fight firsthand, and he’s pretty impressive.” I paused and ran my hand up to his biceps. “I’m sure you are too, but according to the protocols we are only allowed supervised visits. Ryker was the most obvious choice.” I shrugged, hoping to pull off nonchalant. The idea of spending one-on-one time with Ryker had a nervous flutter of dragon wings surging in my belly.

“As to why I feel the need to compete, I think I’ve already answered that. You could never understand because you haven’t been through what I have. I’m asking for your help with this. The Council will never approve this without Ashborne support.”

Rhyland drew in a long breath. “If I do this, convince my father to support your motion, you must promise me something in return.”

I nodded quickly. “Anything.”

“Swear to me that you’ll give this betrothal a real chance, no matter what happens in the trials.”

A punch in the gut would’ve startled me less. Lying to Rhyland didn’t sit well with me. Not from the start. Somehow, some deep, long buried stream of consciousness knew he was a good man. I cared about him. A lot.

I was going off-script here, but it had to be done. “I swear.”

He squeezed my hands before finally releasing me and turning to his father. “We will do as Saphira has asked.”

“Rhyland!” King Kiran hissed. “You cannot be seriously considering this?”

“I am, father, and it is ultimately my choice as heir.”

Ryker shot me a covert glance from across the table. The smile was so quick I could’ve imagined it.

“Well, it seems as if the decision has been made,” the king grumbled.

“Do I get a say?” Ryker raised his hand, waving at his father.

“No,” both royals answered in unison.

Kiran eyed his youngest son. “You’ll accompany King Highborne and the princess back to Mountainhelm Castle tomorrow and remain there until the trials begin. Assuming the Council agrees with the motion to allow Saphira to compete, of course.” He turned his irritated scowl on my father. “To be honest, even with my backing, I doubt any of the other sovereigns will agree.”

“Then, we’ll simply have to make them,” Tatá answered. For the first time since I landed in this strange place, hope flared in my chest.

Nineteen

SAPHIRA



The rising sun painted the pale blue sky in a riot of colors. I took it all in, reveling in the peace of the early dawn. From atop the towering rampart of Flintguard Fortress, the Sea of Speranza stretched a brilliant blue all the way to the neighboring lands of Aelvaria. I wondered what the elves were like? And beyond that, the mages? There was so much of Terrea to explore, of Draconia even. Excitement thrummed in my veins at the idea of finally going home this morning. I hadn't been able to sleep which was what had brought me to the outer walls of the castle before daybreak.

A deep chuckle jerked my attention from the gently lapping waves to the big, surly beast below. Ryker stood on the outside of the fortress gates with a tall, blonde male. Darrik, his second, Rhyland's personal guard, by the looks of it.

The two chattered on, an ease in Ryker's stance and expression that was so at odds with the stiff, grumpy guard I'd come to know. I crept closer remaining behind the stone walls to stay hidden, curious to see this easygoing side from the commander of the royal guard.

When I stood almost directly above them, I crouched low and strained to make out their conversation.

"I can't, Darrik," Ryker murmured. "I'm leaving with the princess in a few hours."

My ears perked up.

“It won’t take long. Please, Ryker. They’re getting desperate.”

So much for getting a glimpse of the lighthearted guard. What was going on down there?

“I’ll get you what you need,” Ryker whispered, “but I can’t risk a trip into the town square today.”

“But you must. It means so much more coming from you. Hope is the most powerful weapon you can gift them.”

My knee was cramping from the uncomfortable position, and I slid my foot out and hit the stone wall. A few loose rocks tumbled free, right on top of Ryker’s dark head of hair. I muttered a mental curse as he tipped his head up.

“Saphira?” he growled.

Damn it, how could he tell? I popped up from my hiding spot, lamely brushing the dirt from my knees. “Oh, hi there.”

He pinned me with those blazing silver orbs. “What are you doing up there?”

“Just taking in the sunrise and the beautiful views.” I threw him my best, most innocent smile.

“You shouldn’t be traipsing across the ramparts by yourself, especially before daybreak.”

“Yes, the prince is right,” Darrik added. “Could be dangerous.”

“Whatever,” I muttered.

“I’ll call one of the guards to escort you back inside,” Ryker continued.

“Why, where are you going?”

He exchanged an uneasy glance with Rhyland’s guard, then as if he’d made up his mind about something, his chin dipped to his chest. “I must make a quick trip into town. I’ll be back well before it’s time to leave for Terre.”

I stepped closer to the wooden staircase that led to the gates of freedom below. “Can’t I go with you? Please, I’m

itching to do *something*.”

The pair exchanged another glance. “I don’t think it would be a good idea—” Ryker began but Darrik cut him off.

“The Fuocan people would love to catch a glimpse of their future queen.”

“It wouldn’t be safe,” Ryker gritted out.

“She’ll be fine.”

“Um, hello? I’m standing right here.” I waved my hand at the two males. “And I agree with Darrik, I’ll be totally fine. Besides, isn’t that what you’re here for?” I threw my personal guard a cheeky grin.

“Fine,” he huffed out. “But we must make it quick. We have a long journey ahead of us.”



The Fuocan town square was nothing like I’d imagined it. I’d pictured a bustling city center with a grand marketplace, like one of those green markets we had back in L.A. Only it was nothing like that. There were a handful of limp wooden carts with sickly looking vegetables and scant offerings of meat. A couple vendors sold items of clothing, but the material was nothing like the gorgeous linens the royals donned within the castle walls.

Despite the cloak Ryker had forced me to wear, all eyes darted in my direction as we moved through the quiet square. My neon blue hair wasn’t exactly lowkey. Nor were the two crimson-clad soldiers beside me. Ryker’s hand remained on the hilt of his sword, his anxious gaze unable to keep still.

“Relax,” Darrik murmured.

Apparently, I wasn’t the only one who noticed the commander’s glaring unease. I’d strapped my sparkly new daggers to my thighs just in case, but it seemed like overkill. We hadn’t encountered more than a dozen people since we arrived.

We followed the stone pathway to the center of the square where a few more carts lined up outside the temple to Mother Terrea. The massive limestone structure shot high into the sky, rising to the heavens, with a round cupola crafted entirely of gold. A circle of gilded pillars enclosed the rotund temple, lending an opulent, ethereal feel to the building.

A few kids played along the alabaster steps, kicking an old ball around.

Ryker and Darrik stopped in front of the temple, and my guard finally released the sword at his hip to dig through his pocket. Revealing a small pouch, he gripped it tight in his fist then turned to me. “Stay with Darrik, I have to deliver something to one of the stewards of the temple.”

“Can I—”

“No,” he barked.

Ryker stepped right in front of me, so close I could see the shimmering flecks within his bright irises. His piercing stare bore into me, and a chill skittered up my spine at the intensity. “Stay here. Do not move. I will be right back.”

“Yes, sir.” I lifted my hand to my forehead in a teasing salute.

“I mean it, Saphira. This is important, and I trust Darrik with my life, otherwise I wouldn’t let you out of my sight for an instant.”

I swallowed hard, the urgency lacing his tone kindling a swirl of unease in my gut. “Okay, I won’t move.” Folding my arms across my chest, I planted my feet just to prove my point.

With one last lingering look, he spun on his heel and darted up the marble steps of the temple.

Geez, what was that about?

Darrik moved into step beside me, the stiff set of his shoulder relaxing now that the prince commander was out of sight. “Ryker, uh, I mean the prince commander, can be a little intense at times.” His cheeks flushed at the little faux pas.

Luckily for him, I didn't care about all the titles and formal shit.

I nodded and glanced over his shoulder at a small stand with little figurines carved from wood. "Oh, this looks pretty." I walked around my temporary guard and took in the intricate array of statuettes. My fingers instinctively went for the little dracon carving. Maybe this was just what I needed to force my own stubborn beast out. I lifted my gaze to the young woman behind the stand. Her tunic was tattered and dirty, small holes dotting the drab material. "How much for this one?"

The girl's cheeks flushed a deep crimson as her eyes met mine. "Oh, princess, I couldn't take your money."

"Why not?"

Her gaze darted to the floor. "You... you are the chosen one. You delivered us from the evil that ravaged our lands. You've already done so much for our people."

But I hadn't, not really. Or at least I couldn't remember any of it.

I dug my hand into my cloak pocket and pulled out a few golden coins. I had no idea what they were even worth. I dropped them onto the wooden counter, and her eyes went wide. "Is this enough?"

"Oh, princess, that is much more than what these insignificant trinkets are worth. That's enough coin to feed my family for a month."

A few of the kids ran by, shouting and laughing as they kicked the ball between each other. "Are those your children?"

Her head bounced up and down. "Three of them are, milady, the other two belong to my cousin." She lifted her chin at the woman at the wooden stand across the way. I dug into my pocket and found a few more coins. I knew what it was like not having enough money to go around. Foster parents didn't exactly spoil their adoptive kids. These children had mothers who were trying their best to provide for them. They deserved more. "Hopefully that's enough for her too, then."

"Oh, thank you, princess. May Mother Terrea bless you!"

“Thanks to you.” I grabbed the little dracon figurine and tucked it into my now empty pocket.

A little blonde girl broke off from the game and raced up to me. She stared up, her bright amber eyes wide. “You’re the future queen, aren’t you, milady? You’re the one that saved us all from the monsters.”

I nodded. “Well, I don’t know about all of that, but you can call me Saphira. What’s your name?”

“I’m Adelia.”

“What a lovely name.”

She giggled, her eyes glistening with delight. They moved from the tip of my head, down my fancy gown and all the way to my shiny boots. “You’re beautiful.”

“Oh, thank you, sweetie. So are you.”

She eyed my jade necklace, then my earrings and I recognized that look of longing. Without thinking too much on it, I reached for the teardrop earrings and plucked them off my lobes. I was sure Queen Aisling had dozens of jewels just like them. “These would look beautiful on you.”

Her eyes went so wide, I was scared they’d pop right out of her head.

I placed them in her small hand, and a beaming smile stretched across her face. “Thank you so much, Saphira.”

“That’s Princess Saphira!” Her mother barked from behind the stand.

“Thank you, princess, thank you. May the goddess bless you!” She fisted the earrings and ran to meet her siblings. For the first time in a while, my heart felt full.

I could feel Darrik’s gaze heavy on me, but he didn’t utter a word as we turned away from the street vendor and started to walk back toward the temple. Heavy footfalls lifted my gaze to the broody prince taking the steps two at a time.

“It’s done,” he muttered to his friend.

“Good.” A smile crossed the guard’s face. “And princess Saphira was able to indulge in the fine wares of our people.”

Ryker lifted a brow in my direction. “Oh, did she?”

I pulled the little wooden dracon out and paraded him in front of Ryker’s nose. “Cute, right?”

“Mmm, yes, princess. That’s exactly what a powerful dracon wants to be called... cute.” A cackle burst free, and my grumpy guard rewarded me with an elusive smile. “Come on, princess, it’s time to get you home.”

Twenty

RYKER



“Get up, Saphira. I didn’t say we were finished.”

“Flame you.” The princess glared up at me, blowing wisps of electric blue hair from her face. She was covered in dust and ash, but goddess, she was still gorgeous. And that murderous look of sheer determination had fire pumping through my veins.

We’d been training for hours in the scorching heat, the unforgiving land of Terre adding to the arduous nature of the instruction. The volcano nearest Mountainhelm Castle rumbled in warning, spewing molten lava across its soaring peaks, and dumping ash on our training ground.

Saphira had fought bravely with a broadsword half her size and nearly double her weight. Though her daggers were her weapon of choice, she’d mastered quite a few now. She’d come a long way in the past two weeks since we’d returned to her home.

A home, I daresay, she didn’t seem too fond of.

I jabbed my sword into the cracked earth at her feet and offered my hand. “Up you go, princess.”

She wiped the sweat from her brow, her lips twisting into a snarl, but her hand wrapped around mine, nonetheless. I hauled her to her feet, and as she rose, she reached for the small dagger strapped to her thigh and slammed it against my neck. The move was quick, precise and perfectly timed. A smile pulled at my lips as the sharp blade dug into my skin, tearing at the sensitive flesh.

“Well done, Saphira.” I held my hands up as she pressed closer.

“Then wipe that stupid smirk off your face.”

A laugh bubbled out, my Adam’s apple bobbing dangerously close to the wicked blade. “All right, all right. I yield.”

“So are we done for today?” She smiled up at me sweetly.

“Yes, now we are finished.”

“Good.” She dropped the dagger and collapsed into my waiting arms. “Carry me.” She pushed out her bottom lip and batted long, dark lashes. “I’m flaming exhausted.”

I somehow managed to get my forearm under her legs as she laced her arms around the back of my neck and jumped on. “You know, you’re not as light as you look.”

“Ash-hole,” she muttered.

I strode toward the back entrance of Mountainhelm Castle where two guards waited. It was strange being here among the Terren green-uniformed guards. I missed my men, and the simple routine of leading soldiers. Here, my sole purpose was to train the future Imperia of Draconia, a much riskier task. If I failed, not only could the entire realm collapse, but Saphira’s life could be forfeit.

Just the idea of losing her sent my lungs into a frenzied spasm. I’d already lost her once, and I was certain I’d never survive a second time.

“I’m not that heavy, am I?” She glanced at my heaving chest.

I forced a smile and lengthened my stride. “No, princess. It’s just hotter than I’m used to in this godsforsaken land.”

Fuoco was hot in the summertime, but at least our proximity to the sea offered a steady breeze. Here in Terre, only hot smoke from the encroaching volcanoes sailed through the stifling air. I’d never spent so much time in this land, but I was starting to understand what the Terren people had to endure to maintain supremacy.

Their territory made it nearly impossible for invaders to succeed in an attack, but they certainly paid the price for the isolation.

“Weak,” she mumbled. The sassy little thing kept me on my toes with her saucy banter.

“Excuse me?”

“Nothing.” She kept her gaze focused straight ahead.

“Just wait until your next training session tomorrow. Then we’ll see who’s weak.”

I picked up the pace, anxious not only to be back inside, but also to peel the princess from my body. With her intoxicating scent wrapped around me, I was growing harder by the second.

Focus, Ryker.

The immense pitch-black castle loomed only a few feet away, the obsidian walls made entirely from the lava of the adjacent volcanoes. At least the obsidian stone kept the air cool within the fortress. Thank the goddess for small mercies.

I dipped my head at the royal guards, and the sleek doors swung open. One of the males eyed my hand as I passed between them. I followed his line of sight. *Curses.* I hadn’t even realized how firmly my fingers were digging into Saphira’s thigh as I held her. Loosening my grasp to a more appropriate hold, I added an inch of space between our bodies as I crossed the threshold into the bowels of the fortress.

Most of the royal guards had come to accept my presence, but still some watched me with suspicion. I couldn’t blame them, each of the four kingdoms had been at odds with one another for decades. Not to mention the last time I was here... Squeezing my eyes closed, I forced the dismal thoughts to the dark depths of my psyche. *Not today, Ryker.* Turning my focus back to Saphira, I caught the curious gazes of another two guards. I feared if anyone looked too closely, they’d realize what I was hiding. What I was apparently failing at hiding.

“Can you just drop me off in the baths?”

“What else, princess?” I rolled my eyes. “Goddess, I’m not your servant.”

“You rough me up, so it’s your job to cater to me afterward.” She shot me a cheeky grin.

“Realms, Saphira, you’ve certainly gotten a handle on this royal attitude in your few weeks back.”

“It’s so much better being a princess than an orphan.” The sparkle in her eyes dimmed, and I hated that I’d even brought it up. She had insinuated some terrible things had happened to her on Earth, and just the idea of it, brought my dracon surging to the surface. He would burn the world down for her, tear apart anyone who wished her arm. One day I’d get to the truth of what happened when she was in those foster homes, and I’d travel to Earth myself and make each and every monster pay.

“Fine, to the baths then.” I turned down another corridor, and the pathway began to descend more sharply. The one privilege to living beside active volcanoes was the wealth of natural hot springs. The Highbornes had harnessed that surging heat into their own personal bath house in the lowest level of the castle. Saphira had been asking me to accompany her since our return, but the idea of the two of us wet and partially naked had heat rushing to the wrong head.

“Do you think the Council will agree to the hearing soon?” Her question tore me from my lust-filled musings.

“I don’t see why they wouldn’t. A request from the Highborne heir shouldn’t be easily dismissed. I would assume they’re stalling in an attempt to discover what the request could be regarding.”

“Do you think your father will tell them?” Her arms tightened around my neck as she lifted her eyes to mine.

“I wouldn’t think so. It’ll be to our advantage to catch them off guard.”

“But King Kiran doesn’t really want me to compete in the trials.”

“No, but he wants you to mate with Rhyland, and if he’s learned anything about you since your return, he’ll realize it’s

the best way to make it happen.”

“Except it’s not.” Her mouth pressed into a thin line. “Or at least, it’s not a guarantee.”

My heart pit-pattered on sluggishly.

“There’s something I didn’t tell you, Ryker. And it’s been eating away at me since we left Fuoco.”

I slowed, then stalled in the middle of the hallway. She shifted in my embrace, her lips only a heartbeat away. I should’ve set her down, I shouldn’t have allowed myself to be so close for so long. “What is it?” I finally mustered, the jagged edge to my tone even perceptible to my own ears.

“I made a promise to Rhyland.”

I drew in a steadying breath as my heart staggered on a beat. My brother had been writing to his fiancée faithfully, every day since our departure. Every letter was like a knife in the gut, every smile as she read his eloquent words, a sword to the chest. “And?”

“He asked me to swear that I’d give the betrothal a real chance, regardless of what happened in the trials.”

I muttered a curse through clenched teeth. Of course, my brother had an inkling of what we were up to. There was a reason he was to become the future king after all. “And you agreed?”

Her head dipped, eyes falling to the dracon mark at my throat. “I still feel a connection to him, Ryker. I can’t explain it ___”

I pressed my finger to her lips, listening to her justifications too difficult to bear. “You don’t have to explain anything to me. You were right earlier; I am here to serve you. I made a vow, and I intend to stick with it. What you decide regarding the betrothal to my brother is up to you; it doesn’t concern me. I swore to help you win the trials and I will. Or die trying.”

She swallowed hard, some unreadable emotion flashing across those brilliant eyes. It couldn’t be regret, could it? Did

she want me to tell her not to go through with it? My teeth ground together as we remained unmoving, the silence thick around us.

A long moment later, she wriggled out of my arms and dropped to the stone floor. "I'm going to go." She hitched her thumb over her shoulder toward the entrance to the baths. "I'm all dirty and gross."

"Right." I waited for her to ask me to join her, but she never did.

The Highborne princess spun on her heel and disappeared through the steam-filled doorway.

I stood there, watching the arch through which she vanished for an endless minute, indecision tearing at my insides. I could follow her... But I shouldn't. Curling my hands into fists at my side, I forced my feet to rotate in the opposite direction, then compelled my feet forward.

Maybe in another lifetime...

Twenty-One

SAPHIRA



“Ha!” I pinned Ryker to the ground, the tip of my sword pressed to his heart. I straddled him triumphantly, the first time I’d ever succeeded in toppling the big dracon onto his ass. My smile couldn’t have possibly been any wider.

“Well done, princess.” He smirked up at me, silver eyes glinting in the mid-afternoon sun.

“You didn’t go easy on me, right?” I’d been training so damned much lately, every muscle in my body ached. Even ones I never knew existed. But the weeks of physical exertion had paid off and already I felt stronger. Lean muscles had replaced the soft, mushy ones of my old life in the human world. Now, if only my stubborn dracon would emerge...

“I did not,” Ryker answered. He shifted beneath me, his dark brows in a tangle.

“What’s the matter with you?”

“Nothing, I’m just not very comfortable down here.”

“Are you calling me fat?” I pressed the gleaming tip harder against the leather chest piece, so that it nicked the tanned hide. When we trained, Ryker preferred the more supple material to the gilded armor the guards wore. I liked it better too because it was easier to move around in.

“Of course not, Saphira. Now, for the love of all that is blessed, stop moving around like that.”

“Are you scared?” I shot him a mischievous smirk. “You think I’m actually going to stab you in the heart?”

His lips slanted into a tight line, and some unreadable emotion flashed across his handsome features.

I tossed the giant broadsword to the ground and shifted on his lap. *Oh!* My eyes widened as a very hard part of his lower anatomy rubbed my center. *Holy shift.* Someone's dragon sure was excited to see me.

Ryker's cheeks blushed a deep crimson, his mouth gaping. He leapt up so fast he tossed me right off his lap and sent me scrambling onto the dusty ground.

"Geez, Ryker, watch it!" I grumbled as I pushed myself off the parched earth, rubbing the ashy dirt off my leathers.

"Sorry." He dragged his palm over the back of his neck, cheeks still flushed, and damn, did it look good on him. He propped his broadsword in front of his crotch, but it didn't do much to cover his big ass erection. Damn, he was huge. "I—um, I don't know what to say—"

Forcing my gaze up, I threw my hand out before this conversation became way more awkward than I signed up for. "No need to apologize. It was just a physical reaction, right?"

His head bounced up and down.

The gods knew I'd been pretty hard up lately. And all this hand-to-hand combat with the sexy dragon shifter sure wasn't helping. Whatever this thing was between us, it only seemed to be getting worse the more time we spent together.

"Saphira..." The tendon in his jaw ticked, molars grinding so hard I could hear the crunch of teeth. He stepped closer, and my feet moved to meet him. "There's something I—"

"There you two are!" Bartus appeared around the dusty courtyard in his deep green uniform, and Ryker took a measured step back.

I couldn't help the disappointment that blossomed in my chest. What was he going to say? I hazarded a glance at my trainer and the open, vulnerable, teasing man was gone. The tough, guard persona was back.

"What's up, B?" I asked.

Bartus's lips quirked as they often did when I spoke human jargon as he called it. I glanced over his shoulder to the back door of the castle, searching for Tatá. I hadn't seen my father all day. According to his best friend, he was having an off day. Which meant he'd been ranting about my dead mother and sister. A fact that I'd banished to the far corners of my mind because I wasn't ready to deal with it just yet. They'd been stolen from me faster than they'd appeared. For a few wonderful hours, I'd had a complete happy family, and then everything went to shit.

"The Council has agreed to your request for an audience."

"Excellent," Ryker replied.

"When?" Now that the moment was finally here, a wave of anxiety tumbled through my insides. What would I say? Would they even take me seriously?

"The day after tomorrow." A somber expression hardened the male's jaw. "It would greatly help our cause if Saphira could at least summon her dracon by then."

My stomach sank to my heels. When I first returned to the castle, Ryker had been so sure she'd emerge once we were home, and I'd believed him, but so far, nothing. I was getting so frustrated my trainer decided to give it a rest for a few days then start out fresh.

"We'll resume our efforts right away then." Ryker moved beside me, his shoulder brushing against mine.

That energy that pulsed beneath my skin awoke. My heartbeat escalated and heat raged from my core, surging through my extremities. It was nothing to get too excited about; it happened a lot lately. Ryker said it was a good sign, but I wasn't so sure. My she-dracon had a mind of her own and for whatever reason, she was staying put within my squishy human walls.

"Very well." Bartus nodded. "I'll leave you to it, then."

"Is Tatá feeling any better this afternoon?" The mornings and evenings were typically the worst. As the day progressed, he was usually back to his old self.

“A little, princess.” He offered a reassuring smile. “Your return has brought him immense joy, but with it, also confusion. He associates you with your mother and Serenity. It’s becoming more difficult for him to distinguish between the past and the present.”

My head dipped, despair crushing my soul. The small glimpses of the man my father used to be were incredible, but it only made the rest of it more painful.

“On that note, I will deliver the good news to the king.”

“Thanks, B.”

He spun on his heel and left Ryker and me in a heavy silence. Dracon, like most supernatural creatures, were immune to most human illnesses, and yet, the loss of my mother, his mate, had sent my dad’s mind on a downward spiral similar to the human disease of dementia. I just didn’t understand it.

Ryker’s arm weaved around my shoulders and tucked me into his side. I often wondered how he knew exactly what I needed even before I did. “This isn’t your fault, Saphira. Dracon mates, aren’t meant to survive alone. The loss of your mother was simply too much for him. If he hadn’t been such a strong male, he would’ve died alongside her like most mates do.” He cupped my cheek and tilted my chin to meet his warm gaze. “Do you know why he didn’t?”

I shook my head, unwanted emotion constricting my throat.

“Because of you. He knew you would come back to us, and he couldn’t stand the thought of you returning to no one.”

Heat burned the back of my eyelids, and I blinked quickly to chase away the embarrassing tears. I was supposed to be the next Imperia, not a weepy, weak girl. “How do you know?” I managed.

His brows furrowed, and the silence lengthened between us. Just when I’d given up hope of an answer, his arm tightened around me, crushing me to his side. “Because it was exactly how I felt.”

His confession hung in the air between us for a long moment. My lungs refused to pump as I considered his words and waited for him to continue. But he never did. A part of me was begging to know more, but the other part, the wise one, kept my mouth shut.

“Come on.” Ryker released me and heaved out a breath. “I have an idea how to get your stubborn dracon out.”

“You do?” A swirl of hope kindled in my core.

“I do, princess. I just hope you’ve gotten over your fear of heights.”



Nope, I definitely had not gotten over the paralyzing panic.

I clung onto Ryker like a flipping baby koala as we stood at the precipice of what I was pretty damned sure was the tallest cliff of the Agrabi Mountain range. Not to mention the fact, we were only a hairsbreadth away from the lava-spewing cluster of volcanos.

Princess flambé, anyone?

A few dracon guards flew around the perimeter of the range. They followed us any time I left the safety of the castle grounds. Ryker said it was because of the eglids but somehow, I was certain there was more to it.

“Why are we here exactly?” I eyed the land below, imagining my bones crushed on the dessicated terrain.

“Motivation.”

My heart punched at my ribs as his intention became clear. I peeled my body away from his and backed against the unyielding wall of the cliffside. “Oh, hell no, Ryker. If you think you can coax my dracon out by throwing me off the top of this mountain, you’re out of your fucking mind.”

He waggled a big finger at me. “Princess, language.”

I shook my finger right back at him. “I thought it was your job to keep me alive.”

“It is,” he growled and erased the space I’d sought so hard to put between us. “If you can’t summon your dracon, you will not survive the trials, do you understand that?”

I gulped, the fire in his eyes drowning out the fury in my own. Not because I felt threatened but because beneath the anger was fear. Fear for my life. I don’t know how, but I could read it as plainly as the anguish carved into his jaw.

“Okay, I’ll try,” I huffed out. “What exactly do you want me to do?”

He towered over me, the hard set of his jaw softening. He dipped his head to the jade necklace tucked beneath my sparring leathers. “Call on the power of the gemstones. That’s why we wear them.”

My eyes chased to the glistening ruby ring wrapped around his middle finger. Except for when he came to kidnap me from Vegas, I didn’t think I’d ever seen him without it. Finally, my head dipped, and I drew in a deep breath.

“I just need you to relax and let her do the work.”

“Okay, I can do that.”

“Good, now I’m going to summon my dracon, so don’t be frightened.”

My eyeballs nearly jumped out of my head. “Excuse me? Right here? On top of this peak where I’d totally be trapped with a fire-breathing monster?”

Ryker’s hands moved to my shoulders and slid up and down my arms. “He would never hurt you. Do you trust me when I say that?”

I trusted him, but did I trust a thirty-ton beast with jagged teeth and razorlike claws? I wasn’t so sure about that.

“Saphira, please?” He leaned closer and fixed those smoldering silver irises to mine. All I wanted to do was get lost in that brilliant abyss.

My stupid head bounced up and down.

“Good, now turn around.”

Twenty-Two

SAPHIRA



A tremor raced up my spine, vibrating my entire body. Thousands of tiny legs crawled beneath my skin as I stared over the mountaintops and out into the Sea of Lacrime. Magic pulsed around me, a scent that seemed so familiar and yet I couldn't quite place it blanketed the air.

“Are you ready yet?”

No answer.

I clenched my fingers into fists to keep from turning around.

“Ryker?”

Warm air blew over my wild locks raising the tiny hairs on my arms. Slowly, I turned around.

All the oxygen escaped my lungs as I took in the silver beast taking up the majority of the mountaintop. A silvery mist hung in the air between us, but it did nothing to conceal the giant creature standing only a yard away.

Sharp eyes peered down at me from a massive head covered in thick, shimmering scales. A crown of jagged horns encircled the gigantic beast's head, a sparkling ruby gem fixed just above his brow. Enormous wings that glistened beneath the mid-day sun spread out across his broad back and nearly reached a barbed tail. I couldn't tear my eyes away from him. I took a step back, and the dragon's shimmering eyes widened. *Be careful!* A gruff voice echoed in my mind, and I nearly jumped out of my skin. It wasn't her... not the familiar timbre

that plagued me as a teenager. And still, I recognized it all the same.

“Ryker?” An embarrassing tremor laced his name.

It's me, princess.

“Why are you in my head?”

I'm not sure, but it's a good sign.

“How so?” The last thing I needed was a nosy dracon listening to my inner-most thoughts.

Too late. I could practically feel the warm rumble of the beast's massive chest as he laughed.

“Ash-hole,” I muttered.

The silver dracon snorted, and two puffs of gray smoke floated over me.

“You better keep that thing in check, Ryker.”

His silver irises found mine, the intensity in his eyes so much like the man's. They razed over me, and that heat blossomed in my core. An odd purring sound vibrated the monster's immense barrel chest. As I took in the gigantic dragon, really looked at him, I had the strangest revelation come over me.

I wasn't scared.

Not even a little bit.

“You're silver...” I mumbled. The exact color of those brilliant orbs staring down at me.

The dracon bent his long neck, revealing another row of sharp horns running from his head, across his spine and reaching all the way to that spiky tail. The silver scales glistened beneath the setting sun, casting the entire beast in an ethereal glow. Mother T, he was beautiful.

My hand reached out before I could stop it and brushed the glistening scales. Jagged protrusions covered the solid armor, but with a light touch, surprisingly didn't hurt. He leaned into

my palm as I skimmed his warm skin. A happy chuff escaped the big dragon's lips. Did dragons even have lips?

You should try now.

Ryker's voice in my head sent my heart flailing. Goddess, I didn't think I'd ever get used to that. I rubbed my thumb and forefinger across the jade necklace father had given me, drawing on the power of the gemstones like Ryker had taught me in training sessions. The gem tingled beneath my fingertips.

Now focus on your dragon. On how she feels, on what she sounds like, looks like.

"How am I supposed to know that? I've never seen her before."

Ryker's eyes closed, the brilliant silver disappearing, and an image shot through my mind. A vivid cobalt dragon. Her wings extended, the iridescent scales sailing across the pale blue sky. Her jaw opened, revealing rows of jagged teeth, and a torrent of deep lavender flames shot from her mouth.

Holy shift!

Now you know what she looks like.

"Hot damn, I am badass!"

Ryker chuckled again, the warm sound filling my mind and traveling all the way down to my toes.

"How did you do that?" I'd seen myself as clearly as the clouds in the sky.

Sometimes dragon can share memories.

"Only sometimes?"

He nodded, his reptilian eyes narrowing.

"That's pretty cool."

Now stop stalling and try to summon her.

Right. Squeezing my eyes closed, I focused on that buzz beneath my skin. Even without seeing, I could feel Ryker's dragon beside me. His overwhelming warmth permeated the

air, blanketing me in a bubble of heat. And my reluctant dracon liked it.

I continued rubbing the gemstone at my neck and willed my inner beast forth. A flicker of power blossomed in my belly. Blindly, I reached out a hand and met fiery scales.

You can do it, Saphira.

Pressing my hand to the top of Ryker's snout, I allowed his heat to consume me. That blazing inferno spread from my palm, down my arm and shot through my body like a wild storm. I chomped down on my tongue to keep from screaming.

Oh goddess, I can't do this.

Yes, you can. I'm right here with you.

I focused on Ryker's voice, the anchor in the fiery inferno consuming every inch of me. Sharp claws tore at my insides, and I buckled over from the pain. A cry burst free, but I held onto the flicker of energy igniting in the dark depths.

I was close, I could feel it. I could feel *her*.

Come on out, girl.

She tore at my insides, gouging at my lungs, ripping my heart to shreds. I sucked in a ragged breath as darkness crept into the corners of my vision.

Hold on, Saphira, just a little longer. She's close I can feel her.

Gritting my teeth, I fought through the encroaching darkness. "Ryker, it hurts," I cried.

A massive silver head butted against my chest, the dracon's warmth seeping through my clothing.

Show yourself, dracon. As your dracuori, I summon you.

Ryker's gruff words floated through my subconscious, so much like his voice and yet not. It was his dracon. And what the hell did he just call himself?

The fire receded, and an icy chill rushed through my veins. I slumped forward, my knees hitting the rocky ground. That

scent of ash and sulfur filled the air, and a silvery haze permeated through the cracks in my eyelids.

“Saphira, are you all right?” Firm arms wrapped around me, holding me against a muscled chest. “Open your eyes, princess. You’re safe, it’s over.”

I leaned into Ryker’s familiar, firm hold. “I suck at this. I’ll never get her out.”

He pressed his hand to the back of my head and ran his fingers through my hair. “That’s not true. You were so close this time I could sense her.”

I tipped my head back and looked up at him. “Your dracon said something in my head, just before...”

His lips pressed into a tight line, expression shuttering.

I forced the question out before I chickened out. I’d felt something for this male since the moment he kidnapped me from the nightclub. I didn’t know much about our kind, but it would explain the overwhelming connection. *Dracuori*. I’d heard it before when Tatá was lost in the past, hallucinating about my mother. “My dracon is your dracon’s mate?”

Ryker shook his head, a scowl forming along those perfectly bowed lips. “I thought maybe but—”

That shred of hope deflated, rolling my shoulders forward. It was stupid anyway. I was to be mated to Rhyland so how could I be Ryker’s dracuori? A dracon couldn’t have two mates, right? My thoughts spiraled as he held me tight in his arms.

Gods, when had this all gotten so complicated?

Maybe my life as an orphan hadn’t been as bad as I thought.

“Ryker?”

He shook his head. “There’s nothing to say, Saphira. I was wrong. You’re betrothed to Rhyland and our focus should be on the Trials anyway.”

“But...” I let my words fall away, despite the gaping void filling my chest. Why did it feel like I’d just lost something I never had in the first place. I clutched onto Ryker for another long minute before my gaze trailed down his chest, across the hard planes of his body covered in those shimmering silver tattoos, then to his completely naked form.

I sprang out of his arms, my eyes trailing the deep V of his torso to the dark hair—*shit!* I squeezed my eyes shut as a dark chuckle filled the air between us.

“You’re such an ass!” I growled.

“I’m sorry, I keep forgetting about your delicate human sensibilities.”

“Put some clothes on.” I hadn’t even seen him shed his leathers, but then again, he had made me turn around, so I prayed to all the gods he hadn’t ripped them to shreds when his dracon emerged. I didn’t think I could handle the entire trek home with him naked beside me.

“As you wish, princess.”

Twenty-Three

RYKER



Saphira glared up at me, hands on her hips, fire in her eyes. Goddess, she was beautiful when she's infuriating. "Didn't you tell me not long ago it was far more dangerous for me to ride your dracon than traipse through the monster-infested lands between our kingdoms?"

"That was weeks ago, princess. You've become much stronger since then. I know, because I'm the one who trained you."

"So you really think I could stay seated on your enormous beast?"

Gods, it was like the female had a direct line to my dick. That one sentence had heat surging below my belt and visions erupting of her straddling me in a completely different way. A much more pleasurable one, at that.

After that day in the safehouse, I'd been so certain of our connection. I hadn't wanted to hope, but I felt her dracon so clearly, as if she belonged to me. But if she had been my mate, she would have been forced to surface when I summoned her.

Days later and my jilted dracon was still licking the wounds of his injured pride.

"Ryker?" She waved a hand at me, and I shoved the useless thoughts to the back of my mind. Saphira was not my mate, nor would she ever be. Even if she didn't go through with the mating ceremony to Rhyland, her dracon had made it clear she wasn't interested.

“Yes, I do think you can stay on now.” I glanced over her shoulder at the rising sun. “Besides, I’ve gotten an urgent request from Abba, and we’re needed immediately. Both of us. We have no other way of getting there in time, so we’ll have to try.”

“If you drop me, I’ll never forgive you.” She scrunched her pert little nose at me and jabbed a delicate finger at my chest.

“Trust me, you wouldn’t be the only one.” I’d vowed never to lose her again, and I intended to uphold my word. Even if she could never be mine.

“Do you really think your brother would be that devastated to lose me?” She cocked a curious brow.

Thankfully, she’d misunderstood my intent. “Of course, he would. Hasn’t he been writing you every single day like a devoted betrothed?” Every day when the messenger arrived, it took every last ounce of willpower to restrain myself from choking the life out of the bastard.

Rhyland was a master of prose. If he couldn’t succeed in winning Saphira over in person, he’d accomplish it with those damned letters.

“He has.” A silly grin stretched her lips.

“Enough about all of this. We must go now if we wish to grant Abba’s favor and reach the council meeting in time. I would like to ensure you can at least stay on my dracon first.”

Her eyes widened, mouth curving into a capital O. “You just said I would!”

“A little test run wouldn’t hurt, Saphira.”

She let out an exasperated sigh and squeezed her eyes closed. “Okay, just do it already.”

We’d been attempting to summon her dracon for the past two days with no success. Even my inner beast’s presence had been unable to coax her forth, instead, it seemed to only send her deeper in hiding. I simply could not understand it.

After quickly shedding my clothes, I summoned my dracon to the surface. The well of magic that resided deep in

my chest bubbled over, and the familiar silver haze consumed my human form. My skin peeled away, and my dracon appeared in its place. Thank the gods for the power of the gemstones which allowed us to become these enormous beasts completely effortlessly.

Well, except for Saphira...

You can turn around now. I easily breached her mental walls and sent the thoughts over. Another reason I was certain we were linked somehow. Most dracon could speak to each other telepathically due to the innate power of our gemstones, while mates spoke directly through their mate bond. But with Saphira's dracon refusing to emerge, how were we able to communicate? And would Rhyland be able to do the same?

I supposed we'd find out today as my brother would be accompanying our father to the council meeting.

Saphira whirled around, her expressive irises alight as they took in my silver dracon. She'd seen me in this form multiple times now, and still, the awe in her expression continued to steal my breath every time.

"I don't know that I'll ever get used to seeing you like that."

Dracon live very long lifetimes as I told you before, princess. You'll have many decades to get used to it.

"Assuming I survive the trials."

Let's focus on the council agreeing to it first.

She nodded and stepped closer, eyeing me warily. "So how do I get on this thing?"

A puff of silver smoke escaped my nostrils as I snorted. *Climb, princess.*

Saphira tipped her head back, her chin up and brows furrowed. "Seriously?"

Fine, I suppose I could help a little. I stretched out my front legs and dropped my belly to the floor. My extended front leg served as a knobby, somewhat scalable ramp. As long

as she avoided my sharp talons and various jagged protrusions along my scales, it should have been easy.

“Thanks, dracon douche.”

A full belly laugh shook my entire body with that ridiculous humanism. It was a good thing she hadn't started to attempt the climb because she likely would've been thrown off by the tremor. *Such colorful human language, princess.*

“I live to pry laughs out of you, Ryker.” She reached for a ridged protrusion and placed a shaky foot on my talon.

I didn't know it was such an accomplishment.

“Oh, but it is!”

Was I really that grumpy? “Hmmpf.”

She made it about half-way up my leg, pausing at the thick knee joint. “Your scales are surprisingly soft and warm.”

Thank you?

She laughed as she reached for my shoulder blade and hauled herself onto my back. “Made it!”

Glad to hear it. I was scared you'd impale yourself on one of my horns.

“You're really not making me super confident here, Ryker.”

What? Only you can make jokes?

“Oh, that's what you're trying to do?” I could practically see the smile in her voice, and gods' damn it, it had my dracon grinning like a fool.

Stop that. I had to focus now. While I was fairly confident she'd manage to stay on, I had to be careful. I couldn't remember the last time I'd carried a passenger.

She wiggled along my spine, sending fiery tingles up and down my animal form. Good goddess, she'd have to stop that for me to focus. I could have sworn a faint gasp escaped her lips as she settled in, but I could have imagined it.

Now, time to get serious, princess.

“Okay, I got this.” Did she seem out of breath or was it only me? Her hands wrapped around the two nubs along my spine.

Perfect, use the ridges like handles and grip your legs as tight as you can to hang on. If you ever feel like you’re slipping, tell me immediately. Understand?

“Yes, sir!”

Okay, I’m going to stand now. Slowly, I straightened my legs until I stretched out to my full height. Saphira wobbled for an instant but thankfully managed to remain seated. Perhaps I should’ve had a saddle of some sort fashioned for her. Too late now. *Are you all right?* I shot through our mental link.

“Yup, just peachy. You know, when I was younger, I had a boyfriend with a motorcycle. When he revved that engine, I’d squeeze my thighs so hard around that thing I walked funny for days after.”

A swirl of envy rose to the surface, and an irritated growl tickled my throat. *Trust me, this is not the same.* And if I had her thighs wrapped around me like I dreamed, she would have been walking funny for weeks.

“What did you just say?” Saphira screeched.

What? Curses. Did I just accidentally send that through the mental link?

My wings unfurled and began to beat at the air. Frantically.

My massive body rose and Saphira fell forward, her arms wrapping around the top of my neck. “Ryker! Thanks for the head’s up! What the hell?”

Sorry.

“A countdown or something next time would be appreciated.” She slid back to a seated position, her hands digging into my back and those thighs clenched tight around me.

I flapped more leisurely now, relieved I’d succeeded in distracting her from that embarrassing slip of the mind.

Slowly, we rose higher into the early morning sky. Brilliant ochre and deep fuchsia painted the pale blue.

“This is amazing,” she whispered, fingers tightening around my scales.

I hazarded a quick glance back, my long neck curving to take in the magnificent sight of my smiling passenger. *It is. And you see, you stayed on.*

“I did. But don’t try anything crazy.”

I wouldn’t dream of it, princess.

Twenty-Four

SAPHIRA



Ryker's dracon sailed across the deep blue sea, the steady flapping of his wings oddly relaxing now that I'd gotten the hang of it.

"Are you finally going to tell me what we're doing?"

I already told you, I don't know exactly. Abba sent word that friends needed help. We are to meet them at this tiny island between the lands of Isramaya and Sepezia.

"The lands of vampires and serpents?" I'd totally been doing my homework, learning as much as I could about the other continents of Terrea.

Very good, princess.

Ryker's wings angled downward, and the thundering flaps grew slower. As we neared the islet, two forms took shape along the sandy beach. A silver-haired female and a male with a dark-head of hair peered up as we descended.

Wait a second...

Ryker's dracon hit the ground and the female figure coalesced into a familiar one. I slid off the tremendous beast, and the girl's silver eyes went wide.

"Saphira?" Her cheeks flushed a rosy pink, then she gripped the male's arm with both hands and squeezed, swaying on her feet.

"Rhode?"

