

Virgo Dragon

ENEMIES TO LOVERS FANTASY ROMANCE

KAYLA WOLF

Virgo Dragon

Paranormal Dragon Shifter Romance

Zodiac Dragons Book 3

Kayla Wolf



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Contents

[Chapter 1 - Mira](#)

[Chapter 2 - Conrad](#)

[Chapter 3 - Mira](#)

[Chapter 4 - Conrad](#)

[Chapter 5 - Mira](#)

[Chapter 6 - Conrad](#)

[Chapter 7 - Mira](#)

[Chapter 8 - Conrad](#)

[Chapter 9 - Mira](#)

[Chapter 10 - Conrad](#)

[Chapter 11 - Mira](#)

[Chapter 12 - Conrad](#)

[Chapter 13 - Mira](#)

[Chapter 14 - Conrad](#)

[Chapter 15 - Mira](#)

[Chapter 16 - Conrad](#)

[Chapter 17 - Mira](#)

[Chapter 18 - Conrad](#)

[Chapter 19 - Mira](#)

[Chapter 20 - Conrad](#)

[Chapter 21 - Mira](#)

[Chapter 22 - Conrad](#)

[Chapter 23 - Mira](#)

[Chapter 24 - Conrad](#)

[Chapter 25 - Mira](#)

[Chapter 26 - Conrad](#)

[Chapter 27 - Mira](#)

[Chapter 28 - Conrad](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Books by The Wolf Sisters](#)

Chapter 1 - Mira

Mira felt her phone vibrate in her pocket and gritted her teeth, a sense of grim certainty settling over her even before she'd checked the screen. Sure enough, the text was from an unknown number... yet another breezy little message asking what she was up to that weekend, for all the world as though she hadn't blocked this guy a dozen times already. She made short work of the new number, but it was too late to reverse the damage to her mood. How was he even doing this? At first she'd assumed he was using his friends' phones to contact her, but when she'd mentioned the harassment to a client, she'd told her about online number-spoofing services that creeps used to get around blocks. There wasn't much she could do about it, short of getting a whole new phone.

Something had told her it was a bad idea to get back into dating again, but her friends had insisted things were better these days. A few weeks ago, over a few too many bottles of red wine, they'd installed a couple of new dating apps on her phone. Mira had been understandably reluctant, given that the last time she'd dated anyone she'd ended up having to get a restraining order, but her friends claimed to be setting her up with only the most safety-conscious apps.

Well, she couldn't blame the app for this, she supposed. That was the guy's fault. They'd met up for drinks after a promising exchange of messages on the app, and when she'd excused herself to the bathroom, he'd grabbed her phone and texted himself from her number, playing it off as no big deal when she'd come back. Just one of a long list of red flags that had made her cut the date short and send him a polite but clear message that evening that she wasn't interested in seeing him again. At the time, she'd been more creeped out by the comments he made about her body. In her twenties, she might have been flattered by his lingering gaze, his constant casual references to how much he liked full-bodied women... but in her late thirties, she knew what fetishization sounded like.

That disastrous date had been over a week ago, and despite her clarity, Eddie simply had not taken the hint. She'd sent the message again after his responses seemed to suggest that he hadn't read it, and then again... finally, not liking how much he was reminding her of the guy she'd had to go to the police about, she'd blocked his number. That earned her a day of peace... until unknown numbers began to reach out, trying to make plans to see her for the weekend. It was exhausting. Why was he so fixated on her? Were men really so stupid that a few hours with a woman could turn them into mindless, slavering beasts like this? She'd never liked dating much. Even when it went well, it was more trouble than it was worth... and this kind of nonsense made her wonder why she'd ever bothered in the first place. People were always shocked she'd never been on a second date, but as far as Mira was concerned, what was really surprising was that she ever went on dates in the first place.

Mira tried to put Eddie out of her mind on the drive to work, but she could still feel the anxiety prickling at her as she headed into her building. Work usually made her feel better. Ever since she'd struck out on her own, she'd been amazed by how fulfilling running her own business could be. It helped that she'd found such a great place to work—a multidisciplinary arts hub, an old warehouse that had been updated and converted into a series of studios for various creative professionals. On her floor alone there were visual artists, ceramicists, a couple of tattoo artists who shared a studio, and even a dance troupe that rehearsed a few nights a week in the spacious room at the back of the building.

And then there was her little space. It was perfect for her—partially divided, which gave her a space to meet clients and a space to sew, and it had even come with an enormous antique table, battered and paint-stained but easily restored to its former glory. Not that the surface was visible most of the time, not with the amount of work she had on the go. A dozen new alterations for some new clients, not to mention the piece she'd agreed to make from whole cloth for one of her regulars.

To an outside eye, the piles of fabric might have looked haphazard and chaotic, but Mira knew her own system. That was part of why she'd resisted expanding, even though she could certainly afford to add a staff member or two. The idea of sharing her space with another person, trusting them with her system, with her work... well, they'd have to be someone pretty special. For now, she was happy to let her waitlist keep building.

It was a blessing to be so busy. When Mira had first started this business, she'd been terrified she was making the biggest mistake of her life. In the modern world of fast fashion and bulk-buying clothes online, applying for loans to start a bespoke tailoring business had been a hard sell... especially when she'd mentioned that her focus was on plus-sized clients. But her intuition had paid off. There was a gap in the market when it came to bigger bodies. Cheap fast fashion could work great for smaller bodies, but the bigger the size, the less likely it would fit well. There was more variation in plus-sized bodies, variation that should have been celebrated, but was instead too often subjected to shame for not fitting neatly into society's convenient categories.

For Mira, who'd always been short and curvaceous, it had started with the despair of trying to find a pair of jeans that fit her hips, waist, legs and butt all at once. Frustrated by a whole day of unsuccessfully trying on pair after pair of factory-produced jeans, she'd eventually bought a pair that were three sizes too big, then dug out an old sewing machine of her aunt's and a measuring tape and set to work.

It had taken a few days, but the results were more than worth it. She'd been surprised by how many compliments she'd received from complete strangers—some of them from creepy men, of course, but a surprising majority from other curvy women, friends and acquaintances as well as complete strangers, all desperate to know where she'd gotten her well-fitting jeans from. When she explained that she'd tailored them herself, the response was almost always an impassioned request for her to do the same for them.

And so she'd run some quick calculations and come up with a fee and a system—her clients brought her a pair of jeans a few sizes above their own, as well as detailed measurements of their bodies, and she'd work her magic. Word spread fast, and it wasn't long before her dining room table was too small to keep up with the piles of jeans that kept accumulating. The income was modest, but enough to pay for a sturdier sewing machine and even some classes in dressmaking and clothing alteration. She branched out from jeans to jackets, dresses, skirts, even formal attire. Her office job, which she'd once found satisfying enough, paled in comparison to the fierce joy of watching a client stare at themselves in the mirror, wearing clothing that actually fitted their body properly—often for the first time in years.

So when she'd stumbled upon this beautiful little workspace, she'd taken it as a sign. She'd been doing patient, careful research for years on small business startup loans that were available in her area—attention to detail had always been her signature strength—and though it took a few rejections, it was only a matter of time before she'd secured one. The day she got the letter was the day she'd submitted her two weeks notice at her office job.

It had also been the day she'd finally gotten that restraining order approved, she thought now, the sour thought tarnishing what had always been one of her favorite memories. Why did creepy men have to ruin everything? Even now, she still got creepy emails coming through from her business's website, making unpleasantly sexual comments about the plus-sized models on her page. For a society that spent so much time demonizing fat people and calling them lazy and disgusting, there certainly were a lot of men whose sexual fantasies seemed to revolve around women like Mira.

As if on cue, she felt her phone buzz again, and she scowled as she switched it to silent. Maybe this was a sign it was time to get a second phone, one specifically for her business... though given how few personal calls she tended to make these days, her existing number was basically already

her business phone. But it would be such a hassle to update all the contact information on her website... Mira had always had trouble keeping up with technology. Her friends always joked that she was an old woman in a young woman's body.

Well, not so young, she thought wryly, the comforting whir of her sewing machine lulling her into the meditative, focused trance she loved so much about working with her hands. As much as it usually shocked people to hear, Mira was a few months away from turning forty. It was a strange thought. Most of her friends of the same age were married with school-aged kids, some of them even in high school... and here she was, a thirty-nine-year-old woman who'd never even been on a second date. That was part of why she'd let her friends talk her into the dating apps again. If she wanted kids, she knew, the clock was ticking. Even if she might not have looked a day over twenty-five. Her friends usually accused her of witchcraft when that subject came up. Good genes, she supposed.

Today really was a day for sore subjects, wasn't it? Mira exhaled briskly, trying to pull her mind out of what her therapist would have probably called a spiral. Nearly forty or not, she had a life she was proud of. She loved her work, and she was reminded every day by glowing testimonials of her clients that she was making a real difference in the world. She was grateful for her friends, for her work, for her comfortable home, for her strong, healthy body. So what if she wasn't married yet? She'd rather be alone than share her life with the wrong man. She was old enough to have seen friends make those kinds of mistakes, plunging recklessly through red flags in relationships because they were so desperate to have the marriage and the family that they were dreaming of.

And she didn't feel like she was running out of time, at the end of the day. Forty or not, Mira had always felt like a new soul... like she'd only just gotten started, like she was running on a different kind of timeframe to the people around her. Her friends always joked that she was cold and ruthless when it came to dating, but really, the truth was that she'd

never been on a second date because she was a romantic. She always knew the moment she met a man whether or not he was the one for her. He could be gorgeous, charismatic, funny, tall, kind, literally royalty... but if she didn't feel the spark, what use was there in pretending?

One day, she knew she'd meet the love of her life, her soulmate. And when she did, she wouldn't have to worry about never having been on a second date with a guy. The spark she was waiting for, the sense of connection, of passion, of trust... it was out there, she knew it on an intuitive level that she'd never been able to explain to her friends. They'd think she was deluded, that her standards were too high, that she'd been brainwashed by Disney movies... but she trusted her gut. If it took her another forty years to find the man she was meant to spend her life with, then she was willing to wait for him.

And in the meantime... well, she always had her dreams to keep her company.

Chapter 2 - Conrad

What better way to follow up a grueling morning of mediating centuries-old academic arguments than with a council meeting?

Conrad tried not to think about what the early spring sunshine would feel like on his wings as he made the all-too-short walk from the Palace Archives up to the Throne Room, where he was already running a little late for a meeting that would last until sunset at the very least. He rubbed at the back of his neck as he walked, not liking the ache that had settled there over the last few weeks. His injuries from the recent attack on the Palace were long since healed... the ache in his neck was something new, something that had more to do with the arduous process of repairing the Palace.

The repairs themselves, actually, were progressing nicely. It had been three months since the attack, and for the most part the Palace looked like it was back to normal. What furniture that had been beyond repair had been replaced, the bloodstains and scorch marks that had resulted from the battle had been carefully cleaned from every surface, and even the damage to the stonework was no longer visible, thanks to the careful work of the Palace's artisans.

But the Archives... the Archives were another story. He should have known, when he'd put his hand up to supervise that particular part of the recovery effort, what he was getting himself into. He'd known Arric and Hartwell, the lead Archivists, for centuries. Why had he thought that they'd allow any process to be simple, especially when it concerned their precious Archives? He'd expected the major problems to have to do with the restoration of damaged records. The cavernous Archives were full of ancient tomes, and a lot of fire had been thrown around during the recent attack. But a small army of industrious archival assistants and librarians had done an impressive job of restoring, repairing, and replacing

the damaged tomes, which numbered in at least the hundreds, if not the thousands.

It had been months of work. But the real struggle had started when it came to putting the tomes back. Arric's position was that the original system must be preserved at all costs—he seemed to feel that the order in which things were stored was in itself a kind of historical artifact. But Hartwell saw the upheaval as an ideal opportunity to completely overhaul the storage system. Neither dragon would budge on his position... which didn't stop them from discussing it for hours on end, entertaining hypothetical after hypothetical until their hapless mediator felt like his brain was about to leak out of his ears.

Conrad took his accustomed seat at the long table in the Throne Room, murmuring an apology for his lateness as he did. Queen Lana flashed him a quick smile, a flicker of sympathy visible in her eyes before her attention returned to the report being made about recovery efforts in the rest of the cavern. The attack had largely been focused on the Palace, but the defense effort had involved every dragon who lived in the great hollow mountain that the dragons here called home.

Three months may have passed, but they were all still reeling from the upheaval of the attack—and from the sweeping changes it had brought with it, not least of which was the knowledge of worlds beyond their own. Perhaps that was why the Archivists were getting so fixated on their storage systems, Conrad reflected as he settled tiredly into the rhythm of the meeting. A kind of stress response to the realization that there was a huge amount of information that their extensive Archives simply did not contain... the realization that sooner or later, they were going to need to add yet more books to their collection.

Seth rose to address the group now. The Alpha of the local wolf pack spoke with the quiet, understated authority of a man who fully understood the responsibilities that came with the power he wielded. His pack had been instrumental in the defense effort, intercepting the attacking mages on their way

through the forest and giving the dragons early warning of their approach... and to everyone's great relief, they'd managed to avoid any serious injuries among the wolves. There was always a problem on the horizon, though, and Seth was warning them that the wolves were growing curious and a little wary about the news of worlds beyond their own.

"Tell them we're just as curious as they are," Queen Lana said with a wry smile. "And that we're looking into it."

That piqued Conrad's curiosity—and Seth's, too, judging by the quick flick of his silver eyes towards his soulmate. Queen Lana smiled as she effortlessly took control of the meeting. She'd been stepping more and more into her power as their leader lately, Conrad thought, looking at the Queen with admiration. The attack had been perhaps the most major disaster their little community had faced in decades, and their brand-new Queen had handled it so well that even the most truculent and critical residents of the cavern had trouble faulting her. And here she was, leading them just as bravely into the unknown future that loomed ahead of them.

Once, Conrad had thought that he would be leading at her side, as her soulmate. Ever since he'd learned of the prophecy that their Queen would come to them from another world, Conrad had been convinced that she'd be his soulmate. Knowing he was waiting for her arrival had made him feel less lonely... but the moment he'd met her, the conviction that they were destined to be together had simply evaporated. When it came to soulmates, a shifter just knew. And as much as he admired Lana and had come to count her among his closest friends, Conrad had known from the start that there couldn't be anything else between them.

He'd hidden his reaction, of course, but privately, that realization had been crushing. Lana's prophesied arrival had been the only thing standing between him and heartbreak, and when he'd realized that her heart belonged to Seth, Conrad had had to confront the reality that he was simply one of those shifters who didn't have a soulmate. It hurt. It still hurt, even

years later... even with so much work to distract him. Maybe that's why he'd been having so many dreams lately about—

“Conrad?”

“My apologies,” Conrad said, his brow creasing as he realized he'd zoned out. “What was the question?”

“That's an answer in itself,” Queen Lana said wryly. “We were asking how the restoration efforts are going in the Archives.”

“Yes,” he said, smiling a little tiredly. “Indeed, it's been a long day. A series of long days. The majority of the repair efforts are complete, including some truly expert repairs to the decorative stonework in the entrance hall. There's a little more work to be done on restoring damaged records. The major ongoing work, though, is...” He glanced up and down the table. Neither Archivist was present—it was a smaller meeting than usual, it seemed. A little candor was acceptable. “A debate between the lead Archivists about the extent to which the storage system ought to be updated.” He rubbed his forehead, not missing the flicker of a sympathetic smile from Seth on the other side of the table.

“Academic debates,” Lana said with a nod. “I understand your fatigue.”

“They're right, of course, that it's a valuable opportunity to overhaul the storage system, especially with new resources likely to be added soon... but I wish they'd decide a little more quickly on the nature of that overhaul.” Conrad exhaled. “As problems go, though, this is a good one.”

“I'm sure Morgan will be pleased to know that space is being made for her schoolbooks,” Acantha put in. The stoic Captain of the Guard had been instrumental in the Palace's defense, almost at the expense of her own life. And despite her characteristic resistance to change, they'd all been surprised by how readily she'd embraced the strange new future they were heading for.

“She's looking forward to her trip?”

“I’m hard pressed to get her to talk about anything else,” Acantha remarked drily. “Ever since Cato mentioned the college, she’s had her heart set on it.”

“I’m glad she’s eager,” Lana said with a nod. “Not many dragons here would be brave enough to make a journey to a whole new world.”

“She spends too much time with Cato,” Acantha said with a shake of her head, not quite hiding the fond smile on her face at the mention of her charismatic soulmate. “He insists that the other insulas are the same world as ours, only separated by Fog... like islands in a lake. His precise words are that it ‘isn’t a big deal’.” The roll of her eyes was affectionate.

“Nevertheless, it’s a major journey. I hope she knows she’ll have all the support we can offer her.” Lana tilted her head. “I believe the subject of our resident mage was on the agenda for this meeting?”

Acantha nodded. “He wanted to be here himself, but I thought a private discussion would be more useful.”

“What news does he have for us?”

“No news. Only impatience. He wanted me to stress how eager he is to share all of his knowledge of magic. He seems to feel we could be doing more. I’ve urged patience,” she said, and Conrad sat back in his chair with a faint smile. “He doesn’t seem to know the meaning of the word. At any rate, that’s his message.”

“He’s barely been here three months,” Conrad pointed out, not bothering to hide his amusement. On dragon timeframes, that was barely enough time to make someone’s acquaintance, let alone to build trust.

“It’s a human thing,” Lana said with a shake of her head. “It’s those tiny lifespans of theirs... they feel this constant pressure to get things done as quickly as possible.”

Seth’s expression didn’t change, but Conrad felt the subtle uneasiness creep into the atmosphere of the meeting

regardless. Acantha cleared her throat and changed the subject, and the meeting proceeded, but Conrad caught the worried glance that Lana shot Seth's way when the wolf wasn't looking. It wasn't only humans that had short lifespans compared to dragons... wolves, too, were lucky to reach a century in age, where dragons had no such limitations on their lives.

This had never been a problem... that was, until the first time a dragon found a non-dragon soulmate. There was nothing in their culture more heartbreaking than the prospect of losing a soulmate. When dragons did pass away, due to illness, injury, or misadventure, it was rare that their soulmate would live much longer. The same was true among wolves, from what Conrad had learned... bonded pairs would spend their short lives together, then when old age came to claim them, it would usually do so at about the same time. It was intimately connected with the magic that made them shifters, and the connection that that magic had with the soulmate bond.

At some point, they were going to need to confront the question of what would happen when old age came for Seth, or for Cato. Would Lana and Acantha simply be left behind to grieve their loss? It seemed so cruel, when most soulmate pairs rejoiced in the knowledge that they would spend the rest of their lives with their loves. It was almost enough to make Conrad glad that he had no soulmate of his own. What would be worse—never to love, or to love and then lose? For now, they all seemed happy simply to have each other. Maybe that much really was enough... it wasn't like he was in any position to know.

He walked back to his quarters after the meeting, lost in thought with the weight of his weariness pressing down on him like stone. Work was a welcome distraction, but it was never long before the emptiness came back to gnaw at him. His quarters, cozy and well-appointed as they were, had never quite felt right to him. He'd moved a dozen times before he'd realized that the problem wasn't with his rooms... it was that it

was only him inhabiting them. With a soft sigh, he dropped onto his back on his bed, staring up at the stone ceiling.

Maybe all of this ruminating on soulmates was what had been making his dreams so vivid lately. Dreams weren't uncommon among dragons, of course, and the Archives were full of folklore detailing the prophetic power of dreaming. These weren't those kinds of dreams, though. Conrad grinned a little at the thought. No, these were much more... personal. They'd started around the time that Lana had arrived, and at first he'd hoped they might be a sign he was about to meet his soulmate. But even after those hopes had been dashed, the dreams had kept coming. Not every night, but at least a few times a month, there she would be... a woman with the most incredible golden eyes, a soft smile curving her plump lips, her ringlets of chestnut hair falling around her face.

All of the rest of his dreams involved people he already knew, but this woman was different. She was a dragon, but nothing like any of the dragons who lived here in the cavern. He'd even taken to searching for her face among the wolves he occasionally met, wondering whether his subconscious had borrowed the image of someone his conscious mind had forgotten. But there was nobody like her out there. And the dreams... he always woke up blushing from their intensity, their detail. At first they'd been simply physical, the two of them melting into each other's arms and satisfying their passion for one another. But as time had gone on, the dreams had changed. Sometimes, the two of them simply walked together, hand in hand, through landscapes that were totally unfamiliar to Conrad. Slowly but surely, they began to talk to each other, too... and though the details of their conversations often escaped him when he woke up, he still couldn't shake the feeling he was getting to know her.

It was embarrassing, really, how much he looked forward to their occasional dream meetings. How fond of her he felt, how much he enjoyed her company. She wasn't *real*, he kept telling himself. She was just a dream, some figment of his imagination intended to ease his loneliness.

And the joke was on him. Because every time he woke up from a dream of holding her in his arms, he was only more acutely aware of just how alone he really was.

Chapter 3 - Mira

It was already dark when Mira got home that night, shadows from the streetlight outside her house falling across the yard as she headed for her door. She loved her little workspace, but with no windows, it was easy to lose track of the passage of time—it had been well after eight before she'd realized it was time to go. Still, she'd gotten a good start on the week's orders, and she was in good spirits as she shifted her takeout to one hand to unlock her front door. A quick glance at the street behind her, and a cold feeling settled over her like a shroud. The van was still there.

Paranoia, she told herself firmly as she shut the door behind her. That was all it was. The gray van had been parked down the block for a week now, and it didn't seem to have moved... but that didn't mean it hadn't. She'd never seen anyone driving it, but she also hadn't been spending a lot of time at home lately. Maybe one of the neighbors drove it for work. There were any number of explanations for why it was there that had nothing to do with her. She put the TV on and poured herself a glass of red wine, trying to make herself relax.

At least her phone had stopped going off. Maybe Eddie had finally taken her silence as a hint... or run out of numbers to contact her from. Still, she hated the feeling that he'd gotten under her skin. It wasn't just him, of course. It was the last guy, too, the restraining order guy... and a handful of others who'd been threatening in their own way. And if she was really honest, a lot of it ran all the way back to her childhood, to the last night she'd seen her mother. But that wasn't somewhere she wanted to go right now. Her next appointment with her therapist was in a couple of weeks, and while she knew she could always call to ask for it to be moved up, she was holding off for now. If she didn't hear from Eddie again, maybe that would be enough to settle her down.

For now, though, a night on the couch with wine and her favorite takeaway worked wonders. She wasn't even thinking about the van across the street when she turned in for the night, curling up contentedly in her enormous bed. It took up far more of the bedroom than was really necessary, and it was an absolute hassle to change the sheets by herself with her pint-sized frame, but Mira didn't regret the purchase for a second. It was the delicious little luxuries in life that made it worth living, and she loved that her bed could comfortably sleep five of her.

Besides, maybe one day she'd share it with someone special. Then they'd both be grateful for the extra room, wouldn't they?

That was the last thought she had before sleep claimed her, and maybe that was what brought him to her ... her favorite recurring dream, her handsome blue-eyed suitor. He'd been visiting her for years now, on and off, and for the life of her she couldn't figure out the pattern. But part of her liked that he was a surprise.

For as long as she could remember, Mira had been a lucid dreamer. Every time she dreamed, she was not only aware she was dreaming, but that she was also in complete control of what took place. For a while, she hadn't realized that this was unusual, always mildly confused when people complained about stress dreams or their unpleasant nightmares... why didn't they simply choose to dream about something else? Then she learned that the ability she'd taken for granted was something that not many other people ever experienced.

But this dream was an exception. The first time she'd dreamed of him, he'd surprised her... something she was so unused to that she'd actually woken up with a start. The second time, she controlled her reaction, and quickly learned that when it came to the mysterious blue-eyed man, her dreams behaved like everyone else's. He was unpredictable and uncontrollable. And she wouldn't change a thing about him even if she could. At first, they'd been very

straightforward sex dreams that always left her blushing when she woke. But over time, they'd grown more and more complicated. And now... well, now it was a little embarrassing to even talk about. Her friends knew she had a recurring dream about a handsome, muscular man with sandy blond hair and piercing blue eyes, but they didn't know how deep the dream had gotten.

They didn't know that she'd learned a whole *language* for him.

After a few purely physical dreams, she'd started trying to talk to him. But he'd always responded with strange words she'd never heard before. Slowly, though, she began to recognize patterns, to pick up on meaning where there'd only been sounds before. Now, she was—for want of a better word—fluent. She'd tried Googling a few of the words she'd learned, making her best guess at spelling, in the hopes that she might have somehow subconsciously learned a real language... but there were few results. As far as the rest of the world was concerned, it was gibberish. Gibberish that Mira was fluent in.

Still, it meant she could talk to her dream suitor when he appeared... and she was thrilled when she saw him stepping out of the shadows of her living room, that handsome smile on his face. Mira quickly set the scene, decorating her table with candles and spreading a few rose petals across the floor, too... she could alter the environment around him in these dreams, just not the man himself. And why would she want to mess with perfection? There he stood, wearing a crisp white shirt that made her fingers itch to tear it from his shoulders. She was another woman altogether in her dreams. For someone who'd done little more than kissing a man in the real world, she got very adventurous indeed when she was asleep...

But tonight didn't feel like one of the dreams where they simply tore each other's clothes off. Instead, he pulled her into his arms for a long embrace. Mira barely cleared five feet, and even in heels she was best described as pint-sized—even

the shortest guy she'd ever been on a date with looked tall standing next to her. But her dream guy didn't need her to look tall. Somehow, though, the height difference was never awkward. She seemed to fit into his arms like she belonged there... and then she felt his hand slip into hers and the two of them were walking down her street, talking softly.

She never remembered much of what they talked about. Sometimes she told him about her day, sometimes he told her about his... a lot of the time, she just took him on tours of her favorite places around the city. Taking advantage of her lucid dreaming powers, she'd move them seamlessly from the beach to the hills, from her favorite restaurants to her aunt's farm where she'd spent a lot of her teenage years. He was always interested, always attentive... and he often remembered details she'd mentioned in other dreams.

Of course he did, she always scolded herself. He was a figment of her imagination, wasn't he? A dream, not a person. Still, she'd be lying if she said she didn't have a real attachment to him. Imaginary or not, he made her feel the way she knew that her soulmate would make her feel, once she met him in real life. And as much as she'd always been too embarrassed to tell anyone about her dreams, she was fiercely grateful for them for reminding her not to settle for anything that didn't feel this good.

They were walking down her street now, and her soft smile faded a little when she realized that she'd subconsciously replicated it the way she'd last seen it. It was late at night, with the shadowy figure of the van parked down the block. Now, it looked menacing—probably a reflection of the anxiety she'd been pinning on it since the disastrous date with Eddie. She'd told her dream suitor all about it as they'd walked, grateful for the protective way he'd squeezed her hand, for his firm reassurance that she deserved much better treatment. There was her little house, the lights glowing in the window. She was already looking forward to getting him into bed, to making the most of the time they had together, because all too soon, she knew, she'd wake up alone...

But now, to her surprise, she felt his steps slow. His blue eyes were fixed on the van, and there was a frown playing across his face, an expression she'd rarely seen him wear.

“What’s wrong?”

“Over there,” he said, nodding towards the van. “I don’t like that. Something about it... my instincts are telling me it’s bad news.”

“So are mine,” she agreed, sighing a little. Had her anxiety really infected her dream to this extent? Venting about the jerk who was bothering her was one thing, but when her handsome suitor started worrying about the van on her street under his own steam, that was when she knew she needed to dial it back. Maybe she should move up her therapist appointment in the morning. “It’s alright. It’s just a...” Odd, that he’d never taught her any of the words for vehicles in the strange language he spoke. She settled for the English word instead. “It’s just a van.”

“Van,” he repeated, frowning. “Something has been telling me you’re in danger. Not just tonight, but for some time.”

A chill ran down her spine... not a feeling she was used to having in dreams, and not one she liked much. “What do you mean, I’m in danger?”

“I don’t know.” His blue eyes were worried. “It’s a feeling I have. I can protect you, but only while I’m here, and —”

But his sentence was melting away, and Mira cursed in frustration as she felt his hand slip out of hers, too, replaced by the soft warmth of her blankets. His voice had faded out, too, replaced by the buzz of her alarm. There was sunlight creeping through her window, and she sighed heavily as she sat up in bed. She’d tried before to dive back into the dreams of her suitor... but she’d never been successful. Once she was awake, there was nothing for it but to wait until she was lucky enough to see him again.

She peered out the window, finding the place where the two of them had been standing in the dream, hand in hand. And sure enough, there was the van... and something about the sight of it sent another shiver of fear down her spine.

Chapter 4 - Conrad

Conrad didn't feel at all rested when he got to the Archives the next day. Dreaming of the curly-haired woman usually put him in a good mood for days on end, but this time something was different. He'd woken up abruptly, his hand still reaching helplessly for hers, and the anxiety had stayed with him as he'd prepared himself for another day in the Archives. More arguments over filing systems, more endless, pointless notes... he could feel the stress ache in his neck intensifying. But it wasn't just his frustration with Arric and Hartwell. Now, it was the strange feeling that the woman in his dreams was in danger.

It was an absurd thought, of course. She'd been created by his mind... if she was in danger, then it was fictional danger, too. But that logic didn't seem to be doing much to get her off his mind. He barely made it through a few hours with Arric and Hartwell. Even the famously short-sighted scholars noticed his distraction. Maybe that was why they ended the conversation early, both of them agreeing to spend the rest of the day individually brainstorming a solution to the most recent problems raised. Conrad was grateful... but more than a little worried that his dreams were interfering with his ability to do his work.

He was staring into space on the Palace steps when Lana found him. He'd taken to eating his lunch out here, bringing whatever simple things he could scavenge from the kitchens to balance on his knees while he sat in the relatively fresh air. The Palace was at the very bottom of the cavern, with the distant disk of sky hundreds of feet above it. Still, there was a lot more room to think out here than in the cluttered, crowded Archives where he'd spent the majority of the last few months.

“You've been distracted lately.”

No preamble. He glanced sidelong at her, becoming aware that this was Lana his friend, not Queen Lana his monarch and ruler. To his Queen, he'd have offered an apology. To his friend... he just nodded, turning his gaze back towards the roof of the cavern, where the flutter of dragonwings occasionally blocked the disk of light.

“Is it the attack?”

“No,” he said, after only a moment's pause.

“It'd be understandable if you were still shaken up. I'm still shaken up.”

He glanced at her, genuinely surprised by that casual revelation. Lana had seemed to take the entire attack in stride. “You are?”

“Of course I am. Are you joking? That woman was going to kill me. And she was going to do it wearing your face,” she added with a scowl. Conrad felt a shiver run down his back. One of the mages had gotten to him early, during the attack—a woman, Cato had explained later, with a gift for changing her shape. She'd disguised herself as Conrad, and only Acantha's quick thinking had stopped her from taking the Queen hostage. “She got away, you know.”

Conrad looked over at her. Most of the mages had scattered after their leader had been killed, but it was his understanding that the shapeshifter had not been among them. “I thought...”

“I did too, but it seems Cato's little magic trick didn't differentiate between shifters and mages.” Lana shook her head. “The ones who fell were brought back, same as our own. Cato doubts we'll ever see her again, though.”

“Not that we'd know if we did,” Conrad pointed out, winning a huff of weak laughter from the Queen. It was an unsettling thought, that the mage might still be out there somewhere... but at the same time, he was a little relieved. It had been a bloody and fierce battle, and he'd witnessed firsthand the casualties it had brought about, deaths that

numbered in the dozens. That was, until Cato and Acantha had finally unlocked the power of the very artifact that had brought the mages to them in the first place—a gauntlet that in a burst of magic had not only healed every wound in the cavern but even restored the lives of those who had been lost. The only exception had been the tyrannous leader of the mages, whose body had been disposed of shortly after the battle had ended.

“I’m glad,” Lana said softly. “I’m glad she didn’t lose her life, even if she causes trouble for us later.” She tilted her head. “But if it’s not the battle bothering you, then what?”

Conrad hesitated for a long moment. As much as he liked and trusted Lana, he wasn’t exactly in the habit of sharing his private thoughts and feelings... especially when it came to matters of the heart. That had always been his role in the Palace staff, the stoic, dependable second-in-command.

But Lana had trusted him enough to be vulnerable with him. It was the least he could do to return the favor. And so he found himself telling her about the dreams he’d been having, about the curvy woman with the golden eyes who filled him with so much delight. He tried not to dwell too much on the rather pathetic emotional background to these dreams... his own loneliness, his regret that he’d never have a soulmate of his own, the wistful envy he felt towards every bonded pair he knew...

“What’s her name, this woman?” Lana asked, tilting her head curiously. He snorted.

“I don’t know. I never asked.”

“Well, does she know your name?”

“She knows everything I know, presumably, because she’s not real, Lana.” But the Queen only shrugged, and he narrowed his eyes. “She’s a dream. She’s a figment of my imagination.”

“That’s what I thought about the spooky old forest I used to dream about,” Lana pointed out with another shrug. “Then all of a sudden, here I was. I’m just saying, dreams are

worth paying attention to. Especially if they're bothering you this much," she added, nudging him gently in the ribs with one elbow.

"It was only last night's dream that was about danger."

"Sure, but you've been preoccupied for months. Before the attack, even," Lana pointed out. "Maybe this is why."

"It seems like quite a stretch, Lana."

"So does my arrival here," she said impatiently. "Conrad—you know I've been working with Cato lately, right?"

He nodded, not quite understanding the connection. When she'd first arrived here, the Queen had discovered a miraculous ability to form a magical portal in the Fog that surrounded their home... a portal that had allowed her to save dozens of shifters who'd gone missing in the months leading up to her arrival. How she'd done it, however, remained a mystery even to Cato, who knew a great deal more about magic than any member of their community. So lately, the two of them had been meeting in the Fog to investigate the matter further. It didn't sound like they'd been making much progress, but most things took time.

"I think you should tell Cato about these dreams, that's all."

Conrad wrinkled his nose. The mage was still on thin ice, as far as he was concerned. He'd brought a lot of chaos with him when he'd arrived a few months ago, and while he'd also brought a lot of good, Conrad was waiting to see whether one would balance out the other. It was hard to trust a man with such a gift for lying, even if he did seem to have turned over a new leaf since finding his soulmate in the taciturn Acantha. "Is that an order?"

