

AMY SUMIDA



THE
DRAGON KING'S
PHILOSOPHER

The Dragon King's Philosopher

Amy Sumida

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Chapter One

The clang of swords was like the sound of a squeaking wheel, grating on my nerves. I hurried by the training yard where the young Dragons of Fyreholde learned to fight, preparing for war or, in the case of the nobles, for the day they'd go to Erimbar to serve the King of Zaru for a term as a palace knight. Every noble house sent one of their young men to serve. Every house but mine.

I had shown such an exceptional talent for scholarly pursuits at a young age that my mother had petitioned King Saric to excuse me from service. As she often served as the Vas—a mediator of grand status who kept Dragon meetings calm—he agreed and gave me a dispensation to study. As a result, I knew little about the art of war, and as much as I loved to unravel the great mysteries of our world, men who could use their bodies as skillfully as I used my mind fascinated me. At least, they had.

I had just returned from Erimbar, the crown city of Zaru, where the warriors of the Zaru Dread had gathered to defend the King and the city against an uprising. Although neither my sister nor I were warriors, we had gone with my mother to assist her in her duties as the Vas. I had started the journey with hope in my heart, excited at the prospect of not only meeting the King but also his renowned brother, Prince Racmar. The Prince had been a hero of mine since I was a child. I'd read many stories of his prowess on the battlefield and they all thrilled me, but what really held my attention was his loyalty and love for his brother.

Racmar refused to fight in the crown tournament against Saric, but once Saric won the crown, he fought the same men his brother had so that he could become Prince. Racmar didn't want to rule; all he wanted was to look after his brother, who had raised him after the death of their parents. I

found that noble and terribly romantic. And the Prince lived up to my expectations.

Racmar was handsome, powerful, and a good man, but he had a consort when we first met. My twin sister, Thada, tried to break them up, knowing how much I desired the Prince. Her plans backfired horribly on her, resulting in Racmar casting her out of the city. Normally, such machinations were tolerated among Dragons but Lord Daha, the Prince's consort, turned out to be his mate. And you separate a Dragon from his mate at your own peril.

Thankfully, neither the Prince nor his mate held a grudge against me. I had been unaware of my sister's last and most terrible attempt at sabotaging their relationship, the one that sent Lord Daha running from the Prince, and they graciously believed in my innocence. I had also saved Lord Daha's life, so that helped. But, in the end, I went home brokenhearted and humiliated, with a fresh distaste for warriors *and* my sister.

"No more fighting men for me," I muttered as I made my way through the streets of Fyrehollde, one of the Dragon enclaves in Zaru.

Every Dragon had a mate, someone chosen for us by our goddess, Ensarena. We just had to find them. I had been nearly certain that Prince Racmar was my mate, but I was wrong and now, I didn't trust my instincts. Not that I lived my life instinctively. Far from it. I was a scholar, not a fighter—a philosopher and man of science as well as magic. I used my intellect instead of my physical might most of the time. Except when it comes to men.

"With men, I lose all of my reasoning," I muttered. "I turned into a damn fool with the Prince. And for what? He

wasn't my mate. I only embarrassed myself. *Why* did I kiss him?"

But I knew why. Thada. She told me that the Prince had sent for me, and she implied he desired a romantic interlude. I was so excited that as soon as I saw Racmar, I rushed forward and pressed my lips to his. What an idiot I'd been. The Prince had been shocked enough to allow the kiss to continue for a few seconds but then had pushed me away roughly and demanded an explanation. Baffled at first, then horribly humiliated, I told him about Thada and how she said that he'd sent for me. Racmar, of course, informed me that was not the case. He had gone to the garden to be alone. My sister, my twin and best friend, had lied to me. Because of her schemes, my family left Erimbar in shame.

Now, men like Racmar only reminded me of my humiliation. I couldn't be with a warrior again. But my new resolution made finding my mate more difficult. Every Dragon, even those who weren't warriors, was physically strong. Because of this, most men tended to be warriors or at least embody those aspects. If they did not exclude our women from fighting, it would likely be the same with them. Not that ours was a chauvinistic race, quite the contrary. It's just that as potential mothers, no one wanted to risk women in battle.

We were a power-oriented people and the power we respected most was that of the body. Although magic came in as a close second. Suffice it to say, I don't rank very high in either department. I had no warrior training and only a passable ability with Fire. I'm respected for my noble status and my looks, but my scholarly achievements—the things I prize most—are ignored by most Dragons.

Because of our ferocious nature, Dragons don't do well together. They formed enclaves like Fyrehollde of a central hub of businesses and such, like the training yard and the

library (where I was headed), with estates spread around it. *Widely* spread. Only immediate family members lived together, with acres of land between them and other estates. Which meant that I had to walk or fly several miles to get to my favorite place in all of Serai—the Great Library of Fyreholde.

I sighed as I stepped through the arched doorway, leaving the desert heat outside. Within, the air was cooled magically, but the arid quality remained the same—moisture was bad for books. The scent of old parchment and leather greeted me like a dear friend. Here, I didn't feel lacking. Only here was I completely accepted. Not just accepted, but also appreciated for who I was and what I could offer. My mother and sister loved me and supported my scholarly pursuits because that's what I loved, but they didn't completely understand me, and I knew, deep down, they sneered, just a little, at my lack of savagery. They thought me less of a man for it.

All of this—Racmar, my family, and the general opinion of Dragons—is why I had determined that my mate must be a fellow scholar. Some men are good for nothing but knowledge, and I was such a man. I accepted that, and I needed a mate who accepted it too. I had spent too long chasing the idea of a powerful warrior for a mate, believing that I needed someone to protect *and* love me. But now I saw that my lack of physical prowess would disgust a man like that. Often, men who desired other men found me beautiful. They enjoyed my slim body and how I wore my hair longer than most men. They liked how my Dragon features were softer than those of other males, prettier. But even those who appreciated a delicate man still wanted him to be strong. At least if they were Dragons.

Perhaps I needed to find a mate outside my race, just as Prince Racmar had. But how could I do that within a Dragon enclave?

“Thas!” Shoder, one of my closest friends, stepped up beside me. “You’re back from Erimbar. How was it? Was the Prince as handsome and heroic as you expected?” He grimaced. “Or was he awful? They say you should never meet your heroes.”

I barely stopped my wince. “Prince Racmar was magnificent. Handsome, brave, and a nice person. Unfortunately, he also found his mate while I was there.”

“Oh, damn. I had hopes for you.”

“I did too, but it was just a silly boyhood fantasy. At least now that I’ve met him, I can move on and grow up.”

Shoder frowned. “You’re never silly nor childish, Thas. You’re one of the most rational men I know.”

“Except when it comes to romance. Honestly, I’m a little put off by warriors after all that’s happened.”

“Ah.” He looked around the small entry hall at the few scholars gathered there, most hunched over books or speaking in hushed tones with their fellows. “Well, the pickings are rather slim here.” He brightened to ask, “How about a coffee in the courtyard? You can tell me as much or as little about your trip as you like.”

“Thanks, Sho. I could use a friendly ear.”

“Come on.” He slapped my back and ushered me to the right, where a corridor led to the library’s cafeteria.

“What have you got there?” I nodded toward the book he was carrying.

“Huh?” He looked down. “Oh! Quantum magic.”

“*Quantum* magic?” I asked, my interest peeking. “What does that mean exactly? Tiny spells?”

Shoder laughed. “I missed your wit, Thas. No, it’s the study of the origin of magic, how it begins with a vibration and then grows from there.”

“A vibration? Fascinating.”

“It’s only a theory, not a lot of hard facts, but it’s interesting and well-presented. Would you like to read it when I’m done?”

“I would, yes. Thank you.”

We reached the cafeteria, a little room that looked much like every other room in the library—wood-paneled, hung with old paintings, and lit with bright crystal spheres—except with the addition of food and drinks. Everyone has this image of scholars squinting at books in low light, but that’s so inaccurate. Why would we do that? We like things bright, all the better to read by.

A counter separated the kitchen from the dining room. Food could be ordered there, but Shoder and I headed to the sideboard where huge carafes of coffee, tea, and cold water were set up, their steel containers glinting with the magic used to heat and cool them. I took a mug from the stack to one side,

filled it with hot tea, added sugar, and grabbed a date cookie from one of the platters between the carafes. Once Shoder had his coffee and a handful of sugar cookies, we went out to the adjoining courtyard.

The cafeteria courtyard was a sanctuary within a sanctuary for me. I felt as insulated as that giant carafe of cold water out there. Within the stone walls of the library, I was safe, and the courtyard was the heart of the library—an oasis of palm trees, flowers, and bubbling water. There, the humidity—what little could be achieved in our climate—didn't matter. In fact, the glass dome of the courtyard's ceiling encouraged and preserved it. As Dragons, we are kin to fire, masters of it, with magic to control the flames we breathe in our beast forms. But we love water in the way that moths love light. We are drawn to it despite what it can do to our flames. It soothes us.

I sighed as I sat down at a cafe table with Shoder, finally at peace. It felt as if I'd been seeking it forever.

“All right, tell me,” Shoder said.

“Ah, my friend,” I said, perhaps a bit dramatically. But it was dramatic for me. Traumatic even. “I've been betrayed.”

“What?” Shoder sat forward. “By whom?”

“Thada.”

“Your twin? No, she'd never betray you.”

“She meant well, I suppose.”

“What did she do?”

“She tried to set me up with the Prince.”

“That doesn’t sound so bad.”

“It wasn’t at first. In fact, I was almost positive that he was my mate. I tried to win him over myself, but he was obsessed with his consort, the man who truly was his mate.”

“Ah. So how did Thada betray you?”

“I was trying to help you!” my sister’s voice slid through my mind. *“I thought you two just needed a little push.”*

“She saw the Prince heading into a garden and told me he wanted me to meet him there for a secret tryst.”

“Oh, my.”

“Yes, and if that wasn’t bad enough, she then told the Prince’s consort that he had taken me there for that tryst. I, thinking I was summoned for romantic reasons, kissed the Prince, and his consort happened to see it. What he didn’t see was the Prince pushing me away and demanding to know why I had taken such liberties with him.”

“Oh, no.” Shoder’s eyes went round.

“Yes. The Prince’s consort left him, believing that he was betrayed, and the Prince nearly lost his mind searching for

him. Luckily, Prince Racmar tracked Lord Daha's scent and found him. That's when he claimed his mate."

"Wow."

"When they returned, the Prince attacked Thada. He nearly strangled her to death."

"Holy shit!"

"Yes, and I couldn't defend her." I grimaced. "Even had I wanted to."

"We have other strengths, my friend." Shoder took my hand.

Shoder understood me as no one else could. Luckily, he had an older brother, so even though he was from a noble Dragon family like me, they didn't send him to serve the King either. We'd met in school when we were just boys and have been friends ever since.

"Yes, I know," I said. "But it was hard to watch my mother try to defend Thada while I stood aside and did nothing."

"You stood aside because you were mad as well?"

"Honestly, yes. She humiliated me in front of a man I respected and may have fallen in love with. Just a little."

"I'm so sorry, Thas."

I shrugged. "It's a good thing we live in separate wings of the house. I can barely stand to look at her right now."

"You could stay with me for a while."

I grinned. "I might just take you up on that."

"Lord Thas?"

I looked up to see a young man standing beside our table. He was a member of the library staff. "Yes?"

"The Head Librarian would like to see you."

"Did he say what it was about?"

"No, only that you must come immediately."

"Leave your mug. I'll take care of it." Shoder waved at my tea.

"Thanks. I'll find you when I'm finished." I got up.

"I'll be here." Shoder lifted a cookie in salute, then shoved it in his mouth with a look of delight.

I followed the boy inside the library, but he left me in the corridor, trusting me to find my own way to the Head Librarian's office. I hurried through the wood-paneled hallways, nodding at the men and women I passed while averting my gaze from the portraits of scholars that hung on

the walls (they gave me the creeps). Finally, I reached the west wing of the library and a door with a brass plaque upon it that read, “Head Librarian Corlys Grafmul.” I knocked.

“Come in,” Corlys called.

I opened the door to find Corlys seated at his enormous desk, books piled on the floor, the window ledge, and a side table—every surface within reaching distance of him except for his desk. He reserved his desk for work and, besides the usual items—lamp, pens, blotter—it had a single piece of parchment upon it. Before the desk, seated on one of the two armchairs for visitors, was a foreigner.

The foreigner was a Dragon but didn’t wear the layered, light robes of a Zaruian. This man wore a sleeveless wrap tunic with loose pants and high boots, the garments made of dull green cotton. He wore his long, dark hair braided back from his face and a thick torque around his neck, cat heads forming the knobs at the torque ends. No, not cats, jaguars. And if he wore jaguars, he was probably from the Kingdom of Ha’tezan.

“Lord Thas, please have a seat.” Corlys waved at the open chair.

I nodded a greeting at the foreigner as I sat. “What’s this about?”

“The King of Ha’tezan has requested our help to interpret an ancient text and possibly perform an archaeological excavation.”

“An archaeological excavation?” I sat up straighter.

*Dear, sweet Ensarena, this was exactly what I needed!
Something to distract me and take me out of Zaru.*

“We’ve discovered a pair of very large stone doors,” the stranger said. “There is ancient writing upon them, possibly Ancient Draconian. Our scholars can’t say for certain. We need an expert to help them translate.”

“Lord Thas, this is Sir Nyl. I told him you are the only scholar here who knows the ancient tongue as if it were the language of your birth,” Corlys said.

“I know Ancient Draconian in addition to many others,” I said. “So, if it isn’t Draconian, I still have a good chance of interpreting it.”

“And he’s also trained in properly excavating finds such as this,” Corlys added.

“Yes, I know how to unearth delicate items and preserve them,” I said eagerly.

“Wonderful! We would like to hire you, Lord Thas,” Sir Nyl said.

“I accept.”

The man’s eyes went wide. “You haven’t even heard what we’re offering.”

“Will you see to my needs while I’m there—food, shelter, and such?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Then the pay will be fine, I’m sure.”

Corlys laughed at the man’s expression. “Lord Thas is a true scholar, Sir Nyl. He does it for the knowledge, not the money.”

“Well, then, on behalf of my king, I thank you, Lord Thas. We will be most pleased to have your assistance.”

“When do we leave?” I asked.

“As soon as you are able.”

“Give me two hours.” I stood up.

Sir Nyl went back to gaping at me while Corlys returned to laughing.

Chapter Two

“You can’t go without me!” Thada shouted again.

I ignored her again as I had been for the last fifteen minutes and kept packing.

“Mother!” she screamed.

My mother sat on my bed, calmly watching me pack. She had begun by asking questions about the assignment and location—as a normal person might. But then Thada asked what she should pack, and I told her she wasn’t going. It was the first thing I’d said to her that day, and it might be the last if she kept up her ranting.

“That is enough!” Mother didn’t shout, but her words had a resonance that carried through the room.

Thada went still. I kept packing.

“Your brother needs time to get over what you did, Thada. Let him go. This mission is the best thing for your relationship.”

Thada gaped at her. “But, Mother ...”

“I said enough. Now, get out.” She pointed at the door.

Thada spun, her long crimson hair—the exact shade as mine—flaring out behind her like a cape. Where my hair fell to my lower back, hers went down to her thighs. That length and her sex were the two major differences in our appearance

—those that people saw immediately. They often commented that we looked more like identical twins than fraternal, but that’s only because they see our coloring, a couple of similar features, and my ... let’s call it *delicate masculinity* and don’t look any further. They don’t notice that my cheekbones are higher than hers or the way her lips turn down. They don’t distinguish the more feminine arch of Thada’s eyebrows or the more masculine angle of my jaw. They see our dark eyes and long noses and declare us to be the perfect example of twins.

Well, I needed to not be a twin for a while.

“I’m glad you’ve taken this assignment,” my mother said as she stood up. She stepped around my trunk and hugged me. “Forget about your sister and ... all that happened in Erimbar for a while, Thas. Immerse yourself in the ancient world and discover its secrets. Then, when you’re ready to return to the present, come home.”

“Thank you, Mother. I love you.”

“I love you too, Thas. But we are Dragons and even twins need to leave the nest and fly alone.” She paused to grin. “At least until you find your mate.”

My stomach burned with her words and an image of Prince Racmar with Lord Daha—the beautiful *and* powerful Lord Daha—instantly came to mind.

She made a wincing groan. “Sorry, Son. Try to forget about him too. You are meant for someone else, and I believe he will be even more amazing than our prince.”

I internally scoffed that anyone could be more amazing than Prince Racmar of Zaru, but I pasted on a smile for her.

“I’m sure he will be. The Goddess knows best.”

Chapter Three

Out of all the kingdoms of Serai, I knew the least about Ha'tezan. As an island kingdom, it was already isolated, and its Dragon inhabitants also kept to themselves. Not that they were secretive exactly. They welcomed commerce with other kingdoms and had a thriving port, but there were few books written about their culture. I knew they had a jaguar on their device, were of a darker complexion like us Zaruians, and their kingdom had a tropical climate. What I didn't know was that they didn't allow Dragons of other Dreads to travel to Ha'tezan in dragon form.

Not that I minded. The journey was long and across the Fresian Sea. An oversea flight meant there would be no stopping along the way, and that sounded exhausting to me. Because of the restriction, I assumed we'd be flying to the coast, then traveling the rest of the way by boat.

I was wrong.

Sir Nyl ushered me into what was essentially a carriage without wheels, topped with a wide, gold bar. That bar looked like a perch for a giant bird, but it wasn't a perch; it was a handle. After Nyl and I had settled in the luxurious box and stowed my trunk beneath my padded bench, all five of his attendants shifted into their dragon forms. One of them grabbed the bar atop our carriage and when he launched himself into the sky, he took us with him.

I was prepared for that. I mean, how else could that carriage go anywhere? But nothing could prepare me for the experience of flying without wings. I gasped and grabbed the edge of my bench as I peered through the glass window at the ground below. How could a Dragon have a fear of heights?

“Are you all right, Lord Thas?” Sir Nyl asked.

“Yes,” I said breathlessly. “I’m sorry. I’ve never flown like this. It’s ... unsettling.”

Nyl grimaced and glanced out the window. “I understand. I dislike it myself. But then, we are Dragons; we don’t enjoy giving up control.”

“Oh. Well, you don’t need to be in here with me. I’m the only one barred from flying to Ha’tezan. Why don’t you join the others?”

“That’s kind of you, but I can’t leave a guest to travel alone. It would be rude.”

“Truly, I’ll be all right. I’ll probably take a nap. And you’ll be right outside if I need you.”

Nyl looked longingly out the window. “Well, if you insist.”

I shrugged. “There’s no sense in both of us suffering.”

Nyl swung his stare back to mine. “You’re a very nice man, Lord Thas.”

It didn’t sound like a compliment, so my response was unsure. “Thank you?”

Nyl laughed. “I’m sorry. I ... we don’t ... I ...”

“Men aren’t nice in Ha’tezan?”

“No, they are. Or they can be. But most Dragon lords I’ve met are not exactly generous. And, at least in my kingdom, it’s for a reason.”

“What reason?”

“You won’t have to worry about it.” He bent and pulled a basket out from beneath his bench. “There’s some refreshment in here and a chamber pot beneath your bench, if you need to relieve yourself.”

“Thank you, but, Sir Nyl, I still want to know. Why are your Dragon lords unkind?”

Nyl sighed, shoved the basket back, then straightened. “They are not unkind, but rather ... wary. In my dread, the higher your station, the harder you must fight to defend it.”

“It can be taken?”

“Oh, yes. If you are too weak to hold it. Nobility is won, not something you are born with.”

My eyes widened. “I don’t think I would do well in your dread.”

“No, I don’t think so either, my lord.” He softened his words with a smile. “But that is a good thing, and I hope your time in Ha’tezan doesn’t change you. You are refreshing.”

“Thank you.” I meant it that time.

Chapter Four

I fell asleep somewhere in the middle of the Fresian Sea and woke to the screech of a dragon. Jolting upright, I scrambled toward the window and stared out at the dragons flanking me. One of them was Sir Nyl—recognizable by his slender snout. His coloring differed slightly from the others, but with all of them in shades of green, it was harder to mark him by it. In addition, night had fallen, darkening their green scales to gray.

Nyl swung his head toward me. “We’re approaching the island, my lord.”

Another screech drowned out his next words.

“What was that?” I asked.

“The coastal patrol. I must speak with them. I will return shortly.” And then he flew off.

I leaned over, trying to see where he went, but the dragons of our group blocked my view. The only light was that of the moon, but as a Dragon, my eyesight was excellent, even in the darkest night. Colors were muted, but everything else was sharp. Still, I craved light. I pulled the cord for the overhead lantern, and the carriage filled with the glow of a light sphere.

A roar came from ahead, and the dragons around me broke off, angling outward to either side. Suddenly, I could see Nyl with another group of dragons. The largest of them broke off from the patrol, shooting upward and flipping into a graceful arch to fly in the opposite direction. Toward me.

The dragon dove, and I pressed my face against the glass to watch him fly beneath the carriage. He circled above us, shrieking at the dragon who carried me, then leveled out beside me, his head perfectly aligned with my window.

A large eye the color of young mint leaves stared at me, its slit pupil constricting in the light. I stared back, transfixed by the emerald striations within the pale green and, above all, the ebony scales that surrounded the eye. Black dragons were common enough, but this one shimmered green in the light, like the wings of a scarab. So beautiful. Without thought, my hand went to the glass, and I realized with a jolt that if that barrier hadn't been there, I would have touched him.

That giant eye blinked as if he realized it too, then the black dragon banked away.

“Whoa,” I whispered.

A few seconds later, Nyl appeared beside the carriage. “We’re cleared to pass. We’ll be landing in the crown city of Lucar soon, my lord.”

“Nyl, who was that?” I shouted through the glass.

He glanced at me. “That was King Xa’din of Ha’tezan.”

“That was the King?!”

“Yes. He was on a pleasure flight when he saw our approach and joined the patrol. He’s gone ahead to warn the palace of our arrival.”

“That was the King,” I whispered as I sat back on the bench. “Sweet Ensarena, he’s magnificent. I wonder what he looks like as a man?”

Chapter Five

To be honest, I expected something primitive from an island kingdom. But the island was enormous and anything but primitive. We passed over a coastal city just as advanced as any in Zaru, complete with teeming docks and an orderly design, and then another city further inland that rivaled our capital. Roads wove through the thick jungle, heavy with carriage and horse traffic even at this time of night, and lit by lampposts every few feet. Those illuminated roads formed a glowing web across the dark jungle, with some threads leading to areas cleared for farmland. We didn't veer toward any clearing but instead headed for the thickest parts of the jungle at the center of the island. I saw light before I did the city. Lucar was so brightly illuminated that it cast a glow over the surrounding jungle for half a mile.

Another dragon patrol circled the outskirts of the city, but they'd been alerted to our arrival and let us pass without questioning. And then it stood before me, the crown city of Lucar. The most magnificent city I'd ever seen—and I'd seen my fair share.

Lucar was like an island on an island, a plateau sundered from the jungle by a deep ravine and the river rushing over its rocky floor. Smaller rivers veined the city, their runoff creating many waterfalls that fed the river, two of which boarded a wide, stone bridge—the only foot access to Lucar. A pair of life-sized dragon statues stood guard at the city end of the bridge, glaring at anyone who dared to cross the natural moat.

As far as architecture, Lucar was beyond compare. Lit from within and without, the soaring stone structures proudly displayed complicated arches and intricate carvings. Figures of dragons and jaguars featured predominantly, but there were also delicate designs more floral in nature. I peered out of my

window at spires that rose from magnificent mansions, admiring the craftsmanship of the conical roofs and the curving eaves. It all looked like something out of a children's story.

“Those carvings.” I narrowed my stare at a tower as we passed by. “They look ancient.” A thrill shot through my chest. If the city was this old, their archaeological discovery would be even older. “It will predate every dig site I've worked.”

But archaeological thoughts vanished from my mind as the royal palace came into view. Many of the common structures had looked like palaces to me, but this central building outshone them all. It spread its wings over several acres of land, with towers capped by domes of stone instead of those conical shingled roofs I'd seen earlier. Bas relief designs larger than I snarled at me with jaguar fangs and arched nooks held golden statues of dragons. In the center of it all, rose a keep of stacked squares fronted by long balconies. A wedding cake of stone. The top tier held a giant golden statue of a jaguar sitting on its haunches, head bent to regard the city.

We circled the keep and landed in a courtyard ringed by an arcade. My carriage alighted first, then the dragons set down around me. As soon as we landed, a group of people came rushing up to us, several holding garments for the dragons who then shifted into Dragons—capital D. Humans call our prime bodies “human forms,” but we find that a bit insulting. We are not humans, not even in appearance. We are dragons when beasts and *Dragons* when not.

I retrieved my trunk and climbed out of the carriage. The dragon who had been carrying me moved the carriage to the side of the courtyard, in line with several others like it, and then shifted to his prime form.

“Thank you for the ride,” I said to him as he got dressed.

“It was my honor to bear you, Lord Thas.” He bowed to me, then waved at Sir Nyl, who was waiting for me near a doorway, just past the arcade. “Go on ahead. I will take your belongings to your guest chambers.” He took my trunk from me.

“Thank you,” I said again and strode over to Nyl. “This city is amazing. The carvings on the buildings look ancient. How old is Lucar?”

Nyl waved me toward the doorway, then preceded me through it. “So old that we do not know the age.”

“What?” I hurried after him. “How can you not?”

With a small smile over his shoulder, he said, “This is the birthplace of our race, Lord Thas. Do *you* know when the Goddess created us?”

I stopped walking. “Say that again.”

Nyl stopped and spun on his heel to face me. “The Kingdom of Ha'tezan is where Ensarena created the Dragon Race.”

“How do you know that?”

He shrugged and started walking again. “It is our truth. Our people have passed the knowledge down through the years.”

“And why don’t the other Dragon Kingdoms know this?” I scrambled to fall into step beside him. “This is important information.”

“Dragons left Ha’tezan and spread across Serai to rule it as our goddess commanded. They either forgot about their birthplace or didn’t believe it was important enough to record. I do not know. But we both know that Dragons can be prideful.”

I grimaced. “So prideful that they don’t pass down information on the race’s creation?”

Nyl shrugged again.

“Unbelievable,” I whispered as the décor caught my attention.

The stone floors were bare, a stark contrast to the rich color of the wood-paneled walls and ceiling. Paintings in gilded frames adorned the walls, but they weren’t the flat variety I was used to. Expertly placed jewels and precious metals adorned these pieces of art, giving them a more sculptural look. My footsteps lagged as I came upon a landscape, the trees highlighted with tiny emeralds and glints of sunlight done with chips of gold. It was so subtle that at first, it looked like masterful paint, but then the light glinted off something raised and it all shifted.

“I feel as if I can step into it,” I murmured.

Nyl glanced over his shoulder at me. “It’s big enough for that.”

And it was. The painting was at least ten feet tall and twice as wide. Not quite life-sized, but close. And this was just a random piece of art in a hallway!

I hurried after Nyl, who had left me behind again. “Is there any written documentation on your claim about Ha’tezan being the birthplace of our race?” My gaze wandered up to where intricate glass bulbs in the shape of flowers hung from gold chains. Light spheres shone from their centers. “Beautiful.”

Nyl grinned at me. “I’m sure there are many sources in the palace library. Your attendant will take you there if you ask him.”

“My attendant?” I tore my gaze from the ceiling to look at him.

“We give every guest an attendant to see to their needs.”

“Ah. Yes, thank you.”

He glanced at me. “Are you ready to meet the King?”

“I ... *now*?” I smoothed my rumped tunic. The layers were already making me sweat, something that never happened in the dry heat of Zaru. But in Ha’tezan, the humidity was much higher.

“The King himself has heralded your arrival. It’s best not to keep him and his court waiting.” He looked me up and down. “You look fine.”

“Uh, yes. All right.” I pulled the length of my hair forward and finger-combed it as we walked.

Nyl chuckled. “Are all Zaruians so vain?”

“I thought it was a Dragon thing?” I countered.

He shrugged again. “I suppose all of us enjoy looking nice, but I wouldn’t be so worried if I had a face like yours.”

I stared at him for a second, then cleared my throat. “Thank you.”

Nyl winked at me. “You’ll be fine, Lord Thas. Just don’t back down. No matter what happens. The King, like most Ha’tezans, respects courage.”

“Why would I need courage?”

“Here we are.” He waved at a huge arched doorway instead of answering my question.

The murmur of lowered voices trickled out of the doorway. I looked up at the apex of the arch to find a dragon head staring back at me, mouth open as if to breathe fire. Hopefully, that wasn’t an omen.

“You can tell the older pieces by the subject matter.” Nyl waved at the dragon head. “The dragons came before the jaguars.”

“So the gold jaguar atop the palace?”

“Added when the first King of Ha'tezan took the throne.”

I didn't respond. By that time, we had stepped through the doorway and into a throng of people. Most of them weren't Dragons, and that was normal for a Dragon Court. As I mentioned before, Dragons do better with space between them. But there were also Dragon courtiers in attendance—more than I'd seen in any court. How odd.

The courtiers drew back for us, staring at me with curious eyes as I strode down the aisle they made. And I shamelessly stared right back. Because in addition to the Dragon courtiers, there were also people from races not found in Zaru. Races I'd only read about in books.

The Kueya I recognized by their large, amphibian eyes and glistening pale-pink skin. I looked closer and found the other traits I knew they possessed; webbed hands and long earlobes. Nictating membranes flashed across their slightly bulging eyes as they stared at me, calling to mind a footnote I'd read—that they were possibly related to the Neraky. But seeing them in person made me doubt that. The only feature they shared with the Neraky were those nictating membranes. In all other regards, they appeared to be a completely different species.

There were also Osomah courtiers with wide faces and noses. Their triple-jointed hands especially interested me; they were a little creepy, while their tufted tails were the opposite—almost too cute. With long faces and noses, the Litoto courtiers stood out among the Osomah. Although it wasn't their facial features that made them so distinctive, not even with the tiny feathers adorning their temples. It was their wings.

We had a winged race in Zaru called the Lelurra, but they didn't leave the deep desert often and mainly kept to themselves. They also didn't have such vibrant plumage. Wings of bright green, fuchsia, and brilliant blue rose from the shoulders of the Litoto, more beautiful than any piece of jewelry could be. But that didn't stop them from covering themselves in gemstones.

“Lord Thas,” Nyl whispered, humor lacing his tone. “Compose yourself. We are nearly to the throne.”

“Oh. Yes. Thank you.” I tore my gaze away from the fascinating court and set it forward.

As I did, the last of the courtiers drew back with a rustle of silk and feathers, completing the aisle and revealing my destination. A stone dais spanned the entire width of the vast hall and swept back into the recess of an arched nook. If you can call something that large a nook. Cave might have been a better word, but that would imply something rough and natural when this stone was smooth, with a scene of fighting dragons carved into it. A chandelier of glass talons—or perhaps teeth—hung over the throne, casting a threatening ambiance as well as light.

Now, I've seen a few thrones in my time. They're always impressive, and after walking the corridors of Lucar's palace, I was expecting something grand. And it was. In a way. The chair itself was made in the same style as the palace, though the stone was deep indigo and carved more rustically. I might have called it beautiful if not for the collection of items around it.

Set in artful piles behind and on either side of the throne were dragon skulls. Enormous things with sharp teeth

and gaping eye sockets. They filled the massive space both horizontally and vertically, one set forward a little so that its snout could serve as a footrest for the throne's occupant.

The occupant. Oh, fuck. I was so horrified by the skulls that I forgot about the King! Nyl had introduced us while I was gawking, and I'd barely heard the name. *What was it? Zayman? No, Zaydin. But it was a Ha'tezan name, so they would spell it with an X, not a Z. Xa'din. King Xa'din of Ha'tezan.*

Without taking the time to look at the King, I hurried forward and bowed. "Your Majesty. Thank you for the opportunity to assist you with your discovery." I remained bent over, waiting for him to tell me to rise.

He took his damn time about it.

Finally, the King said, "Rise, Lord Thas, and be welcome in my kingdom. We are pleased to have you with us."

I pasted on my court smile as I straightened, but the expression froze on my face.

Sweet Ensarena. How do I breathe? I need air. What do I do? Right, inhale, you idiot!

After seeing the King's dragon form, I had expected him to be striking. But I hadn't been prepared for this sucker punch of a sight. Unlike most Zaruian warriors, whose bodies bulged with muscles, King Xa'din possessed a sleek physique, with long, lean limbs. Not that he was lacking in muscles. His body displayed many hard curves, but without the bulk I was

used to. This gave an impression of grace that contradicted the brutality of his surroundings and softened his angular features.

He wore his midnight hair short, as if he couldn't be bothered with the maintenance of longer locks, and the shadow of stubble peppered his chin in that same careless manner. A dark tan, at least three shades deeper than mine, brightened the color of his right eye so that the pale green appeared to glow, while his left eye became one with the shadows on his face, the brown of its iris so dark, it was nearly black. The contrast of those mismatched eyes was so startling that it felt physical, as if someone had slapped me with his attractiveness. I nearly dropped back to my knees.

The startling eyes twitched. "Lord Thas?"

I cleared my throat. "Yes, Your Majesty?"

"It's your turn in the conversation."

"Oh! My apologies. I was waiting for your instruction."

"Instruction?"

"Yes, on my work. I'm at your disposal, Your Majesty." Yes, it was a poor cover for my foolish gawking, and I had no idea what he'd said to me while I was drooling over him, but I was committed.

King Xa'din sprawled back on his stone throne, one boot propped on a dragon skull, and smirked as if he knew I was floundering. "It's a little late in the day to put you to work,

Lord Thas. I thought perhaps I'd give you the night to settle in."

"Thank you, Your Majesty, but I would like to at least look over the initial findings, if I may?"

He lifted his thick, dark brows. "Eager. Very well, I can appreciate that." He abruptly stood up and dashed down the dais steps.

And then he was right in front of me, and I faced the royal pectorals, displayed by the deep V of his sleeveless wrap tunic. The man had a good foot on me in height, which he must not have realized until he stood before me. He took a step back and met my stare. I couldn't decide which eye to focus on—jade or jet. I kept looking back and forth between them. Dark, pale, dark, pale.

Oh, damn, they're both beautiful. Hadn't I just sworn off warriors? But he isn't just a warrior, he's also a king, and his body is nothing like Prince Racmar's. Not too big and not too small. Just perfect. And with that height, he would curl around me in bed and—

"Are you all right, Lord Thas?" the King interrupted my silent worship.

Right on cue, my stomach growled.

King Xa'din burst into laughter and softer chuckles flitted about the room.

I slapped a hand over my belly. "I'm so sorry, Your Majesty. I fell asleep on the journey here and didn't partake in

the meal Sir Nyl had so thoughtfully packed for me.”

“Then maybe I should feed you while I show you what my scholars have found.” He looked me up and down. “And find you something more suitable to wear.”

I glanced down at the sweat stains on my tunic and my mortification went up several notches.

“Thank you, Your Majesty. I’m afraid my Zaruian clothes are not up to the challenge of your kingdom’s humidity.”

King Xa’din chuckled low, almost wickedly, definitely sensually. “Then I must divest you of them at once. Come with me, Philosopher.”

With that, the Dragon King strode out of his throne room, leaving me to gape after him as my brain swooned under all the innuendos. Then Sir Nyl slapped my arm, waking me and setting me in motion. Still a little numb from shock, I went running after the King.

Chapter Six

“Bring a meal for the Philosopher,” the Dragon King said to a passing human servant. “We’ll be in the library.”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” the man said and hurried off.

As I said, the King had a good foot on me and it all seemed to be in his legs because his casual stride forced me to double my steps. And I am not a short man. I finally made it to his side, panting in my layers of sweat-dampened clothing, and swung a glance his way.

Great Goddess, he was even more brutally handsome up close.

A muscle ticked in the King’s jaw.

Oh, fuck, I’m staring! I tore my gaze away and set it determinedly forward.

King Xa’din didn’t speak for the rest of the walk to the library, but I thought nothing of it. As far as I knew, he wasn’t a talker, or maybe my obvious admiration had made him uncomfortable. I could have misinterpreted his words as innuendos when he meant nothing of the sort. It would be just like me to misread a man. He was probably straight and didn’t know how to handle a drooling gay man.

Great, I’d just made a fool of myself in front of another Dragon royal.

Then the King led me into a three-story library, and I forgot all about him.

I whisked past King Xa'din, my stare shooting from soaring bookshelves packed with leather-bound volumes to glass cases displaying bits of stone, bone, and primitive weapons. I barely noted the luxurious carpets beneath my feet or the dragon skull that served as a chandelier. The archaeological objects had caught my attention.

From glass cloche to tabletop display case, I went, hunching to inspect each item as I murmured to myself. There were archaic tools, buttons made of gemstones, delicate pieces of jewelry, and chunks of stone with strange carvings. I paused, bent over a glass case, and ran my hand through the air above it, following a line of text on a preserved parchment.

“Can you read it?” King Xa'din's voice made me jump.

When I looked up at him, he had his lips pressed together and eyes narrowed.

“Uh, yes. Would you—”

“Do I scare you, Philosopher?” he asked suddenly.

“Excuse me?” I was so surprised by his question that I forgot to use his title.

“Do my eyes frighten you?” Those strange eyes twitched.

I straightened. “Why would your eyes frighten me?”

“Don’t be coy!” the King snapped, making me flinch again. “I am well aware of my appearance.”

I cocked my head at him. “Are you referring to your uncommon attractiveness?”

“I am referring to—” he started to say, then blinked and processed my words. “You think I’m attractive?”

I couldn’t help it; I burst into laughter.

The Dragon King’s stare narrowed again.

“I’m sorry.” I held up a hand as I continued to laugh. “Are you teasing me?”

“*Teasing* you?”

My amusement vanished, and I just stared at him. *Dear Goddess, did he not know? Or worse, did he think he was ugly? Why?* Finally, I just asked him, “What makes you think you’re unattractive? Is it truly because of your eyes?”

“I do not suffer fools or liars, Philosopher.” He leaned over me and bared his teeth. “I know what I look like. My eyes are a curse, a sign of evil. But I’ve conquered the evil inside me and won this kingdom.”

“Evil?” I whispered.

He grunted.

Then, in a bold voice, I asked, “What in Ensarena’s name are you talking about?”

The King blinked and backed up. “My eyes. They are two different colors.”

“Yes, I know what you’re *referring* to,” I snapped. “But what are you *talking about*? What kind of primitive nonsense convinced you that the color of a person’s eyes has anything to do with their character?”

“It is not primitive. It’s a belief handed down from our ancestors.”

“That is, by definition, what primitive is,” I said dryly.

He just stared at me.

“I am a man of science, Your Majesty, and I can tell you that your eyes are the product of a rare gene. The trait is called heterochromia, and it even occurs in animals. It is a miracle of nature, just as your dragon form is. It’s not a curse or in any way evil. People are not born evil; they choose to become so.”

“Heterochromia?” he whispered.

“Your scales, are they a family trait?” I asked eagerly.

“My *scales*?” The King was looking more and more baffled. It was rather adorable.

“Yes, your dragon’s black scales have a fascinating green sheen to them. I noticed that the other Ha’tezan dragons who escorted me here all possessed green scales. Is that a Ha’tezan trait?”

“Uh, yes, most of our dragons are green. I am one of the few with an alternate color and the only black dragon in the kingdom. It was ... I’ve been told it was yet more proof of the, uh—”

“Curse?” I lifted my brows. “You do know that there are many black dragons on Serai? It’s a common color.”

“There are? It is?”

“Yes. What is uncommon is that iridescent green sheen to your scales. I’ve never seen the like. It must be a mutation of the green dragon gene.”

“A mutation?” The Dragon King scowled.

“Mutations can sometimes be a good thing. In your case, it’s a splendid thing. You are rare and beautiful, Your Majesty.”

“Beautiful?” he scoffed. “*You* are beautiful. I am a monster.”

“A monster?” I gaped at him. “You are the most handsome man I have ever seen in my entire life. And although I’m barely past my first century, I have traveled extensively and met many people, a few of them royals. None compare to you.”

“Now you are teasing me,” he said softly. Not gently, more in the way a cat makes little sounds before it pounces on prey.

“No, I’m not.”

“You stared at me when we first met, so shocked by my appearance that you didn’t hear what I said to you. You couldn’t speak.”

“Yes, because you’re so fucking gorgeous that I forgot words existed!” I shouted in frustration. “Your eyes are stunning. The green one so bright and pale that it glows against your skin, and the brown eye so dark that it’s nearly black.”

He blinked.

“You have the chest of a marble statue, a jawline that could inspire sonnets, and an ass that nearly made me weep for mercy. I literally lost my breath when I first saw you. I couldn’t remember how to fucking breathe! That’s how handsome you are.”

His lips twitched. “You have a very nice ass too, Lord Thas.”

Blood suffused my cheeks as my brain caught up to my mouth. “Oh, fuck,” I muttered. “Can we just forget that I said all that?”

“No, I will never forget all that.” He grinned and prowled closer. “And I was just as fascinated by you when I

saw you in the carriage earlier.”

“You were?” I squeaked and backed up, my bravado banished by his searing stare.

The Dragon King nodded, his grin turning wicked. “That beautiful face.” He stepped closer. “Those soft lips.” His stare went to my mouth.

All right, so he wasn’t a poet, but he got his point across. And his point was aimed directly at me. I backed up until my heel hit the base of a display case. Breath catching and heart racing, I licked my lips.

A low growl was his response, and the sound set my whole body to trembling ... in a really good way.

“I, um ...” I held up a hand.

Xa’din kept coming until he pressed against my hand, then angled himself so that my palm slid into the V of his tunic and touched his bare chest. I think I whimpered, then quickly drew my hand away.

He breathed in deeply and sighed. “You smell delicious.”

Of course, I said something stupid, “I’m sweaty from this wet heat.”

The King grinned. “I like you sweaty.”

“Holy shit,” I whispered. “I think it’s just gotten warmer. Do you mind if I take off my coat?”

He didn’t answer, just watched avidly as I shrugged out of my jacket. But then his nostrils widened on an inhale, and he made a low, growling sound. I shivered, and I wasn’t sure if it was from the air hitting my damp skin or from his growl.

“You’re certain that I don’t scare you?”

“Well, maybe a little, but only in a good way.”

He chuckled, and it was low in his throat, the kind of sound a man makes when he’s confident that he has you. Or will have you soon. “Let me feel your heartbeat.” His hand slid around my waist and down to grab my ass.

“That is not where my heart is.”

The King laughed boisterously this time. “I’m trying to kiss you and you make me laugh? I don’t think anyone has done that before.”

“Oh? What do people normally do when you try to kiss them?” I asked breathlessly.

“Cringe and endure it.”

My grin fell. “Are you fucking serious?”

He stepped back.

“Oh, no, you don’t!” I grabbed his neck and hauled his mouth down to mine.

I couldn’t believe my boldness, but I also couldn’t let this chance pass me by. He’d been about to kiss me, he’d flat-out said it, and then I’d gone and ruined it. Well, I wouldn’t make that mistake again.

The King groaned as I slipped my tongue through the seam of his firm lips and touched just the tip to his, luring him out. Into me. That invitation was all he needed. His tongue speared into my mouth and lashed against mine. Taking. Claiming. Arousing me to heights I’d never been before with one damn kiss! My knees actually buckled. I had to grab his shoulders to keep myself standing. But I didn’t need to concern myself with that; the King’s hands went to my ass and lifted me off my feet, hauling me up his hard body.

Every solid plane and ridge of him pressed into me, including a very thick piece of flesh bulging between his thighs. He started kneading my bottom and, with my legs dangling in the air, there was nothing else for me to do but wrap them around his waist. The King made a pleased sound and settled me more firmly against him, pressing our erections together. Then he jerked back and stared at me.

“What is it?” I whispered, lips swollen and aching for more.

“You’re hard. You really do want me.”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake,” I muttered. “Enough of that already. I’m obviously attracted to you, you big, beautiful, ridiculous man.”

Xa'din's lips twitched. "Ridiculous?"

"Yes, you are being ridiculous." I ground my cock against his. "Now, bring those sexy lips back here."

If I'd been watching this scene, my behavior would have horrified me, but at that moment, I felt beautiful and powerful. Especially when Xa'din grinned and returned to kissing me.

Then a voice interrupted us, "Your Majesty? Where would you like the—oh! Uh, I'll just set it here."

The King and I broke our kiss to see a servant hurrying away, a tray of steaming food abandoned on a heavy wooden table near the door.

I giggled.

The King grimaced at me.

My stomach rumbled.

King Xa'din burst into laughter again and set me on my feet. "You certainly don't fear me," he said in a tone tinted with wonder. "Go on, eat something before you waste away."

I licked my lips and stared at his mouth. Then my belly rumbled again. "Oh, damn it all!" I hurried to the tray as the Dragon King continued to laugh.

Chapter Seven

King Xa'din sat beside me as I ate. Or rather, sprawled in the chair next to mine. His relaxed position appeared false to me. Tension radiated from him. It was in the curl of his fingers, the angle of his head, and the way he stared at me, watching every move I made. He was a snake, coiled to strike.

“Would you like some of this?” I waved at the plate. “It’s delicious.”

“I’m sure it is.” Xa'din’s gaze went to my lips. “But no. I’ll wait for more succulent fare.”

I flushed, and he laughed to see it.

“I’ve created a monster.” I shook my head.

He went still. “A monster?”

“Oh, cut it out. You know what I meant. You’re all full of yourself now.”

“I have always been a confident man.”

I stared at him. After hearing all of that curse nonsense, I was skeptical about that, but I wouldn’t call him out on it. Instead, I said, “Well, you are the King.” Then I remembered his throne. “May I ask what’s with the skulls?”

“The skulls?” He lifted his stare from my lips to my eyes.

“Around your throne.”

“Oh. Those are the men I challenged to become King.”

I dropped my fork. “What?”

“Didn’t your king fight for his throne?”

“Yes, but we’re a more ...” I started to say civilized but quickly amended it to, “modern kingdom. Our crown tourneys are not to the death.”

“What?” He scowled as if that were blasphemy.

“Other kingdoms hold death tourneys, so I’m not surprised that yours does, just that you would display the skulls of your opponents in such a ...”

“Yes?” The King cocked his head at me. “Such a what?”

“I’m sorry, but it seems barbaric to me. To flaunt their deaths like that.”

“It’s meant to honor them. They died so that I may rule.”

“You honor them by propping a boot on their skulls?”

His eyes widened.

“Forgive me. I shouldn’t have said that.”

“No, it’s fine. And yes, I honor them but also show my dominance.”

“Why are they in dragon form?”

“That is how we fought.”

“You fight your crown tourneys in dragon form?”

“Yes. Aren’t they all?”

“No, every other kingdom—as far as I know—holds tournaments that are fought in our principal forms.”

“But our beasts are more powerful, and only the most powerful should rule.”

“Interesting.” I started eating again.

“Interesting, he says.” The King chuckled. “You are so unlike any man I’ve met.”

“You have philosophers here, don’t you?”

“We have scholars, wise men and women, but they aren’t like you.”

“Do they search for the truth?”

He made a dramatically severe expression. “When I tell them to.”

I laughed brightly.

Xa’din cocked his head and stared at me strangely.

“What is it now?” I asked.

“I’m trying to remember the last time I made someone laugh.”

“Oh, well, how could you when you stare at them with your *evil* eyes?” I wagged my fingers at his face.

He straightened. “Do not make light of that. You may not believe it, but my people do. They believe it very strongly.”

“I’m sorry.” I set my fork down. “I was trying to tease you, and I ... well, I just can’t understand that kind of thinking. It’s hard for me to not make light of it.”

“Because it’s ridiculous?” He lifted his brows.

“Yes. To me it is. The very thing about you that should be celebrated causes your people to fear you. I find it ridiculous, but it’s also horrible, and I’m so sorry.”

“Do not pity me either, Philosopher,” the King said in a deadly tone.

“I would never pity a man who props his foot on the skulls of his dead rivals.”

Xa'din's lips twitched.

“Come on, give me a little smile,” I urged. “That was funny.”

He laughed and shook his head. “How do you do that?”

“Do what?”

“Take me from furious to amused with a few words.”

“That's what words are for.” I shrugged. Then I remembered the scroll. “Speaking of which, do you want to know what that parchment says?”

The King's face went blank, then amazed. “Great fuck, you made me forget all about that. Yes, I want to know. That writing has baffled my scholars ever since it was found.”

“Was it found at the site where you unearthed the doors?”

“Yes. It was the first discovery. A heavy rain caused a landslide that unearthed it. An oiled leather case preserved the scroll, but it was still a miracle that nothing crushed it. One of my scholars brought it to me and requested permission to excavate the area. I approved a square half-mile dig site, and they found the top of the doors. We didn't know what they

were until the excavation was complete. They had to take down a good portion of the mountainside.”

“Doors within a mountain. Interesting.” I considered that for a moment, then got back to the scroll, “Well, the scroll is written in Ancient Draconian and appears to be a religious text.”

“About Ensarena?”

“That’s the really interesting bit. It does mention a goddess but most of what I read was about a god. I have to assume it’s another religion entirely.”

“A god?” the King whispered.

“What is it?”

“I’ve always thought it strange that we have a goddess, but no god.”

“Why? It’s not as if she gave birth to us. Ensarena created the Dragon Race with magic.”

“Yes, but still. What if there were a god?”

“Then where is he? Ensarena accepts our offerings every year when we perform her rite. We have proof that she exists.”

“When we perform her rite,” he repeated meaningfully. “What if there is a god, but we forgot about him? What if there

is a rite to honor him but it has gone unperformed for so long that he has turned his back on us?”

I went still. “That would be terrible. But wouldn’t Ensarena remind us? Wouldn’t he show his displeasure?”

“Perhaps.” The King shrugged. “I’m just casting questions from my mind.”

“Theories. We philosophers call that creating theories, and it’s not a bad one. Especially for your first attempt.” I winked at him.

“Enough with theories. Finish your meal, Philosopher.” His striking gaze shifted down my body. “The sooner you do, the sooner I can get back to devouring you.”

Chapter Eight

“As if I could eat with you leering at me.” I pushed my plate away and stood up.

The King sprawled back in his chair. “I don’t leer.”

“Yes, you do.” I straddled his lap and sat down.

His brows lifted, but his hands went to my waist. “I could close my eyes.”

“Don’t you dare,” I whispered as I lowered my lips to his.

He didn’t. The Dragon King stared at me even as I kissed him. Depending on which eye I cracked open, I saw a different face. Five seconds into the kiss, I started smiling, then I pulled back.

“I didn’t mean for you to keep them open while we kissed.”

Xa’din made a rumbling sound, his gaze on my mouth. “Come back here.”

Looking at him, I suddenly remembered what my mother had said about finding someone better than Racmar. Sweet Goddess, not even a day had passed and her words had become prophecy. But then again, I hardly knew this man. I shouldn’t assume he was wonderful after some conversation and a few kisses. He could turn out to be the monster he claimed to be.

“Are you deliberately provoking me?” the King asked.

“What do you mean?”

“I told you to kiss me again and instead you stare at me.”

“Oh.” I smiled softly. “I was just thinking of something my mother said.”

His eyes went wide. “You’re thinking about your mother? *Now?*”

I laughed brightly. “About something she said concerning ... you know what? Never mind that.” I leaned forward.

Xa’din grabbed my jaw and held me away from his lips. “No, I want to hear what your mother said that was so important you remembered it amid our intimacy.”

I took his hand from my jaw. “It’s too personal for me to share right now.”

He looked pointedly down at the way our erections pressed together.

I sighed and sat back. “This is about me and another man. Are you sure you want to hear it?”

His grip on my hip tightened. “Your lover?”

“No. I was interested in him, but he mated a Raltven necromancer.”

“A necromancer? A man who brings the dead back to life?”

“Not entirely back to life, but yes.”

“Who was the man you pursued?”

“My prince.”

“You have a prince? How?”

I slumped with another sigh. I was ruining things again. It made me wonder if, given a chance, I would have messed things up with Racmar too.

“Tell me,” Xa’din insisted.

“Yes, we have a prince. His brother won the Crown Tourney, and Racmar wanted to join him in Erimbar but not without status. So he fought the same men our king did just so he could gain the title of Prince. Only if King Saric dies will he rule.”

Xa’din grunted. “The same men.”

“Yes, I told you that our tourneys are not to the death.”

“So, this man you loved is a warrior?”

“I don’t know if I loved him or was just infatuated.” I ran my hands through my hair with a sound of exasperation. “I wish we had never begun this conversation.”

“You were the one who thought of your mother while we were kissing.”

“Not while. After.” I chuckled and slid off his lap. “I’m sorry, Your Majesty. I think I’m just too weary to do this properly. Can we postpone?”

“Postpone?” Xa’din surged to his feet, then lifted me off mine, his mouth finding mine seconds later.