We stared at each other unblinking for a long moment before we let out high-pitched squeals and charged forward. We collided at full speed and wrapped our arms around each other, rocking back and forth. I held onto the girl who was like a sister to me in the human world until tears streamed down my face.

I finally pulled back with a sniffle, sweeping back the tears. “I can’t believe you’re here, Rhode. I thought I’d lost you forever. I figured I’d go back to Earth in fifty years and, best case scenario, find you a little old lady.”

My adoptive sister chuckled and shook her head. “You know, like half an hour ago I would have said the exact same thing to you. It was killing me to think I’d lost you. But my memory just came back.”

I scowled. “Your memory was gone too?”

“Yes, but now I remember everything from our first lives.” Rhode was absolutely beaming. “Saph, we knew each other before.”

A gasp slid past my huge smile. “We did? How?”

“That’s a long story. Soon you’ll remember, but we met as kids and stayed friends. We saw each other fairly often, granted, it wasn’t to binge watch Netflix with a feast of five different fast foods from DoorDash.”

The male standing beside her glanced up at the looming dracon. There was something familiar about him too, but I couldn’t quite place it. “Ryker?”

My big dracon guard nodded.

“You know who I am?”

He nodded again.

“You hate me?”

Ryker snorted and little silver flames burst from his snout, but slowly, he shook his head.

The dark-haired male smiled. “Excellent.”

Aren't you going to return to human form? I shot through our mental connection.

I'd rather not.

Shaking my head at the insufferable dragon, I refocused my attention on my old friend.

“I can't believe you're here. In Terrea!” I pressed my fingers to my temples, certain my brain would explode any minute now. “This is so wild.”

Rhode laughed. “How are you? Are you good?”

My lips twisted into a frown, unbidden. “Let's just say, it's complicated... But damn, I just can't believe you're here.”

“And I can't believe we found each other on Earth. Of all the cities you could have lived in, you were in mine. Or vice versa. It's like we were always meant to have each other.”

I tackled Rhode into another hug. This was all so surreal. “So, you're one of the eight girls from the different continents? You were part of the sacrifice?”

“Yes, I was one of the eight who came here to kill my husband, whom I was tricked into marrying, by the way.” Rhode frowned, then she glanced over at the guy still lurking beside her. “I think I need to send out a memo to all the other girls so they understand.”

“Give me the tea-”

“Not yet.” Rhode shuddered. “It's still really raw. I just remembered myself. When your memory comes back, we'll have a tea sesh.”

A hint of disappointment coursed through my veins. Even my adoptive sister, the closest person I had to family in the human world, besides Morgana, was keeping things from me. “You're not going to tell me anything until my memory comes back, are you?”

Rhode reached out and squeezed my hands. “I was just in your shoes. I know how overwhelming and frustrating it is, but I think your memory will return when it's supposed to. And I

don't want to make this any harder for you than it already is. Just know I'm good now. And I'm sure you will be too."

"Are we?" The guy arched an eyebrow at Rhode.

"Still have some things to sort out." She smiled and shot him a good eyeroll, but then she held her hand out for him. When he took it, she pulled him close. "Remember when I told you I had a foster sister back on Earth? This is her. This is Saphira."

"Ohhh." He held out his hand, dipping his head. "Nice to meet you."

"Likewise, whoever you are."

Rhode grinned up at the male. "Saph, this is the love of my life, Varan."

With those dark eyes searing into me, something clicked. "You're the guy from Vegas..." I knew he looked familiar.

Varan scowled. "Excuse me?"

"In Las Vegas." I wagged a finger at him. "We were at that club, and you came up to ask her to dance."

He turned to Rhode, surprise brightening his dark eyes. "You really saw my face?"

"I told you I saw you," she answered softly. "Ambrose used you as a weapon."

I threw my hand up, thoroughly confused. "Um, what? It wasn't him? I totally saw his face. You were practically drooling all over him!"

"I am not sure how to feel about that," he muttered.

Rhode turned to me with a patient smile. "Some vampires can use glamours and change their appearance. So while it looked like him, it was very much not him."

"Oh, shit. That's really freaky."

Language, princess. Ryker's voice echoed through my mind, interrupting my conversation.

Mentally shushing him, I eyed the vampire, not sure how I felt about all of this. “Why did this Ambrose guy disguise himself as you?”

“Varan is my soulmate.” Rhode’s entire expression lit up before the corners of her lips twisted as she turned to Varan. “Do you think Ambrose knew that?”

“Impossible, the markings of soulmates have been blocked for ages. You and I are the first ones to show again, so I don’t know why he would go to such lengths.

“Well, you are significantly prettier. But you’re also the king—”

“Prince, I was the prince at that time.”

They continued their conversation, and I couldn’t help but eavesdrop though I had no idea what was going on. Rhode rolled her eyes at her *soulmate*. “Yes, the sole heir to the vampire throne who was loved and respected by his entire kingdom. I’m sure no one saw your coronation coming.”

My eyes widened as I took in her words. “You’re the King of vampires?”

Behind me, Ryker bowed his head at Varan. The king smiled and offered a bow in return.

“Wait. Your soulmate is the king....”

“I am the queen.” She shuddered. “It’s weird as fuck. I’m still not used to it. But that’s why my hair is silver; it’s a vampire queen thing. I’m telling you this so that when your memory returns and you recall me from our previous life with red hair, you’ll know why.”

“Right. That’ll be my first thought.” I smirked. “Wait, back in Vegas, I remember you were on the dance floor with the fake version of him, so I went to pee. That’s when I got snatched. How did you—”

We gasped in unison.

“Morgana!”

“Morgana?” Varan cried.

Rhode spun at him with terror in her eyes. “Rev...Rev... Avalon has Morgana!”

He opened his mouth then slammed it shut. “I...um... what? Your sister? The one you just told me about who was dying?”

“Yes! She was one of the eight!”

“How? It was only one per, oh no.” He paused, his jaw grinding. “She was turned into a demon, wasn’t she?”

Rhode nodded, and her hands began to tremble. “When he took off with the root from the sacred tree, Morgana chased after him. She was always tougher than me; she said she was going to try and stop him. I went looking for you. That’s how we got separated. Oh, my god. That’s what Avalon saw!”

They continued their back and forth, and I just couldn’t keep up. All I knew was that somehow, Morgana, Rhode’s real sister was in trouble.

My eyes bounced between the pair as I gnawed on my bottom lip. “Is Morgana in danger?”

Varan sighed. “I’m sure she is. But we cannot go in there after her. You don’t know their current king like I do. That will only put her in more danger. I will get a message to Avalon and let him know Lily is your sister, Morgana, and to trust her.”

“You can do that?” Rhode asked, panic glistening in her silver irises. “Get a message to him?”

“Yes, it’s not like the message I tried to send to Earth. This is just the other side of the mountains. I promise, to both of you, I will get word to him.”

“Okay.” I held up my hand. “But when you hear that Morgana’s safe, you’ll send me a message too, right?”

The king smiled. “Of course, Saphira. You have my word.”

Rhode reached for my hand, giving it a gentle squeeze. “I won’t pry into your journey right now, or why your dragon friend didn’t shift but is acting shifty—”

Ryker snorted, and silver flames danced in the air.

I gave her a faint smile and shrugged. “It’s a whole thing ___”

“I know. I get it. Trust me, if anyone in this realm gets it... it’s me. But that’s why I won’t ask more now.” She tugged on my hand. “Promise me when things settle for you that you’ll send for me. I long to see Draconia again.”

I nodded. “I will.”

“And if you need anything at all, you’ll call for me.” Rhode gestured between the king and her. “Because you’re about to do us a huge favor, so we’re gonna owe you one. Expiration not included.”

“Oh! You’re the reason Abba called us here?”

“She called *you*?”

Ryker snorted.

“Well, she summoned Ryker.” I pointed at my grumpy escort. “But the message said to bring me. She needed a favor. I didn’t get to ask questions because apparently, she sent a little magical note like something out of Harry Potter.”

“Harry Potter?” Varan asked.

“I’ll explain later, Rev. But yeah, we got one of those, too.” Rhode grimaced. “We didn’t know she called for you until right before you arrived. We need a ride home. Our ship blew up on the way here.”

Ryker’s enormous wings flapped, and his voice filled my mind. *We must get going if we’re going to make it to the council meeting.*

Right. I pushed my shoulders back. “Let’s get you home then. Come on, climb on.”

Varan glanced up at Ryker. “You okay with us climbing on your back?”

He nodded and lowered his tremendous beastly form, so he was nearly flat on the ground.

It only took a minute to get everyone settled on his back. I took the front, squeezing between the hinges of his wing bones and Rhode sat behind me, with Varan in the back. I liked how he seemed to always have his eyes on her.

Ryker flapped his powerful wings, and a second later, we were skyborne. Rhode chattered excitedly as we sailed across the sea. I was so consumed by our conversation, I almost missed the flames that burst into the sky from Isramaya.

King Varan leaned over Ryker's wing, his eyes bulging out of his head as he took in the sight. Isramaya was in chaos. Vibrant purple smoke exploded left and right, like it was being fired from different sides of the kingdom. More flames reached high into the sky. Our huge dracon escort swerved and dipped to avoid the onslaught.

"Ryker..." Varan cleared his throat. "Ryker, drop us at the edge of Shadow Mountains but do not land."

I gasped and spun back to stare at the vampire. "Drop you? You're going to jump down?"

"Yes. Get as low as you can. I won't risk another kingdom's prince when I don't know what's going on."

Rhodelia spun and climbed into his lap, wrapping her arms around her soulmate's neck. "I may have my memories, but I never knew how to land a jump like this."

Oh gods, she wasn't really going to do this was she?

Varan slid his hand beneath her knees, holding her tight against his chest. "I've got you, Rho." Then he turned back to shout, "Ryker, just get as low as you can."

The mighty dracon obeyed, dropping low to the earth. I closed my eyes as the king jumped with the woman I loved like a sister. "Be careful!" I cried out, but my shout was carried off on the wind and the turmoil below.

Don't worry. They'll be fine. Varan is resourceful. There's no other way he would've survived this long. Ryker's voice surged through my mind, providing some comfort. Hold on, we've got to get back to Eyre for the council meeting.

I gripped the thick nubs of his protruding wing bones, and he banked left, heading back toward Draconia.

Twenty-Five

SAPHIRA



I would seriously be walking funny for weeks after that flight on Ryker's dracon. Not to mention my now desperate need for a cold shower. I'd been so preoccupied with Rhode and whatever was going on in Isramaya I hadn't focused on Ryker until our return flight. Then again on the one to Eyre. That beast was like an oven, his warmth seeping between my legs. I felt every rumble of his chest, every vibration of his body straight up to the apex of my thighs.

Flaming hell, if my father and Bartus hadn't been flying right beside us, I might have had a big O in mid-air. This was so not good. My eyes darted across the clearing to a half-naked Ryker. Some attendant had appeared with clothes shortly after our arrival in the Kingdom of Eyre. I tore my gaze away, forbidding myself to ogle his broad shoulders and perfectly sculpted ass. And here we were about to meet with my fiancé, who despite that steamy flight with his *brother*, I was actually looking forward to seeing.

I'd never gotten the chance to spend as much time with Rhyland as I had with Ryker. And his daily letters had finally given me the opportunity to get to know him better.

"Welcome to the Kingdom of Eyre, darling, the land of the Skybornes." Tatá weaved a strong arm around my shoulder, his gaze clear. Bartus had explained the king's secret, the reason he'd been able to hold onto the throne for the past year without most knowing the truth of his mental state. One of the high mages of Magieria, an old friend of his, had created a special potion for my father. It provided brief moments of

mental clarity, but he warned it would lose effectiveness the more it was used. So Bartus saved it only for important events such as these.

I eyed the lush green lands, so different than the harsh, arid terrain of Terre. A cool breeze stirred wisps of blue hair across my eyes. It was a good thing I'd had the wherewithal to tie it back or I would've been slapped by wayward strands the whole flight over.

A massive white tent had been erected in a clearing surrounded by deep green trees with roots so large they broke through the surface, and thick like Ryker's dracon's legs. A few males stood beneath the shade of the pavilion and another two sat along a dais at the front.

Father ticked his head at the royals lounging on the thrones. "The pompous idiot on the right is King Ezekiel Skyborne of Eyre, while the round, tubby one to his left is King Silas Stormborne of Aquos."

I barely suppressed the laugh before it tumbled out. "So I take it you're not very fond of either of them?"

He shrugged. "They're all right... just stubborn fools."

"Is that why you chose the Ashbornes for my betrothal?"

Father grunted. "Kiran's more of an ass-borne if you asked me."

I couldn't stop it this time, the sharp laugh burst right out of me. "Tatá!"

"It was your mother who convinced me the betrothal was what was best for my girls. Kiran was the least idiotic of the bunch. And your mother was partial to his sons."

Sons? I opened my mouth to ask more, but Bartus marched over, his light brows tangled like an angry caterpillar.

"What's the matter?" Father asked.

"Kiran and Rhyland are late, and the rest of the council wishes to proceed with or without them."

Ryker materialized at my side, a frown carved into his scruffy jaw. “They left before we did. It shouldn’t have taken them this long.” He fingered the ruby ring around his middle finger, and his eyes glossed over. Now, I finally understood that vacant look was the physical reaction to dracon communicating telepathically. He blinked a moment later, the tight set of his jaw only hardening. “Neither of them is answering.”

“Does that happen often?” I asked.

He shook his head. “Hardly ever. Even in the middle of battle, dracon can communicate with one another.”

“What if they lost their gemstones?”

“We’re family, direct blood, our mental link supersedes the power of the gems.”

Huh... so that meant I should be able to talk to Dad whenever I wanted? I’d have to test it out. *Tatà? Can you hear me?* I glanced over at my father who stared blankly ahead. *Hello?* Nope, nothing. Stupid, stubborn dracon. I’d have to try again later when we weren’t in the middle of a rising disaster.

“That blowhard Kiran is probably ignoring you,” Father grumbled. “He’s trying to sabotage the whole process.”

“He wouldn’t do that,” Ryker interjected. “Or at least Rhyland wouldn’t let him.”

“Then what do you suppose happened, young man?” Dad’s wiry brows slammed together.

“I don’t know, but I don’t like it.”

A sharp horn sounded, sending my heart rocketing up my throat. A blue uniformed guard appeared from beneath the tent and shouted in our direction. “The Imperia Council meeting will begin in five minutes.”

“Without King Kiran’s vote, we’ll never have the majority,” I whispered.

We barely had it with him. We’d already discussed the likelihood of the results since my return home. With father and King Kiran, it would be two against two. We assumed neither

the kings of Eyre nor Aquos would approve of a female joining the trials. That left us at a stalemate. However, in such cases, the priestess Abba would have to decide. I only hoped the female would vote on my side, but according to Bartus she was a fickle woman with a direct line to Mother Terrea herself. Who knew what the goddess wanted?

My weeks of training could all be for nothing.

Ryker stepped forward, and my body lurched along with him. *So weird.* “I’ll go search for them.”

Forcing myself to take a step back, I wrapped my arms across my chest to keep from physically restraining him. *What in all the realms?* Dread blossomed in my gut, an inexplicable feeling taking over me. “No, don’t!” I blurted.

Ryker spun at me, the harsh line of his jaw softening. “Why not?”

“I don’t know. I just have a bad feeling about it.”

“All the more reason he should go,” Bartus interjected. “If King Kiran has gotten into some sort of trouble, it would be in all of our best interests to help him.”

“And Rhyland.” Ryker squeezed my shoulder and tossed me a reassuring smile. “Don’t worry, I’ll be back with your betrothed.”

That gnawing ache only intensified with his touch.

“I’ll see if there’s anything I can do to postpone the proceedings.” Bartus turned toward the tent, and Father took off beside him.

As soon as they were gone, I grabbed Ryker’s hand. “Please, don’t go.”

The fine line between his dark brows deepened as he regarded me. “I must. If something has happened, I have to help.” The hint of a smile tugged at the corners of his perfect lips. “Are you actually worried about me, princess?”

“Yesss—no!”

His smile blossomed and goddess, that insatiable heat rose from deep down below and slashed across my face. “Hmm...”

“Of course, I worry about you.” I drew my fist back and punched his arm. I was fairly certain I only hurt myself with that dumb move.

“That makes me happier than you know.” The smile faltered, and a wave of regret pummeled me in the chest. *Regret?* I felt it as clearly as the strength radiating from the powerful man standing in front of me.

An uncontrollable urge came over me as he released my hand and began to turn away. I snatched his wrist and whirled him back toward me. Rising to my tiptoes, I pressed a kiss to his cheek. It was meant to be sweet, chaste even, but fire consumed my lips with the gentle touch. My lungs faltered, and I sucked in a breath. “Be careful,” I finally whispered before spinning around and sprinting toward the tent to join the others.



I fiddled with the jade gemstone hanging from my necklace as a variety of brightly hued eyes drilled into me. The council had allowed us an additional twenty minutes, thanks to some masterful work by our royal emissary, Bartus. Which left me sitting at a table surrounded by the Skyborne princes. Eric, Elias, and Ezra, apparently King Ezekiel had a thing for E's, watched me from across the pale blue tablecloth like I had three heads. Or I'd been sacrificed at a bloody altar and returned fifty years later.

At the table beside us sat King Silas Stormborne's family, Queen Constance and their children, Maximus, Maximillian, and Maxine. Now that I had a minute to think on it, Rhyland and Ryker both started with R's and S's for Saphira and Serenity. What the realms was up with that? If I ever had kids, I'd one hundred percent break this stupid naming cycle. My heart pinched for an instant as a faded image of a pale, blue-haired girl rose to the surface. Happy giggles echoed in my mind before the faint memory faded.

“So, Saphira...” Prince Eric eyed me warily, a shock of blonde hair tumbling over his brow. The Skyborne royal was incredibly tall but lanky and lean, unlike Ryker’s massive form. “I’ve heard rumors as to why this special meeting has been called. Do you care to enlighten us?”

I briefly debated our strategy. At this point, I wasn’t sure it really mattered, but I decided to keep my mouth shut anyway. This time would be better served scoping out the competition. “You’ll all find out soon enough.”

“Is it true you cannot summon your dracon?” The Stormborne princess, Maxine, called out from the table beside us. She seemed young, only a teenager in human years, but here that could make her well into her fifties.

I cocked my head back. “Yes,” I muttered.

“Then she can’t possibly be the one from the prophecy,” she hissed at her mother.

“Be quiet, Maxine. No one is certain about anything yet.” Queen Constance threw me a narrowed glare.

This was going to be fun...

Damn it, where are you Ryker?

On my way back, princess.

A wave of goosebumps shot across my flesh at the sound of that rough voice through my mind. It was a million times more invasive than the most heated touch.

“How did you do that?” I blurted.

All eyes turned to me, and I muttered a curse.

Talk to me in your head, Saphira, not out loud.

Now you tell me.

His warm chuckle echoed all the way down to my toes.

Is Rhyland okay?

Yes, everyone is fine.

I could have sworn I felt a swirl of annoyance from the grumpy male.

He and father ran into some trouble from the rebels upon their departure. I'll tell you more when we arrive. We'll be there in twenty minutes.

Well, you only have ten, so you better hurry.

As you wish, princess.

Twenty-Six

SAPHIRA



“We’ve heard your case, Princess Saphira, and now it is time for the council to vote.” King Ezekiel of Eyre stared down at me from the dais, his eldest son, Eric, at his side. Not only was each king allotted a vote, but also their seconds, which in this case were the king’s heirs. Prince Maximus with his wild red mane sat beside his father, King Silas, both royals ready to cast their votes.

I stood in front of the council of royals, my fists clenched at my sides. I’d delivered a hell of a speech if you asked me.

“But King Kiran and Prince Rhyland have yet to arrive,” Bartus interjected. My father’s old friend stood from his seat beside the younger Skyborne royals. “I must insist on postponing the vote.”

“We’ve postponed for long enough,” King Silas growled, his paunch bumping against the table at his outburst.

“It’s true,” said Prince Eric. He tossed back his long, golden locks and speared me with a narrowed glare. “Saphira certainly dragged out the explanation for as long as humanly possible.”

Really? A human joke? Sure, I’d been trying to stall, but I didn’t think it was that obvious. *Where are you, Ryker?* A trickle of fear seeped into my chest. What if something terrible had happened since last we spoke? The thought of losing my moody guard ripped the air from my lungs. I buckled over and heaved in a breath.

“Are you all right, princess?” One of the blue-uniformed guards eyed me as I clung to the back of a chair.

“Yes, I’m fine.”

Father leapt out of his throne, tossing the chair back with the force. “You should all be ashamed. Saphira gave her life to save us, to save all of Terrea. Does she not deserve the chance to lead the people she died for?”

My chest constricted, overwhelming emotion bloating my chest. Between the fear of losing Ryker and my father’s words, it was too much. I dropped my gaze and blinked quickly to keep the tears back. The last thing I needed was to seem weak in front of the entire council.

“It is exactly for that reason that she should not enter the trials,” King Ezekiel responded, sinking back into his chair, dragging thick fingers through his wiry silver strands. “She’s sacrificed enough, let others fight for our kingdom.”

“Like your son?” Tatá growled. “Because the great Prince Eric Skyborne of Eyre would make such a brilliant Imperia?” He scoffed, throwing his hands in the air. “Saphira is not asking for a handout. She is requesting to fight alongside the other heirs to the throne.”

A chorus of murmurs broke out along the dais.

A long moment later, King Ezekiel smashed his fist down on the table, calling everyone’s attention to the raised dais. “It is time to vote. We cannot postpone any longer. The Stormbornes must return to their lands, and we have important matters to attend to in Eyre.”

My eyes darted to Bartus, but the royal emissary’s only response was a downhearted shrug. We’d stalled as long as we could.

A guard in pale blue passed out slips of paper and pencils to the five men on the dais, then turned and offered me the same.

“A simple yay or nay will determine the result,” said King Ezekiel.

I glanced up at my father from across the dais. His deep azure hair tumbled over his shoulders in wild waves from dragging his frustrated fingers through it over and over again. He offered me a reassuring smile, but we both knew that without King Kiran and Rhyland we had no chance.

All the royals bent over the table and put their pencils to paper as I stood in the middle of the space, waffling. *Ryker? You better be dead if you're not answering me.* Oh, please don't be dead. *Now would really be a good time to get your dragon ass back here!*

Your wish is my command, princess. His deep rumbling tone sent my heart aflutter. It filled my mind a second before the thunderous flapping of wings vibrated the skies. A flood of relief overtook my being, and I released the breath I hadn't realized I'd been holding since my guard left.

"Wait!" I cried and ran out from beneath the tent.

Three dracon sailed toward us, Ryker's brilliant silver and two others in varying shades of gold. *Rhyland.* Somehow, I knew the paler shade of glittering amber belonged to his dracon.

My gaze fixed across the clearing to those smoldering silver orbs. *Talk about cutting it close.* It took all my restraint to keep my feet planted to the ground instead of rushing toward him.

I like to keep you on your toes, princess. It'll be good practice for the trials.

I smiled as the three ginormous beasts landed, shaking the earth beneath my feet. No sooner had they set foot on the lush grass than the shimmering mist blanketed their dracon forms. I averted my gaze, knowing full well what happened next.

Not only did I not need to see Ryker and Rhyland naked at the same time, but Kiran? *Bleh.*

As I turned away, a troop of light blue uniformed guards toting armfuls of clothing approached the presumably naked males behind me. I kept my gaze fixed to the commotion

beneath the tent. The remaining council members were arguing in angry whispers as Tatá watched, grinning.

“Saphira...”

I spun around at the sound of Rhyland’s voice. My gaze darted between both brothers, and a noose tightened around my heart. All the fear I felt for Ryker dissipated now that he stood before me safe and sound, and my eyes drifted toward Rhyland. It had been three weeks since I’d seen my betrothed, and I... missed him. Maybe it was the letters or maybe it was something else, but when our eyes met, I felt *something*.

He pulled me into his arms, and my body easily sank into his embrace. Until a broody dracon appeared between us.

“Decorum, brother,” Ryker snarled. “You wouldn’t want to forsake propriety in front of the watchful eyes of the council.”

“Yes, yes, of course.” Rhyland released me with a frustrated sigh. “You know, I haven’t seen my betrothed in weeks, I’m fairly certain a simple hug is well within the allowed parameters.”

“I disagree.” Ryker threw his brother a wicked grin.

Rhyland puffed out his chest and gritted his teeth. “You’re a bastard you know that?”

“A bastard who just saved your ass.”

I stepped between the males, suddenly feeling like a big dracon chew toy. “What happened out there?”

Rhyland heaved out a breath and dragged his hand over his face. “Damned rebels are getting more brazen by the day. They attacked us just outside the guarded perimeter of the fortress.”

“They had father and my big brother surrounded before I arrived.” A shit-eating grin plastered across Ryker’s face.

“Yes, it was very fortunate you arrived when you did, son.” Kiran stepped forward and placed his hand on his younger son’s shoulder. “I chose well in assigning you the role of commander of the royal guard. There is no better fighter in all Draconia.”

Or Terrea. Ryker's thought echoed in my mind.

I shot him a good eye roll. *Conceited, much?*

It's not arrogance if it's true, princess.

I'm glad you're all right, I murmured in my head, more to myself than him, but judging by the smile that stretched across his face he'd heard the errant thought.

King Ezekiel clapped his hands, diverting my attention from our mental discord. "Well, since you have finally arrived, let us not delay the vote a moment longer."

Rhyland's hand wrapped around mine, and he led me toward the tent. Ryker walked a few steps behind us, his heated glare boring into the back of my neck. A swell of envy filled my chest, tightening my ribcage. *What the blazes?*

I cocked my head over my shoulder and met fiery silver irises. Was this overwhelming feeling coming from my reluctant guard? I made a mental note to find out more about this mental link we shared. If he could send over his thoughts and memories, maybe I had a direct link to his emotions too.

Oh goddess... Did that mean he could feel mine? My thoughts whirled to all the lusty sensations I'd felt around him. That would be so bad.



A thick silence descended over the tent as the Eyren guard counted the slips of parchment. Twice.

"Well?" King Ezekiel barked.

"It's a tie, my king. Four for the inclusion of Princess Saphira into the trials and four against."

Great, just like we predicted.

"Of all the selfish, unjust, fu—" Father went off on a tirade of more colorful expletives that had the queens and princesses flushing a bright crimson.

"According to the procedures set forth by the Imperia Council," Bartus began, "only the priestess Abba can decide a

stalemate.”

“How long will that take?” I blurted.

“Herve,” King Ezekiel called out, “send message to the great Abba right away.”

One of the Eyren guards stepped forward and dipped into a bow. “Yes, of course, my king.”

The Skyborne royal turned to me with a sly smile. “In case you’ve forgotten in your time away, the priestess Abba has a direct link to Mother Terrea herself. We do not question her or her process.”

I bristled at his tone. I wasn’t some idiot child. “I was just looking for a general timeline, Zeke.”

Gasps broke out across the dais, and Ryker chuckled beside me. No, that was in my head. His expression had remained perfectly neutral, the laughter bouncing around only in my skull.

Queen Ethel Skyborne rose and clapped her dainty hands. “While we wait for a response from the great Abba, you are all welcome to remain here in Airslinger Citadel.” She motioned toward the immense castle on the other side of the lush forest.

The Stormborne king sulked. “We really must be going...”

“The rules are the rules,” said Bartus, donning a placating smile, ever the diplomat. “We must wait for an answer from the ever-wise Abba.”

I don't like it. Ryker’s voice brushed through my subconscious.

I glanced toward the dais at my father. The fire in his eyes had dimmed, and a blank expression crossed his weary face. Crap. The effects of the potion must have been wearing off. I subtly nudged Bartus in the side and lifted my chin in Father’s direction. His old friend must have read the signs as quickly as I had.

“That would be very gracious of you,” Bartus responded through the thickening silence. “A little rest would do us all

some good.” At that, a few of the other royals agreed to the group sleepover.

We have no other choice, I mentally shouted at Ryker, then spun at him, eyes narrowed.

Fine. He inched closer and bumped his shoulder to mine. *But we must keep our guard up*.

I nodded and threw him an appreciative smile. When I turned back to face the dais, Rhyland’s stare burned into me, the corners of his eyes tapered.

Could he hear me too?

I dropped my gaze to the floor, the events of the day suddenly catching up with me. Between seeing Rhode, thinking I’d lost Ryker, and all the stress of the upcoming trials, I was bone tired.

“Come along, everyone,” said Queen Ethel. “The staff will show you to your rooms now.”

Twenty-Seven

RYKER



Mother Terrea, walking behind Rhyland and Saphira playing the role of dedicated guard as they whispered and giggled was the most wicked of tortures. I thought I could handle this, thought I'd moved on after so many years, but now that she was here again and so close, not touching her was pure hell.

Why couldn't I be more selfless? More like Saphira? She gave up everything for Terrea, for our people, and I couldn't even do this. It was my duty to protect her, to ensure the successful betrothal to my brother to break the curse and save dragon kind. And all I could think about was sinking into the sweetness between her legs.

And the thought of Rhyland being the one to claim her—a deep growl vibrated my throat and my nails sharpened to deadly points.

Saphira spun around, her eyes wide. “Are you okay?”

Shit, could she feel my raging jealousy? I laced my hands behind my back and forced my mouth into a smile. “Just fine, princess. And you?”

Her brows knotted as she regarded me for a long moment before turning back to her betrothed.

Good goddess, if he wasn't my own brother, I'd wring his damned neck.

We traversed corridor after endless corridor of rusty brick stone. It's soaring walls, adorned with intricate dragon carvings did nothing to distract from my mood. Airslinger Citadel was situated in the center of Eyre, deep within lush

forests. At least that kept the castle cool, unlike the fiery hell of Saphira's home.

A blue-uniformed guard finally stopped at towering double doors. He spun around and faced our weary procession: Father, King Sebastian and his trusty emissary, Bartus in the lead, followed by our reluctant threesome. "King Skyborne assumed you would all prefer to remain in the same wing considering the betrothal."

"Yes, that would be fine as long as we all have separate chambers," Bartus interjected.

The guard dipped his head. "Of course." He signaled to the guards by the dark oak doors, and they wrenched the monstrous things open. Another wide hallway stretched before us with a series of doors on either side. "Choose the chambers you prefer. The king and queen welcome you to their home. Please, make yourselves comfortable."

I zipped between Saphira and Rhyland, my feet moving of their own accord. "Princess, I must insist on taking the room adjoining yours. For your safety, of course."

Heat flashed across those dazzling orbs before her head dipped, and she dropped her gaze to the rust-hued tile. "Of course."

"Then I will take the chamber on the other side of hers." Rhyland threw me a smug smile, and I curled my hands into fists to keep from throwing him out the window.

"And I will be across the hall from you, darling." King Highborne gave his daughter an indulgent smile. "I'm very proud of you, Saphira. You spoke like a true leader today in front of the council. They're imbeciles if they don't see what an incredible Imperia you would make for our people."

"Thank you, Tatá." Her eyes lit up, a soft crimson staining her cheeks.

Goddess, she was beautiful when she blushed. A memory rushed to the surface, those cheeks flaring that same enticing crimson the first time I claimed her in one of the abandoned towers of Flintguard Fortress over fifty years ago. We'd fought

the pull between us for months, but when we'd finally given in, gods it was heaven. I'd never forget the vision of absolute perfection, her bare body splayed out beneath me, breasts bouncing with every thrust, and the sounds, those sweet moans that fled her lips as I spilled my soul inside her.

"Ryker?" Saphira's voice snapped me from the vivid memories.

Clearing my throat, I buried the heated images and met Saphira's curious gaze. Her eyes razed over me, lingering below my belt for a second longer than they should have. Oh blazes, I was hard, wasn't I? I slid my hands in front of my crotch, folding them in front of my obvious arousal.

Thank the realms my brother's attention was elsewhere.

Saphira's eyes had widened to the size of full moons, and a familiar scent tickled my nostrils. Her chest heaved, lips parted, pupils rounded. *Shit*. Had she seen a glimpse of my memories? She was undoubtedly feeling my arousal, and it was clearly affecting her. How was this possible?

"Come, Saphira." I laced my arm through hers and tugged her toward the door at the end of the hall. "Let me escort you to your room." Before Rhyland catches scent of your arousal.

She easily folded into my side, and my entire body hummed at her proximity.

"Once you're settled," Rhyland called out, "I'd love to spend some time with you, Saphira. It's been too long."

She canted her head over her shoulder and gave my brother a sweet smile. "Of course."

I lengthened my stride, practically breaking into a run as overpowering, fiery sensations swirled between us. I still couldn't wrap my head around it. This sort of emotional and physical sharing only happened with mates—and yet, when Saphira's dracon refused to emerge at my call, she made it clear we were not.

So how was she feeling everything I was?

I nearly ripped the knob off its hinges as I jerked the door open, ushered Saphira inside and slammed it shut behind us. The moment it was closed, she flattened her back to the dark timber and heaved out a breath. “Why am I so hot?” Her cheeks were flushed, and that tantalizing scent flared in the air between us.

My feet compelled me toward her, erasing the minute space separating our bodies. Goddess, the desire to be near her was completely overwhelming. I braced my forearms on the back of the door on either side of her head, caging her in. She exhaled sharply as our heated gazes met.

“Were you jealous out there? Jealous of Rhyland?” Her eyes searched mine, digging for an answer I couldn’t provide. “I felt the strangest thing...” She pressed her palm to her chest.

My eyes trailed her perfect form, my body molding around hers. “Maybe,” I muttered. “Were you frightened for me when I left?”

Her head dipped. “I couldn’t help but think about what would happen if I never saw you again. How would I survive here without you?”

My ribs tightened around my heart, nearly suffocating my senseless organ. We had a second chance to do the right thing, but somehow, we were right back where we started again. “You’ll never be without me. I’ll always be here with you, I swear it, princess.”

Her pupils were so round with desire, they nearly eclipsed the blue. Her hips tilted to meet mine, and just like that our forms were perfectly aligned. “Ryker, I feel so—I don’t even know how to describe it. Why does this keep happening between us?”

The thought of losing me must have triggered this reaction. There was no other explanation. “I don’t know,” I finally rasped out. Our lips were so close our breaths mingled, each haggard pant a wicked memory.

“This isn’t normal, right?” Her mouth nearly brushed mine with the question.

“No, it’s not.” I crushed her against the door, my body so desperate to be one with hers. She let out another gasp as my arousal streaked across her center.

“We can’t keep letting this happen,” she whispered. Her mouth spewed lies, but her body cried the truth. Her hips ground against mine, rubbing up and down my hard length. Her head tipped back, eyes closing as she leaned against the solid wood.

“No, we really shouldn’t.” I brushed her lips as I spoke the damnable words. Every ounce of me knew we shouldn’t do this. We were headed straight down the path of destruction; the same one we were on all those years ago.

My hands skated down her sides, fingers digging into her hips and guiding them up and down over my erection. Up and down. Up and down. No, this was certainly not normal. I was mere moments away from release, and we both still had our clothes on. I hadn’t felt this way around a female since I was a teenager. And judging by the soft groans fleeing Saphira’s pressed lips, she wasn’t far either.

I should stop. Put an end to this before we cross the line of no return. This was treason. But goddess, I couldn’t stop, not when she felt so right.

“Ryker...” she panted. Her taut nipples poked through the soft material of her blouse, and my dracon released an appreciative growl.

“I’ve got you, princess.” Sliding my hands down to hold her perfect behind, I lifted one leg around my waist, baring her center beneath the riding leathers. I thrust slowly, dragging my erection across her middle, blindly searching for that taut bundle of nerves at the apex of her thighs despite the thick material blocking me. She let out a groan as I quickened my pace.

“Ryker, I’m going to—” A deep growl vibrated her throat as her head fell back and a tremor raced through her entire

body. The quake was so violent, my own body trembled from the vibrations. I held her tight against me as she rode the wave of pleasure, dribbles of the intense sensations reverberating through me.

Once she stopped shaking, I loosened my hold and forced myself to take a much-needed step back. Scorching heat soaked my being, my own release so close just from the echoes of hers.

I gently lowered her leg to the floor, but she still clung onto me, her form molded to mine. “Saphira,” I whispered. Her face was buried in my tunic, eyes refusing to meet my own. “Saphira, please, look at me.” Dipping a finger beneath her chin, I forced her eyes to mine. Embarrassment and guilt masked her beautiful, flushed face.

“How could I let that happen?” Her lips were twisted into an irresistible pout.

I wanted nothing more than to claim that mouth, drag her onto the bed and coax another orgasm from those pouty lips as she cried out my name. “This isn’t your fault,” I murmured and ran my thumb across her soft cheek.

“I’m betrothed to your brother,” she whisper-hissed.

“But you belong to me.” The confession slipped from my lips without my approval. But now that it was out, the crushing weight on my chest finally lifted.

Her eyes grew impossibly large as she regarded me. “What do you mean?”

“I don’t know how it’s possible, but I believe our dracon are dracuori, fated mates.”

Twenty-Eight

SAPHIRA



Dracuori. My father's inane ramblings rushed to the surface. "Fated mates?" I blurted. I peeled my body away from Ryker's, despite every nerve ending screaming at me. The echoes of the most mind-blowing orgasm still surged through my body, tingling deep within my veins. I'd never felt something so explosive, so soul bending. And *with* all our clothes on. "What the hades does that mean?"

"Exactly what it sounds like." He dragged his hand through his hair and huffed out a breath. "Our dracon reside deep within our very being. They are an integral part of our soul. You've heard of the human phenomenon of soul mates?"

I nodded.

"Same idea."

"But soul mates aren't real." The notion that there was only one person out there you're destined to be with sounded insane. What if you never found that person?

"Maybe, maybe not. But I can assure you that dracon fated mates are very real."

"But the other day, you said—"

He nodded, mouth curving into a frown. "Yes, it was very odd that your beast refused to emerge when summoned by her mate. But we have no idea what happened to your soul as a result of the sacrifice. You still haven't been able to beckon her forth at all. Maybe there is something blocking her, and I'm not strong enough to get past it."

My head spun, the idea of dracuori, fated mates and soul mates whipping around my mind. A part of me wanted to believe it. It would at least explain the way I'd felt about Ryker from the first moment I saw him in the club in Vegas. I would be lying if I said I hadn't felt an instant connection. But...

"What about Rhyland?" I still felt something when I was around him as well. It was nothing as powerful or all-consuming as with Ryker, but I couldn't deny its existence either. Steeling my nerves, I forced the words out. "I feel something for him too."

His expression shuttered, and that dribble of jealousy unfurled in my gut. His, not mine. "I don't know," he finally grumbled. "None of this makes sense. Maybe you simply recognize him from your previous life, that could be it."

I took a measured step closer. "Rhyland said you and I were close before the sacrifice, when I was betrothed to your brother fifty years ago." I swallowed hard. "Exactly, how close were we?"

"Very close." His lips curled into a wicked grin, and a wave of heat drenched my pulsing lower half.

Son of beraatch... no wonder he seemed so familiar. In the biblical sense. "And he never knew about us?" I forced out, fighting past the tumultuous sensations.

Ryker shook his head. "No one did."

This all made so much sense now. In a super fucked-up way. My reincarnated soul recognized his. It might have been insane but so was all of this. The man before me could transform into a dracon, and so could I, in theory.

The question was: what did we do now?

I was betrothed to his brother, destined to have little dragon babies with him to save dracon kind. I couldn't abandon my people; I couldn't be selfish like that.

Squeezing my eyes closed, I summoned a power I didn't know I possessed. Opening them once more, I fixed my gaze to Ryker's. "That can never happen again."

His jaw ticked, that tendon beneath his scruffy skin fluttering like mad. “Saphira—”

I whipped from side to side and took a giant step back. “No, stay away, Ryker. I can’t think when you’re so close.” I paused, pressing my lips into a tight line before I forced the words out. “I sacrificed so much to save Terrea, we all did. I can’t let that all go to hell because of my horny dragon.”

Pain radiated across my chest, a tangle of his and mine at this stupid declaration. What we had went far deeper than attraction, and a part of me was brutally aware of it, but I had to do what was right.

“Don’t say that, Saphira.” The silver of his eyes darkened, the vibrant light nearly extinguishing. “I already lost you once, and I can’t bear the thought of it happening again.”

“You can’t lose what’s not yours to begin with. I am betrothed to your brother.”

A mixture of hurt and rage flashed across those expressive irises, his emotions echoing through our mental link. Gods, I hated causing him pain, especially when I felt every tortured stab, but what other choice did I have? We couldn’t be together.

“Please go.” Heat burned the back of my eyes, and I blinked quickly to chase away the tears. Once he was gone, I’d let them fall, allow the dam to break until it overflowed.

Ryker dipped his head into a bow. “As you wish, princess,” he gritted out before turning on his heel.

I traced his broad shoulders, the coiling of the muscles in his back, and that perfect rounded ass as he trudged out. I committed each and every detail to memory because as much as I didn’t want to believe it, I felt it deep in my soul.

Ryker *was* my dracuori, my fated mate, and I’d be forced to let him go for the good of Draconia.



I sulked in my room, stretched across the lavish sheets staring at the pitch sky. Two brilliant moons stared back at me, the vivid blue one still so startling. Twinkling stars blanketed the night, their happy sparkle taunting me. I'd been miserable since the moment I kicked Ryker out. I'd skipped dinner with the royals, and I'd even lied to Rhyland when he came looking for me to catch up, blaming it on a migraine.

I wasn't even sure dracon suffered from headaches.

But my betrothed, ever the kind man, accepted my lame excuse and left me to my wallowing. What was wrong with my stupid dracon? Why had she fallen for the wrong brother?

I was meant to be with Rhyland. It was what the prophecy decreed after all. How could Mother Terrea screw that up?

A soft knock at my door sent me leaping out of bed. I crept toward the entrance of the grand chamber, sniffing the air. It was weird, but I'd come to recognize Ryker's scent from far, and this wasn't it. Or Rhyland's...

The hair on the back of my neck rose as I tiptoed toward the door. Slowly turning the knob, I opened it a crack and peered through the opening. Prince Eric Skyborne darkened the doorway.

"Good evening, princess, I hope I'm not disturbing you." His long, blonde locks were free, tumbling over his bare shoulders. My gaze traced his exposed torso, lingering along the carved muscle that disappeared beneath light cotton pants.

I knew dracon weren't shy about nudity, but a visit at this hour half-naked felt weird. "Nope," I finally mumbled. "What's up?" My dracon stirred in my chest as I eyed the royal.

"I was hoping I could have a word with you." He ticked his head at the crack in the doorway.

I opened it a smidge more, debating. What did I really know about this guy? Ryker had said to be careful, but it's not like the prince would attack me under his own roof, right? I ran my hand down my thigh at the dagger still holstered beneath my light tunic. I could totally handle myself. Besides,

I was fairly certain if I screamed for Ryker he'd be here in two seconds flat. Despite what had happened between us. He'd rip the snotty royal apart before he laid a finger on me.