Lana huffed laughter and elbowed him in the ribs again. "Does it have to be?" Her smile faded. "I don't like seeing you like this, Conrad. You deserve more than just a lifetime of duty and diligence."

“Fine,” he said finally. She always was a difficult woman to say no to, even when she wasn’t wearing her crown.

Cato came to find him that night after dinner. The mage’s wiry frame had filled out a little since he’d been living with them in the Palace—he looked healthier, safer, happier. Some of it was finally escaping the tyrannous influence of his old boss, of course, but Cato insisted that it was mostly due to his soulmate being in his life. With his characteristic impatience, the white-haired mage wasted no time in sitting down beside Conrad.

“So Lana tells me you’ve been having weird dreams.”

Fighting the urge to simply walk out of the room, Conrad tightened his jaw and schooled his expression. “Is that so?”

“Tell me everything,” Cato said at once. But before Conrad could let his temper get the better of him, they were joined by Lana, who shot Cato a reproachful look as she slid into a seat on the other side of the table.

“Sorry for the ambush, Conrad. Is this a good time to talk?”

“It’s alright,” Conrad said with as much dignity as he could muster. He’d known Cato long enough to know that delaying him from getting something he wanted was more trouble than it was worth. Besides, part of him was genuinely curious about what the mage might have to say about his dreams. The idea that they were anything more than idle fantasy hadn’t occurred to him until today, and the more he thought about it, the more he hoped it was true. “Go ahead. What do you want to know?”

“The woman,” Cato said hurriedly. “You said you don’t know her name, but—she’s always the same?”

“Well, the dreams are always different, but—”

“But the woman. She doesn’t change? Her features, her height, her voice—”

He remembered the feeling of pulling her into his arms, the way her head always came up to the same place on his chest, the way she often laughed at the almost comical discrepancy between them. He remembered the vivid gold of her eyes, the way her hair moved and shifted when she tossed back her head to laugh, those rich brown ringlets that never quite fell the same way twice... then he shook his head. "She's the same person."

"And where do you meet her? Is it always the same place, like Lana's dreams about the forest?"

He shook his head. "It changes. It's as though she's in control of it... I see her deciding, sometimes, where we'll go next."

"Do you ever go anywhere around here?" Cato gestured towards the stone walls around them. "I mean, around the insula here. The forest, the mountaintop, the lake...?" Conrad shook his head, and Cato shot Lana a triumphant glance. "See?"

"What?" Conrad folded his arms, not liking the idea of Lana and Cato having talked about this without him.

"Regular dreams are usually pieced together from stuff that's familiar to us, would you agree?"

Conrad hesitated. It was true that most of his dreams that didn't include the golden-eyed woman tended to take place in the Palace. "I suppose so."

"So what does it mean when your dreaming mind gets this creative? Making up a whole person, as well as a whole world? I'll tell you," he said, not giving Conrad a chance to respond. "I don't think your mind's making her up at all, Conrad. I think she's a real person."

He couldn't help but laugh at that. "A person who lives in my dreams?"

"No more than the forest lived in my dreams," Lana said softly. "It was real when I was dreaming about it as well as when I wasn't."

“I think you’re visiting her in your dreams, Conrad,” Cato said excitedly. “I think she’s real, and that you’ve built up this relationship through your dreams. And that might mean ___”

“Wait,” Conrad said, holding up a hand. “Just—give me a minute to process this absurd idea.”

“It makes sense, Conrad,” Lana said softly, while Cato visibly fought to stop himself from speaking. “Me visiting the forest over and over for years, you visiting this woman... it would explain why she’s been weighing on your mind so much.”

“There’s more,” Cato said, then shut his mouth tightly at the warning look Lana shot him. Conrad sighed.

“Tell me.”

“The way you described the places you go with her,” Lana said carefully, her eyes holding his intently. “The streets, the strange trees, the objects you couldn’t name... it sounds like Earth, Conrad. I think you’ve been visiting a woman from Earth in your dreams.”

He let that idea sink in for a moment, the silence in the room suddenly heavy. Lana had told him all about the strange world she’d come from, farther even than the places Cato had been... but how could it be possible that he’d visited that place when Lana herself hadn’t even been able to find a way back to it? He had a hundred questions, a thousand... but when the silence grew unbearable, he simply chose one at random. “Why?”

“I don’t know,” Lana said simply. “Neither does Cato. But... didn’t you say you felt like she was in danger?”

A cold feeling settled into the pit of his stomach. Even knowing she was a dream, he’d felt uneasy about the palpable sense of danger that had been emanating from that thing outside of her house. If what Lana and Cato were saying was even possible—if he’d been meeting with a real woman in his

dreams, not simply imagining one—then that meant the danger was real, too.

But how could he protect her when he had no idea how to reach her?

Chapter 5 - Mira

Two days later, Mira's phone rang again. This time when she looked at the screen, expecting to see yet another unknown number, it was almost a relief to see no number at all... replaced quickly by unease. 'Private Number', that was what the screen said. What did that even mean? She let the call ring out before she tried blocking the number, to no avail. And a few minutes later, her phone rang again.

This was somehow worse than the nonstop texts from Eddie. He'd sent a couple more over the last few days, but she'd been hopeful that he was losing interest. Maybe he'd just switched to this new tactic instead. But something kept gnawing at her, telling her that something more sinister was going on... and finally, the tenth time the private number called, she decided impulsively that she wanted answers.

"What do you want?" she demanded as soon as she'd picked up the phone. But there was only silence on the other end of the phone, a long, yawning silence with a faint electrical crackle behind it. Then she heard a click, and the call ended. Somehow, that crackling electronic silence had been even more unsettling than heavy breathing. She spent the rest of the night uneasy, flipping from channel to channel in the hopes that something on TV might take her mind off the uneasy churning in her belly. Nothing did. She didn't sleep well, either. Ever since the dream in which her blue-eyed suitor had pointed worriedly to the van parked on her street, she'd been sleeping badly. And as much as she'd hoped he might return to comfort her, he was nowhere to be found that night.

The van was still on the street, stubbornly silent. She even went up to look through its windows, emboldened by her growing frustration, but there was no sign of any identifying information in the empty seats... just a neat, well-kept cabin,

with a divider that stopped her from seeing into the windowless back section of the van.

Even more bad news was waiting for her at work. One of the girls from reception flagged her down on her way through, telling her that she'd missed a meeting with a client the day before. Mira's dismay quickly changed to confusion. The day before had been Monday, her admin day—she never met with clients on Mondays, preferring to have the flexibility to work from home. She'd spent the whole day updating her website. But the girl just shrugged.

“They didn't seem like your regular clients. Maybe they made a mistake.”

Despite her confusion, Mira hesitated before she asked, some part of her worried that she didn't want to know. “What do you mean, they didn't seem like my regular clients?”

“They were men, for a start. They didn't seem like they cared about fashion. Dark clothes, Army vibes.” The girl shrugged again. “Anyway. Thought I'd let you know. They didn't leave a message or anything.”

Mira thanked her, forcing a smile to hide the fear that had clutched at her gut like an icy fist. Then she went straight into her workspace, closed the door, and called her therapist's office to see if they could move her appointment up. The chills running through her had less to do with the last few days and a lot more to do with what had happened to her when she was eight years old... and that meant she needed to bring in the big guns. After an agonizing wait, while the receptionist clicked carefully through the appointment list, she found a last-minute cancellation and moved Mira's appointment to Friday. She thanked her and hung up, wishing like hell it was sooner... still, it was better than nothing.

Work was out of the question. She knew herself well enough to know that. With a mixture of regret and resignation, Mira drafted a quick cancellation text to the clients she had bookings with that afternoon... and after a moment's hesitation, sent it through to the following day's appointments,

too. She was in no state to handle clients right now. Even sewing felt like harder work than usual, her fingers clumsy on the fabric and her mind seeming to work slower than it should. She finished what urgent work she could and called it a day.

It felt strange, driving home in the middle of the day. But the sight of the van in her street sent fresh panic coursing through her, and she knew she'd made the right call. Whatever was going on right now—the men coming to her work, the weird phone calls, the creepy guy—it might well be nothing to worry about, but it was pretty clear her nervous system hadn't gotten the memo. All of this had triggered something... something that more than likely had to do with that horrible night, over thirty years ago now.

It had been the most normal night imaginable, that was what was so strange about it. She'd gotten home from soccer practice and dumped her gear in the laundry, traipsed upstairs to get her homework out of the way before the rush of exercise endorphins had worn off. Then her mom called her down a few hours later for dinner. She couldn't even remember what they'd eaten—only that the three of them had been together. Then they'd watched some TV, and once she'd started yawning, her mother had chased her up to take a bath then get to bed. She could still remember her smiling softly at her from the doorway, outlined in the light filtering up from downstairs.

And then her dad had been shaking her awake in the darkness, tossing things into a half-packed suitcase lying open on the floor, telling her to stay quiet, that they were going to stay somewhere else for a few days. They were in the car before she'd realized her mom wasn't with them. Promising she'd catch up with them later, her dad had pulled out of the driveway and floored the accelerator, the old truck lurching down the street with a surprising turn of speed. Mira stared out at the rapidly disappearing street, and before they turned a corner, she caught a glimpse of her mother standing on the porch, head turned towards the shadows in the front yard.

Maybe she'd imagined it later, or maybe she really had seen what she remembered there, almost hidden by the

darkness... a handful of tall men, dressed in dark clothing, moving with a sinister, purposeful stride towards the house.

That had been the last time she'd seen her mother. Eventually, she'd fallen asleep in the back seat of the car, and when she'd woken up they were halfway across the country, on the way to her aunt's place. They'd made the road trip to visit Heather a few times, usually for the summer—she'd always loved roaming around on her aunt's farm up in the hills—but this didn't feel like their usual summer road trips. They'd stayed there for two long, weird, horrible months... and by the time she and her dad moved out to their own place, she had come to understand that she was never going to see her mother again.

It was the lack of resolution that had done her the most damage. What she'd learned that day was that sometimes, horrible things would simply happen for no reason... which meant there was no way to prepare herself, no way to avoid catastrophe. It was hard not to resent her father for it. He'd promised he'd tell her everything when she was old enough, and she didn't doubt for a minute that he'd meant it... but he'd passed away shortly after her fifteenth birthday, and any explanation he might have had for her had died with him.

And now it was all coming back to her again, memories of a night she hadn't thought about in a long time, the fear and dread and confusion all fighting for dominance in her mind. She spent the afternoon and evening busying herself with errands around the house, deep-cleaning the kitchen, casually checking all the locks on the doors and windows, trying to kid herself she wasn't terrified of night closing in, of men in dark clothes walking casually up to her own front porch. Her phone, at least, remained silent... though at this point, she might have welcomed the distraction of a message from Eddie. He was annoying and pathetic, but at least she was fairly certain he was harmless.

Friday, she told herself firmly. She would see her therapist on Friday, and they would work through all of this stuff, and things would get better. She just needed to hang on

until then. Maybe get some sleep, if she was lucky. She lay wide awake in bed for a long time before she finally felt drowsy enough to drift off... but to her surprise, she quickly found herself dreaming. Usually when she was under this much stress, her mind didn't bother with dreaming. But here she was, walking down the beach with the sand between her toes... she brightened the sunshine and put herself in a bathing suit, hoping the summery vibes might help her sleep a little better.

And then, to her surprise, she looked up to meet a pair of familiar blue eyes. Shock ran through her, as well as an odd little pang of relief... the strangest feeling that no matter what was going on, this man would protect her. Stupid thought. He was a dream. The only things he could protect her from were other dreams, and she was the one in control of those. Still, it felt incredibly good to see him. She felt his warm arms tighten around her and smiled against his chest, quietly adjusting her bathing suit to be a little more daring. If there was one thing that could get her mind off her troubles, it was the man from her dreams...

His kiss lit the fires in her it always did, and she grinned against his lips as he lifted her into his arms, effortlessly strong. The world swirled and shifted around them and she realized she'd transported them back to her room, to the vast expanse of her king-sized bed. And then he was pulling out of the kiss, a regretful expression in his eyes even as his hands lingered on her skin... but something about the look in his eyes stopped her from protesting.

“What’s wrong?”

“I’m worried,” he said softly, looking around her room. “We’re in your room, aren’t we? This is where you live?”

“Yes,” she said, a little confused. Suddenly he was pacing around the room, studying it intently, moving to the window to test the locks... she felt anxiety start gnawing at the pit of her stomach again and wrapped herself in the soft, fluffy

robe that usually hung on the back of her door. “What are you worried about?”

“I don’t know yet,” he said softly, turning back to her. “But I think... this is going to sound ridiculous, but I think you’re... real.”

Mira processed that for a moment. “Well, yes,” she said blankly, not sure how to translate ‘no duh’ into his language. “What—”

“I mean... you’re not someone I’m dreaming. You’re a real person, with a life outside of the time we spend together.”

Mira tilted her head, mind racing. Was this some new anxiety symptom? The subject of her escapist sex dream fantasies was performing some kind of bizarre meta-analysis on the dream. She could feel the edges of it fraying and she fought to keep herself calm. Unsettling as this was, it was also undeniably fascinating. Wasn’t she the one who was supposed to wonder if *he* was sentient? Whose dream was this, anyway? “Of course I’m real.”

“Well, that’s not proof,” the man said, half to himself, and Mira folded her arms across her chest, frowning despite herself. “I mean...” He turned back to her, eyes narrowing. “I’m also real.”

“Sure.” This seemed like more familiar ground, somehow, for all that it was confusing. “You and this language, totally real.”

“I’m serious.” Her suitor was looking at her hard. “I’m... we only meet in dreams. But I have a life outside of that, and so do you. Do you believe me?”

To her surprise, Mira realized that she really wanted to. And it was that, more than anything, that made her sit bolt upright in bed with her heart hammering in her chest. She stared wildly around her room, half convinced she was going to see him standing where he had been in her dream... but of course, the room was empty. It was just before dawn, and she

drew the covers tightly around her, shivering with more than cold.

That appointment with her therapist couldn't come soon enough.

Chapter 6 - Conrad

Conrad's heart was pounding when he hastened through the Palace in search of Cato, hoping like mad that he and Lana hadn't yet left for the day. The two of them had been spending regular days in the Fog, trying to get to the bottom of Lana's curious and as-yet-unknown abilities... but right now, all Conrad could care about was the dream he'd just had. He'd seen her, he'd spoken to her... and before the dream had fallen apart, he was absolutely convinced that she'd seen what he was beginning to realize was the truth. She wasn't a figment of his imagination, she was a real person—one who thought in turn that he, too, was only a figment of *her* imagination. It had made his head spin to realize it. No wonder the dream had fallen apart when he'd told her... he only hoped that she didn't simply discount what he'd said as part of the dream when she woke up.

He found Cato on the steps of the Palace, clearly still waiting for Lana, and he exhaled with relief, hastening down the steps to join the mage. "I talked to her," he said without preamble, his words falling over each other in his haste to explain. "I saw her, I talked to her, I told her she's a real person—which, yes, I know was foolish, but I hadn't exactly planned what I was going to say, and I told her that I was real, too, and..."

"And?" Cato said impatiently. But Conrad exhaled, aware that the end of his story was an anticlimax.

"And then I woke up."

Cato made a sound of disgust. "You had me excited." But there was a thoughtful expression in his eyes regardless. "That's something, though. Maybe next time you'll make more progress."

"I can't wait for next time," Conrad said with a hard shake of his head. He'd been thinking about this for days, ever since the first conversation they'd had about her. "If she's real,

then so is the danger that she's in. I can't just wait for my dreams to decide that we can talk again. Who knows what could happen to her?"

"So what do you suggest we do?" Cato's eyes widened, and before Conrad could so much as open his mouth, he'd surged on. "A portal! Open a portal through to her world, bring her back here where it's safe!"

Conrad stared at him. "You can do that?"

"Oh, of course not," the mage said impatiently. "But we can try, can't we? Come with us today," Cato said, gesturing vaguely northwards, to where Conrad knew the two of them had been meeting in the Fog.

Conrad hesitated, his eyes creeping reluctantly back to the doors to the Palace. He had a whole morning of work in the Archives scheduled, promises to keep to both Arric and Hartwell about finally finding at least one resolution to the dozens of disputes the two of them had found so far... but nothing had ever seemed less important to him. There was a chance that the woman he'd been dreaming about for years was actually out there somewhere—a living, breathing woman with a life of her own. A life that was in danger. Surely the Archivists wouldn't begrudge him that?

And so it was that he met Lana and Cato in the woods. It had been too long since he'd stretched his wings, or even inhabited his Draconic form for longer than it took to fly back and forth across the cavern, and when he landed in the trees on the edge of the Fog, he almost didn't want to shift back. Lana and Cato were waiting for him, and the Queen's eyes were alive with curiosity as she peppered him with questions about his dream.

"Do you think you can do it?" he asked finally, gesturing to the Fog around them. "Do you think you can make a portal through to her?"

"I can try," Lana said, shrugging her shoulders. "Progress has been slow so far, but... I mean, I did it once,

right? Twice, if you count the first time I came here. I must be able to do it again. That first time I did it, it was to save everyone's lives, right? Cato's been saying that some of it must be about motivation. And I'd say that saving this woman from the danger she's in is pretty good motivation."

Conrad nodded, his chest full of hope as Cato and Lana started working. But as the day wore on, the adrenaline began to fade a little. Progress was a lot slower than he'd hoped it might be... there was a lot of bickering back and forth between the two of them, and Conrad found himself reminded more than a little of the Archivists whose disputes he'd been mediating.

The problem, he began to realize as he observed the two of them, seemed to be in their communication. Cato was attempting to describe what it felt like for him to use magic... but everything Lana was saying told him that she had a very different experience of her own powers. No wonder they were struggling. Eventually, they called a break... and Conrad cleared his throat softly.

"I wonder if I might venture an observation, Your Majesty?"

"You don't have to do all that out here," Cato said impatiently, blowing an errant lock of white hair out of his gray eyes.

"I don't mind it," Lana said loftily. "It makes me feel less stupid for not being able to do this. What's your observation, Conrad?"

"Your styles may be incompatible, here. I admire your commitment to technique and practice, Cato—it's exactly how I learn best. But I'm an Earth sign, and Lana here is a Gemini through and through." The Queen gave him a blank look, and he fought the urge to sigh. "An air sign."

"Of course," Lana said wisely. "Indeed. Tell Cato what that means."

He'd forgotten how little Lana knew about Draconic beliefs about astrology. "The constellation under which a dragon is born is said to have a great deal to do with their abilities. Their connection to their dragon, to their magic, to their very nature as a shifter... and to the kind of soulmate they find. I wonder if Lana's qualities as an air sign might have something to do with how she uses magic."

"I *don't* use magic, that's the problem," Lana said with an irritable sigh. "I just... did it once because I needed to. I don't remember anything I did to make it happen, I just..." She gestured helplessly.

"That's exactly what I mean," Conrad said quickly. "Intuition and gut instinct... those are the strengths of your sign, traditionally speaking. Maybe instead of trying to follow Cato's instructions, you should... follow your impulse."

Lana looked at him for a long moment. "Prince Conrad, I would never in my life have imagined that you were capable of giving such reckless advice."

He felt a flush rise to his cheeks. "Well—"

"No, don't take it back," Cato interjected, his eyes bright. "It makes sense. And the connection between shifter magic and the stars... well, that's a whole research project of its own, huh? First things first, though," he said, shaking his head and taking a step back. "Lana. Go for it."

She looked back and forth between them, looking suddenly lost. "I don't know what to do."

"Follow your impulse!"

"My impulse is to tell you to stop shouting at me," Lana told Cato testily. Then she paused. "Maybe it would help if you gave me more information about your dreams, Conrad? Maybe if I can picture her house I can sort of... punch a way through."

Cato winced visibly at the description. "Careful punching though, right? I'd like to remind everyone present

that we're playing with magic that literally nobody understands—”

“Careful punching, right,” Lana said breezily, though she tipped Conrad a wink that couldn't help but make him feel a little worried. Still, the thought of the woman from his dreams wouldn't leave his mind. If she was out there—really out there, not some figment of his imagination like he'd always thought—then he owed it to her to do what he could to reach out to her. Even if it sounded reckless and dangerous, and like the exact kind of thing he'd spend most of his political career advising people against...

Conrad took a deep breath. His own astrological sign was famous for both loyalty and stubbornness. While Lana channeled her own astrological gifts, he was going to need to draw on his own to get through this. He shut his eyes, bringing to mind the memory of the room he'd spent so many pleasant evenings in... and then opened his eyes again and began to describe it. He saw Lana listening intently, her eyes widening a little when he hesitated over descriptions of the objects in the room he didn't recognize. She volunteered a few names for them, all in that strange language of hers, the one she dropped into when (he suspected) she wanted to swear without anybody understanding.

“That's Earth,” Lana whispered when he paused in his description. “Conrad, you're talking about a room on Earth, you must be.”

“That's where you're from?” Cato had been physically biting his lip to stop himself breaking into the conversation, but the technique seemed to have let him down at last. “This woman Conrad's been dreaming of is from Earth too?”

“But you said you talked to her,” Lana said, her brow creasing. “Is she speaking Draconic?”

“She learned it,” Conrad said faintly, thinking back to the earlier dreams. At the time, he hadn't questioned the strangeness of his new friend's failure to understand him...

especially given that so many of their earlier encounters had been almost completely physical.

“This is incredible,” Cato murmured, almost to himself. “I could spend the rest of my life studying what’s going on here—”

But before Cato could continue, there was a strange shimmer in the air, and Conrad whipped his head around as the mist around them began to drift towards a central point, thickening into a rectangular shape that hung in the air before them. He realized he was holding his breath as the shape grew and stretched, remembering the day that felt so long ago when Lana had first summoned a portal like this one. He didn’t want to move, didn’t want to break her focus—he just stared, frozen to the spot, as the mist shifted and thickened. And then, as though through a clouded window, he realized he could make out vague shapes in the rectangle. Cato was beside him, moving silently to get a better view of the nascent portal, his gray eyes alive with shock and reverence... and Conrad spared a glance for the Fog around them, wondering exactly how much strange power it had held all these years without their knowing.

“Lana,” Cato whispered, nodding at the portal. “Lana, you’re doing it.”

“I know,” the Queen gritted out, her voice strained. “Conrad?”

He swallowed hard, squinting to try to make out the dim space that lay beyond the portal. “I can’t quite make it out...”

“Try harder.” Lana’s voice was shaking. He obeyed, moving closer, willing the tendrils of gray mist to move out of the way... and then, just a glimpse of deep green. The color of the walls of his dream woman’s bedroom. And as if that glimpse had somehow strengthened the connection to the other world, he realized he could see more—he could make out the painting that hung on the wall beside the window, the enormous bed that took up almost all of the room’s floor

space. But the bed wasn't empty. There was a shape just visible beneath the heaped covers, a shape he'd seen a hundred times in his dreams, a thousand. Her sleeping face on the pillow was serene, her curls falling such that they just obscured her face... he felt his fingers twitch to reach out and brush that soft hair behind her ear, to wake her with a gentle kiss and feel her smile spread across her lips—

“That’s her,” he murmured, spellbound. “That’s the woman from my dreams.”

“I see her,” Cato breathed. “Lana?”

“I see her too.” The Queen’s voice was still unsteady, but she flashed Conrad a quick smile nevertheless. And then, as quickly as it had appeared, the portal was gone. Lana sat down on a fallen tree nearby, breathing hard, and Cato uttered a whoop so loud that it must have echoed through the trees for miles. Conrad simply stood where he was, shell-shocked. He’d have known her face anywhere. That had been her, there wasn’t a single doubt in his mind... and both Cato and Lana had confirmed that they saw her, too.

The woman he’d been dreaming about was real. She was real. He was torn between whooping for joy like Cato, who was now capering furiously around the clearing, and burying his head in his hands with frustration.

He could feel Lana’s gaze on the back of his neck, and he turned to meet her eyes.

“I did it once,” she said calmly, for all the world as though she’d been following his thoughts. “I can do it again. We know she’s there now, Conrad. We’ll get through to her.”

He nodded his gratitude... but worry still twisted in his gut. She’d looked so peaceful, lying there... and so vulnerable. What if by the time they got another portal open, they were too late?

Chapter 7 - Mira

Mira had hoped that going back to sleep might reunite her with her mysterious suitor. Something about the dream had unnerved her—the way he'd paced around the room, the way he'd told her she was in danger. Silly as it was, she wanted to return to the dream just to make him tell her that everything was okay, that they could go back to wandering her neighborhood and having hot, steamy sex in whatever setting she chose to summon for them. But she woke midmorning after a restless few hours of fruitless tossing and turning, her sleep too shallow to hold even a regular dream, let alone a special one...

Probably for the best, she told herself as she reluctantly dragged herself out of bed. He was clearly becoming a crutch for her anxiety, and she didn't want something so pleasant to be tarnished by the horrible stuff that was going on with her right now.

With all her work now canceled or postponed until a later date, Mira felt strangely at a loss about what to do. Her instinct had been to cancel work to give herself a clean slate to focus on her mental health, but now she wished she'd at least brought a few projects home to keep her mind occupied. Instead, she checked all the locks on the doors and windows again, unable to stop herself from peering down the street to see the familiar shape of the van, still menacing her from where it was parked.

She'd always loved living alone. But now, with horrible images of stone-faced men in dark clothing circling through her mind, she wished that she'd made different choices. The annoyance of a housemate's dishes piled up in the sink would have been a welcome relief compared to what she was feeling right now.

When her phone rang, she nearly jumped out of her skin. Heart pounding loud in her ears, she picked it up and

checked the screen, feeling a rush of relief at the familiar number on the screen. It was her therapist's office. Not Eddie, not the scary silent blocked number, not anyone at work telling her that yet more scary men had been asking for her... her voice was shaking when she answered the phone. Another cancellation had come up, they told her—an appointment was available the very next day if she'd prefer.

“That would be great,” Mira whispered, feeling herself dangerously close to tears. She thanked the cheerful receptionist and hung up the phone, suddenly exhausted. Talking to her therapist would help, it always did. But if she was honest, the only person she wanted to talk to right now was the man from her dreams. It wasn't rational, how badly she wanted to see him, to have him pull her into his strong arms... but neither were her fears, were they? If an imaginary threat could make her feel this terrible, surely it would be okay for an imaginary protector to make her feel safe again. But she'd never been able to summon him at will. She even took a nap on the couch, something that had never been a habit for her, but to no avail.

Sunset was what she'd really been dreading. As the dark closed in and the lights along her street started switching on, Mira closed all the windows after a final check of the locks. At least she'd done something useful with this anxious day—she'd deep-cleaned the whole house, more or less, and the kitchen was gleaming when she headed in to put together some dinner for herself. Food always brightened her mood, and by the time she'd eaten, she was feeling almost normal again. Normal enough to check her emails. A few new client inquiries, a couple of friendly responses to her apologetic cancellation—and something from the front desk?

Mira's heart sank to her toes. More men had come by, the email told her. They'd refused to leave their names or their contact information, but they were very insistent about wanting to speak with her. She deleted the email on impulse, as though that might somehow erase the event it had been

describing... then she buried her face in her hands and let the sobs shake her whole body.

There was absolutely no way she was going to be able to sleep tonight. Part of her kept wanting to call the police... but what could she tell them? At the end of the day, what crime had been committed here? Some people had asked for her at work, and there was a van parked on her street. Hardly breaking news. Cops didn't appreciate having their time wasted... until she had something concrete to worry about, she couldn't call them. Still, she kept her phone in her hand with 911 dialed as she made a final check of the doors and windows, making sure everything was locked as tightly as possible.

She'd been in such a state of high alert that when the knock on the door came, she barely reacted. She was in her pajamas, about to plug in her phone to charge, and she was half convinced she'd imagined the knock completely when it came again, sharp and hard. She couldn't remember the last time anyone had knocked on her door. She rarely had friends over, and she got most packages delivered to her work address these days. And this late at night, she couldn't think of a single good reason for a stranger to be knocking at her door.

Grateful that the lights were all off and the blinds all drawn, Mira unplugged her phone and crept as silently as she could into the living room, eyes fixed on the suddenly terrifying shape of her front door, just visible in the gloom by the contrast between its dark wood and the cream wallpaper that surrounded it. A third knock, quieter this time... then silence. Ten seconds, twenty, thirty... she counted her breaths as she stood frozen in the living room, hardly daring to move in case she made a sound to alert the visitor to her presence here. Desperate, adrenaline-charged hope hit her like a truck. Maybe they'd go away. Maybe it really was something completely innocent—a passerby who'd found something in the street, a door-knocking politician who'd lost track of time, anything. Anything but a group of hulking men in dark

clothing, walking out of the shadows with purpose and menace in their faces...

The sound of metallic scraping reached her ears, and she flinched, feeling a tear roll down her cheek. The scraping continued—she could hear the tumblers in the lock on her front door shifting and turning as whoever was on the other side of the door did their skillful work. How long did it take to pick a lock? How long could she stand here, frozen to the spot like this, until the door simply swung open to reveal her?

Eventually, that fear outweighed the one that kept her frozen to the spot. Whoever was out there had decided she was asleep, and they were breaking in. There was a chance, still, that she could scare them off. So she took a deep breath... then slammed her fist as hard as she could into the wooden door, raising her voice at the same time.

“Get away from my house!”

Whoever was out there was well-trained. The scraping metal stopped abruptly, and she heard a couple of soft footsteps as though someone had taken a couple of rapid steps backwards, but there was no sound from them. Another long silence stretched out, making her whole body vibrate with terrified hope. Was the would-be home invader gone? Had she scared them off?

“This is the police, ma’am. Open the door.”

No such luck. Her heart sank as a low, masculine voice reached her through the door, gruff and authoritative. The police, she thought faintly. Why hadn’t she called the police when she heard the lockpick? Too late now. “What do you want?” she demanded, pleased to notice that she’d managed to keep her voice from shaking.

“You’re in danger. Open the door.”

“What kind of danger?” she demanded. Her phone was in her pocket—she fished it out, grimacing at the way her hands were shaking.

“We can discuss it when you open the door,” the voice said, a hint of impatience in it now. She heard the handle rattle. “Don’t make me kick it down.”

“What’s your name, Officer?” she demanded, her blood running cold. “Name and badge number, please.” It was a bluff—something she’d heard on television—and she wasn’t surprised when the man didn’t even bother answering her. She unlocked her phone with shaking hands, her eyes fixed on the rattling door, hoping against hope that the hinges would hold out for as long as it took to dial 911—

There was a terrifying thud, and the sound of splintering wood. Mira screamed despite her best efforts, stumbling backwards away from the door and scanning the living room furiously for some kind of makeshift weapon... something, anything. She had a friend who kept a baseball bat in her room for this very purpose. But what good would that do? Her phone slipped out of her hands and she went to retrieve it—but a final, splintering crash froze her in place as the door finally flew open, the lock giving way before the hinges.

There, outlined in the doorway, was a figure straight out of her nightmares. A tall man, wearing nondescript dark colors—a pair of black pants, a tight-fitting dark gray T-shirt, a dark denim jacket around his shoulders. He was younger than her by the looks of him and much taller. One look at the muscle on him told her she was looking at a man who knew how to fight. Mira felt time slow to a crawl as she took him in, her mind racing with increasing desperation as she ran through her rapidly diminishing list of options. What could she do here? Dive for her phone and hope that her 911 call went through before the man could grab her? Run into her bedroom and try to barricade the door? Grab the TV remote from the coffee table and do her level best to bludgeon him to death with it? There was something about going out fighting that appealed to her, doomed as the effort would no doubt be.

But something strange was happening. The man, triumphant in the doorway, wasn’t looking down at her any

longer. He was looking right past her, and the look on his face had shifted from the grim half-smile he'd been wearing when he'd first broken the door open to a watchful, suspicious, closed expression. The look of a man who was assessing a new threat. Mira turned in what felt like slow motion to see what he was looking at, and if her jaw could have dropped to the floor, it would have.

There, standing outlined in the light from her bedroom doorway like some kind of angel, stood a tall man with sandy blond hair and a pair of piercing blue eyes. She didn't have a name to put to that face, but she didn't need one... she'd know him anywhere. The man of her dreams had come to save her. Did that mean all of this was a dream, too? No. The hammering of her heart, the pain of her fingernails digging into her palms as she clenched her fists tightly... she was awake, she was really here.

And so was the man from her dreams.

Chapter 8 - Conrad

“Don’t get ahead of yourself,” Lana had said.

It had been good advice, Conrad reflected in the split second before he made the most reckless decision of his long, long life. Very good advice from his close friend and Queen. Advice which on any other day he’d have found very difficult to ignore. But after hours of discussion, it was getting harder and harder to shake the image of the woman from his dreams, lying there fast asleep as a nameless, faceless danger came closer and closer to her. He’d spent his whole political career advising patience in others, but right now, every single instinct he had was screaming at him to act, not think.

It was getting dark before Lana made another attempt at summoning a portal. They’d agreed that it would be a simple test, nothing more—confirmation that she could restore the connection between the worlds at will, then they’d turn in for the evening and start fresh again the next day. Communication, that was the next step. A careful attempt to talk with the woman from his dreams through the portal, likely for only a few minutes at a time. After all, the effort of keeping the portals open wore heavily on Lana. It might be days or even weeks before they got to the stage of bringing the woman through the portal.

It all made sense, Conrad knew that. It was the best course of action available to them. But when Lana opened the portal in the Fog and he peered through to see the familiar little room beyond the swirling mist, something came over him that he’d never felt before. The bed was empty, the covers thrown back, even though there was still nothing but darkness in the window beyond the bed. Why had she gotten up in the middle of the night? Lana was saying something behind him, but Conrad wasn’t listening. And casually, as though he was simply taking a step through a doorway in the Palace, Conrad stepped into the portal and felt the Fog envelop him.

A strange, disorienting feeling rushed through him. He closed his eyes against the incomprehensible patterns he was seeing, an odd rushing sound in his ears causing him to suspect that the distance between the forest where he'd been standing and the little room might be a little farther than it appeared... and then his eyes were open again, and he felt a jolt of surprise and recognition go through him. This was it. The forest-green walls, the enormous bed, even the ornaments that decorated the top of the dresser were all familiar to him. This was her room.