With a groan, I wrapped my arms around his shoulders and gripped the muscles of his back. They flexed under my fingers, bulging as he laid me on the table. Following me down, keeping our tongues busy, the King fumbled with the layers of my clothes. I shoved his hands away and pulled up the hem of my tunic myself, then arched my back to remove it. As I did that, he undid my pants and yanked them down with my underwear. Thwarted by my boots, the King pulled one of them off and removed one leg of clothing, leaving the other side to hang from my remaining boot.

I flinched, shocked to be suddenly naked. I mean, yes, I knew we’d be undressing, but I thought it would take a little more time than that. And there he was, still fully clothed.

And staring at me as if he’d never seen a naked man before.

I limply cast my tunic away as I watched him take in my nudity. Suddenly, I wasn't so confident. But then one of his broad palms coasted over my chest, pausing to twirl a finger over my right nipple before dipping into my belly button. My cock stood at attention just below his hand, emerging from crimson curls. The royal hand delved into those curls first, playing with them as if fascinated, twirling them around his finger. Then he grabbed my shaft.

“Sweet Goddess!” I cried, my whole body jerking with the jolt of pleasure that shot through me.

Xa'din made a happy sound and started to pump me with his warm fist, collecting the bead of desire from my tip and rubbing it down my dick with his thumb. I latched onto his forearms as I writhed on the table, my hair sticking to my slick skin.

“You are exquisite,” the King murmured.

“Thank you.” I opened my eyes to find his stare waiting to lock onto mine.

The Dragon King grinned, but it was more a baring of teeth, then he let go of me. I gasped, a little let down, but then I saw the reason he had let go. The King undid the tie at his side and opened his wrap tunic, revealing the sleek chiseled chest beneath. A sprinkling of dark hair adorned the upper curves of his pecs, trailing down between them. Just enough to grip and pull him down to me. But before I could do that, he dropped his pants.

“Holy fuck,” I whispered. “I think I've just discovered why you think you're a monster.”

Xa'din chuckled wickedly and gripped his enormous cock by its base. Stepping forward, he shoved my legs apart with his free hand, then grabbed my hip to pull me closer. As he did, he angled his cock to stroke me—first, my sacs and then he ran his tip up the base of my shaft. I pulled up my legs and set my feet on the rim of the table, angling my body for him.

The sound that came from the Dragon King was sheer, masculine delight. He let go of himself to stroke my legs, moving down from my knees to my inner thighs, and then he trailed his fingertips between my nether cheeks. A thick finger pressed against my opening.

His Majesty bent over.

“No!” I held out a hand to stop him.

Xa'din lifted his head and a brow.

“I'm not clean enough for that. I've been traveling and
—”

Xa'din cut me off with a chuckle. “All right, but I must use something to ease my passage, or I will hurt you.”

I glanced at the nearby dinner tray. A dish of olive oil had accompanied the hot bread. Stretching out a hand, I dipped my fingers into the oil and then reached for the King. He grinned and thrust himself into my oily hand. We both sighed as I worked the oil over his shaft, slicking that thick length. Just touching it was a mind-blowing experience. I took my time learning the feel of him—the ridge of his tip, its angle, and the exact girth of his cock. He was right; we needed the oil.

“Enough.” The King took my hand and put it between my legs. Holding my gaze, he moved my hand over my opening. “Slide your finger in. Prepare yourself for me.”

I shivered at his words, my lips parting with a gasp, and did as he said. Xa’din’s stare went there, and his chest rose with his heavy breaths as he watched me penetrate myself. Then his gaze wandered up to my cock and the tip of his pink tongue flicked over his lips. He bent over again, his hands pressing my thighs back.

“No,” I whispered. “I told you; I’m dirty.”

“I don’t fucking care,” he growled.

I moved my hand out of the way seconds before his lips brushed up my shaft. Reaching the top, the King opened his mouth and consumed my cock. He took it all in one gulp, angling over it and coming down to press his face into my belly. Without conscious thought, my hands went to the back of his head, fingers weaving through his thick hair, and my legs fell further outward in bliss. The voracious sounds of his feasting echoed in my ears, adding to the eroticism and making my sacs clench. The feel of his wet, hot mouth and those firm lips tightening around me was magical. Pleasure spiraled up my spine, but I wanted more.

“I need you inside me,” I panted.

With a primal growl, the King sucked his way off my cock, lurched up, and met my stare. His eyes were wild, one practically on fire and the other drawing me into its shadowy depths. One strong hand grabbed my hip and the other, his

cock. Slowly, he pressed forward, his oiled tip popping through my slick ring.

“Oh, fuck,” the King whispered. “You’re sucking me in, clenching around me already. I don’t know if I can be gentle.”

“Don’t!” I cried and set my feet on his glorious chest. “Fuck me hard!”

King Xa’din’s face shifted into something bestial as he roared and thrust forward. The sound had the tone of a battle cry and was loud enough to cover my delighted shriek as the monster between his legs split me in two. It felt as if he became a permanent part of me, as if that rod would connect us forever. But then he began to move.

Unlike every other lover I’d had, the Dragon King didn’t work up to a fast tempo; he started with it. Deep, guttural grunts passed his clenched teeth with every slam of his hips. This wasn’t fucking, it was rutting. A mindless, desperate, savage search for release. The cords in his neck stood out and a bead of sweat ran down his belly. Even the way his hands clutched my waist felt wild. My cock flopped on my belly, every smack sending zings to tickle down to meet the explosion of ecstasy Xa’din built below. Smack, smack, smack. Zing, zing, zing. My whole body was on the verge of going into spasm.

“Look at me!” the Dragon King demanded, his voice something you might hear in a midnight jungle, right before you became prey.

I met his stare. Something shivered through him; I watched his muscles twitch and felt his hands clench. The ferocity inside those mismatched eyes softened and his hips

slowed. But I didn't want tenderness. Not yet. Mindless rutting was just what I needed to get over Racmar. So I grabbed the back of my thighs and pulled my legs up and out, opening myself more to Xa'din. That savage look returned instantly, and his stare lowered.

“Your hole is so pink,” he growled as he pumped into it. “So pretty. Stretched tight around my cock. I want to see it covered in my cum.”

That did it for me. I screamed my release and came all over my belly.

Seeing my climax sent Xa'din back into a frenzy. His thrusts sped up until he was bucking against me, and he took hold of my legs, hugging my thighs to his chest for leverage. Teeth bared, he claimed me as no other man had—with brutal passion and desperate need. I just stared at him in wonder as my body twitched through the little zings of pleasure that followed a phenomenal orgasm.

At last, just when I thought he'd fuck me forever, the Dragon King pulled out and shoved my legs open. Stare locked on my asshole, he came, painting it with his pleasure as promised. Then he stood there, panting, and admired his work.

A small part of me was disappointed that his frenzy hadn't been that of a mating Dragon. If it had, he would have covered more than my opening with cum. For that matter, I would have done the same to him.

But this was just our first time. Sometimes it can take longer, even months, before a Dragon bonds with his mate. And I shouldn't have been thinking about mating him so soon anyway. As I said, we barely knew each other. I should have been relieved that he hadn't claimed me immediately. I should

have been thankful that we'd have time to get to know each other before we were bound in an unbreakable way.

I should have been, but I wasn't.

Chapter Nine

The Dragon King took a napkin from the dinner tray and cleaned me off. I watched him, amazed at the tender motions of his hands after such a wild bout of sex. With a casual movement, as if he cleaned off his lovers with dinner napkins all the time, he tossed the cloth aside, then helped me sit up. Cupping my face, he kissed me. Again, it was tender, almost reverent, his lips brushing over mine in between gentle nudges of his tongue.

At last, he pulled back to say, “I may have to keep you a while, Philosopher.”

I stared up at him. *A while. How long was that? Either way, it implies an ending. Which means he’s already thinking about the end. Or maybe I’m overthinking. As usual. I need to take a deep breath and enjoy this. I can’t get obsessive just because he’s astonishingly handsome and incredible at sex. I had to—*

“Nothing to say to that?” Xa’din lifted a brow.

All right, play it smooth. Just be casual, Thas. “May I call you Zay?”

He laughed boisterously, then said, “Yes, you may. In private.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty.”

“You’re welcome.” He bent to pull up my pants and underwear, helping me get my leg back in them. He even got my boot back on and helped me off the table, all before he got

dressed. “I don’t want you clothed, but it would probably shock my court if you walked naked through the hallways.”

I bit my lower lip, trying to keep my heart from leaping into his hands. “I could tell them my clothes are unbearably hot in this weather.”

“Yes, but then I’d have to share your beautiful body with them.” He tapped my chin. “And I don’t think I’d like that.”

“Very well.” I sighed dramatically and pulled on my tunic. “But I’m not putting my jacket back on. It’s too damn humid here. Layers do *not* work in humidity.” I jumped off the table.

“I’ll have some new clothes delivered to you tomorrow.” He bent to nip at my lower lip, then took my hand. “Come, Philosopher. I’d best see you to bed. You’ve had a long day.”

“I have.” I stared at him while we walked, trusting him to lead me. “But I wouldn’t mind if you wanted to make it longer.”

The King stopped suddenly and pulled me into another kiss. A steamy kiss full of promise. When he eased back, his expression was one of amazement. “I want to bring you to my bed and make love to you all night, but I’m having the strangest dilemma.”

“What’s that?”

“My desire is warring with what I know will be best for you. You’ll be going to see the dig tomorrow, and if I keep you up all night, you’ll be exhausted and won’t enjoy yourself as you should. Oddly enough, I care about that.”

“Caring about a lover is odd for you?”

“Yes,” he said frankly. “They don’t care about me, so why should I care about them?”

“Wow,” I said. “Well, *I* care, and it sounds as if you do as well. I’m glad we got that settled.”

The Dragon King grinned at me and suddenly looked several years younger. “Then, I will do what I know is best for you, and wait until tomorrow to take you again.” He cupped my face and brushed his thumb over my cheek and swollen lips. “I’ve abraded your skin with my stubble. I’ll remember to shave tomorrow.”

“That’s very gracious of you, Your Majesty,” I teased. “Both the postponement of your needs and the shaving. Although, I like the stubble.” I ran a hand over his rough chin. “And I’ll heal in a few minutes.”

“I can be generous,” he said loftily, then quickly shifted his head to nip at my finger. “Remember my generosity tomorrow night when I send for you.”

“This sounds more like a bribe than a gift.” I lifted a brow at him, but couldn’t hold the stern look. “And bribery works with me every time.”

“Then I will be *very* generous, and you will be very grateful. I’m glad we got that settled.”

Then the Dragon King escorted me to a guest room and graciously allowed me to get some sleep. Or attempt to. Even after a cold shower, it was difficult to relax enough to fall asleep. And when I did, a pair of mismatched eyes haunted my dreams.

Chapter Ten

I woke up and, for a few seconds, wondered if I had dreamt it all. I couldn't have traveled to an exotic island inside a box and met a cursed king who made love like a wild animal and then kissed me tenderly afterward. But the silk bedding against my skin was an unusual sensation, as was the heavy moisture in the air. With only the former covering me, the latter was actually pleasant, hydrating my skin as only creams could do in my homeland.

I opened my eyes with a sigh and there I was—in a magnificent bedroom, done in shades of lavender and gold. I lay there and stared up at the masterpiece of a ceiling, memorizing the architecture of another culture. It rose a good hundred feet at the center, so I suppose you could call it a dome, but it wasn't rounded. Instead, the stone formed long, triangular panels that swept up to a point and then swooped down like a stalactite. Honestly, it felt a bit dangerous, hanging over the bed like that. Beautiful and deadly, just like the king who ruled there.

I cast off the thin silk sheet and sat up, only to close my eyes and enjoy the breeze that swept in through the open balcony doors. After pulling on the shorts that I'd discarded beside the bed the night before, I wandered out to the balcony. The palace rose around me, its towers tipped by sharp points like my ceiling, and beyond its gates, the city spread like a crowd of worshipers kneeling to its majesty. Past the city and its guardian ravine, a jungle clung to rolling hills, its verdancy veiled in morning mist. Vibrantly colored birds flew through the mist, crying out to their mates, and they weren't the only colorful creatures in the sky. Litotos flew through the morning mist as well, just a few of them, but it was enough to make the scene even more magical.

“Magnificent,” I whispered. “Utterly magnificent.”

“We think so.”

I jumped and spun around to find a man standing just beyond the balcony doors, hidden partially by the billowing, sheer curtains. He was human, wiry in build, and dark-skinned. As dark as the Wy’Var of Zaru but with a richer undertone, more umber than amber. His eyes, even darker than his skin, crinkled as he grinned.

“Forgive me, my lord. I didn’t mean to startle you. I am Cual, your attendant. I’ve come to help you dress and then take you to breakfast.”

“Oh. Thank you, Cual. I’m Thas. Could you fetch me some breakfast? I’d rather not waste time dining with the court. I know how tedious those things can become, and I’d like to get to the dig site as soon as possible.”

Cual’s eyes widened. “Uh ... yes, of course, my lord. His Majesty has sent me with some clothing for you. Would you like me to help you dress before I fetch your food?”

“I think I can manage to dress myself.” I winked at him. “Just get the food, please. Something simple. Portable, if possible.”

“Portable, my lord?”

“Something I can take with me. You know—walk and eat?”

“Oh.” Cual’s face went through some interesting expressions before he settled on polite blankness. “Yes, my

lord. Walk and eat. I've put the clothes in your dressing room." He waved toward a doorway. "I'll be back soon with your meal."

"Thank you." I hurried to the dressing room, eager to start my day, but then my bladder reminded me that I needed to do something else first.

I veered into the bathroom and hurried through my morning routine, barely sparing time to admire the grandeur of the room since I'd seen it all the night before. Relieved and refreshed, I went to the dressing room.

The long, rectangular space was mostly empty, of course. I hadn't bothered to unpack and even if I had; I didn't bring enough clothing to fill even a fifth of the space. But several of the wrap tunics favored by the men of Ha'tezan hung from one of the golden rods that traversed the length of the room and, on a rack below them, were many pairs of pants. Across the way, set on a shelf, was a selection of sandals and boots. My trunk sat on the floor beneath the shoes.

I went to the trunk and fished out the satchel with my excavation kit in it—dig tools, magnifying glass, and notebook. Only then did I select some clothing, starting with a pair of loose cotton pants. Knowing it was bound to get dirty, I tried to find the simplest tunic, but that proved difficult—most of them were adorned with gold embroidery and jewels. I chose the one with the least amount of decoration, frowning at it as I fastened the waist ties. I just knew it would be ruined by the end of the day. Last, I selected a pair of boots instead of sandals since I didn't know what kind of terrain I'd be facing. Fully clothed, with my satchel slung over my shoulder, I returned to the bedroom to find that Cual was back with breakfast.

“I’m sorry, my lord, but the chef didn’t understand your request,” Cual said. “His idea of portable was to place everything in jars that you could take with you. I didn’t think that was what you meant, so I just brought you a breakfast tray.”

“It’s fine, Cual. Thank you.” I went to sit at the little dining table, set off to the side of the balcony. There was an assortment of breakfast items, none of which I recognized and all of which smelled amazing. “Is this coffee?” I reached for a delicate teacup that he had filled with steaming brown liquid.

“Yes, my lord. And there is cream and sugar if you wish. I’m sorry; I forgot to ask how you liked it.”

“That’s all right. I like a little of both.” I grinned at him as I fixed my coffee. “Have you been to the archaeological site?”

“Archae ... ?”

“The place where they found the ancient doors.”

“Ah, yes. I know where it is, but no, I haven’t been there yet.”

“Do we need to take a carriage?”

“Horses, my lord. It’s within Axunktli and the path to it is new, unfit for carriage traffic.”

“Axunktli?” I repeated the word slowly.

“The jungle, my lord.”

“Ah, I see.” I started to eat. “Oh, this is good. What—”

A booming knock interrupted me.

Cual rushed to the door and opened it. I laid my fork down as I watched his eyes go round, then his body bend in two with a low bow. He sputtered something, but before he could get the words out, King Xa’din brushed past him and strode into the room. Two Dragon knights with swords strapped to their waists followed him in.

“Your Majesty!” I surged to my feet.

“What are you doing here, Philosopher?” The King demanded as he came to a stop before me. A muscle twitched in his cheek.

“Uh, eating breakfast?” I waved at the food and frowned in bafflement. “Would you care to join me?”

The Dragon King grimaced at me, then at the food. “You.” He pointed at Cual. “Bring another tray for me.”

“Yes, Your Majesty!” Cual ran away.

The King waved at the two guards who had accompanied him. “Get out.”

The men bowed, then left the room, closing the door behind them. As they did, Xa’din sat down, taking the seat beside mine instead of the one across the table. He looked over

the selection of food, hooked a finger over the lip of a bowl of sliced fruit, and pulled it closer to him.

“Good morning to you too,” I said as I sat down.

“Hmm?” He looked at me as he popped a piece of fruit into his mouth.

“I said, good morning, Your Majesty.”

Xa'din licked his lips as he stared at me. He was even more handsome in the sunlight, one eye aglow in the golden beams and the other revealing golden striations within its dark depths. Seeing those bits of gold felt like finding buried treasure; I was certain that very few people had the chance to peer into his sunlit eyes and even fewer were brave enough to take that chance.

“Why did you not come to the dining hall for breakfast?” he asked, his tone crisp.

“What?” I was so fascinated by his face that I didn't understand the question.

“I was expecting you to join me for the first meal. I had them lay out a place for you beside me at the King's table ... which is a great honor. And then they notified me that you were dining in your room.”

“Oh,” I whispered. *Shit, had I just embarrassed him? In front of his entire court?* “I'm so sorry. I didn't know you were expecting me. I just wanted to get to the site as soon as possible. I tried to get them to give me something I could take with me, but your chef didn't understand the request.”

He grunted.

“Zay, I wasn’t trying to avoid you, if that’s what you thought.” I laid a hand over his. “If I had known that you wanted me to eat breakfast with you, I would have chosen the finest clothes to wear and gone without delay.”

The King looked up sharply, his stare searching mine. Then, suddenly, he grabbed my wrist and yanked me out of my seat. Momentum sent me stumbling forward to land in his lap. As I fumbled to right myself, his hand went to my chin, taking it roughly, and his lips covered mine.

The kiss was hard, a bit punishing, but I wrapped my arms around his shoulders and welcomed it. The King grunted and softened a bit, his hand wandering down my throat to my chest. Deftly, he slid it inside my tunic and started playing with my nipple.

Panting, I broke away from the kiss and stood up, but only to reposition myself astride his lap. The Dragon King watched me like prey, lips wet and slightly parted, eyes narrowed. When I settled over him again, he grabbed my ass and pulled me firmly forward, pressing the bulges in our pants together. My cock twitched to feel how hard his was, and I instinctively undulated against him.

“Your Majesty, I ... uh, have your food,” Cual stammered.

I started to get up, but Zay held me fast, his fingers digging into my ass.

“Set it down and leave,” the King said without looking away from me.

“Yes, Your Majesty.” Cual didn’t bother to set out the dishes, just put the tray on the table and fled.

With the click of the door, I started to laugh.

Xa’din glowered at me.

I laughed harder.

His lips twitched.

“Come on, that was funny. You terrified poor Cual.” I bent to nip at his lower lip. “Give me a smile. I love your smiles.”

He grinned with a snorted laugh. “You are ruining my mood, Thas.”

Oh, Goddess, the sound of my name on his lips was like the most beautiful music I’d ever heard. He didn’t have to recite poetry to seduce me, all he had to do was say my name.

“Ruining?” I lifted a skeptical brow. “You’re smiling. I’d say that’s an improvement.”

“Not to what I wanted to be doing.”

“Oh?” I reached between us and undid his pants. “What is it you desire, Your Majesty?”

Zay inhaled sharply as his erection sprang free, blushing deep red at the tip. With a wicked grin, I slid down, off his lap and between his legs to kneel before him. I ended up half under the table, which made me feel even more naughty.

“My mood is improving,” the King announced.

I licked my lips as I leaned forward. And then his scent hit me—a mouthwatering spicy musk. Thick and dark. I inhaled deeply and nuzzled my face against him, wanting to roll myself in that smell. A sound of pleasure rolled up Xa’din’s chest as his hand went to my head. Gently, he stroked my hair back, away from my face, and stared down at me as if I were the most beautiful thing he’d ever seen. But then I took him in my mouth, and his fingers clenched.

With the way he smelled, I half expected him to taste of cinnamon. He didn’t. Though that scent enhanced the flavor of clean, male skin. I moaned over the Dragon King’s cock, delighting in that taste but also the way he filled my mouth, stretching my jaw wide. I squeezed my lips around him and sucked him in as far as he could go.

Gasping for air, I pulled up but immediately went down for more. The feel of him against my tongue set my cock to pulsing. Clenching my thighs became necessary to ease the pulsing ache between them as all those wild sensations collided and overcame me, every bob of my head sending a thrill down my spine. I opened my throat, taking him further inside me, threatening to make myself gag, but I didn’t care. I wanted all of him. I wanted him over and over.

“Great fuck!” Xa’din roared, clutched my face tightly between his hands, and erupted in my mouth.

I groaned in bliss as I drank him down, the salty richness waking me as no amount of coffee could. As the King jerked through his release and gripped my face tighter, I sucked every last drop out of him, holding the base of his dick so that he couldn't deny me any of it. After his last shudder, I withdrew slowly, leaving him wet and beautifully spent. Tenderly, I tucked him back into his pants, slid out from beneath the table, and stood up.

The Dragon King panted, sprawled in his chair as if he'd fallen there, and stared at me as if I were some alien creature he'd never seen before. "What in all Serai was that?"

"I believe the colloquial term is, *blow job*," I said as I sat down. I took my napkin, delicately wiped my mouth, then returned to eating, feeling content and very pleased with myself despite my aching erection. In fact, I quite enjoyed denying myself. It made me want him more and look forward to later.

Zay took a moment to catch his breath, then poured himself a cup of coffee. He sipped it as he watched me.

"Aren't you going to eat?" I asked him.

Have I ever felt this smug about giving oral sex? No, I don't think so. Making Xa'din come made me feel like a god.

"I can smell your arousal."

I blinked and looked at him at last. "You thought I'd perform oral sex on you and be sated by it? I was a little too focused on you to touch myself."

“No, I ...” He wiped a hand over his mouth. “I’m still getting accustomed to your desire.”

“My desire for you?”

“Yes.”

I set my fork down again. “I think many people desire you, but they fear you too, and you can’t see past that fear.”

“Why do you think that?”

“Because a person would have to be blind to not find you attractive.” I couldn’t help it. His complete lack of conceit—at least concerning his appearance—made me want to flatter him. No, it was more than a lack of conceit, it was utter delusion. What had been said and done to him to make him this way?

The King straightened. “I’m not sure if you’re teasing me.”

“Is this going to be a thing with us?” I asked in mock irritation.

“A thing?”

“Yes, a constant issue. Are you going to keep making comments about your appearance that I then have to argue with, which you then don’t believe? Because it’s already getting tiresome.”

He snorted a laugh. “I’m tiresome, am I?”

“Look, I understand that it’s hard for you to see yourself as something other than what you’ve believed your entire life. I do understand that, and I can’t imagine how difficult it’s been to overcome the stigma of your eyes. But will you try, *for me*, to let that go when we’re together?”

“Let it go?”

“Yes. Try to understand that for someone who hasn’t been raised to believe this nonsense, you are extraordinarily handsome. If you left this island, you would have men and women panting after you. I swear it. I’m not exaggerating to tease you.”

“I would have them *panting* after me?” He lifted a brow.

“You would be highly sought after,” I amended. “So, for me, having you is, well, I feel very lucky to not have to fight for your attention.”

Emotions flew across the King’s face too quickly for me to label, but he finally settled on a cocky grin. “Everyone feels lucky to be with me, whether they are attracted to me or not. I’m the King.”

“Ugh!” I tossed my arms up. “You’ve gone and ruined it. We were having a sweet moment, really connecting, and then you slid into king mode. Why do I even bother?”

Xa’din chuckled, low and deep. “You are ... I’m glad you’ve come to Ha’tezan, Philosopher.”

My expression and heart softened. “Me too, Your Majesty. You have no idea how glad I am to be here.”

Chapter Eleven

After breakfast, I expected King Xa'din to leave. He didn't. I mean, he did, but he left with me.

"I didn't know you were planning to visit the site with me," I said as we strode down the palace corridors, his knights marching behind us.

"I want to hear your initial thoughts on the discovery immediately," the King said. Then he looked me over. "You're very handsome in those clothes."

I brushed an errant lock of hair behind my ear and tried not to blush. "Thank you, Your Majesty. I'm certainly more comfortable. And thank you for lending them to me."

"They are a gift, Lord Thas."

"Then thank you for the very fine gifts. I will show you my gratitude later." I slid a secret grin toward him.

"Yes, you will," he said with a similar look. Then he nodded toward my satchel. "What do you have in there?"

"Tools, a notebook, and a pencil."

He grunted, his gaze going lower and back to my ass.

My grin turned inward.

I could hardly believe it. A single day had passed and my entire world had changed. I'd gone from heartbroken and humiliated to elated and hopeful. I had to reel in my racing thoughts before they surged into a future I may not have. Better to simply enjoy this while it lasted and not start dreaming about moving to Ha'tezan and mating its king.

I tended to get carried away when it comes to lovers. Racmar was a prime example of that; I had fallen for the Prince before we'd even met, fantasizing about all sorts of futures for us. And in the end, it wasn't meant to be. I had to learn from that and this. Xa'din proved that no matter how wonderful a man is, there is always someone else out there who is just as incredible. If the Dragon King of Ha'tezan wasn't for me either, I would find someone else.

Hopefully.

We stepped out into a courtyard. It was the public courtyard, outside the main doors of the palace, and was much larger than the side courtyard I had arrived in the night before, with room for a training yard to the right and a stable on the left. The King led the way to the stable, his boots hitting the square courtyard stones with confident thuds. Whinnies and the scent of hay hit me before we entered the building. Probably because the entire front of it was open to the elements, protected only by an overhang of the roof.

I glanced up at a patrol of dragons flying over the palace and asked, "Why don't we just fly to the site?"

"There isn't a clearing large enough for us to land in." He looked from me to a human man who was tending the horses. "Saddle four of them."

“Yes, Your Majesty.” The man bowed, then hurried away.

We went back out to the courtyard, and as we waited for our horses to be saddled, I looked around. Just something you do while you wait. Initially, the architecture attracted my attention. I couldn't help it, there was so much history everywhere. But then I noticed how people were looking at the King. Or determinedly *not* looking.

I may have been too hasty to say that these people found King Xa'din attractive. They barely looked at him and when they did, it was quickly, usually a side glance with a bit of a wince. They feared him, no doubt, but they were even more scared of what he represented. Those damn eyes of his. He was right; they believed he was cursed. They probably thought that if they met his stare, they might become cursed too.

And no, I hadn't doubted the King when he'd told me, but I hadn't thought it was as bad as he implied either. I thought it was a silly superstition that some people might believe, but most would scoff at. The way people believed in ghosts and the like. But this was very real for all the citizens of Ha'tezan. They were terrified of Xa'din. Even his guards stood several feet away from us.

I realized then why the King had those skulls arranged around his throne. Why he propped his feet on them. It was to foster this fear. He had accepted his lot and used it to his advantage. If they thought he was evil, they wouldn't mess with him. So he was going to look as evil as possible. I admired that, but it saddened me. And it also suddenly pissed me off. Royally so, you could say.

But what could I do about it? Start yelling that the color of a person's eyes had nothing to do with evil or curses? That in the year 6597 people shouldn't give credence to such nonsense? We were not primitives scratching around in the dirt, making idols out of mud, and warding off illness with charms of chicken feathers. We were an advanced planet of civilized people (mostly) and beyond such foolishness. But they wouldn't listen to me. I had to prove them wrong. *Show* them that their king wasn't cursed. That a man of reason didn't fear such nonsense.

I stepped closer to the Dragon King.

Xa'din lifted a brow at me.

"I'm glad you're joining me today, Your Majesty," I said loud enough to be overheard, but not so loud as to sound dramatic. "I'm not a warrior, nor am I familiar with your jungle."

"Are you nervous, Philosopher?" Xa'din asked in an amused tone.

"I might have been if I'd gone with only an attendant."

"Axunktli contains many dangers, but you will be safe with me."

"I know." I winked at him. "That's what I was trying to say. You make me feel safe. Thank you for coming with me."

Xa'din chuckled and took my hand. "I'm not used to Dragon males who need protection."

My stomach clenched. “Does that ... ?”

“What?”

“Do you find it unappealing that I’m not as ... virile as other men?”

“You are the perfect amount of virile.” He grinned and lifted my hand to kiss it.

I swallowed past the sudden dryness in my throat as I watched him linger over my fingers, his stare locked with mine.

“Your Majesty?” The stableman came out, leading four saddled horses.

Xa’din absently waved at a guard to collect the horses as he continued to stare at me.

“May I kiss you?” I whispered.

His eyes widened. “Here?”

“Would that be too familiar? I don’t want to assume liberties I don’t have.”

“I will allow it. If that is what you wish.” Xa’din’s gaze softened, but he let go of my hand.

I looked down at his hand, hanging loosely at his side, and saw the gesture for what it was. The King wanted there to

be no confusion—not with me, nor anyone watching us. And they *were* watching now; I could see them out of the corner of my eyes. If I kissed Xa'din, it would be willingly, because I desired it, and they'd see that.

I grinned and stepped up to him. “Thank you, Your Majesty.”

I set the palms of my hands on his chest and took my time sliding them up his pecs, over the thin fabric of his tunic to his shoulders. I left one hand there but took the other up the side of his neck, then around back to pull his head down to me.

Tension bloomed between us, and his stare widened like that of a startled horse. I just closed my eyes and kissed him. It was a mere press of our lips, that's all I intended it to be, but then I felt his shoulder droop in relief, and I couldn't stop there. I leaned into him and opened my mouth. The King instantly swept in, gently nudging my tongue with his and pulling our bodies together as his arms went around me. One of his hands wound through the length of my hair and rubbed it as a child might do with a security blanket.

Around us, the courtyard went quiet.

Honestly, I forgot about everyone else as I kissed Zay. It stopped being a performance and became all about him. The way he felt, smelled, and tasted. My world narrowed down to one man. My focus sharpened to feel his clean-shaven cheeks and the rapid beats of his heart beneath my palm. When I eased back at last and met his stare, I knew that I'd be happy to never remember the rest of the world. Let it all fade away, and I would stay there, staring at him for eternity.

“What are you thinking, Philosopher?” The Dragon King stroked my hair back.

“That you are all I ever want to look at.”

“What about your work? Don’t you want to see the great doors we unearthed?”

“Fuck the doors. I’d rather see your bed with you in it.”

Xa’din burst into laughter, throwing his head back with the force of it. Sunlight worshiped him, and I stared, utterly in awe. Slowly, I became aware that I wasn’t the only one captivated by the King. Courtiers and servants had gathered in the courtyard, all of them watching Zay laugh.

It was so much better than yelling at them.

“Not yet,” the Dragon King said at last. “I want you to see the site, then we’ll have something to talk about in between bouts of wild sex.”

“We’ve just met. We have our entire lives to talk about.”

“You want to know about my life?” he asked softly.

“I want to know everything about you. Will you tell me?”

“Yes.” He took my hand and stepped back. “In between—”

“Bouts of wild sex,” I finished the sentence with him.

“Yes, precisely. Now, come along, Philosopher. It won’t take long to reach the site.” He lifted me and set me onto a saddle as if I were a child.

When I glanced around the courtyard, I saw Xa’din’s people frozen in shock. Even his guards gaped at us.

“What’s wrong with you two?” the King growled at his knights. “Mount up!”

“Yes, Your Majesty!” the men said in unison and hurried to their horses.

Chapter Twelve

It had been a few years since I'd ridden a horse. Horses tended to be skittish around Dragons and had to be specially trained to carry us. So, they were usually restricted to pulling carriages. Only royalty kept horses for riding and then only a few. A stable full of them, such as Xa'din had, was rare. This made the journey into the Axunktli Jungle doubly enjoyable for me—a horse ride and the company of the King.

I glanced at the Dragon King again. He rode at my side but a little ahead, leading the way through the city. With a lifted chin and his stare set straight forward, he staunchly refused to acknowledge the citizens on either side of us, strolling through Lucar's streets. They all acknowledged him, though, stopping to bow deeply even as they edged back from the road. Sweet Goddess, that hurt my heart.

How could his people treat him like that even after he became King? It baffled me, as did their revulsion. I wanted to cradle him to my chest, stroke his hair, and tell him he wasn't cursed, over and over. That he wasn't evil. But he also wasn't a child and didn't need that kind of comfort. Well, maybe not such an extreme version of it. He certainly wouldn't welcome such coddling.

I had slid into his good graces quickly with my open admiration, and I knew a lot of his attraction for me had to do with how much I was attracted to him. It had to be. I was nothing like the men he was used to, and I suspected that he secretly shared the opinion of most Dragon men—that I was too effeminate. Too pretty for a man. Too soft. Not fierce enough. The lovers I'd had in the past had appreciated that. They enjoyed how I could be both beautiful and masculine, and they didn't mind that I wasn't a warrior. But they were in the minority. Most Dragons thought I was weak. A poor example of a man. Of a Dragon.

I guess we had both been rejected by our people—admittedly him more than me. Even so, I understood what it felt like to be both scorned and adored. For him, it was something to be conquered, and he had conquered it, which is what brought him adoration. Or, if not adoration exactly, at least a type of respect. For me, it was something to be accepted. I couldn't change Dragon culture, so I had learned to live with the sneers and jokes whispered behind my back. It helped that I received praise and respect in equal measure to such vileness, but sometimes a man who worshiped me in private would turn on me in public. It differed from what Xa'din had gone through, but I still felt a kinship with him.

How strange it was that after a single day, I was ready to fight for Xa'din, to stand up for him when I had never done so for myself. Perhaps his boldness was affecting me. It was time that I stopped allowing people to mistreat me or think of me as a lesser Dragon. And maybe I would affect him too, and he would stop believing the lies they had fed him.

Xa'din's shoulders relaxed once we started over the bridge and left Lucar behind. His chin lowered and his stare finally wandered off its steady course. The first place it wandered to was my face.

"It's confusing, isn't it?" I asked when he met my waiting stare. "To be so respected and scorned at the same time."

The skin around his eyes twitched. "I am not scorned. I am the King."

"No, of course not," I hurried to say. "In your case, it's feared."

The King grunted.

For fuck's sake, I had to stop pushing him. I was acting as if we were a mated pair, expecting him to open up completely to me, even about such sensitive issues. I had to keep reminding myself that it had been a day. A single fucking day. And he was a king.

Stop being such a child, Thas! You're falling for a story you've created in your head. I mentally slapped myself.

"I'm sorry, I think I was projecting," I said aloud.

"Projecting?" Xa'din scowled at me and then turned off the main road, taking us down a smaller trail, this one bare dirt. "What's that?"

"Seeing myself in your situation and altering it because of the way I feel."

"I still don't understand."

I sighed and bit my lip. If I wanted him to open up to me, I had to open up to him. "I saw the way people bowed to you but also backed away from you, and it reminded me of how I get treated sometimes. My feelings about my experiences colored the way I saw your experience, and I ... oh, fuck, I don't know how to say this."

The King remained silent, but the silence felt angry.

I risked a glance at him and found him staring at me. "Have I upset you?"

“Yes,” his voice had a deadly tone to it.

“I’m so sorry, Your Majesty. I—”

“Are you saying that people have mistreated you?” he cut me off.

“We’ve all been mistreated,” I said and looked away. “That is an unavoidable part of life.”

The King leaned out of his saddle and snatched my hand. “Who?”

“What?” I looked back at him in shock.

“Who has treated you poorly?”

“Holy fuck,” I whispered as the reason for his anger finally became clear.

“Thas!”

“There are too many to name, Your Majesty. And it doesn’t matter.”

“What do you mean, it doesn’t matter?” he growled.

The horses didn’t like his tone and suddenly reared, shrieking in terror. The King reined in his horse, but I was not as accomplished a rider and didn’t know what to do.

Instinctively, I flattened myself along the horse's neck and held on tightly.

That was evidently the wrong choice.

My horse brought his hooves down hard on the packed dirt, sending clumps up in a spray, then took off in a mad dash. I heard shouting behind me, but it was vague, my ears too full of rushing blood to make out the words. The reins had fallen and flapped along the horse's flank—probably a bad thing for several reasons but the main one being that I had lost control and couldn't attempt to regain it without letting go of the horse's neck and risking a terrible fall. As a Dragon, I would survive it, but only if I didn't break my neck. And that was looking more and more like a possibility.

At least the horse kept to the path.

The thunder of hooves startled a flock of birds that had settled to peck in the dirt and they took flight just before we reached them. This, in turn, startled my mount further, sending him rearing again. This time, he came down facing the jungle, and that is precisely where he headed.

“Oh, sweet Goddess!” I cried as the horse bolted through the thick undergrowth.

“Thas!” The King roared behind me.

I glanced over my shoulder to see Xa'din's horse leap into the jungle after me. It was just a glance, but the image of Zay leaning over the neck of his horse, his tunic gaping open to display his heaving chest, and the expression of furious determination on his face burned into my mind and shot straight to my loins.

“How in Ensarena’s name am I turned on right now?” I muttered to myself.

Then I yelped as someone grabbed me around my waist and yanked me out of the saddle. Feathers in brilliant jewel tones thudded through the air to either side of me, and the hands that gripped my waist were tipped in claws. I looked over my shoulder at a lean-faced man with hair the color of leaves at midnight. He met my stare, and my jaw dropped. Purple. He had eyes like velvety iris petals. *Did Ha’tezan breed men with amazing eyes?*

“I’ve got you. You’re safe now,” he said.

Below us, the Dragon King roared.

I glanced down. “Yes, thank you. But I don’t know how safe you are.”

The Litoto man chuckled and swooped around. “I’m not afraid of the Cursed King. I am a knight of the Litoto. I serve *our* king.”

“He is not cursed!”

“As you like. No need to get your feathers ruffled.”

“Wait. There’s more than one kingdom on this island?”

His thin lips spread into a broad grin. “It’s a big island.”

Trying to be reassuring, I waved down at Xa'din, who had dismounted and was undressing. "If you don't take me down soon, I think King Xa'din will come up after us."

"Are you sure you want to go back to him?" He cocked his head at me in a very avian manner and the sun glinted off the bright green feathers at his temples. "I could take you home and entertain you, pretty Dragon. You will not regret it, I promise. I have amazing stamina."

I laughed. "I'm sure I'd have a wonderful time, and I'm grateful for your help, but I'm already involved with the Dragon King."

"Ah, that is why he is so eager to have you back." He glanced at the ground. "Very well. If you ever change your mind, just come into Axunktli and call for one of my kind. They all know where to find me."

"Who are you?" I asked with a grin as I looked over my shoulder at him again.

"My name is Yaotl, Knight of the Litoto. And you?"

"I'm Thas Thorncal of Zaru. It's a pleasure to meet you, Sir Yaotl."

"So polite. Obviously, it's because you're a foreigner." He chuckled again as he landed. "I like you, pretty Dragon. Your king had best watch over you carefully, or I might swoop into your bedchambers in the middle of the night and steal you away."

A low growl from behind us told me that Zay had overheard Yaotl flirting. Yaotl's grin told me that was exactly what he intended.

I stepped away from the Litoto knight, turned around, and got my first good look at him. His eyes weren't the only impressive thing about him. Yaotl was thickly built, especially around the shoulders, where he needed the muscles to fly—a fact easily discernible since he was bare-chested.

Yaotl grinned at my perusal, winked at me, and shot into the sky. “You're welcome, King Xa'din,” he called down. “Now, you owe me.”

“Stay away from him, Yaotl! He's mine!” Xa'din shouted back.

“We'll see about that, Your Majesty,” Yaotl said gaily as he flew away.

I looked from the gorgeous plumage of the departing Litoto to the Dragon King's glower. “So, should we go after my horse?”

Chapter Thirteen

“Are you injured?” Zay demanded.

“No, I’m fine. But the horse—”

“Damn the horse!”

His horse stomped its feet and jerked back. The King absently stroked its neck, calming it as he continued to glare at me.

“Why are you upset with me?” I asked.

Zay’s face twitched. “I’m not. I’m ... concerned. It was my fault that your mount bolted. I ...” He ran a hand over his face. “Fuck.”

“I’m fine,” I said gently and slid my arms around his waist. “Really, I am.”

Zay looked down at me, his throat working and muscles twitching in his face. “That Litoto is a scoundrel. Whatever he said to you, it was meant to seduce you. He fucks everything on two legs.”

I blinked. Let go of him. Stepped back. “He just saved my life.”

“I would have saved you!”

His horse reared, but he ignored it this time.

“All right.” I held up my hands. “I get it. You were going to save me, and he literally swooped in and stole your glory. You’re upset that you don’t get to be my hero.”

He grimaced. “That’s not it.”

“Yes, it is.” I grinned. “Do you really think I’m going to fly off with that man after starting something with you?”

“Starting something?” The King frowned.

“Yes, starting. We’ve just begun, but I like where this is going. I’m not interested in anyone else. You have my full attention, Your Majesty.”

“I do?”

I went serious. “Look, Zay, earlier, I was trying to tell you that I’ve experienced a small fraction of what you’ve gone through. I didn’t want to upset you by talking about those who have scorned me or make you feel sorry for me; I just wanted you to know that I understand.”

“Who scorned you?” he growled.

“Don’t start that again. We’ve only got one horse left.” I took his hand.

Xa’din made a soft huff of amusement. Then he met my stare to ask, “Why would anyone scorn you?”

“You truly don’t know?”

He shook his head. “Is there something you haven’t told me?”

“I’m not what most Dragons expect a man to be.” I waved a hand at him. “I’m not like you. I’ve only been in one battle, and I didn’t even fight, not really. I did save someone’s life, but it wasn’t with my strength, more my dexterity. I never trained to be a warrior, and I don’t want to. I love books and learning and discovering new things. My sister is far more ferocious than I am.”

“Most women are more ferocious than men.”

I chuckled. “True, and no one dares to tell them to behave like a lady. But I am seen as too fragile. Too weak to be a proper Dragon. Too pretty to be a man.”

“Horseshit,” he said simply.

“Thank you. I agree. I’m just telling you what I’ve had to live with. And I never tried to change things as you have. I never fought against my lot in life. I know I’ve been very fortunate in many ways, so I learned to accept who I am and who everyone else is. They can’t change me, and I can’t change them. But that’s all right.”

The King’s hand went to my cheek. “I wouldn’t want you to change.”

“Nor I you.” I set my hand over his.

The Dragon King bent his head and brushed his lips over mine. “You scared me,” he whispered against my mouth. “That’s why I was upset. I feared for you.”

I grabbed the back of his neck and kissed him as if he were my only source of air. Zay growled, swung an arm around my waist, and hauled me up his body even as he leaned further into the kiss. The slash of his tongue felt like the flapping of a victory flag. He wanted me. More than that, he had claimed me. He told Yaotl that I was his. And maybe I was. Maybe Ensarena had led me to my mate at last.

When the King ended our kiss, he did so slowly, lingering over my lips with his and then with his fingers. “You are so beautiful, Thas. Nothing on this island can compare.”

I flushed with pleasure, and he grinned to see it.

“Thank you, Your Majesty.”

“What happened to calling me Zay in private?” He nipped at my lips.

“Thank you, Zay,” I whispered.

“Better.” He lifted me and set me on his horse. Then he mounted behind me. After settling his body around mine and taking up the reins, he leaned over my shoulder to speak in my ear, “If Yaotl had taken you from me, I would have hunted him down and killed him. Thas, you are mine now. You offered yourself to me, and I have accepted. You belong to me now. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” I whispered as a thrill went down my spine.

I was right, the Dragon King had claimed me. This was it; I'd found my mate at last. I was certain of it.

Chapter Fourteen

We came to a wooden gate, guarded by two men—one a Kueya and one a Litoto. They both bowed to the King as we rode up.

“Your Majesty, the scholars are waiting at the doors,” the Kueya said, his nictating membranes flicking over his huge, blue eyes.

“Good. I have brought the Zaruian Philosopher to help them.”

“Yes, Sire.” The man bowed to me as the other opened the gate. “Welcome, my lord.”

“Thank you,” I said. “We’ve had an accident along the way, and I’ve lost my horse. If you see it ...”

“We will bring it to you, my lord.”

“Thank you.”

“The horse will be fine, Thas,” Zay said as he tapped the reins and sent his forward.

“It could have gotten hurt.”

“It’s familiar with the jungle and knows the way home.”

“Yes, all right,” I conceded and snuggled back against him.

He chuckled softly and rubbed his palm over my belly. “I like how tender-hearted you are.”

“I’m not tender-hearted just because I’m concerned about a beast who *you* startled.”

The King made a noncommittal sound and brought his horse to a stop beside a row of horses, all hitched to a long bar. He dismounted first, then plucked me out of the saddle and set me on the ground. I would have protested the way he treated me like a child, but, to be absolutely honest, I was enjoying it. He had claimed me after all. I smiled to myself.

He, of course, noticed. “Why do you look so pleased?”

“I’m excited to see the excavation,” I said. It was partially the truth.

He grunted, nodded at his knights, took my hand, and started pulling me along. “It’s this way.”

The camp seemed deserted, with only a few guards sitting around a travel-stove, drinking cups of steaming coffee. They hurried to their feet and bowed when they saw His Majesty, but Zay didn’t notice them. He just kept walking, leading me down a path through the tents.

The path took us through the center of camp and down a slope to a sort of valley bordered by high cliffs and ending in a mountain. At the bottom of the path, a crowd gathered before a pair of stone doors set into the mountainside. They were no

ordinary doors. Besides being made of stone and ancient, they were tall enough for a dragon to pass through. The mountain and surrounding cliffs bore tool marks, and the path we strode had an equally freshly formed look to it. It must have taken them forever to dig those doors out of the mountain; thousands of cubic feet of earth had to be moved.

“Sweet Ensarena,” I whispered as I let go of Zay’s hand and hurried up to the doors. “This is astonishing.”

“I’ve brought you the philosopher as promised,” the King said behind me. “He can read the ancient language.”

I glanced over my shoulder to see him waving toward me.

“Where are the hinges?” I asked as I scanned the enormous slabs of stone. “How do they open?”

“That is indeed the question,” the King said as he joined me.

“Thank you for bringing us the Philosopher, Your Majesty,” a dark-haired Dragon said as he approached us. He looked at me to add, “My lord, welcome to Ha’tezan. Thank you for coming. I am Lord Mazah, the scholar in charge of the excavation.”

“Thank you, Lord Mazah. I’m Lord Thas.” I spared him a glance, then motioned toward the scaffolding spanning the doors. “May I inspect them?”

“Yes, please.” He motioned to a ladder to the left of the scaffolding.

I scrambled up the ladder, onto the first platform, then continued up a series of ladders and platforms until I came to the top. This brought me to the level of the lintel, and I peered over the top to see approximately three feet of stone before it merged with the mountain. The mountainside soared up from there several thousand feet, leading me to speculate that the building those doors belonged to was nearly as big as the mountain itself.

I ran my hand over the stone reverently. Normally, I'd put on gloves first, but these doors were solid and had been thoroughly cleaned; I wouldn't damage them with a gentle touch. They were both covered in carvings, words that were indeed Ancient Draconian, but it was the symbols at the very top, those that crowned the rest, that I inspected first. They were larger and had the look of a title to them.

“What do they say?” Zay's voice, coming from right beside me, made me jump. He steadied me as the platform shook and growled, “Be careful!”

“I didn't know you had followed me up here! You gave me a fright!”

“Of course, I followed you. You expected me to wait on the ground?”

“I don't know, but don't go sneaking up on me like that!”

“Pay more attention to your surroundings! If you had fallen and hurt yourself, I would have been very upset.”

My lips twitched. “Are we fighting about your concern for my safety?”

He snorted. “I believe we are.”

A glance toward the ground showed me that all the scholars were gaping up at us. I suppose someone arguing with their king was nearly as shocking as someone willingly kissing him.

“Shall we kiss and make up?” I suggested.

Zay laughed brightly. “You are a child.”

“Am not. I’m one hundred twenty-one.”

“As I said.”

I stuck my tongue out at him.

“Is that an offer?”

“Maybe.” I smirked, feeling as if life couldn’t get any better. There I was, standing before a pair of ancient doors, possibly on the verge of entering an ancient building housing secrets of the past, and flirting with the most amazing man I’d ever met.

“Tell me what it says.” The King waved toward the stone.

I turned back toward the carvings eagerly. “This is a little strange. Taken individually, these symbols mean ‘water, moon, and cage or maybe confinement,’” I pointed at each one. The question is, what do they mean together? It’s not a sentence. I believe it’s a name or a title. Perhaps this place houses an underground pool that people once thought was holy, or maybe it has magical properties.”

“Interesting. And the rest?”

“The rest.” I looked down at nearly two hundred feet of stone, all of it carved with symbols no bigger than my hand. “The rest will take me weeks to translate.” I slipped my bag off my shoulder, set it down on the platform, and removed my notebook and pencil. “I’ll have to start up here and work my way down.” Going to the left side of the platform, I started the translation, mumbling to myself as I took notes. Then I realized Xa’din was still there. “I’ll be here all day.”

“Read to me as you go.”

“I can’t. Interpreting Ancient Draconian takes more than a knowledge of the symbols. I must note them all down, then go through each sentence, putting them together in a way that we, as modern Dragons, can understand.”

“Read me the symbols, then.”

“Truly? You’re going to stand here all day while I read to you?”

“Give me the notebook. I will write them down as you translate them.”

“You will?”

“I will.” He held out his hand.

I put the book in his palm. “Thank you. That would be helpful. But you’ll need to note the ancient word, then the modern one beside it.”

He grimaced at me and said dryly, “I think I can handle that.”

I handed him the pencil. “I’m just telling you what I’ll need notated so I can accurately interpret.”

The Dragon King grunted, sat down with his legs hanging over the side of the platform, and spread the book on his lap. “Ready.”

I began to read.

Chapter Fifteen

“I think it’s a story,” I said to the Dragon King much later that day, sitting with him at a camp table, absently eating as we poured over the notes together. “Maybe a myth.” I tapped at the word *divinity*. “I think this is referring to the god mentioned in that scroll.”

“A Dragon god?”

I shrugged. “It doesn’t say that specifically, just calls him a divine being, but it is in Ancient Draconian so I suppose it’s very possible.”

“A god.” He nodded. “Go on.”

“This god was very naughty. This word here, I told you to write ‘kill’ as the translation, but it can also mean slaughter. As in mass murder. I think the god’s followers became so violent that they weren’t merely executed but instead were entombed alive.” I pointed at another series of words. “Lay, ground, cage. And those symbols near the lintel mention a cage too. My original theory is incorrect. I don’t think a shrine or a water source is behind those doors, nor do I think they’re meant to be opened. This may be the entrance of a mass tomb. Which isn’t so unusual. A lot of archaeological excavations end up being graves.”

Xa’din sat back and looked from the notebook toward the doors. “A tomb.” He nodded. Then he waved the hovering Head Scholar over. “Lord Mazah, do those doors remind you of a tombstone?”

Mazah’s eyes widened as he swung back to face the doors. “Yes, Your Majesty! Many ancient gravestones look

remarkably similar!”

“Why did you not notice earlier?”

Mazah turned back toward us slowly, his expression wincing. “I’m sorry, Your Majesty. I never would have made the connection if you hadn’t asked. These are obviously doors and so very large. Tombstones are single slabs and are much smaller.”

“Oh, give him a break,” I said to the King. “Archaeology is like a blind person trying to figure out a new environment. We all sort of stumble onto the truth and learn it in increments. And I’m not certain that this is the truth. I’ve only started translating.”

“What do you have so far, Lord Thas?” Mazah leaned forward eagerly.

“The carvings mention a divine being, perhaps a god, connected with the killing of many people. I’ve theorized that this god commanded his followers to slaughter people, but a goddess stopped him and entombed his followers alive as punishment.”

Mazah frowned pensively. “Our scholars record our history as it occurs, but the first historical entry is a vast recounting. I was told that we lost many of the history books in a fire, and they had to be recorded anew from memory. I wonder if the historians forgot about this god and failed to recount his terrible deeds in the new record.”

“Perhaps they forgot him on purpose. But let’s not get ahead of ourselves. There’s a lot yet to be translated.”

“Yes, but you *can* read it?”

“Yes, so far it’s all Ancient Draconian, which I’m an expert in.”

“This is wonderful news!” Mazah clapped. “I’ll tell the others.” He ran off toward the tables of scholars who’d been watching us, waiting anxiously for my conclusions.

Zay lifted a brow at me.

“He didn’t deserve to be browbeaten,” I said to his stern look. “All scholars give their best because they do this for the knowledge. You don’t have to push them.”