With renewed courage, I opened the door all the way and signaled toward the seating area around the stone hearth in the corner of the spacious chamber. Unlike the deep crimson and garnet that blanketed every nook of Flintguard Fortress, Airslinger Citadel was decorated in pale greens and silver, a sharp contrast to the brick façade.

"We missed you at supper this evening." Eric folded down onto the settee and patted the empty spot beside him.

I rubbed at my temple and winced, hopefully convincingly. "Headache," I murmured.

"It's a shame. Your father didn't join us either."

I nodded slowly. "Something he ate along the journey didn't sit well." Bartus had stopped by earlier informing me of his worsening condition. I just hoped Abba would make her ruling already so we could be out of here by morning. With all the Ryker drama, I hadn't even thought about the vote in the past few hours, but it was still as critical now if not more so. I'd vowed to give Rhyland a chance, and I would stick to my word, but the more time I spent here the more clear it became that things had to change in Draconia. If I became Imperia, I could make that happen.

"Hopefully, you'll both be well by tomorrow."

I smiled. "Yup." So we could get out of here and get back to training for the trials.

The prince eyed me for a long moment, the corner of his lip curling into a sneer.

When the silence became intolerable, I blurted, "So what's up?"

"Such curious human verbiage." He smirked, stretching out his long legs. "I've come to offer a proposition."

"Okay..."

“I will rescind my original vote and give you the necessary number needed to allow you to compete in the Imperia Trials if you vow to break your engagement to Rhyland Ashborne once the trials are over and mate with me instead.”

The rushed words tumbled around my mind as I stared incredulously at the conniving royal. Was he not aware of the prophecy? Or did he just not care to condemn the entire realm?

“I...” I had no idea what to say. On one hand, I could lie, right? Agree to his plan just to get his vote and then refuse to go through with it. A pang from my conscience stilled my tongue. Okay, okay, maybe not. “I’m sorry, Eric, but I’ve made a vow to Rhyland, and I must stay true to my word.” If I was giving up my possible fated mate for this realm, I wouldn’t betray Rhyland just for a chance to rule.

He grunted and slid to the edge of the settee. “I would suggest you take a moment to consider, Saphira. Rhyland is weak, he doesn’t have what it takes to triumph in the trials. I assume that’s why you’re entering, isn’t it? To help him win?”

I shook my head. This guy really thought I was nothing but a frail little girl, trying to claim the throne through a strong mate. “No,” I growled, and that presence stirred deep within my skin. “I deserve to fight for this realm just like the rest of you. What does it matter my sex?”

“Oh, sex always matters, Saphira.” His fingers danced up my arm, and a swirl of disgust ignited in my gut.

“Get your hands off her.” A lethal voice permeated the air. “Before I break every single one of your fingers and force feed them to you.” Ryker materialized in the doorway, his footsteps so soft, I hadn’t even heard him enter.

Eric leapt to his feet, twisting his arm behind his back. “I think you’ve misunderstood, Ryk—”

“Prince Commander Ryker,” he barked and stalked toward us. Molten silver blazed as he glared at the trembling prince beside me.

The Skyborne royal dropped his gaze to the floor. “My apologies, Prince Commander. I only stopped by to wish the

princess a good night.”

“And I think she made it very clear she did not wish to be disturbed this evening.”

“Hm, yes, you’re right.” Eric spun on his heel and darted toward the door. “I shouldn’t have bothered her.”

The Eyren heir moved surprisingly quickly for such a tall man. The door whipped closed before I had a chance to wish him a good night. The sharp crack of the timber echoed across the quiet space, highlighting the now thickening silence between the looming dragon and me.

Ryker pressed his arms across his bare chest, the moonlight highlighting the swirls of silver ink. Low slung linen pants hung at his hips. He must have been getting ready for bed given his disheveled state.

“How much did you hear?” I finally murmured when the lingering silence grew deafening.

“All of it.” His jaw tightened. “I didn’t want to interrupt, but when he touched you...” That tendon fluttered across his jaw, and his hands rolled into fists at his sides. Sharp claws pierced the flesh, and a trickle of blood ran down his hands.

“Ryker!” I cried.

As if he hadn’t even noticed his claws digging into his own skin, he slowly uncurled his fingers and surveyed the damage. I rushed over and took his bloodied palms in my hands.

“You’re bleeding!”

“Clearly.”

“Don’t be an ash-hole.” I dragged him to the bathroom and turned on the faucet. “I don’t need you tracking blood all over Airslinger Citadel. Then surely the Skybornes will hate us even more.”

“I don’t give a fuck, as you would say, what they think of us as long as that idiot prince keeps his hands off you.” The murderous edge to his tone had a mixture of fear and a thrill of excitement battling through my insides. “That male has no honor. How dare he try to convince you to betray my brother.”

He wiped his hands on a towel and trudged back into the sitting area.

Pressing my lips together, I bit my tongue as I trailed him. I didn't want to state the obvious here, but we were kind of doing the same.

"It's not the same," Ryker barked, stealing the thought right out of my mind.

"Hey! Don't eavesdrop."

"I can't help it. You're projecting your thoughts to me." He leapt over the small settee between us, and my breath hitched as he loomed closer. "This thing between us will only strengthen the more time we spend together. You may think it's easy to fight a burgeoning mate bond, but it's nearly impossible. Every single thought I have, every heated touch, every vivid memory of us will bombard your waking and sleeping thoughts. I hope you're ready for the battle." He stalked toward the door that led to his bedroom, and I forced my jittery feet to still despite every muscle urging me to follow.

Shit. I was definitely not ready.

One lusty memory he'd had of us earlier had me climbing him like a mountain, desperate to reach new heights of pleasure. And it was going to get worse? I'd never survive.

Twenty-Nine

SAPHIRA



The thunderous flapping of wings echoed across my subconscious. I rolled over, unease dragging me from a deep sleep. *Wake up! Wake up, Saphira!* That voice, the one that had been with me since childhood shouted in my mind. My lids snapped open, and I jolted straight up in bed.

Darkness filled the unfamiliar chamber as my heart battered at my ribcage. What in all the realms? I glanced around the room as dread filled my gut, that mad pounding of wings still echoing in my head.

Pushing the coverlet back, I crawled to the edge of the massive bed and slid on a pair of soft slippers the Skyborne handmaiden had left me. The hair on the back of my neck prickled, and every nerve in my body stood on end. I walked toward the arched window, white and blue moonlight spilling into the dim chamber guiding my feet. My haggard breaths sounded like thunder in the thick silence. I reached the stone sill and peered into the thick forest that surrounded us, blanketed in darkness.

Shadows moved through the trees.

Squinting, I trailed the silent forms as they moved toward the outer walls of the brick citadel. A gasp hissed past my lips as the figures began to climb the towering ramparts. *Shift.* As I spun toward the door to alert the others, the pounding of powerful wings echoed overhead. I raced back to the window and stared up into the pitch sky. Dragons. At least a dozen.

I darted across my room and banged on the adjoining door to Ryker's bedroom. "Ryker!" I hissed. "Wake up!"

The door swung open seconds later, revealing my bodyguard in all his naked glory with a sword fisted in each hand. Wild locks of dark hair tumbled over his brow. He dragged them back with his forearm, eyeing me. The moonlight glinted across his carved chest, highlighting every dip and valley of his torso. My gaze dipped lower, trailing that sharp V—

"We're under attack," Ryker growled. He darted to the nearest window and peered into the darkness. I moved beside him, the shadowy figures I'd seen only a few seconds ago growing larger in number.

Right. Right. That was why I woke him, not to ogle his obnoxiously perfect body. "That's what I was trying to tell you!"

His eyes glazed over, and I could only imagine he was alerting the guards. I'd never asked him if dracon of different bloodlines could communicate telepathically. A question for another day. I spun toward the nightstand where I'd left my daggers in their scabbards as he stalked back into his chamber. I unsheathed them, the jagged silver blades glinting beneath the dim light, and a swell of power flickered in my core. I gripped the handles and the jade encrusted jewels warmed beneath my touch. It was unlike anything I'd ever felt before.

"What do you think you're doing?" Ryker barked as he stood in the doorway now in fighting leathers and his swords sheathed behind his back.

I slipped on a tunic and leather pants over my sleeping shift then strapped the daggers to my thighs. "Getting ready to fight. What does it look like?"

He shook his head, clucking his teeth. "You will do no such thing, princess."

"The hell I won't. I've been training for this, Ryker."

He closed the distance between us in one long stride, those silver irises murderous. His hand clamped around my neck,

and brilliant orbs locked on mine. “You are the heir to the Highborne throne. You cannot throw yourself out there in the middle of a fight with the rebels. Your life is much too valuable.” He cleared his throat, and a storm of emotions crashed below the surface. “To me.”

I swallowed hard, a tangle of unwanted sensations, his or mine I had no idea, constricting my throat. Or maybe it was his fingers still tight around my neck. “I can’t just sit here and hide. Not like last time. If I expect these royals to take me seriously, I must prove to them I deserve my spot in the trials.”

“Saphira, these are not the trials. This is a mob of angry rebels who have spent their entire lives ground under the heel of wealthy and powerful royals. They’ll stop at nothing to destroy all of y—us.”

Alarm bells rang out across the citadel, the sharp sound halting the air in my lungs.

“You see, the royal guard has already been called to duty.” He slid his hand down my shoulder and closed it around my palm. “Now, my job is to get you to safety.”

“And Rhyland?” I asked.

“I’ve already alerted Darrik and Bartus. They will see to my brother and your father. The Skybornes follow the same protocol as we do at Flintguard Fortress; all royals are to be separated and hidden in assigned bunkers. This is how we’ve survived the attacks over the past decade.”

My head whipped back and forth. “I refuse to hide, Ryker. It’s what cowards do.”

His jaw stiffened, and a growl vibrated his throat. My dracon returned the snarl, the familiar sound echoing in the pits of my stomach.

“If you didn’t have to protect me, what would you be doing right now?”

“Fighting,” he bit out.

I squirmed out of his hold and slapped my hands on my hips. “See...”

“Because I am not only the Ashborne prince, I am the commander of the royal guard.” His hands curled around my cheeks, and he dipped his head so his eyes were level to mine. “And you, you are the Highborne princess, the future queen of Fuoco, the curse breaker of the dreaded prophecy. You. Are. *Everything.*”

“You’re right, and tonight I will be a warrior.” I spun free of his grasp and marched to the door. I fully expected him to stop me, to yell, to tell me how crazy I was.

Only he didn’t.

Ryker followed behind me, jumping ahead as my hand closed on the knob. He jerked the door open and seared me with those piercing irises. “If I die today, it will be on your head, princess. Because I vowed to protect you with my body, and I intend to uphold that promise. I’ll be damned if I allow a single drop of your blood to be spilled tonight.” With that, he reached over his shoulder and handed me one of his swords. “Jab the pointy end into the enemy.”

An incredibly uncalled-for laugh bubbled out.

Ryker moved into the corridor and tugged me behind the wall of his muscled shoulders. “Stay behind me at all times, do you understand?”

I nodded.

“And for goddess’s sake, see if you can coax your stubborn dracon to the surface. Now would be a good time for her to make an appearance.”

You heard him, girl. It’s time to set you free.

Ryker led us down the hallway, an eerie stillness settling into the bones of the ancient citadel. Just outside the thick walls, the sounds of battle had commenced.

A door whipped open just in front of us, and Rhyland appeared, dressed in full royal attire with medals glinting off his crimson jacket. Beside him stood Darrik, his personal guard and shadow.

“Saphira,” he breathed, his shoulders sagging in relief. He jerked me away from Ryker and pulled me into his chest. I held the giant sword behind my back as he held me.

“We don’t have time for this,” Ryker growled. “Both of you must get to safety immediately.”

My head swiveled over my shoulder spearing my guard with a glare. We were lying to Rhyland now? His eyes chased to the floor before he pivoted on his heel. “Fine, say your goodbyes quickly.”

Rhyland’s soft palm brushed my cheek. “You’ll be safe with Ryker, and I promise this will be over soon. Once the new Imperia has been chosen, all of this will finally come to an end. The rebels think us weak, but once the trials are over and we’ve been mated, we will prove them wrong.”

I nodded quickly, swallowing down the lies. Maybe we’d be mated. Maybe I’d compete in the trials. There was so much still left to fate.

He leaned in and brushed his lips against mine. They were soft and gentle, much like the future king. I couldn’t help but compare it to the fire that consumed me at Ryker’s touch. Twice now we’d nearly kissed, the faintest brushing of lips really. And it had been cataclysmic.

How much longer could I deny what we shared? I couldn’t keep my feelings buried forever, or I’d drown in them, caught in the tempestuous storm.

“I’ll see you soon,” Rhyland whispered, tearing my thoughts from his brother. He released me and followed the royal guard waiting patiently at the end of the hallway.

My escort was not quite so patient. As I moved into step beside him, my fingers tight around my sword, irritation radiated from his tall form. To be perfectly honest, I was in no mood for his bullshit. “What?” I growled as we followed the snaking corridor to the ground floor. A chorus of screams and cries vibrated the thick castle walls.

“Nothing,” he hissed.

“You’re angry because of that kiss?” I could feel his jealousy punching at my insides.

“No.” His answer was barely more than a growl.

I crossed my arms over my chest and stomped beside him. Two could play this game. If he wanted to be childish and stubborn, then so could I. How could he not understand how difficult this situation was for me? Gods, it felt like my heart was torn in two.

Maybe that was the real reason I wanted to fight. At least this one thing, I could control.

As we reached the lower levels, a sea of pale blue filled the corridors as Eyren royal guards raced to their positions. In all the chaos, hardly any of them spared me a second glance. We passed the munitions hall, the weapons room, then a large cloak room. Ryker darted inside and returned a moment later with a black coat swinging from his arm and his sword sheathed once again. “Put this on. We can’t risk anyone recognizing you.” He tossed the worn cloak to me. “And make sure you keep the hood up.”

Handing him my sword, I nodded and slid my arms into the oversized sleeves and pulled the cowl over my head, concealing the brilliant blue of my hair.

Ryker’s dark gaze raked over me, lingering for a long moment. He clenched his teeth, the outline of that raging tendon clear against the stubble. “Are you ready?” he gritted out.

My chin dipped to my chest, a storm of anxiety, dread and excitement unleashing in my gut. His hand closed around the door that led to the citadel’s gardens. The rush of battle seethed through the cracks in the thick timber.

“Ryker?” My eyes found his.

“Yes?”

“Why are you letting me do this? Not that I’m complaining obviously, but yeah, why?”

Propping my sword against the wall, he closed the distance between us, jabbing his finger to my chest. My heart beat widely beneath his fingertip with each touch. “Because I know you Saphira Highborne, in this body or any other. I know your heart and soul, you’ve always had the heart of a warrior. There was a reason you were chosen for the sacrifice. Who am I to stand in your way?”

My breath hitched at the intensity of his words, at the fire in his smoldering gaze. With every moment that passed with this man, the truth I was trying so hard to deny became clearer. Because I too, knew his soul, recognized his heart.

We stood in the small niche of the doorway, hidden from view with chaos exploding just beyond the thick timber. Cries, screams, and growls vibrated the door. Either one of us could die out there. And right now, the idea of Ryker’s brilliant silver irises dimming forever without having ever tasted those lips was unbearable.

My arms laced around the back of his neck, shoving him against the wall. His eyes widened, two shimmery orbs of molten silver as my lips crashed into his.

Thirty

RYKER



Saphira's mouth captured mine with the fiery passion of a hundred suns. I could barely get my arms around her waist fast enough to crush her against my chest. Her tongue slid through my clenched teeth, prying them open. It was so unexpected. And goddess, it was heaven.

Every single cell in my body lit up at her touch. I could feel each and every point of contact acutely. Her fingers digging through the hair at the back of my nape, her tongue tangling with mine, her soft lips, her breasts pressed against my chest, hips tilted to meet mine. We fit so perfectly, our pairing must have been chosen by the goddess herself.

Before the sacrifice fifty years ago, we'd been good together, but this? This was supreme perfection. What had changed? She wasn't my fated mate back then, of that I was certain because my fated mate was—

I pushed Saphira away a second before a Skyborne guard turned the corner. Beneath the dark hood she released a ragged breath, her eyes were dilated, chest heaving as she leaned against the wall across from me. The sullen guard darted past us, armed to the teeth. Thankfully, he didn't spare Saphira a passing glance.

He whipped the door open and revealed the chaos in the courtyard outside. It echoed the frenzied pounding of my heart and utter devastation she'd wrecked with that single kiss. Shouts and snarls filtered into the quiet hallway, the scent of blood and scorched flesh making my nostrils burn. Was I insane to let Saphira out there? No, I was insane to think I

could *let* her do anything. She'd always been strong-willed with a mind of her own.

I slumped against the wall once the door closed behind the guard, shutting us off from the commotion of the battle. Glancing up at Saphira, determination streaked across those electric blue eyes. Fear surged through my veins at the thought of losing her again. I had to at least try to dissuade her one more time...

"Saphira," I murmured, trapping her against the wall this time. "You don't have to do this. I could take you to the bunker in the level below and we can wait this out. Spend the next hour doing whatever your heart desires." A wicked grin parted my lips at the thought of all the things I wanted to do to her. All the ways I'd claim her as mine, every single body part I'd capture and make prisoner. *Mine*. My dracon's rough growl vibrated across my skull.

Saphira's eyes latched onto mine, crystalline orbs rounding. She heard my inner beast; I was sure of it.

"Please, Saphira, just one time."

Her lips twisted, perfect cupid's bow flipping upside down. I could feel her indecision through the blossoming bond between us. There was no denying it any longer. A sad smile melted across that kissable mouth. "I can't, Ryker."

"Why not?" I nuzzled her cheek, running my nose across her jaw and nibbled at her earlobe.

"Because once would never be enough." She pressed her palms to my chest and pushed me back. Mother Terrea, she had gotten stronger. Before I could stop her, she grabbed her sword, spun toward the door and darted into the battlefield.

Panic stalled my movements as the bedlam unfolded around her. The entire scene moved in slow motion. A male rebel arced his sword, but Saphira lifted her blade and blocked the attack, an instant before he landed the lethal blow.

The paralyzing fear morphed into rage, and a growl erupted from my depths. "No one touches what's mine and lives." I barreled around Saphira and lunged at the male,

burying my blade into his belly. His wide eyes rolled to the back of his head as I held him tight against me, watching as the life drained out.

The clatter of swords rained out in every direction as an onslaught of rebels flooded the courtyard. The clash of steel reverberated through the air like a thunderous symphony. Each stroke carried with it a cacophony of metallic clangs, a melodic dance of steel against steel, accompanied by primal grunts and fierce war cries. Overhead, at least a dozen dracon circled. I could barely distinguish the difference between the royal dracon and the commoners. If it weren't for the gemstones the royal guard of the Eyre wore, they would've been impossible to differentiate. When had the common dracon grown so large? The trace amounts of royal blood coupled with their lack of gemstones had always kept them so much smaller. I supposed those gems were really making a difference...

I fought my way through the crowd of rebels, slashing and hacking away at the enemy. The swish of blades slicing through the air created a razor-sharp hiss, a poisonous serpent's whisper. All the while I kept one eye on Saphira. A swell of pride filled my chest with each rebel she cut down. The weeks of tireless training had served their purpose.

Saphira had become as lethal as she was beautiful.

I stopped to take her in, the precise swing of her sword, the perfectly balanced footwork. The rebel males had no idea what hunted them. Sweeping through another mass of enemies, we cut across our opponents in perfect synchronicity.

A female rebel approached from behind, catching her off guard. Saphira swung around just as I called out her name. Her hood fell back, and the woman's eyes widened as they landed on the future queen. "You?" she cried out an instant before Saphira's blade ran through her gut.

The woman fell to her knees, gripping the sword protruding from her belly. Saphira sank down beside her, and a swell of pity filled my chest. Hers, not my own.

“It’s really you,” the woman whispered as she collapsed to the blood-soaked earth. “You were supposed to save us...” Her eyes rolled back, and that unseeing gaze lifted to the heavens.

A powerful wave of regret assaulted my insides as Saphira’s weary eyes met mine.

Don’t listen to the ravings of a crazed rebel. I sent the thoughts through our mental connection.

Is she really that wrong, though? My sacrifice was supposed to end the war, not start a new one.

A screech echoed across the sky, massive wings blotting out the full blue moon. Then dragonfire lit up the night sky, a vivid blue tingeing the burning gold. Blue dragonfire typically came from Eyren royal dracon, not commoners.

“Watch out!” a guard shouted from across the yard.

A massive ball of dragonfire hurtled toward the eastern tower looming just over my princess. “Saphira!” I cried out as the fire hit, toppling down the crimson bricks. My feet were moving before I realized it. I leapt on top of her, covering her body with my own as we hit the lawn. Sharp pain lanced into my back, over and over again. I gritted through the assault as the tower crumbled on top of us, my arms burning from the strain of keeping myself suspended over Saphira’s body so not to crush her. “Are you all right, princess?” I managed to whisper before the pain became too much.

“I’m okay.”

The steady sound of her voice diminished the choking fear, but still I fought like hell to hold on. Another hit and another. The massive bricks smashed my lungs, snapping tendons, and breaking bones.

My dracon growled his anger at the onslaught, surging to the surface. If I summoned him, I could crush her beneath me. I couldn’t risk it. Could I?

A sharp pain lanced across my skull and darkness inched into the corners of my vision.

“Ryker?” Saphira’s voice grew more distant. “Ryker, please answer me.”

As the icy darkness took hold, I wrapped my arms tighter around Saphira’s slim waist. I meant it when I said I’d protect her with my entire body and soul. Or I’d die trying.

“Ryker!” Her anguished cry was the last thing I heard before I succumbed to the overwhelming night.



The earth quaked beneath me, the steady rumble prying my heavy lids open.

Ryker! You come back to me, you infuriating, surly beast. Don't you dare leave me. My head throbbed, a blinding pain piercing my skull, but still that insistent voice called me back from oblivion.

Another tremor shook the layer of bricks off my back and dim light pierced through the darkness. Lush green grass enveloped me, a tangle of ivy curling around my body and lifting me from the rubble. I blindly reached for Saphira, memories of the attack surging to the surface.

“Saphira,” I muttered. She had been buried beneath me. “Saphira!” My voice rang out louder this time.

I blinked quickly, trying to shed the dust and dirt from my eyes. My head throbbed.

“I’m right here.” Warm arms encircled me, and my body melted into a familiar form. “You’re okay, you’re really okay.” Saphira buried her face in my chest, warm tears spilling over my tunic.

The courtyard was quiet, the chaos of earlier vanished. I scanned the rubble, oddly aware of how improper it would seem to be caught in this position with the princess. She still wore that cloak, the dark hood covering her features and not a single royal guard turned in our direction. They were too busy tending to the wounded and collecting bodies.

“I’m okay,” I finally whispered, my voice like sandpaper.

Pain lanced across my chest, spearing my lungs as I forced the words out. I was fairly certain I had a broken rib or five. Internal bleeding for certain. And a possible concussion. That entire damned fifty-foot tower had fallen on top of us. So how the hell was I alive right now?

Deep green vines still encircled my body, and I squeezed my eyes shut as foggy memories surged to the surface. Had I imagined it or had this wild vegetation pried me from the depths of the earth?

I glanced down at Saphira, her eyes glossy from the tears. Her shoulders shuddered as a sob wrenched her chest.

“Shh, I’m okay. I don’t know how, but I am.” Pressing her tight against me, I winced as she squeezed. “Are you hurt?”

She shook her head, wiping a smudge of dirt from her forehead. “No, I’m fine. Just a little cut.” She turned her palm, revealing a long gash across the center. “You took the brunt of the entire tower, Ryker. Goddess, you could’ve been killed.”

I fixed my blurry gaze to hers, then to the blood seeping from that wound. “But I wasn’t. Do you know why?”

She sat back, not fully releasing me, but placing some space between us. The vines laced around my torso climbed onto her forearms. They raced up to her shoulders before sinking into her skin, leaving a glimmering golden tattoo of ivy across her flesh. “I think I did it.”

Thirty-One

SAPHIRA



I had no idea how, but as I lay there beneath the rubble with Ryker's motionless body shielding mine something awakened. Something ancient and powerful. The feel of Ryker limp above me had fear clawing out the dormant power. The idea of losing him was completely unbearable.

I kneeled in front of him on the grass, taking in every sharp angle, the scruffy jaw, straight nose, and the perfect curve of his lips. Lips that had devoured mine seconds before the chaos started. Mother T, those moments in the dark niche and earlier in my bedroom had been *everything*. I'd kissed and done much more with plenty of humans in my teenage years, but those sensations were like whispers on the wind compared to this. This was all-consuming, raging emotions that filled every empty corner of my being.

"Your dracon," Ryker murmured. "Your Terren abilities must have emerged. The power to control the earth and its life comes from your inner beast." He pressed one hand to my chest then curled his fingers around my wrist and turned my palm facing me. "It's your blood, Saphira."

"What?"

"Your blood has always had the power to create life. You must have done it without even knowing."

I swallowed hard, trying to process what that meant. "I tried so hard to summon her, but she wouldn't come out. Then you stopped moving, stopped talking and something just snapped inside me."

“Good.” A rueful smile tilted the corners of his lips. “Use that when you try to summon her again next time and when we get home, we’ll try to coax more of that Terren power out.”

“Oh, hell no, you better not try to die on me again.” I playfully punched his chest, and a sharp hiss escaped his clenched teeth. “Shit, sorry!”

He shook his head, gritting his molars. “It’s okay, I just need to rest.” He rubbed the ruby ring on his finger and drew in a deep breath. “The gemstones will quicken my healing. I’m sure father brought a stash. He never travels anywhere without them.”

“Oh gods, our fathers and Rhyland!” I’d been so torn up about Ryker I hadn’t even thought about anyone else, not even my betrothed.

Ryker’s gaze went blank and a moment later the icy silver refocused. “They’re all fine. Given the multitudes of royals here, they’d been forced to double up. Rhyland is with your father and mine got stuck with King Stormborne.” A smirk flitted across his lips. “I’m sure it was a long siege for both of them.”

“Did you tell Rhyland where we were?”

He shook his head and something like guilt flashed across those expressive irises. Goddess, we were both going to hell or whatever it’s called in this realm. “He’d kill me if he knew I let you out here.” He pushed himself to his feet, and a muffled groan rumbled his chest.

“Let me help you.” I moved to his side and wrapped my arm around his waist. Slowly, I helped him limp toward the entrance of the citadel. “How are you going to hide this from him?”

“Guess I’m not. But there’s no need to tell him you were with me.”

A grisly array of bodies littered the ground as we wound our way between the bustling royal guards. I’d been so preoccupied with Ryker I’d missed the grand finale of the battle. Somehow the Eyren forces had been able to overtake

the rebels. The fight had been won in the air by the massive dragon. Which was exactly why it was so important for the royals to start reproducing dragon heirs.

And that would only happen if I broke the curse by mating with Rhyland.

I glanced at Ryker from the corner of my eye, the idea of being with anyone else but him squeezing the air from my lungs. Could I really give up the man I was falling for to save my people?

The old Saphira must have been a hell of a lot more selfless than I was because I didn't think I could.



“Mother Terrea, what happened to you, Ryker?” Rhyland ate up the distance to his brother in two long strides as we entered the grand hall of the citadel. My eyes lifted to the ornate tapestries hung from the sky-high brick walls, depicting great Eyren kings in battle. Anything rather than meet my betrothed's worried gaze. After a quick visit to our rooms to freshen up, the Skyborne king had sent word to convene in the massive chamber. My father, Bartus and King Kiran had already arrived.

Ryker's cuts and bruises mottled his skin, while I'd shed the dirty, torn up cloak and looked good as new. Somehow, I'd managed to emerge from the battle unscathed with the exception of the small cut across my palm, thanks to my overprotective bodyguard.

In all the chaos, I still hadn't been able to focus on the emergence of my new powers. I'd literally birthed vines from deep within the earth with my blood, and they'd saved Ryker.

Mind. Blown.

Ryker cleared his throat, his gaze chasing to the floor. Shame burned my cheeks as he started to spout out the lie we'd fabricated on the walk over. “I was escorting the princess to the bunker on the first level when I caught sight of the battle raging outside.”

“You know Ryker,” I added. “He couldn’t help but jump in.”

Rhyland’s dark brows furrowed as his eyes bounced back and forth between us.

“After he got me to safety, of course.”

King Kiran marched closer fixing his youngest son with a narrowed glare. “It was foolish to risk your life like that, Ryker.”

“I’m the commander of the royal guard, Father. It’s my duty.”

“In Fuoco. You are the commander of the Fuocan royal guard. You shouldn’t have meddled in a battle that had nothing to do with you.”

A booming scoff resonated across the grand hall as King Ezekiel Skyborne trudged in with his wife beside him. “You’re a fool if you believe that, Kiran. This attack was clearly orchestrated on all of us. The rebels must have discovered we’d all be here and took the opportunity to attempt to take us all out at once.”

“Well, they failed.” King Stormborne marched in behind the royals of Eyre with his mate and children in tow. “And we will continue to fight them until they realize all of this is futile.”

“Or they don’t,” Ryker blurted. “They’re tired of life under royal heels. Wouldn’t it be better if we just heard them out? Perhaps we could come to some sort of agreement and stop this bloodshed.”

A sinister chuckle surged from the bowels of the Skyborne king. “Once the Imperia has been chosen, all of this will be over. You’ll see.”

“Or better yet,” King Kiran interjected, “once the curse has been broken and the royals are able to bear dracon heirs, we will crush the rebellion at its roots.” His beady eyes darted to mine, then to his eldest son.

A wave of anger rushed over me, and the broody dracon to my side was the culprit. “I don’t believe that is the only way to end this, Father.”

Kiran rolled his eyes and released a frustrated grunt. “What say you, Sebastian?” He turned to father who was staring out the window. He didn’t even flinch. “King Highborne?” Kiran repeated.

Bartus moved to father’s side so quickly he soared like a wraith. “The king agrees the rebellion must be squashed by any means possible. If you’d all voted on Saphira’s behalf, we wouldn’t have been stuck here in the first place. Every day we waste squabbling over the princess’s right to enter the trials, only delays the inevitable.”

Way to go, Bartus. I wasn’t sure about Tatá’s righthand man at first, but he’d made his loyalty to my father clear with every passing day.

Prince Eric and the youngest prince, Ezra raced into the room. The elder Eyren royal scanned the massive chamber before pivoting toward his parents. “No one has seen Elias.”

King Ezekiel’s eyes grew impossibly wide, and the queen let out a whimper. “What do you mean?” he growled. Both Skyborne royals’ gazes blurred over. A moment later, their eyes refocused and dread replaced the blank stares.

“I searched each of the bunkers myself, and he’s missing,” Prince Eric continued. “I’d hoped he was here already. Perhaps had fallen asleep or—” His eyes flitted across the room for the second time. “I’ve informed the royal guards, and they’re scouring the citadel and outer grounds.” Despite the smarmy prince’s late-night visit and indecent proposal, a twinge of sadness filled my chest. I hadn’t spent more than a few minutes with the younger prince, but after feeling the loss of my own sister, I hurt for him.

Queen Ethel’s eyes brimmed with tears. “I can’t feel him.”

I still wasn’t very clear on this mental link dracon shared. Could a parent feel the loss of their child? The thought

constricted my heart. Poor Tatá. Had he been forced to suffer the pain of losing both my mother and Serenity?

I snuck a peek at father from the corner of my eye. He still stood by the window, his face an expressionless mask. He'd retreated to that hidden place in his mind where my mom and Serenity still lived.

"We should all go search," I offered.

The queen shook her head, her shoulders rolling and chest caving in. "It's too late. He's gone." A sob rang out through the silent chamber, the depth of emotion so powerful I felt it deep within my core.

"We should go." Bartus moved to my side with father in tow. "Let's allow the family to grieve in private."

King Kiran, Rhyland, and Ryker followed us out of the chamber with the Stormbornes close behind. Once we reached the lengthy hallway, Bartus turned and addressed the royals. "There's no point in all of us remaining here. I say we return to our respective homes until we receive word from Abba about the trials."

The three kings all nodded their agreement, and we dispersed to our temporary chambers. After our fathers returned to their rooms, I walked in silence between Rhyland and Ryker, my chest heavy. One royal had been lost and countless rebels killed. So many lives stolen for nothing.

I turned to Rhyland, sadness weighing down my steps. "What exactly is the core cause of this rebellion?" Maybe someone had mentioned it earlier, but I'd never really understood the full story with the jumble of information I'd had to process in my first weeks in Draconia.

"To my knowledge, there hasn't been a particular inciting incident. It just happened one day."

Ryker scoffed. "Are you really that blind, brother? You haven't seen this rebellion smoldering for ages?"

"No, of course not, or we would have done something to halt it."

A rueful laugh shook Ryker's broad shoulders. "This started decades ago, Saphira, long before the vampire Valandril and the resulting sacrifice. A group of people can only live suppressed for so long before something breaks. The majority of the residents of Draconia have no power, no money, no influence. No gemstones. Without the gems, they lack the power to access their dracon spirit. They live only to serve the royals. When we could all summon our dracon, they had no option but to obey us, but now with fewer being born with the power to do so, the tides are shifting."

"So why can't we change things?"

Rhyland laughed, a cocky, arrogant sound that scraped at my insides. "It isn't possible, Saphira. The hierarchy of our society provides structure. Without it, there would be chaos. Just like what we saw tonight."

I spun to Ryker. "Do you believe that too?"

He heaved out a breath, lips pressed together. "I'm not sure anymore, honestly."

My thoughts whirled as we continued walking in silence. Was I crazy because I'd spent the last twenty-one years living in the human world? It didn't have to be this way. The peasants didn't have to be squashed by the wealthy royals. We'd figured out a way to make it kind of work in the human world, why couldn't it here?

Thirty-Two

SAPHIRA



In the wake of the attack, Rhyland had insisted on escorting us back to Terre which had my bodyguard bristling the entire flight home. Somehow, he'd managed to convince my future fiancé that it would be completely against royal mating protocol for me to ride his dragon, so I was forced to endure a tense flight in silence with Ryker.

His irritation fluttering through our bond, coupled with the intense heat of his dragon soaking between my thighs had made for *the* longest trip ever. I nearly cried from happiness when the soaring midnight turrets of Mountainhelm Castle appeared.

Now back in my own room and freshly bathed and perfumed, I could finally breathe again. Even without my memories, my chamber felt like an oasis of luxury and serenity amid the rugged, fiery landscape. I couldn't wait to dive into my bed this evening, a grand, dragon-carved four-poster bed, draped with rich, blue-hued silks and adorned with luxurious textiles. A sharp distinction from life at Flintguard Fortress was the absence of handmaidens waiting on me hand and foot. Which I loved. Not that Lumia and Arissa weren't great, but I always felt weird having them serve me. I was perfectly capable of bathing and dressing myself. I'd been doing it for twenty-one years.

I'd asked Tatá when I first arrived why we didn't have servants littering the halls of the castle like the other royals, and his surprisingly lucid reply had been simple. *Royals need to learn how to wipe their own asses too.* It had left me

cackling long after he walked away. Now his words bounced around my mind as I slipped into a simple, silk gown.

Drawing in a breath, I moved toward the towering windows that provided a breathtaking view of the volcanic peaks Ryker and I trained beside. The ominous crags offered a stark contrast to the room's serene interior.

King Kiran and Rhyland would spend the night with plans to return to Fuoco in the morning. Ryker insisted we kept up with my training until we heard the official word from Abba. At least the physical toll of training would keep my mind off other, completely inappropriate things. Like Ryker's lips ghosting over mine, his hands branding my flesh, his erection streaking across my center...

"Ahhh!" I shouted into the silence, tugging at the long curls cascading over my shoulders. *Stop it!*

That familiar essence nudged at my insides, and I could practically feel her purring at the heated memories. *Make up your damned mine, girl. Is he our dracuori or not?*

A deep chuckle vibrated through my entire body, and I wanted to shrink into a hole and die. *Damn it, Ryker, get out of my head!*

I can't help it when you call me.

I did not call you. I stomped in a frustrated circle around my bed.

Maybe it was your dracon then. I could practically see the cocky twist of his lips as his thoughts caressed my mind.

Glad to hear you're in a better mood, I bit back. He barely spoke to me the entire flight back.

He huffed out a breath, ignoring my comment. *Are you ready to go down for dinner? I can come by your room and escort you.*

The idea of his touch, his arm entwined through mine as we traversed the dark, winding corridors sent a thrill racing down my spine. *Sure—*

A quick knock at my door sent my thoughts scrambling. That was quick. Reaching for the antique knob, I whipped the door open and a tangle of disappointment and annoyance with myself battled it out. Rhyland stood in the doorway, a shy smile on his handsome face. He held out his arm as he lingered awkwardly. “I was hoping I could escort you to the banquet hall.”

I plastered on a smile and weaved my arm through his. “Of course, thank you.” I followed him out, and he tucked me into his side. The faint sound of footfalls echoed behind us a moment later, but I refused to turn around. I could already feel Ryker’s heated glare boring into the back of my neck, his jealousy bloating my chest.

I swallowed it down and did my best to focus on Rhyland’s words. He was catching me up on the latest news from Flintguard Fortress and his plans for when he became king.

Rhyland paused in the middle of the hallway and lifted his gaze over my head. I tensed. Was Ryker glaring at him? He took my hands and squeezed, his eyes fixing to mine. “There’s something I’ve been wanting to do since the moment you returned.” His lips captured mine, his tongue snaking between my teeth before I could gather my wits. Mother T, this male could kiss. Was it just a dracon thing? Or a prince thing? His fingers brushed the side of my face, tilting my head to deepen the kiss.

I almost got lost in the feel of his lips against mine. Until a powerful growl vibrated across my insides. I jumped back and hit the sleek obsidian walls.

“I’m sorry,” Rhyland murmured, licking his lips. “I shouldn’t have been so bold.”

“No,” I muttered, embarrassingly breathless. “It’s okay.”

“I just can’t wait to make you mine.”

Another growl surged to the surface, this one decidedly more high-pitched. *Is that you, girl?*

“Rhyland...” I whispered.

He raised his hands, a rueful grin curling his lips. “I know, I know. We’ll wait for after the Imperia Trials to decide anything concrete.”

I forced my raging heart to slow and rubbed the center of my chest to loosen the rage bleeding in through Ryker’s side. Where was he anyway? I glanced down the hallway but couldn’t make out my shadow. “So the Imperia Trials...” I blurted. He never mentioned them at all, and I was starting to wonder why.

“What about them?” He cocked his head and gave me a warm smile.

“Are you nervous? Excited?” A tangle of both fought it out in my gut. A part of me wanted more than anything to have the chance to compete, but the other was slightly terrified.

“It’s really a formality, Saphira.” The line between his brows furrowed.

“What do you mean?”

His lips twisted. “Didn’t Father tell you? Everyone knows I’ll be chosen winner; the events are really nothing but an antiquated convention.”

“What?” I squealed. Ryker had painted the event as a brutal version of *Survivor* with dragons. “Then why am I wasting my time training so hard?”

“The past events *have* been savage displays of power, but with the rebellion in full swing, the kings have agreed this year should be different. The people need to see a strong ruler, and the more the royals fight amongst themselves the worse it becomes for all of us.”

Shit. So either way I was doomed? “That’s not fair,” I blurted.

He stopped and turned to me, his warm golden eyes searching. “Please, Saphira, you are meant to be my mate, and together we’ll bring peace to the kingdom. As King of Fuoco and Imperia of Draconia and with you as my queen by my side, we can finally have that.”

“So you don’t really want me to compete at all?”

“I want you to do what makes you happy, Saphira.” He cupped my cheek, running his thumb over my skin. “But the truth is, it’ll all be for show, and the last thing I want is for you to get hurt.”

I couldn’t wrap my head around what he was saying. The trials were rigged? “You’re telling me the other royals are going to let you win?”

He shrugged. “That’s the plan.”

I wondered if he knew about Prince Eric’s proposition. Was that part of the plan too? I kept my mouth shut for now, but I searched the mystical bond between Ryker and me. *Did you hear that?*

Nothing.

I waited a long minute and tried again, but my broody bodyguard had shut me out. Had he felt the kiss? He must have. I’d felt the swell of lusty sensations for a moment. They were nothing like what Ryker elicited, but it was still something. I couldn’t figure it out. If dracuori mated for life, why was mine so damned confused?



Dinner sitting between Ryker and Rhyland was excruciating. Ryker’s jealousy flowed from every pore in his being, and now that Rhyland and I had kissed, my betrothed wouldn’t stop touching me. Nothing inappropriate, just little touches to my hand, my arm, my cheek. Each one had uncontrollable fury raging through the savage dracon beside me. I thanked the goddess we were just waiting on dessert and then the torturous evening would be over.

King Kiran dipped his head at one of the serving boys. “Bring the berrium liqueur from the pantry, boy.”

Bartus quirked a brow at Rhyland’s father. The king certainly was arrogant enough to boss around our staff but to request something so specific?

“It was a parting gift from the Stormborne king.” He rushed the boy along with a wave of his hand. “I gave it to one of the kitchen maids earlier to keep on ice.”

The young boy, Kerrith, I thought his name was, reappeared a few seconds later with the icy, frosted bottle. “Here you are, Your Highness.” He dipped his head and began to pour.

Once his goblet was filled, he offered it to the rest of us.

“None for the king or me.” Bartus placed a hand over the ornate glasses. Father’s lips curled into a half-smile, the warmth not quite meeting his eyes. Goddess, I wished I could talk to him in my head like I could with Ryker.

“I’ll have a taste.” Rhyland nudged his glass toward the boy, who filled it only a few inches. The fragrant, deep lavender liqueur filled my nostrils. It smelled like berries and cotton candy.

“Saphira?” My betrothed offered me a taste.

“Sure, it smells delicious.” And if I was being honest, a little alcohol might help with the overwhelming tension. I took a quick sip and found Rhyland’s eyes searing into me from over the rim.

“None for me, thanks, brother,” Ryker barked.

Ignoring him, Rhyland leaned in and whispered, “You look radiant tonight, Saphira. Being near you and not being able to kiss you again is pure torture.”

Ryker stiffened beside me before another growl tore from his depths. The snarl was so full of rage my entire body trembled. I pivoted toward him, my eyes wide. *Control yourself.*

His hand clamped around my thigh under the table. I jumped, and my knee hit the wood, sending my goblet wobbling across the fine linen and knocking my fork to the floor.

Ryker!

“Please, allow me to get that, princess.” Ryker shot me a wicked glare and folded his gigantic form under the table, while somehow managing to keep his hand locked on my leg.

Rhyland sat back, swirling the lavender liqueur in his glass as his father blathered on about the state of the Fuocan commoners.

A warm hand skated up my other thigh, pushing my dress up and prying my legs apart. *Ryker!* I squealed through our mental link. Again, no response. The ash-hole was totally ignoring me.

His fingers danced up my inner thigh, dangerously close to my apex. I squirmed as heat raced to my core.

What are you doing? I tried again.

Silver flames lit up along the corner of my eye, and a cry tore out as I pointed frantically at the fire licking up the tapestry along the wall. Bartus, Kiran and Rhyland leapt up from their seats as the emissary shouted for the servants. “Someone bring a pale of water!”