He was here. But before he could marvel any more at the incredible achievement that his presence here indicated, he heard a crash from the next room. The bedroom door was ajar, and he moved to it, automatically reaching out to push it open, opening his mouth to call for the woman and realizing as he did that he still didn't know her name. Every time he woke from one of their dreams together, he'd wish that he'd thought to ask her name, then reflect that he could simply give her one. Somehow, that had never seemed right.

This was why, of course. She wasn't a dream, she was a real person. A real, flesh-and-blood woman... who, Conrad realized with another jolt of adrenaline, was not alone. There was a man standing in the front doorway, his hard eyes fixed on Conrad's face. An eerie calm came over him as he took in the scene. He knew without any further consideration that this was the danger he'd been worried about. This man, this situation... this was what his instincts had been warning him about. And though he could feel the woman's golden eyes resting on him, there was no time to waste. He moved confidently forward, drawing himself up to his full height, sizing up the man in the doorway. Startled, though he was hiding it well. He'd anticipated that nobody else would be here, that he'd simply overpower his target and be gone. Hot anger burned in Conrad's stomach, but he kept his face serene as he moved between the woman and her attacker.

The man growled something at him that sounded like Lana's strange language. Of course, he thought faintly. This

was no dragon, this man... but nor did he have the bright eyes of a wolf. None of them had ever met a human until Cato had come to visit. It felt strange to know he was encountering another one, a man who had no second body to shift into. A man who was imprisoned permanently in that shape. He repeated whatever question he'd asked, his eyes narrowing with frustration at Conrad's refusal to speak.

"You aren't welcome here," Conrad said, seeing from the flicker of confusion on the man's face that he didn't understand him, either. Well, that was fine. He didn't need language to be threatening... he took a few menacing steps towards the man, who squared his shoulders but didn't move from his position. "Leave, and don't return."

The man's eyes flicked to something behind him, but Conrad knew better than to turn his back on an enemy. He felt warmth at his side regardless, caught a glimpse of the woman's chestnut curls in his peripheral vision, felt his heartbeat accelerate despite the intensity of the situation as a giddy joy he couldn't quite suppress made itself known again. That was her. She was here, standing right beside him, close enough to touch... and as she lifted her arm, he caught a glint of steel in his peripheral vision. A long, sharp knife, held aloft in a hand that didn't shake. The man in the doorway took in the blade, took in Conrad's clenched fists and unwavering expression, and seemed to come to a decision. With one last little comment—it sounded mocking, though the words remained as strange as ever—the man stepped away, moving cautiously backwards until the darkness claimed him. With every step, though, his gaze remained fixed on the woman at Conrad's side.

The message was clear, even without a shared language. That man wasn't going to be gone for long. And when he came back, he wouldn't be alone.

"It's really you, isn't it?"

That voice. Conrad felt a thrill run through him as he turned at last to take a proper look at the woman he'd been

dreaming about for years. She was staring up at him, her expression as intent as he'd ever seen it, the knife still clutched tightly in her hand. Her golden eyes shone the way he remembered, though there were worried lines creasing her forehead and she was pale with fear and shock, too. That made sense. In his dreams, they'd never had to face down an enemy side by side before.

"It's really me," he replied softly. It felt strange to speak to her aloud. In dreams, the speech had an ethereal quality—but here, he could actually feel the sound bouncing off the walls.

"I don't even know your name," she said faintly. Her eyes were dark with wonder, as well as something a lot more like fear. Fear of him, he wondered? Or fear of something else?

"I don't know yours, either." This was beginning to feel like a dream, too. He fought the urge to laugh at how awkward he suddenly felt, standing in her living room with his hands hanging useless at his sides. "I'm Conrad."

She nodded, her gaze cryptic as she filed that away. "I'm Mira."

"It's a pleasure to meet you." The weirdness was intensifying. They both looked at each other for a long moment... then he saw the hint of a smile twitching at the corner of her lips. "What is it?"

"This is ..." She shook her head, gesturing absent-mindedly with the hand that was still holding the knife. Wincing, she set the blade down safely on a small table, then turned back to him with that smile spreading across her full lips. "I mean, what do you say to someone you thought was a dream?"

"I'm facing the same predicament if that's any consolation." Conrad took a breath, tried to focus his racing thoughts. Get a grip, Prince Conrad. You're supposed to be

good under pressure. “Are you alright? That man didn’t hurt you, did he?”

“He didn’t get the chance,” she said with a quick shake of her head, her luminous eyes not leaving his face. “Thanks to you.”

He shrugged, feeling suddenly self-conscious. “I didn’t do much. You’d have seen him off without me. Though it might’ve done some damage,” he added, glancing around the little room that they were standing in. Definitely not enough space here for a dragon in all her winged glory... he was glad to have spared her the need to break her possessions. She looked at him curiously for a moment.

“How did you get here?” she asked, though he couldn’t shake the feeling she’d wanted to ask something else. “You weren’t in my bedroom the last time I checked.”

His eyes widened, a jolt of shock moving through him like lightning, and he hastened for the bedroom door, heart pounding. The portal... he’d just walked away from it without so much as a glance over his shoulder. He’d been so fixated on saving the woman from his dreams... Mira, he corrected himself, feeling an odd flush of pleasure as he thought of her name. He’d been so fixated on saving Mira that he’d completely forgotten about how he’d gotten here. Sure enough, there was absolutely no trace of the portal left in the room. Only the rumpled bed, the gathered darkness. There was no way back home.

He turned away from the bedroom door and moved back into the living room, suddenly feeling like he was overstepping a boundary. He’d spent countless dream hours in that room, of course, but somehow it felt different to be here for real. Mira was looking at him intently, her arms folded over her chest and that watchful, wary look in her golden eyes. He couldn’t help but smile a little as he looked at her, and he saw her lips twitch in response before she consciously smoothed her expression.

“My friends helped me through,” he said, gesturing towards the doorway. “But for the moment, I’m afraid it looks like I can’t go back.”

Mira studied him for a moment. “The last time we met,” she said softly. “You said that you sensed I was in danger. How?”

“I don’t know,” he admitted. “Just an intuition I couldn’t seem to shake. And then, when I realized that there was a chance you weren’t a dream... well, that was all the more reason to come.” Her expression was uncertain, and he bit his lip, suddenly worried he was being too forward. “Forgive me if I’m speaking out of turn.”

“It’s—no,” she said, shaking her head. “No, this is—useful. This is good. We should share what we know, figure out what’s happening here. But I think we’re going to need tea,” she added. He followed her into the dark room adjacent to the living room, jumping in shock as she reached out to flick some kind of switch that lit the room immediately. “Sorry,” she said, glancing over her shoulder at him. He did his best not to crane his neck up at the glowing disk affixed to the ceiling. He was grateful Cato wasn’t here—the mage would be having a field day trying to figure out what kind of magic was illuminating the room.

But Conrad wasn’t interested in staring at the walls or the ceiling. He wasn’t even interested in the strange, shining devices that covered Mira’s countertops. He only had eyes for Mira... for the way her chestnut hair bounced around her face, just the way he remembered it from his dreams. The way the robe she had pulled around her shoulders disguised but didn’t quite hide the gorgeous curves of her body. The way her golden eyes seemed to flash and dance as she glanced over at him from where she was preparing the tea, a faint smile lingering on her lips.

For all intents and purposes, the two of them were strangers, Conrad reminded himself. He would remember that. He would be polite. But still... there was something about her

that made him feel like he'd known her his entire life. And despite everything else that was going on, it was that feeling—that hope so acute and intense that he was almost frightened to face it—that was foremost in his mind.

He only hoped that Mira felt the same spark when those golden eyes met his.

Chapter 9 - Mira

Mira had cycled through about a dozen different phrases for ‘complete break with reality’ before she gave up on trying to diagnose herself. Whatever was going on here was strange enough without adding the unnecessary layer of relentless self-analysis. If she’d snapped like a twig, mentally speaking, then there wasn’t much she was going to be able to do about it, now was there? Might as well see this ridiculous situation through to its logical conclusion.

The man from her dreams was here, she kept telling herself. Sitting at her kitchen counter, politely sipping at his tea, and those stunning blue eyes of his were even more breathtaking in person. It was all she could do to hold his gaze for more than a few seconds, too frightened that her expression would give her away, somehow. But give away what? She’d given everything away in her dreams already... the blush that threatened to rise to her cheeks stopped her from entertaining those memories too much. Did he remember all of those dreams with the same intensity that she did? It was unimaginable. There were things she’d done with this blue-eyed stranger that she’d never in a million years even *considered* doing if she knew he was an actual person she was going to meet someday...

And here he was. Flesh and blood, sitting in her kitchen. She’d even summoned up the courage to let their fingers brush when she’d passed him his cup of tea, and the electricity that had shot through her at the warmth of his skin had confirmed it. A real, flesh-and-blood man. With a name and everything. Conrad. She liked it. There was something old-fashioned about it, something strong and upright that seemed to suit him.

“I did thank you for saving my life, right?” she said abruptly. “I have no idea what that guy would have done if you weren’t here.”

“I was happy to help.” Conrad’s voice had always sent shivers down her spine in her dreams, and it was even worse in person. She took a steadying sip of the herbal tea she’d made for them both, in the vain hope that it might calm her down a little. No luck thus far.

“It feels so strange to be speaking this language.” She bit her lip, fighting back the wild urge to laugh. “I thought... I mean, I thought I’d imagined it. A whole language. But it’s real.”

“And so are you,” Conrad said softly, those blue eyes lingering on her face again. That look in his eyes... she had to turn her gaze from it, it set too many butterflies battering their wings against the inside of her ribcage. “If I understand the situation correctly... you, too, have been dreaming of me for some time?”

She nodded. “Five or six years, I think.” His eyes widened slightly, and she tilted her head. “What?”

“It’s been less than that, for me. Perhaps two years.” A pause. “It’s possible that our years are different lengths.”

She looked at him for a long moment, trying to ignore the way that casual comment had made her whole brain seem to lurch. “Our years... what are you saying?”

“If my understanding of the situation is correct,” Conrad said carefully, “then... we are currently in a place called Earth.”

The English word sounded strange on his lips. Mira tried not to let the strangeness overwhelm her. “Currently,” she repeated. “You’re telling me that you’re from somewhere else.”

He nodded, and suddenly she felt the wild laughter bubbling to the surface. She pressed one hand to her mouth, trying to suppress it... a faint smile rose to Conrad’s lips, but it quickly faded as her laughter built in pitch and volume. Hysterical, that was the word, she thought faintly... and then,

seamlessly, she felt the laughter change gears and realized that there were tears rolling down her cheeks.

This was embarrassing, she thought faintly as she heard the scrape of Conrad's chair, felt him move over to put a comforting arm around her shoulder. Here she was, sobbing her heart out against the warm shoulder of a man who was either a complete stranger or one of her most intimate acquaintances, depending on where you stood on the reality of dreams... but she could no sooner have stopped herself from weeping than she could have turned back the tides, so despite her embarrassment, the tears kept flowing. There was a strange sense of catharsis in it, of relief from the days and weeks of tension and stress. The realization that she'd been right, that there was someone watching her house, that the worst imaginable scenario had come true... she couldn't tell if it made her feel worse or better, but it was definitely a new feeling.

Conrad simply held her against him, strong and stalwart as a tree. When the worst of her sobs had finally subsided, she summoned the courage to look up at him, worried she'd see reproach in his handsome face, or disgust at her tearstained face. But he was looking down at her as calm and implacable as ever. She opened her mouth and spoke before she was even aware of what she was saying.

“It's late. You should stay here tonight.”

Had she ever, in her entire life, invited a man to stay the night? Never. Even her closest friends knew that she wasn't the kind of friend whose couch you could crash on—it was a boundary she'd never seen any reason to cross. But the thought of Conrad leaving her house right now was unthinkable, and not just because of her fear of that dangerous man coming back. She didn't want him to leave her line of sight, that was the truth. If all of this was some kind of psychotic break that she would snap out of any minute... well, she wanted to make the most of it. Conrad being real might have been a dream, but it was a nice one.

And so they found their way into her bedroom. Conrad questioned the invitation once or twice, making it clear he was happy to sleep on the couch, but she refused, mumbling some unconvincing excuse about the springs being broken. She kept feeling stray tears spill over her eyes again, and when she caught a glimpse of her face in her bedroom mirror she saw a predictably puffy, tear-stained mess. So why did Conrad keep looking at her like that? Something wondering and reverent in his gaze, like he was looking at some great work of art.

“Still wondering if you’re dreaming?” she asked him finally. A faint smile twitched at his lips—he was sitting on her bed, politely waiting for a further invitation. “I know I am.”

“I hope you’re not,” he said thoughtfully, rising to help her fold back the rumpled bedsheets. “And I hope I’m not, too.”

“I wouldn’t mind that man from earlier being a dream,” she mumbled as the two of them slid into bed. At once strange and familiar, this feeling. How many times had she dreamed of falling into this bed, wrapped in this man’s arms? But that felt like another world completely. She might have spent countless hours dreaming of the man beside her, but he was still someone she’d only just met.

“Do you know who he was?” Conrad’s voice was low in the dim light. “What he wanted from you?”

“No idea,” she said softly, feeling something twist and ache in her chest as she thought, yet again, of that horrible night from her childhood. “But I think something similar happened to my mom.”

“I remember.” She glanced over at Conrad, surprised. “You told me once, about the night your father took you away from the house. That you never saw her again.”

“I thought I saw men just like that one, coming up the path, just as we left. Men in dark clothes. Army-looking guys, you know? But it was so long ago... I don’t know if I dreamed

it or not,” she admitted, feeling her body shiver despite the warmth of the bed. Like it was the most natural thing in the world, she felt Conrad slide an arm around her, drawing her close. The warmth of his body, the press of his long limbs against hers... she rested her head against his chest, shocked by how unbelievably comfortable she felt in his arms. She’d always thought it must be unbearable to share a bed with someone. But this... this was something she could see herself getting used to. “What if he comes back?” she found herself asking, her voice feeling very small.

“Then he’ll answer to both of us,” Conrad said, and there was a strange note in his voice... something almost like pleasure. “He looked tough, but he was only human.”

That was odd. Mira looked up at Conrad, about to ask why he’d used the English word for ‘human’—it sounded strange, especially contrasted against the lilting syllables of the language he spoke, the one he’d taught her in their shared dreams. But something stilled her voice in her throat before she could give voice to the question, and then she couldn’t for the life of her remember what she’d been about to ask. It didn’t matter. Not with Conrad’s face so close to hers, the heat of his arms suddenly burning against her skin, the sweet scent of him filling her mind completely. Even in the low light of her room, she could make out the blue of his eyes, as though they were lit from within. She was intensely aware of the way his breath was brushing against her lips. How many times had they kissed in dreams, she wondered? How many times had she thrown herself into his arms and claimed his mouth with her own, demanding, possessive in a way that she’d never dream of being in the real world?

This wasn’t a dream. This was frighteningly, overwhelmingly real... and with the exception of a few clumsy and uninterested pecks on the lips, Mira had never kissed anyone at all in the real world. It seemed impossible, as much as her whole body seemed to be yearning for it, to close those few inches between them. What if he didn’t want her? What if she was misreading the situation? What if the dreams

she'd had were all completely different from the dreams he'd had, what if he didn't want her at all, what if—

Her mind was racing so fast that she almost didn't realize that he was kissing her, his lips warm and soft against hers, his arms loosening just a little as if to give her the option to pull away, if she wanted to. Mira froze for what felt like an eternity as her mind, always so fast, struggled to catch up with this fresh wave of feeling. And then, with a shaking exhalation, she let herself relax into the warmth of his embrace... and just like that, they were wrapped in each other, their kiss deepening. How could it be so familiar and yet so new?

When they parted for breath, she could feel that the steady drum of his heartbeat through his chest had quickened, felt a dizzy rush of desire flood through her at the realization that she'd been the cause of it. Then she felt his hand cup the side of her face, brush an errant curl out of her eyes with incredible gentleness. "Much better than the dreams," he whispered, his voice slightly hoarse.

Mira nodded, not trusting herself to speak. Despite everything that was going on, every worry that was tugging at her attention dissolved effortlessly in the warmth of Conrad's arms... and she was more than happy to lose herself, for now, to a kind of peace she'd never felt before.

Chapter 10 - Conrad

Conrad was frightened to fall asleep. He could hardly believe that any of this was really happening—that the woman he'd been dreaming about for so long was actually here, fast asleep with her head resting on his chest, the sweet scent of her soft hair reaching him with every quiet breath. He'd never felt more frightened than he had in the split second between kissing her and feeling her respond... and never more exultant when he realized that he hadn't misread the situation, that she was kissing him back with a sweet ardor that set his whole body ablaze. The heat of every memory of running his hands all over her gorgeous body was tempered by an instinct that told him to hold back, to take things slow... she'd been through so much that night, and as much as his body might be aching for her, it was enough to enjoy this amount of closeness.

After all, it was more than he'd ever imagined would be possible.

It wasn't long before her weariness caught up with her, and Conrad pressed a kiss to her temple as her eyes slid closed. But that same deep sleep didn't seem interested in taking him along for the ride. With Mira asleep, he found his mind beginning to pick up speed again, pointing out the things he'd let slip away behind him in the rush of adrenaline that had been his arrival here. Like, for example, the question of how he was going to get back. There had been no sign of another portal appearing in the room, no indication that Cato and Lana had figured out how to reach him... a cold chill ran down his spine despite the warmth in the room. They must be angry with him. Certainly they'd be worried for his safety. What had he been thinking, just stepping through the portal on impulse?

Not impulse, he thought, glancing down at the woman fast asleep in his arms. Instinct. Something had told him, deep

down, where he needed to be. And as much as he regretted how worried his Queen must be about him, he knew in his heart that he wouldn't have changed his decision even if he could. Mira had needed him.

Or had she? There had only been one man at the door, and Conrad hadn't even seen any weapons on him—how could one man stand up to the brute strength of a dragon? She'd seemed a little confused when he'd pointed it out, too. Lana had mentioned that shifters in this world often pretended only to have one body so they could fit in among humans—perhaps Mira felt that she couldn't shift for fear of revealing what she was? It seemed strange, but so did the rest of this bizarre place...

And somewhere among these racing thoughts, sleep finally rose up to claim him.

As the deep, dreamless sleep began to give way, he became acutely aware of the warmth of the bed... and of the lack of another person's body against his. A cold chill of fear chased more of his drowsiness away, and Conrad pressed his eyes tightly shut, frightened to open them. What if everything that had happened last night had been a dream? He knew, in that strange suspended state between sleeping and waking, that he simply couldn't bear that kind of cruelty. He'd break apart.

But then he heard a distant voice raised in song, in a language he didn't understand... and the relief that rushed through him when he opened his eyes was almost enough to knock him out. He was still here... here, in Mira's huge bed, surrounded by her forest-green walls. The door to the little bathroom that adjoined her room was shut, and behind it he could hear the rush of water. He'd spent a little time in there, he remembered, a flush of heat stirring in his drowsy body. At least, in Mira's dream projection of it. A lot of time in the shower, in fact...

The water stopped, and Conrad cleared his throat and got quickly out of bed, trying to will the heat out of his cheeks. Inappropriate thoughts to be having about a woman he'd sort

of only just met, he told himself firmly. But then the bathroom door slid open, and she was standing there, a towel wrapped around her voluptuous figure and her curls falling damply around her face. Conrad knew he was staring, but he simply couldn't stop himself.

“Good morning,” she said, raising an eyebrow at him. Did she have any idea what she looked like, standing there in the doorway like a monument? “You're still here.”

“I'm still here,” he agreed faintly. Smiling, she lifted her arm and pinched the skin on it lightly between the forefinger and thumb of her other hand. He blinked at the gesture.

“Pinching myself,” she explained. “You don't have that expression, I guess.” She shook her head, murmured something in the other language, then glanced back up at him quickly. “I can't believe you taught me another language in my dreams. I took Spanish for years at school and I can barely count to ten.”

“You're a quick study,” he agreed. Add that to the growing list of mysteries, actually. He'd assumed that she must have had some background in the language, being a dragon. Lana had explained that her father had insisted she study it... in this world, it wasn't commonly spoken, but it was still used for record-keeping. But from the way she'd been talking about it, it seemed it had been brand new to her. “You really didn't know any before we... met?”

“Of course not,” she said, quirking an eyebrow as though he'd asked her something ridiculous. “Hey—would you like some breakfast? I can't offer you much more than toast or cereal, but I've got plenty of coffee to make up for it.”

Strange words, interspersed with the familiarity of his language. But the rigorous politeness that had been ingrained in Conrad for centuries wasn't going to be put off by a simple lack of knowledge. He was being offered hospitality, and so he inclined his head graciously and followed Mira through her living room and into the kitchen they'd sat in last night. With

the midmorning sun spilling through the window, it felt much brighter, and he could almost forget the grim confrontation with the strange man from the night before as Mira cleared away their cups and busied herself preparing food for them.

He felt like a child as he studied the strange objects she pulled from a cupboard to prepare their breakfast. For the first time, he began to wonder how exactly Lana had managed to settle into their world so easily. He'd only been in this place for a few hours, and he was already beginning to feel overwhelmed by how different it was here, by the unfamiliar magic that Lana used without a second thought.

She laughed when he pointed it out, though, her golden eyes crinkling in a way that made him itch to lean across the counter and kiss her. "Magic? It's electricity." Her smile faded a little. "You don't have electricity, huh?" A mute shake of his head, and Mira took a deep breath. "Coffee first, I think."

The drink she offered him was unfamiliar, but it had a rich, balanced flavor that reminded him a little of some types of herbal tea from back home. Perhaps that was why Lana had been so interested in sampling every kind of tea the kingdom had... he'd even gifted her an ornate teapot for the first anniversary of her coronation. His gaze drifted around the kitchen, taking in all the unfamiliar objects, his mind grappling with the size of the difference between their worlds...

"You alright?" Mira's gold eyes on him, and he realized with a start he'd dropped his guard a little, let his expression change. He felt too comfortable around her, he thought, straightening his spine and nodding.

"I'm looking forward to learning more about this place."

She smiled back at him. "I'm looking forward to showing you around. Speaking of which, I've got an appointment this afternoon. I was wondering if you'd like to come with me? It's only a short drive, but you'll see a bit of the city."

Conrad blinked, a little thrown. She wanted to leave the house? “Are you sure that’s safe?”

A shadow passed across her face. “No, I’m not. But I can’t just hide in my house for the rest of my life, can I?”

“Well, no, but—”

“I’m not missing my appointment.” She exhaled, sipping her coffee, and Conrad could see a glint of stubbornness in her eyes that reminded him a great deal of himself. “They know where I live, right? How am I any safer here than out in public?”

Conrad bit his lip on the urge to argue with her. It would be a lot easier to defend her here, in this little house with doors and windows they could lock... but when he tried to explain that, Mira held up her hand to stop him, eyes flashing.

“Conrad? I appreciate your concern, but I’m going.” After a moment, she softened the declamation with a smile. “But if you’d like to accompany me as my bodyguard, I won’t say no.”

“Bodyguard,” he repeated, smiling a little despite the worry that was twisting at his gut. “An official title, hm?”

“Very official.”

“I’m honored, dear lady,” he said solemnly, drawing on archaic honorific terms that were rarely used. They won a laugh of recognition from her, and he faintly remembered talking about the terms in a dream. “I wonder how much time we’ve spent together,” he heard himself muse aloud.

“I was thinking about that myself,” Mira agreed. “It’s like we’ve known each other for years but we’ve only just met, all at the same time.” She smiled softly. “I like it.”

He reached across the table to take her hand in his, feeling the familiar shiver of sparks moving through him at her touch. “I do too.”

After the odd, almost-familiar experience of breakfast, they set about preparing to go out. Conrad checked over the damage that had been done to the front door, noting where the lock had been scraped by the man's lockpicking tools. Thankfully, it had been the lock that had given way when the guy had kicked the door down, not the hinges. It meant they couldn't close or lock the door, of course, but it was easy enough to shift some heavy furniture in front of the door to bar any attempt at entering. He caught Mira watching him from the doorway as he heaved her heavy couch in front of the door, her eyes roaming across his back and shoulders... she blushed when she saw him looking and turned quickly away, but he grinned to himself as he turned back to his work.

They left through the house's side door, and Conrad found himself confronted with one of the contraptions that he'd been most fascinated by in Lana's stories of her home. Mira opened the car door and slid inside like it was the most natural thing in the world, and he tried to look confident as he followed suit, settling himself in the carriage and trying not to stare at the unfamiliar console spread out in front of them.

"No cars in your world, huh?" Her gold eyes were curious as she looked across the seat at him, and he nodded in agreement. "Well, you're in safe hands with me, alright?"

She turned something below the wheel of the vehicle, and he jumped a little as the machine began to rumble. And then they were in motion. Conrad sat very still, hoping he didn't look as shocked as he felt as they pulled out onto the street and set off. There were dozens of these things on the street. "Does every human pilot these things around every day?"

Mira chuckled, glancing over at him. She looked incredibly relaxed for someone who was apparently in full control of a ton of metal hurtling at fatal speeds down a street crowded with other, similarly deadly contraptions. "Most of us, yeah. They're killing the planet, of course, but..."

"What?"

Another quick smile. “Let’s put climate change on the ‘later’ list, okay?”

He nodded agreement, grateful for his decades of practice at maintaining a calm, implacable exterior. It hid a lot of unease as he gazed through the window of Mira’s car and tried to take in the strange world he’d entered without so much as a second thought. Perhaps if he’d known how strange this place was, how many new things he’d be confronting... would he have made a different choice? Would he have hesitated before taking the plunge through the portal?

He glanced over at Mira, tapping her fingers on the steering wheel with the sun shining on her hair. He thought of the man who’d come to her house in the dead of the night to break her door down, thinking she was alone. No, Conrad thought, fresh courage pooling in him. No matter how strange this new place was, he knew in his bones he was exactly where he needed to be.

Chapter 11 - Mira

Mira couldn't remember the last time she'd had a passenger in her car... let alone one as handsome as Conrad. She kept fighting the urge to sneak sidelong glances at him, sitting there like some kind of marble statue, his hair tousled by the wind through the open window. It was a gorgeous day, blue skies and a few puffs of cloud, and she was surprised by what a good mood she was in, all things considered. Maybe that was a bad sign. Maybe she was entering some kind of manic state. That wouldn't be a surprise. Nothing would, at this point.

She parked outside her therapist's office, but when Conrad made to follow her inside, she hesitated. She hadn't really thought this part through, had she? What was he going to do, sit in the waiting room for an hour? But Conrad seemed to sense her hesitation, and with an easy smile, agreed to wait by the car. Mira squeezed his hand in gratitude and promised she'd only be an hour. Why was she so concerned about leaving him, she wondered? Nobody was going to mess with a guy built the way he was.

It felt good to be back on her therapist's familiar couch, and it wasn't long before she was spilling every detail of the past few weeks—the disastrous date with Eddie, the way his creepy texts had activated some of her past trauma. She didn't mention the man who'd broken into her house the night before, though. And when it came to talking about Conrad, she covered the truth of his bizarre arrival with an explanation that he was an old friend who was visiting from out of town. It was a story she'd come up with that morning in the shower, when she'd been privately debating whether or not she should keep her appointment.

Her therapist, unflappable as always, listened in attentive silence until Mira had finished her diatribe. Then, she

sat back in her chair, raising an eyebrow. “Is Conrad a friend we’ve talked about before?”

“I don’t think so,” Mira said, hesitating for a moment. She’d told her therapist about the blue-eyed suitor from her dreams... but she hadn’t had a name for him then, had she? “Although... he does remind me a lot of the guy I dream about, now that we’re spending time together in person.”

Her therapist leaned forward. “That’s interesting.”

A flush rose to her cheeks. “Is it?”

“Well, isn’t it?” The woman smiled faintly. “This fantasy man has been your model for relationships for a long time, hasn’t he?”

“I guess.”

“Is the friendship strictly platonic?”

A flash of how it had felt to fall asleep in Conrad’s arms the night before... the memory of his arms tightening around her, the heat of his lips against hers, somehow so much more intense than it ever had been even in the dreams that left her breathless when she woke... “No,” she admitted, her cheeks burning. “No, I don’t think so.”

“And what does that bring up for you?”

Mira had intended for this session to be about her anxiety, but she found herself talking a lot more about her feelings around Conrad than she’d intended to. The end of their session came more quickly than she’d expected, and for a moment she wondered whether it had been a mistake not to spend more time talking about her stalker, her irrational fear that she was being followed, the resurgence of memories around what had happened with her mother. But what could she have said about it, at the end of the day? The truth was that she hadn’t been imagining it—she *was* being followed, there *were* men out to get her. Knowing that her fears were grounded in reality had oddly done a lot to reduce them.

She headed back out into the afternoon sunshine, already looking forward to seeing Conrad's handsome face again. But she stopped dead on the sidewalk when she saw a familiar figure standing next to her car... and it certainly wasn't Conrad. Her heart sank and she felt a cold chill run down her spine, debating for a split second whether she should turn on her heel and walk straight back into the reception area to ask them to call the police. That would have been the sensible course of action. She knew that, even as she felt her legs carrying her straight across the sidewalk, a fierce anger burning in her. She didn't need the cops to deal with this creep.

"Eddie," she greeted him coolly. "Get the hell away from my car."

"I'm sorry I had to do this, Mira, but you left me no choice." Eddie folded his arms across his chest, straightening up to his full height. Did he think that she was going to be intimidated by the fact that he had a few inches on her? Everyone on the planet had a few inches on her. And after her brush with real danger last night, Eddie was suddenly feeling like much less of a threat. "If you'd just been sensible and answered my messages, I wouldn't have had to track you down."

"How did you find me? Have you been watching my house?"

"Never you mind how I found you. Let's just say that you should probably learn a little bit more about the technology you rely on every day," he added, nodding to the phone in her hand. She fought the urge to roll her eyes. He'd ranted about cybersecurity for a considerable part of her date... when he wasn't leering down her dress and making disgusting comments about full-bodied women, that is. "Now, I'm still willing to take you on a second date—provided you apologize for jerking me around like this."

"I'm not jerking you around, Eddie. I'm not interested."

A flash of anger on his face. “Listen here, you ungrateful bitch. You’d be lucky to land a guy like me, so stop playing hard to get. It’s not cute.”

Frustration seethed in her. Didn’t she have enough on her plate at the moment without dealing with this asshole? “What’s it going to take for you to get the message, Eddie? I don’t want to see you again. We’re done.”

“I say when we’re done,” he snapped. “I only agreed to go out with you out of pity, but I can see that was a mistake. It’s given you an inflated sense of your own market value—”

“You can take that incel shit elsewhere,” Mira snapped. “Get away from my car, now.”

“Or what?”

She narrowed her eyes. Threatening to call the police would have been the right move, most likely... but what she actually wanted to do was punch him square in the nose. But before she could do either, a shadow fell across Eddie. His eyes shifted upwards—and suddenly, a lot of the anger drained from his expression.

Conrad was standing at her side, looking somehow even taller than she remembered him. His face was as calm and serene as an iceberg, those cool blue eyes boring through Eddie like he was nothing more than an ant. Mira felt him take her hand in his, a small gesture that made Eddie’s eyes widen for a moment, then narrow sharply.

“Oh, I get it,” he scoffed. “I thought that prude act was all for show. You’re a slut like the rest of them—”

She realized suddenly that Conrad wouldn’t be able to understand a word Eddie was saying. But it seemed he didn’t need to. He took a single step forward, and though he didn’t so much as raise his hand, Eddie stumbled backwards as though he’d been hit. The movement seemed to break his conviction. With one last poisonous look at Mira, Eddie turned and strode away across the street, earning an angry blast of a car horn from the traffic he hadn’t bothered to check for.

Conrad looked down at her, and she saw his cool expression vanish, revealing real worry in its place. Strange, to actually watch him take off that mask... “I’m so sorry, Mira. I was walking around the block, checking for more men like the one from last night—”

She shook her head, fighting back an odd urge to laugh. “It’s okay, Conrad. That guy’s a whole different story to the guys from last night. Way less of a threat,” she added, shaking her head. “I’ll tell you the whole story in the car.”

It was too nice a day to head straight back home—she’d decided that on the drive over. And besides, she’d promised to show Conrad around a little. So she headed for the beach. On the way over, she filled Conrad in on the story of Eddie. He listened intently, that implacable mask on his face, though she definitely noticed a few flickers of jealousy when she talked about going on a date with him.

“You thought this man might be your soulmate?”

She glanced across at him. “I mean—I hoped he might, I guess. Isn’t that the whole point of dating? But I knew pretty fast that he wasn’t going to be it.” She shook her head. “He’s been sending me nonstop messages ever since.”

“Why? If it was clear that you weren’t meant to be...”

She shrugged. They were almost at the beach now, and she scanned the road ahead, mindful it would be tough to find a good parking spot—the beach would be busy on such a beautiful day. “He didn’t see it that way.”

Conrad nodded, a thoughtful look on his face. “I understand that humans have a different understanding of love.”

There it was again—that strange word. Mira swung them into a spot and switched the engine off, then looked over at Conrad curiously. “You’ve used that word a few times—‘humans’. Do you mean men?”

He frowned a little as they got out of the car. “No, I don’t think so? Humans. Those who inhabit only their two-

legged bodies.”

Was the stress beginning to catch up to her? Or did she have a poorer grasp of this language than she’d thought? What he was saying didn’t make any sense. “Sorry—two-legged bodies? Is that some kind of poetry?”

“As I understand the words—these are ‘human’ bodies,” Conrad said patiently, as naturally as if he were explaining some simple quirk of grammar. “As opposed to our winged bodies.”

“What? I don’t have a winged body.” They were heading for a sandy path that wove through the dunes and would eventually emerge on a beautiful view of the ocean... but right now, Mira was far more interested in the absolutely bizarre turn their conversation had taken.

Conrad looked at her, looking a little nonplussed. “Of course you do. You’re a dragon.”

“I’m a dragon,” she repeated, her frown deepening. “I think I’ve gotten some words wrong. I thought ‘dragon’ meant... a big lizard. Wings, scales, pointy teeth?”

Once in her high school Spanish class during an oral exam, she’d tried to tell her class a story about how humiliated she had been when she’d tripped and fallen at the mall. Hiding a smile, her teacher had explained that the word she’d used might have sounded like it should mean ‘embarrassed’, but it actually meant ‘pregnant’. She waited, now, for Conrad to laugh and explain her mistake. But instead, he only nodded.

