

LAUREN CONNOLLY



DEVOTED
TO A
DRAGON



FOLK HAVEN

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BOOK 3.6

LAUREN CONNOLLY



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CONTENT WARNINGS

This story contains scenes with violence, emotional abuse, physical abuse, a near-death experience, and prejudice. This story contains scenes describing killing someone in self-defense and suicidal thoughts.

CLEAN WINGS DRY CLEANERS used to be owned by an old male griffin who enjoyed roaring at kids who skateboarded on the sidewalk outside his shop. Now, the store belongs to a beautiful harpy I've thought about every day since I left this town.

I'll be lucky if she remembers who I am.

"You sure you want to do this fake-name shit?" Xavier asks as he walks around the front of his truck to meet me on the curb.

The dragon has designated himself as my Folk Haven liaison. Up until this moment, I've been grateful. But I can't have him letting people know who I am. Not yet.

There's still a chance I'll leave.

"Not fake," I rasp. The damage to my vocal cords makes speaking difficult, but I don't much notice the pain anymore. At least I'm still alive. There were a lot of days I had to remind myself that was a good thing.

"Fine, *Lee*." Xavier puts more emphasis on the nickname than he needs to.

"You swore," I remind him, and the towering Black man grimaces.

"Yeah, fine. Just sayin'." He doesn't push again, letting the disapproval ease off his face, replaced by curiosity. "You ready for this?"

Glancing at the storefront's large glass window, I catch a hint of my reflection in the surface.

I don't recognize the ragged stranger staring back at me. Brown hair, roughly shorn at the shoulders; beard, grown scruffy enough to obscure the bottom half of my face; and thick glasses, distorting the top. My body is strong and lean from living too long on the edge of survival, fighting claw and fang to find my way back to Folk Haven—this small town in northern Georgia. I've traversed continents with nothing more than stolen clothes and a killer instinct.

All to get back to her.

"No." I smooth a hand down the flannel shirt Xavier gave me to replace the threadbare T-shirt I'd shown up in. The material is too hot for September in the South, but I'd asked for something with more coverage, and this is what he gave me. "Let's go," I mutter.

Coward that I am, I let him lead the way into the shop. A tinkling bell alerts anyone inside to a new arrival. The first thing I smell is cleaning supplies. Lots of cleaning supplies. Makes my nose itch until I'm forcefully holding back a sneeze. But after another breath, the industrial scents fade away.

All I smell is *her*.

Flowers, baked in the sun and caressed by a breeze. Gentle, comforting, and a memory I held on to as long as I could. It took years for the harsh bite of frost to obliterate the fragrance from my mind.

I breathe deeper, then choke on air when Xavier strolls farther into the shop, his large shoulders shifting enough to reveal *her*.

Esmerelda Sharpwing.

Esme.

"Hey, big man. What's up? You got your nice suit smelling like smoke again?" Esme stands behind a counter, barely glancing up from where she's bent over a notebook, pencil scratching away.

She's changed.

Of course she has. It's been a long time, and neither of us is a teenager anymore.

The girl I once knew is now a woman. She used to be soft with rounded cheeks, but years have honed the angles of her face, somehow crafting her into a more beautiful creature than the image of perfection I held in my mind. The same shade of dark blonde hair falls in curls over her naturally tan shoulders, but I spy a handful of white strands.

Bleached by the sun or age?

I couldn't have cared less if I'd returned to find her stooped and wrinkled with a head full of white. Only that her changed appearance would mean she had lived a lifetime without me.

They took half a life with her from me. If I think on it too long, rage will cloud my mind, and I won't be able to soak in this moment.

Every muscle in my body tenses, quivering, demanding I stride across the room and gather the harpy into my arms. To hold her close and breathe her in and promise never to let anyone or anything take me from her again.

But I wait. Esme hasn't glanced up again from her drawing. Hasn't reacted to my presence on an instinctual level, like I have with her. As much as I long to, there's no way we can simply start where we left off. Too much time has passed.

"I'm calling in my favor," Xavier announces.

That gets her attention. Esme straightens with a snap, her amber eyes wide and focused on the man.

"Of course. Anything. Tell me what you need," she says.

At that word—*anything*—my hackles rise. I don't like the idea of her leaving herself so open to someone else's whim.

Protect yourself, I want to warn her. *You are too precious for this world and the cruel beings living in it.*

But I keep quiet.

“Favor is for my friend actually.” The big man turns and looks ready to drop his hand on my shoulder but thinks better of it. He tilts his chin my way. “A new dragon in town. He needs a place to stay. I figured he could crash in your upstairs apartment since those witches left.”

Her eyes flick to me, running over my face and my body in a quick sweep.

There’s no flash of recognition. No gasp or shout or angry glare.

Esme’s expression only holds mild curiosity.

“Really?” The corner of her mouth ticks up. “I thought you were gonna ask for something hard.” Esme sets down her pencil before strolling around the counter, coming closer.

A pulse of needy energy picks up in my body, the thrumming increasing as she approaches. Starved for any detail of her I can claim, my eyes eat up this mature version of the harpy.

The softness of her youth is also gone from her body, replaced by toned muscle. She looks strong. Like she could take down someone twice her size. Like she could wrestle me to the ground.

I would give anything for her to do exactly that.

“Hi.” She smiles wide, staring up into my face, so open and sweet and welcoming and ...

Fuck. I want to *devour* her. And then I want to worship her.

“Hi,” I mutter.

“Nice to meet you, newbie. I’m Esme.” The woman I’ve loved since I was seventeen years old holds out her hand to shake.

Because I’m a stranger.

With both eagerness and reluctance, I slide my palm into hers, noting the new calluses that rub against mine. When she curls her fingers around my hand, gripping tight, I bite down hard on the inside of my cheek to keep from blurting out the

truth. To hold back the confession of who I am and what she is to me.

Because I couldn't stand it if the lack of recognition in her golden eyes remained. If, armed with my name, Esme still struggled to recall who I was.

Her hand releases mine, and I want to snarl at the loss. But she doesn't back away, continuing to gaze into my face.

When I realize she's waiting on a response, I force one out.

"Lee," I grunt.

Her grin, already enchanting enough to stop my heart, manages to stretch wider.

"Man of few words?"

My fingers twitch with the urge to rub the scar on my neck. Nasty thing, but my beard and buttoned-up shirt cover it.

I give her a silent nod.

"That's all right. I have plenty enough for the both of us." She whirls on Xavier. "This is *barely* a favor. I wanted a new renter anyway." Esme crosses her arms and contemplates the dragon, who leans against her counter, totally at ease in her space.

"He'll need some time to find work," Xavier explains. "Won't be able to cover rent to start off."

Shame coats my insides. There was a time in my life when money meant nothing to me because I had an abundance. Now, my pockets are empty, and I'm a burden.

Esme shrugs with a glance my way. "No problem. You pay when you can." She tilts her head, eyes to the ceiling, as if in thought.

"A quarter," her sweet voice declares. "This only covers a quarter of the favor. I still owe you three-fourths."

The dragon snorts, his mouth curling in amusement. "You're shit at bargaining. But fine. If you want to still owe me, that's on you."

Curiosity twists in my gut. Why does Esme owe him anything? Did she get into trouble and need his help out of it?

Why wasn't I here to keep her safe?

That last question is pointless. I know why, and I couldn't have stopped it. But now, I'm back, and while I'm in Folk Haven, I will make sure nothing harms Esmerelda Sharpwing.

"Let's go check out your new digs." Esme slips behind the counter again, coming up with a set of keys. "Entrance is around the side."

She strolls to the front door, and I follow in her wake. When she reaches to flip a sign to *Closed*, Xavier stops her.

"You two go. I'll watch the shop. Let people know you're coming back soon."

Esme offers a grin over her shoulder that has my heart stuttering. "Thanks, bud."

We walk around the side of the brick building to find a set of exposed metal stairs. They're sturdy, barely making a sound when both of us climb them. As hard as I try to be a gentleman, my baser urges have me studying the way her round ass shifts under her tight black pants. Leggings, Xavier told me they're called. He's been giving me a crash course in the changes in the world since I've been gone. Just the advancements in phone technology are hard to grasp.

But this style choice? I can get on board.

"The lock sticks sometimes. You need to press down on the key as you turn it." Esme pushes the door inward and ushers me into an open space.

The room has furnishings—a table, an overstuffed couch—and through an open doorway, I spot a bare mattress on a bed frame.

"There're two bedrooms, one bathroom, a full kitchen, a view of Main Street ..." She strolls past the couch to tug open a set of curtains. "Pretty nice place, if I do say so myself. Feel free to make it yours. Just try not to damage anything." She tosses her honey curls over a shoulder as her eyes trace down

my body again. “Are you in an *I’ve only got the clothes on my back to my name* kinda situation?”

I can’t stifle a grimace. Even the clothes on my back aren’t mine.

“Xavier”—his name is gravel in my throat, but so are most words—“gave me some ... things.” Never thought I’d be so grateful for a toothbrush. The man offered plenty more, but *this* is all I really wanted. An introduction to the woman I used to know so well.

“Okey dokey. Well, I’ve got plenty of extra things too. When I get a Bed, Bath, and Bargains coupon, I *have* to use it. And they send me one, like, every week. It’s a problem, but today, it’s a solution!”

I think I remember what that store is, though I never used to have to buy those items for myself. My parents had staff for that.

“I’ll drop off some bed linens and towels. I don’t know if you use loofahs, but I’ve got at least six, so you’re getting one. And I’ll see what else I’ve got around my place.”

“You don’t—”

“Don’t tell me I don’t have to because I’m already doing it in my brain, which means the action is unstoppable.” Esme reaches out and gives my chest a gentle pat.

Every part of me tenses, wanting to lean into the affectionate caress. Esme misinterprets my reaction, backing up a step and folding her hands behind her back.

“Sorry. I’m a touchy person. Half the time, I don’t realize I’m doing it.”

“You ... can touch me.” *Please do. Run your fingers over my body, like you used to.*

“Noted.” Esme’s smile is softer this time as she gazes at me. “Any questions about the place?”

“Why don’t”—I have to clear my throat to keep my voice working—“you live here?” This seems like the perfect spot for her. Above her business and near the heart of town.

*Did she need more space because she doesn't live alone?
Did Esme find a partner while I was gone?*

I couldn't—wouldn't—blame her even if I have the overwhelming need to find the shadowy figure and tear their throat out with my claws.

“I used to, but people don't respect closing hours when you live above your business.” She fiddles with her key chain as she talks. “There're only so many times a girl can get a knock on her door at eight p.m., asking about a clothes pickup, before she snaps and moves. So, I did. Got myself a little place on the other side of town.”

“Just you?” Despite my sore throat, the question sneaks out without help.

The harpy smirks, so adorable with her playful expression that I almost kneel at her feet and beg her to let me be hers. “Wouldn't you like to know?”

Yes. I want to know everything I missed.

She hands me the key and leads me downstairs, telling me to stop by the shop if I have any questions or problems.

Though I'm terrified to leave her sight, sure she'll disappear when I turn away, I force myself to go with Xavier.

“Changed your mind yet?” he asks once we're in his truck, heading to his house to pick up the few belongings he gifted to me.

I shake my head as I watch the vibrant greenery speed by the window, still thrown off by so much color after years of white and gray.

Xavier grumbles low in the back of his throat, “Guess I learned my lesson. Never make a blood oath without all the facts.”

The dragon rubs a small mark on his wrist, a pale white scar from where a knife drew blood. I have a similar one on mine, but it's not as obvious among my many other healed wounds.