I was frozen in place as a finger snagged the thin waistband of my panties, and a gasp stole the air from my lungs. The rip of fabric rang out over the haggard rhythm of my breaths. And there went my thong. I scanned the dining room in a panic to see if anyone else had noticed, but the three males were focused on the fire, oblivious to the head moving between my legs.

Did you set that fire? Even in my head my voice came out ragged.

Of course not, princess.

Liar. Scruffy cheeks tickled my inner thighs, and a warm tongue traced across my center. I nearly leapt out of my skin. Ryker’s hands tightened around my knees keeping me in place. Oh, gods. He was not.

Mmm, princess, you taste even better than I remembered. His rough voice raked through my insides; those words nearly more powerful than the tongue lavishing me.

A faint groan slid past my lips, and I shoved my napkin into my mouth. A mixture of excitement and fear throttled my lungs as he licked and sucked, devouring me. He was like a starved man who'd found a Vegas buffet. My head fell back, a wave of pleasure crashing with each skillful move. He circled the taut bundle of nerves and in mere seconds, I ached for release.

This sort of reaction was not normal.

Ryker's hand freed my leg, and I let out a breath, mistakenly thinking he'd given up this insanity. Instead, a finger plunged deep inside me. I bit down on the napkin to keep from screaming his name. *Ryker, stop. I can't...*

Get the napkin ready, princess, because you're about to come.

Good goddess, how did he know? I was hurtling toward the edge, so close. Each sweep of his tongue pushed me harder, the fiery sensations licking up through my veins. And the thrill of it all, the thrill of getting caught only amplified the raging lust. It was all happening so fast. I could feel myself tightening around his finger, my hips moving, desperate for the friction. I was so damned close. I couldn't believe I was doing this. At the dinner table. Only a few feet away from my fiancé.

"Ryker, you still haven't found that fork?" Rhyland's question from across the room froze the boiling blood in my veins. "We could use a hand putting out the fire..."

"Almost got it," the wicked dracon purred against my center and plunged a second finger inside me.

The incredible fullness, coupled with the delicious vibrations of his tongue shoved me off the precipice. A tornado of pleasure consumed me, and I bit down on my tongue, muffling my moans with the napkin as fiery heat raged in my core.

He kept lapping me up, thrusting and sucking as I rode the earthshattering waves into oblivion. When I found the strength to open my eyes, I had no idea when I'd closed them, Ryker

stood beside his brother, the picture of innocence. The fire had been put out and the three males returned to their places at the table.

Rhyland conversed with his father, while Tatá's gaze grew distant as if only his body occupied the chair while his mind had traveled elsewhere. I snuck a peek at Ryker from the corner of my eye and horror seized my veins. My arousal glistened on his chin.

I grabbed my napkin and swept it across that stupid grin. *Don't you ever do that again,* I snarled through our connection.

Why not? You seemed to have enjoyed it.

Ryker! You know very well why not. Mother, this male would be the death of me. How could I even pretend to give Rhyland a chance after that.

I don't care. And I'm not done with you yet. His deep growl echoed through my mind.

We can't keep doing this.

I felt it the instant he shut me off. The flow of emotions that surged between us suddenly stopped. And a gaping hole opened up where those overpowering sensations once inhabited.

Thirty-Three

SAPHIRA



“Saphira...” Rhyland’s voice drew me from the chaos of my mind, and I finally turned to face him. Judging by the confused expression, I’d guess he’d been calling my name for a while before I responded.

“Hmm? Sorry,” I murmured lamely.

“Would you like to accompany me on a walk of the grounds this evening?” His warm hazel eyes were so full of hope I didn’t have it in me to deny him.

“Sure.”

“No, that doesn’t work for me,” Ryker snarled.

Rhyland’s head snapped back as he regarded his younger brother. “What does that mean?”

Ryker inhaled a breath, and the tense set of his shoulders softened. “If you wish to take the princess on a romantic stroll, per the protocols, I must be present. And to be perfectly honest, I’m tired, brother. I’d like to get to *bed*.”

The rough tone of that last word sent goosebumps cascading across my arms.

“Understandable,” Rhyland muttered. “Perhaps Bartus can accompany us?” He turned toward my father’s faithful friend.

Already the royal emissary was shaking his head, and I understood exactly why. Father’s gaze grew more distant by the second.

“I’m sorry, Rhyland, I completely forgot,” I interjected, “but I promised father I’d escort him to his chambers.” I sprang up and darted around the table. “Maybe in the morning before you leave?”

Ryker traced my movements, his heated gaze burning into the back of my head, but he remained seated, thank the goddess.

“Of course, whatever you prefer, Saphira.”

I helped Tatá to his feet and weaved my arm through his. Bartus appeared on his other side before he took his first step.

“There’s my little princess.” Father’s glossy eyes skimmed over me, and a smile lit up his face. “My sweet Serenity.”

I cleared my throat obnoxiously loudly, hoping no one else had heard his slip. Luckily, the kitchen staff appeared with a tray of desserts and provided the perfect distraction.

“No dessert, Princess Saphira?” King Kiran eyed me.

“Oh no, I just couldn’t. I’m stuffed.”

“As am I.” Ryker stood and moved into step beside me. “I’ll see to it that the princess gets to her chamber safely after escorting the king.”

“Do you really think that’s necessary, son?” The Fuocan king’s dark gaze made my stomach churn.

He couldn’t possibly know about us, could he? Not that we’d been discrete or anything. F.M.L.

“I take the responsibility of the future queen’s safety with the utmost seriousness, Father.”

Kiran muttered something unintelligible between his clenched teeth before he huffed out, “Fine.”

I dipped my head at the remaining royals and offered a quick goodnight, then shuffled father out of the banquet hall.

“It seems to be worsening,” Bartus whispered as soon as the doors closed behind us.

I canted my head over my shoulder and found Ryker a few steps behind. There was no point in keeping it from him. He'd already heard the damning evidence. Father wasn't stable, and no one knew how long he could keep the throne.

"I know," I mumbled. "Isn't there anything we could do? Another potion from the mages?"

He shook his head, lips twisting. "I'm sorry, Saphira, I've tried everything in the past year. The potion's effects are only temporary, and it's the best we can do for now."

A swell of sadness filled my chest, rounding my shoulders. I'd only just gotten my father back, how could I lose him again? Tatá walked between us, a happy smile on his face, completely oblivious to our conversation.

"What will happen to him, Bartus?"

He blew out a breath, shaking his head. "I'm afraid I don't know, princess. So few dracuori survive their mate's death. I'm fairly certain he only held on this long for you. I can only imagine his mental state will continue to deteriorate until only his body remains with us."

Tears burned my eyes, and I blinked quickly to keep them from spilling over. It just wasn't fair.

I'm so sorry, Saphira. Ryker's gentle voice caressed my aching heart. I hated that he had that sort of power over me, the ability to brighten my darkest thoughts.

Tatá's eyes darted to mine, and a hint of clarity seeped through the glossy stare. "Dracuori," he mumbled and pointed to his temple.

Oh, my goddess, had he heard Ryker in my head somehow? "What?" I blurted.

His bright eyes dimmed, and the blank expression returned.

I stopped in the middle of the hallway and shook his shoulders. "Tatá, what did you just say?"

That docile smile curled his lips again, and he cupped my cheek. "My sweet Serenity. You're such a good girl. You and

Saphira are everything to me, along with your mother, of course.” A rueful smile tumbled out, and gods, I hurt for him.

My heart plummeted, a mix of grief and anger twisting around in my chest. It was all so unfair. I’d given up my life to save this realm, then I’d gone through hell in the human world, and this was how I was repaid by the goddess? It was a load of bullshit.

My feet were moving before I’d realized I’d taken a step. I needed air. I needed to get the hell out of here.

“Saphira!” Bartus called out. “Where are you going?”

“I must go. I’m sorry.”

I barely made out Ryker’s whispered words pacifying the old emissary, but his footsteps resonated behind me loud and clear. Let him follow me all he wanted it didn’t mean I had to speak to the frustrating dracon.

I quickened my pace, eating up the never-ending dark corridors with long strides. That familiar presence stirred, awakening a well of power in my core. It was building, expanding with each stride. By the time I reached the door to the inner courtyard, my chest was so tight, I was certain my lungs would explode right out of my ribcage.

I whipped the door open and heaved in a breath of sultry night air, then followed the footpath across the lush lawn. For the first time since my return to Mountainhelm Castle, I really took in the beauty of the verdant yard. Deep green ivy climbed along the slick obsidian walls, and an entire colorful garden of hydrangea, orchids, roses, along with dozens of exotic flowers I didn’t recognize bloomed in the center. How was it possible amid the parched, foreboding landscape of towering crags and molten volcanoes?

“It’s because of you, Saphira.” Ryker’s voice echoed across the stillness.

That bastard was invading my thoughts again.

I spun around and nearly brushed his nose. Good goddess, when had he gotten so close? My breath mingled with his, our

mouths a mere heartbeat away. “What do you mean?” I mumbled.

“Your Terren powers, the reason you were able to save me from dying beneath the rubble.”

I stared at my arms, at the mystical golden ink imprinted across my skin. “So I bled out to produce all these plants?”

He chuckled, the warm sound doing more to comfort me than should be possible. “You can control the elements of the earth without shedding your blood, princess. It’s just a nice side effect.”

“Um, that was kind of an important fact to share, Ryker.”

He ran his hand down my shoulder, inciting goosebumps with his light touch. “I’m sorry. With everything that happened after the attack, I haven’t exactly been thinking straight.”

“Yeah, like with that incredibly risky move under the table.”

A wicked grin curled the corners of his lips, and dammit, as much as I wanted to be angry, all the fury melted away at the beautiful sight. “It’s my dracon, Saphira. I have little control over the beast when it comes to claiming his mate.”

“Why is he so sure I am his?”

“He can feel it in his soul.” His arms snaked around my waist, drawing me closer. “And, I can feel the truth in every cell of my being.”

Then why couldn’t I? I felt something, there was no doubt about that, but I lacked the certainty that seared across those molten silver irises.

He nuzzled my ear and another wave of goosebumps dominoed down my arms. “There’s one way to tell for certain,” he whispered.

“Oh, yeah, what’s that?” Goddess, that came out embarrassingly breathy.

“Allow me to make love to you.”

My breath hitched, the L word sucking all the air from my lungs. Why couldn't he just have said let's have sex or screw or fuck? Damn it, now my whole body was short circuiting. Because the embarrassing truth was that in my twenty-one years on earth, I didn't think I'd ever been in love. And a part of me, the part I kept buried far beneath the surface, now understood why.

How could I love another when my heart had already been claimed by this man in another life?

Goddess, I'd fought so hard to deny this, and the truth was I didn't want to anymore. I wanted him to make love to me, to experience what that felt like with a man I felt inexplicably connected to.

"I—" My stomach roiled, and acid flooded my gut. I buckled over, a scream ripping through my clenched teeth.

"Saphira!" Ryker's firm grip clutching my shoulders grounded me from the nausea clawing its way up my throat. "What's wrong?"

"I don't know!" I cried.

The nausea morphed into waves of fire, and I folded over, spewing the contents of my stomach all over the verdant lawn. The black bile dripped down my chin and hands, and Ryker hissed a curse, eyes bugging out of his head.

I followed his gaze to the grass coated in the dark sludge and watched horrified as the green blades shriveled and died.

"Poison," he growled.

Thirty-Four

SAPHIRA



“Poison? But how?” I rasped out as another round of pain cramped my gut.

“The wine...” Ryker scooped me into his arms before I could warn him of another wave of nausea. The noxious black substance dribbled from my mouth all over his boots. Gods, if I didn’t feel so shitty, I would’ve been so embarrassed.

“I’m sorry,” I blubbered. My head felt like it weighed a ton, keeping my eyes open such a freaking struggle.

“Saphira, you have nothing to apologize for. Just stay with me.” He clapped his palm to my cheek. “You’ve been poisoned by the midnight orchidae. It’s the only thing that would do *that* to your stomach.” He paused, a flash of fear swirling through the silver abyss. “It’s lethal to dracon.”

Oh goddess, I was going to throw up again. I just got my life back; I couldn’t die now.

He dropped down to the grass, holding me tight against his chest. “There’s only one antidote, the daylight orchidae. It’s very rare and only grows on the isles of Aquos.”

My hazy thoughts whirled, and I struggled to hold onto consciousness. “You think the Stormborne king tried to poison me on purpose?”

“I don’t know.” His silver irises fixed to mine, the storm of emotions brewing across the mesmerizing hue stealing the remaining air from my struggling lungs. “But I promise you, I will find out, and I will tear his spine out of his throat and stomp all over his bloodied remains.”

A chill skittered up my spine from the intensity of his words and the echo of his rage surging through our mental link.

“I could fly there, but it will take too long.” He sucked his lower lip between his teeth and chomped down on the soft pillow. His gaze dropped to the mess of black slime coating the grass, and a vein popped in his head. I could almost feel his mind churning. “But you, you can grow the flower from this.” He pointed at the earth. “Both midnight and daylight orchidae stem from the same plant. You can use the trace amounts of the root contained in the poison to amplify the remains.”

I stared at the black goo soaking the soil. “You mean from my vomit?”

He nodded, his eyes filled with a hope I couldn’t fathom. “Your Terren blood will grow the antidote for us.”

“Are you fucking kidding me right now?” I could barely keep my eyes open. How was I supposed to summon non-existent powers?

“You can do it. I know you can, Saphira. I feel your dracon; she’s so close to the surface. You summoned your powers before to save me, and now you must do it to save yourself.”

I wanted to believe him. The hope glistening in his eyes was crushing. How could he have so much faith in me? I inhaled a deep breath and pushed past the burning in my lungs. The poison was spreading, its dark tendrils extending from my stomach and coiling around my organs, spreading its toxins. I had to try. “Okay,” I mumbled. Swallowing down the pain, I focused on the damned beast who refused to surface. *Come on, girl, this is it. Now or never.*

An ember of power ignited in my core, and that familiar presence roared to life. I grasped onto it, clawing at the essence of my soul. Energy flooded my veins, battling with the poison ravaging my organs.

I let out a scream as the power blossomed and filled my torn-up insides. Oh gods, it felt like thousands of blades piercing the lining of my stomach, then stretching out further, jabbing at every corner of my existence.

“Now, Saphira!” Ryker unsheathed the dagger at his waist and pressed the tip to my palm. He waited, eyes intent on mine, until I nodded a reluctant okay. He dragged the blade across my flesh until blood pooled along the seam.

I fisted my hand over the murky remains of the poison, and drops of crimson trickled into the dark vomit.

“Now focus on your powers, focus on Mother Terrea and the gifts of the earth.”

“How do I do that?” I rasped out.

“Do whatever you did when you summoned your powers to save me.”

Too bad I had no idea how I did that. How would I explain the thought of losing him had been too much to bear? That somehow, my unenthusiastic dracon had awoken only to ensure his survival. But what about my own?

Come on, girl. Help me out here.

Focusing on the swell of emotions coursing between this strange mental link we shared, I tried to imagine my life without Ryker. Not because he was dead, but because I was. The pain that ricocheted through our bodies surged like a tidal wave threatening to suck me under. If I died, he wouldn't survive. I felt the truth deep within the marrow of my bones.

Blood continued to drip from my clenched fist, swirling in the black mess. *Grow, damn it.* A shimmering glint caught my eye, brightening the deep crimson until it sparkled. It curled around the dark puddle like a snake, writhing and weaving through the liquid. Tiny fragments floated to the surface and the black bits mingled and combined until a thin root formed within the sludge.

“It's working,” Ryker mumbled, his gaze intent on my glittery blood. It wrapped around the growing root, coating it

in a shimmering lilac vapor and the sickly hue transformed to a vibrant green.

Waves of power crashed over me, each one strangely strengthening yet debilitating at the same time. I wouldn't be able to hold on much longer. My lids drooped again, and my entire body began to falter. My hand fell to my chest, and a few remaining droplets of blood stained my gown.

The glowing ivy vines mystically tattooed to my skin wriggled across my arms, skittered down my hands and slid right off my fingertips. They tangled with the root growing from the dark pool of vomit, until the small bud blossomed. The crushing weight in my chest began to dissipate, but my head still felt so heavy, my eyelids impossible to keep open for a second longer.

“Saphira, hold on.” A pair of fiery orbs filled my vision. “Don't give up, you've almost got it.”

I lifted my head from his shoulder, and a flash of color caught my eye. The bright ochre petals springing forth from the murky earth were the last things I saw before the overwhelming darkness pulled me under.



My head jostled against a firm pillow, and I forced my heavy lids to open a crack. The murky walls of the castle corridors blurred as Ryker sprinted with me in his arms, my head bouncing against his chest, toward the lower-most levels. My head lolled back, vision cutting in and out with each step.

“Saphira, you must hold on. Do you hear me? I will not lose you again.” That beautiful ochre blossom was clutched in his fist.

I tried to nod, but I wasn't sure if my chin dipped, or it was just my head spinning.

“I'm taking you to the healer. You're going to be fine, just stay with me.”

A chill iced my veins, despite the warm body draped around me. I snuggled deeper into Ryker's chest in a vain

effort to stave off the liquid frost dousing my bloodstream. Darkness inched into the corners of my vision again, and this time I allowed myself to drift into peaceful oblivion.

Thirty-Five

RYKER



The old woman flitted around the room, her long silver hair plaited in a thick braid. She assured me Saphira would survive, but her word meant nothing to me. Not when the love of my life lay motionless on the examination table.

“I will return shortly. I must check on the king.”

I nodded and the healer slipped out the door. When I’d arrived at the woman’s chamber, I’d found my father in a similar condition. It was a good thing Rhyland had never taken a sip of the tainted liqueur. If Saphira hadn’t been able to access her powers and grow the daylight orchidae, we would have had two dead royals on our hands. The thought tore the air from my lungs. I wished I could say it was equal parts anguish for the loss of my father, but the truth was Saphira was the only one who mattered.

Kiran and I had never been close; my brother was the heir to the throne. The only son who mattered in his eyes. For multiple reasons. When I was young, I resented it, resented Rhyland, but once I was named commander of the royal guard everything changed. I fit so well in my role, and for the first time in my life, I felt complete despite my questionable origins.

Until Saphira appeared in my life all those years ago as my brother’s betrothed. I hadn’t meant to fall in love with her then. I had no intention of stealing Rhyland’s mate, but I was young and foolish, and I allowed my beastly urges to control me.

When I met Serenity years later, I understood how reckless I'd been, but it was too late. Saphira had stolen a piece of my heart; one I'd never been able to give to her twin sister. I squeezed my eyes shut, burying the dark thoughts. Still, after all this time, thinking about Serenity ignited a tangle of tumultuous emotions deep in my gut.

A soft knock at the door sent me jumping to my feet. After the blatant attack, my overprotective dracon viewed each intruder as a threat. And the truth was, we had no idea if Saphira truly was the target or just an innocent caught in the middle of the royals' dangerous games. The liqueur was gifted to my father after all. It's most likely he was the one targeted to be eliminated.

I jerked the door open, already fully aware of who I'd find on the other side. After over seventy years, my brother's scent was as familiar as my own. "Rhyland." I dipped my head.

"Any improvement?" He barreled by me and sank into the chair beside the makeshift bed.

"Not since the last time you came fifteen minutes ago."

My brother had been back and forth between his betrothed and our father, spinning his wheels like a lost puppy. Rhyland was a good man, but he lacked the assertiveness and ferocity required of an effective ruler. Where my brother would've mourned the king's loss to the point of a breakdown, the other ruthless royal heirs would've been overjoyed at the thought of preemptively taking the crown.

Rhyland wrapped his hands around Saphira's pale, limp one. "She's still so cold," he murmured.

"I know." I took her free hand, enveloped it in my own and blew warm breath across her icy fingers.

My brother's gaze lifted to mine, golden orbs latching onto my own. "She's not Serenity. You know that, right?"

My head dipped, a ripple of unease lighting up my insides. I had no intention of discussing this with my brother. Especially not after all the things I'd done with his betrothed. All the things I intended on continuing to do until she realized

she was mine. “No, she’s not.” But she was her twin, and I wondered if that too would explain the odd connection we shared.

“Saphira is *my* betrothed.” Rhyland spoke slowly as if his sluggish pace would somehow convince me.

“But she’s not your mate,” I gritted out.

“Nor is she yours.” His eyes lanced into mine, daring me to say otherwise. I should have kept my mouth shut, but I couldn’t. In addition to being a good man, Rhyland was also a good brother. I hated continuing to deceive him.

“I’m not so sure about that.”

His dark brows slammed together as he regarded me. “What are you saying, Ryker?”

“I don’t know.” I stared at her small hand in mine. It fit so perfectly.

“Do you feel something?”

Guilt spread through my insides, coiling around my lungs until I could barely force in a breath. I hated lying to my brother, but nothing good would come from him knowing. Not until we knew for sure. “I don’t know,” I repeated.

“Come on, Ryker. You’ve never been one for waffling. You don’t have an ambiguous bone in your body. Nor does your dracon.”

My gaze chased up the gilded tattoos across Saphira’s arms and settled on her face. A soft smile tugged at the corners of her lips. At least, she was resting comfortably. Her beauty radiated even in slumber, those dark lashes and brilliant azure hair. My heart staggered as I took her in. I didn’t know how it was possible, but this female *was* my dracuori.

“Ryker?” Rhyland’s voice drew my attention back to the awkward moment.

“I think she might be.”

His expression shuttered, darkness creeping across the typical gold of his eyes. “And what does Saphira say?”

“She’s not sure.”

Rhyland released Saphira’s hand and raked his palms over his face, sinking into the chair. “How long have you suspected?”

The moment I saw her. “For a little while now.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“How could I?” That damned guilt reared up, and the childish stunt at the dinner table last night sent heat racing up my neck. It hadn’t been my finest moment. My brother didn’t deserve that sort of disrespect, but his hands on her had driven me to the brink of insanity.

“Goddess, Ryker, you’re my brother. You should’ve told me as soon as you suspected it. The survival of our kingdom rests on this prophecy, on the prophecy of Saphira and me forming a mate bond and producing royal dracon heirs.”

“I know that,” I growled. “You don’t think that damned prophecy fills my every waking thought? It’s a constant torture. If it wasn’t for that cursed prediction, I would’ve claimed her as mine weeks ago.”

Rhyland’s jaw dropped, and I hissed a curse at my own traitorous, loose tongue. “Glad to know how you really feel, brother.” He jerked up and marched toward the door.

“Rhyland, please, wait.” I wrapped my hand around his upper arm, forcing him to stop. He tried to wriggle free of my hold, but I was stronger than him. Always had been, despite my tainted blood.

“Let go of me!” he snarled.

“I never wanted this. I would never set out to betray you, brother.”

“But you did anyway.”

“I haven’t—we haven’t...” Not in this lifetime anyway. I decided to keep that little tidbit to myself for now. No sense in making this worse.

“You haven’t fucked my betrothed? How noble of you, brother.”

I peeled my fingers off his arm and loosed an exasperated breath. “Saphira is still willing to give this betrothal a chance, for you and for our kingdom. And trust me, I’ve been very persuasive otherwise.”

“I bet you have,” he huffed.

“She’s willing to give it all up for you, brother. She’s determined to do right by you and our people”

“Right. As long as she’s screwing you on the side.”

I shook my head. “You know what the burgeoning mate bond is like.”

“No, I don’t, Ryker, because unlike you, I’ve never felt one before.” He stormed out of the room, slamming the door shut behind him. The entire chamber vibrated from the violence of the crack.

As soon as he was gone, I sank into the chair and buried my face in my hands. “Damn it,” I grumbled.

“Well, that didn’t sound good.” A soft, raspy voice sent my heart racing. I jerked my hands away and met a pair of brilliant orbs.

Thirty-Six

SAPHIRA



Ryker's mesmerizing silver irises fixed to mine, and my sluggish heartbeat accelerated. For a terrible moment there, I didn't think I'd ever see him or anything else ever again.

"You're awake." He dragged me into his arms and squeezed me to his firm chest.

"Barely," I murmured against his shoulder.

Slowly, he released me, and I lay back down on the rigid examination table. Exhaustion still weighed down my lids along with every part of my body.

It had been incredibly painful to listen to the last bits of Rhyland and Ryker's conversation. The guilt of them fighting over me, or maybe it was just the lingering effects of the poison, was suffocating. More than anything, I hated what it was doing to their relationship. I may not have remembered much about my twin sister but having grown up with Rhode and Morgana I understood the strength of a bond with a sibling.

It would be easier to pretend I hadn't heard a word of their heated discussion, but I hated lying.

"How much of that did you hear?"

"Not much."

"Saphira..." He pointed at his temple. "I can still get in your head, and I will get to the truth even if I must drag it out myself."

“Fine,” I grumbled. “I was drifting in and out when you were talking about the mate stuff.”

He visibly relaxed, and a hint of my unease drifted to the surface. What more had they discussed that he didn’t want me to know about?

“I hadn’t planned on admitting any of that.” He jabbed his fingers through the thick waves of dark hair. “But I hated lying to him.”

“I get it,” I muttered. I didn’t feel good about any of this.

“Anyway, that isn’t important right now.” He sat up straighter and reached for my hand. “How do you feel?”

A rueful grin parted my lips. “Like I was just poisoned.”

“Well, at least the toxins didn’t permanently affect your sense of humor.” He smirked and despite the general feeling of yuckiness, it broadened my smile.

“Did anyone else get sick?” In the chaos, I hadn’t even had time to consider who else had drunk from the tainted bottle. I vaguely remembered Rhyland and the king accepting a pour.

“Father was quite ill. If it wasn’t for the flower you created, he’d be dead, and Rhyland would be king.”

I sucked in a sharp breath. And I would’ve been queen... Wait a second. “But your father offered some to Rhyland too.”

Ryker’s dark brows knitted. “Yes, but he never drank it. Too busy with the little fire I assume.”

“Thank the goddess.”

“I suppose it’s a good thing I was otherwise occupied under the table.” Ryker shot me a sinful grin, and heat flared between my legs, rushed up my neck and across my cheeks.

Like I’d ever get that out of my mind. “Ryker,” I gritted out, the fiery heat intensifying at the memories.

He scooted the chair closer and took both my hands in his. “Now that Rhyland knows, I don’t see why we must keep fighting this.”

“Ryker, you know why we must. The prophecy.”

“Damn it, Saphira, prophecies are fickle beasts, seers and goddesses even more so. We have no way of knowing that your bonding with Rhyland will do anything. But what I do know is that it will wreck me; I cannot survive without you.”

Those words coupled with the fire burning through the vibrant silver stole the remaining slivers of my sanity. Nearly losing Ryker twice now had shed new light on this impossible situation. There had to be a way to save our kingdom without sacrificing the possibility of a life with this man. Whether he truly was my mate or not, I owed it to myself to find out.

I pushed myself off the table and tumbled into his lap.

“Saphira, careful!” Ryker’s eyes widened as his hands settled on my hips, holding me in place.

Before I could chicken out and think of all the reasons why this was an incredibly stupid decision, I pressed my mouth to his. A resounding growl of approval vibrated his throat, and his arm tightened around my waist like a steel band holding me imprisoned against the firm plains of his chest.

He kissed me like a starved man who’d stumbled upon an oasis in the desert. His tongue parted my lips, then tangled with my own in an intricate dance only the two of us understood. A warm hand curled around the back of my neck, tilting my head to deepen the fiery kiss.

I dug my fingers into the fine hairs at the back of his nape, desperate for more. I needed to touch him, to feel him everywhere. I scooted further up his lap until I found the friction I so urgently needed between my legs. His thick erection rubbed against my center, and I rolled my hips to heighten the pleasure.

Ryker’s lips moved from my mouth, to kiss the corner of my lips, then traveled across my jaw before descending lower. He dragged his tongue down my neck, over the tawny patch of skin at the base of my throat, then across the sensitive flesh of my collarbone. I arched into him, each touch, each fiery sensation electrifying my core.

A moan slipped out as he cupped my breast, kneading the sensitive flesh until both of my nipples were so hard keeping them contained in the corset hurt. As if he'd read my thoughts, and probably he had, he tugged on the top lace of my gown, freeing one of my breasts.

I let out a hiss as the cool air rushed over my heated skin, and then another groan when Ryker's warm mouth closed over my nipple. He sucked and teased until my body curled into his, hips grinding against his erection.

The creak of the door swinging open over my shoulder froze the blood in my veins. Thank the goddess Ryker was faster than I was, tucking my bare breast back into my gown and curling his arms around me.

"Get out," he growled.

The familiar sound of a throat clearing only intensified the burn in my cheeks. Shit. Shit. Shit.

"My apologies for the intrusion." Bartus sounded so flustered I wanted to sink into the ground and get swallowed up by the earth. "I only wanted to check on the princess, but it's clear she's on the mend."

Mother T, I did not want to turn around. "Yup, I'm good, thanks B."

"When you're finished here, I'd like a word with you, princess."

I swallowed hard, embarrassment steamrolling over every inch of me. "Sure. I'll be right out."

"And you, Ryker..." He grunted. "I'm certain your father would appreciate a visit now that he's awake."

"Yes, of course," he muttered through clenched teeth.

The moment the door closed, my shoulders rounded, and I slumped into Ryker's chest. "That's so bad, really bad."

He framed my heated cheeks with his firm hands. "They'll all understand soon enough, Saphira. We're all dragon; we know what happens when a mate bond clicks into place, and

I'm certain that is exactly what will happen if we keep this up."

"If?" I lifted my eyes to his.

"You *can* ignore the call of the dracuori. It's very difficult for both parties, but if it is not consummated by Havestia, it will eventually fizzle and die."

Havestia, that was the Terrean version of Halloween, the day Ryker had kidnapped me and forced me back to my old life. It was nearly an entire year away. Could I possibly fight off these urges for another nine months? Not likely. Nor did I want to.

"I don't want this to die." He brushed his lips against mine. "I've never wanted anything more in my life."

I nodded, emotion tightening my throat. I was too scared to utter a word. My stupid mouth would probably blabber something completely inappropriate like the L word. Then I'd freak him out and ruin everything. There was still so much to sort out, so much standing between us.

Two sharp knocks sent me scrambling off Ryker's lap. "Quickly, princess, this is important." Bartus's gruff tone lit a fire under my slow ass.

After running a hand through my crazy hair and straightening my corset, I pressed a quick kiss to Ryker's mouth and tugged him toward the door. "Maybe he won't yell at me if you're there."

"I doubt he'll tell you whatever it is in front of me."

I shrugged, drew in a steadying breath and pulled the door open.

Scrutinizing eyes met mine, and for a second, they were worse than facing my father. For some reason, in Tatá's moments of insanity, he'd deciphered something we'd all been too logical to see.

"What is it you wanted to talk to me about?" I offered my father's emissary a sweet smile.

His light eyes darted to Ryker and back to mine. “Two things, but I’d prefer to speak in private.”

How could I tell Bartus Ryker had a direct link to my thoughts, and nothing was truly private anyway? “Whatever you have to say to me you can say in front of Ryker. He’ll find out anyway.”

Bartus’s unruly, blonde brows twisted like an angry caterpillar. “Oh, goddess, no.” He paced a quick circle, raking his hand over his face. “But you’re betrothed to Rhyland.”

I nodded slowly. “Please keep what you saw today between us, Bartus, for the sake of all our kingdoms.”

“This is a complete disaster, Saphira.”

“I know...” I gritted out.

“Is that all you have to say, Bartus, or is there more?” Ryker bristled behind me, his irritation flaring through our bond.

“No,” he snapped. “I’ve dispatched an envoi with a troop of royal guards to question the Stormborne king about the poisoned wine.”

“Good,” Ryker growled.

“But I fear their efforts will prove useless now.”

“Why?” If that bastard tried to kill me or King Kiran, at the very least, he deserved to be punished.

“Because I also come bearing news from the council.”

The breath caught in my throat, my thundering pulse muddling his words.

“The great Abba has deemed you worthy to compete in the Imperia Trials.”

No, shit. Every organ in my body decided to fail in that instant. My knees wobbled and if it wasn’t for the big beast behind me with his arm snaked around my waist, I would’ve hit the unforgiving obsidian stone floor.

“All competitors will meet at the Great Rift the day after tomorrow.”

Thirty-Seven

RYKER



“Focus, Saphira!”

“I am focusing, you ash-hole! And stop yelling at me.” Fiery azure eyes seared into me, full lips pulled into a snarl, and I wasn’t sure what I wanted more: to kiss or strangle her.

Likely both.

We stood atop the tallest peak of the Agrabi Mountains, only a stone’s throw away from a bubbling volcano. The suffocating heat and ash only heightened the miserable conditions. I’d hoped it would somehow coax that damned dracon of hers out.

She clutched the jade necklace at her throat and jerked until the chain snapped and the brilliant gemstones clattered to the floor. “It’s just not working.” Tears of frustration filled her eyes as she glared up at me.

I dropped to the ground and gathered the gemstones and broken silver chain and shoved them in my pocket. She’d regret the rash outburst later. Releasing a slow breath, I took a measured step closer before pulling her into my chest. Surprisingly, her body easily melded into mine. “It will work because it has to, Saphira. You *will* summon your dracon or you won’t stand a chance in the trials.” I ran my hand down the back of her head, fingers tangling in her soft, silken locks. “There are three days of events and typically the first does not require your dracon, but the other two undoubtedly will.”

The line between her fine brows puckered. “Rhyland made it seem like the trials would be rigged. Like he was to be the

obvious winner.”

I shook my head, scowling. “He lied. He was probably just trying to find a way to convince you not to bother entering. He’s obviously worried for your safety.”

“So it’s not true?”

“I wish it were that easy. There is no way the other royals would simply bow down to my brother. Unless they’re simply lying to placate him.”

“Then what am I supposed to do?” She lifted her weary gaze to mine. “I’ve tried everything to get my dracon out, and the stubborn beast just refuses to emerge.”

I wished I had the answer. I’d tried everything I could think of too. We’d spent all morning attempting to entice her out, but not even my dracon could get her to budge.

“There must be something blocking her. I just don’t know what it is, but I know that somewhere deep inside, you must.”

“I have no idea what it could be.”

I squeezed Saphira’s shoulders and dipped my head, so we were eyelevel. “Our dracon are a part of our soul, our heart, our body. If there’s a disconnect somewhere, that could be the cause of her reluctance.”

“What are you saying?”

My hand slid up her shoulder and settled on her cheek, cupping that soft skin. “Your memories from before the sacrifice are still repressed. Maybe if you find a way to unlock your turbulent past, your dracon will be free to emerge.”

Her lips twisted into a pout, and I simply couldn’t resist capturing them. I brushed a chaste kiss, chasing away the angry set of that perfect mouth. With Rhyland and my father gone, I didn’t feel the need to hide my feelings any longer. My brother and the king had departed yesterday as soon as Bartus shared the news of the council’s decision. Saphira wasn’t the only one that needed to prepare for the trial.

Rhyland was certain he’d win.

And now, I had to do everything in my power to ensure that didn't happen.

“That was unexpected.” A smirk pulled at the corners of her lips as she tipped her head back.

“Good unexpected or bad?”

She rose to her tiptoes and stole another kiss, her mouth moving slowly against mine. My tongue parted her lips, begging to taste, to explore every inch of her. But if we kept this up, we'd never accomplish anything, and we had less than twenty-four hours to get that dracon of hers to emerge.

I was the one to pull back this time, my entire body resisting the space I attempted to put between us. “Is there anything I can do to help? To bring back your memories, perhaps?” I shot her a mischievous grin.

All night I'd considered the ramifications of claiming her. On one hand, it could force her dracon out, but on the other, it could also strengthen our burgeoning mate bond. Which could prove useful in the trials but could also hinder her chances of winning if we were both distracted. Not to mention the fact that dracuori were forbidden to enter the trials together. And if the other ruthless royals discovered our connection, they wouldn't hesitate to use it against us. As much as I hated to admit it, her role as the betrothed to the future Fuocan king afforded her a level of safety I couldn't match.

Saphira closed the distance between us, weaving her arms around my waist and tugging me flush against her training leathers. “There might be something you can do.” She swept her tongue across her lower lip, and I was instantly hard. She rubbed up against me, clearly feeling my arousal, and her smile widened.

“Be careful what you ask for, princess. I'm powerless to deny you.” I dropped a kiss on her forehead.

She worried her lip between her teeth, eyes fixed to mine. I barely repressed the urge to pluck the thoughts right from her head. I longed for her to feel comfortable enough to voice

them herself. “I’ve been thinking about what you said the other day. You know, before I was poisoned...”

Mention of King Silas sent a surge of rage crashing through my body. If the trials weren’t starting tomorrow, I would’ve made a personal visit to the Stormborne leader and tortured the truth out of him. Unfortunately, now it would have to wait. Getting Saphira’s dracon out was more important than revenge. But I’d be sure to quell my wrath by taking out my anger on his heirs in the trials. They’d suffer for their father’s sins.

No one hurt what was mine and lived.

“Hello, Ryker?” Saphira waved her hand an inch from my nose. It was a good thing she hadn’t quite mastered delving into my mind yet.

“Sorry,” I muttered. “I’m just a bit bitter that King Silas is still drawing breath.”

“We still don’t know if he *meant* to kill me.”

“No, we don’t, but I would have by now if the trials hadn’t conveniently interrupted.”

Her brows furrowed, and she scrunched her pert nose. “Do you think this is all related somehow?”

“I’m not sure.” I shook my head and heaved out a breath. “Anyway, you were saying?”

I could practically feel the words poised on her tongue, but something kept them from spilling out. She crossed her arms over her chest and pulled her shoulders back. “I want you to make lo—have sex, whatever, like you said the other day. Just to see what would happen—” A flush of crimson coated her cheeks and goddess, it only made her more beautiful.

But now I was speechless.

I stood there gaping, like a fool. I had been the one to suggest it in the hopes of triggering the mate bond, but now that she’d been granted approval to compete in the trials, we wouldn’t be allowed to enter as dracuori. And as awful as it sounded, now that Rhyland knew about us, the urgency to

claim her had waned. We didn't have to rush; we could savor every moment of the mating ritual.

"Oh, Saphira, you have no idea how long I've waited to hear you say that." I took her hands, unfolding them from across her chest and pressed my lips to her knuckles. "There's nothing I want more than to make love to you, believe me."

"But?" Her light brows slammed together.

"I'm worried about the implications."

"As well you should be. Sex with me is completely mind-blowing."

I snorted on a laugh, the unexpected sound rumbling in my chest. "I don't doubt that for a second. I quite enjoyed the previous version, and I know when the time is right, it will be that and so much more."

"What are you scared of then?"

Everything. I prayed to Mother Terrea I hadn't accidentally sent that thought through our link. I couldn't admit that the notion of finally claiming her only to lose her once again had me so terrified my lungs refused to draw breath, my heart denied pumping another beat.

I framed her face with my hands, drawing her close. "There's something I haven't told you. Mostly because I wasn't sure it would happen... dracuori aren't permitted to compete against each other in the Imperia Trials. The bond is too strong, and it would give them an unfair advantage against the others."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

Shaking my head, I released a frustrated sigh. There was still so much I hadn't confessed... "As much as I'd always hoped you'd be my mate, I never thought it was possible."

"Why?"

Because I thought I found my mate long ago, and now she was dead. I forced my tongue to spit out the words, but my brain refused. I'd have to tell her the truth eventually, but I

simply couldn't, not on the eve of the trials. "Because I'm not good enough for you." Not a complete lie.

"Ryker..."

"And regardless, as Rhyland's betrothed, as the future queen of Fuoco, you'll be somewhat protected." *I hope*. "I cannot afford you that safety right now. I can only offer my body as a flesh and blood shield."

"I'll take it." She tossed me a smile, and my silly heart grew wings. "I don't need Rhyland if I have you."

"Just like that then? You're willing to give up on the prophecy, on the survival of our people, on everything?"

"I almost died, Ryker, and now with the trials looming, it put a lot of things in perspective. And no, I haven't given up on everything, but I'm certain there must be a way for us to be together and still ensure the survival of royal dracon for many years to come."

"How can you be so sure?"

"Because Mother Terrea must have a plan." She pressed her hands against mine, then dropped them between us. "She wouldn't have made all eight of us sacrifice our lives for our kingdoms for nothing. I have to believe that, Ryker. Don't you get it?"

I nodded slowly. I wanted to believe that more than anything. But after everything I'd endured in Saphira's absence I wasn't so sure anymore. "I know that you want to believe that, and I wish I had the same faith in the goddess that you do."

"You trust me, don't you?"

With every last breath. "Of course, I do."

"Then trust me when I say I know it will all work out as it should. Because I can't imagine a future where you aren't mine."

Goddess, I hoped she was right once she knew the truth of everything. My mouth claimed hers with the force of my mighty dracon. I swept Saphira off her feet and yanked her

into my arms. Her legs curled around my waist, and I pinned her against the jagged cliff face.

“Is there a way to do this without completing the mate bond?” Her cheeks were flushed, the rosy hue irresistible.

“Possibly. But I’d have to possess the willpower of a gods’ damned priestess.”

“I trust you too.” Her hands slid between us, fingers searching for the laces to my worn leathers.

I snatched her wrist and gently shook my head. “Not here, not like this, Saphira. I want to make love to you the way you deserve on a mountain of rose petals in a candlelit room. I want to savor every moment as I claim you as mine.”

A chill skirted up her spine, her entire body shuddering against mine. “I want that too.” Her eyes sparkled with lust, desire flowing through our bond.

Reluctantly, I released her, her soft body dragging down my own. I was so hard it was painful. And she was about to see the full extent of my desire for her. Slowly, I shed my clothes. Her heated gaze remained intent on mine before descending down my bare torso and diving further.

Her mouth curved into a capital O, breath catching, as she took all of me in, and I couldn’t help the crooked smile that curled my lips. Before I lost all restraint and claimed her right here on the mountaintop, I called to my dracon.

The shimmering silver vapor rose around me, and an instant later, my beast took the reins. Saphira watched in awe, just like she did every time I succumbed to my dracon spirit. She didn’t hesitate this time, easily crawling up my leg and situating herself at the crux of my wings.

Ready? I broadcasted my thoughts to her mind.

Always.

The warm sound of her voice in my head surged to every inch of my dracon.

Dracuori. The deep timbre I heard next didn’t belong to her but rather to my own inner beast. He knew it as well as I.

And when I did make love to her, I'd make her mine forever.

Thirty-Eight

SAPHIRA



A nervous giggle tumbled out as I dragged Ryker down the castle's quiet hallways. An unnamable energy raced through our intertwined hands then surged across my body with each step closer to my chambers. I'd tried so hard to deny the connection I'd felt to this man from the moment I met him. Even when he captured me from the night club in Vegas, something had felt so right about the whole crazy thing.

"You're not getting cold feet, are you?" Ryker's whisper drew me from my internal musings.

"No, not at all." I cocked my head and threw him a smile as I quickened our pace. Sure, I was anxious, but the idea of finally being with him just felt so right. Fuck the consequences.