“That’s right.”

“You think I’m a dragon,” she repeated slowly. “You think I can turn myself... into a dragon.” Conrad was looking at her with confusion that was slowly turning into concern. A suspicion struck her. “Does that mean *you’re* a dragon?”

“Of course,” the man of her dreams said, as easily as if she’d asked him if he’d like to grab some dinner. They walked down to the water’s edge in silence, Conrad taking in the vast

expanse of the ocean with vivid admiration. But Mira was more concerned with what he'd just told her.

Had she invited a complete madman into her life?

Chapter 12 - Conrad

There was something wrong, Conrad could tell. Mira seemed distant for the rest of the afternoon, distracted... though she didn't seem willing to explain what was wrong, and he didn't want to risk aggravating her further by prying. She'd seemed completely baffled when they'd talked about shifting. It was as though he'd been telling her brand new information, as though she'd never heard of shifters at all. But how could that be? She was a dragon... he'd known that since the moment he'd set eyes on her in his dreams, and the magical resonance had been unmistakable when they'd finally met in person. Could he be wrong, somehow? It wouldn't have bothered him if Mira was human, of course, but he'd met a few humans now, and she simply didn't feel the same as any of them.

Was it possible that she didn't know what she was? But how? Conrad's dragon was as close to him as though, drowsing beneath his skin. Every instinct, every intuition, every move he made was underpinned by that deep presence. He'd known it was there for as long as he'd been alive—the idea of not recognizing it for what it was, why, that was unthinkable. He tried not to stare too long at Mira as he reflected on the subject, keeping his gaze on the beautiful surroundings... but as fascinating as the great ocean was, he couldn't seem to focus on it.

They headed back once the sun had set, driving in silence. He was getting more accustomed to the feeling of being in a car, but it was still strange to move so fast without his wings powering the motion. He tried a few times to strike up a conversation with Mira, but she gave him short answers to his questions, keeping her eyes on the road. Grim foreboding settled in his stomach. Had he offended her earlier? He kept catching her sidelong glances, but he couldn't read the expression on her face.

They pulled into the driveway at last, and as Conrad climbed out of the car, something made him pause. It was nearly dark now, and the windows of the house were all closed and curtained... save for one, where there was an inch or so of space separating the white curtains. Conrad's gaze lingered on it for a long moment, and when Mira moved past him towards the back door, he extended an arm to block her passage.

“What—”

“Let me go ahead of you,” he said, keeping his voice low. She nodded agreement, her golden eyes suddenly watchful, and handed him the keys to the back door.

Hoping fiercely that he was jumping at shadows, Conrad let himself into the house, blinking as he willed his eyes to adjust faster to the darkness. His dragon's eyes were keen even on a moonless night, but this body had a little more trouble seeing in the gloom... yet another drawback that made him grateful not to be trapped in his two-legged form. His intuition buzzed like an insect against the inside of his skull as he moved cautiously through the house, Mira watching him from the doorstep. The house wasn't empty, that was what his dragon was telling him. And his dragon was rarely wrong.

When the attack came, Conrad was ready for it. He shrugged off the man who'd leaped onto his back effortlessly, barely even registering the surprise attack before he was swinging around in readiness for the next. Suddenly, there were two men on him, and he shouted a warning to Mira in the doorway as his fist connected with the first man's jaw. The second man was holding something, seemingly trying to wrestle it over Conrad's head, and he struck the man's wrist hard, sending the object flying. It hit the floor with a dull thud, and he caught the glint of bright metal. Silver, he thought, his jaw clenching. Then he brought up his elbow to make short work of the second attacker. His human form may not have been his most deadly, but he'd made sure he could fight with it just as well as he could with claws and teeth at his disposal.

Speaking of claws and teeth... these men might be human, but if they'd brought silver to this battle, they knew that they were up against shifters. And even more worrying, they knew about one of their more closely-guarded weaknesses. Lana had told him that the humans of this world didn't know about the existence of shifters, with very few exceptions... he wished now that he'd asked her more about it.

Mira screamed a warning, and he spun at the sound of her voice, his chest tightening. More men, out in the yard, closing in on the house, men in the same dark clothing as the one from the night before. He counted six of them—a team of eight, if you included the men now passed out on the living room floor. But then a shadow moved, and he roared a warning as a ninth man emerged from the darkness and grabbed Mira around the waist.

Conrad tore forward, pure instinct driving him, and he knew that he'd have torn the man apart with his bare hands if he'd reached him first. Before he could, he heard Mira spit a profanity in her language and bring up one of her knees. The man doubled over with a grunt of surprise, and Conrad took the opportunity to throw him aside, grabbing Mira's hand. They needed more space, he knew that with a dragon's instincts, and she ran with him into the front yard, where still more men were gathering. He saw a few of them holding glinting metal, realizing with a sick lurch that the devices were collars. Silver had the effect of separating a shifter from their magic, preventing them from shifting or healing... and from what he understood, the experience was deeply painful both physically and spiritually.

“What do you want?” Mira demanded, her voice shaking a little with fear though she lifted her chin bravely. “Why have you been following me?”

The men didn't reply—only surrounded them in a loose circle, wary looks on their faces. Conrad could feel his heart thudding hard in his chest. It was only a matter of time before the men struck. He knew he shouldn't shift out here, knew from Lana's stories that it would endanger every dragon

in this world if he was seen... but what alternative did he have? These men were here to kidnap Mira, he remembered, rage flaring in his stomach. Or worse. He wanted to tear them limb from limb... to feel his talons rip and tear through their soft flesh, to inflict on them the fear they'd been so happy to inflict on Mira. The strength of his anger frightened him. He'd always been a peaceful person, always searching for the most diplomatic solution to even the most tense of disputes... but where Mira was concerned, he was frightened by the fire he'd discovered in his belly.

But there was no need for a bloodbath, he told himself. These men, moving together, dressed alike, they were most likely soldiers, following orders. And as reprehensible as those orders might have been, they didn't deserve a bloody, gruesome death. Wishing he believed that, he took a breath... then let the shift move through him.

It felt good to unfurl his wings at last. The men around him took a few steps back as the transformation took place, and one glance at their worried but unsurprised faces told him that his hunch had been right—they knew what they were dealing with. But one look at Mira told him that she wasn't with them on that. Her golden eyes were larger than he'd ever seen them, and all the color had drained from her face. She looked utterly terrified, and he had to steel himself against the feeling of guilt that wrenched at his heart. If she was frightened now, it was about to get a whole lot worse.

The men were barking orders at each other, and he looked up to see yet more of them gathered around the back of a vehicle, busily pulling something out of it that glinted in the darkness. Conrad wasn't going to wait around to see what kind of weapon they'd prepared for use against a dragon. Hoping fiercely that Mira would find it in her heart to forgive him, he leaped aloft... and in the same moment, scooped Mira up as carefully as he could in his razor-sharp talons, careful only to grip her where her denim jacket would protect her skin.

His wings burned as he powered his way into the sky. Aside from one strangled scream when he'd first grabbed her,

Mira was silent in his talons, but he knew it was hardly the most comfortable way to travel. If they'd had time, he'd have encouraged her to climb onto his neck instead... not that he had any way of knowing if she'd accept that invitation. He scanned the unfamiliar landscape below them as he gained altitude, acutely aware that they couldn't stay up here for long. Even in the darkness, they risked being seen. The city below them danced with bright lights, and he found his gaze drifting towards the great dark mass of the ocean to the west. That would simply have to do.

It was cold on the beach, a blustery wind blowing in from across the water that buffeted him as he winged his careful way in to make an awkward landing in the sand. He set Mira down as carefully as he could, feeling her grip the blunt side of his talon as she got her balance. Once she was steady, he lowered his head, making use of his sharp dragon eyesight to check her for injuries. A few rips and tears in the jacket, but her skin, thankfully, was unscathed.

She hadn't moved away from him, he noticed. She was standing close, her head tilted back to take in the sight of him, golden eyes full of as much wonder as fear. Had anyone ever studied him this intently? Feeling oddly self-conscious, he folded his wings to his back and returned her gaze steadily. It was clear from her expression that his suspicions earlier had been correct. This was not the expression of a woman that had ever seen a dragon before. She murmured a few things in her own language as she stared at him.

"It's you," she said finally, seeming to remember herself. "It is you, isn't it? Conrad?"

He inclined his head, blinking in agreement. In these bodies, they were capable of a kind of telepathic communication, but something told him that the brush of his mind might be a little too much for Mira to handle right now... assuming she could hear him at all. He'd never tried to communicate that way with a human.

“Can you turn back?” she asked, her voice suddenly uncertain. He let the magic rush through him... and then he was standing beside her in the sand, the dark expanse of the beach around them suddenly feeling a lot more desolate without his thick scales to protect him from the chill. “Thank you,” Mira said softly. Then her eyes narrowed—and she thumped him in the chest with a closed fist. The blow wasn’t hard enough to hurt, but it certainly surprised him. “What were you thinking, you idiot? No, you—*blasted* idiot. No—” She narrowed her eyes in vexation. “Why didn’t you teach me how to swear?”

“I’m sorry,” he said quickly. “I’m sorry I didn’t warn you, but we had to get away—”

“Warn *me*? I’m fine. I don’t care about that!” Her expression was incredulous. “I care about you, doing *that* in the middle of a public street! What if someone had seen you? What if they’d caught you? Do you have any idea what kind of insane science experiments they’d do on you? You’re a dragon!” She clapped one hand over her mouth, eyes disbelieving. “A literal dragon. This is what you meant earlier, isn’t it?”

All he could do was nod. She was pacing up and down in front of him now, the cold air tousling her curls.

“Assuming for the moment I’m not having a complete nervous breakdown, which is definitely not off the list of possibilities... okay. You’re a dragon. You’re a shapeshifting dragon.” She looked up at him abruptly as a new thought occurred to her. “Those men knew, didn’t they? They weren’t surprised when you changed.”

“They knew,” he acknowledged. “They’d brought weapons specifically designed for disabling shifters, too.” It had been a net they were getting out of the van... a net woven with silver. He shuddered to think of what it might have done to him.

“Weapons... how could they know about fighting shifters? Are they from your world too?”

He shook his head. “There are shifters in this world too, Mira. Unlike those in my world, they live in secret among humans.”

She stared at him. “You’re telling me I could’ve walked past a dragon every day of my life and not even known it?” When he nodded, she closed her eyes for a long moment, swaying on the spot, and he moved instinctively closer to steady her. Mira’s eyes flashed a warning at him... but after a moment, she leaned against him instead. He wrapped his arms around her, feeling her shoulders shivering a little.

“You’re freezing,” he told her softly, not liking the way the cold night air was biting into them. “I know you have a lot of questions, Mira, and I want to answer them, but—”

“You’re right,” she said, her voice a little muffled where she was pressing her face against his chest. As worried as he was about her, he couldn’t help but enjoy the feeling of holding her against him. Eventually, she pulled away, taking a deep, steadying breath. He could almost feel her straightening her spine, pushing down the fear and shock that must have been racing through her. “First things first—shelter. Come on. This close to the beach, there’s bound to be a motel or something nearby.”

And with that, they were off. Obediently, Conrad fell into step behind her, feeling his worry for her mixing uneasily with his admiration for her strength. She’d been through so much in such a short time... but his instincts were telling him that the worst was yet to come.

Chapter 13 - Mira

Mira had never been more grateful to have her phone in her pocket. As much as she'd grown to hate the world's increasing reliance on technology, which seemed more unnecessarily complicated with every passing year, she had to admit that it was good to have everything she needed in one handy place. Her credit card, her ID, her emergency contacts... all stored safely in the device in her hand. Good thing, too. Going back to her house was out of the question right now. As far as she was concerned, everything she owned in the whole wide world was right here in her hand.

Conrad was following along behind her, quiet and implacable as always. Already, she was beginning to wonder whether any of it had really happened. There was no way that any of that could have been real, was there? If it wasn't for the holes in her thick denim jacket, she might have been able to dismiss all of it as some kind of stress-induced blackout... but she hadn't blacked out at all, had she? She'd been wide awake when the dragon's great wings had carried them both over the twinkling lights of the city below. And as if finding the eye of the storm, she'd gazed down at the landscape below her and felt, for just a few minutes, a curious sense of wonder and something almost like joy.

Dragon, her mind kept whispering, as though if she thought about it long enough it might sound a little less ridiculous. Conrad could turn into a dragon. No, she thought, thinking back to the language he'd used. He *was* a dragon. If anything, it was the human form that was the one he could turn into. Was that more or less unbelievable than the part where they'd first met in their dreams, she wondered?

To her relief, there was a motel not far from the beach with a neon vacancy sign flickering its sickly light over the street. Not the classiest place she'd ever seen, and she knew what kind of assumptions the receptionist was making when

she looked the two of them up and down, but right now, she couldn't bring herself to care. Let her judge them if she wanted to. Mira had bigger things on her mind. The receptionist slid a key across the counter and the two of them headed for their room. Mira was aware of the yawning silence between them—neither of them had said a word since they'd left the beach—but she had no idea how to break it. It would have felt a little disingenuous, making small talk after what had just happened.

The room was predictably dingy. A double bed, a sparsely appointed en suite bathroom, and an armchair that looked like it might have been picked up off the side of the road. Mira excused herself to the bathroom, leaned on the sink, and took a few deep, steadying breaths. Then she found her own gaze in the mirror.

“You've always said you're good in a crisis,” she told herself in a low undertone, not wanting Conrad to overhear her talking to herself. “Guess you've got to prove that now.”

When she emerged from the bathroom, Conrad was sitting on the edge of the bed with his hands neatly folded in his lap. She studied him for a long moment, that calm blue-eyed gaze, that unruffled mask of confidence. The creature she'd stared up at on the beach, the creature that had snatched her up in its talons and spirited her off into the sky... where was that creature now? Buried somewhere under that handsome face, sleeping... ready to pounce at any moment.

“Should I be frightened of you?” she heard herself ask. It wasn't the question she'd intended to open with, but it had seemed to come out without her permission regardless.

Conrad looked back at her for a long moment, a curious expression on his face that she couldn't quite read. “No,” he said finally, with a smile that was almost sad. “But I'd imagine that's little comfort, coming from me.”

She frowned. He'd misunderstood her. “I'm *not* frightened of you,” she clarified, moving closer. The grimy armchair was absolutely not an option—instead, she sat on the edge of the low desk opposite the bed. “But that's just the

thing—logically, I should be. I just saw you turn into a—a mythical creature, twenty feet long, with claws sharp enough to kill me in about two seconds flat.” She gestured at the slices in her jacket. “Even my best fabric scissors aren’t that sharp.”

“I would never harm you.”

“But why do I believe that?” She exhaled hard. “I barely know you, Conrad. We met barely a day ago, and it’s been nothing but a disaster ever since. I’m an incredibly guarded person, for good reason. Half of my closest friends don’t even know my home address. If anyone else had brought one tenth of this amount of chaos into my life, I’d have cut them out of my life forever.” She looked at him, willing him to understand. “But despite all of that, Conrad, somehow I still trust you. Why is that?” He looked at her for a long moment, his expression shadowed—but he didn’t respond. She bit her lip. “On the beach, earlier today... when we were walking down to the car. You told me... you said I was a dragon, too.”

He nodded, not taking his eyes off her.

“Why?”

“It’s hard to explain. It’s an assumption we make, a kind of...” His hands shifted in his lap. “Instinctive judgment. Something about you resonates with my magic.”

Magic, she thought faintly. That’s what he’d called her kitchen appliances. She’d thought he was being poetic again. “What about me?”

He gestured, a little helplessly. “Your eyes, your voice, the way you move. I have a friend who can read auras, perhaps it’s something similar to that. And the way I feel about you, I assumed—” He cut himself off. Was that a slight flush rising to his cheeks? She leaned forward, suddenly fiercely curious about what he’d been about to say. “I could be wrong—”

“The way you feel about me?”

“Yes.” He seemed to be making a concerted effort to hold her gaze. He’d been as cool as anything with a battalion of armed men surrounding him, but right now, she could see

that his composure was cracking. “You know.” It almost sounded like an accusation. “You must know.”

Mira nodded, some resistance in her giving way, and she quickly moved to sit beside him on the bed. He stiffened momentarily in surprise, but when she leaned against his shoulder, he cautiously slipped an arm around her. The silence that stretched between them was still strained, but she could feel that the tension had eased.

“I’m starving,” she said finally, rising to her feet. “Let’s see what kind of disgusting takeout we can get delivered here.”

And so the strangest night of her entire life continued. There were plenty of takeout places nearby, it turned out, and it wasn’t long before the room was littered with empty containers. Conrad ate politely and without complaint, but she could tell from the careful way he studied his meal that it was all deeply unfamiliar to him. She fought the urge to ask if dragons preferred to hunt and kill their own prey. Something told her she wasn’t quite at the stage where she was ready to joke about the deeply surreal twist her life had taken lately.

Instead, she asked him about where he’d come from. With this crucial piece of information to complete the puzzle, a lot of the strange comments he’d made about his home made a lot more sense. Their meals finished, they sat back on the bed as he described the mountain range that made up his home, the dense forest that surrounded them. But when she asked what lay beyond the forest, he hesitated.

“We don’t know,” he admitted after a pause. “Beyond the forest lies the Fog.”

There was something strange about his pronunciation of that word. “Can’t you just fly through the Fog and see what’s out there?”

He shook his head. “It isn’t like regular mist. The deeper you go, the denser it becomes. You begin to lose track of where you are, of which direction you’re heading... and

eventually, even of who you are and where you've come from. And there are monsters that live within it, too." He sighed. "We've only recently learned of the existence of communities beyond our own—other fragments of land, inhabited by other people. Some of them have learned to navigate the Fog. We're learning, too."

"Is that how you got here?" Lying back on the bed like this, it almost felt like she was listening to a fairytale. "Through the Fog?"

"No. This—this place is somewhere else again. The Queen—the dragon I told you about, the woman from this world—she was able to create a doorway between our worlds, but only for a moment."

"You're worried about her."

Conrad glanced at her, then nodded. "Mostly, I'm worried that she's worried about me. I didn't exactly... warn her. It wasn't part of the plan, my stepping through. But I knew you were in danger, and I just... didn't think. Most unlike me, if I'm honest," he added, those blue eyes finding her face again. There was such tenderness in that gaze.

"How will you get home?"

"I don't know," he admitted softly. "But I don't intend to go anywhere at all until I've ensured that you're safe, Mira. Those men—"

But Mira shook her head, lifting a hand to silence him. "Let's not talk about them, alright? Just for tonight. I think we've got more than enough to deal with. They can be tomorrow's problem."

Conrad hesitated, but she held his gaze firmly, and he nodded his acceptance. "And tonight's problem?"

"Tonight's problem is that you're a scaly fire-breathing *dragon*. I think that's enough problem for an evening, don't you?"

“I don’t breathe fire,” he said, sounding a little ruffled. “That’s an old folk tale.”

“Oh, how could I have been so foolish?” Mira said with a roll of her eyes. “What a ridiculous thing to believe...”

Conrad laughed, leaning over to elbow her affectionately. Without even thinking about it, she took advantage of their closeness to claim his lips in a quick kiss... a kiss that lingered, Conrad catching his breath with evident surprise. Mira was surprised, too. After the exhausting and terrifying day she’d had, and with all of the after-effects of the evening’s adrenaline and terror, she’d expected her body to collapse under the weight of its own exhaustion. But with the faintest brush of Conrad’s lips, electricity shot through her, skin tingling, breath catching in her throat. She’d never felt so awake.

And suddenly, sleep was the furthest thing from her mind.

Chapter 14 - Conrad

Conrad was half convinced he was dreaming. Ever since they'd fled her house, he'd been waiting for Mira to tell him to get away from her, dreading the inevitable moment she'd tell him to leave and never come back. But instead, she'd stayed with him. He could hardly believe she was still by his side after what he'd revealed to her on the beach... especially knowing that she'd never so much as known dragons existed, let alone seen one before. How could his instincts have been so wrong about what she was? It didn't make any sense... but he wasn't going to push it. He answered her questions as best he could, the two of them talking long into the night.

But the real shock came when she kissed him. His body seemed to react without his input, claiming her lips, heat moving through his whole body from that single point of contact... and as the kiss deepened, he realized she wasn't moving away. Quite the opposite... he felt her shift closer to him on the bed, felt her arm slide around to draw him closer. What could he do but oblige? He wrapped his arms around her, caution warring with a desire so intense it left him breathless. Earlier, she'd told him that she wasn't frightened of him. He couldn't allow that to change... but as their kisses grew deeper and more urgent, he could feel his body resisting his control. He wanted to hold her closer, to kiss her harder... he wanted to tear off every scrap of fabric that hid her gorgeous body from him and to lose himself absolutely in the feeling of her skin against his.

And she wanted him too, he was beginning to realize, heart pounding against his ribs. Her breath was coming quicker as his hands caressed her, roaming across each curve and dip of her voluptuous body. He found himself taking note of particularly sensitive places, as though he was drawing a pleasure map. For future reference? Conrad scolded himself for his presumption even as he slid a palm down her lower

back, drawing her possessively closer to him and feeling her shiver in response.

He'd held himself back the night before, knowing instinctively that it was best for them to go slowly in the strange new space between them. That was, if anything, even more true now than it had been last night, and he did his best to keep his cool... but there was something demanding in the way she kissed him, a kind of intensity that hadn't been there last night. Last night, she'd been all but falling asleep in his arms—but the woman he was holding now was far from drowsy. Her hands were balled into fists around the fabric of his shirt, pulling him closer, kissing him deeply. He was so distracted by her lips that he barely noticed that she'd unbuttoned his shirt until she was shoving it impatiently from his shoulders.

Who was he to refuse her what she wanted? Conrad broke away long enough to pull the shirt free, and Mira snatched it from his unprotesting hands and tossed it across the room. He chuckled hoarsely, remembering a similar gesture from more than a few of their dream encounters... but as often as they'd been together before, this all still felt brand new to him. She'd shrugged off her tattered jacket long ago, but now she went to unbutton the blouse she was wearing, and he felt a shiver of longing run through him as her gold eyes flicked up to meet his, dark with desire.

Alright, he thought faintly. This was the best night of his long, long life. He let his eyes roam hungrily across her bare skin, gorgeous even in the hard light of their little room, and when he found her gaze again, he was surprised by the vulnerability he saw there, just for a moment. He leaned in to kiss the tip of her shoulder, kissing his way along her collarbone to her throat, murmuring against her throat how beautiful she was... and before long she was giggling and breathless at the tickle of his lips against her sensitive skin. Emboldened by her quickened breathing, he kissed his way lower, paying close attention for any sign of hesitation or reluctance... instead, Mira arched her back, wordlessly

encouraging him. He caressed her breasts, gently at first, more firmly as the neediness in her whimpering gave way to impatience.

He could have happily spent the rest of the evening finding every sensitive place, every imaginable way of drawing whimpers and gasps of pleasure from her, every combination of lips and tongue and fingertips on the sensitive swell of her nipples, on the soft warmth of her breasts. But it wasn't long before her desire overcame her, and suddenly she was kissing his lips again with a fresh ferocity, pushing him back until they were lying face-to-face on the bed, legs and arms entangled... and Conrad suddenly found it difficult to think when he felt her hand rake down his front and caress the straining bulge of his manhood through his pants.

He froze solid, half convinced it had been an accident... but then that thoughtful hand moved, and he groaned against her throat, his hips shifting helplessly at her touch. More, he wanted more, more friction, more of her... he groaned again as he felt her fingers unbuttoning his pants, caught his breath as she shoved them impatiently down his legs. He kicked the pants away, adding them to the growing pile of clothing on the floor of the room... then caught his breath again at the look in Mira's eyes.

“Are you sure—” he started to ask, his voice hoarse... but before he could even finish the question she was on top of him again, the hunger in her kiss all the answer he needed to his question. She was touching him again, her hands roaming across his skin hungrily, far less polite than his own explorations of her body... taking inspiration from her, he let a little more of his desire show as he pulled her hard against him. The way she moaned was all the encouragement he needed, and his hands slid with much more confidence across each delicious curve of her body. He hesitated for a moment when he reached the waistband of her pants... and with an impatient huff, she pulled them down herself and kicked them away.

Finally, there was nothing between them any longer... nothing but skin, nothing but the delicious friction of their bodies. The night air was cool against his skin, giving him all the more encouragement to hold her scorching body close against him. Every touch was intoxicating... the heat of her, the slide of her soft skin, even the scent of her seemed to make him dizzy. He'd never imagined anything like this could happen to him. Even the delicious encounters they'd had in their dreams paled in comparison to what it felt like to have her right here in his arms.

She breathed his name into his ear, sending shivers down his spine, and even more arousal pooled in his gut as her hand slid down to caress his manhood again. He'd been cautious about how close he strayed to the heat between her legs, too, sensing an almost imperceptible hesitation in her when his fingertips inched closer... but now he felt her take hold of his wrist with her other hand and guide his fingertips to her sex. Holding his breath, he brushed his fingers lightly against her lips, heard her whimper against his throat. Her folds were slick with her own arousal, and the heat of her was intoxicating as he began a careful exploration, paying close attention to the way her body tensed in response. As adventurous as they'd been in the dream world, Conrad knew that as far as the real world went, this was new ground for her.

But with each caress, he could sense her eagerness growing, some of her uncertainty relaxing as he explored her most sensitive place with his fingertips. Before long, she was gasping and moaning, rocking her hips eagerly against his hands as he found the places that brought the most pleasure. Her arms were wrapped tightly around him, hands clutching at his back—even the sensation of her fingernails digging into his back seemed to drive his arousal to a higher peak, his whole body aching for her. But when she reached down to take his manhood into her hand, he bit back his groan of need, drawing on every shred of willpower he possessed to pull back and meet her gaze instead.

“I want you,” she whispered, her breath coming hard between her parted lips. “Now. Please.”

“You’re sure.” His voice shook with need, but he held himself back. If he rushed her, if he hurt her... he’d never forgive himself. Mira’s golden eyes were dark with lust when she nodded, and he couldn’t stop the groan that ripped itself free from him. Her arms tightened around him and she uttered a surprised little gasp as he lifted her effortlessly, rearranging their positions until she was on her back beneath him, propped up against the pillows. He took a moment to appreciate the sight of her, reclining there in all her splendor, her sweat-damp curls spread out on the pillow around her head like a halo. She smiled back at him for a moment... then made an impatient sound in her throat, reaching out with both hands to draw him closer.

How could he have denied her anything, in that moment? Conrad claimed her lips again in a searing kiss, his heart thundering in his chest as he felt his manhood brush against the heat of her sex. For all her seeming impatience, he felt her stiffen a little at the touch... and he slowed down, body trembling a little with the effort, ever so slowly sliding the tip of himself between her slick folds. He waited there for just a moment until he felt her cautiously shift her weight to draw more of him inside her... and at her gasp of surprise and delight, he slid himself a little further. By the time he was completely inside of her, she was gasping for breath, rocking her hips against him with wordless impatience. For a moment, he was convinced he was simply going to pass out. This felt—nothing had ever felt this good. Groaning against the soft skin of her throat, he drew back, the new friction winning another gasp from her as her nails dug into his back. And more quickly this time, he slid himself deeply inside her.

The word she uttered wasn’t from his language, but he recognized it as a profanity nevertheless... though not an unhappy one, judging from the way she’d thrown her head back against the pillow. Cautiously, he thrust again, earning the same response... and slowly but surely, they built up

speed. Before long, Conrad knew that he could no sooner have stopped himself than he could have turned back the tides. Every time he drove himself into her, her pleasure seemed to grow... and every buck of her hips in turn drew more and more pleasure from him. Still trying to hold himself back as his pace grew frantic, Conrad heard himself groaning against her throat, heard a new urgency to her cries of pleasure as they hurtled towards the inevitable peak of their pleasure. His body was shaking with strain, pleasure crackling across every inch of his skin, and still he held himself back, determined not to let her down.

And finally, she gasped his name, and he turned his head to seal her lips in a kiss as her climax cascaded through her. He was only seconds behind, his body finally giving in to the building pressure, his orgasm blasting through him with more power than he'd ever believed was possible... and yet, all the while, somehow the best part was Mira's lips against his, both of them moaning into each other's mouths as their passion spent itself. Finally, breathless, bodies still shuddering in the aftermath of the orgasm, they broke apart, gasping for breath.

Mira murmured something in her language, her golden eyes shining with wonder as she looked up at him. He didn't need to ask for a translation—only smiled back with breathless exhaustion, closing his eyes a little as she ran her fingers through his tousled hair, damp with sweat. Somehow, they managed to find their way into the bed, Conrad reluctant to relinquish any contact with her. Some part of him, he realized, was still petrified that this was a dream... that at any given moment, he might wake in his own bed again, back in the Palace.

“This really isn't a dream, is it?”

He blinked in surprise, for a moment convinced that she'd actually read his mind. Her sleepy golden eyes were inches away, full of drowsy contentment that he could feel a mirror of in his own body. “I hope not,” he whispered. The lazy smile that curved her lips upward was the most beautiful

thing he'd ever seen, and he opened his mouth to tell her so... only to be interrupted by a huge yawn.

And then, as if all of the exhaustion of the evening had finally caught up with him, he felt the comforting embrace of sleep rise up to claim him.

Chapter 15 - Mira

Mira drifted in and out of a strange, twilight doze for a long time after she heard Conrad's breathing settle into sleep. She needed sleep too, she knew that ... but somehow, she couldn't quite seem to drift past that final frontier into true sleep. Every time she got close, some memory of Conrad would stir her awake again with a twinge of arousal. She'd never felt so utterly satisfied in her life... and paradoxically, she'd never felt more eager for more.

Was this what her friends had been talking about for all these years? She owed each and every one of them an apology for every time she'd rolled her eyes when they'd insisted that a terrible boyfriend was good in bed. Only now could she understand how that could matter. Right now, she'd have forgiven just about anything of Conrad if it meant he'd do *that* to her again... she felt her cheeks flushing in the cool night air.

She had genuinely been trying to keep her expectations low, especially after all the time they'd spent together in their dreams. It would have been unfair, comparing the real world to a fantasy. After all, from what her friends had told her, your first time was meant to be uncomfortable and awkward. Sex took practice, that's what they told her. Nobody ever really enjoyed the first time—like any new skill, the first time you tried it out was always the worst.

Well, if that had been the *worst* sexual encounter she and Conrad were going to have... her blush intensified, and she felt herself grinning like an idiot in the darkness.

Eventually, she must have drifted into a proper sleep, because the next thing she knew, she was blinking in the bright morning sunlight that was peeking through the curtains of their room. Blearily, she sat up, reaching out instinctively for Conrad. He was gone. For a moment, Mira felt her heart freeze in her chest. Was this it? Was this the moment she'd been waiting for—the realization that he'd been nothing more than

a dream? Then she realized that she could hear the distant rush of water in the bathroom. Sure enough, it wasn't long before he emerged, wrapped in a towel with that faint smile on his lips and his sandy blond hair darkened by the water.

“Good morning.”

“Even better now,” she said as she took in the sight of him, pleased by the way his smile widened at the compliment. “Come here.” He took a few steps towards the bed, but then she saw his smile fade. She sat up again, frowning a little. “Conrad?”

“As much as I'd like to,” he said, his tone almost apologetic, “I'm afraid I have some bad news.”

Her heart sank as the unpleasant memories from the day before came rushing back into her awareness. The night with Conrad had been so pleasant that she'd almost succeeded in forgetting about the men who'd come to her house to kidnap her. Conrad dressed quickly as he explained that he'd gotten up just after dawn, something telling him to check out the motel . . . and sure enough, he'd spotted a familiar van parked across the street that hadn't been there when they'd arrived.

“There are a lot of plain vans,” she said, trying to will her heart to stop pounding so sickly in her chest. But Conrad shook his head.

“There was a man behind the wheel. He was one of the men from the house, I'm sure of it.”

“Goddammit,” Mira muttered, aware that Conrad wouldn't understand the English profanity but not caring. “How did they find us?”

“That's what worries me.” Conrad's brow was furrowed. “I flew us well out of sight of the house before I even thought about landing, and there was nobody on the beach when we got there. There's no way they should have been able to figure out where we'd gone this quickly.”

Mira felt a cold chill run down her spine. What had Eddie said the day before about technology? The only thing

she'd brought with her was her phone... there it was, sitting on the nightstand where she'd left it, plugged into the wall to charge. The furniture might have looked like it had been picked up off the side of the road, but they knew their clientele—the room had come equipped with a universal charger. Still, she gnawed on her lip as she unplugged her phone. A full battery was all well and good... but what if the phone was what the men had used to track her down? After all, Eddie had done the same thing, hadn't he? She scrolled through the settings, but as far as she could tell, all the GPS and location settings were switched off.

The one upside to having nothing but the clothes on their back was that it didn't take long to get ready to leave. Checkout wasn't for a few hours yet, but Mira didn't feel great about hanging around long enough for the men to get impatient and come looking for them. Nor was she interested in leaving through the reception area. After a quick peek through the curtains to ensure the coast was clear, she and Conrad slipped out of the room and headed in the opposite direction, hoping like hell to find another way onto the street. Sure enough, they found it—a supply room at the end of their row, the door left unlocked. Inside, beyond the clutter of mops, buckets, and other assorted cleaning supplies, was a dirty window, just big enough to climb through. Unfortunately, it didn't seem designed to open.

Resolving that she'd come back and pay for it once all of this had been resolved, Mira grabbed a towel from a nearby laundry hamper, wrapped her fist in it, and punched a neat hole through the glass. Conrad watched her with both eyebrows raised, but if he was going to say anything, he must have decided against it. With the glass taken care of, she grabbed another couple of towels to cover the window ledge, grateful at least that she was wearing a hardy pair of boots—this wasn't a job for stilettos, that was for sure.

Not her most graceful moment, climbing through the window—but Conrad assisted her ably, and soon enough they were both outside, hastening through the tall grass and trash

beyond the motel and up a small embankment to the road that ran beyond the motel and into a busy part of town. They'd flown some distance, she realized as she got her bearings. This wasn't a part of town she knew very well—it was more of an area for tourists and beach bums, and at this time of year, there weren't many of either around.