“That is for me to decide, Lord Thas.”

I went still.

“I am King. You are my guest. Remember that.”

My stomach clenched. This is what I got for falling too quickly for Xa’din. I saw what I wanted to see, got too familiar with him, and then ended up fucking up horribly. I forgot I was dealing with a king and having sex with him, no matter how fantastic it was, did not change the fact that he was more powerful than I. Kings *must* be respected. *All the time*. Especially in matters involving their kingdom.

“Yes, Your Majesty.” I inclined my head. “My apologies. I didn’t mean to overstep.”

Xa'din gentled his tone to say, "You don't know everything that has gone on here, Thas. These men have been studying the doors for *months*. They should have made the connection to the gravestones even without the translations. The appearance alone should have been enough. This is their job."

"I see." I looked back at my notebook.

"Do not pout, Thas."

"I'm not pouting."

"You are, and it's adorable, but not appropriate for this situation."

I snorted and glanced at him. He was smiling at me—just barely.

"I'm sorry I overstepped," I said again, but this time, with less hurt in my tone.

"I forgive you." He stood up, closed the notebook, picked it up, and handed it to me. "Now, come. That is enough for today."

I stood up and put the notebook in my satchel. "It's not that late."

"It is nearly time for dinner." He waved at the lampposts around our table, providing the light I'd thought was coming from the sun. But the sun was setting.

“Oh. Sorry. This is how I get when I’m investigating a mystery.”

“Must I mother you, Philosopher? I don’t want you to forget to eat or sleep.”

“I ate.” I waved at our plates.

“That was four hours ago.”

“No, we were just eating.”

“You were just *nibbling* on the remains of the meal that we ate *four hours ago*.”

“Was I?” I looked at the plates again. One of the camp servants had brought us the food shortly after we came down from the scaffolding. And yes, that had been hours earlier. “Shit.”

Zay laughed and pulled me toward the horses. “Come along. You’ll be pleased to hear that your horse has found us.”

“He has?”

“*She* has.”

“You put me on a mare?” I made a face at him.

“I didn’t choose the horses.” He chuckled and looked back at me. “Are you always so argumentative?”

I blinked, surprised that he thought so, then surprised that he might be right. Was I? Shit. “No, actually. I think you bring it out of me.”

“Good. I like you spirited.” The Dragon King winked at me and slapped my ass. “But not too spirited.”

“Thanks for clearing that up.” I rolled my eyes.

Chapter Sixteen

We were headed toward the horses when we heard a rumbling clamor, and then utter pandemonium. Xa'din and I spun around just in time to see a cliff crumble, the landslide bringing boulders and entire trees with it. So much earth fell that it tumbled up the slope, filling the valley and nearly reaching the camp. People were running everywhere, horses breaking loose of their tethers, and the ground vibrated with the fading quakes.

“Have we lost anyone?” the King shouted. “Was anyone near the doors?”

“No, Your Majesty,” one of his knights said. “The area was vacant. I scanned it mere seconds before the event.”

“Thank Ensarena,” Xa'din murmured. Then he roared, “How the fuck did that just happen?”

Scholars scrambled, several heading straight for the King to offer apologies and explanations. Xa'din's knights tightened their circle around him, stares scanning the area even more intensely now. Meanwhile, I just stared at the pile of rock and dirt. I had only begun to unravel the mystery of the doors, and now they were completely covered again.

“Thas?” Zay took my arm. “Thas, are you all right?”

“Yes.” I tore my gaze away from the buried doors. “Just disheartened.”

“We will uncover them again.”

“But how long will that take?”

He shrugged. “Are you in a hurry to leave Ha’tezan?”

A smile tugged at my lips. “Not especially.”

“Then do not lose heart, luvvari. Have patience.”

“Luvvari?”

“It’s a rare flower that blooms only in the deepest, darkest parts of the jungle.” His hand stroked back my hair. “Your hair is the exact shade of its petals.”

“Luvvari,” I repeated. “A flower that blooms in darkness.”

“Yes, a rare beauty that only the most determined of men can touch.” He stroked a finger along my jaw.

What was it he had just said about not losing heart? I could feel mine slipping away as he stared at me.

“Your Majesty?” Mazah stepped up to us hesitantly.

The Dragon King gave me one last heated look, then turned away. “Lord Mazah, how did this happen?”

“We don’t know, Sire. We believed the cliff to be solid.”

“You were obviously mistaken.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.” He hung his head.

“See that the excavation is more secure this time.”

“We will build supports for the mountain as we go.”

“Good. We were lucky not to lose anyone this time. Make sure that we do not repeat this mistake.”

“I will, Your Majesty. We are scholars; we are always learning from our mistakes.”

“Uh, how long do you think it will take to uncover them again?” I asked Mazah.

He shook his head. “Weeks, my lord. Working in dragon form will speed the process but constructing supports will slow it.”

“Then I’d like to come back to study the doors as they’re uncovered. If we examine them as you dig, we won’t need the scaffolding, we can simply stand on the dirt.”

“That’s a good point, my lord!” Mazah brightened. “I shall send word to the palace once we make some progress.”

“Thank you.”

“Proceed with caution, Lord Mazah,” the King said sternly.

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

“Come, Lord Thas.”

I nodded goodbye to Mazah, then hurried after the King.

Chapter Seventeen

The court was waiting on the King for dinner. We strode into the dining hall together hand-in-hand, straight from the stables. Courtiers who'd been lounging in their seats, sipping wine as they waited, surged up and bowed as the Dragon King passed. Their finery a sharp contrast to our dirty clothes, as was the grandeur of the room.

I nearly missed the shocked expressions on the courtiers' faces; I was too busy admiring the cobalt floor and bejeweled columns. The columns stood along the side walls but also in two lines down the center of the room, forming an aisle that stopped thirty feet short of the far end of the hall. They swept up into arches that crossed the hall's length and width, creating complicated patterns on the ceiling. Pendant lights hung from the apex of those arches, casting light on the round tables set to either side of the colonnade aisle. The King and I strode down that aisle to the only rectangular table in the room.

On a platform along the back wall, dominating the open space before the end of the colonnade, the King's table was long enough to seat twenty people but only had two chairs, one of them a throne. A crimson cloth covered the table and two, massive candelabras stood on either end, holding light spheres instead of candles. Xa'din led me up the platform steps and pulled out the smaller chair for me.

"Thank you, Your Majesty." I sat down and shrugged off my satchel to set it on the floor.

Mere seconds after Zay settled on the throne, they set platters of steaming food before him. He reached for the closest dish, but I went for my notebook. I couldn't help it; I wanted to take another look at what he'd recorded. I opened

the book and set it on the table beside my crystal wine glass. As I skimmed the page, the King ladled food onto my gold plate.

“Thank you, Your Majesty,” I said absently.

“I finally get you at my table and you ignore me.”

“Huh?” I looked over at him.

The Dragon King grinned and waved his fork at my plate. “If you’re going to be silent, it should be because you’re eating, not reading. You’ll have time for that later.”

“Oh, forgive me.” I closed the book and set it aside. “I can’t stop thinking about the carvings.”

“Well, I insist you do, at least during dinner.”

“Yes, of course. I’m being rude.” I smiled and looked over the fare. “And this smells delicious.” I put the book away.

Xa’din nodded in approval as I ate, but then he looked around the room and his jaw tensed. I followed his gaze to the courtiers who quickly diverted their gazes. That space between his table and the rest suddenly seemed like an insult. Seated at their round tables, the courtiers appeared clustered together, the columns mimicking a fortress around them, while the King was left unprotected, an outcast in his own court.

“I don’t see any Eljaffna among your courtiers,” I said to draw the King’s attention away from them. “Or Brujai or Ricarri or any of the other races I’m familiar with. Are the

Kueya, Litoto, and Osomah the only other people on the island?”

“Yes. And the humans.” He leaned on an elbow and angled himself to face me. “I am unfamiliar with the Brujai and Ricarri.”

“Oh, the Brujai are a desert race, so I’m not surprised you don’t know of them, and the Ricarri are a mountain people who have Stone magic.”

He grunted pensively. “I have never left Ha’tezan.”

“Never?” I asked in surprise.

“When I was young, I focused on training to enter the Crown Tournament, then I became King.”

“A king can leave his kingdom, can’t he?”

He shrugged. “Tell me about Zaru.”

“Zaru is known for its deserts, but it also has a beautiful coastline and lush mountains. I live near a mountain range but within the desert.”

“That’s why our humidity affects you so much.”

“The desert is arid, but the mountains help with that, so Fyreholde—that’s where I’m from—isn’t as dry as other regions of Zaru. We grow some of the best grapes there.” I leaned in to add, “And we make the best wine from them.”

“I’ll have to send for some.”

“Actually, I didn’t have time to unpack before our first meeting, or I would have given it to you already, but I brought a few bottles for you.”

“For me?”

“Yes, of course. One does not visit royalty without bringing a gift.”

“Bring them to me tonight when I send for you.” He grinned wickedly. “We can share a glass when we have need of refreshment.”

I grinned back. “I’ll be sure to do that.”

A group of musicians entered the hall and played their instruments as they wandered about the room. Dancers wove around them—lithe, dark-skinned women and bare-chested men who tossed them into the air. They danced their way into that open area before the King’s table and remained there for the rest of the performance. Zay leaned back in his chair and watched them with a half-lidded gaze.

I followed his stare to one woman in particular—a raven-haired stunner who had more skin on display than she did covered. Shit. I hadn’t considered that he was bisexual. He’d been so ravenous with me that I thought he was only into men. But many men who were attracted to me also enjoyed women. I suppose that was the curse of looking the way I did. I just hadn’t expected to fight for the King’s attention, not after all he’d said about his cursed eyes.

As I watched him watch her, I replayed our conversations in my mind and recalled what he'd said about his lovers, how he didn't care about them because they didn't care about him. And what was it he'd said about his lovers enduring his kisses? He knew they only slept with him because he was the King, but he still fucked them, didn't he? I suppose a man has needs, especially a man as virile as Xa'din, but what did it say about his morals? Maybe he did it partially from anger and it wasn't rape if they were willing. Regardless of his reasons, it looked as if he had desires I couldn't fulfill and ways of fulfilling them that I may not approve of.

And even though Xa'din had claimed me, he said nothing about being claimed in return. I belonged to him, but did he belong to me?

I pushed food around my plate petulantly, then realized what I was doing. Damn it all, was I prone to immaturity? As a scholar, I focused on research and history. Facts and the hunting of them. I did little socializing beyond my group of scholar friends. I had met all my past lovers through my sister or at events I attended with my mother. And those relationships never lasted long, though that wasn't unusual with members of my race. Dragons jumped into bed with each other because it was the fastest way of learning if someone was your mate, but if those rapid relationships didn't result in matings, they could end as quickly as they began.

Unless, of course, the Dragons involved were only looking for pleasure. In such cases, the lack of a mating bond wasn't a disappointment. But I'd never met a Dragon who didn't want to find their mate. Our mates and the bonds that formed between us were gifts from our Goddess, proof of her love. A mate was the one person in all of Serai who would never betray you. It would be like betraying themselves. And love was more than secure in a mating, it was assured.

So, yes, I was in search of my mate, and I didn't regret sleeping with the Dragon King the first day that we'd met. However, now that he had expressed a desire to become more serious, I didn't know how to behave. Especially with our relationship in its infancy. I didn't know what he expected of me or what I should expect from him. I knew what I wanted but wasn't sure if it was appropriate to make demands of him after a mere day together. In short, I was ill-equipped to deal with the complications of our relationship. Should I tell him to stop staring at the dancing girl? Or should I shrug it off as normal male behavior? Just because he was with me, it didn't mean he stopped being attracted to other people. No matter how much I wished it did.

Unless we were mates, that is. If we mated, no one would be able to draw Xa'din's attention away from me. So, was this proof that we weren't mates?

"Why aren't you eating?" the King demanded. "Is the food not to your liking? I can have them make you something else."

"No, it's wonderful." I pasted on a grin, deciding it was too soon to bring up such things. "I'm just tired."

"Well, I'm not letting your weariness dissuade me tonight, Philosopher." He leaned over to whisper in my ear, "I intend to fuck you until you beg for mercy."

Those words sent a shiver down my spine and banished all negative thoughts. What did it matter that he looked at some dancing girl? He'd be with me tonight. Until I begged him to stop.

“I’m not too weary for that.” Then I looked down at myself. “Although I would like to bathe first.”

“You will be bathed.”

“What does that mean?”

“Attendants shall prepare you for me. That includes bathing.”

“I don’t need nor want anyone to bathe me.”

“It’s how it’s done here. My lovers must be prepared for my bed.”

“I wasn’t prepared last night.”

He grinned. “We never made it to my bed last night.”

“This is ridiculous. I don’t need to be primped and perfumed before I have sex with you.”

The Dragon King narrowed his eyes at me. “I say that you do, and since you are mine, you will obey me.”

“Obey you?” My voice dropped into a growl, “I think you’d better find a different word to use with me, Your Majesty. I am not one of your servants.”

He spun to face me fully. “You agreed to be mine, Thas. This is what it means to belong to me. You must do things as I wish for them to be done.”

“It’s been one day—”

“Time is irrelevant,” he cut me off. “You and I are well suited for each other. I want you and you want me. I claimed you, and you agreed to be claimed. You are mine and will obey me. That is final.”

“That is *not* final. I thought the whole ‘belong to you’ thing was just sexy alpha talk. I didn’t think you actually expected me to obey you like a slave.”

Xa’din growled and bared his teeth, but then abruptly switched tactics. Softening his tone and his stare, he leaned in again and nuzzled my cheek before nipping my earlobe. “Don’t you *want* to obey me? There are benefits to being mine, *luv*. I will take care of you in *every* way.” He rubbed his nose along my ear, his words hot against my skin. “See to all your desires as you see to mine. You will enjoy everything I ask of you.”

I sighed in both pleasure and concession. “The carrot instead of the stick, eh?” I slid my gaze to his. “Nicely played, Your Majesty. You know me better than I thought.”

The King sat back to grin at me. “Then you will allow yourself to be prepared for me?”

“Fine.” I rolled my eyes.

“Good.”

“I just want to make one thing clear.”

“What?”

“If I belong to you, you belong to me. I want to be your only lover.”

His stare softened. “There is no other lover for me, luvari. I am lost in your dark jungle.”

Suddenly, obeying him didn't seem all that bad.

Chapter Eighteen

“Prepared for him,” I muttered to myself later that evening, alone in my room.

I had bathed despite the Dragon King’s insistence that it was part of the preparation process. The servants would get over it. Waiting for them in a thin, cotton bathrobe, I sipped some cognac at the dining table and tried to go over my notes. But I couldn’t stop thinking about being with Zay again and what I’d have to do to make myself acceptable as his lover. I kept wondering if all kings were like this. I couldn’t imagine King Saric of Zaru demanding that his lovers be prepared for him. And what did that even mean?

“Are they going to spritz me with perfume and curl my hair?” I asked the statue of a Dragon that stood beside my balcony.

It didn’t respond.

But someone did knock on my door.

“Enter!” I called out nervously.

Four women came flowing into the room in a billow of silk and dark hair, their gazes lowered and arms laden with wooden boxes.

Women? He sent me women to bathe me? But then he wouldn’t want men touching my naked body, would he? I grimaced at them.

“My lord, we’re here to prepare you for His Majesty,” one woman said.

I sighed deeply. “Yes, I know.”

They introduced themselves but honestly, I forgot their names immediately. It was awful of me, but I was too nervous, my attention taken by those boxes. The ladies set them down on a side table and started removing little bottles, jars, combs, and jewelry.

“I, uh, I’ve already bathed,” I said.

“We shall have to bathe you again, my lord,” the woman said. “We must be certain of your cleanliness.”

“Or, for fuck’s sake,” I muttered. “I am perfectly clean.”

“Please.” She waved toward the bathroom. “I cannot disobey the King.”

“Is there anyone here who *doesn’t* obey him?” I grumbled as I followed her into the bathroom like a man going to the gallows.

“If you would remove your clothes, please.” She stood demurely to the side of the enormous, circular tub. Once I started to undress, she turned on the taps and emptied a bottle of something sweet-smelling into the water. “Please.” She waved at the tub.

I stepped into the warm water and what followed is something I shall never speak of. Let's just say that I was *very* clean when she finished. When that atrocity was over, she dried me off, helped me into my robe, and escorted me back to the bedroom. At least she had bathed me alone while the other women prepared whatever torture I was to endure next.

Two of them took my hands and drew me to the center of the room. Then, like a dance, they gracefully removed my robe. Lithe hands moved around me, drying my hair with lengths of white silk and brushing sparkling dust over my skin.

“What's this?” I lifted my arm and turned it to catch the light.

“Powdered kuya fruit, my lord,” one of them said. “It will soften your skin as well as enhance your beauty. It has a delicate but sweet flavor.”

“Of course. Powdered fruit. How silly of me.” Then I saw the paintbrush. “You're going to paint me?”

“Adorn you in sacred symbols, my lord. They will bless your pleasure.”

“Great. Who doesn't want their pleasure blessed?”

They painted gold symbols along my collarbone, down my spine, and then ...

“What in Ensarena's name do you think you're doing?” I jerked back as a woman with a paintbrush knelt before my naughty bits.

“I will adorn your shaft, my lord. Please, stand still.”

“Sweet Goddess,” I groaned and lifted my gaze to the ceiling, wincing with the tickling touch of the brush.

When I looked down, I had a gilded cock, painted with pretty designs. The tip had a fucking flower on it. A dick flower! I was on the verge of hysterics, though I wasn't sure if it would be hysterical laughing or madness.

And they were far from done. My tormentors braided my hair into an elaborate style and secured it with jeweled pins, then slid gold slippers on my feet. Next, they held up a web of gold chains and helped me step into it. Once fastened, the chains draped my torso, outlining my pectorals and creating a belt. More chains extended down my legs from the belt, holding up chains that circled my upper thighs like garters. There wasn't a single inch of me left unadorned.

When I saw one of them reverently lift a golden robe from a box, I thought they were finished at last, and I breathed a sigh of relief. Oh, but I was wrong. So wrong.

“Please bend over, my lord.”

“What?” I squeaked.

“We must prepare you to receive the King's shaft.” She held up a bottle of golden liquid. “It is to enhance your pleasure, my lord.”

“Uh, I can apply that myself.”

“I’m sorry, my lord, but I must do it.” She opened the bottle as another woman stepped up to her with a phallic piece of stone laid across her palms like an offering.

“What is *that*?” I pointed at the stone.

“The applicator, my lord.”

“Oh, great Goddess!”

“It is only half an inch in diameter, much smaller than the girth of the royal shaft,” she said. “You will be grateful that we prepared you with it.”

My face went as red as my hair.

“Please, my lord. There is no shame in this. We only seek to give you the best possible experience with the King. We are so grateful to you.”

“Grateful? Why?”

“For your bravery and kindness, my lord.”

“How is this brave or kind?” I knew where she was going with it, but I wanted to hear her say it.

“You face the curse by bedding him. It is a great risk and by taking it, you save others.”

My face twitched and it must have been frightening because all the women stepped back. “He is *not* cursed. I risk

nothing tonight, do you understand? I'm not doing this to be kind or brave. My motivations are simple—he's gorgeous and a phenomenal lover."

They gaped at me.

Finally, one of them whispered, "You truly don't fear the curse?"

"Oh, for the love of the Goddess!" I rolled my eyes. "The King's eyes are a natural condition called heterochromia. There is nothing evil about it. Even animals can have mismatched eyes."

"Heter ..." the woman looked at the others.

"Heterochromia," I repeated the word. "That's what the condition is called. There is nothing unnatural or supernatural about it. Pass that information on to the rest of the court. Tell the entire kingdom. And read a fucking book!"

The women blinked at me.

"All right, that last bit was mean, and I apologize," I huffed. "But he isn't cursed."

They looked at each other again.

"Oh, just get it over with." I bent over.

Chapter Nineteen

I was furious by the time I reached King Xa'din's chambers and it was only partially because of that ridiculous superstition. If there was any evil in that palace, it was in those sadistic maids who, after invading my person, paraded me through the palace on a roundabout route to the royal wing. People came out of rooms and lined the corridors to bow to me as I passed by. Evidently, everyone knew what a bejeweled man in a gold robe meant. I was mortified.

Yes, I knew that the court knew I was having sex with their king. I had helped to make that clear. But kissing Xa'din in the courtyard and prancing before his court like a peacock with an oiled asshole were two different things. And the way they looked at me—as if I were their savior, sacrificing myself for them. Ugh! No one envied me as they should have. They bowed out of gratitude and sympathy. I wanted to smack their stupid faces! And I wanted to smack Xa'din's face for making me endure them.

At last, the women escorted me past the guarded entrance of the royal wing (and yes, even the Dragon knights bowed to me), down corridors lined with thick rugs, past rooms of sumptuous and very masculine luxury, to the King's bedroom. I thought they would leave me at his door, but no. They knocked, and upon Zay's command to enter, they opened the door and followed me inside.

If I hadn't been so angry, I might have taken some time to note the black marble columns skirting the edge of the room, making the square space seem circular, or admired the intricate designs of polished jet set into the walls. I may have recalled that the presence of jaguars in those designs indicated they were a newer addition to the palace. I would have paused to look at the gilded furniture and how it shone against all that black. I certainly would have praised the massive bed—a

circular mattress set on a round pedestal, hemmed in delicate ironwork that formed an elaborate, domed pavilion. Instead, I only glanced at it all as I stomped forward to meet the King in front of that sex altar of a bed.

Before I could speak, the women came forward, two of them untying the belt of my robe as the other two pulled at the shoulders. Like a rare delicacy, they revealed me to His Majesty, and his gorgeous, mismatched stare went lava-hot. He stood before me in a robe as well, so his instant erection was impossible to miss, as was the way he trembled.

My anger vanished.

The women murmured something to the King and left, quietly shutting the door behind them. I didn't watch them go or say goodbye; I couldn't tear my eyes away from the Dragon King.

Zay opened his robe and flung it aside as he sprung forward. I had a glimpse of tanned skin and that massive erection before his hands claimed my attention. Not grabbing, not pulling me to him, but sliding over my body appreciatively. He traced the line of my shoulders and gently ran a finger over my braided hair as he circled me, soft sounds coming from him. One warm palm swept down to cup my ass cheek as he came around to my front, and then—dear, sweet Goddess—the King dropped to his knees before me.

“You are even more beautiful than I imagined you would be.” He ran his hands up my belly to graze my nipples. “My bright luvari, gilded and jeweled. This is how your beauty is meant to be displayed. A priceless painting that finally has the proper frame.”

Breath shivering in my chest, I stroked his short hair back. “I thought I was supposed to kneel to you?”

“Not tonight.” He bent forward and kissed my cock, just a brush of his lips, but it made me twitch and gasp. When he looked up at me, his lips had a golden sheen. “Tonight, I will show you what it means to belong to me.”

The King stood up, sliding his hands up my body as he did, then swung me into his arms. Muscles bulging, he carried me to the bed and laid me down on its silk sheets gently, as if I might break. With low growls coming from his chest, he crawled up my body, and every few inches, he bent to lick me. The sparkling dust was laved away, leaving dull patterns on my skin.

“I forgot the wine,” I whispered. “I was too upset.”

“Fuck the wine,” he growled. Then he blinked. “Why were you upset?”

“They were ... very invasive with their preparations.”

He stared at me. Then his lips twitched.

“Do not laugh, Zay!” I pointed at him.

He, of course, burst into laughter.

“They stuck this stone in my ass and used it to oil me up!”

He laughed even harder.

“That’s not funny!” Then I giggled. “Oh, dear Goddess, what I have gone through for you tonight. You had better appreciate it.”

The King’s laughter subsided into a tender stare. “Thank you, my sweet luvari.” He stroked my cheek. “You are beyond compare, and I do appreciate all that you’ve done for me.”

“I suppose I can forgive you since it makes you so happy.”

He grinned. “With you so intimately anointed, I won’t have to worry about lubrication. Nor do I have to go slowly with you.”

“I am prepared as per your commands, Your Majesty.” I bent my knees and lifted my legs. “Have your way with me.”

Zay groaned as he got to his knees, his stare lowering to my golden sex. Licking his lips, he spread my lower cheeks, then made a wounded sound. “They have gilded you there as well. Your perfect pink hole is now gold.”

“Are you kidding me?” I angled my head to try to see it for myself. Of course, I couldn’t. So I just flopped back on the pillow and huffed, “Unbelievable! Those tricky torture maids!”

“Beautiful,” he growled and surged forward.

“Oh, fuck!” I cried out as he thrust into me, all of that length and girth filling me with slippery ease.

My golden cock twitched, then flopped as the Dragon King began a rapid tempo. His arms slid beneath my hips and over my thighs to hug me to his chest, lifting my lower half from the bed. I clutched at the sheets, jewels falling from my hair like stars, and locked gazes with the King. Inside me, his cock hit pleasure points that set me to quaking and hardened my nipples. My moans grew in intensity with every thrust of the royal hips.

“No, wait!” I shouted.

Zay’s whole body flinched as he came to an abrupt stop. Panting, he asked, “Have I hurt you?”

“No, but I want to ride you.”

“You what?”

“You’re going too fast. I want to ride you before you come.” I pulled away from him, sat up, and pushed him onto his back.

Zay gaped up at me as I straddled his hips. My fallen braids swung, the surviving pins clicking as I bent forward and reached between us to set him at my entrance. Then I slid down that thick rod, thighs and groin clenching with pleasure, until I had all of him inside me.

“You fucking beautiful Dragon,” Zay growled. “Ride me. Ride me hard!”

I grinned as I lifted myself, then bent forward to kiss him as I slid down. The King’s hands went to the chains at my

waist, pulling at me.

“No, no, no,” I chided. “Let me ride, Your Majesty.”

I straightened, glorying in the slack-jawed amazement on his face, and rode my lover. This was one thing I knew I was good at. I had learned how to clench a man inside me and prolong his arousal with the speed of my movements. I knew just how to churn my hips and squeeze my inner muscles to make his toes curl and his eyes roll back in his head. And when those things happened, when the Dragon King clutched my waist and writhed beneath me, I felt more powerful and masculine than I ever had before. But I knew he needed to take control.

With great pride and an aching, golden cock, I dismounted and turned away from him.

“Where are you going?” Zay growled.

“To position myself for you,” I said over my shoulder as I got on my hands and knees. “It’s your turn to ride. Mount me, Your Majesty.”

Xa’din snarled and leapt for me. Hands clutching the bedding, my smile widened as the royal shaft impaled me and started thrusting faster than it had the night before. So fast and so savagely that the King lost all semblance of reason and became a madman, insane with lust. He took hold of the chain at my waist and used it to pull me back on him.

“Yes!” I cried and laid my head on the mattress. “Give me that big cock! Give it all to me!”

“You shall have it,” he snarled.

Oh, it was glorious. I will never forget the look on Zay’s face as he lifted his head and roared his release or the feeling of his hot cum lashing my back, sending me into orgasm. Nor will I forget the way Xa’din laid down and pulled me into his arms when it was over, tenderly cradling me against his chest. And I will certainly remember his next words forever.

“You have claimed me as surely as I have claimed you, luvvari. You have your wish; I am yours.”

Chapter Twenty

I am yours.

Those words burned through my mind, branding themselves into my brain. And yet, neither of us had mated the other. How could we be so enthralled, so drawn to each other, and yet not mate? It must simply be taking longer than usual. My grandparents took several months before they mated each other. Mother often remarked on how persistent her father had been because he was so certain that her mother was meant to be his. And if he hadn't held on despite the odds, she would never have been born. Not that it took a mating bond to conceive. She proved that as well when she had Thada and me. Our father wasn't her mate, though she did try for months with him. Damn it all, I'd just talked myself into, then out of hope.

“Why are you frowning, *luvari*?” Zay's deep voice rolled over me.

I swiveled my head on his chest to look up at him. “How did you know I was frowning?”

“I could feel the tension in you.” He rolled me onto my back and rose onto an elbow to lean over me. “What terrible thoughts are causing you distress? Are they about me or the buried doors?”

“The doors?” I blinked. “I completely forgot about them.”

“So, your dark thoughts are about me?” He lifted a brow.

“No, I ... I really like you, Zay.”

“I really like you too, Thas.” He grinned. “More than like, but I think you know that.”

“I don’t want to ruin this.”

“How would you do that?”

“I don’t know. I always seem to find a way.”

“Not this time, Philosopher.” The Dragon King cupped my cheek. “I won’t allow it.”

Then he bent his head and kissed me. It was the perfect response. A little dominant, sure, but he was a king. Dragon kings were, without fail, alphas. They had to be to become kings. But it wasn’t his aggressive words that I heard and responded to, it was the underlying message—that he was just as invested as I. And if this was the start of our relationship, we would surely become something magnificent.

So I kissed Zay back with all my hopes and desire for him.

“That’s better,” Xa’din rumbled as he eased away, his gaze going down my body. “I can smell my cum on you.” He licked his lips. “I like it. It suits you.”

Right. That was the itchy line down my back. Although the sheets had wiped away most of it, some had dried on me. But the way Zay looked at me made it less annoying. I was hoping his dragon was stirring, needing to smell his scent all

over me. Once he mated me, I was certain that my dragon would rise and mate him in return. As the dominant lover, Xa'din would undoubtedly mate me first.

So I wriggled my hips against him, sliding our shafts together. "I want you to come inside me next."

His eyes flared, the pale one flashing green in the low light, and his hips jerked forward as if instinctively seeking to fulfill my request. "Get your legs in the air, luvari."

"Wait." I bit my lip and reached between us. "There's something I've always wanted to try."

"What's that?" He looked down our bodies to where I held him.

I used my other hand to bring the tip of my cock to his, aligning our shafts. We both wept in need, and those beads of desire made the sensation into something effervescent. Xa'din groaned and rolled his head back, putting the muscles of his chest on display. But I had just begun.

Using one hand to hold him at his base, I rubbed the other over our cocks, moving from his to mine and back, keeping our tips pressed together. More liquid seeped from our shafts, and the motion of my hand drew it out over our engorged flesh. Pleasure shot up from my dick to tickle my pelvis.

Xa'din must have felt something similar because he roared as his body thrashed. It was all I could do to hold on to him. At last, it became impossible.

He jerked back, grabbed his dick, and angled it at my face. “Open your mouth!”

I opened my mouth just as Zay came, shooting that salty delight across my tongue. His fiery stare watched it all, and his hips locked up as he shivered through aftershocks of pleasure. Then he dropped to the bed beside me, panting.

“Great Dragon Dreads, that was fantastic,” he muttered.

“I am still in need,” I said as I straddled him.

Zay blinked in surprise, focusing on me languidly. “I’m sorry, luvari. I will see to you momentarily.”

“I will see to myself.” I grinned and laid down on him, squeezing my legs against his for leverage.

“What are you doing?” He nipped at my chin.

“Just lie there and be your gorgeous self.” I bent my head to kiss him.

As our tongues entwined and the Dragon King groaned in awakening ardor, I rocked my hips, rubbing my cock between our bellies. His powerful arms suddenly wrapped around me, his kiss heating, and a growl rolled through his chest into mine. His limp cock revived, its length twitching against my sacs.

“Spread your nectar over me, my sweet luvari,” Zay whispered in my ear. “Let me see your pretty cock erupt.”

I lurched up with a cry, grabbed my dick, and climaxed across his chest. As I came, Xa'din lifted me by my hips and brought me down on his cock. Full of him, I shot higher into my orgasm—convulsing, braids flying, and jewels tinkling to the floor.

As soon as I made it through my pleasure, Zay growled, lurched up, and rolled me onto my back, all the while keeping himself seated deep in my ass. I flopped on the bed, panting and shivering, while he bared his teeth at me, positioned my limp legs over his shoulders, and started to thrust.

“Now, you’ve roused the beast, my precious flower. It will take hours to appease me.”

Oh, and it did. Hours of the most magnificent pleasure I’d ever had.

Chapter Twenty-One

I woke itchy and sweaty. Groaning, I turned on my side and sat up, then winced.

“Fucking chains!” I climbed out of bed and glared at the red marks on my thighs and waist—indentations from the gold chains pressing into my skin all night. “How are these things even—”

A cleared throat made me flinch and spin in the sound’s direction. Cual stood near the door, politely averting his eyes. I snatched a blanket from the bed—the empty bed—and covered myself.

“I’m sorry, my lord. The King sent me to inform you that he is busy today, but he’d like you to break your fast in his private dining room,” Cual said. “Your meal is ready for you.”

“I need to bathe first.” I glanced at the crumpled gold robe.

“I’ve brought you some clothing as well, my lord.”

“Thank you, Cual. That was very thoughtful. I’ll just be a moment.”

“Would you like me to attend you?”

“No, thank you. I’ve had enough of people bathing me.”

Cual coughed to cover a laugh and said, “I mean with the adornments.” He motioned at my hair. “It will be difficult for you to remove everything on your own.”

“Oh.” I looked down at the chains. Of course, I’d have to suffer another indignity to remove everything they’d put on me the night before. “Yes, please.”

Cual strode over and immediately went to work on the jewelry that they had braided into my hair. “The chains have clasps I don’t believe you can reach. Shall I?”

I sighed and dropped the sheet.

“There is nothing to be ashamed of, Lord Thas,” Cual said gently. “Being chosen as a concubine to the King is a great honor. The entire court deeply respects you.”

“I’m sorry, what?” I turned to look at him.

Hands still hovering in the air, Cual blinked. “What, my lord?”

“Did you say, *concubine*?”

“Yes, uh,” he stuttered. “The ceremony last night, your presentation to the King, it’s ... you didn’t know it was a concubine ceremony?”

“No, I didn’t. He told me that his lovers were always prepared for his bed.”

“Always prepared? As in they ... you thought that every time he bedded someone, they were adorned like this?”

“Yes, I thought it silly as well, but he insisted it’s the way things are done here,” I said crisply.

Cual stepped back.

“I’m not mad at you, Cual.” I held up a hand. “I just can’t believe the King would trick me like that. He could have simply asked.”

“I don’t dare speak for the King, my lord, but perhaps something was lost in ... our cultural differences?”

“Like maybe he thought I knew?”

“Yes.”

“No, there was nothing lost last night but respect.” I turned back around. “Please finish, Cual. I want to be free of these chains as soon as possible.”

“My lord, the King is a fair man. He’s been good to us despite his ... limitations. I can’t imagine him tricking you on purpose. Please, give him a chance to explain.”

“Oh, he will explain, Cual. You can bet on it.”

Cual went silent, but it was a tense silence. The chains quickly slid away and then my hair fell free. The relief of it all—the jewelry and braids—made me feel more like myself. But it also magnified my anger. I had endured it for the Dragon

King, because he said it was necessary and it aroused him. But he'd deceived me. And for what? If he had asked me to be his concubine, I ... hold on.

“Cual, in other kingdoms, concubines are only a step above lovers for royalty,” I said as I retrieved the blanket. “A consort is a greater honor. Concubines are, well, a king can have many of them.”

“Yes, my lord. It's the same here. But concubines are greatly honored—”

I cut him off with, “So that ceremony was just to bind me to him but not him to me?”

Cual's eyes went wide. “Uh, I've never thought about such things, my lord. But I suppose you could say that.”

“That son of a—”

“My lord!” he cut me off. “You must understand, he's the King. It's still an honor for you.”

“Oh, it's an honor *for me* to commit to him without him committing to me?”

“Commit? He is—”

“Yes, yes, he's the King!” I stormed into the bathroom.

“I'll just leave your clothes on the bed, my lord,” Cual called after me.

Chapter Twenty-Two

I was furious again. Even more furious than I'd been the night before. But the shower helped clear my mind. I couldn't go barging in on Zay. He was performing his kingly duties, which most likely included a large audience, and a public argument would humiliate him and destroy any chance for us to move past this. I wasn't *that* mad. Also, I didn't want to be the hysterical lover who causes an embarrassing scene. He had humiliated me enough. It was time for me to take back my pride. So, I pushed aside my emotions to rationally form a plan.

By the time I finished getting dressed, I was completely calm. Planning does that for me. When you know how you're going to handle a situation and have gone over every possibility in your mind, there's no need to be nervous.

Cual eyed me warily as I strode past him, asking where the dining room was. He hurried ahead of me to lead the way, then stood along the wall while I ate, continuing to watch me as if I might suddenly go insane. I didn't. I finished my meal, wiped my lips with a napkin, thanked him for bringing the food, then asked him to show me to the library.

On our way to the library, we encountered Lord Mazah.

"My lord Thas, what luck! I was just looking for the King to inform him that we've made enough headway for you to return to the site."

"That is indeed lucky," I said with a smirk. "The King is busy today, but a visit to the dig site works perfectly with my plans. Shall we?"

“Yes, wonderful!” Mazah started leading me away.

“My lord?” Cual called after me. “What shall I tell His Majesty?”

“Nothing unless he asks. Then tell him the truth.” I smiled at Mazah. “Let me just stop by my room and retrieve my tools.”

“Of course.” Mazah waved me into the lead.

I fetched my things. Then Mazah and I went out to the stables where the stable master saddled a horse for me. Mazah’s horse was still saddled and waiting for him. Within an hour, I was standing on a new platform, this one propped only a few inches above the ground, inspecting ancient inscriptions. There’s nothing like the past to help me forget the present. Soon, I was wrapped up in the mystery of the doors, my anger buried in the back of my mind.

“Lord Thas?” Mazah stepped onto the platform with a couple of steaming mugs. “I’ve brought you some coffee.”

“Thank you.” Coming from a warm region, I knew the value of hot drinks in warm weather. I took the mug and sipped as I stared at the ancient writing.

“Any insight?” Mazah asked.

“Every line is like a riddle,” I admitted. “You see this here?” I pointed at the symbols I’d just translated. “This means, ‘She cast him out for his lack of faith.’ Or it may be ‘cast him *down* for his lack of *faithfulness*.’ I’m not certain.”

“Who cast who out?” Mazah asked.

“Exactly.” I looked at him. “I thought this was about the God’s worshipers, but this is definitely a singular noun—one man. He.” I tapped the symbol. “It’s as if the inscriptions were made by many people who each added a few words. Together, they have no flow. It’s a collection of statements, not a complete story as I expected.” I sighed and sat down. “This is not the way such things are usually written.”

Mazah sat beside me and sipped his coffee as he stared up at the stone. “Do you think it speaks of the God?”

I blinked. “A god without faith? I don’t know. Anything is possible. This is a window into the past that gives us only a portion of the view.”

“Well, we have quite a lot of windows to look through.” Mazah waved down at the mountain of earth.

I frowned at the dirt, then over at the wood planks that held back the cliffs to prevent another landslide. The downward slope before the doors was gone, or rather, it sloped in the opposite direction now and more dramatically. A makeshift path led up the hill to my platform. According to Mazah, workers had toiled there throughout the previous night, aided and supervised by scholars in their dragon forms. Everything looked solid and there was the added benefit that I didn’t have to climb a ladder, just walk up a hill. There was no risk of falling from the scaffolding. But something about it bothered me.

I turned back to Mazah. “Do you recall a tremble before the landslide?”

“What’s that, my lord?” Mazah asked.

“Yesterday, when all of this came crashing down,”—I waved at the dirt—“do you recall any kind of earthquake or rumbling before it happened?”

Mazah thought about that. “I thought I heard a boom.”

“A boom?” I frowned, then my brow cleared. “Like an explosion?”

“Yes.” He looked toward the jungle. “Perhaps the earth was shifting into a subterranean cavern and created a weak point.”

“I hadn’t considered that.” I craned my neck to look up the mountainside. “In the mountains near my enclave, the earth does shift sometimes. Usually, its preceded by a rumbling or a trembling in the ground. I’ve never heard a boom before, but if a cavern were compromised, its collapse could result in such a sound.”

Mazah nodded, not at all bothered by what might be a pointless conversation. With scholars, information *was* the point, and all words had worth. Scholars took their time learning things, never rushing you along as some people might. Some people like Dragon kings.

Then a word caught my attention. I narrowed my eyes at it.

“What is it?” Mazah asked eagerly.

“That’s the symbol for warning.” I pointed at it, set my mug down, and stood up.

Mazah did the same, joining me before the carving. I bent to look closer, then peered at the surrounding words.

“What does it warn against?” he asked.

I shook my head. “It’s so strange. I think it’s a warning to not listen.”

“You mean, to not read?”

“That too, but this symbol here is associated with hearing. I’m certain it means ‘to listen.’”

Mazah’s eyes went wide. “Can you read it to me?”

I looked over the line. “A sloppy translation would be something like, ‘Beware of listening here or lingering too long.’”

Mazah grunted. “Typical warning for a tomb, especially one of this age.”

“It is?” I asked in surprise.

“Oh, yes. My people believe the dead can return if you give them enough living energy. We are warned against spending too much time mourning the dead at their graves, which is where they believe spirits linger. Often, tombstones

bear the reminder; do not tarry here, nor give life to the dead. Listen too long, and they will speak.”

“Oh, my! That gave me the shivers!”

Mazah laughed. “Yes, it’s all very woo-woo.” He waved his fingers. “But you and I know the dead can only speak like this.” He waved his hands at the stone. “Through that which they leave behind. No harm has ever come from listening at a tomb.”

Another shiver went down my spine.

“No, of course not. I mean, you’ve been studying these doors for months and you’re fine.”

“Well, it took months for us to excavate them. We went much slower the first time, taking care to not damage anything we unearthed. We’ve only been seriously studying the doors for a couple of weeks.”

That would be another lie that Xa’din told me. They’re adding up.

“Still, I imagine that’s enough time for the dead to speak.” I winked at him, trying to push away my bitter thoughts of the Dragon King.

He laughed. “I’m sure it is. We have certainly been supplying them with enough of our energy.” Then he retrieved the mugs. “I’ll leave you to it, my lord.”

“You don’t have to go. I’d be happy for the company.”

“Truly?” Mazah brightened.

“Of course. This is your find; I’m only here to assist you.”

“You are more than assisting, Lord Thas. But thank you. I would love to stay and help in any way.”

“It would help to have another scholar’s opinion on the translations, especially one who is familiar with the local culture. You just saved me hours of speculation.” I picked up my notebook. “Shall we?”

“Absolutely!”

Chapter Twenty-Three

I spent all day at the site. When it grew dark, Mazah and I headed down to the tents and had dinner with the other scholars. I was having a fabulous time talking with all of them, gaining a new perspective from the great minds of another land. We talked about the carvings on the doors but also about the scientific advancements of the modern age. The way they heated water enthralled me, and I was deep in a conversation about it when a ruckus interrupted us.

“Where is he?” the King’s voice filtered through the tent walls.

I straightened, my anger instantly returning, along with a very annoying sexual thrill. *So, Xa’din had finally noticed that I was gone. It had taken him long enough.*

“Thank you for a lovely day, gentlemen,” I said as I stood. “Dinner was delicious, but the conversation was even better. I’ll see you all in the morning.”

The scholars nervously bid me goodbye as I turned to leave the tent. I made it two steps before Xa’din burst in, his expression strained. When he saw me, he jerked to a stop.

“Your Majesty.” I nodded to him as I brushed past, out through the tent flap, then kept walking toward the horses.

“Thas!” The King stormed after me. “You should have informed me that you were coming here.”

“Cual knew where I went. I told him to tell you if you asked.”

“If I asked?! Before you leave the palace, you tell me! No, you *ask* me!”

I spun around and leaned in to hiss, “I go where I want, when I want, and I don’t need your fucking permission.” I jabbed a finger into his chest to add, “You are not *my* king.”

Xa’din gaped at me.

While he was stunned, I went to my horse and climbed into the saddle. I was mounted and riding away before he recovered.

“Thas!” Xa’din shouted. “Damn it all! Go after him!”

His knights, all mounted, turned their horses around and raced after me. They caught up in a matter of seconds, then fell into formation behind me. I ignored them, just as I ignored their king when he caught up to us.

“Thas!” Xa’din growled.

Oh, yes, compelling him into making a scene was so much sweeter than making one myself. I always preferred to be a reasonable man.

“Yes?” I asked calmly.

“What has happened? Why are you behaving like this?”

“That is a question you should ask yourself, Your Majesty. What could have possibly upset me?”

The Dragon King went silent. Finally, he said, “All right, you don’t have to ask for permission to leave the palace, but I’d like you to at least inform me so that I don’t worry.”

“Wrong.”

“What do you mean, wrong?” he snarled.

“That is the wrong conclusion. My anger is deeper than that. Try again.”

“I will not try again. You will tell me.”

“Then you’ll have to wait. I don’t want to have this conversation on horseback with your knights listening in.”

Xa’din growled but simmered into silence. He kept glancing at me. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw him scowl. Whether he frowned in confusion or irritation, I didn’t know, but I hoped it was a little of both. No, scratch that. He shouldn’t be confused. He should know exactly why I was upset. I only wished the trip back was longer; I enjoyed watching him squirm.

We made it to the palace at last, and I dismounted before the Dragon King could help me. With a calm expression firmly in place, I handed the horse’s reins to a stableboy, then strode into the palace.

Xa’din chased after me.

Stare locked ahead, I navigated the corridors, heading to my guest room. But I didn't get far. Xa'din grabbed my hand and redirected me toward the royal wing. Then put on speed.

"You are more trouble than any lover I've ever had," the King muttered. "I grow weary of your games."

"Games? *My* games?" I made an amused sound.

He slid a furious look my way.

Finally, we were in the royal wing of the palace, but we still weren't alone. Servants and knights were everywhere.

"Out!" the King roared as he yanked me down the corridor. "Everyone, get out now!"

People scrambled out of rooms and past us, keeping their stares averted. I thought Xa'din was going to take me into the bedroom then, but we went into a sitting room with an open balcony that stretched the entire length. The night sky sparkled through the arches that framed the balcony, moonlight shining through them to highlight the heavy furniture.

Then the King yanked the light-pull, and the chandelier came on. The overhead light muted the sky, turning it into a dark void while bringing the angular carvings on the chairs and sofa to life. It was a very masculine room, with a painting of a battle scene on the wall and nothing dainty in sight.

"Speak!" Xa'din shoved me away from him.

“Speak? Is that how you behave with your *concubine*?”
I hissed the last word and narrowed my eyes at him.

The King went still, his expression falling into the blank lines of guilt.

“How fucking dare you?” I snarled at him. “You lied to me! You tricked me!”

“I never lied. I told you plainly that I claimed you. What did you think that meant?”

“That we’d be lovers.”

“A concubine is a lover. I just made it official!”

“Official? The fuck you did. You deceived me. I dressed up and went through all of that humiliation because you insisted it was how your lovers were presented to you. You didn’t tell me it was a concubine ceremony, nor did you ask if I agreed to be your concubine. So guess what? I am *not* your concubine.” I made a face. “I don’t even like that word. It sounds like a phallic seashell.”

“You agreed to be mine, and you went through the ritual. You *are* my concubine. Nothing you say now can change that.”

“You tricked me!” I pointed at him. “You’re a deceiver!”

Xa’din stretched his neck and grimaced. “I’m sorry.”

I glared at him.

“I’m *very* sorry?”

I cocked my head.

“I don’t usually ask,” he growled, then sighed. “It didn’t occur to me.”

“You just send those women to prepare someone and that person becomes your concubine?”

Wincing, he nodded.

“Wow. I can’t even ... wow.” I shook my head.

“I thought you wanted to be with me?” he whispered.

“I do. But that doesn’t mean you get to decide things for me, especially not important things that could affect my life. If you had asked, I probably would have said yes. But you didn’t.”

“So now you’re saying no?” He ventured closer.

“I’m saying that I’m not your concubine until I agree to be. You can’t just take me like some ancient conqueror.”

“Will you be my concubine, *luv*ari?”

“No.”

Xa'din blinked. “You just said—”

“I know what I said, but I've just why I don't want to be your concubine.”

“Why the fuck not?!”

“Because it binds me to you but doesn't restrict you in any way.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means that you can have multiple concubines, but I can't.”

“A concubine does not have concubines.”

“Precisely. I'll be yours, but you won't be mine.”

“Luvvari,” he softened his tone and took my hand, “I told you, I am yours. I don't want another lover.”

“Then you won't mind having the same uncertainty as I do.”

“What does that mean?”

“We will have our word alone to bind us.”

He sighed. “It’s done. The court has seen you make the concubine’s walk to my chambers. They think you are my concubine.”

“They can think what they want, but you will know the truth.”

“And what is that?”

“I am as free as you are. I can stop sleeping with you whenever I wish. I can leave whenever I wish. And I can fuck whoever I wish.”

The King’s face twitched.

“It is precisely what I must accept about you.”

He looked away.

I grunted. “So, it’s a lie. You are not mine. You simply said it to make me happy.”

“It is not a lie!” Xa’din swung back to face me. “But ...”

“Yes?”

“I have other concubines.”

I went still. “How many?”

The skin around his eyes twitched.

“How many, Zay?!”

“Twenty-four.”

“Twenty-four?!”

He cringed.

“You have twenty-four concubines and you thought that giving me that title was special? It’s a fucking insult!”

“They don’t matter to me as you do. I took so many so that no single concubine would have to bear the full weight of my lust.”

“What?” I whispered.

“They fear my curse, Thas. They think that bedding me
...”

“Could transfer the curse to them,” I finished gently.

“Yes.” He lifted his chin. “With twenty-four of them, I lessen the risk for each concubine.”

“Oh, for the love of Ensarena,” I muttered. “Fine. I understand why you have so many concubines. At least now you can release them.”

“I can’t dismiss them. It would be crippling to their reputations.”

I drew back. “And what if you mated? Would you keep your concubines then?”

His jaw clenched.

“Fuck,” I whispered in deep disappointment. *I should have known we’d come to this. Xa’din is too amazing to settle on someone like me. I keep reaching too high.* I shook my head and said, “We are too different. I can’t do this with you.”

“Again with the dramatics.” The Dragon King rolled his mismatched eyes. “I have not touched a single one of them since I met you, and I swear I will continue to abstain for as long as we’re together.”

I looked away.

“Would you truly have me shame them on the chance that you might choose to stay with me?”

I sighed. Right. I’d just told him that he couldn’t be sure of me.

“Is my word not enough for you?” he pushed on. “Do you not trust me, Thas?”

“Damn it!” I snarled. “Very well, I will accept your word that it shall be only you and I, but let’s get something straight, Xa’din. If we end up mated, I want them gone. You don’t get to have me and them.”

His expression hardened.

“Xa’din, promise me.” I leaned in. “I don’t want to form a mating bond with a man who won’t be true to me.”

“A mate cannot be untrue.”

“Then you will release them?”

“If we mate, yes, I will release them.”

I searched his stare. There was something strange in his eyes and his wording, but I couldn’t figure out what. I didn’t think it was deception, but I wasn’t exactly the best at reading him.

“I swear to you, luvari, for as long as you are mine, I will have no other.” He lifted my hand and kissed it.

I sighed. “All right.”

“Will you make me the same promise?”

“Of course. I, unlike you, don’t sleep with multiple people at the same time.”

“I’m the King.”

“Yeah, all right,” I muttered. Then I narrowed my eyes at him. “Have I met your concubines?”

“Some of them.”

“Who?”

“The women who prepared you for me.”

“You sent your *concubines* to prepare *me* to be your *concubine*?!”

“Yes.”

“Dear Goddess, what is *wrong* with you?”

“The old concubines always prepare the new ones.”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake.”

“But you are not my concubine,” he went on with a soft smile as he grabbed my hips and pulled me closer. “You are my precious *luvvari*. My lover who stays with me because he desires me, nothing more.”

“And you are an ass.”

Xa’din grinned.

“A giant red baboon ass.”

He scowled. “Are you talking about those protruding red buttocks on monkeys?”

“Baboons, but yes.”

“Well, that’s just disgusting.”

“Then stop being one.”

“I will try,” he said softly, then leaned in for a kiss.

Right before our lips meant, I asked, “How many of your concubines are men?”

Xa’din pulled back. “Why does that matter?”

“Just tell me.”

He expelled a huff of air and said, “None.”

I jerked back. “Am I the first man you’ve been with?”

“Did it seem to you as if I’d never had a man before?”

“Just answer the question.”

“No, you are not the first. I just prefer women.”

“Great,” I muttered and rubbed a hand over my face.
“You prefer women.”

“But I prefer *you* to everyone else, Thas.” Zay pulled me back to him. “Doesn’t that make a difference?”

I finally smiled, though it was a small one. “I suppose.”

“Shall I show you how much I prefer you?”

My grin widened, and I repeated my words with more enthusiasm, “I suppose.”

Chapter Twenty-Four

The next week passed in a blur of bliss. I spent every day at the dig site and every night in the King's bed. After the initial drama of our relationship, settling into a calm routine came like a gasp of air after a long underwater dive. We still hadn't mated, but I was becoming more and more certain that we would. We were simply too perfect together to not be mates. Xa'din was attentive, even aggressive in a good way, but also gave me my space. Mainly because he had duties to attend to during the day. Still, he was just what I needed. With him busy being a king, I spent most of my daylight hours at the archaeological site with the other scholars. We had quickly become good friends, and now they all helped me with my daily translations.