When Yuito helped me escape, he gave me the name of a dragon in Folk Haven—Xavier. But when I made it here and found the man, I refused to tell him who I was until he swore not to share the information with anyone without my permission. I made him swear not to interfere with my purpose in Folk Haven. Dragons talk to each other, and even with Yuito's good word, I wasn't sure of the stranger's loyalties. In turn, Xavier only agreed to enter the blood bargain if I swore I'd hurt no one in town unless first attacked. An easy enough agreement to make. I'm done fighting.

We cut our wrists and spoke our oaths as the blood mixed.

Then, I told him my name and reason for returning, and he growled a whole string of curses at me.

“Just ...” I watch him grind his teeth, no doubt struggling with words that come too close to interfering. “Thank you,” I say, getting the sense this dragon *does* want to help me. But I cannot allow him my full trust. Not with the betrayals that lurk in my past.

He's done what I asked, and now, I can complete this task on my own.

Without disrupting Esme's life or causing her pain, I will discover if my mate remembers me.

Eighteen Years Old

I CAN STILL TASTE Esme on my tongue as I hike through the dark woods back to my house. Still hear the way she squealed and laughed and moaned when I snuck my head between her legs and licked her delicious nectar. Just the memory has me half hard. How I can manage that after going through three condoms is a mystery for the gods.

When I catch the hint of lights between the branches, I pause.

They're awake. They're waiting for me.

Knowing that the magic of this night is about to be broken by my parents, I hesitate. Not because I'm scared to face them. But because I want to partition off the joy so their scolding can't taint the gift Esme gave me.

Her first, just as she was mine.

I tried to be gentle, but my eager harpy dug talons into my back and demanded I be rough. She is a force and a light and my everything.

You're young, they'll say.

This isn't love, they'll claim.

As if there's a specific timetable to follow before I'm capable of realizing that Esmerelda Sharpwing is a woman worth giving my heart to.

Pressing my shoulders into the rough bark of a tree, I close my eyes and remember. Play through the way her hands stroked and teased and drew phantom scales on my flesh while she called me her dragon. In my memory, I hear her gasp at my first clumsy attempt to sheathe myself in her tight, wet heat. Then her groans as I got better, found my rhythm, and stroked her clit.

With my eyes closed, I bring up the uncertainty, then determination in her eyes when I asked her to shift. To show me all of her. Esme's body stayed the same shape, but golden

wings stretched from her back, and her flesh transformed. My fists clench on empty air as I recall the brush of feathers on skin as I spilled inside my beautiful harpy.

I won't let anyone ruin this night for me.

And so I imagine the night is over. That this is a new night, the next one, and all that happens now is separated by a buffer of hours from when I held Esme as she whispered and laughed and panted my name.

Soon, I won't have to make buffers. Soon, I'll leave and make a home for myself and for Esme when she's ready to join me.

I press off the tree and stalk toward the grand house my parents constructed on the shore of Lake Galen. Their palace in the small town of Folk Haven. The soundtrack of gentle waves slapping against the protective riprap on the shore accompanies me as I enter the back door into the kitchen.

If I thought the rear entrance would save me from discovery, I was wrong.

My parents wait by the large wooden island, where staff prepare our meals throughout the day before carrying them into the main dining area. My mother sits on a stool with her shoulders bowed inward as my father paces, halting with flared nostrils when I enter the room.

“What have you done?”

I flinch back at the menace in his voice. Since my last growth spurt, he no longer towers over me, but the older dragon exudes the power of decades as he stalks toward me.

“N-nothing.” I hate the way I stammer. The way I feel the need to describe what just happened between Esme and me as nothing.

This night was everything. The start to my future with the woman I love.

In my soul, I know she is more than my first infatuation or even my first love, though she is certainly both those things.

Esme is my mate.

The reminder has me standing steady in the face of my father's rage.

"You were with that girl. The harpy." He sneers the name of her mythic designation as if she were beneath him. "I can smell her on you."

"I love her." Crossing my arms, I stare him down. "She is my mate."

My mother lets out a sound that mixes a gasp, screech, and sob, as if partnering myself with a smart, kind, beautiful woman were some horrendous crime.

"She is not," my father bellows in my face, the heat of his internal forge scalding footprints on the kitchen tiles. "You're a foolish child. Even a human would be better. You will not sully yourself with anything so crude. You will not blight the Blaythorn line with monsters."

Of course that's all he cares about. Our legacy. Not my happiness.

Mythics must only breed with their own kind or humans to maintain the purity of the gods' creations.

But how can that be what the gods want when I felt the approval of The Winged One when I held Esme in my arms tonight? When I slid inside her body, I felt phantom wings on my back, lifted with a wind of purpose.

She is joy and love and meaning.

Esme is my mate. And even if the gods did disapprove, it would not matter.

And neither do my parents' prejudices.

"If you can't accept us, then that's your problem. I'll leave." At eighteen, I'm an adult by human standards, and I can work and live on my own.

"No, dearest, please." My mother appears then, standing between my father and me, facing him, as if in my defense.

Hope takes flight in my chest. I am not alone.

“Please, do not leave. Sleep here tonight. Let us speak again in the morning. When tempers are not as hot.”

As I mull over her words, my father’s eyes drop to her face, and they share a silent communication. A skill I’ve begun to develop with Esme. Not true mind talk, like some of the strongest dragons can manage in their beast forms, but the simple ability to interpret the meaning of the minuscule muscle twitches on the face of the one you love.

Whatever my mother conveys calms him enough to step back, turn abruptly, and stalk out of the kitchen.

“Everything will be better in the morning.” She pats my chest.

I trust her.

I shouldn’t have.

Present Day

A JOB in construction fits my skill set perfectly after I spent the last two decades in a land of snow and ice, living as a mythical beast. Mainly, the foreman has me lifting heavy things.

Today, we're finishing up the kitchen in a lakefront house, and I maneuver through the front door, carrying a five-hundred-pound granite countertop. On my own.

"Look at you go! Fucking glad we added you to the team." Adrian, a white guy with shoulder-length red hair, damp with sweat, pats me on the back, and I manage not to flinch.

I'm still braced for an attack, expecting a heavy body of claws and scales to slam into me and try to wrestle power from my grasp. That was the way of the colony. The constant brutality was something most of the dragons living there respected and prided themselves on.

I just wanted to survive long enough to escape.

But it seems leaving the place didn't automatically free me from the violent lessons I'd learned while there. It's going to take time for me to reacclimatize to this mostly civilized world.

After working with me for two weeks, the crew is used to the fact that I don't talk much, so the redhead accepts my nod as I settle the load onto the lower cabinets. He strolls away, toward the foreman. Both are mermen. Most of this crew is merfolk.

When I asked Xavier about work in town, saying I'd take anything with a paycheck, he came up with a list. The top two were this construction team and a recycling company—one owned by a merman, the other by a selkie.

The same as when I grew up here, there are more Of the Fin—aka water—mythics than any other in town. But I couldn't care less if I worked with my kind, other mythics, or even humans, as long as it was a job. I figured with my

supernatural strength, might as well try out a building team. Fortunately, Bardo, the owner of Lake Castles Construction, found space for me on his crew despite me being Of the Wing, like all dragons.

“Love when I finish a task right when it’s time to clock out.” Callisto, a mermaid and the plumber for this build, rolls out from under the sink and grins my way.

I give her the same silent nod I gave Adrian. She wipes her hands on a rag, then waves before strolling out the door. I fiddle with the counter for a minute, creating a buffer.

The first day here, I learned Callisto’s sister is the police chief in town. Even though I haven’t committed a bigger crime than snatching some clothes and food, I still have the urge to avoid the law. To stay away from anyone who might find my true identity interesting.

“Hey, you want a ride into town?” Adrian throws his thumb over his shoulder, and even though I enjoy walking in the lush Georgia forests, I nod.

Anything to get back faster. Hopefully in time to catch sight of Esme before she closes the shop for the day.

I have no plan. Not anymore. Nothing other than figuring out if Esme would be happier with or without me.

But I’ve spent all my time surviving among dragons in a colony in Antarctica and zero time learning how to discern the inner workings of a woman’s mind.

For now, all I can do is observe. Count her smiles. Look for hints of discontent.

Find out if she sits by her window at night, staring up at the moon, praying to The Winged One that, one day, a dragon mate will come fulfill her life.

I roll my eyes at my own immature hopes.

Esme was never a pine-and-wait type of girl. Once, when she was sixteen and with me and our friends on a boat—my parents’ new speedboat that I was using to show off—the engine crapped out on us, leaving our group stranded in the

middle of Lake Galen. Back then, we didn't have convenient cell phones to call for help. Without a moment of hesitation, she dived into the water and swam to shore, calling out she'd get us a tow. An hour later, the fancy speedboat was hooked to an aging pontoon, and I was crushing hard on a girl who never needed to be saved.

"You're above Clean Wings, right?" Adrian asks as he turns his truck onto Main Street.

"Yeah," I grunt. "Thanks."

"No problem. Feel like you've halved the heavy lifting since you started. Figure I owe you." The guy flicks the rim of his baseball cap as he pulls up to the curb. "See you tomorrow. We're going to happy hour after work at Local Brew if you want to join."

"Maybe."

My twenty-first birthday came and went while I was in Antarctica. I've never had a sip of legal alcohol. Still wouldn't be able to if they carded me. Got no card to give. And under this shaggy beard, I don't look much older than when I left even if I feel ancient.

Adrian's truck spurts out a plume of black exhaust as he drives off, and I fixate on the sign on Clean Wings' front door.

Closed.

Disappointment bows my shoulders, but as I turn toward the steps leading to the apartment, the ringing of a bell stops me. Esme emerges from the shop, carrying a backpack, keys, and my bloody, aching heart.

She doesn't know about that last one though.

"Lee!" The harpy grins wide, gold eyes sparkling as if I'm some kind of beautiful view. Gods, this whole town must be in love with her by now if this is how she approaches strangers. "Done working for the day?"

"Yeah." I glance down and realize I have a light layer of sawdust coating my skin.

Not that I mind. Just a sign that I have a job, that I'm contributing to a community I *want* to be a part of. I don't have to deal with the shame of squatting in her apartment anymore. Since I don't have an identity as far as anyone is concerned, Bardo is paying me under the table, and I was able to start right away. He made it clear he's giving me the amount the other workers get after their taxes are subtracted, and the taxes he'd normally pay, he's donating to the town's Mythic Council.

Even if I don't trust him enough to tell him my real name, I've got to admit, he's a stand-up guy.

"How's the apartment working out? Hopefully better than crashing on Xavier's couch at least."

I nod. "He has pinball machines." Talking gets easier every day—especially around her—but I still keep my words as minimal as possible. "Loud ones."

"Oh goddess, I almost forgot." Esme chuckles, and I lean forward at the sound. "His hoard must be huge by now. Such an oddly specific thing for a dragon to grow attached to, but whatever works for the guy." The harpy tilts her head, the gesture quick and birdlike. "And are you creating a hoard of your own odd objects upstairs?"

I shake my head, wishing I could give a different answer. Name something that would make her smile, make her laugh, make her fall in love with the shell of a man I've become.

But nothing draws me, except for her. Not all dragons hoard, but a lot of our kind do. My father hoarded something more traditional—money.

Despite the comfortable life it gave me for my first eighteen years, I'm glad I don't have the same compulsion. Especially after the expectations he had for how I would pay him back for the support from his hoard.

"Sorry, that was probably a personal question. Ignore my nosiness." Esme hooks her thumbs in the straps of her backpack, looking more like a college student in that moment than a woman in her late thirties. "Any plans for the evening?"

Only if attempting to make edible food from a recipe in the *Cooking for Beginners* book I picked up off Never Judge a Cover's bargain shelf counts. The siren who owns the local bookshop has been helping me find how-to books for the skills I forgot or never had.