The insistent question of 'what now' kept pressing up against the back of her mind, and she took a few calming breaths to banish it. One step at a time, that was the path through any major disaster. And the next step was to get out of the open. The closest building was a gas station—hardly the most romantic breakfast spot, she caught herself thinking, but it would simply have to do. Anyway, it wasn't like Conrad would know the difference. She could see him gazing around at the gas station with that carefully disguised fascination of his, eyes lingering on the collection of novelty baseball caps on display at the front counter.

"Good idea, actually," she said, nudging him. They were close to the highway here, and the gas station clearly catered to truckers passing through—which meant they were each able to buy themselves a change of shirt. After a moment's reflection, she grabbed them a couple of hats, too, as well as some sunglasses. Conrad still stuck out like a sore thumb, tall and broad as he was, but the hat definitely changed his appearance—as did the red hoodie that he kept frowning at in the mirror on the front counter.

"Relax, you'd look handsome in a burlap sack," she muttered, adjusting her own hoodie. The baggy fabric made her feel like a teenager again. When she'd first gone through puberty, she'd learned rapidly that being a child was no defense against the leering gaze of revolting men—and for a long time, a wardrobe of baggy hoodies had been her first line of defense. Her classmates at school had teased her for it, assuming that she was ashamed of her body, but the opposite was true—she was protecting it. Still, they weren't her fondest memories. Even as an adult who was much more comfortable standing up to gross men, she still felt the nagging impulse to

cover herself up instead of holding the rest of the world accountable for their behavior.

She caught Conrad smiling softly at her, but his eyes darted away when they met hers. “What?”

“Nothing.” He cleared his throat. “The color suits you.”

He was right, of course—this shade of forest green had always set off her golden eyes—but she still flushed pink at the compliment. Hoping like hell she wasn’t regressing to her teenage years, she headed for the gas station counter to pay. Her phone made a soft sound as the transaction went through, and she narrowed her eyes at it, wondering if even now it was betraying where they were...

“What language is that?”

She blinked up at the gas station attendant, a young man with pierced ears and a curious look on his face. “Huh?”

“That language you and your boyfriend were speaking. I couldn’t pick it. Russian, maybe?”

She looked over at Conrad, who was still browsing the hats, oblivious to the conversation. Resisting the urge to panic, she nodded. “Yeah, something like that.”

“Must be a really obscure dialect. I couldn’t make out any of it, and I can usually follow most of what my family is saying when they speak it.”

Crap. She’d hoped the kid’s guess was coming from a place of ignorance. “It’s, uh, pretty obscure, yeah.” Her heart was thudding in her chest.

“What’s it called?”

“Draconic,” she said, using the word Conrad had taught her. He looked up sharply at the sound of a word he understood, eyes widening just a little. The kid repeated it thoughtfully, the word sounding clumsy on his tongue, then shook his head.

“That’s wild. I’ll ask my Baba if she knows it.”

“Cool. Anyway, we better—”

“Yeah, thanks for chatting. You have a nice day.”

“Everything alright?” Conrad asked in a low voice as she joined him by the display he was studying. She nodded, resisting the urge to look around. If those men figured out where they’d gone and followed them up here, they’d almost certainly ask the kid behind the counter if anyone unusual had come through... and she’d just given him every reason to remember their faces. “Should we leave?”

“And go where?”

“Anywhere. I’ve got wings, remember?” He gave her a faint smile, clearly trying to cheer her up... but it didn’t do much to soothe the panic bubbling in her stomach.

“You can’t fly in broad daylight. You’ll be shot down by a fighter jet in ten seconds flat,” she muttered, using the English words for the plane—something told her that dragons hadn’t gotten around to coming up with vocabulary for airplanes. He nodded, the expression on his face making it clear that he had no idea what she was talking about but had decided to trust her regardless. Somehow, that made her feel even worse. He trusted her to get them away from those men, those men who seemed just as set on hurting him as they did on hurting her, and she was going to let him down...

But before the panic could really take hold of her, she felt a buzzing in her pocket. Frowning, she pulled her phone out. She had it set to ‘do not disturb’ for all but close family, and the only people on that list only ever called in dire emergencies... which sent a chill running down her spine when she saw it was her aunt calling. “Sorry, I have to answer this,” she said to Conrad, gesturing to the phone. Part of their long conversation last night had involved a quick crash course on the mechanics of mobile phones—he’d been utterly mystified by the device, but thoroughly impressed. He nodded, stepping away to give her privacy.

“Hey, Heather. Everything okay?”

“No, it isn’t.” Her aunt’s voice was always calm and steady, no matter the situation... but she certainly didn’t mince words. “I’m afraid something’s happened. How quickly can you get here?”

Mira felt her heart sink into her toes. She was standing in a gas station, miles from a home that wasn’t safe to return to even if she’d had the means, with a gang of armed men in hot pursuit and a shapeshifting traveler from another world in tow. How quickly could she get to her aunt’s place in the hills, a three-hour drive away?

“I have no idea,” she said, fighting the urge to cry. “But I’ll figure it out. I promise.”

Chapter 16 - Conrad

Conrad kept his gaze fixed on the strange display of mugs he was studying, half-listening to Mira speaking on the phone. She sounded upset, though he couldn't understand a word of what she was saying. He'd have to trust that she'd tell him what was wrong once she'd finished her conversation. Right now, he found his attention being drawn elsewhere. Over by the window of what Mira had called a gas station, two hunched figures were wolfing down two enormous plates of unidentifiable food they'd seemingly ordered from the kitchen here. But it wasn't the food that was holding Conrad's attention. It was the bright silver eyes that kept darting his way whenever the two thought he wasn't looking at them.

He'd been shocked to recognize them as wolves, truth be told. They were wearing such strange clothing compared to the wolves he was used to ... not that he was especially used to wolves, of course. The relationship between the dragons and wolves back home was only new one of cooperation and community, and though relations were warming, it was slow going. But these wolves, he reminded himself, knew nothing of that place. What they knew, based on the looks they were shooting him, was that he was a dragon... and that he was a stranger. Was he on their territory, perhaps? Was that why they kept looking at him like that? Or had the stress of the last few days just taken such a toll on him that he was jumping at shadows? Hard to say.

Mira rejoined him, her face pale and her hands trembling a little as she put her phone back into her pocket. With one last look at the wolves, who were both studiously pretending not to know that he was there, he drew her to a table on the far side of the gas station's dining area, well out of earshot.

"It's my aunt," she explained once they were seated, her eyes full of worry. "She said something's happened,

something bad—she didn't want to talk about it on the phone, but she'd never call me out of the blue like that unless it was something serious. It's the men. It has to be, right?" She took a shuddering breath, and Conrad reached out to take her hand in his, wishing he could do more to comfort her. "It has to be them, there's no way it's a coincidence that she calls up like that the same day as—"

"Easy," Conrad said softly, squeezing her hands. "We'll go to her. Make sure she's okay."

Mira looked up at him. "How? She lives hours away, and it's not like we can just run back home and grab my car."

"We could wait until nightfall and fly," he suggested. "I understand the ride will be a lot more comfortable if you sit on my back. And if I stay above the clouds, nobody on the ground will be able to see me."

A faint smile on that lovely face... but her eyes were still worried. "It's not that simple these days," she said softly. "There's all kinds of scanners and radar and... I don't even know what." She rubbed her head tiredly. "At least, I think there are. I don't know. I don't know the first blasted thing about technology. I barely even know how this works, and I own the blasted thing. Also, you need to teach me a stronger swearword than 'blasted.'"

He smiled a little at that. "That was one of Lana's early requests, too."

"The dragon from this world, huh?" The Queen had come up in their conversation last night. Mira smiled faintly. "She sounds like someone I'd get along with." Conrad nodded in agreement... but Mira's smile didn't last long. "I don't know how to get there," she said dully. "My aunt told me to turn off my phone and take out the battery. She said that was probably how the guys were tracking us. Which reminds me—we need to get out of here."

He wasn't going to pretend to understand what any of that meant, but he knew a suggestion when he heard one. He

offered her his hand as he rose to his feet, and she took it with a tired smile that still lit up his heart.

“Thanks, Conrad. Having you here is... I mean, I’ve been through some next-level disasters on my own, but I have to say it’s a lot better having someone by my side.”

They set off walking, and despite the lump of worry in his throat, the feeling of Mira’s hand in his was enough to keep his spirits surprisingly high. The sunshine helped, too, as did the feeling of being in motion. Every step took them farther and farther away from the men who’d wanted to hurt Mira.

And then there was a shout from behind them. Conrad couldn’t understand the words, but the meaning was clear—stop. He felt adrenaline surge through him as Mira’s hand tightened around his, and he was already scanning the area as he turned to meet their attacker. Broad daylight, dozens of cars driving by—he couldn’t shift here if he didn’t want to make a huge scene.

But to his surprise, there were no men in dark clothing behind them. Instead, there were two scrappy young people, barely out of adolescence, with matching bright silver eyes—the wolves from the diner. He felt his battle-readiness drop a few notches, but he didn’t lower his guard much. Mira was looking at the wolves, and the expression on her face told him she had no idea who they were. But their body language was apologetic as they moved forwards, their hands raised to demonstrate their lack of weapons.

Conrad stood by, bristling and feeling a little superfluous as Mira began to speak with the wolves. He studied what he could of the conversation—the body language, the tone of voice, the way these young wolves held themselves. They weren’t in good shape, that much was clear. Their baggy clothing did little to hide how gaunt they were, and at one point the young woman of the pair pulled back the sleeve of her jumper to reveal a badly injured wrist, covered in barely-healed burn marks. Both wolves kept glancing up at

Conrad, and finally Mira looked at him too, her eyes full of shock.

“So,” she said hesitantly. “This is Vee, and her brother Ren.” She nodded to each of the wolves in turn—Vee was the young woman, whose white-blond hair barely peeked out from beneath the woolen hat she wore pulled down over her ears. Ren was a little taller, a serious-looking boy barely out of adolescence with an unruly mop of black hair that fell unevenly, given that much of his head was shaved right to the skin. “They say that they are *wolves*, Conrad.”

He nodded, giving the wolves his own name, which they repeated with brief smiles that did little to ease his worry. “They don’t understand us?” All the wolves he knew spoke the same language he did... though he assumed they didn’t refer to it as Draconic. There hadn’t been a need to name the language at all until very recently. Mira shook her head. “What do they want?”

“They overheard me on the phone to my aunt,” she explained. He hid a grimace, annoyed with himself for not realizing what had been going on. The wolves hadn’t been looking at him—they’d been looking past him, to where Mira had been on the phone with her aunt. Wolves were known for their sharp hearing. “When I was telling her about the men who came to my house. They say they know them.”

That caught his attention. Conrad’s eyes shot to the wolves. Vee returned his gaze firmly, though Ren had folded his arms across his chest and turned his gaze to the highway. He was clearly worried about being out in the open like this, and Conrad didn’t blame him. “How do they know them?”

“Vee says their whole pack was attacked by the same kinds of guys,” Mira explained quickly, stumbling a little over the words in her haste to explain. “That they jumped on them, overpowered them all, and took them prisoner. She says the men used silver,” she added, gesturing to Vee’s arm. The young woman pulled back her sleeve again as she sensed which part of the story Mira was up to, lifting the injured arm

up for Conrad's inspection. "Stopped most of them from shifting."

"How did they get away?" Conrad asked, not taking his eyes off Vee's face. Mira translated the question, and he saw the young woman's expression twist, grief vivid in her eyes for just a minute before she regained control. Beside her, Ren's gaze stayed on the road... but Conrad hadn't missed the way he'd reached out to squeeze her shoulder, lightning fast. Vee shook her head, saying something in a low voice.

"They didn't," Mira explained heavily. "Only Vee and Ren made it out, she says. The whole pack was dragged into the back of a van and knocked out, and a few days later, Vee and Ren woke up on the side of the road with silver burns and no memory of where they'd been. They haven't seen the rest of the pack since that night."

"Why?" Conrad frowned, trying to put the disjointed pieces together. Assuming these men were from the same organization as the men who'd come for Mira last night, why had they attacked a wolf pack? And why had they released these two, but none of the others?

"They don't know," Mira reported after relaying the question. "But they're trying to figure out the pattern—if there's a pattern at all. They say it's not just their pack. They say it's been happening for a while, that a lot of other shifters they're in touch with have reported similar stuff... I didn't even know there were shifters in the city at all, let alone a whole *network* of them."

Conrad nodded absently, but he kept feeling his gaze drawn towards the road—and he could see that the wolves were likewise uneasy about standing out here like this in broad daylight. Makeshift disguises or no, it would be pretty clear to anyone who knew what they were looking for that there was a meeting of shifters going on. When Conrad looked back, Vee was saying something to Mira, who hesitated, the uncertainty clear in her body language as she replied slowly. Then she turned to Conrad.

“They have a car,” she said. He had a feeling he knew where she was going with this... and he fought the urge to shut his eyes and groan. “They’ve offered us a lift to my aunt’s.” He waited for the catch, but Mira seemed to be waiting for his response.

“In exchange for...?”

“They just want to help,” Mira said, frowning at him a little. “They’ve lost people. They know we’re going through the same thing, so they want to help. Is that so hard to believe?”

“No,” he forced himself to say, though he didn’t mean it. There wasn’t time to get into the ancestral distrust that dragons and wolves bore each other... especially when he wasn’t sure exactly how that translated in this world. For what felt like the thousandth time since he’d gotten here, he wished he could talk to Lana, just for a few minutes.

But he couldn’t. He was here alone. And he didn’t trust either of these young wolves, but neither of them was exactly in a position to be choosy about what help they accepted, were they? So he hoisted a smile he didn’t feel onto his face and nodded his agreement. The relief on Mira’s face was enough to make him feel better about the decision for at least a few minutes... but as they headed back towards the gas station, he felt unease begin to gnaw at his stomach again.

He’d play along, he told himself firmly. But he’d stay vigilant, too.

Chapter 17 - Mira

Just a regular day, Mira thought faintly as she climbed into the back seat of perhaps the most beaten-up pickup truck she'd ever seen. Just going on a quick road trip with a dragon she'd met in her dreams and a couple of punk rock werewolves they'd met in a gas station. Couldn't be more normal. At some point, she knew, her mind was going to decide that it had had enough of this madness. Maybe it already had. Maybe this was all some kind of deeply convincing hallucination brought about by a complete mental collapse... a comforting thought, but not one she could believe for long. She'd always been too practical to come up with something this deeply weird.

The car started on the fifth attempt, the young wolf who'd introduced himself as Ren not seeming concerned by the spluttering engine or the way the whole car seemed to shudder into life. Sitting beside her in the back seat, stiff and composed as always, Conrad barely lifted an eyebrow at the sound. Easy for him to feel safe in a car like this, she thought crossly. He'd only learned cars existed at all twenty-four hours ago.

Still, beggars couldn't be choosers, wasn't that the saying? And she was incredibly grateful to these young people for offering their help. Conrad didn't trust them, she could sense that much from the way he'd been looking at them since they'd introduced themselves, but there was something about them that Mira liked. Maybe it was the way their gentle voices stood in sharp contrast to their somewhat intimidating appearances. Or maybe it was what Vee had said, when she'd offered to drive them both where they needed to go—that she knew what it felt like to be worried about family.

Heather could handle herself in a crisis, Mira told herself firmly as the truck merged onto the highway and they began the long drive. Vee had typed the address into her phone

and set it on the dashboard to direct Ren, whose own battered phone seemed to be dedicated to the task of choosing music. Based on their outfits, she'd expected an unbroken wall of loud, discordant guitars, or maybe some angry rap music. But the playlist was a great deal more eclectic than she'd expected.

"Pack playlist." Vee was twisted around in the front seat so she could see Mira and Conrad in the back seat. "We all get to have ten songs on there, and we always put it on shuffle, no complaints."

"This is Arrow's," Ren said softly, nodding at the stereo, which had just started playing a mournful piece of classical music. "He was always an expert at bringing down the mood."

"He *is*," Vee said sharply, her head snapping around and her silver eyes flashing. For a moment, Mira could almost see the wolf in her, snarling, hackles raised and teeth bared. Then the moment passed, and there was only the scrawny young woman in the passenger seat, glaring at her brother. "He *is* an expert."

"That's what I said."

"No, it wasn't," Vee growled. "You used the past tense. Like he was dead or something."

"Is everything alright?" Conrad was looking at the wolves intently.

"Everything's fine," Mira told him, reaching out to squeeze his hand in reassurance. He relaxed, but only a little. "You know how siblings get."

"What language is that, anyway?" Vee asked, setting the disagreement with her brother aside once he'd lapsed into a brooding silence. "Doesn't sound like anything anyone speaks around here."

"I don't think anyone does, really," Mira said, glancing sideways at Conrad. "They're asking about your language."

“Is it a dragon thing?” Vee pressed. “It’s cool if it’s a secret or whatever, I get it, but... well, we don’t really meet many dragons.”

“Neither do I,” Mira said faintly. She translated the question for Conrad, feeling a little unnerved by how easily she seemed to slip in and out of the language. Wasn’t this the kind of thing that usually took people years to master? Through Mira, Conrad explained that the language was the only one he spoke, but that he didn’t necessarily know that it was Draconic in origin.

“So everyone speaks—that, where you’re from?” Vee directed her questions to Conrad, though her silver eyes always slid back to Mira for the translation. “All shifters, or just wolves and dragons?”

The question seemed to surprise Conrad when she translated it, and he hesitated a moment before asking for clarification. Worried she’d overestimated her translation abilities, Mira checked the question with Vee again, then repeated it.

“You know,” Vee said helpfully. “Like, bears and coyotes and panthers and stuff.”

Conrad’s expression was very still, which Mira was beginning to learn meant he was doing a lot of thinking as quickly as he could. Finally, he explained that only wolves and dragons lived in his particular part of the world, then turned to look out of the window with an air of finality that made Mira a little worried that they’d managed, somehow, to offend him. Vee looked thoughtful when Mira translated his final comments.

“I mean, I know there are a few all-wolf settlements around the place, usually up in the mountains where the humans still can’t find them. But I’ve never heard of wolves and dragons sharing a place—outside of human cities, of course.”

Human cities, Mira thought faintly, feeling that same ominous sense of unreality creeping into her mind. There really was a whole hidden subculture interwoven into the very fabric of the world she'd thought, until recently, that she knew pretty well. "How many people—humans," she corrected herself quickly, "know about shifters?"

Vee tilted her head thoughtfully. "You know, I've never really thought about it. A bunch, probably, these days. It's harder to keep secrets with the Internet and everything."

"I'll say," Mira said, grimacing at the memory of her most recent Internet-related altercation.

"Was it easier, before all that stuff? Before Internet and phones and electricity and stuff?"

Mira laughed, about to rebuke the young woman for the barb—but the look on her face didn't suggest she was joking. "Do I really look old enough to predate *electricity*?"

"Well, no, you *look* like... twenty-five, maybe. But dragons never look their age, right? Or are you a young one?"

"Vee," Ren said, not taking his eyes off the road. "Don't be rude."

"Sorry if that's rude," Vee said promptly. "Just curious. Like I said, we don't meet many dragons."

"Oh, I'm not—" Mira glanced sidelong at Conrad, who was still staring out the window, clearly not even trying to follow the conversation anymore. "He's a dragon. I'm not."

"Huh. You smell like a dragon," Ren said from behind the wheel. Vee's hand lashed out, lightning fast, and smacked him hard on the shoulder.

"Vee! Now, who's being rude?"

"It's true!"

"You smell great," Vee reassured her firmly. "Ignore him. He means—he just means that sense shifters get about each other. We thought you two were both... but I guess we

were wrong?” She kept glancing sidelong at Ren as if for help, but the young man seemed to be sulking, massaging his arm where his sister had struck him. “Like I said, we don’t meet many dragons. Sorry.”

“No need to be sorry,” Mira shrugged. It was a compliment, wasn’t it? Or were there strange politics here that she was yet to get her head around?

“If you’re a human, how come the weird army guys are trying to kidnap you?” Ren asked—and this time when Vee lashed out to hit him, he intercepted her hand instead, seizing her hard by the wrist. “They’ve only ever grabbed shifters before.”

“That we *know* of,” Vee said, grimacing as she yanked her hand free of his grip. “They might be after humans, too.”

“They must be, if they’re the same group that came after my family when I was a kid.” Vee’s eyes widened a little, and Mira realized she hadn’t told that whole story yet. Conrad knew it, she remembered, glancing at him out of the corner of her eye. She’d talked about a lot of things with him, before she’d realized his existence wasn’t limited to her dreams... and though she generally avoided talking about her mother with just about anyone who wasn’t close family, she was surprised by how much she didn’t mind knowing that Conrad had heard all the details. Again, that troubling question: why did she trust him so completely?

She cleared her throat as she turned back to find Vee looking at her intently, a cryptic little half-smile on her lips that she quickly cleared away. “You were saying these guys came after your family when you were a kid?”

They were only just reaching the foothills, Mira reflected, hearing the truck’s engine begin to whine as the slope increased. There were still a few hours to go before they reached her aunt’s remote little farm up in the hills. What better way to pass the time than by sharing a story she’d only ever told a handful of people in her life? And so, as the highway disappeared and was replaced by a road that wound

and undulated through the hills, Mira told the attentive wolf in the front seat the whole story. Their sudden flight in the middle of the night, the mystery of what had happened to her mother. She and her dad relocating to a whole new city, after staying with her aunt for a few months. And then, just when she thought she'd put the worst of the trauma behind her, she realized just how sick her father was.

“How old were you?” Vee asked in a whisper, her silver eyes huge. Despite her tough appearance, the young wolf was an empathic and attentive listener—Mira was surprised by how easy it was to open up to her. Her brother in the driver's seat might have seemed surly by contrast, but he chimed in a few times with questions that proved he was paying close attention, too. “When you lost him?”

“It was just after I turned fifteen,” she said, feeling the familiar pang of grief in her chest. “I moved back in with my aunt after that. Stayed with her until I was old enough to get my own place. We're still very close.” She sighed, fidgeting with the phone in her lap. Heather had ordered her to take the battery out, so it was about as useful as a rock would have been, but she still felt the need to hold it. “I just hope she's okay. I don't think I could lose anyone else.”

Vee lunged awkwardly across the space between the seats to grab her hand and squeeze it, a clumsy gesture of comfort that nevertheless made her smile. Conrad, on the other hand, was suddenly on high alert, his head snapping around and his blue eyes full of a cold, intimidating expression she recognized from the confrontation with Eddie. Seemingly instinctively, Vee shrank back, pulling her hand away from Mira's with a murmured apology.

“No need,” Mira reassured Vee, then turned to Conrad, trying to keep her expression and tone neutral as she changed language. “What's the matter with you? You looked like you were about to attack her.”

“The sudden movement startled me,” Conrad said stiffly. “My apologies.” The overly formal choice of words

made Mira's eyes narrow. It felt disingenuous.

"They're doing us a favor. They're our friends."

"We just met them."

"I just met *you*," she pointed out... then immediately regretted it as she saw the flash of real hurt in his eyes, covered over just as quickly by that cool, blank wall of politeness.

"Apologies," he said again, then turned back to the window. Mira felt odd like she'd done something wrong, but she was still too caught up in her lingering annoyance with him for snapping at Vee to care. Instead, she turned back to the wolves. Vee was fiddling with the stereo, adjusting the volume as the rattling of the engine seemed to be getting louder.

"Sorry about him," Mira said in a low voice, hoping Conrad hadn't had the chance to pick up enough English words to know what she was saying. "I don't know why he's so on edge."

Vee smiled faintly, as though Mira had said something funny. "You don't?"

"Should I?"

"I'm guessing he's one of those old school dragons, right?" That was Ren from the passenger seat, sounding tired. "Those guys that predate the Declaration of Independence always hate wolves."

"Ren," Vee scolded him... but she didn't sound particularly committed to the rebuke. "It's kinda true," she admitted after a pause, shoulders slumping. "It's nothing against you guys, of course. And there's plenty of it on our side, too. Our mom used to spit in the street if she sensed a dragon within a mile. Wolves and dragons just... rub each other the wrong way, traditionally speaking."

"That seems... short-sighted," Mira said, her brow furrowing. "Surely you've got more things in common than you have differences."

Vee shrugged. “Makes no sense to me, either. I dunno, I hope this generation of wolves coming up is gonna be the change, but the generation before us hoped that, too.”

“It just seems more sensible to be allies, not enemies,” Mira said. Then she bit her lip. “Sorry. It’s none of my business, really, is it?”

Vee raised an eyebrow at that, cryptic humor dancing in her bright silver eyes as her gaze darted, just quickly, to Conrad, then back to Mira. “Isn’t it?”

And before Mira could ask her what she meant by that, she realized that Ren was pulling the truck over to the side of the road. With a jolt of recognition, she looked up to see the driveway that led to her aunt’s property, familiar as home always was... but the farmhouse was a five-minute walk uphill from down here. Why had Ren parked on the street?

Her heart sank as she saw why Ren hadn’t driven up the driveway. There, parked such that it blocked the driveway completely, was a horribly familiar white van.

Chapter 18 - Conrad

Conrad let the strange vowels of the unfamiliar language wash over him as the vehicle carried them all deeper and deeper into the mountains. Did he feel a little left out, listening to Mira forge a fast friendship with these wolves? Absolutely not. Yes, the occasional bursts of laughter made him worry that the jokes they were making were at his expense, and yes, he was growing rapidly more worried about these two complete strangers they'd decided to let escort them into the middle of nowhere... but those concerns were all rational. At least, that's what he was going to tell himself.

At least the view was taking his mind off things. The alien shapes of the city had given way to a much more familiar landscape now, thick trees flashing past the window in a blur. Conrad would have liked to get a better look at them. The trees he'd seen in the city were all subtly different from the trees back home, but he had a feeling that if he wandered the forest out there for long enough, he might find at least a few that reminded him of home. When the car finally pulled over, he was looking forward to stretching his legs and having a look through the woods... that was, until he saw what was waiting for them in the driveway.

On full alert, all the petty grievances of the last few hours forgotten, Conrad hopped out of the car and moved up carefully behind the van, making sure to keep out of sight of anyone who might be sitting in the seats. His magic tingled under his skin, ready to transform his body at a moment's notice, and he could feel a denseness to the air around the two wolves waiting by the truck that told him they were ready to shift, too. He glanced over his shoulder at them, caught a thumbs-up from Vee and an encouraging nod. Language barrier or no, he knew she was telling him they had his back. Well, they'd see about that, wouldn't they?

The van, it turned out, was empty. Through the front windscreen, he could see into the back of the vehicle, too, and though the shadows stopped him from making out much of what was actually stored in there, it was clear that there weren't any men lying in wait. That wasn't necessarily a good sign, he thought, turning to look up the driveway towards where, presumably, the house was. But what else was waiting for them up there?

He straightened his back and led the way up the driveway, the wolves falling in behind him as naturally as if they'd been working together for years. Mira brought up the rear with some reluctance—she'd tried to argue with him when he told her to stay back, but to his surprise, Vee and Ren both backed him up. She muttered something about not needing wings or claws to enact violence on anyone who dared to threaten her aunt... but she did stay back.

When they reached the top of the driveway, they found the farmhouse, perched on the crest of a hill that Conrad imagined must fall away on the other side of the dwelling. It was much larger than the buildings he'd grown familiar with down in the city, seeming to sprawl out in all directions from a central point... but there would be time for architectural comparisons later. Right now, all he cared about were the dark windows lining the building's frontage, any of which might be holding an enemy now alerted to their arrival...

“You made it!”

On a hair trigger as he was, the shout almost startled Conrad into shifting. He felt the surge of alarm from the wolves behind him as well, knew they were on the precipice of letting their wild forms out—but then he heard Mira's cry of joy. She barged past him and ran up to the front door of the farmhouse, where a woman with curly gray hair was standing with one arm raised in greeting. She pulled Mira into a tight hug, and Conrad let out the breath he'd been holding.

“Heather,” he said to the wolves behind him, who nodded in agreement. Relief at seeing Mira's aunt safe quickly

gave way to concern. Heather lived up here alone, Mira had said—that was why she was so worried about her aunt being attacked. And judging from the van at the bottom of the driveway, an attack had indeed come. So where were the men who had carried it out, if Heather was standing here safe and sound?

Mira was beckoning them enthusiastically up the hill, and he obliged, the wolves walking politely behind him. He felt Heather sizing him up even before he'd reached her, and when he met her gaze, he was surprised to see her eyes were dark brown, not the luminous gold he'd expected. For dragons, eye color was always a family trait. But though the family resemblance was clear in the woman's curly hair, shot through with gray but still carrying Mira's unmistakable bounce, Conrad realized with a jolt that he didn't feel any of the magical resonance around Heather that he did around Mira. The woman he was looking at may well have been her aunt, but she was no dragon.

The wolves had noticed it too, or something like it—he could hear them murmuring to each other behind him, their eyes fixed on Heather. The woman's dark eyes, though, were fixed on Conrad, scanning him with an unmistakable air of appraisal. Conrad had been sized up a few times in his long life, and he straightened a little, feeling an uncharacteristic twinge of hesitation. Had he ever had judgment passed on him by a human before? What if she didn't like him?

He heard Mira say something to her aunt that seemed to include his name—he inclined his head when he heard it, assuming an introduction was being made. The woman flashed him a smile and shook his hand, her grip strong.

“Conrad, meet my Aunt Heather,” Mira told Conrad. The introduction was unnecessary at this point, but he appreciated the gesture—it was nice to understand a little of what was being said. He caught the sharp look that Heather threw towards Mira at the sound of the unfamiliar language, but then Mira was introducing Vee and Ren, and he was off the hook... for now, at least. Something about the steely maternal

glint in Heather's dark eyes told him that he hadn't passed the majority of her tests just yet.

They were led through to a sprawling living room, very unlike Mira's cozy little home, which felt about a thousand miles away. Heather sat them down at a long table and poured them cups of tea from an ornate service that reminded him a little of some of the Palace's collection. The pang of homesickness surprised him, and he sipped his tea in silence, letting the sound of Mira's voice wash over him. Occasionally, he'd pick up a word or two... usually his own name, which always drew a quick glance from Heather and the wolves... but for the most part, it was indecipherable. Mira would translate for him later, he supposed. Still, he couldn't help but feel a little lonely. After all the adrenaline of the trip up here and the discovery of the van, it felt somewhat anticlimactic to simply sit here having a cup of tea.

But then they were on the move again, Heather leading them out through the back door and onto a patio. He'd guessed right about the landscape here—the house was indeed perched on the crest of a hill, and it spilled out beneath them like a rumpled bedsheet. On the curves and undulations of the hill, he could see that the land had been carefully cultivated, with dense vegetation indicating that Heather's crops were flourishing.

“Heather got this place for next to nothing about forty years back.” Mira's voice surprised him. “Nobody else wanted it because it'd be too expensive to flatten the land enough to work it. But she figured out how to work around it instead.”

He'd been right, then, in his estimation of Heather as a formidable woman. And that impression wasn't about to fade any time soon... especially when she led them to a humble shed that stood at the edge of the patio. When she swung the door open, he'd expected to see tools or other farming equipment. What he saw instead made him catch his breath—and the two wolves behind him recoil with shock and recognition.

There, sitting cross-legged in the dust with his arms behind his back, sagged a nondescript-looking man with close cropped hair. He was wearing neutral clothing in dark shades, but a careful look at him showed that he was carrying a lot more muscle than the average human. When he looked up, blinking in the light, Conrad winced at the enormous bruise that purpled almost half of his face. The satisfied grin on Heather's face when he glanced at her told him all he needed to know about the origin of that injury.

They moved cautiously into the shed—there was plenty of room in here, and though the man's eyes burned with resentment as he looked up at them, it was clear that he was in no fit state to prevent them from entering. Vee and Ren lingered close to the doorway, clearly not eager to get too close to the man, though they murmured answers in the affirmative to Mira's questions. Conrad exhaled, tired of being patient, and caught Mira's eye.

“Right. Sorry. Heather said she found him breaking in through the study window late last night—that's right at the far end of the house from her bedroom. She's had burglars before, and they're usually pretty easy to scare off—she's got this antique rifle she keeps under her bed. Anyway, this guy wasn't scared of it. Drew his own gun on her, then told her to show him where she kept Richard's things. That was my dad,” she added, her voice going a little quiet for a moment. Then she rallied. “Anyway, long story short, she smashed his face in with the butt of the rifle, took his gun and phone, and here we are.”

“She took him prisoner?” Conrad said, glancing down at the powerfully built man. “On her own?”

“That's how you can tell he isn't from around here,” Mira said, pride glowing in her voice. “Nobody from this neighborhood would be dumb enough to mess with Aunt Heather.”

“But why did he?” Conrad wanted to know. “What do your father's belongings have to do with kidnapping shifters?”

Heather cleared her throat, murmuring something and pointing to the corner of the shed. Mira, Conrad, and the wolves followed her gaze. The murmurs of recognition told him that he was looking at something meaningful. A couple of large rectangular containers, bright red, and a couple of palm-sized boxes that rattled when Heather picked one up.

“This was what the guy had in his van,” Mira told Conrad. He was aware that the man hadn’t taken his eyes off Mira since she’d started speaking, and that direct, unbroken stare was beginning to make Conrad feel an uncharacteristic urge to give him a matching bruise on the other side of his face. “Supplies for lighting fires.”

“He was going to burn Heather’s house down?” Conrad said, shocked by the suggestion. Among his people at least, fire was considered one of the most ignoble of weapons. Even in the most dire phases of historical wars against the wolves who lived largely in wooden homes among the trees, no dragon had ever resorted to using fire to harm or weaken the enemy. “But why?”

“That’s what we have to figure out,” Mira said, her expression worried. “Because if they sent one guy all the way out here, they can send more.

“We’re not going to let that happen,” Conrad told her firmly, taking both her hands in his. “We’ll get to the bottom of this, Mira. You and your family will be safe again soon. I promise.”

Chapter 19 - Mira

It didn't feel real, this strange scene in Heather's shed. Every time she looked at the captive, she felt his eyes burning into her with silent resentment. She looked away, uncomfortable with the intensity of his stare. He'd glanced at Conrad and the wolves when they'd come in, but for some reason, it was Mira who got the full brunt of his attention now. It was almost like he recognized her. Maybe he did, she thought with another lurch of discomfort. If he and his organization had been hunting her, maybe he knew her face.