"Is this a crack or a symbol?" Lady Yaretzi asked one afternoon as we worked.

The rest of us hurried over to her end of the platform to peer at the stone. They made room for me to move into the prime spot beside Yaretzi, and I crouched to examine the mark she'd found.

"That is a crack." I smoothed my hand over the deep line. "Odd that it's only a few inches long."

"Should we repair it?" Lord Xipil asked. "We don't want it to spread."

I ran my finger over the divot, then pulled a brush from my satchel and drew it gently through the crack. Dirt fell into my palm. I looked over my shoulder at the scholars. "I think this must have happened during the landslide. Something hit the door and took a chunk out of it, but I don't think we have to worry about the crack spreading." I laid my hand over it

again, running a finger over the line to feel for any loose debris. “It feels solid. I—” A puff of air hit my palm, and I jerked it back.

“What is it?” Lord Mazah asked.

“I thought I felt air.” I bent to inspect the crack, my hand reaching inside my satchel again. Without looking, I found my travel light-crystal and brought it out. With a tap, I turned it on, then angled the metal tube at the crack, directing the light into it. “It’s too deep. I can’t tell if it goes all the way through.”

“It must if you felt air,” Mazah said. “And if there is a breeze within, there must be an air shaft to create it.”

“Why would they install an air shaft if they meant to kill the people they entombed?” Lord Tenoch asked.

“To draw out their pain.”

“It could have opened during the landslide,” Lady Yaretzi said. “Or during any other such occurrence over the years.”

“That’s true.” I nodded at her. “And if there’s an opening somewhere, it might be easier to get in through that passage than through these doors.”

“We’d have to find it first,” Lady Izel said. “It could be anywhere between here and the coast. And we don’t know how large or long it will be, even if we do find it.”

The scholars started debating the best way to locate the potential air shaft and widen it if necessary.

“All right, let’s not get carried away.” I held up my hands. “I could have imagined the air. We know nothing for certain, and I don’t want to waste time looking for a passage that may not exist. Let’s send some soldiers to search the mountain. If there is a passage strong enough to blow air through this crack, it’s likely short and located nearby. My best guess is that it’s somewhere high, where the breeze can be drawn in. And while they look for the passage, we can continue our research.”

Everyone agreed to that, and Tenoch left to assemble the search team.

As he left, I placed my palm over the crack again and waited. The remaining scholars watched me, all of us anxious. And then it came again, that brush of air, but with it came a strange tingling sensation. I gasped as an image flashed in my mind—a man with hair so white that it appeared to glow and eyes the color of a midnight sky, complete with a sprinkling of stars.

I jerked away, stumbled, and would have tumbled down the hill had the scholars not been there to steady me. They instantly bombarded me with questions, but I couldn’t respond. I was reeling from that vision. The sight of the strange man shivered through me, taking root in my chest where it made my heart race. I was not a man prone to random bouts of fantasy. So where had that image come from? My mind raced, trying to come up with a logical explanation.

“Lord Thas!” Mazah was shaking me.

“I’m all right,” I finally managed to speak. “Just startled.”

“What startled you?” Yaretzi asked.

“I felt the breeze again.” I turned to look at the crack. I would have told them about the vision, but the rational part of my mind had already started spinning a tale of reason. My long nights with the King were catching up with me. A lack of sleep had caused the hallucination. That’s all it was—a hallucination. So instead of telling them about the man, I said, “It was more powerful this time. A definite rush of air.”

The scholars started talking excitedly about the possibilities of getting into the tomb. All but Mazah, who stared at me in concern.

“I’m fine,” I said to him. “Just tired. The King has been keeping me up late.”

Mazah’s concern shifted into a knowing smile. “I’m glad you have found other pleasures here, my lord.”

“I as well.” I smiled back at him, but my gaze kept wandering to the crack. “Let’s take a break for lunch. I believe hunger has added to my weariness.”

Chapter Twenty-Five

Thas, a deep voice drew me from sleep.

“Zay?” I turned toward the Dragon King, but he was fast asleep, sprawled on his back, one hand stretched out to lay on my thigh. Frowning, I resettled on my pillow.

Thas, it came again.

I sat upright and searched the room. “Who’s there?”

I’m trapped. Help me, Thas.

“Where are you?” I slipped out of bed and went to the nearest wall.

I don’t know what I was thinking; I was still in that half-asleep state that was close to lunacy. I suppose I imagined there were hidden passages in the walls and perhaps someone had gotten stuck in one.

The earth, the voice said. She tricked me and trapped me here. Buried me in the ground.

“Who tricked you?”

Ensarena.

I went still.

Thas? it came again, a voice with the resonance of power.

“Who is this? Where are you really?”

My name is Karadas. Do you know it?

“No. Should I?”

Yes, child, you should know it as you know the name of your goddess. But I imagine she did her best to erase it from the history of our creations.

“Your creations?”

You, Thas. Your race. We made you. You are one of mine.

Holy fuck. Out loud, I asked, “Are you saying that you’re a god?”

I’m saying that I’m your god. And you, Thas, can free me.

“Free you from where?”

You know where.

“Holy fuck,” I said aloud this time. Then I turned toward the bed.

He will not believe you. None of them will," Karadas said. "They are not ready for the truth.

"How are you speaking to me?"

Something happened many days ago that weakened the spells laid upon the gate. Then I felt you, felt your touch on the tear in the spell. I was able to send a sliver of myself through and connect my mind with yours. We are sharing thoughts.

"Sharing thoughts? Spells?"

Magic, Thas. Ensarena trapped me within our temple and laid a spell over it, sealing her spell with a gate.

"The Goddess imprisoned you?"

Yes.

"Why?"

Silence.

"Was it because you made your worshipers kill people?"

No. Why would you ask that?

"It's written on the gate."

Those words are lies crafted to scare those who might free me.

“Then why did she trap you?”

I stopped loving her.

“You ... you’re saying she imprisoned you because you broke up?”

I began to have urges. Desires that she could not fulfill. I became attracted to our creations and took them as my lovers. Through those sexual interactions, I discovered that I preferred men. Ensarena didn’t like that.

“That you preferred men?”

That I preferred Dragons. She called my behavior disgusting and said that I was debasing myself with the beings we created—creatures who were below us in both power and thought. But I think I simply wounded her pride.

Then I remembered the warning on the doors—the gates, as he called them. *Don’t listen.* This is what it meant. That I shouldn’t listen to these lies.

“I don’t believe you,” I said.

The voice became incredulous. *What?!*

“I don’t believe the Goddess would be so cruel or unreasonable. I think she put you in there because you

threatened our world. It must have hurt her to lock you away, but she did it to save us.”

You are wrong, Thas. So very wrong.

“Go away!” I shouted.

“Thas?” Xa’din asked sleepily.

I waited for a few seconds, but the voice didn’t return. With a sigh of relief, I went back to bed. “Sorry, Zay, I must have been sleepwalking.”

Chapter Twenty-Six

“I think you should take a break from the site,” Xa’din said the next morning as we ate breakfast in his private dining room. “It’s disrupting your sleep.”

“So, I should just laze around here all day?” I sipped my coffee, wondering if that wasn’t such a bad idea. The mere memory of the voice inside my mind gave me shivers. If I got near those gates again, it might return.

“No, I have nothing scheduled for today,” Zay said. “We could spend it together.”

I brightened. “I’d like that.”

“Good. I’d like to take you flying. It’s been a while since I’ve stretched my wings and there’s a secluded beach I think you’ll enjoy. It’s surrounded by cliffs, which makes it difficult to access on foot, so only those with wings go there.”

“Just us and the Litoto?”

Xa’din frowned. “I doubt Yaotl will be sunbathing there today.”

I snickered. “I wasn’t thinking of him, but I’m glad you’re jealous. It’s sweet.”

“I am not jealous of that strutting peacock.”

“Just my possible attraction to him.”

He grimaced, then asked, “Are you attracted to him?”

“He’s handsome, but I’m not interested.”

“That’s not exactly what I wanted to hear.”

I set my cup down, met his stare, and said, “You have twenty-four *female* concubines, and I’ve caught you admiring the dancing girls.”

The King snorted a laugh. “Yes, all right.” Then he leaned forward to add, “But I am not interested in them, not even the dancing girls. I just enjoy the way they sway.”

“Am I going to have to learn to dance for you?”

“Would you?” He swallowed roughly. “I would very much like to see that.”

“I could be convinced to give a private performance.”

A low, rumbling sound came from the Dragon King as his stare focused on my lips. His hand slid into my hair to cup around the back of my head and draw me into a kiss. With gentle movements of his lips and tongue, he had me convinced in three seconds. But I wasn’t about to tell him that.

I drew away slowly, brushing my lips over his. “That was a good start, Your Majesty.”

Xa'din snorted a laugh. "I accept your challenge, Philosopher. Today I shall make you so happy that you won't be able to stop yourself from dancing."

"That's a lot of happiness."

"Do you doubt that I can make you that happy?"

We both went still, staring at each other, and something unspoken passed between us. It felt bright and tingly, a thrill in my chest. Did I have any doubts that he could make me that happy?

"No," I whispered. "I don't doubt it in the least."

Xa'din closed his eyes and drew in a deep breath before sitting back in his seat. "Then I shall have you dancing by tonight, luvari."

I chuckled, a little lightheaded from the exchange. "We'll see." Then I cleared my throat and said, "It's been a while since I flew in dragon form. The last time was during a battle."

"A battle?"

I nodded. "A Brujai sorceress was raising the dead. She attacked Erimbar atop a dead dragon."

"A dead dragon?" His eyes widened.

"Well, an undead dragon, but yes. It was terrible. I bore the necromancer into battle against her."

“The necromancer? Is that the same man who mated your prince?”

“Yes, Lord Daha,” I said with a surprising lack of bitterness. “He had me drop him onto the back of the dead dragon so he could free its soul and fight the sorceress.”

“That sounds incredibly brave,” Zay said softly.

“Yes, Daha is undoubtedly a brave man and one of the most powerful necromancers on Serai.”

“Not the necromancer. You. You carried him to a woman who had enslaved a dead dragon. She could have done the same to you.”

“You don’t have to stroke my ego, Zay. I know exactly how brave I am, and it is not anywhere near the courage of the necromancer.” Before he could protest, I lifted a hand and added, “I know myself, and I am not ashamed of anything. I am no warrior, but I *am* an outstanding scholar and philosopher. I have my talents; they’re just more of the mind than the body.”

“Thas, it was brave *because* you are not a warrior. I don’t know the necromancer, but I’m sure he’s been in other battles. Such bravery becomes easier with repetition. You, however, flew into danger without the confidence of a seasoned warrior, with no confidence at all, from the sound of it.”

“So I was brave because I was afraid?”

“Yes, precisely. What do you think bravery is?”

“Not that.”

“It is just that—overcoming your fear. If you had nothing to fear, you wouldn’t need to be brave.” He chuckled at my frown, then his grin turned wicked. “And as for your talents, *Philosopher*, I’d say your body is just as talented as your mind.”

“I’m glad you think so, Your Majesty. I do my best to apply those talents in your bed.”

Xa’din’s grin faded. “Thas, what were you dreaming about last night?”

I shook my head. “I don’t remember.”

“Whatever it was, you were angry at it.”

“Was I?” I picked up my coffee and focused on sipping it.

I could feel Zay staring at me, but he let it go and went back to his meal. And I went back to thinking of the Dragon God trapped in a mountain, within his own temple, if he were to be believed. And he wasn’t. I couldn’t trust anything that voice said, not even its identity. Although, it lined up with what I’d read, both on the gate and the scroll.

“The gates,” I whispered.

“What’s that?” Xa’din asked.

“Nothing. I just remembered that I told Mazah I’d be back today.”

“I’ll have a message sent to the scholars so they won’t worry.”

“Thank you,” I said absently, my mind already focused on the inscription at the top of the gates.

The moon, water, and divinity symbols. It was a title but not one of a story, more like a name on a gravestone. Here lies the God of the Moon and Water. Holy shit, it made perfect sense. Ensarena was the Goddess of the Sun and Fire. Of course, the God would be her counterpart, a contrast to her fiery nature.

The image of the man came back to me then. Brilliant white hair, like moonlight, and star-filled eyes. Karadas was night to Ensarena’s day, water to her fire, and male to her female. Holy fuck, he really was a god. I had been speaking to our god!

Chapter Twenty-Seven

“This is amazing!” I shouted as Xa’din and I soared above the jungles of Ha’tezan.

Lush treetops glistened beneath us, the occasional bare branch poking through or lacy vine twirling toward the sky. We passed a farming community carved out of the jungle, but other than that, the plant life grew unhindered, a sea of green flowing to the actual sea. And out on the frothy waves, a few ships made for shore.

“You act as if you’ve never flown before,” the black dragon called back to me, his scales shimmering green in the sunlight.

“I don’t go flying often in Zaru.”

“Why not?”

“It’s forbidden to fly over the cities, and I’ve never had the time to travel to open areas for mere pleasure.”

“I would think it would be worth it to make the time.”

“I’m seeing that now.” I grinned at him and adjusted my wings to ride the thermals. “There is nothing like this.”

“We were made to command Serai and a large part of our superiority comes from this form. It must be respected and allowed to rule the sky while we rule the ground.”

“I don’t agree with the superior part, but I do think my dragon needs to be given more flight time.”

The massive black head swung toward me. “You don’t believe that the Dragon Race is superior to others?”

“No. Every race has its merits. I don’t think a more powerful body makes us better than anyone else.”

His dark eye focused on me. “Ah.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means that I understand why you would see it like that.”

I bared my teeth at him. “Oh, because I am not as powerful as other Dragons so I can sympathize with the less-powerful races?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“That’s not it, Xa’din! I’ve seen a lot of non-Dragon people do wondrous things. We are not superior to other races.”

“As you like, luvari.”

I rolled my eyes. *Fucking kings. And Dragon kings are the worst of them all.*

“Here we are,” Zay said and started his descent.

I angled after him and instantly saw the cove. The jungle grew up to the edge of a sheer drop, vines and bushes creeping over that edge to cling to the rocky side. Far below, a pristine beach of sunshine-colored sand spread along the base of the cliffs, up to turquoise water. That shallow turquoise continued up to a half-moon coral reef, then, just beyond the coral, the water went abruptly darker—another sheer drop.

We landed on the beach, dropping our luggage—for me a satchel and for Xa'din a trunk—in the sand. Since the beach was deserted, I didn't get dressed after I shifted, but headed straight for the water. Dragons love water. It was something I'd always wondered about, what with our magic being fire-based.

“Water,” I murmured and came to an abrupt stop. “He’s the reason we love water. Holy shit, do we have water magic?”

Not while I'm imprisoned, the voice suddenly returned. Or maybe he'd been there all along. Free me, Philosopher, and it shall return to you. To all of you.

Go away! I hissed in my mind.

“What are you waiting for?” Zay asked as he joined me.

“You, of course.” I took his hand, and we wandered into the ocean together.

The cool water refreshed me and drove away the fear that had lanced through me with the sound of that voice. I let go of Xa'din's hand to dive in. The sand sloped down toward

the reef, but I still touched the bottom after only a few seconds. I pushed off, glancing at the coral that spotted the area with bright pinks and purples, then surfaced.

Xa'din dove in near me, and we explored the bay together, chasing brightly colored fish and brushing our fingers over the feathery tips of funny creatures that lived in coral tubes. With the reef guarding the bay, the smaller sea life thrived and entire schools of fish swam by us without fear, their scales glinting silver in the sunlight.

After an hour or so of swimming and occasional kissing (both above and below the surface), Zay and I headed to shore and spread a blanket on the sand. We didn't bother to dry off, just lay there wet and let the sun do the work for us. I sighed and rolled onto my back, closing my eyes to bask in the heat like a lizard on a desert rock. I could finally enjoy the temperature without the humidity bothering me.

A shadow covered my face.

I opened my eyes to see the Dragon King looming above me, his short hair dripping water into my eyes.

I squinted and laughed. "You're dripping all over me!"

"Sounds naughty," he growled and then kissed me.

Naked and wet, writhing together, we luxuriated in our kiss, taking our time with it. Rolling in the pleasure without rushing to the climax. But mere kissing didn't satisfy our bodies, and the King's hands soon became more questing than adoring. His fingers slipped down the crack of my backside and teased my entrance.

I moaned and rocked my hips onto him as his kiss traveled down my jaw to my neck. Growling, the King nipped at my tender skin and slid his finger into me. My fingers slid through his hair while he sucked and licked my nipple, running down his neck, then across his broad shoulders. Warm, wet, and insistent, his tongue worked magic on me as his thick finger curled inside me, working me loose.

“Zay,” I whispered.

The Dragon King growled and nibbled his way down my belly, my cock catching under his jaw. Angling his head, he nuzzled my shaft, then licked its length. In response, my legs flopped open, so I pulled them back and bared everything to him, propping my feet on his shoulders.

With a sigh of delight, Zay stared down at me, then he dove, his hands clasping my thighs to push them back. I cried out and drew my legs back for him, practically bending in two as his mouth found me. Strong lips pressed against that ring of muscle just before wet heat pushed through it. My head lolled on the blanket, my body opening to his delving tongue. Growling against me, Xa'din pulled out his tongue and laved me until I was dripping wet.

At last, he rose onto his knees and met my stare. Shivering in need, cock hard and weeping, I thought I was at the height of my arousal, but seeing the desire in his mismatched eyes turned the fire in my belly into an inferno. The King looked like a pirate, come to shore to fuck his lover on the warm sand.

“You are beautiful in this form and the other, luvari.” Zay angled himself against me. “Your hair is a perfect match to your scales. Now I will see your dragon every time I look at

you.” He slipped into me, and we both groaned. “I want to take you in the air.” He started thrusting slowly. “Fuck as dragons.”

“I’ve never done that,” I panted and grabbed his shoulders.

“I know.” He grinned and undulated his hips so that he churned his cock inside me. “I will be your first.”

And I will be your last. With those words vibrating through my mind, Zay changed into the image of the man I’d seen at the dig site—Karadas. The God of Dragons. His white hair glowed in the sunlight, swinging against my chest with his movements, and his star-filled eyes twinkled when they focused on me. Strong hands, several shades paler than Xa’din’s, pushed my thighs apart and a thick cock drove into me. *I will have you, Thas. You will be my first sacrifice.*

Get out of my head! I shouted in my mind as I closed my eyes.

I can give you pleasure such as you’ve never dreamed of. I can take you to my celestial home and make you feel like a god. Free me, Thas, and I will give you everything, including myself. You will gain a status higher than a king.

I don’t want you or your status! Go away!

The voice went quiet. But when I opened my eyes, it was still Karadas fucking me, his full lips spread to bare his teeth and his sculpted stomach flexing with every thrust. Despite the vision, I knew it was Xa’din inside me, it had to be.

So I pushed against Karadas's/Xa'din's belly to stop him and said, "I want to get on my knees."

"As you wish, luvari," Zay's deep voice came from the God's lips as he drew out of me.

I scrambled upright, then rolled onto all-fours. I was right; it was just a hallucination. All I had to do was focus on feeling and ignore what my eyes told me. I felt a pair of hands spread my cheeks, then the tip of a cock nudge me open. With a sigh of relief and pleasure, I felt Zay's cock slide into me. He began to thrust, his deep grunts going primal. I recognized the sounds and the feel of him inside me. The God was gone. I closed my eyes as I sighed.

"Your little hole is so pink in the sunlight," Xa'din said, his voice deepened with lust. "Perfect and tight." His broad palm swept over my ass. "I don't know how you can be beautiful even there, but you are, luvari. I never want to stop fucking you."

"Then don't. Keep fucking me forever, Zay." I opened my eyes, intending to look over my shoulder at him, but froze.

The blanket was gone, and so was the beach for that matter. I knelt on a stone platform carved to cradle my shins and forearms. A thin cushion lined those indents and Ancient Draconian words covered the stone. Words like "pleasure, offering, and worship." Xa'din's thrusts became more powerful, pushing me forward, but the indentations on the stone platform supported me, providing leverage while angling my ass upward. My body swayed with the thrusts but didn't slide off the platform.

Around me, stone columns formed a circle, carved in more ancient symbols, and light spheres hovered amid twirling ribbons of water, casting undulating halos on the marble floor. A shadow stretched across those halos—the hunch of my body combined with that of a man moving behind me. A man with long hair.

Oh, fuck. What is this place? What am I kneeling on?

My altar, Karadas said. This is where my worshipers offered me their finest Dragons.

I'm on a fucking altar?

Yes, exactly. An altar for fucking. I felt his amusement.

That's not what I meant.

I risked a look back and there he was, a glorious man with starry eyes, his moonlight hair streaming around him and large hands gripping my hips. He grinned as he slammed into me.

This is where you will receive me for the first time. You will give yourself to me on this altar, little one.

Stop! Just stop!

Suddenly, it was Xa'din thrusting away behind me, his body slick with seawater and sweat, and his mismatched stare locked on my face. As I stared, his jaw clenched, a sure sign that his release was approaching, and one hand slid up my spine to grab my hair.

“Take my essence, luvari,” Xa’din growled as he yanked my head back. “Receive me and hold me inside you.”

*Receive me, the Dragon God’s voice whispered.
Worship me.*

I shuddered in fear, but then Zay’s hand slid around my waist and started furiously pumping my shaft. I roared through my release, the sound almost a battle cry, and determinedly pushed away thoughts of the Dragon God. Seconds later, the Dragon King echoed my roar and emptied inside me.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

I sprawled across Xa'din, stroking his chest and trying to forget the vision of the Dragon God. But the images were tenacious, so I rose onto my elbows and stared down at the Dragon King. His beautiful face banished the ghost of the God.

“Are you hungry?” Zay asked, his hand lifting to stroke my jaw.

“Yes, actually.” I sat up.

Xa'din did as well, then leaned over to open the trunk he'd brought. While he unpacked, I unwrapped the food and set it out. Soon, we were gobbling down our lunch.

“Oh, sweet Goddess, I didn't realize how hungry I was,” I moaned.

Xa'din chuckled. “Swimming and sex will do that.”

I grinned, my gaze going to his stunning stare.

He looked away.

“What's wrong?” I asked.

“I love that you think I'm handsome.” He looked back at me. “And I'm glad my eyes don't scare you.”

“But?”

“But sometimes the way you look at me makes me ... sad, I suppose. And angry. It sharpens my past, makes it more painful.”

“I’m sorry,” I whispered.

“Don’t be.” He lifted his glass to me. “You make me happy, luvari. If that happiness shines a light on my darkness, all the better. Maybe one day you will conquer the dark entirely.”

“How bad was it?”

Xa’din lowered his glass.

“Forget I asked,” I hurried to say. “I don’t need to know.”

“They cast my mother out of Vicaotl, the city I was born in. She raised me in the jungle. We lived off what we could grow, gather, and hunt.”

“They cast her out?” I gaped at him. “A woman and her baby?”

“Yes. They were afraid that my curse would infect the city, and she refused to kill me.”

“Kill you?!”

“That’s what they do to most cursed children. But my mother is strong and fierce. She vowed that I would overcome my curse, and they would accept us one day.”

“She sounds amazing. Where is she now?”

“I built a palace for her in Vicaotl.”

“She lives in the city that cast her out?”

“Yes.” He grinned. “And now she rules it. I made them accept us, just as she predicted.”

“Oh, I see. Then I’m glad for her.”

So, she was the reason he became King. He spent his life training to fulfill her vow. To get them out of the jungle and back into civilization. To prove to the Dragons of Ha’tezan that she was right to protect him.

“I will take you to meet her someday,” Xa’din said.

I froze. Meeting his mother seemed like a big step. And I was all for stepping forward with him. “I’d love to meet her.”

His smile brightened.

“What about your father?”

And there went his smile.

“He abandoned us. Left Ha'tezan entirely after she refused to kill me.”

“I'm so sorry, Zay.”

He shook his head. “It's my curse. I broke the mating bond between them.”

“No, you didn't. You are not cursed and even if you were, nothing can break a mating bond.”

Xa'din grunted noncommittally.

“Zay?”

“You are lovely, Thas. Your face, your body, your words. All of you pleases me. And you are clever, but you are wrong about this. I am cursed, and you risk yourself to be with me.”

“No, I don't.” I took his hand.

He just stared at me.

“I don't believe you're cursed, Xa'din. But even if there were an evil spell cast upon you, it wouldn't stop me from being with you. You are worth facing any danger.”

The Dragon King's expression softened. “I ...”

“Yes?” Would he say it? Oh, please say those three words, Zay.

“I think it’s time to get back to the palace.” He glanced at the sky.

“Oh,” I murmured. “All right.”

“Thas?”

I looked back at him.

“You are precious to me.”

Okay, so it wasn’t a declaration of love, but it was close enough. I launched myself at him.

Xa’din laughed as he caught me. Then we were kissing, and the darkness of his past and the Dragon God vanished.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

“I need you to prepare me,” Xa’din said after he shifted into his dragon form.

“Prepare you for what?” I hadn’t shifted yet.

“For mounting you.”

“What?!”

“I told you that I wish to fuck you in the sky and that is what I shall do. But I don’t want to hurt you. Get the bottle of oil out of the trunk.”

“Oil?” I opened the trunk and pulled out the only bottle left inside. It was large enough to be mistaken for wine.

“Yes, that one. You’ll need to use it all.”

He rolled onto his back and exposed his belly, something dragons never do around people they don’t trust. It made me feel special enough to overcome my trepidation. I stepped up to him.

“Climb up and prepare me, luvari.”

“Prepare you,” I muttered as I went to one of his back legs. “At least I don’t have to be prepared this time.”

“It is far easier for you to prepare me in this form than for me to prepare you.”

“I don’t even want to imagine what that would entail.”

The Dragon King chuckled as I climbed up his leg and onto his belly. He stopped laughing when I shimmied down his stomach, presenting him with a perfect view of my ass. A rumbling came from beneath me, his amorous growl rolling up from his center and out his mouth. At the base of his tail, between his back legs, his cock sheath waited.

“Rub the sheath first,” Xa’din said.

I glanced at him. His neck was curved so that his head arched over me, his mismatched eyes watching my every move. I laid my hand on the most vulnerable part of a dragon—the sex sheath. Unlike his other scales, it was flexible and warm to the touch. I rubbed my palm over the wide, silken patch larger than my torso. Within seconds, it folded back, and Zay’s ebony dragon cock emerged.

First came the conical head, sliding beneath my hand. I drew my touch along the velvety flesh, curving it around the edge of that huge tip, and Xa’din shuddered beneath me. The rest of his cock shot out, suddenly erect and twice as long as I was tall. With the bottle of oil dangling from my hand, I got to my feet and just stood there, gaping at that column of flesh. I’d never actually seen a dragon cock, not in the flesh, as it were. I’d seen pictures in anatomy books, but never a real cock, not even my own. There had never been a reason for it to emerge.

“Coat me in oil, luvari,” Xa’din said.

Swallowing past the dryness in my throat, I stepped forward. But I didn’t open the bottle. Instead, I ran my hands over that warm, midnight flesh, reveling in the velvety feel of

it. Instinctively, I wrapped my arms around his cock and, with my cheek laid against it, hugged it against my naked body.

“Oh, fuck,” Xa’din whispered.

His flesh smelled of dragon musk, a scent that made my cock harden. I had to get him ready and get into the sky or I’d come all over him, right there, standing on his stomach. So, I quickly released him, opened the bottle, and poured some oil into my hand. Working in rapid strokes, I coated him, rubbing his flesh until it gleamed. Luckily, his cock lay close to his belly instead of standing erect, and I could reach it all. Every beautiful inch.

“Hurry,” he growled.

“I am!” I poured the remaining oil over him, tossed the bottle to the sand, then slid down his side.

Xa’din immediately rolled over and launched into the air. “Get up here *now!*”

“What about all this stuff?” I waved an arm at our luggage.

“I’ll send someone back for it!”

I shifted into my crimson dragon body, bunched my rear legs, and jumped into the air. Seconds after I was aloft, the Dragon King collided with me. Claws hooked over my legs, all four of them, and powerful wings thundered the air to lift me higher and higher. While we ascended, the Dragon King’s cock rubbed against my sex sheath, sending me into violent shivering and drawing my shaft forth for the first time. I

glanced down to see the dark red dragon dick, a little amazed that I was so large. The size nearly matched Xa'din's—a fact instantly apparent since our cocks lay side to side, pressed between us. We ground our bellies together, his cock slicking mine and sending jolts of pleasure up my spine. But then, thousands of feet above the ground, Zay let go of me.

“What the fuck?!” I struggled to stretch my wings against the whipping wind.

But then Zay was at my back. “Fold your wings!”

I folded my wings against my back. Instantly, I plummeted, but the Dragon King latched onto my shoulders and hindquarters, then yanked me upward. With his powerful wings holding us aloft, he bent his head and closed his jaws around my neck. The beast in me went limp for its lover, and my tail curled aside in invitation.

Zay's enormous cock pressed against my hole, but I was now the proper size to receive it, even though my dragon was smaller than his. And with the oil slicking him, his entry was smooth. One thrust and Xa'din sheathed himself in my body completely. We both shrieked in pleasure, and Zay began pumping his hips in time with his wings.

I had never felt bliss like that before—a tide of tingling that rushed up my belly and spread throughout my entire body, even my wings. My talons curled and flexed in the open air as my cock rubbed against my belly scales, buffeted by the wind. Acting instinctively, I curled my tail around my lover's hind legs, urging him into a faster rhythm.

The Dragon King obliged me, releasing my neck to roar with triumph as he pumped faster and faster. Then he pulled in his wings.

I screeched as we plummeted together. Wind whistled against my scales as I struggled to spread my wings, but Xa'din kept thrusting, pinning them in place.

“Trust me,” he growled as his legs wrapped around me. One of his talons curled around my cock and squeezed.

“Oh, fuck!” I roared.

The island was rapidly approaching, but I did trust Zay, and my heart suddenly raced with excitement instead of fear. My cock jerked and emptied, cum trailing upward as we went down.

“That’s it, luvari,” his deep dragon voice rolled over me. “Let go. I’ve got you.”

Twenty feet from the treetops, the Dragon King opened his wings, and we swooped up in a beautiful arch. I was still shivering through the end of my orgasm and the sudden lurch sent me into another one. Dragon cum rained down on the jungle as Xa'din roared loud enough to make all of Serai quake. Hips jerking, then locking up against me, he filled me as we shot upward, then rolled backward into a tumble to tremble with me in another free fall.

“Can you fly?” he asked.

“Yes.”

Xa'din released me, and we broke apart, each of us flapping furiously to right ourselves. Finally, we gained a proper altitude and leveled out with each other.

Zay grinned as he swung his head my way. “And that is how dragons conquer the sky, luvari.”

“I think I conquered a little of the ground too.”

The Dragon King burst into laughter.

Chapter Thirty

You will never win his love, the Dragon God whispered in my mind later that evening while Xa'din and I were eating dinner in the dining hall.

I flinched, and Zay looked at me askance.

“I almost choked,” I said as I reached for my wineglass.

“I’ve made you too relaxed,” he noted. “We may need to do something more strenuous later.”

“Funny,” I said dryly. “As if you need an excuse for that.”

Oh, yes, he enjoys fucking you. In the library, in his bed, on the beach, in the air. But anyone would enjoy that. How much time has he put into getting to know you? Karadas drawled.

In my mind, I replied, *He asks about me and my life often. He’s not just interested in my body.*

Are you sure?

I am. We’ve had long conversations about my life in Zaru. You are the one I’m not sure about. There is an inscription on the gates that warns against listening to you.

I’m sure there is. Ensarena wouldn’t want people hearing the truth and freeing me.

I can't free you, even if I wanted to.

Yes, you can, Thas. You can break the spell imprisoning me with Ensarena's flame.

I am not Ensarena.

No, a fact for which I'm grateful. But you have her fire inside you.

To free you, I just cast fire on the gates?

And chant the counterspell. I will instruct you when you finally learn to trust me.

How can I possibly trust—

“Thas?” Xa'din shook my arm.

I blinked out of my internal conversation to look at the Dragon King. “I'm sorry, did you say something?”

“I asked if you wanted to have dessert in my chambers.” He frowned at me. “Are you tired?”

“No, just thinking about the site again. Sorry. Uh, yes, I'd like that.”

“Good. I'm tired of these people already. I want to be alone with you.”

Zay instructed a servant to have our dessert delivered to the royal bedchambers, then he stood and held a hand out to me.

He will never mate you.

Shut up! I hissed at Karadas as I took Xa'din's hand.

The God went quiet as the King and I strode through the dining hall, past the colorful court. They didn't cringe away from Xa'din anymore, and I hoped that was just the start. Surely after some time had passed and nothing bad happened to me, they'd see how silly it was to be afraid of his eyes.

Then I caught a man staring at me. No, glaring. It was only a glimpse, and when I turned to look more fully at him, he turned away, the hood of a cloak concealing his face. That cloak was odd; most people didn't wear them indoors, not with the humidity. But the nights did get cooler. Perhaps he had just arrived.

Be careful, Thas. I sense danger close by, Karadas said.

I am perfectly safe. Now, go away!

Very well, but remember what I said. The King will not mate you. He will not mate anyone.

What does that mean?

I received no reply.

When I looked at Xa'din, he smiled, but it did nothing to disperse the dread the Dragon God's words had placed in my chest. He was getting to me, and I had to remember that it was probably all lies. I needed to stop listening to him. Although, if he was right about Ensarena's spell, I wouldn't have to worry about him getting free. I could continue to study the gate without fear of the other scholars figuring out a way to open it. Even if one of them did cast fire upon it accidentally, the spell wouldn't break without the counterspell.

By the time we got to Xa'din's bedchambers, I was much calmer. I started my evening routine, taking a quick shower while Zay waited for our dessert to arrive. Something told me I would be the King's second dessert, and despite what he said during our first time together, he liked me to be clean enough to lick everywhere. That thought made me grin as I pulled on the light robe I wore at night.

I stepped out of the bathroom to find the light spheres dimmed to a glow and a tray with two little cakes set on the bed.

"They baked you a peach custard cake," Xa'din said with a wave at the pale yellow dome decorated with sliced peaches.

"Oh, my favorite!" I crawled onto the bed and took the fork he offered me.

"Yes, I know." The King grinned affectionately as he cut into his chocolate cake, then took a bite. His stare wandered to the opening of my robe and moved downward.

Oh, yeah, I was going to be consumed next.

I took my time eating, making Zay wait, and from the looks he was giving me, he knew it. And he liked it. But he would only put up with it for so long. He licked his lips as he watched me eat. Then he ran his finger through the frosting of his cake, leaned over, and rubbed the frosting over my nipple.

I lifted my brows at the King as he brought his finger to my mouth. Holding his hot stare, I sucked the remaining frosting from him and shrugged my robe off, letting it fall to the bed. Zay slid an arm behind me and bent me over it, lifting my chest to his waiting mouth. With a happy growl, he sucked the frosting from my nipple. I sighed, then moaned with pleasure, but even as his tongue spun delight through me, another unwelcome sensation rose.

I fell back, and Xa'din followed me down, drawing his arm out from behind my back to prop himself up with. Pain lanced through me, and I gasped, but he mistook it for pleasure.

Grinning, he lifted his head and asked, "Are you happy enough to dance for me?" Then he saw my face. "Thas?"

"Zay," I gasped. "Something's wrong."

"What? Have I hurt you?"

You've been poisoned, little one, the Dragon God's voice said in my mind.

Poisoned?!

Yes, tell your lover to fetch an antidote for turapa venom.

What is—

Tell him now!

“I need the antidote for turapa venom,” I whispered.

“Turapa venom?” Xa’din gaped at me.

Now, you fool! Karadas shouted.

“Now!” I hissed at the King.

Xa’din jolted from bed. The dessert tray fell in a clamor of breaking porcelain. The initial pain faded, but with the relief came full-body relaxation. My heart started to slow, and it became difficult to breathe.

“Get me an antidote for turapa venom!” the King shouted. He kept shouting, but the sound of his voice rapidly grew fainter.

I got fainter too.

Hold on, Thas. I am with you, Karadas said gently. *The antidote acts within seconds. Just focus on my voice.*

My mind reeled. There were very few poisons that could hurt a Dragon, and I’d never heard of turapas, much less their venom. I didn’t know what it was doing to me, and that made me even more afraid.

They're coming now, little one. It will be all right. You will live.

Sure enough, Xa'din burst into the room with a team of people on his heels. One man, a Kueya, broke ahead of the pack and raced for me. His large eyes bulging out of his head with urgency, he jumped onto the bed beside me.

After uncorking the vial he held, he used his free hand to lift my head. "Drink, my lord." He held the vial to my lips.

I drank. I fucking gulped.

The man—I assumed he was a doctor—gently lowered my head, propping it with a pillow, then slid off the bed. Panting, he stepped to the side and his shoulders slumped.

"Is that all?" Xa'din demanded as he grabbed the doctor by his tunic. "Will he live?!"

"Yes, Your Majesty," the doctor said as the others cringed away from the King. "He should be fine in a few—"

Breath returned to me and on my first exhale, I whispered, "Xa'din."

The Dragon King released the doctor and rushed over to me. As I tried to sit up, he slipped onto the bed behind me and cast the pillow aside.

"I've got you. Just relax." He propped me up against his chest and drew my robe over me. "Are you all right, luvvari?"

“I think so.” I licked my lips. “I could use some water.”

“Here, my lord.” One of the other men stepped forward and held a jug out to Xa’din. “The venom causes dehydration.”

Xa’din took the jug and held it to my lips. I sipped, then took it from him and chugged. As I drank, I glanced at the medical team. They were all Kueyas, and I recalled they were renowned for their healing abilities. It was damn lucky that Xa’din had a team in residence.

“He’ll be just fine, Your Majesty,” the doctor said as he watched me drink.

“Thank you,” Xa’din said softly. “Thank you all for acting so quickly.”

“It’s fortunate that Lord Thas recognized the signs of turapa poisoning, or we may not have administered the antidote in time.” The doctor looked at me to add, “I’m impressed, my lord. I wouldn’t have thought you’d be familiar with our local fauna, much less know what being poisoned by a turapa can do to a man. Well done.”

“Thank you.” I handed the jug to him. “And thank you for saving my life. It was lucky that you had the antidote prepared.”

“We always keep remedies for local illnesses and such on hand. As you know, time can often be of the essence with medical emergencies. And it was my honor to help you, my lord.” The doctor bowed, his long earlobes swinging forward

with the motion, then held out his webbed hands to usher his team out of the room.

Xa'din got up, propped me gently with pillows, then strode furiously toward the door.

“Zay, where are you going?” I called after him.

“To speak with the chefs,” he growled.

“Oh, fuck,” I whispered. I had a feeling someone was about to die.

At least it's not you, the Dragon God said.

“Thank you,” I said aloud since I was alone. “You saved my life.”

I hope that will earn me a little trust.

“I don't know about trust. I'm your only chance at freedom, so it behooved you to save me.”

Yes, I suppose it did. But I still saved you, Thas, and I tried to warn you earlier.

“How did you know something would happen to me but not know what?”

I sensed malevolence around you, but I can't see into the future, Thas. If I could, Ensarena would never have been able to imprison me. No, all I could do was advise you once I

saw the signs. Luckily, as your creator, I know your body as well as I know my own, and I quickly deduced that someone had poisoned you.

“And you know turapas as well.”

The Dragon God chuckled. *Yes, I do. I know all about the inhabitants of this kingdom. The turapa is a type of snake.*

“Well, whatever your motives are, thank you, Karadas. You may not have earned my trust, but you have earned my gratitude.”

You're welcome, Thas. But now you have another problem.

“What's that?”

Someone wants you dead. Any idea why?

“No,” I whispered. “But I think Xa'din will find out.”

Chapter Thirty-One

I got dressed and went in search of Xa'din. Eventually, I found him in the courtyard with all the cooks and food servers standing in a line in front of him.

“Oh, fuck,” I whispered and hurried over.

“Who baked Lord Thas's cake?” Xa'din demanded.

Hesitantly, a human man stepped forward. “I made the sponge, my lord. I'm the Head Baker.”

“What sponge?”

“He means the cake part of the cake,” I said as I stepped up beside him.

“Thas! What are you doing out of bed?” Xa'din took my arm as if I might fall over at any moment.

“I'm fine, I promise. And I don't think any of these people tried to kill me.”

“It must be one of them. These are the only people who came into contact with our desserts today.”

“But were the cakes watched after they were made? Or were they left on a counter for a servant to retrieve them?”

The Dragon King's eyes twitched as he spun toward the cooks. “Well? Were they set out somewhere and left

unattended?”

“I’m afraid so, Your Majesty,” the Head Baker said. “We simply have too much to do to watch a plate until it’s picked up. We leave them on a counter for the servers and then go back to cooking.”

“And we’re also busy, Your Majesty,” one of the food servers said. “We’re constantly rushing back and forth between the kitchen and the dining hall. I was the one who delivered your desserts this evening, and I simply grabbed the tray and took it immediately to you. I swear that I did not poison Lord Thas’s cake.”

“I like Lord Thas,” the Head Baker said. “It’s why I made him his favorite dessert. I have no reason to kill him.”

“Thank you,” I said to the baker. “It was very tasty despite the venom.”

“This is not a joke, Thas!” Xa’din roared. “And if they can poison you so easily, what about me?”

Ah, so his concern is for himself, Karadas whispered.

I ignored the self-proclaimed god and said to Xa’din, “I do not think this is funny. I was the one poisoned, remember? But we need to be rational about this. Where are your Talons? They should be the ones investigating this, not you. You’re too biased. We need clear, impartial—”

“What are you talking about?” He interrupted me. “You want me to transform into my dragon and use my talons to torture them?”

I gaped at him as the servants quaked. Then I processed what he said and what it meant. “Are you saying that you don’t have a police force in place?”

“Police force?”

“You have a government, don’t you? As King, you are at the top. You make the laws, but the Talons enforce them.”

“I have an army to enforce my laws should that become necessary.”

“Oh, sweet Goddess.” I shook my head at him. “I’ve been to many Dragon kingdoms, and I’ve never visited one without a proper government.”

“I govern my kingdom properly,” he growled.

I held up a hand. “That’s not what I’m saying. I’m sure you do an incredible job, but most Dragon kingdoms have a system in place to help them rule. The military soldiers are called Horns, and their job is to protect the realm. The Talons are officers of the law who police the cities and apprehend criminals. Then there are the Teeth, judges who determine how criminals are punished. And finally, the Scales are social workers who ensure that your people are healthy and happy. They all work together under a king’s guidance.”

“Guidance?” he growled at me. “This is Ha’tezan. Here, I rule alone. I find the criminals and I punish the guilty. I see to my people’s needs. I don’t shirk my duty onto hundreds of other people.”

“It’s not shirking, it’s—”

“That is enough, Thas,”

“But—”

“Stop.” The Dragon King took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “Someone tried to kill you tonight, luvari. I cannot allow that to go unpunished.”

“But punishing innocent people only makes you guilty.”

“Aren’t you worried they might try to kill you again?”

“Yes, of course. But now we’ll be more vigilant, right? Perhaps you could post a guard at the counter where they leave the food.”

“You heard him,” Xa’din growled at a knight. “Set up a post for the kitchen.”

“Yes, Your Majesty!” The guard hurried away.

But then Xa’din went right back to snarling at the servants. “One of you must have seen something. You have thirty seconds to step forward or I will start executing you. One by one.”

The servants dropped to their knees and begged for mercy.

“Zay!” I shouted.

The Dragon King swung toward me. “You do not rule here, *Lord Thas*. Step back and shut the fuck up!”

I gaped at him as I took a step back, then I bowed. “Forgive me, Your Majesty.”

That wasn't very nice, Karadas drawled.

I pushed him too far. I shouldn't have brought up all that governing stuff in front of others, I said in my mind.

You were only trying to help.

“I did see someone near your food, Your Majesty,” a woman said tremulously. “But he couldn't have poisoned Lord Thas. He has no reason to. He's a good—”

“Who?!” Xa'din roared.

“Lord Patli,” she whispered.

“Take these people to the prison cells for now,” Xa'din said to his knights. “And one of you get me Lord Patli.”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” the knights said.

Most of the knights herded the trembling servants away, but one of them hurried off to find the doomed lord.

I turned and headed for the palace alone, my chest heavy.

“Thas!” Xa’din chased after me.

“What?” I didn’t look at him.

He let out a rough breath. “You weren’t supposed to use that name in public.”

“Yes, I’m sorry that I forgot that amid you attacking innocent people.”

“I didn’t attack them. I threatened them.”

I swung to face him. “You threatened to kill them!”

“Yes, because one of them may have tried to kill you!”

My jaw clenched as I looked away. “It wasn’t one of them. And you can’t be sure it was Lord Patli either.”

“He is the only logical option.”

“Why would he try to kill me? I don’t even recognize his name.”

“Why would anyone here try to kill you? It baffles me, but someone did. Maybe some of my people don’t want us together. Or maybe they don’t like that I brought an outsider here to work on the dig site.”

“The site,” I whispered.

“What about it?”

“I’ve been wondering about the landslide. Mazah said that he heard a boom just before the cliff came down.”

“Before, not during?” Xa’din frowned. “Do you think someone brought it down on purpose?”

“It’s possible. And if they caused that landslide, they don’t want those doors opened.”

“You are not the only scholar working on that site.”

“No, but I’m the only one who can translate Ancient Draconian.”

We shared a long, heavy stare.

“Go back to my chambers now, luvari.” He cupped my cheek. “Lock the door and don’t let anyone in until you hear my voice.”

“What are you going to do?”

“Find out everything Lord Patli knows about you and those doors.”

“Try to reason with him first, Zay.”

“Thas, I cannot afford to be kind. I am a king. I must never show weakness, especially not when I seek answers that someone doesn’t want me to have. Now, get back to my chambers and lock the door.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

Chapter Thirty-Two

Lord Patli's screams could be heard throughout the entire palace, even in His Majesty's quarters. At first, I tried to hide from them, but then I went to stand on the balcony where they were the loudest. I felt as if I should bear witness to the torture.

Because I was falling in love with the monster behind those screams.

No, you are not, the Dragon God said.

"I'm not what?" I whispered to the night air.

You are not falling in love with him. You know more about me than you do King Xa'din.

"That's not true. You, however, don't know him at all."

I know what I see and hear, and my senses aren't tainted with lust.

Another horrendous scream rent the silence. Yes, silence. It was as if the entire kingdom trembled before the King's wrath. I knew that if I walked outside the Royal Wing, I'd find the halls empty, the courtiers hiding in their rooms, even the Dragons. Because Karadas was wrong; I knew quite a lot about the King of Ha'tezan. I had learned from his words and actions as well as those of others. And I'd found a book.

A book? The Dragon God inquired. *A book about Xa'din?*

“Yes. A history of the Kingdom.”

You're not going to share?

“Can't you just read it in my mind?”

I can hear your thoughts as you think them and sense what you are feeling, but no, I can't pull up your memories at random. Merely trying to search through them would be exhausting.

“Good.”

He chuckled. *Very well, keep your—oh, that scream sounded awful. I wonder what he's doing to that man?*

“As if you care.”

I do. I only wish I could be the one torturing that bastard.

“You're as bad as Zay!” I spun around and went back inside, shutting the balcony doors behind me.

The Dragon God's voice went grim, *I am far worse than your fierce lover, Thas. Because I, like the King, know that being merciful has its place, but not when my life or that of someone I care about is at risk. Then, I would tear flesh from bones if I had to. And I would enjoy every second.*

My breath caught. *Is that why he's being so vicious?*

Why?

“Ugh! I wasn’t asking you!”

Then who were you asking?

“It was a hypothetical question I posed to myself.”

What does hypothetical mean?

“It means that it’s based on theory, not fact.”

Aren’t all questions based on theory? You ask them to discover the facts.

“Yes. Just as Xa’din is doing now with Lord Patli.”

Oh, I think Patli lost his title today. Although, that is probably the least of what he’ll lose. I’m betting he’s down a few fingers by now.

“Would you, please, shut the fuck up?!”

I see you’ve picked up your lover’s penchant for foul language.

“I can’t deal with you right now. Please, go away.”

You need to deal with me right now. If I don’t distract you, you’ll lose your reason and go barging down to wherever

the King is to stop him.

“How is that unreasonable?”

You will ruin all his hard work.

“Hard work? That man could be innocent.”

He is not. And I believe you are right about his motives. He is trying to stop you from freeing me.

“Why would he do that? How would he even know about you?”

I don't know, but I think your lover does. The screaming has stopped.

“Oh, thank the Goddess.”

I wouldn't if I were you. She may be behind the attempt on your life.

Chapter Thirty-Three

A pounding knock came, and then Xa'din growled, "It's me. Open the door, Thas."

I hurried to unlock the door, and the Dragon King stormed into the bedroom, covered in blood from his waist up to his neck, arms included. I pulled back in horror, my gaze locked on the evidence of his brutality.

His mismatched stare shot to mine and narrowed. "Shut the door and lock it."

I shut the door and locked it. "Zay?"

"Is there something you haven't told me, Thas?"

"Me?" I blinked.

"Tell me now, and I will forgive you."

"Forgive me *for what?*"

"For keeping it from me," his voice had taken on a deadly edge.

"I'm not keeping anything from you."

Aren't you?

“Aren’t you?” Xa’din unknowingly echoed the Dragon God.

“Not that I know of. Maybe you could be a little more specific.”

“The Dragon God.”

Holy shit! How does he know that I’m speaking with you? I asked Karadas as I gaped at Xa’din.

I don’t think he does. He knows about me, that is all. Calm yourself. You can’t tell him now. Not after you protested so vehemently that you have kept nothing from him. Stand your ground.

“The Dragon God? Did Patli confirm his existence?” I asked as nonchalantly as I could.

“You didn’t know about him already?”

“I’ve told you what I know. The scroll and the doors both mention a god. But I’m still uncertain that he’s our god, so how does Patli know for sure?”

Xa’din stared at me for several long seconds, then nodded and strode into the bathroom.

“Are you fucking kidding me?!” I stormed after him. “You come in here accusing me of keeping information from you and then you just nod and walk away? I asked you a question!”

“I need to bathe.” He undressed.

“Oh, yes, I realize that,” I said with venomous sarcasm. “Care to enlighten me on what you learned? Or did all your torture only gain you a finger pointed at me? And what did he say about me, exactly?”

Xa’din let out a shaky breath, his shoulders trembling into a hunch, then stepped into the shower.

“Zay!”

“Get out of this room right now, Thas!”

I think you’d better listen to him, Karadas said softly. He had done what he needed to do and now he needs to move past it. Let him at least wash the blood away before he touches you.

What do you mean?

Do you think that cost him nothing? If you do, you truly believe him to be the cursed fiend that everyone else does. How ironic that I do not.

Those words struck their mark, but I couldn’t move, couldn’t leave Zay. Instead, I got undressed and stepped into the shower. Xa’din tensed and spun toward me furiously, but I went straight into his bloody embrace and hugged him. After a few tense seconds, the Dragon King shuddered and crumpled around me. His breath came brokenly against my neck as the warm water rained around us.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered. “I should have considered how hard that would be on you. You only did what you thought was necessary to protect us.

“Thas,” he whispered, his fingers digging into my back.

“Shh, it’s all right. You don’t have to be strong all the time, Zay. Trust me as I trust you.”

A sob left him as he pressed his face against my neck. “I’ve done many violent things in my life. I’ve killed men without thought or remorse. But I’ve never had to torture someone. It will haunt me.”

“Good.”

Zay lifted his head and stared at me in shock, his eyes glassy with unshed tears. “Good?”

“It proves that you’re not a monster.” I cupped his face in my hands. “Not that I need any proof. But maybe you do.”

A tear trickled down his cheek. “I’m still so angry. And I’m scared, Thas. For you.” He took my hands and pulled them down to hold between us. “They almost killed you tonight. You, my beautiful luvari.” He lifted a hand, possibly to brush back my hair, but then noticed the blood and quickly lowered it.

I fetched the soap from its ledge, worked up a lather, then took his hands and started washing them, working my way up his arms.

“Thas,” he whispered.

“Shh.” I drew his arms beneath the spray. “There. Now let me get the rest of you.”

I began washing the Dragon King, and he stood complacently, just watching me. I worked the soap over every inch of his body, massaging his tight muscles as I went, and for the first time, my touch didn’t stir his lust, even when I washed his sex. He just stood there, body limp, and breath ragged. Slowly, his breathing evened out and the strain in his face drained away. After I rinsed him off, Zay drew me into an embrace and kissed me, just a press of his lips on mine.