If only there was a *Wooing a Harpy for Beginners*.

I shrug. "Shower. Eat." *Think about you.*

No doubt that pity for the strange, boring dragon with no life prompts her next question.

"Do you want to come with me to my favorite place in the world?"

Eighteen Years Old

COLD.

It's the first sensation I register when I wake up. The chill makes no sense to my sleep-muddled mind and even less as hazy half dreams fade.

Did the AC go into hyperdrive? Early fall in Georgia still means heavy, humid air, which causes the sheets to cling to my skin, so I normally wake up with an urge to take a shower. This dry, frigid sensation isn't exactly uncomfortable. The mystical fire that always burns in my chest and hands keeps my body toasty, even in winter.

The discomfort comes from the strangeness.

Why am I cold when I should be hot?

When I force my heavy eyelids open, my surroundings answer none of my questions. This isn't my bedroom with its high ceilings, broad windows, and walls plastered with band posters. These walls are bare, metal, and close enough that I can reach out and touch one.

I sit up, immediately regretting the move when my brain rocks and tilts, as if I were drunk.

No, wait. I'm not the one rocking. The room is.

Just then, a door swings open, one with rounded corners and a circular window.

"Good. You're awake." My dad strolls in, taking up too much space. "We'll be docking in a half hour."

If anything, I'm more confused, both by his words and his outfit.

Maximus Blaythorn spends most of his days in a suit. Dressing down means slacks and a polo shirt. Even his pajamas have buttons. If he puts on a coat, best believe that tailored garment is a peacoat, made of the finest wool.

So, why is he wearing a bright orange puffy coat, unzipped to show a set of army-green overalls?

“Where are we?” I croak the words and realize I’m fucking thirsty.

“Antarctica.” He glares down at me, his blue irises glowing the way all dragons’ do when experiencing strong emotions.

“What?” The blaze of my own reflects off his pale face. “How? When?”

Damn The Winged One’s tricks. When I fell asleep, I was in Georgia, exhausted from a night of loving Esme for the first time.

This is impossible.

“Your mother gave you a sleeping draft. We knew you would cause problems, and frankly, I have no patience for your disrespect. After that, it was simply a flight to Ushuaia in Argentina and a passage on the colony’s transportation ship.”

By flight, he means on his private plane, of course. I bet no commercial airline would be cool with him hauling my unconscious body into a first-class seat.

“Why?” But that’s naive. I know why. I stepped out of line for love. “Why here?”

My parents discussed spending a stint in the dragons’ Antarctic colony when they got older and I was out of the house. This was never supposed to be a family trip. There’s no point to me being here when I have no intention of taking my dragon form.

“Because you obviously do not comprehend how much you lowered yourself. We never should have moved to that town. Anywhere else, the distinction would have been clear. We are Blaythorn dragons, distinguished, even among our kind. Our internal forges burn like no other. Here, you will see the respect we deserve. Here, you will understand how much more you can demand from the world.” His expression is feverish by the end of his preaching of his self-aggrandizing worldview.

I've heard it all before.

“So, what? You want me to interact with colony dragons? They're all in beast form.” And stuck that way for roughly forty years from the time they released their beast.

That's the difference between our kind and other shifters. We can't blink and go between forms.

When dragons transform, we must hold that shape for decades.

Hence the need for a colony far from prying human eyes. Seems like a failing rather than a bragging point to me.

“Plenty of our kind live near the colony in our two-legged form.” His jaw tightens as he stares toward the door, as if he can already see our destination. “And there are other ways to communicate. In just the first day, you will see the difference. You will understand what my words haven't been able to teach you.”

I hate this, but I'm trapped. My father holds the power now, having cut me off from the rest of the world. No money. No connections. No way to leave a fucking frozen wasteland, inhabited only by mythical beasts. The only way I can get back to Folk Haven, return to Esme, is if I play along. Ooh and aah over these great dragon traditions and impressive family lineages he always waxes on about.

And when he's convinced himself I'm properly brainwashed, he'll take us back to civilization. Maybe not directly to Folk Haven if he's written off the place, but somewhere that I can get away. Leave his house forever. After this, I'll never trust my parents again.

Get through this. Get back to her.

“Fine,” I agree with resentment in my tone. Can't fully flip my switch and become the devoted model son or else he'll get suspicious. “I'll communicate with whatever dragons you want me to.” I glance around the stark cabin. “Is there a phone on this boat I can use?”

What is Esme thinking? We sleep together, and I disappear the next day. She's the smartest woman I know, so she'll figure

out this isn't just me blowing her off. But I can't imagine what I would do if the roles were reversed. If I didn't know where she'd gone.

I'd tear the town apart.

"So you can contact that harpy?" He shakes his head, disgust in his sneer. "You will forget her."

Never.

"Get dressed." He strolls toward the door. "We're leaving as soon as we dock."

When I'm bundled in the best quality winter gear money can buy, I meet my father on the deck of the vessel. Icy wind tries to cut at my face, but doesn't bother me much. The extra layers mean I don't have to call on too much of my internal fires to stay warm.

Still, I miss the balmy heat of Georgia.

Navigating through icebergs, we come upon a settlement that looks more like a space station. There's nothing meant to be aesthetically pleasing. These structures were built for survival.

I expect my father to lead me into one of the buildings, sit me down in a chair, and have some other pompous assholes lecture me on what a glorious thing it is to be a dragon with a well-known family name. Instead, with a firm hand on my shoulder, he directs me to a vehicle.

"Where's Mom?" I ask, looking around for her slender form.

"She'll be here in a few days."

Fuck. So, this isn't going to be just a day or two visit.

A man with a bushy beard and rosy cheeks gets behind the wheel, and my father sits in the passenger seat, leaving me on my own in the back. As the man drives us through the intimidating landscape, I silently wish Esme were here. Not only because I miss her and want to be wherever she is. But also because the curious harpy would find this place

fascinating. She would make this trip fun rather than my personal hell.

After an hour of driving, a note of foreboding sounds in my head. “How much farther?”

“Ten minutes to the boundary,” our driver responds.

The boundary of the town? At least, I hope there’s something like a town, where our kind live in human form near the colony. But what structures or businesses could last in this harsh climate?

When the vehicle stops, I don’t see anything but a long stretch of snow outside the window.

“On foot from here.” The bearded man pushes open his door, and my father follows suit.

Could I steal this truck? Drive back and sail away?

But there’s no road, and I doubt the boat captain would leave without my father. So, I climb out and trudge behind the two men. Not long until the bearded guy reaches up a hand in a clear signal to stop. Despite the below-freezing temperature, he removes a glove, does something with his hand, and presses his palm against what I thought was empty air.

A red light erupts from his hand, patterns spiraling out until we stand in front of a glowing arch of light-infused symbols.

“Through. Now.”

Too confused at the display to protest, I allow my dad to shove me forward, under the arch. The air is just as cold on the other side yet calmer.

And that’s when I hear the roars.

“Welcome to the colony,” the bearded man grunts, his expression stony.

The archway collapses behind us, and in that moment, I know I’ve made a mistake.

“Fuck!”

I try to charge back the way we came, but I crash into a force that flings me spinning backward through the air. I hit the ground hard, wheezing with the impact. Lying facedown in the snow, air knocked out of me, I can't fight when my father takes the opportunity to grasp my arms and twist them behind my back. Painfully cold metal surrounds my wrists.

"Wha—" I gasp, still choking on my breath.

"Magicked cuffs. You want out of them? Then shift. They can't contain a dragon." His harsh words make no sense.

Shift? Get stuck in a form I can't leave for forty years? No way in hell.

The true purpose of this pilgrimage slams into me harder than the magic of that barrier.

He means for me to live here. To give over to the dragon and separate myself from the human world for decades.

Fifty-eight. If I shift today, Esme will be fifty-eight next time I see her. A life lived without me.

My mate stolen from me by time.

"No!" I roar, fighting against the bonds. "You can't make me!"

"We'll see." He hauls me to my feet and drags me forward.

I don't know how long we walk for. Or how long he walks and I fight. But soon, great, scaly forms come into view, soaring overhead. Any other time, I might find the sight glorious. Now, all I care about is escape.

My father hasn't gotten weak with age, and he keeps hold of me until we reach the edge of a massive, icy pit. Dragons lounge around the exterior and on ledges that jut out from the steep sides. The bottom is relatively flat with only a few jagged rocks piercing the icy white surface.

The place looks like a stadium. An arena. Like something a gladiator would fight in. A red dragon the size of a fire truck waits in the pit, sharpening his claws on stone, the way a cat might on a scraping post.

“Transform now,” my father growls. “Or face him on two legs.”

“What?” I try to back away from the ledge, but he holds me in place. “You’re trying to kill me?”

“You’re a Blaythorn. He’s a nobody. A human father. His inner forge is dimmer than the winter sun. In your beast form, he’ll stand no match. Transform, begin your climb to dominance, and these years in the colony will be the best of your life. When it comes time to change back, you likely won’t want to leave.” My father’s voice turns ragged with anticipation, as if he were sprinting while speaking.

“You’re fucking crazy. I’m not fighting him or anyone!”

“Yes,” he snarls, “you are.”

Maximus Blaythorn shoves me over the edge, and I tumble down the steeply sloping side toward the middle of the pit. Ice shards nip at my skin, and every time I roll, it feels like the same stone bruises my ribs. I land in a groaning heap at the bottom of the incline, lying on my back as I try to orient myself. Silhouetted above me against the bright sky is my father. Dazed, I watch him strip, see his shoulders bow, track how a glowing red fire seems to grow hot and pulse under his skin. He spreads his arms wide and screeches at the sky as his skin splits open, and a massive sapphire creature of myth takes over his body.

He did it. He changed. There’s no going back for him.

But I still have a chance.

Scrambling to my feet, I’m upright only for a moment before a sledgehammer hits my side. At least, that’s what the dragon’s swipe feels like. I fly through the air farther than the barrier flung me. Big Red slinks after me, letting out a huff that sounds like a laugh. He swats at me again, and I go tumbling.

No matter how much I roll and duck and dodge, he always gets me, sapping even my supernatural strength. With my hands cuffed behind my back, I’m hampered. He’s too big. Too fast.

And after the fifth strike, it's clear he's just playing with me.

Because on the sixth, he lets out his claws.

The diamond-hard, razor-sharp tips rake down the front of my body, shredding my winter gear, leaving me exposed but unharmed, other than the shallow cuts on my chest. If he'd wanted to sever my head from my neck, he could have.

But it's still a game. I'm a mouse under a lion's paw.

I could be a lion too.

The mouse must be boring him because the next swipe is not so gentle.

He tears open my throat.

At first, I don't feel a thing, as the cut was so quickly made. But then every nerve in my body screams in agony, and I'm sure that death must be pure fire. As my blood spills onto the snow, crimson on ivory, too much for any mortal to survive, I make a choice.

Survive. You'll never see her again if you die.

With a roar of rage and despair, I do the one thing I've been warned never to do.

I release the dragon.

Esme. Her face is the last thing I see before a black rage clouds my vision and my mind.

Cuffs fall to the ground, and I attack.

Present Day

THE ANSWER IS YES. There is nothing in the world I want to do more than go with Esme to her favorite place in the world.

Wherever that is.

She directs me to take a shower and meet her outside of Wolf Trust Bank, which—surprise—is owned and run by the local werewolf pack.

After speeding through my wash and barely bothering with a towel, I'm clean, out the door, and jogging down Main Street. There's a constant fear festering in my chest that Esme will disappear if she's out of my sight for too long.

But there she is, standing on the sidewalk as she piles her sunlight curls in a messy bun on the top of her head. Luckily, I'm in good shape, so I'm not panting when I arrive at her side. Reaching up, I make sure my glasses are in place, sitting securely on my nose and camouflaging the glow of longing in my eyes.