"Has he said anything about what he wants?" she asked Heather, knowing the answer before her aunt even shook her head.

"Hasn't said a word since I bound his hands." Heather narrowed her eyes at the man, the tone of her voice shifting. "Have you, now? Won't even tell me his name."

The man spat on the floor of the shed, giving Heather a lingering look as he did so. But when he turned his attention back to Mira, he rasped something. It wasn't a word she recognized, but something about the vowels made her look to Conrad—whose head had snapped around like a whip at the sound of the man's voice. The expression on his face was a mixture of shock and anger, and when Mira looked back at the captive, he was smirking.

"What did he say?" she asked Conrad. But he shook his head, lips pressed together tightly.

"An insult I won't repeat," he told her, his jaw tight. Then his blue eyes were back on the captive, real anger burning in them. "How does a human learn a word like that?"

But the captive only smirked, nothing on his face suggesting he understood the question at all. Mira felt even more uneasy than she had when they'd discovered the van. It was bad enough that he seemed to recognize her without

adding familiarity with a language from another world to the mix.

But the captive didn't seem willing to say anything else—so after an uneasy silence, Heather locked the shed again and the little group traipsed back inside. Heather, true to form, whistled as she bustled about in the kitchen, preparing the five of them a hearty lunch. That was Heather for you. Not many women in their sixties could get up in the middle of the night to subdue and capture an armed invader then whistle over a fragrant pot of potato and leek soup the following morning... but Aunt Heather wasn't many women. Living here with her had been a much-needed bright spot in the darkness that had threatened to engulf Mira's childhood completely.

And Mira was going to do whatever it took to get revenge on the men who'd tried to hurt her aunt.

Heather was particularly curious about the wolves, who seemed to feel a little out of their depth here. Mira didn't blame them. The grandmotherly woman in the kitchen and the bruised prisoner locked in the back shed were certainly difficult to reconcile with one another. But Heather would win them over eventually. She'd won over a surly teenaged Mira, after all... and once you'd faced that challenge, you could face just about anything. She hadn't mentioned they were wolves when she'd introduced them, which felt like the right move, for now at least. Aunt Heather had enough to deal with right now without the revelation that there were magical shapeshifters living among them...

They talked more over lunch about the man and his fellows, compiling all their information about the ongoing attacks. Mira did her best to translate for Conrad whenever she could, but it was hard to balance participating in the conversation with conveying it to the man at her side, and eventually she settled for quick summaries of the major points. Point one—based on the van, the outfit, and some addresses that Heather had found on the man's phone, it was a safe bet that they were dealing with the same organization. Point two—well, that was about it. All the rest was conjecture.

“Have you heard of these guys burning down houses at all?” Mira asked the wolves. Vee was clearly racking her brains, but she shook her head helplessly.

“Literally every story I’ve heard has been kidnapping only. People are hanging out, an unmarked van like that one turns up, a bunch of soldier-looking guys all pour out and grab everyone, end of story. Sometimes they come to people’s houses, sometimes not, and sometimes there’s a bit of damage from the fighting... but never any fires. Right, Ren?”

“Right,” the young man agreed. Mira hid a smile as she saw her aunt stealthily adding another bread roll to his side plate. Nobody as skinny as Ren was would be permitted under Heather’s roof without being constantly plied with food. The young wolf grabbed the bread roll and tore into it with his teeth, and Mira saw Heather nod with evident satisfaction. These two were going to be fast friends, she suspected.

“You’re sure he wanted Dad’s stuff?” Mira asked Heather. Her aunt nodded, coming back from the kitchen with another stick of butter.

“He called him by his full name.”

“But—why?” Mira felt utterly lost. She’d been hoping this trip to her aunt’s might give them more information about her mystery attackers... but this information was less helpful than no information at all. “Why would they go from hunting—people,” she said, stopping herself at the last minute from using the word ‘shifter’, “—to ... what, destroying the belongings of a man who’s been dead for twenty years?”

Heather nodded agreement, a shadow of a too-familiar sorrow lingering on her lined face. “You said they came for you last night, didn’t you?”

She nodded, glancing sidelong at Conrad, who gave her a faint smile of encouragement despite the fact that he clearly had no idea where the conversation had ended up. She felt a sudden rush of affection for him and wished she could lean across and kiss him on the cheek, but that wasn’t a

conversation she felt like having with her aunt right now. Heather wasn't exactly the kind of aunt you could just bring a boyfriend home to... not if he wasn't ready to be given the third degree. She knew from the way Heather was studying Conrad that an interrogation would be on its way anyway, but she wanted to hold that off for as long as humanly possible.

"Mira?" She looked up. Heather's gaze, surprising in its intensity. "The attack last night."

"Yeah. A bunch of them, in a van just like the one in the driveway."

"And?"

Mira blinked. What exactly was Heather waiting for her to say? Her aunt sighed. "Mira, your dad only talked to me once about the night you left home. But even I can see the connection here. They came for you then... and now they're back to finish the job."

"*What* job?" Suddenly, anger was coursing through her body. Conrad looked up, clearly sensing her emotion even through the language barrier. "What the hell could they possibly want with me? With Dad? With Mom?" The word felt rusty in her mouth, and it was that more than anything that brought hot tears to her eyes. "You're telling me all this is some action movie conspiracy theory, but it *can't* be. We were just a normal family."

"I don't know if that's true, Mira," Heather said gently. Mira could feel the eyes of the wolves on her, thoughtful, curious. "Your father always said he had something to tell you —"

"Yeah, well, he made a lot of promises before he died. It doesn't really matter now, does it?" She knew her anger wasn't fair, knew it was stress making her lash out... but right now, it was all she could do to stop herself from smashing all the plates and knocking the table over for good measure. Instead, she got to her feet abruptly, feeling her chair skid out behind her, and stormed down the hallway, feeling

uncomfortably like a teenager again. She'd been heading for the bathroom, but some old flicker of muscle memory turned her around at a different doorway, and she found herself standing in her childhood bedroom.

The air was thick in here, and she let the door click shut behind her, trying to catch her breath. This was technically a spare bedroom now, though Heather hadn't changed much about the decor... all of Mira's childhood posters were still up on the walls, and all her keepsakes and treasures were still cluttering every available surface. She'd always had a fondness for amassing trinkets.

Footsteps in the hall outside. She pulled her door open, expecting to see her aunt—but it was Conrad, looking relieved to see her. Something on her face must have revealed how she was feeling, because without a word he pulled her into a hug. For a moment she froze, surprised by the gesture... then she leaned into the embrace, letting the warmth of his arms chase away a little of the stress and frustration that had been building up in her all morning.

“Sorry for leaving you without a translator,” she said when they finally broke apart, Conrad's hands still resting comfortably on her shoulders.

“No trouble. Your aunt is trying to give our new friends a week's worth of meals in one sitting, from what I can tell.”

Mira laughed, dashing away the tears that had gathered in her eyes. “That sounds about right.”

“Did your aunt say something that upset you?”

“Sort of,” she admitted, resting her head against his chest for a moment to gather her strength. The drumming of his heartbeat was a comforting rhythm. “Just... stuff about my mom and dad, about the attack that night. She was saying there was stuff I didn't know about them. Which... she's right, obviously, they both died when I was just a kid, of course

there was stuff, but... I don't know. It just rubbed me the wrong way."

Conrad just held her close. He really was good at silences, wasn't he? Nobody she'd ever spent time with was as comfortable as he was at just letting the air settle around them. Finally, she felt a little of the tension drain out of her, and she exhaled.

"I'm being a brat, aren't I?"

He huffed laughter, pulling back to look down at her with that distant smile in his blue eyes. "You're going through a lot."

"I grew up here," she admitted softly, looking around her childhood bedroom. "Maybe that's why I'm acting like a teenager again. But... I don't know. I'm meant to be an adult by now, but I keep waiting to feel like it. Why do I always feel like my life's barely begun? I mean, honestly. I'm nearly forty."

The way Conrad laughed surprised her. He waved a hand apologetically, clearly fighting to control it, and she folded her arms across her chest, torn between annoyance and delight. Had she ever seen him lose that icy composure to laughter? "I'm sorry, Mira," he said, shaking his head. "It's entirely inappropriate of me to laugh."

"What's so funny?"

"A translation issue. Cultural, rather than linguistic. For a dragon, the age of forty is... well, we consider any age in the double digits childhood, effectively."

"You—" She blinked, thrown by this. She'd always gotten a mature vibe from him, but this was still a revelation. "How long do dragons live, then?"

"That depends on the dragon. But—to put it simply—dragons don't die of old age."

"You don't..." She studied him for a long moment. There had been a lot of new information over the last twenty-

four hours. Maybe that was why she was struggling so much with this final piece. “So theoretically, you’re going to live forever.”

A slight quirk of his lips. “It would be hubris to expect eternity. But yes, in theory alone.”

“So how old are you?” He winced, just a little. “Sorry if that’s rude.”

“Your curiosity is understandable. We don’t tend to keep count.”

“I suppose there’s not much point.” She felt like she was either going to pass out or burst into hysterical laughter. But something about Conrad’s expression made her focus. “Why are you looking at me like that?” She sighed at his hesitation. “Come on. Spit it out. I’ve already thrown my adolescent tantrum for the day, you’re safe.”

“Mira, I think you’re a dragon.” The words came out in a rush, and he held her gaze with something like defiance. “I felt it when we met. The wolves felt it, too. Even that human out there in the shed saw it.”

“That guy?” She wrinkled her nose. “What would he know?”

“I have no idea, but the word he used wasn’t just a standard insult. It’s specific to dragons. To do with heritage, the violation of tradition... not a nice word, overall, but not one that would make sense to throw at anyone but a dragon.”

“You’re saying I’m adopted, or something?” She lifted a hand automatically to her hair. “Ever since I can remember, everyone’s told me how much I look like my dad. You saw my aunt’s hair, right? No way that’s a coincidence.”

“I don’t know,” Conrad said softly. “But Mira—you have to admit it makes sense.”

The whole room felt like it was spinning. Mira shut her eyes hard against the sudden feeling that she was going to pass out. Conrad was at her side in an instant, steadying her with a

warm hand on her arm, but suddenly he was too close, too near. She needed time, needed space—needed silence and nothing but her own company to think this through. “Leave me alone,” she ground out, her voice harsher than she’d meant it to be. Conrad moved back from her at once, though when she opened her eyes, his expression was almost enough to make her cry. “Sorry, Conrad, I just—I need some time, alright? Please.”

“I understand,” he said softly. And with that, he was gone, the door clicking shut gently behind him. Mira sat down on the edge of her childhood bed and stared into the distance, seeing absolutely nothing in the shapes and colors that danced before her eyes.

Chapter 20 - Conrad

Great, Conrad thought faintly as he headed back down the long hallway towards the dining room. He'd blundered in like a fool, trying to give Mira all the answers, and all he'd succeeded in doing was making her even more upset than she had been in the first place. Heather looked up when she saw him come into the dining room, a question in her eyes... and he shook his head mutely, neither of them needing a common language to understand what had happened. The wolves were nowhere to be seen, and when he cast his gaze curiously around the kitchen, Heather pointed through the kitchen window that overlooked the patio. He could just make out the shapes of the two young wolves in a far paddock. Getting up to mischief, no doubt. He smiled faintly at the memory of spring in the forest, when the young wolves would wrestle and play on the shores of the great lake... and another pang of homesickness struck him.

"Conrad." He looked up at the sound of Heather's voice, smiling a little. At least they knew each other's names. She was beckoning him towards a door in the far wall, and he tilted his head curiously as he moved to join her. He soon found himself in a room that was quieter than the rest of the house, putting him in mind of the Palace Archives in miniature. Densely packed bookshelves, a desk cluttered with sheets of paper that had clearly once been intended as a workspace... that much was familiar. The gadgets that cluttered the room, on the other hand, were as alien as could be, with fat wires connecting them to whatever arcane source of power it was that they drew on to function. Mira had tried to explain electricity to him, but she'd failed. Their language wasn't well equipped to describe such things, it seemed.

Heather was holding an enormous book, and she gestured him over to look down at its pages. Half expecting to see the kind of dense script that most of the tomes in the Archives contained, he was surprised when he realized that the

pages of the book were decorated with pictures instead... but these were no ordinary pictures. These were impossibly detailed, exquisitely sharp and lifelike—much like the ones Mira had stuck all over the walls of her room. Photographs, she had called them.

“Mira,” Heather said, tapping on one of the images. He frowned at it, not understanding. This was a picture of a child, a short girl with a round face and a mess of frizzy hair. But then his eyes widened.

“This is Mira as a child?” he asked, but Heather’s quizzical expression made him sigh. “Sorry, Heather.”

She smiled at the sound of her own name, then repeated it a few times—and when he realized she was imitating his accent, he couldn’t help but laugh. He tried to say it the way he heard the wolves and Mira say it, emphasizing the final consonant. Heather burst out laughing, slapping him affectionately on the shoulder. She tapped on the photo again... then on another. This one was below the first, and it showed three figures. One was the child from the photo above, smiling even more broadly. The other two were a man and a woman, standing arm in arm. The photo had frozen them in a moment of looking into each other’s eyes, and Conrad found himself arrested by the expression on each of their faces. He’d seen that look before, countless times... in the Throne Room, whenever Lana called on her mate Seth to speak, or whenever Acantha complained of some new idea Cato had had in the middle of the night.

It was the look of a person who had found their soulmate.

These were Mira’s parents, he realized. The man had the same dark, curly hair as both Heather and Mira did. The woman, by contrast, had a mane of blonde hair that poured down her back and over her shoulders like flax... and though her eyes were crinkled in a smile, he could still make out the glint of gold. Mira’s eyes.

He could feel questions burning in him, and almost started asking them before he remembered himself. Heather was smiling at him. She leafed through the photo album again, showing him more and more pictures of the little family. Mira's mother featured, again and again... he realized they were arranged chronologically, with the child growing younger and younger with each passing page. A photo of the golden-eyed woman, cradling a tiny baby against her chest with love vivid on her face. Then even more, clearly taken before Mira was born. Most of these were of the man and the woman. Heather lingered for a long moment on one particular photo, in which Mira's mother stood resplendent in a long, white gown, Mira's father standing proudly beside her in a dark suit. One long finger tapped on a figure in the crowd around the couple—a young woman with waist-length curly hair. Heather's smile was mischievous when he met her gaze, and she tapped on her chest with her index finger.

Conrad ran some rapid calculations. These photos had to span at least a decade, likely much longer. He could see the differences in Mira's father as the years passed, the fine lines that slowly marked his face, the touches of gray that came into his dark hair... but by contrast, every photo of Mira's mother may as well have been taken on the same day for all that the years had marked her.

He looked at Heather, wishing he could ask her if she knew what this meant. She lifted both of her shoulders in an exaggerated shrug, her expression making it clear that she'd noticed the same strange thing that he had... but if she knew what it meant that her brother's mate hadn't aged a day in all the years she'd known her, she wasn't letting on. But Conrad, at least, knew what it meant. It meant he'd been right. Mira's mother had been a dragon... and Mira had inherited more than just her golden eyes.

Heather closed the book gently, and he put a hand on its dusty cover as he thanked her. The words may have gone over her head, but her smile of acknowledgment told him she'd taken his meaning. Conrad turned back towards the

door, determined to take what he'd learned straight to Mira. She had to know who she was, what she was... but before he could, he felt Heather grab him by the elbow and shake her head firmly. She opened her mouth, closed it again, casting around the room as if looking for something... then pointed at the wall, where a clock was softly ticking. Conrad couldn't help but laugh. Heather said something, then repeated the final word, pointing at the clock.

"Time," Conrad repeated slowly. Mira had tried to teach him a few words of her language, but he'd been a disastrously slow study, especially compared to her own rapid advancement with Draconic. Did that have something to do with her ancestry, he wondered? Some aptitude for language, carried in the magic that made shifters who they were? The scholars back home would lose their minds when he told them this story. They'd be derailed for at least an hour.

That assumed, of course, that he'd ever see them again. And with that fresh wave of homesickness, he realized for the first time in a long time just how tired he was. He swayed just a little on his feet... but it was enough. Clicking her tongue, Heather took him by the elbow and all but marched him through the dining room and down the corridor. Past Mira's room, past the bathroom, and into a small room dominated by two sets of bunk beds.

Language barrier or no, Conrad knew when he was being given an order. Obediently, he moved over to one of the neatly made bunks, and Heather gave him a reassuring smile as she closed the door behind him. He kicked off his shoes before laying back on the mattress, looking up at the underside of the mattress above him. Back home, the wolves maintained emergency shelters on the edges of the Fog, log cabins with enough bunk beds to house a dozen people or more in a pinch. At first, he'd been fascinated by the differences between this strange new world and his own... but the more time he spent here, the more it was the similarities that caught his attention.

Conrad was surprised to find sleep stealing up on him. He'd expected to lie awake here for an hour or so, using the

time to formulate strategies for the overlapping calamities that seemed to be facing them... the question of the man in the shed, the question of the wolves' lost packmates, the question of Mira's heritage, the question of why the men were after her... but he hadn't reckoned on his exhaustion outweighing the adrenaline. His eyes slid shut before he knew it, and it wasn't long before there was nothing on his mind but darkness.

Chapter 21 - Mira

There was only one thing to do when you were feeling this overwhelmed by everything that was going on, Mira decided. It was time to lose herself in nostalgia. And what better place to do that than her childhood bedroom? She dragged all her old diaries from their familiar hiding places, and it wasn't long before she was sitting cross-legged on her bed, giggling and cringing in equal parts at the melodramatic storytelling of her teenage self. The best stuff was from the earlier years, of course. After her father's death, she hadn't journaled for a long time, and when she'd started again, the melodrama was a lot more restrained.

She really had been a self-important little kid, hadn't she? She grinned as she leafed through page after page of her adolescent despair at being the only girl in the entire school who wasn't absolutely obsessed with boys. Every time one of her friends started dating a boy, the pages would fill with disgusted observations on his immaturity, his stupidity, all the things that made him Not Good Enough.

Then she found it—her favorite page of all. It was a manifesto she'd written in a free period one afternoon, incensed by yet another messy break-up between one of her friends and some good-for-nothing boy. In it, she described The Perfect Man, laying out the qualities she would require of a future partner. This was no wish list—this was a list of demands. And at the bottom, she'd signed and dated it, like a contract.

There were more physical requirements than she remembered, she noticed as she scanned the page. The Perfect Man would be taller than her (back then, she'd still been expecting to grow beyond five foot two.) He would be fit and strong, and take good care of not only his health but his hygiene, too... no stinky gym socks. A sharp dresser, who did his own laundry, who knew how to cook and clean and didn't

consider it a woman's duty... she grinned as the list became more personality oriented. He would be calm and fully in control of his emotions. He would be thoughtful and attentive, a good listener, who knew when to offer help and when to simply listen to her troubles. He would understand his own feelings and communicate them intelligently, and he would honor hers. He would trust her judgment absolutely... the list went on and on, and she couldn't help giggling at the emphatic tone she took when it came to commitment timelines. Incredibly specific. They would date for a minimum of five years before considering cohabitation. They would then live together for a minimum of five years before getting engaged was a consideration. The engagement would be a minimum of—yes—five years.

“Really keen on taking your time, huh, baby Mira?” she whispered aloud to the ancient pages. “Good instincts.” But what would baby Mira think if she knew she was already setting herself up for a future of such impossibly high standards that she'd be nearing forty before she even went on a second date with a man? Would she have underlined ‘dealbreaker’ quite so many times, she wondered?

And how would she have felt about how quickly she'd fallen for Conrad?

Mira chewed on her lower lip, shutting the diary and sitting back against her pillow. Outside, she could hear the distant sounds of shouts and laughter, and the occasional splash—the wolves, she guessed, had found the swimming hole around the side of the house. You could always trust Heather to be a good host. The afternoon was wearing on, and soon evening would swallow the property in dusk... her mind strayed to the man tied and bound in the shed, and she grimaced. So much for escaping into the past. The present was far too pressing for nostalgia to hold it back for too long.

Still, it had given her a little breathing room. She leafed idly through the pages of another journal, but her mind had returned to the subject that Conrad kept bringing up, in his quiet but irresistible way. That had been on the list, hadn't it?

Challenges me intellectually, but knows when to give me space... here she was, enjoying that space. And part of her wished that he was right here with her. She'd even be willing to let him read her diaries, she realized with a jolt. There was nobody on the planet she trusted that much, not even Heather.

But did she trust him about this? This wasn't just her—this was her family he was talking about. How could she be a dragon without her parents being dragons? Conrad had said it himself—dragons didn't age. And she'd literally watched her father age—incredibly fast, at the end there. It was like all his life had gone when her mother had... and though he'd done his best to hang on for Mira, at the end of the day, that hadn't been enough to overcome his grief.

Her mother, though... Mira frowned down at the pages of her diary. There, glued carefully onto one of the pages, was a note in her father's careful, looping handwriting. Tears sprang to her eyes as she recognized it. Every day, he'd slipped a little note into the lunch he'd packed her to take to school... even as he'd gotten sicker and sicker, towards the end, he'd insisted on the ritual. And even though Mira had been just about the only kid in her year who still brought a packed lunch from home, she hadn't cared. She still had a huge collection of the notes in a box somewhere... probably with the rest of her father's things. Things that the man in the shed had wanted to set fire to, she remembered with a flash of anger. Suddenly, the huge bruise on his face didn't seem so much like overkill.

It wasn't like his usual lunch notes, the one that had been taped into her journal. Those were usually quick little phrases, well-wishes or affirmations or, more often, terrible jokes he'd heard somewhere. This one was a couple of sentences long. *I'm sorry there's so much I can't tell you yet, the note said. Confusion and grief are both dark places. I promise I have a torch waiting when you're old enough.*

She'd kept it because it had been so puzzling, so unlike his usual missives... but when she'd gotten home that night, he'd been too sick to ask about the note.

“Was this what you were going to tell me, Dad?” she whispered, thinking of Conrad, of the great wings that had spread out across the night sky and carried her to the ocean. She thought of the way her heart had raced, the way her chest had seemed to fill with light, with the city spread out below her and the wind in her hair. She thought of the way that despite everything, she’d felt no fear at all up there.

When she was old enough... the expression had always made her groan. How old was old enough, anyway? Eighteen? Twenty-one? At what magical age would she be mature enough to handle the truth about who she was? Because right now, she was heading for forty, and deep down she still felt like a frightened child. New souls, that was what they said about Virgos, wasn’t it? Virginal... not in the sexual sense, but in the sense of being brand new to the world.

But maybe it wasn’t that she was slow to mature. Maybe it was just that she was running on a very different timeframe to the people around her... and her eyes widened as the correction rose, unbidden, to her mind. A different timeframe to the *humans* around her.

Her childhood bedroom was growing dim by the time she stirred from her seat on the bed. Outside, the sun was setting, and she knew it would be casting ruddy orange light across the fields of her aunt’s rocky, hilly property. The night was setting in. But she wasn’t going to let the sun go down on yet another day of not knowing who she was, of why she’d always felt like she was waiting around for an explanation that never came. Enough was enough. It was time to face up to the shadow lurking in her past. And there was exactly one person she wanted at her side when she did it.

He wasn’t in the kitchen. Outside with the wolves, then? She was halfway out the door when she heard Heather call her name softly. Mira flinched as he turned, aware of what a brat she’d been earlier... but when she opened her mouth to apologize, Heather’s impatient hand wave and a brief flash of a smile told her she’d already been forgiven. Probably hours ago.

“Where’s Conrad?”

“In the spare room,” Heather said. “He was dead on his feet, the poor thing. Needed a rest. We had quite a good conversation while you were gone.”

“He doesn’t speak English,” Mira pointed out blankly. Heather’s eyes twinkled, and Mira couldn’t help but laugh. Her aunt had never needed words to get the measure of someone. A handshake and a few seconds of eye contact, she always said, that was all she needed. “And?”

Heather smiled faintly. “It’s early days. But so far... he gets a passing grade.”

That was high praise, Mira thought faintly as she headed down the hallway. The closest Mira had ever been to bringing a boyfriend home was when her friends from high school came up to stay for the weekend. Once or twice, a male friend had been among them... and Heather was never shy in passing fierce judgment. The woman had good reason to be distrustful of men, of course—Mira never held her defensiveness against her. She’d been through hell when she’d left her ex-husband, a man who hid his abusive red flags until after the wedding... and who’d been on such good terms with all the local cops that it had been years before Heather could get free of him without also losing her farm and her savings. All that had been before Mira and her father had lived in this part of the country, but Heather hadn’t so much as been on a date since the day she’d finally gotten her divorce, as well as an ironclad restraining order. It was framed on the wall in the study, right above the gun safe.

Whatever her parentage, Mira knew one thing for sure—the women in her family didn’t take any nonsense from threatening men. The man in the shed was lucky that a black eye was the worst of his wounds.

She tapped on the door before she let herself into the spare room, smiling a little as she took in the familiar bunk beds where she’d spent so many sleepovers as a teenager. It felt strangely empty in here with only one bunk occupied,

Conrad's sleeping form already stirring as the light from the doorway fell across his face. He blinked those blue eyes at her, coming quickly awake as he recognized her.

"Hey," she said softly. There were a few English words she used when she spoke with Conrad, and that was one of them. His language simply didn't have an informal enough greeting.

"Hey to you," he replied, his voice drowsy. She giggled a little at how stilted the word sounded in his formal accent, pleased by the smile that spread across his face. He was a little less guarded when he was sleepy, she'd noticed. Quicker to smile, and his smiles lingered longer... "I fell asleep. I'm sorry."

"You needed it," Heather said.

"That may be true." He sat up, running a hand through his tousled hair.

"That wasn't all she said," Mira added, hiding a smile at the way his eyes rocketed sharply up to meet hers. "She likes you. Well, that's probably an overstatement, but for Heather, that's a big deal."

"I'm honored," he said softly. He meant it, too. She could tell. Unbidden, a phrase from her crowded Perfect Man Manifesto rose to her mind—he will care for my family as much as I do.

She took a deep breath, steeling herself. "Conrad?"

"Yes?"

"How do we go about proving I'm a dragon?"

Chapter 22 - Conrad

It had been dark for hours when the four of them convened in the back paddock of Heather's farm, jackets pulled tight around them to protect against the wind that had blown up since sunset. This was the lowest point of Heather's property, as well as some of the flattest, which was why they'd come here. An ancient circle of soot-darkened stones marked the place where, Mira had explained to him, she and her friends used to light campfires and spend long evenings under the stars. It felt appropriate, then, to be here now, for this conversation.

Conrad wasn't sure exactly what Mira had said to her aunt about what their goal was down here. She certainly hadn't invited her to join them, and he got the feeling that she didn't really want to be the person who told Heather about the existence of shifters, at least not right now... they had enough to be getting on with without adding that conversation to the to-do list. But the woman must have her suspicions, Conrad thought, thinking of the way she'd shown him the photos of Mira's mother over the years. Humans noticed when other humans didn't age the way they did.

Conrad had been rather surprised when Vee and Ren had offered to join them down here. Mira had filled them in on the situation outside on the patio, out of earshot of Heather, and Conrad had watched them nod, exchanging knowing glances with one another when Mira looked away. They'd recognized the same thing in her that he had, the moment they'd met... how could they not have? In a world dominated by humans, Conrad was already growing more attuned to how different shifters felt, how they seemed to press a different pattern into the vibrations of the world. He wondered how many shifters Mira had crossed paths with and been entirely unaware of what she was...

“They asked the same thing you did, you know,” Mira told him with a grin, nodding to the wolves. Vee was kneeled by the fire circle, fumbling with kindling, Ren watching on and making occasional comments that even Conrad could tell were distinctly unhelpful. It seemed necessary to have a fire burning. The presence of the elements felt... right, somehow. Mira was a Virgo, an Earth sign, but it still felt like they needed all four to be present.

“What did they ask?”

“How I’d lived so long without turning into a dragon out of nowhere.”

“That’s not how I put it,” Conrad objected, ruffled by the phrasing. “I simply meant... it’s difficult to explain. My dragon is always close to me, always at the ready, like a reflex. Shifting is a mechanism that keeps us safe. And you’ve been through a lot in your short life, Mira. It’s a wonder that instinct hasn’t arisen in you before.”

“Maybe I’m not a dragon,” she pointed out, her voice suddenly quiet as she stared out at the valley that stretched from this point onward, the paddock giving way to thick trees that made Conrad homesick. “Maybe all this was just a coincidence. Maybe my mom just had a good skincare regime, maybe—”

“Maybe,” Conrad cut her off, voice firm. He was getting better at noticing when Mira was starting to spiral. “Maybe you’re a human, like you thought all along. In that case, we’ve lost nothing—and gained knowledge. An excellent potential outcome.” But the worry didn’t seem to have left her face. “Mira? Is there something else you’re worried about?”

“What if I’m—a bad dragon?” He frowned. She’d spoken a little awkwardly, clearly unsure of the choice of word.

“Bad...?”

“I mean... my dad was a human, right? We know that much for sure. You’ve all met his sister, you didn’t sense any

—shifter resonances, or whatever.”

“Right, so—”

“So, even if my mom was a dragon—even if that’s what my dad had wanted to tell me before he died—I’m still only half dragon. What if that makes me... I don’t know, broken, somehow?” Her face in the moonlight was stark with worry. “What if I manage to shift and I’ve only got one wing, or something? What if I’m deformed? What if my organs are all messed up and I die as soon as I change shape? What if—”

Conrad grabbed her by the shoulders and squeezed, mercifully stopping that train of thought before it derailed itself completely. “You’re going to be fine,” he told her firmly. But she didn’t look reassured.

“How do you know? Do you know any half dragons?”

He hesitated, biting his lip. “No,” he said, unwillingly.

“Exactly. So how do you know this is going to be okay?” She was pacing back and forth now, frowning down at the grass beneath her feet. “We shouldn’t be doing this. We should go back inside, focus on something important—”

They were interrupted by a whoop of triumph from Vee. The small fire had finally caught onto the larger pieces of kindling, and the little fire was comfortably ablaze as the four of them gathered around it. Conrad looked at the young wolf’s silver eyes, shining brightly in the light of the fire, and felt a pang of guilt for how suspicious he’d been of the two of them. They’d offered their help to a pair of near-total strangers, charging into an incredibly fraught situation bravely and without complaint. They could have left at any point, too. But no—they were still here, still offering their support and camaraderie. And an idea occurred to him, quick as lightning.

“Ask them,” he told Mira, nodding at the wolves. “Ask them if they know anyone who’s only half shifter.”

She looked at him for a moment, then nodded, turning to speak in that strange language to Vee and Ren. The wolves nodded almost immediately, as though she’d asked the

simplest question in the world, and there were half a dozen names in the rapid-fire response that Vee offered. When Mira turned her gaze back to Conrad, there were clear signs of hope rekindled in her expression.

“Vee says basically their whole pack,” she said, her smile widening. “Vee and Ren, their parents were both wolves, but the others... some had a human dad, some had a human mom. Vee said her mate’s grandparents are *coyotes*.”

Conrad felt relief move through him—not just for the reassurance the wolves had offered Mira, either. He’d been wondering for quite some time how partnerships worked between different species. There had been no need for such questions before Queen Lana had arrived—dragons and wolves barely interacted with each other at all, let alone fell in love. But with the Queen mated to a wolf, and with Acantha falling for the human mage Cato not long after... well, he had some good news to bring back to his friends, that was for sure.

He took a deep breath, fighting to recall one of the words Mira had taught him. “Thank you,” he said, carefully. It felt strange and rusty on his tongue, but both wolves looked up with sheer delight at the sound. Vee spoke at once, an unbroken and incomprehensible barrage that made him blink helplessly and look to Mira for help.

“She says you’re welcome,” Mira said, and he felt relieved to see her smiling again. “Now. Enough messing around. Let’s do this. How do I ...?”

She moved a little away from the fire, tilting her head back to let the moonlight fall across her face. Conrad took the opportunity, as he always did, to admire her... the way she moved, the way her hair fell around her face, her silhouette cut out against the backdrop of the distant forest behind her. She had her eyes squeezed shut, clearly concentrating... then she opened one, shooting the shifters at the fire an impatient look.

“Well? How do I...”

Vee called something, taking a few steps towards her and shifting from foot to foot. Conrad could hear her hesitation as she spoke, clearly struggling to find words to put to the feeling she was trying to describe... they had that much in common, he thought with a half-smile. The young wolf trailed off, and then there was a sudden tingling in the air, and the young woman was gone. The shaggy black wolf standing in her place was smaller than the wolves he'd met back home, but that could easily have to do with Vee's age. He tried to fight the adrenaline that was surging through him, ancient instincts singing in his ears. The sight of a wolf had always meant battle, at least until very recently, and old habits died hard.

Mira, on the other hand, was having an entirely different reaction. She had frozen with shock when Vee had transformed, and he realized that she hadn't actually seen a wolf before. He held himself still as she approached the shaggy black wolf, golden eyes shining with delight, reminding himself that Vee and Ren were friends, that there was no reason for him to feel so protective of Mira. Ren was still standing by the fire, and the young man's eyes were fixed on Conrad. He cleared his throat, a little worried about what his expression had given away.

A peal of laughter caught his attention, and he looked back to see Mira with both hands buried in the wolf's shaggy fur. Vee was panting happily, her tongue lolling out of her mouth as she accepted Mira's caresses, and he tried not to look at the sharp teeth gleaming in her jaw. These wolves were friends and allies, he told himself. Friends and allies. Like Seth and his pack.

The diversion with Vee didn't seem to help much, to his dismay. The night drifted on, with Vee and Conrad taking turns to offer hopeful suggestions to Mira, who would close her eyes for a long, frozen moment before exhaling with more and more frustration each failed attempt brought on. Conrad considered suggesting they call it a night, but the hard glint in

Mira's eyes warned him that the suggestion would not be welcome.

"It feels like... stretching your muscles after a long day of sitting still," he offered now. His dragon was wide awake under his skin, a little aggrieved by the way he kept summoning it without actually letting the shift move through him. "It feels like moving your hand instinctively to wave away an insect. It feels like—"

"This isn't helping," Mira snapped, her voice suddenly sounding close to tears. "You're both saying the same stuff over and over in different languages and none of it's helping. Maybe I'm just a dragon who can't shift." She sat down hard on a tree stump by the fire and buried her head in her hands. Vee and Conrad exchanged helpless looks—the wolf clearly didn't need a translation. Mira's tone had said it all.