“Thas, I—”

“Don’t say anything important right now,” I cut him off. “You’re feeling things strongly and maybe inaccurately. I don’t want you to say something you’ll regret later.”

“What could I say that I would regret?” He stroked my face tenderly.

“I don’t know. Something you’re not ready to say or that you don’t truly mean.” I took his hand, kissed it, and stepped out of the shower. “I’ll let you finish up alone.”

I dried off, got dressed, and left the bathroom. In the bedroom, I went straight to the sideboard, where an assortment of crystal decanters held liquor and wine. I poured us two drinks, took them to the round bed, and sat down to wait for him. I had just taken a sip when the bathroom door opened.

The Dragon King stood in the doorway, backlit, steam erupting around his naked body. His dark hair was slicked back and moisture dripped down the curves of his chest to slide into the dips of his belly. I couldn't help it; I followed the droplets down to the nest of black curls below. As I watched, his shaft hardened.

I took another sip. No, a gulp. The fiery liquid fortified me, making me feel more confident. More seductive. More beautiful. I stood up and went to him. He met me halfway, and I held up the drink I'd poured for him. Xa'din took it, downed it in one go, then tossed the glass onto the floor.

As if to prove how unsexy I was, I glanced at the glass to make sure that it hadn't broken. When I looked back at the Dragon King, he was grinning. Lifting my chin, I finished my drink and tossed the glass on the rug by his. They clinked together as if someone had made a toast. Xa'din's grin widened as he scooped me up and carried me back to the bed.

No words were spoken, but I read them in his eyes. Words like sweetheart and beautiful. Desire and need. Words like love, if not love itself. Would Zay have declared his love for me if I hadn't stopped him? I didn't know, but I wanted to believe he would have. I wanted to believe I saw and felt it in him as he swept his hands over my body and drew out my arousal in the ways he'd learned that I enjoyed. With soft growls, he nipped at my skin, then kissed the bites, working his way slowly over my most sensitive areas.

But then Xa'din straddled my chest and stared down at me possessively. With one hand on his cock, he brought the other to my face and rubbed his thumb over my lips. "Open your mouth, luvari."

As soon as I parted my lips, he thrust forward, angling his tip between them, pushing my mouth open, and then my jaws wider as his girth filled me. He started to pump gently in and out, angling his head to watch me as I sucked at him.

“That’s it,” he groaned. “Prepare me to take you. Get me wet. Very wet. I’m going to fuck you hard tonight. So hard and so long that you won’t be able to leave my bed tomorrow.”

With a deep growl, he bent over me, bracing his hands on the bed, and thrust faster, forcing me to gasp air when I could. His balls slapped my chin as he surged down my throat. And still, I wanted more. I grabbed his ass and pulled him to me, urging him on.

“Oh, fuck!” Zay shouted and lurched back, yanking out of my mouth. “Get on your hands and knees.”

Panting, I rolled onto my belly, then pushed up onto my forearms. As I got into position, so did the Dragon King, right between my legs. His warm hands kneaded my ass, spreading the cheeks, exposing me. The pad of his thumb rubbed my opening, teasing me before sweeping down to brush against my sacs and lightly squeeze my cock. As my ass twitched in delight, his wet cock pressed against me, then slowly worked its way in. Back and forth it went, gently, until he was fully sheathed. And that’s when his control broke.

With a roar, the Dragon King thrust forward. The slap of his hips quickened until I was digging my fingers into the mattress for leverage. My hair swished around my face, my cock slapped my belly, and pleasure speared up my spine. I mewed and whimpered like a wounded animal, but they were all expressions of ecstasy.

“Your ass is made for me,” Zay growled. “The perfect channel for my cock.”

Well, that did it for me. I shrieked wildly and came across the blanket.

Xa'din growled and grunted through my orgasm, never slowing, then spread my cheeks wide. Weak from spent pleasure, I glanced over my shoulder to see his stare locked on where our bodies joined. His teeth were bared, and his muscles clenched with every thrust. The slap of flesh echoed in my ears, summoning fresh arousal from me. I moaned and laid my forehead on the silk sheets, letting lust take me along with the Dragon King.

With his usual roar, Zay pulled out and lashed my back with hot streams. It went on longer than usual, and I looked back at him again, hoping that it was the mating urge. But he soon finished and fell to the side, onto his back. I sighed and went flat on my belly, angling toward him so I wouldn't lie in my release.

“Give me a second and I'll get a cloth to clean you off,” Zay murmured.

I turned my head to look at him. “What did Patli say?”

Xa'din flinched. He glanced at me, then got up and went into the bathroom. A few seconds later, he returned with a wet cloth. After cleaning my back, he tossed the cloth on the floor and sat down on the bed.

“Patli said that he had to stop you from opening the temple.”

“It’s a temple?” I sat up, absently crumpling the stained blanket and shoving it aside.

As I said, the Dragon God drawled.

Shh!

Rude, he huffed.

“Yes,” Xa’din went on. “According to him, centuries ago, our Goddess imprisoned her lover inside it.”

“Her lover? The Dragon God?”

“Apparently.” He ran a hand through his hair and sighed. “I don’t know if it’s the truth, but he was ... I’m certain that he believed it.”

“Why did she imprison the God?”

“Patli says that the God was evil. He hurt our people, and Ensarena had to stop him. Since he’s a god, she couldn’t kill him, so she trapped him in their temple.”

“He hurt Dragons?” I asked.

“Patli didn’t know specifics.” Zay shrugged.

Because I hurt no Dragons! Karadas snarled.

“The carvings say that he made his worshipers hurt people,” I said.

“Yes, I recall that.”

“But we only have those writings and what Patli told you as proof.”

Xa'din lifted his brows. “Are you saying that you don't trust our Goddess?”

Yes, is that what you are saying, Thas?

“No, I trust Ensarena. But I don't trust historical records. They are written by conquerors. And if Patli can't give you specifics, I don't know if we can trust him.”

“We obviously can't trust him,” Xa'din growled. “He tried to kill you.”

“And he says he did it to protect the temple?”

“To keep it sealed. He's part of a secret order of Dragons who have trained to guard the temple and make sure that the God never escapes. They caused the landslide, and when that didn't stop us, they planned to create a greater calamity. But then they saw you press your hand to the stone.”

“Press my hand to the stone?” I tried not to sound guilty. “And? I'm interpreting the carvings; I often touch them.”

“Yes, but Patli said that during this instance, you flinched and when you touched it a second time, you jerked back, away from the stone. They’ve been watching you since then, and he says that you’ve been acting strangely. They were afraid that the Dragon God had tainted you. Patli believes the God can speak through the stone if a person listens.”

“I did translate a warning about listening at the doors,” I admitted. “I didn’t understand what it meant. But Lord Mazah said that warnings like that are commonly carved into tombstones here. Something about giving the dead enough energy to speak.”

“That’s true.” Xa’din frowned. “So, you haven’t heard anything? Any ... voices?”

“Voices coming through the stone? No.”

Oh, that was a very cunning answer. Well done, Philosopher.

“You *have* been acting strange, Thas.” He took my hand. “The other night, when you shouted, I found you standing beside the bed, staring into the dark as if you’d been speaking to someone.”

“I told you, that was just a nightmare.”

“Do you remember what the nightmare was about?”

“No, of course not. I rarely remember my dreams.” I leaned forward. “Zay, are you saying that there is a group of Dragons who want to kill me?”

“Patli gave me the names of the other members in his order.” He grimaced, then went on. “I’ve sent knights out to find them, but I don’t have high hopes. I expect they fled when they heard about Patli.”

“Is he ... alive?”

“Yes. He’s in a cell below the palace. I thought it best to keep him alive in case I need to question him again.”

“I see,” I whispered. “I might want to ask him about the God.”

“You are not getting anywhere near that man!”

“He can’t hurt me while he’s locked in a cell.”

“I don’t care.”

“Zay, don’t you want to know if there really is a god trapped behind those doors?”

“Patli believes there is. He believes it enough to attempt your murder. You, the lover of his king.”

“Yes, but Patli only believes because it’s a story that’s been passed down to him.”

“Secret orders don’t form because of stories.”

“Yes, they do. Stories, myths, legends—they’re all the same. We won’t know anything for certain until we open those

doors.”

“I’m not sure that I want to.”

The Dragon God growled.

“I’m not sure either,” I admitted.

Xa’din looked at me in surprise.

I shrugged. “Why take the risk of unleashing an evil god?”

“Yes, exactly?”

“The only reason I can come up with is curiosity. Knowledge. I’d like to know what happened and maybe, if there is a god, he will be grateful to those who free him.”

I would indeed. I’d be very thankful.

You’d do best to shut up now, I said in my mind.

Karadas snorted.

“Having a god indebted to me does sound intriguing,” Xa’din said. “But I don’t believe the risk of what he might do to our people and our world is worth it. I think I’m going to call off the excavation.”

“Surely studying the doors won’t hurt. I still want to translate the carvings.”

“You said there was a warning about listening,” he reminded me. “And there are Dragons out there who are trying to kill you because they believe that you’ve already heard the God.”

“But they’re on the run now.”

“Thas, I don’t want you going back to the dig site again.”

“Then I have no reason to be here,” I said softly.

He took my hand and kissed it. With a sexy look, he asked, “Don’t you?”

“I would if you gave me one.”

Xa’din grinned. “I want you to stay, Thas. Is that reason enough?”

I leaned in to kiss him. Just before our lips met, I said, “For now.”

Chapter Thirty-Four

Xa'din fulfilled his vow and made love to me until my legs gave out and all I could do was lie there. Only then did he curl his body protectively around mine and go to sleep. That night, in my exhausted slumber, the Dragon God entered my dreams.

In my dream, I walked through gleaming white corridors, wide enough to fit three carriages side by side and tall enough to fit fifteen of them stacked. Light was everywhere, bouncing off the channels of water that ran along the walls to create undulating reflections on the ceiling, the sort that one might see underwater. Body moving without my bidding, I stepped into a room that seemed the exact opposite of the bright corridor.

Slabs of polished jet coated the walls, ceiling, and floor, inlaid with diamonds that formed constellations. It felt as if I had stepped into the night sky. And in the center of this midnight skyscape was a round bed, similar to the one in the King's chambers, its platform made of the same stone as the rest of the room. No pedestals ringed the bed and the room held no other furniture so that the bed melded with the darkness and became a part of the faux sky.

“Circular beds honor the Gods,” a velvety voice said. “They represent the Sun and the Moon.”

I turned to find Karadas standing in the doorway. With at least three feet of height on me, it felt more like looming. He was an enormous man. I suppose it was divine proportions, but it was intimidating. I backed up.

“I can adjust this body to suit you.” Shrinking as he walked, he moved across the black floor on bare feet. By the

time he reached me, he was closer to Xa'din's height. His build was bulkier, though, more like the Dragon warriors of Zaru.

“Still intimidated?” He lifted a pale brow. “I won't hurt you, Thas.”

I stared at the breadth of his shoulders, his fair skin showing through the sheer black robe he wore. My gaze went down his sculpted chest, free of hair, to the waistband of his silk pants. “You are at your leisure, I see.”

“What else am I to be here?” He held out his hand. “Come with me. I want to show you something.”

“What?”

“My past. In particular, the day your goddess imprisoned me.”

“I don't know if I want to see that.”

“It was not pleasant, but I think it will help you understand me and it will prove that I speak the truth.”

I reached for him, and he tucked my hand around his bicep, then escorted me from the room. We went down the white hallway and through his temple, past rooms of astonishing beauty where light spheres floated amid dazzling displays of dancing water. But that was the only movement to be found. The temple was empty except for us, and thick curtains covered the windows.

The Dragon God led me through his throne room, where the altar stood in a large alcove to the side of the divine dais, and then we went down a long corridor to the temple's entrance. He stopped me before a pair of massive doors the same size and shape as the ones I'd been examining but formed of precious metal—one silver and the other gold. The gold bore an image of the sun while the silver showcased the moon, with delicate designs around them.

“I can only share my memories from my perspective,” he said. “It can be a little jarring. Brace yourself.”

I nodded, and he took my hands in his.

Suddenly, I was in the same room but seeing it from a higher perspective. I held the hand of the man I loved, and he was smiling up at me, his dark eyes full of adoration. We headed to our bedchambers, but a grating rumble made us pause. I turned around to see the temple doors closing.

“What's this?” the Dragon God's voice came from my throat.

Then I saw her, Ensarena, my partner in creation and ex-lover. She stood beyond the doors, glaring at me.

“Ensa?” I let go of Zekayotl's hand and turned to face her. “What are you doing?”

“If you want him, you can have him,” she called to me. “For eternity!” She clapped her hands together, and the doors slammed shut.

I ran for the temple doors, my heart racing. She couldn't. She wouldn't! I didn't stop but launched myself at the metal doors. With a grunt, I hit, and they held. To withstand the force of a god, they had to be reinforced by a goddess. She had done something to them. I laid a hand on the silver of my door and felt a fiery magic thrum through it.

Jerking back, I shouted, "Ensarena! Don't do this. Zekayotl will not survive without sustenance!"

"You should have thought of that before you took such a frail thing to your bed!" her voice came faintly through the doors.

"You cannot do this! You are not strong enough to hold me forever!"

"I think you've sorely underestimated me, darling. I don't need you anymore. And neither do the Dragons. I'll look after them now. Alone!"

"Ensa!" I pounded my fist and magic against the doors, but her Fire countered my Water.

And then another rumbling began, this one shook the whole temple.

"Karadas?" Zeka called to me.

I ran to my lover and cradled him to my chest, bending my body over him to protect him from whatever Ensarena did next. "It will be all right, my love. Don't be afraid."

“I’m not,” he said, though I felt him tremble.

The temple shuddered and creaked, but then it went silent. Very silent.

“Come, Zeka.” I took his hand and led him back toward my living quarters. “We will find a way free.”

But the first room I came to was darker than it should be. Something covered the windows, and it wasn’t draperies. I left Zekayotl in the hallway and went to inspect them. Beyond the glass, pressed against it, was dirt. No, not dirt, but stone. She had buried us alive.

“That traitorous bitch!” I snarled.

“Karadas?”

I took a deep breath and calmed myself. I would find a way out. I just had to do it before Zeka wasted away. I had some stores of food in the temple, and if I rationed them for him, they should last a month. Then I’d have another few weeks before he succumbed to starvation, maybe a little more, depending on his strength. At least we wouldn’t have to worry about water or air. I could produce one and draw the other from it.

I put a smile on my face and returned to Zeka. “Come, my love. It will be all right. I’ll get us out of here soon.

“I know you will,” he said confidently.

I gasped as the memory ended, and found myself back in my proper body, staring at the Dragon God. We were in his throne room again.

“He ... she imprisoned you in here with your lover?” I asked.

Karadas waved a hand toward the right and there, beyond the altar, on a stone platform against the wall, lay a mummified corpse. “He lived for three months after she entombed us, then died in my arms.”

“You couldn’t create food for him?”

“People, all people, are made in the image of their gods. Dragons are lesser versions of us. As you cannot create life without a woman, Thus, neither can I. It is only through two opposites coming together that the spark of life manifests. Ensarena and I are powerful on our own, but together, we can create worlds. With her, I could have filled this temple with food for Zeka. I could have strengthened him and even brought him back from death. Alone, I am limited to the magic of Water and Moonlight. I have some other divine abilities as well. I can alter inanimate objects, even manifest them, but the living ...” He shook his head. “Without her, I can only destroy life, not create it. If it was my magic that hurt Zeka, it would have been different. I could have healed him or simply pulled back my power. But it wasn’t me. It was his body. The weakness of being immortal but not invulnerable. Not divine. Believe me, I have spent years contemplating my own weaknesses and how I could not save him.”

“I’m so sorry,” I whispered.

The Dragon God looked away from his lover’s body, back to me. “I’ve been alone with Zeka’s corpse and the

memories of him ever since. I'm tired, Thas. Tired of being trapped and tired of being sad. Help me."

"I can't make this decision, one that will affect the entire world, based on emotion. I must be certain that freeing you will be good for Serai, not just you. Believe me, I want to help you, but I cannot discount the words of my goddess. Not only did she imprison you, but she also formed a secret order of Dragons to ensure that you stay buried. It's hard for me to believe that she did all of that because of wounded pride."

He nodded. "I understand. I struggled to believe she was capable of such senseless cruelty as well. I will try to find a way to prove myself to you."

"I really am sorry about Zekayotl. I can't imagine what that was like."

"It was like having my heart torn out of my chest and eaten in front of me."

With those words, the dream faded, and I opened my eyes to see the Dragon King asleep beside me. I tried to imagine being trapped somewhere with him, knowing that he would perish if I couldn't free us. Then watching him waste away. Grow weaker. Die. And then to be trapped forever with his corpse. I shuddered.

The memories had been real; I could feel it in my bones. Karadas had shared the most horrible moment of his life with me. Well, one of them. The day his lover died must have been far worse. But it was more important for me to see the Goddess and hear her words. Ensarena hadn't called Karadas a murderer or evil. She spoke only of his love for a Dragon man. It was hard not to believe him after hearing that.

Still, I had to be careful. Freeing Karadas might hurt *my* lover. It might hurt everyone on Serai. I couldn't rush off and break a goddess's spell just because I felt bad for someone. More facts needed to be found before I could be certain. Even if Karadas was good when he was first imprisoned, centuries of being trapped underground could have hurt his mind.

My mind is clear, little one. Karadas said. *I am a god. I can survive anything.*

Could you at least pretend to not be listening in on my every thought?

My apologies. I will try to respect your privacy in the future.

Chapter Thirty-Five

The hunt for the Order of the Sun—that's what Patli's group called themselves—had gone on for a week, with Xa'din's knights searching the jungle for any sign of the men and women who Patli had given up. Patli himself remained in a cell below the palace in case the King wanted to question him again. Although I had the entire palace to roam, I felt imprisoned as well because the King refused to let me out of the palace.

“This is ridiculous!” I whined on the eighth evening as we prepared for bed. “They're gone, Zay. You know they're gone. They fled the kingdom as soon as you started questioning Patli. I know I would have.”

“We don't know that for certain and until we do, you are not going beyond the palace walls,” the Dragon King declared. “Now, take off your clothes.”

“If that's your way of seducing me, it's abominable.” I crossed my arms and glared at him.

“It's my way of telling you to stop whining and get in bed.” He shoved down his pants—no underwear, as usual—and slid beneath the covers. “I don't have to seduce you; I know you want to have sex with me.”

“That's even worse!” I pointed at him. “We haven't been together long enough for you to get complacent with me.”

Xa'din's expression softened. “I'm not complacent; I'm comfortable.”

“Ugh, that’s the same thing! It hasn’t even been a month!”

He laughed as he got out of bed and walked around the foot—if I could even call the bottom of a round bed the foot—then stopped in front of me. “I’m sorry. I think it’s a good thing that I feel so comfortable with you already. I’ve never felt relaxed around a lover before.”

I deflated. “You haven’t?”

“Of course not. At first, I thought that maybe my concubines truly wanted me, and I tried to give them pleasure, but I quickly learned that it was the crown they desired, not me. After that, sex became nothing more than a physical release, something I had to get through as quickly as possible so my partners wouldn’t suffer. How could I ever be comfortable around a person who had to endure my attention?”

Ouch. That made me want to both cringe and comfort him, but I knew he would appreciate neither. So I just asked, “And now?”

Xa’din grinned wickedly. “Now sex is so much more.”

I glanced down and saw the King’s cock rising. As I stared at him, his hands went to the ties of my tunic and undid them. With a flick of his fingers, he pushed the material off my shoulders and let it fall to the ground. But instead of going for the ties of my pants next, Zay pulled me into an embrace, hunching to press our chests together, and with our hearts aligned, he kissed me long enough to ease my irritation and draw out my desire.

Xa'din drew back and nipped my lips. "With you, sex is something I can take my time with." He nibbled his way to my ear. "I can fully enjoy it. I want to explore all the ways we can pleasure each other."

"You do?" my voice went squeaky.

"I do," his voice dropped into a growl. "Is there anything you'd like to try? Anything else, that is? I enjoyed your mutual masturbation trick."

"Uh ..." I've never been good at being sexy, and coming up with something he might find exciting, something that we hadn't tried yet, made me blush in frustrated embarrassment.

"It's all right, luvari. I have enough fantasies for the both of us."

"Fantasies?" I swallowed roughly. "Like what?"

"Like having sex in the sky."

"Yes, but we did that. What else have you fantasized about?"

"Mostly about things that I wouldn't actually want to happen. It's only the thought that stirs me."

"Like what?" I asked again.

"Bending you over the King's table in the middle of dinner and fucking you in front of my court."

I suddenly couldn't breathe. Not because I was shocked, which I was. It was the sudden rush of lust that stole my breath. The thrill that raced through me at the thought of him pounding into me as his courtiers watched. All those people. Their eyes on my naked body as their king took me. His ass clenching with every thrust. His teeth bared. His hands gripping my hips. My hands clutching the table, or maybe reaching back to grab his thigh. They'd see that huge cock sliding into me and the way my cock wept with desire as he—

“Ah, that arouses you too, I see,” Xa'din purred as he kneaded my ass. “But I would never do it. I couldn't share the sight of you naked and receiving me. That is for me alone.”

“No, I wouldn't want that either. But you're right; the thought is exciting.”

“Maybe we could try my horseback fantasy.” Xa'din started nibbling my neck again.

“Horseback?”

“Me in the saddle and you on my lap.” He looked up and grinned. “The motion of the horse would do the work for us. And if we took one of the lesser-used roads, we wouldn't have to worry about being seen.”

“But we might be.”

He grinned broader. “And that will make it even more exciting.”

“Until some poor person happens upon us,” I scoffed. “Then you’d get upset, and that is never a good thing. Especially when horses are involved.”

Zay chuckled. “You’re right. Maybe we shouldn’t risk the horse ride.”

“We could pretend that we are on a horse.” I pulled him toward the bed, then pushed him back on it.

As Xa’din laid down, I took off my pants and underwear. He licked his lips as he watched me, his gaze going seductively dark, even his light eye. And then he rubbed that long, beautiful cock, working it from base to tip.

“If you sit on your heels, you could mimic the motion of a horse,” I suggested breathlessly.

Xa’din lifted his brows as he got to his knees, then sat back on his heels. “Let’s go for a ride, luvari.” He held out his hand. “But I warn you, I’m going to buck like a wild stallion.”

“I do hope so, Your Majesty.”

I made a brief detour to a side table to retrieve the bottle of oil from its drawer. After pouring a little into my hand, I put the bottle back, then carefully cupped my palm as I climbed onto the mattress. Xa’din leaned back on his hands and presented his shaft to me. Grinning, I coated him in the oil, then reached behind me to rub the rest between my ass cheeks.

“Get me inside you now,” Xa’din growled as he sat up.

“I’m right here.” I straddled his lap. “No need to get gruff.”

“You’re taking too long.” He grabbed my hips and positioned me over his dick.

“You said you could take your time to enjoy me.” I reached back and guided him to me, then sat down to work myself onto him.

The argument vanished as I sank slowly onto his shaft, our words turning into moans and sighs. With me controlling the movements, I could take Zay deeper and angle him the way I wanted. I did just that, sliding down until I was resting on his lap. Then I undulated and squeezed.

Zay let out a grunting groan. “That feels amazing.” One of his hands trailed in from my hip and started stroking my cock.

“So does that.” Head lolling, I leaned back and braced myself on the bed.

“You are so beautiful,” he whispered, his free hand coasting up my belly to my throat.

But then he abruptly grabbed my waist and yanked me back up. My hands went to his shoulders instinctively, and I lifted a brow at him.

“Hang on, luvari,” Zay growled. “It’s time to ride.”

Then he started to thrust. At first, it was just an angling of his hips, but he quickly got the motion he wanted and lifted onto his knees, bucking into me. I clutched him tighter, just as I had my runaway horse, and the King went wild beneath me.

“Can you tame me, luvari?” Xa’din panted. “Or do you like me wild?”

“I want you wild!” I tried to help him by lifting myself in time with his thrusts, but he growled and tightened his hold on my hips.

“Then let go of the reins; do not try to control me.”

“Never, Zay.” I bent my head into the curve of his neck and just held on.

It felt as if he were driving himself into my soul, implanting a part of him there for me to keep forever. My body welcomed him, thrilled at his invasion, and begged for more. And the Dragon King gave it. He gave and took, gave and took, gave and took for what seemed like hours. And he never tired, never slowed, just kept bucking beneath me. A horse that would never be tamed.

Bestial sounds came from Xa’din, and his grip tightened. I knew that meant he was close, but I couldn’t hold out any longer. The constant rubbing of our bellies against my cock combined with his deep thrusts to send me over, and I threw my head back to cry out in bliss. Xa’din snarled as I came on both of us, his stare going from my twitching cock to my face. With a primal sound, he lifted me off his cock and laid me back on the bed. Looming over me on his knees, looking like a god—and believe me, I knew exactly what that looks like—Zay aimed his cock at my chest and added his release to mine.

Panting, the Dragon King stared down at me for several long moments, a look of sheer satisfaction on his face, and then bent forward onto his forearms to kiss me. “You’re right, luvari. We don’t need to go anywhere to fulfill our fantasies. All we need is each other.”

Chapter Thirty-Six

Later that night, I was dreaming about the Dragon God when someone roughly shook me awake. I still had the image of Karadas in my mind. He'd been running through his temple, battering at windows, breaking the glass against the stone beyond, and trying to find a way out. All while I shouted at him to stop. It was a memory of Karadas's past, so I shouldn't have bothered, but I couldn't help it. His panic and pain hurt me.

"What's happened?" I blinked in the darkness and found Xa'din looming over me.

"Who the fuck is Karadas?" Xa'din growled.

"Huh?"

"You were shouting his name in your sleep."

Oh, fuck, Karadas said in my mind. Lie, Thas. Tell him it's a relative who died.

No. I think it's time he knew about you.

That's not a good idea. You've kept this from him for too long. He will not thank you for your honesty now.

I sat up, pushing Xa'din back gently as I did. Moonlight streamed in through the open balcony doors, illuminating his furious expression.

"It's not what you're thinking," I said.

“And what’s that?” his voice had gone very low and deadly.

“That he’s an ex-lover.”

“No? Then who is he?”

“First, let me say that I wanted to tell you about him, but I thought you’d think I was crazy. And then Patli confessed, and I panicked. I should have told you then, but I was afraid to, and the longer it went on, the harder it was to—”

“Who the fuck is he?!” The Dragon King roared.

“He’s the Dragon God.”

Xa’din sat back on his heels, his expression going blank, then baffled. “What?”

“Karadas is the name of our god. The god who is trapped inside his own temple.”

“And how *the fuck* do you know his name? More importantly, why are you calling it out in your sleep?”

“So, uh, when I was translating the Ancient Draconian, I, well ... after the landslide, a crack appeared in one of the doors. I laid my hand over it, and Karadas was able to establish a connection with me.”

“I asked you if you were speaking to the God. I specifically mentioned you touching the stone, and you scoffed at it. You denied everything Patli said about you.”

“Yes, I know.”

“You said that you hadn’t heard his voice.”

“Actually, I said that I didn’t hear a voice *through the stone*, and I didn’t, so I answered truthfully.”

His eyes went twitchy. “That is a liar’s justification.”

I grimaced. “Yes, all right. I twisted things because I was afraid to tell you.”

“And you’ve been talking to this unknown entity since then?”

“He’s not unknown. He’s our god, Xa’din, and he’s shared memories with me. I’ve seen Ensarena trap him in the temple and heard what she said to him. She didn’t mention him hurting people, only his love for a Dragon. She was furious that he had left her for another man. She locked them in together and—”

“Stop,” he said crisply.

“Xa’din, I know I should have told you—”

“You should have told me the very first day he spoke to you! You should have told me every day that followed. You

should have told me before you screamed his name in my bed!”

“I’m sorry.”

In a low voice, he said, “Get out.”

“What?”

He grabbed me by my upper arm and hauled me out of bed. “Get the fuck out!”

I gaped at him for a second before scrambling for my clothes. I pulled on my pants and got them tied, but didn’t bother with my tunic, just bundled it up with my boots, snatched up my satchel, and hurried for the door. I had never feared him as I did at that moment and it was crushing.

“I’m sorry, Zay. I really am.”

“I said, get out!” He pointed at the door.

I rushed into the corridor, where several knights were standing near the door, looking very uncertain. They scowled when they saw the state of me.

“My lord, is all well with the King?” one of them asked.

“The King is fine. He’s just furious with me. Go back to your posts. Believe me, you don’t want to go in there.” I swept past them and went straight for the main door of the royal wing.

Inside, my chest clenched with pain and regret. Xa'din was right to be angry; I should have told him about the Dragon God as soon as I heard his voice. It was just a secret that had gotten out of hand.

You weren't meant for him, Thas, the Dragon God said.

You don't understand. He wasn't telling me to merely get out of his chambers. He wants me to leave the kingdom. I have to go.

No, he doesn't.

Yes, he does. I know him. He's enraged, and for good reason. He's probably afraid of what he'll do to me, so he wants me as far away as possible. Fuck, I'm afraid of it too.

But you can't leave! You need to free me. You are meant to be with me, Thas.

I'm sorry, Karadas. I need more time to think about that.

So, you're going to leave Ha'tezan to think it over?! And then what will you do when you decide to free me?

I ... I don't know. But I can't go to the temple now. If I tarry, he may come after me.

As long as you get to me before he does, that will not matter.

“My lord, you are up early.”

I stopped and turned toward the voice. It was Lord Mazah.

“Lord Mazah, I’m glad I ran into you. I must leave the kingdom, and I would have hated to go without saying goodbye to you.”

“Leave? Why?”

“The Dragon King and I have had an argument, and he’s ordered me to go. Could you convey my regrets to the other scholars? Perhaps we could write to each other and—”

“You can’t go now!” He grabbed my hand. Then he looked around and lowered his voice. “The others scholars and I have been sneaking out of the palace early every morning to go to the site. We’ve been digging out the doors for you, and we’ve made good progress.”

I shall reward this man, the Dragon God said.

“You must stop that,” I whispered. “If the King discovers that you’ve gone against his wishes he’ll—” I looked around, then waved him down the hallway with me. “Let’s move this discussion to my guest room. I need to gather my things anyway.”

“Very well. Here. Let me take your boots so you may put your tunic on.”

“Thank you.” I handed him the boots and slid into my tunic.

My chambers weren't far from the royal wing so by the time I had the tunic tied, we had reached my door. I opened it, took my boots from Mazah, and waved him inside. After locking the door, I pulled on my boots, then headed to the dressing room.

Mazah followed me. “What could you have possibly done to anger the King enough to banish you from the kingdom?”

“I withheld information.”

“What information?”

I looked over at him and sighed. “I know what's behind those doors, Mazah.”

“You do?” His eyes went round and he took a step toward me. “What?”

“A trapped god. *Our* god. His name is Karadas, and he was imprisoned by our goddess for falling in love with someone else. A Dragon.”

“No,” he whispered. “The Goddess would never be so petty.”

“She did it. I saw his memory of the event.”

“But, Lord Thas, if he is a god—and there’s no way you can be certain of that—he would have great magic. Enough magic to deceive you with images of his own creation.”

I take back my earlier words, Karadas said. This man will receive no reward.

“I know. That’s why I haven’t released him.”

“How do you release him?”

“There’s a counterspell, but I don’t know it yet. First, I need to decide if he should be released.”

I can tell you the spell now, and you can tell this man. Then, if you decide to free me, you could get a message to him, and he could open the gate for me.

I could tell him how to do it in a message too.

Yes, all right, Karadas huffed.

“How do you know all of this? How was he able to show you things?” Mazah asked.

“That day I examined the crack in the door, his magic came through and established a connection between us.”

“I knew something had upset you!”

“Yes, I was startled by it. Karadas has been speaking into my mind ever since that day. He even shows me visions and comes to me in my dreams. I think I believe him, but I’m not sure if I can trust him yet. If I’m wrong about him, I could unleash a terrible god upon Serai.”

Mazah went somber. “Yes, this is a difficult decision. But you need to be here to make it, Lord Thas. Please, don’t leave.”

“Where would I go that the King wouldn’t learn of it? I didn’t bring a lot of coin with me, and I don’t know anyone in the cities.”

“I have a cousin in Tochlena; you could stay with him.”

“I’d hate to put your cousin in danger.”

“The King would not hurt him for harboring you. You’re not a criminal, merely a keeper of secrets.” He smiled gently. “Here. I’ll help you with your trunk.”

“All right, but just for a few days. Maybe the King will calm down and change his mind.”

“Exactly what I was thinking!” Mazah said brightly and picked up one end of my trunk. “He is a very reasonable man. I’m sure he just needs some time to think things over.”

Chapter Thirty-Seven

I had a small hope that Xa'din would come running out of the palace and stop me from leaving. But Mazah and I rode away just as dawn was brightening the sky and no one stopped us; the guards didn't even question where we were going.

As we crossed the bridge and left the city, I hunched in on myself, my satchel slung over my shoulder and my trunk strapped on the saddle behind me. I kept seeing Xa'din's furious face as he yanked me out of his bed and demanded that I leave. No discussion, no listening to my explanations, he just cast me out as if I meant nothing to him. Just another lover he didn't care about. I knew I was in the wrong, that I had betrayed and hurt him, but still ...

"Fuck," I whispered. I always screwed things up, but I had hoped that this time would be different.

You will get over him soon enough, Karadas said, calm again now that I was staying.

Could you, please, keep quiet for the next few hours? I can't listen to you right now. I think I'll lose my composure.

The Dragon God didn't answer, just went silent, and I thanked him for it. Meanwhile, Mazah chatted amiably, doing his best to lighten my mood. I wanted to curl up and cry, but I had to hold it together long enough to get to Mazah's cousin's house. Maybe then I could find a quiet place to mourn. Yes, mourn. It felt like a death to me. As if I had killed something beautiful by keeping Karadas a secret.

"Dear Goddess!" Mazah exclaimed and abruptly stopped his horse.

I automatically pulled on the reins and looked up to see that someone had landed in the middle of the road. Not Xa'din unfortunately. Although I did recognize the Litoto man.

“Yaotl?” I asked in surprise.

“Yes, it is I, Sir Yaotl of the Litoto. And here you are, pretty Dragon. I have found you without the Dragon King breathing down your neck. A rare opportunity that I couldn't let pass me by.” Yaotl posed with his fists on his hips and his glorious wings extended, reminding me of what Xa'din had called him—a strutting peacock.

“Not so rare anymore,” I said.

“Oh?” Yaotl dropped his hands. “Why not?”

“The Dragon King has cast me out.”

Yaotl's jewel-colored wings rustled. “How delicious. Then you are ... unattached?”

“The King will change his mind,” Mazah said. “Until then, Lord Thas is going to stay with my family. Now, shoo!” He waved his hands at Yaotl.

Yaotl laughed brightly. “Just because I have feathered wings, it doesn't mean I have feathers for brains. You can't shoo me away like a common sparrow.”

“Then step aside, Litoto. I am a lord of the Dragon Court.”

“Ooooooh a lord.” Yaotl rolled his eyes. Then he looked at me. “Come and stay with me, pretty Dragon. I will not hold you hostage as the Dragon King has.”

“How do you know about that?” I narrowed my stare at him.

“I am a Litoto knight.”

“He means that he’s a spy,” Mazah said. “That’s why he’s here; he’s patrolling the area around the city.”

“My people must always be aware of what yours are doing,” Yaotl said with a bit of a sneer. Then he cocked his head at me. “So, King Xa’din has been holding you against your will. You should be pleased that he let you go.”

“It wasn’t against my will. There was an attempt on my life, and he was trying to protect me.”

Yaotl’s eyes narrowed. “And now he thinks you’re safe?”

“Well, uh, no. We still haven’t caught everyone responsible, but I’m sure they’ve left the island.”

“Then I must insist that you come with me.” Yaotl stepped forward, ran his hand soothingly over my horse’s neck, and lifted the other hand to me. “There is no safer place for you to be than Tapazolli.”

“Where is that?”

“It’s a Litoto mountain city,” Mazah said. “Unreachable except by flight.”

“It’s the crown city of the Litoto kingdom,” Yaotl corrected with a grimace at Mazah. Then he softened his expression for me. “But I must insist that you allow me to carry you. If a dragon approaches, it will not go over well.”

“You can’t go with him,” Mazah said to me.

“Why not?” I asked. “He’s right; I’ll be safe there. No one will find me, not even King Xa’din. If the King changes his mind, tell him he can send word to me in Tapazolli.”

“Send word how?” Mazah waved out an arm in frustration. “You heard the Litoto, dragons aren’t welcome and there is no way to reach the city on foot.”

“I will come here daily to patrol,” Yaotl said. “If King Xa’din wishes to speak with Lord Thas, he can send word to me here.” Then he looked at me. “Well, pretty Dragon? Would you like to see the Litoto kingdom?”

“Yes, I would.” I unfastened my trunk and handed it to him.

“Lord Thas!” Mazah turned his horse around so he could face me.

“Thank you so much for your help, Lord Mazah. But I really prefer to not put your cousin in the path of the King’s wrath. Yaotl doesn’t care.”

Yaotl laughed as he set my trunk down. “That’s for certain.” He reached up to help me out of the saddle. “You’ll have to carry your belongings, so I may carry you.”

“Yes, all right.” I got down and picked up the trunk.

“Lord Thas, His Majesty will be very displeased if he discovers you are with the Litoto. We are not on the best terms with them.”

“Yes, I know. Especially this Litoto.” I leaned over to mock-whisper to Yaotl, “He really doesn’t like you.”

“The feeling is mutual.”

I chuckled, then went to shake Mazah’s hand and give him the reins of my horse. “I’ll be fine, Lord Mazah. If nothing changes, I’ll meet you at the dig site in a week, all right? That should be long enough for things to settle down around the palace.”

Mazah grimaced, sighed, then said, “Yes, all right.”

“Good. I’m glad we’ve got that settled.” Yaotl wrapped his arms around me from behind. “Goodbye, Lord Mazah. Tell your king that I’ll take good care of our pretty Dragon.”

Then Yaotl shot into the sky, and I called down to Mazah, “Goodbye! Thank you!”

Mazah waved up at me, a helpless look on his face.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Yaotl and I flew over the Axunktli Jungle for several miles before a mountain range came into view, rising from the lush greenery in sharp indigo peaks. Winged people flew in the sky around the mountains and several of them approached us as we drew closer. A patrol.

Yaotl had to explain who I was and that I would be his guest for a while. The fact that I wasn't from Ha'tezan worked in my favor. Once they learned that, the winged troop ceased their questioning and escorted us to a stone ledge.

After we landed, Yaotl hoisted my trunk onto his shoulder, folded his wings, and took my hand with his free one. "Come with me, pretty Dragon. My place is this way."

"Could you call me Thas, please?"

Yaotl laughed and squeezed my hand. "As you like, pretty Thas."

I rolled my eyes.

The broad ledge extended into a crowded cave. To get to one of the many openings in the cave wall, we had to dodge winged people, both coming and going. A few scowled at me, but most ignored me altogether, intent on whatever they were about. The corridor we entered was more of a tunnel, just wide enough to be comfortable for someone with wings. But when we came upon a Litoto man heading in the opposite direction, we had to turn sideways to edge past each other.

"It's a little cramped for a kingdom," I said.

“All the passages near the landings are like this,” Yaotl said. “They’re easier to defend.”

“Ah. From Dragons?”

He shrugged. “There have been a few great battles between us. Enough to warrant precautions.”

“Is there current hostility between your people? Because I saw several Litotos at the Dragon Court.”

“Not hostility exactly. Some of us hold grudges for longer and some of us are too young to remember the last war.”

“Was it led by Xa’din?”

“Huh?” Yaotl frowned at me. “Oh, no. If he had led a war against us, I would have attacked him that day when I saved you. No, it was his predecessor.”

“That must have been a long time ago.”

“King Xa’din has only been ruling for about fifty years.”

“Really?” I asked in surprise. “I don’t know why, but I assumed he’d been King for much longer.”

“Honestly, I don’t have a problem with him. I don’t know him well enough for that. But he’s a Ha’tezan Dragon,

which is bad enough, then add to it his curse, and I just figured he's an asshole."

I burst out laughing. "Well, I don't believe he's cursed, but he is a bit of an asshole."

"You wouldn't be prejudiced or anything, would you?" He winked at me.

"Not at all. Xa'din can be wise and sweet, but when he wants to be terrible, he excels at it."

Yaotl snorted a laugh and flung back his dark green locks. "That's all Dragons, isn't it?"

"No, it's not." I gave him a pointed look.

"Oh, yes. Present company excluded." He winked again. Then he led me around a corner and suddenly, the corridor was wider and warmer. "Now, we're on the edge of the crown city. I keep a place out here with the rest of the soldiers."

"Another defense tactic?"

"What?"

"Having the soldiers sleep on the outskirts of the kingdom."

"Ah, yes. Any invaders have to get past us first. I'll show you around a bit after we set your trunk in my room. You hungry?"

“Starving!”

“Good. I want to take you to my favorite restaurant. They make the best pastries in the kingdom, and sweets are mandatory after leaving a lover.” One of his colorful wings curved around me to guide me toward a door. “Here we are.”

Yaotl opened the door and ushered me into a tidy apartment with vaulted ceilings and hardwood floors. He set my trunk on the floor next to a wardrobe and waved me toward a dresser. “There’s a comb over there if you’d like to use it.”

“How did you know?” I asked.

I passed by a kitchenette with a dining table on my way to the dresser. The apartment was mostly one large space, divided by delicate furniture. The only exception was the bathroom; I spotted it across the room, through a doorway. It all looked very normal except for the bed, which was high enough that I’d need a ladder to get into it. A ladder or wings. As big as the bed was, it wasn’t dragon-sized, nor was there a ladder in sight. It looked as if I’d be sleeping on the couch. Which was probably for the best.

“Your hair is a mess. We Litoto know better than to wear our hair loose to go flying.” Yaotl flicked a finger at his braids. “I’m sorry; I should have warned you.”

“It’s all right. I’m grateful for your hospitality. Oh, maybe I should have told you that I don’t have a lot of money on me.”

“Why? Do you expect me to charge you for room and board?”

“No, but you mentioned a restaurant.” I brushed out my hair, then flung it back over my shoulder. “I didn’t want to assume you’d pay.”

“You are adorable.” He held out a hand. “Don’t worry about it. We’ll figure out a way for you to pay me back, *Thas*.”

“Thank you, Yaotl. But there’s one more thing I should have said before I accepted your offer.”

“You’re not going to fuck me?” He lifted a brow.

“Probably not. I’m still processing the break-up. Xa’din woke me up, we argued, and he told me to leave. It’s only been a few hours.”

“Oh, so it’s still fresh, eh? Well, nothing gets you over the last better than getting under me.” He wagged his brows at me.

“I think the saying is ‘getting under the next.’”

“Not when I’m an option.” He grinned broader.

“You’re very confident but so casual about it that it doesn’t offend me. In fact, I think I like it.”

“See?” He took my hand again and led me out the door. “My charm is already seducing you. Soon, I’ll have you screaming my name.”

“Please, don’t be mad at me if that isn’t the case.”

“I could never be mad at you, my pretty Thas.” He kissed my hand, then led me into the Litoto Kingdom.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

“Dear Goddess,” I whispered as I stepped onto a terrace with Yaotl.

Yaotl led me to the edge—no railing—and waved a hand toward the city below. “Welcome to Tapazolli.”

I gazed across the vast space, over open-air towers and flat roofs, to the far side of the cavern. If I could even call the space a cavern. It had no ceiling and was much larger than any cavern I’d ever seen. There were parks down there, for fuck’s sake! Parks! And fountains. And carriages rolling down the streets. For a second, I wondered why the winged Litoto would have roads, but then I realized that the carriages would be needed to carry things other than themselves. Because there were shops as well, entire districts of commerce and residential areas. It was indeed a crown city, all hidden within a mountain.

I looked up at the Litotos who flew above the city and the ring of rock that framed the bright sky beyond them. “I thought the only way into the kingdom was through those tunnels?”

“It is.” Yaotl grinned as he stared at the sky. “There’s a magical barrier protecting the city. Even Litotos can’t penetrate it. If those people flew much higher, they’d get a very unpleasant jolt.”

“Yaotl, this is incredible.” I turned to look at him. “Thank you so much for trusting me enough to bring me here. I feel honored just to have seen this place.”

“And that is why I brought you.” He tapped my nose. “I knew you would appreciate it.”

“You hardly know me.”

“I’m a spy, remember?” He wagged his brows at me. “I’ve been watching you at the temple. I know you’re a scholar, not a warrior, just like that silly man who tried to intimidate me.”

“You’ve been watching me?” I widened my eyes at him.

“Well, I had to see what the Dragons were up to at the temple. I didn’t go just to stalk you.” He grinned. “Though it was a lovely bonus.”

“Wait.” I grabbed his wrist. “You said ‘temple.’ Do you know what they unearthed?”

“Don’t you?”

“Yes, but only because I discovered it on my own. The other Dragons didn’t know that it was a temple.”

“They didn’t?”

“No. I mean, they do now, but they didn’t when they first unearthed the doors.”

“But they’re the ones who buried it.”

“I thought Ensarena buried it?”

“Your goddess? Huh, maybe she did. I just know that my people saw your people at the temple when it was buried.”

Ensa probably made them watch as she buried us beneath that mountain, Karadas said grimly. She'd want to impress upon them the importance of leaving me there.

And warn them not to listen to you.

The writings. Yes. I think Ensarena carved the first words to anchor her spell. Then Dragons added to it. She made an example of us while weaving a lie that she was saving Dragonkind from me.

An example. Yes, it was another warning—this is what happens if you dare to love a god. You get buried alive with him.

Exactly.

“Thas?” Yaotl leaned his face into my view.

“Sorry.” I smiled and refocused on him. “So, you know that our god is trapped in there?”

“I do. And you're telling me that the Dragons don't?”

“Well, they know it now. It's the reason someone tried to kill me and why the Dragon King cast me out.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Ensarena formed a secret order of Dragons to guard the temple and keep Karadas trapped.”

“Karadas is the name of your god?”

“Yes. I’m surprised you didn’t know that.”

“It was a long time ago, not everything was recorded. Or maybe I don’t care enough to remember his name.” He shrugged. “So, how did you find out about the trapped god?”

“There was a landslide and—”

Yaotl snorted. “A landslide caused by Dragons.”

“You know about that too?”

“Of course. I told you, I was watching.”

“Those were members of the Order of the Sun. The same Dragons who tried to kill me.”

“I assumed. Go on. You were telling me about something that happened after the explosion.”

“Explosion.” I grimaced. “Yes, that’s a better word for it. The explosion cracked one of the doors and weakened Ensarena’s spell. The Dragon God was able to connect with me through that weak spot, and he’s been talking to me ever since. In my mind.”

“Even now?” Yaotl perked up. “Is that why you looked distracted?”

“Yes. We were discussing why the Goddess brought the Dragons to watch her bury him.”

“Holy shit!” He grabbed me by my shoulders and peered into my eyes. “Can he see me through you?”

Yes, Karadas said.

You can?

Yes, of course. Your mind processes what your eyes see. I see into your mind, as you can see into mine.

When you allow it.

You could likewise prevent me from entering your mind.

I can? Why would you tell me that?

I should have told you sooner. I'm sorry, Thas. I needed time to convince you to listen to me before you tried to block me out.

I understand.

“Hello?” Yaotl waved a hand before my face.

I blinked.

“Were you speaking to him again?” he asked.

“Yes, and yes, he can see you.”

“This is amazing!” Yaotl waved again, this time in greeting. “Hello, Dragon God. Welcome to Tapazolli.”

Karadas chuckled, then said, *Tell the Litoto warrior that I appreciate the welcome, but I am watching him, and I expect him to treat you respectfully.*

He will.

Tell him.

I sighed, then said, “He appreciates the welcome but wants me to tell you that he expects you to treat me with respect. I’m sorry, he made me say it.”

“I will treat your avatar with all the honor he deserves, Dragon God,” Yaotl said. “He is safe with me.”

Good. And no fucking. You are mine.

I’m not going to fuck him! I just left Xa’din, and I’m not the sort of man who moves from one lover to the next.

You are vulnerable and emotional right now. You might give in to his seduction. Tell him what I said.

No.

Tell him, Thas. It will give you an excuse to refuse his advances.

Fine. Out loud, I said, “He wants me to tell you that means no sex.”

“No sex?” Yaotl’s stunning violet eyes widened. “Why not?”

“He thinks I’m his now that Xa’din has cast me aside.”

You will be mine.

I rolled my eyes.

“The Dragon God desires you?” Yaotl drew in closer. “I mean, you are beautiful, that is undeniable, but I’m a little surprised.”

“Why? Because you thought he was straight?”

“No, we know all about the Dragon God’s male lovers. I’m surprised because, according to what I remember about his history, he had a voracious sexual appetite and took many lovers of both sexes. And by that, I mean he took them to his bed at the same time.”

“Really?” I directed my surprise inward.

Yes, I enjoy sex. A lot. I bedded many men and women at once. I told you this. But then I met Zeka and fell in love. Just because I fucked a lot of people, it doesn't mean I can't devote myself to one. Isn't that the way of your kind? You have lots of sex to find the one.

Well, yes, but only because having sex is the surest way to determine if someone is our mate. Was having sex with Zekayotl the way you fell in love with him?

He hesitated, then said, *No. It helped, but no. I fell in love with the man he was, not his body or the pleasure it could give me.*

“What’s he saying?” Yaotl asked eagerly.

“That you are correct, but he fell in love with one man.”

“You?” Yaotl lifted his brows.

“No, a Dragon named Zekayotl. Ensarena imprisoned him with Karadas.”

“You mean, the Dragon man was buried alive with your god?” Yaotl gaped at me. “Please, tell me that your goddess wasn’t so cruel as to entomb her lover with *his* lover.”

“That’s what Karadas says she did.”

“Vicious,” Yaotl whispered. “So this man ...”

“Zekayotl died in his god’s arms.”

“That is fucking tragic, Thas. Horrifying and tragic. But I guess that’s kind of on point for gods.” Then he bowed to me, or the God, rather, and said, “I am sorry for your loss, Dragon God.”

Thank you, Sir Yaotl.

I repeated the God’s words.

“He’s as polite as you are.” Yaotl chuckled. “You can call me Yaotl, DG. Oh, may I call you DG? It’s short for Dragon God.”

No, you cannot.

“Uh, he’d prefer it if you didn’t,” I said.

“That’s not what he said, is it?” Yaotl’s grin turned mischievous. “Was it harsh?”

“No. He just said no.”

“Ah.” Yaotl looked a little disappointed. “Well, I think I should probably introduce you to our king. Seeing as who you’re carrying with you.”

“No, please. I don’t want to meet another king.”

Yaotl stared at me for a few seconds, then nodded. “Very well.” Abruptly, he added, “Hold on. You said the God

is the reason the Dragon King ended your relationship, but you haven't told me why he's the reason."

"I didn't tell Xa'din that I was communicating with Karadas."

"Whoa. Bad call, Thas."

"Yes, I know. But at first, I wasn't sure how he'd take it, and then it was just too late to tell him."

"How did he find out?"

I grimaced. "I shouted the Dragon God's name in my sleep."

"You did what?"

"We talk in my dreams and sometimes Karadas shares his memories with me. It was a terrible memory."

"So you called out the God's name, and the Cursed King heard you?"

"Yes, but don't call him that. He's not cursed."

Yaotl blinked. "All right. Sorry. And then what happened?"

"I tried to explain, but the King was so furious that he told me to get the fuck out."

“Get the fuck out of his room or his kingdom?”

“He wasn’t clear, but I assumed it was the latter.”

Yaotl grimaced. “I don’t know, Thas. He could have just been really mad and wanted you to get away from him so he could cool down.”

“Well, if that’s the case, you’ll see him tomorrow when you go on patrol.”

“Then I’d better make the best of the time I have with you. Come on, let’s get that meal I promised.” Yaotl took my hand and led me down a path that wended along the side of the cavern, down to the city of Tapazolli and, hopefully, some wonderful post-break-up pastries.

Chapter Forty

That night, Yaotl offered to share his bed with me and even fly me up to it, but I declined. Not because I didn't trust him. I simply feared rolling off the bed in the middle of the night. It was at least twelve feet off the ground. Plus, I needed some space. A quick cry in the shower hadn't been enough. So, I curled up on the couch and waited for the sound of his even breathing before I cried myself to sleep.

The next morning, Yaotl made me breakfast in his little kitchen. As we were eating, a woman named Zaniyah arrived. Yaotl had asked her to keep me company while he was out on patrol. Zaniyah, or Zani to her friends (one of which I immediately became), was just as beautiful as Yaotl, though her wings were in shades of green alone, instead of multiple colors.