“That was fast. I bet you didn't take the time to properly condition your hair. That is going to puff up in the humidity, just you watch.” She playfully tugs on one of the damp strands hanging low, leaving wet spots on my shirt.

I wish she'd fist her hand in the mass and use the hold to drag me to her. But Esme lets go and waves for me to follow.

When we were younger, she teased me about my hair all the time. How I drove an hour and a half to Athens to get it trimmed at an expensive barber. How I used more products than she did to arrange the brown strands in a sleek style. I remember staring at myself in the mirror every morning, going through my hair routine, grinning at the thought of how she'd try to mess the whole thing up the first moment she saw me.

How I'd pretend to be exasperated but secretly always liked the style better once her hands dug into it.

The care I put into my appearance is distant to me now. All the money and effort. If that's what Esme wants from a mate, I'll do it again, but after so many years in the wild, the ability to brush my teeth and shower seems like a luxury.

Besides, this lack of grooming keeps me unrecognizable for now. Or at least, I can tell myself that instead of admitting Esme has probably forgotten me.

“Okay, so this is *not* my favorite place. Not to say it's not good, but it's just a stop on the way,” she says before pulling open a door and ushering me inside a shop with a warm atmosphere and the scent of coffee beans. “Coffee & Claws is pretty cool. Also, I'm one of those horribly unhealthy evening espresso drinkers, and I'm jonesing for my fix.”

Then, something amazing happens. Esme hooks her arm through mine, guiding me toward the counter.

Every part of my body lights up, fueled by an internal sun that blazes bright for her. My muscles want to curl around Esme until I encase her with my body. The hot-flower scent gets me drunk, and I never want to sober up.

“Lee?” Her voice drags me from my happiness haze.

“Sorry. What?” My question sounds harsh, but there's no changing that. Not after that red dragon tore out half my throat when I was still in my mortal shape.

I don't think I was supposed to kill him once I released my beast, but no one had taken the time to explain anything to me before shoving me into that battle pit.

So, I took his head. And I'll never forget the life that faded from his glowing eyes. The scar on my throat will always act as the reminder that I'm not innocent.

“I asked if you wanted anything. Doesn't have to be coffee. They've got lots of good stuff here. Oh, and this is Sonya.” Esme waves toward the tall Latina behind the counter. “She's one of the co-owners. And”—she lowers her voice in the event there are any humans around—“she's a siren.”

“What can I get you?” Sonya asks, friendly smile in place with a set of shrewd eyes taking me in.

Xavier claims I look intimidating with my wild hair and *I've seen shit* aura. “Nothing.” I try to gentle my voice, but it still comes out as a rasp.

“Uh, yeah, nonsense. I’m getting you something.” Esme squeezes my arm, unaware that she’s all I need in the world. “Any bear claws left?”

When we exit the shop, Esme has me hold her drink and the pastry as she fishes out her car keys.

“Sorry, I forgot to say we need to drive to get to my favorite place. Is that okay?”

She doesn’t know I stowed away in the dank hulls of multiple ships for days just to get back to her. A short car ride with her at my side is pure pleasure in comparison.

“Yeah.”

Esme likes to sing as she drives. I don’t recognize the songs on the top hits radio station, but she makes every one beautiful with her joyful harmonies. Her old car doesn’t have cupholders, so she asks me to hang on to her latte, accepting it for quick sips at stoplights. I stir up my internal forge enough to heat my palms and keep her cup warm.

I could stay here, riding beside her, for days. But eventually, we pull into a parking lot.

“Welcome to Bed, Bath, and Bargains!” Esme parks and wiggles her fingers toward the front of the store. The place she claims sends her endless coupons.

“Your favorite?”

“Yes. I spend way too much money here. Well, other people probably think it’s too much. I think it’s the exact right amount. Come on. Let’s find some things for your apartment. My bet is, you’re still functioning with the bare bones.”

She’s right that I haven’t added much, but anything after the crude dwellings of the colony is the high life.

“Here. Snack first. Get a good sugar high going.” Esme reaches into the bag I forgot about and pulls out the pastry, drizzled with frosting and sprinkled with sliced almonds. She

splits it down the middle. “Half for me. Half for you.” After passing the larger piece to me, Esme takes an impressive bite of hers. “You know”—she speaks with a full mouth, as if she were running out of time—“dis wast—”

The harpy did the same thing in high school, and I’d always cover her mouth and say, “Bite, chew, swallow, speak.”

“After that?” she’d mumble against my hand, her eyes sparkling with mischief.

“Make out with me,” I’d growl.

Then, she’d smile and chew *really* slow just to drive me wild.

The memory has my chest clenching with longing, and I have to do something.

I set my hand on hers, stopping the harpy mid-sentence. “Chew. Don’t choke,” I chide her.

Her nose wrinkles with a puffed-cheek smile, but she listens, swallowing before going on. “I was saying, this was made by a bear shifter. The other owner of Coffee & Claws. He’s kind of a grump, but a nice grump, you know? Anyway, I think you’re going to like it in Folk Haven. At least, I hope you do.” Then, her eyes drop pointedly to the untouched pastry in my hand.

I eat the bear claw in more respectable-sized bites, enjoying the treat. “Good,” I tell her, and Esme beams.

Beautiful.

As we enter the store, she bounces on the balls of her feet, pushing a cart in front of her. Within the first aisle, she flits off, and I’m able to claim cart duty, following behind as the harpy adds random items to her haul.

A table lamp.

An orange omelet pan.

A fluffy bath mat.

My attention catches on a wall full of pillows. They’re all stuffed to bursting and look so soft. I pick up one with a purple

checkered pattern and cautiously press the cushion against my chest, not sure why I'm so wary of the object.

Maybe I just don't trust soft things anymore.

"Those are on sale! Let's get four." Esme tosses the matching pillows into the cart, and I like seeing them there. Knowing they're coming home with me.

"Towels next. I always leave them for last because they're my *favorite*." She strolls into a section with towels in every color a person could hope for. "I just really love terry cloth. There's something about it, especially the plush stuff." Her fingers stroke the stacks, coming to land on a royal-blue set. "I want to drape myself in terry cloth. And, yes"—she grins over her shoulder at me—"I know I have a problem."

My fingers automatically check that my glasses are still on my face, blocking the telltale glow of strong emotion. All I can think about is her stepping out of a shower, dripping wet, slowly blotting away the droplets with one of her precious towels.

I wish I were made of terry cloth.

In the Past

I NEED two things to escape. Two seemingly impossible things.

But with decades in the colony stretching before me, I have nothing else to fill my time than trying to achieve the impossible.

My first taste of hope comes from Hotaru Watanabe, one of the elders in the colony. She finds me when I am living feral on the outskirts, attacking any who approach. She, more powerful than any dragon I've ever met, presses her thoughts into my mind and shows me there is a way to regain my human form earlier than the normal time span.

"Trust me," her voice hisses in my skull. *"Trust me enough to teach you."*

I can have what I want if only I put in the time. If I train. If I want it bad enough.

And, gods, I do.

I'm not sure why she chooses to share her knowledge with me. Why I'm worth this secret other dragons would kill for. Whenever I ask, she simply says that the world needs less violence and more love.

Hotaru shows me the magical meditation practice passed down her family line. Guides me through all the subtleties. Drills into me the thought patterns I need to follow to overcome the power of my dragon soul.

I practice every day.

In a decade, I finally master the skill. When I sit still, listening to the power and magic flow through my veins, I can feel my two-legged shape locked within me, waiting to come out.

My heart begs for me to change now and run back to my mate. But I am not only trapped in my beast. I am also trapped in these magical walls.

The second impossible task is to rise so high in the hierarchy of the colony that I receive the gate spell to breach the boundaries. Only a few are allowed access for the safety of the group.

So, I return to the pit, and I fight. The easiest way to rise in the ranks is to dominate in the pit. I never kill another dragon, not after that first one. But I gain a reputation I doubt Hotaru—with her preference for love over violence—is proud of. But she must understand because she does not shun or betray me.

Every morning, even in the winter when the sun never rises, we meet on the same high peak to meditate. Our thick, scaly hides and internal forges keep us warm in the frigid temperatures. Icy wind plucks at the wings on my back, and I find, knowing I can leave this form now, I don't hate the shape so much. I even discover a small amount of contentment when I take wing.

But never enough to justify remaining.

“Why do you stay?” I ask her the morning after a particularly savage battle. My leg still aches from the break that healed overnight. At least I came out on top, although bloody when I got there.

For a long time, she doesn't answer. I don't begrudge her the silence after she's given me so much.

“My mate was human,” her voice whispers softly against my mind. *“They are gone now. And I worry, when I go, we will not meet. That I will simply fade.”* In her two-legged form, she would age like a human, as we all would, moving closer to death. Our dragon form stretches our life span. *“So, I will live a little longer. And their memory with me.”*

While I appreciate the honesty, her sadness spurns a wildness in me. A desperation.

Time is running out for Esme.

The world is full of dangers; what if she's already met her end?

The next day, in the pits, I leave rivers of blood in the snow.

Finally, after years of battling and falsely proclaiming myself as a lover of the dragon way of life, I'm ruled as the best warrior and therefore master of colony protection. The elders, Hotaru among them, feed my blood into the boundary, giving me the key to leave.

Twenty years of dedication, deception, and destruction.

In the dark of the night, I flee. After breaching the barrier, I fly only a short way before testing Hotaru's gift to me.

At the sight of my naked human body, I weep in relief, the tears freezing on my cheeks. Terrified I'll never be able to make the change again, I hike miles in the deadly cold, hoping my inner forge doesn't run out before I make it to the camp. Somehow, I manage the trek, but my problems aren't over.

"Breath of The Winged One, you're in rough shape." The captain of the ship off this icy hell dimension stares down at me, his pale forehead wrinkling as he furrows his gray brow.

"Come on, Veritas. You're acting like you've never seen a return before." A man with hooded eyes approaches me cautiously. "A fighter? In the pits?" he asks.

The scars littering my body tell my tale. Seems he knows of the brutality that exists in the colony if you want to earn an honored space. Or if you're a teenager who stepped out of line.

Despite living in the same area as my parents, I haven't spoken to them in years.

I give a jerky nod.

"I've seen a return before, but he's not on the schedule. The records list three females in the next month. No males."

Records. Of course they keep documents of arrivals and departures—one of the many safeguards for the colony. I should have known it wouldn't be as easy as showing up and requesting a ride home.

"What's your name? The name of your family?" The captain scowls down at me, distrust clear in his eyes.

This, at least, I can give an excuse for not answering. Raising my chin, I display the sloppily healed wound on my

neck. The one that would have been fatal if I'd stayed in my mortal form. The one my magic barely managed to knit back together.

At the sight of my mangled throat, the captain's eyes widen in shock, then narrow.

"So, you can't speak? Fine. You'll write your answers. I'll be back." Veritas zips his coat and pushes into the frigid day.

Dread scrapes my insides with the clanging shut door.

The moment he disappears, the young man turns back to me with urgency. "You're running, yes? You need to get away from here?"

Over the past twenty years, I've only allowed myself to trust one other. Everything in me rebels against allowing this stranger to know the truth.

"Please, I want to help. But we need to act fast."

That's when I see the onyx glow of his eyes. The same color as Hotaru.

"Watanabe."

Despite the shock in his expression, he doesn't freeze. "My grandmother."

If I can put my faith in anyone, let it be one of her line. I nod, staring into his eyes.

"You'll need to knock me out, then run southeast until you spot a rock formation that resembles a turtle. Under the largest stone is a cave. Shelter there, and I'll find you. We'll have to smuggle you onto the ship when the scheduled dragons come. If he finds out the secret my grandmother taught you, he will take you back. Or worse. Do you understand?"

Another nod. Of course, the trials continue.

"We'll make a plan as we wait for the others to arrive. For now, you need to run. Hit me and go."

When I hesitate, tired of bloodshed, the young man shoves my chest. "Now!"

I do. His eyes roll back in his head as he falls to the floor. I snatch a coat and run and hide.

For three weeks, I live beneath a rock, venturing out to catch fish in icy waters, sometimes cooking them with the heat of my hands and sometimes devouring them raw. Antarctic sushi.

Yuito, Hotaru's grandson, comes when he can, bringing supplies that won't be missed and teaching me the many ways the world has changed in my absence.

"Do you have someplace to go?" he asks one night.

Not in the way he means. There's no shelter waiting for me in the world. But I have a destination.

I simply nod. After another week of pushing and a blood oath not to share my location, I relent and tell him.

"Folk Haven? I've never been, but I've heard of it. A town in Georgia. A safe place for mythical creatures looking to coexist."

I grunt in confirmation. Good to know it hasn't disappeared. Would have made the job of finding Esme that much harder.

What if she left?

I push the thought away. If she has, I'll search until I find her.

"I know a dragon who planned to move there. Xavier. Nice guy. Think he's a firefighter. If you need help, you might want to find him," Yuito offers.

With a nod of thanks, I store the information away. Hold on to his name when I hide in the hull of the ship as it sails to the southern point of South America. Silently chant the name when Yuito presses a wad of cash into my hand and wishes me luck before I blend in with the city crowd. Whisper his name after Esme's each night when I fall asleep in a grimy alley or a hidey-hole on another boat, the one that brings me to the States.

During the long, painful journey is the only time I miss my dragon form. The body with powerful wings that could carry me across a great distance, straight to her. But I will never again risk getting stuck in that form, even knowing the secret of early transformation.

After weeks of scraping my way through the modern world, I find myself in Georgia, hitchhiking north.

A trucker lets me off in Toccoa with a granola bar and a gruff, "Good luck."

I walk the rest of the way, sleeping in the woods when I'm too exhausted to take another step.

At the sight of the Folk Haven town sign, my throat tightens, the longing a more painful ache than any injury I sustained from the pits.

Almost there.

Present

TWO MONTHS IN THIS TOWN, and I realize with a sense of trepidation that I've begun to settle in.

I stare at the bags from Bed, Bath, and Bargains, full from another trip to the store. My fourth since Esme showed me the place. Something keeps drawing me back.

I unpack every item but one, keeping it in the small plastic bag and clutching it tight in my hand as I descend the stairs from my apartment and circle around to the entrance of Clean Wings.

This isn't what I came here to do, I remind myself.

I'm supposed to determine if Esme is happy with the life she has. If the sudden reappearance of a dragon mate would be a bad thing.

If I'm honest, I think I know the answer.

She has a thriving business. Friends all over town. Smiles for everyone.

What about love? Does she have that?

It's the final question. The one I'm too much of a coward to dig into.

When I push open the shop door, I find she has customers. Not wanting to interrupt, I lean back against the far wall, waiting for my harpy to be free. When I pick up the thread of their conversation, my body stiffens.

"When are you going to make an honest man of me, Esme? You're doing this town a disservice by letting me stay on the market." A stocky white guy with a flirtatious smile leans on the counter.

I'm about to step forward, make the asshole back the hell off. But then I spy Esme's affectionate smile, and my heart and feet freeze.

“A disservice? That sounds terrible. You’re saying I’m putting the entire town in danger by *not* dating you?” From her playful tone, I can tell Esme is enjoying the exchange.

I want to set the man on fire.

“That’s exactly it. I’m a hot commodity. People are fighting in the streets, dueling for the chance to lock down this rockin’ bod.”

“Gods, Owen.” The man’s companion groans. “Can you stop talking about yourself for a single minute so I can pick up my pants?”

The flirter throws his arms in the air. “Help a guy out! You already have a winged woman of your own. Now, it’s time for you to be a *literal* wingman and help me get mine.” Owen turns back to a grinning Esme, shaking his head in mock disappointment. “Seamus is so selfish sometimes.”

“This is why I don’t take you on errands with me,” the taller man grouses.

Owen and Seamus MacNamara. With their names, I remember the two selkies from my childhood, both a few years younger than me. We never hung in the same circles. But their parents own Float ’N Dive, the water sports shop, and they’re a certain kind of royalty in Folk Haven. One of the founding families.

I think my parents always resented the families that had that claim. The Blaythorns are rich, but they didn’t build Folk Haven. As a teenager, I didn’t pay much attention to the politics, so I have no idea if they were spurned in any way, but I do know they showed up at the Antarctic colony with all the pride they knew our name garnered.

Blaythorns were one of the founding families there.

Nothing to be proud of, as far as I could tell. What did they truly build? Witches established the protective barriers. The buildings are crude caves for the most part.

It is basically preserved land. Good fucking job if all you wanted was to protect animals.

But that's not what dragons are. At least, it's something I refuse to be anymore.

"Well, despite the very real and serious danger it might put the population in, I can't help you. My answer remains the same." Esme reaches out and taps Owen's nose with a single finger. "Someone already has dibs on my heart. You're too late."

Too late.

The words fling through the space, poisonous, deadly daggers.

The final answer to my question.

My cue to leave.

Not yet. Just a little longer, then I'll go.

As I deal with the agony of my fracturing heart, I don't hear the rest of their conversation. With my chin tucked to my chest, I don't even see them leave.

Suddenly, there's a set of golden eyes glaring into mine.

"Traitor!" Esme jabs me in the chest with a finger, and I wish she'd keep going, digging past my rib cage and tearing out the ravaged organ.

Then, her accusation registers, and I feel my brow furrowing.

"You went to Bed, Bath, and Bargains without me," she clarifies, eyes dropping to the bag in my hands. "How did you even get there? Bought yourself a car?"

"Xavier took me." I force the words out, trying to be whatever version of normal I can manage. "Errands."

"But *I'm* your B, B, and B buddy."

That first time we went, she tricked me. I bought my pillows, and she bought everything else in the cart. Then, she carried all the items up to my apartment. Took me that long to realize she'd been shopping for me.

I tried to pay her back, but she ran away before I could get my cash out.

Need to be smarter to get one over on Esme Sharpwing.

We've gone to the store together twice since then, and she keeps pulling the same shit, claiming she enjoys shopping for someone else, but she keeps dodging my cash.

To pacify her, I extend the bag. "Got you this."

They were just setting up their fall display when I arrived at the store, so I'm pretty sure she doesn't already own it.

Esme's attempt at a scowl drops away with an excited gasp. She plunges her hand into the bag and comes out with a set of pumpkin-patterned hand towels.

In an unusual shift of personality, Esme doesn't say anything. She just stares at the silly item, and then her eyes slowly move to my face.

"Terry cloth," I say by way of explanation.

Something changes in her stare, almost as if she's in pain, and I panic at the sight. I don't know what I did wrong, but I have to fix it.

"Sorry." I reach to take the towels back.

Esme steps away, moving faster than me. "Mine. They're mine." She clutches the gift against her chest, the way I wish she'd hold me.

But she never will.

Too late.

My hand falls to my side.

The harpy shakes her head, eyes on the floor, and when she looks my way again, her normal smile is in place. "I love them. These are so cute and soft." She rubs the towels against her face, and I'm jealous of the material. "They're perfect. You get an A-plus for gift giving."

Strolling behind the counter, she tucks them away and comes up with one of her sketchbooks. "How's your day

going? I was working on some designs before the MacNamaras stopped by. Want to see?"

I nod, joining her at the counter. As she flips through the pages and talks about her sketched ideas, I push away the knowledge that I need to leave and try to enjoy this simple moment of just being with her. The scent of hot flowers fills my lungs, Esme's sweet voice caresses my ears, and I'm the happiest I've been since I was eighteen years old.

"The sirens in particular love this style because the racerback shows off their wing marks. And allows them to fly at a moment's notice."

She tilts her sketch pad my way. We stand side by side now, elbows on the counter.

Esme has evolved from the teen with a garage-sale sewing machine to a full-scale designer. Turns out, the dry cleaning is just the storefront and a small part of the business.

"Harpies too?" I ask.

"I mean, it technically works for us." She fiddles with the corner of the page as she contemplates the drawing. "But wearing a top when we shift is uncomfortable. Because of the feathers. Best to be topless. Or completely naked."

I must make a noise because her head whips up and a delicious blush infuses her cheeks.

"Sorry! Too much info." Esme straightens, running an agitated hand through her hair. "If you saw me in my other form, you'd get it."

I have, and I do. Thinking back on the time when she changed for me, I have to bite my lip to stifle a grunt. Her heather-colored feathers created a soft coat over her skin, covering her nipples but provocative in the way they shaped perfectly to her body.

"Oh goddess, that sounded suggestive." Esme's voice is tight. "I-I swear I didn't mean to, like, proposition you just now."

Her words have my eyes narrowing, studying her closer. I note again how oddly Esme is acting. Normally, she's bubbly confidence. But there's an air of anxiety in her words and jerky movements as she shuffles farther behind the counter and adjusts small items that don't need to be rearranged.

"Something wrong?" I ask.

She freezes in the act of arranging pencils in a cup on the counter.

"Wrong?" she repeats, then covers her face with her hands and groans. "Yes. Something is wrong."

"What?" Whatever it is, I'll fix it. Maybe that can be my role. I'll solve all the problems Esme faces. Then, I'll go when she has no more problems and her life is entirely perfect. "Tell me."

She drops her hands and stares hard, studying me and no doubt seeing a husk of a man. With a quick step, she's next to me, her palms settling overtop one of mine. It's all I can do not to drop my head and press my forehead against the back of her hand. Try to imprint the shape of her bones on my skin.

"The problem is," she sighs, "I like you, Lee. A lot."

Her words are lightning, infusing my body with a painful explosion of energy.

"But," she continues, "I've devoted my life to someone else. And I don't want to betray them. Not that I'm sure I would be. Not by *liking* you. But I also might ... as time goes by ... well, anyway, I'm sorry. Just know you're not doing anything wrong."

Who are they? I long to growl. Can I kill them?

With the hand that's not under hers, I rub the bridge of my nose—hard—trying to dispel the fury and lethal rage that someone else has her heart.

"Lee?"

The sudden press of her palm on my chest makes me flinch, causing my thumb to bump my glasses. They slip off my face.

“Oh shoot,” Esme says as the thick spectacles clatter to the floor. “Let me grab those.”

“No. Wait.” I lunge forward the same time Esme bends over, but she’s too fast for me, her strong fingers plucking the lenses up from where they fell.

When she straightens, her body is too close, brushing against mine. Through my flannel, I feel the soft curves of her breasts, the gentle press of her hip, and the steadying pressure of her hand. Rage bleeds to desperate wanting. She smells like warmth on the wind, and my throat aches, holding back the groan of longing.

Curse The Winged One’s tricks. I’ve missed you, Esme.

She offers a rueful smile as her eyes meet mine, but the expression falters, as if disconcerted by our proximity.

“Your eyes,” she murmurs, her gaze fixed on mine. “That blue ...”

And that’s when I notice the glow on her skin. A reflection from my gaze, shining bright with passion for her. With want and need and love. No spelled lenses to mute the vibrant color and block out the mystical reaction I have in her proximity.

Without the shield of magic-infused glass, I reveal more than my feelings.

With the Blaythorn blue, I’ve revealed myself.

“Lee?” Esme’s golden brows twist with confusion. “Lee ...” Understanding dawns in her wide sunshine eyes. “Su-LEE-en? Sulien?”