He halted mid-step, his massive body jerking me backward. "I *can* control my dracon from completing the bond, or at least, I'm fairly certain I can."

"I know."

"Okay." The word came out on a rough exhale.

I spun around just as heavy footfalls resounded down the next corridor.

"Stop the king!" Bartus's frenzied voice froze the heated blood pumping through my veins.

Father raced around the corner in his sleeping robe, his eyes wide, and panic etched into his features. "Run, Serenity, run!"

I planted my feet as he barreled toward me and pressed my palms to his chest. If Ryker hadn't moved behind me, he would've run right over me. "Tatá, you're okay. Everything's fine. I'm here."

"It's not safe! We must go! The castle is under attack."

I wrapped my arms around his waist to control his agitated movements. He wriggled and flailed, his thundering pulse so loud it kicked against my palm. A twist of unease scraped at my insides until Bartus and the royal guards rounded the corner. My father's friend shook his head. "There is no threat, my king. It was a nightmare, that is all."

Bartus crept behind my father and placed a gentle hand on his shoulder. "As Saphira said, everything is fine, Sebastian. You see, your daughter is here, and she is safe."

Tatá's frantic gaze chased to mine. "Serenity?"

I slowly dipped my head. "Yes, Tatá it's me. I'm okay, we're all okay."

His eyes lifted over my shoulder to Ryker, and the ghost of a smile tipped up the corners of his lips. The strained set of his jaw relaxed, and his entire body slackened against me. "I'm glad you're here with my daughter, boy."

Ryker nodded stiffly.

Tatá's icy hand closed around mine, and I pulled him into a hug. "Will you come to my chambers for just a little while, Serenity?" he whispered against the top of my head.

"Of course, whatever you need."

"Thank you, my darling. I am truly blessed by the goddess to have such wonderful daughters." Those weary blue eyes seared into me, and it was like looking into a mirror. He wrapped his arm around my waist, and I turned him back down the hall. The royal guards moved into step beside us with Bartus flanking my father's opposite side.

I canted my head over my shoulder and tossed Ryker an apologetic smile. *Guess, we'll have to save the big romantic evening for after the trials.*

A heart-stopping grin stretched across his face as he stood in the middle of the corridor. *I've waited this long, a few more nights won't change anything. It'll only give me more time to prepare the epic evening. And if we wait until after the trials, I can finally claim you as my dracuori.*

A chill raced up my spine at not only the intensity of his words but the onslaught of emotion that accompanied them.

Ryker was right. We'd waited this long, what would another few days matter?



Anxiety twisted up my insides as Ryker's dracon began to descend, his massive silver wings slowing their powerful beats. The Great Rift loomed below us, the cavernous hole in the earth that stretched across the isle of Draconia echoing the vacant void in my chest. All those missing memories.

Father flew beside us, his huge navy dracon nearly rivaling Ryker's enormous beast, and of course the ever-faithful green Bartus flanked his right. I'd recently learned a group of dragons were not in fact referred to as a flock, but rather a thunder named after the sound of their mighty wings beating the air. A dozen royal guards flew around us in a tight formation, each on high alert after the poisoning.

The half hour flight had felt like an eternity with the jumble of thoughts spiraling through my mind. Not to mention the regret. *Mother T*, I'd dreamt about Ryker making love to me all night. Yeah, I'd said it, the L word. I was falling in love with this man, and it was completely terrifying. Worse, I didn't know if it was just the blossoming mate bond or something else entirely.

I cast an anxious gaze in Tatá's direction. He'd woken up today like nothing had happened. I'd spent all night on the chair by his bedside as he tossed and turned, likely plagued by more nightmares of the day my mom and twin sister were killed. Since I couldn't exactly sleep, I'd tried to do what Ryker had suggested and unlock those hidden memories, but the harder I tried, the further away they scampered.

Ryker was right; something was blocking them. I feared it was my own damned psyche, too frightened to uncover the truth. Losing a mom and sister I didn't remember was hard enough, but I couldn't imagine the pain that would follow once the memories came flooding back. It had to be the reason I couldn't remember. My chicken-shit mind was trying to save me from the utter devastation.

Almost there. Ryker's deep voice echoed through my mind. *Are you ready?*

Guess I have to be, right?

You'll be fine. I'll never let anything happen to you.

I know, but I can't just be fine. I have to win, and that means figuring out a way to summon my dracon in the next twenty-four hours.

Then we'll just have to force her out.

The big silver dracon snorted and two rings of gray smoke floated across the brilliant blue. At least it was a beautiful day for a trial. I'd peppered Ryker with questions about the three-day event as we flew across the Agrabi Mountains, but he hadn't been able to give me much information as the trials changed every year. The only thing we knew for certain was that the first trial generally involved more mental acuity than brute strength, whereas the second two would definitely require my dracon's abilities.

So essentially, I was screwed.

The entire thunder of dracon angled their wings toward the earth and as one, we descended. I gripped onto the knobby endings of Ryker's wing bones and squeezed my thighs, praying to all the gods I didn't tumble off the big beast. What a grand entrance that would make. As it was, I was the only loser having to ride a dracon instead of flying here myself.

The Great Rift grew larger as we descended, the creepy, massive hole in the earth the designated spot for the great Imperia Trials. I hated to find out why. Like would the losers get tossed into the giant pit? That wouldn't be a problem for most dracon since they had wings, but not this girl.

They're not going to throw you inside the Great Rift. Ryker's warm chuckle did the opposite of soothe. I wanted to strangle the bastard.

Easy for you to say since you have wings!

If anyone so much as tries, I'll gut them from spine to sternum. There was no warmth in his tone this time, only an icy frost that chilled the blood frantically pumping through my veins.

My body pitched forward, and I tightened my hold on the slick dracon beneath me as his talons sank into the earth. The ground shook and trembled as the entire thunder landed around us.

Just ahead, a looming structure caught my eye in the center of the arid desert. The circular battleground stretched over at least two-hundred yards in diameter, its floor a composite of sleek obsidian and quartz, shimmering in an ethereal dance of light and shadow. The surface was etched with intricate runes that glowed, providing a radiant show.

I sucked in a breath as I took it all in.

Incredible, right?

"Yup." I peered over the big dracon's head to see more. "What are those glowing symbol things for?"

They provide the boundaries for the combatants on the battlefield. We won't be able to get past them even in dracon form.

"Oh, so like an electric fence for dogs."

If you say so.

I followed the curve of the arena to the colossal pillars of stone, each carved with the face of a dracon and its corresponding element. I immediately recognized the Fuocan symbol, as it was the exact replica of the tattoo across Ryker's throat. The silver dracon encircled in flames.

Ryker must have followed my gaze. *Don't let those harmless looking columns fool you. They not only offer cover*

and high ground, but also each one is imbued with magic, one might freeze or scorch you, depending on its enchantment.

No shit. “Seriously?”

Deadly, seriously.

My gaze lifted to the sky, to a dome of magical energy that encapsulated the arena, its color shifting with the streaks of golden sunlight. My guess was we couldn’t get past that thing either.

Correct. It serves as both a protective barrier and a dynamic scoreboard, displaying the names of the combatants and their current standing in the competition.

Oh goddess, the entire audience would have a front row view of how badly I was doing in the battle. The spectator stands were levitating platforms of wood and stone, tiered in a circular fashion around the arena. Each platform offered a panoramic view of the entire arena.

It was so much to take in at once.

Huddled just outside the arena, stood a familiar group. The Skyborne royals, minus one child, hovered anxiously in the entrance archway between two immense statues of gilded dracon. I couldn’t believe they’d shown up after the recent loss of Prince Elias. I slid off Ryker’s back before the other royals could witness my arrival atop the dracon. So embarrassing. Not that they wouldn’t find out I couldn’t summon my own soon enough anyway.

The moment my boots hit the floor, the shimmery mist crawled up Ryker’s beast. I turned away, knowing full well what came next. The last thing I needed was to be caught ogling the naked male in front of all the royals.

Within seconds, half a dozen servants appeared from the bowels of the arena with clothes draped over their arms. They spread out among the thunder of naked dracon and a few short minutes later, everyone was fully clothed.

Ryker, back in human form, moved beside me, his shoulder brushing my own. Even through the deep crimson

jacket, his heat blazed through the material, sinking into my own flesh. “I have something for you.”

Despite the inner turmoil, the hint of a smile peeked through as Ryker extended his hand. He opened his fist and my mother’s necklace lay in his palm, the silver chain and jade gemstones perfect once again.

“You fixed it!” I cried, emotion thickening my throat.

“I hoped that having a piece of your mom with you today would make the day slightly more bearable.” A flash of insecurity streaked across those silver irises, a look I rarely saw in the proud male.

With a quick glance to make sure no one was watching, I lifted to my tiptoes and wrapped my arms around the back of his neck and tugged him into a quick hug. “Thank you,” I whispered. “This means more to me than you’ll ever know.” Releasing him much too soon for my liking, I took a measured step back and clasped the family heirloom around my neck.

Ryker cleared his throat, his Adam’s apple bobbing in his throat and awakening the dracon tattoo. It shimmered and wriggled beneath the sunlight. “You ready to face the competition?”

“Do I have any other choice?” I fingered the jade gemstone at my chest and drew on its calming energy.

A rueful grin parted his lips. “No.”

I rose to my tiptoes again, this time to see over the growing crowd. Dracon were flying in from all directions, and waves of riders on horseback kicked up dirt from the arid earth. It had never occurred to me that the lowly common dracon would attend the trials as well. My thoughts flickered back to the vendors at Fuoco, to their haggard appearance, the desperation in their eyes. From the herds flocking toward the arena, it looked like all of Draconia would be in attendance.

Cue the panic.

I scanned the growing masses for Rhyland, that pang of guilt still a fresh wound. “I don’t see your brother anywhere.”

Ryker shrugged as he skimmed the crowd. “Neither do I. But don’t worry, princess, he’ll be here.”

Another ripple of anxiety stormed my insides. I hadn’t seen my betrothed since he found out about Ryker and me, and I was dreading the awkward encounter. He was going to be livid, and I couldn’t blame him. He’d been nothing but nice to me, and I’d gone and fallen for his brother, and stabbed him in the back.

As if my thoughts had summoned him, a sharp cry tore out across the sky. My head dipped back and focused on the golden dragon flying toward us. He was flanked by a slightly smaller gold one as well as an entire multi-colored fleet.

“And there he is, the future king of Fuoco.” A bitter snarl curled Ryker’s lips.

More than anything, I hated how this thing between us was affecting their relationship. “Behave yourself, Ryker. We’re the ones that did wrong here.”

He spun at me, silver irises blazing. “There is nothing wrong with our feelings for each other, Saphira. Our union was blessed by the goddess herself. On the contrary, he’s the one intruding, or rather, my father. All he cares about is more power. He’d sacrifice us all if it meant the Ashborne legacy lived on forever.”

I released a breath, glanced over my shoulder to ensure no one was watching again and hooked my pinky around his. “I didn’t mean it like that, and you know it. I don’t regret this. Not one bit. I only hate hurting Rhyland.”

“He’ll be fine,” he muttered. “There’s a long line of beautiful female royals waiting to take your place.”

“Ouch.”

“You know what I mean.” He squeezed my pinky before releasing it with a sigh.

The two lead dragon banked toward the earth, and the ground shook beneath my boots as they landed. The smaller golden dragon eyed me from across the clearing.

“Do you think your father knows?”

Ryker’s head dipped. “I’m sure it’s the first thing Rhyland told him when he regained consciousness.”

“Great,” I murmured.

His eyes found mine, the silver so radiant it rivaled the gleaming sun. “It will never be easy for us, Saphira, but that’s exactly what makes this worth the fight.” He whispered the words, but they held so much power he may have been shouting them across the mountaintops.

Thank you. I sent the thought across our mental link. For everything since the moment you stole me away from the night club.

“Don’t thank me yet, princess, you still have to win these trials.”

Thirty-Nine

RYKER



“Well, if it isn’t my traitorous son.” My father’s glare was so deadly daggers flew from his narrowed orbs. So much for hoping Rhyland hadn’t spilled the truth.

“Father.” I dipped my head.

That look of pure hatred shifted from me to Saphira, and every muscle in my body tensed. I moved between them as if somehow my flesh and bones could protect her from his rage. I would almost understand, even respect it, if it were for the right reasons. But my father’s fury didn’t stem from the betrayal of his eldest and favorite son, but rather the fear of all he stood to lose from the advantageous pairing.

Securing a strong mate for the future king was much more important than one for his insignificant second-born son.

“Do you two have any idea what you’ve done?” Kiran hissed.

“We haven’t *done* anything,” Saphira blurted. Technically, true. She moved around me, despite my best efforts, and faced my brother. “I’m so sorry, Rhyland. I just want you to know I never meant to hurt you. You’ve been so kind to me, and I honestly wanted to give this a chance. I’ve fought this connection between Ryker and me since the moment I discovered I was betrothed to you—”

“Connection?” Father jumped at the word.

Rhyland muttered a curse and crossed his arms over his chest.

“You didn’t tell him?” I barked at my brother. “How could you leave out the most important factor?”

He shrugged, turning his head and lifting his regal nose in the air. “You said you weren’t certain.” His lips twisted, a light green pallor settling over his face. “Did you—”

I raised my hand before he shouted it from the rooftops and alerted every damned royal in a hundred-foot radius of our status. “No, we have not.”

Saphira’s cheeks reddened an enticing crimson, and a fresh wave of desire doused our mental link.

“I wouldn’t do that with the trials at stake,” I growled.

Father’s skeptical gaze bounced between us. “You’re certain then?”

I nodded with zero hesitation. Though I wasn’t confident of Saphira’s reaction. I watched her from the corner of my eye with bated breath. With her dracon still refusing to emerge, I understood her uncertainty.

She chewed on her lower lip for an excruciatingly long moment before her head bobbed up and down. “There’s nothing else that would explain the connection I’ve felt to Ryker since the moment we met.”

“What about *our* connection?” Rhyland reached for her hands, and a deep roar vibrated my chest.

“Hands off, brother.”

“For goddess’s sake, this is unbelievable.” Rhyland slipped his hands behind his back, but his eyes remained pinned on my mate. “Saphira, as my brother pointed out, your dracon has yet to emerge. You cannot be sure until that happens. Only when your beasts meet in animal form will the dracuori bond be cemented.”

“I understand, and I don’t know why she’s refusing to surface, but still, I can’t deny my feelings anymore. It’s not fair to any of us.”

I jumped in, eager to put an end to this conversation. Saphira and I were meant to be and talk of anything else was

absurd. “On to more pressing matters, did you speak to King Silas about the wine?”

“The bastard denies it adamantly,” Father gritted out. “Though judging by the look on his face when he saw me, I was clearly the intended target.”

“I’m sorry,” I muttered. As much as I frequently fought with my father, I certainly didn’t want to see him dead.

“All this talk of feelings and emotions,” Kiran snarled. “None of it matters. Either one of us could be dead by tomorrow at the hands of any of these ruthless royals.” He turned to Saphira again. “Mate bonds can be ignored, broken even; a betrothal, a legally binding agreement is all that matters in the end.”

A gasp erupted from Saphira’s thinned lips.

“You cannot be serious, Father?” I snarled. The man truly had a one-track mind. Unless his concern is truly about me... “You mean to hold Saphira to her promise when I am her mate?”

“Her *alleged* mate.” He puffed out his chest and pressed closer to his heir, his golden boy.

“You’re insane.”

“Watch your tone,” he snapped, pupils narrowing to thin slits.

I nearly laughed aloud. My dracon would destroy his, would destroy any creature who stood in the way of him claiming his mate. “Rhyland, you can’t seriously want to continue with this sham of a betrothal?”

“I will if it’s for the good of our kingdom.”

“That’s right.” The king wrapped his arm around Rhyland’s broad shoulders. “At least someone understands what it means to put the needs of his kingdom first.”

“What are you saying?” Saphira asked.

My father seared her with that narrowed glare. “You can marry Rhyland and continue your relationship with Ryker on

the side, as long as you never complete the mate bond.”

Saphira’s eyes grew impossibly wide, her mouth curving into a capital O. Before she could get a word out, a wild burst of laughter split my lips. “I was wrong, *this* is insane. Do you have any idea what that would do to us? Our dracon would tear each other apart.”

Kiran turned to Rhyland and nodded. “Tell him, son.”

“I would agree to it if you would.”

“You would agree to me fucking your wife?” I snarled. “Because trust me, brother, I would never allow you to lay a hand on *my mate*.”

“What about me?” Saphira cried out. “You’re all planning my life as if I have no say.”

“Of course, you have a say,” I hissed. “No one will force you into any of it.” I whirled at my father and jabbed a finger into his chest, rattling the gilded medals hung across his crimson sash. “I will never agree to this. Depriving a dracon of its mate is cruel, deadly even.”

“You seem to have recovered from the loss of yours just fine, brother.” Rhyland’s eyes turned to stone, the warm golden disappearing beneath an icy frost.

No... “Rhyland, don’t.”

“I was right then. You haven’t told her the truth, have you?”

I shook my head, fear squeezing the air from my lungs. “Please don’t, brother.”

“You gave me no such chance when you stole my betrothed right out from under my nose.”

Saphira’s anxious gaze turned to mine, and a fissure rippled across my heart. “What is he talking about, Ryker?”

I’d been a fool not to tell her sooner. I’d wanted to at least a thousand times, but somehow, I’d never been able to find the words.

Rhyland leveled me with an icy glare I barely recognized from my own brother. “Tell her the truth about Serenity or I will.”

Turning to Saphira, I enveloped both her hands in mine, reveling in her soft touch for what I prayed wasn't the last time. “I'm so sorry,” I murmured. “I should have told you the truth long ago.” I paused, biting my lower lip. I'd dreaded this moment for weeks, scrambled with the right words to say and still I had nothing.

“Just spit it out, Ryker. You're making me nervous.”

“Your twin sister, Serenity, was my mate, or at least I was certain she was until the day I found you in that nightclub.”

A gasp curved her lips, and she leapt back, ripping her hands from my grasp. “What? How is that possible?” Pain lanced through our bond, a sharp sting of betrayal and hurt spearing me in the chest.

“I don't know. I honestly don't understand it myself. Dracon are only supposed to have one dracuori, one true mate. It should be impossible.”

“Clearly, you must be mistaken about your feelings for Saphira.” Rhyland's smug smile replaced the ache in my chest and filled it with blinding rage.

My dracon surged to the surface, and jagged silver scales rippled across my flesh. I spun at my brother, jerked my arm back and let it fly. My knuckles smashed into his nose, the satisfying crunch momentarily quelling the fury, but it wasn't enough. I leapt at him and forced us both to the ground. He wriggled beneath me, but I clamped my thighs around his legs and threw another punch. “You have no idea what you're talking about,” I shouted, my voice more beast than man. “You have no concept of what I feel for her.” I hit him again, claws breaking through my fingertips. “It's all consuming, all powerful, like nothing I've ever experienced in my life.” Again and again. Crimson consumed my vision, seeping into the corners until darkness blanketed every angle.

“Ryker!” That voice cut through the tremor of rage and stilled my arm. “Ryker, stop! You’re going to kill him!”

I blinked quickly as Saphira’s blurry face came into focus. My dracon receded, sinking back beneath the surface.

“Get off your brother!” she shouted, curling her hand around my upper arm, over the heavily scaled skin. She jerked me up, and the bloodied, swollen face beneath me finally coalesced.

Realms, Rhyland.

Saphira slid to the ground, cradling my brother’s battered body in her arms. I squeezed my eyes shut as swells of jealousy tore through my insides.

My father’s face was the next one to appear, fury carving into his harsh features. He grabbed my collar and yanked me toward him, his hot breath spilling over me as he shouted. “Are you absolutely mad? Do you see what you’ve done to your brother? And on the day of the trials!”

“I told you,” I hissed. “Our dracon could never share Saphira. The idea is completely ludicrous.”

“The only thing ludicrous was this display, Ryker. I thank the goddess every day Rhyland was my first-born son. He’s level-headed, wise, and willing to do what is best for our people, unlike you. You could *never* be king.”

I snorted. “You’re right. I’d burn down this entire kingdom for *her*. I’d give it all up for Saphira without a second thought, and if that makes me an unfit royal heir, so be it.”

I could feel it, the moment her gaze lifted to mine. It only lasted an instant, before she turned back to tend to Rhyland, but it was there all the same. I’d been a fool not to tell her the truth. I only hoped she could find it in her heart to forgive me somehow.

I dropped to the ashen ground beside her, a tangle of fear and overwhelming terror surfacing when she didn’t even acknowledge me. Her gaze was pinned to my brother. He looked like hell but thank the goddess for our dracon

heightened healing ability, he would be fine by tomorrow. “I’m so sorry, Saphira.”

She shook her head, pink lips set in a hard line. “I can’t right now, Ryker.”

“Please, we have to talk about this.”

A young blonde woman appeared, wearing the typical flowing robes of a healer. She bent down beside Rhyland and got to work. A twinge of regret bubbled up in my chest, but I shoved it down. My dracon was only protecting his mate. It was the natural order of things.

“Saphira, please...” I tried again.

She spun at me, those piercing blue eyes ablaze. “In an hour, the trials start. I can’t focus on anything else but that. I’ve already screwed this up enough. If I have any hopes of healing our kingdom, I must win and the only way that’s going to happen is if you leave me alone.”

“Absolutely not,” I snarled. Trapping her chin between my thumb and forefinger, I forced her eyes to mine. “I will not allow you to do this alone. I swore my sword and my body to your name. It is not a vow I take lightly, and despite everything right and everything wrong between us, I intend to uphold my oath, regardless.”

She snatched my wrist and jerked free of my hold. “Then good luck trying to keep up with me.”

Forty

SAPHIRA



Do not cry. Do not cry.

Ryker's confession had nearly torn my heart out. How could my twin sister have been his fated mate? My stomach roiled at the implications. And how could he have kept it from me for months? I trusted him. Wholly. Like a fucking idiot.

I drew in a steadying breath as I slipped into my fighting leathers in the changing area beneath the arena. A brand-new pair had been provided to each of the contestants, the soft suede in the corresponding color of each royal dracon house. Deep green for me, crimson for the Ashbornes, blue for the Skyborne royals and finally black for the royals of Aquos and the traitorous Stormborne king.

Just outside the mahogany door, the rest of the royal dracon contestants waited. I should've been more anxious to see the other princes, but there was only one that had my heart catapulting against my ribs like a battering ram.

How could I trust Ryker to fight by my side after he lied to me like that?

Then again, the idea of facing Prince Eric after his indecent proposal didn't seem much better. And I didn't know anything about the younger Skyborne, Prince Ezra or the Stormborne heirs, Maximus and Maximillian.

I was royally screwed any way you looked at it.

A quick knock at the door sent me whirling toward the dark timber. "It's nearly time Princess Saphira."

I recognized the voice of the young man who had led us down the tunnels beneath the arena to this sort of contestant lounge. “Coming,” I finally murmured.

Glancing at myself in the mirror, the reflection of the gilded armor hitched along the wall caught my eye. We’d been assured we wouldn’t need it today, but just the idea of it made me queasy. Sparring against Ryker on a mountaintop was one thing but engaging these ruthless royals in battle was entirely another. Especially with my dracon still refusing to emerge. The Skyborne king had already tried to poison me or at least King Kiran... what would his sons be capable of?

“Princess Saphira?” Another quick knock forced my feet to the door.

I whipped it open and found the young man on the other side. Each of us had been assigned an escort upon our arrival. Mine was dressed in a green tunic matching my family’s bloodline. Too bad I’d been so flustered when I got here I couldn’t remember his name. “I’m ready,” I muttered.

“Good. It’s time for the opening ceremony.”

I nodded, my thoughts too jumbled to assemble an actual response.

As soon as I followed my escort into the sitting area of the lounge, Ryker shot up from his chair. A bruised, but at least no longer bloodied, Rhyland sat beside him staring blankly ahead. The future king didn’t spare me a glance as I passed. The remaining circle of royals didn’t offer the same courtesy.

Instead, four pairs of intense irises seared over me. I could only imagine what rumors had already begun about the Ashborne princes’ fight. Ryker had said it was imperative for no one to know about our bond, or we’d be forbidden from competing.

“Saphira...” Ryker began, but I cut him off with a wave of my hand.

“I said no.”

My escort peered at me from the corner of his eye but didn’t make a sound. Instead, he gestured toward the double

doors that would take us to ground level and the opening ceremony, presumably. The lower floors held not only the waiting area, but also sleeping quarters where we'd remain for the three days of trials. Why they insisted on sequestering us I wasn't sure.

"I'm sorry, what's your name again?" I asked the young blonde male beside me, ignoring the big, surly dracon trailing behind me and the short guy chasing after him.

"Viktor, princess." He dropped his chin to his chest. "It's my pleasure to assist you in any way possible during the trials."

"There's no need for that," Ryker barked and moved in step beside me. "As her personal guard, I will tend to all of the princess's needs."

"And I yours, prince," said the man in a crimson tunic, struggling to keep up on his short, stubby legs.

Great. Guess now we had two shadows to contend with.

I spun around and eyed the other young man. "And what is your name?"

"Landry, princess." He dipped his head into a bow.

"Nice to meet you." I gave him my best smile, despite my churning insides.

"We are honored to serve you both." Landry returned the smile, showing off a mouthful of crooked teeth.

I turned to my escort, avoiding the seething male beside me. He had some nerve to be so pissed off. I was the one that was brutally scorned.

I don't know how else to apologize. Ryker's smooth voice infiltrated my mind, and my traitorous body lit up at the sound.

"Don't you dare!" I snarled, whirling at him. "You have no right."

He lifted his hands, eyes wide and disgustingly genuine. "I apologize! It's hard to control."

Shaking my head, I turned to Viktor as we traversed the winding corridors to the surface of the arena. “Tell me about the opening ceremony.”

“Certainly, princess.” He bowed his head, and an errant tuft of light hair fell across his brow. “Each of the four royal houses will be introduced and the head of the council, King Silas Stormborne will speak on behalf of all the royal dracon.”

The hair at the back of my neck bristled at mention of the head of the house of Aquos. It’s a damned shame Ryker hadn’t been able to torture the truth out of him before the start of the trials were announced.

I will find out the truth before this is over. Ryker’s words pingponged across my head.

I shot him a scowl.

“I swear to you that wasn’t on purpose.”

“Then control yourself,” I snarled. I couldn’t have him in my head right now, not when I needed to focus. Thinking of his betrayal only expanded the growing knot of dread in my gut. The remainder of the ascent was spent in silence, with the heavy footfalls of the other competitors echoing just behind us.

When we finally reached the ground floor, Viktor stepped forward and swung the gilded doors open. The roar of the crowd drowned out the rapid thunder of my heart. The arena stretched out before us, each tier of the floating stands bursting to the brim with common dracon.

An aura of anticipation and sacredness permeated the entire arena, as if the very ground was aware of the momentous events that were about to unfold. I could feel it in my bones. It was a place where destinies were forged, where the next great Imperia would rise through trial by combat.

In the center stood a platform encircled by gilded columns with four elaborate thrones across the dark timber stand. The kings of Terre, Fuoco, Eyre and Aquos filled their respective seats, each expression carved into stone. I searched my

father's eyes for a hint of recognition, but his steely gaze remained fixed at an invisible point across the arena.

"The royals are not allowed to acknowledge us," Ryker whispered.

I nodded quickly, refusing to admit how much those murmured words of reassurance helped loosen the knot in my belly.

Landry and Viktor took the lead, marching us toward the raised dais. Behind us, a bruised Rhyland, then the Skyborne and Stormborne princes followed. Guilt twisted in my core with every covert glance at the Fuocan prince. It was my fault Ryker had beat him to a bloody pulp. If I couldn't win this, at least I was certain Rhyland would make a good leader. Had we ruined that chance?

King Stormborne stood, his light blue cape flapping on an invisible breeze as he marched to the edge of the platform. "Welcome to the Imperia Trials." His voice boomed across the stillness. "We have come here today as we do every fifty years to select the next great Imperia who will rule over our four kingdoms and bring the peace we so desperately desire. Through three days of trial and combat, the strongest of the royal dracon will emerge. And now, I will present this year's contenders."

Viktor nudged me toward the steps.

I inhaled a deep breath and compelled my feet forward with head held high.

"You can do this, Saphira," Ryker murmured as I passed.

"Our first contestant has already broken all the rules of the Imperia Trials as the first female to compete." King Silas sneered as he held his hand out. "May I present, Princess Saphira Highborne of the Kingdom of Terre."

Wild applause broke out through the audience, the sound so sharp and chaotic, it stole the slivers of breath from my lungs. What surprised me the most was where the clapping and hoots and hollers were coming from—the top tiers. Not from the royal dracon, but from the commoners.

Lifting my gaze to the top levels, I pressed my palms together and dipped my head. Hope blossomed in my chest, reminding me exactly why I'd entered this competition in the first place. For the people. For my people, who I'd given my life for fifty years ago. Though I couldn't remember the specifics of the sacrifice, the feeling it ignited remained. That sense of duty, that love for *all* citizens, royal and common, of Draconia.

"Thank you!" I shouted. "It is an honor to fight today and to represent *all* the people of this great land."

King Silas nudged me back as his son Prince Maximus stepped onto the dais. The rest of his words blurred in the background as each of the royals took their turn on the stand. Ryker was the very last, his deep voice pulling me from my spiraling thoughts.

"I may only be the second-born son of the great King Kiran Ashborne of Fuoco, but I vow to fight for the next three days as if I belonged on that throne. For you, royals and commoners alike, and for the rightful future Imperia." His gaze flicked to mine for only an instant before he turned to the crowd once more. A round of applause rang out through the stands, and my heart tripped over a beat.

The top tiers hadn't so much as clapped for any of the other royals. Why us? Why Ryker?

The thought sounded arrogant even in my own mind, but since my return, Ryker had drilled into me how beloved I was simply for being the sacrificial offering. But why the overwhelming support for the Fuocan second son?

"And now, onto the first competition of the great Imperia Trials." King Stormborne's sharp voice tore me from my spiraling thoughts and back to the present.

"Ready, princess?" Ryker's anxious eyes met mine.

Gritting my teeth, I dipped my head. "I was born ready."

Forty-One

SAPHIRA



“From fire the great dracon are born and in fire we must all die.” King Stormborne’s final words boomed across the arena.

I stood at the foot of the fire gauntlet, my heart kicking at my ribs in a desperate attempt to escape. So much for the first trial being an easy one. As dracon, our thick skin was somewhat impervious to fire, but not so much in our frail human forms. No wonder we weren’t allowed to summon our dracon for the first event.

“It’s a simple one,” Ryker whispered as he moved to my side, “an easy way to weed out the weak from the beginning.”

“Easy for you to say.” I stared at the maze of flames and sooty smoke, each hidden turn another chance at becoming dracon barbecue.

The object was easy enough, to be one of the first to make it to the end of the labyrinth alive. The bottom two would automatically be eliminated.

Prince Eric stepped to my other side, his long, golden locks plaited over his shoulder. “It’s certainly a pleasure to see you here, princess. After your hasty departure from Eyre, I feared it would be our last encounter for a while.”

Ryker bristled beside me, a storm of jealousy ravaging our bond. Ignoring him, I turned to the Skyborne prince who’d offered me the opportunity of another betrothal during our short time in his home. “I’m sorry for your brother,” I murmured.

Anger flashed across his light eyes. “When I become Imperia, I will crush the rebellion and ensure every one of those bastards pays for Elias’s life.”

“Then I sincerely hope you don’t win.”

Those cold orbs widened to the size of glacial moons. “Excuse me?”

“I truly am sorry for the loss of your brother, but don’t you see that more fighting isn’t the answer? The commoners have been suppressed and suffering for decades. The only way to ensure what happened to Elias never occurs again is by finding a new way to rule.”

Prince Eric scoffed, shaking his head. “I pity Rhyland for ending up with the likes of you.”

A deep growl vibrated Ryker’s throat. Before he could lunge at the Eyren prince, I slapped my arm across his chest.

“It’s clear something went terribly wrong when the goddess reincarnated your soul,” Eric spat before spinning on his heel.

Ryker lunged, but somehow, by the grace of Mother Terrea herself, I held him back. “Stop it,” I snarled. “You said it yourself that no one can know about us. If you keep that up, it won’t be long until everyone figures it out.”

The harsh set of his jaw softened, the fury in his eyes waning as he regarded me. “You said us?”

“Yeah, so?”

“You still believe that we are dracuori?”

I crossed my arms over my chest and pressed my lips into a hard line. As much as I didn’t want to think about the dracon bastard, I couldn’t think about anything else. “I know that I didn’t imagine my feelings for you, Ryker, and I doubt you could’ve done the same. I don’t pretend to understand it or anything about you and Serenity, but I’m not stupid enough to deny the truth.”

“Please, let me explain about Serenity—”

I pressed my finger to his mouth and shook my head. “No. I can’t deal with any of this right now, Ryker. I need to focus on the trials. Can you please just give me that?”

His eyes chased to the floor, and he dipped his head. “Of course, whatever you need.”

A buzzer sounded, and the remaining royals lined up on either side of us with Rhyland at the farthest end. Guilt pinched my heart, a steady jabbing as I watched him across the row of competitors. In only a few hours with the combined efforts of the healer’s potions and his natural dracon healing abilities, he already looked better.

A floating timer appeared overhead, shimmering red numbers blinking the two-hour timeline.

“Two hours?” I squealed.

“This isn’t a normal maze, Saphira. It’s constantly moving which will make it more difficult to find the exit. It’s not just the fire we’ll have to contend with but also the possibility of getting endlessly lost.”

“Awesome.”

The second buzzer rang out, and the gilded gates of the gauntlet squealed open.

Ryker’s hand wrapped around mine, and he tugged me through the opening as the royals raced to the entrance.

The moment we crossed the threshold, a blanket of heat wrapped around me, the intensity so piercing it sucked the air from my lungs. Fire and smoke filled the air, stinging my eyes. Obsidian walls kept us captive, the black stone so dark it annihilated all the light.

Lucky for me, I’d grown up with the same midnight walls in Mountainhelm Castle and despite my missing memories, I still felt accustomed to the dark shadows it cast.

Rhyland whizzed past us with his sword drawn, and I couldn’t help the pang of hurt that sank low in my chest. He had every right to hate me, and still, it stung. Though I couldn’t remember much about our relationship before, I knew

I cared about him. I'd hoped we could put the ugliness aside and work together for the length of the trials.

Give him time. Ryker's voice breezed through my mind.

"That's a luxury we don't have."

"You're right, it's not." He jerked me past a spray of gray smoke, the pungent scent clogging my nostrils.

Fire blazed around every corner in an intense array of colors. Each dracon bloodline produced a different hue, a deep lilac for Terre, bright crimson for Fuoco, a pale blue for Eyre and an ominous black for Aquos. Not that the color mattered particularly, any one would burn us to a crisp.

Bright crimson for Fuoco... wait a second. I spun at Ryker. "Why is your fire silver?"

He shrugged, the natural tan of his complexion paling a notch before a jagged line slashed across his mouth. "There's something—"

Prince Maximus raced by, dousing the torrents of flames and us along with it. With a flick of his hand, water sprayed from his palm, allowing the Aquos royal to run by completely unscathed.

"Hey, that's not fair," I barked as I swept the water from my lashes and tugged at my soaked tunic. "The Stormbornes have an unfair advantage with their elemental water abilities."

Ryker shook off the water from his unruly dark hair and weaved us through the sizzling smoke. "I'm afraid that's how it is, princess. But if we're lucky, we'll find our own advantages as well." He took the lead, choosing the corridors through the maze.

I had no idea where we were. We could have been walking in circles for all I knew.

Minutes passed as we darted around corners, avoided blasts of fire, and poisonous smoke-filled air. A fine layer of soot and sweat covered my brow, hell, covered every inch of me.

We turned down a dark passageway, and Ryker's arm slapped across my chest. "Wait," he hissed.

Nothing but silence lay before us. No fire. No smoke. No other contestants.

I glanced over my shoulder and found no one.

An eerie silence tinged the air, and goose bumps rippled over my skin. I reached for the dagger strapped to my thigh in the same instant Ryker drew his sword.

The air began to shift, and a dark shadow coalesced between the midnight walls.

"Get down!" Ryker shouted before a hailstorm of fire rained down.

I hit the ground with a smack, all the air evacuating my lungs when my protector's massive form landed on top of me. From between the cracks of Ryker's form, I could just make out the creature spitting fire and barreling toward us.

Ryker leapt to his feet, a sword in each hand and spun at the fire-breathing beast. "Stay down," he called out over his shoulder.

Like hell. I jumped up, gripping my daggers and focused on the dormant power quickly rising to the surface. My thumbs stroked the jade gemstones encrusted in the silver hilts and fiery energy blossomed.

Summoning his own fire in his palm, Ryker whirled a ball of silver flames at the six-legged smoke monster.

"What the hell is that thing?" I shouted.

"Demon," he barked back and threw another flaming sphere. It whizzed at the creature, catching it on one of its arms, legs? Who the hades knew? It let out a shriek, and its body twisted and coalesced into a new form with only four legs now.

Gripping the hilt of my favorite dagger, I hurled it at the creature, holding my breath as it flew end over end and sank into its smokey belly. The blade was sucked into the dark haze, then clattered to the ground beneath it.

“Blades won’t work on that thing,” Ryker shouted.

Now you tell me.

Come on, girl, I could use your help here. I searched the barren earth for a hint of life, something I could use to kill this thing. That unnamable presence stirred in my depths, and the glittering tattoos along my arms awoke.

I summoned my elemental Terren magic, focusing on the glowing embers in my core, and the cool jade stone pressed against my skin. Power expanded in my chest, filling my ribcage with fiery energy.

My arms shot out as the power continued to build and expand until I was certain my ribs would crack from the strain. The gilded ivy raced across my flesh, leapt off my fingertips and buried itself deep beneath the cracked earth.

What in the realms?

The demon hurled another round of demonfire at us, and I barely leapt out of the way in time. Ryker took the brunt of the hit, jumping in front of me as always. A hiss ripped through his clenched teeth as the flames seared into his flesh.

“Oh, my gods, are you okay?”

“Yes, I’ll be fine,” he snarled.

The earth began to rumble beneath us, and faint fissures of glowing light raced between my boots.

Ryker’s eyes widened as they spun at me. “Your powers?”

I nodded as the cracks grew larger and brilliant golden light illuminated the murky ground. A dark tangle of thorns rose up from the cracks, weaving and winding until they surrounded the monster. The earth quaked again, and my arms shot out to steady my trembling knees.

The mass of thorny vines climbed like snakes across the demon, spearing its shadowy form, again and again. Its shrieks rang out, bouncing across the sleek obsidian walls.

“Mother Terrea, it’s working,” Ryker breathed. His eyes met mine, and a glimmer of pride brightened the gleaming

silver.

The ropes of winding thorns dove deep into the earth, dragging the creature down with it, shaking the ground so violently, I dropped to the floor. Ryker huddled beside me, wrapping a strong arm around my shoulders.

Screams and smoke surrounded us as the earth continued to quake and crumble, sucking the demon down into the arid soil. I watched, power surging through my veins until the monster disappeared and all fell silent once again.

“Holy smoke monsters, I did it.” A laugh burst free, all the tension dissipating from my straining muscles.

Ryker wrapped his arms around me and tossed me into the air. I slid down his chest, and he pinned me to his body. “I knew you could do it. You are a force of nature, Saphira.” He dipped his head, his lips a hairsbreadth from my own.

A lethal mix of adrenaline and excitement pumped through my veins, and the thrill of the moment almost pulled me under. Almost. My gaze fixed to those lips, on the nauseating realization that they’d likely been all over my sister.

I pushed out of his hold and brushed the soot and ash off my leathers, keeping my gaze pinned to the cracks in the earth.

“I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have done that,” he muttered, dragging his palm across the back of his neck.

I looked up at him, the swell of regret racing through our bond too much to ignore. Thick black soot covered his forehead and chest, angry burn marks racing up and down his arms. “You’re hurt...”

Ryker shook his head, wincing as he scanned his broken, charred skin. “It will heal in no time.” He offered his hand, then jerked it back at the last second. “We should keep moving.”

I nodded quickly and stepped into stride beside him.

We marched through the maze of obsidian walls in a long moment of silence. It was as if the mystical labyrinth itself felt

the heaviness between us and was giving us an extended reprieve.

“I never felt for her what I feel for you,” he whispered a long minute later.

Goddess, I wanted to ignore him, to cut him off because I had so many more important things to deal with right now, but I couldn't help myself. I stopped and jerked his arm, forcing him to a halt. “How can you say that if Serenity was your fated mate?”

“We never completed the bond, Saphira. We never came close, we never had the chance.”

A wave of anguish pummeled the link between us, the pain so acute, I nearly doubled over.

“That's what I wanted to explain. I'd met Serenity countless times before and had never felt anything. Then last year at Havestia when all the kingdoms gathered for the great feast, I felt the pull to her, we both did, but it was so short-lived.” He huffed out a breath, his eyes intent on mine. “We never even kissed. Serenity's life was cut short, much too short.”

Ryker's gaze grew distant as if his thoughts had gone somewhere far, far away. “Somedays it feels like just yesterday. Rhyland and I were jousting in the courtyard at Flintguard Fortress when we heard the rebels were attacking Mountainhelm Castle. I left Fuoco immediately, but I was too late.” His voice grew rougher. “By the time I reached Terre, she was gone. Along with your dear mother. I was sure our connection had to have been real, because it truly felt like I lost a sliver of my soul that day.”

I drew in a steadying breath, willing the tears back. “Did you feel that way the day of the sacrifice?” I finally asked. It felt petty but I couldn't help myself.

He didn't move for a long minute, then he slowly shook his head. “I grieved for you, Saphira, I did. It wasn't just physical back then either, I was in love with you.”

His words pierced my fragile heart, stealing the air from my lungs.

“You may not have been my mate, but at the time, they were the strongest feelings I’d ever experienced for anyone.” He paused, sucked his bottom lip between his teeth and huffed. “Until now.”

I swallowed hard, emotion tightening my throat. Heat flushed my skin, and I was too hot and too cold all in the same instant. Mother Terrea, I wanted to tell this man the truth, that I was completely in love with him, but how could I?

“I don’t know how it’s possible, Saphira. I don’t pretend to understand the mysteries of the goddess. I only know that when you died you weren’t meant to be mine, but now you’ve come back to me, and you *are* mine.”

A tear raced down my cheek, but I quickly swept it away before the deluge followed. “We—we have to keep going.” I twirled around toward another passageway, the hiss of crackling fire burning just ahead.

With a grunt, Ryker trudged by me, his shoulder brushing mine as he moved past. It took every ounce of willpower I had not to lean into that touch. Instead, I forced my shoulders back, squaring them and trailed behind him, until I overtook his long strides and took the lead.

Forty-Two

RYKER



A breath of relief filled my aching chest when my eyes landed on the gilded double doors only a few yards ahead. Hovering midair was the timer, the flashing lights enumerating just over sixty minutes. Not only had we reached the exit, we'd done it in damned good time.

Saphira had been unstoppable after killing that demon. The tears vanished, replaced by a fire that reminded me of the woman I knew fifty years ago. The one who had fought bravely against King Valandril and the monsters he'd summoned, and who'd sacrificed it all for the good of not only Draconia but the entire realm of Terrea.

"We made it!" Saphira raced in front of me, drawing me from thoughts of the past.

The earth opened up beneath her feet a second before I could stop her.

"Saphira!" I screamed as she fell into a yawning pit. My feet were moving before I knew what had happened. Blinding fear clawed at my heart for an endless instant.

Until I saw those hands. Strong fingers digging into the dirt, clenching at the ledge.

I slid to the ground and wrapped my hands around her. She dangled from the edge, a fiery inferno licking at her heels from below. "I've got you." I dragged her back up to the surface and held her tight in my arms. She shuddered against my chest, a sob building in her throat. "By the goddess, Saphira, you scared the life out of me."

“No shit,” she mumbled against the torn leathers at my chest.

A deep laugh rumbled in my gut, and I held her flush against me until the last shreds of panic evaporated. “I’ve got you, Saphira, and I’m never letting you go again.” I tipped her chin up, forcing her eyes to mine. “Do you understand? I don’t care how long it takes for you to forgive me, but I’ll wait. Because we are meant to be. Why else would Mother Terrea bring you back to me?”

Her chin dipped, but I held fast.

“Come on, let’s cross that finish line. We have a trial to win.” Weaving my fingers through hers, I walked her past the fiery pit and through the gilded gates.

A buzzer rang out as we crossed, and a wave of wild applause filled the arena.

Saphira’s eyes lifted to the crowd, to the highest tier where all the commoners sat. Goddess, they adored her. Almost as much as I did.

Viktor and Landry, our trustee escorts, appeared a moment later with hearty congratulations. “You’re the first to finish the gauntlet, my princess,” Viktor crooned.

“Yes, congratulations, Prince Ryker.” Landry’s curious gaze dipped to our entwined hands.

With a quick squeeze, I released Saphira, every bone in my body screaming at me not to. As if she’d understood my motives, she turned to her escort and smiled. “Prince Ryker is my bodyguard, as the future king’s brother, it is his duty to see to my safety.”

“Of course, princess, that makes complete sense,” Viktor replied.

I wasn’t certain Landry believed it, his wary gaze lingering between us for a few moments longer. Something to deal with later. For now, I believed a victory celebration was in order.

The thump of approaching footfalls sent my head swiveling over my shoulder. Rhyland raced across the finish

line with Prince Eric right on his heels. Both males looked as bad as I imagined I must have with scorched leathers, burnt and soot-covered skin.

Still, Prince Eric somehow managed to pull himself together and approach Saphira. He swept the sweat and ash from his brow and dipped his head into a bow. “Congratulations, princess. I must say I did not expect to find you at this end of the finish line, and I’m beyond relieved so that I may apologize for my rather harsh words earlier. You see, I am still in mourning of course.”

She gave him a half-smile. “Of course.”

“In any event, congratulations on the win.” The buffoon dipped into a regal bow.

She motioned toward me, the smile only growing. “It’s all thanks to my guard.”

Rhyland scoffed, rolling his eyes.

“I assure you, princes, Saphira is being modest,” I cut in. “She was the one who saved my dracon hide more than once through the maze.”

“Hmm.” Prince Eric rubbed at his clean-shaven jaw. “Let’s just hope she’s able to summon her own dracon by tomorrow. Rumors are the creature refuses to emerge.”

A sneer curled my lips, and a growl erupted from deep within my gut. “Trust me, Eric, those rumors are entirely untrue. You just better hope you don’t get to meet her dracon upon the battlefield.”

His cheeks flushed a deep crimson, mouth gaping, and goddess, was it satisfying. Even Rhyland seemed flustered. He hadn’t seen his betrothed in a few days, it was entirely possible her dracon could have emerged. She hadn’t of course, but he didn’t need to know that.

“Enough bickering, gentlemen.” Saphira moved between us. “I’ve heard rumors of a victory celebration and that sounds much more interesting to me.”

“Save me a dance.” Prince Eric leered at *my* mate.

It took every ounce of restraint to keep from biting his head off.

“We’ll see how the night goes.”

I offered Saphira my arm, and to my surprise, she willingly weaved her hand through it.

“See you this evening, my princes.” She rewarded both males with a tight smile, and I led her off the arena floor.

The moment we were beneath the quiet, dark corridors of the battlefield, she slumped against me. My silly heart soared at the feel of her. “Do we really have to go to the afterparty?” she whined.

“Yes, but we don’t have to stay long.”

“Why do we have to go at all?”

“All the royals will be there, not only the kings and queens of the four kingdoms but all their cousins and nieces and nephews, etcetera, etcetera. It’s about time they had a good look at the future of Draconia.” I threw her a smile and was pleasantly surprised when she returned it.

“Can we take a nap first?”

“Your wish is my command, princess.” I led her down the halls in a comfortable silence. We’d survived the first day of the trials and now only two more remained. If all went according to plan, Saphira would be crowned the new Imperia in three-days time, and I would spend the rest of my days begging her to forgive me. And once she did, I’d claim her as mine forever.



I pressed my hand to the dark timber and strained to make out a sound through the thick wall. Saphira’s sleeping quarters were adjacent to mine, better still, there was an adjoining door I’d specifically requested as her royal guard.

The chamber was small, with dark mahogany walls and no windows, since we were underground. The furnishings were

sparse, but adequate with an adjoining bathroom. What more could one need in a situation such as this?

After escorting Saphira to her room nearly two hours ago, I'd spent most of the time pacing the wall between us. Not that I thought any harm would come to her here, but one could never be too sure. Besides that, my dracon was restless. He filled my chest, his presence rushing to the surface. He wanted out, and I could hardly blame him.

That restless energy flickered through our burgeoning mate bond. Something had Saphira's reluctant beast on edge as well. I only hoped that meant she was readying herself for a grand appearance tomorrow. There was no telling what the trial would entail, but if her dracon refused to emerge, one thing was certain, Saphira would not prevail.

The sound of soft footsteps spun my head toward the wall separating my chamber from Saphira's. My feet instinctively moved me to the door. I knocked softly, unable to keep my hands still any longer.

The squeak of the knob turning sent fiery anticipation blooming in my chest. The door opened, and Saphira filled the doorway. My heart staggered on a beat. "You look absolutely breathtaking." A flowing silver gown clung to her curves as if it had been painted on. The indecent neckline drew my gaze to the swell of her perfect breasts, and goddess damn it, I was jealous of that silky material for touching what was meant to be mine. My slacks were suddenly painfully tight as I imagined running my hands down the curve of those luscious hips.

"You don't look bad yourself," she murmured, a hint of roughness lacing her tone.

I wore the Fuocan royal guard uniform, more at home in it than any fancy suit. And if I was to be forced to endure a night of mingling with the arrogant royals, I needed at least a hint of comfort. But Mother Terrea, I'd be happy if I could just spend the entire night basking in Saphira's beauty.

"So you think I'm beautiful?" A smirk twitched at the corner of her lip.

“Did you hear my thoughts?” Realms, I hope she hadn’t felt the surge of lust. As it was, I could barely contain myself.

She nodded slowly. “It’s been happening more lately.”

A smile melted across my face. That meant only one thing...

“So should we get this over with?” She held out her arm, and I laced my own through it.

I tucked her into my side, and again, it startled me how perfectly she fit. I’d spoken the truth earlier, I always tried to when it came to Saphira. The dracuori bond with Serenity had been so brief, I’d never experienced its full magnitude. This feeling of utter happiness and satisfaction just having my mate beside me was unfathomable.

I led her out of my chamber and into the hallways. A rush of commotion filled the corridors as the remaining royal competitors appeared, all dressed in their finest linens. During my manic pacing earlier, the official announcement had been made that Prince Ezra of Eyre and Prince Maximillian of Aquos had been the last to emerge from the labyrinth and therefore, the first two eliminated.

I couldn’t say I was sorry to see either go.

Now only my brother, Eric, and Maximus remained. One from each kingdom, with the exception of my sibling and me.

A flash of golden hair caught my eye, and my entire body stiffened as Prince Eric of Eyre sauntered closer. His gaze remained fastened on Saphira, and the urge to claw his eyes out with my talons was overwhelming. If he didn’t stop ogling her, I was fairly certain my dracon would rip out of my skin and tear his head off to make sure those eyes would never again chase to her direction.

“Princess Saphira.” The Skyborne heir dipped into a bow. “You look stunning as always.” A smarmy smile curled his thin lips.

“And what about me?” I barked, positioning myself between him and *my* mate.

A whiny chuckle leaked out. “Always so entertaining, Ryker. I suppose that’s what happens when you spend all your time with common guards.”

Saphira’s hold on my arm tightened. *Behave yourself.*

“Hmm.” I released a grunt. “Those common guards have more loyalty, more integrity and more ferocity in their pinky fingers than you do in your entire body, Eric.”

The royal’s face paled, a shade of lime tinting his cheeks. “No need to be rude, Ashborne.”

Saphira tugged me into her side and motioned down the hallway. “Enough, my princes. There’s been an abundance of battling today, verbal or otherwise. I’d like to get to the festivities.”

“Well, said, Saphira.” Eric shot me a smug smile before turning his attention back to my dracuori. “Will you save me that dance? You never answered me earlier.”

“No,” I growled. “She will not. She is betrothed to Rhyland in case you’ve forgotten, and I don’t believe it would be at all proper. Especially given the indecent proposal you made on your late-night visit while we were guests at Airslinger Citadel.”

Eric’s mouth twisted into a snarl. “We’ll see about that.” He spun on his heel and marched down the corridor, disappearing into the growing crowd ahead.

“Ass,” I muttered.

Saphira’s elbow sank into my side as she pulled me forward. “Oh, come on, grumpy, don’t let him ruin our night.”

My eyes swiveled to hers, the swell of hope that ignited from that one word truly ridiculous. “*Our* night?”

Her cheeks rosied, and she drew her bottom lip between her teeth. “You know what I mean, the contestants, all of us.”

The balloon of hope deflated, a slow leak until my chest felt like it would cave in. Steadying myself, I continued toward the sound of music and laughter drifting down the

endless hall. I couldn't lose hope so easily, I'd fight for Saphira until my dying breath.

Forty-Three

SAPHIRA



I drew in a breath, my eyes jumping from corner to corner of the extravagant ballroom hidden in the bowels of the arena. The opulent ball unfolded with an air of enchantment and regal splendor. The women, draped in gowns of iridescent silks and velvets in hues of emerald, sapphire, and garnet, moved with grace, their dresses reminiscent of dragon scales shimmering in the moonlight. Chandeliers glittered above suspended in midair, the crystals casting rainbows of light across the chamber. Four marble columns stood at the corners of the packed dance floor, each engraved with the symbol of the four royal dragon houses. Servants fluttered around the space carrying trays of food and crystal flutes.

“It’s beautiful,” I murmured. It was the most extravagant ball I’d ever seen. Or at least, from what I remembered.

“Mmm, you are.” Ryker’s warm breath tickled the shell of my ear.

Ryker! I squeaked through our bond. I had to keep reminding myself how angry I was, but with each minute that passed, the fury waned. Nothing like nearly dying in a fire gauntlet to put things into perspective. Knowing he hadn’t actually had sex or even kissed my twin sister also helped a little.

But it was the lie that stung most. If he’d only been honest with me...

Rhyland scooted by us, his gaze intent on something across the room. Goddess, I hated seeing him like this.

“Rhyland, please!” I reached for him as he tried to dart past.

He spun around, scanned the room, then pried my fingers off his forearm. “What is it, Saphira?”

“I was hoping we could talk.”

“Now?” He eyed the room full of royals.

“A dance maybe?”

Ryker bristled beside me, a wave of jealousy streaking through our connection, but I ignored him. I owed Rhyland this.

“I don’t think so.” His jaw stiffened. “Besides, you’re not my betrothed anymore, correct? So there is no need to pretend.” He whirled on his heel, disappearing in a circle of female dracon.

So that’s it? It’s really over?

Is that not what you wanted? Ryker’s voice sped through my mind.

“Yes and no.”

Fury flashed across those molten silver orbs.

“No, because our mating was supposed to break this curse of royal heirs, and yes, because despite knowing that I shouldn’t want you for so many damned reasons, I just can’t help myself.”

The corner of his lip tipped up into a rueful smile and Mother, that look alone had fire racing through my core. It had to have been the dracuori. No other male had ever had that effect on me.

Soft, enchanting music filled the air, played by a symphony of instruments that evoked oddly familiar melodies. Taking my hand, Ryker spun me in a tight circle, before reeling me into his chest. His palm landed on the small of my back, and he guided me onto the dancefloor.

“No, no, no,” I whispered. “I don’t know how to dance to this!”

He swept me into his arms, tangling his fingers through mine. “You just asked my brother to dance a second ago.”

“That was different. I was just trying to get him to talk to me, to forgive me.”

His feet began to move and somehow, I followed on instinct. “Forgive you for what?”

I swallowed hard, locking my eyes to his. “For allowing you to steal me away from him.”

“It’s not stealing if you were never his to begin with.” The rough edge to his tone streaked straight to my lower half.

My breath hitched as he drew me closer, his hand splayed possessively across my lower back. “You’re mine, Saphira, do you understand? I don’t care if it takes multiple lifetimes for you to forgive me, but I will have you.”

The ferocity in his tone only intensified the rush of emotions. The truth was I’d already forgiven him. It was stupid and weak, and I’d like to blame it on the effects of the dracuori bond, but the fact remained, I belonged with Ryker. I didn’t think there was anything he could do that I wouldn’t forgive.

Which was wholly terrifying.

He led me across the dancefloor in a daze, winding between the crowd of royals, contestants, and guests. Familiar faces rushed by as he twirled and dipped me, but it was all a blur. In this moment, it was only Ryker and me, in a gilded bubble that no one could touch.

His typical scowl melted away, showcasing gleaming white teeth. And goddess, he was gorgeous when he smiled. I didn’t think I’d ever seen him so happy.

The minutes turned to hours, until sweat slickened my brow and a burning desire settled low in my belly. After countless dances with our bodies flush against each other, we crept desperately close to a crescendo.

“We should probably get out of here,” Ryker whispered, his nose nuzzling my sensitive lobe. “Those nosey royals are

starting to stare.”

Because we’d only danced with each other since the moment we arrived. I knew it was risky, but I just couldn’t stop. My hips ground against his, finding the growing erection, and a low growl vibrated his throat. “Saphira…” His lips were a whisper from mine.

“Yes,” I rasped out, “you’re right, we should go.”

The race from the ballroom, across the dim corridors, to my chamber passed in a blur of laughter and pounding hearts. Ryker whipped the door open, and his mouth was on mine before it slammed shut.

His lips captured my own, tongue darting between my teeth to explore, to pillage every unclaimed corner. He walked me back toward the bed, my legs buckling as they hit the footboard. I fell back and his arm snaked around my waist, tempering the fall. He climbed on top of me, silver eyes like molten steel. He planted a hand on each side of my head, caging me in. His powerful chest, that musky scent, blanketed me in everything Ryker.

“Do you forgive me?” he breathed.

My head dipped, emotion tightening my throat.

“I need you to say it, Saphira. I’ve dreamt about this moment for fifty endless years, and I refuse to look back on it thinking it was anything but perfect.”

“I forgive you, Ryker, as long as you swear that you’ll never lie to me again.”

His lips pursed and darkness etched along his features, deepening the crease between his brows. “I swear it.”

My hands wrapped around his ass, driving his hips to mine. I needed this, I needed him.

“I love you, Saphira.” His words were so soft I wasn’t certain I’d heard them. My eyes widened and met two shimmering pools of silver. “I love you so much it’s sheer agony not being able to touch you, not being near you at all times.”

“I love you, too,” I whispered. And Mother, it was the gods damned truth. I’d never loved anyone like this.

He paused, bracing himself over me, and I let out a whimper. “There’s something else I need to tell you...”

“Right now?” I squealed as my fingers made quick work of the laces on his trousers.

“Well...”

“Will it impact this moment between us?”

He shook his head. “I don’t think so. Or at least, I hope it won’t...”

“Is it about my sister?”

“No.” His head whipped back and forth.

“You’re not taking back the love thing?”

A rueful smile curled his lips. “Never.”

“Then it can wait. Fifty years is too long.”

A smile melted across his face, chasing away the momentary darkness. His lips captured mine again as his hand moved down my torso and lifted up my skirts. “You’re going to have to sit up so I can get this gown off.”

Damned corset and all the strings and ties.

“Later,” I mumbled against his mouth and moved his hand to my panties. “I need you inside me now.”

His entire body shuddered above me, those eyes sparkling like the finest jewels. “Saphira, I must warn you, I may not be able to control my dracon if we do this. Once I’m inside you, he’s going to be desperate to complete the bond.”

I framed his face with my hands, pulling him close. “You *will* be able to control him. Because you know how important the trials are, and so does your dracon.”

“You certainly have a lot of faith in me.”

I drew his pants down over his hips, and his arousal sprang free. I bit down on my bottom lip as I took him in. Good

goddess, he was huge. I'd never seen such an enormous, beautiful dick. A pang of irrational fear bolted through me.

A wicked chuckle vibrated the air between us as Ryker gripped the waistband of my panties and tore them right off. A powerful tremor quaked through my body, a mix of fear and the thrill of excitement all consuming. "I promise it won't hurt, Saphira. We were made for each other."

My head bounced up and down, lip still snagged between my teeth. Fiery heat raced through my core as Ryker fit his hips between my thighs. He bent his head to mine and dropped a chaste kiss to my forehead. "I love you, Saphira. I've loved you for decades on end and will continue to love you until the last dracon stands." He pressed another kiss to my lips this time. "There were a few terrifying moments when I thought I would never be with you like this again. It almost killed me."

"You'll never be without me again." I captured his lips, and that raging heat filled my chest.

Lining himself up at my entrance, my core clenched with anticipation. He thrust inside me, and a burst of glittering stars consumed my vision. A gasp escaped my clenched lips, and fear streaked through our bond. "Are you okay?" he murmured, freezing inside me.

"Yes, don't stop." I grabbed his ass, urging him deeper. I tightened around him, my body stretching and molding to his thick length.

Ryker was right, we were made for each other.

The bed trembled as he began to move, slowly rolling his hips and gods, it was like finally coming home. I'd never felt like I truly belonged here, a part of Draconia, until this very moment.

A golden glow caught my eye, and the vines across my arms began to shift and wriggle over my skin. What the...? The earth beneath the bed rumbled and shook.

"Ryker!" I glanced over his shoulder as deep vines of ivy crawled up the footboard.

“Your powers,” he murmured, a shit-eating grin splitting his lips. “They’re awakening because of this.” He glanced between us, at our entangled bodies. He slowed his thrusts, watching intently as he thrust in and out.

Each time we came together, the energy between us intensified. Plants shot up from the earth, weaving around the bed and filling the small chamber with an array of colorful flora.

“Oh, my goddess,” I squealed as a veritable jungle grew around us.

Dracuori. That familiar feminine voice echoed through my mind. I’d never heard her say that before...

Dracuori. The word resounded, over and over again, growing louder with each thrust.

“Do you hear that?” I rasped out, my arms tangled around Ryker’s waist driving him deeper.

“I do.” His grin grew wider as the encroaching jungle expanded, vines crawling up the walls and an array of flowers blooming from every corner.

Molten lava surged through my veins, the heat between us a heady mixture of pleasure and mystical energy. Every thrust pushed me closer to the edge. It had only been minutes, and already I knew I wouldn’t last long.

Ryker’s hand moved between us, his finger finding that tight bundle of nerves at my core. I let out a groan as he began to circle.

“Mmm, you like that princess?”

“Yes,” I panted out. Between his finger and the increasing tempo of his hips, I was barely holding on. My legs wrapped around his waist, urging him on. I couldn’t get enough of him, couldn’t get him close enough. Fiery desire licked at my core, intensifying every roll of my hips. We moved as one in perfect synch, one body of raging emotion and endless pleasure.

“I’m close,” I whispered against his lips.

“Not yet.” He drove harder, deeper, until I had no concept of where he ended, and I began.

A rough growl vibrated my chest, that presence rising to the surface amid the lush greens that enveloped us. I glanced up to meet Ryker’s eyes thinned to narrow slits, the burning silver consuming those luminescent orbs. A snarl peeled back his lips, revealing sharp, elongated canines.

“Ryker?” If he bit me that would start an unstoppable chain of events. So much for *his* control, I wasn’t sure I’d be able to contain my dracon from claiming *her* mate.

“I’m okay,” he muttered, blinking quickly. “Just kiss me.”

I pressed my lips to his, slightly terrified those fangs would draw blood, but somehow as my tongue found his, they morphed back to their normal blunted state. I kissed him harder, winding my arms around his neck.

“It’s coming,” he warned, and I could feel him twitch inside me. “Are you ready?”

Ready? I was about to explode.

His slick finger picked up its pace, circling the tight bundle at my center until I squirmed beneath him, and a moan broke free. He thrust into me, long and deep and I hurtled over the edge, crying out his name.

Wave after wave of pleasure crashed over me as he continued to rock his hips against mine, prolonging the fiery sensations racing over every inch of my being. He finally fell, his warmth spilling inside me as he groaned my name.

“I love you, Saphira, gods, I love you so much.”

When the final remnants of the earthshattering tremors subsided, he lay on top of me, dropping his forehead to mine. “That was incredible, Saphira. So much better than I remembered. It had always been good between us, but this... this was soul rending.”

A twinge of the high simmered at his words. I hated that I couldn’t remember us. That I couldn’t remember anything before that damned sacrifice. Running his hand beneath my

waist, he rolled me on top of him. Then his eyes met mine as he cupped my cheek. “You will remember, I’m sure of it.”

“How do you know?”

“I suppose it’s the same way that you knew I’d be able to control my dracon from completing the bond.”

The hint of a smile returned to my face.

“And goddess, I wanted to, Saphira. I fought with every ounce of my being to keep my dracon at bay. He, no, *we* need to claim every part of you.”

A swell of happiness filled my chest, bloating my heart. “Well, you already have my heart, and my, you know.” I glanced down to my bare lower half, cheeks heating.

“I want your soul. The other half that belongs to my dracon. The dracuori.”

My head dipped, chin resting on his chest. “I want that too, and as soon as the trials are over, we’ll make it official.”

Ryker’s smile was so wide I was worried it would slide right off his face. He gripped my thighs and parted my legs around his hips so I straddled him, then he sat up. His hard length rubbed against my still-throbbing center.

How was he ready again?

His arms encircled me, deft fingers quickly finding the tangle of laces at the back of my corset. “Now, shall we do this again, the proper way?”

“Again, right now?”

He popped his finger into his mouth and sucked, his cheeks hollowing. Heat blossomed as I watched him release his finger and bring it between my legs. He dragged it across my center, and my hips grinded into his fiery touch. “I think you’re more than ready.” A wicked grin stretched his lips.

He wasn’t wrong. As incredible as it sounded, I *was* ready for him again. I didn’t think I’d ever get enough.

His fingers got to work on the ties, and endlessly long minutes later, the corset sloughed off. His heated gaze raked

over my bare breasts for an excruciating moment. “So beautiful, Saphira,” he murmured before he devoured my nipple.

A moan escaped as my head fell back, and sheer pleasure streaked all the way down to my core. He lifted my hips and his arousal prodded at my entrance. Heady desire bubbled up again, and I dropped down, slowly taking him in. And in. The overwhelming sense of fullness and completeness was enough to ignite the burning embers anew. Closing my eyes, I rocked against him.

Ryker’s hands curled around my thighs forcing himself deeper inside. “I’m going to make love to you all night long, princess, and every night for the rest of our days.”

I forced my lids, heavy with desire, to meet his fierce gaze. “You promise?”

“I swear it upon my life, mate.”

Forty-Four

RYKER



I spent the remainder of the night watching Saphira sleep. Not that many hours remained after I'd claimed her nearly a dozen times in every position, across the verdant jungle she'd created in our room.

It was beautiful. She was beautiful.

She slept soundly on top of me, both of us still completely bare. I'd hoped to have her once more before the start of the trials, but that would have been selfish. She needed her rest if she was to win today. And goddess, she needed to win.

I only hoped after last night, her dracon would emerge. I could feel her every time I sank inside her sweetness. There was no reason for her to hide any longer, and I'd drag her out today if it was the last thing I did.

I swept Saphira's azure hair off her forehead, reveling in her scent, in her porcelain skin. Her cheek was pressed against my chest, my heart rapping out a frantic beat to reach her. I was already hard again, the feel of her soft form against mine too powerful to control the desire.

I could only imagine what it would be like once we completed the bond. My dracon was insatiable, and once we were mated, his only goal in life would be to impregnate his dracuori. Thank the human physicians for whatever magical pill Saphira ingested daily to keep that from happening. While I wanted nothing more than to have a whole litter of children with my mate, it would have to wait until peace was restored to the kingdom.

A niggle of dread awoke in my gut. I must tell Saphira the truth about the rebels... That fear strummed through my system at revealing my traitorous actions. Would she understand? Be able to forgive me? She had to...

Saphira stirred, her warm breath spilling over my chest. I held her tight against me so she wouldn't roll off as I had all night. I needed her close to me, a part of my body; it was just never close enough.

She lifted her head, dazzling eyes meeting mine. "Good morning," she mumbled.

"The best morning." I pressed a kiss to her lips and wrapped her tighter in my embrace. Goddess, I wasn't ready for what was to come. The idea of letting her go stole the air from my lungs.

"For someone who wasn't sure if he could control his dracon, you did a pretty damned good job. Again and again and again." A mischievous smile tilted the corners of her lips.

"Mmm, you were right, princess. I suppose I can do all sorts of things when you're involved."

"It feels like you're ready to do them yet again." Her hand glided between us, finding my arousal.

Goddess, I wanted her again. It would never be enough. Still, I grumbled, "We shouldn't..."

Her eyes widened, a hint of disappointment coursing between us. "Did you seriously just deny me?"

I couldn't help the chuckle that burst out. "I know, it's completely out of character, and the some of the hardest words I've ever had to speak in my life." Pushing myself up to a sitting position, I dragged her along with me until she sat up straddling me. Realms, this was even worse. Now my arousal stood between us, announcing my obvious desire.

Saphira's gaze followed my line of sight, and a devious smirk lit up those blazing azure orbs. "It seems like you're the only one who's not on board."

I let out a groan and forced myself to focus. “There’s something important I need to tell you...” I’d imagined this moment dozens of times but no matter how many times I’d practiced it, it never came out right.

How could I tell her the secret I’d kept hidden for my entire life? A secret that could change everything...

“So tell me.” Her hands framed my face, eyes drilling so deep into my own I feared she’d rip the devastating truth right out of my soul. “You said it wouldn’t change anything between us, right?”

“Technically, I said it wouldn’t impact making love to you, nor would it change how much I loved you.”

Her lips puckered, and she sat up straighter, hands falling to her side. I felt her absence acutely the moment she stopped touching me. “Just tell me, Ryker.”

“Do you remember the day the rebels attacked Flintguard Fortress? The day you and Rhyland were to celebrate the mating ceremony?”

Pounding at the door froze the words perched on my tongue.

Saphira stiffened above me, and I reached for the discarded blanket, tossing it over her shoulders. “What is it?” she called out.

“Princess Saphira it’s nearly time for the second day of trials to commence. You must meet the remaining competitors in the arena in twenty minutes.”

A curse fled my lips as I glanced up at the clock on the wall. How had I let the time slip away from us like that?

“Okay!” She turned back to me, eyes wide. “Well?”

I hesitated for a long moment. What if I’d underestimated her reaction to the truth? I couldn’t have her distracted before the day’s events. She needed her dracon to emerge today if she had any hopes of winning. “It’ll have to wait until later.”

“Are you sure?”

I nodded stiffly and wrapped my hands around her waist, lifting her. “I have to get back to my room.” Once I’d dropped her gently onto the bed of lush grass, I hurried toward my chamber. The last thing we needed was that guard finding my room empty.

“Ryker...”

The concern in her tone stopped me midstride. I spun back, anxiety rippling across my chest. “Yes?”

“Please tell me you didn’t do something incredibly stupid that day just to prevent the ceremony from happening?”

The truth was that it hadn’t only been because of her. What I’d done was the culmination of months of deliberation, of observing, of clandestine meetings and plotting. The fear of permanently losing Saphira had only been the final push I’d needed.

“If I had, would you be able to forgive me?”

Sharp knocks echoed from my chamber, diverting my attention.

“I’m sorry, I have to answer.”

She nodded, lips pressed in a tight line.

I searched the bond between us for an inkling of what she was feeling, but nothing but an icy chill dribbled across the link. Forcing my feet forward, I darted into my chamber and slammed the door shut behind me. The crack held an odd sense of finality, and dread pooled in my gut.

Saphira had to forgive me. I couldn’t live without her.



The five of us stood in a line atop the dais, the remaining royal dracon competitors. Prince Eric was about a yard too close to Saphira for my liking. The sleezy Eyren royal still had his sights on my mate, I was certain of it. He’d watched her all night as we danced, clearly noticing as surely everyone else had that her betrothed had remained far away all evening.

I'd honestly been shocked Father hadn't stepped in and forced Saphira away from me. Perhaps, he'd finally given into the inevitability of it all, as Rhyland had. My brother, again, stood on the furthest side away from us, with Eric and Maximus between Saphira and him. He still hadn't spared his ex-betrothed a passing glance.

I hazarded a peek at Saphira from the corner of my eye. She hadn't spoken more than a word to me since we emerged from our respective chambers. I wondered if hers was still blanketed in a jungle of green after our tempestuous night.

Are you okay? I shot through our bond.

I guess.

Are you worried about the competition?

That and other things.

Mother Terrea, I'd been an idiot not to tell her everything from the beginning.

King Silas Stormborne stood, cleared his throat, and his voice boomed across the arena. Like yesterday, the floating stands were filled with spectators. Today, the commoners seated at the very top would have the best view for the aerial acrobatics.

"Welcome to the second day of the Imperia Trials," King Silas announced. "In today's events, the great royal dracon will take to the sky in a battle of beastly combat. Only physical prowess shall prevail today, no elemental power is allowed in this trial. Two dracon will compete at a time, contestants eliminated in each round. By the end of the day, only two competitors will remain for the final event tomorrow."

Saphira shuddered beside me, her shoulders trembling.

"You'll be fine," I whispered.

"How do you know? My stupid dracon still hasn't emerged. Even after... you know..."

"She will. I'm certain of it."

Prince Eric's watchful gaze pivoted in Saphira's direction, and it took every last ounce of restraint not to gouge his wandering eyes out. "Good morning, princess, you're looking rather rested this morning." He flashed a sneer, showcasing pointy canines.

Saphira looked about as well-rested as I did. The desires of the dracuori bond were not easily quelled, and the night of endless lovemaking was evident in the dark patches of soft skin beneath her eyes.

"Too much partying last night, I guess." She shot him a narrowed glare, and my dracon purred a contented sigh.

"Hmm, yes, I did see you dancing quite a bit." He tossed me a sidelong glance. "With your devoted guard."

I took my mention as an invitation to join the conversation, pressing closer to Saphira's side. "I take my job seriously."

"I see that. It doesn't seem as if your brother is too concerned with the safety of his betrothed." He scratched his chin, watching Rhyland. "I wonder why that is."

"That is none of your concern," I gritted out before Saphira opened her mouth to speak.

Saphira shoved me aside and glared up at the royal. "None of this is any of your business, Eric. I see what you're doing, and I already told you I'm not interested. I've already found my mate, and I have no intention of forsaking him." Her eyes flashed to mine before locking on the irritating royal, and gods, that one look had the knot of unease in my gut slowly unraveling.

"The first competitors today will be my son, Prince Maximillian Stormborne, and Prince Eric Skyborne." Applause broke out across the crowds as the two princes moved to the center of the arena. A shimmery haze blanketed the pair, crawling up their booted feet until nothing but the mystical fog remained.

An instant later Eric's pale yellow dracon emerged from the haze with Maximillian's turquoise beast nipping at its heels.

Saphira sucked in a sharp breath as their wings unfurled, and the two monsters shot to the sky. Despite months back in Draconia, she still hadn't quite gotten used to the enormous creatures. Once hers finally emerged, I was sure that would change.

And that day was today.

I spun at Saphira as snarls and growls rent the air just over our heads. "It's time, princess. You must summon her now."

"I can't—I've tried, she just refuses."

"Your dracon still hasn't emerged?" Rhyland's voice over my shoulder sent my heart leaping up my throat.

"No," I hissed.

"That's odd, if you are her supposed mate."

"I don't pretend to understand any of it, Rhyland," I snarled.

"You really do not, do you?" A wistful gaze flashed across my brother's eyes. "I was so angry at both of you, but mostly at you, Ryker. Your betrayal..." He shook his head, squeezing his eyes closed. "At any rate, I spent all night in bed stewing. After seeing you together at the ball, I simply couldn't deny it any longer. But, like you, I didn't understand it. Not until, I thought of Serenity."

Saphira's expression fell, her shoulders rounding.

"Rhyland, don't," I snarled.

"No, listen, this is important." He squeezed my shoulder and fixed his eyes to mine. "Dracuori bonds are only supposed to occur once, with *one* dracon soul."

Saphira watched him, a mixture of anguish and awe in her weary expression.

"Saphira and Serenity were twins. It is often said that twins share one soul, and maybe, just maybe, when Saphira gave her life in the sacrifice and her soul was returned to her, perhaps a sliver of Serenity's went with it. There is no denying that there is something different about her now, don't you agree?"

I nodded, begrudgingly. I'd been in love with Saphira before but this time, our connection was soul deep, something unlike anything I'd ever experienced in her past life.

“So you're saying Serenity and I shared a soul?” Saphira's eyes were glassy, her throat tight.

“It is the only explanation I can think of. When you crossed over the Veil to return to Draconia, perhaps a piece of her was still out there, and now she is back inside you.”

Saphira pressed her hand to her chest and rubbed the spot just over her heart. Tears filled her eyes, and she leapt into Rhyland's arms. “Thank you,” she whispered against his crimson leathers. “Thank you so much, Rhyland.”

Forty-Five

SAPHIRA



Serenity. Blocking the thunderous roar of the crowd as the dracon battled overhead, I closed my eyes and searched my missing memories for those faint images. A laughing young girl with hair as blue as my own cascading across slim shoulders. Running and giggling as we raced through the winding obsidian corridors of the castle. Tatá was chasing us, snarling like a horrible beast, but an occasional belly laugh would burst through the frightening roars. My hand closed around an identical one, tugging her faster down the halls.

Serenity.

I'm here, Saphira. I've always been with you since the moment you sacrificed yourself for Terrea.

I gasped, a tear rolling down my cheek. *Serenity, is it really you?*

A part of me, yes. A sliver of my soul lives within the essence of your dracon, our dracon.

Why didn't you tell me a long time ago? My thoughts flashed back to all the sessions with the psychiatrist, all the technical explanations for hearing voices in my head.

You weren't ready, and now you are.

A sharp screech tore me from the mental conversation, shooting my gaze to the sky. The yellow dracon snapped at the turquoise one's wings, and another shriek echoed through the arena. Prince Eric sure wasn't fucking around.

Ryker and Rhyland stood on either side of me, both intent on the battle above. One of us would face the winner... if I could only get my dracon to show herself. *Serenity*? I searched for that familiar presence, but she was gone again.

Eric's dracon soared overhead, gaining speed with the mighty flap of his wings. Maximillian's slightly smaller beast darted through the clouds, his wounded wings slowing him down. The digital clock hovered overhead, ticking down the minutes of the battle. If neither dracon forfeited when the time was up, the four kings of the council would choose the winner.

From the look of Maximillian's dracon, I doubted he'd survive the remaining ten minutes. Eric was brutal, teeth gnashing, talons clawing at the other royal every time he came within striking distance. The dracon twirled through the sky, their elegant movements all at once beautiful and terrifying. Flashes of pale yellow and vivid turquoise streaked across the puffy white clouds, thunderous roars vibrating the arena below.

"Who do you think will win?" I whispered.

Ryker and Rhyland responded simultaneously. "Eric."

Ugh, great, that was my guess too.

Ryker spun at me, silver irises pulsating. "It's time, Saphira. Either one of us could be chosen for the next round and you must be ready."

I forced my head to dip. Surviving without my dracon wasn't possible anymore. It was now or never. "Okay," I murmured.

A thundering pulse vibrated the air overhead, and all three of our gazes lifted to the sky in the same instant. An enormous, dark mass flew straight for the arena.

"What is that?" I asked as a scream tore through the stadium.

Ryker's head swiveled to the floating stands, to the lower level where the royals sat. More screams broke out through the crowd. "Curses!" he shouted. "Rebels!"

The ominous cloud above surged closer, and a wave of dread kindled in my gut. The pounding of wings vibrated the air, and a thunder of dracon coalesced only a few dozen yards away.

At least twenty dracon flooded the skies, shrieking and growling. The head dracon opened its maw, showcasing row after row of jagged teeth. It drew in a breath and dragonfire spewed from its mouth showering the entire arena in crimson flames.

“Get down!” Ryker shouted, grabbing Rhyland and me by the collar of our tunics and shoving us to the ground.

Screams and cries echoed overhead as the flames darted across the stands, burning royals and commoners alike. I hazarded a peak beneath Ryker’s massive arm. The spectators pushed and shoved, some jumping off the burning floating platforms. The scent of burnt wood and charred flesh blanketed the smoky air.

Rhyland and Ryker leapt to their feet, and I jumped up, following their lead. The gilded gates of the arena groaned, and another quake raced across the ground. The doors whipped open, the golden metal whining in protest as a gigantic dracon burst through the opening.

“When did the common dracon get so big?” Rhyland shouted.

“Not sure, brother, but now is not the time to focus on it. We need to move.”

Rhyland tore his clothes off, the familiar shimmer of gold racing up his legs. An instant later, his enormous dracon appeared, dwarfing the one that had just broken through the front gates of the stadium. With a powerful flap of his mighty wings, he soared up into the raging battle above.

“Be careful!” I shouted behind him.

The pounding of heavy footfalls sent my gaze spinning toward the group of males racing toward us with gleaming swords drawn.

“Saphira, get ready!” Ryker shouted unsheathing the sword from his back, a second before we were swallowed up in the wave of rebels.

I reached for my blade as four menacing figures encircled us, each wearing the worn, haggard tunics of the commoners and swords that were chipped and stained with rust. Ryker, gripping his sword tightly, stood in the center, a snarl on his lips. “Don’t do this,” he snarled. “We aren’t your enemies.”

The tallest one loomed closer. “It doesn’t even matter anymore. We’re out for royal blood and both of you fit the bill.”

With a battle cry, the first opponent lunged at Ryker, his sword aimed straight for the heart. He sidestepped, narrowly avoiding the blade, and countered with a swift strike that disarmed his attacker. The clang of the falling sword echoed across the arena.

Before he could catch his breath, the second male was on him, swinging a broadsword in a wide arc. Ryker ducked, the gust of the blade passing over his head, rustling his hair. He thrust his sword upward and met flesh, and the rebel staggered back, clutching his side.

The third and fourth rebels attacked in unison, coordinating their strikes to trap us in a deadly crossfire. But I was ready. Clutching my sword, I parried the male’s thrust while dodging the fourth’s slashing attack. In a fluid motion, I spun around, my sword leaving a trail of silver light, and struck the third opponent on the arm. It fell to his side, limp and useless.

Seizing the moment, Ryker kicked the fourth opponent square in the chest, sending him stumbling backward into a gilded column. The male let out a screech as the spelled pillar burned his flesh. The scent of charred skin reached my nostrils, and my gaze landed on the torn tunic and blackened flesh beneath. With a quick flick of his wrist, Ryker disarmed the wounded male, sending his sword clattering across the obsidian floor.

Breathing heavily, I scanned the circle around us. All four males were down, some clutching their wounds, others searching for their lost weapons.

Ryker raised his sword, its blade glinting beneath the sunlight and loomed over the rebels. "It's over. Yield, or the next strike will be lethal."

I stepped beside him, fixing my gaze on their weary faces. "We want to put an end to this fighting. That's why we're here today, fighting for the crown of Imperia. We want something better for all the citizens of Draconia."

The battle raging around us momentarily stopped. Dozens of curious eyes seared in my direction.

"It's her." Excited whispers hissed in unison.

"It's the princess from the sacrifice," another male said.

"She's the one," muttered another.

A rush of energy filled my veins, my confidence bolstered by their hushed words. Power twisted in my gut, carving at my insides. "I'm fighting for all of us here today. Please, let me return our kingdom to what it once was." That power seeped into my words, exerting authority and influence in every syllable.

The rebels exchanged glances, their eyes filled with a glimmer of respect as they razed over me, then Ryker. One by one, they nodded and dropped their swords.

Hope blossomed in my chest, my heart so full of promise it battered my ribcage desperate to escape.

Ryker approached the males on the ground and offered his hand. One by one, he helped them up.

Saphira! Ryker's voice ripped through my mind an instant before a wave of dragonfire and an enormous shadow hurdled toward me. Panic paralyzed my lungs, freezing my feet to the spot.

A flash of gold consumed my vision, shoving me out of the way, and a spine-tingling screech vibrated the air. My ass

hit the floor with a smack, the pain reverberating all the way up my tailbone.

From the corner of my eye, I could just make out four dracon battling it out in the middle of the arena. Their ferocious growls and snarls rent the air. The three smaller brown ones ripped and tore into the familiar gold one. Oh, no...

“Are you okay?” Ryker slid to my side before I caught my breath from the impact. His eyes were fixed on mine, hands skimming every inch in search of wounds.

“I’m okay, Ryker. But—”

He held out his hand, helping me up, and his gaze finally lifted over my shoulder to the three rebel dracon taking flight. “No!” he shouted and released me the moment I was back on my feet. He raced to the motionless golden dracon splayed out on the blood-soaked earth.

I spun around, and a gasp hissed through my clenched teeth. I darted to Ryker’s side where he kneeled beside Rhyland’s enormous dracon. Besides the jagged claw and bite marks, a gaping wound hollowed out his side, his beautiful golden scales were charred and blackened around the hole.

“Oh, goddess, Rhyland.”

Forty-Six

SAPHIRA



“We need a healer!” I shouted into the chaos. Soldiers and rebels continued to fight all around us, the cries and shouts nearly drowning out the mad pounding of my pulse.

“It’s too late,” Ryker murmured. “He’s dying.”

A snarl lifted the dracon’s lip, his lids half-mast.

“What? But he’s a dracon,” I cried. “He’s... we’re supposed to be indestructible.”

His nostrils flared as he ran his hand over his brother’s torn, bloodied scales. “The rebel’s weapons must have been tipped with velarium root, it’s lethal to dracon.”

I spun my head over my shoulder to the rebels nursing their wounds and gathering their dead. Fury ripped through my insides. “There has to be a cure... I can create it, just like with the poison in the wine.” The gilded tattoos across my arms began to awaken, wriggling across my skin. “I can save him. I know I can.” The earth shuddered beneath my feet, that power taking hold.

Ryker’s hands clutched my shoulders, forcing my eyes to his. “There is no cure, Saphira. It is too late. I’m afraid there’s nothing we can do.” Tears glistened in his silver irises, illuminating the darkness carved into his jaw.

“No,” I cried. “It can’t be.”

Chaos ensued around us, the clash of metal against teeth and claws like the crack of thunder in a wild storm. Ignoring the raging battle, emotion clogged my throat, making it

impossible to breathe. No... Rhyland had saved me. He'd thrown himself in front of those rebel dragon for me. If he hadn't, I would have been the one dying instead of him.

My eyes chased down to Rhyland to where the gigantic dragon had been only a moment ago, now only a naked, wounded prince remained. Ryker ripped off his tunic and draped it over his brother's body before he sank down beside him once again.

"Rhyland, can you hear me?" The jagged edge to his tone broke something inside me, a racing fissure cut across my heart.

The future king's lids fluttered, a faint smile curling the corners of his lips. "You're shouting in my ear, brother, of course I can hear you. I'm dying, not deaf."

A choked sound erupted from Ryker's clenched jaw. "I'm so sorry, Rhy. Mother Terrea, you did not deserve this."

"Maybe, maybe not." His eyes lifted over his shoulder to meet mine, and a tornado of guilt pummeled my insides.

I dropped down beside the brothers, that overwhelming guilt crushing my lungs. "I'm so sorry, Rhyland. You never should've done that. You shouldn't have saved me."

"I am your betrothed, Saphira, it is my duty to keep you safe. Though my brother tried his best to assume my role since the day you returned home."

"I—"

Rhyland raised his hand, wincing from the effort. "Do not apologize, Saphira. You and Ryker were meant to be. It's clear the goddess has made her choice. Not only for you, but for our kingdom." His weary gaze fixed to Ryker, the gold dimmer than I'd ever seen. "The future of Fuoco, of all Draconia is in your hands now, brother. You will be the next king, and hopefully you, Saphira, will be the greatest Imperia the people of Draconia have ever known."

I swallowed hard, the pain surging across our link so acute I could barely draw a breath. I wrapped one hand around Rhyland's frosty one and the other around Ryker's. The

difference in the hot and cold sent ice splashing down my spine.

“I love you, brother.” Ryker’s jaw clenched around the words.

“Make me proud,” he whispered back. “Make them all proud.”

Ryker’s head dipped and I squeezed his hand, lacing my fingers more firmly through his. My thoughts whirled to Serenity, to the goodbyes I’d never gotten to say. Goddess, how I wished I could have just a few minutes with her again.

Do you want to be alone with your brother? I shot the heartbreaking thought through our mental link.

No... yes. Goddess, I just don’t know. His hand curled around mine for an instant before releasing it.

I turned back to my ex-betrothed, and my heart clenched. “Thank you, Rhyland.” I pressed a kiss to his forehead, a tear trailing down my cheek. “Thank you for being such a noble and courageous man. Your sacrifice will always be remembered by this kingdom, and more importantly, I’ll never forget you or what you said about Serenity’s soul. The peace you gave me is one I never would’ve found otherwise.”

He nodded, the golden light in his eyes heartbreakingly dim.

Squeezing, Ryker’s shoulder, I whispered, “I’ll give you a moment alone with your brother.”

Thank you. His words echoed through my mind, the deep timbre a warm caress through the chaos.

I only took a few steps away, my heart so heavy I felt like I was dragging them. I scanned the arena turned battlefield for King Kiran. Wouldn’t he want to say goodbye to his eldest son? I searched the dais, but none of the monarchs remained. Fear gripped my chest for an instant. Where was Tatá?

My gaze lifted to the sky, to the tornado of battling beasts of every shade of the rainbow. By the looks of it, the royal guards had been called in which meant it wouldn’t be long

until the end of the insurrection. The rebels couldn't possibly compete against the larger, more experienced dracon soldiers.

“Saphie!”

I swiveled around at the familiar timbre. “Tatá!” Racing toward my father and Bartus, I released a breath of relief. “Thank the gods you're okay.” I laced my arms around his neck and pulled him into a hug as more tears spilled over. The thick scent of smoke filled my nostrils, but I only held him closer.

“Thank Mother Terrea for keeping you safe.”

“For keeping us all safe,” Bartus added.

Both Father and his faithful friend were covered in dirt and ash, a few cuts and bruises—“The poison!” I peered up at the gash across my father's forehead, searching for the black edges that had bordered Rhyland's mortal wound.

“It was only on the arrows,” Bartus replied, answering my unspoken question. “The archers in the sky riding atop the dracon wielded poison-tipped arrows. We lost many loyal dracon today.”

“Why did this happen?” I growled. “There has to be a way to stop this, Father. This war cannot go on.” I ticked my head toward Ryker who still kneeled beside his brother. King Kiran had finally appeared, along with the queen. The three royals surrounded Rhyland, their cries swallowed up by the waning sounds of battle. “Since I returned to Draconia, no one has explained exactly what the rebels want.”

“What they want is of no consequence,” Father answered.

“Tatá...” I knew my father had every right to hate the rebels, but these rampant attacks simply could not go on any longer.

“No one cares enough to ask them.” Ryker's voice lifted over my shoulder. His sudden presence raised the hair on the back of my neck.

I whirled around and found my mate. *Is Rhyland...*

He's gone. His words were so quiet I could barely make them out in my own head. The pain of his loss sliced into my very soul, a tangle of his and mine.

“What are you getting at, boy?” My father barked.

“Tatá...” I moved beside Ryker and intertwined my fingers through his. “He just lost his brother,” I hissed.

“And that’s why you’re holding his hand or is there some other reason you’ve been keeping from us?” The king’s blazing blue eyes scorched into me. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d seen him this lucid. “Do you honestly believe I wouldn’t recognize a dracuori when I saw one? Especially from my own daughter?”

My heart kicked against my ribs as Father stepped toward me. Though we’d grown close in the month since my return and slivers of past memories had begun to resurface, I had no idea how he’d react to the news.

He reached for my cheek, cupping it in his calloused palm.

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you sooner, but I just wasn’t sure.”

Tatá offered me an indulgent smile. “I knew you’d come to the answer in your own time, Saphie. You always have.” He swung his head over his shoulder at the crumbling remains of the arena. “Now, what are we to do about those rebels?”

“We should hear them out, Tatá. Find out what it is they’re really fighting for.”

Ryker cleared his throat, his firm shoulder brushing mine. “I wholeheartedly agree with Princess Saphira. The commoners have lived under the royals’ talons for long enough.” He turned to Tatá, hope glimmering in his gaze. “And once all of this has been settled, I hope to complete the dracuori bond with your daughter and finally make her mine. With your blessings of course?”

Father dipped his head. “We’ll speak of all this later. There is much to contemplate now, considering both of your uncertain futures.”

My heart spluttered, stopped, then staggered out a happy jig. Goddess, I loved Ryker. Amidst the turmoil and wreckage, I still felt it so clearly.

The link between Ryker and me had gone silent during the exchange, and I assumed it was because of the all-consuming grief. But now, as he regarded me, something else crept through the bond, a completely unexpected emotion. He took my hand, curling his strong fingers around it. *There's something I need to tell you.*

Right now?

Yes, right now. It can't wait any longer.

It's about the rebels, isn't it? My thoughts flitted back in time to his odd behavior the day he'd taken me to the Fuocan town square.

He nodded, expression shuttering. *I need you to keep an open mind.*

My head dipped slowly, and I allowed him to spin me away from the chaos.

Forty-Seven

RYKER



I tugged Saphira to a quiet corner of the arena, to a barely visible niche carved from the stone wall. She backed up against the smooth, granite surface, arms pressed tight across her chest. Wild whispers of azure hair framed her sooty cheeks, and still she was beautiful. She was the only thing keeping me going right now.

A tornado of emotions lashed at my insides, a fiery jumble of hers and mine. Rhyland lay on the powdered sand of the arena floor, body still warm. I should've been at his side, at my father's and the queen's, but I'd put this off for long enough. Saphira deserved to know the whole truth, and I'd finally tell her today even if the arena crumbled on top of us.

"I love you, Saphira."

Her eyes lifted to mine, the wariness in her expression like tiny knives perforating my soul. "Just tell me the truth, Ryker."

"The truth is... Queen Aisling is not my mother."

Saphira's face blanched, a gasp parting her lips. She stared at me for an endless moment, the intense scrutiny worse than any torture.

"Please, say something."

Her eyes narrowed as she regarded me. "And that's why you're helping the rebels? That's your big secret, isn't it?"

My head dipped, eyes chasing to the ground. She had every reason to hate the common dracon who'd banded together to fight the royals. They killed her mother and her

sister. Would she see me only as one of them? “It wasn’t like that in the beginning, Saphira. I swear to you I had nothing to do with your mother or Serenity’s deaths. The extremist rebels who were involved have long since been killed. I made sure of that before I vowed any support to their cause.”

“When did you join them? You’re a prince for goddess’s sake, Ryker! And now...” She sucked in another sharp breath. “You’re the heir to the Fuocan throne.”

“I know,” I hissed and dragged my hands through my hair. “It was never supposed to be this way. Rhyland was never meant to die. There are too many rebel factions, the ones from each kingdom do as they will. I’ve only aligned myself with the commoners of Fuoco through Darrik.”

“Rhyland’s personal guard is a rebel?” All the pieces finally clicked into place.

“He doesn’t consider himself a rebel per say, more of a freedom fighter. You saw him out there today, didn’t you? Darrik would never have hurt Rhyland. We all practically grew up together at the castle. He’s one of the few royal dracon guards who is not actually royal.”

She slowly shook her head, lips pulled into a frown.

“The only thing the commoners want is the least they deserve – a tiny portion of the treasure troves of gemstones that we take for granted.”

“This is about sparkly jewels?”

“Saphira, you know those gems are the source of our power as dracon. It’s the reason the royals continue to grow more powerful while the commoners can’t even summon their own dracon any longer.”

“You’ve been supplying gems to the Fuocan commoners?” That small pouch tucked into Ryker’s pocket drifted to the forefront of my mind.

“Yes.”

“And that’s why more and more are now able to transform into dracon while the royals remain cursed and unable to bear

offspring that can shift.”

I slowly nodded again. “I only wanted to give the others a level playing field.” I inched closer, trapping Saphira against the wall. There was nowhere for her to go until she heard me out. “I never hurt anyone, never condoned any violence...” I paused, a heavy weight sinking to the pit of my stomach. “Until the day you arrived at Flintguard Fortress and my father had the insane idea to marry you off to Rhyland.”

“You instigated the attack?” she squealed.

“I only helped Darrik smuggle a few of the commoners through the fortress gates. No one was supposed to get hurt, no one was supposed to die. It was only a way to stall the mating ceremony until your father arrived. I knew he and Bartus were already on their way; I’d sent word to Mountainhelm Castle the moment I realized what my father was trying to do.”

Saphira slumped back against the wall, shoulders rounding. “Gods, Ryker, why didn’t you tell me?”

“We’d only just met then. You had no memories of us, of any of it. If I’d told you the truth, you would’ve been the first to turn me into your precious Rhyland.” My jaw snapped shut around my brother’s name. Goddess, I’d been an idiot. I’d wasted so much of my life being jealous of him. For what? He’d always been a decent man. He’d treated me like a real brother, never the king’s bastard. Not like the queen. “I was so jealous of him, Saphira... He had everything, and then when he got you, too? I lost it.”

I reached for her hand, terrified she’d deny me. My heart nearly jumped out of my chest when her fingers laced around my own. “I’m so sorry for keeping this from you. I swear to you there are no more secrets. There never will be any between us again.” I crept closer, needing to feel her body flush against mine. “Please, say you’ll forgive me.”

Those eyes lanced into me, and a jumble of emotions swam through our connection. “I’m pissed, Ryker. Really pissed. I’ve blindly trusted you from the moment I let you drag me through that damned portal in Vegas. I don’t even know why I continue to do so after all the times you’ve lied to me.”

“I haven’t really lied, Saphira, I’ve only kept the truth locked away until I stupidly thought was the right time.” A tenuous smirk curled my lips. I pressed her hand against my heart, and it thumped wildly against her palm. “I am so madly in love with you that the mere notion of losing you is enough to break me. I’ve wanted to tell you countless times, but goddess, I was so scared you would walk out on me once you knew.”

“It’s too damned late for that,” she grumbled.

My heart catapulted against my ribcage, battering my weary bones and icy fear spread through my veins. “Too late for what?”

“To walk out on you, you ash-hole.” Her lips twisted into a smile, and I could finally breathe again. “I don’t know if it’s this crazy dracuori bond or something else entirely, but I don’t think it’s possible for me *not* to forgive you. It’s like your grumpy dracon has embedded himself inside my soul and removing him is no longer an option. Despite all the stupid things you keep doing.”

I framed her face with my trembling hands and captured her mouth before the final word fled her lips. *I love you so much, Saphira, my dracuori. Thank you, thank you for trusting me with your heart and soul. I swear to guard it with my body, my sword, my very life from this day onward.*

You better. Her voice seeped through my mind, filling all the dark corners. *I swear to you, Ryker, I don’t care if it kills me to leave you, but if you lie to me again, I will.*

I understand. I kissed her like it was the first time. I’d nearly lost her yet again, and I vowed I’d never again be so reckless. She was mine and I was hers, forever.

The sharp blast of a horn pried my lips off Saphira’s. Despite her forgiveness, it was imperative to keep our bond a secret, especially after today. I swallowed hard and glanced over my shoulder at the bloodied arena. We’d been gone for long enough. It was time to face the destruction.

As if Saphira had read my mind, and maybe she had, she'd been growing more adept at sensing my emotions, she squeezed my hand and tugged me toward the center of the stadium. "We have to join the others," she murmured.

"Or what's left of them." The bleak thought spilled out. I doubted Rhyland would be the only casualty today.

"Let's go find Tatá and your parent—" Her jaw snapped shut and embarrassment flushed her cheeks. "I'm sorry."

I shook my head. "I've long called Aisling a mother even though she never behaved as such. Father decided many years ago that no one should ever know of his indiscretions with one of our housemaids decades earlier."

"So you never met your mother?" Pity radiated from Saphira's voice, from those deep blue eyes.

"No..."

"Guess that makes two of us." Her fingers laced tightly around mine before she finally released my hand as we grew closer to the pandemonium. Guards, royals, and commoners alike trudged around the rivers of crimson and fallen dragon.

Anger raged through my veins, darkening my vision. All of it was so senseless.

And now you can change it. Saphira's voice darted across my mind. *When you become king of Fuoco, it'll be in your hands.*

And when you become Imperia, you can change the entire continent. I shot the thought back at my future mate, and a small smile lifted the corners of her lips.

The truth was I had no idea what would come next. Technically, as a bastard, my claim to the throne could be denied, and given today's terrible events, would there be anyone to compete in the final trial or would they suspend it all?

Never-ending questions spiraled through my mind as we approached the dais where the four kings of Draconia had convened. Miraculously, they had all survived.

Another wave of fury sent my claws ripping through my fingertips at the sight of the Stormborne king. He was bloodied and bruised but still standing. If anyone had deserved to die today, it was him. And I vowed to make him pay for the attempt on Saphira's life. I should've taken the opportunity today in the chaos.

I curled my fingers into fists, the sharp slash of my nails across my palm tempering my inner beast.

King Silas's dark gaze razed over us as we approached the raised platform. "Thank Mother Terrea you're both alive." A strangled, choking sound erupted from his throat before he swallowed hard. "My son Maximillian did not fare as well. He fought bravely against those rebel bastards before succumbing to their poisonous arrows."

Saphira sucked in a sharp breath.

"I'm sorry for your loss," I gritted out. It should've been the king instead of his son to join the dark souls of the underworld. "Perhaps it's time to find a way to put an end to this war."

"When my son, Eric, becomes Imperia, he'll crush the opposition." King Skyborne thumped his chest. "We've all suffered too many losses at their hands."

"Or we could find another way to end this without bloodshed," Saphira interjected.

The three males, my sire included, laughed darkly. Only Saphira's father remained silent.

"What of the trials?" I asked.

"It's too soon to say," King Stormborne barked. "We must tend to our wounded and bury our dead."

"Nonsense," the Skyborne king interrupted. "This ends tomorrow. No better way to show those rebels we will be undeterred than to continue the events and crown the winner."

Father's mouth twisted into a scowl as his weary gaze bounced between Saphira and me. "Who would fight? There is barely anyone left."

“If no one wishes to challenge Prince Eric,” said King Skyborne, “then he wins by default.”

“That will not happen,” I gritted out.

“Then we finish today’s events and tomorrow the final two shall battle.”

“That is insane,” Saphira blurted. “You can’t honestly expect us to fight after all the lives that were lost today.” She turned to her father, but King Highborne’s expression had glazed over. He was gone, off to another, hopefully sweeter, place and time.

There was only one way this would end. Without looking at my father, I dropped to one knee. “As the princess’s royal guard, my duty is to her. I forfeit my spot in the Imperia Trial and pledge my sword to the future queen.”

Ignoring my father’s curses, I pinned my focus on Saphira. “I have the utmost faith in you, princess. I am certain that tomorrow, you will triumph, and I vow to serve you faithfully when you become Imperia. Will you fight for your kingdom?”

Saphira nodded, a swirl of emotion, fear, excitement, and most of all inexorable power, racing through our bond.

From the corner of my eye, I could’ve sworn I caught King Highborne’s satisfied grin, but perhaps he was smiling about something else entirely.

“Ryker...” Saphira’s murmur was cut off by King Skyborne’s howl of approval.

“The princess has spoken. Let us be done with this then. Tomorrow Prince Eric and Princess Saphira shall face each other in the final battle, and the new Imperia of Draconia shall be crowned.”

Forty-Eight

SAPHIRA



I threw my head back as the powerful release vibrated through every inch of my body. My hips kept moving, drawing out every last moment of pleasure until Ryker's eyes slid closed, and he moaned my name.

I slumped forward on his chest, my breaths ragged, my ear pressed to his heart, reveling in the frantic beats. He was still inside me, exactly where I liked him best. A smile melted across my face as I lay there, flush against his warm body.

The morning came much too quickly after another intense night of lovemaking. I knew I should've rested to prepare for today's battle, but I was too restless, a buzz of energy constantly surging just below my skin. Hopefully, it was my dragon readying herself to make an appearance because if she didn't, all of this would've been for nothing.

"She will." Ryker's rough voice surprised me. I'd gotten use to the quiet timbre in my head.

"She better," I grumbled.

"I hate to say it, princess, but we have to get moving if we have any chance of coaxing that beast out of you before the last trial."

"No," I whined, wrapping my hands around the back of his neck. I rolled my hips for good measure too.

He groaned, still hard inside me. "Saphira, if you keep that up, I'll never let you out of this chamber."

"Good, let's just hide out here forever." I smirked.

If only it were that easy. After Ryker's revelation yesterday, I couldn't stop thinking about the commoners and the rebel cause. It wasn't fair for the royals to hoard all the gemstones, all the wealth, all the power. There had to be a solution without the bloodshed, and if finding it meant I had to get out of bed, force myself from the arms of this male, I better get to it.

Ryker pressed a kiss to my forehead and sat up, taking me along with him. "You're going to be magnificent today, I know it."

"Right." I tried to scramble off his lap, but his arm laced around my waist, pinning me to his body.

He lifted my hips and dropped me down over his erection, filling me so deeply, a groan escaped. "Mine," he growled against my mouth.

"Always." I kissed him hard, and he finally released me, lifting me off his lap and onto the lush green grass that had covered my room once again. Apparently, my powers tended to show off whenever we made love. Ryker thought it was a good sign. I hoped he was right.

I marched to the bathroom to get ready, a trickle of anxiety following each step. I whirled around before I closed the door and met a pair of shimmering silver orbs.

"You will win, Saphira, trust me."

I nodded, his confidence in me shattering the mounting dread. Even after all the lies, I did trust him. More than anyone. Maybe that made me stupid, but I liked to think it was simply being in love.



When we surfaced onto the arena, my jaw nearly hit the sandy floor. All the destruction from yesterday, the pools of blood, the bodies, the wreckage, it was all gone, as if nothing at all had happened.

I exchanged a weary glance with Ryker.

“You know what the humans say... the show must go on.”

I snorted on a laugh. “How would you even know that saying?”

“I read human books.” He shrugged, like it was the most normal thing in the world. “Now, focus, Saphira. We don’t have much time.”

The floating stands hovered above us, still empty but in less than an hour the final trial would begin. Squeezing my eyes closed, I summoned my dracon, no, I ordered her out. I searched for that familiar sensation, that scurry of energy. Latching onto it, I jerked it free, ripping her out of my core.

Pain ripped apart my insides. I was barely aware of footfalls before strong hands framed my face, the warmth a soothing balm to the devastation roiling just beneath my skin. “I’m right here with you.” Ryker’s hands slid down to my shoulders, his firm hold the only thing keeping me from sinking into an endless abyss.

“I think she’s coming...It hurts, Ryker. Damn it; it hurts so fucking bad.”

His anxious gaze locked on mine, the shimmering silver blazing. *Your eyes...*

“What?” I gritted out, clutching my belly, jagged claws shredding my gut. I couldn’t suck a breath in fast enough. My heart pummeled my ribs in a desperate attempt to escape.

“Your eyes are changing. It’s your dracon...”

“Get her out!” I shrieked. “I can’t take the pain.”

“Yes, you can.” He stepped even closer and wrapped his arms around me, holding me tight to his chest. “Just keep your eyes on me, princess.”

Hot tears burned, brimming over until they spilled down my cheeks. Fiery heat surged through my veins, destroying everything in its path. “Ryker,” I rasped out.

“Hold on, you’re close, Saphira. You can do this.”

“I can’t!” The words exploded through a scream.

“Look at me, my dracuori.” Ryker tugged my face closer, pulling my trembling body flush against his. “You are the strongest woman I know. You died and fucking came back from the dead. You can and you will do this, because without your dracon you will never survive this final trial or win the crown.” His chest brushed mine with each exhale. “And because I can’t live in a world where you don’t exist.”

I bit back a snarl as sizzling energy coursed through my veins.

I buckled over, and then I felt it. The moment a tether snapped, and my soul drifted right from my body. Darkness consumed my vision, and I faded into nothingness.

When my eyes jolted open an instant later, my viewpoint had completely changed.

You did it, Saphira! You. Did. It.

I glanced down at Ryker, a small speck on the arena floor. Then I looked up at the bright blue snout protruding from my face, and the enormous wings beating the air. *Oh, my goddess! I’m a dragon!*

You are a dracon. Ryker’s deep voice ricocheted through my massive skull.

Whatever. I laughed, the deep rumble of my barrel chest vibrating my entire body. Holy hell, I couldn’t believe it. I flapped harder and rose up, taking in the empty arena below. My moment of overwhelming joy was short lived as a barrage of images flashed across my mind.

The terrible war that had torn apart our kingdom, so much death, so much destruction.

Eight royal females from each of the continents gathered around the sacred tree in Mother Terrea’s temple, every one of us with daggers in our hands. Ready to take our lives to save our realm guided by the priestess Abba.

I stepped forward with my head held high and lifted the chalice in my hands. Shimmering golden vines snaked across my arms, writhing with power. My voice was as strong as the overwhelming force within the temple’s walls as I spoke,

“From my blood flows the power of the mighty dracon, its great strength will fortify the sacred tree and make us all whole once again.”

Then came the next image and the next. Serenity and I playing as children, hugging and kissing our mother. Father chasing us around the yard.

Then Ryker. The weeks we’d spent together at Flintguard Fortress when I was betrothed to Rhyland, the first time. How his duty as my guard had turned into so much more.

I drew in a breath, my massive dracon chest struggling from the influx of emotions.

Saphira, are you all right? Ryker’s voice cut through the onslaught of memories. I glanced down at the arena floor where the love of my life stood.

I remember. I remember everything. Every stolen kiss, every moment we spent terrified we’d be found out, the guilt at the betrayal. It rushed through my body like a whirlwind.

Thank the goddess. Now get back down here before anyone else sees you. I can’t wait to see the surprise on that arrogant prince’s face.

My enormous head bobbed up and down. *And how exactly do I do that?*

The same way you summoned her.

Right, easy peasy. I flapped my wings, angling them toward the earth and slowly descended. My talons sank into the sand a few moments later, my knees wobbling for an instant before I steadied myself. Ryker moved hesitantly beside my giant claws. “Now, will her back.”

Closing my big dracon eyes, I imagined my soft, vulnerable human form, and how much I longed to have Ryker’s arms wrapped around me. A lavender mist encircled my massive form, and my entire body clenched, waiting for the pain.

Only this time there was none.

I blinked, and I was back on the arena floor. Ryker pulled me into his arms, crushing me against his firm chest. “I am so proud of you,” he whispered against my lips before he kissed me.

“I remember everything,” I mumbled once he released me, holding me out to arm’s length. His heated gaze razed over me, and it was only then I remembered I was completely naked with the exception of the jade necklace which still hung around my neck.

He jerked his tunic up over his head and tugged it over mine. “You do? Everything?”

My head bounced up and down as his familiar scent fell over me.

“Do you still love me after all of it?”

“Of course, I do, you ash-hole.” I curled my arms around the back of his neck and brought his mouth to mine once again. “I loved you in my last life, Ryker, and even more in this one. I’m fairly certain I’ll love you even more in the next.”

Forty-Nine

SAPHIRA



My heart pounded out a desperate beat as I stepped onto the arena floor for the second time this morning. Ryker stood beside me, his steady presence driving away some of the overwhelming anxiety. The stands were filled with spectators once again, a tense aura of expectation filling the air. Had the commoners been allowed to attend today? I squinted to see the top tiers. Yes, by the looks of it. How had that happened?

Maybe they were trying to drive the point home that the royals would continue on regardless of their attempts.

I pushed the pointless thoughts to the side as a rumble shook the ground beneath my feet. On the opposite side of the arena, Prince Eric's light yellow dragon stomped onto the battleground. The creature was huge, nearly as large as Ryker's silver beast.

"Don't let him intimidate you," Ryker whispered.

"Sure, easy for you to say. You're not the one that has to face him."

"Just remember I'm always with you." He pressed his fingers to his temple. "I'll help you every step of the way."

Right.

King Silas Stormborne stood atop the dais with the remaining three kings seated on their respective thrones. "Ladies and gentlemen," his voice boomed across the stadium, "despite the cowardly acts of the rebels yesterday, and all the lives lost, we are here today for the final event of the Imperia Trials."

Half-hearted applause rang out through the tense silence. Apparently, I wasn't the only one not happy about being here. Had the audience been forced to attend? I wouldn't put it past the council.

"Today, our fine competitors, Prince Eric Skyborne of Eyre and Princess Saphira Highborne of Terre will compete in a final match to determine the next Imperia. Both will fight in dracon form with full use of their elemental powers."

"Don't forget to force Eric to the ground," Ryker whispered. "He'll have the advantage over you in the sky due to his air abilities, but if you get him to the surface, you can easily take him down."

"You realize of course all of this is contingent on my dracon behaving, right?"

"She'll be here."

He kept saying that, but I was starting to worry again. I hadn't felt a trickle of power since we left our underground chambers.

"Competitors, take your places!" King Stormborne's voice reverberated across the arena.

"You can do this, just like this morning. I'll be with you all the way." *Imagine that I'm holding your hand right now, that I'm kissing you fiercely.*

I squeezed my eyes shut and pictured those strong hands and warm lips. Opening them again, I marched toward the center of the arena, willing my dracon out.

Prince Eric's monstrous beast loomed only a few yards away.

Shit. Shit. This wasn't working.

I felt nothing, each step only intensifying the raging anxiety.

A wave of bright green dragonfire lit up the ground just a few yards in front of my feet. I gasped as the heat scorched my face. The tremendous dracon towered over me, a sneer on its terrifying maw.

My eyes swiveled across the arena to Ryker's where he stood just in front of the dais. *It's not working.*

It will. Believe in yourself and your dracon.

I searched my core for that presence, the one that had been with me even on earth. Serenity. *Come on, girl, where are you?* A hint of something stirred deep in my gut.

Prince Eric blew out a puff of dark smoke, taunting. The blue tourmaline hanging around his neck glistened, lighting up the jade around my own.

He's trying to communicate with you through your gems. Ryker's voice snuck through my spiraling thoughts. *But he won't be able to until you're in your dracon form.*

I'm trying! I huffed out.

More dragonfire lit up the arena, until a circle formed around me.

"Just a reminder, Princess Saphira," the Stormborne king's voice tore through the tense arena. "You can always forfeit."

"Never," I gritted out.

"We don't have time for this." I barely distinguished King Skyborne's voice through anxious mutters across the arena. More arguing ensued, and I could have sworn I heard my father shouting curses at the other kings.

This is it. *Come on, Serenity!* That flicker of power ignited, and the lavender mist climbed up my legs, enveloping me in a shimmering haze.

I blinked away the fog, and suddenly, I stared at the audience from above, the pounding of flapping wings roaring across my eardrums. *Yes! I did it!*

Saphira, watch out! Ryker's voice rattled in my brain a second before a gust of wind sent me hurdling toward a floating marble column. I smacked into the unyielding stone and let out a screech as it seared my flesh. Flaming hell, that hurt! I blinked quickly, taking in the glowing boundaries in the sky. Four columns marked the edges of the mid-air arena with a bright crimson glow outlining the outer margins.

You must remain within the glowing square, or you'll be eliminated, Ryker instructed.

Now you tell me.

I set my sights on the pale yellow dracon, his scales rippling beneath the midday sun. I'm coming for you, asshole.

With a powerful flap of my wings, I lunged at the royal, my claws extended. He dodged just in time, releasing a stream of blue dragonfire in retaliation. I twisted my enormous body in midair, narrowly avoiding the flames, and countered with a blast of my own fire. The deep lavender flames met the azure, creating a cloud of steam that momentarily obscured the battlefield.

Prince Eric roared in frustration and circled higher, trying to gain the upper hand. I followed, my wings pounding to catch the updrafts, lifting me higher and higher until we were both above the clouds where the air was thin, and the sun blazed mercilessly.

Seizing the opportunity, I dove, my talons aimed at the prince's vulnerable underbelly. He saw me coming and rolled in the air, dodging the attack but losing his balance in the process. I used the moment to my advantage, coiling my barbed tail around the beast's neck and pulling him downward. Luckily, some of the moves Ryker drilled into me in training transferred easily to my dracon form.

The Skyborne prince struggled, his wings flapping wildly as he tried to break free. The bastard spun around and bit down on my tail, freeing himself. I let out a shriek of pain as his jagged teeth ripped into my flesh. Then he unleashed another torrent of fire, aiming directly at my wings. Fiery pain roared across my flesh, but I fought through it, summoning every last ounce of strength to keep moving.

You've got this, Saphira. Don't give up.

The mid-air dance ensued, an intricate series of dodging and attacking. The minutes ticked by overhead, seemingly endless. The prince sent me flying toward the columns more

than once with his powerful air abilities. I'd been badly burnt, frozen, clawed at, and bitten. He was ruthless.

I heaved in a breath, my energy waning. I had no idea how difficult it would be to keep this ginormous creature in the air. My wings ached. I focused on the power of the jade gemstone, calling upon it for strength like Ryker had taught me. Another burst of energy filled my core, surging to my extremities.

We circled each other cautiously, each waiting for the other to make a move. A tear raced across Eric's underbelly, and I saw my chance. Forcing power into my tiring wings, I lunged at the prince one last time, my claws glowing with magical energy. *What the...?*

Prickly thorns emerged from the ends of my talons, tipped in black. Eric tried to dodge, but it was too late. My claws sank into his belly, black veins instantly spreading across his soft underside. His eyes widened for an instant before an anguished cry rang out. He glanced at the wound, maw hanging open. With a final roar, he plummeted from the sky.

I angled my wings downward and sailed after him. I had no idea what had coated my claws, but my guess was some sort of plant poison. Ironic, since I'd almost been killed by the very same thing less than a week ago.

Prince Eric's mighty dracon hit the ground, and the entire arena vibrated from the force of his fall. Gasps and muttered curses echoed from the stands as I landed beside him. I called on my Terren powers and vines crawled up from the earth, wrapping around the tremendous beast.

Do you forfeit? The jade gemstone around my neck lit up with my thoughts.

No. The prince's snarl echoed through my mind, illuminating the blue tourmaline hanging from his bloodied chest.

The vines grew thicker, and deep purple thorns sprung from the roots, digging into the dracon's flesh. He let out another howl as the sharp points punctured his shimmering yellow scales.

Forfeit or die, Eric. The poison is spreading I can feel it. A hint of regret twisted up my insides. I didn't want to kill the Skyborne royal. Despite his completely inappropriate behavior since we met, he didn't deserve to die. No one else should.

I glanced over my thickly scaled shoulder at the four kings on the dais watching the standoff. King Skyborne was on his feet, eyes intent on his son, but he didn't utter a sound. Was he communicating with him telepathically? Telling him to surrender or to force this match to become one to the death?

"Get the healer ready." Ryker's shout echoed through the wild pounding of my heart.

I didn't want to kill this dracon, this *man*. There had been enough loss in all our kingdoms.

"Kill him! Kill him!" The steady chant ricocheted across the arena, the mantra originating from the highest tiers. "Imperia! Imperia! Imperia!" The thunder of feet stomping and fists pounding rang out until the tension was so thick in the stadium I could barely breathe.

Saphira, you must end this. Ryker's voice crept through the chaotic noise.

I can't. I won't kill a defenseless man in cold blood.

He would have done the same to you if the roles were reversed.

I don't care, I growled. *That is not the type of Imperia I plan to be.*

Ryker nodded, the dip of his head barely perceptible to anyone who wasn't paying attention. *Then do what you will, I'll follow your lead.*

Heaving in a breath, I searched for the power hidden deep within my core. It had taken me months to figure out how to summon my dracon, I only hoped dismissing her would be as easy as last time without Ryker at my side. I focused on my human form, my hands, my feet, my long legs, the soft version of myself that could love and heal. A swirl of lavender blanketed my dracon, and when I blinked, my long snout was gone, and my bare toes dug into the soft sand.

Also, I was completely naked. Again.

Ryker raced off the platform and tugged his tunic over his head and draped it over mine. Luckily, it reached mid-thigh covering all my most important bits.

“What are you going to do?” he whispered.

“What I was brought back to Draconia to do. Heal this fractured kingdom.” I dropped to the ground and placed my palms to the earth. Focusing on the poison that ran through my veins, I called on my Terren powers. I visualized a bright fuchsia blossom with petals like silk. *The moritae ignae*. I had no idea how I knew, it was probably the returning memories, but it was the antidote to the poison contained in my claws. Energy dribbled from my fingertips, soaking the earth until green sprouted from the sandy soil. It grew around the fallen dracon, wrapping him in a tangle of vines and pink blooms.

Standing, I lifted my gaze to the thousands in the stands. “Today marks the start of a new Draconia. No longer will the commoners be kept separate, underprivileged, and powerless. The royals’ treasure troves will be opened up for all to share. Each and every citizen of this great continent deserves the right to commune with their inner dracon through the gemstones the goddess provided as sources of our power. After having just experiencing it for the first time myself, I realize how unfair it has been for all of you. From this day forward, that changes. I swear to you. There will be no more rebels, no more commoners, no more royals. We are all one dracon people.”

Shouts and whoops exploded across the arena along with muttered groans from the remaining royals that I refused to acknowledge.

Ryker’s hand slid to mine, fingers entwining with my own. Now that the trials were over, there was no reason to hide anymore.

Eric’s huge dracon lay at my feet. The tremendous creature huffed out a breath as the vines grew thicker, blanketing his entire form. The tight set of his maw suddenly softened. His lids slowly opened, and a groan rumbled his massive chest.

The twisted lines of black crisscrossing his pale-yellow underbelly began to fade. He drew in a steady breath, then another. His enormous dracon receded a moment later, leaving only the naked prince beneath.

King Skyborne leapt off the dais and slid to the grassy ground beside his son. “Thank Mother Terrea, you’re alive, Eric.”

The prince’s lips slid into a sheepish smile and warmth flooded my chest. “Just barely.” He lifted his gaze to mine and dipped his chin.

I returned the gesture as wild applause and chants boomed across the auditorium, the loudest shouts coming from the furthest tiers above.

“Long live, the new Imperia! Princess Saphira! Imperia Saphira Highborne!”

Ryker turned to me, the silver of his eyes glistening like the brightest stars. “You did it. You are incredible.”

Goddess, I wanted to kiss him so damned badly. So I did. I was the Imperia now, after all. His tongue moved softly against mine, the blazing kiss filled with so much promise. Much too soon, I pulled away, the eyes of the entire arena on us.

“I guess the dracon’s out of the bag now.”

His laughter vibrated between us, filling my heart with so much love and hope for the future, it was almost painful.

“Imperia Saphira Highborne... I think I like the sound of that.” I shot him a smirk.

“You know what I’d like even better?” He quirked a dark brow.

“What’s that?”

“Imperia Saphira *Ashborne*.” He framed my face with those strong hands, pulling my lips to his again. The kiss was sweet, and chaste this time, and left me wanting so much more.

“I don’t know how I feel about changing my name,” I murmured against his lips.

He threw me a rueful smile. “We can argue about it at another time then.” He captured my mouth once more, and the roar of the crowd, the bustle of bodies, everything else vanished.

Fifty

RYKER



The funeral pyre bobbed a few hundred yards from the shore, and yet it already felt like Rhyland was a lifetime away. My brother. Though we only shared one parent, he'd never treated me like less of a man, like a commoner. I'd simply been his younger brother. And now, he was gone.

The king and queen stood beside me, both gazes intent on the motionless body surrounded by rubies atop the wooden barge as was the Fuocan tradition. The darkening sky reflected the somber mood of the crowd, the churning waves another echo of my tumultuous state. Behind me, along the shore stood every single resident of Fuoco, commoners and royals alike standing shoulder-to-shoulder commemorating the loss of their would-be-king. It was beautiful in a way. Rhyland would have been pleased.

The barge floated farther out into the Sea of Speranza, the sea of hope. Ironic as there was no hope left for the future king. Saphira's fingers tightened around mine, her constant presence dulling the ache of Rhyland's loss.

You're the future king now, Ryker. Saphira's voice edged through the darkness in my heart and mind. And you're going to do exactly what your brother asked of you, make him proud.

I swiveled my gaze toward her, nodding slowly. *I hope so.*

I know so.

It had only been a day since we left the arena, returning home to make the preparations for Rhyland's return to rest in the arms of Mother Terrea. I'd been so busy with the

arrangements, there hadn't been time for anything else. But now that my brother was put to rest, I firmly intended to make this woman mine. Forever.

“Are you ready, son?” The king turned to me, his crimson suit perfectly pressed, golden medals lining the lapel.

The queen let out a whimper, her slim shoulders lifting on a sob. Aisling may not have been my real mother, but she'd raised me as her own. Rhyland had clearly always been her favorite, but given the situation, it could have been much worse for me. I reached for her and gave her hand a slight squeeze.

She returned the gesture with a half-hearted smile. I wouldn't blame her if she hated me for all this. If I hadn't gotten in the way of Rhyland and Saphira, perhaps things would've turned out differently.

Don't say that. Saphira's voice trampled over my thoughts. *What happened to Rhyland was terrible but it had nothing to do with us. We were meant to be, and you know that.*

“Ryker?” Father's voice drew me back to the present. “Are you ready?”

I nodded slowly and took a few steps into the water, the frothy foam coming over my boots. I focused on the motionless form floating farther away and sent a prayer to Mother Terrea for us to be reunited once again. Flicking my wrist over, a small flame appeared in my palm. I called to my Fuocan powers and it expanded, until a raging ball of silver dragonfire floated between my two hands. Silver, not crimson like the royal Fuocan dracon. The tiny evidence of my impure blood.

“Goodbye, brother,” I whispered and hurled the dragonfire across the rolling waves. It landed on target, lighting up the barge in brilliant silver. The entire royal guard took aim and dozens of flaming lights sailed across the sea.

Saphira inched closer, weaving her arm around my waist, and tucked herself into my side. “Rhyland was a great man, a wonderful brother, and we'll always remember him.”

I nodded slowly.

“He saved my life for you, Ryker. I’m sure of it.”

Emotion tightened my throat, and I fought hard to swallow it down.

“Long live the king,” she whispered into my ear.

My heart kicked at my ribcage. I’d never wanted to be king, I’d never longed for power or influence, but it would be mine all the same.

“Long live the king.” As if they’d heard Saphira, the chants picked up behind us, and the vacant spot in my chest filled with each chorus.



Once the memorial feast ended and the crowds dissipated, only our two families remained in the courtyard. Saphira’s father and Bartus had already retired to their quarters, and I’d temporarily lost sight of my sire. Servants tidied up, carting half-empty platters of food and drinks back toward the kitchens.

I stopped one of the girls before she disappeared into the tunnels. “Please make sure all the extra food goes to the staff, and if there is any left, distribute it to those in need beyond the castle walls.”

The young girl’s bright eyes nearly popped out of her head. “Yes, of course, milord. Right away.”

“Nicely done, my prince.” Saphira shot me a wink.

“I’m trying. It’s going to take time to earn the commoners’ trust.”

“You can start by not calling them commoners.”

“Touché.” A rueful chuckle rumbled in my chest. “It is a good thing I have you to keep me in line.” I pulled her into my arms, crushing her body against mine. I couldn’t wait to have her all to myself. It was time to complete the bond. If she’d let me...

Darrik marched by, carrying an armful of dirty plates. I called out to my brother's personal guard before he past us. "Have they sent you to the kitchens now?" No one except Saphira knew of his involvement with the rebels, and I intended to keep it that way. If he deserved punishment, then so did I.

"Thankfully, not yet." His expression was subdued, much like it had been for days. Darrik loved my brother nearly as much as I did.

I moved closer, whispering. "What's the sentiment across the rebel camps?"

"It's all quiet, my prince. In just two days, Imperia Saphira has done more to quell the unrest than the prior kings had done in decades."

"Good." Pride simmered in my chest. My future mate had become a hero, the stuff of legends in only a few days.

"You'll keep me informed?"

"Of course." He dipped his head and followed the servants into the castle.

"Well, that sounds promising." Saphira's hopeful smile was all I needed to survive this day. Well, maybe not all...

Tugging on her hand, I turned her toward the back doors to the castle. "Come, I need you." If we used the servant's entrance, we could sneak in unseen and spend the rest of the day in my chamber.

"Where are we going?" Her bright eyes sparkled with mischief.

"I don't know about you, but I could use a little happy distraction after the somber day."

"Sounds like exactly what we need."

I whirled her around and ran straight into the king and queen. "Father..." I blurted.

"I was looking for you, Ryker." His scrutinizing gaze raked over me, a look in his eye I barely recognized. Pride.

“We have a lot of work ahead of us to prepare you to take the throne.”

“Yes, Father.”

“Rhyland spent his entire life in preparation.”

“I know,” I muttered.

“But you, Ryker, you were made to be a king, despite what the fates had written.”

My eyes widened, mouth curving in surprise. Had my father just complimented me? His praises were few and far between. “Thank you,” I murmured lamely.

“Still, there is much to do.” His sharp eyes turned to Saphira, and the hint of a smile curled the corner of his lip. “I imagine there will be a betrothal announcement soon?”

I squeezed her hand, and she beamed up at me. My fool heart nearly doubled in size. “If she will have me.”

“I’ll think about it.” Smirking, she stood on her tiptoes and pressed a chaste kiss to my cheek.

“Very well, let me know when you have come to a decision so the mating ceremony preparations can be made.” He turned to his wife. “I know the queen will be thrilled to have something to keep her mind busy.”

Queen Aisling gave Saphira a smile, wiping away the fallen tears. “I would still be honored if you wore my gown.”

“I would be honored to wear it, my queen.”

“Wonderful,” said my father as he glanced down at our intertwined hands. “Were you two going somewhere?”

“Yes,” Saphira blurted, pressing a finger to her temple. “I have a bit of a headache, and Ryker was kind enough to escort me back to my chambers.”

“Very well.” Father’s mouth curved into a knowing smile. Even the queen’s dismal expression seemed to have brightened a bit. “Be sure to join us for dinner this evening. I would like to discuss the matter of the betrothal with King Highborne.”

I could feel Saphira stiffen beside me. She still feared his true mental state would be discovered. Which it would eventually. My father was no fool. But if I was to become king, and Saphira and I were to be mated, perhaps we could find a way to rule both our kingdoms together.

So much of our future still remained unclear, but there was one thing that could be settled immediately. And I could not wait another second.

“Yes, of course, Father. We will see you in a few hours.” I tugged Saphira past my parents and quickened our steps into a jog.

If I didn't claim this woman as mine today, I would lose my mind.

Fifty-One

SAPHIRA



The moment the door slammed shut behind us Ryker's mouth claimed mine. He pinned me to the thick timber, mouth ravaging, hands exploring. Clothes sloughed off, ties were unbound, underthings were shed and a second later, he dragged me onto the bed.

Oh gods, I was so ready for him.

Though we'd made love repeatedly for the last three nights, the excitement that raged through the bond was like none of the other times. This was it. We were doing it. We would finally complete the dracuori bond.

My dracon surged to the surface, claws ripping at my insides. She wanted out, she wanted to finally get a look at her mate in the dracon flesh. *Too bad, girl. Wait your turn.*

Ryker crawled over me, his erection heavy against my leg as he dropped kisses up my torso. "Oh, Saphira, you have no idea how long I've waited for this."

No, I couldn't imagine. I'd only been back a few months and already it seemed like an eternity. Ryker had been waiting for fifty damned years.

His tongue dragged across my breasts, sharpening my nipples to tight peaks. I arched against him, the tangle of emotions between us raging. His mouth met mine, and he devoured my lips, then danced with my tongue. I could kiss this man forever and never get bored.

He dropped kisses along my jawline, then moved further up to my ear. Snagging the sensitive lobe, he sucked, sending

heat racing between my legs. It already felt like an inferno down there, one only Ryker could quell.

I traced the sharp planes of his back with my fingers, then dived lower, gripping that perfect ass. He groaned as I urged him closer. “I’m ready, Ryker,” I whispered.

He braced himself over me, his corded arms caging me in. “You’re certain? You’re ready to commit to a lifetime with me?”

“Yes,” I whisper-shouted. “I’m so ready.” Yanking him down, I parted my legs to fit his hips between my thighs. “I want to be your mate, and I want us to complete the dracuori bond. I’ve never wanted or needed anything more in my life.”

I could feel him hard against my entrance, and a shiver crawled up my spine.

“There’s no turning back now,” he whispered.

“Good.” My hands clamped around his ass and urged him on. He sank inside, and a moan slipped free as he filled me. “Oh, goddess, Ryker, you feel so...”

“Perfect?” He glanced down at me, the raw emotion surging through the brilliant silver tearing the air from my lungs.

I nodded quickly, too overcome with overwhelming sensations to string together a reply. My hips moved with his, naturally and in perfect sync. Every thrust filled me deeper, connecting us more wholly. It was different than the other times. Ryker moved slower, with more intention, his eyes locked to mine. The other times had been savage, a desperate edge to every second.

This, this was truly making love.

“Not that I’m not enjoying this,” I finally murmured, “but what comes next?”

A wicked glimmer flashed across his brilliant eyes. “I will bite you, and then you bite me. Once our blood is exchanged, we finish the act and should allow our dracon to officially

meet again. They'll repeat the process of mating, then blood-sharing and the bond will be complete."

"Wait a second." I froze beneath him. "Are you saying we must have sex in dracon form?"

A deep chuckle rumbled his chest, vibrating against my own.

"It is an important step in completing the bond and tying our dracon for life. We'll definitely want to. Trust me."

A mix of anxiety and excitement tumbled in my chest. I'd only just re-learned how to summon my dracon. How was I supposed to have sex in that beastly form?

It'll be as natural as this, Saphira. Ryker's voice caressed my mind.

Somehow, I doubted that. Either way, it was something to worry about later. Ryker resumed his spine-tingling thrusts, and I gave myself into the waves of building pleasure. I was close... if we didn't do this thing, I'd freefall over the edge.

Ryker's mouth abandoned mine, moving across my jawbone and down to my neck, to that patch of tawny skin. His tongue dragged over my flesh, drawing a shudder all the way down my spine. "Ready?"

My head bounced up and down. He licked his lips, and his incisors lengthened. A trickle of fear leeches through my veins.

"Relax, Saphira, it will only hurt for a second."

"Okay, just do it."

He rocked his hips against me, burrowing himself deep, so deep that I felt him all the way in my soul. I held him tight against me as he turned my focus to the fire building below. A sharp prick stung the column of my throat before heady pleasure roared to the surface. Fiery heat emanated from the dual pinpricks and surged outward. The mixture of pleasure and pain was so acute, my entire body trembled from the swelling sensations.

“Now bite me.” His words were garbled over the roar of my pulse across my eardrums. I was impressed I was even able to process his command. He bared his throat as he hovered over me, still moving in a steady rhythm.

How I found the wherewithal to keep up with him was beyond me. The emotions flooding my system were so overpowering they were all I could see, all I could hear, and everything I could feel.

“Now, Saphira.” His thick arms strained as he fought for control. I could feel the waves of lust rolling between us.

I had no idea what to do, but I assumed my dracon would take over. Lifting my head off the pillow, I ran my tongue over Ryker’s tattoo of the gilded dragon surrounded in flames. I hated the idea of taking a bite out of it.

It’ll be fine, just do it, Saphira. Ryker’s impatient voice echoed through my mind.

I bared my teeth and sunk my incisors into his throat. The coppery, pungent taste of blood filled my mouth, and instead of the repulsion I expected to feel, it tasted incredible. I sucked on his neck, taking more of him in.

“Easy, easy, Saphira,” he groaned.

Reluctantly, I finally released him, licking the tiny crimson punctures my fangs had left on his flesh. As I lay my head back, the gilded dracon illuminated, the flames flickering to life.

“Oh, my goddess!”

“I know.” A smile melted across Ryker’s face as he stared at my neck. “Your dracuori mark is surfacing.”

“It is?” I clapped my hand over my throat as if I could somehow feel it. “Yours is glowing.”

He nodded. “The bond is being completed.”

I drew in a breath as that fiery energy took hold, darting between our bond and racing through every inch of me.

“Now let’s finish this, my love.” He pumped his hips, and a moan slipped out as he buried himself completely inside me.

Just like before, I was ready. I’d barely been holding on the entire time. The intense pleasure washed over me, the heat raging at my apex. “Ryker, I’m going to—” A cry broke free as I plummeted over the edge, wave after wave of heady emotion pulling me under.

Ryker jerked inside me, a groan splitting his lips, and his warmth filled my core.

We remained like that locked in each other’s arms for an endless moment. I was dying to run to the mirror and take a look at my new mate mark, but my legs were like jelly and the idea of being torn away from Ryker’s body sounded like hell.

“It will be like this for a while,” he whispered as he dropped down over me and pressed a kiss to my forehead. He was still inside me, and goddess, it felt so right. “The need to be near each other, to be inside each other constantly.”

An exciting shiver raced up my spine. “I think I’m going to like this part.”

He smirked, a smug grin curling those kissable lips. “It’s the beastly urges to mate, to procreate taking control.”

My soaring heart plummeted back down to the surface. For a second, I’d forgotten all about the prophecy. I was to mate with the Fuocan royal heir to break the curse. “Mother Terrea!” I shouted.

“What?” Ryker peered down at me like I’d lost my mind.

“The prophecy... it *is* about us.” Another type of excitement rushed my veins. “Once we’re mated, we’ll fulfill it. Don’t you see? You are the Fuocan heir now.”

He nodded slowly, as if he were trying to process my words. “Maybe...”

“We’re going to save the kingdom after all, you’ll see.”

Ryker cupped my face, drawing his thumb across my cheek. “You did this, Saphira. You have saved us all.” He

pressed a kiss to my lips, and I could feel him harden inside me. “I love you, I love you so much, my dracuori.”

“I love you more.”

A swirl of lust raced through our newly forged bond. I could feel him so clearly now. Every faint echo I’d felt before was magnified. I could hear every breath, sense every swallow, his thoughts raced across my mind. I didn’t think it was possible to feel so connected to someone.

He began to move inside me again, and I easily picked up the rhythm. I could spend the rest of my life in his arms. And I prayed to Mother Terrea I would.

Fifty-Two

SAPHIRA



One Week Later

“Are you ready, Saphie?” Tatá’s voice cut through the jumble of emotions battering my chest. I stood at the edge of the balcony, the sultry breeze coming off the sea prying free a few strands of hair. I hated to mess up Lumia’s hard work. She’d spent hours perfecting my hair and makeup for the ceremony, but I desperately needed the fresh air. The new crown atop my head felt so damned heavy, even with the light ivy entwined with jade gemstones to balance the massive silver dragon head. It was beautiful, but what it symbolized increased the rapid flutter of my heart.

I finally turned around, lifting the long, billowing skirts of my gown so they wouldn’t drag across the stone floor. Queen Aisling had personally delivered her mating ceremony gown first thing this morning. It was exactly as I’d remembered it even though it seemed like a lifetime ago that I had first put it on. The embroidered pale blue corset with delicate gold lace molded perfectly to my frame, and the sparkling jewels embedded within the brocade shimmered beneath the mid-day sun. It really was beautiful, and today, I felt more like the Imperia than ever before. Still, monster-sized butterflies lashed at my insides. “Almost,” I forced out as I faced him.

Tatá looked regal as always with his deep green jacket and breeches with gilded piping. The high collar only added to the majestic flare, highlighting the long column of his throat. “You look radiant, darling.” Tears shimmered in his eyes as he stepped closer. “Your mother would have been so proud of

you. I know she is. Have I ever told you I speak to her sometimes?”

A nervous giggle erupted through my lips.

“I’m serious, Saphie, and no, I’m not crazy. I can still feel her sometimes, here.” He pressed his hand to his chest, and I nodded slowly. Now that Ryker and I had completed the dracuori bond, I understood. I was fairly certain I’d always feel him inside me some way or another.

“I know you do, Tatá.” I pulled him into a hug, burying my face in his warm chest. I never knew which version of my father I’d get, and I was always overjoyed when the lucid one appeared. Especially on a day like today. He and Bartus had remained at Flintguard Fortress for the entire week as preparations for the ceremony were made. He’d had good days and bad, and every one that passed, King Kiran’s scrutiny increased.

Which was why I’d pushed for today’s ceremony to be dual-purpose.

Loud banging at the door sent my heart leaping up my throat.

“Who is it?” Father barked.

“My apologies, my king.” Ryker’s voice seeped through the door. “I didn’t realize you were with Saphira.”

“You can’t be here anyway,” I shouted. “You know it’s bad luck...”

“That’s a silly human notion, Saphira. And you are *not* human.”

And yet, sometimes, and especially on significant days like these, I felt more human than ever. “You still can’t come in here.”

“Please, Saphira. I need to see my mate before the ceremony.” *Please*. The familiar, deep timbre echoed in my mind.

Tatá dipped his head to me and turned toward the door. “I will give you a moment with your dracuori.” He pressed a kiss

to my forehead before spinning away.

I darted behind the bathroom door before my dad ushered Ryker in. After a quick exchange of pleasantries, the door closed and father's footsteps fell away, leaving me alone with my mate. I hid in the bathing chamber, a nervous energy thrumming through my veins.

"You're really not going to come out here?" A hint of irritation mixed with amusement laced Ryker's tone.

"Don't you think we've been through enough? I don't want to jinx it."

His warm laughter filled the room, seeping all the way into my panicked heart. Maybe I was being silly. Just being in Ryker's arms would chase away the nerves.

I peered around the door, sneaking a peek at my dracuori and the future king. He held a crown in his hands, the intricate silver carving bearing the same massive dracon head as my own but instead of the ivy and jade, his crown was covered in spiked flames and rubies. No wonder he was hesitant to put it on.

My gaze traveled up from his hands to the hard set of his jaw. As our eyes met, it softened a touch. And now, I couldn't take him in fast enough. The crimson jacket accentuated the broad set of his shoulders, cutting down to his slim waist and narrow hips. A frilly white dress shirt peeked from beneath a matching crimson waistcoat, unbuttoned at the top to display his dracon mark.

My fingers brushed over my throat, running over the edges of my own. Though his was covered in flames and mine in ivy, the dracon were identical. The true mark of fated dracuori.

A sharp gasp fell from his lips as his eyes chased to mine. I was still mostly hidden behind the door, but something must have caught his attention. "What?"

He rubbed at the center of his chest, eyes wide and brimming with emotion. But his lips remained pressed together.

"What is it?" I repeated.

A beaming smile melted across the hard set of his jaw, but he shook his head, waving me off. “You are simply breathtaking is all.”

That was definitely not it. I mean, sure, I looked fantastic but...

“Ryker...” I whined.

“It’s nothing we can’t discuss at a later time.”

My brow quirked, a hint of dread unfurling.

“I swear it’s nothing, my love. I only needed to see you, and now that I have, I feel much better.”

I watched him from behind the door, warily. “So you’re ready for this?”

“Saphira, I’ve been ready for this from the moment I saw you in that ridiculous costume in the nightclub.” His eyes sparkled with mirth, and I couldn’t help but giggle.

My thoughts flew to Rhodelia and Morgana, my adoptive sisters in the human world. I only hoped they were as happy as I was in their new-slash-old lives. At least I’d received word that Morgana was safe as promised.

Ryker dipped into an elaborate bow, his hand nearly scraping the floor. “Now, can I escort you to the courtyard?”

I drew in a steadying breath and ran my hand over the plunging neckline of my corset. *We can do this, right, girl?* My dracon purred within my darkest depths. She was infatuated with Ryker and his dracon. And he’d been right, sex in beastly form was mind-blowing. From the first moment she saw him, it was all I could do to keep her from jumping him.

I finally nodded, and Ryker’s silver irises brightened, a silly smile curling those perfect lips. Lust pounded through the bond as he took a step closer, then another. I crept out from behind the door, and his jaw dropped, mouth forming a capital O.

“Mother Terrea,” he hissed, the awe and reverence in his tone sending a chill up my spine. “You are... exquisite.” *Gorgeous. Splendid. Heavenly. Breathtaking...*

About a dozen more flattering adjectives flitted through our connection as his heated gaze raked over me, and fire blossomed low in my belly.

I wagged my finger at him, keeping my distance. I knew exactly what would happen if we got too close. We'd never leave the room and end up late for our own mating ceremony.

Would that really be so bad? Ryker's gravelly voice stoked the building embers.

"Yes!"

A wicked chuckle burst free as he closed the distance between us, taking my hand in his. "We are mates, Saphira, it is perfectly natural to be unable to keep our hands off each other."

"I know, but let's not forget all eyes will be on us today for another, equally important reason. Your father would argue that it is a *more* important reason."

"Of course, he would," he growled.

I caressed his clean-shaven cheek with my free hand, already missing the typical rugged scruff. "He's not entirely wrong. It isn't every day a new king is crowned."

Ryker's lips flipped into a frown. "I want this day to be about us."

"It is, but that also means keeping to our promises of returning Draconia to its glory. And we can only accomplish that with you as king."

"And you as Imperia and queen of Terre." He threw me an indulgent smile.

Father had been eager to relinquish the heavy weight of his crown. Joining our two kingdoms made the most sense, given our dracuori bond. The royals wouldn't be happy, but change was coming whether they wanted it or not. With our two houses joined, the Stormbornes and Skybornes would have little to say about it.

I pressed my forehead to his. "I love you," I whispered against his lips. "I could never have accomplished any of this

without you.”

He slowly shook his head. “That is not true, and you know it. You had already accomplished so much in your life much before I was even a real part of it. The people of Draconia never would have come around so easily if you hadn’t been the one to sacrifice her life fifty years ago. You set all this in motion that day at the Sacred Mountain with the other seven girls. You deserve all of this and more.”

“Well, when you put it that way...” I shot him a smirk.

He crushed his mouth to mine, stealing the air from my lungs and making it his own. *I love you, Imperia Saphira Highborne, and I can’t wait for the rest of our lives to begin.* His sweet words caressing my mind coupled with his heated kiss lit an unquenchable fire in my core.

I guess we could be just a few minutes late...

His sinful chuckle echoed across my mind as he walked me back toward the bed.

Epilogue



Ryker – Six Months Later

A balmy breeze lifted over the sea, reaching the highest turrets of Flintguard Fortress, and ruffled Saphira's brilliant azure hair. The sun dipped behind the horizon, painting the sea in a portrait of vibrant colors. My mate, my queen, the Imperia of Draconia, let out a contented sigh and leaned deeper into me. I ran my hand over the swell of her stomach, and absolute joy filled my heart.

I had never expected this. Never felt anything like it. Once we were mated, I assumed we would eventually have children but the emotions that would come along with it were greater than I ever could have imagined.

The day of our mating ceremony, I had sensed something through our bond. I'd raced across the fortress to find her, fear crushing my lungs. The moment I set my eyes on her, I knew. I could feel the tiny presence sharing the space within my soulmate's body.

I hadn't said anything for fear of frightening her, and I wanted to be certain. After the ceremonies had been completed, and we had been officially mated and dubbed king and queen of both kingdoms of Terre and Fuoco, I had shared my suspicions.

It wasn't exactly planned... Apparently, human birth control did little against the relentless desires of the newly cemented dracuori bond or powerful dracon seed.

It had taken Saphira a moment to adjust to the idea. She was very young after all; we both were. But the possibility of finally breaking the royal dracon curse was a powerful motivator. All of Draconia waited in eager anticipation for the birth of our child.

Would he or she be able to summon their inner dracon?

There was so much at stake.

For as long as I could remember the royals had the upper hand, and now Saphira and I were doing everything in our power to ensure that was no longer true. The commoners had gotten access to the royal treasure troves and now nearly all the people of the continent could summon their inner beasts, except for the cursed royals.

It was time now for us all to be equal, once and for all.

Saphira's hand moved over mine, her gaze still intent on the Sea of Speranza. So much hope rested on this little being growing in her womb. Even once the baby was born, it would be years until we would discover their abilities. Most dracon didn't emerge until early adolescence. I wasn't sure I could wait that long.

"Penny for your thoughts," Saphira whispered.

"You and those strange human expressions." A grin curled my lips. All the memories of her previous life may have returned, but her human ones were equally strong. And she was stronger for them. The past six months had been tumultuous ones.

The Stormbornes and Skybornes had fought us each step of the way toward unification. At least I'd finally gotten a chance to employ my revenge on King Silas for the poisoned wine. After the mating and coronation ceremony, I'd had Darrik snatch the king of Aquos. I tortured him until he admitted the truth. As suspected, my father was his target, and Saphira had been caught in the crosshairs.

It didn't matter. I still made him pay.

He was lucky it had only cost him one hand. If Darrik hadn't restrained me, I would have snapped the bastard's neck

for hurting what was mine. And Saphira was *mine*. My mate, my dracuori, my everything.

A possessive growl vibrated my throat. Once the mate bond had been completed, my dracon went from controlling to downright obsessive.

“Ryker?” Saphira’s soft voice drew me from dark thoughts of the past. “You okay?” She tipped her head back, eyes meeting mine.

I released a slow breath and pressed a kiss to her cheek. “I couldn’t be happier.”

“At least that makes one of us.” She crinkled her nose and shifted to her side on the blanket. Her growing belly protruded between us.

“What’s wrong?”

“I’m just so freaking uncomfortable,” she groaned. “Your huge dracon baby is squishing my insides.”

I barely suppressed a chuckle, smothering it with my hand as Saphira’s eyes threw daggers. “I’m sorry, my love.” I drew her into my arms, cradling her against my chest. “Is there anything I can do?” We spent many an evening out here staring at the stars and the two beautiful full moons discussing our future and the future of our people. Perhaps we’d have to keep these talks to our chambers from now on so she could be more comfortable. Or... “Should I move one of the beds out here?”

Her gaze swung at me, wide and unbelieving. “Seriously?”

“Certainly, why not? I want you to be comfortable, and I love our nights out here. Don’t you?”

She nodded. “I do.”

We split our time between Fuoco and Terre, but with the pregnancy, Saphira seemed to enjoy the cooler weather of my home. Her father and Bartus also traveled back and forth between both kingdoms, the old man ecstatic about his future grandchild. Just the idea of the baby seemed to have improved

his condition. His moments of lucidity came more often now, and that alone had Saphira thrilled.

“So... are you going to do that now?” Her mouth curved into a sly grin.

“Of course, my love. Anything for you.” Reluctantly, I released her and lay her back against the mound of pillows. “I will be right back.”



Saphira

I stared up into the darkening sky, focusing on the round, full, blue moon. It had seemed so crazy to have two moons when I'd first returned from the human world. Some of that wonder and awe still remained. Kind of like how this baby came to being.

I rubbed my belly, and the little dracon invading my insides kicked. The kid was definitely going to be a soccer player. And a boy. I was certain somehow. I was still a little salty about that damned human birth control fail, but most days, I was just overwhelmed with excitement and only a slight trickle of anxiety.

Ryker was amazing. Not only was he a devoted mate and king, but he would make the best father. I didn't know how I knew, but I felt it deep in the marrow of my bones. Just as I felt our fractured kingdom was on the right path with us at the helm.

If only there was a way to confirm that this little guy had the spirit of a dracon within his little baby soul. I ran my palm over my expanding stomach and imagined the future.

A flash of light at the end of the balcony caught my eye, and my pulse skyrocketed. My head swiveled toward the sight, and I shot up, reaching for the dagger strapped to my thigh. The situation with the rebels may have simmered, but Ryker still insisted I should always be armed.

The shadowy darkness coalesced into a female form. Long, flowing purple locks framed a heart-shaped face. The

priestess's ethereal presence sucked the air from my lungs as her sharp lavender gaze lanced over me, or more specifically, my belly. I hadn't seen the messenger of the goddess since my arrival in Draconia all those months ago.

"Priestess Abba?" I breathed.

Long buried memories surged to the surface. The eight of us, from each of the continents of Terrea, circling the sacred tree in the temple of Mother Terrea.

I stepped forward with my head held high and lifted the chalice in my hands. Shimmering golden vines snaked across my arms, writhing with power. My voice was as strong as the overwhelming force within the temple's walls as I spoke, "From my blood flows the power of the mighty dracon, its great strength will fortify the sacred tree and make us all whole once again."

Together, we'd banished King Valandril and ended the war, giving up our lives in the process.

"Imperia Saphira." Her perfect mouth stretched into a smile. "It's true then..." She stepped closer, her long robes swishing with each step, her gaze intent on my stomach.

"It is." Heat burned my cheeks at her piercing gaze.

She lifted her hand to my cheek, and the golden mark of Mother Terrea's sacred tree glowed on the bare skin of her upper arm. "You have done well, my child. Your sacrifice has not been forgotten by Mother Terrea. She has sent me here to still your thoughts, to quiet your mind." Again, her gaze dipped to my belly. "You and the Ashborne heir have broken the curse placed on the royal dracon. Your selflessness and love for your people has re-instilled the power of the dracon in all the females of your lands. From this day forward, all dracons, royal and commoners alike, will produce offspring with the dracon spirit."

All the air whooshed from my lungs, and the weight on my shoulders vanished. "Thank you."

"No, my child, thank you for everything you have done for not only Draconia but all of Terrea. The goddess is very

pleased.”

Heavy footfalls resonated behind me, and the hair on the back of my neck prickled at the approach of my mate. “Saphira!” A rush of fear surged through the bond as Ryker took in the scene along the balcony.

“Relax, King Ryker, it is only I.” Abba’s soothing voice immediately quelled the turmoil racing through our bond.

He moved to my side, wrapping an arm around my shoulder and trapping me against the warmth of his body. “What’s going on?” he whispered.

“I’ll catch you up in a second.” Then I returned my attention to the priestess. “Thank you again for coming to deliver the news. It has brought me much peace.”

“It is the least you deserve.” She dipped her head and turned toward the edge of the balcony. “Goodbye, Imperia Saphira and King Ryker. I wish you both an abundance of health, multiple lifetimes of happiness, and an array of powerful offspring.” With that, she disappeared.

“What just happened?” Ryker’s wide eyes seared into mine.

“We did it. Abba confirmed the curse is broken.” I rubbed my belly smushed between us. “The people of Draconia will finally be whole again.”

Ryker crushed his lips to mine, devouring me with his warm mouth. “We really did it,” he whispered against my lips.

I love you. I sent the thought through our bond as his arms curled around my waist and drew me flush against him.

Forever.

THE END

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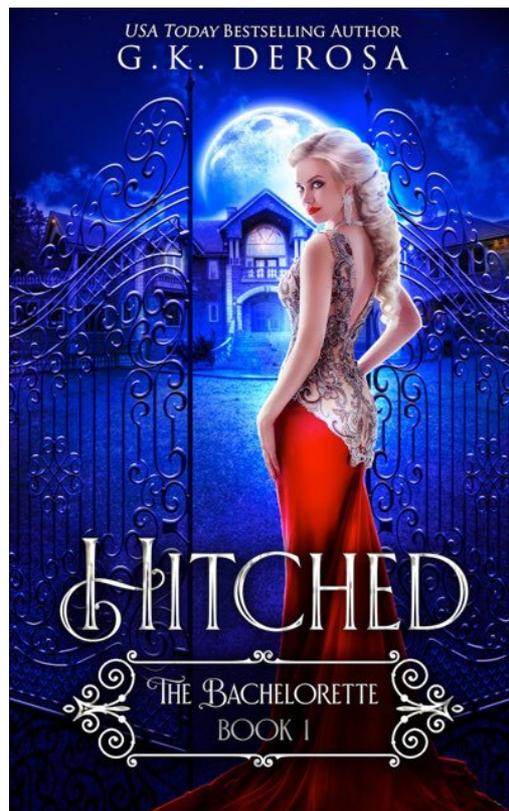
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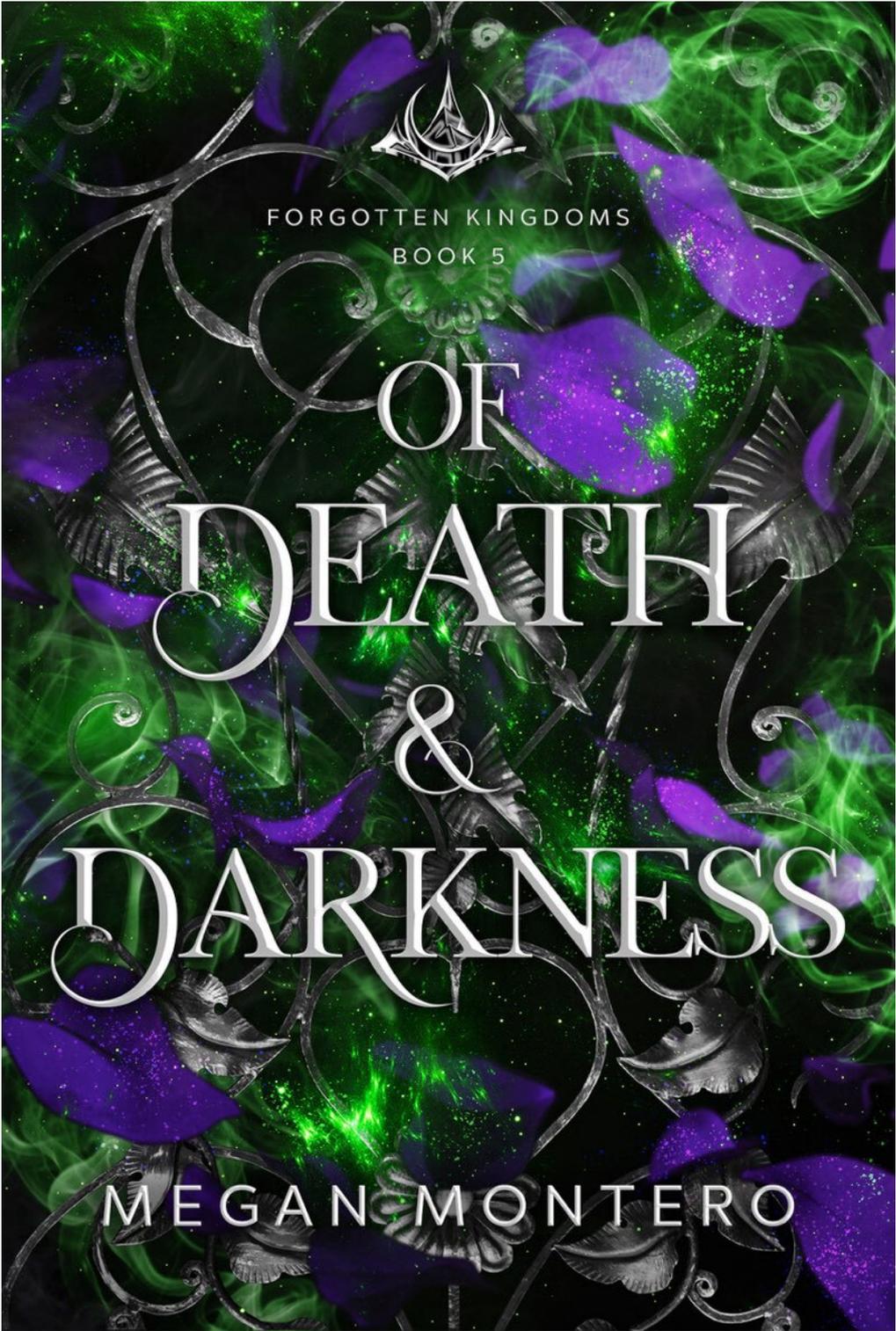
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****This is an upper YA/NA crossover with lots of schmexy bachelors and is best suited for age 17 and over. The steaminess factor does increase through the course of the series!*



FORGOTTEN KINGDOMS
BOOK 5

OF
DEATH
&
DARKNESS

MEGAN MONTERO

Of Death & Darkness



CHAPTER 1

Morgana

“Come on, we’re gonna be late, and you know Saphira will start to worry.” I held the door to our hotel room open for my sister, Rhode.

“I’m coming, just a second.”

She stumbled from the bathroom and shoved another small Band-Aid into her clutch purse. Her pale blonde hair was pulled into a high ponytail that flailed around with each of her hurried movements.

“And everyone says I mother people and you’re the one with a Band-Aid in your purse.” I chuckled as she spun in a circle looking around the room like she was forgetting something.

It was a typical hotel room with two pristine white beds, a single TV, and our luggage sprawled out everywhere.

“Why are you laughing?” She put her hands on her hips and narrowed her eyes at me.

“Because your tits are pointing at me.”

My sister had decided to go as Madonna to the world’s most notorious Halloween party in Vegas. It was pretty shocking we even got invited to The Portal Hotel and Casino, yet here we were. Her with her huge, cone-shaped boobs and me in my best Cher fishnet outfit trying to turn back time.

She looked down at the golden cones, then did a little shimmy. “You know you like it.”

“I do.”

We both broke out into little shimmying dances for a moment.

“I still can’t believe so much of your ass is showing, but I’m kind of proud of you.”

Rhode walked over to the dresser and grabbed a little packet of alcohol wipes and shoved them into her bag.

“It’s not that much.”

My entire body was covered in a black fishnet bodysuit with some thick, black strips of fabric over all the parts I didn’t want to show.

“Besides, my jacket covers a lot.”

I did a half-turn, showing her where the jacket fell to my hips. Normally, my hair was dark and wavy, but tonight, I teased and curled the hell out of it to get that huge eighties curl to top off my costume. We went big so we didn’t have to go home. Rhode and I were the same height at a towering 5’2. Where she was slim and delicate, I was just a tiny bit curvier. Though we couldn’t remember our parents, I liked to think that our matching blue eyes might’ve come from our mother. I didn’t know why, but the thought comforted me.

I tossed my hair over my shoulder. “I’m here for our ladies-of-the-eighties vibe.”

“Me too.” Rhode smiled but there was a sharpness in her eyes that told me she wasn’t as relaxed as she looked. “Let’s get out of here, I need to shut my brain off.”

“I’m ready for a break.” As if on cue, my cell rang, and I pulled it from my bag. “Hey Janet, how’s it going?”

“Now who’s slowing us down?” Rhode teased as she sauntered past me with her giant cone boobs and bright red lipstick.

I let the hotel door fall shut behind me as Janet spoke. “Hey, I know you’re on vacation but I had to make sure we didn’t need anything else for Jason’s adoption hearing tomorrow?”

“No, we should be all good. I made sure all the paperwork was done on our end, and the future parents signed off on everything. Jason can’t wait to officially be part of the Rojas family. Literally all that needs to happen tomorrow is for the judge to sign off and for the family to celebrate.”

Janet let go of a happy sigh. “Man, I wish our jobs were always like this: good kid, good family. Match made in social services heaven.”

“If only.” As a social worker, I’d seen a lot of good things but also a lot of bad.

“I know it’s the first vacation you’ve taken in years, but honestly, Mo, you deserve it. Now go have a good time and forget I called.”

As we walked down the hall toward the elevator, my spiked, thigh-high boots sunk into the carpet, giving me the traction I needed to get to the elevator faster. “Don’t worry about it. Text me tomorrow and let me know how it goes.”

“Will do. But Mo, HAVE FUN. You always take care of everyone else. It’s your turn to take care of you.”

My turn to take care of me, was there such a thing? “I know. And don’t worry. What happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas.”

“You wish,” Rhode whispered. “If you do anything awesome, I’m going to video it as proof you know how to have a good time.”

“I’m with her.” Janet chuckled.

“And I’m going...byeeee, good luck tomorrow.” I ended the call and slid my phone into the pocket of my leather jacket before Janet could respond to me.

We stopped in front of the bank of elevators and Rhode hit the button.

“I can’t believe we’re here, like how did this actually happen?”

“I have no idea. I’m shocked we won these tickets.” I wagged my eyebrows. “But while we’re here...we gonna do the damn thing.”

Rhode chuckled. “Oh, I love when this side of you comes out to play. It’s so rare.”

The elevator gave a ding and the golden doors slid open and we stepped inside. Out of habit, I moved to the side and hit the button for the lobby. Rhode moved to the other side and stood across from me.

“Hold the elevator!” a woman called from down the hall.
“We’re coming!”

My arm shot out and stopped the doors from closing. Three women dressed as The Chipmunks piled into the elevator. They each wore an oversized sweatshirt, knee-high white socks, and little hats. The one dressed as Alvin looked me up and down. “Cher, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Love it.”

The other, dressed as Simon, shoved her big, fake glasses up her nose.

The doors started to slide shut once more when a guy called out, “Hold on!”

Again, my arm shot out and Rhode narrowed her eyes at me. I didn’t want to be packed in here anymore than the next person, but I couldn’t help it. Two towering guys piled in. One wore one of those blow-up T-Rex suits, the other a blow-up shark. When they got into the elevator, I got smacked in the face with a blow-up fin. I leaned away from him and pushed the fin away from my face.

“Oh, my bad. This thing has a mind of its own.”

“It’s cool.” I sidestepped my way to the back of the elevator as the doors slid closed and the elevator began to descend.

The T-Rex tried to turn to face the door but ended up smacking the Theodore chipmunk woman in the legs. She chuckled and danced to the side, bumping into her other friend. We all stood there laughing when the elevator began to shake back and forth as if there were some kind of earthquake. The chipmunks began to scream and hold onto each other while our two blow-up guys rocked back and forth, struggling to gain their balance. When I met Rhode’s eyes, her face was a mirror of my own. Both of us stood there with the “oh shit, we’re in trouble” faces. It sounded like wind whipped up the elevator shaft, and then the elevator ground to a halt and

everything stopped moving. Everyone fell silent for a moment before panic filled them all.

The T-Rex shifted from one foot to the other. “Yo, what was that?”

“I can’t be stuck in here, bro.” The guy in the blow-up shark suit sounded like he was talking through a bubble.

The girl with the Alvin sweatshirt began to whimper. “Now would be a really bad time to tell everyone that I have to pee so bad.”

“Oh my God!” Theodore exclaimed. “Me too! We have to get out of here.”

She shoved her way toward the panel of buttons but tripped over the T-Rex’s tail and fell head-first into the doors. There was a loud *thunk* as she dropped to the ground and pressed her hand to her head. “Shit! My head.”

“Oh bro, she’s bleeding, bro!” Shark guy tried to hit his T-Rex friend.

“Rhode!” I called past Simon and Theodore as they hovered over Alvin.

“You see? I told you.” She started rummaging through her purse. “Take back your mockery.”

“Okay, let’s everyone calm down for a second.” I bent down and pulled Alvin back toward the wall and let her sit on the ground. “Just give it a minute. My sister’s a nurse and she can help you.”

Rhode bent over, and her cones got a little too close to her face. “Hey, don’t poke her eye out.”

She chuckled. “I’m a pro even with these things.”

“I can’t breathe...it’s too hot...it’s too tight in here.” Shark Boy started shifting back and forth on his feet. “I can’t be here, bro. I gotta be free.”

“Be free? What are you talking about?” T-Rex turned toward him and smacked Rhode and the other two chipmunks with his tail.

“Okay guys, this isn’t working.” I stepped behind them and quickly pulled down the zippers of their blow-up suits. Shark Guy practically leaped out of it. He was at least six feet tall and a sheen of sweat covered his rotund body.

T-Rex was just as tall and round, except he seemed more disappointed to be out of his dino suit than ever. “I liked that costume.”

“Relax, Dino Guy. It’s just until we figure out what’s going on.” I glanced down at my sister. “You good?”

“Yeah, it’s not too deep.” She pulled a small tube from her purse. “I’m about to save you like three hours in the ER. I don’t think you have a concussion, but no drinking tonight. And if you get even the tiniest bit dizzy or out of it, you gotta go to the hospital. Okay?”

Alvin looked up at her with wide eyes and nodded. “What are you gonna do?”

“This is surgical glue. I’m gonna glue this together and throw a Band-Aid over it. You’ll never know it was there.” She pulled off the cap.

Alvin smiled and angled her head toward Rhode. “Cool.”

“Glue is not cool, bro.” Shark Boy’s eyes darted around the elevator. “I gotta be free!”

“What?” His friend’s brow furrowed as he looked him up and down. “What are you talking about?”

Suddenly, Shark Guy ripped his shirt over his head and dropped it to the ground, revealing all of his rolls. His belly jiggled as he hooked his thumbs into his shorts.

“STOP!” I jumped around him and snapped my fingers in his face. “Hey, look at me.”

When his wide eyes met mine, I broke out my best “do what I say” voice. “Do not drop your shit in this elevator. No one wants to see that, dude.”

When he looked like he wasn’t going to listen to me I snapped, “Hey.”

“Ohhh, you got mom voiceeeeeedddd.” Rhode chuckled from her spot on the ground.

“His ass is about to be in your face. You want to keep teasing?” I pressed myself against the wall and slid around him toward the panel of buttons.

Rhode finished cleaning up Alvin with some antiseptic wipes, and it was like nothing had ever happened. She shrugged and eyed the guys back. “I’ve seen worse.”

I shook my head. “Wise-ass.”

“You still love me.”

I turned back to Shark Guy. “Okay, give me a minute. Can you do that?”

He slowly unhooked his thumbs from his shorts and nodded.

I sucked in a deep breath and pressed the call button. It buzzed and a voice came over the intercom.

“Yeah.”

“Um hi, we seem to be stuck.”

“Well, yeah.” The guy sounded like he was chewing gum.

I tried for patience. “Do you think you could call someone to help get us out?”

“I don’t think so,” the voice crackled.

“Why not?”

“Because you all pushed the stop button. Hit it again and the elevator will go.” The intercom clicked again, and it sounded like he hung up a phone.

“Really?” I smacked my hand against the button and the elevator rocked to life.

The guy in the shark suit hooked his fingers back into the waistband of his shorts and smirked at me.

I jabbed my finger into his face. “Do it and you lose a fin.”

The doors slid open and Shark Guy and T-Rex tumbled out of the elevator in front of me. Across from us stood the most beautiful man I'd ever seen. He was so much taller than me with long, dark hair cut in jagged lines at the ends. His eyes were so blue, they nearly glowed in the dim light. His lips pulled up in a cocky half-smirk, and I felt my heart do a little flip-flop. He wore a long, leather coat that covered a leather breastplate and old worn-in leather pants. I had no idea what kind of costume it was. All I knew was that it was sexy as hell.

“Free! We're free!” Shark Guy rolled on the floor at my feet.

His buddy jumped to a stand and pulled him up. “Come on, man. Let's go.”

The two of them stumbled away. When I glanced up, looking for the sexy-as-fuck-guy, he was gone. I glanced over to Rhode. “Now I could really use a drink.”



If you can't wait to read Morgana's story then make sure to pre-order it now! Releases December 8th! [CLICK HERE TO PRE-ORDER](#)

Introduction

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Eight women.

One sacrifice to save their kingdoms.

A chance to reclaim the love they lost.

Collection notes:

Forgotten Kingdoms is a collection of full-length stand-alone fantasy romance novels with fated mates and a guaranteed happily ever after. With vampires, fae, shifters, and everything in between, each book features a unique heroine and her epic love story that can be read in any order. All relationship dynamics are strictly M/F.

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~ G.K.

About the Author



USA Today Bestselling Author, G.K. De Rosa has always had a passion for all things fantasy and romance. Growing up, she loved to read, devouring books in a single sitting. She attended Catholic school where reading and writing were an intense part of the curriculum, and she credits her amazing teachers for instilling in her a love of storytelling. As an adult, her favorite books were always young adult novels, and she remains a self-proclaimed fifteen year-old at heart. When she's not reading, writing or watching way too many TV shows, she's traveling and eating around the world with her family. G.K. DeRosa currently lives in South Florida with her real life Prince Charming and their little royals.

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