Zani showed me around the city and introduced me to several of her friends. I soon knew more people in Tapazolli than I did in Lucar. She prefaced every introduction with, "He is from Zaru." It was a sentence that instantly put Litotos at ease. Which made me wonder what had happened between them and the Ha'tezan Dread. I didn't ask. Instead, I asked all the other questions I had about the Litoto and their culture. Zani was thrilled to answer all of them. Litoto love to talk about themselves.

For lunch, Zani took me to a little cafe where we met Yaotl. I'd been secretly hoping that Yaotl would return early with the news that Xa'din had come looking for me. He didn't. And when Yaotl walked up to our little table, set right beside the sidewalk, he was alone. He gave me a sympathetic look as he sat down.

"No sign of him?" I asked anyway.

Yaotl didn't ask who I meant. He just said, "No. I'm sorry, Thas. I really thought he'd come today."

"The Dragon King?" Zaniyah's sharp, yellow stare focused on me.

"Yes." I sipped my fruity drink and avoided looking at her.

"He's a fool," Zaniyah said. "You are beautiful and wise. I would fuck you if you liked women."

I choked on my drink.

She laughed as she smacked my back. "You should know by now that we Litoto are a candid lot. We say what we think, usually right when we think it."

"Thank you for the compliment," I said after wiping up my mess. "But I think I hurt Xa'din too much for him to forgive me. He's had a hard life, with very few people he could trust."

Zani grunted and nodded. "Because of the curse."

"No, because people *believe* he's cursed," I said. "He is not cursed. The very fact that he is the Dragon King should prove that."

"Easy now, Red Dragon." Zaniyah held up her hands as she laughed. "If you say he's not cursed, then I believe you."

“Sorry.” I grimaced. “I was just getting over someone when I came here. Then Xa’din sort of snatched me up and refused to let me think about anyone but him. I’ve been so focused on him and the archaeological site, and now I have neither.”

You have me, the Dragon God said.

“You have us,” Yaotl said. “And you are the chosen avatar of a god. That is no small thing.”

The God grunted approvingly in my mind.

“Thank you. You’ve both been so kind to me. Without all this distraction, I’d be a wreck.”

“You’re welcome,” Zaniyah said.

Yaotl grinned wickedly and added, “It’s my pleasure. Although, it could be more of a pleasure for both of us.”

“Oh, give it a rest, Yao. He’s not going to fuck you.” Zani smacked his arm. “Now, Thas, tell me more about the God. What does he look like?”

“Hair like spun moonlight, fair skin, and black eyes full of stars,” I said. “Oh, and he has a warrior’s body, more muscular than Yaotl.”

“Holy feathers!” Zaniyah declared. “I think I just came.”

Yaotl and I laughed with her, but then I felt the Dragon God's delight.

"Oh, he likes that," I said in surprise.

"Oh? Does he like women too?" She leaned closer.

"He does indeed, though he prefers men."

"Then tell him to find me when he gets free." She winked at me. "That is, unless you become his ... what would your title be if you became the Dragon God's consort?"

Divine Consort, Karadas said.

"Oh, wow. That's impressive," I murmured.

"What did he say?" Zaniyah was positively drooling.

"He said it would be Divine Consort."

"That makes it sound as if *you* are a god," Yaotl said.

The title must convey the importance of the bearer.

Is that what Zeka was called?

Karadas went silent.

Karadas?

No. I never made him my consort. I should have. But I just ... I wasn't certain of him.

That's understandable. You're a god. You have to be careful about who you choose to commit yourself to.

Maybe. But I regret it now. I wish I had shown him how important he was to me.

I'm sorry. But I'm sure he knew.

“Thas?” Zani asked.

“Shh, don't distract him,” Yaotl whispered to her. “Let them talk.”

“It's fine,” I said. “We were just discussing the title. Karadas said it must be grand enough to convey the status of the bearer.”

“And *you* could have that status,” Zaniyah said. “Forget the Cur—” She caught Yaotl's rapid head shaking and abruptly started a new sentence, “Forget the Dragon King. Go for the Dragon *God*.”

She makes sense, Karadas said.

You're not about to make me your consort, I said.

I might, but Xa'din won't.

Ouch.

Sorry, but it's true. I told you he will never mate you.

This isn't the time for an I-told-you-so either.

Sorry. He didn't sound sorry.

"I may have no choice in forgetting the Dragon King," I said softly.

"Oh, fuck!" Zaniyah exclaimed. "I'm sorry, Thas. That was a shitty thing for me to say. It's only been a day. You need to mope and eat vast quantities of sweets, not hear that you should move on."

"Thank you." I straightened in my seat. "And yes, I do need to mope and eat sweets."

"Well, we can help you with that. At least the sweets part," Yaotl said as he raised his hand to flag down a server.

Chapter Forty-One

I spent the next two days exploring the crown city of the Litoto Kingdom with two of its sauciest residents. Yaotl and Zaniyah were wonderful for lifting my mood, but every night, I curled up on Yaotl's couch and cried silently, hoping my blanket muffled the telltale sniffing. I don't think it did. Every morning, Yaotl gave me a sympathetic look. It was the same look he gave me every afternoon when he joined Zaniyah and me after his patrols.

My fourth morning in Tapazolli started as usual; the three of us had breakfast in Yaotl's apartment, then Zaniyah and I went strolling through the shopping district. We were peering in a window at some stunning ruby necklaces when I noticed a man inside, trying on a piece I would have thought was for a woman. It was a necklace of sorts that hung low on the man's chest. The shop clerk helped him fasten it around his back so that the chains, embedded with diamonds, outlined his pectorals. I winced, thinking about the chains I had worn the night Xa'din tried to make me his concubine.

"Mmm, very nice," Zani murmured.

"The necklace or the man?" I asked.

"Yes," she said and giggled.

"I would have thought that piece was for a woman. It's so extravagant." I glanced at the women on the street, all of them with wings in a single color, while the men were multicolored. "But the men are more ... colorful here, aren't they?"

“They are.” Zani hooked her arm with mine and led me away from the jewelry shop. “It is their responsibility to attract a lover.”

“Even the gay men?”

“Oh, it’s even worse with the gays!” she exclaimed. “Wait until you see Yaotl dress up for a night out. He will blind you with the wealth of jewels he wears.”

As if her words summoned him, Yaotl landed beside us, looking flushed.

“Yaotl!” Zaniyah jerked back. “What’s happened?”

“The Cursed King is here!” Yaotl declared.

As I gaped at him, a roar vibrated through the city.

“You brought him into the city?!” Zaniyah shrieked.

“No! He’s outside. I convinced him to wait near the entrance, but it sounds as if he’s growing impatient.”

I finally found my voice. “Impatient?! Xa’din left me to wallow for three days and now *he’s* impatient? He can fucking wait.”

“Um, normally, I’d agree with you,” Yaotl said. “And don’t think that I’m scared or anything, but if you don’t come with me *right fucking now*, he’s going to make a lot of trouble and since I’m the one who brought you here, that trouble is going to land on my head like a load of steaming shit. I may

not be afraid of the Dragon King, but I am afraid of *my* king. Please, Thas.” He held out his hand.

“Of course. I’m sorry. I didn’t consider—”

Yaotl yanked me into his arms and shot into the air.

“Goodbye, Zani!” I called down to my new friend. “I’ll try to come back for a visit!”

“Good luck, Red Dragon!” she called after me. “Tell the God, I’ll be waiting for him!”

And then we reached a terrace, and Yaotl landed. He used his wings to push people out of our way and hauled me into the corridor while they shouted at him. By the time we navigated the maze of tunnels and reached the landing ledge, I was out of breath. But Yaotl didn’t pause. He grabbed my waist and jumped off the ledge.

A few feet away, a snarling black dragon waited, surrounded by anxious, heavily armed Litoto.

“Here he is!” Yaotl called out to the Dragon King. “Unharmd as promised.” He held me out as one might hold a puppy to a child, by my waist, with the rest of me dangling.

Xa’din bared his teeth at Yaotl as he swooped in. His enormous claws wrapped around me and tore me out of Yaotl’s grasp. With the breath knocked out of me, all I could do was wave goodbye to Yaotl as the Dragon King flew off with me.

I caught my breath just before we got out of earshot and called out, “Thank you, Yaotl!”

“Thank you?!” Xa’din snarled down at me. “That man held you hostage.”

“*You* held me hostage!” I shouted at the Dragon King. “*He* gave me sanctuary.”

“Oh, is that what you think?” He snapped his teeth at me.

“Don’t you snap your teeth at me!” I waved my fist at him, then sputtered as my hair got in my face. “Damn it all!” I grabbed the length of it, twisted it into a rope, and tied it in a knot.

The Dragon King snorted.

“Turn around! I just realized that in his haste to bring me to you, Yaotl left my belongings behind.”

“I will send one of the Litoto courtiers to fetch your things.” He kept flying away from Tapazolli.

“Maybe I don’t want to go back to the palace!”

“Fuck!” Xa’din roared and suddenly swooped into a downward spiral. He landed in the middle of a road. Luckily, it was an empty road.

I smacked at the Dragon King’s claws until he opened them, then stomped away.

Xa'din bent his long neck to bring his enormous, fiercely beautiful face to the level of mine. "I decided to be generous and forgive you, but when I went to find you, you weren't there. Your guest room empty, your things gone. You left me! How could you leave me, Thas?"

I uncrossed my arms and pointed at his face. "You told me to get out!"

"Of my chambers, not the fucking palace!"

"It sounded as if you never wanted to see me again. I thought you might attack me if I stuck around."

"I was angry!"

"I know! And you had every right to be!"

He huffed a warm stream of breath on me and pulled back a little. "Of course, I had every right to be."

"I was wrong to not tell you about the Dragon God."

"Yes, you were."

"But I said all of this to you that night."

"I wasn't ready to listen, Thas." Xa'din suddenly shifted into his man form, the enormous dragon vanishing in a haze of magic and condensing into that glorious, frustrating man. He strode up to me naked but with such a powerful

presence that it seemed as if he were wearing armor. “You betrayed my trust.”

“I know it seems like that to you, but it’s not how I meant it. I just didn’t think you’d believe me.”

“I asked you about the God and you lied to me.”

“Yes, all right. I wasn’t entirely truthful, but at that point, I was too deep into the secret to tell you. And I feared how you’d take it. I responded without thinking.”

“Then why tell me the other night?”

“Because I knew it was wrong to keep it from you, and I couldn’t do it any longer. It was eating at me. Zay, I’m sorry. Can you forgive me?”

The Dragon King growled and yanked me into his arms. “I do forgive you, but I’m still a little angry.”

“Good. Because now, I’m angry too.”

“What?” He pushed me back. “At me?”

“Yes, of course, at you! You took three days to get over it? Three fucking days? Do you know how miserable I was? I cried *every* night! And now, I find out that you thought I’d be moping about my guest room, just waiting for you to acknowledge me?” I shoved at his chest. “Fuck you, Zay!”

“Fuck me?! Three days is nothing! I’m furious with myself for not being strong enough to resist you longer!”

I deflated. “Resist me?”

“Yes, resist you. I had to forgive you because I couldn’t be without you. Damn you, you fucking beautiful traitor!”

“I’m not a traitor.”

“Fine,” he muttered. “You’re not a traitor, but it felt as if you were. I should have let you stew for a month. But then I found out that you left with that fucking Litoto!”

“You didn’t hurt Mazah, did you?”

“Why would I hurt Lord Mazah? He’s the one who came to me and told me where you were.”

“I thought you might be upset that he helped me leave.”

“Mazah told me that he convinced you to stay and offered you a room with his cousin, but then that Litoto found you and talked you into going with him. How could you stay with that man, Thas? You know how much I hate him.”

“That was part of the attraction,” I admitted. “I was upset, and he offered me a distraction I knew would annoy you.”

Xa’din went still. “Did you fuck him?”

“No! Sweet Goddess, Zay. Of course, I didn’t fuck him.”

Could you, please stop using that exclamation?
Karadas asked dryly.

Fuck? I asked.

No. Sweet Goddess. Believe me, she is far from sweet.

Oh. Sorry. Force of habit.

Xa’din took a deep breath and let it out. “I believe you.”

I rolled my eyes. “Oh, thank you, Your Majesty. I’m so grateful that you’ve condescended to believe my humble, insignificant words.”

“It was lucky that Lord Mazah helped you,” the King went on as if he hadn’t heard my sarcasm. “If you had left the kingdom, I don’t know what I would have done. The damage to your guest room would have only been the beginning.”

“You tore apart my room?”

“You never slept in it. What do you care?”

“I care because it shows how upset you were.” I stepped back into his arms. “And I enjoy knowing that you were upset about me.”

“Luvari,” he whispered as he touched my cheek. “I have missed you.”

“I’ve missed you too.”

The Dragon King kissed me then, and it was everything I needed in a make-up kiss. Except for it ending too soon.

“Aw, isn’t that sweet?” Yaotl drawled.

Xa’din snarled as he spun to face the Litoto knight. “You! You have some massive fucking balls to come after us.”

“Relax, Dragon.” Yaotl rolled his eyes as he set my trunk and satchel down. “I brought Thas’s things.”

“Oh, thank you!” I rushed over and hugged him. “And thank you for all you’ve done for me. You’ve been a good friend.”

Yaotl sighed. “I was hoping to be a little more than that, pretty Thas. But I’ll take your friendship. I can never have enough of that either.”

“I’ll come back and visit you again,” I promised. “Will you be on the same patrol for a while?”

“Another month. But you can always call for one of the other knights, and they will take a message to me.”

The Dragon King growled.

“Yes, all right. Simmer down, I’m not stealing your man,” Yaotl huffed at him. Then his gaze wandered down Xa’din’s body and paused between his thighs. “It all suddenly makes sense.”

Xa’din scowled and looked down at himself as I laughed.

“Goodbye, Yaotl. I’ll see you soon.”

“Bye for now, pretty Thas.” He kissed my cheek, then launched himself into the air.

Chapter Forty-Two

As soon as we were alone in the royal bedchambers, Xa'din—dressed only in a robe handed to him upon arrival—shoved me down on the floor and flung off his robe. I landed on my hands and knees and started to get up, but he was on me in two seconds, yanking my pants down, along with my underwear. He didn't speak, only snarled and growled, and damn if I didn't find it exciting.

The problem was, he was too big to fuck me dry.

Xa'din pushed and pushed, grunting in frustration, then finally bent over, shoved my ass cheeks apart, and tongued me. I cried out from the instant, decadent pleasure, then gasped as his tongue slipped inside me. In and out it went, his groans vibrating against my skin and his stubble scratching me. I trembled from the lightning bolts of bliss that shot through me and my mind spun. With another primal grunt, Zay drew his tongue out and lapped at my hole furiously until it was dripping wet. Then he tested the results with a finger.

“Oh, fuck!” I cried out as he spun it inside me, working me open.

With an arched back, I wriggled on him, my cock aching. I considered rubbing myself, but I didn't want to come too quickly, and I knew a few pumps would send me over. No, I wanted to be in blissful need for the entire interlude. So I focused on the feel of him and him alone.

Once Xa'din had me relaxed enough, he started pumping his finger. Head tossing, I pushed back on him until he was punching his fist against my ass, his middle finger going as deep as it could.

“That’s enough,” I growled over my shoulder. “Get inside me.”

With another grunt, this one deeper, Xa’din straightened and tried to penetrate me again. His cock slipped in smoothly this time, going nearly to the hilt with the first thrust. I moaned and pushed back, but his hands went to my hips to hold me still. And that was when the Dragon King unleashed his storm. All I could do was brace myself as his speed increased until the sound of slapping flesh became nearly one constant vibration. It didn’t take long for him to climax. Within a few minutes, his hips locked up, and he came inside me.

With such a fast session and my refusal to touch myself, I was still hard, and Xa’din knew it. As he collapsed over me, his hand went to my shaft and he started pumping it. Softening cock still inside me, Zay worked me, his breath hot on my neck and scent surrounding me.

“Come for me, luvari,” he whispered in my ear. “Let me see how much you desire me.”

I couldn’t deny him. I let go at last and shuddered my way into ecstasy.

Zay groaned along with my release, his cock pushed out of me by the strength of my orgasm. “Beautiful,” he said with a sigh, then he straightened, his hand coasting over my ass, and finished undressing me.

When I was naked, he carried me to bed and laid me gently upon the cool, silk sheets. Languid with satisfaction and

happiness, I reached for him, but although he took my hand, he just stood there and stared at me.

“Zay?”

“This is where you belong, luvari.” The Dragon King finally crawled onto the mattress beside me. “Your hair spilling across my pillows like fresh blood. Your dark eyes staring up at me. Your beautiful body bared for my pleasure. This is how I want you every day. Never run from me again.”

“Never send me away again,” I countered.

He grunted and pulled me into his arms. After a few moments’ silence, he said, “Tell me about Karadas.”

I looked up at him in surprise. “Now?”

“Yes, now. And speak quickly because you have only temporarily sated me. I’ll need you again soon.”

His words shivered through me, making me smile.

Lust is not love, Thas, Karadas said in my mind.

I tried to push him out of my mind.

If you want me to go, just ask, he said, his tone injured.

Can you give me some time to be alone with him?

I felt a shimmer and then an easing. The Dragon God's presence was gone. Relieved, I sat up so I could face Zay while we spoke. He frowned but sat up as well.

"The Litoto know about our god," I said. "Yaotl told me that his people witnessed Karadas getting buried alive."

"How could they know about that when we didn't?"

"They didn't have a goddess encouraging them to forget. Also, they recorded it in their history books."

"What else did he tell you about *our* god?"

"That Karadas had a voracious sexual appetite and took many lovers, both men and women."

Xa'din grunted.

"I know, that doesn't seem like a great revelation, but it confirms what Karadas told me—that he took many Dragon lovers and then, eventually, fell in love with one of them. A man named Zekayotl."

"Karadas told you about his lovers?"

"Yes, and I tried to tell you when I was explaining myself."

"I was a little too mad to listen then." He grimaced. "Patli said that the Goddess imprisoned the God to save us. That he was hurting people."

“Yes, and that could be partially true. I can’t say for certain that Karadas never hurt Dragons. But he denies it, and he has shared his memories with me as proof. I saw the Goddess imprison him, and she accused him only of sleeping with Dragons, not hurting them.”

“Memories?”

“Yes, our connection works both ways; we can speak to each other and share images through our minds. When he shares his memories with me, I experience them through his perspective. It seems to be easier for him to draw me into them when I’m asleep.”

“He enters your dreams?” Zay narrowed his eyes at me.

“Yes. It’s why I called out his name the other night. I was in one of his memories. Karadas was in a panic, and I was trying to get him to stop.”

“And you’re certain that these are memories he’s sharing with you, not illusions?”

“Not completely certain, no. But I can feel his emotions and focus on the smallest detail. I can’t imagine that an illusion would be so thorough. I watched Ensarena trap Karadas and his lover in their temple, Zay. The God begged her not to. He told her that his lover would die, but she didn’t care. She was too angry. I think she wanted Zeka to die. It was punishment for falling in love with the God.”

“And she punished Karadas for betraying her?”

“She saw it as a betrayal, but he didn’t, and I don’t think it was a betrayal either. They aren’t mated. He simply stopped being her lover and took Dragon lovers instead.”

“I see. He left her, and she felt scorned.”

“I believe so. Ensarena accused Karadas of lowering himself to sleep with our kind.”

“She’s our goddess.” He frowned. “How could she think so poorly of us?”

I shrugged. “She’s also a woman whose lover left her for several others. That was bad enough, but then Karadas fell in love. I think that was the greatest insult. Karadas gave his heart to another, so she buried them both in the temple. It was punishment but also revenge—a lover’s revenge.”

“And you believe him?”

“I think so. I haven’t freed him because I’m not completely sure, and releasing him could affect the entire world.”

“Yes, it could. You were wise to wait.”

“But after hearing what Yaotl had to say, I’m more certain. With a neutral party validating his statements, they hold more weight. I think we should free him.”

“No. Not yet. No harm comes from waiting, but freeing him might hurt us all.”

“Those have been my thoughts exactly. But there’s something else for us to consider. With Karadas imprisoned within Ensarena’s spell, we are cut off from his magic.”

“What do you mean?”

“The God and Goddess created us together, and we inherited magic from each of them—Fire from Ensarena and Water from Karadas. But his magic is trapped with him, behind her spell. This blocks us from the source of half of our magic.”

“And if we free him?”

“We would gain power over water.” I took his hand. “It’s not just the power, though. When Ensarena buried Karadas, she separated us from half of ourselves. We are, in a way, buried with him. Our race was born in balance—Fire and Water in equal measure. Without Water, we are prone to be too fiery.”

“Too fiery?”

“Quick to anger, violent even. Our imbalance makes us more volatile.”

“That is simply our nature.”

“It’s not supposed to be. With Karadas free, Water would return to us, bringing not only power but also its calming influence. We would find balance within ourselves and with Dragons ruling most of Serai, I believe that would bring peace to our world.”

Zay frowned. "I don't know if that's as good as you make it sound."

"I understand that for a warrior like you, the idea of being calmer doesn't appeal. But balance would make you a better warrior, not the opposite. Those who can keep a cool head are more likely to prevail in all things, even battle."

"But you think that balance would put an end to battle."

"I would hope so, but I'm not naïve enough to think that all conflict would end. When I say that it would bring peace to Serai, I mean it would make Dragons more peaceful, less violent. Wouldn't that be a good thing?"

"Perhaps. I will think about it more later." He motioned at me. "Now fetch the bottle of oil. I want to fuck you again."

"How can I resist such a romantic proposition?" I rolled my eyes.

"I've been without you for days, Thas," he growled. "I'll give you romance after I'm sated."

"I'll hold you to that, Your Majesty."

"Get the bottle, damn you!"

I chuckled as I clambered out of bed.

Chapter Forty-Three

The search for the Order of the Sun continued for another three weeks after my return until finally, Xa'din conceded the traitors had likely fled his kingdom. During that time, Xa'din did not relax his guard for a second. Not only did he restrict me to the palace as he had before, but he also required me to attend him at all times. Well, nearly all times. Some things required privacy, but the rest of my time was spent at Xa'din's side. The Dragon King made only one concession when he escorted me out of the city to briefly speak with Yaotl and let him know I was safe. That concession cost me an hour of attending to His Majesty's cock with my mouth. Not that I'm complaining.

Spending so much time with Xa'din wasn't a bad thing. We'd grown closer because of it, sharing things about ourselves as lovers do when they're together but not making love. I learned how he liked his coffee, that he hated keeping his hair long because it tickled his face and took too much effort to maintain, that he preferred flying over walking, and that his mother was the only person in all of Serai whom he loved.

Zay told me stories about running wild in the jungle as a child, his only friends were the animals who he could lure into accepting him. It was sad, of course, but also sweet. I could imagine little Xa'din climbing trees and crawling under bushes to help some creature in distress or offer it a piece of food to gain its trust. His mother hid his curse from him for as long as she could, giving him an unusual but happy childhood. It wasn't until he was older that he learned the harsh reality of his existence.

In return, I told Xa'din about my family and life in Zaru. How I had never been interested in warfare, only knowledge. How my favorite toys had been things I could take

apart to discover the way they worked. My mother had protected me from the cruelty of others as well. She'd known early on that I would be different, but she never pushed me to be anything else. She may have sheltered me a bit, directing my attention to more solitary pursuits instead of taking me to meet other boys my age. But she did it out of love, and I was grateful for it. It taught me to be content with myself, with being alone. Even though I'd had Thada, she was outgoing and often out of the house.

It wasn't until we got older that things changed. My mother took me to visit the Great Library of Fyreholde and there, I found people like me. People who showed me that my mind had great value and knowledge could take me places. That's when Thada started to accompany me places instead of dragging me to her parties. I told Zay all about my friends and the Great Library where we studied together. I told him about the smell of the books and the oasis in the center of the library. I told him about learning to unearth history and the digs I'd gone on in different kingdoms. Eventually, I confessed my anger toward my sister and how she had betrayed me. He encouraged me to forgive her, as he had forgiven me for my mistake.

Nearly ending things with Xa'din had actually been good for our relationship.

"You're a twin? Why didn't mention that before?" Xa'din asked during one of our deep conversations.

We were having breakfast in his private dining room on the twenty-second day of my confinement—excuse me, I mean the twenty-second day of increased security at the palace. I'd been talking about Thada again and how she used to accompany me on jobs like this one.

“I did. I must have,” I said.

“No, you didn’t. I would have remembered the fact that you are a blessed one.”

“A blessed one?” I chuckled. “I don’t know about that.”

He’s right, Karadas said. Twins are sacred. You are more powerful than other Dragons. Why do you think I’m so drawn to you?

Because I’m the only one who can free you.

Only because I was drawn to you and forged a connection between us. But that’s not the only reason I desire you, little one. You’re also beautiful, kind, honorable—

I let Karadas’s voice fade into the background and focused on Xa’din. The Dragon God left whenever I asked, so I hadn’t tried to push him out of my mind again. Plus, I was starting to like him. With our minds connected, Karadas and I were becoming closer as well, closer than was possible for most people, and having his voice in my mind now felt as if he were another part of me. And then there were the dreams. Every night, the Dragon God came to me and showed me more of his life. Sometimes we just talked. You’d think we’d be all talked out by the time night came, but speaking to him when I could look into his starry eyes was different from having him in my head. I suppose he was still in my head when he was in my dreams, but it felt different.

“A blessed one,” Xa’din murmured. “I have a sacred twin for a lover.”

“Does that make you feel less cursed?” I asked.

He looked away and poured himself more coffee.

“You *still* feel cursed?” I leaned forward and angled my head to meet his stare. “Even after all the time we’ve spent together?”

“Do you think you have the power to break my curse, luvari?” he asked, his tone a little wistful.

“If it was real, no. But I thought perhaps being with someone who doesn’t believe in it might help you see that it doesn’t exist. I had hoped you’d at least doubt it a little by now.”

“My life has been one obstacle after another, Thas. Believe me, the curse is real.”

“We all face obstacles. That’s life. But you’ve conquered all of yours when very few people do. How can you see that as being cursed?”

Xa’din sat back and stared at me. “That is a strong argument.”

“But you still don’t believe me.”

“It’s not about believing you. It’s about knowing myself. I know I’m cursed. I can feel it.” He swallowed roughly and whispered, “There is evil inside me, Thas.”

“You only think that because it’s what you’ve been told most of your entire life.”

He shrugged. “What does our god say?”

He is not cursed, Karadas said immediately. That is primitive nonsense. But he will not believe that. In fact, he might believe less in me if you convey my words. Instead, tell him that belief powers his curse and only disbelief can break it.

“Karadas says that your curse is powered by belief and only disbelief can break it,” I repeated.

Xa’din snorted.

As I said. He will not believe either of us, even though one of us is his blessed lover and the other is a god. I suppose that, in itself, is a curse.

“I guess I’ll just have to keep telling you it’s not true until it sinks in,” I said to Xa’din.

The Dragon King smiled softly.

You are a gentle creature, the Dragon God said. Then, in a surprised tone, he added, That made you feel ... what is that terrible shivering sensation? Anger? No. Not fear, either. I just made you feel small. Inadequate. Why, little one?

You ask why I feel small, and then call me little one.

All of you are little to me. I don't use that endearment to make you feel small, just to imply that I can look after you.

I don't need looking after.

Ah, now that is absolutely anger. Why have I ... ah, I see. You believe Dragons should be strong and fierce. An idea passed down from Ensarena, I assume. Or something learned during the years of my confinement.

You don't agree?

No, of course not. Have you learned nothing from me? You explained to your lover how my magic cools and balances the Dragon Race, and yet you still don't understand. That, your body is strong because you are a Dragon, you don't have to increase its strength to be worthy of your race. What you have dedicated your life to is so much harder than swinging a sword or maneuvering your dragon in battle. You have improved your intellect, and that has made you very special, That Thorncal. Warriors abound, but sages are few. As I just told you, you are more powerful than the average Dragon. The mind is a greater weapon than any sword or claw and yours is exceptional. Never allow yourself to feel inadequate again.

I couldn't respond at first. Karadas spoke the truth I knew in my heart, the way I'd always felt about scholarly pursuits versus physical. But I didn't expect a non-scholar to understand, much less the Dragon God.

Finally, I said, *Thank you. Your words have eased something inside me. But they will not change the way most Dragons view me.*

I will change that once you free me.

Karadas, I—

“Thas?” Xa’din shook me by my upper arm.

“Sorry, I was talking to the God. Did you say something?”

“Did I say something?” Zay laughed. “No, I guess it wasn’t important.”

“What did you say?” I leaned toward him, eager to know.

“I said that I would never believe you.”

“What?” I gaped at him.

“I would never believe you, so you would have to stay here forever and keep trying to convince me that I’m not cursed.”

My face went slack. “Zay, I ... what are you really saying?”

“You’re a blessed one.” His hand went to my cheek. “There’s a chance my curse won’t hurt you. You’ve already survived it.”

“You mean the poison?”

He nodded. "I was too happy with you. I knew it would end, but I never thought your life was in danger, luvari. If I had, I would have ended things early on."

"You think that I was poisoned because of your curse?"

"Yes."

"That's insane."

"It doesn't matter. You are blessed by the Gods, Thas. Protected. We have a chance. I ..."

"Yes?" My breath caught. *Would he say it now?*

"I want you to be my consort."

Karadas snorted in my mind.

Shut up! Emotions are difficult for him to express, I hissed. And you said he'd never make me his consort, yet he just offered.

Oh, I'm sure emotions are very difficult for him. He is the ultimate warrior. Look upon him, Thas. This is what you say Dragons prize? Ridiculous.

He's amazing!

The Dragon God snorted again.

“Thas?” Xa’din frowned. “Is Karadas speaking to you again?”

“Yes, I’m sorry. He ... is opinionated.”

“Does he disapprove of me?” the Dragon King asked in shock.

“No, of course not. He’s just being protective, as you are.”

“Then will you be my consort, Thas?”

“Oh! Yes, of course, I’ll be your consort.”

The Dragon King’s face lit with a brilliant grin, and he jumped up to pull me out of my chair and kiss me.

You are making a mistake, little one.

Hardly.

Very well, don’t believe me. But remember that I warned you.

Chapter Forty-Four

If I thought the preparations to become Xa'din's concubine were ridiculous, the ones to become his consort were enough to drive me insane.

The Dragon King announced that he had chosen a consort mere minutes after he asked me, and by late afternoon, I was swarmed by seamstresses. Xa'din sprawled in a chair nearby and watched it all with a smug grin, but he wasn't there just for the entertainment. He made most of the decisions—color, cut, fabric. I was merely the doll they had to dress.

“This is like a mating presentation,” I said as I stepped down from the stool the seamstresses had me on.

Everyone in the room went silent and slid surreptitious stares toward the King.

“This is the closest I will ever come to getting mated,” Xa'din said.

I went still. “What?”

“I am cursed, Thas. I will never mate.”

“You can't know that for certain.”

“That's all.” He waved the seamstresses out.

They scurried away, but many of them cast sympathetic looks at me over their shoulders.

“You truly believe that you will never find a mate?” I demanded.

“I do. I know I shouldn’t have asked you to shackle yourself to me, but I don’t want to let you go, luvari.”

“Shackle? Xa’din, we could be mates.”

With a somber look, Xa’din stood up, walked over to me, and laid a hand on my cheek. “I am no one’s mate. The Goddess would never join an evil man with a blessed one. And I understand if you want to keep seeking your mate. But, please, if you leave, do so in the middle of the night. I’m afraid that I will try to stop you.”

“Enough! This is nonsense!”

His eyes twitched. “I do not call your beliefs nonsense.”

I briefly closed my eyes and calmed myself. “You’re right. I’m sorry I said that. I’m just frustrated. You’re saying that the most I can hope for is this, but I want a future with you.

“What’s wrong with being a king’s consort?” He took my hands. “You have me, and I have you. That sounds like a wonderful future to me.”

Xa’din was right; this was a lot. A tremendous step. And what he believed didn’t matter. If he wanted me enough to make me his consort, we must be fated to mate. It was probably his stupid belief that was holding his mating urge

back. But he wouldn't be able to resist it forever, and once we mated, Zay would see how silly this whole curse thing was. I just had to hold out until then.

He will never mate you, Thas, the Dragon God said gently. I'm so sorry, but it's the truth. You're right, his belief holds him back. It prevents the urge from rising.

Mating is not something he can control.

I think you are underestimating him and the power of belief.

No man can resist the mating urge. To even attempt it is said to be so painful it can drive you mad.

That is only once it begins.

“Thas?” Xa'din brushed his lips over mine. “Will this be enough for you?”

Tell him no. Come to me, little one. I will never disappoint you, as he will.

“Yes,” I said to Zay. “Being with you is enough for me.”

Xa'din grinned. “And you are more than enough for me.”

Good luck, little blessed one.

Chapter Forty-Five

The next day, the Head Chef and Head Baker went over the menu with me. Xa'din had to attend to kingly business; with no Talons, Teeth, or Scales to help him, he had a lot to do. So I made the selections alone. The men brought several trays of samples and two Dragon knights with them—men who had watched them prepare the food. Honestly, I was glad Xa'din wasn't there; he would have made them nervous.

They laid everything out in the King's private dining room, setting little plates before me in a half circle. The Head Chef—an Osomah man with a tail that never stopped twitching—hovered over me, explaining each dish, then took notes on whether I chose it, wanted it altered a little, or didn't like it at all. The Head Baker, a human, waited on the side for me to get to the desserts.

“Are you and your staff all right?” I whispered to the Head Baker.

The man blinked at me, then smiled softly. “We are, my lord. Thank you for asking.”

“I hope you know the King was just trying to protect me. He isn't an evil man.”

“We do know that, my lord,” the Head Chef looked up from his notes to say. “And we understand why His Majesty was so harsh with us. It was our fault. Your food was our responsibility.”

“No, it wasn't. You had no reason to think that someone might slip poison into my cake.”

“I’m so relieved that you think so, my lord,” the Head Baker said. “We were all distraught over your poisoning.”

“I’m just glad you don’t hold a grudge against the King for his actions.”

“My lord.” The Chef glanced over his shoulder at where the guards stood, just outside the doorway. “Is it true that you don’t believe the King is cursed?”

“The condition of his eyes is rare but completely natural. People have been born with mismatched eyes before and they lead normal lives.”

“Truly?” He frowned.

“The King’s eyes should be celebrated as something special, not a marking of misfortune. It’s science, not magic. Just as my being born a twin doesn’t make me blessed, his eyes don’t—”

“You are a blessed twin?!” the Chef exclaimed. “Praise Ensarena! You are exactly what this kingdom and our king needs!”

I grimaced as I caught the guards looking in at me, their stares just as hopeful as the Chef’s and the Baker’s. “I am not blessed, and King Xa’din is not cursed. Twins are even more common than dual-colored eyes.”

“As you say, my lord.” The Chef grinned at me, then exchanged a pleased look with the Baker.

I rolled my eyes.

You will never get through to them, Karadas said. You need me to tell them the truth. They will believe me.

So, now I should free you to help Xa'din? You said that he wouldn't believe you.

He won't believe me while I'm imprisoned, but once I'm free, he will see the truth of who I am, and then he shall believe in me. And you should free me to help everyone, not merely your lover. Or have you forgotten that with my release, the Dragon Race will receive its long-lost magic? You are all functioning at half your strength. I can return you to your full glory.

No, I haven't forgotten. I'm just not sure that I believe you.

The truth is carved into stone. Even Ensarena can't change it. I am the God of Water and the Moon. I cool you when your fire becomes too hot. I offer balance and power, control that many of you are lacking.

I considered that. Dragons were prone to fits of rage if they weren't careful with their emotions. It had always been that way, and I had once thought it was simply an aspect of our race.

It is an aspect, the Dragon God said. But only because you are magically incomplete. Without Water to temper your Fire, you live on the brink of burning out of control. You know this. We've spoken about it, and you feel the truth of it inside you.

“My lord, is there anything special you’d like me to make for your consorting day?” the Head Baker asked.

“I’d say peach cake, but I don’t think the King would like that.”

The Head Baker laughed. “Probably not, my lord. But I can bake something similar. Perhaps strawberry?”

“That sound delicious, thank you.”

“It’s my honor, my lord.”

The Baker and Chef grinned at each other again.

I chose to be heartened by their hope instead of frustrated by what it stemmed from. If this was the only way to make Xa’din’s people change their minds about him, so be it. I would embrace the title of Blessed One.

Chapter Forty-Six

My consorting day—what a strange appellation—arrived, and I faced most of it without Xa'din. He had to make his own preparations (oh, please let them paint his dick gold) while a team came to bathe, massage, anoint, paint, dress, and bejewel me. I went through a very similar torture to the concubine incident except that this time, I had four women bathing and then drying me. I was red-faced by the time I left the bathroom and it wasn't from the steam.

But the massage that followed relaxed me a little. The women plied me with liquor before and after the massage, then sat me down in a chair to have my hair braided and bejeweled. I sipped my drink and watched them work languidly. I didn't even protest when the painting began.

“My lord, if you would stand?” One woman helped me up. “We need to finish painting you.”

“Sure.” I swayed on my feet, and someone whisked my glass of cognac away.

“Coffee,” someone else said.

“Why did you let him drink so much?” another asked.

“He needed to relax. Besides, he'll burn it off in an hour. It will be fine.”

“She's right!” I declared. “Everything will be fine.” Then I felt someone painting down there. “Whoa! Do we really have to paint my cock again?”

“It’s even more important this time, my lord,” the woman kneeling before me said. Then she lifted my gold dick and started on my balls.

“Oh, for the love of Ensarena,” I muttered.

“It is indeed in the Goddess’s honor that we paint you gold, my lord.”

Yes, I prefer silver, Karadas drawled. So, you can thank the bitch for this indignity.

Did they paint your sacrifices?

Karadas went silent.

“That’s what I thought,” I muttered.

“You are very wise, Lord Thas,” the woman said.

“Oh, uh, yes, thank you.”

Karadas snorted a laugh.

“Which would you prefer, my lord.” A woman held an open box before me. In the box, on a cushion of velvet, lay three oddly shaped objects. They all had one bulbous end, one disc end, and a small bar connecting the two. They were made from gold and the discs were inlaid with jewels like the pommel of a ceremonial sword.

“I guess the blue one,” I said.

“The sapphire it is, my lord.” The woman took out the gold object with the sapphire in its disc, then closed the box. She held it up to another woman, who coated the bulbous end in oil.

That’s when its purpose dawned on me.

“Oh, no!” I stepped back, nearly causing a paint accident. “You are not sticking *that* in my ass.”

“We’ll prepare you first, my lord,” the woman said as if that would reassure me.

“It’s too big!”

“It’s the same size as the tip of His Majesty’s shaft.”

Right, these were his concubines. Well, fuck.

“The last time, you only massaged me open,” I argued, even though I knew I’d lose.

“Last time, you were going straight into His Majesty’s bedchambers. Tonight, we will present you to him before the court, and we will feast before the King takes you to his bed. You must be ready for him as soon as he requires you.”

“Are you saying that I’ll have to keep that inside me throughout the meal?!”

“It will be pleasant, my lord. I promise.”

“Pleasant?!”

“Do you not enjoy it when the King penetrates you?”

“Oh, sweet Goddess, have mercy on me,” I muttered. “Of course, I enjoy it. But *that* is not *him*. And he does not merely stick his cock in and leave it there all night!”

The women burst into laughter. Or giggling, rather.

“Yes, yes, it’s all very silly. I’m so glad you’re amused. But I’m not putting that in my ass.”

After they stopped giggling, the one who asked the penetration question suggested. “Why don’t we put it in and if you find it uncomfortable, you can take it out?”

I sighed deeply and gestured at the bottle of cognac.

She poured me a small amount and handed it to me.

After downing it in one go, I said, “Fine, but I’m putting it in myself.”

The women looked at each other and shrugged. The one holding the object handed it over, passing it to me by the disc.

I grimaced and headed to the bathroom.

“We’ll have to verify that it’s in correctly, my lord,” the bold one called after me.

“The fuck you will!” I called back.

The women giggled again as I slammed the door.

“Damn women,” I muttered and slipped out of my robe. “I should make them give me a demonstration ... on themselves!” Then I thought about having to watch that and winced. “On second thought, no.”

My lovely liquor haze disappeared, banished in the wake of imminent rectal invasion. I glared at the golden thing, then took a deep breath, let it out, and propped a leg on the edge of the bathtub. Leaning over, I set the thing against my hole. It felt warm, probably from getting rubbed with oil. So at least there was that. I pushed gently, going back and forth until finally, it sort of popped into place. I gasped as my body sucked it in, the shape perfect for my muscles to clasp tightly, and the disc preventing it from getting drawn in completely.

I straightened warily, then gave my inner muscles an experimental squeeze. A zing of pleasure shot through me. “Oh, my,” I whispered as my cock twitched. Then, “Oh, fuck. Don’t you dare get hard,” I said to my blushing member. “We can’t go back out there with you in that state. They’ll die laughing.”

I waited, standing very still (no squeezing), and my cock settled.

“Unbelievable,” I muttered to myself as I yanked my robe back on and went out to the bedroom.

They were all standing there, waiting, watching the door.

I grimaced. “Yes, very well. I can stand it.”

They burst into giggles again.

“You are horrible people!” I chided, then laughed with them.

“Come, my lord. We are finished adorning you with paint. Now, we will clothe you.” One woman stepped forward with some delicate undershorts, the fabric so thin, they were practically transparent.

“Oh, all right.” I stepped into the shorts, then held out my arms.

I had to admit, it was all beautiful. The emerald silk wrap tunic was trimmed in gold embroidery that depicted flying dragons, and the pants had matching embroidery down their sides. I had a new pair of black leather boots and, over it all, a lightweight cape that fell to the floor and trailed behind me. Then came the jewelry.

Lengths of glittering diamonds went around my neck, each one so beautiful that I lost track of everything else for a few minutes and became enamored with them. An image of the Litoto man in the jewelry store came to me, and I determinedly removed my attention from the diamonds. But the necklaces were only the first of a treasure trove’s worth of jewels. Rings went on my fingers, a pair of earrings hooked

over the tops of my ears, and jingling bracelets went on both arms. Finally, I held up my hands in surrender.

“Enough!” I cried. “I’ll have trouble walking under the weight of it all.”

“Then the King will carry you,” one of them said.

“Straight to his bed,” another added.

Then they all started giggling again.

“At least there is no harness tonight,” one of them said to my grimace.

“Harness? Is that what you call the chains that wrapped all around me?”

“Yes, the harness. It’s for His Majesty to use like the reins of a horse.” The woman grabbed an invisible harness before her, pulled on it, and started thrusting her hips.

Of course, this set them to giggling again.

“All right, you heathens,” I said affectionately. “You’ve had enough laughs at my expense. That damn harness was awful. It bit into my skin. So, yes, I’m glad to not have to endure it tonight. But no more jewelry.”

“Yes, my lord.” They bowed to me. “You are ready to be presented to the King.”

“About time,” I muttered.

Chapter Forty-Seven

Xa'din's concubines surrounded me and paraded me through the palace again. This time, there were only knights and servants were about, but they bowed to me as I passed. Upon our approach to the throne room, it became apparent where everyone was. The murmur of a massive crowd spilled out to me.

I took a deep breath as a pair of knights opened the double doors. The concubines led me into the throne room and all conversation stopped. We didn't move, just stood near the doorway. The crowd separated to form an aisle, and at the end of it was the royal dais.

“Your Majesty,” one woman called across the hall, “we have brought your chosen consort.”

Xa'din, seated on his barbaric throne, stood up and strode down the steps of the dais. “Send him forth!”

The courtiers immediately bowed, and I started walking alone down the aisle, receiving their respect. It felt almost like a wedding, but the Dragon King looked more like a conquering warlord than a groom. Despite the luxurious robes of emerald silk he wore—the color an exact match to my garments and the cut emphasizing his trim waist and broad shoulders—he exuded ferocity. Because upon his head, he wore the crown of Ha'tezan.

At least, I assumed it was the crown. With those sharp, gold points circling the top, it looked crown-like, but the front of the band continued downward to form a mask, complete with a pointed nose guard and swooping side pieces that covered Xa'din's cheeks. With eye slots slanted downward, the mask had a glowering appearance that made Xa'din's eyes

look menacing and his firm lips cruel. It was a crown made for a battlefield, something worn instead of a helm. But perhaps the whole world was a battlefield for Xa'din.

I met that daunting stare, found my lover behind it, and strode confidently to the Dragon King, a smile forming as I walked. When I reached Xa'din, he smiled back, took my hand, and kissed it. I expected there to be some vows exchanged, but there was none of that.

Instead, the King grabbed me by my waist, lifted me onto a dragon skull, motioned at me as if I were a prize of war, and declared, "I have chosen my consort. May all here bear witness that this blessed man is mine!"

They cheered and applauded as I stood on the skull of a dead dragon.

Right. I was his, not the other way around. And displaying me atop his kill was probably his idea of romance. *Dear fuck.*

I did warn you, the Dragon God whispered.

Go away! I pushed him out of my mind, and this time, it worked. I felt him vanish abruptly.

Then Xa'din went on, "Disrespect him, and you disrespect me. Hurt him, and you will die."

While the court's cheering subsided into shocked silence, Xa'din helped me down, right into his arms and a passionate kiss. His crown/mask dug into my cheeks, but his kiss was so hot that I didn't care. I instantly forgave his

presentation of me. Plus, it was sort of sexy that he had threatened the court on my behalf. I'd never had a lover willing to kill for me.

When Zay eased back, his gaze was tender, even behind that ferocious mask. "You are more than I could have ever hoped to hold, luvari. Thank you for staying with me."

"I suppose that eases the sting of you announcing that I'm your property."

"You are not property, and I am as much yours as you are mine. You know that. This display is for your protection, not my pride."

I grinned. "That's even better."

The Dragon King chuckled as he led me down the aisle, between the courtiers who bowed again, this time with grave sincerity. Holding my hand aloft, Xa'din marched me down the castle corridor to the dining hall. His court and knights cheered as they followed us, many shouting blessings on our union. Zay's smile made my heart shiver; I had never seen him so happy. He proudly escorted me up the length of the dining hall to the King's table and only then did he let go of my hand so he could pull my chair out.

As I sat down, Zay leaned in to whisper in my ear, "You outshine the heavens tonight, luvari."

"Thank you."

Chest puffed out, the Dragon King sat down beside me and clapped his hands. Servants suddenly streamed out of the

kitchen with the dishes I'd selected. I straightened in my seat to see what they presented first and with my movement, a shiver of pleasure zinged up my spine. I went still with a gasp.

“What is it?” Xa'din asked.

“Uh, they, uh, put something in me. Well, I put it in me, but they insisted I wear it, and it, um, is ... it feels nice.”

“Ah, the relaxer.” He grinned wickedly.

“Relaxer?” I grimaced. “That's the last thing it does.”

“It relaxes your muscles to receive me.” The King trailed a finger down my throat, then slipped it into my robe to rub my nipple.

I slapped his hand away. “Not entirely. My channel is being stretched a bit, but the first ring of muscles is closed around the item's, uh, stem.”

“Really?” He cocked his head and let his stare wander from my face to my lap. “Tell me more.”

“You are a scoundrel!” I mock-hissed at him.

Xa'din burst into laughter. “Just eager to bed my consort. Don't worry, luvari, if the relaxer doesn't do its job, I will open you up gently. I have had you enough that I won't go mad with lust.”

“I don't know if I should feel comforted or insulted by that.”

“Never be insulted by my desire for you.” He leaned over to kiss me. “I may not be insane with need, but I will never stop needing you. It’s impossible for me to be unaffected by your beauty.” He took my hand and pressed it onto his bulging erection. “Shall we forget dinner?”

I licked my lips, massaged him a little, and contemplated it. Then I remembered how hard everyone had worked to give us this feast, and I let go of him. “No, the cooks and bakers have put a lot of effort into planning this meal. It wouldn’t be right to leave without at least sampling the food.”

“Look at you, a king’s consort already. Very well, let us sample.” He started ladling food onto my plate.

“I will do my best to be a good consort to you, Your Majesty.”

Xa’din set down the spoon and stared at me. “I will never find you wanting in that regard either, Consort. You are all that I desire in every way.”

I met his mismatched stare and said, “I love you, Zay.”

Oh, fuck! I exclaimed in my mind and was half surprised when Karadas didn’t respond. But he was gone, and I was alone in my panic. *Oh, why do I always ruin things? I should have just shut my damn mouth!*

Xa’din went still, deadly still, his stare locked with mine. Finally, he let out a shuddering breath and whispered, “I love you too, Thas.”

In joy and maybe a bit of relief, I grabbed the Dragon King by the back of his neck and hauled him into a kiss. At first, I could feel him smiling against my mouth, then he growled, grabbed me back, and kissed me fiercely. When we eased away from each other, we were panting, and Xa'din's stare was both soft and wild.

“I should have said it sooner,” Zay said. “But I was worried about binding you to me. I didn't want you hurt by my curse or feeling as if you couldn't leave me because we had exchanged words of love.”

“Telling me you love me is not something you should ever worry about. You could have ended a lot of arguments with those words.”

“I'll remember that for the future.” He waggled his brows at me.

“What have I done?” I exclaimed dramatically as I sat back and held the back of my hand to my forehead.

“You have made a true lover out of me.” He kissed my cheek, then, with a smug grin, started to eat. Quickly.

Chapter Forty-Eight

After the finest meal of my life and what seemed like an endless stream of entertainment, Xa'din decided it was time for us to retire. The court stood and applauded as the Dragon King and I left the dining hall. His knights fell into step around us and marched us to the Royal Wing. When we reached the main door, they stepped aside in a practiced maneuver to form an aisle, and as we passed through them, they smacked their armored chests with gauntlet-clad fists and bowed. A knight at the end opened the door for us, then shut it behind us.

“What was all that with the knights pounding their chests?” I asked Xa'din after we made it to the privacy of his—I mean *our*—bedchambers.

“They were acknowledging you as the Royal Consort.” Zay removed his crown, set it on a table, then drew me to the bed with a tender smile. “And now it’s time for some private acknowledgment.”

The Dragon King undressed me slowly, caressing my skin as he exposed it. By the time I was down to my sheer underwear, my erection had created a significant bulge. With a rumbling sound, he ran his hand over that bulge, then cupped it.

“No other man will ever touch you here again, *luvari*,” he said.

My breath caught. Those words had the sound of forever to them. “Not as long as you keep touching me.” I stepped out of my underwear and saw his stare catch on my gilded dick. “Yours had better look similar.”

Xa'din's eyes widened, then he abruptly laughed. "No, luvvari, I did not paint my cock gold for you ... for obvious reasons."

"Obvious reasons?" I glowered. "I went through a lot of primping for you."

"And I primped as well." He pulled open his tunic to display the designs painted on his chest. "But I left my cock bare because it will be inside you."

I blinked, then thought about what could result from such an intimate transfer. My face went red.

Zay laughed again and leaned down to kiss me. "Maybe I should paint my dick for you. I might enjoy seeing my cum leak from you in golden drops."

"Sweet Goddess!" I reeled back. "That was naughty."

"I'm a very naughty man." He took my hands and pointedly set them on the front panels of his tunic.

I went serious as I undressed him, taking the time to admire the intricate designs that curved around his nipples and ran down his sides. Xa'din stood still as I removed his elaborate tunic and cast it to the floor. But he couldn't control his cock, and as soon as I untied the waistband of his pants, it sprang forth, reaching for me eagerly. No, it wasn't gilded, but it was magnificent. With a whimper, I dropped to my knees.

A low growl vibrated from the Dragon King as I took him in my mouth. His powerful hands framed my face, his fingers weaving into my hair, and he stared down at me

possessively with his mismatched eyes. I held his gaze as I wrapped a hand around the base of his long dick to stroke him as I sucked. Laving his tip, then nibbling at it. Licking up his shaft, then wrapping my lips around it. I worked him with lips, tongue, and fingers until his hips were thrusting and his lips parted on heavy breaths.

Then something thudded on the floor. I blinked in horror when I realized what it was.

Xa'din paused, looked over my shoulder at the relaxer, and let out a deep laugh.

I drew off him to say, "That's not funny."

He drew me to my feet and kissed me languidly as he rubbed our bodies together. Slowly, his tongue worked its magic and soothed me, making me forget about what had been inside me and ache for him to replace it. As if he could sense my need, Xa'din slid his hand over my ass and between my cheeks to stroke my entrance.

The tip of his finger slipped into me.

I broke our kiss and cried out, my hands clutching his upper arms.

"Easy, luvari. I'll make sure you reach your pleasure many times tonight." Zay picked me up and carried me to the round bed, then laid me down gently.

A pedestal had been set beside the bed and the golden tray atop it held a collection of sweets, fruit, bread, wine, water, and a bottle of oil. Zay grabbed the oil, then climbed

onto the mattress with graceful movements. Seeing him like that made my body move on its own, my legs opening to welcome him and my cock weeping for attention. The Dragon King grunted in approval and bent to lick the bead of desire from the golden flower on my tip. My whole body shuddered in response.

“So beautiful,” he whispered as he straightened.

With deft movements, he opened the bottle and poured some oil into his palm. After corking it and setting it aside, he rubbed the oil over his shaft. But he didn't stop there.

“Lift your legs for me,” Zay said, his voice gone low. “Let me see what's mine.”

I grabbed my legs behind my knees, then pulled them up and out to the sides until my pelvis angled upward and air cooled my opening. Xa'din made a happy sound and rubbed the remnants of oil over my hole. His finger slipped inside, moving past my muscles easily.

As he pumped into me, he looked up and said, “You see? You are relaxed.”

“I don't want to be relaxed, Your Majesty,” I said. “I want to be screaming your name.”

With a savage growl, Xa'din moved into position and set himself at my entrance. He eased slowly into me despite my readiness, those exotic eyes watching my every twitch. As I shuddered and pulled my legs even further open for him, he licked his lips. Then, suddenly, he slammed into me, filling me completely.

“Zay!” I shouted.

“Take me, Consort,” he growled as he lifted my legs and set them against his chest. “Take all of me!”

The Dragon King wrapped his arms around my thighs, holding them tightly as he began to thrust. Pleasure zipped up my spine and spread out with every pump of his hips, speared into me by his cock and sheer determination.

“Tell me,” he demanded.

“I love you.”

“Only me?”

“Only you.”

Zay growled, bared his teeth, then softened his expression to say, “And I love you, my luvari. Squeeze me as only you do. Draw the desire out of me.”

I squeezed him inside me, and something tingled at the base of my spine. My balls tightened and pulled up against my cock, and when he reached down and took me in hand, I exploded, thick streams jetting over my chest.

And they wouldn't stop.

Gasping and shuddering, heart racing in joy, I realized what was happening. “It's the mating urge,” I whispered.

“What?” Xa’din stopped and stared down at my erupting cock in horror.

“I need to mark you!” And I did. The need was clawing at my insides, my dragon rising to roar at me that this man was ours and we should take him now! *Claim him, bind him to us for eternity!*

“Mark me?” Xa’din lurched back, his cock sliding out of me.

“Zay,” I growled and got to my knees. I grabbed my throbbing cock with one hand and reached for him with the other.

“No!” Xa’din roared and tumbled out of bed.

Without my mate to receive my cum, my body locked up, and I fell forward. Desperate, I crawled to the edge of the bed. “I need you, Zay! You know I must mark you. Come to me!”

“No.” He shook his head and backed away from me. “You can’t. I won’t allow it.”

“You said you love me! You said we had a chance!”

“I can’t!” Xa’din, the ferocious Dragon King of Ha’tezan, turned around and ran naked from his bedchambers like a scared child.

I rolled onto my back, pain suddenly shooting through my entire body. A mating should never be denied. If it is, it sends the Dragon into a terrible state of self-destruction. The beast will fight for its mate. It will fight everything holding it back, even itself.

“Xa’din!” I roared.

It was the last word I could get out before the pain obliterated my ability to speak. Then I could only scream.

Chapter Forty-Nine

Burning. Clawing. Tearing. So much pain. I had to be dying. It felt as if my dragon were about to explode out of my chest to hunt down our mate.

I'm here, Thas. You're going to be all right, the words slipped into my mind along with a cooling sensation that swept through my body. *I may not be able to break a mating bond once it's established, but I can ease the pain of an unsuccessful attempt. That much I made sure of when Ensa cast this curse upon our creations.*

I gasped in relief and sat up. "Karadas?"

I felt your pain—your mental anguish. I found no resistance in your mind and when I entered it, I realized what had happened. I wasn't able to use the full force of my power, not with Ensa's spell hindering me, but with our mental connection, I managed to ease your mind. As the mind controls the body, that was enough to stop the mating urge from consuming you. I am greatly relieved that I could help you.

I shuddered, trying to process what had happened.

I am so sorry, little one. Truly, I am.

"He left me," I whispered. "What kind of Dragon leaves his mate like that, right in the middle of a claiming?"

A broken one, he said gently.

“Aren’t you going to tell me that you warned me about this?” I muttered.

No, of course not. You are hurt. I want to help you, not hurt you more.

I started to cry. “But you were right; he’s never going to mate me. All those pretty words he said about being the only man to ever touch me again and how he loved me. It was all bullshit. He doesn’t love me. If he did, he wouldn’t leave me like that. He wouldn’t be able to cause me such pain.”

I’m so sorry. I wish I were there to comfort you better.

Pain lashed through me again, but this time it was only emotional. I roared in anguish and launched myself to my feet.

Thas, it will be all right. You will recover.

“From losing my mate before he’s even mine? From his betrayal on the very day he was supposed to commit himself to me? No, I will not recover. But I *will* have vengeance.”

The Dragon God went quiet as I stormed through the room, tearing off my jewelry and scrubbing the paint from my body. I went into the dressing room and yanked on some clothes, then a pair of boots.

Thas? Karadas asked hesitantly. *Thas, what are you going to do? Please, don’t try to hurt him. On your own, you will be overpowered by his knights and—*

“I’m going to free you.” I stormed out into the hallway.

I felt the God’s shock like a vibration in my mind. He didn’t say another word. I think he was afraid that anything he said might change my decision. It wouldn’t have. I had been hanging over this precipice since the Dragon God had first spoken to me and now I had a reason to take the plunge. If the Dragon King didn’t want me, I was going to take Zaniyah’s advice and go after the Dragon God.

Do you still want me, Karadas? I demanded.

Of course, I do.

*I am without a mate, alone in this world for eternity.
Will you make me your consort?*

Yes. For you, I will make that commitment. You will never be alone, Thas. Free me and you will have me forever; I vow it.

“So be it,” I said aloud. “I am yours.”

No one was in the courtyard and only a few knights stood guard at the gate. They didn’t see me go into the stables and saddle a horse, and they were too shocked to stop me when I rode past them, jewels still falling from my hair. I set my horse to an easy canter to navigate Lucar. Around me, the city celebrated, drunken people swaying down the sidewalks, cheering and hugging. It finally occurred to me that they were celebrating the King taking a consort. A blessed consort.

“How disappointed they’ll be tomorrow,” I muttered.

No, they won't. Because tomorrow, they will have a god among them, and their king, cursed or not, will no longer matter. Hurry, Thas, I'm anxious now that you're on your way.

But I didn't drive the horse to go faster. I needed the time to calm myself and prepare for what I was about to do. Could I truly give myself to another man when I came fresh from Xa'din's bed? The altar flashed in my mind again. Not just a man, but a god.

I will not require that of you. The altar is only for sacrifices. You are not a sacrifice, Thas. I will make love to you in a bed, as you should be claimed. I will make you my consort, and you will forget about him.

"I'm going to hold you to that promise."

If there were any Litotos on patrol that night, they didn't care about one lone man leaving the city and heading into the forest. No one stopped me along the road to the temple, not man nor beast. The jungle was quiet around me, as if it knew what I was about to do and waited with bated breath.

And then I was there, riding up to an open gate. They had dismantled the camp, so there was only open land before the mound of dirt that half-covered the gate. With a calm born of fury, I dismounted, tied my horse to a tree, and climbed the slope. Supports still stood to either side, but the scaffolding before the gate was gone. At the top of the mound, I stood on bare dirt and stared at the stone carvings. My gaze found the inscription that warned against listening.

They are lies, Thas. I swear to you, I will not hurt your people or you.

“Or anyone else?”

I cannot promise that. What if I have to defend you or the race? I will not be shackled by such a vow. But I will swear that I will harm no one without reason, and I keep my promises, little one. I have never broken a vow.

“I believe you. I have ... faith.” I breathed in deeply and set my palms on the stone.

Repeat these words exactly as I say them ...

The Dragon God spoke words I'd never heard before. They were definitely not Ancient Draconian. But I was good with languages, and despite the unusual inflection, I pronounced them perfectly.

Now, the fire! Karadas shouted.

As soon as fire encased my hands, the doors rattled. A roar came from beyond the stone and light flared around the edges of the doors, as well as through the little crack that had enabled our connection. A wave of magic knocked me backward onto the dirt and I lay there, staring at the ancient words at the top of the gate. The God of the Moon and Water. The symbols carved by my goddess to anchor her spell. They glowed with pale blue light.

Thas! Get back! Get away from the gate! Hurry!

I scrambled to my feet and ran down the hill.

Are you safe? I can't hold back much longer.

“I’m over fifty feet away. Free yourself.” I turned just in time to see the pile of dirt and rocks explode outward.

Despite my certainty that I was out of range, I dove to the ground and covered my head with my arms. Another roar came, this one far louder than the last. Powerful enough to make the world tremble and the heavens take note. More light came from the gate, but this time, it was softer. Like condensed moonlight. I lowered my arms and lifted my head to see that the area before the gate was clear and the doors were opening. An enormous being, nearly as tall as the gate, emerged from the glow beyond. Star-filled eyes surveyed the world from his great height and moonlight hair whipped around his muscular body.

The Dragon God opened his arms, lifted his face to the sky, and shouted, “I am free, you horrid creature! A Dragon man has broken your spell with your fire, and I’m going to take him as my consort. Do you hear that, Ensarena? I am free and I will be loved again!” Then his massive palms filled with pale light, and he cast them outward. “Wake up, my Dragons! It is time for you to become whole again!”

A wave of power washed over me, rolling me onto my back. Cool magic surged into my body, running through my veins, and filling me with energy that I immediately recognized. Water. I had sampled it earlier that night when Karadas banished my mating pain, but this was a full measure of magic, enough to stay with me, enough for me to own. The cool magic met Fire inside me, but instead of creating steam in conflict, the two wove together and spun into a circle, creating a perfect harmony. The balance Karadas had promised.

I stood up, feeling more certain and stronger than I had ever felt before. Karadas had spoken the truth. He was our god. He had just returned our magic. Which meant ...

“Thas.” The God stepped forward.

Behind me, the horse shrieked and tore loose her tethers. She went racing down the road, hopefully back to the palace. But I didn’t worry about my frightened mount this time. I was too enthralled by the Dragon God.

“Ah, yes. It’s been so long that I’ve forgotten the scale of things.” Karadas shrank as he came forward. By the time he reached me, he was just a little taller than Xa’din.

Xa’din. My mate.

“No, not anymore.” Karadas cupped my cheek. “Now, you are mine, little one. And I shall make you Divine Consort.”

His hair swung forward as he pulled me into his arms, the length of it undulating in the air as if we were underwater.

“Hair like moonlight,” I whispered and touched a waving lock.

“Hair like blood.” He smoothed mine back from my forehead. “You are perfect for me, blessed one.”

And then his divine lips were on mine—soft, insistent, and cool. The wet touch of his tongue sent a shiver through me, and I opened for him. With a growl of pleasure, Karadas swept inside me. Instead of lashing or twirling, he speared me with his tongue, alluding to another act we’d soon perform together.

With a soft rumble of delight, the Dragon God eased away from me, brushing our lips together before he straightened. “Not yet, little one. First, we must let the world know that I have returned. That I am the one who has gifted them the power of Water.”

“How will we do that?”

“The moon is out.” He grinned. “My power is at its height and I haven’t used it in a very long time. It shouldn’t be that difficult to contact the Dragons of Serai.”

Karadas waved an arm out, and the bare dirt became a lush meadow spotted with night-blooming flowers, their pale petals set aglow by the moonlight. A delicate veil of scent rose around us as he escorted me through the meadow and to the gate. Beneath his feet, the ground rumbled, the vibration spreading toward the ancient doors. The mountain withdrew, sliding off a soaring structure like sand, revealing a palatial temple as it glided back several hundred feet. The mountain settled into a curve, then extended into a circle around the meadow. As stone peaks rose from the soil, the meadow grew, pushing back the jungle until it was beyond the new mountain range. The sheer mountains stopped just short of connecting, leaving a passage between them that led to the road. As I watched over my shoulder, the stone gate appeared there, open but still imposing.

I looked forward to find that the stone doors were indeed gone, replaced by the pair I’d seen in the God’s memories—one silver and one gold. The temple’s true doors rose before me as tall as the stone gate, bordered by enormous columns, and crowned by a steeped roof. But that was just the entry. Looming above it were two main buildings, each several stories high, their square tiers growing smaller as they ascended until they became towers. The tower on the left bore

a golden sun on a spike, and the one on the right had a silver crescent moon on its side, pointed toward the sun. More structures swept out from those two in rectangular wings, but no other towers rose from the temple. At ground level, standing guard to either side of the shining doors, a pair of dragons stood guard, similar to the statues at the entrance of Lucar. Except that these dragons were gold and silver.

“This is no longer your temple, Ensarena,” the Dragon God growled and flung his arm out in an arch to encompass the whole of it.

The two towers shimmered as a deep groaning came from them. Atop the left tower, the sun symbol vanished, and then the two main buildings flowed together, their towers merged into one, setting the moon in a central position. As it gained prominence, the crescent turned so that its points faced upward like a pair of dragon horns.

Smiling in satisfaction, the Dragon God drew me forward, and the temple doors—now both silver, engraved with moons—opened for its master. To either side of us, night gardens sprouted, filling in the space between the temple and the mountains. Within the temple, lights came on, bursting from every window. A familiar half-moon entryway welcomed us. But Karadas didn't step inside.

Instead, the Dragon God left me in the doorway and stepped back out beyond the overhang. As he lifted his arms, his body enlarged. No magic haze encased him, as it does Dragons when we shift. He simply grew taller until it looked as if he were touching the sky. At his ultimate height, the night sky in his eyes spread like ink, first through the white sclera and then over his fair skin until he appeared to be utterly composed of it. Falling stars, comets, and heavenly bodies in a multitude of colors spun and sparkled within him. His hair undulated around the cosmos of his body, glowing like the

moon, and his voice, when he spoke, had a resonance that made my heart race.

“Rejoice, Dragons of Serai, for your god has returned to you!” Karadas shouted.

I heard an echo of his words in my mind, and I had a feeling that I wasn’t the only one to hear him this time.

“I have restored your Water magic and made you whole at last. This is my first gift to you, given in celebration of my return and the future we shall make together. I understand you don’t know me anymore, that most of you have never known of my existence, so I will be patient with you. Come to me in your own time, of your free will, and I will share the truth with you—the truth of your past, your gods, and yourselves.”

And then an image of the temple burst into my mind along with the knowledge of where it was located.

When the God’s presence withdrew from me, I came gasping back to myself. I had fallen to my knees without realizing it, but I couldn’t stand. I could only gape at Karadas as the sky withdrew into his eyes and his body dwindled to a size closer to mine.

With a graceful stride that was rare in a man of his bulk, the Dragon God returned to me and helped me to my feet. He kissed my hand, then asked, “How did I do?”

“I believe you shocked the entire Dragon Race, including myself, but I think it was perfect. You gave them the incentive to come without besmirching the Goddess, but

implied that you could be a better god to them. I know I wouldn't be able to stay away."

"Good. I wish for them to come to me without fear." He drew me inside the temple and the doors shut behind us. "I am free at last, my temple restored, and my people summoned. Now, it is time to make you mine, little one."

Chapter Fifty

I had seen glimpses of the Dragon God's temple in my dreams. But like most dreams, they paled when compared to reality. Karadas led me past rooms with polished walls of precious metals and furniture adorned with sparkling jewels. Everything gleamed as if freshly made, even the stark white floor was pristine. Moonlight infused the very walls, and Water reigned in every room—spinning across ceilings, twining around paintings, and dancing around light spheres in midair. Droplets, streams, fountains, mist. It kissed my skin and collected in my hair. And instead of making me uncomfortable, it revived me. Energy thrummed through every tiny drop, and my body connected with it as if it were an extension of us.

I lifted my free hand and a ribbon of water collected around it, then twined up my arm like a snake. *Amazing*, I thought to myself.

Karadas chuckled and lifted my free hand to kiss it. “Not as amazing as you, little one.”

“Why are you still in my mind?”

“I enjoy hearing your thoughts. It makes me feel closer to you.”

“I think I'd like to keep them to myself while we ...”

“Make love?” He grinned wickedly and drew me up a spiraling staircase. “You don't understand, Thas. I will let you into my mind as well and the experience will be unlike any you've ever had. We will connect both physically and mentally. It will be beautiful, I promise.”

“All right,” I whispered.

“We are about to become one, Thas. You will know me as no other does, not even Ensarena. Love is certain to follow, and then no one will ever come between us.”

I shivered and tried not to think of Xa’din.

A door opened before us, and we entered a room similar to the bedroom he’d taken me to in my dreams, but far more wondrous. The vast space was large enough for several dragons to stand comfortably, wings extended. Just as in my dream, everything was black—walls, floors, ceiling, even the bed. But this space was vast compared to the one I’d seen before, and so was the bed. It was still the only piece of furniture in the room, with a circular mattress set on a three-tiered platform, but now it was large enough for two full-sized dragons to sleep on it. In my man form, I would be lost on that bed, an insect crawling across the sea of silken sheets. But it wasn’t the most awe-inspiring part of the room. Unlike my dream, the black of the walls, ceiling, and floor wasn’t polished stone.

It was the midnight sky.

The sparkling constellations weren’t formed of diamonds nor was it a trick of light that the nebula glowed. The galaxies, those heavenly bodies floating around me, were real, and as we stepped into the room, the cosmos spun around us, then stopped, as if orienting itself to the Dragon God, placing him at the center of all existence.

It was too much, that sudden step off the planet. I cried out and covered my eyes, unable to process the feeling of

standing in space without free-falling or dying a horrible death. My brain couldn't grasp that I was safe, and my dragon wanted to flee—something dragons *never* do.

“I have you, little one.” The Dragon God's arms wrapped around me. “You are safe here with me. This is my domain.”

I looked up at him, trying to focus on him instead of the room, but his eyes were more of the same, the stars twinkling at me mockingly. I flinched back.

“All right. Easy now, Thas.” He cupped my face in his hands and the galaxies disappeared, replaced by solid black walls. “I will save the heavens for another time.”

I gasped in a breath and looked down at the jet floor. No stars winked at me and no comets flared in dramatic arches. “Thank you.”

“I didn't expect such a reaction from my wise philosopher.” He brushed my hair back. “I thought it would fascinate you.”

“I might have been if you'd prepared me. But this wasn't the bedroom I expected.”

“I had to show you a version of the room that your mind would accept. Even in a dream, you refused to believe the other could exist.”

“Oh,” I whispered. “Well, thank you for trying.”

His full lips spread in another smile. “You’re welcome.”

Then my clothes were gone. Just like that. No warning, no kissing. I was just suddenly naked. And so was he. I looked down his amazing body and then up and then down again. Nothing sagged or wrinkled or dared to be squishy on the Dragon God. At least not if it wasn’t meant to. Although, I wouldn’t be surprised if his balls were solid too.

Karadas burst out laughing, and my face went as red as my hair.

“Oh, don’t do that,” the God said softly and pulled me closer. “There is no shame between us. You amused me and should be pleased by that. *I’m* pleased that you find this body beautiful.”

“Can you change your body?”

“Of course.” He frowned. “Would you prefer something else?”

“No,” I rushed to say. “Well, maybe fewer stars?” I cringed. “Your eyes can be difficult to look at.”

His hand lifted to touch the skin outside his right eye. “You don’t like my ... , ah, I understand. How is this?”

His eyes lightened. No, that’s not exactly accurate. It was as if a star came forward in each of his eyes to become silver irises while the midnight sky thinned to a limbal ring.

“Beautiful,” I whispered.

“Perhaps I’ll keep them this way.” He took my hand and led me to the bed.

The cosmos had vanished, but the bed remained the same. I climbed the steps with wide eyes, thinking silly things about how much fabric it must take to cover the mattress and how odd it was that there were no pillows. There was something appealing about the vast expanse of it now. I liked the thought that I could turn into a dragon inside a building and not hurt anything.

“That is rather the point,” Karadas said and helped me onto the mattress.

“Do you take the shape of a dragon?”

“You thought I didn’t?” His amusement shimmered through our connection. “I am the *Dragon God*.”

“May I see your dragon form?” I asked hesitantly.

“Shall we shift together? I’d like to take you in that form as well. Maybe it would be better to start with it and ease you past any ... residual feelings you might have for your last lover.”

“All right.” I tried to ignore the instant bonfire in my belly that started at the mention of Xa’din. I was there to forget him and move on. This was something I had to do. If a god couldn’t get me over Zay, no one could.

“I will, Thas.” Karadas drew me down onto the silk sheets and kissed me. “You will forget him soon. Your love for me will overpower everything else.”

“I hope so.”

Karadas kissed my forehead, then said, “Together?”

“Together.”

My dragon came roaring to the surface, shifting skin into crimson scales and hands into talons. Horns, wings, and a tail sprouted, all in seconds, and I continued to enlarge, stretching as one might upon awakening. When the transformation was complete, the sensation of silk vanished, but I could still feel the cushion of the mattress. I opened my eyes and beheld my god in his draconian glory.

A dragon made of moonlight. Of course. What else could he be? Karadas shone like the moon itself, his scales glowing softly, and a pair of silver eyes stared at me from his angular, dragon face. An ebony talon reached out and stroked a line down my side, sending shivers past the armor of scales and into my flesh.

“You are beautiful, little one,” the Moonlight Dragon said. “Like a ruby carved into a dragon.”

“Not as beautiful as you.”

Karadas sent his pleasure into my mind, opening the connection so that it went both ways, and then bent his head to nuzzle me. Scales slid along scales. Cool breath met hot. Tails twined together. It was so beautiful and erotic. Lying there on

a luxurious bed amid all that darkness, the two of us shining as if we were the only things in existence. The start of life. And yet, I didn't desire him. But I wanted to. So, I folded my wings and drew my tail to the side as I got onto all-fours.

“So eager,” Karadas murmured. “Good. So am I. It's been a long time since I've been with someone in the flesh. And I've craved you, Thas.” He nipped at my shoulder and got into position behind me. “I need to be inside you.”

With the first touch of his shaft against my opening, something changed. My dragon took over, and it rolled us away from our god. As Karadas gaped at me, I roared a challenge, then bared my teeth. My tail lashed violently, tearing at the bed.

“Thas?” the Moonlight Dragon whispered.

Snarling, I backed off the bed, then lifted my wings to make myself as large as possible. I couldn't think, could only react instinctively, and it felt as if I were being attacked. As if someone were trying to take something from me. Something I would fight to the death to keep.

“All right, little one.” Karadas shifted into his man form and even made himself small so he wouldn't be intimidating. “It's the mating instinct, that's all. Your beast doesn't understand that your mate has rejected you. I am not trying to take you from him. Thas? Can you hear me?”

I couldn't. Suddenly, all I could hear was my mate's voice. *No*, Xa'din said, over and over, denying that he was mine before running from me. But that didn't matter. He was my mate, chosen for me by the Goddess. The God couldn't change that, not with his magic or magical body. Xa'din was

mine! I roared again, snapped at the air, then spun around and burst from the room.

“Thas!” Karadas shouted after me.

I ran through the dragon-sized corridors, fleeing the man who wanted to replace the bond I should have formed with my mate. With that thought, reason returned. I had *started* to bond with Xa’din. He hadn’t been fast enough to leave me. Or maybe his rejection didn’t matter. I had forged something between us despite his denial. His skin may not bear my scent, but my soul had claimed his.

I had to get to my mate!

When I reached the stairs, I dove over the railing and down the tunnel formed by the spiral, pulling up at the last moment to land with a thud on the marble floor. I came up running, dashing through the corridors, then the throne room, and finally, I shot out of the temple, flinging the silver doors wide with a slam of my head. Then came to an abrupt halt. There, before the doors, stood the Dragons of the Court of Ha’tezan, and at their head was the King.

My mate. He was there. He had come for me.

“Thas?” Xa’din stepped forward.

No, he hadn’t come for me. He had come for Karadas.

The Dragon God stepped around me, back in his giant body and clothed in shimmering robes of silver-speckled black. “Welcome, King Xa’din,” he said. “Welcome, all of you. There is much we need to discuss.”

Chapter Fifty-One

The entire court went to its knees. All but Xa'din, who just stood there, staring at me. His gaze shifted to the left as the Dragon God stepped up beside me and laid a hand on my scaled back, his height even greater than mine. Then his mismatched eyes narrowed.

I thought Xa'din would say something then, tell Karadas to step away from his consort, but he didn't. He just continued to stare.

“You look upset, King Xa'din,” Karadas said. “You need not be concerned. I haven't deceived Lord Thas. I am not an evil god intent on hurting the people of Serai, especially not my Dragons. Love prompted my imprisonment and, in a way,”—he glanced at me—“love has released me. I wish to play an active part in the lives of my people, unlike your goddess, who barely acknowledges you once a year when she accepts your offerings.”

“Ensarena is active in our lives,” the Dragon King finally spoke. “She has never deserted us.”

“Ah, yes. She chooses your mates for you, doesn't she?” He glanced pointedly at me. “How did that work out for you?”

Xa'din's face twitched as he growled, “I'm different. Cursed.”

“That is not true, King Xa'din,” Karadas said gently.

The Dragons went still, every eye on the King.

“My life has not been an easy one,” Xa’din said.

“This again.” Karadas shook his head. “Life poses challenges for everyone, even us gods. Look upon my glorious temple and see the truth of that. I have suffered at the hands of your beloved goddess. But I am not cursed, nor a lesser god for my suffering. It is simply a fact of existence. Obstacles will come and, if you’re strong enough, they will be surmounted.” He waved a hand at his temple as if to show his triumph. “Your difficulties have stemmed mostly from people who believe a silly myth about the color of your eyes. The curse is their belief and the actions that stem from it, nothing more.”

“You didn’t say that before,” Xa’din’s tone went low.

“I did. I told Thas that you are not cursed, but I knew you wouldn’t believe such a stark statement. So I had him tell you that belief created your curse and only disbelief could break it. It is the truth that I thought you could accept. But even that, you refused to believe.”

“I am not cursed?”

“No.”

Xa’din’s stare went to me.

“Yes, rejecting him was a terrible mistake,” Karadas said. “And now it’s too late. Thas insisted upon several conditions when he freed me, and one was that I make him my consort.”

Xa’din went tense, fury rolling off him.

“Karadas,” I whispered.

“But enough of this.” Karadas waved one massive arm toward the courtiers. “Come inside, and I will receive you properly.” He turned and took a step before glancing back at me. “Come, Thas. You will attend me.”

I looked at Xa’din, willing him with my eyes to say something, to show me that he still wanted me. That he was ready to be my mate. He just looked away.

Heart disintegrating inside my chest, I turned and stepped up beside the God. Karadas laid a hand on my neck, and we both transformed as we walked into the temple—he diminished in size while I became a man. With the change complete, I flinched in shock. I hadn’t instigated the shift; Karadas had. He had forced me into my prime body. Normally, such a transformation would leave me naked, but the Dragon God had taken care of that as well. Luxurious robes covered my body, robes that matched his.

Oh, fuck. Zay would think that I had betrayed him. Again.

He betrayed you, Karadas spoke in my mind. Don’t forget that he left you writhing in tremendous pain instead of mating you.

Because he believed he couldn’t mate me. Now, he knows he can.

But you told him he could. You told him again and again, and he wouldn’t believe you, Thas. He had his chance

with you, and he ran away instead of taking it. He increased your pain instead of easing it. A man who can watch his mate suffer and do nothing about it is not good. He is certainly not worthy of you, little one.

Karadas, I don't think I can be with you. You saw what happened with my dragon. I don't think I have a choice.

It's too late for you too, little one. You have forged an agreement with me, and I am a god. You cannot break your word now. Just as I cannot break mine.

I went silent, but glanced over my shoulder at Xa'din. He was following us with his court, inspecting the glory of the temple. Looking anywhere but at me.

From the God's memories, I knew that the rooms we passed were reception rooms, places for worshipers to wait and prepare to meet the God or seek the counsel of temple priests. There used to be two throne rooms, but now there was only one and the corridor ended in it, opening to it without doors to bar the way. Karadas strode to the far end of the room where the divine dais waited, the altar alcove to the side. I determinedly averted my gaze from the stone altar as we passed, keeping my focus on the gleaming black dais. There, a silver throne waited, the point of its back topped by a silver crescent moon with points facing up. It looked made for the Dragon God's larger body, but as we approached, it shrunk to something better suited to his current height, and the dais shrunk with it, the height of the steps lowering to one I could manage.

The Dragon courtiers murmured in wonder over this casual display of power, but the King remained silent. Karadas, holding my hand, pretended not to notice their reactions. He climbed the steps and finally let go of my hand

so he could take his throne. But as soon as the Dragon God sat down, he reached for me and drew me over to stand beside him.

“I will require priests and priestesses dedicated to serving me,” Karadas said. “I will train them in my worship so that they may instruct others. But I will force no one into service; they must come willingly. I want only those who dearly wish to devote themselves to me.” He looked over the courtiers and let that sink in before continuing, “I will give the Dragons of Ha’tezan the first opportunity to fill the positions of my holy ones in residence since they will live here, in my temple. But I will also train Dragons from every kingdom so that they may return home and build more temples in my name. If there aren’t enough Ha’tezan Dragons to serve me here, I will seek them from other kingdoms.”

“I’m sure there will be many who will want to attend you,” the King said crisply, his gaze wandering to me.

Once again, I put my heart into my eyes, and once again, Xa’din ignored it and looked away.

My jaw clenched along with my chest.

“Yes, there will be,” the Dragon God said with a heavy glance my way. “For I can offer many benefits to those who serve me, not the least of which will be prestige.” He held out a hand. “Now come forward, King Xa’din. I will accept your allegiance first and then the rest of your court.”

Xa’din stiffly strode up the steps and bowed to the God. Karadas extended his hand. Tight-jawed, the Dragon King took the God’s hand, and with that contact, his expression instantly changed. Xa’din’s eyes widened and his

jaw went slack. He dropped to his knees before the God and bent his head.

Even though Xa'din didn't speak, the God nodded in satisfaction. "I accept your allegiance, King Xa'din, and in return, I shall guard and guide you and your kingdom. You have been instrumental in my freedom and in return, I shall ensure that your kingdom prospers more than any other on Serai."

Xa'din lifted his head. "Thank you, Great Karadas."

"Rise, King Xa'din. You now rule under my blessing and with my support."

The Dragon King stood, and I knew then that I had lost him. He would never challenge the God for me, never oppose him. Karadas had shown Xa'din his power, and Xa'din had not only seen how great it was, but also how wondrous. He'd been converted in an instant. Holding the hand of God will do that to a man.

"Attend me as I receive your court." Karadas waved to his left.

And there we stood—the God, the King, and I—as the Dragons of the Ha'tezan Court were likewise converted. One by one, they came up the steps to kneel before Karadas and devote themselves to him.

Halfway through the reception, more Dragons arrived at the temple. Converted courtiers greeted them and directed them to the throne room. All the Dragons of Ha'tezan had heard their God and come running.

Not just Ha'tezan, little one, Karadas spoke into my mind even as he accepted another Dragon's devotion. All the royal Dragons of Serai are on their way to me, attended by their nobles and retinues. The others will come once their royals give them leave. I can feel them, their eagerness. It has been too long since they've seen a god, not just some silly light show. They long to touch divinity. My temple will be full again soon. The Dragon God looked at me and grinned. Ensarena must be furious.

I looked past Karadas to the Dragon King, and Xa'din's stare finally shifted my way. It was full of regret, heartache, and longing. Was this my future? My mate standing just out of reach, with our god eternally between us?

Chapter Fifty-One

Karadas welcomed Dragons throughout the night. And he was right; not only did the Dragons of Ha'tezan come, but also those of other kingdoms. The resident positions of his priests and priestesses quickly filled, and those Dragons went to work immediately, directing the droves of new worshipers.

When the sun rose, the God lifted a hand and said, "You may use the reception rooms for your rest or camp on the grounds outside, but I am God of the Night, and it is time for me to retire. I will return when the sun sets." Karadas stood, offered me his hand, and then spoke to Xa'din, "Prepare your kingdom for a large number of visitors, King Xa'din. This is just the beginning."

"Yes, Karadas." Xa'din bowed, then swiftly descended the steps and gathered his court.

I didn't see him leave the throne room; the Dragon God had ushered me away by then. He took me to the left of the dais, into a corridor that led through the priest and priestess dormitories, past the library of sacred texts, and to the stairs that led up to his private residence.

My heart raced as we strode the same path we'd taken earlier. The same one I'd raced down after I fled the God's bed. I'd have to go through with it now. Xa'din had deserted me, or maybe I had deserted him, but either way, I belonged to the Dragon God. And it was all my doing, so I could hardly complain. And yet ...

"Stop, little one," Karadas said gently. "I am not a rapist. If you do not wish to be bedded, I will not take you tonight. I'll wait until you're ready and then we can try again. But I urge you to forget him, Thas. Ensarena may have chosen

him for you, but I did not. I choose you for myself.” He lifted my hand and kissed it. “And I will give you everything you’ve ever wanted, little one. Trust me, you will forget him soon enough, and then you’ll wonder why you waited so long to love me.”

Love. Could I love Karadas?

“It is inevitable,” he said.

The doors to the God’s sleeping chamber opened, and he led me inside, straight to the bed. Now I knew why there were no windows in there. He wouldn’t want the sunlight seeping in to disturb his rest. If he even needed rest.

“I do not,” the Dragon God said. “But during my solitude, I’ve grown to enjoy it. It gives my mind a chance to settle and brings me peace. And I think I will especially enjoy it with you in my arms.”

Our robes vanished, and Karadas let go of me to crawl onto the mattress. As he moved, his size increased until he was at least fourteen feet tall. Not as large as he could get, but still big. One enormous hand reached out to me as he settled on his side.

“You want me to sleep beside you when you’re like that?” I asked. “You’ll crush me.”

“Trust me, little one.” His finger stroked my face before his hand slipped behind me to urge me forward. “I will cradle you against my heart. No harm will come to you in my arms.”

“I suppose that endearment suits me now,” I muttered as I climbed onto the massive mattress. “Little one.”

But it felt nice to lie beside him, within the curve of his immense body. The mattress reformed around me, supporting my head like a pillow, and the God’s scent was amazing, sort of crisp but also rich—a refreshing, masculine aroma like pine resin in winter. It lured me into languidness, and I soon drifted off to sleep, feeling safe and wanted.

Maybe Karadas was right, and I would forget about the Dragon King.

Chapter Fifty-Two

I woke feeling incredible. The air was cool and dry, and a muscular body cradled me. Then I opened my eyes and remembered who that body belonged to.

The Dragon God was asleep.

Without his penetrating stare on me or his consciousness in my mind, I felt free. I could look at him for as long as I wanted, without him drawing conclusions or teasing me. And he was worthy of being stared at.

Moonlight hair pooled around his perfect body, muscles defined as if sculpted in stone, even with him asleep and on his side. My belly didn't defy gravity like that and even though it was flat, it still sagged compared to the God's. He was tight and smooth and fucking perfect everywhere. Porcelain and pearly pink. And huge. His current size stopped just short of being frightening, but was definitely impressive. Especially *there*.

My stare came to rest on his limp cock, the heavy flesh draped over his thigh. It was as perfect as the rest of him, emerging from a nest of moonlight curls and blushed peony-pink at the tip. Below it nestled a pair of silken sacs that didn't wrinkle as a normal man's but had a velvet look to them that made me want to rub my face against them. Against them and that massive shaft as long as my forearm.

"Please do," a sleep-roughened voice purred.

My stare shot up to meet the silver orbs of the God's eyes. They gleamed with lust and magic.

“You don’t have to do anything you don’t want to, Thas,” he said. “But this might be a good way for you to get over your hesitation.”

“I don’t know,” I whispered.

“What if I made myself even larger? So large that it would be impossible for me to penetrate you? Would that make you more comfortable?”

“It’s impossible for you to penetrate me now.”

“I agree, but I don’t think you do. Not really.”

I grimaced. “Maybe a tad larger.”

The Dragon God chuckled as his body grew to immense proportions, as large as he’d been when he’d first emerged from the temple, and then he rolled onto his back. It left me in line with his hip, and I had to stand up to scale his pelvis. I was trembling by the time I knelt next to his cock, my mouth watering and my mind spinning. The divine shaft was nearly as long as my leg and twice as thick. And those moonlight curls felt like silk against my skin. I wanted to dive into them.

I eased closer, careful not to tug on his hair, and the God’s hand lifted to cup my back, supporting me so I wouldn’t fall. I looked up his long torso to find him watching me, his head lifted by a rise in the mattress. I couldn’t hold his gaze and touch him. Part of the appeal was that he was large enough to separate him from his cock.

Karadas must have heard me because he laid back, the mattress going flat beneath him, and his hand fell away. Then I was alone with that massive dick, feeling as if I were in a dream. I reached out slowly and ran my hand over the silken skin, rumpling it into folds. The thing twitched. Leaning in, I nuzzled it with my face, then pressed my ear against it, listening to the pound of his divine heart. The God's smell was thicker there. Richer. I turned my head and kissed him, then flicked out my tongue to sneak a taste.

A low rumbling vibrated beneath me, and the enormous shaft went hard, rising like an erotic tree. I rose with it, thighs lifting off my knees, and wrapped my arms around it to slide my hands over that velvety skin. So firm but also pliable, bending and curving with my body. Glorious, and yet my cock remained limp, utterly unaffected. Then the image of Xa'din's dragon cock filled my mind—my hands gliding over it, coating it in oil—and my cock responded, hardening instantly. My hips moved on their own, rocking forward to rub my dick against the giant one. Thoughts firmly on Xa'din, my thighs split around the God's shaft, and I undulated my whole body over it.

A drop of desire collected on the tip of the Dragon God's member. I reached up, collected it, and drew it down that silken length to coat my cock with it. Quickly, before my mind accepted reality, I closed my eyes and focused on the memory of Xa'din's enormous shaft. Yes, I knew I was fooling myself, but it was the only way to get through this. And I had to try. I had to move on, even if I had to think of the Dragon King to do it. So, I embraced the God's cock tightly and pumped my slick shaft over his flesh.

My cock probably felt like a little bead to Karadas, but it, along with my embrace, was enough to keep him hard, and although I ached to be filled, thrusting against him sent pleasure zinging through me. Just as long as I focused on Xa'din.

Zay's scaled belly is beneath me. That's him groaning in pleasure. I'm with my mate. My mate. Xa'din.

His name became a chant in my mind, a spell that wove a beautiful illusion around me. With a cry, I clutched that giant cock tighter and began rising and falling on my knees, my whole body stroking it—thighs, chest, face. I stuck out my tongue so that I could lick my mate as I moved and massage him with my hands. Xa'din growled in delight, his pelvis pumping beneath me.

Then the God's voice invaded my illusion, "Turn your back to me, Thas. Then you can push forward on my cock. Even lie on it, if you wish, and wrap your legs around it."

But I was intent on Xa'din and so far into my lust that I couldn't stop. I did as he suggested and found that facing away from him helped the illusion return. And he was right. That position allowed me to push down on his cock, bringing it parallel with his body until I could crawl on top of it and wrap my legs and arms around it.

"Yes, let me see the pretty ass that will soon be mine," Karadas said, but my mind heard Xa'din's voice.

I shivered in excitement. My whole body tingled, full of the scent, taste, and feel of my mate. A part of me whispered that all those sensations were wrong, but I determinedly pushed that thought away. And then Xa'din's claw ran down my crack, its soft tip nudging my sacs and splitting my ass open. I cried out and pumped faster.

"Allow me, little one." His talon wrapped around my body and took control, moving me up and down his cock.

I went insane with lust, mouth open and tongue dragging over him along with my dick. Although it was unnecessary, I kept thrusting. I lost myself to instincts, becoming almost bestial. And then I felt him tense beneath me. With a cry, Xa'din pumped me off his cock and opened his claws so that I lay sprawled on my back.

That's when reality shattered my imagination. It wasn't Zay's dragon talon holding me, nor his mismatched stare locked with mine. It was Karadas.

The God's free hand went to his shaft and angled it at me as he positioned me before the tip. Cum erupted from him, and I closed my eyes just before it covered my entire body. Despite my dragon roaring a denial, the sparkling warmth of divine cum hitting my dick sent me over, and I came with Karadas, though the sound of my release was lost to his shouts of pleasure.

Panting, the Dragon God laid me down gently beside him, then waved his massive hand over me. His cum vanished, leaving me pristine, and yet, as soon as the convulsions of ecstasy abandoned me, I felt dirty. I rolled onto my side and curled up, facing away from him. Inside me, my belly clenched, my heart shriveled, and my dragon whimpered. I had truly betrayed Xa'din this time. There was no going back from that.

"Thas?" A hand touched me gently—a hand just a little larger than my own. And then a normal-sized body curled up against my back. "Did I hurt you, little one?"

"No. It's my fault. I shouldn't have done that. It's too soon for me."

“Thas,” Karadas whispered and stroked my hair. “It will get better. I promise you, it will.”

“Could I be alone for a moment, please?”

The Dragon God went still, and then he moved away from me. “As you wish, little one. Take as long as you need. I can be very patient.”

I waited to hear the soft click of the door before I started to weep.

Chapter Fifty-Three

Dragons from all over Serai traveled to Ha'tezan to meet the God. Doves of them. King Xa'din hosted the royals in his palace but soon ran out of guest rooms and had to find other arrangements for their entourages. Inns all over Ha'tezan turned people away, at full capacity. So, the Dragon God allowed his people to camp around the temple. When the meadow and gardens were full, the Dragons erected tents beyond the gates, in the jungle of Axunktli. Meanwhile, Karadas trained his priests and priestesses. They would soon be ready to instruct Dragons on how to worship their god and train other priests and priestesses. Everything was going as Karadas had planned. Everything but me.

A week passed with nothing sexual happening between us. Every time he tried to seduce me, I tensed up and remembered that horrible feeling I had after our first sexual interlude. I still felt as if I had betrayed Xa'din, and even though I knew it wasn't true, that he would never be mine to betray, I couldn't move past it. The mere thought of intimately touching the Dragon God made me physically ill. I was beginning to think I was doomed to never have sex again.

But Karadas was confident enough to set a date for me to become his consort. Most of the Dragon Kings and their nobles were on the island, and he liked the thought of them witnessing the event. Of course, the one king who I wanted to see never came to the temple. After that first day, Xa'din avoided the God's temple, sending his respect to Karadas through couriers along with the excuse that he was busy seeing to the influx of visitors. He sent one letter to me, congratulating me on my upcoming union.

I spent two days hidden in one of the terrace gardens, weeping over that letter. Screwing things up had been inevitable for me, but I never thought I'd mess up badly

enough to lose my mate. I kept going through my memories, picking out the moments when I had fucked up and replaying them. Torturing myself. I thought I deserved it. I thought Xa'din hated me. I thought I would never see him again.

I was wrong.

Karadas was receiving his worshipers as he did every night, when a roar echoed down the hallway to us. The crowd parted as a black dragon came charging into the throne room, his scales gleaming green in the light of dancing-water chandeliers. I froze, my heart racing as my mate ran to me, smoke seeping from his open jaws and his green eye aglow. He had nearly reached me when the Dragon God stood up and made a slicing motion.

Xa'din went tumbling through the air and landed on his back. The crack of his impact vibrated through the floor.

“Zay!” I screamed and leapt off the dais to run to my mate.

The black dragon rolled onto his belly, his head swiveling my way. “Thas.”

As I reached Xa'din, he shifted into his man form and opened his arms. I went straight into them, clutching him close as he bent over me.

“You came for me,” I whispered in amazement. “You’re here.”

“I am always with you, luvari.”

“Enough!” the Dragon God roared. “You will unhand my consort, King Xa’din.”

“He is not your consort yet.” Xa’din, naked but still every inch the King, tucked me in against his side, and lifted his chin. “I know I made a grave mistake with Thas, but I only thought to save him from my curse. You said it was too late, and I tried to accept that, but I cannot. He is my mate. I suffer without him, and if I am suffering, I know Thas must as well. I don’t believe you would want that for either of us, so I have come to ask for your mercy, Great Karadas. Please, release my mate.”

Every eye shifted to the God.

“Where was your concern for Thas when he tried to mate you?” Karadas stepped off his dais and approached us. “You say that he’s suffering because I have separated you, but it was you who left him shrieking in pain, and I who delivered him from it. You turned your back on your mate, Xa’din. Do you know what Thas said to me afterward? He asked me what kind of Dragon could do that—leave their mate in the middle of a claiming, shrieking in pain.”

Zay winced, but his grip on me tightened. “I know I’ve failed him horribly. I know he has suffered for me, and I will never forgive myself for that. But I truly believed I was saving him from my curse. Taking him as my consort was already a risk, but a mate? He would surely die. I couldn’t risk that, no matter how much I wanted to claim him. Hearing his screams of pain was unbearable, but it was preferable to his death. I held back my dragon for him. To save him.”

“Then you’re a fool and a scoundrel.”

“Yes, I have been both.” Xa’din turned to face me and ask, “Will you forgive me, luvari?”

“Yes, of course,” I said immediately.

“I will not!” Karadas roared and lifted a hand.

Light shot from the God’s fingertips, arcing across the room toward Xa’din. I cried out and shoved Xa’din out of the way. As he went tumbling to the ground, his mouth open in shock, Karadas cried out and dropped his arm. But it was too late. The beam hit me right over my heart. I didn’t get shot across the room. It wasn’t that kind of blow. No, it was far worse.

Divine, destructive light poured into my cells and attacked me. I fell to the ground, my body shaking through horrifying pain, pain even worse than that of my failed mating. I couldn’t speak, couldn’t breathe, could barely hear the shouts of my mate and god as they knelt beside me. I was dying, my immortality taken by my god.

“No!” Xa’din roared. Then he said it again, but with a whimper, “No.” His arms went around me and gently lifted me onto his lap. “Thas? Luvari, open your eyes. Please, open your eyes. Please.”

I struggled and lifted my heavy eyelids, but I couldn’t see. Tears blurred my vision. I blinked them away, and Xa’din’s face came into view. I wasn’t the only one crying.

“Why did you do that?” Zay whispered as he stroked my hair. “Why?”

“You know why.” I tried to lift my hand to touch his face, but my body went into convulsions.

“I love you too.” He clutched me tightly, steadying me. “Don’t go, *luv*ari. Stay with me. Please, don’t go. You are my world. Please, *Thas*.”

“Move aside,” Karadas said.

“The fuck I will,” the Dragon King growled, suddenly ferocious. “You’ve killed us both. He’s my life. I will die with him, and I will do it holding him in my arms.”

“Stop the dramatics, you blubbering fool!” The Dragon God yanked me away from the King. “He will not die. It is my magic hurting him, and I control it.”

A cool palm pressed against my chest and the pain instantly abated. I gasped and sat up, a rush of energy filling my body to not only heal but also revive me.

“*Thas!*” *Xa’din* reached for me.

“No!” Karadas stood up, hauling me with him. “I made a vow to *Thas*, and I will keep it.” He took my hand and dragged me down the hall, back to his throne.

I slid in front of the God and laid a palm on his chest. “I know what I said, what I demanded from you, but I was hurt, and *you* know that. I release you from your vow to make me your consort. Please, if you have any feelings for me, release me in return. He’s my mate.”

“You tried to mate him, but he hasn’t tried to mate you.”

“Karadas, you know he will if you allow it. Please.” I went to my knees.

“Do not beg for me, luvari,” Xa’din growled as he hooked an arm under mine and yanked me up. “If our god is cruel enough to keep mates apart, your groveling will not change his mind.”

Karadas glanced around the room at the watching Dragons, then looked at me, really looked at me.

“Please, Karadas. I know you’re a good god. I have faith in your goodness. Don’t do this to us.”

He sighed deeply. “I could have loved you, little one. I could have given you everything, laid the world at your feet.”

“But the only thing I want is him.” I took Xa’din’s hand. “I freed you. Can you not do the same for me?”

The Dragon God swallowed roughly, his face twitching. At last, he spoke, “As you wish. I will forgive your offenses and free you of your vow to me.”

The entire room seemed to breathe a sigh of relief, me especially, but before I could turn to Xa’din and hug him, the God went on.

“But first, you must find me a replacement.”

I went still. “What does that mean?”

“I spent centuries alone, but then I heard your voice. I went into your mind and you warmed me with your wit and tenderness. You freed me long before you opened the gate. Thas, I cannot be alone again. I want you to find me a sacrifice. Someone as beautiful, brave, and brilliant as you. A Dragon man of your caliber. You will bring him to me and offer him to me upon my altar. But he must come willingly and be free to devote himself to me. I will not go through this nonsense again.” He waved his hand at Xa’din.

“You want me to find you a willing sacrifice?” I gaped at him. “How long will he have to serve you?”

“Maybe a year, maybe ten years, maybe forever. I don’t know. That is part of his sacrifice.” He grinned. “I have faith in you as you have in me. You will find me someone of worth. Stronger in mind than body. I don’t want a warrior; I want someone rare and truly special. Find him for me, and you are free. Fail, and you are mine. Agreed?”

I looked at Xa’din, then said, “Agreed.”

“Good. You have three days.”

“Three days?!” Xa’din roared. “You are purposefully making this impossible.”

“Many of the Dragons of Serai have gathered here,” Karadas said. “If Thas cannot find me someone suitable among them, that man doesn’t exist.”

“But three days?” I asked. “Can you not give me a week?”

“Very well, little one. For you, the man who has freed me, I will grant a week.”

“Thank you.”

“We will start searching immediately,” Xa’din said.

“Oh, you think you’re going to help him?” Karadas lifted a brow. “No. This is Thas’s task alone. And you will not have him until he completes it.”

“What?” Xa’din snarled. “You—”

“I am your creator!” the Dragon God roared. “Your *god!* I have more power in my fucking earlobe than you do in your entire body. So do not mistake my mercy for weakness. I can be a kind, generous god, but I can also destroy you in a heartbeat. Do not test my patience!”

Twitching with rage, Xa’din bowed his head. “Please, forgive me, Great Karadas. You’re right. I’m being ungrateful. Thank you for this chance to reclaim my mate. I will return in a week for him.”

Karadas grunted and took my hand. “For him or to attend his consort ceremony, in which you will relinquish all claims to him.”

Xa’din growled.

“Yes, he will,” I hurried to say. “If I fail, I will become your consort.” I looked at Zay and repeated, “If I fail.”

“You will not,” Xa’din growled as if it were a command.

Chapter Fifty-Four

After a tense goodbye under the Dragon God's sharp gaze, Xa'din shifted back into his dragon form and left the temple. The other Dragons in the throne room, those who had witnessed it all, waited silently for the God to speak, their stares going back and forth between Karadas and me.

"Come here, little one." Karadas held out his hand.

"I'm so sorry." I went to him, took his hand, and whispered, "I wish that hadn't been so public."

"And I wish I hadn't hurt you. It was foolish to get between a god and a king."

"I acted instinctively."

He nodded. "The mating urge. Damn Ensarena for her meddling. If it had happened when I was free, I would think she matched the two of you out of spite. Either way, I cannot undo what another god has done. I can only help you through the pain of separation if you fail."

"I will not fail."

Karadas stared at me for a long moment, then lifted his head to look at the other Dragons. "Go forth and spread the word that I am seeking a sacrifice, a companion willing to devote themselves completely to me. Those who wish to become mine should speak to Lord Thas."

I widened my eyes at him as the Dragons bowed and left the throne room.

“You as well.” He waved at his holy ones.

The priests and priestesses bowed to the God and hurried away.

When they were gone, I hugged him. “Thank you.”

“I want you to be happy, Thas. You freed me. You *saved* me. I owe you a great debt for that. But you hobbled me with my vow to make you my consort, and your king made things worse by coming for you like that, aggressively and in front of witnesses.”

“I know. That was poorly done, but it was as instinctual an act as my attempt at protecting him. Please, forgive him.”

The Dragon God sighed deeply. “I do. I am more disappointed than angry.” He stroked my cheek. “I didn’t lie when I said that I crave you. But I understand how strong the mating magic is. I will try not to be offended.”

“You shouldn’t be. There is no greater man in existence. You’re our god. I wish I could be with you. But my heart has already made its choice.”

“Then you had better start searching, little one. You only have a week. I have given my word, this time before witnesses. If you fail, you will be my consort.”

“I will not fail,” I said again. Then I went to my knees.
“Thank you for your mercy, Great Karadas. I will serve you well.”

“Yes, yes. Get up and go already.” He shoed me off.

I stood, bowed, and turned to leave. As I did, I caught a sad smile on the God’s face.

Chapter Fifty-Five

Many Dragons were eager to be the God's sacrifice. None of them cared that the position wasn't one of consort or even concubine and therefore, not assured. Evidently, being a god's sacrifice comes with a fair amount of status, but I don't think they cared about that either. They just wanted to be near him. To serve him in any way. Especially in his bed.

With word spreading through the camps and then across Serai, I didn't have to search for candidates. A line of Dragons formed outside the temple every morning, and interviewing them became an exhausting, day-long task. Karadas was fucking picky. Yes, he was a god and had a right to be, but some of the most beautiful men I'd ever seen presented themselves, men far more beautiful than me, and he wasn't interested. He had me send them all away.

After one particularly grueling day, I sent the last man away, shut the door, and fell onto a pale blue velvet couch to sprawl back and stare up at the water chandelier. Directing my thoughts at Karadas, I said, *You are deliberately refusing perfect men, men who could please you. You want me to fail.*

"Part of me does," the Dragon God said as he stepped into the interview room—a small room to the right of the divine dais. "But I am not deliberately sabotaging you, Thas. None of those men come close to your quality. It's your fault for setting my standards so high."

Karadas was never physically present during the interviews, only in my mind. Of course, that had a lot to do with the fact that I held the interviews during the day, and he liked to rest when the sun was out. But I suspected he also wanted to supervise unseen. He didn't want to hurt their feelings by rejecting them, nor did he want them to fawn over

him instead of revealing their true selves. It was a wise decision.

“I don’t think I was the one who raised your standards,” I said gently. “Where is Zekayotl’s body? I noticed that you removed him from the altar alcove.”

“I buried him in one of my private gardens, under his favorite tree. And I have you to thank for that as well.” He came to stand before me and cupped my cheek. “Which is why I am not trying to thwart your efforts.”

I sighed, stood up, and stretched my neck. “All right. I believe you. I’m still frustrated, but I’m not annoyed with you anymore. Actually, I could use some fresh air. Do you mind if I go for a walk?”

“No, of course not. I could—”

“You’ll be with me.” I tapped my temple. “I’d like to at least have the illusion of being alone.”

“Very well, little one. Return in time for dinner. You know I don’t like to dine alone.”

“I will.” I strode away as casually as I could, but I was eager to be free of the temple and my god.

The simple fact was that I was afraid. Afraid that this would become my life, and I would never be free of it. Imprisoned in that temple as thoroughly as Karadas had been. And just a few miles away would be my mate.

I stumbled outside and sucked in the thick air. Karadas controlled the climate within the temple, keeping it cool and dry. So leaving it sometimes felt like getting slapped in the face with a damp towel. At first, I had appreciated the lack of humidity even though it came with a lower temperature, but now it felt frigid instead of refreshing, and I longed for heat *and* moisture.

I started down the path to the gate, not sure where I was going, my feet instinctively carrying me away from the Dragon God and toward the Dragon King of Ha'tezan. As the twilight-lavender sky darkened to indigo, I passed through the camps of visiting Dragons, and the sound of male voices reminded me I had a mission and only two days left to complete it. But I kept walking.

The Dragon God's compound was immense, but it was full of tents and left me nowhere to go to be alone. So I continued down the path through the meadow and entered the mountain pass. Sheer rock surged up thousands of feet to either side of me, but I wasn't afraid of a landslide or even falling rocks. A god had formed these mountains, and they wouldn't fall unless he wished it. At the end of the pass stood the stone doors that had once sealed the God's temple, open but guarded by Dragon knights. They bowed to me as I walked by, and I nodded absently.

Further, I had to go further.

Soon, I left the gate behind, and with all signs of the God gone from my sight, I breathed a sigh of relief. The empty stretch of road—now cobbled and widened for carriages—felt like a sanctuary, but I craved cover. The road felt too open; I was too exposed there. I wandered off the path, hoping to get lost among the plants and darkness. But with so many Dragons visiting the God, camps spotted the jungle outside the temple

compound as well, and they were all near the road. It wasn't long before I stumbled across one.

I was about to turn away when I heard raised voices speaking a foreign language. It was a language I knew. I learned Rasokain for a job I took in the Kingdom of Rasokai. The language alone was enough to make me pause; Rasokain Dragons were fascinating, as was their culture. I'd written a paper on them, hypothesizing that it was Rasokai's harsh winters that had prompted their dragon forms to develop unusual traits such as horns with an antler-like appearance and scales in multiple colors. The males had long whiskers that trailed from the tops of their nostrils to wave like ribbons around them when they flew, and their wings had opalescent membranes. Truly, Rasokains had some of the most beautiful dragon forms I'd ever seen, though their language was guttural and not my favorite.

I drew closer, my mind filling with memories of my time in Rasokai. I recalled the sharp-peaked mountains capped in ice and the vast lakes of crystalline blue water. They had to be miserable in Ha'tezan's humid weather, even more so than me. I thought of the layers they usually wore, similar to the clothing of Zaru. But where our layered clothing was comprised of thin cotton and silk, theirs was made of sturdier stuff, even in summer. They had probably left their furs behind, but it still surprised me to find them camping in the jungle instead of somewhere more open to the breeze.

"We should send you to the God," a male voice said in Rasokain. "I hear he likes men who look like women."

"I am as much a man as you are," another male voice said, but in a softer tone.

"Are you?" a third scoffed.

I drew closer and peered through an overhang of thick leaves. Three men stood outside a tent, around a cold lantern—a device that looked like a traditional lantern but radiated cold as well as light. And that explained their decision to camp in the jungle; the trees would help trap the cooled air. All three men wore traditional Rasokain summer clothing—heavy cotton tunics and loose pants, and they had the long, pin-straight, black hair common to their dread, two of them wearing their hair tied back in a thick club while the third had his loose, draping his body like a silk cape.

The third man with the loose hair wasn't smaller or more slender than the other two—all three were on the slim/short side of Dragons, as most Rasokains were—but there was something about him that appeared more delicate, even fragile. His face had the refined look of a porcelain doll, enhanced by the peachy-gold color of his skin. A darling, button nose added an impishness that made light of his stern expression while the other two men bore wide-nostril noses that matched the severe lines of their mouths. But it was the third man's eyes that I couldn't look away from. Most Rasokains had dark eyes that matched their hair, but this man's were bright green, like sunlit summer leaves or the most precious emeralds. Even in the crisp, blue-tinted light of the lantern, their color couldn't be dulled.

If I hadn't been so enthralled by him, I might have been more prepared for what happened next. He certainly was.

One of the other men tried to snatch Green Eyes by the tunic, but he twirled away. Unfortunately, his loose hair swung out behind him, and the man grabbed a handful. He yanked the beautiful man off his feet, then followed him to the ground to hold him down.

“Let's just check and make sure,” the aggressor said.

“Get off me, Yako!” Green Eyes shoved at Yako’s chest.

“If you were a real man, you’d be able to throw me off.” Yako reached for the waistband of Green Eyes’ pants, but he started to buck and punch at Yako.

“I’ve got him.” The other man went to his knees, grabbed Green Eye’s hands, and shoved them down.

I’d forgotten that the Rasokai culture had some aspects I truly hated. They valued physical strength and magical prowess more than other Dragon dreads. Even their scholars trained to fight, and their warriors were renowned for their ferocity in battle. The Rasokains had shown me respect as a visitor, but I could tell that they secretly scorned me for my lack of battle skill. Despite that, I enjoyed my time there. They were big on honor in Rasokai and, other than their opinion on males, they were generous, welcoming people. It looked as if that generosity didn’t extend to their fellow dread members. This poor man had been born with great beauty, but in the wrong place for it.

“Well, *this* man, in *this* place will not let *this* shit stand,” I growled as I got up.

Wait! Karadas said sharply in my mind. *I want to see how this plays out.*

He’ll be raped!

I don’t think so. But if it becomes obvious that is their intent, you may stop them.

It's obvious now!

No, it's not. I believe those are his brothers.

Brothers?! I gaped as the attacker, Yako, tore open Green Eye's pants and yanked them down. How could his brothers treat him like this?

I've seen brothers do far worse to each other.

“I don't know, Hinbaru. Is that a dick?” Yako asked the other man.

“Fuck you both!” Green Eyes thrashed, but didn't have the strength to overpower two men.

“With what?” Hinbaru asked. “That tiny thing wouldn't penetrate a woman, much less a man.”

Yako laughed as he stood up. “That's okay, Hin. Sora doesn't want to penetrate anyone, especially not a woman.”

“Cause he *is* a woman.” Hinbaru released Green Eyes—I mean, Sora—and stood up.

Hinbaru and Yako had another laugh as Sora struggled to pull up his torn pants and get to his feet. After tying them closed as best he could, he lifted his chin and faced his assailants. Sora said nothing, just looked at them as if he knew what was coming next and, even worse, knew that he couldn't stop it.

Fuck, I know that look; I've worn it. This is going to be awful. Let me step in.

Not yet, the God insisted.

“You’re a fucking disgrace to the family,” Hinbaru said, then swung his fist.

Sora ducked, but Yako predicted that and swung lower, hitting Sora in the gut. Sora was back on the ground in two seconds, taking hit after hit from the other two men.

Now, can I interfere?

Not yet.

Fuck!

Calm down. This is normal for him; he'll survive. I want to see what he does next.

As Sora’s brothers beat on him, he lifted his hands and summoned Water. *Water*, not Fire. A wave of water blasted the two men off Sora and sent them tumbling into the jungle. Panting, Sora got to his feet and wiped the blood from his face. He stared at the broken foliage, his hands out to the sides, waiting for his brothers to return.

They appeared within a few seconds, wet and meaner than before.

“You’re going to get strung up for that, Sora!” Hinbaru snarled.

“Try it.” Sora calmly lifted his hands. “Oh, that’s right. You two haven’t gotten the hang of Water magic yet. I wonder why? Maybe it’s because you’re a couple of morons who spend more time trying to get into my pants than you do learning ... oh, anything. What kind of man likes to stare at his brother’s dick?”

The men snarled and started forward, but Sora lifted his hands, and Water condensed around them.

“You will lose your edge soon enough, Brother,” Yako said as he smacked his hand through the hovering water. “Then you will pay for this!”

“We’ll be coming for you soon!” Hinbaru added as they strode off.

When they were gone, Sora deflated, lowering his arms and stumbling to a log. He crumpled onto it, leaned forward on his knees, and stared into the blue light of the lantern.

Sora’s right about the magic, Karadas said. As I told you before, men like you and him are special. During my imprisonment, most Dragons became unbalanced, but not you. I believe it’s because Dragons like you were born with an awareness of the dormant Water magic inside you. Perhaps you even awakened a little of it. It would explain why I connected with you so easily and why Sora has already mastered Water magic when his brothers have not.

Fascinating. I still think I should have interfered.

You will be glad you didn't when you hear what I say next.

I went still. *What?*

I want him. He's the sacrifice I desire. Now, all you have to do is convince him to be mine.

I grinned. *Consider it done.*

Chapter Fifty-Six

I stepped forward, making enough noise to warn Sora of my approach.

Sora straightened immediately and then stood. “Greetings,” he said in the common Seraian language. “Are you lost, Sir?”

“No. In fact, I think I’ve found what I’ve been looking for.”

“I’m sorry?”

“I’m Thas Thorncal of Zaru.” I extended my hand.

“I am Sora of House Hisanato of the Rasokai Dread.” He shook my hand.

“It’s nice to meet you, Sora.”

“Thas? Not Lord Thas, the man who freed our god?”

“Yes, that’s me.”

“It’s an honor to meet you, my lord.” He inclined his head.

“May I join you? I have something I’d like to speak with you about.”

“Yes, of course.” Sora waved at a log, waited for me to sit, then resumed his seat. “May I offer you some tea?”

“No, thank you.”

“How may I help, my lord?”

“Sora, the Dragon God has made his choice.”

“For a sacrifice?” Sora’s green eyes widened wistfully.

“Yes.”

“I hope his sacrifice serves him well and brings him joy.”

“He hopes that as well. But I have yet to determine if the man is willing.”

“Who wouldn’t be?”

Yes, indeed, Karadas drawled in my mind.

“Well, a straight man, for one,” I said. “Or those who are mated. Are you mated, Sora?”

“No, I have not been so fortunate.” He looked away.

“I’ve visited Rasokai before,” I said gently. “I know how your people view men like us.”

He looked up at me. “Us?”

I nodded. “Those who are more inclined to scholarly pursuits than physical.”

Sora grimaced. “I’m not much of a scholar either. Although I enjoy reading, I have no talent for science.”

“You must have something you’re good at.”

“I heal animals,” he whispered and glanced around as if someone might overhear him. “I learned the art from a Yubari woman.”

“Ah, the mountain folk of Rasokai. They are good with animals.”

“Some of the Dragons in my dread say that the Yubari are animals themselves, but I think that’s idiotic, seeing as how we transform into beasts.”

“I agree. The Yubari may be a little furry, but they are still people. Come to think of it, I’ve met some Dragons who are hairier than most Yubari.”

Sora chuckled, then winced when his split lip bled.

“Are you all right?” I pulled out a handkerchief and handed it to him.

“Yes, I’ll heal soon. I just had a minor argument with my brothers.”

A minor argument, he calls it, I scoffed. This man has been abused.

And yet he is not beaten, Karadas said. I like him very much. He has a spirit that shines like a star. And I do love stars. Ask him to be mine. Ask him now!

I'm getting to it! I don't want to spook him. Aloud, I asked Sora, "Do you love your family?"

"I ... I honor them."

"That is not what I asked. But let me make the question simpler. Do you think you could live apart from them?"

Sora blinked. "What are you getting at?"

"I have an offer for you. It may not be a permanent position, but it is illustrious and will take you away from your family."

Sora's bow-shaped mouth opened to form an O. "You don't mean ...?"

"You are the Dragon God's choice. Would you be willing to become his sacrifice?"

"I ..." He looked away, toward the rest of the camp, then down at the ground.

“As I said, it’s not guaranteed that he would keep you for long. You may serve for a month, a year, or forever. I don’t know. But he will treat you well. Of that, I’m certain.”

Sora looked up. “What would happen to me when he stopped wanting me?”

When, not if, I thought.

Yes, he is a little wounded, but I can heal him, the Dragon God said.

“That may never happen,” I said aloud. “He has fallen in love with a Dragon before. He could end up loving you too.”

Sora made a soft sound of doubt. “No, he will not. Very few do.”

“All right, enough of that!” I said sharply. “Are you a man who feels sorry for himself? One who whines about the life he has been given? Or are you a resilient man who will take any opportunity to better his situation?”

Sora straightened. “I’m a resilient man.”

I grinned. “That’s what I thought. Now, you are being offered a chance to be with our god. Will you take it or will you refuse because of what *might* happen?”

“He’s our god. I will, undoubtedly, fall in love with him,” Sora said. “And when he does not return that love, it will devastate me. I don’t know if I’m resilient enough to

survive that. I think perhaps it will be better to not reach for greatness that I cannot keep.”

“Nothing is ever certain. You may find him to be pompous and annoying. It may be you who leaves him.”

Karadas snorted.

“I don’t think that will happen,” Sora said. “And I don’t believe sacrifices are permitted to leave even if it did.”

“Sora, can I tell you something that I’ve only recently learned?”

He nodded.

“Greatness, especially great love, requires a bold heart. And even if your bold heart breaks, at least it will have known love.”

“I am not that brave.”

“You will accept!”

Sora and I both flinched, our bodies turning toward a man who stood just beyond the cold lantern’s light. He stepped forward, and I instantly saw the resemblance between them. Another brother? It’s hard to tell with Dragons. After a certain age, the years stop affecting us.

“Father, this is Lord Thas.” Sora stood up and motioned toward me. “My lord, this is my father, Lord Jakanu, Head of House Hisanato.”

“Lord Thas.” The man nodded respectfully to me.

“Lord Jakanu.” I nodded back. “It’s an honor to meet you.”

“The honor is mine and our family’s. I’m overjoyed that the Dragon God has chosen my son.” He set his pointed, dark stare on Sora. “It is a request we *cannot* refuse.”

Sora bowed deeply to his father, then to me, and said. “I accept your proposal. I will become the Dragon God’s sacrifice.”

No, Karadas said sharply. *It must be Sora’s decision.*

“I’m sorry, Lord Jakanu, but Sora must decide without your influence,” I said. “The God insists upon it.”

Lord Jakanu’s face twitched as he looked at his son.

“*It is* my decision,” Sora said. “My father is right. It is a great honor to be chosen. I willingly and humbly accept.”

Lord Jakanu smiled, sort of, and nodded crisply at his son. To me, he said, “Please convey our gratitude and joy to the God. Let Sora know what’s expected of us, and we shall provide it. I must inform our King.”

“I will, and thank you, Lord Jakanu.” I said.

“I am proud of you, Sora,” Jakanu said to Sora, then turned and strode away.

A sheen covered Sora’s eyes as he stared after his father, but he didn’t let a single tear fall. “Thank you, Father.”

“Sora, are you certain?” I whispered.

He looked at me. “My father has never said those words to me before. Never looked at me like that.” He took a deep breath and let it out slowly before saying, “I am certain.”

Karadas sighed. *I dislike how he has come to his decision, but I accept it. Tell him to pack his things and come to the temple tomorrow morning with his family. You will prepare him for me and his family will present him as my sacrifice.*

I repeated the God’s instructions to Sora.

Sora inclined his head. “I will see you tomorrow, Lord Thas. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Rest well, Sora.” As I walked away, I muttered, “I hope this is what you truly want.”

Chapter Fifty-Seven

The next day, I awoke smiling. It was the last time I would wake up without Xa'din beside me. We would reunite that very night and become mates. No more strained meals with Karadas or lying beside him in his gigantic bed. I'd be free.

Sora showed up a little after I'd had my breakfast, paraded to the temple by his family and king with more pomp than that of my consorting day. His parents presented him to me ceremonially and then retired to the waiting rooms while I prepared Sora to be sacrificed to the Dragon God.

Karadas had given me a list.

Sora endured all the primping and embarrassing procedures stoically, and I tried to be as gentle with him as possible. I certainly did not mention that the Dragon God watched it all through my eyes or that he became aroused when I, er, relaxed Sora's opening and inserted the jeweled object that would keep him in that state until the God accepted him.

As I prepared Sora, my mind kept turning to Xa'din, and I grew more and more excited about our reunion. I could hear the Dragons gathering in the temple and random cheers came from outside. I wondered if Xa'din was out there somewhere.

He is, the Dragon God said in my mind. Now, take my sacrifice to his family, and instruct them on how to present him.

Karadas ... thank you.

You're welcome, little one. Thank you for finding Sora.

You're welcome.

Sora's family—his parents and two brothers—were waiting inside the throne room with their king and his court. I delivered Sora to them, and their eyes widened to see him adorned in silver paint and jewels, his body clothed in a silver silk robe and nothing else. By order of the Dragon God, I left Sora's hair unadorned to hang in a glossy cape down his back. It was a good choice. With the rest of him sparkling and silver that wealth of black became another treasure, its beauty framed by the ostentation.

“My son.” Lord Jakaru stepped forward and laid a hand on Sora's shoulder. “We are here to do our duty to you and present you to the God.”

“Thank you, Father,” Sora said.

Then the woman who must have been Sora's mother—a black-haired beauty with eyes the same color as his—stepped forward, her long robes swishing behind her and emeralds sparkling from her hair sticks, and embraced him.

“I love you,” she whispered in Rasokain. “If you don't want to do this, I will take you from here and we will flee this island.”

“Mother,” Sora's voice broke. “Thank you. But no. I want this. And I love you too.”

Sora's mother stepped back, smiled beatifically, and cupped his cheek. “You are so handsome, my precious boy. I

always knew you were special. I'm not surprised our god has chosen you."

"Thank you, Mother." Sora kissed his mother's cheek, then he turned to me and introduced us, "Lord Thas, you, of course, remember my father. This is my mother, Lady Rieya, and my brothers, Hinbaru and Yako."

"It's a pleasure to meet all of you," I said. "Now, please, come with me. The sun is about to set and then the God will come to accept his offering."

I gathered the family and ushered them past the freshly hung panels of silk that divided the throne room from the altar alcove. Silver crescent moons glinted across the indigo fabric when I drew them back. Sora, standing beside me, flinched, and I followed his wide gaze to the altar, draped in night-blooming flowers for the occasion.

"It isn't as scary as it looks," I whispered to him.

He nodded.

I instructed Sora's family on what to say when the God appeared, then left them to it. Sora knew the rest—he'd stand before the altar, facing away from the silk panels. Then, after his family presented him and left, he would disrobe and kneel upon the altar. He wasn't to look at the Dragon God until given leave to—that was one of Karadas's commands. I found it odd, but perhaps he thought it would make things easier on Sora. Whatever the case, it was out of my hands now. I had done all I could for the Dragon God and his sacrifice.

As I shut the panels behind me, I saw Xa'din striding up the center of the throne room with an escort of knights.

Dragons drew back, kings nodding to a fellow royal, while everyone else bowed. All the visiting Dragons knew Xa'din by now, but today, he wore that aggressive crown, and it made an impact. People bowed lower and stayed down long enough for him to pass them by.

I shook my head as the Dragon King stopped before me. "You look so fierce in that thing. As if you're on your way to war."

"And you look beautiful today, Mate." Xa'din took my hand and bent over it. As he kissed my hand, those mismatched eyes stared up at me, framed by that severe gold. Handsome enough to make my heart tremble.

Ah, yes, but that is the issue, isn't it? Karadas spoke in my mind.

I went still. *What do you mean? My heart trembling?*

No, he called you his mate, but you are not mates yet.

But we will be.

That remains to be seen.

What game is this? I growled. *I did what you asked. I thought you were happy. I thought you had released me.*

It is not a game, and I have not released you yet. I want to see you mated before I take my sacrifice. Bring your king to me, and we will settle this now.

“Thas?” Xa’din’s expression went worried as he straightened.

“Karadas has summoned us,” I said. With a look at his guards, I added, “Leave them here.”

“You heard him,” Xa’din said to the knights.

“This way.” I took Xa’din into the corridor that led to the temple’s restricted areas.

We passed the priests’ quarters, then those of the priestesses, before we climbed the spiral stairs to the God’s residence. Xa’din’s stare flicked over the opulence of the divine quarters as if he were taking mental notes for palace renovations, but I was too nervous to appreciate the surreal beauty. Plus, I’d seen it all before.

I took Xa’din into the room Karadas directed me to—a bedroom he had used with his lovers before he settled on Zekayotl. The windows were open, but from the doorway, I could only see the sky through them—a darkening sky. The sun was setting, and the Dragon God was supposed to appear to his people shortly thereafter. But instead of making his way downstairs to his sacrifice, he stood before a massive bed, this one in the standard rectangular shape, dressed in a long, midnight velvet robe and a heavy silver belt. He wore no other accessories, not even footwear.

Karadas motioned toward the bed. “Complete the mating bond, and you are free.”

“Here?” I asked. “In front of you?”

“Yes.”

“You fu—” Xa’din growled.

I grabbed Zay’s hand and cut him off. “Thank you, Karadas, for the opportunity to consummate our mating in your divine presence. It is an unexpected honor to be blessed by you.”

The Dragon God smirked at the furious Dragon King. “Unless you’re not up to the task, King Xa’din.”

“I will have my mate.” Xa’din tossed aside his crown and stripped. “If I must take him before you to mate him, then so be it.”

Karadas chuckled and sat down, even though there wasn’t a chair behind him. One appeared just in time, and he settled back onto his silver throne to enjoy the show.

I shook my head at the God as I undressed. I should have known there would be one last obstacle to overcome. Hopefully, the mating urge would rise in both of us despite the divine eyes watching our every move.

“You do have a fantasy about being watched,” I whispered to Xa’din.

He grimaced at me. But then he was naked, and I was staring at all that perfect flesh. Flesh that I hadn’t seen or touched in what seemed like forever. I let my clothes fall to the floor. When I lifted my gaze to Zay’s, I found him staring at me with the same look I must have worn—one of longing and love.

“We’ll need oil,” the Dragon King growled at the God.

A bottle of oil appeared at the King’s feet.

Xa’din grunted, picked it up, and hastily coated his cock. “I don’t know how gentle I can be, luvari. I am ... oh, fuck, I can’t wait any longer!”

He tossed the bottle aside and grabbed me by the back of my neck, hauling me into a rough kiss. The room and its other occupant disappeared as the King lifted me, and I wrapped my legs around him. Our cocks went hard instantly and knocked together like a pair of fighting swords. Then we were moving, my lover carrying me to bed.

“Thas,” Zay whispered in my ear as he laid me down. “I need you so badly. I need to get inside you *now*.”

In response, I lifted my legs and pulled my knees down nearly to the bed, exposing myself. Xa’din growled and dove. After his talk of needing me and roughness, I thought he’d penetrate me immediately, but instead, he grabbed my cock and nearly swallowed it whole. I cried out, my legs flopping open wider as Xa’din worked me hungrily, his stare locked on mine. The wet, eager sounds were nearly enough to drown out the heavy panting of the Dragon God.

Nearly, but not quite.

I looked over to find Karadas watching us, his eyes glowing like the moon.

With a growl, Xa'din withdrew his mouth and rose above me. "Don't look at him. Look only at me, luvari. You are mine."

"I love you."

With a predatory snarl, the Dragon King rose to his knees and grabbed his cock. I pulled my legs back as far as they could go as he rubbed his oiled tip over my opening. Then, his whole body shuddering, he slowly entered me.

"It's all right, Zay. I'm ready. I want it rough," I said. "Take me."

Xa'din roared as he thrust forward, impaling me with his entire cock, then he gripped my hips and started a savage rhythm. "Thas. Oh, fuck, Thas. I've missed you. Not just this—you." His hand cupped my cheek, his thumb brushing over my lips. "Nothing seems real without you beside me."

"I've missed you too. Make me yours forever."

Xa'din's expression went fierce, and he bared his teeth at me. "Rub your cock for me. I want you to come all over me, Thas. I want your scent on my skin. Your essence in my soul."

I groaned as I grabbed my shaft and started vigorously pumping it.

Xa'din's stare shifted down to watch me, his tongue flicking out to lick his lips. "That's it, luvari. Pump that dick and make sure you angle it toward me when you come."

“Zay,” I moaned.

He slowed his thrusts to bend forward and kiss me. My legs lowered to wrap around his waist, and I let go of my cock to grip his shoulders. I couldn't touch enough of him; my hands kept wandering over the clenching muscles of his back as our tongues and bodies entwined. I let go of the anxiety, the pressing need to mate him. We'd get there, but the journey was just as important as the destination.

As if he could hear my thoughts, or maybe because he'd been thinking them first, Xa'din eased out of our kiss to stare at me adoringly. “This is ours, Thas. No one can take it from us.”

“No one can take you from me,” I said.

“My luvari.” He sighed and kissed his way up my jaw, then down to nibble and suck at my neck.

With Xa'din's body bowed over mine, and mine angled up toward his, we found our rhythm. It wasn't a wild, mindless passion, although that lay waiting to rise and regain control as soon as we let it. Our lovemaking became just that—loving. Tender. A slow movement that joined more than our bodies.

Zay drew out and shifted us so that we lay on our sides, his back to the Dragon God. I don't think it was a conscious decision, more instinctual. A Dragon protecting his mate. He drew me into the curve of his body and buried his face in my hair. Those warrior hands became gentle instruments of pleasure, sweeping up my thigh, fluttering over my chest, and tracing my jaw. All while his cock nestled against my ass.

“Xa’din, please,” I whispered and bent my top leg to open myself to him.

With a low, rumbling sound of delight, the Dragon King ran his hand along that leg, drawing it up to my ass and my wet entrance. He tickled me there, teasing me a little as he nipped my neck, then slipped his finger inside me.

Pumping it, he asked, “Is this what you want?”

“No, and you know it.” I turned to look at him. “Fill me with your cock and your cum.”

Another rumble, this one of possessive lust, rolled up his chest as he yanked his finger out. Then, holding my stare, he grabbed his cock and worked the tip into me. Once seated, he let go of himself to grab my hip. A single thrust and he was deep inside. We both cried out from that primal pleasure.

“Better?” Zay drawled.

“Yes.” I pushed back on him as he slowly pumped in and out of my body, rubbing all the right places. “So much better.”

We stayed like that for a while, hands sweeping over each other, whispering words of love as we took our time reuniting. I kept looking over my shoulder at Xa’din; I had to see his eyes. They were so full of love for me, so open, with none of the barriers that had been there before. And I loved the way he held me, his whole body embracing me, but I needed to be face-to-face.

I drew off Zay and rolled over to face him. As we kissed, my hands went to his jaw to stroke the hard line of it. We pressed our shafts together, his slicking mine, but then I pushed him onto his back and straddled him. Xa'din made a happy rumble as I positioned him at my entrance, then a broken groan when I slid down his shaft.

“You are so fucking glorious!” His hands ran up my thighs to grip my hips. “Ride me, luvari. Ride me hard.”

Bracing myself on his taut belly, I rode his cock, our flesh slapping together. “Xa'din, you are everything to me. Everything I've ever wanted.”

“My love.” His hands moved up my chest, one coming to rest over my heart. “You have changed everything. Turned sorrow into joy and pain into pleasure. You are my miracle.”

“I love you.” I rode him faster, our stares locked.

“That's it, luvari. Come for me. Join us in magic as well as love.” His hand went to my cock and started pumping it.

That feeling bubbled inside me again. The need. The urgency that started at the base of my spine and surged into my sacs. My dragon roared and mating essence surged into my cock.

“Zay!” I cried as I came.

Xa'din grinned triumphantly as my cum hit his chest, his eyes closing in ecstasy. My body went into spasm, hips jerking forward with every explosion. Relief, joy, and pleasure

filled me. And it wouldn't stop. I striped his chest with mating essence, and, at last, the feeling of being claimed sent him over.

“Thas!” Xa'din roared as he filled me.

I was still coming, my body trembling with pleasure so great that I could hardly think, and Zay's release sent me zooming into another level of ecstasy, one I never knew existed. A Dragon's mating essence is different from normal cum; it holds magic and pieces of our souls. Xa'din's essence tingled inside me, sinking into my body and surging through my cells to forge a bond no man could break, not even a god. When I absorbed it, I absorbed him and the feeling of becoming one with my mate was so profoundly beautiful that I cried out and came again, smiling as I saw the stripes of my essence sink into Xa'din's dark skin, claiming him as he claimed me.

“My mate!” Xa'din roared, his hips slamming up to lock against me yet again. “Mine!”

Cum kept filling me, and my body kept taking it, craving all he could give me. But Zay needed more. He lifted me off his cock, then grabbed it and angled it to paint my chest with glorious shimmering ribbons. I leaned my head back and closed my eyes, accepting him and the bliss he gave me. Still, it wasn't enough. With a growl, he rolled me onto my belly and came across my back. I was still ejaculating, but we had appeased my dragon, and it allowed Zay to do what he needed to assuage his.

And he needed a lot.

The Dragon King tossed my hair aside and came upon my shoulders, my back, my ass, my thighs, and even my

calves. As he came, he snarled and rubbed the essence into my skin. Then he turned me over and coated my front again. This allowed me to return to covering him with my mating magic, and I delighted in watching the gleaming essence sink into his skin. We went a little mad with it, grunting and growling, using one hand to rub our essences in and the other to angle our cocks at each other. Zay even shoved my legs apart and came on my sacs, then massaged them with a look of pure masculine satisfaction, his middle finger slipping down to rub my clenching hole. We came and came and came until at last, grinning at each other like fools, we fell into an embrace and kissed as our bodies writhed, mingling our essences as we absorbed them.

Panting and pleased, the Dragon King eased out of our kiss to stroke back my tangled hair and say, “I love you, *Mate*.”

I glanced over to where Karadas had been sitting to find both him and his throne gone. Inside my head, there was nothing but my own thoughts.

With a cry of joy, I kissed my mate. “I love you too. It’s over, Zay. He’s released me. My mind and body are all yours.”

“Praise Karadas,” Xa’din growled, then rolled me onto my belly. “Get on your hands and knees, *Mate*. It’s my turn to ride you.”

I eagerly rose onto my hands and knees, then looked over my shoulder at my mate. “Ride me until we come all over each other again.”

With a snarl, the Dragon King did as I commanded.

Chapter Fifty-Eight

By the time my mate and I returned to the throne room, the curtains were pulled back to showcase an empty altar, and the Dragons were celebrating. Neither Karadas nor his sacrifice was present.

“What happened?” Xa’din asked one of his knights, his arm slung around my shoulders.

“Your Majesty, congratulations on your mating!” the knight exclaimed.

“Yes, thank you.” Xa’din grinned, though it looked a little frightening framed by his crown. “Where is the God?”

“The sacrifice was well received.” The knight grinned back. “We heard the sounds of a vigorous joining and then a fierce roaring. Moments later, the Dragon God emerged, carrying his sacrifice in his arms. He declared that the sacrifice pleased him greatly and instructed us to start the celebration. Then he took the sacrifice through the corridor there.” He waved at the archway between the throne and the altar alcove, the very one we had just taken.

Xa’din and I exchanged smug looks.

“God is pleased,” I said.

“Very, from the sounds of it,” my mate said. To his guards, he added, “Now we have two things to celebrate—my mating and the God’s acceptance of his first offering.”

“First and last of that sort, if my instincts are correct,” I said.

“We can only hope,” Xa’din said. “But frankly, I don’t give a fuck as long as he stays away from you.”

“I’m just happy to have my thoughts to myself again.”

“Lord Thas, King Xa’din,” a familiar voice said.

We turned to find Sora’s family there, all four of them looking pleased, if not outright smiling.

“Thank you for helping the God find our son, Lord Thas,” Lord Jakanu said.

“It was my honor, my lord. Congratulations.”

“Thank you.”

“Who knew the little half-man had it in him?” Hinbaro muttered to his brother in Rasokain.

“Silence!” Jakanu hissed. “You are speaking of the God’s Sacrifice in his sacred temple!”

“Father, he’s still—”

Jakanu simply glared his son into silence.

“Sora’s still the amazing man he always was,” I finished Hinbaro’s sentence in Rasokain, leaving all four of them gaping at me. “The God told me that Dragons who are prone to aggression behaved in such ways because of the imbalance in their magic. Being cut off from our god has turned us into savages. Most of us, that is. Karadas believes that some of us were born with a stronger connection to him and used it to awaken a piece of the dormant Water magic inside us. It made us calmer, less unbalanced. It’s how Karadas formed a connection with me. He told me that men like Sora and me are rare and powerful. You have abused a treasure,” I said to Sora’s brothers. “A man who is blessed by our gods and now chosen by Karadas himself. Perhaps you should think on that before you next speak ill of your brother.”

“Lord Thas, please forgive my sons. They did not know you could speak our language,” Lord Jakanu hurried to say.

“That is no excuse, but in honor of this blessed day, a day when our god has accepted a sacrifice, and I have claimed my mate,”—I took Xa’din’s hand and kissed it—“I forgive them. And I wish all of you great happiness.”

“You are an honorable, kind man, *Duke Thas*,” Lady Rieya said, giving me the title I know possessed as mate to a king. “Thank you for enlightening us and proving something that I’ve always known was true.” She shot a smug look at her husband and sons. “Sora is the best of us, and I rejoice in his good fortune. As I rejoice in your mating, Your Grace and Your Majesty. Congratulations to both of you.”

“Thank you,” Xa’din said. “We’ll be celebrating at the palace. You’re welcome to join us.”

“That is a gracious offer, Your Majesty, but we must attend our King,” Lord Jakanu said. “And we also wish to be here for our son, should he need us.”

“Are the rooms I had prepared for you suitable?” I asked.

“Yes, thank you, Your Grace.” Jakanu inclined his head to me. “It’s a great honor to sleep in the God’s temple.”

“Then we shall wish you goodnight.” Xa’din nodded to the Rasokains and ushered me away.

“That was abrupt,” I whispered to him as we hurried through the throne room, his knights marching after us.

“I know,” he growled. “And I’m sorry, but we must find somewhere private immediately.”

I grinned, knowing exactly what my mate needed. Mainly because I needed it too.

Chapter Fifty-Nine

A week later, two dreads of Dragons gathered in the Royal Palace of Ha'tezan for two newly mated Dragons to be presented. Because we were from different dreads, Xa'din and I had to present each other to our people, and they had to accept or deny our mating. Although the ceremony was sacred to both dreads, it was far more important for the Ha'tezan Dread to accept me than for the Zaru Dread to accept Zay. If I wasn't accepted, Xa'din would have to choose between me and his crown. It occurred to me that this would be the perfect way for the Ha'tezan Dread to be rid of its Cursed King. I knew it had occurred to Xa'din as well, but he didn't show any concern as he stood beside me in front of his throne, his ferocious crown upon his head and the skulls of those who challenged him around us.

Among those skulls, to our right, stood the Dragon God.

Accompanying Karadas was the Divine Sacrifice—a title granted to Sora by the God himself. The Divine Sacrifice looked resplendent in silk robes, his dark hair a sharp contrast to the silver fabric, hanging in a sleek line to his hips. But Sora kept glancing at the God in a way that bothered me. There was something in his eyes—a hesitation or maybe even fear. I told myself I would talk to him later and make sure he was all right. But at the moment, I couldn't concentrate on Sora. I was focused on my family.

My mother and sister stood in the front row beside King Saric, Prince Racmar, and the Prince's mate, Lord Daha. For the first time, I didn't feel hurt when I looked upon the Prince, not even when he smiled at his mate. I was happy for them and happier for myself, even a little relieved that I hadn't ended up with Racmar. I was so happy, in fact, that my anger toward Thada had also disappeared. Zay and I had welcomed

her and my mother when they arrived the day before, and I did so with open arms. Thada had wept when I told her I forgave her. It was the first time I'd seen my sister cry. Then she demanded to meet the God.

I had also met Xa'din's mother, though that meeting occurred several days earlier when she came to Lucar to help her son prepare to present me to their dread. She stood in the first row as well, but across the aisle from my family, surrounded by courtiers who fawned over her. Duchess Ohtli was as fierce as her son had said, but also very loving. She had embraced me and whispered her thanks to me for breaking the curse upon her son. I didn't try to tell her that her son had never been cursed—you don't argue with your mate's mother. I just kissed her cheek and thanked her for coming to help us.

Behind the Duchess was the rest of the Ha'tezan Dread, just as the Zaru Dread stood behind their King and Prince. All of those Dragons waiting to cast their judgment upon Xa'din and me. The murmur of excited voices was a constant vibration in the air until the Dragon God stepped forward. Then it went silent.

“Before you judge these mated Dragons, it is traditional that they are given the opportunity to speak,” the Dragon God said as he stepped up beside me. “But before they make their statements, I have something to say. This man is blessed,” he laid a hand on my shoulder. “A sacred twin. He also freed me from my prison. He has my full support and gratitude. This man, however, was cursed.” He motioned toward Xa'din.

“Karadas!” I hissed between my teeth.

“Let him speak, luvari,” Xa'din whispered. “It is his right.”

“Or that is what King Xa’din and his dread have believed these years,” Karadas went on. “Hear me now, Ha’tezan; there is no curse upon this man. In fact, King Xa’din is now blessed as well. I give him my blessing and support as I do this mating.” He stepped back beside Sora, crossed his arms, and stared at the two dreads as if daring them to rebuke us. “That is all I have to say.”

“Holy shit,” I whispered.

“As our god has said, I am the Cursed King no longer,” Xa’din declared. “But I believe it was this man, my mate, who broke the curse—if not an actual curse, then one formed by belief. Thas has freed me as surely as he has freed Karadas, conquering the darkness that haunted me with his love and strength as he has conquered my heart. With Thas beside me, both of our dreads will be stronger. Zaru, you will have Ha’tezan as an ally, and you, Ha’tezan, will have a blessed one bound to your king.”

Dragon stares shifted around the room, the dreads eyeing each other as well as us.

“I don’t believe Xa’din was ever cursed,” I started my speech next. “But I do believe I was destined to come to Ha’tezan and meet him. Destined to free my mate and our god. Xa’din’s curse was a falsehood, but false or not, it was treated as truth, and he has endured much to become King of Ha’tezan. Suffering has tempered him as fire does a sword. This man is as sharp and as strong as a blade, but he will never break. He will make a great ally to Zaru and a fierce but fair king to Ha’tezan.”

After a few seconds of silence, the Dragon God said, “Very well, then. Step forward, Ha’tezan and Zaru Dreads. Let

us hear your judgment.”

In unison, the Dreads formed lines before us—the Zaru Dread before Xa’din, and the Ha’tezan before me. Leading the Ha’tezan was Duchess Ohtli while King Saric stood at the front of the Zaru line. They climbed the dais steps together.

King Saric laid a hand on Xa’din’s shoulder and said, “Welcome to the Zaru Dread, King Xa’din.”

Simultaneously, Duchess Ohtli kissed my cheek, then said, “Welcome to the Ha’tezan Dread, King’s Mate.”

And it continued from there—hours of declarations given under the stern stare of the Dragon God. Xa’din and I received welcome after welcome until, at last, the final Dragons stepped forward and gave their approval. As those final Dragons left the dais steps, Xa’din pulled me into a triumphant kiss, lifting me off my feet. The Dragons of both dreads cheered.

“Well done, Ha’tezan and Zaru,” the Dragon God said. “You have made the right decision. I am pleased to declare this mated pair accepted by their dreads. King Xa’din may continue to reign without opposition, and I don’t have to kill anyone.”

The throne room went abruptly silent.

“I’m teasing!” Karadas said.

As the Dragons laughed nervously, the Dragon God winked at me.

“Thank you,” I whispered to him.

“I will always do what I can for you, little one.” Then the Dragon God shouted, “Let the celebration commence!”

As Xa’din led me down the dais steps to our waiting family, I finally felt peace wash over me. I had my mate, the God was appeased, and our dreads approved of us. Whatever happened next didn’t matter because nothing could tear Xa’din and me apart. We were blessed.

If you enjoyed Xa’din’s and Thas’s story, you’ll love the romance between Karadas and Sora. Keep reading for a special look into the next book, available on Amazon on January 30th, 2023, available now for preorder. Get your copy here: <https://mybook.to/DragonGod>

A Special Look

Please enjoy this special look into the next book of the Dragons of Serai Series:

[The Dragon God's Sacrifice](#)

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Chapter One

“Is this really happening?” I whispered as I sat down on a log and stared into the blue light of the cold lantern before me.

I had come to the island kingdom of Ha'tezan with my family to support our king. As the head of our family, my father was required to attend King Miraye, but in this instance, that duty had become a boon. Everyone wanted to come to Ha'tezan after the Dragon God had been freed from a prison no one knew about and returned magic to us that was equally unknown—Water magic.

I had been raised as every other Dragon had, to worship our goddess, Ensarena. She gave us mastery over fire and drew sacred mates together. We adored her. But now, things were changing. Karadas was freed by a Dragon man and upon his release, he called out to all of us, his people. He offered us truth along with his first gift of magic. A new story. One that contradicted much of our religious texts.

According to the God, he had created us with Ensarena, but she grew jealous when he began to take Dragon lovers. And when Karadas fell in love with a Dragon man, Ensarena trapped them both in a temple, leaving the God entombed with his lover, who eventually died. Dragons are immortal but not invincible. We need things like water, food, and sleep. Without them, we are as susceptible to death as a frail human.

I was afraid when we began this journey. Although I, as every other Dragon, heard the God's voice in my mind and felt his sincerity, I wasn't sure that he could be trusted. How could I be? I knew only Ensarena, and although the Goddess never showed herself physically, she visited us with her light

every year during her rite. I had faith in her and her goodness. How could a goddess that joins Dragons in love be anything other than good?

But Karadas had proved to be good as well. At least, so far. Moreover, he was here. Present in a physical form. And he vowed to stay in his physical form and guide us. For the first time in hundreds of years, a god walked Serai. A god who seemed to want only the best for us. A god who offered us magic that balanced our fire, calming the ferocious natures that we had always believed to be the mark of true Dragons. A beautiful god with hair the color of fresh snow and eyes like stars.

“And he wants me,” I whispered. “Why?”

The Dragon God had demanded a sacrifice. He wanted a Dragon man willing to devote himself to him. A man to be his companion and lover. The Dragon camps had buzzed with the news and men lined up every morning at the temple doors, waiting to meet Lord Thas, who was conducting the search for the sacrifice. And every day, the lines of beautiful, strong, Dragon men were turned away, none of them good enough for the god.

And yet, just minutes earlier, Lord Thas Thorncal, the Dragon man who freed the God, came out of the jungle and approached me. *He* came to *me*! And he told me that the God had chosen me as his sacrifice. Me! I didn't offer myself. I never would have dared. But there, hidden within the jungle, Lord Thas had found me and offered me the coveted position.

I tried to refuse.

It wasn't that I didn't want to be the God's sacrifice. I wanted it more than anything. The thought of speaking to him

was thrilling, but touching him? Feeling that divine skin against mine? That would be truly magical. But after being intimate with the God, I would surely fall in love with him. And he would just as certainly not fall in love with me. Accepting the position would mean great pleasure quickly followed by great pain. I would have avoided that if not for my father.

Father had overheard Thas and the God's request. When I tried to refuse, he stepped in and demanded I accept. Thas tried to intervene, he said the God wanted me willing and it must be my decision, but I couldn't refuse my father. I agreed, and my father told me he was proud of me. He looked at me as if I were someone worthwhile. It was a first on both accounts and left me reeling. For him, I would face any pain. Just to see him look at me like that again.

A rustling came from the jungle.

I frowned and stood up. Another visitor? Perhaps it was a priest, come to instruct me on how to prepare for the God. Lord Thas told me to pack my things and go to the temple in the morning, where I would be prepared, but maybe there was more to be done.

Or maybe it was one of the wild animals of the jungle. We'd spotted a few when we set up camp—things with sleek fur and long claws. And there I was on the outskirts of the Rasokai camp, as far from my brothers as I could get. I'd chosen the spot out of self preservation but now it looked as if I'd ironically placed myself in danger.

"Greetings," a low, male voice said just before a man stepped out of the jungle.

I let out a sigh of relief. “Greetings, Sir. Have you come from the temple?”

“The temple?” The man drew closer, into the cool light of the lantern. “Why do you ask that?”

I was struck speechless for a moment. The stranger had a sublime face with a strong jaw and high cheekbones. A pair of gray eyes stared at me from beneath blond brows, and his skin was pale, untouched by the sun. He had to be a nobleman, probably from a western kingdom.

“Are you all right?” His full lips spread into a smile as he cocked his head, and he suddenly became ten times more attractive.

“What?” I blinked. “Oh, uh, yes, I’m well, thank you. Would you care to sit down?” I waved at the fallen tree trunk Lord Thas had sat upon mere minutes before.

“Yes, thank you.” He sat down and brushed his long, blond hair back, over his broad shoulders. “The cold drew me.” He waved at my cold lantern and sighed. “This is wonderful.”

“Ah, yes. My people are from a cooler climate. We brought the cold lanterns with us to battle the heat and humidity here.”

“Well, I’m grateful to share the cold with you.” He looked at me and something in the way he did so made me shiver.

“I’m called Sora.” I held out a hand to him.

“I am Das.” He shook my hand, and as he drew back, he rubbed his thumb into my palm.

I cleared my throat and said, “May I offer you some tea?”

“No, thank you. I’d hate to ruin this lovely temperature.”

“Ah, yes. Of course. I must have my tea, no matter the weather.” I picked up my mug and took a sip.

“You asked if I was from the temple. Why?”

“I ...” I shook my head. “I can hardly believe it but I have been chosen to be the Dragon God’s sacrifice.”

“Why can you not believe it?” Das asked, his voice gone soft.

I glanced at him. *Sweet Ensarena, he’s handsome. Thick and muscular. And tall. I love tall men.* Then I mentally shook myself and said, “I am not ...”

“Beautiful enough?” He lifted a brow at me.

“Not enough. Not in any way. I have no idea why I was chosen.”

“Perhaps the God sees something in you that you cannot see in yourself.”

“What?” I shrugged and held my arms out. “I am hardly an example of prime Dragon masculinity.”

“There is more to a man than his face, but, that being said, your face is stunning, Sora. Believe me, you are beautiful enough for a god.”

I flushed, unable to form a response to that. No one but my mother had ever told me that I was beautiful. “Thank you,” I finally managed to whisper.

“Are you perhaps having second thoughts of giving yourself to him?”

I looked away.

“Ah, I see that you are.”

“No, not exactly. I’m honored and excited to become the sacrifice.”

“But?”

“But also afraid,” I admitted, my stare sliding toward the rest of the camp.

“Of Karadas?”

I looked back at Das. “A little.”

“What are you afraid he’ll do to you? Do you think he’ll hurt you?”

“Not physically. Well, maybe he will hurt me physically too. I don’t know. I’ve never ...”

Das blinked, his brows lifting. “You’ve never been with a man?”

“I’ve never been with anyone.”

He went silent.

“You think less of me now,” I whispered.

“No. Absolutely not.” He took my hand. “Don’t be afraid, Sora. The God can be very kind, and I’m sure that he will treat you with the greatest respect and care.”

“Have you met him?”

“I have.”

“And you think he’s kind?”

“He is kind. He’s also powerful and that can be frightening, but as his sacrifice, you will belong to him. That means that all his power will be used to protect you.”

“I’m not ... I mean, I appreciate that, but protection isn’t something I need.”

“I’m sorry.” He drew his hand back. “I didn’t mean to imply that it was. Just that he would never hurt you. Not purposefully.”

“But on accident?”

Das shrugged. “Tell him that you are a virgin. He will take care with you.”

My face went hot. “I couldn’t. I will be sacrificed to him. A sacrifice shouldn’t ask for special treatment.”

Das stared at me a few moments, then said, “I could introduce you to sex. Prepare you for what to expect. I’m very attracted to you, Sora. It would be my pleasure to bed you.”

My breath caught, and I just stared at Das. He stared back, calmly waiting for my answer. Part of me wanted to accept. I had gone my whole life believing that I was ugly and unacceptable. One night, no one hour, had changed everything. Suddenly, the God and the gorgeous stranger both wanted me. My sex stirred at the thought of bedding him, and I dearly wanted to know what it was like. It would be so much easier to experience it with Das first. Then I’d be less afraid, less worried about making a mistake.

But something inside me whispered to wait. That giving myself to this man the night before I gave myself to the God was wrong. Dishonorable.

“I want to,” I said at last. “I truly do. You are very handsome, and I’d like to know what to expect. But I can’t accept.”

Something strange passed over Das's face, something oddly like pleasure. "Could you tell me why you refuse me?"

"I will give myself to the God tomorrow, and it feels wrong to lay with you tonight. I think he would prefer me to come to him as I am."

Das nodded. "You may be right. I admit that the thought of bedding a virgin excited me. It will likely excite our god as well. I urge you to tell him before he takes you. Trust me, it will benefit you both."

"I will think on it. Thank you, Das. I didn't realize how badly I needed someone to talk to."

"I've got all night, and you've got a cold lantern." He winked at me. "What else shall we talk about?"

Pronunciation Guide

Axunktli: Axel-unk-T-lee

Corlys: Core-liss

Cual: Coo-all

Ha'tezan: Hah-teh-zahn

Izel: Eye-zell

Karadas: Care-rah-dass

Kueya: Coo-ay-yah

Kuya: Coo-yah

Litoto: Leh-toe-toe

Lucar: Loo-car

Luvari: Loo-var-ree

Mazah: Mah-zah

Nyl: Nile

Ohtli: Awt-lee

Osomah: Oh-so-mah

Sora: Sore-ah

Shoder: Show-dur

Tapazolli: Tah-pah-zole-lee

Tenoch: Ten-awk

Thada: Thah-dah

Thas: Th-ah-ahs

Turapa: too-rah-pa

Xa'din: Zay-den

Xipil: Zee-pill

Yaotl: Yah-oh-till

Yaretzi: Yah-rhet-zee

Yubari: You-bar-ree

Zaniyah: Zah-knee-yah

About the Author

Amy Sumida is the Internationally Acclaimed author of the Award-Winning Godhunter Series, the fantasy paranormal Twilight Court Series, the Beyond the Godhunter Series, the music-oriented paranormal Spellsinger Series, the superhero Spectra Series, and several short stories. Her books have been translated into several languages, have won numerous awards, and are bestsellers. She believes in empowering women through her writing as well as providing everyone with a great escape from reality. Her stories are full of strong women and hot gods, shapeshifters, vampires, dragons, fairies, gargoyles... pretty much any type of supernatural, breathtakingly gorgeous man you can think of. Because why have normal when you could have paranormal?

Born and raised in Hawaii, Amy made a perilous journey across the ocean with six cats to settle in the beautiful state of Oregon which reminds her a lot of Hawaii but without the cockroaches or evil sand. When she isn't trying to type fast enough to keep up with the voices in her head while ignoring the kitties trying to sabotage her with cuteness, she enjoys painting on canvases, walls, and anything else that will sit still long enough for the paint to dry. She's fueled by tea, inspired by music, and spends most of her time lost in imaginary worlds.

For information on new releases, detailed character descriptions, and an in-depth look into the worlds of the Godhunter, the Twilight Court, the Spellsinger, Spectra, and the Happily Harem After Series, check out Amy's website:

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