She remembers.

I knew I wanted to hear my name—my true name—on her lips at least once more. But I didn’t know how much until my entire body shudders with the simple pleasure.

She remembers me.

That single gift, my name spoken in her sweet voice, is more than I let myself hope for. Now—maybe—I can leave Folk Haven. Let her live a happy life with her new love.

“You’re here?” She pants the question, and my brief spike of triumph morphs into concern when I spy the wildness in her gaze.

“Essie—” The nickname slips out.

“You’re *here*?” Her features sharpen in a flicker, taking on the beautiful angles of a hawk, as she digs her fingers into my beard, searching for the shape of my face. “*YOU’RE HERE!*”

A harpy’s scream.

The words pierce my skull like needles shoved into my eardrums. Painful. Powerful.

The last thing I hear before the world goes black.

AS I SLOWLY AWAKEN FROM a strange dream, I hear muffled voices speaking around me. Part of my mind wants to pay attention to them. But another part—a more demanding part—wants me to turn over and bury my face deeper into the most comfortable pillow in the world.

I'm distracted from the internal argument by the gentle brush of fingers through my hair. Someone is touching me, and it feels *good*.

If I could stay in this half-wakeful state forever, I would. But there's one problem.

My ears itch. When I reach up to rub them, my fingers come away, coated in an oily substance.

“Don't do that. It's a healing potion.” The sweet voice coaxes me to open my eyes, meeting an amber set above mine. “Sorry. I ruptured your eardrums when I screamed.” Esme scowls. “I mean, I want to throttle you.” Her hands fist in my shirt, and I watch her glare go soft. “But I didn't mean to hurt you.”

“Yes, well, he's fine now.”

Glancing to the side, I spot a Black woman with iron-gray hair in braids, washing her hands in my kitchen sink, and I realize we're in my apartment.

“Easy enough fix. Easy for me, of course. Doesn't mean it won't cost you.”

“Madeline is a healing witch. One of two in town,” Esme explains before leaving off staring at me to glance the stranger’s way. “And of course. What payment do you want? Money or favor?”

Madeline packs up her bag, tucking away glass jars full of colorful liquids. “Favor,” the witch declares. “I want you to stitch me a dress for the Halloween Ball. Something that’ll make Georgiana choke on her snobby tongue.”

Even from my lower angle, I can see the curve of Esme’s smile.

“I can do that.”

“And do I get a favor for carrying his heavy ass upstairs?” The familiar voice comes from the couch, and I know who it is without looking.

“Don’t get me started on you, Xavier.”

My pillow shifts with her movement, and I realize I’m not lying on fabric and stuffing. My head is in Esme’s lap.

Now, even more than before, I want to bury my face into the plush surface.

But before I can roll over, her strong hand cradles the back of my skull, and her legs disappear, quickly replaced by an actual pillow. A grumble of protest sneaks out of my throat, but she doesn’t seem to be paying attention to me anymore.

“You knew this whole time, didn’t you?” The harpy advances on the dragon, face fierce.

“Hmm. Not my kind of drama. I’ll be in touch about the dress.” Madeline heaves her workbag over her shoulder and exits through the front door.

“I wanted to tell you.” Xavier holds up his hands in surrender. “But he swore me to silence before I knew who he was.”

“Are you kidding me?” Esme hisses, all sweetness gone.

“Blood oath.” Xavier points to the healed slash on his wrist, where the skin is pink against his normal dark brown.

“Swore I wouldn’t interfere with his plans as long as he didn’t harm anyone in Folk Haven. I couldn’t say *anything*.” He sits up abruptly. “But now, you know. Figured it out on your own, no thanks to his secretive, brooding ass.” Xavier rises from the couch, looking mighty pleased, even in the face of Esme’s wrath. “Looks like my work here is done. Send me an invite to the mating.” His eyes flick my way, and he offers a sympathetic grimace. “Or the funeral. Whichever. See you both around.”

The dragon strolls out of my apartment, leaving me with an angry Esme. My strength slowly returns to my limbs, and I’m able to push myself into a seated position as the harpy paces around the living space, unnervingly silent.

I expect the obvious questions.

How are you here?

Why did you come back?

Why didn’t you say who you were?

Instead, Esme, like always, surprises me.

“Why do you have so many throw pillows?” She snatches two off an armchair I bought at a yard sale.

Glancing around, I realize I do have a lot. Probably twenty in this room, and there’s more on my bed. Every time I went to Bed, Bath, and Bargains, I would toss a few in my cart.

“Missed soft things,” I say, now realizing that’s the reason.

Everything in the colony was hard and sharp and cold.

Throw pillows are the opposite.

“You’re hoarding them.” Esme tosses one my way, and it hits my chest like a lobbed marshmallow. “You’re hoarding throw pillows because you want soft things,” she mutters.

I shrug. Collecting them simply felt natural. Like being around Esme.

She continues to pace, not meeting my eyes, clutching a piece of my hoard to her chest, as if it will comfort her.

“Tell me,” she commands.

So, I do. In slow, halting words, I tell her about leaving against my will, only realizing my father’s intentions once he shoved me into the fighting pit. How I had to change to survive, but then I just wanted to die. How a dragon saw my torment and shared her sacred secret with me. How I trained and meditated and fought every day to get back to myself. Back to her.

“But you didn’t come back to me though. Lee did,” she points out.

“Would’ve left,” I say. “If you were better off. Better without me.”

Esme crouches in front of me, her eyes wild, tears on her cheeks. “I’m going to kiss your fucking face off, you fucking infuriatingly dense dragon.”

My sluggish brain takes a moment to register the words. The deliciously perfect threat.

“Yes.”

Esme flies forward, straddling me, plastering herself to my chest as her fingers dig into my hair. Her lips crash into mine, dragging a groan from deep in my chest when I taste her hot flavor on my tongue. She kisses like a woman starved for my mouth, and I want nothing more than to be her feast.

Until I can’t fight the urge to consume her myself.

There are so many throw pillows in my place; a handful have toppled to the floor. I roll Esme over onto her back so she’s cradled among the soft cushions, and then I drag my mouth from hers, licking my way down her neck to her collarbone.

“Sulien,” she moans, and I grow hard at the sound.

Shoving up the thin cotton of her shirt, I continue my trail of kisses over her bare flesh, enjoying not only the salty, sweet taste of her skin, but also the way she twists and laughs and groans. Just like she did all those years ago.

The two times blend together, and for a moment, I can imagine I haven't lost decades of this magic.

I dip my tongue in her belly button as I pull down her leggings and underwear. Golden curls, pressed flat by fabric, greet me. I nuzzle them, breathing in her scent, rubbing my bearded cheek against this intimate part of her.

“Sulien!” Her voice is half scolding, half giggle, and I feel the demanding tug of her fingers in my hair, as if she's trying to pull me away from perfection.

I snarl as I palm her thighs wider and nip at the soft flesh of her lower belly.

“Fine, you evil dragon.” Her voice is breathless, and I glance up to find her face flushed, chest heaving, as she tries to glare down at me. “I want an *I'm sorry I didn't tell you who I was the moment I stepped into your shop* orgasm. Got it?”

A wicked grin spreads over my face. I don't care who the bastard is she's devoted her life to, but they're forgotten with my face inches from her pussy. She'll never think of them again once I'm done with her.

Because I'll never be finished.

“One for every day,” I rasp.

Her sass disappears with a hard swallow. “One orgasm for each day you've been here? No, that's, like ... more than thirty orgasms. I'll die.” Despite her morbid words, there's heat in her eyes, and her lips press tight, trying to suppress a smile.

“Die happy,” I say with a smirk before swiping my tongue up her vulva, collecting the wetness that's all for me.

“You're *evil*. Oh gods.” Esme's head drops back to a pillow, and her legs hook over my shoulders, heels digging into my shoulder blades to urge me forward. “You'd better fucking kill me,” she mutters as her hips rock against my greedy mouth. “Because I'm going to murder you.”

I suck her tight clit and growl a wordless response. The sound must create the right vibration because, the next thing I know, she's tensing and convulsing and shouting my name.

“One,” I grunt before sucking on her inner thigh, just hard enough to leave a hickey.

That’s how I plan to keep track.

I slip two fingers inside her and get to work.

When there are five hickies, Esme uses her feet to press hard on my chest and shove me away. I could probably win against her shaky legs, but I decide to give my harpy a respite. A short one. Crawling up her body, I kiss a trail as I go and try to ignore my demanding hard-on. My cock wants to slide into her soaking wet channel so fucking bad.

When I’m sprawled beside her, head propped on my hand so I can gaze down at the woman I love, I watch as she raises her hand, fingers still twitching with post-orgasmic shocks, slides it under my beard, and wraps the digits around my neck. As if she wants to strangle me.

I lean hard into her hand, liking the idea of her fingers leaving impressions on my skin. But she’s not trying to choke. Instead, her touch traces the thick scar. The proof that I had to change or die.

Please, forgive me.

“Does it still hurt?” she asks.

I shake my head. When compared to the pain of losing her, it was nothing.

“You can’t leave again,” she says, her tone allowing no argument.

“Your partner. They’ll want me gone.”

And they could get me to leave. Whoever they are, they wouldn’t need force or might. If it came to a fight, I’m confident I would win.

No. All they would need to do is take Esme into their arms.

I would go, if only to survive the pain.

Her brow dips. “Who?”

Hmm, were my orgasms that good?

“You’re devoted, you said”—*Was that just a few hours ago?—“to another.”*

Esme’s mouth drops open, and now, I feel the strength in her fingers, tightening enough to make me pay attention.

“I’m devoted to *you*, Sulien Blaythorn. Only you.”

Does she mean what I think she means? After all this time, I’m the one who holds her devotion?

“You still want me?” I rasp.

“Want you?” She stares at me, expression bewildered. “I was coming to *get* you.”

ESME HAS an entire room in her house devoted to research on Antarctica and dragons.

Books on shelves and open on tables. Scrolls unraveled. Pictures of great, scaly beasts scattered about. Maps pinned to the walls with notes about different areas.

The largest is a detailed image of the Antarctic continent.

There's a blue pin placed exactly where the colony is.

“Did you ever wonder why I owed Xavier that big favor?” Esme asks as I stare around in wonder.

After her cryptic confession, the harpy righted her clothes and dragged me out of the apartment, not caring that my body was obviously still in *I want to fuck you* mode. Even after the car ride to her house on the edge of town, I'm still half hard.

Silently, I nod.

My harpy strolls up to the map with the blue pin. “Because he promised to take me to the colony twenty years from now.”

“What?” The question comes out hoarse—and not just because of my injury. The idea of Esme in that place is my nightmare.

“When I found out a dragon moved to town, I sought him out and pestered him until he agreed. Only took a few months.” She smirks, all cocky and triumphant. “He promised to guide me there, help find you, and get you out.”

“Twenty years. You’d be almost sixty.” An even more fragile version of herself, braving the Antarctic wild.

“So? Yuichiro Miura climbed Mount Everest when he was eighty years old, and that guy was human.” She crosses her arms, glaring at me, like she still plans to go and needs to convince me to let her. “I’ve been training since I was eighteen. Designing some kick-ass magical winter gear, better than Gore-Tex.” She jerks her chin toward a corner with a rack of clothing that looks like it belongs in a ski apparel shop.

“I knew I couldn’t change you back. At least, I couldn’t *find* record of any dragons changing early, other than one.” Her eyes flick to a shelf of scrolls. “But they used a god artifact that was lost on a sunken ship hundreds of years ago.”

She stops next to a pinned-up map of the world, tapping her finger near Japan before sliding south to the giant white ice patch at the southernmost point of the world. “But I figured if I was *there*, if I was nearby when you transformed naturally, I could save you from your parents. Prove whatever they might have told you was a lie.”

She shoves her fists in the pockets of her shorts, glaring at the floor. “Your mom came to my house. The day after we slept together. She told me you and your father were already gone. That you were so ashamed of what you’d done, you wanted to live in the colony as a dragon to repent for your *sins*.”

Wrath boils in my gut, and my parents are lucky there’s a world between us.

My harpy straightens her spine. “I knew it was a lie. She knew you were mine, and that terrified her. So, they took you from me. Thinking I’d forget. But I never did. Not for a single day.”

The magnitude of what she’s telling me threatens to rupture my brain.

“All this ... time ... your loyalty.”

Esme grimaces, her eyes sad. “I’m not perfect. There were times—a whole year once—when I convinced myself it was

impossible. Or that I'd go through all this, find you, and you'd shift back into a young man, and I'd be an old woman, clutching too tight to the past. That you'd pity me for never letting you go."

Pity? More like worship at your feet.

I'm humbled by her.

"What changed?"

Esme shrugs and fiddles with the pages of an open book. "I realized it didn't matter. If you had moved on and were happy with some lady dragon, then I'd hurt, but I'd deal. Or if you simply didn't want me, I'd live with that too. But one thing I was absolutely sure of was, they had *forced* you to go to the colony. And when you could shift back to your human form, I wasn't going to let you face them alone if you wanted to escape. I could not live the rest of my life, knowing you were trapped."

She would've been there. Four decades apart, and she would have come for me. Done her best to save me.

No less than I'd do for her, but I've spent so much of my life among selfish, backstabbing creatures that I can't comprehend this commitment.

"I don't deserve you." I stare at Esme and wonder if I'm dreaming. If I fell asleep on the icy tundra and my internal forge finally ran out and I'm now drifting toward a death dimension. One that gives me every joy I never had in life.

"That's a ridiculous thing to say." The harpy circles the research-covered table to face me, staring me down with her golden gaze. "Do you want me? Because I want you."

Blue light flickers across her skin in response. "Yes."

"Do you love me like you used to?"

Like I used to? We were both barely more than children then. What I feel now eclipses those fledgling feelings.

"More."

She grins as tears spill down her cheeks. “And you’re not mad I was this close”—she holds up her fingers in a pinching motion—“to cheating on you with you?”

“Do it,” I growl, lunging forward to scoop her into my arms.

Esme laughs against my mouth as I kiss her, tasting the salt of tears and scenting hot flowers. I sink to the ground with her atop me.

“Do you ...” I groan when she reaches between us to palm my erection, fully stiff again.

“Do I what?” Her quick fingers undo my fly and pull out my cock, stroking until I almost forget my question.

But the answer is too important.

“Love me?”

Esme pauses with her fingers around my heated flesh, meeting my eyes with a look that says, *Seriously, you dense dragon?*

Then, she smirks, all sass and teasing.

“Oh, I see. An entire room devoted to you isn’t clear enough. My dragon needs to hear me say it. Do I have that right?”

Her dragon.

Fuck yes, I’m hers.

I nod, a quick jerk of my chin.

“Fine, you want to hear it? I”—she stands my cock up straight, positioning me at her entrance—“love”—she sinks down an inch—“you.” She slips the rest of the way.

Fully seated inside her, I’ve lost the few words I had.

Then, with each rock of her hips, the teasing harpy gives me a different variation.

“I love you, Sulien.”

“I love you, Lee.”

“I love you, my infuriating bearded dragon.”

“I love you, my ... mate.”

“Wait,” I croak, my balls tight, on the verge of spilling. “I am?”

Mating is different for every kind of mythic. I knew the fates had chosen her for me when I first filled her with my cock and felt as though wings had sprouted from my back and my chest caught on fire and my heart reformed to the shape of her small palm.

“That first time”—she moans as I thrust into her again, then licks my neck—“you asked to see my other form. You wanted all of me. Every last feather.” As she talks, I nod. “Your soul lifts my wings. Of course you’re my mate. Now, stroke my clit.”

Her profound words, followed by the crude demand, have me chuckling and falling further in love. I do as I was told, and soon, I’m rewarded with the fist-tight clench of her around my cock.

“Gods,” I shout, slamming deep and locking an iron arm around her hips, keeping Esme close as I spill inside her. Over and over, filling her with my ecstasy and love.

Later, when we lie, spent and panting, Esme’s fingers twisting my hair around her fingers, she brings up the future.

“Everyone is going to know something is up with you. My devotion to Sulien Blaythorn isn’t a secret. If I suddenly abandon my mission and start making out with you in public—which, let’s be honest, I’m going to do every time the urge takes me—people will ask questions. If you want to remain anonymous, we’re going to have to leave Folk Haven.”

Leave her business? Abandon her friends, this house she bought? Run away, like I did from the colony?

That place was hell and deserved to be abandoned.

Folk Haven is different. A place where we could be safe and happy.

“I won’t hide. Not anymore.” I speak the words against her hair, breathing in the warm floral scent. “I want to stay.”

My parents might come for me, demanding ... retribution? Obedience? I’m not sure. But whatever they might want, they won’t be able to lash out for twenty years. Plenty of time for us to prepare. They’re as stuck as they tried to make me. And when I see them again, I won’t be a naive teenager. I’ll be a warrior dragon with allies and a fierce harpy mate at my side.

“Good.” Esme pushes herself up until she sprawls over my chest, our naked bodies pressed together. She brings her mouth to mine for a series of kisses. “Welcome home.”

EPILOGUE

ESME CLAIMS the research room reminds her of the decades we spent apart, so after only a week of her knowing my identity, she boxes everything up.

“The Shellys might want the dragon books. They’re the witches who used to rent the apartment,” my harpy explains. “Have you been by their library?”

I shake my head as I help her arrange the heavy boxes in her car.

“Then, prepare yourself for a treat.” Esme flits to my side, pressing a hot kiss to my neck while my hands are full.

She enjoys doing that, I think, as a small means of torture. Giving me lusty kisses when my hands are occupied and I can’t grab her.

She’s a sneak, and I fucking love her for it.

She’s also brazen with her affection. The memory of how she laid me out on her bed and kissed every scar on my body makes me half hard. After packing the last box, I rearrange myself and slide into the passenger seat.

Then, I wrap my hand around the back of her neck, drag her in for a scorching kiss, shove my fingers past her waistband until I find her greedy little clit, and mercilessly stroke her until she’s coming while strapped into the driver’s seat. Luckily, the car is in park.

“You bastard,” she pants. “Now, my underwear is going to be damp for this whole errand.”

I dip my fingers lower, stroking the wetness, then drag my hand free and suck her pleasure off my skin like the sweet treat it is.

She glares, even as her cheeks flush hot and needy. “You’ve turned evil. I’ve mated an evil dragon.”

“Mmm,” I rumble. “Yes.”

As Esme backs out of the driveway, she goes on a rant. “I don’t know what happened to you. You used to be this sweet, preppy boy with styled hair and a closet full of polo shirts. I used to make *you* blush.” Eyes on the road, she reaches over to poke my chest, and I chuckle at the playful assault. “Remember that time you took me on your boat? You thought you were so cool and confident, up until I lost my top in the water. You were the color of a tomato! You could not form a single word.”

“Not true,” I argue, fighting my grin at the memory. “Think I said *one*.”

“Oh yeah. How could I forget? When I climbed out, you said, ‘Boobs.’ Like, *really* loud.”

Gods, I was dense. And obsessed with impressing Esme, who made the task impossible, which only made me try harder.

We turn down a road with lush green forest pushing in from all sides. How most of the roads around Lake Galen look.

“And now, you’re this confident, swaggering seduction master. It’s not fair. I’m going to have to up my game,” she declares just as she pulls into the driveway of a Victorian house.

The place looks kind of spooky in the evening light.

Perfect house for a set of witches and their magical library.

Esme throws the car in park, shuts off the engine, and turns to face me.

“Get ready,” she warns.

“For witches?” I ask.

“No. For me to up my game. Right now. Are you ready?”

I bite my lip to keep my laughter at bay. She’s too fucking cute, wanting to out-seduce me. Not like she needs to work at it. She walks into a room, and I’m already looking for a surface to bend her over. Still, I’m not about to complain.

At my nod, her smile grows wicked.

“I love the way your beard feels against my thighs.”

Damn her. I palm my dick through my pants and swallow hard. “Yeah?”

She nods slow. “Whenever you see me looking at your mountain-man facial hair, I want you to know, in that exact moment, I’m thinking about riding your face.”

“Fuck, Esme.”

I go to claim her mouth, only to get held up by my seat belt. As I wrestle with the strap, she giggles and escapes the car. When I get out, I have to tuck my hard cock into my waistband to hide what her words did to me.

“*You’re* evil,” I tell her as she pulls a box from the trunk.

“Then, we’re a perfect pair.”

My mate gifts me with a chaste kiss on the cheek, and I silently vow to make her come so many times on my tongue that she forgets her own name when we get back to her house.

The inside of the house looks like a library in progress. Some books are on shelves, but most are in stacks around the dim rooms.

“Thanks for these.” A curvy white woman with russet hair accepts the box in Esme’s arms. “I’m hoping to build out our sections on the different mythic groups.” Her eyes flick to mine. “I’m Morgana Shelly.”

“Sulien Blaythorn.”

I’ve decided to use my real name, parents and past be damned. Still debating on trying to find the legal documents my parents had for me or getting a new set forged. It’s not the

most uncommon thing among our kind. A safety measure some use.

“Would you be willing to verify the validity of these texts?” Morgana asks me as I set down my box of books on one of the few clear surfaces in the room.

“Sure.” I feel no loyalty to my kind. No reason to keep their secrets.

“Are any of those grimoires?” The question comes from the stairs, where a woman with hair as red as Morgana’s and pale skin, covered in freckles, descends.

“Sorry, no.” Esme moves to my side and smiles at the new arrival. “Just dragon stuff. Sulien, this is Amethyst Shelly. Ame, this is my mate, Sulien.”

A bolt of pure pleasure goes through me. She’s called me her mate before, but this is the first time she’s used it in an introduction. I wrap an arm around her waist, pulling the lovely harpy into my side.

“Bummer. About the grimoires. Not about the mating. That’s a good thing.” The witch’s green eyes meet and hold mine, and I feel like she sees more than I mean to reveal. Suddenly, the woman smiles wide. “You’re exactly what Esme has wanted all this time.”

The words are odd, but also kind of endearing. Before I can think on them more, a territorial growl sets my hackles up. But then I see the noise emanates from the throat of a small black cat lingering on the steps.

“This is Bee,” Amethyst says. “Don’t take the aggression personally. He doesn’t like anyone.”

I meet the cat’s dark eyes, and for a moment, I’m held by the intense stare. There’s something in the depths, more than animal.

Understanding. Intelligence.

Rage.

“He’s a cat?” I have to ask, tearing my eyes away and meeting the freckled witch’s.

She tilts her head, wearing a sad smile now. “I’m ninety-six percent sure he’s not.”

Whatever he is, I sense familiarity.

He is what I was. A beast held captive.

“Don’t worry,” Amethyst assures me, as if hearing my thoughts. “I’m working on it.” Her attention flicks to my side, and I realize she’s holding Esme’s stare now. “Even if it takes forty years, I’ll figure it out.”

“Good luck,” my mate says, her tone sympathetic.

We leave then, both of us needing distance from the somber reminder of our forced time apart. When we reach the car, I stop Esme from climbing inside, pulling her in for a kiss. Not one of passion and sex and craving.

This one is a thank-you.

When I pull back, I find her lashes glimmering with tears, though her mouth smiles.

“I love you too,” Esme whispers. “For my whole life, I will always love you.”

“My mate,” I say in response, the words holding everything that’s in me.

Then, her eyes dip, lingering on my beard, before flitting back to my face as she smirks.

The tension breaks as I rumble a chuckle.

“Evil mate,” I mutter.

The next kiss is full of promises.

The End



Thank you so much for reading DEVOTED TO A DRAGON. I hope you enjoyed Esme and Sulien’s love story and that you leave a review! Do you want to spend more time in the

mythic-filled Folk Haven? Check out the following books for more small town, sexy, fated mates romances.

SEDUCED BY A SELKIE

Folk Haven Book 1

Delta Novac hates Folk Haven, and as soon as she's done cleaning out her father's mess of a house, she's giving the town her taillights. But after she dives into the lake to save a drowning man that's not actually in danger, she finds herself with a sweet and sexy selkie shadow ready to do anything to get her to stay.

SUCKER FOR A SIREN

Folk Haven Book 2

Seamus MacNamara refuses to believe in the selkie mating myth: that his one true partner will rescue him from great danger. So, when the adorably beautiful barista he has a secret crush saves his life, Seamus ends up insulting her instead offering heartfelt thanks. Now he just wants a chance to redeem himself...and he's willing to go down on his knees to earn her forgiveness.

SWEARING AT A SEA MONSTER

Folk Haven Book 3

Moira MacNamara takes shit from no one, and that includes Levi Abadi, the enticing, infuriating monster who thinks he can dictate what she does with her own property. She makes a deal with him, sealed in blood. But now she can't help noticing how her veins thrum with heat every time he comes near...

SHELTER FOR A SHIFTER

Folk Haven Book 4

Ame Shelly found a cat, but this is no ordinary stray. She's almost certain her feline friend is a man stuck in an animal body. After years of searching, she's finally found the correct spell to release him from his fuzzy prison. Only, the man who appears in front of her demands two things: his witch mate and revenge.

If you enjoyed DEVOTED TO A DRAGON, please consider rating and reviewing the book. Reviews help other readers discover my books, which helps me make a living and funds my ability to write more mythical romances for you!

Keep reading for a sneak peek of *Shelter for a Shifter*, Book 4 in the Folk Haven series. Join Ame Shelly, a powerful witch, as she tries to return her cat Bee to his human form. At least, she thinks he's human...

 Shelter for a Shifter cover.
Redheaded woman holding a
book next to a black cat.

SHELTER FOR A SHIFTER

AME

I hold the door of Coffee & Claws open for Bee to make sure his tail doesn't catch when it swings shut. He immediately abandons me to go greet Gigabyte, an anxious dog that peers out the top of his carrier under a table near the window. Delta, Gigabyte's owner, smiles at my cat companion, then at me. Then, she goes back to typing on her computer, her nails—or more accurately, claws—filling the café with pleasant, repetitive clicking.

Would like another academic article. Her subtle desire slips into my mind, riding a current of my magic that brushed against the dragon, who is also a professor.

Despite the innocent nature of the want, I attempt to ignore the magical message by focusing on the stacks of colorful mugs behind the counter.

The red one with the yellow leaf design is pretty. How many leaves? One, two, three ...

The thoughts might be childishly simple, but I've found focusing on random objects, digging into every little detail about them, distracts my mind from hearing the desires of everyone around me. An unfortunate side effect of my magical specialty. My siblings have learned to shield themselves, but everyone else unknowingly shouts their secret cravings the moment I'm within hearing distance.

As I keep my gaze on the mugs, I approach the counter and tug my phone out of my pocket, swiping open the Notes app. My sister is a creature of habit in many ways, but she constantly experiments with coffee. Every day, it's something new, which means I have no hope of rattling off a memorized order.

"Iced coconut latte with almond milk and cinnamon on top," I read off to the barista. Belatedly, I remember to make eye contact—actually staring at a freckle on the bridge of her nose—smile, and add, "Please."

Please don't accidentally share any dark desires with me.

“Hi, Ame. That sounds yummy. Another Morgana experiment?” Sonya, the woman behind the counter and co-owner of the shop, gives me a smile that creases the copper skin around her eyes, reassuring me I haven’t offended her with my distracted delivery.

Want to stretch my wings. The siren’s silent longing is a quiet whisper I can easily ignore, like an overheard conversation.

“Hello, Sonya.” I slide my phone back into the pocket of my overalls. The clothing piece isn’t exactly flattering, but the depth of the pockets is worth the shapeless form. “Yes. She said she wanted her drink to taste like summer turning into fall.”

With her so fully entrenched in the library, I was surprised that my sister knew we were approaching a change of seasons. Morgana only realized it was midsummer when I built a bonfire in our backyard.

“That’s genius.” Sonya raps her knuckles on the counter. “I might steal that and make it the drink of the week leading up to the equinox. I’ll give your sister credit, of course.”

I imagine it—the chalkboard sign outside this staple of Folk Haven, proclaiming the specialty drink was invented by a Shelly witch.

“Morgana would like that, I think.”

My sister doesn’t seek out notoriety—coffee-related or any other kind—but she might like the subtle approval of Coffee & Claws. After living in this small town for a year, she’s shared her frustration with how we’re both still seen as outsiders. I never expected to be an insider. People don’t like when I get too close to their insides, worried what I’ll do to them with my magic.

Can’t imagine how they’d feel if they found out I knew their secret desires too.

But I see Morgana’s point about fitting in when she wants to run a well-trafficked magical library.

Currently, the Folk Haven Public Mythic Library is only meagerly trafficked.

“You let her know my plan,” Sonya says. “She can object if she wants.”

“Will do.” I pass over the cash for the coffee, then drop the change in the tip jar before I wander toward the pickup end of the counter.

As I peer around the shop, searching for Bee, my eyes catch on a blue set that holds my gaze in place.

The intensity is uncomfortable, more so when I recognize the stare’s owner. And eye contact always opens a direct path into ...

Want to bend her over a table, spank her ass. Fist her red hair. Have her moan and call me daddy.

I tear my gaze away, drop it to the floor, and trace the grain of the oak hardwood. Anything to clear the man’s craving from my mind.

“Amethyst. I was hoping to run into you.” Hamish strolls up to me, his hands in his pockets and a wide smile on his broad mouth, no idea that I glimpsed his fantasy, starring me.

I don’t blame him for being attracted to me or making a mental porno. Honestly, I’ve seen much more explicit desires than his. But it’s particularly uncomfortable because I see Hamish so often, as he’s one of the few frequent visitors to the library.

The selkie is a handsome mythic by many standards with his strong jaw, wavy and dark hair, and muscular build. Plus, there’s the Scottish lilt in his voice, which hints at a life lived on a different continent.

But he’s never inspired a hint of lust in me. He’ll have to find another partner to bend over a table.

“Hi, Hamish.” I give him a polite smile and examine the dark metal light fixtures on the ceiling to avoid hearing any more of his imaginary dirty talk.

The smell of freshly baked pastries is another pleasant distraction, and I glance toward the kitchen, wondering if Heath—the baker and other co-owner of Coffee & Claws—might be on the verge of bringing out some tasty creations. I never drink coffee—I’ve found caffeine makes me anxious—but I wouldn’t deny myself a scone.

“It’s been too long since I came by the library,” Hamish says, still intent on speaking to me.

“Not too long,” I murmur. “You came last week.” And I might have snuck out the back door after seeing his car from my bedroom window.

From the corner of my eye, I see the selkie grin as he continues to watch me.

“Keeping track of my visits? I’m flattered.” *Take me in her mouth.* “Why don’t you let me buy you a treat to go with your coffee?” *Watch her suck me.* “We can grab a table and get to know each other better.” The selkie gestures to the empty seats in the café as his imagination has me on my knees.

Normally, I don’t mind lingering in Coffee & Claws, especially if it means I can sit on the floor near Delta’s table and say hello to Gigabyte. Even though I can manipulate what animals want, I never seem to sense them the same way I do with humans and mythics. They’re a relief to be around.

But I don’t have any urge to spend my afternoon with Hamish, dodging his desires. Luckily, I have a ready-made excuse.

“I’m here to get coffee for Morgana. To go. Need to get back to the house before the ice in her drink melts.”

“Here you go, Ame. Tell your sister I said hi.” Sonya slides my cup to me across the counter with perfect timing.

“Sure thing.” I turn to find my path blocked by the selkie.

“You’re eager to get back to that library of yours.” He smiles down at me.

Thinking of all the texts that still need reviewing and sorting and translating, I wrinkle my nose, as if preparing for

the future sneezing that comes with the work I do. No matter how many times I run a microfiber cloth over the lot, the dust returns. Dust loves old books.

I—please never tell my sister this or else she might perish on the spot—do not.

Leather spines, cracked with age. Yellowed pages with preservation spells wearing off. Plus, witches have terrible handwriting, making their scrawled spells uneven and almost illegible on the parchment.

Give me an eBook any day.

“In a way,” I say. The way that going there gets me away from minds that can’t help broadcasting into mine.

He laughs, as if I said something witty. “You know, I’ve only ever seen the lower level. I’d enjoy a look around. Maybe you could show me what you all are hiding upstairs in that old house.”

I frown and wonder if the wetness on my palm is condensation from Morgana’s drink or sweat.

“There’re just bedrooms upstairs.”

Hamish grins. “Even better.” He steps close, bringing the scent of seaweed with him.

In the coastal town I grew up in, there was a sea witch who would create a cracker-like snack out of the slimy green foliage and would gift batches of them to families around town. One night, I was hungry for dinner, but Morgana was at a friend’s house, my brothers were at the movies, and my parents were doing what they often did—working on spells that required zero distraction. The only food in the house were those crackers, so I ate the lot. Turned out, that much salt on an empty stomach didn’t settle right, and an hour later, I puked all over my favorite blanket. No washing machine or cleaning spell was strong enough to eradicate that level of stomach acid and half-digested algae. Morgana had to throw my blankie away.

The memory and the smell have my stomach churning now.

“What do you say, Amethyst? Want to give me a private tour?” Hamish leans toward me, his eyes a deep ocean blue as they try to snag mine. *Tie her up*—

A growl rips into the space between the selkie and me, followed closely by a small black body. Bee leaps onto my shoulder, rudely hooking his claws into my T-shirt to hold his perch. Somehow, the feline-man manages not to pierce my skin.

“Gods,” Hamish barks, stumbling back a step as his searching gaze connects with Bee’s dark, menacing glare.

The cat continues to emit a noise he shouldn’t be able to make.

I don’t know that I’ve ever heard *this* growl before. Or if I have, not enough times to assign a specific meaning to it.

Normally, I try to correct Bee when he’s overly aggressive. I assume being a man, stuck in the body of a cat, has him in a perpetual stage of confusion that makes it hard to distinguish friend or foe, so he makes it easy on himself by assuming everyone is foe.

This time though, I’m silently grateful for his intervention. The salty scent lingers in the back of my nose, coaxing a queasiness in my stomach.

“You are free to visit the downstairs part of the library. Because it is public,” I tell the selkie as I step around him without letting his eyes snag on mine again. “Bye.”

If Hamish has anything else to say to me, he chooses not to.

Bee’s unbroken growling would have made the words hard to hear anyway.



BEE

Water man smells of fish and lust.

He wants my witch.

I will tear his face off...

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A selkie's secret
cover, woman
standing near a lake
surrounded by trees


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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lauren Connolly is an award-winning author of contemporary and paranormal romance stories. She has lived among mountains, next to lakes, and in imaginary worlds. Lauren can never seem to stay in one place for too long, but trust that wherever she's residing there is a dog who thinks he's a troll, twin cats hiding in the couch, and bookshelves bursting with the stories written by the authors she loves.



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