And then Ren was sitting at her side, speaking to her in a voice too low for even Vee to make out, judging by the way she craned her neck forward. Mira listened, her expression shifting from frustration to curiosity, then to something else entirely... something Conrad couldn't read, in the flickering firelight. But her golden eyes lit on him for a long moment... and then she nodded, new resolution in her movements as she rose to her feet and moved away from them into the dark field. Conrad watched, almost holding his breath.

For the longest time, it seemed like this attempt would end like all the others—a protracted, tense silence, then a slump of defeat. But the silence stretched, and stretched, and stretched. Was he imagining it, the buzz of magic under his skin? His dragon was suddenly still and watchful, alert, the way he felt when his instincts told him that something was about to happen. It was the way he'd felt just before the portal had opened, the unspoken force that had driven him through the portal and into Mira's world despite all the protests of his rational mind...

A great rush of air, and a yelp of surprise from beside him. Conrad stared at the huge, dark shape in the paddock

before him, heart pounding ... and then a smile broke out across his face as a pair of enormous wings spread, a little shaky, moonlight glistening through the semi-translucent wingsails. It was her, he knew as he moved towards her. It was Mira... he'd know those golden eyes anywhere, even though they were set in the scaly face of a dragon. She lowered her head to him, her sinuous neck uncoiling, and he smiled back at her, so full of joy that he felt the unexpected sting of tears behind his eyes.

Behind him, the wolves were both yelping with delight, leaping from paw to paw and capering in the circle of flattened grass that surrounded the fire—they'd both transformed right after Mira had, and their silver eyes were bright points in the gloom. What was he still doing down here, his impatient dragon demanded? He glanced up at the house, not so far from where they stood, his hesitation giving way. It was far too late now to worry about Heather seeing what was going on down here. Two wolves and a dragon already... what was one more added to the number?

Conrad spread his wings once he'd shifted, knowing instinctively what the next step had to be. Without waiting for Mira, he sprang aloft, his wings powering him upwards. A flicker of concern over what she'd told him about humans and their technology... would they be detected out here? He didn't care. For the first time in her life, Mira was finally in touch with the other side of herself... and he could not in good conscience allow that experience to remain earthbound. It would be a betrayal to everything he was ... to everything they both were.

Below him, he could hear the wolves howling, their voices echoing with an eerie beauty across the valley. So much for keeping a low profile, he thought with some amusement. Would the local farmers worry about their flocks? It didn't seem to matter now... not with the sky stretching out above him. He reached out to Mira with his mind, not wanting to overwhelm her with telepathic contact... just a subtle brush of consciousness, some encouragement to join him.

Conrad?! I can't. I don't know how.

He didn't respond—simply kept rising. She'd find a way to follow him, his dragon assured him lazily. She just needed to get out of her own way. He traced a few circles at a low altitude. Below him, the paddock was a dark stretch of ground lit only by the glow of their little campfire. Conrad waited, circling. She could do it. He knew she could.

Another burst of howls from the wolves, triumphant, joyous—he'd never thought he'd find such joy in a sound like that. Because Mira was airborne, wings flapping frantically, her body rising erratically but quickly through the night air... and the absolute panic he could feel in her was quickly giving way to exultation as she realized that she wasn't imagining it. She was flying. It wasn't something a dragon ever forgot.

He rumbled laughter when she reached his altitude and promptly kept rising, barely sparing him a backward glance. It was like that, was it? He sped after her, exulting in the burn of his wing muscles. Strange as this new world was, everything below them seemed to have melted away, leaving only the ever-familiar feeling of wind and sky beneath his wings. The low, patchy cloud cover was quickly pierced by their bodies as they rose and rose, Mira's scales glimmering in the moonlight. He took the opportunity to study her closely, wondering whether dragons from this world were any different from those from his own. She looked just like him and his fellows, Conrad realized... a few subtle personal distinctions, of course, but clearly the same kind of dragon. Not for the first time, he wondered how that was possible. Their worlds were so different in so many ways, but the similarities were even more puzzling.

But those concerns quickly faded into the background. The world below could wait, for the time being. Mira had a pair of wings to break in... and right now, all Conrad cared about was dancing with her in the moonlight above the clouds.

Chapter 23 - Mira

Mira was breathing hard when they finally, reluctantly, returned to solid ground below the clouds. Exhilarating as it was, flying took a lot out of you—just one of a whole host of fascinating new discoveries she'd made tonight. Conrad was by her side like a shadow. She marveled at his easy grace in the air. Now that she had firsthand experience, she could recognize the skill it took to exert such control, the expertise with which he maneuvered his way into land beside her. She'd gouged great holes in the soil when she'd landed, tearing up chunks of grass and making a mess. Conrad, by contrast, settled into the grass like a raincloud.

Not for the first time, it occurred to her that she had a lot to learn from this man.

The wolves were waiting by the fire, and when Mira regained her human shape, it was only a few seconds before Vee had all but tackled her, nearly knocking her off balance as she pulled her into a tight hug and whooped with celebration. It was strange to look into the young woman's silver eyes and see a shadow of the great wolf she'd met earlier, to know that she was only seeing a fragment of the picture when she looked at her.

"I knew you could do it, I knew it, I knew it. How was the sky? How's flying?"

"Amazing," she said faintly, her voice cracking with wonder. "It—it's amazing." A pause. "I'm starving."

That won a laugh from Conrad, human-shaped again and barely out of breath as he regarded her from where he stood, for all the world as though the two of them hadn't just been playing tag in the sky.

"That was amazing," she told him, switching language. He nodded, that smile much wider than she'd ever seen it. "Probably old news for you, I guess."

But he shook his head. “It’s always like that,” he said simply. “Every time, the same joy. Never wears off.” His eyes kept drifting skyward, and she tilted her head curiously. “The stars here,” he said thoughtfully. “I could be wrong, but... I swear they’re the same as the ones back home.” He shook himself briskly. “Not important right now. Mira—I think we can safely conclude that you’re a dragon.”

“Yeah,” she said faintly. “Yeah, I think that might be the case.” They headed back to the fire, which Ren had built up to a roaring little blaze while she and Conrad had been exploring the sky. How long had they been up there, anyway? It could have been anything from five minutes to five hours. She’d never felt so completely alive, so at one with herself... with a body that felt simultaneously brand new and completely familiar. It was like... a jolt of realization hit her, drawing a curious glance from Conrad.

“I’ve never done that before, but it still felt so familiar,” she said, still breathless. “It... it felt like meeting you, Conrad.”

Across the fire from her, she saw Ren smile—just a quick flash of teeth, and then his head was lowered again, poking at the fire. Conrad followed her gaze, and she could sense his curiosity warring with his politeness. For once, curiosity won.

“What did he say to you?” he asked quietly, nodding across the campfire to Ren. “It seemed to help more than anything Vee and I suggested.”

Mira felt a blush rise to her cheeks and hoped that the warm light of the fire hid it. But out here, under the stars, with the giddy rush of flight still warming her veins like quicksilver, it felt somehow ridiculous not to just answer the question. “He told me shifting feels like being with the one he loves,” she said, meeting Conrad’s eyes squarely as she said it. The surprise on his face was gratifying, as was his visible struggle to regain his composure... and she grinned down at the fire, feeling even more warmth in the pit of her stomach.

And then, sitting out there under the stars, she talked. It took a while to say everything she had to say, especially with the need to swap back and forth between languages to keep Conrad in the loop as well as the wolves, but there was a strange, easy calm in her that felt at once brand new and familiar as breathing. It was her dragon, she realized, a shiver of delight running down her spine as the recognition hit her. It had always been with her, that wild part of her spirit... but now, at last, it was awake. Strange, how clear it made her mind feel. Part of her had expected to be transformed into someone entirely new when she shifted. Instead, she felt more like herself than she ever had before... as though the night air had cleared away a thick layer of dust and shown her who she'd actually been all along.

And who she was, right now, was a woman with a plan. A plan to deal with the man in the shed, a plan to deal with Vee and Ren's missing packmates, a plan to make sure Heather was never bothered again... and a plan that, all things going well, would get to the bottom of what had happened to her mother all those years ago, once and for all.

There was a long silence when she'd finished speaking. The wolves had a few questions, but she was surprised by how readily they accepted her suggestions, by how willing they were to follow her. She'd always thought that she wasn't cut out to lead, given how vulnerable it made her feel... but now, having stepped into that vulnerability with an open heart, she realized that vulnerability was what made a good leader. Then she turned to Conrad, taking a deep breath as she readied herself for his criticisms. It was too dangerous, there were too many potential risks, it involved trusting the wolves too much... she was ready for it, whatever it was.

But Conrad only met her gaze, steady as a rock. "It's a good plan," he said softly. "I'm with you, Mira."

She wanted, very much, to kiss him right then and there... but the wolves sitting on the other side of the fire made her feel too self-conscious. Hoping he could read her gratitude in her eyes, she smiled instead. The four of them sat

a while longer under the stars as the fire burned itself down to embers. Then Ren stamped out the last of them with his great boots, eyes downcast.

“You said he mentioned his mate,” Conrad asked her, his eyes lingering on the young wolf as he finished stamping out the fire. “Where is she now?”

“Wherever the rest of their pack is,” Mira said softly, her eyes moving from Ren to his sister. “Her mate is there, too. We hope.

Conrad hesitated. “Can you teach me how to say something?”

He practiced under his breath all the way up the hill—she could hear him muttering the words so quietly that even the wolves’ sharp hearing wouldn’t be able to pick it up. Then, when they were on the patio, he cleared his throat. Vee and Ren turned, both looking curious.

“We will find them,” he told the wolves, in strongly accented but clear English. “We will bring them home.”

Vee threw her arms around him, and Mira had to stifle a laugh at the way he froze in abject shock. Ren stood back, as was his habit, but Mira could see by the look in his eye and the quiet nod of acknowledgment that he was touched by the gesture, too. Vee pulled back, dashing tears away from her bright silver eyes, and bid them both a breathless goodnight.

Heather was in bed already, it seemed—the farmhouse was dark, but there was a light on in Mira’s childhood bedroom and even a set of pajamas laid out for her to wear. Two sets, she realized as she picked them up, a smile breaking out across her face as she saw what Heather had done. If that wasn’t a clear sign of approval, Mira didn’t know what was.

That being said, she had no intention of letting Conrad stay clothed for long. They had a long few days coming up ahead of them, and right now, she was going to do everything in her power to make both of them forget about everything but each other.

Chapter 24 - Conrad

When the sun rose the next day, Conrad was already awake. He and Mira had stayed up long into the night... once their appetite for each other had been temporarily satiated, they'd lain talking for even longer. Still, he felt refreshed and ready when he rose with the sun, leaning down to press a kiss to Mira's forehead as she stirred in her sleep. She was every bit as beautiful as she was intelligent, he reflected, gazing down at her for as long as he could before he sensed she was about to wake and hastened away. There would be time enough for admiring her in the dawn light later... at least, as long as they pulled off her plan successfully.

The morning was mostly spent in conversation. Mira had insisted that they speak with her aunt first. Heather deserved to know everything that was going on... including the part about her niece being a dragon. She'd talked about it with the wolves, who hadn't resisted her desire to let her aunt in on their secret... but had cautioned her to emphasize the importance of not spreading the word. But Mira knew she could trust her aunt.

Conrad joined her for the conversation. He still couldn't make out a word of what anyone was saying outside of names, but he did notice a distinct shift in energy, the way Heather's eyes widened with disbelief and a touch of amusement. It was the same expression Mira had worn when he'd first mentioned dragons to her... and just like then, it wasn't long before the amusement was gone. They talked at length, then. Conrad was half convinced they were going to need to go out into the paddock again and demonstrate the transformation to her... but in the end, that wasn't necessary.

After that conversation, Mira and the wolves filled Heather in on the plan. Conrad returned to the hostage while they did, curious to see whether the man's long stint in isolation might have made him more willing to talk... but his

malevolent glare was unchanged. He tried asking him a few questions, but he remained stubbornly silent.

“What happened to your filthy mouth, hm?” Conrad asked, kicking at the man’s boot to get his attention. “Or do you only insult women?”

No response. Well, he hadn’t really expected one.

By sunset, they were as ready as they were going to be. Conrad could tell Heather was worried, but she didn’t seem to be trying to talk any of them out of it. She cooked them an enormous dinner, though—delicious roast meat, flavored with a range of herbs that tasted tantalizingly familiar, just different enough that he couldn’t quite name them. The wolves took a plate out for the captive, talking and laughing among themselves. They’d been in good spirits all day—glad that things were in motion again, Conrad suspected. Funny, how much more he felt he could trust them, even after such a short span of time with them. They all stayed up a little longer, playing a card game that required so little speech that even Conrad could join in. Then they switched out all the lights and went to bed.

But they didn’t sleep. Conrad and Mira lay fully clothed with the blankets pulled over them, listening intently to the night air outside. Difficult to distinguish anything unusual from the distant sounds of wildlife... but then Mira held up a finger, holding her breath. Conrad redoubled his efforts, squeezing his eyes shut as though that would help him hear better... there it was. Ever so quiet, the sound of a boot on a driveway. And a few minutes later, the distant rumble of a van’s engine.

“Oh no,” Mira whispered. The grin on her face was wicked. “It sounds like our prisoner has escaped.”

Ten minutes later, they were all gathered around Heather’s computer, Conrad doing his best to pretend that the machine wasn’t just about the most baffling thing he’d ever seen. Ren seemed to be piloting the contraption, commanding it by tapping on square keys to reveal what must have been a

map of the city. On it glowed two red dots that he pointed at with one long finger. One dot was stationary... the other, moving very slowly.

“He found one,” Mira said, grinning widely. She said something to Heather, who responded with a funny little bow. It had been Mira’s idea to allow the prisoner to ‘escape’—the wolves, pretending to argue with each other, had left the shed door open after delivering his meal. During the day, they’d plant some kind of device on the man’s vehicle that would allow them to see where he went. It had been Heather who’d suggested planting two instead... one that was easy to find, and one that wasn’t.

They watched the screen for a very long time, the little red dot winding its way along road after road until finally, it came to a rest. They waited a short while longer to ensure that their ex-prisoner had surely reached his destination... and then Heather gestured towards the door, her face set. Before they left, she hugged each one of them in turn. Conrad smiled down at her, wishing he could say more than the stilted little phrase he’d learned for the purpose.

“Thank you, Heather.”

It felt strange to be back in the wolves’ car again. They’d only been at Heather’s for a little over a day, but so much water had passed under the bridge since then that he barely felt like the same person. No music this time, as Ren drove them swiftly through the winding roads, the battered phone propped up on the dashboard guiding them towards a distant address. Conrad looked across the seat at Mira. Her eyes were alert but far away, that sharp mind of hers clearly racing... he reached out and squeezed her hand, and she flashed him a smile that made his heart skip a beat.

Whatever was waiting for them, he’d do whatever he had to do to keep her safe.

The city began to build up around them again. It must have been close to midnight when Ren finally eased off the breakneck pace he’d been setting, the phone beeping gently to

indicate they'd reached their destination. For a moment, Conrad didn't know what it meant. All around them were enormous, nondescript gray buildings, looming into the sky. Mira called them warehouses, explained that they were used for storage, that nobody lived around here... he took in the sight of them, wondering at the size of a civilization that needed this much space to store its spare possessions.

But which building belonged to the organization they were searching for? For a while, Conrad worried they'd reached a dead end, that all their efforts and planning had been for nothing... but then he heard Ren murmur something and saw what the young wolf had seen. There, half-hidden beneath a sloping roof, a whole row of vans, unmarked and incredibly familiar. There were at least a dozen there, if not more. Ren pulled the car over and the four of them got out, the slamming of the doors seeming too loud in the quiet night air.

Were they walking into a trap, he wondered? The wolves both split and ran off, their footfalls quiet despite their speed—doing a lap of the building, he guessed, trying to see if anyone was still inside. It was the middle of the night, but that didn't necessarily mean they were about to walk into an empty building. He and Mira found the door, a nondescript entrance not far from where the vans were parked.

“It really does look like an ordinary old warehouse,” Mira murmured. He could tell she was worried that they'd gotten this wrong. “What if I'm wrong? What if this isn't the place?”

“Then we find out together,” he told her softly, slipping his hand into hers. The wolves rejoined them a few minutes later, giving them the all-clear—no lights on in the building, no sign of any guards. That didn't mean there weren't any, Conrad thought, wishing he had Captain Acantha and a few of her well-trained soldiers behind him. But he didn't. It was just him, his two unlikely new friends... and the woman he loved.

Ren and Vee were already prying the door open with a surprising amount of skill, their movements practiced as they

passed each other tools. He thought of the man who'd broken into Mira's house that first night and smiled to himself at the symmetry. Revenge, or something like it. Mira had a faint smile on her face, too... and as the door finally sprang open, he caught her hand.

"Before we go in," he said, his heart drumming hard in his chest. Her golden eyes on his, curious, luminous... his apprehension evaporated like mist. "I love you," he said simply. How could he have spent so long grappling with those words? They were the easiest thing in the world to say. She looked at him for a long moment, almost seeming to hold her breath. Then that faint, wondering smile widened.

"I love you too," she said, as though the revelation had surprised even her. "Now, come on. We've got a building to break into."

Let the armed men come, Conrad thought as he followed Mira and the wolves into the dark, echoing space beyond the doorway. Let dozens of them attack... hundreds, thousands. Right now, he felt like he could fight the whole population of this world without taking so much as a scratch.

But there was nobody to fight. Just as they'd hoped, the building was completely empty—its staff all gone for the night, presumably. The wolves peeled off immediately, their heads low and their eyes intent, something of their wild forms showing in the glint of their silver eyes and their rangy movements through the gloom. Conrad followed Mira through a few doorways, not seeing much in the gloom—some furniture, mostly trash. What had he been expecting? Books full of records that would conveniently explain everything that happened?

And then Mira made a triumphant sound, and he hastened to her side. She was prying open what looked at first glance like a slender book, but that he quickly realized was nothing of the sort—the cover revealed a dark screen which flickered to life when she pressed a part of the lower section, and there were more of the familiar square keys embedded

there. Mira had explained computers to him, but he was still getting accustomed to all the different shapes and sizes they seemed to come in.

He heard a shout from some distance away, and he and Mira both looked up at the sound of running footsteps. Vee found them, panting, her silver eyes wild and a look of intermingled triumph and terror on her face. She breathed a few words, and Mira inhaled sharply, looking up at Conrad. He didn't need a translation. He glanced down at Mira, who gestured wordlessly for him to go.

Vee led him at a breakneck pace through a couple of gloomier rooms... and then to a door that had been knocked off its hinges completely, fresh splintered wood telling him that this was a recent development. The room on the other side was very different from the nondescript, shabby offices he and Mira had been exploring, and a chill ran down his spine as he realized why that was. Hard floors, made of a kind of artificial gray stone... and arranged before him, at least a dozen of them if not more, were prison cells. That was being charitable, he thought, his breath catching in his throat. A cell suggested at least some comfort... a bed, maybe, or at least a bench. These were cages.

Cages that were full of frightened-looking people, fingers looped around the bars. He took in the scene, realizing with a rush that not only were they in the right place but that this organization was more powerful than they'd imagined. He'd been imagining a few dozen men, maybe... but there were more prisoners than that here, some of them injured, all of them clearly frightened. He hurried to help Vee, who was gritting her teeth with frustration as she rummaged through the drawers of a desk that stood against the far wall. Ren, meanwhile, was taking a more direct approach... he was wolf-shaped, and his great jaws were clamped around the metal bars of one of the cells, every muscle in his great body straining as he yanked and tore at it. It was giving way, but slowly.

Conrad frowned a little. There were dozens of shifters here. Why hadn't any of them thought to do what Ren was

doing? There were no guards here to stop them... but then he remembered Vee's wounded wrists, and he looked to the nearest prisoner. Sure enough, her hands were bound in front of her by dull silver manacles. He felt a shudder of revulsion pass through him at the sight of them, met her exhausted eyes, and tried to promise with his eyes alone that he'd get them out of there.

Vee was still rummaging, clearly searching for the keys. But Conrad was worried about how long that would take, acutely aware he'd left Mira by herself, rummaging through the computers. He couldn't leave these shifters here, locked up with silver draining the life from them. He shouted a warning, hoping it would be enough... then let the magic move through him.

It was cramped, that was for sure... Conrad could feel his wings pressing against the roof and he hissed disgruntledly, lowering his body to the floor and feeling his forelegs scrape against the cage bars. There was fur pressing against his underbelly and he rumbled an apology as Ren extracted himself with some difficulty. But then Conrad lifted one razor-sharp talon and began to slice through the locks that held each cage door shut, his claws meeting little resistance as they dug through the metal. One by one, the cages fell open. Turning was awkward as he made his way down the line... but eventually, he'd taken care of every single door. Coiled at the far end of the room, he blinked down at the mass of shifters he'd freed... at least two dozen of them, if not more, their faces full of a mixture of awe and relief as they looked up at him.

No dragons among them, he realized. Had any of them seen a dragon before? Vee was saying something, looking up at him and then back at the huddled group. As if in response, one of the shifters shuffled forward. He was a wolf around Vee's age, with hair a vivid and unnatural shade of green, the sandy brown roots showing. He limped a little as he walked, and the pain on his face was clear. He lifted his hands towards Conrad in an oddly ritualistic gesture.

Carefully, Conrad extended the tip of his razor-sharp talon, facing upward. The young wolf looked at it for a moment, then nodded, seeming to get the idea. Gently, he scraped his metal manacles against the sharp edge of Conrad's claw, the sharp edge digging through the metal slowly but surely. Behind him, the other shifters watched with bated breath... until finally, with a dull clunk, the manacle fell to the ground in two pieces. Beneath it, the skin was raw and blistered like Vee's wrists had been... but the wolf's face was full of elation, a great weight clearly lifted from his shoulders.

"Thank you," he said, and Conrad inclined his head, grateful that he recognized that phrase at least.

The rest of the shifters lined up then, and he held out his talons as steady and still as he could, well aware that one injudicious movement would be enough to cut deep into an artery... or worse, take a whole hand off. He was also very worried about the time that was creeping past. With each shifter freed, his impatience grew, his worry. Vee was with him, he could tell... she was standing with her arm around the shoulder of the green-haired wolf, love and relief vivid on her features, but she kept looking anxiously at the door. They needed to get out, and soon.

He only hoped Mira had found what she needed.

Chapter 25 - Mira

Take what you need and run, she kept telling herself. Her heart was pounding hard in her chest as she navigated the laptop she'd found. Conrad would be okay, she told herself. He was with the wolves—they could handle themselves. Right now, her focus was on getting what she could get off this computer.

Aunt Heather had surprised her with a tech-savvy turn... it seemed she'd been spending her retirement doing more than just cooking. After the morning's revelations, her aunt had wasted no time in reflection, barely seeming surprised that her sister-in-law had been a shapeshifting dragon, or that her niece was one too. But she had been very, very interested in what they planned to do once they broke into whatever headquarters the prisoner led them to. She'd headed into the study, returning after some time with a couple of USB thumbsticks, some sleek black hard drives, and a couple of cables. The explanation had been utterly lost on Mira, but the instructions were very clear. Find a computer, turn it on, check it was connected to a network... then put in the thumbstick and let it do its work.

She had no idea what was happening—whatever program her aunt had put on the thumbstick may as well have been a magical spell, though Heather had laughed at that, saying it was simpler than she'd think, that there were plenty of websites with helpful instructions. Now, Mira reflected that she was very glad never to have made an enemy of her aunt, watching the laptop screen as file after file was downloaded onto the hard drive she'd also plugged into the device. She'd opened a few, just to check what she was stealing. The files were packed with information... photos, screenshots of social media pages, even birth certificates and government records. She saw several family trees, with various names circled, crossed out, or highlighted in bright colors. What any of it meant was beyond her—but that didn't matter right now. This

was a smash-and-grab operation. Get in, get the information, get out.

Sooner, rather than later. She could hear noise from where Conrad and Vee had run off, and was just hoping it was positive chaos, whatever it was. She was listening intently to the rest of the building. Quiet as it was, she knew they'd be fools not to assume that there were security guards on their way. It was only a matter of time.

And sure enough, just as her anxiety was reaching a critical point, she heard the sound of footsteps and low voices coming from the front of the building. Catching her breath, she slammed the laptop shut and unplugged her devices as quickly as she could—however much she'd gotten would have to be enough. Time to get out of here.

She wasn't expecting the sight that greeted her when she found where Conrad and Vee had gotten to. A huddled group of worried-looking people turned as one as she appeared in the doorway, expressions of fear on their faces—she heard Ren bark a quick reassurance that she was one of them, hastening to her side. She took in the scene quickly—the gaunt faces, the wounded wrists—and behind them, the familiar shape of a great dragon, his talons outstretched. A young man was carefully filing through a metal band that was tight on his wrist, and as she watched, it dropped to the ground, its owner uttering a sigh of relief as he flexed the hand it had been attached to.

“Guards on their way,” Mira said, taking in the destruction around them. So much for keeping a low profile, she thought faintly... they'd definitely know they'd been hit. But these were clearly prison cells. Her heart was racing. “Is this everyone?”

“Everyone here,” an older woman said, stepping forward. She had pale yellow eyes the color of sand, and a deep, angry bruise on the side of her face. “But there are other sites.”

A look of relief on Ren's face, quick as blinking. Mira could see that Vee was standing with her arm around a young man... but Ren didn't seem to have found his own mate among the freed prisoners. But before she could ask any more questions, there was a sudden crash behind her, and Vee bellowed a warning. Mira felt a flare of that strange, half-familiar magic tingle across her skin, and she moved forward faster than she thought she was able. Behind her, the man who'd been about to grab her swore and stumbled.

More men poured into the room, and Mira turned to face them, instinctively positioning herself between the men and the freed prisoners. The tallest of them stepped forward, and that familiar sneer made her catch her breath. Heather's prisoner.

"You have a lot of nerve, coming here," he said, narrowing his eyes and spitting that insult that had made Conrad so angry. She heard him hiss behind her, still dragon-shaped... but the men in front of her didn't seem cowed. She scanned their ranks, feeling ice in her gut as she realized they were all holding guns. "Surrender now, or we'll open fire on these half-breeds."

He meant it, she realized, a chill running down her spine. He spoke so dispassionately, as though he was talking about exterminating insects, not people. What had he called them? It didn't matter, she realized, her heart pounding in her chest. There was about to be a bloodbath if she didn't surrender, right now...

But then there was an odd crackling in the air. The men masked it well, but she could see the shock on some of their faces, unease as they lifted their guns. She chanced a quick look behind her, and her heart leaped into her throat. At least a dozen wolves, a handful of coyotes, even a sleek black panther that was uttering a low, frightening growl. And rearing up onto its hind legs in the midst of the group, impossibly tall, was a grizzly bear, larger in the flesh than anything she'd ever seen on TV.

The leader's lip curled with disgust. She saw him raise his hand, knew that he was about to give the order to fire. Time slowed to a crawl. She'd only shifted once... she wasn't even sure she knew how to do it again. But there was no other choice, was there? And with that realization came a cool, calm clarity. She felt her wings spread, felt her great body filling the space between the armed men and the menagerie of shifters. And she roared her defiance, a brassy bugle that seemed loud enough to tear down the whole building.

A few of the men managed to shoot. She felt the bullets glance off her scales, the impact painful, but only in the way that a punch to the shoulder was painful... nothing she couldn't shrug off. And the men only had a few seconds to shoot at Mira before the surge of angry shifters hit them like a truck. She felt Conrad move up beside her, incredibly agile even in such a confined space, his forelegs and even his tail lashing out to send the men flying, knocking guns out of their hands.

More men were coming, but the crowded space worked to the shifters' advantage—they could only file in one at a time, and the vengeful shifters made short work of each new soldier, jaws snapping and claws tearing at armored bodies. Before long, the men were retreating in a panic, shouting at each other as they fled. The shifters pursued, spilling through the dingy warehouse, knocking furniture flying. By the time they'd reached the front door of the building, the building behind them was all but destroyed... Mira glanced over her shoulder, grateful she'd done what she'd come here to do already. Right now, a person would be hard pressed to find a computer that hadn't been smashed.

The humans were running back and forth in a panic, piling into vans and shouting at each other. She could see a lot of injuries and was worried for a moment that this might be about to turn into a pretty horrible scene... but the shifters were pulling back, letting the humans retreat. A wave of relief washed over her. They'd all have been well within their rights to seek revenge on the men who'd imprisoned them. Ren and

Vee's pack alone had likely been there for more than a month, and who knew how long everyone else had? But instead, they'd chosen mercy. She watched the vans skid away into the night, taking the last of the men with them. Then with a start, she realized she was still dragon-shaped. Strange, how comfortable she felt in this shape she'd barely spent an hour in. It almost felt like a shame to return to her two-legged form.

Strangely anticlimactic, the end of the evening. The shifters they'd freed left one by one, some of them murmuring their thanks or promising to stay in touch. Eventually, only a handful of wolves remained. Two new faces, the green-haired young man and a hard-eyed girl with tattoos covering the right-hand side of her face. Arrow, Vee's mate, and the other young woman was Brie... but Ren shook his head hard when Mira opened her mouth to ask the obvious question.

"There are other facilities," she said, fighting off the weariness. "We'll find her, I promise."

"You've done enough," Ren said softly. He wasn't rebuffing her help—there was genuine gratitude in his eyes. "At least for tonight, Mira. Get some rest."

"You too," she said, feeling oddly emotional at the prospect of parting ways. They'd known each other for barely a day... why did she already feel closer to them than half of the friends she'd known for years? Because you actually showed them who you are, she heard her inner voice murmur. That voice was louder, lately. "Stay in touch, yeah?"

"Of course." Vee smiled and hugged her... and she yelped in surprise when she felt the other wolves pile into the hug, too, almost crushing her with the force of it. Conrad was laughing for a moment, but that changed when he, too, was hauled into the dogpile.

The wolves dropped Mira and Conrad home—it was a tight squeeze now in the truck, but neither of them minded. The truck pulled off with a squeal of rubber, and she watched it go, smiling faintly and hoping it would at least get them all home before some part of the machine gave out entirely. It felt

strange to be home. She lingered on the front doorstep, feeling uneasy about the prospect of even going inside.

Then Conrad was behind her, and she remembered the feeling of her wings spreading, remembered that at any moment she could transform into a twenty-foot lizard with razor-sharp claws and a mouth full of fangs. Nothing could be hiding in her house that was scarier than that, could it? With a grin, she let them both in through the front door. Strange, how little had changed in here. Somehow, she'd expected the whole place to be trashed—but it seemed their attackers had given up pretty quickly once Conrad had mounted his daring rescue.

“Are you alright?” Those blue eyes on her, always watchful. She smiled, reaching out to grab his hand and pull him closer.

“I am more alright than I've been in a long time,” she told him, squeezing his hands in hers. “Are you alright?”

A faint smile. “Yes.”

“Would you tell me if you weren't?”

“Probably.” A moment's hesitation. “Perhaps a little homesick, if I were looking for a complaint to make.”

“Of course you are.” She wrapped her arms around him and smiled as he hugged her back, feeling herself dissolve into the warmth of him... “That can be our next project, getting you home.” That reminded her... they weren't quite done with their current project, were they? She bustled into her room to grab her laptop, setting it up on the coffee table. Conrad settled onto the couch behind her, dropping his head back against the backrest with a soft sigh.

She'd really only intended to check the drives to see how much information they'd gotten away with, that was all. But once she'd gotten the machine set up and started clicking through the files, she found herself entranced... and before she knew it, Conrad was fast asleep on the couch behind her, and she was wide awake, lost in the wealth of information she'd stolen. She dragged herself away from the screen just long

enough to shoot a quick text to Heather, letting her know that everyone was safe—and that whatever magic she'd worked with the thumbsticks had worked a treat.

And by the time the sun rose, a bleary-eyed Mira shut the screen of her laptop with a soft click. The sound roused Conrad, who stirred a little on the couch behind her, murmuring a sleepy question.

“What'd you find out?”

“Everything,” she said softly. “I know everything.”

Chapter 26 - Conrad

He felt a little guilty for falling asleep on the couch while Mira was still researching, but when he woke to find her still hunched over the laptop as the dawn gradually began to lighten the room, he knew from the look on her face that it would have been pointless to try and coax her to come to bed with him. When a Virgo was on a mission like this one, there was nothing that would stand in her way... hadn't she proven that back at the warehouse? He grinned to himself at the thought, wondering if the news had spread through the organization about what had happened to their headquarters. He hoped so. Remembering the fear on the faces of those shifters, the awful burn marks on their wrists from protracted exposure to silver, he hoped each and every one of those men was suffering enormously today.

Mira began to fill him in on what she'd learned from the computer as the sky steadily brightened. He listened, curiosity quickly giving way to shock at the extent not only of what she'd managed to steal from their computers... but of what she'd learned about the organization. They'd had a few pieces of it right already, as had the wolves. The attacks were all connected, organized by the same shadowy organization, and they were targeting shifters. As for why some shifters were captured but not others...

"It's some kind of weird eugenics thing," Mira explained, sounding disgusted by what she'd read. "I found their manifesto and some of their so-called research materials—even I could tell that it was mostly crap. I didn't bother with much of it. They call themselves Purists, which ... yuck." A roll of those gorgeous golden eyes. "But basically, they think shifters and humans should stay away from each other. Not that they're *prejudiced*, of course," she added with another theatrical eye roll. "But given that it's mostly humans in the organization, you can kind of guess how they feel about shifters."

“And that’s why they’ve been kidnapping them?”

“Yeah, that’s the thing. Remember when Vee and Ren were telling us about their parents? That’s why the Purists let them go. The rest of their pack had mixed heritage, human and shifter, so they kept them.”

“What were they going to do with them?” Conrad wanted to know, feeling an uneasy weight in his stomach at the idea of the shifters he’d met last night being held prisoner because of their parentage. “Did they plan to kill them?”

“I don’t know,” Mira said, frowning at the screen. “A bunch of these files is encrypted, and I got interrupted before I could get everything. But this is still useful stuff. I have to get it to Vee and the others, get them to spread it to their networks, warn all the shifters in the city that these guys are around... they’re in other states, too,” she added, tabbing into another window and showing him a map. “They’ve got headquarters all over.”

He blinked at the map, mystified. “I thought only a handful of humans knew about shifters.”

“It’s like Vee said, I guess. The Internet makes it hard to keep a secret... and I doubt you’re the only dragon who’s ever gone flying in the sight of humans. The word must’ve gotten out somehow.” She sighed, scrolling through the file she had open. “It’s pretty awful stuff, Conrad. Doesn’t make me feel super proud of my human half.”

“Your human half helped us free more than twenty trapped shifters from these guys,” he pointed out. “Your human aunt was instrumental, too.”

“My human aunt,” she echoed with a tired grin. “She’ll like that.”

He blanched. “Please don’t tell her I called her that.”

“Relax.” Mira’s smile widened. “She likes you.”

“Not for long, if she knows I call her The Human Aunt.” He nodded at the long list of files that Mira was

scrolling through. “Did you find your mother?”

“Yes,” she said quietly. His heart leaped into his throat... but her voice was small and she wasn’t looking back around at him, so he forced himself to stay quiet. She’d tell him when she was good and ready... and finally, she spoke again. “She’s dead. She died a few weeks after we left, from the dates in her file.”

“I’m sorry,” Conrad said softly, reaching out to put his hand on her shoulder. She didn’t look around, but she did reach up and hold his fingers, just loosely.

“They were coming for me.” Her voice was bleak. “That’s their move, sometimes... they find shifter-human couples who have kids, turn up and offer to spare the lives of the parents if they’ll agree to sending their children away with the Purists. I don’t know what they do with them then,” she added, gesturing to the file. “A bunch of redacted mentions of some facility somewhere... I don’t want to know. Anyway, Mom tricked them. She pretended to call Dad to tell him to bring me to them, acted like she was playing along, went with them back to their base as a prisoner. Told them that he’d do it, that the soulmate bond was stronger than the love for a child.”

Conrad could feel his heart pounding sickly in his chest, horrified by where the story might be headed. “But she hadn’t called your dad.”

“Of course not. They must have known,” she said softly. “They must have known these guys were out there, they must’ve had a plan in place for if they turned up. The way Dad just... packed up our stuff and went, no hesitation. They’d talked about it.”

“So she was their prisoner. And then...”

“They kept her for a few weeks. She was buying me and Dad time to get away, saying that he’d come soon, that he was probably just fighting with his own guilt about me...” She nodded to the screen. “There’s lots of statements from the guys who were guarding her saying how convincing she was. And

then, when she could sense they were out of patience, she broke out of her cell. Destroyed half the facility—they were still using paper records back then, and somehow she managed to set a bunch of them on fire.” He could hear tears in her voice. “She—she destroyed all mention of us. They were furious, because they didn’t know where to start looking for me and Dad. They brought her down with silver, eventually.” She let out a shuddering breath. “She died to keep us safe. He must have known.”

“Soulmates know,” Conrad said softly. “He’d have felt it, when she...”

Mira uttered a hoarse little sob, and then she was in his arms, face buried against his chest. He held her close, pressing kiss after kiss to the top of her head while she cried. Eventually, the sobs faded, and a solemn silence returned to the living room, incongruously bright with the morning sunlight.

“Is it weird, that I feel better?”

“Not at all.”

“Knowing that my mom’s dead shouldn’t make me feel better.”

“You understand what happened now,” he said softly, squeezing her shoulder. “You can see the whole picture. It’s still a tragedy, but it’s a tragedy that you can understand. That’s easier to make peace with than a mystery.” He couldn’t help but think of his friends back home with another pang of guilt. What if he was the mystery they couldn’t make peace with? What if he never saw any of them again?

“Conrad?” Her voice was very small. “Should we go to bed?”

He smiled, rising to his feet and pulling her with him. She stumbled a little, then uttered an enormous yawn that was just about the cutest thing he’d ever seen. Was it really fair to expect him not to lean down and kiss her? She protested briefly, pulling away to inform him that she hadn’t slept, that

she looked a mess... but when he kissed her again, softer and sweeter this time, he could feel her reaching up on her tiptoes to deepen the kiss. This time when they parted, they were both a little breathless, and there was a glint in her golden eyes that sent a jolt of arousal arcing through his body.

“I thought you wanted to go to bed,” he murmured, leaning in to let his lips brush against her ear. He could tell from the way she shivered at his touch that she felt what he felt, exhaustion or no exhaustion.

“I did say bed,” Mira said, and Conrad could have drowned in those golden eyes and been happy about it. “I don’t think I said anything about sleep.”

Chapter 27 - Mira

They fell into bed together, and all of the exhaustion of the last few days couldn't have been further from her mind as she felt Conrad's hands roam possessively across her body, almost tearing her clothes in his urgency to get them off her. That sent a curious jolt of arousal through her. She hadn't seen this side of him before... the side of him that was a hair's breadth from losing control, the dark, animalistic glint in his eyes as they roamed possessively across her body. She lay back against the pillow and welcomed his staring, lifting her arms above her head to give him a full view, arching an eyebrow in a silent challenge.

He gazed at her for a long, frozen moment, and the look in his eye couldn't be called anything other than worship. Then he was on top of her again, his breath scorching against her skin, his hands roaming freely across her body and lighting fires everywhere they went. It was like he'd been taking notes of exactly what felt best every time he'd touched her. Her friends had been right, she thought faintly, arching her back against the bed and pressing her breasts into Conrad's eager hands. Sex really did only get better after the first time... not that her first time hadn't been absolutely amazing, too. She might have left losing her virginity a little late—people made jokes about forty-year-old virgins all the time, didn't they?

But then again, those timeframes didn't really apply to her, did they? She was a dragon, not a human. It didn't matter either way, she decided. Human or dragon or something else entirely, if it meant her first time was with Conrad, she'd have waited another hundred years if necessary. He was just... he was it, wasn't he? He was kissing her lips, sweet and urgent as his hands roamed steadily lower, and she broke away for a moment, looking into his eyes with a helpless little smile on her face. He tilted his head, breathless.

“What is it?”

“You,” she said softly, shaking her head. “I just—it’s you. You’re ... you’re the only person I’ve ever—the only person I think I could ever...” She bit her lip, panic suddenly setting in, freezing her solid. This was too much, wasn’t it? She was doing that thing she’d always sworn she’d never do, plunging in, committing herself recklessly to someone... but Conrad was looking at her closely, something cryptic in his eyes.

“You know that shifters have soulmates,” he said after a pause, clearly working hard to choose the right words in the face of the distraction offered by her naked body... he wasn’t alone in that, she thought faintly, fighting the urge to let her eyes roam downwards. “One destined partner in life, one person who is simply... it. Once you meet them, you know.”

She held his eyes, hardly daring to breathe. “You know?”

“You know who they are to you. That’s what everyone always told me, my whole life. When you meet her... you’ll know.” He looked down at her, his blue eyes full of more feeling than she’d ever seen there. “And then I met you, Mira. And I did.”

Soulmate, she thought faintly. One lover, one person for the rest of her life... she thought of her childhood manifesto, her rigorous list of non-negotiable qualities in a lover. She thought of the strict timeline upon which commitment would operate. And then she felt a blissful smile break out across her face. “So did I,” she told him, stunned by how simple it was, how easy. She’d known, hadn’t she? Even in dreams, she’d known he was the love of her life. Why bother fighting that? Why bother pretending it wasn’t true? “I loved you the minute we met, Conrad. Soulmate, partner, whatever you call it, it’s you.”

And then he was kissing her again, and she could feel tears of joy spilling down her cheeks. She laughed breathlessly as he kissed them away, not feeling even a hint of self-consciousness. Why would she? He was her soulmate... that

word just kept unlocking more and more of her heart, joy spilling out of it with every beat. Conrad pulled the blankets over them both and drew her down into his embrace, his kisses growing scorching hot as he mouthed a possessive trail down her throat and across her chest, nibbling at first one nipple and then the other, his hand parting her thighs at the same time and then resting with teasing obstinacy just a few inches from where she wanted it... with an impatient growl, she rocked her hips and hummed approval as his fingers, obligingly, began to stroke her. The combination of his lips on her breasts and his hand between her thighs had her gasping and twitching in no time at all, her body quivering as her pleasure built and built...

 Tempting, to simply lay here and have pleasure drawn from her body by his expert hands. But curiosity about his body had been building in her since that first night together, and she shifted her weight after a few moments, rearranging their positions until he was lying on his back with her straddling him. His eyes gleamed with desire in the dark beneath the blankets, and for a moment she was tempted to simply lower herself onto his manhood, to feel the exquisite friction of her body engulfing him... but she resisted that temptation. Instead, she kissed his broad, muscular chest, drawing a soft huff of surprise and delight... and as she began to trail her way lower, she felt his breath beginning to come more sharply. It stopped altogether when she took the tip of his straining cock between her fingers, caressing it ever so gently as she let the heat of her breath ghost across it—he groaned her name, half question, half desperate entreaty.

 She lingered there for a moment, enjoying the way he whimpered and twitched beneath her. The power of it... no wonder so many of her friends bragged about how much they liked doing this. She'd never understood it before. But when she lowered her head to brush the head of his cock with her tongue, the way he arched his back and moaned beneath her was almost as enjoyable as the caress of his hands in her most intimate places. And so she explored, setting her own pace, lazy and teasing and knowing without question that Conrad

was enjoying absolutely every second of it. When she drew most of the length of him into her mouth, she heard him whispering words she'd never heard before... and she grinned to herself, resolving to ask him what they meant a little later, when her mouth wasn't otherwise occupied...

But soon enough, her own body was crying out for attention. Cruel of her, really, to neglect her own desires... her lust seemed to have grown tenfold while she pleased him, driven on by the sound of his gasping and moaning, by the sensation of his hard cock against her lips and tongue. Reckless, aching for him, she flattened her palms against his chest as she straddled his hips again. She held his dark-eyed gaze as she impaled herself on his waiting manhood, feeling him slide effortlessly into the heat of her sex, a spasm of pleasure rocketing through her as her body welcomed his like an old friend.

They moved together then, his hands gripping her hips tightly, her nails digging gently into his chest as she pressed against him for leverage. At this angle, every tiny movement of her hips brought a slightly different sensation, the head of him probing at every sensitive spot deep inside of her... every angle unique, but united in the work it did of driving her ever closer to climax. It was almost embarrassing, how quickly she found herself approaching that edge... part of her had wanted to hold off, to tease him here the way she'd teased him with her hips and tongue. But her body wasn't having it. There had been enough holding back, enough lingering... now, her body seemed to say, the two of them were going where they were going in as straight a line as possible.

Conrad wasn't far behind—she could tell by the way he was biting his lip, his hands clenching hard around her hips as he fought to hold back the wave of his pleasure. Seeing that, knowing how hard he was working to stop his desire for her from overwhelming him... somehow, that was what pushed her past the point of no return. She whimpered his name, hands digging into the muscles of his chest as she felt the tension finally give way, blasting through her body so

powerfully that it almost overwhelmed her. Conrad was groaning her name as he came too, each thrust of his hips driving aftershocks of pleasure through her, extending their pleasure until they were utterly, utterly spent.

And only then, in a sweaty tangle of her soulmate's limbs, did Mira finally let herself fall asleep.

It was almost sunset when she woke. She was amused to realize, through the thick haze of sleepiness, that neither of them had moved at all—her limbs were stiff when she extricated herself from his embrace, and she pressed an apologetic kiss to the side of his head when he groaned a protest. She pulled some pajamas out of her cabinet and dressed herself enough to ward off the cool air as she padded into the kitchen for a glass of water.

But when she got back, she froze in the doorway. For a moment, she thought there was something wrong with her eyes. The area in front of her dresser was shifting and warping, and it was only when she'd blinked a few dozen times to no effect that she acknowledged that it was really there. It had woken Conrad, whatever it was—she could see him staring at it, his blue eyes wide with surprise and what was unmistakably recognition. Her mind still blurry with sleep, she wondered if it was some kind of dragon-specific experience. But then, as she watched him hurriedly pull his clothes on, she put a few more of the pieces together.

“Is this—your friends, back home? Is this a portal?”

“It could be,” he said hoarsely, buttoning his shirt up and stepping quickly into his shoes. Then he stood in front of the shifting, swirling mass. It looked a little like a gray mist, but denser somehow, more solid without actually being solid, moving more like liquid without seeming at all wet... her head began to spin the harder she looked at it, and she averted her gaze, looking up at Conrad instead.

“This means you can get home,” she whispered, feeling elated for him. He'd mentioned his homesickness enough that she knew it was weighing on him—and as much

as she'd appreciated him being here, she knew that he'd have to go home sometime.

“Come with me.” His blue eyes were bright with joy as he reached for her hand, and she took it automatically, blinking up at him in surprise at the suggestion. “I mean it. Come and meet my friends, explore the Palace... you'll love it there, Mira.”

She hesitated. She could use a holiday from just about her whole life, after everything that had just happened... but as the portal before them began to shift and coalesce, figures coming into greater focus on its surface, she felt a sudden lurch of unease. What about the wolves she'd just met? What about their still-missing pack member? What about all the information about the Purists she'd managed to steal, that she was yet to get out into the shifter community? Those guys were still out there... and they were probably furious that their building had been attacked. Was she really just going to disappear through a magic portal and let their wrath fall on the rest of the shifters of this area?

She couldn't do it, she realized. Not even for the man standing before her, a man she loved with all her heart. He may have been her soulmate... but even her soulmate couldn't ask her to abandon her responsibilities at the drop of a hat.

“I can't,” she whispered, turning to him with her eyes full of tears. “I can't just leave everything here, Conrad.”

“Then I'll stay,” he said immediately. “I'll stay here, I'll—I won't go. I'll...”

“No,” she said, feeling her heart breaking even as she said it. “No, Conrad. Your home, your work, your friends and family... they're as important to you as mine are to me. I won't let you give that up just to be with me.” She lifted her chin, fought back tears. “You go home. Just—come back soon, okay?”

He looked at her for a long moment, clearly fighting with himself... but she knew, even as she spoke, what his

response would be. He nodded slowly, unwillingly, his expression conflicted. Then, his voice halting: “I understand. But... Mira, I don’t know when I’ll see you again. This portal... it could be the last for a long time.” Her heart sank. It hadn’t occurred to her that this portal situation might be unpredictable. Conrad grabbed her hands in his and kissed each of them in turn, his blue eyes serious. “I promise you, Mira, I will do everything I can, every single day, to make my way back to you as soon as I can.”

She hesitated, biting her lip, suddenly worried that she had made the wrong choice. But then the portal warped again, and there were unfamiliar voices shouting Conrad’s name. There, on the surface of the shifting gray liquid... It was as though a doorway had opened, showing a slightly blurry image of two people in unfamiliar clothing. They waved furiously as they called Conrad’s name. She could already see the portal’s edges wobbling, and she remembered Conrad telling her how quickly the one that had brought him here had disappeared. They only had seconds. Should she go with him? Should she be reckless, leave everything here behind her, throw her life away to follow her lover?

Conrad stooped to kiss her, sweet and fierce, a kiss that chased every last thought from her mind.

“I love you,” he told her. And before she could even open her mouth to tell him to wait, that she’d changed her mind... he stepped through the portal. The last glimpse she caught of him was his hand raised in farewell, those blue eyes of his full of determination. And then the portal was gone, leaving her standing alone in her bedroom again, utterly shell-shocked.

He was gone. After the most intense, revelatory, life-changing week she’d ever experienced, he was simply gone. She wandered into the living room, too shell-shocked to even cry the tears that were building up in her eyes. She’d cry later. Right now, all she could do was sit on the couch and wonder if she’d just made the biggest mistake of her life.

Chapter 28 - Conrad

“Are you ready?”

Conrad nodded, not bothering to hide his impatience. That won a smile from Lana. Ever since he'd come back from the other world, she'd told him, he'd been a lot more honest with his emotions... a lot easier to get a read on. It made him feel oddly vulnerable, but at the same time, he was glad. There was something to be said for letting the people close to you know the truth about how you were feeling.

“Of course he's ready,” Cato said impatiently. “Poor guy hasn't seen his soulmate for six weeks, I'd be losing my mind. I hate not seeing Acantha for six *minutes*.”

They were in the forest again, where the Fog was thickest, preparing to open another portal through to the other world. Cato was absolutely right... these had been the longest six weeks of his life, bar none. As grateful as he'd been to get home, and as glad as he'd been to reassure his friends that he was safe, from the moment that first portal had closed behind him, all he'd been able to think about was seeing Mira again. He spent most of that first day agonizing about whether it had been a mistake to leave her behind. Should he have just stayed with her? Or should he have fought harder to convince her to come with him? But the more he thought about it, the more he knew that this was the only option. And that night, as if to confirm his convictions, he'd seen her in his dreams again. It was her, he just knew it... and though their reunion was tearful and bittersweet, he woke the next morning full of hope.

She was waiting for him. All he had to do was find his way back there.

Cato, Lana, and even the Archivists had been hard at work in his absence, working around the clock on improving her ability to manifest portals. The work had been slowed somewhat by how much it affected her—after the first portal that had taken him through to Mira's world, Lana had almost

passed out, and Cato had had to support her out of the forest and call for help from a passing patrol of wolves. It had taken them almost six months for Lana to develop the resilience and the skill to create the portal that had brought him home.

He'd been shocked to learn it had been so long. But he supposed it made sense, that the passage of time worked differently in their two worlds. He and Mira had tried to figure out how long they'd been dreaming about each other, and they'd kept drawing a blank when they'd compared dreams both of them remembered. Sometimes there were weeks or months between dreams for Conrad, where Mira reported only a few days passing... and sometimes the opposite was true.

That was part of the anxiety weighing on him now, as Lana prepared herself to attempt another portal—how much time had passed in Mira's world? He'd described his soulmate's house in as much detail as he could, hoping that would help Lana form a stronger connection. And he knew what he was going to say when he arrived. He'd tell her that he loved her, that the only thing he wanted was to be with her. He'd said his goodbyes here, wrapped up his royal duties with an extended leave of absence... everything was in place for him to join her in her world for as long as she wanted to remain there. Forever, if necessary.

“Are you sure about this?” Lana asked him, her eyes serious. “I mean... it's a rough world, over there.”

He straightened his shoulders and nodded. “You know I'll miss you all,” he said softly, his voice cracking a little. “But...”

“We understand,” Cato said with uncharacteristic softness. “All the best, Prince Conrad. Really.”

And with that, he heard Lana take a deep breath, then exhale hard, her breath stirring the Fog... which kept moving, faster and faster, whirling into a familiar shape before him. There—he caught his breath—there was a familiar living room. He laughed aloud, realizing that the furniture had been

rearranged. Then, with one last look at Lana, he stepped through.

She hit him almost before he'd set foot on the ground, holding him so tightly that the air rushed out of him. Her curly hair, her golden eyes, that unbelievable smile—he was so happy to see her that he almost couldn't make out what she was saying to him.

“Quick!” she said, frustration snapping in her voice. Conrad was confused, but he knew an order when he heard one. He followed the tugging of her hand, and there was a strange lurching, and then the sounds of surprised voices. The portal vanished... and Conrad blinked to find himself standing in the forest again, Cato and Lana both staring at him with shock.

No, he realized. Not staring at him. Staring at Mira... who was standing next to him, holding his hand tightly in hers.

“You must be Queen Lana,” he heard her say, sketching an odd little bow to the Queen. “My name is Mira. It's an honor to meet you.”

“The honor's all mine,” Lana said, lifting an eyebrow. “Your Draconic is incredible. Conrad told me you were a quick study, but...”

“I had a good teacher,” she said, flashing him a smile. He tried to catch up.

“Mira, you—we—I was going to stay with you,” he said faintly. He'd had a whole speech prepared and everything. But Mira shook her head impatiently.

“Absolutely not. I've spent the last year preparing for a long stay with you—assuming the invitation you extended is still valid?” she added, glancing at the Queen, who nodded so quickly it was a wonder she didn't displace her crown. “Vee's pack has moved into my place, Heather's running the information network now from her secure server—remind me to tell you about the information network later,” she added, her

eyes twinkling. “And I’ve let all my favorite clients know I’m taking an extended leave of absence from work.”

“Did you say a year?” Cato interrupted. Presumptuous of the mage, but Conrad appreciated the breathing room. “It’s only been six weeks on this side. That’s fascinating. I’m Cato, by the way.”

“Mira. Pleasure to meet you.”

“You’re here,” Conrad said finally, feeling like he was about to pass out. “You’re—you’re here, you’re staying.”

“I’d like to,” she said softly. “I’ve missed you so much, Conrad. Every single day, I’ve been looking forward to seeing you again. As nice as the dreams were,” she added, eyes twinkling, “I much prefer the real thing.”

It didn’t feel real. Not when the four of them were flying back towards the mountain where they made their home, taking a scenic, circuitous route there to give Mira a more thorough look at the landscape below. Not when he introduced her formally to the court in the Throne Room, Lana declaring her an official honored guest of the Palace, and permanent resident if she should so choose... though of course, it was likely that the two would make regular trips back to the other world, especially as their understanding of travel between the worlds grew. He especially didn’t believe it when Mira was all but pinned down by Arric and Hartwell, who were both so eager to interrogate her about the other world that he was genuinely concerned they both might pass out.

But then he finally got her back to his chambers and closed the door behind them... and when she melted into his arms, he knew for sure that she was really here.

They talked, then, for hours. All night, he’d been expecting to simply lose control and tear her clothes off the minute they got each other alone... but it was her voice he wanted the most, at the end of the day. She told him all about the long year that had passed without him, about how much

she'd missed him, about how hard she'd worked to make sure that she was ready to join him the instant she got the chance.

"I did the same thing," Conrad said faintly. "I was ready to come to your world and never return..."

"Not until you speak a little more of the language, I think," Mira said frankly, her eyes twinkling affectionately. They were lying in his enormous bed together, and he'd never appreciated the enormous expanse of it more than he did when Mira had voiced her hearty approval. "Besides, you stayed with me last time. It's my turn to be the special guest."

"I won't argue," he said softly, leaning over to kiss her. "Wherever you are, that's where I want to be."

She told him about the wolves, about the fast friendship she'd developed with their pack. They'd formed a kind of unofficial alliance of shifters with a few of the ones they'd freed from the Purists, which quickly became an information network dedicated to spreading the word about that elusive enemy and the dangers they posed. A few weeks after that first attack, they'd finally tracked down the final member of the wolf pack... alive and well, to everyone's great relief, Conrad included.

"You should have seen Ren when we found her. I've never seen him so happy. Bouncing around like a kid... or like a puppy, I guess."

"And the organization is on the retreat?"

She sighed. "There's a lot of work still to do. Those records I stole go back decades... there are a lot of missing shifters to chase up. But there's a lot of shifters involved, now, and more every day. It's in safe hands there."

"I'm impressed," he said, glancing sidelong at her.

"With me?"

"Virgos aren't exactly known for being comfortable with relinquishing control."

“I have grown and evolved,” she said primly, tapping him on the shoulder. “I’m a new woman, I’ll have you know.”

“Are you now?” He kept his tone innocent, but the wicked smile that spread across her face told him that she’d caught his intent regardless. “I suppose I’ll have to find out.”

So much better than the dreams... it wasn’t long before they were wrapped in each other, all the pent-up longing of their separation adding urgency to their movements and fierce desperation to their kisses. Conrad explored her body as though it was the first time he’d ever touched her, every exquisite curve, the firm, ample flesh of her breasts, her waist, her butt... they’d made short work of their clothes early on, and he luxuriated in the touch of her skin against his, the delicious friction of their bodies sliding against each other in the cool night air. Her breath was hot against his throat as she kissed him everywhere she could reach, but his impatience drove him down her body with hot, messy kisses that made her shiver and gasp as he moved lower and lower.

The scent of her was intoxicating, the wet heat of her sex inviting him in, drawing him closer. He buried his face in her folds, smiling a little as she buried her hands in his hair and crushed his face even more deeply against her most intimate place. He needed no further encouragement to devour her, exploring every part of her as though for the first time, reminding himself of the places that made her gasp and whimper, the particular angles of his tongue that she liked the most, what exactly would make her shriek and tighten her hands in his hair... he lost himself in her utterly, in the delightful game of drawing her closer and closer to her climax without quite pushing her over. She was panting, writhing, gasping beneath him, her curly hair damp with sweat and her eyes absolutely wild with desire as she choked out his name like she was begging him for mercy.

“Please,” she breathed, catching his eyes when he pulled away from his work for just a moment. “Conrad, it’s been a whole year...”

The entreaty was almost enough to break his heart. How could any man in either world say no to a request like that? He kissed his way up her body, pausing only for a moment or two to tease at her nipples with his lips until she groaned such a heartfelt protest that he had to stop himself from laughing aloud. It wasn't as though he wasn't fending off some fairly powerful desperation of his own... his body had been aching for her since she'd first pressed her lips to his, and right now part of him was convinced that he might actually die if he couldn't have her, right this very instant...

But still, he lingered for just a moment before he pressed himself into her, leaning down to claim her lips in a kiss that he hoped was tender enough to remind her of just how much he adored her. Then he felt her legs wrap around his waist... and he almost lost control completely as he buried himself to the hilt inside of her. Every thrust of his hips seemed to bring more pleasure than he'd ever felt before, and his rhythm quickly grew frantic, her moans of ardent encouragement only spurring him on to greater and greater heights. A few times, he felt the great stone bedhead slam against the rocky wall behind them, and he hoped very much that the crack he could suddenly see in the ornate stonework had been there already....

Then Mira was uttering his name in a low, urgent voice... and in that moment, everything was utterly wiped from his mind except the orgasm that crashed over them both like a tidal wave.

Gasping for breath, alternating between panting and laughing, they held each other in the dizzy aftermath of their passion, breathing hard. Mira recovered a little quicker than he did, propping herself up on one elbow to gaze down at his face. He blinked dazedly up at her, well aware that he must look a mess... and not caring in the slightest. She loved him. The most wonderful woman he'd ever met loved him... and if she didn't care that he looked a mess, then neither did he.

"How are you even better than the dreams?" she murmured, stroking his chest with one finger. He felt a flush

rise to his cheeks, and suddenly his joy felt too enormous to express.

“You tell me,” he said softly, reaching up to kiss her. She leaned into the brush of his lips, falling into his arms like they’d been made for the express purpose of holding her.

No matter what happened, he knew that this was the most important thing in his life now... just this, lying here with her. If she wanted to back to her world, he’d go with her. If she wanted to stay, then he’d stay. For as long as he could remember, work and duty had been the most important things in his life. But that had been before he’d met the woman of his dreams. Tomorrow, they’d explore the Palace together. The day after that... who knew? His days of trying to control and predict the future were over. And Conrad couldn’t wait to see what kind of strange, surprising, exciting, brilliant future the two of them were going to find together.

THE END

About the Author

Kayla Wolf is a mom of two, an obsessive reader and a total sucker for paranormal romance. Sexy shifters, sassy women, steamy encounters, and dangerous enemies are the things that make her lie awake at night. Whenever she thinks about these things, she just has to get up and write about them immediately... Come on in, and spoil the beast in you.

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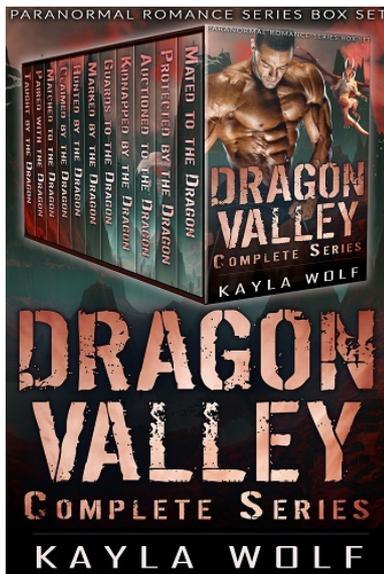
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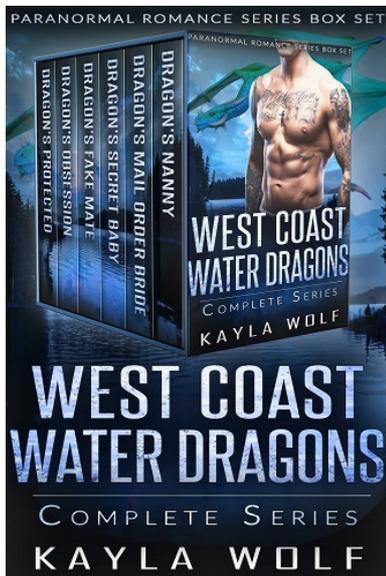
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Standalone books in the series:

[Dragon’s Nanny.](#)

[Dragon’s Mail Order Bride](#)

[**Dragon's Secret Baby**](#)

[**Dragon's Fake Mate**](#)

[**Dragon's Obsession**](#)

[**Dragon's Protected**](#)

The “West Coast Water Dragons” series is a spin-off of the “Dragon Valley” series.

* * *

“City of Dragons” Series

The City of Dragons is the place of your dreams. Red-hot dragons left, right, and center, waiting for you to explore the concrete jungle with them. Are you ready to enter this city of fantasy, where mates, magic, and more await?

[**Dragon King**](#)

[**Dragon Player**](#)

[**Dragon Prince**](#)

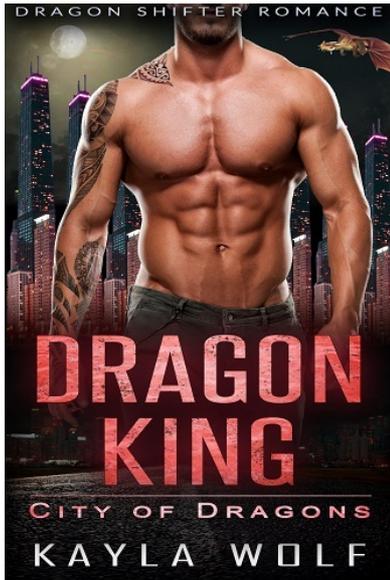
[**Dragon Mate**](#)

[**Dragon Billionaire**](#)

[**Dragon Roommate**](#)

[**Dragon Boss**](#)

Start reading book 1 of the “City of Dragons” series now:



* * *

Books by Mia Wolf:

“Silverdale Wolves” Series

Silverdale Wolves is a sizzling paranormal romance series where delicious wolf shifters compete for rank, respect and women. These strong males are possessive, demanding ... and very seductive. Once they've identified their mate, they won't allow anyone or anything to get in the way...

[Alpha's Mate](#)

[Wolf's Mate](#)

[Beta's Mate](#)

[Shifter's Mate](#)

* * *

“Menage Dating Agency for Shifters” Series

Have you ever wanted not just one, but two mates? Two hot shifters to claim you, protect you, and make you melt? Two guys to enjoy cool days, hot nights, and steamy encounters with? If your answer is a resounding yes (and let’s face it, why would it be a no?) then sign up for the Menage Dating Agency for Shifters and fulfill your wildest dreams and fantasies...

[Double Alphas](#)

[Double Pumas](#)

[Double Wolves](#)

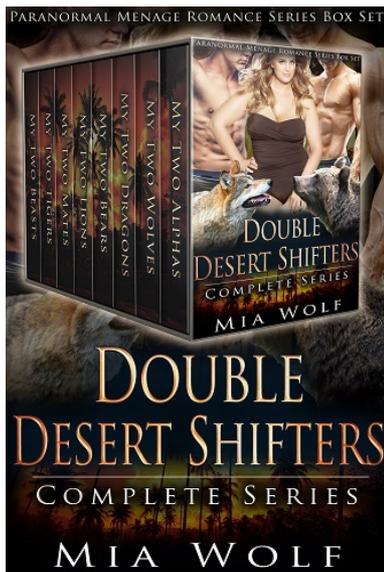
* * *

“Double Desert Shifters” Series

What if I told you that deep in the desert is a place that all women dream of? A place where every woman is loved by two men, and where curves are like a gift from the gods? Would you stay home? Or would you come with me to check out the Double Desert Shifters?

Double Desert Shifters is a paranormal menage romance series. The stories are standalones, each with a HEA.

[OUT NOW: Double Desert Shifters Complete Series](#) SAVE more than 70% compared to the standalone books



Standalone books in the series:

[My Two Alphas](#)

[My Two Wolves](#)

[My Two Dragons](#)

[My Two Bears](#)

[My Two Lions](#)

[My Two Mates](#)

[My Two Tigers](#)

[My Two Beasts](#)

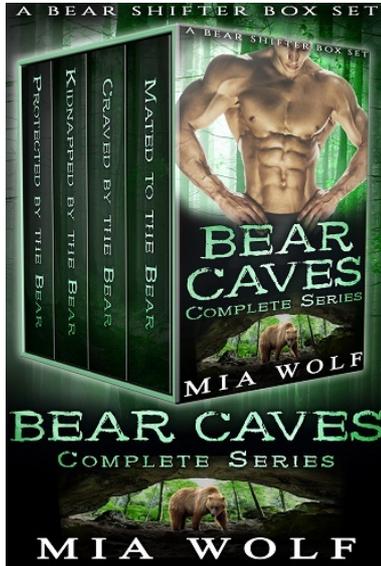
* * *

“Bear Caves” Series

Come visit the Bear Caves, a mysterious village where bear shifters live far removed from humans. This village, with its caves and its festivals houses not just any bears. No, it houses Very Sexy bears, who are not easy to please, but who will protect their mates with their lives without question.

The Bear Caves series consists of stand-alone stories that are connected through the bears who live in the village. Each story has a guaranteed satisfying HEA.

[OUT NOW: Bear Caves Complete Series](#) SAVE 25% compared to the standalone books



Standalone books in the series:

[Mated to the Bear](#)

[Craved by the Bear](#)

[Kidnapped by the Bear](#)

[Protected by the Bear](#)

* * *

[“Wolf Mountain” Series](#)

Come with me to Wolf Mountain, a village with hot, single wolves who are strong, muscled, and ... single. They don't need a mate. They don't want a mate. Until they meet the one they will die to protect...

Wolf Mountain is a paranormal romance series consisting of stand-alone stories, each with a HEA, that are connected

through the wolves who live in the village.

[Werewolf's Surrogate](#)

[Werewolf's Second Chance](#)

[Werewolf's Prisoner](#)

Start reading book 1 of the “Wolf Mountain” series now:

