



DRAGON  ROYALS

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Dragon Royals I

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CHAPTER ONE

H*onor*

IN MY WORLD, DRAGON SHIFTERS RULE. DRAGON SHIFTERS ARE always Royals. They're always male. And they're always assholes.

I have to obey if I want to survive.

But I don't have to like it, and I don't have to like *them*.

It was lunch time, and I was thinking about just how much I disdained the royals as I watched them from the balcony of Prince Jaik's room. I'd been cleaning his room when the noon bell tolled, and I hadn't hesitated to dump his dirty laundry in a pile by the door and head outside.

Red strands lashed my face until I raked them back into a ponytail, tying them with a leather thong from around my wrist. I needed that breeze after being up-close-and personal with the prince's laundry.

Prince Jaik was sword-fighting with one of the young dukes, Arren. Arren moved impossibly fast for a man so tall and muscled, his dark hair pulled taut from his chiseled features. Jaik's gorgeous cheekbones, wavy dark hair and tall posture in his dark uniform made him look impeccable.

But I knew better. The man's armpits stunk like any other's when he was done with a day of training.

That was what he—and the other dragon royals—were up to at the moment. The rest of the shifters at the academy had already melted away to lunch, but the five of them continued to banter and fight. Their swords rang against each other's, their muscles rippling and flexing under tanned skin. They

seemed to coordinate without ever saying a word, two of them attacking the other three, moving in fluid tandem.

They should stay shirtless like that forever.

And not just because it was easier on the laundry.

“Honor.” My friend, Calla, leaned across the opposite balcony, waving to catch my attention. “How did I know you’d be watching them?”

“I wish we could train too,” I said, before she could accuse me of having too much fun watching them.

I could enjoy the sight of the pretty men even if I didn’t have any respect for them. Not that they needed my respect; they had the adoration of an entire nation, because they stood between us and the Scourge.

“I know, I know. Come over here, I’ve got cake.”

I threw my sandwich back into my bag and tossed it over my shoulder, just as Calla hurriedly said, “Use the *door*; Honor. The hallway is your friend.”

I grinned back at her as I backed up and ran toward the balcony ledge. Calla backed up, shaking her head, until her back pressed the stone exterior of the building.

I jumped, got my balance on the edge of the railing, and leapt easily from one side to the other. In a second, I was beside Calla.

She sighed. “You scare me.”

“You’re still afraid of heights.”

She leaned over the railing, taking in the training yard far, far below. She was silhouetted against the shimmering lake and the blue outline of the mountains in the distance. “You don’t have to be afraid of heights to know that jumping balconies is a bad idea if you want to live until our first Shifting Moon.”

She was excited for our first shifting. I imagined that would be nice.

“Mm,” I said. “Maybe I don’t want to live long enough to find out my soul-creature is a field mouse.”

“What’s wrong with being a field mouse?” She raised both eyebrows at me, reminding me—too late—that Calla was from a proud family of chipmunks. Perhaps field mice and chipmunks were cousins in her eyes.

“Nothing,” I said, too late to be convincing.

“You want to be something fierce.” She put her hands up beside her face and imitated claws. It was adorable. It was charming. It was not remotely fierce.

“Hey, when you’re an orphan, the first shifting moon is an exciting gamble.” Although our soul-creatures were supposed to be manifestations of who we truly were, most times, they ran in families. Only males shifted into dragons, the highest of creatures, but their royal sisters tended to shift into lions or wolves.

And servants like Calla and me tended to be smaller, meeker, and far more edible.

“It’s an exciting gamble for everyone,” Calla reminded me. “Greta Sandstone discovered her real father was a hawk.”

I groaned. “What a terrible day.”

Greta had squawked and run away from the temple as if her true soul creature were an angry chicken.

One of the Royals whirled, throwing his sword—and a long, horned head and a powerful tail whipped out of his body as he grew long and scaled. The next second, his transformation was complete and he was an enormous dragon. He let out a long, blast of fire at the other royals, who threw up magical shields to block the attack and jumped over his wicked tail.

Their power was incredible, I had to admit. The Scourge had recently surged right outside the gates of the city. The royals had stopped them as the rest of the city cowered in their houses.

Calla propped her chin on her hand, forgetting to eat as she gazed at the royals. “You know, Lara got her hands on this *amazing* story being passed around about the dragon royals.”

“A true story?”

“No, it’s a fantasy. A romance. One of Lara’s cousins wrote it.”

I groaned. “Look at those men down there. They might be the heroes of the kingdom, but they are wildly arrogant. They’re probably terrible in bed.”

Calla looked considering. “They’re really good with those swords.”

“Don’t tell me you’ve fallen victim to their fan club, too.” I had regrets about being so condescending about the Royals’ fan-fiction now, because part of me was a little curious. Did they always have tails? Some Fae did, although our race of shifters looked more mortal than the Fae in the storybooks I’d read.

Ever since the Scourge began, our island had been sealed away from the rest of the Fae world. Storybooks were the only glimpse I’d had of the bigger world beyond.

“Come on,” Calla swept her arm toward the door. “We should get out of here. We’re not supposed to linger in their rooms once we’re done.”

The military students training here were apparently too precious to wash their own laundry or scrub the hallway floors. Worst of all, though, were the royals, who were too important to even clean their own rooms.

“But I like the view,” I pouted, then added, “of the mountains.”

I glanced down at the empty yard only to realize the royals had left the yard as we were chatting, and sudden disappointment dropped like a stone.

“Mm-hmm.” Calla gave me a knowing smile.

Maybe every girl in Rylow secretly dreamed of winning the heart of a dragon prince.

Maybe that was even true for me, even if I also fantasized about kicking their asses.

They were a pretty fine-looking group of men.

A voice in the hall called for Calla, summoning her out of the room, and Calla scrambled toward it. I grabbed half her handful of cake before she could go.

“You’re going to get in trouble,” she hissed at me.

“Is that a promise? Because I’m so very bored,” I answered, even though the truth was, I needed the money. Which meant I needed the job.

But that didn’t mean I wouldn’t defy the head housekeeper behind her back. I was an *uppity orphan*—as she’d informed me. Now I had a reputation to live up to.

“I’m going to work right through my lunch break because I’m such a diligent employee,” I added, and even though Calla’s back was to me as she bustled through the room toward the door, I could feel the eye-rolling vibe.

Carrying my cake in one hand, I leapt onto the balcony, then across. I strolled into the prince’s room, scattering crumbs as I ate my cake. I still had to mop the floors anyway.

Then the connecting door to the bath swung open.

Prince Jaik stepped out, wearing nothing but a towel wrapped around his waist. Beads of water trickled from his spreading shoulders down the most beautiful set of abs I’d ever seen.

He stopped dead, staring at me, now wearing both a towel *and* a frown.

“Hi, just finishing up tidying your room,” I said, flinging my arm to encompass the room—and flinging crumbs along with it.

A bit of frosting landed on the prince’s cheek. Pink frosting. It complemented his dark hair and furious amber eyes quite nicely.

“What are you doing in here?” he demanded. “Haven’t I requested my privacy?”

I was momentarily flummoxed. “Did you think the towels picked themselves up by magic? That the dirty clothes turned sentient at night and walked themselves to and from the laundry?”

“Oh, you’re a smartass, aren’t you?” He leaned in the doorway. “I’m sure the head housekeeper would love that.”

“And I’m sure no one loves a tattler tale.” I tapped my cheekbone with two fingers. “You’ve got a little something right there.”

He swiped and his fingers came away covered in pink frosting. “You’re not a very good housekeeper, are you?”

Funny, I’d heard some variation on that—usually with a lot more swearing—several times from the Head Housekeeper since taking this job. “Maybe I’m meant for something more.”

“Mm. What’s your name?”

Giving him my name seemed like a very bad idea. “Aren’t you supposed to be in class? I can take care of the floors while you’re off. It’s no trouble.”

His eyes blazed. “I don’t need you to tell me where I’m supposed to be.”

Oh god. Even those abs wouldn’t make up for his anger problems. Why are the beautiful men so often such bitches?

The bit of cake still in my hand was becoming a sticky distraction, and I didn’t know how else to get rid of it, so I stuck it in my mouth. I backed away from him, still chewing.

“What is wrong with you?” he demanded.

I had an awesome snarky response for that, but the words came out a bit jumbled and with a spray of crumbs.

“I’m sorry, what did you try to say to me?” He took a step forward to match each step I took backward, as if we were dancing.

I’ve never liked dancing.

I swallowed just as I stepped out onto the balcony. “Honestly, you’d think with all that power you wield, all the reverence you get from the common people, you wouldn’t be so *touchy*. How do you get your feelings hurt so easily?”

He took the next step forward a bit faster, and I turned and leapt onto the railing, then over to the next balcony.

We rotated who cleaned the princes’ rooms. I wouldn’t come up in the rotation for a week or two, and hopefully I’d embarrassed him enough that he wouldn’t *tattle* to the Head.

But probably, I was going to end up fired in the next hour.

I stopped and turned toward him. His eyes still blazed with anger, but he leaned against the railing opposite me.

“You’re awfully sure-footed for a servant.”

“And you’re awfully tender-feeling for a king,” I shot back.

I stuck my tongue out at him and sauntered into his friend’s room.

The second I was out of his sight, I ran through the room and careened out into the hallway.

But the prince didn’t chase me.



CHAPTER TWO

H*onor*

BY THE END OF THE DAY, I STILL HADN'T BEEN FIRED, WHICH was surprising, and a relief, and a disappointment, all at the same time. I needed this job, but that didn't mean I wanted it.

"Almost adequate work today, Honor." The Head Housekeeper said as I was stowing my cleaning equipment that afternoon in the bay. All around us, the dozen other maids that worked together to keep the academy spick-and-span were putting away mops and buckets and dusting cloths.

"Thank you, Head?" There was a question mark in my voice.

She sniffed, her wide nostrils flaring. We called her Head because it was short for Head Housekeeper. But *I* called her Head because her head was enormous, truly disproportionate to her slender body. She looked as if the weight of a hat might finally cause her neck to snap completely.

"When are you going to come stay at the dorm with us instead of just visiting?" Calla asked, tucking her arm through mine as we headed toward the showers. I preferred to clean up in the servants' dorm, because I never knew what kind of mood my stepmother was going to be in when I went home.

"Once I get Hanna settled in at school," I answered.

My father and his first wife had adopted me. She died not long after Hanna was born. She'd loved both of us with a fierce adoration, the kind of love that I hoped would last us both a lifetime.

Because now we were alone in that house.

My father had died soon after his second wedding, and we'd passed to the loving care of my stepmother Alis. She sometimes said it took a special woman to love children who weren't one's own.

Turned out, she wasn't actually special.

"Such a fancy boarding school for the little sister," Calla said, since she knew my plans. "If she's anything like you, she's probably going to get kicked out."

"If she's anything like me, she's definitely going to get kicked out."

I'd attended Posselbaum Academy, a posh boarding school for young ladies where they were trained in etiquette, the fine art of flower arrangement, and the even finer art of driving a pen through an opponent's eardrum.

The last part was a secret.

But I'd never had the chance to graduate, because when my father died, so did my tuition. Hanna would graduate, though. She was almost old enough to attend, and once I got her out of my stepmother's house, I was leaving myself. Since I couldn't store Hanna under my bed at the dorm—she insisted, twelve-year-olds are so picky—that was the best I could do for the moment.

I'd saved over the past year to pay her tuition, which was due soon. If I lived in the dorm, I'd lose part of my paycheck, but I'd be free of my stepmother—and if I subsisted mostly on pilfered cake, I'd be able to save enough money to pay Hanna's tuition for the following year. Once Hanna graduated, I'd use my salary to start a better life for myself, too.

"I should really be more careful not to piss off any princes," I muttered.

Calla glanced around, making sure the Head was out of earshot. "What did you do?"

"Nothing. He was just surprised to find me in his room."

"I can tell when you're lying," she said. "Also, you lie a little too easily for someone named *Honor*."

“I don’t think Prince Jaik brings out my best self.”

She snorted. “I’ve seen the way you look at him. He brings out your horniest self.”

“Okay, that’s just not necessary,” I said with as much dignity as I could muster, given that it was true.

I didn’t want to have a conversation with the self-involved jerk, but I wouldn’t mind sex as long as he kept his beautiful mouth shut.

“How’d you get to be so cheeky, anyway?” Calla teased me. “No one else would want to risk the ire of the prince.”

“I don’t *want* to risk his ire. I just don’t care.” I turned, lifting my hair from my neck, and Calla started to unbutton the dress I wore. Even maids’ clothes had to be uncomfortable, apparently; I missed the pants of my childhood, before my stepmother, before I was sent away to school. My father had loved my recklessness.

Maybe that was part of why I couldn’t quit a certain carelessness. Even if it might cost me my job—or my life—one day.

I tapped my fingers to the side of my head, giving Calla a meaningful look. “Head injury, or so my stepmother says.”

I didn’t remember anything before I was nine years old, so maybe that was true. My father had told me about a terrible accident. But he’d never sniffed at the end the way my stepmother did, as if the scar that my bright red hair hid was a personal affront.

As soon as I’d washed away the lemon-and-vinegar scent of cleaning solvent and left my maid’s dress folded—okay, *stuffed*—in my cubby, I waved goodbye to my friends and started for home.

Home. It wasn’t my home anymore, my stepmother had made that clear, but I still couldn’t stop thinking of it that way.

The coral-colored mansion where I’d grown up stood at the edge of the city, overlooking lush green public gardens. My family owned another mansion—a castle, really—on our

lands to the south, but my father had liked to stay close to the high king, and the king liked to stay close to his dragons' academy.

The world revolved around the damned dragons.

Dusk was falling, and the enormous trees that lined the drive cast lengthy shadows. The tangle of their branches whispering against each other might have been eerie, but this place was familiar, comfortable.

One of the shadows unfolded, sliding down the tree. I dropped to one knee, caught my knife's hilt from the top of my boot, and rose again, all in one smooth, fluid motion, without ever taking my eyes off the shadowy figure.

But then I caught a glimpse of strawberry-blonde hair, smug pink lips, and bright green eyes. Hanna, dressed in dark trousers, her face freckled and her hair wild around her narrow face.

"Hey, sis," I said. "You're getting stealthier."

"You wouldn't have had a chance to knife me."

"Maybe not." I walked past her toward the house, muscles aching and strained from the day's work. The dragon royals might've had pretty muscles, but I didn't think there was much harder work than scrubbing and mopping all day.

But just as I passed her, I reached back, caught her knife hand in mine so I could control the blade, and swept her leg out from underneath her. I twisted the knife away, turning it under my forearm to make sure she wouldn't cut herself, then stepped back.

She hit the ground with a solid thud, the loudest sound she'd made while she'd been outside, her breath exploding from her chest.

I winced. That always hurt. "I might not have managed to knife you. But I would've gotten a second chance."

She struggled to catch her breath, her words coming out in an indistinct rasp, which was nice because it allowed me to

pretend that my adoring little sister wasn't calling me a bitch-faced bitch.

"Aw, I missed you too!" I offered her my hand up.

She took it, still glowering at me, and let me tow her to her feet. She was as tall as I was now, which seemed a little rude to me.

"I'm just trying to get ready for your crazy boarding school," she told me.

"Those were some of the best years of my life," I assured her. "You're going to have so much fun! Gal pals! Dorm parties! Assassination training!"

"Oh? The best years of your life were when you were away from me and Father?" She didn't bother to mention my stepmother.

"Come on, Hanna. You know I'd keep you with me forever if I could." I tucked my arm through hers as we headed toward the big house.

"Then why can't you? Why can't we run away and get a house of our own?"

"Because you're *twelve*." I hated that my sister was ten years younger than me, and I couldn't protect her.

Technically, our stepmother was her guardian, and she refused to hand over Hanna's guardianship. I'd asked. Many times.

And if Hanna just abandoned her inheritance, our stepmother could petition the king to have my father's will amended, instead of being required to hold the houses and lands until she came of age.

Hanna huffed a sigh, and I squeezed her arm. "We'll be able to see each other all the time when you're at school. Once I'm living at the academy, I'll be freer than I am now."

We were almost to the elaborate circle where the carriages turned around in front of the house; there was a fountain in the center, and water bubbled around a marble statue of a young woman who was holding an armful of flowers. Small birds

perched on her shoulders. The water was suffused coral-pink with magic, lighting the circle.

Beyond the fountain, the marble stairs to the house led to enormous white-and-gold doors. It really was a beautiful house. It was everything Hanna deserved.

I let go of Hanna's arm. "I've got to put my things in my room, but I'll see you later."

She shot me a look as if she could see right through me. "I'll go through the servant's entrance with you."

"It's just because my clothes are dirty," I lied.

I hated lying. Well, I hated lying to Hanna. But it was easier than telling the ugly truth, that I wasn't allowed in the front door, and it was easier to give my stepmother what she wanted.

One day, I'd stop doing things the *easy way* though, and then everyone should watch out.

She just gave me that look like she saw right through my shit, and the two of us headed around the house together. The servant's entrance was at the side of the house, hidden between the lavish front yard and the lush grounds and pools. Inside, a long plain wood entryway led to the back stairs or the kitchens ahead; a delicious scent of roasted meat and fresh bread wafted toward us.

"I can't wait for supper," I said, starting up the stairs.

We emerged through the narrow wooden door into the long hallway of the center house, where the family lived; guest rooms were in the wings. It was usually hushed here, but then I heard something break down the hall. In my room.

Hanna and I exchanged a look. Then I knelt, grabbed my knife, took off running.

I exploded through the door, only to find my stepmother Alis kneeling at the trunk at the foot of my bed. Her long blond hair was teased up into a bouffant on top of her head; I would've recognized her pinched posture anywhere.

She rose and turned, casting her gaze over me dismissively. “You’ve been stealing from me, Honor.”

“No.” My fingers trembled around the hilt of the knife. I couldn’t help it. She filled me with rage so intense it made me weak.

Sometimes I wondered if she’d killed my father, once she had her talons wrapped around his money.

“You’re working, and yet you refuse to contribute to the household expenses.”

“You’re rich.”

“That’s no excuse for entitlement.” She smoothed her skirt with one hand. Despite the disdain with which she looked at me, her eyes kept being drawn back to the knife. “You must pay room and board. What kind of mother would I be if I didn’t force you to take responsibility? You’re an adult.”

“What kind of mother would you be?” My voice came out in a whisper. “The same kind you’ve always been. No kind.”

She rubbed her hand across her face as if I tired her, although the movement was performative. She was too careful of her makeup to actually rub her skin.

“Goodnight, Honor.”

She moved away from the trunk where I stored my secret things: my other knives and swords, the jewelry my father had left me. It was where I’d stashed my money in a hollowed book for Hanna’s tuition.

The hollowed book lay open, empty.

“What did you do?” I demanded.

She just glanced over her shoulder at me as she swept out the room. “I had every right.”

“No, you didn’t.”

Hanna stepped between the two of us. Alis’s silky emerald skirts flickered around the doorway, trailing her, then she was gone.

“She’s not worth murdering,” Hanna whispered. “You don’t want to get on the wrong side of the law.”

Although Hanna sounded as flippant as I usually did—she mimicked me, no matter how much she would’ve been annoyed by the idea—her bright eyes had gone wild. I’d seen that fear in them too often since our father died.

If something happened to me, she’d be alone in the world. Only Alis’s thin veneer of civility kept her from casting me into the street. She’d come close already, and I’d made nice with her to stay close to Hanna.

I searched the room, checking that all my treasures were still here. My books lined the shelves, my favorites with gilt-edges and soft leather covers. Little magical trinkets and weapons were everywhere.

My jewelry collection was still untouched; I might not get to wear them anymore, but my father had brought me pendants and earrings, jeweled combs and tiaras. I loved pretty, shiny things. Someday, when Hanna was taken care of, I’d buy them for myself again.

The loss of the money I’d saved felt like an ache torn open in my chest.

But I could find a way to get them back.

“You know me,” I said lightly. “I would never do anything ill-advised.”



CHAPTER THREE

H*onor*

THE NEXT MORNING, I KNOCKED ON THE DOOR TO THE Posselbaum Academy for Young Ladies. It swung open almost immediately, and a girl in a long blue dress with a lacy pinafore over it greeted me with a bright smile. Her dark hair was immaculately smoothed back from her pink-cheeked face. She had that perfect Posselbaum girl look, the one that was supposed to make us so very marriageable.

She probably also had six knives on her body somewhere, which was the other part of being the perfect Posselbaum girl.

“How may I help you?” she asked cheerfully.

“I’d like to see Headmistress.” No one but a Posselbaum girl would call her simply Headmistress; I might not have had the chance to graduate, but I’d claim that as my right.

“Please come into the sitting room, and I’ll see if she’s available.” She led me through the door—where I’d once stood guard just as she was now—and into a pink and ruffled room that looked just the same as when I attended.

A fire burned in the fireplace, and the white curtains were open to the sunlight streaming in and the city street. I took a seat in one of the stiff, high-backed armchairs and crossed my legs primly at the knee, even though I was wearing my plain brown peasants’ dress and an embarrassing lack of blades. The wardrobe Alis provided was intended to make me feel like nothing, and I lifted my chin higher. It didn’t matter what I wore or what anyone took from me. I knew who I was.

Someone would be watching me, but even though I let my gaze slowly wander the room, searching the art for eye holes

and the curtains for the faintest whisper of breath, I didn't see who.

Quite a bit later, Headmistress Gloria swept in, looking glamorous and unsurprised. Someone must have identified me already. "Good morning, Honor. It's a pleasure to see you as always."

I rose from the chair and rested my hand on her shoulder as we pressed our cheeks together in a phantom kiss. "Always a pleasure to see you as well, Headmistress."

"I hope that we'll see more of you with Hanna enrolled here." She had an inquiring note to her tone as if she knew I was here because I was in trouble. But then, I was always in trouble; she didn't have to be a seer to know that. She indicated my chair with a sweep of her hand, and I took my seat again.

"Straight to business, Headmistress?"

"I know how much you hate small talk, Honor." Her eyes crinkled at the corners. She knew me very well, and the same ache pressed my chest as when I walked out those doors for the last time as a student.

I knew she didn't see me as anything but a former student, but she'd meant so much to me. She'd been the closest thing to a mother I could have since I lost my adoptive mother.

There was something especially raw about loving someone who would care about you but never love you back.

I cleared my throat. Best to just get this over with. "I lost Hanna's tuition money."

"You lost it? That doesn't sound like you."

"I'm going to get it back." My steely resolve was going to be my stepmother's bad day.

"I would always lay my odds on you," she assured me. "But I don't run a charity school. I have a waiting list of students hoping for admission. I can't allow a student to take one of those precious places without paying."

“I know.” She required a full year’s tuition upfront, which I’d come within a dime’s width of affording.

She gave me a long look.

My heart beat wildly in my chest. Freedom for Hanna was so precarious right now. “Headmistress, you know I’ll find a way to get the funds. If you just give me some time. I won’t disappoint you.”

She smiled just slightly. “You already have—when you left the school.”

“I didn’t have a choice.” Even if Gloria had offered me the chance to stay and work off my tuition, I’d needed to be home with Hanna, to comfort her after she lost her father.

“I’m still disappointed. I would like to have you back here.” She tilted her head. “You were something special, my dear.”

“I still am something special.”

“Of course.” Her tone was warm and gracious.

But she meant what she’d said first, and my cheeks burned.

“I wish I could please you, Honor,” she said softly. “You are a very special young woman, and I have no doubt your sister is as well. But I can’t give away a seat to a student who may not be able to finish. Especially as she would be the second Hannaby sister to leave this school abruptly.”

“I had to leave, for Hanna’s sake...”

“I know. The very reason that took you away is one of the reasons I wanted you here. You could have been such a fierce assassin, but most importantly, you’ve always been such a loyal friend.” She smiled and rose, already dismissing me now that our business was done, that my plea had been rejected.

“Could I have just a small extension?” I asked desperately, hating the need that had leaked into my voice. I’d find a way to pay for her school, somehow.

A look of embarrassment—on my behalf—darted across her face, and I swallowed.

“Tuition is due ten days before the first day of school,” she reminded me. “But I have great faith in you, Honor. I always have.”

She squeezed my arm and gave me a sympathetic look. “There are simply too many girls who want to come here, and your situation is too precarious. But I will wait until the tuition due date has passed to release her spot. That’s the best I can do.”

I nodded woodenly, unable to speak.

She walked me to the door, where a different girl with the same look except for her soft blonde hair opened the door for me.

I walked until I was out of sight of the school, but I could hear the bells tolling the whole time, coiling tension in my belly. I should already be at work. The wait in the sitting room had taken too long.

As soon as none of the pretty, proper girls could judge me anymore, I ran for the academy, ducking and dodging people on the street. I wound around people walking to work and a handful of street vendors selling roasted nuts and breakfast buns, wishing I had time to stop. Alis had breakfast served just after I left the house for work, because she was a real peach who wasn’t petty at all.

I was panting by the time I reached the academy, which towered above me on its high hill, a switchback of multiple flights of stone stairs leading to the academy entrance. I paused at the bottom of the stone steps, staring up the long route into the castle as I tried to catch my breath.

“You should really exercise more.” It was another of the gorgeous asshole princes, speaking directly into my ear. I whirled and stared up at him in confusion, wondering why he was talking to me, as he added, “Panting like a puppy... It’s a poor look for a nice girl.”

Lord Talisyn.

I spun to face him, startled to find how close we were together. "I'm not a nice girl."

"No?" He cast a brief look over me, despite how close we were already standing. He was even handsomer than he'd been from a distance in the training yard, with the hard angles of his jaw and cheekbones and a strong nose. His eyes were bright with flecks of gold and mischief, and I swallowed, finding myself drawn to him even though I knew better. "Then perhaps you're more useful than I guessed from the sad state of my bedroom floor. You're terrible at mopping." He clucked his tongue.

I wasn't particularly invested in my mopping skills, but I was still annoyed. "I don't have time to talk to you. Don't you have somewhere to be?" I started to run up the steps.

He matched my pace easily, staying beside me. "We only have a half day of training today. Party tonight."

"Oh, I'm sure it's always a party with you." Listening to this guy's cutting barbs seemed like endless entertainment.

He eyed me skeptically. I tried to side-eye him back, but I tripped on a step.

He grabbed my arm, saving me from face-planting on the stone steps, and jerked me up to my feet. I was stunned, and judging from the look on his face as he stared at me, he was too. He let go of me, a vaguely horrified look on his handsome face as if I was going to spread my peasant germs to him.

"Why are you trying to run when you're so bad at it?"

"I'm late for work." I jogged up the steps, trying to pretend that I hadn't left my dignity a few stairs back. My cheeks burned. "Why are you talking to me when you're so bad at it?"

"Really? And here I was enjoying our conversation. You still haven't told me your name. You didn't tell Jaik either."

Oh lord, Prince Jaik had sent one of his fellow royals to do his dirty work. I was probably going to get fired *today*.

"And I'm not going to. I'm not encouraging you to stalk me."

He started to grin, and oh my god, if I didn't get my eyes off his stupidly handsome face I was going to trip again and roll all the way down those damn steps.

He was just beginning to say something when we reached the top of the stairs, but he broke off abruptly. Another of the royals, a dragon embroidered on the breast of his training tunic, grabbed his arm and swung him to the side.

"Why are you talking to the wench? We don't need any distractions." Lord Arren growled at Talisyn.

"The wench?" I demanded. Dragon royal or not, this asshole was about to roll all the way down the stairs himself.

But they ignored me.

"She's not a distraction." Talisyn's voice was dismissive, as if the idea were ridiculous.

Dragons are dicks.

I ran past them into the academy, fighting my way through the throngs of tall, muscular shifters headed to class. Whether male or female, I was shorter than all of them, which seemed like another check in the column for my fate as a *future squirrel shifter*.

I was still breathing hard and blushing—mostly from the stairs, but possibly *slightly* from talking to Mr. Tall-Dark-and-Dickish—when I reached the nearly empty cleaning bay. June was the last one leaving, her cleaning bucket over her shoulder, and she shot me a sympathetic look.

The bay usually would've been full of maids preparing for their shift, but I'd missed the start of the day. Now the only occupants were a few left-behind mops and brooms and Head, who looked so dry and prickly she could've been hanging with the brooms and blended right in.

"I thought you were getting your life together, Honor," she said crisply.

If my life were *together*, I wouldn't be working here. "So sorry I'm late, Head. Got held up."

“Mm.” She regarded me skeptically. “Is there any good reason I shouldn’t fire you?”

The floor dropped from under my feet abruptly. I couldn’t come up with anything, so it dropped a little further. Head wouldn’t care that I needed this job.

“I’ll do better,” I promised. “I’m trying. I’m just not... great at cleaning.”

“Or being on time. Or being teachable. Or being humble.”

That was fair, which just made it worse. I lied, “I want to be here. I need this job to take care of my sister.”

“You have someone depending on you?” Her eyes widened in mock-shock. “That poor unfortunate soul.”

I wanted to slap her. But I tried to look contrite and humble and not homicidal.

“You can make it up to me,” she said. “I need someone to work the party tonight.”

Oh great, a double shift of cleaning up after assholes. I plastered a smile on my face like I was delighted. “I’d be happy to.”

“Oh, I doubt that very much.” She smiled back in a way that told me she genuinely was delighted...to make me miserable.

As I shouldered my mop, I wondered idly if I’d see the royals tonight as I passed canapes or bussed empty champagne flutes.

A wise girl would stay clear of the royals.

I have many wonderful qualities, but *wise* might not make the list.



CHAPTER FOUR

H*onor*

“BAD LUCK,” CALLA TOLD ME AS SHE FOLDED HER SERVANTS’ gown, while I prepared for my fun evening in the scullery.

“I wish it was bad luck. It’s my own fault.” I pursed my lips, leaning against the wall as I watched her pack up her things.

“At least you’ll get the chance to spy on those royals.”

The memory of this morning rose, accompanied by sudden heat in my cheeks. Talisyn had been pretty cute, even antagonizing me. “I’m staying away from dukes and princes.”

Calla gave me a knowing look. “You can *stay away* and still *stalk*.”

“Please. They have enough women falling over them—and they’re impressed enough with themselves. I don’t like arrogant—”

“Gorgeous, strong men who save the kingdom on the regular,” she sang to finish my thought.

I rolled my eyes. “They’re still in military training.”

“It’s a formality. They serve at the front already. They’ve been training to fight the Scourge since they were toddlers.”

“Why are you taking up for the royals? They don’t need you. I do.”

She laughed. “You don’t need anyone. You’re a force of nature.”

I wished that were true. I adored Calla, and Hanna, but neither of them could help me fight the world that was trying

to beat me down so badly. It felt as if we were all likely to be crushed under the weight of expectations and roles and regulations.

But despite the sudden heaviness, I managed to grin and ask, “Which one do you have a crush on?”

“Does it matter? They’re each more gorgeous than the last.” She heaved a big sigh. “Jaik. Talisyn. Arren. Branok and Lynx. They’re all amazing. All gorgeous.”

“You already used that word.”

“I’m just a simple maid. I don’t have a big vocabulary.”

“You’re so full of—” I broke off as Head entered the room.

Calla waggled her eyebrows at me. “I’m not the one who’s full of nonsense,” she whispered right before she headed off, humming a bawdy tune under her breath.

My friends were simultaneously amazing and astute—and incredibly annoying.

An hour later, I circled the room looking for empty glasses to whisk away, when I saw some of the noble girls I used to know. I turned in the opposite direction, but a cheerful noise—like the bay of a hunting dog—went up from Larena, and the next thing I knew, I was surrounded by girls with pretty dresses and black hearts.

“Honor! I haven’t seen you in ages.” Jaini was always genuinely nice and probably meant it; she just couldn’t read the room.

“Because her stepmother finally put her in her place.” Larena glanced over me with a sneer, then dropped her soiled napkin onto the tray I was carrying. “It was an embarrassment how Danen paraded the mousy maid around as if she were his real daughter. A bit of delusion until he had his own *real* one, my mother always said.”

“Your mother was always a—” I began, only to find a hand suddenly settling on my shoulder.

A tall, muscular body brushed against my backside, and the girls’ eyes went wide.

There was a royal standing behind me. The shiver of danger and arousal that traced my skin like a callused palm was the surest tell, along with the dark, heady scent of expensive cologne.

“Nobody likes you, mm?” Talisyn asked quietly. His voice was rich like honey, low and sexy.

“I’m an acquired taste,” I shot back.

“I wasn’t talking to you.” He stepped beside me, resting his elbow lightly on my shoulder.

My heart stuttered, then started beating again. It was such a randomly possessive gesture, and it was almost... sweet. But I knew this asshole wasn’t sweet.

His gaze met Larena’s evenly. “What’s your name?”

“We’ve met eight times,” she said, then pressed her lips together tightly under his glare.

Talisyn was using his powers for good for once.

“Larena.”

“I’ll remember your name this time,” he said, promise in his voice. He raised one hand and flickered his fingers at her condescendingly. “Shoo.”

The girls scattered. Everyone bolted away from Larena as if her skin were poisonous, and she stared after them. Shocking that they weren’t loyal and true and kind. Absolutely shocking.

He still had his elbow on my shoulder as he glanced down at me. “Who was your father?”

“Lord Danen.”

“He was a decent man.”

“You knew him?”

“A little.”

I missed my father so much. Hanna was so young when he died that she didn’t have many stories about him, and Alis always made a mockery of his memory. I wanted to ask more,

but there was a sudden rawness in my chest, the one I never dared acknowledge. I had no time for grief.

I cocked my head at him, then gestured at Larena, who was hiding—badly—behind an enormous centerpiece of white roses and glaring at us. “What was that about?”

“I don’t like those girls.” He crossed his arms over his chest. “They’re always trying to sleep with my friends and me, trying to win our hearts.”

“Don’t they realize there’s no hope for your cold, dead hearts?”

His lips quirked at the corners. Oh gods, did the man have a kink for being insulted? Because I could happily dominate him if that was his thing. I had a lot of insults stored up for the royals. I could go for days on his laundry alone.

“Aren’t you a clever little thing? Dance with me.”

“No, thank you,” I said.

He laughed as if nothing I said mattered, then pulled me close. My breath came out in a gasp as I found my body against his. The tray dropped to the ground with a clatter, and he kicked it out of the way before we waltzed across the floor.

“I’m going to punch you in the face if you don’t let go of me,” I whispered, ignoring the way lust pulsed through my body when he touched me.

“That will definitely get you fired.” His hand wrapped my hip, and he smiled down at me, a mischievous sparkle in his eyes. “Are you really the one woman in the kingdom who can’t stand me?”

My pulse pounded traitorously. I caught a glimpse of outraged nobles beyond his handsome face before everything else blurred but him, the scene lost to our quick, certain movement. “Yes.”

But we danced anyway. His movements were smooth and elegant, his grip on my waist something I felt keenly through my whole body. I wasn’t going to fall for them like all these idiots they disrespected; the royals might fight bravely on the

front for us all, but they were still assholes when they came home.

His hand on my lower back was certain, his muscular body moving against mine as he led me so gracefully through the dance steps that I never stumbled. Up this close, he smelled delicious, like cinnamon mixed with a darker musk. He was suffocating me, and he was smiling down at me all the time as if he knew just what he was doing.

For a moment, I forgot I hated dancing. It was just the two of us moving smoothly across the dance floor.

As the music faded, he raised my hand to his lips. “Thank you for the dance, beautiful Honor.”

So he’d learned my name.

Everyone in the ballroom had turned to look at us. My cheeks flushed scarlet at the disapproving glances. “You’re making a spectacle of yourself.”

“No, I’m making a spectacle of you.” His voice was near my ear, low and sexy, but his words still hurt. Because they were true. I yanked away to find him still smiling at me, the expression not quite kind. He didn’t seem quite as sexy to me when he looked so damn arrogant. “I do what I please.”

“Well, that doesn’t include doing *me*.” I yanked my hand free of his and barely resisted the temptation to rub my knuckles, where his lips had pressed them in a kiss.

I stormed across the dance floor to pick up my tray, ignoring the people who shied away from me as if I’d been dipped in acid when I touched the duke. Maybe they were right. He stood watching me no matter how pointedly I ignored him.

“You have no idea just how cold and dead our hearts really are,” he promised me, his voice quiet.

I threw a champagne-soaked napkin onto the tray, turned with a barb on my tongue.

But he was gone. It took me a second to find him in the crowd, already dancing with another girl. The two of them

flew across the dance floor with ease and grace, and she smiled widely up at him, her long dark hair smooth as it swept behind her. She couldn't look more different than I did with my braid and ugly, simple dress, and a wave of longing rushed through me, no matter how much I tried to pretend I never missed the years I'd spent as a noble's daughter.

I was left picking up soggy napkins and discarded goblets and my fractured feelings. What the hell just happened? I stood with my tray, my chin lifting as I did my best not to look toward Talisyn.

"Take a break," Head told me crisply, materializing out of nowhere. "Somewhere...out of sight." She yanked the tray from my hands.

"Gladly," I said.

I made my way through the crowd of dancers, ignoring the cold, judgmental looks—some of which came from noble girls who used to be my 'friends.' Calla and the other women in housekeeping seemed a lot warmer, but it was still hard for me to let down my guard around other girls.

Meanwhile, Lord Talisyn was dancing and everyone still seemed to love him.

I caught the hard eyes of a man watching me and my gaze went back to him, startled, drawn to him. It was the knight who'd scolded Talisyn for wasting his time on me.

He was tall and more thickly muscled than Jaik or Talisyn. He didn't look away when our gazes met, not even pretending that he hadn't been staring at me.

Lord Arren. The quietest and most terrifying of the dragon royals, from what I'd heard.

His gaze seemed to sear right through me.

Who the hell was he to stare me down as if I was some kind of unexpectedly sentient turd?

I stuck my tongue out at him.

His brows rose. He just stared at me, the two of us making eye contact that sent prickles of heat washing over my skin.

Then, abruptly, he pushed off the wall.

As soon as he moved, the spell between us was broken. He probably wasn't coming toward me, but I didn't wait around to find out.

I headed through the double doors into the hallway, then realized I should have gone the other way, into the servants' quarters. I'd been here with my father for dances when I was just a young girl and I'd gone the wrong way out of habit. Sometimes I forgot that without Lord Danen, I was nothing again to the nobility, just as I had been before he rescued me from the streets.

I stared around the long marble hallway. Even the portraits on the wall seemed to glare at me.

The library. I'd always loved the library at the academy. I wasn't even allowed in there to clean now, but I missed it.

I ran down the hall toward its refuge.



CHAPTER FIVE

Honor

THE LIBRARY AT THE ACADEMY CARRIED A SOFT HUSH THAT was welcome after the noisy chaos of the party. The room was enormous, five stories with ornate wooden balconies running around the outer shelves; the domed ceiling was open to the starlight. There were many small student work areas clustered around fireplaces, and private carrels built in between bookshelves, hung with lush velvet curtains for quiet study groups.

The academy did *cozy* awfully well for a place where its students trained for war and death.

But I'd always loved it here, since my father brought me in when he came to the academy for a meeting when I was ten. I'd crawled under one of the tables with a book. A boy with a freckled face and mischievous eyes had crawled under with me. We'd spent the afternoon leafing through the gilt pages, unaware that my father thought I was lost and half the academy had turned out looking for us. The memory made me smile.

On a whim, I strolled down the aisles and picked out a book. I needed to clear my head after that odd dance with Talisyn, and nothing ever cleared my head like a few minutes—or hours—lost in a fantasy world. Books are a break from reality that make it far easier to bear.

It was hard to pick just one, but I finally pulled a book out. I glanced around, struck with an urge I knew was silly, before I crawled underneath one of the tables, rested my elbows in the thick rug, and started to turn the pages. I was a lot bigger now than I was at ten, but the space under the table still felt cozy

and familiar. I should really vegetate under furniture more often.

Then the door creaked open. Rough, masculine voices, teasing each other, entered the room.

And I realized just how flipping weird it really was that I was under the table.

I'd just wait for them to go, and then I'd make my escape. I'd been humiliated enough for one day.

"What's Purick doing here?" That was the smoothest, sexiest voice I'd ever heard. Prince Jaik. I dropped my face into my hands.

"You'd think he'd know better than to show his face around us, even if the Olds are protecting him." That was probably either Branok or Lynx, one of the twins; the speaker dropped into a seat near me, and I bit my lip. He tilted back in his chair, and his fancy boots disappeared as he stacked them on the table.

"He has no reason to think you're any threat." That must be Prince Arren, with the rough grumble. "Because you aren't. We aren't moving against the Olds."

"Not anytime soon."

"Talisyn."

"You say my name like you're my mother, Arren."

"Perhaps that's because I've spent so much time in her bed."

They all laughed. I rubbed my hand across my face. I was too tired to listen to boys being ridiculous. I should've asked Head if I could've gone home, but I hadn't been thinking clearly.

Counting the pairs of expensive shoes, all five royals had assembled. How disappointed the dancing ladies must be now that the main attraction had left the ballroom.

One of them perched on the edge of the table, which made the faintest groaning sound. I hoped I wouldn't die pinned

underneath an enormous oak table and the five of them.

“I see Caldren’s here tonight too.”

“Don’t bring up Caldren.” Jaik’s voice was dangerous.

“You’re being an idiot. Are you just going to ignore him forever?”

Wait, did one of the princes have a love affair gone wrong? Maybe that was why Jaik was so infamously cold with the ladies; I’d heard he was good in bed but an asshole after. Frankly, I was surprised by the notion that Jaik was fun to be with any time at all. He hadn’t seemed like a bundle of laughs when he was yelling at me in his room.

“I’m being an idiot? What are you doing, dancing with that maid?” Jaik asked icily.

“Antagonizing Ariza.”

The bastard had implied on the dance floor he was using me for his own amusement, I knew he was just using me for his own amusement, and yet somehow, I was outraged when he said that he was using me for his own amusement.

“Sure, sure.”

Although maybe I could spin the way he’d danced with me to get a little revenge on him, and to make life a little easier for myself. The mean girls had melted when Talisyn’s touch on my shoulder implied he’d protect me.

“But if you were just antagonizing what’s-her-face,” Arren said, “what were you trying to accomplish when you flirted with the maid on the steps?”

“Why are you in my business? What do you care what I do with the maid?” Talisyn asked. “She’s pretty. Quick-witted. There’s an abundance of *pretty* around here, but these noble girls are all so boring...”

Talisyn thought I was interesting. I shouldn’t be so pleased by that.

“She’s a Posselbaum girl, and you’re going to get taken for information if you aren’t careful.” Jaik warned.

“You think she’s a spy?” Talisyn sounded as if the thought were ridiculous.

“Why else would she be always underfoot? Always waving her adorable little ass in our faces?” Jaik demanded.

Adorable? The royals thought I was *adorable*?

No, that was the wrong part of that sentence to focus on.

Shit, shit, shit.

The royals would certainly think I was a spy if they found me hiding under a table. This was it. I was committed. This table was my home now. I rested my forehead on the open page in front of me, wishing I could become one with the rug.

One of the twins snorted. “She’s not adorable.”

“If you really think she’s a spy, have her fired.” That was the other twin. “Or killed. Either way.”

So, neither of them was a fan of mine.

“How embarrassing if you’re wrong, though.” Talisyn was sticking up for me, even though his lazy drawl suggested he didn’t care much.

“I’m never wrong.”

“You most certainly are,” I mouthed.

“I’ll get close to her and find out,” Talisyn offered.

“Please. You can’t be trusted with the girl.” That was a twin again.

I’d always thought twins would be fun, but I didn’t like *these* twins, no matter how handsome they were.

“I can fuck her without spilling any state secrets.”

“You can’t talk to her without spilling your semen. I should know—I used to be your roommate.”

I gagged silently under the table. These guys seemed very comfortable with each other. They should be the ones picking up crusty socks from under their beds.

Even princes and dukes, who can get almost any woman they want, jerk themselves off.

And despite how badly it ended in terms of laundry, I kind of liked the mental image that went through my mind.

Prince Jaik, his head tilted back and his narrowed eyes on mine, working his hand up and down his long, hard dick... The way he would look with his chiseled abs and dark happy trail running down his flat lower abs, the way he'd watch me, knowing how aroused I was, even as he picked up the pace, moving faster and faster, until he was jerking himself off furiously...

“Do you think she’s working for the Olds? Or for the rebels?”

“Enough talk about the Olds,” Arren’s impatient voice cut through my reverie. “The girls will be here any moment. No un-dragon needs to hear even a whisper of what’s happening in the Order.”

Un-dragon? These arrogant weirdos actually called the other shifters in the world *un-dragons*?

The doors opened again, letting in breathy voices and giggles and the click of heels across hardwood that softened once the girls reached the rugs. The guys’ tones changed from the bantering way they talked to each other, became warmer and smoother. All lies, all fucking lies.

There were the soft sounds of murmurs, of lips meeting lips, the silky rustle of hands caressing over clothes. I bit my lower lip. Fuck me.

Were these reprobates actually going to have sex in the library?

With each other watching?

There was a thump on the table right above me as one of the guys threw one of the girls onto the surface. She laughed, high and surprised, then the sound was cut off as he kissed her hard. She moaned eagerly, and her legs almost disappeared from view as she wrapped them around his waist, drawing him closer.

The sounds of their sexscapades filled the once-dignified quiet of the library. I stared down at the page and tried to read my book.

But I couldn't focus.

The dragon royals might be assholes, but they were also sexy as hell, and from the happy, wet, sometimes gassy sounds, the girls they were fucking were having a much better night than me.

I caught glimpses of bared calves, of bodies touching. Some of the royals stumbled away with the girls to parts farther away in the library, but two were still fucking girls on top of the table. The door might as well have been a million miles away. I had zero chance of crawling out of here without being caught.

And the sounds—and my own imagination—were driving me mad. A desperate throb between my thighs accompanied the sounds of satisfaction happening above.

I rolled carefully onto my back, let my legs fall open and rubbed my fingers over myself through my dress. But it wasn't enough, and soon—imagining that *I* was the one Prince Jaik and Talisyn were fucking on top of the table, which was rocking with rhythmic thrusts—I delved under my panties, then finally pushed them down entirely. I rubbed my clit, wishing it was his lips and his tongue instead of my own fingers.

“Bend her over the table,” Talisyn ordered. “I'm going under.”

The next thing I knew, while she was moaning and her hips were swaying against the table, her skirt pulled up to expose her long, pale legs, and Jaik was behind her driving away... Talisyn dropped to his knees.

His gaze met mine. For a long second, the two of us stared at each other, and his gaze fell to my hand between my thighs, my fingers resting on my swollen center. I moved to push my skirt back in place, and he grabbed my wrist. He gave me a quick shake of his head, and I stopped.

“Good girl,” he mouthed, giving me a wink, and despite myself, something in me flip-flopped at the unexpected praise.

I should’ve been terrified. How was I so horny that I wasn’t even terrified?

“Talisyn,” the girl said impatiently. “Where are you? We all know Lynx won’t play with us. He’s off in his books again.”

“I’ll take care of you,” he promised, his amused gaze still fixed on me. Then he wrapped one hand around her creamy thigh, and pressed his mouth to her clit. Her hips kept rocking back and forth against the table as the other drove into her, but he kept time with them easily.

I watched his soft, pink mouth above that hard jaw work patiently against her clit. His Adam’s apple bobbed from time to time, and his face was the most beautiful thing I’d ever seen, all but chiseled from marble. He watched me from the corner of his eye, his hand moving to mine. He pressed my fingers against my core, commanding me silently to keep touching myself.

And I did. I let my legs fall open wider, let him watch me as I teased my fingers around my opening, as I worked my clit. The girl groaned, her legs shook, she cried out their names. He pulled away from her abruptly and leaned over me. Above, the table shook as the prince pushed her to where he wanted for yet another round.

But Talisyn leaned over me and brushed his hand over my thigh. He looked at me with a question in his eyes.

“Please,” I mouthed, and I was rewarded by his enormous grin.

“Who knew that there was such a good girl under all that smartass?” he mouthed back. “Good girls are always rewarded.”

His hand slid up my thigh, and when the back of his fingers brushed my clit, I jerked. He touched one finger to his lips, a small smile playing over them. He watched me as if he liked the effect he had on me. He began to work his fingers

against my clit, and when my hips rolled, he pressed my thigh down with his other hand.

He worked my clit expertly with his thumb, sliding two fingers inside me. When he pressed the secret spot on the inside of my channel, I let out a soft gasp, then crushed my lower lip mercilessly with my teeth.

I'd pleased myself before. But it had never felt as intense as when my core squeezed around his fingers, when I had to be completely silent and yet I wanted to scream. He watched me the whole time, his gaze heavy-lidded and satisfied. The only clue as to how badly he wanted *me* too was the enormous bulge of his cock pressing through his unbuttoned trousers, but he paid no attention to it. I shattered around him, twining my fingers in my hair, trying not to move a muscle under the table.

He withdrew his fingers. Still watching me, he licked them clean.

My clit was sore and aching. He waved me closer with one finger, a lazy gesture, and I sat up, careful not to bump my head on the table.

He pressed his lips close to my ear, fluttering my hair, and I felt the close contact all down my spine. His voice was a warm whisper: "If you get caught, you're dead, little mouse."

I stopped, stunned. I knew he was right, but that somehow made it all the more terrifying that he sounded so cheerful about it.

While I was still speechless, he pressed a kiss to my cheek, the movement chaste and sweet even though nothing else about Talisyn was sweet.

Or even tolerable.

My thighs were still trembling from the power of that orgasm as he climbed out from under the table and dusted his hands against his thighs.

"We've been away from the party long enough, gentlemen, and I dare say the ladies are growing a bit boring."

After a while, they all left—the girls groaning about it—as he shepherded them out.

When I thought it was safe, I started to creep from under the table. He met my gaze through the doors just as he was swinging them closed, and I couldn't read his face, but heat still seemed to crackle between us.

Then the enormous ornate wooden doors slammed shut, and I was alone in the enormous library again.

Just me, and my addled brain.

How did I let that happen?

And how was I going to convince the royals I wasn't a spy?



CHAPTER
SIX

H*onor*

I STUMBLED INTO CALLA'S ROOM AT THREE IN THE MORNING, kicked off my shoes, and fell into the spare bed in the dark. My morning shift would come all too soon.

But when I woke to dawn light flooding the room, there were three watchful pairs of eyes on me.

I scrambled up, finding Calla, June, and Lara sprawled across Calla's bed. Lara was eating a muffin, breaking off little pieces of it to pop into her mouth. And Calla, bless her, handed me a stoneware mug of hot tea with an obscene amount of sugar.

"Why are you watching me?" I asked, my head throbbing from so little sleep.

The memory of the princes accusing me of being a spy last night made my head throb worse.

"If I'd known the party last night was going to be so interesting, I'd have picked up an extra shift," Calla said.

"At least you would've gotten paid for it. I was being punished."

"Were you, though?" June leaned forward, giving me a long, searching look. I stared back at her, trying to blink the sleep from my eyes and wondering if I had to convince *everyone* I wasn't a spy.

"We heard about your dance with Lord Talisyn." Calla filled me in.

"Already? How?"

“Breakfast in the servants’ cafeteria,” Lara trilled. “It’s the best goss in the city.”

“I don’t think I can handle *goss*, or people who say *goss*, before seven o’clock in the morning.” I stared around Calla’s room, at the empty stone fireplace that she’d filled with flowers and the garlands of knotted fabric flowers that hung from the raw wooden rafters. She’d decorated it to be cozy, as if it were her home, and I felt a sudden jolt as I realized it *was* her only home. My best friend was always so cheerful that I’d never really thought about it.

“So spill,” Calla said.

“I don’t want to talk about it.” I rubbed my hands over my face. “I made mistakes last night... terrible mistakes...”

“With Lord Talisyn? *Terrible mistakes* sounds like a good time.”

“I’m doomed,” I said flatly.

“I’ve got something for you.” Lara rose abruptly and bustled out of the room.

Calla smiled then buried her face in her hands as if she knew what was happening.

Lara returned with a bundle of pages, covered in rounded handwriting, and thrust them toward me. “You should read this! It’ll cheer you up! Maybe it will inspire you.”

I glanced through the pages, and the words *cock* and *Jaik* and *moist* all jumped out at me.

“Sure,” I said, because why not? Why not, at this point? “Thank you.”

I’d never get any closer to the dragon royals. Maybe I could at least have my harmless fantasies.



THAT AFTERNOON, I WAS MOPPING THE DORM HALLWAY WHEN Lord Talisyn walked by. He was focused entirely on the book

in his hands. I might as well have been a piece of furniture, which to be fair, was how the academy shifters usually treated us.

He was almost to his door when I slid against the doorway. He raised his eyebrows, opened the door with the key hanging from a leather thong around his throat, then pushed it open and held it, his arm braced toward the top of the door.

I ducked under his arm. It was strange to be invited into the room I cleaned. Talisyn's room was always tidy, his fiddle hanging on the wall surrounded by mounted swords and shields, a handful of books stacked on the desk. His room smelled like his spicy aftershave, and I breathed a little too deeply.

He waited until the door was closed to ask, "Can't get enough, little mouse?"

"I just wanted to make sure you weren't going to have me murdered." My voice came out light.

He leaned against the wall, crossing his arms over his chest in a way that was slightly distracting, given how the biceps in his arms rippled. He flashed me a bright smile. "It wouldn't be a murder. It would be an execution. It's not personal."

"That's not comforting."

"I'm not trying to be comforting. You don't want to spy on us, little mouse."

I frowned at him. "Call me that one more time."

He scoffed then pushed off the wall. He walked behind me, then paused, so close that I breathed in that heady scent that was his own. "I thought you came here to beg for your life."

I turned to face him, and our gazes locked. His eyes were an amber shade, specked with gold, with heavy dark lashes that dropped like a veil when he was studying me. My voice came out even when I said, "I didn't come here to beg."

"I'm the only one who knows you were in the library eavesdropping on us." He murmured. "Why exactly *were* you hiding under a table?"

“If you’re the only one who can tell on me, maybe that means I should murder—sorry, *execute*—you.”

“Answer the question. What were you doing under the table?”

“I find it very comforting, hiding under tables, as long as I have a good book.” That was true, then I went on to add, “I’d just had the worst dance of my life with the most ridiculous man, and I desperately needed to escape into a world that made sense. The only world that makes sense is between the pages.”

He tilted his head to one side, still studying me. “Why are you like this?”

“I had a lot of head injuries as a child.” I raked my fingers through my red hair, showing him the edge of my scar.

“You’re completely reckless,” he said, his voice almost admiring. “You remind me of...me.”

“Gods, no, I don’t think so.” I stared at him, frowning, confused by the bantering tone he took—and that I used too—even when discussing the possibility of my own death. Somehow the world felt more fun when he was around, even if he was crazy. “Do you really think I’m a spy?”

“No, of course not. Do you think I would’ve crawled under the table with you if I thought you were a spy?” He popped one finger into his mouth, sucking on it absently, reminding me of the way he’d sucked my juices.

Lust stirred between my thighs again. The asshole succeeded in making me wet just as much as he made me crazy.

“Maybe you would. If it entertained you.”

He grinned and didn’t argue the accusation. “I know you’re not a spy. I know what you are.”

“And what am I?”

“Obsessed with me. That’s why you keep turning up.”

“You’re dreaming.”

“I’m dreaming? I’m the ridiculous dreamer—a dragon prince thinking a horny scullery-maid wants me to finger-bang her so she has a fun story to whisper to the other servants? Does that sound farfetched to you?”

I had a cocky answer, but he closed the distance between us. He slid one hand up my throat, his touch pressing against my throat in a way that I liked more than I should. I should be scared he’d choke me.

But I wanted him to. Just a little.

His hand reached my chin, tilted it upward. His gaze fell to my lips, then flickered back up to my eyes. “Answer me.”

I didn’t remember the question anymore. My heart was beating fast, and not because I was scared. “I’m not a spy.”

“We covered that already. But my friends don’t know that, so you might want to stop skulking around us.”

“I’m not skulking.”

“Mm.” He pulled away suddenly, moving across the room to the windows, tucking his hands behind his back. His shoulders were broad in his training tunic, and his tight trousers hugged the muscular curves of his ass. I jerked my gaze away, staring out the window over his shoulder.

“I’m not going to tattle, Honor.”

“Thank you.”

He grinned, as if my gratitude was amusing... Or perhaps misplaced.

“You should go,” he chided me.

“Great talk.” I could still feel the phantom press of his warm fingers against my throat.

I made it out into the hallway, closed the door behind me, let out a long exhale as if I’d been holding my breath the whole time I was around him. I rubbed my throat absently.

And then I realized Arren was watching me—again.

Always.

He was leaning against his own door, his big frame filling the space, his eyes as cold as ever.

I resisted the temptation to stick my tongue out at him again and instead grabbed my mop and bucket. The dirty water in the bucket sloshed and the bucket bumped my legs as I headed for the servants' stairs at the far end of the hall.

“If you're going to run away, run far.”

I turned around, but he was gone. I wasn't sure if I'd even heard him correctly.

But I still shivered as I headed down the stairs.

I wasn't going to run, but maybe I should.



CHAPTER SEVEN

H*onor*

THAT NIGHT, HANNA WAS WAITING IN ONE OF THE TREES along the walkway again when I returned home. She dropped down beside me, silent as a shadow.

“Where were you last night?” she asked, her voice teasing. “Do you have a beau?”

I laughed. “No.”

“Are you a virgin?”

“Hanna.”

“Because being twenty-two and a virgin seems like a waste.”

“First of all, wrong. Doing what you want is never a waste, whether that means wild, wanton sexcapades, or saving yourself for true love.”

“Thanks for the lecture.” She held her hands up to placate me.

“Second of all, I’m not discussing my sex life—”

“Or lack thereof.”

“...With a twelve-year-old, thank you.”

“Alis waited for you for dinner.” She sounded skeptical at the thought. “She has guests.”

I groaned. She expected me to appear. Usually, she was happy to pretend I didn’t exist as much as possible. She’d even replaced the staff; the servants I’d grown up with had disappeared since Father died. They would’ve made sure I had

something for breakfast instead of playing her silly games with blank smiles etched across their faces.

“Why?” I asked.

“I don’t know.” She was silent for a moment, then said, “I think *she* has a beau.”

“Oh good lord. I guess there’s someone for everyone, even the monsters.” Our stepmother was very pretty. Even nature lied sometimes. “I’m too tired for this.”

“Up all night?” Her eyebrows lifted.

“Hanna. No.”

“Then why are you tired?”

“I took an extra shift at the academy. They had one of their big parties.”

She sighed. “I’d love to go.”

“Someday,” I said lightly. I didn’t want to discuss how my sister would be welcome to blend with the wealthy high-born visiting the academy for balls, even though I never would again. My status as an adoptee in our twisted little world meant that I’d never count to most of these people. Our father had forced them to pretend they accepted me, but he was powerless in the grave. “The balls are more boring than you’d think.”

“Not the balls,” she scoffed. “Please. The academy.”

An instant wave of unease swept over me, as if one of the Scourge was about to hop over the walls around the mansion and try to rip our heads off. “Absolutely not. You want to train to fight the Scourge? I’m pretty sure there are better things you can do with your life than face down braindead killing machines.”

“If these braindead killing machines are wearing fancy gowns, you just described the girls that Stepmother wants me to be friends with.”

“I had some of those friends too when I was your age.” I thought of the girls who’d glanced me over with visible

disdain on their faces the night before, then of Calla and June and Lana waking me this morning. “It’s gotten a lot better since. You can’t give up on finding your people.”

“I don’t want to give up on finding my people, but so far, they appear to be in deep hiding. I’m not sure I have any people.” She kicked a rose bush lightly with the toe of her slipper; her people were not hiding under the leaves.

I tried to think of something comforting to say, but I remembered what it had been like to be that kind of lonely, and I didn’t remember anything anyone ever said that would’ve made it better. My loneliness had softened once I went to boarding school. I could fix this for Hanna if only I could earn the money for her tuition.

The memory of last night’s dalliance with Talisyn swept over me, and with it a mix of both lust and shame. I’d keep my head down and keep working at the academy. No more royals.

“Why are you going all red?” Hanna blurted out.

“No reason. But also, if you’re trying to find your people, you might want to resist the temptation to ask awkward questions.”

“*My people* are going to be thick-skinned.”

“Your people are probably going to be awkward as you are,” I corrected.

She considered that. “Fair.”

I could tell she had follow-on questions about my reaction, but we’d just reached the house. Hanna reached for my hand, and I wrapped my fingers around hers. It reminded me of all the times when she’d been truly a child that we’d walked hand-in-hand. It reminded me of how we’d stood together at our father’s grave, with Alis on the other side, dabbing at her dry eyes. And it reminded me that I could do anything for Hanna.

When we walked in, Alis favored me with a cold smile. “Honor. So glad you’re finally home. I wondered when you didn’t come home last night.”

Her tone was icy. I doubted she'd wondered very hard.

"I'm sorry." I glanced past her to the men sitting in the parlor.

I recognized one of them—Pend Deragon. The King, which would also make him Jaik's father. After King Terin and his family died in the Scourge, the four royal dragon families had stepped into his place, dividing the kingdom into three dukedoms, which united here at the capitol of Rylow.

But what the hell was he doing in our house?

I dropped a curtsy, belatedly.

There were two other men with him, both dressed just as richly. Alis introduced Hanna and me to them.

"Lord Teris, Sir Henrick," Alis told me. "My ward, Honor Hannaby."

Lord Teris, one of those three dukes who'd saved the kingdom along with Pend...and also Talisyn's father. Hopefully he didn't know his son had finger-fucked me in the library the night before. I squeezed my lips tightly together, somehow worried that the thought would leak from between them. It was insane to think he might know, that he might *care*—but I didn't understand why else he might be here.

Teris simply looked bored, though. I wondered why they were all here as suddenly, Alis tucked her hand through the crook of Henrik's arm.

"What a lucky young woman," Henrik told me with an oily smile.

"Alis certainly is," I said brightly. "Well, not young. But lucky! To have Hanna and me!"

Alis's icy smile grew icier. To the men, she added, "Honor is a comedic genius."

I laughed out loud. No one else was laughing, which was always awkward. I folded my hands in front of me and tried to look demure, about two minutes too late to fool anyone. I just wanted to have my soup and cake and to get to my own bed. I could play nice for five minutes for cake.

I made it through dinner and endless small talk and was about to say that I was headed to bed when the servants brought out sparkling cocktails. Long wisps of gold, smoldering flames flickered from the tops of the tall glasses.

“What are we celebrating?” I asked as I took my glass. I always wondered about our tradition of handing drunk people things that were on fire. I took the wisp and blew it out before dropping it on my plate.

Alis looked toward Henrick with faux adoration in her eyes, the same way she used to look at my father, and my stomach flip-flopped. He smiled at her, gave her a little half-nod of approval. Then she said sweetly, “Henrick and I wish to take this opportunity to announce our engagement to you two.”

“Engagement?” Hanna asked, her voice hollow.

My little sister looked stricken. She stood from the table, crumpling her embroidered napkin in her hand before she dropped it to the floor. “You’re marrying again?”

“It’s been four years since your father died, Hanna.” Alis sounded impatient.

“She’s allowed to have feelings about it,” I said, my voice coming out irritated. “You should have told her in private.”

“I don’t need yet another of your endless opinions, Honor,” Alis told me.

“Just like that?” Hanna demanded. “We meet him tonight and you’re marrying him...”

“Next month,” Alis said coldly, answering a question no one had asked.

“Why so quickly?” I blurted out. Was she pregnant? I had no doubt she’d redouble her efforts to drive my little sister away and claim her inheritance for herself, instead of merely frittering it away as quickly as she could while she held the keys.

“There are no doubts when it is true love,” Henrick said, catching my mother’s hand.

I snorted. I couldn't help it; I'd seen one man destroy his happiness by trying to provide my stepmother with hers. This fool *should* have doubts.

Alis fixed me with a cold look, then her gaze swept back to Hanna, only growing icier. I felt the chill in my stomach, which hardened as if it were freezing over.

"How could you?" Hanna demanded. "You never really loved Father."

"It's been four years," Alis said again. "It's not fair to expect me to go through my life without ever finding love again, Hanna."

Alis had a point, though I hated to admit it.

"You've never been sorry he was dead, though," Hanna said.

The words jolted me, bringing back a memory of my stepmother standing outside my father's room, the night he'd died. She'd just left it, and she'd stopped with her hand still on the doorknob. She hadn't seen me. She'd stopped and smiled.

Hanna was right.

My hatred for her had blurred into my grief then. But now, with a cooler head, seeing that same smile on her face now while she hurt Hanna... Had Father really died of a heart attack that night?

"Don't talk that way to me," Alis warned her. "You're allowed your feelings, but you're a young lady. You must manage yourself."

"Or someone else will manage you," Henrick warned.

That was it. I hated him too.

"I don't like him," Hanna told Alis.

Alis looked bored in the face of Hanna's ire. "You don't even know him. He doesn't deserve that. Stop being ridiculous in front of our guests."

"Stop being ridiculous all of the time!" Hanna exploded.

Alis slapped Hanna across the face.

It wasn't the first time she'd hit Hanna, but it was the first time I'd seen it. Rage swept over me, more hot and intense than the times she'd hit me. My hands trembled, my vision going red as if I was the one slapped.

Worst of all, as my vision cleared, my gaze fell on Henrick. His eyes glinted, his face full of just-barely contained enthusiasm. Revulsion dug a pit in my stomach.

Hanna clutched her cheek, staring at Alis with wounded eyes.

I dropped into a curtsy. "Good night, gentlemen."

I had a thousand things I wanted to say, but tonight I just slipped my arm around my sister and steered her from the room.

She was quiet in the hallway, quiet until we reached her bedroom, and then she turned into my arms and put her head on my shoulder and began to cry.

Even the strongest girls need to break sometimes.



CHAPTER EIGHT

H*onor*

THE NEXT DAY I WAS IN NO MOOD FOR ANYONE'S NONSENSE, which is always a problem when you work in service.

Prince Talisyn started to say something to me in the hallway, and I pretended I didn't hear him. I was a reformed maid. Nothing but a maid. A fucking sentient broom. I wasn't going to risk my sister's chance to get out of that house. I needed every dollar I made in my job, and I needed to find another source of funds besides.

It didn't matter how much I enjoyed insulting and/or flirting with those dickish royals; there was probably something really wrong with me given how much we had blurred the line between insults and flirting and death threats already.

I was heading out at the end of the day when I had to walk past the training yard, where Jaik and Talisyn were fencing. They were shirtless, because of course they were. The setting sun was in my eyes when I glanced their way, which was for the best. I had no reason to look at them.

One of the twins sat on the fence, also shirtless, watching them. Lara's fan-fiction called them *the golden twins*, and it certainly had some truth to it, given the way their skin was tanned a golden hue, and the mussed hair above it was bright as spun gold. He whistled to me.

I ignored him. *I am a sentient broomstick. Undesiring broomstick. Undistractable broomstick.*

"Honor," he called.

He knew my name?

I turned to face him. He didn't actually want to talk to me; maybe he was the one who'd said he was going to get to know me. To see if I was a spy or not.

"Yes, your highness?"

His lips tugged at the corners. "You're a lot more respectful than I thought you'd be, after hearing Jaik's story about how you flung cake at him."

"I wouldn't exactly say I threw cake at him..."

"But I would. It's a very funny scene in my head. One I'd pay you money to see play out again."

"How much money?" I asked automatically—because money was always on my mind.

"I have a bet with Talisyn that Jaik will win their match." He nodded at the two fencers. "Talisyn gets very distracted when you're around. Come sit on my lap and I'll give you a gold coin."

I stared at him in shock for a second, then my chin lifted. "What do you think I am?"

"I don't think you want me to answer that."

I closed the distance between us. His eyes widened in surprise.

"I do," I said, my voice coming out very quiet. "You implied something. Aren't you willing to say it out loud?"

"Stop antagonizing the housemaid," Talisyn called. He flung his practice sword into the storage.

"Thank you," the golden twin said, giving me a self-satisfied smile; Talisyn looked so cross, he must have lost to Jaik.

I narrowed my eyes. I had zero interest in helping him. "Which one are you?"

"Which twin?" he asked carelessly, propping his chin on his hand as he studied me. "I'm Branok."

He thought I was a spy. He thought I couldn't be trusted. My mind raced, debating what to do with him.

“Is your twin any more of a gentleman than you are?”

“I've offended you.”

“You are so brilliantly observant. Who would have known treating me as a whore would offend?” I pressed my lips together tightly, trying to seal my sharp tongue away. Maybe it would've been smarter to let him close to me and let him know just how innocent I was.

Well, at least I was innocent in regard to the *spying* business.

He flashed me a bright white smile. “We should start over.”

“But why, though?”

Talisyn rested his elbow on my shoulder, once again. He smiled down at me, his grin wide and handsome, and something warm bloomed in my chest. I was terrible at being a broom.

Jaik came over, looking pissed, and shoved his arm away.

“What?” Talisyn demanded, looking as if he might just punch the heir-apparent to the high throne.

“Don't act like you want to fight Jaik again,” Branok warned him. “You already lost once.”

Jaik ignored them both, his smoldering gaze fixed on me. “Why are you always turning up?”

“I work here.” I took a step back.

He vaulted over the wall from the training yard with ease. “Come spar with me.”

I almost laughed out loud. “I wouldn't be much of an opponent for you.”

I'd learned to fence at my boarding school, but I'd been pulled out long before I had the chance to master any skills.

And the past few years my sole exercise had involved a lot of scrubbing.

“I don’t mind.” He vaulted back over the fence, but this time he stopped at the top, one leg on either side, and reached his hand back toward me.

He was gorgeous as hell, limned by the sunlight that was getting into my eyes, his dark hair waving in the breeze.

“Why?” I demanded.

“I’m curious about the girl who intrigued Talisyn so much,” he said. “And who jumps like a naughty cat from one balcony to another.”

“A *naughty* cat? Cats are just living their lives. They can’t help it.”

“Are you just living your life?” he asked me lightly. “You just can’t help it?”

“I can’t,” I said, taking a step back. “Talisyn was right the other night when he said he was making a spectacle of me. No one’s going to judge you for amusing yourself, but I... I have responsibilities.”

I wanted to spar with him so badly. To test myself against these arrogant men, even knowing I wasn’t quite as good, not with my abbreviated education. I wanted the chance to *fight*. To relieve some of the pent-up aggression that burned in my chest after watching Alis hit Hanna and doing nothing.

“What responsibilities?” Branok asked quietly, his bright blue eyes dancing with curiosity.

But I turned and fled.

I could feel the princes staring after me, their eyes daggers in my back.

I wanted to go back to them, to give in to the pull between us, to fight and play and lose myself in the pretend that I could matter to this world like they did.

Instead, I walked down the steps, letting my aching shoulders slope, letting the exhaustion of the day drag me

down.

Today, I was a good broomstick.



CHAPTER NINE

H*onor*

THE NEXT DAY, I TURNED MY SUPPLIES IN AND CHANGED clothes. My footsteps echoed in the empty halls of the academy, the students already having scattered.

In two days' time, I'd know exactly what I was, or rather, what my soul creature was. Part of me would prefer to keep it a mystery, to believe I might be a wolf or a tiger or a panther or even a clever, quick-on-my-feet cat. But Alis had told me the story a dozen times of how my father had pitied me after I was found beaten and abandoned by my first parents. I came from the worst kind of stock, not the kind that created sleek, gorgeous predators, but the kind that would eat their own young.

As I was passing the training yard, a sudden explosion of color and movement and growling startled me.

I whirled to see two dragons fighting each other. They took up the entire yard, with their lashing tails and their enormous, winged bodies covered in rippling rainbow-colored scales. They were as beautiful as they were fierce, and I stopped dead, overcome by longing.

Two other students passed by me, saw the dragons, and broke into a run as if they were afraid they would accidentally be stomped into little piles of jelly.

Flames burst past me as one dragon breathed fire at another, heat beating against my face, and I stepped backward.

Right into a hard chest.

"Honor." Jaik said, his voice curt. "Here you are again."

I pulled away and whirled to face him. His dark hair was damp with sweat, and more drops of sweat trickled down the broad, flat planes of his chest and down his tanned abs.

Did these men ever stop training?

Did they ever wear shirts?

“Quite often,” he said drily.

I’d said that bit about the shirts out loud.

Maybe I should tell them I was a spy and let them murder me so I’d be out of my misery.

“You like to watch us train.” There was no hint of question in his voice.

“Because I’d like to train myself.” *Not because you’re gorgeous.* Although that was true as well.

He scoffed, stuffed his hands into his pockets. “Why?”

“I don’t know, in two days I’ll probably discover I’m a field mouse, but for now I can pretend I could be anything.”

I shouldn’t have blurted out the honest truth. Jaik wasn’t the kind of person who deserved my honest truth. The prince would just use it to mock me now.

“You wish you could be something more than...this.” Jaik’s gaze swept up and down me as he fell silent, as if he’d searched me over and could understand why I’d want to be more than the pathetic thing I was.

“Well, we’ve established that I’m pretty bad at being a housekeeper.”

“Servants are supposed to be invisible,” he chided. “You are certainly...not.”

“I’m trying.” I took another step back, even though it was the wrong direction, back toward the academy.

I felt just as hot and uncomfortable when I was near Jaik as I did when dragon flames seared too close.

He glanced me over one more time, then said, “Come spar with me. You can pretend for today.”

“I can’t.”

“You can and you will.” His gaze searched mine, no hint of kindness or teasing in it. “I can make it an order.”

“Let’s not.” I flashed him a big, bright smile. I hated the feeling of being trapped, even if this was the exact scenario I’d longed for before. “Let’s save your dignity and pretend I want to be here with you.”

He vaulted the wall again, offered me a hand up. This time I took it, planted my foot against the stone wall, and used his weight to help me leverage myself up on top of the wall.

He was still holding my hand, his palm warm against mine, when he demanded, “Why are you such a smartass? Aren’t you afraid?”

“Should I be?”

He released my hand and stood on the wall abruptly. “Probably.”

Then he jumped backwards into a flip. One of the dragons whirled around, smoke steaming from his nostrils; his flickering tail barely cleared the field before Jaik landed on the dust, sending a cloud of it up from his boots.

“Show-off,” I accused.

“Branok, Lynx, enough,” Jaik called to the two dragons.

A moment later, the two dragons had shimmered and changed. The tall, broad-shouldered, golden-haired twins stood there instead.

“I’m rooting for the girl,” Lynx called as he swung himself onto the top of the wall to watch.

Branok gave me a look I couldn’t read—right, he was *Team Murder Me* if I’d heard correctly in the library—and joined his twin.

“Are they going to watch?” I asked, my mouth dry at the thought of sparring with Jaik, let alone with an audience.

“Always,” he said, which made me think of the library, of how I’d imagined Jaik as a voyeur himself, working his hand

up and down his cock.

Apparently I could think inappropriately sexy thoughts about these guys even when one was about to kick my ass. I took off my jacket and slung it over the stone wall.

Jaik didn't smile, but his gaze softened in approval. "What a brave girl."

"We've already established what you all think of me, and I didn't think *bravery* was one of the adjectives."

"It might make the list." He gripped his sword in one hand and held another out to me. "But it is a very long list."

"Entirely complimentary, I'm sure." As I reached for the sword, he tossed it lightly toward me. I almost managed to catch the hilt, but the wooden training sword was heavier than I remembered, and the tip hit the ground as I gripped it awkwardly.

Talisyn winced, then gave me a thumbs-up.

"I'll take it easy on you," Jaik promised. He tapped the blade of his sword against mine.

"Don't bother," I answered. "I don't like to be bored."

I blocked his next feint, then spun toward him, knocking his blade away as I tried to get inside his long reach. His fingers wrapped my throat, his smoldering gaze meeting mine, and the two of us shared the briefest glance before he shoved me away. I barely managed to catch my footing as I turned to meet his blade, our wooden swords clashing.

I caught glimpses from the corner of my eye of the other dragon royals arriving, along with a sixth man who leaned against the wall as well. They called out encouragement to me as Jaik and I continued to spar. I let out a ferocious volley of blows, and Jaik blocked each one, giving way a step.

"Go for his left knee!" Talisyn called. "He broke it a few years ago. Still a soft point."

Jaik pinned my sword and halted, giving Talisyn a withering look. "You are supposed to be my friend."

“I’d die for you, brother. But I do think you could use a little humbling.”

Jaik grunted and slammed his forearm against my chest, knocking me backward. The blow stung, but he’d obviously pulled his power. It was still enough as he trapped my blade that my fingers released the hilt as I stumbled back.

He kicked my sword to one side, then dropped his own on the ground and advanced toward me. So we were going to spar hand-to-hand.

“You can hit me,” I said. “You don’t need to pull your punches.”

“I think I do,” he disagreed.

The two of us fought on, but soon I found myself on the ground, pinned there with his boot lightly resting on my shoulder.

“You’re better than I’d anticipated,” he said.

“Thanks.”

“Not very good. But better than expected.” He offered me his hand up.

I caught his wrist and let him pull me to my feet.

“You should know your place,” he said quietly into my ear. “You aren’t good enough for Talisyn. At least have the dignity to see that.”

I yanked my arm out of his, hard enough to make myself stumble. He caught my elbow, gave me a mocking glance.

“I’m not the one chasing *him*,” I said. “I didn’t ask for his attention.”

He gave me a long, cold look, and I stared right back at him.

“You can go now,” he said. “Run away.”

He was echoing the same words Arren had said.

“I don’t think I will.” I smiled at him broadly, then turned and stalked out of the arena.

He didn't have to know that I was still panting or how I felt trembling, undone.



CHAPTER TEN

Caldren

HONOR STORMED AWAY FROM JAIK, HER BRIGHT RED HAIR flying in the breeze.

“He always pisses everyone off,” Talisyn said, shaking his head mockingly, as if Talisyn didn’t piss everyone off too. My friends weren’t known for their warmth and likeability, even if they were the kingdom’s heroes.

Branok sighed, rubbing his hand over his face. “Why is he antagonizing her? I want to get close, not push her away, until we know her game.”

“It would be weird if he wasn’t antagonizing her, let’s be honest,” Lynx said. “He’s always an asshole and the ladies still line up.”

Jaik sauntered toward us, then he saw me and his gaze hardened.

“You should go,” Talisyn drawled. “Last time you two were face to face, I could barely get the blood stains out of my clothes.”

I scoffed. “He’s not worth it.”

When I lost my place with the dragon royals, I lost everything. All I had left was my room at the academy, my gambling skills to fill my pockets, a few illicit activities, and a position teaching lesser shifters.

I could feel Jaik staring at me as I walked down the path toward the long, stone steps that twisted down the academy to the gates, then the city street below. I started to jog down them once I was out of sight.

Until I caught up with Honor.

Why was Jaik—and the other dragon royals—paying so much attention to her? She was beautiful; even from behind, with her long hair swishing across her back and the graceful, easy way she moved, she was striking. But they had plenty of beautiful women hanging off their arms and on their every word.

She was brave, too. I still didn't understand why Jaik would pull her into the training yard. Of course a trained dragon royal could decimate any civilian, most likely any other shifter warrior, forget an untrained girl. Why were they so obsessed with her?

I reached her, then matched my pace to hers. "Hello."

She glanced at me out of the corner of her eye, then turned to face me with disbelief written across her face. "Now what?"

I raised an eyebrow at her. That wasn't usually how women reacted to me. "Why is Prince Jaik picking on you?"

"I don't know. You fling cake at a noble one time, they get all weird." She seemed to contemplate. "Maybe that's his kink. Do you think that could be his kink?"

I didn't want to think about Jaik's kinks, although I'd certainly had a front-row seat to them many times before. The dragon royals had perverse habits.

"What's special about you?" I mused.

"Absolutely nothing. Who are you?"

"Oh, I doubt that very much. Caldren." I offered her my hand, and she shook it.

"Honor."

"I'm a teacher here."

"Great. Please don't get me fired... I swear I'll stay away from the royals. Somehow." She cast a glance over her shoulder at the academy, which seemed to loom above us the closer we came to the street.

I didn't want her to stay away from the royals. I wanted to know what the degenerates were plotting.

"It's all right," I said. "No one's getting fired. That wasn't your fault. Jaik goaded you into sparring."

"How'd you know?"

"Jaik goads everyone. He's an asshole." I eyed her contemplatively. "You might be no match for him, but you have good moves."

"Just not good enough."

"Not good enough," I agreed. "But they could be."

She laughed. "Please."

"I teach weapons at the academy. I can teach you."

"Why?"

"Because when one of the royals warns someone to know their place, it pisses me off." The truth of it unfurled in my chest, and some of the tension I carried every time I saw Jaik released.

She glanced at me, her eyes widening. "What did he do to you?"

"Nothing," I said curtly. "He's just the inevitable result of a fucked-up system."

She watched me curiously as the two of us kept heading down the stairs.

"There's nothing for me to train for," she said finally.

"Bullshit. It's always worth being ready for a fight."

She hesitated, licking her lips absently. I found myself watching her, studying the tiny tip of her pink tongue, her curvy red lower lip and the distinct bow in her upper lip. There was something magnetic about her, and it wasn't just her beauty. No matter how much she claimed to be trying to be practical, to be invisible, there was something fierce and fearless about her. Something wild that she couldn't quite deny.

“When?” she asked, and I grinned, knowing I had her.



THE NEXT DAY, I WAS SURPRISED WHEN SHE SHOWED, trudging up the dark stone steps just before dawn broke over the academy.

“I didn’t think you’d come,” I admitted.

“I’ve got nothing better to do at five in the morning,” she said. “Just...sleeping. And sleep is so boring.”

“Exactly,” I said.

I tossed her a training sword. This time she managed to catch it, which was a small improvement already. She frowned at the sword as if she were thinking the same.

“Why don’t you come at me?”

I’d intended to let her get some good shots in, to build her confidence a bit after her humiliation the day before. She came at me with a burst of violent fury, her long red braid flying behind her head, and I found myself taking a step or two back, trying to block each quick blow. She had explosive power and good instincts, even if she lacked the higher-level technique that came with years of training.

I trapped her sword with mine, and the two of us finally came to a halt, both of us breathing hard. She looked up at me, her eyes bright. Some insane part of me wanted to lean over and kiss her.

“Where did you learn to fight?” I released her sword and moved back, putting some space between us. I needed a break, and part of it was just because of how beautiful she was, how disconcerting I found her.

The two of us prowled around each other, looking for an opening. “My father thought every girl should learn some useful skills. How to cook and bake, how to drive a pen through a man’s eye... You get the picture.”

“He sounds like a wise man.”

“In some ways.”

The two of us sparred again, then finally paused, both of us guzzling water and eying each other.

“What kind of shifter are you?” she asked.

My jaw set. “Wolf shifter.”

I hadn’t known until I finally reached my shifting ceremony and disappointed my family. But there was no reason to shy away from the truth.

“Ohh,” she said, a note of admiration in her voice.

“Are you coming up on your ceremony?”

She nodded and held up a finger. “One more day.”

“Do you know...?”

She shook her head. “I don’t know my birth parents, so I don’t know what I’ll be. But they weren’t exactly the finest stock.”

“How do you know that, if you don’t know them?”

“The part where they abandoned me suggests they weren’t entirely awesome,” she answered.

“What do you hope you are?”

She shrugged, tucked a wayward strand of strawberry hair behind her ear. Finally she admitted, “Maybe a cat, or a hawk...”

She wasn’t being honest. She couldn’t even admit to herself how big her dreams were. “So you want to fight the Scourge, but you don’t think you’ll be good enough?”

“I don’t understand why your soul creature determines what you get to do with your life even when you’re in human form,” she said, her voice intense as if this thought plagued her.

“Because there’s no truer indication of who you are on the inside?”

“Except maybe for what we *do*?”

“Maybe,” I admitted, although our soul creatures were everything about who we truly were.

Besides, certain shifters could do more in battle than anyone else. Dragons saved lives on the battlefield below them; a dragon shifter breathing fire from on high was worth a dozen wolf shifters tearing out throats of the Scourge. That was the hard truth.

“Can we pick this up again next week?” Her voice came out light, but she bit her lower lip as if she were hanging on my answer.

“Yes,” I said, surprised at how my heart thrilled at the thought of seeing her again. “You’ll get a little less pathetic every day.”

“And perhaps you’ll get a little less arrogant every day.” But she couldn’t resist smiling at me, and I couldn’t resist smiling back.



CHAPTER ELEVEN

H*onor*

THE NEXT DAY PASSED IN AN EXPECTANT HAZE UNTIL I dressed for the shifter ceremony. My hands trembled as I fastened the straps of my dress.

The door clicked open behind me, and I turned, expecting to see Hanna. Instead, my stepmother glided into the room.

“You look lovely.” Alis could make even a compliment sound like a curse.

Hanna materialized in the doorway behind her, rolling her eyes, and I smothered my smile. I didn’t mind Alis’s insults when Hanna and I laughed at her together.

I ran my hands down the sides of my long red gown, smoothing the soft fabric against my legs. “Thank you.”

Hanna threw herself at me, wrapping her arms around my neck as I swayed, trying to keep us both upright. “Good luck, Honor.”

“Oh, she doesn’t need luck,” Alis said. “She is what she is.”

If only that were comforting. I ruffled my little sister’s hair and headed for the door. Calla and June were having their first shifter night too, and I’d join them there, but I wanted to walk alone.

As I headed down the walkway beneath the trees, Hanna stood on the porch, watching me. I raised my hand to wave before I turned the corner out of sight. She waved back, a frozen smile on her face that obviously hid her real feelings.

Alis had forbidden her to go tonight, even though many families would be thronging outside the temple.

Hanna's heritage was bear shifters and swans, a strange marriage of grace and brawn. That seemed to suit my little sister perfectly, though it was hard to imagine which she would be. Women more often followed in their mother's footsteps. The dragons, for instance, were always male, but their sisters were almost always wolves or panthers, graceful and fierce. I wished so badly to be a bear that it burned in my chest. It would feel like another connection to the man who'd raised me.

I joined the rowdy procession through the streets; the noise and bustle made me feel even more alone.

Strangely enough, when I felt lonely, part of me always wanted to pull back from crowds. But Calla saw me first, and threw her arm around me, dragging me into her body. June smiled at me distractedly as if she were nervous.

I hugged Calla around the waist. She was already chattering about celebrating afterward, even though I wasn't sure there would be anything to celebrate. When she invited me to join her family afterward, I made an excuse. The only thing that seemed more lonely than losing my own family was being with someone else's.

We separated when we reached the front of the lines into the temple. In the old days, we were supposed to slaughter a sacrifice; I was grateful that now I could just drop a handful of coins into the priest's hand. He nodded and stepped back, letting me enter the temple itself.

There were shifters at the front of the room, but they melted out, leaving me alone for the moment of truth. I approached the altar and performed the ceremony, lighting the incense and murmuring the beginning of the spell.

I took a deep breath and closed my eyes as I whispered the last word.

Then everything changed.

Suddenly pain ripped through my back, through my shoulder blades. I found myself on my knees on the cold marble floor, staring at my hands and arms as they rippled and grew over with scales.

Something moved behind me, startling me, and I jerked my head around, only for my tail to bash into one of the marble columns. I stared at the long spiny tail and tried to make sense of what the hell was happening.

Several priests and shifters ran into the room. They looked small. And worried as hell.

They looked small, because I was big. I looked up and saw stars overhead; if I raised up onto my legs, I could crane my neck and see through the open roof, to the city outside and the people thronging the streets. Someone screamed when they saw me and I ducked my head back down, too late.

“Get back.” Caldren shouted at the other men. What was he doing here?

Caldren stretched out his hand toward me. “Easy, girl. It’s weird waking up in a dragon’s body, hm?”

“That’s not a girl,” one of the other men said, sounding dumfounded. “It can’t be.”

“Pretty sure,” Caldren snapped back, but his tone was kind again as he stared up into my eye.

Just one eye. I turned my head so I could see him with the other one. Man, my vision was *amazing* now. I could even see the scar through his eyebrow, the gold flecks in his brown eyes. He was a very pretty man.

“Come on now,” he said quietly to me, as if he were afraid. Afraid of what? That I’d accidentally thrash around with these new wings, this tail, and bring the whole temple down on us all?

Ah. Suddenly I realized that was an option, and I didn’t feel good about it.

“Leave us,” Caldren told the men. “Clear everyone out of the temple.”

The men scattered, clearing the area.

I tried to say everything would be fine.

Instead, I accidentally blasted fire at Caldren.

He ducked to one side, throwing up a shield of magic, and the flames burst harmlessly against it. He didn't look mad; he let out a laugh.

“You are going to make the world a much weirder, more interesting place, Honor.” He reached out his hand again, not afraid of me apparently, and began to pet my snout.

I had a snout. That was weird.

So was the fact that Caldren was touching it.

He murmured soothing words to me. “You can turn back into a girl at any time. You just have to imagine putting your soul creature back into her home deep inside you, the place where you've kept her sheltered all this time. The soul of a dragon, sleeping in her nest, surrounded by her gold and treasures...”

I didn't know why he was droning on about treasure, but the more he talked about it, the cozier that nest sounded.

I yawned.

“That's right. Back to sleep for a little while. Now that you've found each other, you'll be back again soon,” he said encouragingly, stroking my cheek, then up over the bumps of my horns.

I yawned again, found myself shrinking—this time it felt odd, a pulling of my muscles, a tweaking of my bones, but it didn't hurt like it had the first time—and then suddenly, his hand on my horns was in my hair instead, and the two of us were standing intimately close.

His gaze met mine, and for a second, I thought he was going to kiss me, because he was looking at my face so intently.

Then he cleared his throat, breaking the spell, and his hand dropped back to his side.

“Thank you,” I said, my voice coming out hoarse. It was my turn to clear my throat. “Well. I guess breathing fire hurts your vocal cords.”

“It’s only weird at first,” he said. “You’ll get used to it soon.”

“How do you know? I thought you were a wolf.”

“I’ve spent a lot of time around dragons. Too much.” He offered me a strained smile.

For some reason, that hurt. “Oh.”

Then I remembered what the one priest had said about how I couldn’t be a girl. “Oh! I’m not supposed to be a dragon!”

“Aren’t you?”

“I’m a girl!”

“Yes,” he said. “Yes, I imagine the Order of Dragons is going to have some... thoughts.” Then he seemed to think to himself, before amending, “Well, opinions. The Order of Dragons doesn’t always have thoughts, but they *do* always have opinions.”

“That’s an epidemic everywhere,” I agreed.

A small smile touched his lips, but his gaze was still worried. “By now, everyone will know there’s a new member of the Order of Dragons. Normally, the Knights would come and introduce you to the crowd outside, but... I don’t think they’re going to do that for you.”

Besides the High King and his three dukes, and their sons, there were a few dozen other nobles who were also dragon shifters and the king’s beloved knights—the Order of Dragons. All male, of course.

My nerves twisted. “No, I guess they might not.”

“I want to know you’re all right,” he said. “If you need anything... come to the Twisted Pines pub tonight, will you? It’s filled with friends. I’ll be there, waiting.”

“Are you going to wait there all night?” I asked skeptically. “You have no idea if I’ll even be... where I’ll

be...”

God, I hated this. I liked for my life to be predictable, even if it was predictably terrible for these past few years.

“I’ll be there all night,” he said quietly.

“What exactly do you think is going to happen to me?” I demanded.

He didn’t answer that.

But there was a sound of wings beating far above us, and we looked up through the open ceiling to see the stars blotted out by the bodies of dragons as they descended.



CHAPTER TWELVE

H*onor*

“KEEP YOUR MOUTH SHUT,” CALDREN SAID TO ME QUIETLY, moving to my side. “Try not to be a smartass.”

“Me?” I sounded shocked, and he gave me a long look.

The four Elder Dragons entered the room, having transformed from dragons back into men.

Pend Deragon strode in first, his dark hair brushed back from his sharply handsome face. He looked so much like a slightly older version of Jaik that it startled me.

Behind him came the three dukes, Joachim, Teris and Gorion. Gorion was a mountain of a man, heavily bearded and tattooed, with Arren’s cold blue eyes. Teris’ golden hair and unlined, beautiful face gave him a youthful air, but he still carried the same chilling presence as the others. Teris’ gaze widened when he saw me again, outside my stepmother’s drawing room; so he recognized me.

It felt as if the air left the room when they walked in, and there was no mistaking their presence. They were followed by a younger man, in his early thirties, with a craggy face and a muscular build. Anywhere else, I would have thought he was a bodyguard for the kings. But the dragon royals didn’t need bodyguards.

“Where is he?” Pend Deragon demanded, looking around in confusion.

“Right here.” Caldren rested his hand on my shoulder, his grip strangely comforting.

These were the four most powerful men on the continent, and they moved swiftly around me, staring hard into my face. I'd joked with Talisyn about my execution but these men could easily snap my head off and no one would ever question them.

Except Hanna. The thought of Hanna facing these men with the glimmering eyes made me swallow and resolve to be my very quietest and most mild-mannered self.

“She can't be.”

“She's prophecy come to life.” The fifth man said.

Prophecy?

Pend Deragon gave him a hard look. “I doubt that very much.”

“I saw her transform from her dragon form to human again,” Caldren said. “I can vouch that she is what she seems to be.”

Pend Deragon didn't even bother to look at him. It was as if Caldren was invisible to him.

He waved his hand airily. “Show me your transformation then, girl.”

I glanced at Caldren—I didn't even know why—but the king's gaze flickered, following mine.

“Caldren. You aren't needed here.” His tone implied that Caldren was never needed.

“He was close by when I turned,” I said. “He helped me shift back—”

“Did I ask you to speak?” Pend asked coldly.

“Technically, no,” I answered, then fell silent as Caldren shook his head, just the faintest shake.

But Pend noticed, and his eyes narrowed. He seemed to hate Caldren on sight. Behind him, Teris gestured to someone outside the room.

Caldren squeezed my shoulder, gave me an encouraging look, then loped out of the room. Before he could, a pair of guards stopped outside the door seized his arms.

“All right, all right,” he said, raising his hands, but that didn’t stop them from pushing him roughly out the door.

Tension twisted through my stomach. Was he okay? I craned my head to follow him, and Joachim snapped his fingers in my face.

“Is the girl thick?” he asked no one in particular.

I felt alone when Caldren had gone, as I faced these four angry elder royals.

I began to go mechanically through the same steps I had when I first transformed. Right, they wanted to see me transform before they could believe I was a dragon.

“You don’t need to do any of that again,” the king said impatiently. He sounded bored with me, and he cast a glance at one of his dukes, as if I were stupid.

Suddenly, everything about my body was changing, shifting. I dropped to my knees, then all fours, my claws twisting out from my hands. Pain rippled through my body as muscles and bones raced to grow, as scales sprouted from my skin again.

The elder royals scrambled back; clearly they hadn’t expected anything to happen. Gorion was surprisingly nimble for such a large man as he skipped over my tail, which I had very little control over.

The four elder royals stared up at me.

It was the man in the back who drawled, “Well, fuck.”

But I was pretty sure it was a sentiment they all shared.

“Return to your first form,” Pend demanded.

All that work for a mere moment as a dragon? I exhaled an annoyed little blast of smoke and fire, and Pend raised a hand, shielding himself and his companions. The flames curled harmlessly against his shield, then died.

I'd better get myself back into my human form before I accidentally roasted our high king. I concentrated on my imaginary nest, on sending my dragon back to sleep, and found myself shrinking. I'd been looking down at the royals; now suddenly these four terrifying men towered over me again. I smoothed the lines of my dress, grateful that it had shifted with me.

The *lesser shifters*, as the dragons and wolves called us, didn't transform with their clothing intact until they mastered their magic. I'd assumed I'd be a squirrel, drowning in the silky puddle of my dress. But this way I had more dignity in front of the Elders, and that was a relief.

Pend let out an exasperated snort.

Well, I didn't have *much* more dignity.

"What are we going to do with her?" he demanded. "The people don't want a female dragon. She's not even of royal blood."

"Where does she come from?" Joachim looked troubled.

No one was talking to me. I hated that, but I crossed my arms over my chest and pretended to have the same personality as the marble columns. They were about as interested in hearing from me as from the furniture.

"She's an orphan. Rescued by Danen," Pend Deragon said. "She's nobody."

They all looked annoyed by my existence.

"What if we disguise her as a male?" The muscular man in the corner suggested. "We can see if she can even survive academy training."

"Damyn has a point. If she doesn't survive, the problem does resolve itself," Teris mused.

Right here, assholes.

"If she's unworthy, she'll die the first time she faces the Scourge," Gorion agreed.

“How are you going to disguise me as a man?” I blurted out.

Teris raised a finger to his lips and shushed me. The movement was condescending as it was, but even worse, my lips tingled, my tongue suddenly heavy and numb. There must have been a curse in his motion. I tried to make a noise, and my lips wouldn't form words.

Damyn gave me a sympathetic look, the only one of them to acknowledge me directly.

I pressed my numb lips together, resisting the impulse to try to speak again, even though I felt as if I'd go mad. I wouldn't lose my composure in front of these bastards.

“We have that damned noble who stole from me,” Joachim said. “I can bury him somewhere. Give her his identity.”

They were going to kill a man to give me his identity? I tried to tell them that I didn't want that, but I couldn't form the words. I couldn't form *any* words.

“Teris,” Damyn said quietly. “I believe the young lady has taken your point.”

Teris frowned, but waved a hand impatiently. Suddenly my lips parted, and I drew a ragged breath. Ugh, they could probably tell how panicky that had made me feel.

“I'll take care of the situation,” Damyn said. “The people will be looking for their new royal.”

“We'll create an apparition to appear to fly with us,” Joachim said airily. “She can pretend to have passed out in fear or hidden under a table or something during the evacuation of the temple.”

I was offended by the implication that I'd hide under a table, even though I'd done just that quite recently...with Teris's son.

“One thing,” Pend Deragon told me.

“What's that?”

“Don't mention this to your mother.”

“Stepmother,” I corrected automatically.

He glanced me over, his gaze steely, and I added, “I won’t.”

“Let’s make sure she can’t say a word to anyone,” Teris said breezily.

I shook my head frantically, but Teris merely shushed me again, magic flaring across my lips. I turned toward Damyn frantically, expecting not to be able to speak, but the words tumbled from my lips. “I don’t understand any of this.”

I stopped, relieved.

Teris gave me a long, lingering look—perhaps he *did* know what I’d done with Talisyn—but the others were already storming from the room, and he turned and left too.

Damyn lingered, waiting for me.

The dragons soared overhead. I cupped my hand over my eyes, searching the sky. As they’d promised, there were five dragon forms that blotted out the stars for a moment, then they were gone.

Their magic was even more powerful than the stories I’d heard.

“Now what?” I asked shakily.

“Now you’re going to look terrified, and I’m going to take you out of here,” he said. “I’ll help set up your disguise.”

“Look terrified? That’s going to be a challenge.” I grumbled.

I desperately needed some time to process what had just happened. But I clearly wasn’t going to get that because Damyn whistled.

Caldren came in, as if he’d been lurking nearby, hiding. His hands were jammed in his pockets, his posture stiff, but he relaxed when he saw me.

“I knew you’d have slunk back in here,” Damyn told him.

Caldren flashed him a bright smile, then looked to me. “I thought for sure you’d talk your way into having your head bitten off.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence.”

He shrugged. “Just calling it as I see it.”

I glanced between the two men who faced me. “What happens if I fail at the academy?”

I knew what would happen if I failed fighting the Scourge. I’d die, or end up worse than dead, becoming like them.

“You’ll give them an excuse to say you were never worthy,” Caldren began.

Damyn shook his head, cutting him off.

“What?” I demanded. “I’m pretty sure *harsh words* aren’t the end of it. What happens if I’m not worthy?”

Caldren cut his eyes toward Damyn. “She deserves to know what’s at stake.”

Damyn said, “Just make sure she doesn’t fail, Caldren.”

“I can’t,” he said. “I’m not even a dragon.”

“But no one knows them better.”

“And I didn’t offer to take on a charity case.” Caldren glanced me over skeptically. “The best thing for her is to run.”

Hanna was waiting for me in her tree right now. She’d keep waiting for me if I disappeared, too.

“I’m not running. I’ve got nowhere to go.” I raised my chin. Maybe I could do this, anyway.

I’d wanted the chance to prove myself.

Now I had it.

Even if the cost was a little terrifying.

Damyn stopped and rubbed some scorch marks on the marble—had I done that?—and then used them to smudge my face.

He offered me his elbow. “Let me help you out. Try to look weak. And Caldren—don’t get caught. You know the King’s Guard is lingering.”

“I never get caught,” he said.

“Even the cleverest get unlucky sometimes,” Damyn said, “and I’m not as certain as you that you are, in fact, the cleverest.”

Caldren rolled his eyes, then touched my arm. Electric sparks seemed to tingle across my skin where his fingers had brushed. “Until we meet again, Honor.”

As soon as he was gone, Damyn said, “You should stay away from him. And he should stay away from you.”

I studied him, my mind still reeling too much to judge his advice. I’d turn it over later.

Damyn was dressed in the armor of one of the shifter knights. I frowned at the emblem on his shoulder. A dragon, the same as the princes wore on their training tunics. There were only a few dozen lower dragon royals, besides the kings and their sons, and I was standing beside one of them.

And he was holding his elbow out insistently.

I gave in and took it. He smelled good and strange at the same time up close, a mix of leather and something metallic.

I pretended to limp as the two of us headed out of the temple.

Calla rushed over to us, and Damyn released me just before Calla threw her arms around me. “Where have you been?”

“I got stuck in the temple,” I said.

Damyn gave me a hard look, and I added, “I...hid. I got scared.”

“Oh,” Calla gave me a sympathetic look. “I can understand that! What happened with the dragon?”

“She’s hurt,” Damyn interrupted. “I’m going to see the young lady home.”

I cringed and touched my ankle. Calla fussed over me briefly, then let Damyn pull me away. She gave me a knowing look, and I gave her a scandalized one back. He must be ten years older than me, at least. And a dragon royal, too. And probably an asshole, even if he was looking after me for the sake of the other royals.

“You have sweet friends,” Damyn observed as we headed down the dark streets, leaving the noise of the party behind.

I nodded. It occurred to me now that it was just the two of us, and I wasn’t entirely sure the Royals wouldn’t just go with burying *me* instead of the unfortunate noble son whose identity I was taking.

I should have been entirely focused on the possibility this man would murder me, but Calla was right—he was really handsome. His corded forearm rippled under my fingertips in the most distracting way. I tugged my hand free, then crossed my arms.

“You have to lie to them.” Damyn didn’t seem to notice that I’d pulled away. “Do you know what will happen to anyone who knows your secret?”

“I’ll keep my mouth shut,” I promised.

“You’d better. For their sakes. Don’t try to evade Lord Teris’s enchantment.”

“Isn’t anyone going to notice when I just disappear from my life though?” I asked, wondering how it was possible my own friends wouldn’t notice me when I re-appeared at the academy as a student.

“You’re not going to,” he said shortly. “You’re going to keep up...what is it you do now?”

“I’m a maid at the academy.”

“How convenient.”

Convenient wasn’t the adjective I’d use for that job. “You think I’m going to be a student there and work at the same time?”

“Yes.” The two of us passed under a streetlamp, which cast a glow over his russet hair. He looked angelic in a hard-edged way, a strange contrast to the clipped, demanding way he spoke to me.

“That’s impossible!”

“Nothing’s impossible for a dragon royal. Or a girl who wants to live to see next Tuesday.”

I glanced around the empty street. “I’m not a dragon royal. I’m not a royal at all. There’s been some kind of...”

“Mistake?” His brows rose. “A mistake of magic?”

Well, that was rude. I could call my dragon a *mistake*, but no one else needed to say it. “What about the prophecy? What was that about?”

“Don’t worry about the prophecy.”

“Are you kidding me right now? *You seem to be part of a magical prophecy but meh, no need to think about that too much!*”

His lips quirked. “You only have to worry about surviving the next few months.”

“You’ve got a really positive outlook on life. But I have news for you: I am *terrific* at worrying. I can worry about all kinds of things, all at one time. You can’t put limits on me and my ability to worry.”

He gave me a strange look, then led me to one side, toward a dark house.

“What’s this?” I demanded. There was no way a dragon royal lived in such a random little house, with what seemed to be an antique shop on the first floor and an apartment above. The Order of Dragons had an enormous mansion on the city limits, far bigger than necessary given there were only a few dozen of them altogether.

“A safe house,” he said.

“Is it safe for me?”

“You talk so much I’m starting to think no place is safe for you.”

He took me through the shop, which glittered with various treasures, turning on a few lights as he went. I stopped and looked over a display of jeweled daggers, glancing at him to see if he was watching me.

He was.

I resisted the impulse to slip something stabby into my pocket and followed him the rest of the way across the shop, through a door he unlocked, then up the stairs.

He walked ahead of me into a warm, cozy little apartment. He snapped his fingers at the fire, and suddenly it blazed.

I stared at the dancing flames, wishing I wasn’t awestruck. We didn’t gain our full magic until we began shifting, and our powers were different depending on our soul creatures. Dragons were, of course, the most powerful. “Can you teach me how to do that?”

“One thing at a time,” he said.

One more thing to learn eventually, then, in a very long list. “I don’t understand any of this. How I’m supposed to pretend to be a man, how I’m supposed to work two jobs at the academy, how I’m a dragon!”

He didn’t answer me, or even meet my eyes when I sounded as if I was coming unwound. But on the plus side, he didn’t seal my lips shut. I was starting to have a very low bar of expectations for the Order of Dragons.

“I’m going to put a spell on you,” he said. “And I’m going to teach you to turn it on and off.”

“Speaking of spells,” I said. “What did Teris do to me?”

“Lord Teris,” he corrected mildly, “put a spell on you to prevent you from blabbing the truth to anyone. Given how... chatty... you are, I think it’s for the best.”

“He’s just going around putting spells on people?”

“Better than going around murdering them,” he said cheerfully. “And since the dragons can communicate telepathically, and you seem very... leaky... the spell is a blessing for you.”

“Excuse me, what? Communicate telepathically?” I did not want the dragon royals to saunter inside my brain.

He grabbed my arm and pulled me in front of a mirror, his touch firm but not brusque. “Close your eyes. One thing at a time, little dragon.”

I heaved a huge, nervous sigh but obeyed.

He murmured words in magic, touching my face—his fingers sent my skin tingling even before I felt magic racing over it.

I opened my eyes with a gasp and met the gaze of a man in the mirror, a man with chiseled features, generous lips and long reddish hair.

I looked like a slender, short man, especially next to Damyn’s massive, muscled bulk. But I was a handsome man—pretty, even.

“Yes, you are,” Damyn said. “But you probably should never be a spy, given your tendency to blurt out your thoughts.”

“There’s a lot going on in my mind at the moment, all right?”

He started his spell, but it suddenly occurred to me that as long as he was changing my hair and eye color, it could be anything. “How about white-blond hair and violet eyes?”

He looked at me as if I were stupid.

“Fine,” I grumbled. “Green eyes? And... hair with really great highlights?”

He touched the top of my head, and my hair curled around my ears. “You need to look like Lucien Finn. Maybe... less like Lucien-Finn-in-the-dungeon and more like Lucien-Finn-ready-for-the-academy.”

“That’s the opposite of what I asked for,” I complained. But my new, reddish-blond hair looked good shorter. I grinned at myself, admiring my bigger jaw, my broad nose, my bright brown eyes. This was weird, but it wasn’t the weirdest thing to happen to me today.

He taught me how to change back, discussed how I’d get through my days at the academy, and then told me he’d see me back home while I was still trying to catch up.

He hustled me out of his house—or *was* it his house—and down the dark streets, and I glanced back, trying to memorize the route though I had the feeling he was purposefully winding us back and forth, taking a longer route than needed.

“I need to talk about pay,” I said. “I don’t think I’ll be able to manage long as a housemaid and an academy student all at once—”

“Honor Hannaby can’t just disappear,” he said. “It will make people suspicious.”

“Will it, though? I don’t think anyone is going to imagine *I’m* a dragon royal.”

“You can do both,” he assured me. “I’ll have an enchanted trunk for you at the academy tomorrow. It will allow you to hide items to make it easier for you to change back and forth. Simple spell.”

“Simple spell,” I repeated. “And I’ll just...work two jobs. Fantastic.”

“You’ll be fine.”

“Or I’ll be dead, apparently. Right?” I raked my fingers through my hair. “Why didn’t the Elders just kill me already?”

“Because they aren’t allowed to,” he answered. “They can’t touch you—or any other dragon—unless you prove unworthy.”

“Who do they answer to?” I demanded. “Are you sure they know that?”

He paused, and I realized we were under the white flowering trees that marked the start of our property. “Give

them hell, Honor.”

He said my name as if he knew me. Wait, had he known my father?

I started to ask, but he had already gone, vanishing into the shadows.

Caldren. I'd have a million questions to ask Caldren.



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

H*onor*

I GLANCED TOWARD THE HOUSE, WHICH WAS BRIGHTLY LIT, then turned back toward the dark streets. Was Damyn still watching me? I decided to pretend to make my way up toward the house, then I doubled back through the trees—keeping an eye out for my sister, but apparently Alis had successfully locked her up in her room tonight—and headed through the city.

It was beginning to rain, slow, fat drops that still managed to soak my hair by the time I found the Twisted Pines. I was thankful to push open the door and duck inside.

Then I raised my head, and found two dozen people staring at me.

I was getting really sick of people looking at me as if I didn't belong. "Good evening!" I called cheerfully.

Caldren made his way to my side. "You look like a drowned rat."

"I think you're pretty too, Caldren."

He didn't respond to that, but he frowned down at me before his hands settled on my goosebump-covered arms. I really should have gone inside to change instead of wandering around in my skimpy temple dress.

He rubbed his hands vigorously up and down my arms as if he were trying to warm me up. "Come in front of the fire."

I should've pushed him away, but I was damp and freezing, and his warm hands on my body felt good. I let him pull me to a table in front of the fire. There were two young

men sitting there already, but when they saw Caldren moving toward it, they rose and went to the bar.

I side-eyed him, curious about the power he seemed to have here when the Elders had been so dismissive.

“The Elders don’t care for you much?” I asked.

“Nor do I care for them much, so at least it’s mutual,” he said brightly. He pulled a chair out for me and, as soon as I took a seat, he whirled his jacket around my shoulders. His hand rested on my back for a second as I sank into the warm, soft fabric.

“I was worried they’d hurt you.”

“You don’t have to worry for my sake,” he promised. “I’m good at keeping myself out of trouble.”

That had the note of a lie, and I raised my eyebrows.

He smiled slightly. “All right, I’m good at getting myself *out* of trouble. Better?”

“It sounds like we have something in common.”

He scoffed. “Well, so far I haven’t seen you get yourself out of much trouble. You seem to have captured Jaik and Talisyn’s attention.”

“I don’t know why.”

“Mm.” He didn’t seem to believe me, but whatever he’d been about to say next died on his lips as a barmaid sashayed up toward us. She rested her hand on his shoulder, a smile fixed on her lips, and she ignored me completely.

“What can I get you, Caldren?” she purred.

“My friend and I will both have cider and brandy. Hot, please.”

“I’d love to know about desserts,” I added, which got me a look from both of them, but it was true. I always loved to know about desserts.

The two of us sat quietly for a few moments—I needed time to process my evening—while the fire crackled behind

me, warming my skin and beginning to dry my clothes. The fiddler in the corner had begun to play again, and conversation had picked up around us, as if Caldren's approval of me meant I belonged.

It wasn't long before the barmaid returned with cider and brandy, and a very large dish of toffee bread pudding for me. The hot drink warmed my insides, and the sugary scent of the pudding teased my nose. I tucked in as he regarded me skeptically, but death threats always make me hungry.

He studied me, kicking back in his chair. "So, you are going to be the new and perhaps improved Lucien Finn."

"He doesn't sound like someone who's made wise choices," I said, thinking about how he'd stolen from one of the royal families.

"No, no, he does not make wise choices, he's definitely someone who's made interesting choices instead. But as much as Branok and Lynx hate him, he's not nearly as hated as you would be yourself."

"Why would the dragon royals hate me?" I demanded. "Is it so terrible, to have a woman in my place? What is it about the prophecy?"

"Hold on, hold on." Caldren said. "I don't have time to deal with the prophecy, you just need to worry about surviving tomorrow. And that means that we need to talk about your cover."

"Right," I said flatly. "Look, there's a prophecy about you —"

"Not necessarily *you* specifically."

"But just go ahead and don't worry about it! Would you do that?"

"One thing at a time, Honor. Like surviving your first day at the academy."

"I'm not scared of the academy, I'm scared of not knowing a prophecy—" I broke off abruptly, because the look on his face was uncomfortable—not the cocky expression I'd seen

from him almost every other time. “Do you even know the prophecy?”

Reluctantly, he admitted, “Only the Olds know the prophecy.”

“The Olds?”

“Dragon elders,” he corrected, looking uncomfortable.

I’d heard the young Royals call them *olds*, but I’d never heard anyone else say that. Everyone else was afraid of them.

“Well, I don’t think you can just tell me not to worry about a prophecy, it sounds like something I need to worry about.”

“All right, worry about it then, but I don’t have any way to get my hands on it at the moment and neither do you. The Elders aren’t going to open up to you for a heart-to-heart. They want to see you fail.”

“What happens if I fail?” I asked. “Really?”

“I don’t know for sure.”

“But you have a theory.”

“I think even if they’re honor-bound not to kill you, they’ll drive you out of your mind,” he admitted. “And leave you begging on a street corner or abandoned before the oncoming Scourge.”

The thought of being insane and not being able to protect myself from the Scourge sent a shiver up my spine. It was too easy to imagine wandering helpless in front of those gaping mouths and grasping hands.

“But I won’t let that happen,” he promised, then added pointedly, “If you listen to me, you’ll be fine.”

“Are all of you academy types this bossy?”

“I’m a little bossier than most, given that I’m a teacher at the academy.”

“Wait, you’re gonna be one of my teachers. Are you one of Jaik’s teachers?”

“I am, unfortunately for me.”

“So how old are you?” I demanded, because he didn’t look much older than me.

I wouldn’t be surprised if Damyn were one of the teachers. My mind turned back to him; I was more curious about the older man than I wanted to admit.

“You don’t need to worry about how old I am,” he said in exasperation. “Did Damyn tell you all about Lucien Finn?”

“A bit,” I said.

“What did he tell you?”

“Lucien stole from Lord Joachim. He’s been imprisoned in Joachim’s dungeons ever since—about two months.”

“Lynx and Branok’s father,” he added. “it’s important that you remember that.”

I nodded.

“Lucien would be weak from the dungeons,” he said. “That will help for your cover for, well, this...” He gripped my bicep.

I pulled my arm out of his grip. “Excuse me? I’m in exceptional health.”

“For a scullery maid, maybe. Not for a warrior. I’ve seen you in the ring.”

My lips parted in irritation, but before I could come up with a response that would wither him appropriately, he added, “You and I are going to have to be honest with each other. I just want to make sure that you don’t get killed on your first day at the academy. I don’t make any guarantees about days two, three, four or eighty-nine.”

I didn’t want to think about how long I was supposed to maintain this ridiculous cover—and my position as a maid on top of it, because I couldn’t stop working. I needed the money. “Don’t remind me. I don’t understand any of this, Caldren. I don’t know how I’m going to get through this.”

His gold-flecked brown eyes met mine, and this time when he touched my bicep, his touch felt warm. “With me.”

“Why do you care?” I asked, covering the fact that I felt strangely touched in his words.

“I just really hate the dragon royals,” he answered.

God, what a letdown.

“Why, what did they ever do to you?”

“There’s a long story,” he said. “Before long, trust me, there’ll be plenty of things that they’ll have done to *you*.”



THAT NIGHT, I TOSSED AND TURNED, UNABLE TO SLEEP. I finally got up and wandered around my room, running my fingers over the edges of the leather-bound books that filled my shelves, picking up the little figurines that my father had bought for me when I was a child. My mother had always teased me that I had a little hoard of treasures. When I was younger, I used to touch them all, saying goodnight to them in what had been an excruciating bedtime ritual for my patient parents.

Wait. I’d always had a hoard of treasures. Was that really a dragon thing? I’d heard rumors that the Order of Dragons had little caches of treasure everywhere...and that anyone who stole from them tended to be roasted alive.

And Lucien had stolen from one of those dragons. A shiver ran down my spine at the thought of the fate that awaited that stupid bastard, so that I could take his place. It made me feel guilty for his death.

The door flew open, smacking the wall hard enough to make me wince, and Hanna bounded into my room. “What are you? Sorry, I fell asleep waiting for you last night.”

“Did you fall out of your tree?” I teased her, hugging my sister. I didn’t want to lie to her, but I had to. I hated to lie and manipulate, it made me feel like my stepmother, like I wasn’t living up to the memory of my parents.

I wanted to be a good person. Being a good person was awfully difficult when the world itself was terrible.

Now I'd have to lie to everyone. The dragon royals weren't exactly known for their kindness or their laid-back attitudes; trying to duck the elder royals' spell would be suicidal.

"Turns out that I'm a squirrel," I said brightly.

She searched my face and I realized, too late, that I should have sounded more upset.

"Honor, are you okay?"

Not in the least. "Yeah, I'll be fine. I always knew deep down that I wasn't going to be anything special."

"Oh no, Honor." She gripped my hand in a way that she must have meant to be reassuring.

Instead, her hand felt fragile in mine, a reminder that she was mine to protect. I'd sounded self-pitying, and now my little sister felt sorry for me. My mind raced, trying to figure out how to undo my last words without pulling any threads loose from my lie.

She went on, "It doesn't matter what you are, squirrel, chipmunk. You could... You could be a frog and you'd still be special."

"Not in anyone else's eyes." I still felt a warm glow at my sister's affection.

"Well we can't help that the rest of the world is full of idiots who don't see how amazing we are," she said. "But that doesn't mean we have to believe them."

Everyone should have someone in their lives who loves them and believes in them like Hanna believed in me.

"Well, I have got to get to work," I said.

"I brought you breakfast. I knew you had a late night last night, and I didn't want you to miss out."

"Did you steal something from the kitchen?"

“Maybe.” She handed me a breakfast pie.

“I’m lucky I have you,” I told her. “I’m glad you’re my sister.”

She pretended to preen. “Well, I guess you had to be lucky some way. Even though nothing else seems to have really worked out.”

“Everything will work out eventually,” I promised her.

If only I believed that myself.



CHAPTER
FOURTEEN

H*onor*

LATER THAT MORNING, I KNOCKED ON MY STEPMOTHER'S door. "Come in." Her voice sounded sweet as sugar, the way it always did when she talked to those she valued—or to me in front of an audience.

I pushed open the door, wondering if she didn't expect me, and found Henrick shirtless in her enormous four poster bed. He seemed perfectly comfortable as I paused in the doorway, trying to get my bearings.

Alis was sitting in front of her vanity, her long blonde hair loose to her waist, brushing through the silky strands which did more to cover her than her wispy nightgown.

"What is it, Honor?" she asked, her brows arching as she studied herself in the mirror. She seemed amused by my discomfort.

"I came to tell you I'm moving into the academy's dorm for servants."

"Are you?" she mused. "I'm not sure that's the right place for you."

She'd wanted to get rid of me since before she married my father, but now she wanted me to stay? My gaze flickered involuntarily toward Henrick, only to find him watching me, his eyes openly roaming my body.

I snapped my gaze back to her, despite the prickles crawling up my skin like insects. "Why?"

My tone came out blunter than I meant, but then, it usually did.

“I’ll want you to stay close to help me with the wedding. You are my daughter, after all... More or less.” Her gaze finally left the mirror and her startlingly blue eyes met mine.

She came the closest to anyone I’d ever met to having violet eyes, which seemed ridiculously unfair when she was a monster. Supposedly, some of the Fae across the sea had violet eyes; maybe someday, the Scourge would be defeated and we’d join the rest of the world again.

She began to draw her hair up from her long, slender neck, pinning it in place with a comb. A familiar looking comb. My stomach tightened with hatred as she said, “People expect to see you, Honor.”

“I’m not moving across the globe,” I promised. “You’ll see plenty of me.” For Hanna’s sake.

“Will we?” Henrick’s voice was suggestive, and my jaw stiffened.

I didn’t look his way, so I saw the way Alis’s face changed, an unpleasant smile tightening her lips.

I had to get Hanna out of here.

But the only way to do that was to keep working as a maid. The Olds—excuse me, *Elders*—weren’t going to help me, not when they apparently wanted to see me crumble so they had an excuse to say I wasn’t prophecy material and toss me into the path of the Scourge.

“I want you to be home for the engagement announcement,” she said. “There will be a party, and I hope you’ll be presentable and pleasant...for once.”

“I’m very happy for you,” I said woodenly.

“Mm. I’ll have a new dress ordered for you.”

“I’ll wear whatever you want,” I said.

She was always happiest when she had the opportunity to control the stupidest little things about Hanna and me.

Still, I had her blessing—and the creeps, thanks to Henrick’s busy eyeballs—by the time I shut the door behind

me.

Then I hurried off to my first day at the academy.

Caldren had drilled into my head that the younger dragon royals couldn't know who I really was—for my own well-being—and I felt anxious that Teris' spell would slip.

Caldren had told me, "They're going to be cruel enough to Lucien Finn."

I checked in with the brooms and mops and Head, then headed to the bathroom I was supposed to be cleaning. We kept the academy spick-and-span and our duties rotated every day; I thought I could skip out on my actual work for a while without being caught, and every day longer I went with a paycheck would help Hanna. Hopefully, I'd wear the Royals down into giving me money for playing their little game and posing as a boy.

I made sure the door was locked. "Here goes nothing," I muttered to my reflection in one of the enormous mirrors. My reflection-self looked very skeptical.

I murmured the words of the spell that Damyn had taught me. Every type of shifter had unique powers, but Dragons were supposed to have the rawest magic to form spells. I'd been raised believing magic was so difficult for small shifters, that we shouldn't even try, although I had tried a few spells over the years—mostly in an attempt to inflict small revenge on mean or petty people, and mostly with little apparent consequence. Mean people seemed to keep going with their lives with a level of cheerfulness that suggested the universe was deeply unfair.

My face distorted in the mirror, and it sent a jolt of horror through me before I'd shifted completely.

Lucien Finn stared back at me: wavy reddish-blond hair, a big jaw and nose, soft, full lips. I ran a hand through my hair, surprised to see the movement reflected in the mirror.

Lucien looked a little ridiculous wearing my brown dress.

I had purposefully left the top few buttons undone so I could more easily wiggle out of it myself, although it still felt

as if I were dislocating my shoulder as I tried to undo the rest of the buttons. I slipped the dress off, stowed it in the magic trunk Damyn had left me and dressed instead in the academy tunic, pants, socks and boots. The new clothes were about a thousand times more comfortable than my gown.

I shoved the trunk into one corner of the room, muttered the word to hide it, and it vanished from sight.

If I could really make myself look like a man and hide a chest, then maybe I could use magic to clean, too, so Head would never notice. I'd probably have to go somewhere other than to Damyn for *that* spell, though. The royals definitely didn't seem to do a lot of cleaning, magical or otherwise.

I let myself out of the bathroom just as the first bell rang, the one for morning meeting. I joined the throng of students winding their way toward the enormous outdoor amphitheater where the royals loved to stay and train... or show off, depending on one's perspective.

Everyone must have heard I was a dragon shifter, because the crowd seemed to part around me. People greeted me cheerfully; I'd never had so many people happy to see me. It would've made me smile if I'd been *me*.

But these people wouldn't clap my shoulders and wish me good morning if they knew who I really was.

I walked into the enormous rows of the amphitheater, and all I could see was *them*.

The Dragon Royals were in a knot at the top row of the amphitheater.

Jaik leaned forward when he saw me, muttering something to the others. Their attention all went to me, and suddenly five pairs of hostile eyes fixed on me. The noise of the crowd faded away.

They didn't want me here—not even as Lucien Finn. Caldren hadn't known exactly what happened between Lynx and Branok and Lucien; he said he wasn't part of their inner circle. But he'd warned me that these guys would not be friendly.

Better to face the dragons than run.

Those bastards can fly.

I marched up the steps, ignoring the murmurs and greetings and invitations to sit with my fellow students. When the royals stared at me, the rest of the world faded, as if there were only me and them in all the universe.

And therefore, there would be no witnesses to stop them from murdering me.

Just kidding. No one would stop them from murdering me anyway.

There was space at the end of the bench. I plunked my ass down there, defying them to tell me to move.

Talisyn was beside me, his elbows resting on the bench behind him, his feet kicked up in front. Everyone had left a respectful distance around the royals.

“Make yourself at home,” Talisyn drawled.

I fixed him with a smile. “I thought we should get to know each other.”

“I think I already know you quite well enough, Lucien,” Branok said. “I don’t care to know you any better.”

“All right,” Jaik said. “We should give Lucien a chance. He’s one of us...to my great surprise.”

“It was a surprise for me too,” I said, which was honest enough.

Instructors walked out onto the field. Jaik’s face darkened when he saw Caldren down there. What was going on between the two of them?

“As you know,” one of them announced, “we’ll be moving to the field for training maneuvers next month. So enjoy your beds while you can.”

Talisyn snorted. “As if we haven’t spent enough time in the field.”

“It’ll be a shock to the un-dragons,” Jaik answered. He leaned back so he could side-eye me properly, since Branok was between us. “And to...Lucien.”

Branok was focused on the field, his jaw tense, as if he couldn’t stand having me this close to him. What the hell had Lucien done to Branok and Lynx? I wished Caldren knew.

“You can come to lunch with us,” Jaik said, as if he were doing me some huge favor.

Talisyn glanced toward me. “If you survive morning hand-to-hand.”

“And morning magic,” Jaik added in a considering voice.

“And how’s your flying?” Talisyn asked.

“A little shaky,” I admitted, not wanting to admit that I hadn’t even been in the air yet. Caldren had told me to avoid going air bound and that I should get Damyn to take me up.

“Aw,” Talisyn said, sounding mock-sympathetic. “Then this should be fun!”

Talisyn and Jaik ignored the instructors, instead convincing Branok to join them in placing bets on the likelihood I’d crash and burn—literally—before dinner. Meanwhile, Arren watched the instructors with his arms folded over his chest and a grouchy look on his face. Apparently, he hated me in all my incarnations.

The instructors dismissed us to our training. I caught a glimpse of Caldren watching me as I rose and shouldered my bag.

Hand-to-hand combat, aka ass kicking. I could handle that, even though I’d be the one getting my ass kicked.

Then I had to face Magic. Well, it turned out I was a lot better than I’d thought, so I had that going for me. Magic had been an advanced skill at boarding school; Headmistress wanted us to learn to save ourselves with our bare hands before we discovered any *cheats*, as she called them, and we didn’t get our true magic until we got our shifting abilities anyway.

What I was really dreading, though, was lunch. Lunch at a new school is always the worst.

Have you ever had a girl who has been a total bitch to you all your life suddenly decide you're best friends? Because that was suddenly my life. As I made my way down the steps of the amphitheater to the training yard, everyone wanted to chit chat with me. Many of the girls smiled and fluttered their lashes. Any other day, they would have been staring at me as if they were imagining spooning my eyeballs out of my head. It was disconcerting. I did not like having mean girls flirt with me.

Although it was nice they were finally recognizing my complete awesomeness, even if they weren't seeing it for the real reasons, because I did deserve to be loved.

High-bred girls just weren't genuine. Normally, I probably could have been cool with having a hot girl flirt with me. I would always love dicks—or at least the idea of dicks. I'd never actually had a dick, but I was pretty sure I would like them, just like I knew when I saw some chocolaty dessert I'd never had before that I would like that too.

But a beautiful person is a beautiful person, male or female. We all like beautiful things. At least that was my theory.

Unfortunately, I still had to walk out to the training yard, where the people that liked me the least were waiting to smush me into a pretty red-headed stain in the ground. Time for hand-to-hand training.

It began with Damyn and Caldren addressing us. "I know you dragon shifters think it's beneath you, but you're going to have to fight other shifters, you can't just fight each other."

"And for God's sakes, stop calling them *undragons* where they can hear you." Damyn sounded mildly exasperated by the royals, which made me like him even more. I'd quickly discover over the course of the next few days that Damyn was quick to take the Royals down a few pegs, something they all desperately needed.

“But we all want to play with Lucien.” Talisyn mock-pouted, crossing his arms over his powerful chest. “He’s our new friend.”

Damyn quirked an eyebrow. “Why do I somehow doubt the sincerity of your friendship?”

Tal looked shocked. “I am never anything but sincere.”

No one believed that lie, not even his best friends.

Damyn gave me a look as if he were gauging the odds of me surviving the next hour, if he let the royals have their way with me.

I tried to give him a secretive nod to let him know I’d be okay. There was no way that these bastards would ever accept getting anything but their way. In the end, I would have to fight them, to prove what I was capable of.

Even though *what I was capable of* was probably pretty much just getting my ass kicked and hopefully not crying about it. I knew that. I’d come face to face with Jaik’s impressive combat skills before.

But maybe I could earn their respect. Maybe I could at least keep from sobbing—because I had a feeling Jaik wasn’t going to pull his punches like he had when he thought he was just entertaining himself with the housemaid.

“This will be fun,” Talisyn promised me cheerfully, resting his elbow on my shoulder, the same way he had all those times I’d found him so incredibly adorable. It was a lot less cute when I was worried *I* wouldn’t be cute anymore by the time these guys were done with me.

Jaik snorted as he looked at me. “Lucien is not ready for me yet.”

“He’s not ready for any of us,” Branok pointed out.

“Lynx, you take him,” Jaik ordered. “But go easy.”

Lynx looked at me and cracked his knuckles. I had a feeling *going easy* didn’t mean the same thing to him that maybe Jaik intended.

Jaik must have realized the same thing because he amended, “Only humiliate him a little bit.”

Wow. He was an absolute saint.

Lynx and I squared off. For the first few seconds, I thought I was kind of holding my own. He feinted left. I avoided the right hook that followed, expecting it to come.

And then the next second, he followed up with a fierce volley of blows that sent me flying halfway across the training yard onto my ass.

“That was unsuccessful,” Jaik observed helpfully.

“Stop observing and start training,” Damyn told him sternly. “Training maneuvers are coming soon.”

“And I am so concerned about them,” Jaik said. “Definitely taking them very seriously.”

“I know that you’ve been facing the Scourge since you were ten, even without being able to fly,” Damyn told him, “But this will be different. You’re responsible for other lives out there. You need to take every training maneuver as seriously as you take your time in the field.”

Jaik hesitated, then nodded. “You’re right, Damyn. We’ll stay focused.”

I’d never expected to hear those words come out of Jaik’s mouth. Damyn seemed to have a lot more respect from them than anyone else I’d seen so far, including their own fathers, given the way they called them *the Olds*.

But I didn’t have time to wonder about the family dynamics within the royal families because Lynx was coming at me again. His fists were quick and brutal. I managed to snap his first few punches to the side, blocking each movement with my forearm and pushing his fists away, but he was relentless.

He quickly hooked one foot around my heel, as I tried to dance out of the way. Before I knew it, I was flat on my back, trying to find my breath again.

He landed a brutal kick in my side as I was still going down, and I rolled halfway across the training yard.

I'd thought Lynx was the sweet dorky one. He was the only one who hadn't joined in the sex festival that the rest of them had staged in the library. But maybe he wasn't the nice one. Maybe he was just scared of librarians. Everyone should probably be a little bit scared of librarians anyway.

I started to scramble to my feet, but I didn't get the chance to get up before Lynx slammed a fist across my jaw, and I hit the ground hard. I rolled into a ball protecting my most important parts, because I suddenly realized he was never going to let me up.

But my attempt to turn into a hedgehog did not stop Lynx. He dropped on top of me, pinning me down.

One of his hands forced my shoulder down to the earth. I lashed out at him and I got in a good punch across his jaw that whipped his head back. If he was going to trap me, he wasn't going to like what he found in the cage.

Lynx's eyes flashed at me furiously and I bucked my hips, trying to throw him. He was heavier than he looked though because as lean as he was, he was ropey with muscle, and he drove his hips down into me, knocking me down into the ground harder.

"Alina says hi, by the way," he snarled. Then he was driving his fist into my face over and over again.

My nose shattered under the onslaught, blood flooding my face, and I started to choke, gagging on it. I was drowning in my blood. I couldn't get myself off the ground. And I couldn't get my airway clear when he was forcing me to the ground, continuing to punch me over and over again.

"Stop," Damyn called, but even Damyn couldn't make Lynx's unexpected temper tantrum stop. The world went red, washing out Lynx's furious face.

Jaik was closer, and it was Jaik who hauled him off me. Lynx struggled in his arms as Jaik lifted him off.

Jaik put a controlling hand on his jaw, muttering into his ear. Whatever he said caused Lynx to finally stop fighting. Jaik let go of Lynx and Lynx paused, folding his arms across his

chest, glaring down at me as I tried to draw a breath. Blood was still streaming all over my clothes. Well, Lucien Finn's clothes.

Damyn demanded, "What the hell was that?"

"We never go easy on each other," Lynx said, "Didn't you teach us that, didn't you break my nose, two years ago?"

"I'll break it a second time if you ever fail to fucking listen like that again," Damyn said. "You know this was different. You've got a grudge against the kid and you want them to know it."

"Oh, I'm sure Lucien knows it," Branok said. "I'm sure Lucien remembers why we don't feel too fondly about him."

"Gods," Jaik said, "You made me be the good guy, and you know how much I hate that."

Even though he was talking to Lynx, he strode past him and offered me a hand up. I grabbed his wrist and let him haul me to my feet. The world was blurry. I only caught glimpses of his handsome face at the center of my discombobulation.

"Don't worry," I said, "I doubt you're ever much of a good guy. I won't be confused."

Jaik kept his grip on my wrist, as he kicked my legs out from underneath me. For the second time in as many minutes, I hit the ground hard on my back.

Jaik leaned over me, his hands braced on his knees, his hair tousled by the breeze. "You're going to have to learn some manners if you're going to be one of us."

But I knew damn well that I was never going to be one of them.

I was supposed to be going to more hand-to-hand training after that but given that I'd just gotten my ass roundly kicked within three minutes of walking into the arena, Damyn told me to hit the infirmary.

"Talisyn, walk with him," Jaik said.

Talisyn looked grim but didn't bother to argue. He led me out of the amphitheater without looking back.

I had to assume he knew why Lucien had pissed off Branok and Lynx so badly, but he'd kind of expect me to know how I'd wronged them, so it was going to be hard to get any information.

"I sure wish they'd get over it," I said as we entered the quiet, cool marble halls of the academy. I'd do my best not to bleed on the floors; it was the least I could do for my sisters in Housekeeping.

Talisyn glanced at me over his shoulder. "Just because I'm babysitting you doesn't mean I want to be your friend."

"You're just here because Jaik told you to?"

"Well, yes." Talisyn didn't even pretend that Jaik wasn't the leader of their little band. Interesting. "But also I have to admit I have a morbid sense of curiosity. You're the last one that I ever would have expected to see become a dragon shifter."

"The last one?" I asked skeptically. "I think that there are more surprising people who could become a dragon shifter."

"Who?" He scoffed. "I would like names."

"For one, I could be a peasant, instead of a royal."

"You barely count as a royal. Your family legacy might be one of honor and heroics, but you're a fucking carriage wreck."

I decided to continue ticking things off on my fingers and ignore him. "Second of all, I could be a woman."

"You are awfully chatty for someone who has blood all over their face." Talisyn looked disgusted. "Try not to bleed on me."

Oh, if I had anything to say about it, I was definitely going to bleed on this asshole. He seemed so charming when I first met him. Even now, just thinking about how he touched me sent a weird twitch of desire traveling up my spine.

“Anyway,” he said, picking up the thread that had been dropped when he was busy being disgusted by me. “There’s never been a female dragon.”

“But there could be,” I said.

“Dragon shifting is a masculine magic.”

“I don’t see any reason why magic has to be gendered,” I said.

“Only because it’s been that way since the rise of the shifters,” he said. “Since the dawn of the Scourge.”

There had always been shifters, but before the Scourge, they had been reviled. Dragon shifters had been considered monsters. Once the Scourge emerged, the dragon shifters had become our saviors.

According to ancient prophecy, magic had spread across the land when it was needed most. Now everyone was some kind of shifter. The dragon royals led the war against the Scourge. Lower shifters that were still predators served on the battlefields beneath them. And the lowest shifters kept the home fires burning and fled into the burrows if the Scourge overwhelmed them.

I touched the bridge of my nose, then cursed.

Talisyn said, “Yes. Having a broken nose hurts. Is that really the first time someone has broken your nose? I would have thought that would be a regular occurrence for you.”

“I would assume it was a regular occurrence for you too,” I snapped back.

I turned to the left, into the infirmary door, just as Talisyn said, “Here’s the infirmary.”

I had cleaned the hallway outside the infirmary plenty of times, so I knew where it was. But now I realized I shouldn’t seem like I knew my way around so well, since Lucien Finn had never scrubbed and polished every last inch of the academy.

“I’ve been here before for balls,” I said smoothly.

“You mean, before you were imprisoned in Lord Joachim’s dungeon?”

“Yes, before that,” I said dryly.

“Are you going to acknowledge what you did? To apologize to Broderick and Lynx?”

Oh, an opening. “What should I apologize to them for?”

Talisyn’s jaw tightened. “You know, I almost want to give you the benefit of the doubt, but you are just such a stupid asshole.”

“I don’t think anyone has given me the benefit of the doubt.”

“If you weren’t getting any benefit of the doubt, Jaik would have just let Lynx beat you to death right there.”

“I’m sure Damyn would have stopped him. It would look kind of bad if the royals were murdering people in broad daylight.”

“No one can really stop us, if we want to hurt someone.” Talisyn offered me a slow, wicked smile. “You don’t want to get on our bad side.”

“Seems like it’s too late already.”

“Seems like it.” The physician was hustling from behind the counter. “I can help you.”

“Thank you,” I said gratefully, my voice hoarse from the blood still flowing slick down the back of my throat.

I turned in time to catch Talisyn striding out the door, letting it slam shut behind him.

So far, my first day of school had not been a massive success.



CHAPTER FIFTEEN

H*onor*

THE PHYSICIAN USED MAGIC TO HEAL MY BROKEN NOSE. I wondered what kind of shifter he was because healing magic was rare among shifters. We were more the *breaking it* types than the *fixing it* types. I certainly got the feeling that dragon shifters were all about the breaking, very light on the fixing.

“I’m here until the dinner bell,” the physician told me, as if he knew that I was likely to require more fixing today. That certainly put me in an optimistic frame of mind.

By the time I headed into the hall, my shirt still soaked to my chest with blood, the entire academy was done beating each other bloody and was thronging the halls, moving on to magic classes.

Unfortunately, every kind of shifter had their own kind of magic, which meant that every kind of shifter had their own magic class, and I was headed for my second date of the day with the dragon royals.

I joined them in their classroom, which was far too small, with six large desks besides the teacher’s lectern, and tall windows open to let in the sea air.

I stepped over Arren’s enormous booted feet, sprawled in the aisle, and he glared at me, exuding murder. I managed to jump over one of the golden twin’s boots when he kicked one out to trip me and finally slid into my seat.

“How old are you?” I scolded. “Are you seven?”

“It *is* embarrassing,” Talisyn agreed. “Because he missed.”

“I’m so glad that the physician was able to patch you up,” Branok—or maybe Lynx—said.

I wasn’t really sure what to make of that, given that it was either him or his twin who had just demolished me. I couldn’t tell the difference between Lynx and Branok.

I’d soon find out that the other dragons had no issues telling them apart, but I had no idea how. To me, they looked the same—tall, well built, golden bronze skin, golden blond hair, piercing green eyes, and an extremely surly attitude. I mean that was fine if you were into that kind of thing.

On another day, if one of them hadn’t just tried to kill me, I would probably have been into that kind of thing.

Damyn walked into the room, pushing his sleeves up corded forearms. He glanced toward me and said, kindly enough, “Lucien, you’ll need to start at the beginning.”

He directed me to some books at the back of the room as the other guys snickered. I paged through the books, reading about how to ignite a flame in my palm while they practiced using dragons’ breath in human form.

These men exhaled breaths of smoke and fire that swirled around their handsome faces, making them even more impressive figures. I hated it.

I side-eyed Branok and Lynx as they casually threw flames back and forth, close enough to heat my face. When I finally looked back down at the page, a spark landed in my hair. I launched myself from the desk. Damyn looked up and saw my situation just as I was beginning to run around like a crazy person.

He threw a hand toward me, smothering the flames with his magic. I stopped with my heart pounding, reaching up to touch my hair. A few charred, brittle ends broke off in my fingers, and my scalp still felt hot.

“Who lit you on fire?” he asked, which was such a surreal question that I began to giggle, as if I were coming completely undone.

I knew damn well it had been one of the twins, but ratting them out wasn't going to get me anywhere.

"I don't know," I lied. "Maybe I did it to myself accidentally, practicing."

Damyn frowned. "I see already following in the footsteps of your new friends, just the very model of honesty."

"That's me," I said cheerfully.

As we were leaving the classroom, Talisyn's big shoulder bumped mine. "Don't think that wins you any favor."

"Oh, I wasn't confused that it did," I answered. "I've seen Arren glaring at me all day long."

Talisyn glanced at Arren too. "Yes, he does that. It's kind of creepy. We've told him."

For a moment, Talisyn reminded me of the lord that I'd first met, a man who was definitely not sweet, but also not psychopathic, and not actively trying to murder me. I had liked that version of Talisyn much better.

But one of the twins gave him a hard look and suddenly Talisyn walked away from me.

I was starving for lunch. Being set on fire made me hungry. But when the bell rang. It didn't just ring. Instead, an unusual deep tolling sound boomed across the campus.

Down the hall, Talisyn swore as he turned back toward me, stuffing his hands in his pockets as he waited for me to catch up. Despite his casual pose, there was tension etched through his muscles.

"What's going on?" I asked.

"That means we have Scourge at the gates." Talisyn answered.

"Scourge, here?" My pulse was suddenly rattling, my mouth dry.

Damyn said calmly. "The rest of the academy will be locking down. You know where you all are needed."

“Except for you, Lucien,” Jaik said.

“Take him with you,” Damyn snapped. “And I want him back alive. You can all return to tormenting him after we’ve dealt with the Scourge.”

“We don’t even know that he can fly yet,” Talisyn protested.

“He’s a dragon. Dragons can fly. Keep him close.” Damyn made eye contact with Talisyn specifically. “I’m making you personally responsible for his safety.”

Talisyn groaned.

“Believe me,” I said. “I’m not that happy about it either.”

“Why am I being pressed into being his babysitter?” Talisyn demanded as the six of us ran down the hallway.

I followed them with my heart pounding. I’d been raised on horror stories of the Scourge, all my life. And I’d rarely heard of them coming anywhere near our city

Damyn told us, as we traveled through the halls where the classrooms were all locking down, that the tunnels beneath the school had been breached. He added, “As far as the rest of the school knows, this is a routine drill.”

“But we have these kinds of drills all the time,” I answered.

Talisyn looked at me as if I were stupid. I didn’t ask any more questions, but suddenly I wondered if my whole life was a lie, if I was never as safe from the Scourge as I thought I was even when I was inside the city, in my own castle, in my own bed.

“We’re going to clear the tunnels,” Damyn said.

Dragons couldn’t fly in tunnels. But I quickly realized that their ability to wield fire would make them enough of an asset in burning the Scourge out of the stone tunnels beneath the academy.

I’d never known those tunnels existed, either, but I followed them down long, twisting flights of metal stairs. The

temperature dropped with every spiral around the stairs.

When we reached the bottom, we were in a cavernous room with tunnels branching off every which way. There had to be two dozen of them, all unmarked, all leading into darkness. Where did they go? And how come no one who lived at the academy—like Calla and June—knew they slept above this nightmare?

Talisyn slapped the back of my head. “You can sightsee later,” he growled. “For now, I need you to not be a moron because it’s my job to keep you alive. And even though I’m not really that invested in my mission, I don’t want to piss Damyn off.”

“Very generous of you,” I answered. “Good looking out, I appreciate the protective impulses.”

Talisyn gave me a long look. “I don’t remember you being capable of sarcasm, Lucien.”

Oh fuck, was I doing a bad job of pretending to be the asshole? They should have let me meet Lucien before they murdered him. It still really bothered me to think that they’d killed someone so I could take his place.

But I couldn’t control what the Elders did. And I was lucky that I wasn’t the one they had murdered.

I needed to get my hands on that prophecy, because I was pretty sure that was the only reason they hadn’t murdered me on sight. They’d certainly looked as if they were fantasizing about my untimely death.

There was a roar from the tunnels. It seemed to echo through them, like dozens of voices turning into hundreds. My vision narrowed as adrenaline crashed through my body, and I couldn’t help but glance at the guys.

“Make sure they don’t reach the stairs,” Damyn said calmly, moving in front of me.

“Is the rest of the Order on their way?” Jaik asked.

“There’s no time,” Damyn answered.

“We’ll hold them,” Jaik said confidently, glancing around to each of his friends. They locked eyes with each other, giving each other small nods, as if they bolstered each other’s strength. “Arren, Branok, Lynx, shift. The rest of us will stay agile.”

Staying in human form to face the Scourge seemed terrifying. But I understood why he’d ordered some of us to stay human. The tunnels themselves were narrow, too small for a fully-grown dragon to move easily.

But it didn’t matter, because the Scourge pulsed out of the tunnels like blood spurting from an artery.

Arren strode forward, shifting as he headed toward the Scourge. By the time a dozen of them had poured out of the tunnel, he was an enormous dragon, aiming a blast of fire at them. The Scourge screamed as they burned up.

Talisyn fought with his sword in one hand and flame in the other. He drove a sword into one of the Scourge, yanked it out, splattering blood across the stone.

“On your left,” Jaik called, and Talisyn spun to blast fire at the Scourge who lurched toward him.

The scent of the Scourge was overpowering, the sickly-sweet rot of death, and I almost choked. Their faces were fixed in rictus grins, and one of them stared at Talisyn with beady eyes as he lurched toward him.

I got there first, drawing my own sword. The Scourge turned toward me too late, just as I drove my sword through its chest. It let out a scream as I kicked it off my sword, and its body fell into two pieces, the scent of rot washing over me.

“Nice of you to join the party,” Talisyn said.

“Shouldn’t you be too busy to make wisecracks?” I demanded.

Dozens more Scourge poured out of the tunnels.

Jaik called out commands, making sure none of us were surprised. “Lucien, behind you!” he shouted, and it took me a moment to realize *I* was Lucien. By the time I whirled, Arren

was there, stomping on the Scourge who had been seconds away from slashing into me.

Arren grabbed the Scourge in his powerful jaws and tossed him across the room where he slammed into two other Scourge. I could've sworn that I saw Arren roll his golden eyes in his enormous, horned lizard head, so I didn't bother thanking him for the save.

The guys worked seamlessly as a team. The Scourge were the monsters from our nightmares, but they didn't seem shaken. They bantered with each other as they fought, always watching each other's backs.

"Branok," Jaik shouted, and Lynx moved to intercept the Scourge attacking his brother, but it was too late. One of the Scourge drove a knife into Branok's ear.

The dragon reared back and roared before trampling the Scourge beneath his feet.

"You're fine, shake it off," Jaik shouted at them, and Lynx growled at Jaik. His horned head bumped his brother's protectively, the two of them checking on each other, accidentally stepping on the Scourge over and over until it was just a bit of rotten jelly squished across the floor.

As the noise faded, as the last of the Scourge fell, for the first time I truly wanted to just be one of them. Even though I couldn't yet fight alongside them as quite their equal, I could imagine myself being a part of their team.

"We'll need to go through the tunnels and make sure there are no Scourge left," Damyn said. "I'm calling down a cleaning crew."

There were dead Scourge, finally put out of their misery, scattered all around us.

"Lucien, with me," Talisyn said, his voice resigned.

"Just the two of us?" I asked, looking down the long deep tunnel. I couldn't even see the other end as it vanished into darkness. There could be Scourge hanging from the ceiling for all I knew.

“Don’t worry. I’ll protect you,” Talisyn said, his voice thick with disgust.

That tone made my spine snap to attention. I refused for him to see me as weak. I was stuck being Lucien Finn, which meant it was time for Lucien Finn to redeem himself.

I didn’t know how I would make up with Brandon and Lynx. But I was going to have to try, and for right now I could show that even though I’d been a dragon shifter for less than a day, I still had the heart of a warrior.

“Lead on,” I said.

He flicked his fingers and a ball of fire appeared in his palm that lit his way.

As the two of us made our path down the long tunnel, a Scourge came flying out of a side passageway.

Talisyn snatched the Scourge away from me and murdered it, setting it on fire, and then murmuring a word of a spell. The Scourge burnt so hot that it was almost unbearable to be in the tunnel. I took several steps back as the heat beat against my face, and the Scourge crumbled away to nothing but ash, leaving a heavy acrid smell of smoke in the tunnel and char marks on the ceiling.

“Can you teach me how to do that?” I needed to learn the magic these men had.

Before Talisyn could answer, we were attacked by more Scourge.

The two of us ducked and fought. Talisyn grabbed one, set it on fire, moved swiftly to the next. The Scourge stumbled around windmilling their arms, scattering flames everywhere. I had the distinct impression that I was about to be set on fire again, and really no one should have to deal with that more than once per day.

Talisyn seemed to feel he had everything under control, even without my help. But then, he was attacked from behind by another Scourge, who had a long, wicked knife that he drove toward Talisyn’s kidneys.

“Look out!” I shouted. Talisyn turned, but I had the feeling he wasn’t going to make it in time.

I threw myself forward, intent on pushing the Scourge away from Talisyn, tackling him, so that Talisyn would have time to adjust. By then I was sure he would come to my rescue with his very useful flame hands, I really needed flame hands of my own.

Talisyn whirled faster than I would have thought possible, and sent out a blast of flame, just as I slammed into the Scourge. The two of us both slammed into the ground, and we were both on fire.

Talisyn grabbed me and yanked me to my feet. The flames igniting across my clothes flickered and died. Cool air brushed my skin as the two of us faced each other.

My heart stumbled every time Talisyn locked eyes with me. No matter how much my brain knew better.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

“I’m fine.” My voice came out remarkably level, given that I was facing my childhood nightmares.

“Just for future reference, we try to kill the Scourge, not get killed.”

God, what an asshole. “I was trying to protect you.”

“I know. It was cute. I assume, with time, you’ll get better at it. Don’t be discouraged.”

“If I get another chance, I’m going to just let them murder you.”

“No, you won’t,” Talisyn said, sounding as confident as ever. I’d never met such a cocky guy in all my life.

But he slapped my shoulder as we headed back up the tunnel. “Surprisingly adequate, Lucien.”

He was such an arrogant ass.

I made sure he didn’t see me smile.



CHAPTER SIXTEEN

H*onor*

THAT NIGHT AT DINNER IT WAS SURREAL TO BE SURROUNDED BY the chatting, laughing students when I knew how close we'd come to having Scourge storm the academy.

Despite the fact that Lynx had broken my nose earlier, I decided to be forgiving. Or foolhardy, depending on your perspective. But I'd always considered forgiveness to be a foolhardy act to begin with.

I sat beside him. The long wooden tables were laid with family style meals, which was much nicer than the way we ate in the servants' quarters, where food was pretty much thrown at us for lunch, and we ate it on our brief break between dusting, mopping, and scrubbing sessions.

"Why are you sitting here?" Lynx demanded.

"I know you don't like me," I said, which was answered with enthusiastic nodding. That was the most enthusiastic I had ever seen these guys. "But I want to talk to you about what happened today."

"Not here," Jaik snapped.

"All right, then. Where do you want to talk? I have a lot of questions. I never thought I would see what I saw today."

Talisyn looked considering. "We could take him into the hideout. If we want to have a real discussion."

"A hideout? There's a hideout?" I asked.

"It is not a hideout." Jaik said harshly. "You're making it sound like little kids with a treehouse."

“Well, there’s usually not that much fucking happening in a treehouse.” Talisyn glanced at me and added, “I’m kidding, actually. We don’t let anyone in there who is not part of the order of dragons. And not part of a very select group of the order of dragons. We are not inviting the *Elders* in there.”

The way Talisyn said elders had a slight emphasis as if that wasn’t how they normally described them when it was just the five of them. Maybe they said *olds* all the time. I felt like such an outsider around them, but after seeing them fight today, hearing their banter and the way they worked together, I desperately wanted to be a part of their little group.

It was a strange feeling. I’d never wanted so badly to be a part of anything. It wasn’t really my style. I was never a joiner.

But if these guys had a clubhouse, I wanted a look at it.

“Hey, where has your little best friend been today?” Arren asked Jaik.

Jaik snorted. “Maybe my stalker has found new shifters to obsess over.”

“I doubt it,” Talisyn said pretending to adjust his lapels. “Because I’m pretty sure I’d be her number one obsession.”

Oh my god. They were talking about me. *Honor*. I had to sit there and pretend like I didn’t have any opinion about Honor while they talked about me. This was madness.

“You guys have a stalker?”

Branok snorted. “They wish.”

Well, that was an interesting piece of information. “What’s she like?”

Who wouldn’t ask that question if they were face to face with the dragon royals and there was an opening to discuss how they saw you?

“Deeply unwise,” Arren said.

He barely spoke, but apparently, he would break his vows of silence to insult me.

“I didn’t know you could talk,” I said delightedly.

“Really?” Jaik asked me. “Wasn’t having your nose broken once enough already? You want to piss Arren off?”

“Look,” I said, “I’ve obviously made you all deeply unhappy before day one at the academy. But I *am* a dragon, and we *are* stuck together. Maybe we could try to start over. Maybe I deserve a second chance.”

Lynx rose from the table, as if the idea grated his last nerve.

“No, stay.” Jaik ordered. “Lucien will go.”

I propped my elbows on the table and put my chin in my hands before realizing that was a distinctly feminine gesture. I straightened, then sprawled back in my seat, spreading my legs and trying to take up room like a man.

Talisyn was watching me with a skeptical look on his face. I was not doing a very good job of beginning to win these men over to my side.

“Lucien will not go,” I said.

“Lucien will do what the fuck he’s told.” Jaik leaned over the table, meeting my gaze.

I was very familiar with that angry smoldering gaze. But it did things to me that Lucien probably wouldn’t have felt. Even when Jaik looked pissed, there was something that was hot about his gaze and the power that rolled off his body.

“You will do what you’re told,” he told me. “And if you want to begin to have the chance to get back into our good graces—”

“Never going to happen,” Branok interrupted.

“Then you are going to need to obey.” Jaik cast a glance at Branok, including him in his icy orders.

“I need to obey you. Why? Right now? We’re all going to be a part of the order of dragons. You’re not the High King yet.”

“That’s not why I’m the one who’s in charge,” Jaik answered.

“Then why?” I pressed.

Talisyn buried his face in his hands as if he couldn't bear to watch. Then he said,

“Jaik, I'll get him straightened out.”

“You're going to take responsibility for this one?” Jaik looked disbelieving. “Weren't you whining about that earlier today when Damyn told you to watch him?”

“I can't say I'm excited about the idea,” he answered. “But the kid wasn't entirely useless today. He did try when we were dealing with the Scourge.”

“He tried?” Jaik scoffed. “He's borderline useless right now. Make sure he can fly.”

“I will.” Talisyn rose from the table and walked toward the two-story wooden doors that led out of the dining hall, his broad shoulders cutting through the crowd of students who melted away in front of him. He obviously expected me to follow, and as the others glared at me, I jumped up too.

The two of us headed out into the hallway. My stomach growled, but apparently Jaik decided how much time any of us got to spend eating.

What a bizarrely controlling bastard. I was talking out loud again. Hopefully I hadn't mentioned the part where I found Jaik ridiculously hot.

“He is pretty domineering,” Talisyn agreed. “But he does try his best. And he does have his reasons.”

“That's a little hard to believe right now,” I said.

“Well, you might find that he grows on you in time.”

“Why are you being decent to me?” I asked.

“You know, maybe you're right. Maybe everyone does deserve a second chance.” Talisyn said the words off-handedly, but they hit me like a fist.

I admitted, “I don't know how I can begin to make things right. With Branok and Lynx.”

“I don’t know how you can begin to do that either,” Talisyn confessed. “But being basically competent as a dragon shifter and a Knight of the Order will certainly be a step in the right direction.”

“I never expected to be a dragon.” I leaned against the wall, hugging my chest. It had been a long day, and when it was just the two of us in the hall, the sense of overwhelm struck me hard. I had to keep him from seeing it, but I was struggling. “I have a long way to go.”

“Well, then we better start tonight,” he said.

June hustled down the hall, carrying an armful of clean pillows. *Shit.*

“Talisyn, I can’t right now,” I said, “I’ve got to take care of some things first.”

“What can be more important than learning how to use your new powers?” He demanded.

“I’ve only been a dragon for twenty-four hours, you’ve got to give me the chance to adjust a little bit,” I said. “I still have business to take care of.”

He gave me a strange look and I realized that I’d misstepped.

“What kind of business could you possibly have, besides being grateful to have been freed from the dungeon instead of being executed? Like we all expected?”

“Yeah, well, I’m not out of the woods yet on that whole *execution* thing.”

“No, you certainly aren’t. But you would never have left that dungeon, except to go to the gallows, if you didn’t have powers that our people desperately need. That *you* need to learn to control.”

“Well, I wasn’t trying to piss off the dragon Elders,” I shot back, thinking of how furious they had looked at my presence in the temple. “Apologies for my existence..”

He gave me a look again. Right, Lucien Finn would’ve known damn well how the Elders would feel about having

someone steal from them.

It was really hard to adapt to having a different cover story when I was close to Talisyn. I'd already connected to Talisyn, in intimate, dirty ways. Now it was hard to filter everything I said through the lies that I'd already told.

That made it difficult to talk like I was a normal person instead of sounding like a faltering idiot. I had a lot of practice talking. But all of a sudden, it seemed challenging.

"I'll be back soon," I promised Talisyn. "Could we meet somewhere to work on flying?"

"I think maybe you should remember that I'm the one doing you a favor," Talisyn said.

"You are," I said, "And I deeply appreciate it. And I can tell that you're not afraid of Damyn at all."

He laughed. To my surprise, Talisyn seemed to have a delightful sense of humor where he didn't take anyone too seriously, but at least that included himself.

"All right," he said. "How long do you need?"

If Talisyn kept being so reasonable, it was going to be hard to keep my guard up around him. I had to remember that he was one of the dragon Royals, and he couldn't be trusted. Still, I had so many questions and Talisyn was willing to talk to me. Maybe I could begin to get some answers. For now though, I had to see Calla.

Once we made plans, I headed quickly down the hallway, trying to keep my pace to a graceful saunter. I was supposed to look like a dignified nobleman now instead of myself, who had many great qualities but a surplus of dignity had never really been one of those qualities.

I took off to the bathroom and checked that there was no one in here. There were female shifters at the academy, but this was a relatively unused bathroom, and I had a little bit of privacy.

I was surprised to find a pair of feet underneath one of the stalls and I retreated back to the elaborate mirrors that hung

over the long, gleaming marble counters.

Everything at the academy was not just sparkling clean, thanks to me and my friends, but also truly beautiful. At least as beautiful as any place can be when people take shits in it all the time.

I waited impatiently, until the girl in the stall let herself out. I turned hastily to the mirror to pretend like I was busy preening. She gave me a look as she moved to the sink.

“I know you’re new here,” she said. “But you do know this is a lady’s bathroom.”

“Oh,” I said. “I’m so sorry.”

But I still didn’t move. She gave me another strange look, then finally went out, shaking her head. I was going to ruin what was left of Lucien Finn’s very thin reputation.

As soon as she was gone, I locked the door behind her. Then I pulled out the trunk and rapidly changed. I grabbed my mop and bucket and ran, then stopped at the door, turned around and met Lucien’s face in the mirror.

I was getting really tired of not being myself. Even if everyone else in the world thought that it was an improvement. I returned to the mirror and did the spell. My features softened and shrank, my hair lightening and growing longer until it was myself that I faced in the mirror again.

“Nice to see you, Honor,” I said because no one else was ever going to be happy to see me. Well except my little sister. But at least I could love myself. I headed down the hall as fast as I could and arrived in the maids’ area just as everyone was beginning to store their items.

Head said, “I had a hard time finding you today, Honor.”

“Oh, how strange,” I said. “I might have taken a brief break from my daily chores to save the academy from Scourge invaders, but I definitely spent most of my day working away.”

She eyed me skeptically, but let it pass with nothing but an irritated sniff. Head did not think I was funny.

As soon as Head was gone, Calla grabbed my wrist and whispered, “What are you up to, Honor?”

“I’m not up to anything,” I said, even though I didn’t think that I sounded convincing.

Calla gave me a long look. “Where have you been all day?”

“You don’t believe that I was cleaning? Head does, and she usually considers me quite suspect.”

“I’m your best friend,” she said, and warmth flooded my chest.

She’d never called herself my best friend. Somehow it was even more exciting than my flirtation with the dragon royals. Maybe girlfriends matter just a little more. After all, we truly can’t survive without our friends, but dicks can be optional.

“Can I be your roommate?” I asked. “I told my stepmother today that I can’t stay in that house anymore.”

She regarded me as if she knew I was trying to cut off the other discussion, but asked, “Do you have your stuff?”

“I’ll have to go back and get it... I’m not exactly up to anything. I promise.” She continued to regard me skeptically, even though I rested my hand on my heart. “I just found myself in a really weird situation.”

She scoffed, but her face softened. “Aren’t you always in a really weird situation?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, you seem to have the attention of all five dragon royals for some reason.” She couldn’t hide the smile that slipped across her lips.

“It’s mostly bad attention,” I disagreed. “Arren thinks that I’m some kind of monster intent on sucking the life out of his friends. Jaik called me a naughty cat, which is super weird. *He* is super weird. Super bossy. And I don’t think the twins like me very much.”

They didn’t seem to like me in either of my incarnations.

“Maybe,” she said. “I noticed that you left out Lord Talisyn.”

“Talisyn is his own story,” I said. “But ultimately, he’ll do whatever Jaik tells him.”

I was really curious about their dynamics and why Jaik was the undisputed leader of their little group.

“Okay, but where were you today?” Calla glanced around, as if to make sure that Head was nowhere to be seen. “Do you need help?”

It touched my heart that the first thing that she thought of was that maybe I needed some kind of help, and that she was willing to offer it instead of being mad about how I’d been absent today.

“I don’t know. Maybe? It’s tricky.”

Her face fell. “You don’t want to tell me what’s going on? I understand. It’s all right.”

Somehow, the fact that she was willing to respect my privacy made me feel even worse about the idea of keeping any secrets from her. “No, it’s not that, Calla. It’s just, there are parts of this that I can’t explain to you for both our sakes. I wish I could, but I have secrets that aren’t mine to share.”

“Is it a bad secret or a good secret?”

“Both?” I answered.

“This is really not doing anything to sate my curiosity.”

“I know. It’s a complicated secret. But the big thing is that I have a second job now, and so I’m trying to figure out how I’m going to handle that because I can’t lose my income from this job. I have to take care of my little sister.”

“Oh,” she said. “I thought you saved up all that money for Hanna’s tuition.”

“My stepmother stole it.”

Calla seemed to consider this for a long minute, then said, “What are we going to do to get back at that evil heifer?”

Calla had called herself my best friend. But that was the moment that cemented for me that this was my ride or die best friend that I'd love for ever.

“If you need help,” she added, “then I'll cover for you. But I don't know how long it's realistic to keep up having two jobs, especially if they overlap.”

“I know. I don't know how I'm going to do it either. But I have to try.”

“Then I'll help,” she said. “If there's really nothing else that you can do, and you have to do that, then I'm sure I can at least move your stuff around and try to make it look like you're still doing your job.”

“Thank you,” I said, a rush of warmth filling my chest.

“It's not like you were ever very good at your job,” she said, “so this might not change anything.”

“Excuse me.”

She just grinned. I wasn't entirely sure she was joking.

When I left her, I changed back into my new clothes and my new face. I had to get to Talisyn, but I also wanted to take a look at my room with the academy.

The dragon shifters had their own wing, which seemed a little ridiculous; they owned the very top floor of the west wing of the academy. I knew how small the other rooms were and that everyone had a roommate. But my new, enormous room looked out over the training yard far below and had an expansive balcony. There was a fireplace surrounded by empty bookshelves and an elaborate four poster bed.

I didn't have anything to put in my room at the moment. Lucien Finn understandably wouldn't have had a lot of his belongings. I had to be grateful that Lucien was an orphan just like I was. At least he wouldn't have parents to miss him.

Even though he'd been foolish, and his demise had probably been inevitable, I didn't like the fact that I was linked to it now.



CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Honor

WHEN I LEFT MY ROOM, TALISYN WAS WAITING IN THE HALL.

“Finally,” he said. “What were you doing?”

“Just trying to get my head on straight.” My literal head. I was really worried I was going to forget one day which face I was supposed to wear.

“Good luck with that,” he said. “You seem to be like someone who’s perpetually lopsided.”

He pushed open a door at the end of the hallway, and I went up with him to the rooftop.

“You know,” I mused, taking in how close it felt like we were to the stars, how hard the wind tugged at my hair, “This seems like a terrible place to begin learning.”

“It’s a great place,” Talisyn disagreed, with his customary confidence. His tousled hair was flying in the wind above his sharp-planed face. “The higher the stakes, the lower the learning curve.”

“The greater the likelihood of me ending up as a splat on the training yard far below,” I said. “You don’t want to permanently traumatize the *undragons*, do you?”

He winced. “I’ve been trying to stop them from calling the other shifters that.”

“I’d definitely avoid it, assuming you want them to watch your back in battle.”

“To be fair.” He smiled as if my suggestion were slightly ridiculous. “We pretty much just rely on each other.”

“Must be nice,” I said.

“Yeah. It’s hard to imagine us beginning to rely on you. But maybe it could happen in time, if you can win Branok and Lynx over.”

“I hope so,” I said. “That’s hard to imagine right now.”

“Yeah, it is,” he agreed. “You’ve got to find a way to begin to make up what you did to Alina.”

“Yes. Yes, I certainly do.” I had no idea who Alina was or what I’d done to her, though, so that was going to be a challenge.

Maybe I could ask Calla. She’d talked about how the servants had their *goss*. Maybe the *goss* could actually be useful to me.

I thought Talisyn and I were having a nice conversation.

But it ended pretty abruptly when he shoved me off the edge of the building.

I definitely should not have a crush on that man.

For a few seconds, as wind streamed past my face, blind panic ripped through me. The training yard seemed to rush upward blindingly fast.

Pain washed through my body as my wings rippled out. I tumbled, jerked to a stop, tumbled more as the wind caught my wings. I clawed through the air, my legs windmilling, and then my wings caught the breeze and it bore me upward.

Suddenly I was soaring.

I desperately wanted to tell Talisyn what an asshole he was. But it became impossible.

“Oh, come on. I’m not that bad,” Talisyn said into my mind.

The words hit me with a wave of shock, overcoming the sudden exhilaration of flight. It sounded as if he’d spoken to me. But obviously we couldn’t speak to each other at the moment.

“It’s the power of communication that we all have,” he explained. “Just one of the many things that makes us superior in battle.”

“Did you really just say that? No wonder no one likes you.” But my thoughts were reeling. If they could hear me, then they could hear all my secrets. Hopefully Damyn was right that the spell Talisyn’s father had put on me would prevent them from knowing I was Honor.

“There is a way around that,” Talisyn said in my head, as I tried desperately to think of anything else. Unfortunately, what came to my mind to keep from accidentally revealing my secrets was just what I thought about Talisyn. And it wasn’t that he was a jerk.

Even in his dragon form, Talisyn’s shock radiated from him.

“That’s okay. It doesn’t hurt my feelings, Lucien,” he said. “I know I’m a beautiful man.”

Maybe arrogance was part of the dragon shifter package.

He explained to me that there was a way to put up walls in your mind so that the other dragons could only hear you when you wanted them to. “That’s a very important skill because of the elders.”

“Tell me more about them.”

“I don’t think you’re ready for that conversation.”

“There’s a lot going on around here that I’d like to understand.” *Focus on my question. Not my secrets.*

“What secrets do you have? The worst things that you’ve done are already well known by the royals.”

“I don’t think you know the half of it,” I said before realizing that was exactly the wrong thing to say.

“What else could you possibly have done?” Talisyn demanded. “You’re already persona non grata with the other dragon royals.”

“I know. Right now, though, why don’t you teach me how to build those walls.”

“Right now, I’m going to teach you how to land,” he said.

My landing hurt almost as much as the good time I’d had with Lynx earlier that day. I skidded across the roof, and Talisyn bounded after me, his wings flaring out as he caught my neck with his mouth. His teeth barely clamped down as he pulled me back, keeping both of us from sliding over the edge of the roof.

In human form, I scrambled to my feet, only to be greeted by Talisyn, who had already changed.

Talisyn scrubbed his tongue with the back of his hand. “You are not delicious, Lucien.”

Funny, because he seemed to find Honor a tasty snack.

“I really appreciate you being so decent to me,” I said.

I could’ve sworn a flicker of indecision crossed his handsome face. “Everyone deserves a second chance. We’ve all done stupid things. But you crossed the line with Alina.”

“Right,” I said, as if I had any idea about Alina.

“That’s the only thing that really matters,” he went on. “I mean, you don’t steal from Dragons, that’s a terrible idea. They will hunt you down and they will burn your ass. But since it wasn’t my hoard you stole from, I could get over that. What you did to Alina is different.”

“Are the twins so angry just because I stole from their father?” I asked, trying to follow the logic. “Because their father’s property is their inheritance, so it feels like I stole from their... hoard?”

“I mean, you messed with their sister,” he said.

Alina was Branok and Lynx’s sister. Shit.

Well, that certainly changed things. I’d break apart anyone who hurt my little sister. “Okay. So how do I begin to put that right?”

He frowned at me, the look more confused than angry now, and I realized I had to abandon this line of questioning. I knew too little.

“All right, help me understand the shield.”

“Why would I want to do that? It seems to me like it’s better for me if you can’t keep your secrets.”

“Do you really want to hear everything that goes through my head?” As it was, some people complained about how often the things that went through my head came out my mouth.

“After finding out how sexy you think I am, yes, absolutely. Everyone can use an ego boost.”

“Really, you can use an ego boost? You seem like you’re doing okay for ego on your own.”

To his credit, he grinned at that. “Maybe. You know, all of us have trained since we were kids with the idea that we’d be dragon shifters. We’ve trained hard, given up huge chunks of our childhood, surrendered our own dreams and desires. You have to convince yourself it’s worth it—that you’re special.”

“You know, lots of people have miserable childhoods *and* don’t get to tell themselves they’re special. They just keep on going.” Being a dragon shifter still felt like something I couldn’t quite wrap my claws around.

He shrugged. “I don’t know what that’s like. I just know the wake-you-up-at-night fear you’ll find out that you aren’t a dragon after all—after growing up expecting it, having everyone else expect it.”

“Does that happen to people?”

“Yeah, it happens to people.” He sounded sad. “But not often.”

“I’m surprised there are never dragon shifters born to the royal family that are girls,” I said.

“It is strange, isn’t it? All the other shifter types are born male and female. Even the bears and wolves. It’s only the dragons who are always male.”

“Do you have any thoughts on why that is?”

“No,” he said, “and I don’t waste time thinking about anything that doesn’t amuse me.”

I had a feeling that was a lie. But I let it pass.

“All right, let’s practice. Let’s take off from the flat.” He nodded across the roof. “You won’t always have a good fall to help your powers wake up.”

We spent the rest of the night practicing our flying, and he tried to coach me through how to raise a shield to protect my thoughts. But he winced. “You’re still leaking thoughts about how cute I am.”

“I am not!”

He shrugged, a small smile tilting up the corners of his mouth. Whenever he smiled for real, there were dimples in his cheeks. Both smiles were adorable and I swallowed, trying to push those thoughts out of my mind.

“Time for bed, Lucien.” He headed for the door that led back down the stairs into the dragon’s wing. “You have to go to your own.”

“Wait. How often do the Scourge attack the city?” I asked. “None of you seemed to be that shocked. But I never thought they came that close.”

“We’d like to wall up the tunnels,” he said. “But we have to follow what the elders decide, and they think we need those escape routes to be able to pass through the city.”

“Even if they put the city in danger?” I demanded.

“That’s what they have us for.”

He let the door close behind him. I was alone in the bracing night air, my mind racing.

The world still felt like a puzzle I had to put together, but at least Talisyn had handed me a few pieces.



CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

H*onor*

THE NEXT DAY OF CLASSES SEEMED TO GO A LITTLE BETTER, and by a little better, I mean, at least I didn't break my nose. I had a pretty low bar for happy days at the academy at this point.

I focused on my training and my classes, kept my head down, and tried to ignore my almost roommates. Even though it turned out they really were allergic to wearing shirts. But I knew they were expecting to see Honor again.

I'd have to find a way to change jobs, perhaps to some kind of night position. If I didn't have to be in two places at once, it wouldn't be such a problem that I had two very different jobs at one time. I mean, except for my sleep and mental wellbeing and whatnot. Little things like that, which didn't matter to anyone.

I could make anything work. I might not have a lot of positive qualities, but I had grit.

The next night, exhausted by the day, and by the lies, I slipped into the library. I stopped at the door, touching my hair, reminding myself I wore Honor's face. My own face.

When I was Honor, I wasn't supposed to be here, but I couldn't resist. The library had always been a place of peace for me.

Although after meeting the royals, my library memories were a lot more lively.

Lynx was already seated at one of the tables, his chin propped in his hand, slowly turning the pages of an enormous book. I hesitated in the doorway, surprised to see him. For

some reason I hadn't expected there to be anyone else here, even though it wasn't like the night of the party when of course, no one else had been in the library except for my depraved new dragon friends.

"You can come in," Lynx said without looking up. "You're not scared of me, are you?"

I scoffed, my mind made up now. "Certainly not."

He finally looked up from his book, those bright golden eyes pinning me. "No, you certainly don't seem to be afraid of me nor my friends."

Lynx's gaze might've intimidated anyone else—there was something about those bright golden-amber eyes that reminded me of his dragon form—but it just amused me. "Did Jaik miss me today?" I asked, my voice teasing. After all, I'd already heard part of the answer at dinner tonight.

"Why are you so comfortable with all of us?" He was back to flipping pages.

"You are just men, despite what you tell yourselves," I answered. "And you're entertaining. Life is cruel, you might as well indulge in dessert."

"Or dragon princes?"

"I don't know about that, sir. We just met," I said, mock-haughty.

He colored slightly and the sudden blush spreading across his high cheekbones surprised me immensely.

"Which one are you?" I asked, even though I had a pretty good idea. Lynx was the bookish twin and I imagined he was also the only blushing twin. Branok was a touch more homicidal.

He studied his book as if that might convince me to go away. It would not. With his forehead propped on his hand, he finally muttered, "Lynx."

"How can I tell you apart from your twin?"

“You don’t need to worry about telling me and Branok apart. I’m not like Talisyn or Jaik or Arren.”

“What do you mean, you’re not like Talisyn or Jaik or *Arren?*”

Something smoldered between Talisyn and me, between Jaik and me. When we were close, I could feel the promise of it, could feel the rising burn like I’d get hurt but I couldn’t stop myself. But Arren was a different story. The only heat he seemed to feel was a raging distaste.

“I’m immune to your charms,” he answered. “And I don’t know what you’re playing at, trying to get the attention of all five of us.”

“Okay, first of all, I am not trying to get your attention. It’s not my fault that you’re obsessed,” I shot back.

“You don’t have *my* attention,” he corrected a little too quickly.

“I don’t know how I earned the honor of capturing Jaik’s attention.” I said, although when I thought back, jumping off his balcony, after deliberately pissing him off, I suppose that had been kind of an attention-getting maneuver. I hadn’t realized how bored the royals were with girls eager to laugh at their jokes and hang on their arms.

It had been fun flirting with and baiting the royals. It was *still* fun. I just had regrets about it now when I was also facing the challenge of being Lucien.

Still, it was fascinating to see both sides of the dragon royals—the way they were with a woman and the way they were with the fellow dragon shifter they didn’t think very highly of. I wondered about their true selves, which I had a feeling they hid from everyone but each other.

“Do you mind if I sit with you?” I asked Lynx, because some devilish impulse had just come over me.

I wanted to know more about him, and I’d had a very long day. I wasn’t in the mood for self-denial.

To be fair, I was never in the mood for self-denial.

“If you must,” he said.

I wandered the shelves, picked out a book, then clutched it to my chest as I carried it across the rug. I could’ve sworn I still smelt the faintest citrus tang of sex in the air, blending with the notes of old leather and pages and wood.

He glanced up as I slid into the seat beside him, eyeing my book, then snorted. “Gods. A romance novel.”

“Why do you say it like that?” I demanded, tapping my knuckles on the book. It was, sadly, just an adventure story with a bit of romance—but not quite enough to be satisfying. “Romance novels are terrific. And there is a distinct dearth of them in this library.”

I wasn’t supposed to know that. I wasn’t supposed to have entered the door, let alone been stealing books from the library all this time. It wasn’t as if they’d give a housemaid a library card... but they had given me a dress with a very voluminous skirt. And if someone was going to make me wear a skirt, I was going to make the best of it. Book smuggling.

“I’ve never read one,” he said.

“Then why do you have such strong opinions?”

“Oh, come on. They’re trash.”

“Well, I don’t have one at the moment. But if I did, I’d suggest you read it before you pass judgment. At least you could have an educated level of patronizing and condescending.”

“Maybe I’ll buy one,” he said. “See what they’re all about.”

“You should do that.”

“And then will you let me condescend to you?”

“I have a feeling that you can’t help being condescending,” I said, “so I’m not sure I’d bother to ask you not to.”

He tilted his head as he studied me. I always had the strangest sense when I was face to face with the dragon royals that they viewed me like some kind of fascinating specimen,

the rare girl who wasn't tripping over myself to talk to them. I found them amusing, but I didn't care what Lynx thought about me, or my books.

He and I passed the rest of the evening in surprisingly companionable silence, turning pages and reading together. I couldn't help stealing glances over at him. He was always a beautiful man, but there was something endearing about his concentration as he was reading. The stern lines of his profile and the softness of his pink lips, the way those golden eyes tracked back and forth across the page so rapidly.

"Good night," I said finally, closing the book.

"Good night, Honor." He barely glanced away from his page, but when he was distracted, he forgot to be rude to me.

I had just reached the door when he looked up, then half-rose from the table, surprise written across his face. "Oh, you're going."

"We were just talking—" I began, then cut myself off. I became equally distracted when I was reading. "Good night, Lynx."

"Good night," he said with a frown.

I walked out of the library with a strangely pounding heart.

Lynx seemed like a very different person when he wasn't beating Lucien bloody.

I definitely needed to understand why he hated my other incarnation so much.

I didn't want to waste more time changing clothes. I ran up the stairs and paused at the heavy wooden door to the dragons' wing. It was carved with an enormous terrifying horned dragon's face, and I ran my fingers across the smooth, polished wood as I listened for a moment.

I didn't hear anyone in the hall. I slipped inside, facing the long, shadowed stone corridor with lamps blazing from the ceiling, and ran down the hall to my room.

When I closed the door behind me, I exhaled in relief. I'd made it without any of the dragon royals seeing me, even

Arren who seemed to be lurking around and glaring.

A figure emerged from the shadows, looming toward me.



CHAPTER NINETEEN

H*onor*

I PULLED MY KNIFE OUT AND DASHED ACROSS THE ROOM, slamming the figure into the wall just as I realized it was Caldren.

“I knew I liked you.” He smiled down at me, looking not remotely disturbed to have a blade pressed against his throat.

I dropped the knife down to my side and stepped back. “You should really knock.”

“I can’t exactly knock,” he said. “I’m not supposed to see you outside of everyday classes.”

“How did you get in here? Do you have a key?”

“I don’t need a key.” He flashed me a cocky smile, and I flashed him skeptical eyebrows right back. His cockiness wilted slightly as he admitted, “But yes, yes, I do have a key.”

“What do you want?” I sank onto my bed, exhausted by men, and kicked off my slippers. I pointed my toes at him. “Please tell me it’s to rub my feet.”

He ignored me and my invitation. Probably for the best, since he was a handsome man and my feet smelled like damp socks and old cheese after a day of training, but I would’ve sacrificed my dignity for a good foot rub.

“You’re going to need a lot more training to survive than the standard academy course. The dragon royals have been training to fight the Scourge all their lives.”

“Yes, I’ve heard. So many times. But I already feel as if I’ve been washed with lye and wrung out to dry. And I had extra flying lessons with Talisyn last night.”

“You and Talisyn seem to be getting along.”

“I get along with everyone,” I lied cheerfully.

“Well, you and I can train in the morning before the academy starts.”

I was bone tired and deeply unimpressed by that notion, but I definitely did need...more... if I was going to not just survive, but kick the ass of some spoiled royals. “As Lucien or as Honor?”

He hesitated. “To be honest, no one here at the academy is going to go easy on you as Lucien. But they’ll like you even less if they think you’re close to me.”

“What did he do to piss everyone off so much?” I asked, but it was rhetorical. I already knew he didn’t have the answer. It was on me to figure it out. “And what did *you* do to piss everyone off?”

“So you’ll be Honor then,” he said, with an impressive ability to ignore my questions. “We trained together before. It will make the most sense.”

“But why does it make sense? Why is it so important to you to embarrass the dragon royals? And why am I apparently so useful to accomplish that goal?”

He looked briefly shocked by how quickly I’d rattled off questions, then said, “Jaik and I have a long-storied history that I’m not in the mood to even begin when it’s close to midnight. Especially when you and I have a date at five o’clock tomorrow morning.

“Five o’clock tomorrow morning,” I repeated. “That’s a bit early to want to get your ass handed to you every day, you know.”

“I know,” he said, flashing me a cheeky smile as he headed toward the door. “But I’ll show up anyway.”

I couldn’t help grinning back just before the door closed softly behind him. I’d get answers from him tomorrow; he couldn’t think he was going to see me every day without ripping like a wet sheet.

I stretched out on the bed, wondering when I'd get to be Honor again. I couldn't pretend to be Lucien forever. And while life as Honor Hannaby wasn't particularly easy, it was who I truly was. I didn't want to lose her.

I thought fretting about when the Elders would release me from this ridiculous lie would keep me awake. Instead, I found myself startled awake at five o'clock in the morning. My eyes were hot with exhaustion, and I rolled over into my pillow, seeking a cooler side, only to hear the same little *crick-crick* that had woken me.

I tried to ignore the bug, then got up, slipped into my clothes, and made my way out to see Caldren.

"Did you put a magic cricket in my room?" I demanded. "To make sure I made it down here?"

"Who would do such a thing?" He jerked his head toward the stairs that led to the basement—and the hidden door to the deeper stairs. "Come on, we need to find some privacy."

"I'm not a fan of the tunnels," I said. "And I'm going to squash your cricket."

"You're too tender hearted for that."

"I'm not tender hearted when you fuck with my sleep."

He ignored me, leading me through twists and turns of the tunnels until we emerged in a shadowy pocket of forest.

"How do you know about the tunnels?" I asked.

"I used to be close to the royals," he said shortly.

"Why do you all hate each other now?"

"I don't hate any of them." He nodded at me, trying to change the subject. "You can shift here. I brought you all the way out here so no one would see what you really are."

I crossed my arms. "I'm getting very tired of people telling me what's best for me and not answering my questions, Caldren."

He raked his hand through his hair, then heaved a sigh. "We all grew up together. But they're...dragons...and I'm

not.”

“That seems like a terrible reason to throw away a friendship.” Before he could answer, I added, “Things between you and Jaik seem personal.”

“They are personal.” He pulled his sword from the sheath across his shoulders, murmuring a spell to blunt the blade as he ran his fingers across the steel. “He knows I’m better than him—a better leader, a better fighter. But because I’m a wolf, it means nothing.”

There was a bitter edge in his voice that made me pause, my own sword half-drawn. But he leapt toward me, and I hastily drew my sword the rest of the way. The clash of his sword shocking against mine rang through the clearing.

I kicked him in the stomach, and he stepped to one side, knocking my leg out from under me. I rolled and came up again, blocking his blade as it ducked toward my throat. “What about the others?”

“Talisyn’s a good man,” he said, surprising me, as the two of us fenced back and forth. Caldren’s voice had darkened when he spoke of Jaik, but he was back to his usual calm, level and fair self. “I mean, he’s Jaik’s bitch, so that’s a character flaw. But that’s the case for all of them.”

“What about Arren?”

“He’s dangerous, and you should be careful around him.”

“As Honor or as Lucien?”

“Both.”

“I want to understand why I have to spend so much time doing hand to hand training when it seems dragons mostly soar around setting stuff on fire.” Sometimes I had the funny feeling Caldren might just like to spar with me—although to be honest, I liked that as well.

“Well, sometimes your dragon magic can’t be accessed for one reason or another. And you should understand what you ask the other shifters to do... Face-to-face with the Scourge.”

“Why is it that the dragon shifters always lead?” I asked him.

They soared above the battles, directing them from the air; I’d heard grumblings from shifters about it before, but only furtive mumbles.

Caldren snorted. “That’s a question I thought only people who weren’t dragon shifters asked.”

“I never expected to be one,” I reminded him. “So I have a lot of questions about the whole system. How did you become such an expert on dragons, anyway?”

I kind of expected him to give me another glib answer. But he gave me a long look instead. “Time to shift. As a dragon, you’re just as strong as Lynx and Branok. Maybe stronger, if my guesses are correct. So if you want Lynx and Branok to stop kicking your ass in the training yard, we need to work on your skills as a dragon.”

“Happily.” I sheathed my sword, then poked him in the chest with the tip of the sheath.

He paused, his hands in his pockets, raising his eyebrows as the two of us regarded each other.

“Answers, Caldren. I am very worried that I’ll accidentally roast you if you can’t prove to me that you know how to protect yourself.”

My voice was soft, but he must have heard the steel in it.

“I trust you. You’re not going to roast me.” He met my gaze, then gave up, blew out a slow breath.

“Not on purpose. But I don’t feel like I’m exactly myself when I’m a dragon,” I confessed. “It makes me a little scared of what I could do.”

“I don’t feel exactly like myself when I’m a wolf. But I like to think we’re all a little bigger and stranger than the self that we’ve known all along.”

“That’s a lovely philosophical point,” I said, “but it doesn’t make me feel any better about the possibility I might burn you alive.”

“It should. Usually people find philosophers unbearable. Just trust yourself,” he assured me, “and if you can’t do that, just trust me. I won’t let you hurt me.”

I prodded him with the tip of the sheath. “How?”

He cursed as he grabbed the sheath from me, but I didn’t let go, so the motion brought us close together. His chest rose and fell as he gazed down at me. “Can you stop that?”

“How do you know so much about dragon shifters?”

He swallowed, his Adam’s apple bobbing, and made no motion to move away from me. “I was supposed to be one. I come from a family of dragons.”

“So you spent your whole life expecting to be a dragon shifter?”

“I did. And now I have to try to make sense of being something else. *Someone* else. And that someone is a huge disappointment to my family.”

His tone was cool and level, the way it always was except for when he talked about Jaik.

“I’m sorry,” I said, “I’m only a disappointment to my stepmother. And I don’t really care that much about her opinion. But if I disappointed my little sister...”

My worries that I’d fail her, that I’d abandon her in that house instead of spiriting her away to Posselbaum’s, rose and fell again, driven away by the pain written across Caldren’s face.

“To be honest, I don’t know exactly how I feel about my family,” he admitted. “Not my parents anyway. And I have pretty complicated feelings about my brother at the moment.”

“What are they like?”

“My mother is beautiful. She always wants things to be a certain way. The right way—beautiful and sparkling as she is. She can’t handle anything else.” His lips pursed ruefully. “Including little boys’ bloody knees or tears when we were growing up. Including broken hearts and dreams now.”

“As for my father, well, you know the dragons. They’re arrogant assholes, but they’re our best protectors against the Scourge. And somehow that makes it okay to treat everyone around them like shit.”

“Like calling them *undragons*.”

“Exactly like that.”

It struck me how hard it must be for him to be one of the *undragons*. “I’d really like to ban that phrase.”

“It wouldn’t change the feelings underlying it.”

“I think it would make a difference. The words people say impacts how they feel more than I think we admit.”

He smiled down at me, his eyes crinkling at the corners. “All right. I’m certainly not going to use the word *undragons*. You’ve convinced me.”

The two of us were so close together, he smelled of pine and snow, and his lips looked inviting. I was tempted to kiss him. I didn’t even know where that rogue thought came from.

I didn’t feel the same mad pull toward him I felt with Jaik and Talisyn. There was something tender there, something more tentative, like a bud unfurling in soft soil. But I felt a strange lightness in my chest when the two of us were close together like we were now.

“Well, I hope someday your family stops disappointing you.”

“It’s all right. I can defend myself. I’m not convinced it’s worse to be a wolf shifter than to be a dragon. Even if I felt that way for a long time, when I first had to reconcile myself to a different identity, a different future, a different family.” His lips quirked ruefully. “Well, maybe someday, when I get to make my own family. I’ve been disowned by the dragons.”

My heart ached for him. “You deserve better, you know that?”

“I don’t know. I tell myself I deserve better, but I’m not sure I really believe it yet. I’m trying.”

I understood how he felt. “Sometimes people tell you lies about yourself, and you know they’re lies and yet... part of you still believes them. No matter how much you try to keep their poison from seeping into your skin.”

“What lies do you believe, Honor?”

He’d let down his guard with me and it touched my heart. But I wasn’t ready to offer him the same vulnerability. “Hmm. That Branok and Lynx will continue to kick my ass?”

His lips quirked, although his gaze was still shadowed by sadness. “Not if I can help it. Go on and shift. I don’t shield flames as well as a dragon, but I can do it well enough to keep from turning to toast.”

I backed up, giving myself space to grow. He nodded encouragingly at me as he set down my sheathed sword and drew his own.

A moment later, I lurched a step in the unfamiliar huge body, catching myself with claws that scraped the ground.

Caldren smiled at me and urged me closer, his sword in one hand. As soon as my head swung toward him, he leapt onto my back. I tried to shake him off half-heartedly, but he finally pestered me into a true fight, whacking me with his sword and generally acting like an asshole. Apparently, his true self wasn’t that different from the dragon royals.

I finally turned around and snapped at him. He leapt free, transforming into the wolf in midair. A snarling dark gray wolf, larger than any I’d ever seen in a zoo, lunged for my throat. I slammed my horns into him, knocking him halfway across the yard.

The two of us sparred back and forth. Finally, I trapped him against the ground with my snout, little curls of smoke rising around us both.

He shifted back, grinned up at me. “Good girl.”

Caldren put his hand on my snout, scratched my head beneath my horns. It felt good, and his eyes lit up when the two of us were this close. “You’re going to destroy the dragon royals,” he murmured, giving me a pat.

In my dragon form, the words barely registered.

But the rest of the day, I kept coming back to those words.

Destroy...as in, embarrass in the yard?

Or did he mean something else?



CHAPTER TWENTY

H*onor*

THAT NIGHT, I FRANTICALLY MOPPED THE FLOOR OF ONE OF the classrooms, already late to see Head and late to dinner in the banquet hall.

A tingle ran up my skin as if someone were watching me, and I looked up to find Jaik stalking toward me.

“Watch out, it’s slippery,” I called.

“I’m not afraid of slippery,” he scoffed, kicking my mop bucket out of his way. Soapy water flooded across the hardwood floor.

I looked from it up at him, and maybe anger flared in my eyes, because he seemed to pause for a millisecond before he started toward me again.

“Why are you like this?” I demanded. “Do you want to mop?”

I offered him the mop. But Jaik knocked it out of my hands, and it clattered to the floor.

I stared at him, thinking I was about to knock out the nation’s greatest hero and the heir apparent to the kingdom, and that was going to be hard to explain.

But the next second he grabbed my shoulders, pushing me against the wall, and his lips met mine. I was so startled I couldn’t breathe. His hands were hard on my body but his lips were tender.

His scent—that faint smokiness that clung to his skin even when he was in human form—washed over me, and my traitorous hips swayed toward him. My hand stroked up the

fine material of his shirt, felt the hard angles of his chest and his heart beating wildly. By the time my palm reached his shoulder, I wasn't sure if I wanted to push him away or fist the material and yank him closer.

Then I thought of the dismissive way Talisyn had spoken of the girls who tried to get their attention.

I shoved Jaik away, and he stumbled, confusion flooding his face.

He was confused? I was the only one who had a right to be confused at the moment.

“What was that?” I demanded.

He took a step back, his expression suddenly cool, and shrugged.

“No,” I said. “You can't come along, ruin my handiwork and kiss me like that, and then think that we're not going to have a conversation afterwards.”

“I can do what I want.”

“In many ways,” I said, “and thanks for that reminder that you're a spoiled-rotten prince and not exactly lover material.”

His eyes widened, then his nostrils flared, his lips parting.

I slapped my hand over his beautiful mouth. “You can do what you want, but you can't do anything you want to me and then expect that I'm going to shut up and take it.”

He grabbed my wrist and yanked it away from his lips. I thought he might slip his boot around my foot and drop me to my knees like he had Lucien, he looked so furious. But he folded his hand around mine, his chest rising and falling. The two of us were tethered together, and I didn't understand why.

“I just wanted to kiss you,” he said.

“Why?”

His frown deepened. “Why?”

“Why? I'm nothing to you. I'm a maid.”

“I never said that.”

“You don’t have to.”

“Did someone say that to you?” He somehow looked even more angry. “That you were nothing?”

He didn’t need to be furious on my behalf. I was pretty sure there were more serious injustices I’d like to point his attention to, as the future king. My hurt feelings were nothing.

“All my life,” I assured him. “But I don’t believe I’m nothing. I believe I’m nothing *to you*. We barely know each other.”

“You would think you’d feel honored.” He caught my chin between two of his fingers and raised my face to his, studying me as if he were searching for my defect.

Unfortunately for him, I was a woman, not a cracked teacup waiting to be poured into.

“Honored?” I scoffed. “I doubt you could ever really appreciate my many wonderful qualities, because you’re always too busy *appreciating your own*.”

If he thought he could touch me so freely, I’d do the same. I reached up and booped his nose in time as I delivered each of those last three words, and he looked affronted, almost going cross-eyed looking at my finger.

The prince finally released me.

I brushed myself off, as if I were offended by his touch, as if his hands didn’t leave electricity tingling across my skin.

His jaw worked once. He was still staring at me. “Why are you so opinionated?”

“That it’s a ridiculous question to ask me right now. Do women really let you get away with this?”

“Have you been seeing Lucien?” he asked

Branok and Lynx gave me whiplash in the training yard, but Jaik could give it to me with conversation. “What now?”

“Arren thought he saw you go into his room.”

“You guys have really got to stop stalking me.” My voice came out breathless, and I wasn’t sure if it was with anger or far more confusing emotion.

“Stay away from Lucien,” he growled.

I stared at him, my lips falling open. “Are you jealous?”

He scoffed. “I’m merely looking out for you.”

“If you were looking out for me, Jaik, you wouldn’t be kissing me. Anyone can see you’re trouble for a lady.”

His bright eyes bored into mine. He licked his lips as if he were stalling on what to say. “But you’re no lady, are you, Honor?”

The words were insulting, but his tone was something else.

“I’m not your equal,” I reminded him.

As far as he could know, I was a servant and a squirrel shifter—beneath him in every way.

He leaned toward me as if he was going to kiss me again, but stopped with his lips a breath away from my ear. His voice was low and sure when he said, “I don’t care.”

Those three words took my breath away all over again.

“I’m better than you,” I said, before I could falter.

He straightened. “Mm. See you around, Honor.”

He turned, giving me a good look at how well his shirt hugged his broad shoulders, the lean taper of his back, as he stepped over my mop and made his way down the hall.

“You can’t make a mess and leave me to clean it up!” I called after him, knowing full well he could.

He turned, shoving his hands in his pockets. “Keep playing with Lucien and you’ll see what a mess nobles make with their toys and never clean up.”

I grabbed the mop and shoved it furiously across the floor, pretending it was the prince’s face. “Are you going to pretend to me that I’m *not* a toy? That my primary value to you now isn’t the fact that Lucien wants me as well?”

His eyes blazed with sudden fury.

I should not have said that.

“You don’t know nearly as much as you think you do,
Honor Hannaby.”

Then he was gone.

That was probably the one thing he’d said in the whole
confusing mess that was true.



CHAPTER
TWENTY-ONE

H*onor*

THE NEXT MORNING, I COULDN'T HELP BUT FEEL A STIR OF excitement when Caldren walked into the training yard. But I schooled my face to be dispassionate. I was Lucien now.

And Arren was always watching me, his gaze narrow. I turned and flashed him a bright smile, and he stared at me, dead-eyed as always.

“What should we do today?” One of the golden twins asked as we were dismissed to our classes and the six of us headed down the steps toward the amphitheater.

“I can't imagine. I don't have any ideas at all,” the other twin answered.

Damyn glared at them both; I wondered if he could tell which asshole was which. “Cut it out, you two. It's time to train. Not continue your little vengeance game.”

“It's all good,” I said breezily. “Jaik's right; he and Arren and Talisyn are probably all too powerful for me to face down right now. I'll partner with the twins as long as they'll play with me.” I smiled at them cheerfully, pretending as if I hadn't just purposefully called them both weak.

As they glared at me, I studied their angry faces, trying to pick them apart. But they looked so alike when they were mad, it was almost impossible. And they always seemed to be mad.

Talisyn whistled. “You really do have a death wish don't you?”

“Deathwish sounds a little dramatic. I just like to keep things interesting. And you guys definitely keep things

interesting.”

“Branok, you this time,” Jaik ordered.

Damyn glanced at me and I turned my bright smile on him. He gave me a skeptical look as if he was worried I wasn't going to survive the week. But he shrugged. “Your call, Lucien.”

Branok and I paired off and faced each other. There was a wicked glint in Branok's gaze and despite my bold talk, that gleam always made me feel a stutter of apprehension.

“As dragons,” Damyn said, maybe hoping that would help level the playing field.

Branok smiled, a smile that promised bad things for me, the last thing I saw before the scales swallowed his face and suddenly he transformed into a monster ten times my size.

I hurried to shift too, barely feeling the ripple of pain this time. By the time my four paws hit the earth, he was already diving at me.

His jaw struck my shoulder, his mouth twisting and angling for a bite to the throat, but I turned my horns, trying to jam them down his throat. He struck at my wings instead, and I snarled at him, taking flight just long enough to get out of his reach.

He clung to me with his claws before he fell toward the earth, but I didn't have time to catch my breath before he bounded off the ground and tore into my exposed stomach before I could catch myself. He ripped away a bloody mouthful of flesh, tossing it to one side, and I kicked out at him desperately with my clawed feet.

We fought back and forth, snarling and snapping at each other. When I couldn't take his bites to my shoulders and chest anymore, and he'd gotten a mouthful of flank, almost tearing it away from me, I ran.

I galloped away from him, felt the wind tease at my wings, then soared into the air. He was right behind me, a breath of fire licking at my back legs. Then he tackled me in midair,

both of us flapping our wings and snarling as we locked together, angling to bite.

As the two of us tumbled through the air, I caught glimpses of nervous students running out of the way. There were no other shifters as big as the dragons. We were several times the size of the bears, so it was no wonder they ran.

I couldn't entirely give the fight my full attention either because I had to remind myself to transform back into Lucien, not Honor.

As the two of us finally crashed landed, I shifted back into Lucien.

I lay there on the ground, bleeding profusely from my torn open shoulder and stomach and chest, as the physician hurried over.

"Wow, you almost lasted a minute this time," Jaik said helpfully.

I groaned in response. That had felt like a lot more than a minute. That had felt like a decent chunk of a lifetime that I'd spent trying to avoid Branok's fury and to pin him down myself. He was impossibly fast.

The physician came over. He winced sympathetically as he looked at my wounds, his hands pressing against them as deep red magic radiated between his fingers.

I glanced at Jaik curiously, knowing that he was the one who called all the shots.

He told me, "I figured it would be more efficient this way."

"Good idea." Pain surged through my body as the wounds healed over. The physician offered me a hand up, and I took it, my clothes wet and clinging to me with my own blood even though the damage beneath was healed.

"Thank you," I told the physician, pulling my hand away from him. I ran my hand over my side, feeling a ghost of a wound that was all in my head.

"All right." I turned toward the golden twins. "Well, let's try this again."

“I should really take you to the infirmary,” the physician said. “Just because it feels like you’re healed doesn’t mean you are completely. That kind of damage still takes a toll on your body. It’s exhausting.”

“I’ll be fine,” I said. “I’m not afraid of a little hard work.”

After all, I did the royals’ laundry.

“I have to give this to you,” Jaik said. “You’re stupid. But you’ve got grit.”

“Compliment?” I asked him in wonder.

“I wouldn’t exactly call it a compliment. More like a grudging admission.”

“I’ll take it,” I answered.

Even Branok had to eventually get tired of kicking my ass.



LATER THAT DAY, I SKIPPED LUNCH TO FRANTICALLY ATTEND to my chores. I was rolling up the rugs in an unused drawing room so I could mop when Calla slipped into the room with me.

“What are you doing here?” I asked.

“Oh, I would never miss a party,” she said.

“A cleaning party?”

“It’s the only kind of party I get invited to.”

I could have hugged her. But when I went to try, she batted me away with a scrub brush.

“We have a lot of work to do, I’m not skipping lunch just so that you can get fired.”

The two of us were frantically scrubbing and cleaning when she added, “I got the gossip, about what happened between Lucien and Alina?”

“What is it?” I asked, my heart sinking as I was almost scared to know.

“I guess they had a secret relationship. And from the sounds of it, he dishonored her.”

“What exactly does that mean?” I paused, clutching the mop so tightly my knuckles ached. “There’s a big difference if it was consensual or if it wasn’t.”

Gods, if Lucien had raped Alina... I’d never be able to fix that.

Although the thought made me more comfortable taking his place while he rotted in an unmarked grave.

“You know how some people are. I don’t think it really matters to her family. They feel that Lucien violated her honor. Their family has very old-fashioned values.”

I snorted. “Branok is an absolute man whore and a hazard to the cleanliness of any flat surface at the academy.”

“Old-fashioned values are really just for girls. You know that.”

She started to mop, leaving me to stew. I shoved the mop back and forth, fuming at how much more frustrating this turn of events was. I couldn’t fault Lynx and Branok for wanting to beat Lucien half to death, just for Jaik to have me revived. But it was also very hard to forgive people who mashed my body each day like they were going to serve me over toast.

Calla sang cheerfully as she worked. After a few moments, I joined her. The two of us sang a bawdy sea chanty she’d learned from her parents before their ship went down forever.

Arren walked through the hallway, paused with his boots making a mess of the damp floor as he glanced at me curiously. “So you do something around here besides stalk the royals.”

“And you do something around here besides sulk?” I asked brightly. “I thought you didn’t talk.”

“I don’t usually waste my breath on people who don’t listen.”

“And what would you say if I were listening to you?”

“I’d tell you to stay away from my brothers,” he growled. Then he turned and stalked out.

Why did he think that I was so dangerous to them? A little flirting never killed anyone.

Calla’s curious smile was bright with delight.

“What?” I demanded, some of the irritation I felt whenever I was face-to-face with Arren spilling into my tone. Even though Calla never deserved anything but sweetness and light reflected back at her, given that she was sweetness and light herself.

“Why is Prince Arren flirting with you?”

I snorted. “That wasn’t flirting. That was an intimidation attempt.”

“Oh, it definitely was, even if he doesn’t know it yet, it just wasn’t *good* flirting.” She ducked her head, failing to hide her smile. “But we can’t all be our best selves all the time. I guess you don’t bring out the best in the dragon royals.”

That was an understatement.

I wasn’t sure they brought out my best either.



CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

H*onor*

THAT AFTERNOON, WE ASSEMBLED IN THE AMPHITHEATER TO begin practicing the maneuvers we'd use in the field in small groups. I had missed this part before when I was recovering in the infirmary.

“Ready to get bloody while the dragon shifters soar overhead?” A wolf shifter with mussed russet hair grumbled to his companion.

The man he was standing with shushed him, glancing toward me.

I pretended I hadn't heard him and pushed through the crowd, joining the other dragon shifters waiting on the hard-packed sand. Half the school stood on the other side, ready to pretend to be the opposition.

Jaik glared at me, which was nothing new. “Where've you been? You missed lunch.”

“Sorry,” I said, my tone making it clear I wasn't sorry at all. “I thought I wasn't allowed at lunch.”

“You're allowed wherever I tell you to be,” he said.

“Well, you threw me out of dinner the other day, so you'll have to forgive me for finding other options rather than dealing with your capricious ass.”

“I don't have to forgive you. Where were you during breakfast?”

I glanced forward, where the instructors were making sure everyone was in position. It took a long time to form two

mock armies, and in the meantime, I had to suffer through Jaik. “I was busy.”

“Meals are one of your assigned places to be at the academy. You’re going to ask my permission if you want to skip a meal.”

“You’re not one of my teachers,” I pointed out

“You need to gain some muscle anyway. You can’t do that without eating. And eventually when you and Lynx and Branok get your heads together, we are going to be a team. You need to pull your weight, and that means you need to eat.”

“Why, Jaik, I didn’t know you had such a maternal side,” I answered.

He crossed his arms over his powerful chest, looking down at me with that dangerous gleam in his eyes that should’ve warned me off. Instead, it made me shift impatiently, my nipples pebbling against the soft material of my tunic.

“Keep being a smartass. See where it gets you in life.”

“So far, it’s gotten me here.”

“Did they knock the sense out of your head in that dungeon?”

Gods, once again, I was not doing a good job of acting like Lucien. Apparently Lucien was boring as fuck.

I could handle pretending to be Lucien in most regards, including the part where I got knocked on my ass a thousand times. But giving up my sarcasm? That was never gonna happen.

“You’ll be at breakfast, lunch and dinner from now on,” Jaik said.

“And you’ll let me eat?”

“If having food in your mouth keeps you from running it, I’m definitely for you eating.” His gaze focused on the instructors as they began the briefing.

He seemed so bored every other time with our training and, watching the intent expression on his face, I wondered

what made the difference now.

Soon we were staging for the training exercise. I was assigned to stay with Jaik in the frontline when we were all assembled for battle, but I knew we wouldn't stay there long. We'd charge the enemy, send an initial blast of flames their way, then take to the skies strafing our enemies with fire. That meant that we'd have to soar over the enemy's side to keep from burning our own side, while the wolf shifters, panthers and bears held the main lines and did the actual hand to hand fighting.

Maybe that wasn't very fair. But it was true that we had unique abilities no one else had. And in time, we—well probably not me—the other dragon shifters would command the battle from the air as well, relaying telepathic communications back to a dragon in human form on the ground, who'd be able to issue orders. I twisted my neck back to see Lynx standing at the rear of our phalanx, the sun silhouetting his figure in his dark uniform and shining off his golden hair.

It didn't sit right for me, the idea of being so high above the devastation when our friends would be dying below. Not when we had to fight the Scourge for real.

“They're not exactly our friends,” Jaik said.

My stomach tightened. I had once again, muttered something out loud. Maybe it was better this time. I wasn't talking about how hot he was. But maybe it was worse, because Lucien probably would've looked down on all these other shifters like the royals.

“This is how things have to be,” Jaik said. “You can't see them as friends. You can't see them as equals. Because if you do, you won't be able to send them to die.”

“That's so cold.”

“You know what's cold?” he said. “Letting the Scourge invade our cities, letting innocent men, women and children die because you don't want to do what has to be done. Because it seems unpleasant to you.”

Talisyn gave me a strange look. “I never thought you were that principled.”

“Maybe my time in the dungeon altered my personality for the better.” I needed to find some excuse for why I was so different from Lucien now; maybe I could sell that one. “Maybe I’m not the same man that you knew before.”

Branok snorted. “That would be nice.”

We apparently had plenty of time to chit chat as we waited for the rest of the legions to form up behind us. Just what I needed.

“Would it be?” I asked Branok. “Because it seems like you really need me to stay the same person so that you can feel good about taking your rage issues out on me every day.

“I don’t have rage issues. I just despise you.”

“Branok, Talisyn, Arren, take the other side,” Jaik ordered. “Lucien and Lynx and I have it under control over here.”

Branok glanced at me, said, “Good luck, Jaik,” then sauntered toward the other side. Talisyn slapped his shoulder, said something to him, and Branok kept moving toward the back of the other side, taking the same position as Lynx.

Arren and Talisyn stopped and faced us from across the field. Talisyn threw me a mock salute.

The instructors called something. A shout went up from the students clustered behind us, and I jumped at the noise and ferocity, even before it was echoed by the other side.

Jaik gave me a strange look. “Steady there, Luce.”

My heart pounded in my chest. Jaik surged forward, running toward the ‘enemy’ on the other side, and I followed a step later. He bounded into a jump, transforming in mid-air, and I followed more clumsily.

The moment all six of us shifted, my head filled with noise—the chatter of six dragons, relaying information to each other and orders to Branok and Lynx on the ground. At first, I couldn’t tell their voices apart.

Then I realized that part of the noise was softer, quieter. I couldn't pick out the thread of their individual voices from the tangle of thoughts, but that's what they were; not the words they spoke to each other, but the beat of their thoughts.

Lynx's headaches... hope he can handle the position. He hates himself when he...

...Wolves are so fucking stupid. Sentient rugs might fight smarter...

...Gods, I'm tired. I hope these fucking nightmares...

This isn't going to prepare them to face the Scourge. But then, nothing can. A memory rose—not mine—of a terrifying face, a gaping maw, and pain tearing through a chest...

The bonds between us all were stronger than I'd been prepared for, and I could barely keep my wings flapping and my head up as I tried to put my shields up, tried to protect myself from the rattle of their thoughts that was even louder than the roar of combat.

What the hell are the wolf shifters doing? It was Jaik's voice, and at first, I thought he was talking to me before I realized I could barely hear it, unlike when he barked orders. Caldren's got to get them straightened out. The Scourge would see that open flank.

He could easily imagine the Scourge tearing through the students, and I realized with a jolt that he was remembering something he'd seen before, too, chaos on the battleground.

Unlike Jaik's callous words earlier, he worried about everyone. Down below, students were fighting each other mercilessly, and his gaze swept to the healers at the side, hoping there were enough to make sure any injuries weren't permanent. *They don't care about losing some of us in training as long as we're ready for the war. None of us really matter.* It was a bitter, irritated thought.

Jaik has feelings. Who knew?

His head snapped in my direction. Had he heard me?

As we soared over the field, setting training dummies on fire and strafing along lines laid down with paint to represent Scourge, trying not to hit any of our friends, the older members of the Order of Dragons stood by ready to shield if one of us slipped and blasted fire in the wrong direction.

But the instructors won't be here to shield when we face the Scourge for real. Jaik's voice again, an accidental murmur in my ear. He was watching Tal and Arren circle toward our own side, swooping low and breathing blasts of fire. Some shifters, in the lead of their line, shied back as if they'd felt the heat of the flames. *If Talisyn or the twins accidentally light up their own side, they'll pretend they're fine, but they'll never get over it if they make a mistake.*

Then, more dryly, *and neither will the shifters.* But there was a memory there too of a group of bears going up in flames, and panic crawled up my throat before the memory was gone.

"Lucien, dive," Jaik ordered in my mind. "Light up the line. Try not to embarrass us."

I would've been annoyed if I hadn't heard the thoughts leaking underneath, the way he kept close to my side to make sure I didn't make a mistake as I breathed out fire along the line. He kept a watchful eye on the students beyond. *That's it, Lucien. Yes!*

By the time the mock battle was over, I was exhausted. I stumbled as I came out of the air, transforming into a human, and Jaik raised an eyebrow at me, then turned toward the others dismissively.

But now I knew how much the sarcastic bastard carried the weight of the world on his shoulders, and how much he'd seen already. It made me soften toward him.

Jaik wouldn't exactly appreciate any discussion of his weakness, even if it was something that was really a strength. After all, he made it pretty clear how he thought we should all feel, even if his internal thoughts made him more of a gooey fresh-out-of-the-oven cookie.

Talisyn was the one I'd connected with the most, and so I said to him quietly, "And here I thought Jaik was the meanest bastard of you all. I guess that honor goes to Arren. Or maybe the golden twins. I'm still holding some grudges against them."

He gave me a strange look. "What brought you to that conclusion?"

"The way he thinks about things," I answered.

Talisyn looked at me in confusion. Maybe no one else had heard Jaik's leaked thoughts.

"Almost competent work, Lucien." Jaik patted my shoulder, his hand heavy. "Maybe we'll make a man out of you."

"Yeah. I highly doubt that you can teach me that," I shot back. Good luck. I was never going to be a man.

Now we had talons on the ground, he was back to being an asshole.

But I was going to be haunted by the other side of Jaik I'd glimpsed.



CHAPTER
TWENTY-THREE

H*onor*

THAT EVENING, I PRETENDED TO GO TO SLEEP EARLY IN MY room with Calla, only to slip down dimly lit halls and stairs to Lucien's room. Maybe it wouldn't be such a bad thing if it seemed like Lucien and I were sleeping together; at least it would give an explanation for why I was always in his room.

That night when I walked into my room, Caldren was there already, lounging on my bed.

Seeing him gave me a jolt of adrenaline before I crossed my arms and glared at him. "We really need to work on your social skills. I'm happy to see you. But a girl needs a certain amount of privacy."

"You have bigger concerns than privacy," he told me, propping himself up on my pillows. His hair was mussed, the first few buttons on his tunic undone, and he seemed more relaxed with me than he ever did addressing students in the arena.

"I do," I said, "and I'm not sure that you're actually helping me with all of them. But I still need some time to deal with my issues in peace, and I never get any peace, thanks to you and the dragon royals."

He looked pained at being lumped in with them. I didn't want to press his past. I hated that his parents and friends had hurt him. The more we dipped into emotional topics, the more dangerous our relationship felt. I didn't want him to stop coming to my room, but I should.

"Why are you so late anyway? I've been waiting here for ages."

“So sorry to inconvenience you,” I answered. “Maybe you should let me know when you’re stalking me so that I can make myself more available.”

But despite the banter between us, there was no real heat in any of our words. If he wanted to talk, he had to sneak into my room. But I worried about how strange it might seem, Caldren making regular visits to Lucien’s room.

“I had to start the night in Calla’s room. Now people think that I’m slipping out to see Lucien like some kind of... Well, you know.”

“You’ve got to quit working as a maid. It’s hard enough for you to be a believable Lucien without both Honor and Lucien darting through the halls.”

“I’m aware. Did you know that Lucien was an insufferable bore? Apparently, he was the least interesting person on the planet.”

“I’m sorry there wasn’t a more convenient identity for you to assume.”

“I can’t quit my job. Believe me, I’m not exactly enjoying this either. Just one of these jobs was more than enough. The two together are going to drive me actually insane.”

He wisely didn’t comment on how I probably already was. “Well, why don’t you just quit? Your room and board at the academy is free. It’s not like you need anything.”

“I don’t need anything, but my sister does.”

“Your sister.” He sounded surprised; did the man think I’d hatched from an egg?

“We all have a family, strange as that is to think about. My stepmother is terrible, and I have to get Hanna out of that house. The only way for me to do that is to stay on my stepmother’s good side, since she’s still Hanna’s guardian, and to pay the tuition for her boarding school.”

“Is that the school you went to? Posselbaum?”

“Look at you, you stalker.” I sank onto the edge of the bed, and his body dipped toward mine. I instantly regretted moving

so close to him as butterflies rose in my chest. “You know just everything about me, don’t you?”

“Not everything. There are many ways you’re a mystery to me.” His voice was smooth, calm. He didn’t seem to feel undone by our proximity.

I didn’t want to talk about her situation with anyone. It felt too vulnerable. But he had shown me vulnerability earlier when he told me about his family. It felt like a betrayal to take his truths and refuse to share mine.

“I’d saved up the money for Hanna’s tuition,” I admitted. “My stepmother stole it from me. Now, I don’t know how I’m going to get the tuition in time. I had to drop out. I don’t want that for my sister. I want her to have a better chance to have a better life.”

His gaze softened, and he sat up in bed, one arm propped on his knee. I bit my lower lip as more nerves winged through me, as he asked, “Don’t you have a better chance for a better life right now?”

“Do I?” I tugged absently on the end of my braid. “I can’t be myself. I have to be Lucien. And even I don’t like that guy.”

He let out a laugh. “Yeah, I can’t imagine you would right now.”

“I asked Damyn to be paid for this farce, but he just laughed at me. What about Lucien’s fortune? Surely he must have inherited some money.”

He looked hesitant. “Well...it was seized by the crown. But I’ll see what I can do, Honor.”

“Thank you,” I said. “Why did you come here, anyway? It wasn’t to hear my sob story, I’m sure.”

“I just wanted to check on you. You took a lot of damage today.”

“I do every day.” I studied his face, his kind, gray eyes. He was lying to me, or at least concealing the truth. “You shouldn’t take the risk.”

“You’re right,” he said.

I liked Caldren, but I didn’t like that he was lying to me.



CHAPTER
TWENTY-FOUR

H*onor*

THE NEXT DAY, I RAN TO CLEAN THE GUYS' ROOMS ON MY lunch break. It was my turn in the rotation. I was beginning to miss the old days of laughing with my friends in between scrubbing floors and carrying foul-smelling laundry.

I was snapping clean sheets over the mattress when the door flew open, and Jaik stormed in. He'd stayed after drills in the training yard to practice extra with Arren, who'd been cursing at him when I left. Jaik was in an exceptionally bad mood today, and he'd been relentless in the yard.

I ignored him as he dropped his sword in the corner of the room, but even with my back to him, I could feel his gaze. A blush of warmth swept up my throat, as if I could feel his warm hand sliding across my skin.

I'd pushed Jaik away when he first kissed me. While I'd been stupid enough to enjoy his attention, he and the other royals despised the girls that hung all over them. I didn't need Jaik's kisses, not when they came with his contempt.

"What are you doing with Lucien?" he demanded.

I turned toward him in disbelief. I couldn't deal with fitted sheets *and* possessive assholes.

My first impulse was to tell him that I wasn't doing anything with Lucien. I wanted to keep as much distance between Honor and Lucien as I could, my life was already way too complicated.

Instead I raised my chin and said, "That's none of your business."

“He already ruined Alina’s life. I’m not going to let him ruin yours.”

I scoffed; Gods save me and all women from masculine bullshit masquerading as protection. “Oh, because that’s your department. You and Talisyn using me for your amusement before you cast me off.”

He scoffed right back, but he didn’t even try to argue with me. At least the monster was self-aware.

I leveled a finger at him from across the bed. “You guys are a bunch of womanizing pricks who don’t treat girls with respect, and I have no interest in being one of those girls.”

“You think Lucien will treat you with respect.”

“I think I know what I’m getting into when it comes to Lucien,” I said, even though that was an absolute lie.

So far, trying to be Lucien had overwhelmed me. And it had led to a whole lot of shattered bones, bruises, and blood, even if the physician was quick to heal me afterward. I was tired of taking hits just because Lucien’s face was apparently so very punchable.

Jaik leaned against the wall, his muscles tight despite the casual pose. “I don’t think you do.”

“Well, I don’t see why you care.”

“Lucien doesn’t deserve pretty things,” Jaik said, his tone rough and savage as his gaze roamed my face.

I let out a huff of a laugh. “That’s not much of a compliment. You just sound like a possessive prick.”

“I’m not complimenting you. I’m stating a fact. You’re a very pretty thing.”

“I’m not a *thing* at all. That’s exactly why I’m not interested in you, Jaik.”

I expected the rejection would hurt, but instead, his face softened, some of the heat fading from his eyes. “Now you’re lying. I know you want me, not Lucien.”

“I do not want you. Especially not when you don’t want me, not truly, you just want to take something away from Lucien.” I threw the pillows into place, resisting the temptation to throw one at Jaik.

I was too mature to throw things at him. Also, pillows wouldn’t do enough damage.

“That’s not true, taking something away from Lucien is a bonus. I want you.”

“Why?” The word was supposed to come out demanding, but instead it came out too soft. There was something about Jaik’s heated gaze that left me feeling a little bit undone.

“Fine,” I said. “You know what, I do want you, but I don’t want all your bullshit, Jaik. It’s obvious how you treat women. The second I do anything with you, you’re going to get bored with me, and that’s going to be the end of that.”

His brows drew together in an expression of confusion that was, unfortunately, just as handsome as ever. “Do you want a *relationship* with me?” he asked as if it were ridiculous.

He was right. It was ridiculous. The noble and the maid—it was never going to happen—but it still bothered me. “No, I don’t want a relationship with you.”

“But you want me. For a moment, at least.” His eyes smoldered as they met mine. “Why don’t you take what you want then, Honor?”

I stared at him, refusing to answer.

I wanted more than a moment.

The truth of it hammered in my chest, so loud that my pulse hummed through my ears. I didn’t dare let him see that desire.

He took a step toward me, looking as if he didn’t know what to do with his hands, before he folded his arms across his chest. “Tell me you want me to go, and I will.”

When I didn’t answer, his face tightened with frustration. He raked a hand through his hair. “First time I’ve ever heard you be silent, Honor. You usually have so much to say.”

“Well, I don’t know right now. I’m trying to make sense of all the bullshit you’ve sent my way in the last few minutes.”

“You can reject me, but you can’t say it’s bullshit. We can’t have a relationship, no.” His voice dropped, became raw, when he added, “But I feel drawn to you, and I know I shouldn’t. You’re like a fucking addiction. And you know what? You’re right. I hope I don’t feel it anymore. I hope I fuck you out of my system and then you’re just as boring as all the other girls.”

Fury washed through me, hotter than lust. “You are such an—”

“But I’m afraid I won’t.” His words were clipped.

That was the one thing he said that I believed. He was really terrified he might fall for me.

I threw my arms out in exasperation. “Maybe you should figure out your shit before you come in here and try to kiss me.”

There it was. I was yelling at the heir to the throne. Head was right, I *was* an uppity orphan.

“Who said I’m trying to kiss you?” he demanded.

“You’re looking at me like you want to kiss me.”

“I’m not sure if I want to kiss you, or spank your stuck-up mouthy ass.”

“I think we’re going to have to get to know each other a little better before I consider letting you do that,” I said, surprising Jaik and surprising myself at the same time.

His eyes widened, and I was stunned I’d sounded so confident.

I had a head full of dirty, erotic dreams from the books I’d read. But I’d never had sex with anyone. And Jaik was a terrible starter lover. He had the look of a man who’d ruin me.

And yet, I couldn’t help the way I felt drawn to him. Heat seemed to smolder between us.

And I knew from being in his head that he wasn't as bad as he seemed. He shielded his decent and caring side.

He chewed his lower lip as if he was going to make some crazy offer, but all he said was, "We could get to know each other."

Actually, maybe to him that was crazy. I was just a squirrel-shifter servant after all, for all he knew. Furniture. Background noise.

"I thought we agreed you'd be bored with me after we had sex." I lifted my chin, my voice coming out clipped.

He regarded me skeptically, his posture relaxed again, one hand stuffed in his pocket. I hoped it was an act. "I guess we'll have to see how it plays out."

"It's always a game with you dragon royals, isn't it?"

"Yes," he admitted freely. "Everything is a game. We spend our childhoods playing terrible, dangerous games—brutal games—preparing for our lives as dragon royals. It's hard to get out of the habit."

He walked slowly around the bed, giving me every chance to run. "But this game will be a little more fun for both of us."

I wasn't sure if that were true. Falling in love with Jaik seemed like it would be its own dangerous, brutal game. I wasn't sure my heart could handle him.

But my body, that was another story. I had told Calla that I'd love to have sex with the Dragon Prince, as long as he kept his beautiful mouth shut. Maybe I *could* fuck him out of my system. *And even if it doesn't work, it'll still be fun.*

I could have what I wanted for today. I could pretend. I could accept that any tender moment with him would be as fragile as snow melting in the sun.

Jaik was watching me, his brows arched in question. I'd never seen the prince smile, but there was the faintest smug lift to his lips, as if he might consider it. The expression made me ache to be the one who made him grin.

“What?” I demanded. “You’re being too quiet. You’re usually either ordering me around or arguing with me. No, I’m being unfair. Sometimes you insult me.”

The way he was looking at me made me self-conscious, and I brushed stray hair off my forehead. His amber eyes were arresting, lit from within as if with flame. It was hard to look away from the hard planes of his face. He was beautiful in a roughly rugged way, as if the dragons were special in every way, even in their human form.

He grabbed my face, cupping my jaw in both his palms and pressed his lips to mine. The kiss was so sudden that it shocked me, and I was stunned all over again by the softness of his lips against mine, underneath the firmness of his mouth.

His grip was gentle on my jaw despite the aggression of the way he’d just grabbed me. I was lost in that touch, then finally surfaced back to sense. The dragon prince was kissing me and I shouldn’t like it—or him—definitely not as much as I did. He should be a conquest, a story, if I had to be his secret.

I put my hands against his hard chest and pushed him away.

“Have you lost your damned mind?” I sputtered, trying to ignore the way heat was flooding my body, pulling between my thighs.

There was something between Jaik and me that felt intense and real. Even if it was just intense real *lust*.

And maybe I shouldn’t stop him. Maybe I shouldn’t stop myself. He stared at me, a wounded look on his face. Was he wounded because he really cared about me kissing him back? Or was he wounded because it was the first time in his ridiculous life that a woman had ever rejected him?

I don’t care.

I grabbed his shirt, yanking him close to me, and tilted onto my tiptoes to plant my own kiss against his lips. For a second, he resisted, his mouth hard and unyielding, as if he was still mad at me. But I kept kissing him anyway, just as insistent as he had been with me.

His lower lip was soft and plush. Then he grabbed me, his hands stroking up my thighs to settle on my hips. When he yanked my hips against his, his hard length pushed against my thigh.

He kissed me back just as hard, his lips teasing against mine until the tip of his tongue pressed insistently against the seam between my lips.

I pulled away. "I don't have a lot of kissing experience." I didn't want to confess that, but it was better than seeming as if I were just bad at it.

He frowned down at me. "How lacking, exactly, are you in kissing experience?"

I was not about to answer that. I glared up at him.

"So you haven't been having sex with Lucien?" he mused, sounding pleased.

"No, No, I haven't. Although I've thought about it." Ever since Talisyn's hands on my body during the library, I'd thought I could love myself a little more.

He frowned down at me. "What about Caldren?"

"Why are you such a possessive bastard?"

"Well, we all have our things." He tucked a strand of hair back behind my ear, his touch lingering on my cheek. "And you think I'm cute anyway."

Thinking that Jaik was cute was like thinking some kind of dangerous, beautiful wild animal was cute. Dragons are many things. Gorgeous, splendid. But definitely not cute.

"I just wanted you to know that I might not be very good at kissing." I sounded as exasperated as I felt. "I don't want to talk about it. I just didn't want you to think I was bad at it, or if I was bad, that I would *always* be bad..."

"Let me see." His hand cupped my jaw, and he kissed me again. This time was softer, slower. His lips caressed mine like a test, like yet another dragon game.

My lips parted against his and his tongue stroked confidently into my mouth. The heat of his mouth, the way his tongue danced against mine, reminded me of what it would be like for the other parts of our body to combine, and lust ached between my thighs.

He kissed my lower lip before he straightened. One soft, sweet little kiss. Somehow it was the tenderness that left me most breathless.

“That actually wasn’t as terrible as I would have thought,” he mused.

I’d always known he’d ruin the fun of his body by opening his mouth. “I wasn’t asking you to judge me.”

“Just one of the many services I provide.”

“I shouldn’t have sex with you. You’re only going to make me crazy. And then you’re going to get bored with me.”

“But you don’t care about that anyway,” he said.

“No, I guess I don’t.”

His lips curled up at the corners, and my heart lurched. I’d do anything to turn that faint amusement into a genuine smile.

He tilted my face up to his with one finger, his gaze intent as if he wanted to make sure I truly heard every word. “Honor, I like the way you kiss. And I like kissing you.”

It was so unexpectedly disarming. He must have seen that in my face, because he leaned forward and kissed me again. This time, I felt more confident, and my hands slid up his chest to his shoulders. He rested his hands on top of mine, his fingers curling around mine. I angled my face to his, learning his rhythm, the way he alternated between several soft, shallow kisses and deeper ones, his tongue teasing against mine.

As the two of us traded kisses, he walked me back. I moved with his body, feeling how tall and commanding he was, the way his legs slid between my thighs, his hands confident on my hips as he steered me backward. My shoulder

blades hit the wall as his lips plundered mine, his body lighting mine on fire.

I had one more chance to come to my senses. But I didn't. Maybe I would never come to my senses where Jaik was concerned.

My lips felt bee-stung, and I couldn't imagine stopping. I wanted more of him.

He'll just be a story to tell if I ever find a way back to my normal life.

And other lies I tell myself...

He hitched my skirt up, his hands caressing my hip through the fabric, then finding my bare thigh—I jerked in response, flooded with sensation as his bare skin met mine—and then I didn't want to think about my own lies anymore.

I gripped his hard length through his pants, trying to seem more confident than I was, and he yanked at my dress, groaning in exasperation at the buttons. He wrenched the material in his impatience.

“Careful,” I warned, pushing his hands away. “I’m not rich like you are. I can’t afford to replace this.”

I began pulling off the dress myself; I always left a few buttons undone, looking careless, so I could change quickly. As I started to pull the bodice down, I realized he had paused.

“Honor. Are you sure you want to do this?” He sounded calm and reasoned, and that didn't seem fair when I was half-naked.

I frowned up at him. Suddenly I felt ridiculous, standing in front of the heir to the kingdom half-bare, while he looked untouched. “You seemed really sure a minute ago. What’s made you stop now?”

He leaned against the wall, looking entirely too comfortable with the conversation. “I’m not entirely sure it’s fair, given the differences between the two of us.”

“Why, do you mean the part where you’re rich and powerful and royal-blooded and I’m a housemaid?” My voice

came out hot.

“Yes.” He remained calm and reasoned and an absolute bastard.

“I didn’t realize you had ethics when it came to your dick.”

It was the second time a wounded look had passed over his face. “I’ve never had sex with someone from the lower classes before.”

“Even though I’m sure they’d be lining up just like the noble girls.”

“Yes, even so,” he said dryly.

“I know what I want right now. I know what the consequences are. I know that nothing is going to come from this. And I don’t want anything from you but a good fucking.” I wrapped my hand around the hard length in his pants.

His eyes narrowed in response, his breath giving.

I wasn’t sure if I was telling him the truth or not. But it sounded good. And I didn’t want the space that had suddenly grown between us. I was being cock-blocked by the prince’s newly discovered ethics.

I was starting to think I hadn’t understood the princes. The arrogant way they presented themselves to the world wasn’t exactly the truth. They were assholes, but they were *complicated* assholes.

“If you’re sure,” he said, and before I could say anything else, he kissed me as if he were going to devour me.

His hand threaded through my hair, holding my face steady as his lips caressed mine. He nipped my lower lip, and when my lips opened in shock, his tongue plunged into mine. He kissed me as if he couldn’t get enough of me.

And all the while his hands were busy tearing off my clothes. He was just as adept with women’s buttons as I’d expected, but it was nice that he’d felt so fevered for me for a moment that he’d been stymied by my ridiculous clothing.

He studied every inch of my skin as he worked the dress down over my hips, exposing my small breasts, my nipples sharp as pink pebbles. I stared at his face, wondering what was going on behind his cool demeanor.

He looked back to my face, his hands pausing on my hips. Concern seemed to flicker in those amber eyes. “Your first time should be special.”

I regarded him skeptically. He’d gotten me down to my panties only to pause. “Don’t quit on me again.”

“No, I’m not. I just have to make it a time that you won’t regret too much.”

“You’re really selling your skills here, buddy.”

The dress whispered down my legs. He lifted me abruptly from the pool of fabric, throwing me over his shoulder. I let out a gasp of surprise, finding myself with his arm pinning my legs to his chest, his hard shoulder digging into my stomach.

He laid me on his bed, leaned over and kissed my lips. When he pulled away, I came with him, my hands twined around his neck.

He slipped out of my grip and pressed my knees open, already yanking my panties off. There was a distinct tearing sound of fabric. He said quickly, “I’ll buy you another pair.”

“You knew I was about to scold you.”

“You can try. I’m not going to listen.” He thrust the panties into his pocket.

I gazed up at him suspiciously. “What are you going to do with those?”

“You don’t want to know.”

“Do you keep souvenirs from all your conquests?”

“Maybe.”

I let it go; I could easily steal my panties back when I was cleaning his room. I’d seen his thighs shaking from orgasm as he fucked a girl in the library; I’d chosen to enter his depraved little world despite all due warning.

He quickly skimmed off his tunic and trousers. I watched him appreciatively as his body emerged from what clothing had covered it. Then he pushed my knees apart, grabbed me around the thighs and yanked me toward him.

As his lips dipped lower and closer to my pussy, I squirmed in confusion. “What are you doing?”

“What I want, as always, and what I want is to taste you.”

I’d never had a man put his mouth there. But he seemed certain, as always, and I wanted so very badly to experience it for the first time, so I nodded, trying to lie down, trying to relax.

He licked my pussy, his tongue tracing along the seam between my thighs. The sensation was so strong, so intense, that my hips bucked, but his arms tightened around my thighs, his shoulders and biceps rippling with the motion.

He was gorgeous to watch, even if he hadn’t set to working his mouth against my pussy until I was beginning to lose my mind. Then he backed off, his gaze watchful on mine, changing the pace and beginning to bring two fingers up to tease against my clit until he pushed his fingers into me over and over again.

“How do I taste?” I managed to ask in a voice that came out ragged in a way that was entirely unfamiliar to me. I’d never sounded so weak before.

But if this was what happened when I let myself be vulnerable, I might be tempted to do it again. It was an unfamiliar feeling for me, being held by a man, being at his mercy as he ravaged me with his tongue. And there was something about it that felt risky and thrilling and more wonderful than I’d ever experienced before.

I clenched around his tongue. I’d never experienced a feeling that intense, but it just kept going, his tongue stroking into my pussy, his thumb massaging my clit furiously. And unlike with Talisyn in the library, I could give full voice to what I was feeling. Somehow, my moans seemed to make the sensations even more intense.

My hips struggled to buck, but his powerful arms held me still. His bright eyes gauged me as my channel squeezed over and over again, yet he kept on going until I was sagging onto the bed.

He looked self-satisfied as he kissed my inner thigh. “I like the little noises you make.”

“Are they little? Because it feels to me like I should have just woken up the whole academy.”

He pressed a kiss to my core and my whole body seemed to shiver. He kissed his way up my body, his lips lingering on my breasts, his tongue teasing around my nipple, before he sprawled beside me.

He pressed his lips in a tender kiss to the side of my mouth. I turned toward him, trying to capture his lips with mine, and he kissed me soft and slow.

It was all more sweet than I’d been expecting. “I thought this was going to be a little more rough. A little more... hate sex.”

“I don’t hate you. Not exactly.”

“Not exactly. How romantic.” But my voice came out light, relaxed. I felt boneless as his fingers stroked over my bare skin, tracing lines of warmth.

“Ready for the next course?”

“I thought I was the feast. You’re the one who tasted me, or should I taste you now?” I was surprisingly intrigued by the idea. There was something about the idea of wrapping my mouth around his cock, of teasing him until his muscles shuddered, until he jetted streams of cum into my mouth that made it feel as if I would be powerful.

And part of me wanted to simply reciprocate the pleasure that he’d just given me.

“We could,” he said, “but I’d rather save that for another day. I’d rather this first time where you made rash, terrible decisions was fully rewarded.”

This first time. I was struck that he'd said that when this was supposed to be the one and only time, but after what I'd experienced, I had to admit that I liked the idea of doing this again. Maybe many, many times.

"Come here," he said, his voice still rough with desire. He fell on his back, grabbing my thighs and pulling me over him.

His hard, throbbing cock rubbed against my core. His skin felt warm to the touch, warmer than normal as if he had a fever. But maybe that was just how dragons were. He reached up and twined his hand through my hair, pulling me down till my lips met his. My nipples felt hard as little pebbles where they rubbed against his chest, and sent a jolt of sensation through me. His eyes smoldered, as if he could feel my reaction. As I kissed him, one of his hands went to my breasts, cupping them, palming them.

The calluses along the base of his fingers were rough against my nipples, but somehow, I craved their roughness. He might be a nobleman, but he had a warrior's hands.

He teased my nipples then caught one in his mouth, and I let out a gasp, my back arching. I couldn't move, because I didn't dare pull my nipple away from between his teeth, as he nipped me hard enough that it almost hurt.

And yet, it also sent a strange awakening through my body, a sense of pain and pleasure intermingled that I'd never felt before, that I couldn't quite make sense of. I let out a long slow moan.

"What, do you want that?" He teased the head of his cock around my opening, and I ground down on it, only for him to pull himself away.

"You know what I want, you insufferable man."

"Maybe I want to hear you say it."

I leveled a look at him in exasperation, although it wasn't strong enough to overcome the throb of lust between my thighs. "Always a game."

"Always a game," he confirmed, but I didn't want to stop anyway.

I pressed my hips down, grinding against his cock, and even though he was teasing me, he wasn't exactly impervious himself because his face changed. He looked as if he were fighting to hold back his own orgasm, though he hadn't even entered me yet.

"I want you inside me." The words felt awkward in my mouth, but I was rewarded by the light in his eyes.

"Well, I won't deny you anything." His hands gripped my hips, his fingers massaging my ass.

As he pulled me down roughly, I slid the tip of his cock across my wet pussy, let him enter me.

As I sank onto him, as his cock filled me completely, my breath gave. The sensation of being stretched ached and burned and then gave way to pleasure. His fingers found my clit, as his tip brushed a new place deep within me, and electricity hummed through my body.

He was always a beautiful man, but the way he looked at me was the sexiest thing I'd ever seen—there was so much intensity in his eyes as he touched me, sensitive to my every reaction, careful of my pleasure.

The prince had many flaws but a lack of generosity and enthusiasm was not one of them.

The two of us began to move in rhythmic time together. Over and over again, he plunged deep inside me, every time his hard lower abs pressed against my clit and the tip of his cock seemed to press that inner place that left liquid warmth unfurling through my body.

"Jaik," I murmured,

His eyes smoldered as if he loved hearing his name on my lips. So I said it again, over and over, as I rode him, his fingers hot against the curve of my ass.

My channel squeezed powerfully around him, and his fingers tightened around my hips, directing me up until his tip brushed against my core. "Not yet. I want you to come when I tell you to come."

That bossy possessive bastard. Maybe I shouldn't like it, but I did. I wanted to make him just as crazy as he made me.

My fingernails sank deep into his shoulders as he rolled with me, changing position until he straddled me. He paused, kissing me, his lips slow and gentle and savoring even though I pressed my hips insistently up into his.

As soon as he entered me though, I knew it was going to be just as hard to stop myself from coming within minutes this way. He plunged inside me over and over again.

I ran my hands across his ass, enjoying the way the muscles moved beneath my palms. I sank my fingernails into his ass hard enough that maybe I could mark him.

He pulled back for a second, giving me a skeptical look.

“Do you hate that?” I asked.

“Honor, I don't think you can do anything to me that I don't like.”

“Please,” I whispered, feeling how close I was to coming and his eyes darkened, as if my need was the most incredible aphrodisiac to him.

“Be a good girl and come now,” he said.

And I did, squeezing around him as I felt him reach his own climax. The sense of finally surrendering after trying to hold back seemed to make the tremors of pleasure running wild through my body even more intense.

The sense of him flooding me was new, and it only seemed to push my orgasm to greater heights, feeling his cock jerk inside me, feeling his hot cum spurt inside me.

Then the two of us were clinging to each other. His chest was damp with sweat against mine. He pressed kisses to my cheeks, to my lips, to my throat. His kisses were as fevered as his touch.

For someone who seemed to hide all of his emotions all the time, he was a passionate lover. Maybe that was the one place he let himself indulge having any feelings.

Or maybe I was getting way beyond myself, and he just really enjoyed fucking girls.

If we shifted into our dragon form, I could know what he was thinking. Could he hear my thoughts the same way I could hear his? What made his thoughts spill into my head so loudly, even louder than Talisyn heard him, when Tal considered him a brother?

“I guess now you’ll be bored with me,” I teased as his lips were still on my throat. I said it lightly, but the thought was also really on my mind. I wondered if now he would walk past me in the hallway and ignore me.

I shouldn’t care. But the truth was that I did.

“I guess we’ll see.” He pressed one last kiss to my throat. He didn’t seem nearly as interested in the subject as I was.

He was still touching me, but maybe he was just trying to make my last moments pleasant before he threw me away.

A stone settled into my stomach. “I should go.”

He traced an idle circle across my stomach with his fingernails, the faintest scrape making me hot all over again. “Not yet.”

“What do you mean, not yet?” I demanded.

He seemed to hesitate, and I wondered what he’d been about to ask for. Had the dreaded prince of dragons wanted to cuddle?

“You’re right,” he said. “I guess we’re done here.”

“Good.” I rose shakily to my feet, unable to hide just how intense everything felt to me after that orgasm. His cum dribbled down my thighs, and it felt as if everything was throbbing, as if I wouldn’t be able to walk normally. “God, I feel like everyone is going to know.”

He watched me with a self-satisfied, smug look on his face, one arm cocked behind his head.

“Thanks for the pleasant diversion.” I wasn’t going to be any more attached to him than he was to me. I wasn’t going to

care if this was the one and only time that we ever had sex.

That was what I told myself. But the truth was after today, I wanted more. I could pretend that I just wanted more of Jaik's body, I wanted more of Jaik's cock. But I wasn't sure I could lie that well.

I started to dress, feeling clumsy and self-conscious in front of him, especially when his cock was still hard, jutting above those powerful lean muscled abs. The sight of him hard again, when he was watching me naked, made me want to join him in bed again for another round. But I had to get back to my own room, had to prepare myself to be Lucien Finn again.

Even though right now I desperately wanted to be Honor. I might be nothing but a maid, but I was a maid who had a very interesting life.

I didn't know what to say to him, so I struggled to do up one last button, then opened the door to let myself out.

Before I could close the door, he suddenly jumped up from the bed and crossed to me in a few quick strides. I looked up at him, my lips hanging open, not really sure what he was going to do. He grabbed me and yanked me into the doorway. I only realized he was going to kiss me a second before his mouth collided with mine.

He kissed me until I was breathless, and then he abruptly pulled away. He gave me a nod and said, "Have a good day, Honor."

Then he closed the door between us, and I was left standing in the hall, my clit throbbing, my channel sore from being stretched to take him in, his cum and mine wet between my legs.

I wasn't ready to be Lucien Finn again.



CHAPTER
TWENTY-FIVE

H*onor*

THE NEXT DAYS BROUGHT A BIZARRE COMBINATION OF BOTH pleasure and pain at once, just as Jaik had introduced.

The physician was always there now, when I fought, and I was always tested against Branok or Lynx over and over. They kicked my ass, but every single time, I fought a little bit better. I held my own a little longer.

And as painful as it was, as they broke bones or wrenched blood from my body, the damage was always quickly healed. Maybe the pain was worth it to me, as bizarre as it was, because the brutal beatings gave me a chance to inflict damage of my own on them. And every day I grew stronger. Not to mention, there was something deliciously primal about letting loose on the two of them.

Growing stronger was more important to me than being comfortable.

On a daily basis, I was broken apart all over again—more or less literally. And then the physician healed me. And I moved on about my business.

I thought maybe Branok and Lynx were beginning to develop grudging respect for me even though Damyn looked at us all like we were crazy. And maybe we were, but I felt like I understood these guys on some weird level, that I knew what would bring them to my side, would show them I was just as strong and powerful as they were, that I was worthy.

Maybe Lucien Finn didn't deserve redemption. But if I had to wear his face, I was damn sure going to try.

Of course my mornings all started with Caldren. As we walked through the tunnels, he reached into his pocket and tossed a bag my way. I caught it against my chest and opened it, finding an unexpected glint of gold. The bag was heavy; this had to be a third of Hanna's tuition right here. Four months of her freedom. I clutched the bag tighter, wanting to keep it, knowing it was wrong.

"Where's this coming from?" I asked him.

He favored me with a smile. "My family fortune."

"I thought you were disowned."

"I have my ways."

I tried to hand the money back to him. "You don't need to take care of me, not if you can barely take care of yourself."

"I'm not taking care of you." He sounded affronted by the idea.

"I don't know what you call it then."

He stopped and faced me. Glowing luminescent mold hung from the tunnel walls, and it cast faint light on his handsome face as he sighed. "When my parents threw me out, I didn't have anyone. I lost my only sibling. I was so alone. Here you are, trying to do your best by your sister and I guess I appreciate that. I want to help you if I can."

His raw honesty shocked me.

"Thank you." I licked my lips, feeling a nervous flutter in my chest, before I blurted out, "You know, I never feel like I'm ever really alone, even in this weird net of lies. Because I have you on my side."

"What, sweet words, no glib remark?" His brows arched, a smile playing around his lips. "I'm a little shocked."

But he wasn't looking at me like he was shocked. It looked as if I'd made his day with my genuine expression of gratitude.

"I know we academy students aren't usually grateful to instructors," I teased as we headed through the passage. "We

usually fantasize about murdering you all a bit, to be honest.”

“Not me, though. Everyone loves me.”

Being with Caldren was always fun, but it felt as if our relationship faded as we climbed the stairs. When we pushed open the door into the academy’s basement, we were back to being all but strangers, nodding goodbye to each other and slipping away down different passages.

Along with the sour and sweet of my days, I had to face the sour and sweet of Jaik himself. He wasn’t exactly unkind to me when I was Lucien Finn, not like the others, but he wasn’t warm and playful like he was with Honor.

I was surprised to find out he was capable of warmth. How many girls had discovered that side? I knew I was being stupid but part of me dared to hope that there was something special when he touched me.

Sometimes he found me when I was cleaning, and he’d come up behind me, wrap his arms around my waist, pull me against the hard length of his body and plunder my throat with his kisses. Maybe he wasn’t bored with me after all.

“Come to my bed tonight,” he murmured to me.

“Maybe,” I answered, but something kept me from going back to his bed, the sense that I would lose my damn mind if I kept dancing so close to him. He’d called me an addiction. I had a feeling that the high prince might be my own addiction.

Then one day I came incredibly close to actually pinning Branok. He was especially pissed off by the time we transformed back and I’d limped over to the physician. He threw his sword when he’d transformed back, cursing as he looked at the wound in his shoulder. It was shaped like my dragon’s jaws and I smiled even though all my teeth felt loose in my mouth at the moment from his punishing blows.

“That was surprising,” Jaik commented.

“What?” I rasped through bloodied lips.

“You almost put up a fight today.”

“I put up a fight every day, I’m just not usually very successful,” I shot back.

For a second, the two of us stared at each other. To my surprise, Jaik said, “Good work today.”

The words clearly surprised Branok and Lynx. Their faces tightened, and Branok shot Jaik a look of outrage.

Arren glanced between them, then said, “I think Lucian has proven himself enough.”

I’d never expected Arren to say such a thing, and I stared at him, my mouth falling open.

“We should introduce him to the hideout for the order of dragons today,” he said.

I glanced toward Branok and Lynx to see their reaction. But the two of them turned away so I couldn’t see their faces.

“All right,” Jaik said guardedly, “If you think so, Arren,”

“I do,” Arren said, “I think it’s time we took the first steps toward moving on.”

Arren was in my corner. I was shocked. Maybe Calla had been right when she thought he was flirting with me.

I smiled at him, and he stared back at me, stone-faced as ever, as if he weren’t doing me any favors. I didn’t want to hurt his feelings by making it seem as if he wasn’t a total nightmare, because I had a feeling that was an important part of his identity.

“Tonight,” Branok said, “if we’re going to do it, at least let’s get it over with tonight.”

I had my stepmother’s engagement party tonight. But when we visited the Order of Dragons early, I might begin to uncover the answers to some of my questions. That was worth missing a toast or two.

After all, if the elders knew about the prophecy, there had to be more about the prophecy at one of the Order of the Dragon sites. Maybe I could begin to figure out where to look

—I'd take any hint. And then hopefully, I could still make it to my stepmother's stupid party.

It was with a surprisingly light heart that I left the training arena that day.

Maybe things were looking up for Lucien Finn and Honor Hannaby.



CHAPTER
TWENTY-SIX

Honor

I HAD TO HOPE I'D BE DONE WITH WHATEVER ANTICS THE dragon royals were up to now in time to get to my stepmother's house tonight for her engagement party. I'd promised to wear a pretty dress and smile big. She could marry the biggest creep she could find if that made her happy—I only cared that Hanna was still in the house, and Hanna obviously wasn't dealing very well with Alis's engagement to Henrick.

The six of us headed down into the tunnels once again. I glanced skeptically at the glowing mold that clung to the ceiling, then down to the damp, smelly water that pooled at our feet. "Who built these, anyway?"

"They've been here since before our fathers ruled," Jaik said.

"Why don't they seal them up, if the Scourge can get into them too?"

"Damyn said the exits outside the city walls have been sealed again," Jaik promised, although he looked irritated.

I assumed he was annoyed by me, as usual, but then he added, "The Elders refuse to have the tunnels sealed completely. They claim they're too useful."

Branok glanced at me and said, "*Your* father made extensive use of them before he died."

I was about to protest before I realized we were talking about *Lucien's* father. "So all the nobles know about them?"

“Just the ones closest to the throne.” Talisyn glanced down the opening to each tunnel branch-off as we passed it, his hand resting lightly on the pommel of his sword. No matter how casual he acted, I was pretty damn sure he was on high alert.

“On the plus side, if we have to have the tunnels, at least they give us easy access to our hideouts.” Lynx glanced at me.

Oh, he was talking to me? Wonders would never cease. Maybe we were finally turning a corner.

“Hideouts, plural?” I asked, and Lynx’s face shuttered as the others glared at him.

“I guess we aren’t sharing all our secrets yet,” I said lightly. “Is that where you guys go to stash your treasures or where you go to sleep with girls?”

“A little bit of both,” Talisyn said brightly.

Arren snorted. “There’s only one girl some of you are interested in now. The worst possible one.”

I wasn’t sure if I should be complimented or offended. Maybe both. Arren had a way of making me feel *both*. I might be their dirty secret, but at least I was special.

We took another turn, and I was hopelessly lost in the tunnels, which twisted left and right, plunged steeply up or sloped down.

Worry squirmed through my stomach. The royals could abandon me here, and it would be hard to find my way out. I stopped, letting them walk ahead of me, as I studied the damp stone walls. There was a low, constant rushing sound—water was moving beyond the stone. We must be near the tunnels that carried fresh water to the city’s homes and businesses.

Talisyn turned to face me but kept walking backward, far more sure-footed than anyone should have the right to be down here. “What is it?”

“Oh. We’re near the cistern, aren’t we? Like we were when we dealt with the Scourge?”

He looked uncomfortable, which was funny, since I wouldn’t think he was embarrassed by any part of his heroic

antics during the Scourge attack. I hurried to meet him.

“I guess we are.” He rested a big hand on my shoulder. “Come on. We don’t want to fall too far behind the others.”

He shivered dramatically. “This place gives me the creeps.”

As the two of us caught up, Arren walked through a spider web. Lynx used the pommel of his sword to brush an enormous black spider away while Arren stood there with his hands jammed into his pockets and a tortured look on his face.

“You’ve got some web in your hair,” Jaik observed.

“Why don’t you make yourself useful?” Lynx scolded Jaik, picking web off of Arren’s face. “You know how much he hates spiders.”

“And their webs,” Talisyn added helpfully. “Is that an egg sac by his ear?”

Arren’s broad shoulders hunched up just slightly.

Talisyn brushed it off. “No, I suppose it was just a bit of lint.”

“I am going to beat your ass in the training yard,” Arren said, but Talisyn just grinned.

Lynx picked a last bit of web from Arren’s dark hair and shook it off his fingers. “All better. You don’t have to bother saying I’m your favorite; I know.”

Listening to them banter made me want to be a part of their little group. I turned my shoulder to find Branok staring at me in the same cold, hard way he always was, and a shiver ran down my spine that had nothing to do with the damp chill in the tunnels.

“Come on,” Talisyn told me. “I’d like to put some distance between me and Arren’s misplaced rage. He doesn’t deal well with his fears.”

He slid ahead of me through a narrow passageway, and I followed. I turned back to say something to Arren about how his enormous body might not fit through here, not that I

minded the sight of all Arren's muscles. The others had stopped dead.

My heart rose in my throat, and I moved quickly toward them before I even realized what I was doing. Jaik's body blocked mine from joining them in the hallway. "What is it?"

Jaik's gaze met mine. "If you're going to be one of us, then we'll see you in the morning."

He slammed a door shut between us. A heavy metal door, carved with grotesque monsters. My palms hit the cold metal and I shoved my body weight into it, but the door didn't move; there wasn't even a handle on my side.

I spun around, only to see a door twenty feet down the other side of the hall swinging shut. Talisyn regarded me regretfully through the crack in the door.

"You'll be okay," he told me gruffly just before he slammed it shut, plunging me into darkness.

Gods, this had to be some kind of test. I fumbled through the dark, my hands sliding helplessly across the doors, then lit my flames across my fingers. Shadows danced on the wall, making me jump for a moment, and I breathed in slowly through my nose, exhaling, forcing my heart to calm. I was supposed to be at my stepmother's in a few hours, and I considered yelling at them, but that would do nothing but shred my last fragments of dignity.

Jaik wasn't going to relent. He wasn't the type to be merciful anyway, and he'd probably done this at Branok and Lynx's urging. They hadn't seemed very impressed by his grudging compliments.

They didn't know how terrified I was of being trapped. But even if they had, my fears wouldn't have mattered to them—no matter how they'd tended Arren and his fear of spiders—because I wasn't one of them. Being with them had made the tunnels bearable. Now it felt as if the walls were pressing toward me.

Once when I was a little girl playing hide and seek, my competitiveness had overcome my usual resistance to hiding

in small spaces; I'd always picked the curtains or crawled under tables. But that time, I'd been brave, determined to win the whole thing—and I'd accidentally gotten locked in a wardrobe.

I'd fought so wildly to escape it that I'd brought the entire thing crashing over. Then my father had been there, pulling me out of the splintered wood and cradling me in his arms. I'd sobbed in part because I was hurt and in part because I was humiliated as my father ordered my playmates and the servants out of the room.

“This is just another scar from your past, sweetheart,” my father had said softly. “But you're lucky. Your scars are all on the inside. They're your own secrets.”

I would have preferred if some of my scars were on the outside. Those were the kind of scars other people believed in.

I turned away from the shadows dancing across the walls to face the narrow tunnels. I should be alone down here, as long as there were no Scourge. Lonely was safe, at least.

Would it make a difference in escaping if I were a dragon? Maybe that was part of their test. I moved forward into the narrow tunnels, ducking my head in the places where the ceiling fell low—and trying to ignore the panic that spurted through my blood—until I emerged into a wider tunnel, where maybe there was just enough space for my dragon.

I closed my eyes and raised my hands to either side, trying to call out the dragon.

But nothing happened.

I opened one eye, glancing around at the luminescent mold once more, disappointed to see my human hands. Why couldn't I shift? I tried again, grinding my teeth as if pure effort could force my dragon.

But nothing happened.

Had the guys enchanted me to make sure I couldn't shift? Was that part of the test?

“You’re a bunch of assholes, and I’m going to make you pay,” I sing-songed. But the words seemed to echo through the vast, empty tunnels, and I regretted ever speaking.

My heart was pounding. As a dragon, I wouldn’t have been terrified of these tunnels. But now I’d have to face my fears.

I just had to make sure I could find my way back to these doors. I ripped my shirt over my head, pulled my knife from my boot, and nicked the hem. I unraveled a line of thread, then began to pull it loose. I found a heavy, slightly slimy rock and wrinkled my nose as I carried it awkwardly back to the door.

I trapped one end of the thread under the rock, then carried the shirt with me, leaving a trail of thread.

As I slowly explored the labyrinth, I used the noise of water trickling to tell when I was further or closer away from the doors. Was there some way to unlock the doors? They seemed totally smooth from the inside, nothing but cold steel under my palms. But there had to be a way out.

Maybe this was just a hazing ritual, but I had a feeling with everything with the dragons was an intense, competitive game. There had to be a way to beat them. Even if it was a narrow chance and even if it was unfair. Dragons seemed to specialize in *unfair*. I began to search for ways to escape.

Then I tripped over the pile of bones.

These weren’t small bones either. And there was still a lot of meat attached to them. Something had been killed in this tunnel, and recently.

My heart froze.

A shuffling, snorting sound seemed to echo from down the tunnel.



CHAPTER
TWENTY-SEVEN

J*aik*

I DIDN'T EXACTLY FEEL SORRY FOR LUCIEN FINN, BUT I DID wonder if he was ready for the test we were putting him through. We'd all had our night in the dark labyrinth after we found out we were dragon shifters, but it had happened so suddenly for him, and he was scrambling to catch up.

Despite the low opinion I had of him based on what he'd done to Alina, I had to admit that he'd shown a lot of grit and determination lately. I'd expected him to quit and run, to make sure he could never be dragged back to Joachim's dungeon. Branok and Lynx still hoped that he would.

Well, one night in the cold stone labyrinth wouldn't kill him. The worst case scenario was that he failed to find his way out, and he'd be humiliated in the morning when we let him free. He'd have a sleepless night, and be ill prepared for another day at the academy, which probably wouldn't make a huge difference in his performance.

Instead, my thoughts turned to Honor. I really wanted to see Honor instead of going to this stupid engagement party. But Henrick was a powerful noble in our world, and since my father had given his permission to Henrick to marry, my father had told me to go in his stead.

It was easier to humor my father than to have him realize just how rebellious the younger dragons truly were. We were going to save that for a fun surprise in the future.

I longed to prove to Honor I didn't find her boring. I would never let any of the other guys do what I was doing now.

There was no future with Honor.

And yet, even though I usually denied myself and focused on whatever I needed to for the good of the others, or the good of our country, I didn't have it in me to deny myself Honor.

I hadn't been kidding when I said she was addictive to me. Her long red hair, the mischievous shine in her eyes, her soft lips, her leanly muscled body that hid so much strength. Oh and the beautiful sounds that had come out of her mouth, the way she'd moaned my name, the way she looked at me with a flash of admiration for just a second, breaking through her usual sarcasm and distance. I was getting hard in these moldy tunnels just thinking about her.

We climbed the stairs back to the basement.

"See you at the party," I told them. "My father asked me to meet him for dinner."

"Asked?" Talisyn arched an eyebrow.

"Well, ordered. He always orders."

"You learned from the best," Talisyn said lightly, and I ignored him, even though he had to know how much that grated me. I didn't want to be anything like Pend Deragon.

I could have taken the tunnels to the castle, but instead I jogged down the long stairs that wound down the mountain from the academy to the street below. The breeze carried the scent of salt coming off the ocean, and the sun was sinking behind the academy, lighting the spires golden. People passing by greeted me respectfully. It was always strange to think that across the sea, other royals needed bodyguards; here, the nobility were the most dangerous shifters to walk the streets. That simply seemed right to me. How else could we lead?

Of course there was more security as I headed up the marble stairs of the palace, but I barely saw anyone as servants opened doors for me. Security watched unseen from the shadows. The palace was only a block away from my father's precious academy, and yet I never came here. I preferred the dorm over the opulent house.

I didn't care if I ever inherited the castle. It was supposed to be my brother's before he fell from grace; maybe I would give it to him after I inherited it. It meant nothing to me.

I wanted a new house, a new life, if we eventually managed to put the Scourge behind us, and I lived long enough to become king. I wasn't entirely sure I *wanted* to be king, but at least I could be a better man than my father.

One of my father's advisors, Rand, greeted me inside the glittering hall. "Your father asked for you to wait for him in the informal dining room, your highness."

"Thank you." I made my way through the enormous dining room, where the long table was set for a hundred, to the smaller dining room off the throne room. The table was set for just one in front of the enormous fireplace, where flames danced merrily, and I eyed it warily. My father hadn't actually invited me for dinner, then.

I was never very fond of his surprises.

Pend kept me waiting there for a while. He was very fond of those power plays. But I stood and waited patiently, knowing better than to disobey.

My brother royals and I sometimes went against our fathers' wills, but not without good reason. Reckless rebellion didn't serve anyone. Despite what my brother seemed to think.

When my father finally made his way in, he wasn't even alone. One of his men, Lukan, shadowed him. Apparently, we weren't having an intimate father and son chat today.

Pend didn't have bodyguards. He didn't need them, but he did have rough men who did his bidding, who went out and did violence on his behalf.

Some poor sap was getting his ass kicked tonight, if he were lucky. If that poor sap were unlucky, he'd end up dead. My father didn't mind murdering people himself, but he was all about being efficient.

I greeted Lukan, who gave me a curt nod. I had known him all my life. But his loyalty was to my father, not to me.

Pend didn't move to hug me, but he never had. "How has the academy been treating you?"

"It's always fun," I said.

Pend had founded the academy to train shifters, to help us fight the war against the Scourge. I had a wealth of ideas about how we could make the academy work better to give more of our people a good chance of surviving. But he wasn't particularly interested in my ideas. He made that very clear.

"I heard that you've been quite the ladies' man," Pend said.

That was not exactly a new part of my reputation. But a chill still ran through me. I didn't want Pend anywhere near Honor.

I should have stayed away from her. But there was something about her that was so magnetic, my common sense got lost in the fray.

"I need something to do when I'm not training or fighting."

"Wet your dick all you please with the noble girls," he said lightly. "More dragon-born can only serve us. But I heard you've been toying with one of the maids."

"Yes," I admitted grudgingly. There was no point in lying to him. My father had spies everywhere.

As much as I liked Damyn, sometimes I worried that he answered to my father too well. I wouldn't blame Damyn for choosing the king over the prince. But I still hated the thought. I'd looked up to Damyn all my life in a way I could never look up to my father.

"It's one thing to plow the fields amongst your peers. We've already had one shame in the family. Can you imagine if you impregnated this maid, if you have a child of your own who was a squirrel or chipmunk?"

"I know, Father. I'm being careful."

"The only way for you to be careful is to stay the fuck away from this girl."

I nodded. “Understood.”

“So you’ll stay away from her?”

Everything in me wanted to resist him, but I didn’t want to risk him hurting Honor. “I will stay away from her. It only happened once—it was nothing.”

“I want to remind you not to let it happen again,” he said.

A ball of ice formed in my stomach. Was one of Lugan’s friends on his way to visit Honor right now?

“You don’t need to remind me. I’m standing right here. I’m going to remember.”

“See that you do,” he said, his voice cold.

Lugan moved toward me.

And that was when I understood. *I* was the one that was getting my ass kicked today.

I didn’t dare ask him to leave the girl alone. He would’ve known then that she mattered to me.

I’d been so stupid to let Honor close.

I didn’t care what Lugan did to me. I deserved it—just not for the reasons my father thought.

My father sat down to his meal, spreading his napkin across his lap, as Lugan stalked toward the fire for the brand. The door opened, and two more of my father’s men moved into the room.

Apparently, my beating was going to be the dinner entertainment.

I’d survived dozens of beatings over the course of my life. I turned toward Lugan, not giving a damn, even before those two men tackled me against the wall.

My father sipped his wine as Lugan carried the red-hot brand toward me. An enchantment to keep me from easily healing—as this was my *reminder*.

Yet when I closed my eyes, it was still Honor I saw.



CHAPTER
TWENTY-EIGHT

H*onor*

AS I LISTENED INTENTLY FOR THE PREDATOR, MY HEART pounding in my ears, some part of my brain still managed to muse, *I should never have had sex with Jaik.*

Of course Jaik and Talisyn were loyal to Branok and Lynx, not Lucien.

But had they intended to kill me? Did they know there was something dangerous down here in the tunnels?

I pressed myself into the shadows, letting my light flicker out, and I plunged immediately into darkness.

The walls and ceiling of the tunnel pressed in on me desperately, and my breathing hitched. I tried to breathe through my nose. The more I tried to channel calm and quiet, the louder my breathing.

I was going to kill Jaik when I got out of here.

Given the look of guilt on Talisyn's face, I'd let him die quickly. Jaik and the others though, they were in for a long, painful death. Thinking about revenge kept my thoughts from spiraling completely.

There was a kind of snuffling sound almost like a pig hunting along the ground for truffles. Every muscle in my body was drawn taut. Gods, I'd do anything to be able to shift into the dragon again, even though I'd be too large to move in this tunnel, squeezed in here like a bloated sausage. But I'd be a sausage that could breathe *fire*.

The sound of huffing turned into muttering, as if whatever was in the tunnel with me was human. But the dark panic

squeezing my chest didn't abate.

The snuffling grew louder and for the first time I could hear the grumbling more clearly. "Fresh meat. There's some kind of fresh meat down here."

Panic curdled in my stomach. Whatever it was smelled me as *fresh meat*. I didn't like to think of myself as meat in any way, shape, or form.

I backed slowly along the tunnel. I had to move silently. I didn't want to alert the thing to where I was, and I didn't want to know how fast it could run. I'd rather save some things for a fun surprise later.

The thing paused. "Come out, come out, wherever you are,"

Was it a human? Was it one of the Scourge? Was it a half shifter, half human hybrid, gnarled in between stages?

Maybe I should give up on trying to be silent, should go for speed, because my breathing was a rasp now that seemed like a call to the creature.

It turned a corner just as I did, and I caught the briefest glimpse of its face, lit faintly by the luminescent mold. It was enormous, far taller than I was, walking on a man's legs, with ram's horns curved around its face. Its eyes were wide and white, and pus ran in trickles across the fur of its flat, human face. It was blind. But its face still turned toward me as I ducked around the corner.

Adrenaline tensed every muscle as I hurried along the line toward the door. Even though it didn't matter; there was no way to get those doors open from the inside, so reaching them didn't mean reaching any kind of safety.

Except... I would pass that corpse again on my way back.

If the thing was blind, it must be tracking me by scent. Would the corpse be enough to confuse it?

I retraced my steps faster and faster. The shuffling seemed to get ever louder.

I reached the corpse, alerted by the sickly sweet scent that made bile rise in the back of my throat. What would give me the best chance to hide?

I decided to press myself behind the corpse along the stone wall, putting my back against something solid.

I crouched low by the bones, hoping that maybe the monster would track all the way to the door and I could get a better look at it. I had to know what I was dealing with. I wasn't going to be its *fresh meat*.

I'm not a particularly lucky person, given my dark childhood. But luck smiled at me this time as I held my breath. The thing shuffled past me in the dark, its enormous shoulders hunched. It had to be some kind of hybrid shifter because I caught a glimpse of a human ankle bone under the tattered hem of its pants, but it was several heads taller than me.

It never stopped muttering as it tracked along my route. The rambling figure's face looked almost human, but it was obscured by the horns. Those horns gouged its cheeks, which were weeping blood.

I'd thought failed shifters were a myth they told us to scare children. According to the stories, they proved unworthy of their soul creatures and were driven mad. More than mad, they were driven to kill. Their souls were lost to human cruelty and predator's instincts.

As the shuffling and muttering sounds receded along the corridor, I tried to catch my breath.

If it were tracking my trail, it would soon reach the doors and then likely double back. The monster didn't give off a *quitter* vibe.

How was I going to keep it from finding me?

I looked at the corpse stinking at my feet and groaned, but I clutched the knife from my boot.

When my father had given me my first knife, he'd told me I would always be able to save myself, that I didn't need to have nightmares anymore.

We'd been sitting in the garden while my mother snipped roses to fill the crystal vases in my room. She'd smiled faintly, as if she knew his logic couldn't cure my nightmares. But she'd let him go on, giving me a sympathetic look as she stripped the thorns from a rose for my hair.

I could never remember my nightmares, let alone my life before my parents brought me home. But something terrible had happened. Something that haunted me, that was close when I was here in these tunnels.

But my old nightmares didn't matter. I was smack dab in the middle of a shiny new one.

I had to get out of here alive and then I would process the fact that the men I'd begun to consider my friends had left me in so much danger.

I used the knife to rip open the corpse and turn it into the world's worst jacket. If only the noble girls who mocked my sense of fashion sense could see me now. I'd really hit a new low.

Given that the monster seemed to see me as its next dinner course, I had no choice but to strike first, even though I couldn't shift. The longer I stayed down here, the more I'd get worn out from staying on the move, and the lower my chances were of surviving when the creature and I inevitably met face to face.

I snuck up behind the beast. It turned just as I reached it, nostrils flaring as if it could sense that I was close. Maybe it could smell me now. Maybe it could smell the moving carcass but either way, the monster whirled.

It snarled, lashing out with a long dangerous set of claws. I danced back, keeping my footing despite the damp stone underfoot.

Okay, this thing and I were definitely not going to be friends. And that was helpful. That meant I could kill it without guilt.

I slipped under the claws and drove my knife up into its throat. It let out a desperate squeal and slashed toward me, but

I moved swiftly out of the way.

The knife came free and blood ran down my hands making the hilt slick. But I'd practiced for this. I'd gone to the kind of really fancy boarding school where they coat your hands in olive oil and make you practice your stabby-stab.

I had the knife free in my hand as the monster lunged at me. I danced back but its claws glanced off my abdomen. My skin tore, blood splattering across us both. But nothing could stop me now.

I managed to slip underneath the attacking claws and jumped up since the thing was bigger than me, slapping one arm onto its shoulder and hoisting myself so that I could slash open its throat.

The air filled with the scent of blood and the horrifying but promising odor of bowels releasing.

I jumped free as the thing landed hard on its knees.

It made a desperate sobbing sound that reminded me that it had been human once before it fell over. My stomach wrenched as I stumbled away, careful to watch my back in case it came back to life.

The putrid stench of its bowels and of the dead animal rotting around my shoulders combined, and I threw up over and over again until my throat was raw.

As I wiped my mouth on my bare shoulder, I tasted coppery blood in the back of my throat.

In that moment, I wanted the guys to pay, for them to suffer as much as I had in these tunnels. Though I wasn't convinced that any of them would feel anything about killing a monster.

I got up shakily, my legs wobbly underneath me.

Now that I'd survived, the letdown of adrenaline was so intense my muscles ached and exhaustion flooded my body.

I retraced my steps to make sure that the monster was still lying there, then lit flame in my hands to examine its body. As

I leaned over, I couldn't help but feel like at any moment, it would come back to life to attack me. But nothing happened.

I was alive.

It was dead.

Simple math. So why did I feel so stricken?

How had this monster become trapped, torn between its shifted self and human self?

How long had it been here?

Had this been some kind of hazing ritual the guys had all been through? Had they all faced some kind of monster in these tunnels and survived? I had so many questions.

But I didn't trust any of those bastards to give me answers.

Jaik's stupidly handsome face, Talisyn's easy smile—both rose in my mind. I even thought of Lynx picking spiderweb off Arren, and the longing that had risen inside me to be one of them.

I wouldn't be so stupid again.



CHAPTER
TWENTY-NINE

Honor

I STILL HAD TO FIGURE OUT HOW TO ESCAPE. WHEN I retraced my steps to where I'd been before, the doors were as unyielding as ever. The steady rush of water still trickled beyond the walls.

Fighting the Scourge with Talisyn almost seemed like a pleasant memory now. At the time, I hadn't felt crushingly alone.

Now I'd never feel safe around the dragon royals again.

None of them would care, but it still felt like a loss to me. I'd been fooling myself to think that any of the Royals gave a damn about me, in either of my forms. If Lucien Finn couldn't trust them, how could Honor?

The dragon royals were heroes. But they weren't good men. And they'd never be my friends.

As I listened to the water running, an idea occurred to me—a crazy one. The conduit to the city water was obviously just on the other side of the wall. The noise was louder in some places than others. I could barely hear it when I was close to the doors. But further down, it was so loud it seemed as if there was the thinnest of barriers between where I stood and the lines of the city water, which made me wonder, could I reach those lines?

"This is probably a bad idea," I muttered to myself, because I was apparently steadily losing my mind.

But I couldn't let the dragon royals win.

I wanted the chance to surprise the bastards. Maybe I'd be able to tell from their faces if they'd been confident I could defeat the monster. There was a definite possibility they'd sentenced me to death for whatever Lucien had done to Alina. And while Talisyn and I had joked about my death in our banter before, I no longer found that very funny.

My sense of terror simmered white hot at being trapped again. What if there were more monsters? Something deep inside me seemed to squirm, a primal fear that had mutated into a shadow within me when I was just a child.

I ran my hand over the stone wall, trying to force the same icy chill over my heart that Jaik seemed to exude, until I found the thinnest place.

Please work this time.

I tried to transform into my dragon, not daring to hope it would actually work.

My horned head slammed into the stone ceiling so hard that stars burst in front of my eyes. I let out a roar, flames briefly illuminating the dank, tiny corridor around me

My dragon was in the mood to annihilate someone, and I was not in the mood to stop it.

I slammed my tail into the wall, over and over, and the ground seemed to shake with my power.

The wall began to crack, beads of water beginning to trickle in. My sense of fear gave way to burning hot rage as I lost myself in my dragon.

The wall collapsed, a wave of water bursting into my tunnel like a hurricane. For a desperate second, it seemed it was going to flood my tunnel and I would drown.

No. I'm not doing those bastards a favor and dying.

I slammed my horned head furiously into the barrier, and it finally ruptured completely.

A wave of water slammed through the broken wall. The force drove my head into the ceiling hard enough to stun me.

The water drove me through the narrow tunnel. My grasping claws struck out at the rock, trying to fight my way to the broken wall.

The water moved so fast, so deadly dangerous, that I couldn't get my feet beneath me, couldn't get a breath of air. I'd never been so trapped—except for in my nightmares.

Fresh waves of panic washed over me. And with those waves of panic also came fresh waves of *homicidal*. I was going to live to *discuss* this situation with the royals

My claws scraped into the stone, and I dragged myself up, pushed my head through the crack in the wall and managed to gulp a mouthful of air—right before the stone wall crumbled, and I fell back into the water.

My rear legs found purchase on the wall and I pushed through the crack in the stone, breaking the rest of the wall out of my way, then emerging into the dark channel.

My face broke the water and I drew in a desperate rasp of air.

Those men were definitely going to have to suffer. I had very inventive ideas of what I was going to do to them.

My mother used to say I was a very creative little girl. She probably wouldn't have appreciated the way my imagination worked these days though.

At first, I didn't know how to move my big dragon body through the water. It seemed as if I was heavy as a stone, and I was going to sink to the bottom of the waves like one. But eventually, I began to move steadily through the water.

Eventually it felt as if I might survive. I swam through the dark water that ran steadily through the tunnels underneath the city, listening as best I could for sounds above that might guide me out.

This was one of my nightmares come to life, trapped where I could hear people above, but couldn't reach them.

Then I saw light that shone from above, a thin crack of lamplight leaking around a metal panel that wasn't seated right

in the road above. I spread my wings and flew, slamming into the ceiling.

I was so much stronger than I remembered being in my human form that I accidentally over balanced and sent the sewer lid flying up into the sky. I broke through the cobblestones, too big to fit through the sewer opening, and clawed my way up.

I collapsed in the middle of the street.

Fuck the dragon royals.

Wide-eyed people scattered to the sides, staring at me but keeping their distance. Jaunty music played, lanterns lit the evening, and the air was filled with brightly colored banners and the scents of roasted nuts and popcorn.

A fair.

I'd just crash-landed in the middle of a fair.

Dragon royals were supposed to be dignified, and here I was, sprawled in the middle of the broken street and gasping for air like a dying fish.

Jaik would probably be pissed. I was making the royals look bad. But if he didn't want to be embarrassed, he should stop trying to murder me.

Gods. I wasn't dead. That meant I was late to my stepmother's goddamn engagement party.

I never wanted to go to parties, I wanted to be left alone in the library to read, or possibly—at the moment—to die of shock or cold or possibly embarrassment.

I'd kissed Jaik and Talisyn. They hadn't known I was both Honor and Lucien, but still. If one of them tried to kiss me again, I'd remember the looks on their faces right before those metal doors slammed shut, trapping me in nightmares.

I had wounds to lick and no desire to party. But... The guys had said they had to attend. I had pretended disinterest as they complained. They hadn't put together yet that Honor Hannaby was Alis' stepdaughter.

Honor, I'd been looking forward to seeing them tonight. But I felt a lot less excited about the prospects now that I knew I wouldn't be sleeping with any of them. They didn't deserve sex with me.

As far as they knew, killing Lucien Finn had nothing to do with flirting with Honor. But I didn't want to be around people who were so miserable and unkind. They couldn't forgive Lucien for whatever he'd done, despite his endless striving to prove himself, to win their approval.

Now I was done. Done with these guys in every way, unless... It occurred to me that maybe staying close to them as Honor was the way to exact a little revenge. After all, they'd expect Lucien to seek revenge.

Branok, Lynx and Arren might see me coming, but Jaik and Talisyn would never expect to be hurt by sweet Honor.



CHAPTER THIRTY

H*onor*

I TRANSFORMED BACK INTO LUCIEN BEHIND AN ABANDONED building. I still didn't entirely trust myself. I worried that I would accidentally transform into Honor instead. Besides, I couldn't risk the royals seeing me as Honor, in my current very damp state.

Instead, I made my way as Lucien—shirtless, bedraggled, and probably stinking of corpse—into my childhood home.

There were guards outside, and doormen who viewed me distastefully even as they bowed. But everyone recognized me, even if my hair was plastered against my forehead.

I made my way through the brightly glimmering house and the mass of partygoers, who shied away from me. Yep, I definitely stank. But I barely registered anyone's faces beyond their general wide-eyed shock and horror.

I only had eyes for my boys.

"Excuse me," I said to a passing serving girl. She stopped and held her tray toward me, her lips parting in shock as she took in my appearance.

I didn't particularly want the wine she was offering, but it couldn't make things worse. I took two glasses. "Thank you. Have you by chance seen five miserable fuckheads who've judged all of humanity and decided they only like the other four fuckheads? Two blond, three dark, all excessively tall and painfully handsome but just exuding general dickishness?"

She stared at me in horror.

I made people uncomfortable.

Then she squeaked out, “They’re in the pipe room,” before she turned and fled.

I stared after her as she headed into the crowd. Huh. She’d recognized their description.

Since when did my house have a *pipe room*, anyway?

At least that information narrowed things down. I headed down the hall, which was lined now with flowering trees in pots, which scented the air fragrantly. Given how I smelled, I should probably just have dragged one of these trees along the marble.

I pushed open the door to what had been my father’s study. For a second when my hand was on the mahogany wood and I breathed in the scent of woodsmoke from the fireplace, I almost thought I’d see him in front of the fire again, with his book on his lap. The memory of him was so strong that his death was a shock all over again.

But the dragon royals were here instead, and that felt like a slap. Grief, even once it had aged, always seemed to have another sucker punch to throw. They didn’t belong in here.

They were drinking whiskey, laughing and joking. Talisyn was telling some story in front of the fire, talking with his hands the way he did, the fire casting his handsome, grinning face in shadows. Branok was trying to shout him down, Lynx was laughing, and Arren surveyed the three of them the way he so often did, as if he were an outsider, as if he were the adult watching over them.

I used to come in here to tell my father about all my little kid problems. When I pushed open the door, he’d always laid down his pen and held out his arms. He’d prop his chin in his hand and smile at me as he listened to me ramble.

I wondered what the royals’ fathers had been like. Probably assholes. It was probably genetic.

People who had happy childhoods really never turned out quite that badly did they?

Arren’s gaze was on my face. He’d noticed me before any of the others

“Hello, gentlemen,” I said and plopped down on the couch beside Lynx, who lay sprawled across it, one arm cocked behind his head.

He scrambled to sit up, his eyes widening.

“Hello, Lucien,” Talisyn said. “Nice to see you. I see you found the wine.”

I took a long sip from one of my glasses, buying myself time to gauge them. Branok didn’t even acknowledge me. It seemed as if they hadn’t been surprised at all to see me. So perhaps they hadn’t gone into the night planning on murder.

I glanced around the four of them again. Branok sipped his whiskey and stared into space, his laughter forgotten once I walked into the room. Lynx was ignoring me, leaning forward with his elbows braced on his knees. Arren had moved closer, resting his forearms on the back of the couch; I could feel his presence just behind me, threatening enough to make my skin prickle.

But Talisyn was still smiling, as if there was nothing to fear. Foolish boy.

“Where’s Jaik?” I asked.

“He never showed.” Talisyn eyed me skeptically, but I could have sworn there was a glimmer of happiness. Was he glad I was alive?

The same couldn’t be said for the golden twins. Were they the ones behind the murder attempt? Maybe they’d exhibited some rare independence and gone behind Jaik’s back.

I didn’t want to be unfair though. I was giving everyone the chance to get on my murder list tonight.

“Are you all right?” Talisyn asked me, crinkling his nose in disdain as he glanced over me.

“Wonderful.” I didn’t bother to look down at my bare chest and soaking wet trousers as I polished off the second glass of wine. “I just hate to be late for a party.”

“It looks like you’re missing some clothes.” Talisyn poured himself a fresh glass of whiskey, then to my surprise,

held a second glass to me, though he didn't move from his spot in front of the crackling flames.

I rose to join him at the fireplace, glad to get closer to the warming flames. "This is the hot new look. I hear all the Fae royalty beyond are doing wet-and-bedraggled."

No one asked about my evening activities, although from the glances they exchanged, almost behind my back, I had a feeling they were very curious. But were they curious how I escaped? Or were they curious how I survived?

How much did the answers to those questions change things? I'd want revenge either way. But their motives determined whether it was the stabby kind of revenge or not.

But there would be time to sort that out later, because my stepmother swept in briefly, with a pinched look on her face.

I was very familiar with that look. Alis almost always had it when it came to anything involving me, and she was probably not very happy that I had gone missing when she intended to parade me around. She glanced around, looking far less satisfied than usual to have five such august heroes drinking her booze, then minced angrily out.

"I'll be back," I said.

"No rush," Lynx said magnanimously.

I offered him a sweet smile before I remembered Lucien wasn't likely to give him any such thing, even sardonically. Eventually, Lynx was going to get tired of being such a dickhead, wasn't he? The Lynx I met in the library instead of the training yard seemed like a sweetheart. Maybe Branok had the magical effect of turning Lynx into a monster.

Or maybe they had their reasons for hating me. Maybe Honor could charm one of the Golden Twins—ha, that did not seem promising—and wiggle the truth out of them. If not, I needed to find Alina and uncover exactly what her story was. No one was likely to let me chitchat with her, given whose face I was wearing at the moment, so perhaps it would have to be Honor who squirreled into her life. But I had to try. I had to know exactly what had happened.

I walked into the corridor and glanced around, making my way toward the back of the house where the servants' stairs were. There was a constant rattle of dishes and prattle of voices coming from the kitchen. All hands were downstairs making Alis' party magical. When the stairway was clear, I slipped up the servants' stairs to reach the second floor.

I darted into Honor's room, hoping that anyone who saw me would assume once again that I was having an illicit tryst with myself.

Honestly, now that I'd had my first orgasms with Talisyn and Jaik, I wished I had had more trysts with myself all along.

If it weren't for the annoyance of the men that I had to deal with now, and the precarious nature of life as Lucien Finn, I'd be in a much happier mood now that I was beginning to have regular orgasms.

I hurried into my gleaming white bathroom to wash away the stink that clung to me. Even after I scrubbed my body twice, that odor lingered in my nostrils. I hastily sprayed on some perfume, hoping that it was just my imagination. The monster and the corpse in the labyrinth would probably haunt me.

A long red gown with a diving neckline and beautiful, billowing skirts hung from one of the hooks in my bedroom.

It was truly beautiful. Although my complaints about my stepmother were many and varied, there were some things that she did well. She certainly knew how to dress.

It was sexy—sexier than I probably would have picked out for myself.

And I was thrilled to wear it in front of the guys.

I wanted to have an effect on them. I wanted to drive them wild and make them want me. Even if I didn't exactly want *them* right now.

In that nightmare down below, I came face to face with my deepest childhood fears: monsters, enclosed spaces, drowning, all in one particularly unsavory evening, and I knew who I had to thank for the terror that still clung to me.

The memory of Talisyn's face as he closed the door, of Jaik, and the others pausing as they let me continue forward to my doom, might haunt my nightmares, too.

But maybe not. Not if I took my power back, not if I made them pay. I'd been stalked by a monster—and worse, by my own panic—tonight, but I'd also murdered a monster.

Maybe someday, I'd be able to murder the fear that sat like a knot choking my throat.

I raked my hand through my long, red hair, which was only faintly damp by now. If only I was confident enough in my ability to wield flames without lighting myself on fire; I didn't want to leave the faintest connection between Honor and Lucien.

I opened my jewelry cabinet and looked for my favorite gold and jade bracelets, the ones that Honor didn't dare wear as a maid, but I couldn't find them. I had to settle for a simpler golden set. Then I gave myself a final once-over in the mirror. My hair cascaded around my shoulders, and my cheeks were pink, my eyes wide. My face was innocent, but the way this dress clung to my curves channeled my mischievous side.

This time, I strode gracefully down the sweeping stairs with my shoulders back, my chin held high. The interior doors downstairs had been pushed open, turning our entryway, dining room, ballroom and receiving rooms into one enormous ballroom, dripping with brightly colored flowers.

The guys had finally left their whiskey to rejoin the party. Talisyn was dancing with someone, smiling down at her, but when he saw me, he came to a dead stop. He forgot to twirl her and she tripped, caught his arm, glared at him. But he didn't even notice.

Lynx stared at me, his mouth agape, until Branok cuffed him in the back of the head. But I'd caught a glimpse of the desire written across Branok's face, a second of raw longing before he caught himself.

Even Arren gave me a second glance, his eyes widening faintly before they narrowed, as if he saw this dress as a threat.

The sense of power that flooded me was a welcome relief to how I'd felt the rest of the night. I reached the bottom of the stairs just as Talisyn reached me, and I smiled up at him, struck by how quickly he'd abandoned his dancing partner.

"Honor, you look beautiful today." Talisyn's gaze was admiring, the look on his face very different from when he slammed the door, shutting me into the realm of nightmares.

I swallowed hard, tried to push all my anger down so deep that it couldn't seep through the faintest crack in my façade. "You look handsome as ever, Talisyn."

I'd felt guilty about the fact that I'd had sex with Jaik and I hadn't talked to Talisyn. I hadn't wanted to see them angry with each other.

But I didn't owe them anything. If jealousy fractured them apart... Well, it was a bad day for dragon royals, and they really, really deserved a bad day. Nothing was going to compare with my evening of wearing a corpse-coat and dancing with a minotaur shifter.

Talisyn held out his hand. "Dance with me."

I smiled at him, but didn't take the outstretched hand. "Are you giving me a choice?"

"I've never needed to give you a choice because you would always take one." He didn't lower his hand, his face confident that I would choose him. "Are you going to pretend that you wouldn't have just smacked me if you didn't want to dance?"

"You have a point." I agreed. "But do you really think I could have smacked you in front of all those people, Lord Talisyn?"

"Yes," he said without hesitation. "You're not like anyone I've ever met before. I can't imagine you doing anything but what you want."

"I'm not doing what I want right now," I answered.

"And what is that?"

Stabbing you through the heart.

But of course I didn't say that. I smiled up at him and twirled slightly letting my dress swirl around my legs. "You."

His brows rose. "I can never tell just how innocent you are."

"A little less than I was before meeting the dragon royals." I finally took his hand, and he drew me onto the dance floor.

"That's too bad," he said, but his hand wrapped low around my hip, his fingers pressing into my ass, in a way that wasn't innocent at all either.

"Is it? I don't think so."

"If you're happy," he said, "That's a wonderful thing."

"So very happy," I said. The stench of rotten flesh still lingered in my nose, no matter how perfumed I was, no matter how many floral bouquets dripped from every surface.

He gave me a look that I couldn't quite read. "That's a pretty extreme level of happiness. I'm not sure I've ever felt that happy."

"You should try it."

"Maybe I've met a girl who will make me that happy."

Oh, I doubt that very much. I kept that thought to myself. It wasn't happiness that I planned to offer. "I'd love to meet this girl."

The two of us moved steadily across the dance floor. Even dancing the most staid waltzes, there was something so effortlessly graceful and sexy in the way Talisyn moved his tall, powerful body.

"You should meet this girl," he agreed. "She's something special."

He was talking about me, right? I was pretty sure, but there was still a sliver of doubt that made me anxious. I stared at him suspiciously as the two of us danced across the floor.

"Special, hmm? Tell me about her."

“I don’t think she even realizes how special she is. I don’t think she can see herself truly.”

“I don’t know why you’d think that you could see her, then.”

“Sometimes, we need someone to see us in a more generous light before we can see ourselves that way,” he said, quietly but confidently.

I would have found him very charming if he hadn’t tried to kill me three hours earlier. “What else about this girl?”

“She’s as strong and cocky as a dragon shifter. Even though all her life, people have told her that she’s probably nothing,” he said. “There’s something about her inner power that staggers me because that strength doesn’t come from her soul creature, her family, or her money, like the rest of us. It’s just...her.”

If he’d said those words before tonight, they would have made my heart sing. Now I murmured glib nothings in response, ducking my head because he regarded me too intensely.

I couldn’t let his pretty words thaw my heart that had iced over in the labyrinth. There was a part of me that was too drawn toward these dragon royals, a strange magnetism that left me feeling undone and vulnerable. Maybe there was a connection between us because we were all dragon shifters, even though they didn’t know it.

But they’d reminded me tonight that a woman in my world could never let herself be vulnerable. These men weren’t my heroes, flying to my rescue. I had to play the princess but be the hero in my own fairy tale.

“Your friends are staring at us,” I murmured into Talisyn’s ear. “They don’t approve of me.”

His gaze followed mine to where Arren glowered; maybe his face had gotten stuck like that. “It’s not personal. They wouldn’t approve of anyone I really cared about.”

“So you’re allowed to fuck all the girls but not...” I faltered, gazing up at him. “Well, we haven’t yet...”

Let him think I was this clumsy, lovestruck idiot who faltered even trying to put a word to how Talisyn felt for me.

“Not yet,” he said.

“Not yet? How arrogant,” I teased.

The song ended, and I disentangled myself from him. “I’m going to try to win over your friends.”

“You don’t need to do that.” He frowned, trying to catch my hand again. “I like to annoy them.”

I smiled at him over my shoulder as I made my way toward Lynx. Talisyn stared after me, a disappointed look on his face, but he was immediately swarmed by other women. He ignored them in favor of joining Arren, who handed him a glass of brandy without ever taking his watchful eyes off me.

Lynx didn’t hate me when I was in Honor’s form, which was a very strange shift from when I was being Lucien. He seemed to be the tenderest and geekiest of their group, although given that he was a tall, muscular, bronze golden twin, calling him *the dork* didn’t seem quite right. But I had a feeling that if anyone had a kinder, humbler side, besides Jaik himself—who kept his kinder side tightly bandaged by that harsh exterior—it was Lynx.

“Talisyn is exhausting,” I said with a laugh as I joined Lynx and Branok. “I’m going to go for a walk in the garden. Does one of you want to come with me?”

“No,” Arren said from behind me. I was surprised he’d joined us. “I don’t like gardens and I don’t like you.”

Ah, he’d joined us so he could insult me. That made much more sense.

“You’re always such a grouch,” I said with a smile. “Do some women find that endearing?”

No,” Lynx said dryly. “No, they don’t.”

Arren glared at him but let it pass. Branok started to say something, but Lynx cut him off, resting his hand on Branok’s arm.

Branok thought that I was a spy this whole time. Maybe I didn't want to be in the garden alone with him. If he tried to quietly murder me and leave my body under the rosebushes, I was just as likely to quietly murder *him*. Branok and I probably shouldn't be left alone.

"I'll take a walk with you," Lynx said. "I heard the grounds are nice."

"Have you been here before?"

He offered his elbow, and I looped my hand over his corded forearm.

"Not since I was a boy. My father used to come here on business quite often."

"You'd think I would remember you," I said, "unless it was before my time."

"It might have been while you were still in hiding with your mother."

A familiar ache shot through me. My father had planted the rumor that I was the daughter of his mistress, and my mother had gone along with it. I could never inherit, but the lie still protected me, gave me some sort of place in our world.

The story had made him a bit of a laughingstock in the court. But my father was always willing to do whatever was necessary, to do what was right, even if no one else understood what he was doing. Sometimes, I doubted I'd ever measure up to the legacy my parents had left me.

"So where *is* Jaik tonight?" I asked.

"I don't know," Lynx said, "He went to see his father, and that's never a good time for anyone."

"Do you all have bad relationships with your fathers?"

"It varies. You know how grumpy Arren is, but his bad moods are largely genetic. His father's a taciturn, stern asshole, but he loves his son and his wife. Arren's had a hard time since his mother died."

It was hard to imagine Arren feeling other emotions besides anger and irritation, the two I saw on display. Trying to imagine him grieving, burying his face in his hands, shoulders heaving, gave me pause. “I lost my mom too. It’s so hard.”

“Your adoptive mother?”

“She’s my mother, even though she didn’t birth me. But I like to make it very clear that I’m not related to Alis.”

“It’s funny, because you two look like you could be mother and daughter, and yet in every encounter I’ve had with her, she certainly seems like she’s nothing like you.”

“Oh and what am I like?” My voice rose on a teasing note. It wasn’t as if these guys liked me either.

“I don’t always know what to make of you. None of us do.”

“I’m not trying to trick you, Lynx. I’m just trying to live my life.”

He chewed his lower lip, gazing down at me thoughtfully. “It’s not your fault. But as a general rule, we don’t really like anyone except for other dragon royals. So your sudden presence in our lives has been... unexpected.”

“Why don’t you like anyone else?” No wonder my description to the serving girl had resonated.

“Well, the jealousy that other shifters feel make them hate us, which makes it difficult to ever trust them.”

He’d said the words as if everyone else’s jealousy was a fact of life. “Why do you think they’re all jealous of you? Why would a bear or a wolf think that it was better to be a dragon? Maybe some people like being who they are. They don’t need to be something else.”

Lynx smiled at me a little bit indulgently. He clearly thought that it was best to be a dragon. “And do you like who you are?”

“I’ve got some pretty mixed feelings about it,” I admitted. “It isn’t what I expected.”

“What did you expect to be?” Lynx stopped, studying the night-blooming roses, their fragrant white blooms unfurled after midnight.

“You know, I don’t even remember now. But nothing feels the way I thought it would.”

He pulled one rose loose, turned to offer it to me, then dropped it on the stone walkway and stuck his bleeding finger in his mouth. He’d been pricked by a thorn. “I don’t think anything ever feels the way we expect it to be. Life is always kind of disappointing.”

“Well, that’s something I expect to hear from Arren.”

He laughed. He was telling me so much about how the dragons saw the world. What else could I weasel out of him tonight?

Before I could decide how to play my next move, a servant scurried out to see me. The look on his face was dark and worried.

“Honor,” the servant said. “Your mother would very much like to see you.”

“*Stepmother.*” And even though I was a powerful dragon now, something in my stomach still curdled when I had to face the woman who had mistreated me for the last several years.

It felt as if I were a child again, about to be punished for some stupid childish misdeed.

Maybe Lynx read something in my face because he said, “Do you want me to go with you?”

He distrusted me and yet he was so willing to be a buffer when I went to see my stepmother. That unexpected kindness certainly made me think they didn’t hate me at all.

But I didn’t want anyone to see me dealing with Alis. She’d always had a knack for humiliating me, and I couldn’t stand to lose what little power I’d regained tonight.

“It’s all right. I’m sure she wants to have a private conversation. She’s just so happy to be getting engaged. I’ll catch up with you later.”

He half-bowed in answer. I left him behind and followed the servant back through the maze of night-blooming flowers toward the bright lights of the house.

“She asked you wait in here,” the servant said, escorting me into an unused drawing room at the back of the house, in the one-story addition built at the end of the hall. This room was next to the conservatory, where she’d grown all sorts of rare flowers smuggled from the other isles. My father had added the drawing room to the castle for her collection of lutes and harps and fiddles. These rooms had been so full of life—greenery and music and Mother.

There were new signs of life in this room, as if Henrick were beginning to take it over as his own drawing room. I realized with a jolt that he was moving in *here*, that Alis wasn’t moving *out*.

I wandered around the room, curiously, studying the new furniture. There was a giant wooden cross along one wall with leather bonds hanging loosely from it.

A shiver ran down my spine. This shouldn’t be here. It looked out of place in the sunny drawing room where my mother used to play the piano and sing with me. If Alis and Henrick had commandeered her rooms for games they played between the two of them, then it should be private—not something they wanted me to see.

I was feeling doubly disquieted when the two of them finally entered behind me. They were laughing gayly, deep in conversation, always performing for someone.

The second the doors closed behind them, the laughter cut off. Alis turned her furious gaze on me, and some childish part of me deep inside lurched.

“Where have you been?” Alis hissed at me.

“Dancing with the dragon royals.” Surely she’d appreciate that. It made her look good that her stepdaughter had the heirs’ attention.

“You’re late.”

“I was unavoidably detained at the academy.”

Henrick scoffed. “You should quit that ridiculous job. I don’t want my daughters working.”

My heart dropped. I wasn’t his daughter, but that didn’t mean he couldn’t force me to do as he wished—especially when he was in the same house as Hanna.

“Alis appreciates me bringing in the extra money, don’t you?” I asked, purposefully trying to make my stepmother sound pathetic. Since after all, she *had* stolen my money.

“You’ve disappointed me.” Alis ignored anything she didn’t like, as usual. “I’m so unhappy that I’ve had to delay my announcement this evening until you finally arrived, finally ready to act like part of our family.”

“I wouldn’t exactly say I’m ready to be part of the family,” I said, since she’d done all she could to exclude me for years, once she’d realized she couldn’t win me over with sugary smiles, “But I am ready for the announcement.”

My stepmother went red in the cheeks except for the tight strained white lines around her eyes. It was a familiar look. I was always able to bait her and make her crazy so easily. Maybe that shouldn’t have been my hobby. But to be fair, she was pretty heinous to me.

But Henrick merely looked amused.

“Such a spirited little thing,” he mused, stepping closer to me. “It’s strange to think that you and Hanna are only half sisters, because you have so very much in common. So much spirit.”

There was something strange about the way he was talking, something that gave me a bad feeling. He talked about our *spirit* as if it were something that was fun for him. Something that he enjoyed. And yet I didn’t get the feeling that he was the kind of man who appreciated girls speaking our own mind, forging our own paths.

“Thank you,” I said uncertainly.

He made me feel thrown off and uncomfortable in a way that I very rarely felt.

“But I hope you won’t disappoint your stepmother again, that you’re ready to take your responsibilities in the family seriously.”

“What responsibilities would those be?”

“Your stepmother has provided so much for you. Looked after you like a mother, loved you as her own.”

I snorted.

Alis went from red to purple-ish with rage.

But Henrick only smiled more broadly. “You will show us both the appropriate respect. If you don’t, you’ll be punished.”

“Really? That seems extremely unlikely.” I was already in a bit of a murderous funk. If my stepfather pushed me, I might have to ask Calla to help me hide a body. “Why in the world would I let you punish me? I’m a grown woman.”

He might try to make me quit my job, make me dependent on him for money, forbid me to leave the house. But my eyes couldn’t help being drawn to the ridiculous contraption against the wall, its leather bonds hanging open like an invitation.

“You are,” he agreed. “But Hanna is not. Hanna remains under your mother’s guardianship.”

The room went sideways. He’d use Hanna to control me.

He smiled as if he could see my reaction and it thrilled him. I quickly schooled my face to look as if I didn’t care about anything. The less I seemed to care about Hanna, the safer she probably was in this house.

I had to get her away from Alis and Henrick while keeping her inheritance intact.

“I see,” I said icily. “I’m not sure how well that would work for you.”

“We can see right now,” he suggested.

“That’s all right. I’d hate to distract from your engagement.”

He gave me a condescending smile that made me want to transform into a dragon and snap off his head, before he said, “So I thought.”

I went out to their stupid party and smiled as they held hands and announced their engagement. I clapped for them as hard as anyone, and I didn’t meet my sister’s eyes when she made faces behind their backs. I didn’t want to risk her getting in trouble with them.

Things kept changing, and they kept changing in new and horrible ways, and I didn’t know how to stop the rapid spinning from disaster to disaster.

When the announcements were over, I’d seen my sister off to her bed upstairs, although the music of the party kept leaking through the door into her dark room. She’d buried her face in my shoulder and sobbed and I’d wrapped my arms around her.

I didn’t understand the intensity of her feelings. I’d never understood why Father married Alis in the first place, and so her marrying someone else felt like nothing to me, except for worrying about the threat Henrick posed to Hanna. But I patted my sister’s back and murmured comforting words in her ear. She was entitled to her feelings even if I didn’t understand them.

When her hitching sobs finally dropped into a snoring sleep, I smoothed my dress, squared my shoulders, and came back down the stairs.

Talisyn watched me from across the party. I smiled as if I were just so happy for my stepmother. And I didn’t think anyone would be able to read my true feelings. After all, except for my bizarre tendency to blurt out what I was thinking when I was around dragon shifters, I’d spent my life learning to be guarded. *If there’s anything a well-off girl learns, it’s to keep her mouth shut.*

Talisyn made his way across the party. A few girls stopped him, smiling up at him, their eyes shining as they looked at him. The first time someone stopped him, he made a quick remark and smiled at them, touched a shoulder, and moved on.

When the next girl blocked him, he gently pushed her aside without even stopping. His gaze was fixed on me. He moved across the room toward me as if he were relentless, unstoppable.

It gave me a strange shivery feeling through my stomach. I turned and fled into the garden. I couldn't stand the way he was looking at me with so much concern when I knew what he'd just done to Lucien. And maybe I shouldn't take their revenge against Lucien personally. Lucien had wronged them somehow. But I couldn't help feeling as if Tal had betrayed me.

I needed time, time to process what had happened. But Talisyn wasn't giving me time. I made my way out into the garden, slipping amongst the blooming night flowers. My stepmother had ordered a large and elaborate night garden planted. It was beautiful. She never came out here. It wasn't like when my mother had planted so much of the garden herself. I saw my mother normally everywhere when I was in the day garden.

Maybe that was why I so often fled to the night garden. Maybe I would have disappointed my real mother, my father, the ones who had chosen me when I was nine. I was trying my best, but it never seemed to be good enough. I was trying to protect Hanna, but that charge, the most important task in all my life, slipped steadily through my fingers. I wasn't sure I could protect her from Alis and Henrick.

Talisyn spoke, his voice quiet behind me. "Is everything all right?"

I exhaled a long shaky breath. Given the way we'd danced earlier, I knew I would sound crazy, but that didn't stop me from blurting out the truth. "I don't want to talk to you right now."

"ALL RIGHT." HIS WARM, COMMANDING PRESENCE WAS CLOSER now, at my elbow, and my heart leapt traitorously in my chest. "We don't have to talk. But I'll sit here with you, if you want."

I turned to him, confusion flaring like dragon's breath. "You want to...sit quietly?"

I'd never heard Talisyn stop talking.

"If it's what you need," he said, "I can be quiet as a mouse shifter."

"I doubt that very much."

"Try me," he said. "I care about your needs as much as I care about my own need to *chatter incessantly*, as Jaik has so kindly described it. And if you need quiet, then quiet you shall have."

"All right, let's see it." I patted the garden bench.

He sat, his broad shoulder briefly brushing mine. He rested his hands on his knees, looking around at the night garden.

I waited for him to break and speak. But he was remarkably silent. I genuinely hadn't known he was capable of such a thing.

How was it possible that this man had led me into the terror that I'd just experienced in the labyrinth, and yet, there was something so comforting about his warm solid presence beside me?

"All right, you win," I said finally.

Talisyn looked over, his eyes widening, then shushed me. "I'm enjoying the peace."

"You are so full of crap," I said, and he finally gave in and laughed.

But he still didn't dictate the conversation. Instead, he rested his hand lightly on my shoulder and said, "If there is anything that you want to talk about, or anyone you want me to kill, please let me know. I'm here for you, Honor."

"You probably shouldn't be. You're not going to make Jaik very happy."

A pained look came over his face.

"Or Arren," I added. "Arren really hates me."

“Arren hates everyone.” He didn’t argue with the statement. “He’s just very protective of his family.”

“You guys see each other as family.” At least the miserable fuckheads had each other—and it worried me that I longed to be one of them sometimes.

“Yes,” he said. “At their best, I feel like I’m very lucky to have them. And when things aren’t at their best... I mean, we *are* like a family. They drive me crazy.”

He distracted me from my worries for a few moments but I quickly found them coming back. After all, Alis and Henrick had just threatened to hurt Hanna, and I didn’t want to see how imaginative Alis could be when she was trying to get back at me. Worst of all, if I didn’t stay on my stepmother’s good side, she could refuse to let Hanna go to school at all, and I wanted so badly for Hanna to have the chances I hadn’t had.

He glanced over at me as if he were very curious about what was going on in my head, but he didn’t push. The pained look on his face made me smile, though.

“What?” he demanded.

“I can tell that being quiet is killing you slowly.”

He plunged to one knee, kneeling beside me. “For you, I’ll die, Lady Honor.”

I couldn’t resist giggling at his dramatics. I had so much to worry about, but he made me feel like I could forget my pain for a few hours. I could pretend indulging my desire for Talisyn was the surest way to ruin the royals, but the truth was a complicated stew in my heart. “I had a bad night, Talisyn.”

“I can tell. You’re normally so irrepressibly bubbly.”

“Jaik usually uses the word *reckless*.”

“He is so judgmental.” He heaved a dramatic sigh.” Don’t worry, he judges me all the time too. What are you going to do?”

“I don’t know.” The rose Lynx had picked for me lay trampled on the stone, and I rose to pick it up, careful not to

prick myself. “I have to face situations that are far beyond my capacity to cope with them.”

“How did you end up becoming a maid?” He tilted his head, studying me. “I didn’t expect to see you here. I didn’t know that you would be Alis’ daughter.”

“I’m not really her daughter, as she’s always made clear.” I stripped the thorns absently off the rose, one by one. “She married my father, but not until I was twelve. I’ve spent most of my life trying to stay out of her way.”

“You aren’t close.”

“Not at all.”

Talisyn rose to his feet and took the rose from my fingertips. He tucked it behind my ear, and I breathed in the dark, heady scent that seemed to be his own. “She seems like a very foolish woman then.”

“Why’s that?”

“If I had the option of being close to you, I’d take it.”

I studied him. Arren had told him to stay away from me that one day on the stairs. Had Jaik warned him off too? Jaik was the undisputed leader of their little group.

If I could make Tal rebel against Jaik, I could destroy their peace with a kiss.

Warmth and sexiness radiated from Talisyn. Jaik and I had lied to each other that we were playing once and letting our longing for each other go. But it hadn’t worked for me. I longed for more of him, for more of Tal.

“Talisyn,” I whispered.

“Yes, Honor?”

He looked at me as if he knew what I wanted, but a devilish gleam danced in his eyes. Jaik had kissed me first, had taken complete control of the situation. And that was Jaik to a tee. But Talisyn was different. Talisyn would probably make me work for it for his own amusement.

“Let’s walk in the garden.” He rose and offered me his arm.

The two of us began to stroll through the arches of white, blooming flowers. The air was sweetly scented with freesia and jasmine.

“The night air is delicious,” I said softly.

“So beautiful,” he mused, but he was looking at me.

I had to laugh out loud. “Did you practice that line? Maybe with Jaik, or the golden twins?”

He gave me an outraged look, but he didn’t try to deny it. They were very good with the ladies.

“Save your lines for the girls that are impressed by them,” I scolded him.

“Oh, you’re a little bit impressed by my lines,” he teased right back.

“You’re ridiculous.”

“Maybe, but ridiculous can be a whole lot of fun.”

I didn’t doubt Talisyn would be fun. That was definitely not the problem I had with

him.

The toe of my slipper caught the uneven edge of a stone. I could’ve caught myself, but in a split second, I decided to let myself fall.

And he pulled me up against his heart, his arm a bar against my lower back. He smiled down at me. “Clumsy Honor. I’m going to think that your hobby of jumping balconies should come to an end.”

“I’ve never been so clumsy before. Perhaps you put some kind of curse on me.”

He grinned at me. “It wouldn’t be a curse, beautiful girl.”

He tilted my chin up, and his lips met mine. His kiss was more tentative than Jaik’s had been, his lips soft and warm.

And he tasted of whiskey, an unexpected sour bite, underneath all his sweetness.

Our lips brushed in several soft, sweet kisses before I pulled away.

“Are you allowed to be doing this?” I meant to sound cool and teasing, but my voice came out breathless.

He had more of an impact on me than I wanted to admit.

“I’m not sure that anyone can keep me away from you,” he murmured. “I don’t understand it, Honor, but I do feel something for you. Something that I can’t make sense of.”

“Something you can’t make sense of,” I echoed. “Wow, *you* seem to be under a curse that is making your usual charm vanish.”

“You know what I mean,” he said, “I’ve never been this... affected...by a girl before.”

“You make me pity all the girls that you’ve left behind before,” I said, then realized it was true. “I might not like the noble girls, but it’s still pretty hurtful that you’re able to bring them into your bed, and then forget their names the next morning.”

“You’re different.”

“I don’t believe you.”

His lips parted, and he dared to look *hurt*.

“Well, it’s true.” I said, “I don’t believe that I’m different.”

“If I got the chance to be with you, I wouldn’t leave you in the morning.”

I would have to leave *him* in the morning and go back to being Lucien. The thought made me cross.

“I don’t want to worry about the future. I’ve done enough of that today,” I shot back. “I just want to have fun tonight.”

“I’m always down for fun. We could run away for the night. I could take you to dinner, take you shopping.”

“You want to go shopping?” I asked in disbelief.

“I want you to know that I mean what I’m saying. I’m not trying to make you one more cheap conquest.”

“So charming,” I mused.

He scrunched his face in a way that reminded me of an adorable little boy being scolded, I’d never expected to see it from smooth Talisyn. “I can never say the right thing to you.”

“You’re doing fine,” I encouraged him. “You were pretty smooth earlier.”

“You didn’t seem particularly impressed.”

“It’s not my nature to be impressed by dragon royals,” I said lightly. “After all, I’ve cleaned your rooms.”

“That makes me so uncomfortable,” he admitted.

“Well prepare yourself, because you’re back in my rotation this week,” I said.

He let out a groan. “But then at least I’ll get to see you. I haven’t seen enough of you lately.”

It was strange they weren’t seeing enough of me when I was seeing so very much of them. The dragon royals consumed my days now that I had to pretend to be Lucien. I made a non-committal sound.

“Oh, you don’t miss us?” He tilted an eyebrow my way.

“I miss you, very specifically. Your friends are not particularly warm and fuzzy feeling about me.”

“My friends are idiots, but you have to give them a chance. They’re not who they seem to be on the outside.”

Talisyn walked me out to the carriage that was waiting outside for him, then said something quietly to the driver, who scurried off.

“What’s this?”

“You said you needed to forget your troubles.”

I was confused, but pleasantly so. My trek through the icy water of the conduits felt distant. “I was thinking of something

more physical, but I can't wait to see what you were able to plan, Talisyn, I am so *very* curious."

He groaned. "Now I have to pay for my rare bout of romanticism."

He offered me his arm again and I took it, feeling differently than I had a few hours before. Maybe I had to separate Lucien and Honor entirely. Maybe Honor could lose herself in the company of these men freely, and Lucien could be the one to plot. While I needed to make anyone who had hurt me suffer, it really was a lot of fun to be with Talisyn, when he was being his best self.

The two of us wandered the beautiful cobblestone streets. Flowers spilled over the walls that surrounded each fine city estate. I wanted a respite from my thoughts, and Talisyn offered me just that, telling me quirky and often highly inappropriate anecdotes about the city. If I believed Talisyn, the city was both haunted and depraved.

"This way." He stopped at the bright blue door of a shop. In the windows to either side of the door were dozens of books. The lantern above the door was dark, though.

"It's closed, Tal."

He flashed me a grin so beautiful and mischievous, something in my chest fractured. He was hard to hate. "Not to us."

"Are we committing a crime?"

"Why don't you sound worried?" He raised his brows, even as he pushed the door open. "I worry you'll corrupt me."

"Give me a chance." I ducked under his arm and walked into the shop, which smelled of leather and pages.

"Lynx told me about how he failed to impress you in the library, and I thought maybe we could buy some romance novels. The owner opened the shop for us."

"Maybe I can punish Lynx by reading them to him." I eyed him curiously. "Would you read one?"

"If you told me I should."

“Oh, So you’re going to be obedient to my whims?” I teased.

“Isn’t that part of what you’re looking for in a man,” he shot back, and I had to laugh. He wasn’t wrong.

Talisyn followed behind me as I moved down the shelves of the bookstore. The shop owner sat behind the counter on his stool, yawning sleepily from time to time, but smiling contentedly. How much money had Talisyn spent on this whim for the grouchy old man with his bushy white eyebrows to look so pleased to be sitting there at two o’clock in the morning?

I picked up a book, looked at its cover, put it back.

Talisyn leaned against the shelf, his big arms braced over his chest. “You should get that one too.”

“Do you want me to fill up my room? Well, I should say my half of Calla’s room. She was there first, it’s hard not to feel like it’s really still her room.”

“I want you to have everything you want,” he answered.

When I put books back after that, if I looked reluctant at all, he quickly pulled them back out again, and added them to the growing stack on his arm. He vanished for a moment while I was going down one line of shelves, and I frowned at him when he came back without any books.

“I put them on the counter.”

“No, no, I still have to go through those and see which ones I really want.”

“You can do that at home.”

“Talisyn, I can’t own more books than I can ever read.”

“Why not? Don’t you look at books as friends? Why shouldn’t you always have friends ready to spend time with you?”

“That sounds wonderful. But wasteful.”

He shrugged. “Well, I am a lord. We’re generally pretty wasteful, but at least it can be for a good cause for once.”

Talisyn's coachman came in and began to load the books into the coach.

"He'll make sure these get delivered to Calla's room," Talisyn said.

"But now I'm going to be too busy reading to spend time with you," I teased.

He scoffed. "I think I'll take my chances. As much as you might love to read, I think I can offer you some more interesting experiences than even reading."

"I don't know, you might find that you're disappointed."

"I don't think I could ever be disappointed by you, Honor." There, in the midst of the store, he caught me around the waist, pulled me against his hard body and kissed me. His lips moved slowly against mine, taking his time, until my lips parted with a breathless gasp. His hand cupped my cheek as his tongue plundered mine.

The old man at the counter coughed under his breath. Then the coachman said something to him. The two of them moved to the doorway and the coachman said, "We'll make sure the shop gets locked up whenever you're done here, your Highness."

The door closed behind them with the jingle of bells, and I looked up at Talisyn in bemusement.

"What did you just do?"

"I can tell that you're more impressed by books than you are by me, so I'm winning you over any way I can."

I laughed. "I'm not exactly playing hard to get. I want you, Talisyn. But I have to warn you, I'm a little bit inexperienced."

"How inexperienced?"

"I was a virgin," I admitted, "until last week."

Jealousy tightened his lips, flared in his gaze. Then he relaxed—but was that an act? He sounded back to his usual self when he said lightly, "I hope he was good to you."

He didn't know Jaik and I had sex. Interesting. "Do you want to know who he was?"

He let out a short bark of a laugh. "No, because I might kill him."

"Jealous?" He and Jaik had shared a girl in the library. I hadn't thought he would be capable of much jealousy before I saw that look cross his face.

"It's not a trait I normally embody. But you bring out all kinds of different things for me, things that I've never felt before."

Maybe I shouldn't have sex with my dragon royal crush in a bookstore, but maybe I shouldn't do a lot of things.

Maybe I shouldn't pretend to be nothing but a servant when I was a dragon shifter.

Maybe as long as people made me do things I shouldn't, I could do other things that I shouldn't for my own sake.

I grabbed his lapel, wrenched him down to me, and kissed him hard.

Was I getting revenge?

Was I getting what I wanted?

Was I totally lost?

His hands slid up my sides, tugging up my dress, and when his fingers brushed my bare skin, I swayed forward. My chin tilted up treacherously, inviting him closer, as his lips plundered my throat.

I didn't have answers to any of my questions.

But Talisyn's body was against mine, and I didn't care.



CHAPTER
THIRTY-ONE

T *alisyn*

I WANTED TO FIX WHATEVER WAS BOTHERING HONOR, BUT I could tell she didn't want to open up to me. Honestly, we didn't even know each other that well. I didn't know why I felt the magnetic pull to her that I did, but I wasn't going to pretend I didn't feel it. I felt as comfortable with her as I did with my brothers, but there was something new.

And it wasn't just lust. It was an edge of excitement, a thrill of hope for the future—even though I knew that hope was ridiculous. The two of us didn't have a chance at a life together.

When she seared her lips to mine, my heart beat too quickly, in a way it never had before. I kissed her back, losing myself in her in the feeling of her warm body as my hands traced the satin lines of her dress.

“You're a dangerous man for me, aren't you?” she said softly.

I pulled back to regard her, wondering what she was thinking, but that lovely face never gave much away. “Not dangerous to you. Definitely a bad idea though.”

We'd be fools to invite her into our world. Our world was dangerous, and ugly, and we had the fight coming with the Olds that we all knew that we'd face sooner or later. No one knew it better than me. I had no intention of letting Jaik's father rule with my own at his side much longer. Not when I knew how little they cared about our people.

But I didn't want to deny her, or deny myself, completely. We'd protect her from the Olds. We had more secrets than they

would ever see coming.

I could indulge myself a little. I could have a few precious nights, a past to give me strength as I faced our future.

“Aren’t *I* a bad idea? Arren made that very clear.”

Arren was right when he said she probably didn’t have honest reasons for wanting to be close to us. “I don’t want to talk about Arren right now.”

She let out a lovely little peal of a laugh that seemed to strike straight to my soul. “I don’t want to talk about him either. I can imagine him glaring at us from the shadows.”

She glanced toward one corner, and I couldn’t help but follow her gaze, even though I knew she was playing.

“Let me see if I can distract you from worrying about my surly friend.”

As I kissed her long and slow, her body relaxed against mine. The tension in her muscles that she’d carried all night softened. I loved that I had that effect on her, that I could ease her burden, if only for a night.

And even if we both knew it was a bad idea, we couldn’t stop touching each other.

She yanked my shirt loose from my waistband, then ran her hands up over my skin. She reached one of my nipples and tweaked it playfully.

I pulled back, mock affronted. The mischievous way her lips curved up made me want to kiss her again, though, so I forgot to tease her and pressed my lips against hers. Her lips parted, the two of us trading kisses until I murmured, “I have a funny feeling if you did that to me, then you want me to do it to you.”

I wrapped my hands around her thighs and hoisted her up. Her legs wrapped around my waist and she let out another bubbly laugh. I carried her across the room and laid her on her back on a table in the corner. We were surrounded by the sparkling lights that hung along the ceiling and from the wrought iron of the second story balcony.

For anyone who loved books—and I did—this place was truly magical. I was glad I got to share it with her. When I was a child, I used to take refuge in the shop. The grumpy shopkeeper wasn't just someone I was paying to humor me, but someone who had humored me since I was a little boy. And while that might have begun because he enjoyed taking my allowance money from my pocket, over time, Wil and I had developed a surprisingly cordial relationship.

I all but tore Honor's dress off her body. She lay back, her smile self-satisfied.

"I want to do something for you." Her voice was a husky whisper. She teased her fingers along my belt, until she reached the buckle. She began to work it with a surprising degree of incompetence, given that I'd seen this girl be capable of almost anything she set her mind to. But now, the look on her face was eager, and she seemed to fumble with the belt until I finally took over from her, my fingers brushing hers as I released the buckle. Then the two of us were trading quick desperate kisses and she rolled off the table to her knees.

"You don't need to do that for me," I said.

She smiled up at me mischievously. "I know I don't have to, but what if I want to?"

"I couldn't deny you anything," I said, just before her tongue stroked across my cock and I lost all ability to banter or talk or *think*.

The sight of this beautiful girl kneeling in front of me, her shining red hair cascading across her shoulders as she wrapped her mouth around my cock, working her way up and down the shaft, devastated me. I couldn't believe she was willing to do this thing for me, even though she was so perfect. I'd had a hundred girls suck my dick, and yet there was something different about having her look up at me, her eyes shiny, her beautiful pin mouth wrapped around me.

I twined my fingers through her hair. I'd never show her just how much she affected me. To tell her the truth about how I felt would be to tell her a lie about the future. We didn't have a future. Not in my world.

The thought sucked some of the joy from the moment, even as her mouth worked along my cock, sending tremors of pleasure through my thighs.

She smiled around my cock as if she were enjoying the effect she had on me. I let out a gasp that surprised even me. I wasn't used to being this undone by a woman. I was usually the one who stayed in control.

This was a new feeling, being taken over by lust, swept away by the feel of her mouth on mine, and most of all, those beautiful eyes shining up at me.

“Gods, Honor. You've got to stop now. I'm about to come.”

Her smile only widened around my cock for a second before she went back to busily milking the shaft, her tongue teasing around my tip, as she reached it before she plunged back onto my dick. She'd said she was inexperienced, but she'd still pleased me like no one had ever before.

“Honor,” I whispered, just as I shattered. My cock jerked and jumped as I unleashed inside her mouth.

She swallowed my cum, looking as if she even enjoyed it. I'd seen that look faked by plenty of girls. But Honor didn't seem like she'd bother to lie to me. There was something freeing in her reckless honesty in a world streaked with bullshit.

“Are you going to give me a chance to play too?” I lifted her to her feet, stroking my hands over her arms. The lean muscles underneath her soft skin rippled under my palms.

She was toned—as if she were a fitting opponent when she went out to the training yard with me or Jaik, even if we were only playing around. I hadn't understood at first why Jaik had teased her into sparring with us. The thought of hurting her was devastating to me. No matter how much Jaik tried to hide it, she affected him too.

He might kill me for taking what he wanted. I couldn't resist the pull between Honor and me any more than I could resist gravity.

When I teased against her opening, her back arched, her gaze meeting mine.

“Yes,” she whispered, reaching for my cock hungrily.

I’d been afraid to enter her too quickly, but she looked up at me with her eyes smoldering. “I want to forget, Talisyn. Don’t be shy.”

“I don’t want to hurt you.”

“Don’t be afraid,” she said softly. “Make it hurt.”

There was sadness and anger just beneath those arched eyebrows, shining eyes, glib lips. It made me ache to take it all away.

“If I ever make you hurt, I’ll make it better,” I promised as I pressed my tip against her.

She eyed me stubbornly, tilting her hips up, trying to drive onto my cock.

I surrendered and slammed deep inside her, the table rocking between us. She let out a gasp, clung to my neck, her face lighting with pleasure. The two of us began to move in time, her thighs tightening around my waist, drawing me close to her. Her hands roamed her breasts, and I couldn’t tear my eyes away from the sight of her sharp pink nipples massaged between her fingers.

Everything about her made me feel I was losing control, and I had spent my whole life carefully in control. That was what was expected of a dragon shifter and a royal son.

Her cries reached the most dusty edges of the bookstore. I couldn’t get enough of her.

The two of us tipped over the edge of pleasure together. Her lips found the curve of my jaw, her hand pressing against my throat. I’d never felt so vulnerable as with her body against mine.

I pressed a kiss to her temple. “Princess, I’d better get you home.”

She recoiled at the word. “I’m not your princess.”

“It’s just a pet name.”

“A pet name that you used for how many girls?” Her chin lifted, and she tossed that long, red hair.

I paused, my cheeks heating, an unfamiliar sensation. I didn’t want to think about the girls I’d known before. “You’re not jealous, are you?”

“No, I’m not jealous,” she said, after a moment’s thought, and I had the feeling she was being really truly honest, that if she were jealous, she would tell me. “I want you to at least pretend that I’m special.”

“I don’t have to pretend,” I told her.

She smiled at me, and I knew I would have to do more than say the words to make her believe me. Her disbelief lodged something tight in my chest.

“I’ve never called any girl *my queen* before,” I said teasingly. “And after what you did earlier, I think you might just be my queen.”

She let out another bubbly laugh and a sense of peace flooded me. I would do anything to hear that laugh.

“Come on, my queen,” I said. “Let me get you home.”



CHAPTER
THIRTY-TWO

H*onor*

ONCE TALISYN HANDED ME OUT OF HIS CARRIAGE AND favored me with one last smile before he left me on the academy steps, the reality of the past twenty-four hours hit me hard. I spent the weekend hiding out from everyone but my girlfriends. Calla, June and the other girls from the servants' quarters rallied around me.

I couldn't tell them everything. But I did tell them about Alis' threat against Hanna. They listened with scrunched foreheads and worried lips. There was no way for half a dozen housemaids who worked at the academy to go up against one of the most powerful men in the kingdom and my vile stepmother, who was always so calculating she'd give him whatever he wanted.

"How in the world is it that your stepmother ended up with your father?" Calla asked over glasses of wine as we lounged around her room. June had her head in Calla's lap, and Calla was gently brushing her hair with her fingertips.

Even though my friends were trying to help me, I still felt strangely left out. I was so busy rushing around on my adventures that I didn't have time for the cozy little world they'd been carving out in the servants' quarters.

"I don't know. That's always bothered me." He'd never seemed that in love with her, no matter how much she pretended to be infatuated with him.

"Do you think he married her for some reason besides love?"

“Maybe, but I can’t imagine what it would be, I mean, he was the one who was so wealthy. She kind of came from nowhere.” I’d never seen her in my father’s orbit until just a few months before they married. One day it seemed like she was everywhere we went, at every ball, smiling delightedly at my father as he was grim and polite.

“Maybe we should do some looking into her background.”

“Yeah, maybe I should have asked her questions about her life,” I admitted. “I’ve never been super friendly to her.”

“I can’t imagine why.” Calla was on my side, so she didn’t point out that I had been a petty brat since I was eleven years old.

I’d never given my stepmother a fair chance, but I’d always been able to tell that she didn’t really care for me anyway. Many people think kids are idiots...but those people are idiots themselves.

Lara sauntered into the room. “Give me wine, I have news.”

“I’d give you wine anyway,” Calla said mildly. I handed Lara a glass.

“There are a million questionable stories about what exactly happened between Lucien and Alina.” Lara gripped the stem, looking pleased with herself. “But here’s one solid fact. Alina’s stayed in a castle in the northern territory. Lucien was imprisoned in the dungeon until recently.”

Maybe mice and chipmunks were underestimated.

“Do you think he did something to her?” I could understand why the guys would have wanted to kill me if they thought Lucien had really harmed Alina so badly. What if he had raped her? If someone hurt my sister, I would hurt them, and it wouldn’t matter how hard they tried in the training yard. It made my attempts to win them over seem ridiculous.

And it made me think twice about my desire to use my feminine wiles to tear them apart, all while I finally got some good royal dick.

“I don’t know,” she mused. “You would think that he would have been executed quick and in a hurry.”

“He was a royal son.”

“Yeah, but there are no royals like the dragon elders. And there are certainly no nobles like the young dragon royals.” She added that in a much lighter tone, giving me a once over, her eyes sparkling mischievously.

“Do you think Alina is there by her own choice, or do you think she’s been imprisoned?”

“I wouldn’t put anything past the elders,” she said. “They certainly don’t seem like they’d appreciate being trifled with.”

“I’d hate to be Lucien Finn,” June mused.

“Me too,” I managed.

Then my friends’ gossip and laughter swept me away, and I let Lucien go for a while.



ON MONDAY MORNING, I WAS BACK TO BEING LUCIEN FINN. I strolled into the arena classroom, slightly breathless from running like an idiot. Calla and the others were covering for me now, which touched me more than I ever could have explained.

It was nice having the attention of the dragon royals, but it was more important to have girlfriends. Especially given that the most alluring men I knew also occasionally tried to murder me.

I’d need to talk to them about what had happened. Maybe there was an explanation I didn’t understand.

No matter what, it would still take me a long time to get over what they had done to me. But I wasn’t quite ready to murder them now that I’d cooled off over the weekend. They didn’t even know to be grateful that my homicidal impulses had faded since the engagement party.

The five of them were sitting in the same place where they always were in the amphitheater. Branok looked worried, and then he saw me, and his face took on the usual look of disgust.

I looked past him, searching.

Jaik looked as if he had been beaten badly, his face puffy and swollen. His posture was still perfect, but he moved with a faint look of pain.

“What happened to you?” I blurted out.

“I have zero interest in discussing my extracurricular activities with you.” Jaik sounded more cross than ever.

Although that was no surprise at the moment, since he had to be in a lot of pain. When he shifted, white bandages were briefly exposed at the neck of his tunic, as if he had broken ribs.

“Why don’t you have the physician heal you?”

He snorted. “I’ll have the physician save his juice for you. You’re in worse shape than me by the end of training.”

Well, he sounded glib as ever. But it wasn’t true. He looked as if he’d been beaten even worse than Branok or Lynx usually did to me. And on top of that, I didn’t understand why he was unhealed unless ... maybe there was an enchantment preventing the physician from healing him.

My white-hot rage at what happened in the tunnels suddenly warred with concern he didn’t deserve.

“We need to talk. I’d like to hear your side of what happened on Friday night.” I sat down stiffly just outside their little knot.

The distance between us felt vast. The four of them clustered around Jaik as if they were protecting him. The intrepid leader who bossed us all around so mercilessly was someone they felt the need to protect at the moment.

And why did that make me soften toward them all, just a little?

“My side?” Jaik’s voice came out dangerously cool, no matter how red and swollen his lower lip. The healed-over cut split open again, and he stanchied it with the bloodstained handkerchief he clutched in one hand.

“Why did you lock me into the labyrinth?” My voice came out level.

Branok leaned forward, his gaze blazing, blocking me from Jaik. “Why did you violate my sister?”

The word *violate* jolted me, stole some of my anger. “So it was revenge then. Did you plan to kill me?”

“Kill you?” Jaik asked from behind Branok. He rested his hand on the other man’s shoulder, and when Branok glanced toward him, they shared a look.

The next moment, Branok leaned back, resting one booted foot on the bench ahead, his posture relaxed. It was a lie, but these men lied very well. He stared fixedly ahead as Jaik faced me.

“That was the same little game we have all played after our first shift.” Jaik’s tone was mild. “It’s a simple game compared to what the Elders will put you through, so I hope you won’t always be so dramatic.”

I’d have punched him in the face, but someone had already done that for me, quite thoroughly. “Where did the monster come from?”

Jaik’s gaze sharpened. “What?”

Every face was turned toward me now, even Branok’s. Maybe they hadn’t known. But the bastards were so hard to read.

“After you assholes locked me into that Labyrinth, I discovered I wasn’t alone.”

It was hard to see Jaik’s expression on his damaged face, but I could’ve sworn there was a spark of curiosity. Maybe even concern.

“This is new information to you? Did you know that there would be a hybrid loose with me?”

They scoffed. Jaik looked doubtful. “Hybrids? Really?”

Lynx leaned forward, studying my face, before he asked, “A hybrid? Are you sure?”

“Wouldn’t you know?” I couldn’t stop staring at Jaik. “You’re the one who trapped me in the labyrinth.”

Branok and Lynx wanted me dead, but they would follow Jaik’s lead.

“Let’s go see this *monster*.” Jaik rose abruptly even though the instructors were beginning to speak at the front of the amphitheater.

“It’s a corpse now.” Pride threaded my voice. I couldn’t hide it.

“I’d expect nothing less from a dragon shifter.” Jaik’s voice was bored, stealing my thunder.

“You want to just leave the academy in the middle of the day?” I demanded.

Talisyn said, “You’re not a very good student anyway, Lucien.”

As the six of us strolled out of the amphitheater, every gaze turned our way—student and instructor—and there was a murmur of voices, but nobody stopped us.

While we descended the dark stairs that led down to the tunnels, a muted, shivery feeling came over me. My fingers clutched the metal bannister so tightly it bit into my skin as I turned and turned and turned around the spiral stairs. The air grew steadily colder, but I felt flushed and cold all at once, sweat beading along my hairline.

“You look a little white,” Branok observed. He was always watching and he was too damn good at seeing.

“Last night wasn’t my best night,” I said lightly, but the truth of that statement was in the constant, desperate drumbeat of my heart.

As we threaded the tunnels, I hung back, falling behind the others. I wouldn’t risk being trapped again. Branok cursed

when he waded into the cool water that flooded the passage up to our knees. Jaik glanced at me, as if he wanted to say something, but left me alone.

Talisyn stayed by my side and tried to make small talk, but I couldn't stand it. Not when I was so close to the spot where he'd betrayed me.

His usual amusing prattle in that low, honeyed voice was making me murderous at the moment, and I raised my hand to stop him. "Can you please pause the incessant chatter?"

Talisyn stared at me, and a lead weight dropped into my stomach. He'd used that same phrase, *incessant chatter*, when he was comforting Honor.

"The thief doesn't feel forgiving," Lynx noted, glancing over his shoulder at Talisyn and me. "And here he asks for so much forgiveness himself."

Jaik turned his shoulders to enter the narrow passage where they'd sealed me. He glanced back at me with an expression I couldn't read as I hesitated, then glanced toward Talisyn.

"Go," Arren growled at the golden twins, who followed Jaik.

Then it was just Talisyn and me, and Talisyn said, "Lead on, Lucien. We're all walking out of here together today."

I didn't know why Talisyn was always left to mind Lucien, or why he even seemed to have sympathy while the others despised me. But I had to show them the body; they seemed as if they really didn't know there were monsters loose beneath the academy, and it was one more danger that might destroy our city.

I mopped the sleeve of my tunic across my damp forehead, then dove into the narrow passage, ignoring the too-quick beating of my heart.

Ahead of me, the other men were moving steadily ahead, a glow of fire in their palms. They were far enough distant that the lights grew dimmer, but the ripple of water around their legs echoed through the tunnel.

I hurried to catch up to them, afraid to be left behind. I didn't want to give away how I felt, but the water lapping around my trousers with every quick movement seemed loud, traitorous.

“So where is this monster you slayed—” Branok abruptly broke off. “Ah, shit.”

Talisyn reached my shoulder, and the six of us stared at the half-submerged monster. Its lower half was bloated in the water, making it even larger, but it was already far bigger than even Arren.

Lynx crouched, mindless of the dank water, and studied it.

None of them seemed inclined to apologize for sealing me down here with a monster. Its sightless eyes stared sightlessly above the gouged cheeks. Lynx reached out and touched the horn.

“I believe Lucien is right,” Lynx said steadily. “I believe we have a hybrid on our hands.”

“I'm supposed to believe you didn't know, that you weren't trying to murder me?” I demanded.

“If we were trying to kill you, you'd already be dead.” Branok's tone was dismissive. “Not even Damyn would be able to stop us.”

I snorted. I was pretty sure Damyn could handle the pretty spymaster twins, if it came down to it. Damyn had the powerful muscle of an older man who had spent two decades fighting while the golden twins were still stealing cookies. “Oh yes, you sound like the good guys here. I can totally see your side of things.”

Jaik interrupted the glaring contest between Branok and me. “Every single one of us have been through that particular fun hazing ritual. You're supposed to solve the puzzle, find the keys, find the tunnel upward that you can climb to the door out to the city.”

“I guess I was too busy trying not to get eaten.” A wave of fury rushed over me. I hadn't won their stupid game.

“It looks as if Lucien found another way out,” Talisyn said mildly, regarding the water at our feet.

“Why the hell do you guys do this to each other?” I gestured around the tunnel wildly, unable to prevent anger from bleeding into my voice. “I get why you’d do it to *me*. Aren’t *you* supposed to be friends?”

They exchanged a look.

“We might be closer now than we used to be,” Talisyn admitted.

“Enough.” Jaik’s voice was quiet, but there was that underlying whip snap of authority that cut through our argument. He did not look remotely apologetic about the fact I’d come face to face with the monster. “We need to figure out where this hybrid came from.”

“Maybe it entered the tunnels like the Scourge does. Or maybe someone was trying to kill Lucien,” Lynx suggested.

“I wonder who that could be?” I turned to the golden twins. “Maybe you two went off book.”

“I understand why you would think that of us.” Branok cast a glance at Jaik, as if Jaik’s opinion was the only one he really cared about, and I could die mad as far as he was concerned. “But this wasn’t us. I wouldn’t know where to find one of these things. And if I did, I would put it out of its misery.”

“So is anyone going to apologize to me for the fact that I was almost eaten last night?” I demanded.

No one seemed particularly interested. Lynx gripped one of the horns, studying the monster, and Arren bent over, looking over his shoulder. Talisyn was moving through the water away from us, intent on something else. Jaik’s marked face looked haunted for a moment in the shadows, then he was back to his usual arrogance.

Arren straightened, looking down his nose at me. “Why didn’t you simply shift? A dragon could certainly kill a hybrid.”

“Because I couldn’t shift! Not until later.”

“Did you panic?” Branok asked.

Fury lapped at me, but Talisyn turned toward us. The other men broke off to let him speak.

“You unraveled this shirt to mark your path?” Talisyn asked, holding up the remnants of my tunic. “And after that, you could shift again?”

I ran through the timeline of the night before, then nodded. “Yes.” How did he know?

He turned the hem of my shirt inside out. Jaik raised the flame in his hand closer as they all crowded around, Branok resting his forearm on Lynx’s shoulder to lean in. They were all so comfortable with each other.

Over their shoulders, I couldn’t see what they’re looking at.

But Branok muttered, “An enchantment.”

The five of them turned toward me, and I caught a glimpse of the threads sewn into the hem of my tunic.

“Someone *is* trying to kill our Lucien,” Talisyn said.

“Someone who knew about our little games,” Jaik added.

The five of them looked more curious than dismayed that someone was trying to murder me.



CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

H*onor*

LATER THAT MORNING, DAMYN INTERCEPTED US IN THE hallway, waving the six of us into an empty classroom. His face was taut, and regret crept through my stomach.

I hated to disappoint Damyn, and I wasn't sure why I even cared.

As soon as he shut the door behind us, he demanded, "What the hell were you doing today? Walking out of school?"

"We have bigger problems," Jaik assured him. "There's a body in the basement."

"There's always a body in the basement," Damyn retorted, his tone calmer. He folded his arms across his powerful chest. For some reason, I wondered if he lived in that room above the shop that I'd seen. Where was Damyn, when he wasn't trying to restrain the dragon royals?

The five of them filled him in, telling my story decently well. Who knew these men *could* listen when they chose?

Damyn's piercing blue eyes, electric against his deeply tanned skin, flashed to mine, and I could've sworn I saw concern, just for a second. "I'll take the matter to the Elders."

Jaik nodded, but Damyn gave him a stern look. "You don't need to deal with everything on your own. You're not the king yet."

"Perish the thought," I muttered only to have Jaik glare at me.

Damyn's gaze caught on Jaik's bruised face. Damyn obviously had questions, and I saw the moment his lips

thinned, that he pushed the question away.

They all knew something about what had happened to Jaik. I wanted to know too—perhaps because it mattered to understanding the five of them, perhaps because something in my chest ached at the sight of him hurt.

“I’m keenly aware,” Jaik promised.

“Be a student,” Damyn said firmly. “Do you understand me? You’re not full members of the Order yet. You’re not prepared to track down hybrids or fight monsters.”

“Understood,” Jaik said, his tone mild, compensating for the irritation written across the faces of the others. “I’m sure the Elders will have the hybrid situation well in hand.”

But he was the best liar of all these lying men.



THAT NIGHT, I HURRIED INTO MY DRESS AND SLIPPERS. CALLA cast a knowing glance at me as I slipped out of our room.

When I reached the dragons’ floor, I didn’t hesitate at the ornate carved door. I pushed the snarling face out of my way and banged my fist on Jaik’s door. The knock echoed down the hall, making me nervous it would wake the others. I hadn’t meant to let my emotions bleed out.

Jaik opened the door and blinked. “Honor. What are you doing here?”

I swallowed. “I caught a glimpse of you earlier. Looking hurt and...” I faltered because I didn’t want to tell him, even when I was being Honor, just how much it had impacted me to see him injured.

His gaze softened. “It’s nothing.”

“Who did this to you?” The fierceness in my voice surprised me, given that I’d been making murder plans for Jaik earlier.

My fingertips skimmed a bruise at the side of his jaw, and his lashes fluttered close, just for a moment, as if he could lose himself in my touch.

“So fierce,” he said, his voice mocking. “You don’t have to protect me.”

“Well, clearly no one else does.” I ducked under his arm, striding into his room.

He turned to face me with a resigned look across his face. “I don’t need to be fussed over.”

“I’m not *fussing* over you.” The word offended me, but I couldn’t help being drawn toward him. My fingers rose to his cheek, hovered over his skin, not quite touching the scabbed-over wound across his high cheekbone. “Is this a bite mark?”

“No.”

Who could have done this to him? And why hadn’t the healer fixed it already? “Why won’t you talk to me?”

“Honor,” he said gently, gathering my wrists in his hand. “You can’t keep coming to my room. You and I can’t have any kind of relationship.”

The world tilted under my feet, even as I willed my voice to come out light, careless. “Why?”

“Because being attached to me in any way, shape or form will always put you in danger. You don’t deserve that. You deserve a happy life.”

“I do deserve to be happy,” I agreed. “Maybe dalliances with an inappropriate royal make me happy.”

He huffed a laugh. “I don’t think I’ll ever be able to make any woman very happy.” He’d made me happy the other day. He must have thought of that too, because he added, “At least not for more than a few moments.”

Something clawed at my chest at his rejection, slowly hardening into anger. “You could just have said you were bored of me.”

His cool gaze found mine. “Would that make it easier? I wanted you to know that I care about you, that I simply woke to the danger I posed by paying you too much attention. But I can play the villain instead.”

“You care about me.” He didn’t know that he just put me through my worst nightmares, only to dismiss me when I forgave him. “Me, of all people? When you’re infamous for never caring about women.”

He looked unexpectedly rueful. “Do you think perhaps those stories are exaggerated, Honor? Don’t you have any angry lovers you’ve left behind?”

“No. I’ve been too busy to leave a trail of broken hearts the way you have.”

“I haven’t broken anyone’s heart,” he scoffed. “None of them actually cared about me. They cared about my position, my power, being seen with me. They might have cared about getting into my bed, hoping to get a ring on their finger, but they didn’t actually care about *me*.”

“Is that how you justify the way you’ve acted?”

“And what makes you brave enough to get close to me? If you think I’m such a horrible person.” His tone was cool; the more heated I grew, the icier he was.

“Well, like you said, I’m reckless.” I pressed my palms against his chest, pushing him against the wall. I moved slowly and carefully, because I didn’t want to hurt him even though part of me yearned for the same hot angry clashing of bodies that we’d experienced earlier. I desperately wanted to burn some of the energy churning in my muscles ever since I’d been trapped beneath the academy in the tunnels.

He watched me with hooded eyes. “This is too reckless, even for you.”

His shoulder blades hit the wall, his body jerking. His hands hung at his sides, refusing to rise to touch me, and the hurt sparking inside me felt like fury.

“What changed?” I whispered.

“People will try to hurt you because they’re jealous, because they think you’re beneath me, because they think you’re dangerous.”

“How can I be the one who’s dangerous?” I asked softly. “I’m just a girl.”

Jaik’s amber eyes gazed into mine. “Bullshit.”

Warmth heated my chest and my cheeks. I hated how easy it must be for him to tell the effect he had on me. I pressed on. “Who hurt you? Why?”

He scoffed. “It doesn’t matter.”

“It matters to me. Because I’m going to find a way to hurt them.”

The fierceness that entered my voice surprised us both, based on the look on his face. Then something genuine softened his gaze. “You know that I don’t deserve you, right?”

“Oh, I’m keenly aware.” But I swayed against him anyway, and his lips met mine. We traded a soft, sweet kiss. I was trying to be mindful, but his lip split and started bleeding again.

I pressed my own handkerchief over the wound. I wished I could heal him. But I had dragon powers. I broke things, I didn’t stitch them back together again.

“Let me see you,” I murmured, pulling his shirt loose of his belt.

“You need to leave.” Even as he said the words, his hands wrapped my hips. He pulled me close.

“Make me, then,” I challenged him.

He groaned in response, tugged me closer, his cock hard against my inner thigh. I kissed his face carefully, finding clear skin between the bruises. His lips pressed mine more urgently, mindless of how it made him wince.

No matter how much he thought it was a bad idea, his lips devoured mine. There was a raw throb of need between the two of us as we undressed each other, our movements quick

and frantic. There were deep purple-black bruises across his torso, and I moved behind him, tracing them across his back. His entire back was a bruise. His face was hardly the worst of the damage.

I stepped in front of him again, looking up at him. “Someone did this to you because of me?”

The king, this had to be the king’s punishment. No one else could hurt Jaik. But why did it matter what Jaik and I did together, when he had sex with dozens of women before? What was different now?

He didn’t answer, his bare hands hot against my skin. “This has to be the last time, Honor. A goodbye.”

His gaze studied mine, searching for agreement.

“You’re trying to protect me.”

The tension in his shoulders eased. “Yes. That’s all.”

The knowledge made me want more of him, not less.

For Jaik, I’d defy a king.

It would be difficult to make the king pay for hurting Jaik, but someday, I’d find a way.

There was a swollen, shiny white circle on his chest, angry red symbols emblazoned through it. “What is this?”

“An enchantment to keep me from healing.” His fingers skimmed my back, reminding me of the old scars that crisscrossed my skin, almost entirely faded, but he’d found them. “It doesn’t matter.”

It most certainly did, but I’d let go of it for now. I wrapped my hand around his cock. “I found a place that isn’t bruised.”

“Thank the gods,” he muttered, bringing a faint smile to my lips.

“How do we do this without hurting you?” I whispered.

“I don’t give a damn about hurting,” he promised me, and the realization flooded me that he was trying to avoid me for my own sake, not to protect his own battered body.

The two of us fell onto the bed together, trading quick, fevered kisses. His hands stroked my stomach, my breasts, his gaze as heavy and worshipful as his touch. I gasped against his lips.

He was so afraid he was going to ruin me. But I knew he would ruin me in the best of ways.

“I don’t want you to hurt.” I stroked my hands down his hard sides, my touch light as a feather.

“It just reminds me I’m still alive.” His head dropped, his mouth finding my breast, and my back arched as his lips traveled slowly across it, inching ever closer to my nipple. “After all, I’m my father’s only heir. He can’t get rid of me.”

Something about those words almost worked a memory loose from my mind, but I wanted to be in the moment, so I laid the thought aside for now. His mouth enveloped my nipple, his tongue tweaking and teasing. His mouth was hot, and as my hips rolled against his, my hands stroked up his chiseled arms to his shoulders, a little harder, a little more forgetful.

One of his arms slid around my lower back, yanked my hips up abruptly to his. His cock pressed against my opening insistently, but he ignored it, his lips on my throat. He nuzzled his nose against the bottom of my ear, and I wrapped my legs around his waist, pressing myself needily against him. It wasn’t until the next second I realized I might hurt him, but as soon as I tried to pull away, he caught me closer.

“None of that,” he whispered into my ear.

Then he launched an all out war against my self-control, nibbling my throat, my ear, his hands circling my thighs, dangerously near my clit before he pulled away. My body hummed hotter and hotter. His lips on mine seemed to burn as we traded kisses.

Finally, I pushed him down on the bed, threw my leg over his waist to straddle him. It must have hurt, but he just looked up at me with warmth lighting his eyes. His hand cupped the back of my head, his fingers tangling in my red curls. He

yanked my face down to his, the two of us trading more kisses as his cock brushed between my thighs until I couldn't bear it anymore.

I ground down on his hips, and his shaft filled me as I bit my lower lip. His thumb stroked over my cheek, studying me with an expression that seemed fond—right before he nipped my lower lip with his own teeth.

I pulled away, riding him slowly, trying to take my turn tormenting him since he had tormented me so thoroughly. I threaded my fingers through my hair and pushed it away from my face, arching my back subtly to push my breasts into his face, and he watched me as if I were a queen.

I rode him slowly, feeling the press of his cock against my clit every time I rolled my hips forward at his base. When he groaned my name, I felt the rumble in his chest against my knees and thighs, and it made me twitch around him. There was power in making the dragon prince come to pieces.

“Honor,” he said, his fingertips sinking into my thighs as he tried to resist the pull of his orgasm. He sounded commanding even then.

I rode him faster, taking a second every time I came down, feeling so full of his big cock, to roll my hips forward, pushing the base of his cock against my clit, feeling how much that pause destroyed both of us. A muscle ticked in his jaw; he was trying to hold back, and I just moved faster. His fingers dug into my thighs hard enough to hurt, and I loved it.

“Honor,” he groaned, grabbing my hips and dragging me against him, hard, as he emptied inside me. His lips parted, his face tight with pleasure, his abs rippling.

As soon as he'd spilled over, I started rocking my hips against his, feeling the way his big cock filled me, the way he massaged my clit. My body flushed hot, my toes curling against the sheets. I arched my back, my fingers tangled in my hair as I squeezed around him over and over, as I fell over the edge myself. I let out a long, low moan, my channel squeezing him rhythmically as pleasure flooded my body.

Then he pulled me down beside him, kissing me, his hand sweeping up my thigh—I pulled away, my clit sore and throbbing—but he was relentless, finding my clit and teasing me until, despite myself, my thighs parted, inviting him in. He climbed over me, pressing my thighs open, his body braced above mine.

“I want all of you, Honor,” he murmured.

I caught his cheek with my hand; there was a day’s dark stubble across his sharp jaw. “We don’t get all of each other. You know that. Not for one night.”

His amber eyes locked with mine, and I could’ve counted the specks of gold. His nose was long and straight, his lips pink with a surprising softness above the hard jaw. I never got to be this close to him, this long, and I tried to drink him in, to get enough of him to last.

I knew it wouldn’t. I craved him, even when I was trying to be Lucien.

His lips plundered my throat, my shoulders, my cheeks, my lips; his hands were hot as they stroked every inch of my skin. I let myself let go, think of nothing but him, feel nothing but him. I moaned in his ear, and his cock pressed against me as if the sound made him even harder.

He thrust inside me, his face against mine, the two of us gasping together as if we couldn’t get enough. This time, I came first, felt him shatter after me.

When he was still buried deep inside me, when I was still breathing heavily, he kissed my cheek sedately. His eyes were half-lidded as he studied my face, and it reminded me of how I’d tried to memorize his face earlier.

“I don’t want to forget how you look right now,” he murmured.

I didn’t want to be reminded this was our goodbye. It couldn’t be—a life without the cocky, maddening dragon prince seemed like it would be dull, as if I’d spent the rest of my life wishing to relive an adventure.

“I know this is a bad idea,” I teased. “You don’t need to keep reminding me.”

I’d wanted the moment to last, but he pulled away subtly then, and regret crowded in as my skin cooled without his heat.

“Maybe I keep reminding you because I keep forgetting myself.” He propped his face on his hand, and although he was still just inches away, somehow the distance already felt vast. “I’m only going to get you in trouble. The best-case scenario is the other royals and I hide you somewhere.”

“Hide me somewhere?” I echoed skeptically.

“From the people that did this to me,” he said.

I raced my fingertips gently over his bruised skin, tried to ask ever so lightly, “And who is that?”

Something kindled in his gaze. “I don’t need you to protect me, Honor. You don’t need to make my enemies your enemies.”

“Well, you just said that they’re a threat to me too. But if someone hurts you, I’m going to want blood.” I hadn’t meant to say that out loud, but there was something about the bond between us that teased out words I shouldn’t say.

“Honor,” he said, then looked as if he didn’t know what to say, as if he were at a loss for words. He probably thought I was ridiculous.

I was strangely reckless around him. Not just with my body, but with my heart. “What’s the bond like between dragon shifters?”

He hesitated, suspicion flickering in those beautiful amber eyes. “Why do you want to know?”

“I see you and the other dragon royals sharing this bond, and I know I’ll never feel anything like it. I’ll always be on the outside.” It was a cunning lie to loosen his tongue, so why did the words feel like a painful truth knotting in my chest?

“The bond is powerful,” he admitted. He stroked his fingers down my skin, and I stretched like a cat under his

touch, watching his face. He seemed as eager to talk tonight as I was to listen. “I don’t know what to make of Branok and Lynx and Lucien when we’re all tied together now. When I feel I owe something to each of them.”

“Why do they hate him?” I prompted.

“How well do you know Lucien?” His gaze felt like a test. “Has he really not told you what he did to their sister Alina?”

“He took her virginity,” I answered. “But did she want to give it to him? Maybe she didn’t particularly want to keep it in the first place.”

He pulled a face. “She has claimed that it was consensual—to save his life. He claims that he forced himself on her—perhaps he was also trying to save *her* life, given how Lord Joachim is. I don’t know the truth about what happened with Lucien, except that he made things extremely messy. He never should have gone anywhere near her.”

He mused for a moment, then went on. “Regardless, Branok and Lynx don’t have any doubt. They think that he did violate her. They’ll never forgive him.”

The words *violate* and *never* dropped into my gut like stones.

“So what does that mean for your little band?”

“I don’t know. It’s all a mess. And now Lucien thinks they tried to kill him...” He bit off his thoughts, then gave me a strange look. “You get me talking like no one else I’ve ever met.”

“You need someone to talk to,” I said lightly. “We all do.”

“Maybe,” he said, sounding uncertain. “But I don’t know that I like the feeling very much.”

“What feeling?”

“The feeling I’m losing control when I’m near you. I shouldn’t have let this happen between us.”

“Do you regret it now?” I asked, surprised by the throb in my heart and the way my voice almost seemed to stumble over

the word regret.

“Not exactly, but I don’t want you to get hurt because of me.” He rose onto an elbow and looked at me seriously. “What if we went away together? For real?”

“Where?” I asked.

“What if you went to one of our hiding places?” he said. “You could leave the academy behind. You don’t need to work as a housekeeper. I’d take care of you.”

I let out a short, dark laugh. “Yeah, sounds super fun.”

“I can’t be there all the time. But I would make sure that you were protected in case something happens to me. And it wouldn’t be forever... someday, I’ll be able to offer you a place by my side.”

Unspoken but clear at the end of his sentence: *if I survive.*

“You’re talking crazy,” I said. “You don’t want to be with me.”

“Believe me, that’s not the problem,” he said, a hint of his usual steel coming into his voice, which had softened for a moment. But I’m not going to put your safety at risk.”

“I’m not interested in being your personal servant. I have my own life and people to take care of myself.”

“I’ll take care of them too,” he said.

“My little sister still is under my stepmother’s guardianship. If I just disappear, I don’t know what will happen to Hanna. I have to take care of it.”

He looked frustrated, as if this were the one time the prince couldn’t get what he wanted. “Let me take care of *you.*”

I didn’t understand what I had done to earn this unexpected faithfulness from him, especially in a moment when I’d planned to manipulate him. I was afraid now of what I’d set in motion when I had sex with Talisyn and tried to get him to keep it a secret. Now he had a secret from Jaik and sooner or later, everything would unwind around the three of us.

I didn't regret claiming both Jaik and Talisyn as my own. I wanted them both. But in my fury, I'd started us off down the wrong road. I didn't know how to begin to fix it.

Jaik lay down, pulling me against his body, and for a moment I lost myself in the warmth and comfort of him, even knowing just how dangerous it was.

Even though he claimed this would be the last time, I knew it wouldn't be that easy for the dragon royals and me to stay apart.



CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

H*onor*

I WAS LEAVING JAIK'S ROOM WHEN TALISYN'S DOOR SWUNG open. I froze as if he might not see me, but of course it was too late, and his gaze widened as it met mine.

He startled me so much that I pressed my hand to my chest, my heart thumping as if I'd been caught doing something wrong. This was exactly what I'd planned before, when I thought that I would use the two of them to break their little group apart. Now the moment was upon me and regret sat like a stone in my stomach.

As Jaik stepped out from behind me, Talisyn's gaze swept from me to him to me again. His lips parted, his brow melting in sorrow, for just a second. Then his blue eyes flashed, and he seemed to harden.

All of it made my heart twist.

Talisyn gritted, "You said we had to stay away from her."

Jaik looked at me, not at Tal, his amber gaze as sad as Tal had seemed a moment ago. "This was the last time."

"The last time?" Talisyn's tone carried the same disbelief I felt.

His tone left a muscle ticking in Jaik's jaw. "I'm not discussing this with you. This is not a democracy. She's off limits."

"I understand her being off limits." Tal folded his arms across his chest. He clearly wasn't going to back down now. "What I don't understand is why, if she's off limits, you're fucking her now."

The word *fucking* seared into my chest. Jaik glanced at me, then warned him, “Watch your mouth.”

“What?” Talisyn demanded. “All of a sudden we don’t fuck girls anymore? What were you doing, *making love*?”

Jaik’s face was taut, but he gestured for Talisyn to go on, the movement quick and impatient.

Talisyn took the bait, speaking too quickly. “*I’m* the one who cares about her, Jaik. I know she’s just another conquest for you. You saw I wanted something so you had to have it. You’ve always got to establish dominance.”

True to form, Jaik seemed to only grow cooler the hotter and angrier Talisyn grew. I worried my collar between my fingers, trying to find a space in the fury between them where I could fit, where I could fix things. I couldn’t find one.

“Are you finished, Tal?” Jaik’s tone was ice. “Have you gotten that out of your system? You’ve resented me since we were eleven years old.”

“You’ve been an asshole since we were eleven years old,” Talisyn shot back. “I love you, but there’s no denying that you are not a very nice person.”

Arren’s door flew open, and his furious gaze met mine, as if he’d looked right for me when he heard trouble. I raised my chin, staring back at him. The golden twins piled out of their rooms too.

Branok shot one look at me and said, “I knew you’d be poison.”

He always thought that, but this time I *was* the poison, and the knowledge set me on edge. I turned on him, my hands flying to my hips. “Why do you think this is my fault?”

“You’re standing outside their rooms, it’s pretty fucking obvious.”

“You can’t ask us for more than you’re willing to do yourself,” Talisyn told Jaik. “You should stay away from her.”

“I don’t understand why you can’t both stay away from her.” Branok sounded disgusted with everyone involved. “Is it

really that hard? Does she have a magic pussy?"

"Watch your mouth," Jaik growled for the second time in as many minutes, his tone even more dangerous.

"I'm genuinely trying to understand," Branok said. "You two have been friends all your lives. We've faced the Olds together how many times? We've kept each other alive. And now, what? You both like the same girl? So, I guess that's all over. It's been fun while it lasted."

Branok's scolding might have brought them to their senses. But Talisyn's eyes fell on one of the hickey marks left on my throat. I swallowed hard, my fingers rising to my throat.

Tal's furious gaze flew back up to Jaik. "I can't believe what a selfish bastard you are."

Jaik leaned in close to Talisyn. Any of the other shifters would have shrunk away in the face of Jaik's anger, but Talisyn blazed back at him.

"You don't need to worry about what I'm doing. You need to worry about following orders." Jaik's voice was quiet, but laced with steel.

"Oh fuck your orders," Talisyn said as he slammed into Jaik and the two of them landed hard on the floor.

The two of them wrestled across the hardwood. I winced as Talisyn got in a punch across Jaik's already damaged jaw, then Jaik gripped Tal's throat and began to choke him. The two of them struggled, trying to throw each other.

Lynx heaved a sigh. He looked as if maybe this had happened before.

I glanced around at the three remaining guys who were not involved in trying to smash each other into jelly. Normally, I looked to Jaik or Talisyn when I had questions, and I wasn't entirely sure what to do now.

"Good work, Honor. This is what you intended to do all along, didn't you?" Branok bit off. "You finally got your chance to do the Olds' bidding and drive us apart."

“What are you talking about?” I demanded. “You think I’m working for the dragon elders?”

“I can’t imagine anyone else could so effectively ruin all of our years of work, but you just waltzed in here with your magic pussy and now the two of them are at each other’s throats.”

Branok’s words struck me hard, but I didn’t want to show it. “Well if you think it’s so magical, no wonder you’re so obsessed.”

“I’m not interested,” he bit back.

“Yeah, I’m sure. That’s why you’re so obsessed with me. You’re somehow so much more perceptive than Jaik or Talisyn.” I let my disdain bleed into my voice.

“All right, that’s enough.” Arren said finally. “You two have it out of your systems yet?” He gripped Jaik and Talisyn, his muscles straining as he finally managed to wrench the two of them apart.

Talisyn quickly slipped his grip and flew at Jaik again. Arren glanced at Branok and Lynx, and they got involved, pushing and shoving until Jaik and Talisyn were pinned against opposite walls, barely.

It took both the twins to hold back Talisyn, and it took Arren to hold on to Jaik. Jaik and Talisyn were glaring at each other as if it were a miracle they hadn’t transformed into dragons right there in the dormitory.

I could hear general chaos from outside the door that led to our wing, as if the other students had heard the fight. I hadn’t realized it’d been that loud. The guys’ heads all snapped in that direction, noticing them too.

Jaik’s chest heaved with effort and there was fresh blood smeared across his lip, which wrenched my heart. I would’ve thrown a dirty look at Tal, but he had a black eye and a bloody nose and he was staring at me with a pained look on his face, and I could’ve melted into a puddle of shame right there.

“Are you proud of yourselves?” Arren snarled at Jaik.

Talisyn had thrown the first punch, but Jaik didn't argue with Arren, even if he did shoot him a look.

Instead, Jaik said, "I'll deal with them."

Branok and Lynx finally released his arms. Jaik pulled himself to his full, impressive height, his posture perfect even if he was mussed and bloodied.

He stalked down the hall and pulled open the door, speaking to the students who had assembled outside. "There's no show tonight. Get some sleep. Maybe some of you will be more useful in the training or tomorrow, if you get a little rest."

"Doubtful," Arren muttered.

Talisyn came over to me, wiping the blood from his face with the back of his hand and said, "All right, don't worry."

I stared up at him, my shame flickering into exasperation. "I wasn't worried. I don't need you fighting over me. That's the last thing that I want, despite what Branok thinks."

Jaik and Talisyn both turned to give Branok a long look.

Branok glared right back at all of us. "I just call it like I see it. Apparently, it's a crime not to be in love with Honor now."

"No one is in love with Honor." Jaik sounded exasperated. "All of you are going to stay far away from her. Do I make myself clear?"

No one is in love with Honor.

Why did those words strike me so deeply, even though I hadn't expected love?

"Honor," Talisyn said, his gaze on me, not on Jaik, but I was backing away down the hall.

I had to go be Lucien. They were probably going to wonder where he'd been so I started to move quickly away down the hall. I didn't want to deal with the crowds, and the door to Lynx's room stood half-open, so I rushed inside.

I headed for the balcony. I'd balcony hop until I reached an open window on one of the main halls,

“Stop,” Lynx ordered, his voice irritated. “You can’t start jumping from one railing to another now. You’re too upset. You’ll kill yourself.”

I turned on him, furious. The breeze teased my hair, cooling my flushed-hot cheeks. “I’m often upset since I met you dragon royals, and I haven’t splotted myself yet. And I don’t see why you would care anyway.”

“Well, I wouldn’t say that I care about you.” Lynx had stopped, his arms crossed as he regarded me steadily. “But while it would make my life easier in many ways if you ended yourself, that’d make my friends even more unhinged. And for that reason, I don’t want any Honor jam.”

I winced. “That’s a really unattractive term, Lynx. I’d prefer if you didn’t use that again.”

“Well, it’d be some pretty unattractive jam too. Just calm down.” He paused, then blurted out, “If you don’t want to face them, and you don’t want to face the crowds, you can stay in my room for a few minutes.”

“I thought you and Branok both hated me.”

“You know, my twin and I are not actually one and the same person.”

Weren’t they, though? I didn’t really enjoy the thought of being stuck in this room with Lynx.

“I’ve got something of yours,” he blurted out. I regarded him curiously as he added, “Talisyn loaned me this.”

He held up a romance novel. “He said you wouldn’t miss it for a few days.”

I pounced on it, squealing. “I’ve been looking for that one.”

“I had a feeling you would miss it. I told Talisyn he was an idiot.”

“How did you know?”

“Talisyn is always an idiot.”

I was surprised to find out the next hour passed pretty comfortably with Lynx. He and I took turns reading chapters from the novel, so at least he'd be a *knowledgeable* judgmental prick. He rolled his eyes, but eventually, I could tell that he was getting interested in the plot twists.

We came to a steamy scene. As I was reading, he grabbed a pillow from his bed to pull over his lap.

I laughed, and he glared at me. Apparently, I was supposed to pretend that I didn't notice.

"What?" I said, "It's cute. You can be the most scary, dangerous shifter and still enjoy a good love story. It's sad men don't get the chance to enjoy so many things because you have to live up to someone else's expectations."

"You have an interesting way of looking at the world, Honor."

"I know you wish I wasn't around, but I haven't entirely hated tonight."

He hesitated. "I just don't want to see my friends get hurt."

"I don't either," I said. Not anymore. I still had so many questions, and Lynx seemed softer tonight. "You talked about growing up together out there, and how you've fought against the Olds together..."

He pulled a face. "You're not supposed to have heard that. We're supposed to be one unified entity with the Elders."

"But it's not that simple?"

"I don't want to talk about it with you." His voice came out harsh, then softened. "No offense, I'm not saying you're untrustworthy or trying to hurt your feelings now. It's just been a long, intense day. And it's not really my story to tell."

"Okay, I understand. Besides, I really want to get to the next part of the book."

He cracked the faintest grin, unexpectedly, and kept reading to me.

And eventually, I fell asleep in his bed.

The next morning, I woke up in a panic. I was supposed to be checking in as Honor right now. And then I was supposed to be reappearing as Lucien. And I wasn't ready for any of that when I was still lying in Lynx's bed.

And yet, when he murmured something and reached out for me. I almost decided I didn't care at all about making it to where I was supposed to be.

I hadn't expected to see a softer side of Lynx. But I still really enjoyed it.



CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

H*onor*

THE NEXT FEW DAYS PASSED BY QUIETLY, AT LEAST BY MY standards now that I had begun life with the dragon royals. Maybe it was because only one half of my newly split personality had to cope with the dragons at all. All the royals were avoiding Honor now.

It was driving them crazy, I could tell. Jaik and Talisyn had begun to talk to each other again, even though conversation seemed awkward and strained between them. I was glad to see it. I still felt horrible I'd encouraged them to keep me a secret from the other instead of trying to have them both—openly and honestly.

The days went by in the usual blur of Caldren's morning training, days at the academy, followed by frantic cleaning, and my tiptoeing from bedroom to bedroom, pretending to be two people.

"What do you think Caldren is doing with Honor?" Jaik demanded one day as the six of us stood on the hard-packed sand of the training yard, guzzling water.

Arren groaned. "I really enjoyed the fifteen seconds that we spent not talking about Honor."

"Look, I just think it's a little suspicious. You're the ones who thought she was a spy. If she's a spy, then he's getting close to her for a reason. Maybe she's been his plant all this time so that she can get information from us and pass it to him."

"Good thing you haven't gone full idiot and given her information that you shouldn't, then." Arren's confrontational

gaze found Talisyn. It was a meaningful look, as if he didn't entirely trust Talisyn had lived up to his expectations.

I kept my mouth shut. I didn't dare defend Honor.

But that didn't stop Arren's stony gaze from finding me. "Lucian. What have you been doing with her?"

I groaned. We'd taken a break from training. Right now, I'd rather resume choking on my own blood than be a part of this particular conversation.

But I had rehearsed my cover story, knowing I'd eventually get caught sneaking into Lucien's room. "Honor and I are friends. Nothing more. Everyone needs someone to talk to, even me."

"I issued a pretty clear directive," Jaik's words were clipped, "that no one was to spend time with Honor without my permission."

I stared at him. "Why?"

Talisyn cocked his head at me. There was a glint in his eyes that I couldn't quite read. Maybe curiosity. "Lucien was the only one who didn't come out while you and I had a reasonable discussion of our differences. Perhaps he missed your *clear directive*."

I felt irritated by Tal's baiting tone. "I don't recall. I might have gone on a walk through town or I might have been down in the library."

Lynx snorted. "I've never seen you in the library."

"Are you implying that I'm an idiot?" I asked, trying to cover for my pounding heart.

Of course, I'd spent plenty of time in the library with Lynx. He just didn't know it.

The more time I spent with these guys, the more likely I was to slip, no matter whether I was supposed to be Lucien or whether I was supposed to be Honor.

"Even if he didn't hear that particular moment," Jaik sounded irritated that Talisyn had taken my side, "I'm pretty

sure he still would have gotten the overall vibe.”

The snarling further in the amphitheater caught my attention. While we sipped water and recovered from beating each other even more senseless, the wolves were practicing. Caldren was teaching, the sun shining off his dark hair and bare, tanned shoulders. It was always hard to tear my eyes off him, but I did to glance at Jaik.

“Right. Honor is off limits. Sure. I don’t need any more trouble.” I pushed on my shoulder, and pain twinged all the way up into my neck. I hadn’t been beaten badly enough this morning to need the healer—yet.

I wasn’t sure how Jaik moved as effortlessly as he had in the training yard despite his bruises and wounds, although I’d bet he was the reason Damyn had given us a rare break.

Branok glowered at me, and I demanded, “What?”

I let all my irritation bleed into my tone. I hoped Lucien hadn’t hurt their sister. But I was getting tired of taking the heat for something I hadn’t done.

“You need to stay away from her.” Jaik’s tone was calm, but he exuded menace, a quiet danger.

“I’m not going anywhere near her.”

There was something half feral that came over Jaik’s face, and that probably should have scared me as Honor just as much as Lucien. The dragon prince was far more possessive of Honor than he had any right to be.

But honestly, I kind of liked it.

“When the weekend comes,” Jaik ordered, glancing around us all, “we’re going to go hunting for those hybrids. Pack a bag. We’ll be gone overnight.”

I didn’t like the idea of camping out with these guys. Not to mention my stepmother would expect me home, and I didn’t want to earn her ire. Hanna would expect me home too, and I didn’t want to earn her disappointment.

I struggled internally with what to say if anything, and of course Arren was always watching me.

“Problem?” he demanded tartly.

“Not at all. I’m overcome with joy at the thought of spending even more time with you. I’m just thinking about my packing list. Maybe some pillows for a pillow fight. Card games. Maybe double size sleeping bags, so you and I can snuggle.”

Arren’s eyes narrowed in familiar disgust, even though he didn’t bother to look at me directly.

“It’s hard for me to believe that I’m the only one having all this fun in our relationship.” I rested my elbow casually on Arren’s shoulder. “Because I really can’t stand how fun being your friend is, Arren.”

Branok groaned. “Do you ever shut up? We already have Talisyn. We don’t need two talkers.”

“Talisyn and I each bring something different but equally delightful to the table,” I said. “You guys might not talk much, but that’s why you need us. You would be bored without us.”

“I would really like the opportunity to experience some boredom.” Jaik’s gaze was fixed deeper in the amphitheater now, even though he spoke to us. His face had gone taut, the way it did when he’d fought with Tal.

I followed his gaze, but all I saw was Caldren patiently correcting a wolf shifter. Nothing that seemed to warrant the hate in Jaik’s eyes.

The way Jaik hated Caldren made me nervous.

But did it make me nervous about Jaik, or about Caldren?



THE NEXT MORNING AS CALDREN AND I SPARRED, I WANTED TO tell him about the weekend trip we had planned. But I found myself strangely torn. The guys thought Honor might be a spy. And even though I trusted Caldren, *I* wanted to be someone *they* could trust.

My heart told me I could trust Cal. I wondered why they didn't.

Caldren trapped me against his body, just for a second, my heart galloping at his hard length pressed against my back. Then I grabbed his forearm and threw him over my shoulder. He should have hit the ground on his back, but he somehow landed nimbly on his feet and spun to face me.

“What’s going on between you and Jaik?”

For the first time, he looked off-balance. “Is it that obvious that there’s something going on?”

“Just a little. He practically snarls every time he sees you.”

He rolled his eyes. “It’s funny how when someone has wronged you, they hate you. It’s as if they have to make themselves feel better about what they’ve done, so they start to concoct some story where they don’t have to take any shred of blame.”

His cheeks colored just faintly, his high cheekbones tinging pink. I hadn’t met many men who blushed, but there was something magnetic when Caldren did it. He was certainly one of the most handsome men I’d ever met.

“You’re just as good looking as a dragon shifter,” I mused out loud. “Despite how much they think that they’re superior.”

That color in his cheeks deepened. “Thank you.”

I’d made him uncomfortable. “Sorry, I tend to just say what I’m thinking.”

“It’s a treat,” he assured me.

“Really? You would be the first to think that.” While he was smiling, while we were busy circling each other, I added, “Can you tell me about the psychic bond between dragons? How much have you heard about it?”

“I’ve heard about it endlessly,” he said dryly. “But of course, I’ve never experienced it. Wolves communicate differently. As a wolf, I can understand basic communications from other wolves. But it’s different than the way dragon

shifters can talk into each other's heads. That's part of what makes them so vital in battle."

I snorted. "I have to think that there are other ways. We don't need the dragon shifters."

He grinned at me. "You'd think that you would take the same position as every other dragon shifter. *Yes, yes, it makes sense that we should rule. Magic willed it this way.*"

"I've heard the way the other shifters talk about us. We don't take the same kinds of risks that they do, we soar above them. We don't experience the same danger and pain that they do." It troubled me.

"I see," he said, not smiling anymore. There was something in his gaze I couldn't read. "You have a tender heart, Honor."

I didn't know quite what to say. Jaik had certainly made it seem as if that was a negative thing.

But Caldren was already going on. "Dragon shifters are able to talk to each other or simply open a passageway of sorts into your thoughts and memories."

"I can't imagine any of them being so unguarded," I said.

"How has it gone, keeping your walls up?"

"I haven't accidentally revealed my identity. But then, the Elders helped me." The thought of their enchantment made my skin prickle. "I have to admit, that was a good idea, as much as I don't enjoy anything else the Dragon Elders have ever said or done."

He let out a laugh. "Neither do I."

"How'd you end up at the academy then?" I asked.

"I wasn't wanted at home anymore after I disappointed my family." His face softened as he studied mine, as if he'd seen sympathy there. "Don't feel too badly for me, Honor. Your family situation isn't any less complicated."

"I know, but it's hard for me to believe anyone would reject you."

A frown dimpled the space between his deep brown eyes.
“And why is that?”

“I don’t know.” But it was a lie.

He was such a good, kind man. It was hard for me to imagine anyone rejecting him because he failed to live up to some ridiculous expectation that was beyond his control.

Would he wonder where I was this weekend? Jaik would certainly not appreciate it if I told him we were hunting hybrids.

Jaik was jealous of any time I spent with Caldren, and I wondered how Caldren felt about the time I spent with Jaik.

But then it was time for another round of *asshole versus dragon*, and all conversation dropped away.



CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

H*onor*

THE NEXT MORNING, I WAS WOKEN BY THUMPING ON MY DOOR. I scrambled up and started to dress before I realized my boots were too big. Shit. I froze. I was *Honor*. And I was due to meet the royals to go hunting hybrids.

I hurried to the mirror, muttering the first words of my spell.

“What’s taking so long?” Arren called. No one should have to deal with someone like Arren this early in the morning.

“I’ve got to get changed.” I tried to deepen my voice to sound like Lucien. I murmured the rest of my spell, and my face blurred, replaced by Lucien’s rugged, worried features. This was getting way too complicated. I felt increasingly trapped in lies that weren’t even of my own making.

Sometimes I wished I could tell the guys that I was their dragon shifter. I couldn’t imagine them caring I was female. They *would* care that I’d been lying to them this whole time. Just the thought sent a shiver down my spine. After all, they already thought I was a spy. I couldn’t imagine that finding out that I’d been pretending to have a different identity all this time was going to leave them in a very good mood.

I heard Arren fiddling with the door, and I muttered a curse word as I hastily swept Honor’s clothing from the night before into hiding.

Then I stormed to the door and jerked it open. “What’s wrong with you? Why can’t you wait?”

Arren glowered at me, his big body dominating as he leaned toward me. “I don’t need to wait for the likes of you. Maybe you shouldn’t have stayed out so late.”

I should’ve just felt fury, but there was a wayward throb between my thighs even when Arren was angry. Or maybe *especially* when Arren was angry. Something was wrong with me.

“I really don’t need a mother, Arren, and if I did, I wouldn’t ask you to do the job.”

He swept into my room and frowned down at my bag. “Have you ever rolled a bedroll before in your life?”

No. “I don’t need your help.”

He unlatched the buckles on my pack and upended it.

“Hey!” I shouted.

“Now you do.” He frowned at the rumpled clothes on the floor.

He insisted on helping me to pack, which wasn’t a very pleasant experience for either of us.

Then the two of us bickered all the way up to the rooftop, where the sunrise streaked red and gold along the sea. It was beautiful and awe-inspiring and a sign I was up far too damned early.

Talisyn grinned when he heard us. “Listen to you two, beginning to get along.”

“I wouldn’t say anything quite that dramatic. I still want to murder him,” I answered. Arren’s cutting gaze swept from Tal to me and I added, “And he definitely still wants to murder me.”

“Oh, well, that’s just how he relates to people.” Talisyn sounded cheerful. “I’m pretty sure he still wants to murder me, when he doesn’t find me absolutely charming and irresistible.”

Talisyn winked at me behind Arren’s back, and lightness bloomed in my chest.

Even as Lucien, I was winning these men over. Then I caught the cold way Branok watched me, and my hopefulness fizzled.

“It’s too early to deal with any of you.” Jaik sounded weary already. “Let’s fly.”

We donned our packs and shifted. One after another, the guys ran to the edge and jumped off into the pink-tinged dawn.

We soared over the city spreading out beneath us, quiet for now but with some people stirring.

Soon, we left the city behind and with it, the safety I’d once felt from the Scourge. As we traveled north, we passed occasional farms, where cows nosed the grass and smoke poured from cozy wooden farmhouses.

“Aren’t they afraid of the Scourge?”

It was Talisyn who swung his massive horned head toward me, looking back over his bottle-green and purple wings. Tal was beautiful even as a dragon. “Not everyone is. It would be a lot easier if everyone saw the threat the same way. Instead, there are plenty of people who defy the high king’s orders and continue to live their lives.”

“Then what happens when the Scourge attack?”

“If we can spare the men, my father sends help,” Jaik answered. “But if there aren’t enough warriors, they’re out of luck.”

From this distance, the homes looked like a series of dollhouses. “I don’t understand why the Scourge would come all the way into the city through the tunnels, but they wouldn’t attack that farmhouse already.”

“The Scourge wants most badly to destroy the royals,” Jaik explained. “They know that without the dragon royals, the kingdom would fall apart.”

Talisyn snorted, twin puffs of smoke coming out of his nose. Even in dragon form, Jaik threw a withering look his way, as if he were not very impressed with Talisyn.

But it made me wonder if Talisyn doubted the elders. Why was that? After all, one day he would take his place as an elder, replacing his father.

I decided I'd have to ask him more about it later, when the others weren't around. Talisyn would only speak so openly around all six of us. I wasn't sure how openly he'd ever talk to Lucien, either.

Caldren still refused to help me find the prophecy. He'd warned me that seeking it too hard would be a death sentence. But wasn't prophecy almost always a death sentence?

The six of us landed outside a village near where there were rumored monster attacks and shifted back, dropping our packs in the ankle-high grass.

"You three, stay here," Jaik instructed, glancing from Tal to me to Arren.

"Why are we grouped together?" I asked.

"You're both annoying." Jaik swept Tal and me in his glance. "And Arren is terrifying, and I want the villagers to help us."

Lynx gave us a shrug and walked backward so we could see the smug look on his face.

"You're about to get left too," Jaik said without looking back, and Lynx spun on his heel to follow.



THE VILLAGERS CLAIMED THEY'D SEEN MONSTERS COMING OUT of the forest.

"Do you think maybe the thing got trapped down there somehow by accident and it wasn't a big conspiracy?" I mused as the six of us walked through the forest. It was beginning to rain; the rain shook the leaves high above our heads and fat droplets plopped down on us.

The men were all pretending to be impervious, so I pulled up my hood and pretended I wasn't wet and freezing.

“When in doubt,” Talisyn said, “I always go with *conspiracy*.”

Beyond the trees, the sea glimmered in the distance, gorgeous blue even under an angry gray sky. I’d never left our island. I wondered what it was like beyond the sea in the other Fae lands. I’d heard there were Fae who wielded deeper magic, more complicated magic, who could do almost anything.

I wondered if I’d ever get the chance to see the world beyond. When the Scourge began, the other land stopped accepting any visitors. We had been isolated for years now. I’d read stories about things I’d never tasted—like cocoa and coffee and fruits.

Would the dragon royals ever conquer the Scourge, so we could be a part of the rest of the world once more?

“What are you thinking about?” Talisyn asked. “You look deep in your own thoughts.”

Branok snorted. Clearly, he didn’t think my thoughts could go very deep.

“I was just dreaming about life out there.” I swept my arm toward the sea.

“Why is that?” Branok inquired. “I can’t imagine any world where people would find you very amusing.”

“You find me plenty amusing. I’ve never seen anyone have so much fun as you’ve had, trying to beat me into the ground every day.”

Branok favored me with a slow smile that told me he savored the thought.

The funny thing was, I almost didn’t hold a grudge over his merciless beatings. After all, as far as he was concerned, Lucien had hurt his sister. And as much as I didn’t enjoy it, there was no denying how much stronger I became with each miserable day.

So, really, Branok and Lynx’s hatred worked out in my favor. Even if I never felt that way at the exact moment that

one of them shattered some bone that I'd always consider very precious to me.

"Would you ever travel across the sea?" I asked Tal.

"Maybe I have."

Branok responded by cutting his eyes at him fiercely. We weren't supposed to be able to travel across the sea at all. Had the dragon royals been on some kind of secret mission?

I wanted to go on a secret mission to the far fae lands.

Jaik shushed us. The look on his face was intense, as if he'd heard something that none of the rest of us had. "Time to shift."

His voice was urgent, and he'd barely finished before scales rippled over Talisyn's arms, before Arren's wings sprouted. Shifting was always harder and slower for me.

I was the last one to shift into a dragon.

All the while, I could see what was coming at us, and I really didn't want to face it as Lucien.

Through the woods lurched half a dozen hybrids, all of them huge. Three of them were like the one that I had run into in the tunnels; half ram, half human with twisted horns. Their bodies were muscular and powerful and deformed all at the same time. And they all had the same half-mad air, as if they were desperate for blood.

They ran at us at full speed. Those glowing yellow eyes fixed on me as they sprinted toward us made me want to turn tail and run on my most primal childish level, even though I'd never do that when I had people I needed to fight alongside.

Behind them came three more shifters. One of them had a face like a frog, and somehow, he was the tallest of any of them. He must have been almost eight feet tall, his bulging eyes were fixed on me, and his mouth moved in a strange rhythmic thrusting motion that freaked me out even before he darted out his tongue, an enormous six-foot-long weapon.

Behind him were two huge shambling half bear, half humans. No other shifter was the size of a dragon, but these

came close.

“I do not like this party,” I said out loud to no one.

And then finally, finally, I dropped to my knees, the shift taking me over. My bark of pain surprised me as scales sprouted across my skin, horns wrenched from my body.

The frog thing ran straight for me while my wings were just beginning to rise from my back, in the moment between human and dragon when I was my most vulnerable.

A snarling dragon slammed the beast to the ground. The frog monster’s tongue lashed out, those eyes staring at me even as Arren in his dragon form, went to work on tearing the damn thing apart.

Feeling a puff of fire escape my nostrils, I searched for my own monster to attack.

Jaik shouted, “We need to take at least one of them alive.”

“Do we get to keep ourselves alive?” Arren snarled, his voice recognizable, even in his shifted form.

“Optional,” Jaik snarled back. Even Arren, his second in command, sometimes pissed him off. We all pissed him off though, so that was no reason for him to choose favorites.

One of the bear shifters finally reached me and reared on its rear legs. Its legs weren’t deformed like I thought at first—there were eight of them, all thick, like a tarantula’s legs.

“No wonder this thing is in such a bad mood. I would be too if I were so ugly.” No one else seemed to find me as amusing as I found myself, least of all the bear spider thing, which attacked me.

I danced around it, ripping chunks out of its flesh, trying to take out its legs so that it would be disarmed, but not dead. I wanted to make Jaik happy for once. Not that Jaik seemed like he had a very high threshold for joy.

The monster scrambled away from me toward Lynx’s back.

Lynx was busy fighting another one of the shifters, so he didn't see the enormous bear claws snapping so close to his body. I threw out a rush of flame, lighting the bear on fire and maybe a few parts of Lynx as well. Lynx finally spun, daring to give me a dirty look.

"You're welcome," I snapped in my head.

"I don't need any favors from you," he answered.

The corpse of the bear-thing was smoking. I had accidentally killed it all the way dead.

I looked at Jaik. If I could've pulled a face in my dragon form, I totally would. *Whoops*.

Jaik shifted himself back to human and as I reminded myself, *Lucien, Lucien, be Lucien*, I did the same.

He looked around the carnage still splattered with hybrid blood, and said, "Well, that could have gone better."

"We're all alive," Talisyn offered.

"I wanted to try to track the hybrids, maybe even ask them some questions if they're capable," Jaik said.

"We have no way of asking them questions now, but maybe we can track where they came from," Talisyn said.

The others shot him a look, that familiar look telling him to shut up in front of me.

"How?" When no one answered me, I looked around them in exasperation. "Look, I get it. You don't trust me, but I want to find the source of the hybrids as much as anyone else. And I don't exactly have any other friends to spill your secrets to. I'm not going to betray you all."

"Any other *friends*," Branok mocked.

"I know, I know you're not my friends. You keep making that clear. The thing is, I don't have any friends, I don't have any family, so you don't have to be my friend, but I'm still going to be your friend."

Talisyn cringed sympathetically. Jaik watched me with a look on his face that I couldn't quite read.

“Oh my gods,” Branok muttered to himself. “This is getting embarrassing.”

I met his gaze evenly. “Eventually you’ll realize that maybe things were more complicated with Alina than you realized.”

“Don’t say her fucking name,” Branok interrupted, his voice almost shaking. “You don’t get to talk about Alina.”

I stared at him. His eyes narrowed, his jaw tightening. Tal gave me a quick shake of the head. He was trying to protect me, trying to shut me up.

But I was done with Branok. “Does she want to be exiled to Northern Territory?”

“You don’t get to fucking talk about her,” he said again.

“Fine, but I care about what happens to her. And when you see I care about her, I don’t understand why you won’t give me a second chance.”

Branok’s hands were fisted at his sides, and Jaik moved close to his shoulder, ready to intercept him. Branok snarled, “You should have thought about what she needed before you took something from her that can never be replaced.”

I stared at him. “Tell me you’re not talking about her virginity.”

Even Talisyn groaned. I couldn’t believe that these guys were really so upset about her virginity though. If she was happy, why shouldn’t they be happy?

“Shut up,” Branok said again, tightly.

“Sometimes I wonder if I’m really the bad guy in the story. You take all your hatefulness out on me, but I don’t see you rescuing her from the north.”

Branok jumped forward, but Jaik put his hand on his chest and shoved him back.

“Enough,” Jaik interrupted. “This has been fun, but I’d really like to focus on the corpses now, because I actually

enjoy their company—a lot more than all of you, when you’re feuding.”

“Eventually, we have to get to the bottom of this,” I said. “You have to admit that we’re not working together very effectively when these guys hate me.”

“I’m not saying that we should trust him,” Talisyn said, “but Lucien has a point. He watched Lynx’s back today, and given the way things have been going in the training yard, I think that says something.”

Lynx looked deeply offended by that thought.

“Branok and Lynx have really done me a favor in training,” I agreed.

The air around the golden twins felt absolutely icy.

“Maybe it’s time that came to an end,” Jaik said. “Time that we just trained, without any drama or any payback.”

I beamed my brightest smile around at them all. “But we’ve been having so much fun. I’m in no rush to quit.”

“I can’t believe you’re doing this to us,” Branok flared up at Jaik. He said it as though he wanted to storm off, but we were still in the woods tracking down hybrids. So, the best he could do was walking a foot further away from all of us. From the look on his face, it wasn’t very satisfying for him.

“The gods saw fit to make Lucien a dragon shifter,” Jaik said. “He is what he is.”

“But if you don’t want to track down the hybrids with me here,” I asked no one in particular, “Does that mean I get to go home? There’s a warm, comfortable bed just calling my name.”

“I think we’re going to trust you with this,” Jaik said.

“Just because it will make you miserable too,” Talisyn added, slapping me on the back.

They intended to use an ancient tracking spell, the kind that had been developed before the time of the shifter enchantments spreading like wildfire throughout the people.

“Do you ever think about the fact that the shifters rose at the same time as the Scourge?” I mused out loud as Jaik and Lynx knelt over a corpse, working the spell.

“What are you trying to say?” Arren demanded.

“I just think it’s a funny coincidence. What if the two curses are tied together somehow?”

“Well, people have been trying to solve the Scourge for the last two-hundred years,” Branok said, “but I guess you’ve got a brand new take.”

“You never know,” I said, “sometimes you just need a new idea, a new way of looking at the world.”

No one seemed very impressed by my way of looking at the world.

We tried to find the hybrids, but we were unable to even detect them.

As we camped that night, everyone was in poor spirits. We’d spent the day hunting the hybrids. We’d tracked in what seemed like endless circles through the forest. There was no sign of where they’d originated. It seemed they’d suddenly burst into existence.

We could find where they’d slept, where they’d hunted, where they’d fed. We could even, and this made me shudder, find traces of where they’d fucked. But we couldn’t find where they’d come from.

“What are we missing?” Jaik demanded, scrubbing his hand through his hair. “There’s something that we’re not understanding.”

“Like all of it?” Talisyn said. “There are rumors, but these monsters are not supposed to exist.”

Some said the hybrids were a children’s fairy tale, a story about what happened if there was some kind of disconnect between your soul creature and who you were.

That thought sent a shiver trickling down my spine. After all, I wasn’t supposed to host a dragon’s soul.



CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

Caldren

I WAS LEAVING ACADEMY GROUNDS WHEN I HEARD THE SWOOP of wings overhead. I turned my face up, looking for my brother, but he was nowhere to be seen. Damyn's dragon form swooped overhead, his scarlet wings folding as he landed.

I had other places to be, but he caught me before I could reach the street.

"Getting a well-deserved break, Cal?" he asked, surprising me by catching my wrist and clapping my other bicep. "It's good to see you going out."

That old greeting was the way the older dragon knights tended to greet each other, and once upon a time my brother and friends and I used to mirror them. But of course, I was no longer a dragon royal. I hadn't seen Jaik performed that little ritual with his friends since, but I no longer was invited to their parties anyway.

I shrugged off the random memories. "It's good to see you too. Doing anything interesting this weekend?"

He shook his head, his blue eyes too bright as they gazed into mine—as if he saw too much. "You?"

My father would certainly have me quietly murdered if he knew what I was doing with my life.

"Just running some errands, getting a drink with some friends."

"I'm glad you've made new friends. It hardly seems fair your brother got to keep all your mutual friends."

Damyn referred to him relentlessly as *your brother*. “You seem to forget I don’t have a brother anymore. Or any other family. I was disinherited, remember?”

“Even King Pend cannot control whether you and Jaik choose to still see yourselves as brothers, no matter what he’s decreed.”

“Did you give Jaik a similar lecture?” I shoved my hands in my pockets, even though if I slipped on the dozens of steps down to the street, I’d have no chance of catching myself. Maybe I’d rather die than discuss Jaik.

“You know me so well.”

“And how did Jaik take being lectured?”

“Your brother seems humbled by the past few years. Don’t get me wrong, he’s still arrogant, but... I think the weight of his responsibilities has changed him.”

“One can only hope.”

Damyn sighed. Disappointing him always bothered me. But I couldn’t make up with Jaik; he walked away every time I tried to talk to him, and if he stayed still it was only long enough for us to come to blows.

If he ever wanted to apologize to me and try to make things right, I’d try to repair our relationship. But he was the freaking heir to the kingdom, and I was nothing now. It seemed as if maybe he should be the one to make the first move.

And Honor seemed to be falling in love with him. My hands fisted at my sides. She chose *him*. She’d see me as nothing too.

“Are you going into the city all night? I thought you might want to train a while.”

“Do you want some company on your errands? We could grab a beer if you have time.”

“You know how much I like beer, but... Are you feeling sorry for me, Damyn?” *Just because my brother has taken my throne, my place as firstborn and...* Honor’s face swam into

my mind, her mischievous smile that always made me want to lean in and kiss her.

“No, I wouldn’t say that.”

“You wouldn’t say it, but you’re awfully polite by dragon shifter standards. You might mean it.”

Damyn laughed and slapped me on the shoulder. “No, I would never feel sorry for you. I know just how much you are capable of.”

Given my plans in the city tonight, Damyn’s compliment made something knot in my stomach. Maybe Damyn knew what I was up to. But he still had that jovial look, so it didn’t seem likely.

By now, someone had surely betrayed some hint of what I was doing to my father. If my father knew that I had rebel sympathies now, at some point he would send someone to kill me. I just hoped it wouldn’t be Damyn.

“Maybe we could train tomorrow morning,” I suggested. “Catch up then.”

“I would like that. I know you have some free time in your schedule with Honor gone.”

Where the hell *was* Honor? I wasn’t going to ask, but Damyn studied me, his eyes glinting. Then he said quietly, “You are allowed to care for her, you know.”

“Am I? As soon as I want something...” I broke off, swallowing my ire, my pride, like I’d swallowed so much since I was cast off from my family.

“Don’t make your brother into a villain,” Damyn said quietly. “He’s a fool sometimes. Too proud by half. But he’s decent through and through, just like you.”

“The two of us are nothing alike.” My voice came out level, even though that was hardly how I felt. We’d reached the bottom of the steps and the bustle of the street below. Vendors lined the street, trying to sell wine and beer and roasted nuts and pastries to students. I turned to face Damyn.

“What do you want from me? We see each other every damn day—”

“But we don’t get to talk,” Damyn interrupted.

“What is it, Damyn?” My voice came out impatient, and I regretted it immediately.

Damyn had taken both Jaik and me under his wing—literally—when we were just children taken onto the battlefield to prove our daring and worth. Our childhood had been brutal, pitting us against each other constantly.

When our father abandoned Jaik and me on the battlefield and soared away, Damyn had been the one who stayed with us in the fray, as Scourge raced toward us.

He’d been the one who’d bandaged our wounds, who taught us to hunt, and who banged our heads together when Jaik and I squabbled. For a while, I’d thought Jaik and I were actually friends. Brothers, in the ways that mattered.

“I’m worried about you,” Damyn admitted.

“Why?”

“Come on, Cal. We both know you’ve been finding one hundred and one ways to piss off your father—”

“If he’s mad, I assume he’ll send one of his henchmen to let me know.” My voice came out cool.

“You’ve got your own *henchmen* now, don’t you?”

“Why do you care?”

Damyn rubbed his stubble-covered jaw. “Cal. You’re not that angry at the world that you’ve turned stupid, are you?”

“I’m not angry, Damyn.” I walked backward along the street, forcing a grin to my face. “I’ve got a new life now, and I don’t hate it.”

Even when I turned my back to him, I could feel Damyn watching me.

But when I’d gotten to the end of the street, groaned, and swung around, intending to say *something* to him, maybe even

to apologize, he was gone.

So I went on.



AS I WALKED THROUGH THE FRONT DOOR OF THE TWISTED Pines, the wiggling disquiet running along my spine told me I was being watched. But then, I was almost always being watched.

I called hello to the barkeep, greeted my friends, drained my beer. Then when I'd cataloged who exactly was in the Twisted Pines, I melted into the back.

I walked down the hall that always smelled of spilled beer, passed the bright bustle of the kitchen glimpsed through an open door, then stepped into the stockroom. It was dimly lit, full of jars and bottles and shadows and Fitz.

Fitz melted out of the shadows. He didn't greet me aloud in case someone was following me, but the quick nod of his head was enough.

Fitz bumped shoulders with me. The disquieting ripple over his face turned into *my* face. Then he was heading out into the hallway, and I darted around the shelves of pickles and moonshine to the secret entrance to the tunnels.

The Elders thought they could use these tunnels to keep the populace subdued.

They didn't know how ready the populace was growing to become rowdy, and how much these tunnels would work against them one day in the future.

As soon as my feet hit the metal floor with a soft clang, a voice out of the shadows complained, "You're late."

I turned to find Nora, her pale face barely visible in the dim light, only her white teeth shining clearly.

"Is Morick here yet?"

"You know he's not."

“I can’t be late if Morick’s not here.”

“He’s always late.” That was Briden, melting out of the shadows. Even though he was a goat shifter, he somehow towered above me, an enormous man with messy red hair.

“I know you miss me,” Morick said as he appeared around the bend in the tunnel, “but you don’t need to grow so frenzied whenever I’m a little late.”

His walk had the half-swagger, half-stagger list that always made me wonder if he was drunk or if it were just his sea legs, as he claimed.

“We’re on a tight timeline tonight,” Nora reminded him.

“To meet my ship.” Morick pressed his hand to his chest with his usual dramatic flair.

“We have a few things to accomplish before there’s any reason to meet *your ship*.”

“Then why are you still wasting our time bantering with me, Nora, by all means, let’s get moving.”

Nora rolled her eyes in exasperation. The four of us moved quickly through the tunnels, heading for the outskirts of the city. The tunnels allowed us to move without ever having to go through the city gates, where the guards would’ve kept records of our movements.

Of course, if we encountered any of the kings’ or dukes’ men in the tunnel, we’d have to kill them.

I didn’t relish the idea, but it didn’t upset me that much either.

“You’re walking better now than you were the other day,” Nora said. “Did you finally stop punishing yourself and see the healer for that knee?”

“I was never punishing myself. I was just busy.”

“Does that sound convincing in your own head, or when you say it out loud, do you hear the bullshit as well as we do?”

When I was kicked out of the dragon royals, I’d made a new group of friends.

Equally questionable, equally sarcastic.

They were all criminals and rebels but then, so was I now.

The four of us started the climb out of the tunnel. Nora scrambled out then flopped onto her back, lying there for a moment; the moonlight revealed her dark hair and the mass of freckles scattered across her nose. “Finally. Every time we’re down there, I can’t shake the feeling we’re going to be trapped forever. Finally some moonlight on my face.”

“How you suffer.” Morick nudged her shoulder with the toe of his boot, and she crinkled her nose.

“You’re not easing my suffering, Morick. You’re standing in my moonlight.”

“I know you two think you’re hilarious, but a thousand people are counting on us to save them from starvation this winter,” Briden reminded them both.

“It’s more like nine hundred. Don’t be dramatic, Bri.” Nora said, even as she accepted Briden’s hand to boost her to her feet.

“We’re totally serious,” Morick said. “That doesn’t mean we can’t have some fun along the way.”

Briden snorted. “I don’t consider listening to the two of you prattle on to be all that *fun*.”

“And yet, that’s part of what makes it fun for us.”

We moved to our positions along the road. When the tax collector’s carriage came along, with two guards riding horses on front, Briden shouldered his shield, then shifted into a rabbit and hopped into the road.

“I can’t watch,” Nora whispered, then promptly turned into a bird. She flapped her wings a few times as if testing them, then soared toward the driver.

He let out a screech as the bird dive-bombed him, pecking at his eyes, and tossed the reins.

Briden exploded upward suddenly, transforming from rabbit to man just as the carriage passed, the wheels narrowly

missing him. The shield slammed into the bottom of the carriage, and a blast of magic raced across it, unseating the carriage from its wheels. He was already rolling away as the thing slammed into the ground.

Morick ran in, still in his human form, and hacked the leather harnesses that connected the horses to the carriage.

As soon as the horses were free, I charged at them in my wolf form. I bumped my head against their hindquarters to terrify them until they raced off. Then I turned on the driver, who froze, his face terrified, then ran into the woods.

I didn't bother to chase him.

Morick looked across the expanse of greenery that led toward the sand. "We've got further to move this thing than I like. This road didn't seem so far from the sea when we planned."

Nora landed lightly on her feet, her bright red wings snapping back into her shoulders. "Best get to work then. None of us can help you."

"That's for sure," Morick muttered.

He concentrated, his hands stretched out toward the sea. Slowly, the sea seemed to ripple, white-capped waves rising and crashing against the beach rebelliously, until finally they began to move our way.

The sea touched the carriage then lifted it, carrying it out. Morick's teeth gritted, his eyes closed, as he focused all his power on keeping the heavy vessel floating.

I put my hand on his shoulder, guiding him ahead of me to make sure he reached the edge of the sea safely.

His ship was anchored there.

Nora flew out, but Briden and I had to swim. The ship's crew was busy lifting the treasure out of the broken carriage, hastily spilling gold coins and other treasures over the damp deck. I crouched and picked up someone's necklace, turning it over in my hand. A wedding ring was attached to the chain.

"He'll take anything in taxes, won't he?" I muttered

It seemed like my father taxed the people endlessly to pay for the war against the Scourge, but spent far less on our wounded and dying soldiers than anyone would have expected.

I was done with the war. I was done with losing friends. And I was done with my family.

But tonight, we would divide the taxes we'd just stolen and re-distribute it to the villages. Villagers would be able to afford the food and supplies they needed to survive the winter when my father had just claimed virtually everything these people owned.

Rebellion was coming.



CHAPTER
THIRTY-EIGHT

H*onor*

THAT NIGHT AROUND THE FIRE, JAIK STAYED AWAKE LONG after the others had rolled into their sleeping bags, his elbow propped on his knee, the flames reflected in his amber eyes. Even though I was yawning, I stayed awake with him. Something inside me ached about how we'd left things, even though I had to remember I was Lucien now, not Honor.

Because it was Honor who wanted to lean over to him and soothe whatever tormented him as he watched the fire.

Jaik's gaze flickered up to mine. "You should get some rest."

"I'm not tired. Trying to get rid of me?"

Jaik rolled his eyes. "You didn't grow up that much in that dungeon, did you?" He reached for his sleeping bag.

"It seems like you got rid of Honor. So, you thought that she would ruin things between the five of you?"

"You want to talk about Honor," he said, a disbelieving note in his voice. He certainly seemed wide awake now.

I cleared my throat, having second thoughts. "I'm not doing anything with her."

"How can I possibly believe that? What would she be doing in your room?" he demanded.

Stubborn, jealous prick. I raised my chin. "If you think she's so terrible, you shouldn't care."

"I never said she was terrible." Then he muttered, "She certainly does have terrible taste in men."

“Because she loves you or because she loves me?”

His eyes flashed, reflecting the flames between us.

“I’ve seen the way she looks at you, you know. Whatever’s between the two of you is real, even if it’s so ill-advised.”

The tension in his frame relaxed slightly. “It’s more than just *ill-advised*. I’ll get her killed.”

He frowned into the fire. “Much as I hate the thought of her finding any comfort with you... It’s better if she’s loving you and alive, rather than loving me right up until she’s dead.”

His tone came out harsh, and the word *dead* jolted me.

He’d rattled those words off so quickly, as if he’d been ruminating over these same thoughts. “Dead?”

“My father has no sense of humor about the possibility of a squirrel heir to the throne. He’d rather see her dead.”

“Pend Deragon does not seem like a very pleasant person.”

“No, Lucien, he isn’t, and you’d do well to remember that my father isn’t any great fan of yours, either.”

“To be fair,” I said, “No one that I have met over the past months, or years, or since I was released from the dungeon has been much of a fan of mine.”

Jaik frowned, barely registering my words, as if his thoughts were still fixed on Honor. That didn’t hurt my feelings.

“I’ve been trying to figure out a way to keep her safe,” he mused. “But still, I worry that even though I’m staying away from her, my father will decide that it’s safer to take her out of the picture entirely.”

My breath froze in my chest. He wasn’t angry at me for fracturing his friendship with Tal. He was scared. “Because it’s so hard for you to stay away from her.”

Jaik groaned and scrubbed his hand over his face, although he didn’t argue the point; he just didn’t like hearing it aloud. He still bore the marks from that terrible beating, although

now the cut across his lip and the bruises on his cheekbones gave him a rakish air.

“Your father beat you to warn you to stay away,” I said, filling in the blanks. “And he promised worse to Honor, if you didn’t listen. Well. He sounds like a real swell father.”

For a few long moments, there was no sound but the crackle of the fire between us. I thought he was done speaking, then he said quietly, “I know Honor’s hurt. That’s what really bothers me. I wish I’d never even opened the door. She was just so...”

He trailed off, and I desperately wanted to prompt him to supply some adjectives.

“You don’t know that she has any regrets.”

He scoffed. “I’m sure she has regrets.”

“Maybe not,” I said.

Another of those long silences, while I squirmed with the desire to tell him everything Honor felt.

“My father’s worried I’ll get Honor pregnant and fuck up our bloodline.”

Pregnant? The thought of carrying Jaik’s baby seemed a little ridiculous. And then, the next second, I imagined him actually smiling with a baby in his arms, and I could’ve sworn my ovaries twitched. “Are you worried about that?”

He hesitated. “Everything my father taught me about relationships is starting to seem so fucked up. He taught me that dragons don’t have equals.”

I stared at him without understanding. I’d heard the royals refer to *undragons* enough that this bit of arrogance wasn’t exactly surprising.

Jaik looked at me as if I were thick before he reminded me, “A wife can’t be a dragon. So, a wife can never be our equal. But when I look at Honor...it doesn’t matter that she’s not a dragon. I could never see her as *lesser*.”

My heart hurt worse when he was kind than when he was a dick.

“That’s not the life I want for her. Even if my father hadn’t threatened to hurt her. It’s better if she’s free of my family.” He raked his hand through his dark hair. His handsome features were cast in shadow as he stared mournfully into the flames. “It’s better if she’s free of me.”

I stared at him, so deeply struck with emotion that I didn’t know what to say. I had to stay in character as Lucien. But all I wanted to do to him was tell him that I’d risk anything for him. I wanted to go to him and kiss him. I’d never seen Jaik smile, and I wanted so badly for him to have a moment of deep, pure happiness, to see it light his face.

“I know, I know,” he muttered, glancing around at the snoring sleeping bags scattered around the firelight, as if he were afraid he’d be caught in sentimentality. “It sounds ridiculous.”

“No, I think it’s brave you’re trying to be a better man than your father. And I think it’s amazing that you’ve been told you’re the best of beings, superior to every other shifter, and you actually question that supremacy.” My affection for him leaked into my tone, and I tried to swallow it, too late.

He looked at me skeptically, obviously thinking I was messing with him. Then he scoffed and got up. “I don’t need your approval, Lucien. If anything, it should just worry me. You don’t exactly have a record of making the best life choices.”

He was right, but maybe not for the reasons that he expected. I shrugged and lay down in my sleeping bag. Time to let the conversation die along with the fire.

Jaik’s father, Pend Deragon, already knew what I was. He knew I was a dragon. So, his reasons for wanting Jaik to stay away from me were very different than the ones he’d given Jaik.

I had to find a way to get closer to the Dragon King, to get to know them, because I had a feeling my life depended on it

—just as much as on that damn prophecy.



WE RETURNED FROM OUR WEEKEND WITH EVEN MORE questions than before. We'd never tracked down a hybrid.

As soon as I'd dropped my pack in my room, I made my way down the hall, intending to slip out as Honor to see Hanna. I washed two days' worth of grime off, then stuffed my dress into my leather backpack and threw it over one shoulder before dashing out the door.

"Luce," Talisyn called. I stopped and turned back at the end of the hallway, almost to the dragon's head door. He looked as if he already regretted stopping me, but still asked, "Do you want to come with us to have a drink?"

Gods, I wanted that so badly. But then I imagined my sister's freckled face, pensive with worry, and the dream of laughing and talking with these men I enjoyed so much faded.

"Another night," I said, knowing another night might not be offered.

"Going to fuck around with our girl, despite Jaik's best efforts?" Talisyn tried for a light tone and failed. He sauntered toward me.

"Not everything revolves around Honor Hannaby," I shot back. "She's not even pretty enough to be worth all the—"

"Lucien," Talisyn broke in, his eyes darkening. I rarely saw my light-hearted friend take on such a warning air. "Don't finish that fucking sentence. This way I can pretend I misunderstood you."

Gods, he was still so protective of Honor. I could've melted.

Talisyn frowned at me. "What the fuck are you smiling about?"

"Nothing, sorry. I'm just meeting an old friend. I'm staying away from Honor, I promise."

Talisyn stared hard at me, and I waited until I was hurrying down the steps of the academy before I let myself smile.

I watched my back as I hurried along the dark streets, knowing that one of my royal friends might've tailed me, but I didn't see anyone. I ducked behind some bushes in a park to change, struggling into my dress, then altering my face. Lucien the dragon royal sauntered in, and Honor—slightly bedraggled with a leaf caught in her hair—wandered back out.

I ran along the roads to the big coral house. There was a guard at the gate, which made me frown, but he didn't stop me and I ran up the stairs to my sister's room.

“Honor!” She threw her arms around me. “Where have you been all weekend?”

“Work,” I said. “I'd rather have been with you.”

“Of course,” she said.

My stomach growled just then. She caught my arm and we went together to the kitchen, stole an apple pie from the pie safe and two forks, then went on into the dark garden.

Hanna and I sank into the soft grass, the pie between us, almost hidden by the dark shadows of the flowering bushes around us. I ate a mouthful of sweet, caramelized apples and almost moaned in pleasure.

“Don't they feed you at work?” she asked me.

I'd discovered over the course of the weekend that Jaik, for all his positive qualities, was a terrible cook. He'd almost murdered me serving half-raw rabbit. I shuddered. “Not well.”

The two of us were chatting about nothing when a figure suddenly loomed over us. We were caught in Henrick's shadow, and he grinned down at us.

“Alis wouldn't approve, she wants you girls to keep your figures.” He eyed our pie, then gave us a benevolent wink. “But I won't tell her.”

“Thanks,” I said dryly, wishing he would move on.

He sank into the grass next to us, and I side-eyed him.

“Do you plan to invite anyone to the wedding Friday?” he asked me. “One of those dragon royals, perhaps?”

Did he know? I wasn't sure how close he was to Joachim, who had recognized me at the shifting ceremony.

“Not if I can help it,” I said loftily. “Those royals do tend to follow me around like lost puppies.”

Hanna stared at me, her lips agape as if I'd lost my mind. I wished I could tell her everything.

We made painful small talk with Henrick until he finally left. By then, I was counting the hours I had to sleep until I had to be up for training with Caldren. I hugged Hanna goodbye and dashed off, pretending I didn't see how disappointed she was.

The harder I tried to please everyone, to be whoever they wanted me to be, the more I felt as if I were disappointing them all.

That week of military training seemed to drag on forever. It seemed as if every day got a little bit more brutal in preparation for our field maneuvers. As the weekend approached, the guys began to talk about going out again, to track down the source of those hybrids.

Alis and Henrick's wedding was on Friday, which didn't make me very excited about leaving to hunt monsters as soon as the sun rose on Saturday. When the six of us were sitting in the amphitheater, I bemoaned the fact that we couldn't sleep in, even on a non-academy day, which had earned me a withering look from Branok. But Branok gave me a withering look pretty much every time I spoke, or sighed or smiled, or in any way interacted with other human beings. So I wasn't going to get too tangled in his opinion.

On Friday night, I ducked Jaik, who was probably going to nag me about making sure I attended dinner, and made my way hastily to Hanna's house. The beautiful coral home rose in front of me as I passed under the trees.

There were dozens of guards posted outside the front gate. At first glance, they looked ceremonial, but they were awfully

heavily armed. Alis was marrying a pretty important person in the royal kingdom. Were they so afraid of the Scourge? Or did Henrick have other reasons to expect an attack? I wouldn't give a damn—Alis and Henrick deserved to have enemies—but my sister lived in that house.

The guards eyed me watchfully but didn't stop me. It was strange to have them standing underneath the trees on the grounds where I used to play so freely. One more piece of my childhood had been stripped away.

I went unheralded through the house; the servants seemed to look right through me. In my room, Alis had left a new gown. She wouldn't have wanted me to wear the same thing twice anyway, so it didn't matter. Talisyn had ripped the first from my body. Just thinking about it made me fantasize about his hands stroking beneath my clothes, the way his eyes lit up as his hard body pressed to mine. The guys were suffering while we were apart, but I was certainly suffering too.

I stripped off my clothes and climbed into an absurdly hot bath. After I washed my hair, I soaked off what felt like the accumulated grime and blood of a week at the academy. Even though I washed every night before I tumbled, exhausted, into bed, it wasn't the same as soaking my sore muscles.

The physician might heal my broken bones and open wounds each day. But nothing could take away the soreness of my muscles from the constant training that we did.

As I floated in the water, sudsy bubbles lapping around my breasts and my feet, I imagined Jaik and Talisyn twined around me. I could almost feel Jaik's capable fingers teasing against my clit while Talisyn buried himself deep inside me.

As I fantasized about being sandwiched between their hard bodies, I let my hands slip over my breasts, tweaking my nipples. Then delving lower, my hands slid over my thighs, separated my folds and stroked between them. It wasn't as satisfying as having Jaik do it for me. But I found the sensitive nub and teased it over and over again until my hips began to rise rhythmically out of the water, grinding against something that wasn't there.

The soft murmur of water filled the air as my body fell into the water over and over again, my hips rolling as I pressed two wet fingers inside my throbbing center, trying to push myself over the edge, shuddering around my fingers. And all the while, I could see Jaik's intense gaze smoldering at me. I couldn't wait for the moment he finally broke and smiled. And I imagined Talisyn's self-satisfied smirk between kisses.

Even after satisfying myself, when I sank into the water that felt too hot now, I was still throbbing and aching.

I wanted *them*.

They wanted me too, but they could probably find some other women to satisfy their desire. The thought filled me with a sudden surge of rage. But strangely enough, I hadn't seen them yet with any of the noble girls who normally hung around. They'd been busy hunting hybrids, and I wasn't sure I dared let myself hope there might be another reason. I wondered if Jaik would come tonight, or if he was keeping his bruised face out of sight.

The thought of Pend hurting Jaik made me long to reach inside his chest and rip out his heart. Now that I was a dragon, I was actually capable of quite a bit of violence. It didn't have to just be a fantasy any longer. Of course Pend was also a dragon, old and powerful... so I'd have to bide my time.

I was getting dressed when Hanna knocked on my door, then came into my room. Her gown was the same shade as mine, but in a far more innocent cut. She didn't look thrilled about it, though I guess she wouldn't look very happy about anything today.

I hugged her tight. Then the two of us made our way downstairs, which was thronging with strangers. It was strange to see so many unfamiliar faces, to feel like we didn't really belong in our own home.

Someday, this house was going to be Hanna's. I didn't care about possessing much of myself. But I wanted to make sure that she received her full inheritance. Everything that Father had always wanted her to have, I wanted her to have it just as badly. Alis would take it from her if she could.

Hanna and I sat in the front row, and I reached out and took her hand, waiting for the ceremony to begin the music. The music dragged on long after the wedding should have begun, the repetitious tinkling harp didn't soothe my mutinous feelings one bit,

Then I heard a rustle of someone coming down the aisle.

I looked up in surprise to see Talisyn dressed to the nines. He stopped, towering over me, smiling and looking handsome as ever. He didn't look as if he had a doubt in the world. Which was funny because I was pretty sure he wasn't supposed to be here.

"Mind if I sit here?"

"I don't mind at all. But are you sure you'll survive it?"

He looked a little worried despite himself. "I'm pretty sure Jaik needs me even more than he'll want to murder me for seeing you."

"Did you tell him you were seeing me?"

Hanna was eavesdropping on us with a complete lack of shame or repentance.

"Well, not exactly. I left my room after talking about how one of us should be there to support you. And he didn't attempt to wallop me into oblivion. So I feel that was basically the same thing as approval."

"I see. That seems like some real personal growth from our favorite possessive prick."

He pulled a face. "What's with all the guards?"

"Nice change of subject. I was wondering if you knew."

He shook his head. "No, there aren't any more guards at my house or even at Jaik's castle."

The music changed then. Talisyn offered both Hanna and me a hand up. She had a look on her face like a smacked bottom but she reluctantly took his hand. Talisyn winked at her, and some of the tension in her face softened.

It was nice to have Talisyn beside me for support while I watched Alis marry another man who she would drain.

After the ceremony, Talisyn said, “I know you want to dance with me.”

I grinned at him. “I really do, strangely enough.”

But just then Henrick wandered toward us. He moved slowly, ambling along, stopping to glad-hand people. And yet I had the unsettling feeling his gaze was fixed on me the whole time, that he was stalking me like a predator.

Talisyn followed my gaze to my new stepfather, and something must have shown on my face. He took a step in front of me as if he were blocking Henrick from reaching me. I didn’t think he even realized he was doing it, but his sudden protectiveness made me smile.

“Down, dragon,” I teased him. “You’d think you were a wolf shifter, getting all possessive.”

“Who knows what dragons would be like if they had mates?”

“Probably unbearable. Dragons are already unbearable in every other way.”

Henrick stopped in front of me, offering a well-oiled smile. “Could I have this dance with you, Honor?”

I gave Talisyn the faintest nod, letting him know that I was going to be just fine on my own, then stepped into Henrick’s arms.

As the two of us whirled around the room, I held myself stiffly away from him. I’d never been a stellar dancer, but I felt graceful when I danced with Talisyn. With Henrick, I was all knees and elbows.

He kept moving closer to me so that sometimes our knees collided with each other. I stumbled and his hand on my waist seemed to drop lower, his fingers curling against my ass.

He smiled. “Steady there.”

The words, which seemed so paternal, didn't really match with the way he was handling me.

I fixed a wooden smile on my face.

"Is it true that you don't remember anything before you were nine years old?" He asked the question still beaming, as if it were small talk.

That was a really strange place to start if he intended to get to know me. But I didn't want to get to know *him* anyway. "Yes, it's true. My father always said that it was for the best."

"Your adoptive father?" he corrected. "Or was he?"

I didn't bother to answer the question. I knew what people thought about my uncertain parentage. Sometimes I wished it were true, that he was my father and that I was the love child he'd had with some mistress.

The story of how he'd rescued me was far more painful. And the worst thing was, he died so suddenly that I'd lost any hope of finding my first family. He'd always said that he would tell me when I needed to know all the gory details, but he'd asked me to wait. He'd worried replaying the story would awaken those dark memories. He wanted me to live part of my life unburdened by the abuse and shame that I'd been through.

I didn't understand how it helped me to deny the past. But he'd meant well, and maybe it was better to have a blank book than a book full of torture and abuse and neglect.

"You know, those memories are still there." He twirled me, and stumbled through the rotation before I reluctantly slapped my hand in his. "Buried deep within. No enchantment can destroy your memories, they can only hide them from you."

"I'm aware." As far as he knew I was a squirrel shifter, not a nitwit.

"You're a grown woman now. You should awaken those memories. Why are you still hiding?"

I kept the wooden smile plastered on my face, but let my eyes say how unimpressed I was by this conversation. I had to

be polite and avoid defying him in public to protect Hanna, but didn't owe him my inner thoughts.

"My father said that this way was better," I said stubbornly, "and I still trust him more than any man alive."

He looked as if he were coaxing his lips into the thin smile that spread across his face. "You must have loved your adoptive father very much for rescuing you, even if you couldn't quite remember your old prison."

He'd said *adoptive father* twice now, and I let heat bleed into my voice. "*My father* was a good man."

The dance ended but he didn't let go of me. If anything, his finger seemed to find the cutout in my dress and press into the bare skin just above my ass. His fingers felt too intimate, and my stomach squirmed.

Talisyn was suddenly there, smiling and saying, "May I cut in?"

Henrick gave him a respectful nod of assent, then kissed my hand. "We'll talk about this more later, Honor."

"Wonderful." I had no intention of discussing my last memories with him. I didn't know why he was so invested. But I didn't want to face my past without my father. It was bad enough I'd lost my mother, who had helped with the rescue.

I didn't remember what had come before waking up in their house. But in those early days when I was nine, I'd explored the house with a sense of wonder. Everything had felt like a delight: breakfast porridge and berries in pretty crystal dishes, books and blankets in front of a glowing fire, the vibrant gardens that seemed to stretch on endlessly. Those first memories were lit with their love and my easy acceptance. I didn't think it would have been that easy if I'd been fighting nightmares.

I was still shaken after I'd taken a ridiculous number of turns around the dance floor with Talisyn, despite his best efforts to be cheerful and fun.

I plowed through a crowd of noble girls to the punchbowl, where I met Hanna, who was occupied eating miniature

chocolate cakes as if her life depended on consuming the maximum quantity of sugar.

“How are you enjoying the party?” I asked her dryly.

“Wonderful,” she replied in the same tone. We were definitely sisters. “How did you enjoy your dance with our new stepfather?”

“I thought he touched a bit more of my bare skin than anyone should.”

“Anyone besides Talisyn?” she asked innocently, her gaze following mine to where the young lord held court with half a dozen girls.

He said something and they all laughed, probably harder than they needed to. Talisyn was funny, but no man was *that* funny.

“I’m sorry, I shouldn’t make light,” Hanna said. “I didn’t really enjoy dancing with him either.”

“Did he touch you?” The moment I imagined him gripping Hanna’s hip the way he gripped mine, I could also imagine myself ripping his head off and flying his headless corpse to drop into the sea.

“No,” she said hastily. “It wasn’t bad. He just gives me the creeps.”

“Me too. I hope Alis treats Henrick as well as she treated Father. Father never deserved it, but he certainly does.”

“What do you mean?” she asked me curiously.

“I mean how she never seemed like she really loved Father. Sometimes, I think she married him for his fortune—that we just came along with his money. Then she murdered him and was left with us.” I said the words in a whisper, a hot angry whisper, then immediately stopped, biting my lip, wondering what I’d just done. *Stupid, stupid, stupid.* That wasn’t the kind of thought that I should ever have shared with my little sister.

Her eyes had gone wide. “Do you really think that she might have?”

“No,” I said hastily. “Please forget I said that.”

“How am I going to forget it?”

“That’s a big accusation, and I don’t have any proof. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said anything.”

“No, I’m glad you told me if you think that’s what happened. I’m not going to do anything stupid, Honor. Who do you think I am?”

Who did I think she was? I thought she was my little sister.

And that was exactly why I was worried she was going to do something stupid.



I WASN’T SURE TALISYN EVEN REALIZED, BUT JUST LIKE AT THE ball at the academy, people treated me differently when he was around. When Talisyn treated me like a queen, everyone else bowed too.

When I walked into the knot of noble girls who surrounded Talisyn, his eyes lit up, and he ignored everyone else. They were suddenly interested in speaking with me.

I eventually dragged him away, in the guise of hunting for wine, and told Talisyn, “People treat me a whole lot better when you’re around.”

“Well, then I guess I’ll have to always be around.”

He said the words lightly, then paused. Maybe he’d seen the shadow that must have crossed my face because Talisyn wasn’t supposed to be around. All week, I’d only gotten to see Jaik and Talisyn when I was being Lucien.

I blurted the truth. “I’ve missed you.”

Talisyn was kind to Lucien, at least compared to the others, but it was different being Lucien around him than being Honor.

His face softened. “I can’t imagine why.”

“It’s hard for me to believe too. You *are* very annoying.”

“We talk too much,” he admitted.

“*You* talk too much.”

“You talk just as much as I do.

“I do,” I agreed, “but there’s only room for one person who talks too much in a relationship. And I already claimed that role. I’m the girl.”

He gave me a skeptical look, and my heart pounded. Could he know I was Lucien? There was a way Talisyn looked at me sometimes, whether I was Lucien or Honor, that made me feel he saw right through me.

“I don’t think it’s fair that you get to claim things just because you’re the girl.”

Relief flooded my chest. “Well, what do you want to claim?”

“I’ll be the funny one.”

I scoffed, and he said, “You are so hurtful.”

The two of us were laughing when I caught a glimpse of Henrick watching us from across the room. The smile immediately froze on my face.

Talisyn noticed and gripped my waist. “Why don’t we go for a walk in the garden?”

My mood shifted in a second. Teasingly, I said, “My garden seems like a dangerous place for us.”

“Honor,” he chided, “You know I’ve got to follow Jaik’s rules.”

I wondered if Jaik thought that I was in just as much danger with Talisyn, or if he couldn’t stand to see me with one of his best friends. And either way, I could empathize—the thought of one of them being with another woman struck me with a bolt of rage.

“What are we going to do, Talisyn?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” he admitted as we entered the garden. He glanced around to make sure we had privacy, and my curiosity was piqued by the time the two of us had reached a far corner. His voice was still very quiet when he said, “There’s a way out Jaik and I’ve been discussing.”

I raised my eyebrows to prompt him to go on.

“If you were willing to come be the housemaid at our private retreat, in the north.”

The thought of being forever their *maid* and never the dragon jolted me. “Oh no, not another girl exiled to the north.”

“It’s not an exile. Your life here isn’t really that great.” He gestured around the garden and at the towering pinkish-orange columns and walls rising beyond. “Sure, it looks beautiful, but none of it is really yours.”

“No, the house and grounds will never be mine. But what *is* mine is my sister, and I have to look after her.”

“Well then you have to choose.” Talisyn’s voice was unexpectedly stern. “You can have us, or you can have your sister, but we’re not going to put your life in danger.”

“The king doesn’t need to know.”

“We’re always being spied on, Honor.” Tal sounded impatient, as if I should have just understood the life they lived as dragon royals.

“Is there someone watching us right now?” I asked.

“Maybe.”

I ran my hand up his arm, stopping to look over my shoulder, to make sure the garden was clear. I pushed him in a secluded alcove, where lilies dripped from a ceiling constructed of vines.

“Right now,” I asked, “Do you think someone is watching me touch you?”

He gazed at me with an expression that I couldn’t quite read, somewhere between fond and exasperated. “Why are you like this?”

“Why are you the way that you are, Talisyn?”

“Childhood trauma and too much time on the battlefield at a young age,” he rattled off. “Oh, and then a dash of just plain being born stupid.”

“Always so self-deprecating, as if you’re not one of my very favorite people.”

“Just one of them?”

“Top ten,” I assured him, and his brow furrowed.

“What about the top five?”

“Okay, I guess top three.” I loved bantering with Talisyn, but I loved kissing him more, so I bobbed up onto my toes, my body falling against his as I raised my lips.

He pulled his head back, catching my chin with two of his fingers and regarding me skeptically. “Do you have a death wish?”

“I have a Talisyn wish.”

He snorted in exasperation. Then he leaned forward, pressing his lips against my mouth and kissing me with a mix of tenderness and heat, all at once.

And all the while we traded kisses, my hands were toying with his belt. His lips pressed mine passionately even as he slapped my fingers away.

I finally pulled away and gave him a wounded look. He twined my fingers in his and pulled my hands above my head, pinning me against the wall. “Jaik was right when he called you a naughty cat.”

I groaned. “I really don’t like the naughty cat thing.”

“Oh really?” A mischievous glint entered his eyes.

I’d sealed my fate. “Am I going to carry that incredibly stupid nickname for all my life?”

“Right now, it seems like that might not be very long,” he said dryly, still gripping my hands above me. He bent his head and his lips plundered my throat, and my back arched.

“I am trying to be good,” I said softly, “because when I thought about dying, I thought about what that would do to my sister. But I don’t think that Jaik’s father can kill me that easily.”

He straightened, fixed me with an intent look. “The man has a hired fleet of assassins.”

The word *assassin* made something inside me buckle for a second, and I raised my chin. “That seems normal.”

His jaw set as if he’d slipped and told me something that he shouldn’t, once again. If I were a spy, I’d be a good one. And that worried me, because I wanted to make sure these men always trusted me.

And yet... There were so many lies springing up between us like brambles. I was starting to feel like a princess trapped in a tower, so surrounded by those thorny lies, the royals might never want to battle their way inside. How much longer could I live as Lucien?

“Talisyn,” I said, my voice pleading, although I wasn’t even sure anymore what I was asking for.

He closed his eyes. “Honor, you are really straining my abilities to be reasonable.”

I swayed, even though he still had my hands trapped, so that I could press myself against his hard, muscular frame. There was no one else in the garden. “You’re a dragon. You can sense there’s no one spying.”

“You are incorrigible,” he muttered, right before his lips claimed mine.

The tip of his tongue teased along the seam of my lips until he coaxed them open. I let out a soft hum of a moan. That seemed to drive him a little crazy, and he kissed me more deeply, his lips plundering mine. He trapped both my wrists in one hand and dropped the other to caress my cheek, my throat.

My knees went weak and his hand dropped to my hip, holding me steady. I never liked being weak or vulnerable before, but somehow, I liked it with Talisyn.

“I still feel Henrick’s hand on my skin, Talisyn,” I whispered. “Please help me forget.”

His gaze was somewhere between tortured and angry. “I don’t want you to use me to forget, Honor. I want to be what you remember.”

“If you keep on kissing me, that’s what I’ll remember from today,” I whispered. “The music floating over the garden from the party. Your hands on my body. Your mouth on mine. My stepfather will fade, he’ll be nothing but an unpleasant footnote.”

“You’re killing me,” he said. “But what’s worse is that you’re killing yourself.”

I let my lower lip pudge out slightly.

“Are you pouting at me?” he asked, his voice amused but his gaze still smoldering, giving him away. “I wouldn’t try that with Jaik, Jaik will smack your ass.”

I would love to get the chance to play those kinds of games with Jaik, but Talisyn couldn’t resist my power, no matter how silly it might make me look. I turned my face into his jaw; he was smooth-shaven for now, unlike the sexy stubble he grew out during our hunting trip, and his aftershave smelled spicy and delicious.

He let out a groan just before he kissed me again.

I intended to have as much fun with Tal as possible before, for propriety’s sake, we had to rejoin the party. Now that he had finally broken, he seemed just as eager.

He grabbed my hips and swung me around. I gripped the vine covered stone wall in front of me as his hand slid across my back, raising sparks. His hard length pressed against my thigh, then I pushed my hips back determinedly into him.

His hands rucked my dress up, slid between my thighs and I groaned, seeking his cock eagerly. As sparks traveled through my body, I ripped the vines away with my hands, unable to stop myself from acting like an animal, until he finally pushed me over the edge. He plunged deep inside me

and stopped, wrapping his arm around my waist, his lips against my throat.

He shuddered inside me as my channel tightened and tightened rhythmically around him. His lips grazed my ear when he whispered, “You feel so good.”

“See,” I said, “it’s worth a little risk of death.”

He froze.

I’d said just the wrong thing.

As he withdrew, my skirts fell back around my legs, his cum still dribbling down my thighs.

I turned to find he was already buckling his belt again, paying far more attention to the task than it required. I touched his broad shoulder. “Talisyn. Don’t be angry with me.”

“I’m not angry with you,” he corrected. “I’m scared for you.”

“I can take care of myself.”

That was nonsense and we both knew it. He met my gaze evenly. “You know the deal. You go to the north retreat where we can protect you, or I have to pretend I don’t give a damn about you.”

“What about my sister?”

“We’ll find a way to protect her!” he exploded. “You know Jaik, you know me... do you think we’d abandon her?”

“If she runs away, she loses her inheritance. This house is supposed to be hers.”

“Does someone else’s fortune matter more than your life?”

“That’s easy to say when you’ve always had a fortune,” I shot back. “I’ll do what I have to do to protect her.”

“Fine. But I’m not going to sign your death warrant, Honor.” His voice came out icy calm, unreachable. The dragon royal mask was back. “If this is what you choose, this is what you choose.”

“Talisyn, please wait.” My voice came out too soft. I wasn’t enjoying the feeling of vulnerability anymore.

But he left me there in the garden alone.



CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

H*onor*

WE CONTINUED OUR MISSION TO FIND THE HYBRIDS, FAR TOO early the next morning. I'd left the party as soon as Alis would let me escape, after seeing Hanna safely locked in her bedroom. I told her that she needed to keep the doors locked at night. I hadn't wanted to dwell on why, but I had a feeling she knew far better what I was concerned about than I would like, even though Henrick hadn't gotten handsy with her yet. The way he acted with me made me worry that he would target my sister.

An evil man had entered our house.

Someone perhaps more evil than my stepmother. And I had to find a way to deal with him.

I made my way back along the dark streets, feeling groggy, but not from wine. I felt as if I had a hangover from my emotions. I'd never felt the way I felt with the royals, and I didn't like it at all. Having Talisyn reject me had hurt worse than anything had hurt me in a long time.

I knew he was doing it with good intentions. I wasn't stupid, I understood why he didn't want to take the risk of angering Jaik's father.

There was something about their protection that seemed so infantilizing, though. The way they were trying to order me around, send me off to their house in the country.

And I reacted with so much rancor because their offer was tempting.

If I could bring Hanna with me and know that she was safe, then the idea of being kept by the dragon royals, safe and

cozy, was intoxicating. But I knew it would never be that easy. Since I was a dragon shifter, the elders would come after me. They might even send Damyn. The thought of the man that I'd come to look up to, with the dangerous gaze and quick smile coming after me, sent a shiver of anxiety down my spine. He was one of the good guys, but I didn't want to know what he was capable of when he stopped being good.

I couldn't tell my dragon royals, but I knew that there was no easy happy ending for all of us.

The next morning, bright and early, I staggered onto the rooftop, still bleary eyed.

"What were you doing last night?" Jaik looked me over with a critical eye. "You look like you're in terrible shape."

"He always looks like he's in terrible shape," Branok said, "Today he just looks like he's still drunk as well."

"I'm not," I protested. "I just didn't sleep well last night."

"Did you have nightmares?" Branok asked me, his voice laden with mock sympathy.

"I was dreaming about fucking your mom," I answered. "Really wasn't too bad a nightmare though, until it ended with her giving birth to these two little assholes."

Talisyn snorted a laugh that he tried to hide.

Branok scoffed as if he were sick of listening to us all, then took a few steps and dove off the side of the building. It looked like suicide, then suddenly he was a full-size dragon, sweeping through the air.

"Show off," I accused because my skills weren't that strong.

"You'll catch up," Talisyn promised.

I turned toward him about to say something, only to have his strong hands slam into my shoulders as he pushed me off the edge of the roof. *This game again.*

I transformed in midair, the ripple of pain almost unnoticed underneath the fear of splatting against the ground far below.

Students beneath me scattered as my wings finally caught the air. My back legs scratched the training yard, then I was flying. When I looked back over my shoulder, I'd left a nasty muddy gash through the vivid green grass.

"That was really *my* fault," Talisyn said, though he didn't sound sorry.

The six of us soared over the city, then followed the curve of the brilliant ocean, almost blindingly bright blue under the sun, until we reached the forest.

Once again, we tracked their scent, always waiting to be attacked, but we never saw any of them.

Worst of all, we seemed to hit a dead end. It seemed as if the monsters had popped up out of nowhere.

"What if they *are* popping out of nowhere?" I asked.

Branok closed his eyes as if he was praying for patience, but that was obviously just an act. There was no way that man had ever asked the deities for the quality of patience.

"There are tunnels under the city. Why couldn't there be tunnels out here?"

"Tunnels," Branok repeated as if I were slow, "stretching for miles and miles. Under the forest, deep under the roots of the trees?"

"I suppose it might be possible with magic," Lynx said thoughtfully.

Branok huffed as if his brother had just betrayed him.

But Lynx was interested in the problem, and didn't even notice. "Or possibly, if someone had hired orcs to dig. The orcs would be quick and quiet—they'd never have a hint," Lynx went on musing.

The rest of us had clearly faded out for him as he was invested in the problem.

"There might be signs on the earth above," Lynx said suddenly. "It would be logical, if there were splits in the earth, when it dried. Now, it's relatively rare but I do remember

during the drought that there was a small earthquake that opened up a rift through a village.”

“I don’t suppose you remember the name of the village?” Branok asked.

“Of course I do,” Lynx responded.

I grinned. “It’s nice to have a smart friend. I’m so glad we have one, at least.”

Lynx must have forgotten for a moment just how much he hated me, and he didn’t even argue with me. I’d take it as a win.

We took to the skies again, heading toward the village that Lynx had mentioned. We landed there and tried once again to pick up the scent.

Some curious villagers came out to see what we were up to, although they kept a distance.

Jaik changed back into a human. “Come on.” He grabbed my snout to talk to me. “You come with me.”

“I don’t know why I’m being so favored.”

Just like every time I thought to myself, *Lucien Finn Lucien Finn Lucien Finn*, chanting to myself because I was so worried I’d slip and forget who I was supposed to be transforming into.

When I finished my transformation and picked myself up off the ground, brushing my sleeves, the five of them were regarding me skeptically.

“What?” I asked.

“Why do you chant your name?” Lynx raised his arms and pumped his fists. “Lucien Finn! Lucien Finn! Lucien Finn!”

Shit. “I’m just a big fan of myself. You can’t tell me that you all don’t understand that.”

Jaik rolled his eyes. “I don’t have time for your nonsense.”

I was pretty sure that was a lie. I was pretty sure he loved my nonsense.

At any rate, he gestured for me to come with him, and I really did feel an odd sense of pride at being the one that he'd chosen, even though it was probably because he assumed I was the closest to the peasants. Maybe I'd know some kind of special peasant dialect. Or maybe he just thought it was going to be dangerous, and he wanted someone to push into the path of danger to distract a rogue hybrid.

The villagers said they thought they'd heard strange monsters roaming around, but they all shut up their houses and barns tightly when nightfall came. And so the only potential evidence of hybrids was the occasional torn apart animal they found.

"The woods are full of predators," Jaik said.

"They don't kill like this though," one of the villagers said, "as if they don't even care about eating as much as they care about killing."

That made me think of the thing that I'd run into in the tunnels, the one that had muttered about meat.

We gathered the others, then walked the ground that had split in two as the villager showed it to us. It had closed back up, which seemed strange, but the wound through the woods was still visible from the broken trees.

Lynx paused, kneeling and pressing the ground patiently with his palms while the rest of us stood around much less patiently. "The ground is soft here. It would be a good place to burrow down and see what we can find."

Jaik glanced around, but the villagers had disappeared, perhaps not wanting to be put to work.

"I'm surprised that the villagers didn't want to hang around to watch the dragon royals do manual labor for one of the few times in their lives." In fact, I greatly enjoyed having the opportunity to watch them strip off their shirts and set to work.

Sweat rolled down their bronze muscular bodies, and it made me feel a little bit better about the fact I was sweating quite a bit myself.

There was a clang as metal struck metal and Jaik let out a curse as the shock of the impact traveled up through the shovel.

But he looked as pleased as Jaik ever managed the next moment. “Looks like I hit something.”

We all got to work, digging out the rest of it. I scraped the tip of my shovel along, pushing aside red earth to reveal a gleaming strip of metal. Jaik and I exchanged a look.

Branok dug diligently, but his frown deepened even faster than our hole.

“I’m not going to say I told you so,” I promised him, but for some reason that didn’t seem to make him feel any better.

“Now, how do we get in?” Lynx mused.

“Brute force,” Talisyn said, “That’s always Arren’s vote.”

Arren gave him one of those looks as if he didn’t know why he was being dragged into things, as always. He was so endlessly unresponsive, it was fun to put words in his mouth.

Jaik formed a breath of fire. The light reflected off his face and danced in his eyes, making him look like a fallen angel, something straight out of hell, but with a face so beautifully distracting.

No wonder all the other shifters were terrified of us.

His firebreath came out in a long, thin line and cut away at the metal, until finally he reared back, having made a circular hole through the tunnel and kicked it with his feet. There was an even louder clang as the metal hit the bottom of the tunnel floor.

“Well this is getting very interesting,” Talisyn said. “And I for one am not creeped out at all.”

Jaik dusted his hands against his trousers, staring into the darkness. “We’re going in.”

“Of course we are,” Talisyn said with false brightness. “What else would we do with ourselves? You can’t pass up an

opportunity like this to go into the creepy tunnel full of death monsters.”

Although no one else bothered to argue with Jaik, Talisyn seemed to say what everyone else was thinking. He certainly said what *I* was thinking.

“I don’t suppose we’d want to let the dragon elders know about this?” I was no fan of theirs, but it seems like they’d be pretty curious about the tunnels leading through their kingdom.

“Not a chance,” Jaik said. “If this isn’t Caldren’s work, this is their work.”

“Caldren’s work?” How did he get dragged into this?”

But no one answered me. My friends were slithering through the hole and dropping into the tunnel below. Light glowed from inside the tunnel, as they lit balls of fire in their hands.

I certainly wasn’t going to be left out. I sat on the edge of the sheared-away metal hole, let my legs dangle, then pushed off.

I landed lightly on my feet in their midst.

We were in a long, winding tunnel that stretched as far as the eye could see. The flames flickering in their hands lit the dragon royals’ handsome faces with an ever-changing mix of light and shadow.

I looked past them down the tunnel, which stretched away until it faded into darkness. Anything could be lurking in the dark, more blinded shifters with weeping eyes. A powerful sense of loneliness clutched my stomach with its talons—what if they left me behind down here again?

Jaik was already starting down the tunnel with his usual confidence. “Hold on,” Lynx grumbled, digging in his bag. “Unless you want to get lost down here.”

“We’ve all got quite the sense of direction,” Jaik answered impatiently, but waited for his friend, crossing his arms over his chest.

“In the *air*,” Lynx corrected, dragging a pad of paper and a pencil out of his bag, then letting the leather satchel thump back against his side. “We’re not at our best advantage grunting around under the earth like orcs.”

“This seems like a very big security risk,” I muttered. “Who would want monsters roaming around under the kingdom? And how could this have happened under the dragon elders’ noses, if they weren’t the ones who were responsible? And if they were, why?”

“Lucien.” Branok’s voice was harsh. Shit, I was once again talking out loud. “Nothing that you have to say is that interesting to the rest of us. We’ve all thought through those same questions already.”

“I’m interested,” Talisyn said mildly.

He was definitely my favorite.

Lynx began to sketch a rudimentary map as Jaik led the way into the tunnels. I followed behind Jaik, determined not to put myself in any position to be abandoned. That meant I was close enough to breathe in the dark, heady scent of his aftershave and to notice the way his tunic clung to his spreading shoulders.

Jaik turned and raised an eyebrow at me.

“If you don’t want me to follow right on your ass,” I said, “you should try not abandoning me with monsters. Our trust’s a bit broken at the moment.”

“I didn’t know about the monsters,” Jaik said mildly. “For the record, I don’t trust you either.”

It should’ve just been banter, but it struck me deeply as I followed him into the dark.

Jaik was not going to cope well when he found out who I really was, was he? For all his good qualities, he was also a controlling bastard—and I’d slipped far outside his control.

We proceeded through twists and turns in the tunnels, which rose and sloped through the earth. Little drainage

channels were built at the bottom of the slopes, preventing the tunnels from flooding during the rainy season.

The smell of wet earth was almost overpowering, and my nostrils flared, trying to tease out any other scent. Some shifter with a keener nose would've been a nice addition to the team, able to sense a monster before we stumbled across it. "It's too bad we don't have a wolf shifter with us."

Jaik's shoulders stiffened. "Be quiet, Lucien."

"If the monsters hear you, they'll definitely want to kill you." Arren observed helpfully.

Jaik twisted to look over his shoulder. "You need to stop associating with Caldren."

"Associating?"

"He's a traitor to the kingdom. It's not a good look for a dragon royal. Now shut up."

My jaw stiffened. He was probably right we shouldn't chit-chat at the moment, but he'd launched his right hook, then warned me off making a ruckus.

Caldren was always so kind and patient, training me to fight alongside the royals. He wasn't faking.

We reached another fork in the tunnels, the only sound the scribbling of Lynx's pencil.

Talisyn held his flame-filled hand down the corridor, not that it illuminated much. "So far, no monsters."

Branok groaned. Even Jaik pursed his lips.

"Why are you such superstitious children?" Tal demanded of no one in particular. "You don't summon a thing just by thinking about it."

Jaik shook his head and began down the tunnel once more. When he came to an abrupt halt, I almost walked into his back before he raised his fist to one side, signaling us all to stop.

He'd frozen, his head cocked to one side, listening.

My stomach suddenly roiled. I wasn't really excited about the prospect of whatever he'd heard. I strained my ears, my own breathing suddenly seeming too loud in the hush of the tunnel, then finally heard the faint human murmur in the far distance. Ice formed in my stomach. We weren't alone, and something strange was happening.

Jaik gestured for us to move silently along. We passed a ladder that reached up. Jaik gripped the ladder with one hand and turned to Branok, who was already moving forward. Branok quickly scaled the ladder. His nicely-shaped ass in trousers paused right in front of my face as he went up, then he lifted a hatch that let out a slow, quiet groan. The noise still made me cringe. He climbed up the rest of the way, until only the toes of his boots were in my vision.

I looked up. Past Branok, I glimpsed sunlight and green trees.

These hatches must be how our hybrids reached the forests without leaving a trail.

Jaik patted Branok's calf, and Branok closed the hatch and climbed carefully down. The tunnel felt somehow more airless when the hatch had been closed. The two of them exchanged a grim look, but none of us were talking now.

Jaik smothered the flames in his hands, and everyone else followed suit. We were plunged into complete darkness.

I couldn't help but reach to touch Jaik's shoulder. He didn't flinch away, and I dropped my hand, my eyes adjusting to the dark. The royals seemed to move in sync with each other, and I followed more clumsily, sometimes crashing into one warm body or another. In the dark, maybe they couldn't see who I was, because a hand would steady my shoulder and we would move on.

We began to pass more branches, more hallways, even doors. Flickering lights in the walls provided soft illumination, and we could move more quickly.

Then we passed a room carved into the side, where there was a litter abandoned in one corner, a heap of rags on the

ground. Branok knelt and gathered the rags to his face, inhaled, winced. In all our minds, he whispered, “Fresh blood, old wounds.”

In the distance we heard chanting, a mystical sound that seemed to reverberate through the tunnel and directly into my soul. I didn't want to see what was at the end of the tunnel.

But I kept going anyway. Wherever the dragon royals went, I'd go too.



CHAPTER FORTY

H*onor*

WE TRACKED THE SOUNDS OF CHANTING UNTIL WE REACHED A chamber where we found more ram and bear hybrids groaning in pain, lying on high beds. I counted about half a dozen of them and a dozen others who moved between them, seeming to take care of them, but they often stopped to incant over the broken, twisted bodies. What the hell was happening?

“This time, we take some alive.” Jaik whispered into our minds. He flashed a hard look at several of us.

“I’ll do my best,” I promised.

I noticed Arren didn’t make any promises. He wasn’t really the *leave them alive* type.

The caretakers checked on several shifters, but slowly I realized they entirely ignored some—there were two hybrids who seemed to be still breathing—and crying or begging—but who were twisted into odd shapes they ignored entirely.

The hybrids were massive, all tooth and claw and horn, but they seemed helpless. It seemed as if they were dazed by the enchantment thick in the air.

Several of the caregivers—if that’s what they could be called—gathered around one shifter. The others joined them as they chanted, leaving other groaning hybrids behind.

This hybrid vacillated back and forth between human and shifter and something that wasn’t quite either, his features twitching as he shook on the altar. A desperate screaming ripped from his throat, rising over the sound of the chanting.

“We have to help him,” I whispered.

Arren turned to me with a look of disbelief.

“I’ll take care of the keeping alive part,” Talisyn said confidently, pointing to two. *“I’ll nab those two.”*

“Then the rest of us will watch your back,” Jaik said.

We didn’t want to fight in an area where we were so closely confined. Once we shifted, there would be little room for us to maneuver. Sometimes, being the largest and most terrifying of the shifters wasn’t all advantage.

One of the shifters raised his head, his nostrils flaring. “We’ve got company.”

Two shifters started toward us. Talisyn darted to meet them, his sword still hanging in the harness across his back since he intended to keep them alive. Jaik plunged toward the others, his sword in his hand.

Branok secured his map in his bag, pushing it behind his hip, then drew his glittering sword. He and Lynx seemed to move into the fray as one smooth unit.

“Finally,” Arren muttered. He moved quickly into the center of the fray as the caregivers broke off their incantations and drew their own knives.

The hybrids seemed oblivious to the fight raging around them. I met the eyes of one of the creeps who carried a long, gleaming dagger. There was a feral gleam in his eyes as he braced his hand on the bed and leapt over the body in front of him—the figure under him let out a bark of pain—and strode toward me.

“It’s the dragon royals!” one of them called.

The creep stared at me for a second—I expected him to come and fight—then abruptly turned and plunged his blade into the chest of the struggling shifter. I stared at him in shock, feeling the weight of my own carelessness drop into my stomach. I’d waited for him to come to me, but if I’d move to attack him first, that hybrid would be alive.

Then I burst into motion, advancing toward him.

“Don’t let them take you alive!” he shouted.

I slashed out at him with my sword—and he threw himself forward, impaling himself on my blade.

Fuck. As I kicked him off, I glanced around the room at the other royals. This was bad news. It was hard to fight Fae who were intent on dying, who threw themselves into knives and fangs, who are happy to be incinerated. Trying to fight them, while also preserving their lives when they were so eager to die, was difficult.

One of the creeps leapt toward another groaning hybrid. My rush to reach him must've felt like panic to my dragon, because suddenly, the shift took me over, dropping me to my knees as scales raced over my arms. I lunged toward him, trying to stop him—and accidentally bit his head off.

“Lucien,” Jaik chided.

“Sorry, I didn’t want to eat him.” Humans were not delicious. Even in my dragon form, I knew that raw humans were the worst. Humans were all bones and digestive system, crunchy and disgusting all at once.

Next thing we knew, most of the hybrids were dead, and the last of the creeps backed away from us as we closed in, incanting some kind of magical enchantment the whole way. His eyes were wide.

I shifted back too, all too conscious of how I muttered a smothered, *“Lucien Finn.”* I felt embarrassed that I’d shifted by accident. Tal was rubbing his shoulder, and I had a vague memory of my tail lashing out. Maybe I’d accidentally slammed into him.

Lynx shook his head, but they were too busy to mock me much now.

Jaik held out a calming hand to the Fae who stared around at all six of us as we edged in closer, surrounding him. *“Just put down the knife.”*

The creep threw the knife to the ground, and it rattled against the stone. Jaik exhaled.

Then the creep grinned as if he’d won—and went up in flames. For a shocked second, everyone stared at the flaming

column where a man had been.

“Jaik, what did you do?” I demanded. It seemed only fair, given how Jaik had scolded me like a child for accidentally eating someone just a little bit.

Jaik looked at a loss for how to make someone *not* on fire. He grabbed a blanket and tried to smother the flames on the man’s body. The creep fell to the ground, his skin blackened and blistered as Jaik blotted the blanket over the last of the flames.

The creep rasped out a desperate sounding breath. There wasn’t much longer left to interrogate him.

“What the hell were you doing here?” Jaik glanced down at the man’s robes, which looked the same as the priests’ clothes in the temples. “What were you doing with these shifters?”

The man pressed his lips together, refusing to speak.

“Tell me,” Jaik warned. He exhaled slowly, a breath of flame forming at his lips, smoke curling around his face.

The priest couldn’t hide his panic at the threat, but he groaned, “I’ll be dead soon anyway.”

“You talk to him,” Jaik said to Arren, straightening abruptly.

“Oh, come on. No mercy for a dying man?” I asked.

Arren gave me his usual withering look and went to convince the dying priest he wanted to spend his last moments in peace, not pain.

Talisyn and Lynx stood at one of the beds. I glanced around at the carnage and realized every other hybrid was dead.

I followed Jaik to the last survivor. Lynx held his hand and my heart melted just a little bit at the obvious concern that Lynx had even for a dying monster.

As Jaik studied the man, compassion flickered in his amber eyes, though his face was stony as ever. “Who brought

you here?”

“I sold myself,” the man said, “to protect my family from the Scourge.”

“How would that protect your family?” Lynx asked.

The man’s face blurred, his face deforming, his nose and mouth blurring into a muzzle. The sight made bile rise in my throat. He let out a desperate groan before the muzzle faded back into his face, and his voice was a rasp when he managed, “It was the only way they’d heal my little girl, my wife.”

“The priests were able to heal your little girl from, the Scourge?” Jaik’s skepticism leaked through.

No one was supposed to be able to stop the Scourge once it spread to a person. Once they were infected, they became a part of the hive.

It seemed likely this man had sold himself into this House of Horrors for nothing. “Did it work?” I blurted out.

“She’s alive and well.” There was a rattling sound in his chest as he tried to breathe.

“Where is she?” Lynx demanded, but the man didn’t answer.

I looked around and wondered if some of the hybrids had been dead before we even got here. Shifters had transformed into monsters here—and not all of them had survived. The room was half makeshift hospital, half dark temple.

“Hang in there,” Lynx said. “Gods, what I would do for a healer right now.”

“It’s almost as if we’d be better off if there were other shifters with us and not just the superior dragons,” I suggested with a sunny smile that no one returned. No one seemed to like my good ideas.

We tried to get as much information from the man as possible. The people who had taken him told him he could serve the kingdom by being a part of their experimentation.

“They said we would fight the Scourge, that no one else would get sick like my daughter.” His desperate gaze met Jaik’s.

Jaik patted his shoulder. “We’ll beat the Scourge.”

He sounded far too confident, as if he knew the man wouldn’t live to see if Jaik kept his promise.

“We should probably bring him with us and get out of here,” Branok said urgently. “We don’t know how many more are in these tunnels. We don’t know how far the tunnels extend. And we don’t know if we’ll soon find ourselves under attack.”

“Agreed,” Jaik said although he didn’t seem to like the idea. He glanced around the chaos we’d caused, then said, “It’s going to be hard to cover our tracks.”

I studied the carnage. “What if we make it look as if one of the hybrids lost his mind and attacked the priests?”

“Worth trying,” Jaik said.

I was glad that at least for once, someone seemed to think I had a decent idea.

The six of us went to work staging the room, moving the bodies around. Then Jaik shouldered our new shifter burden and we prepared to head out back through the tunnels the way we’d come.

All the while I kept expecting that we were going to be attacked again.

But the tunnels seemed long and empty.

We finally climbed out the other side. But just as we left the tunnel, our hybrid friend began to jerk, trying to speak.

“What is it?” Lynx asked. “How do we help you?”

But he clutched his throat in pain, making desperate hitching sounds but not able to speak.

Lynx said grimly, “There’s another enchantment on him. I don’t think that we can take him past the tunnel boundaries.”

Jaik glanced back down the dark tunnel. “We can’t leave him down here.”

We’d bury him instead.

He knelt next to the man. “Thank you for all your service to your kingdom. Your daughter would be so proud of you.”

He caught the man’s wrist in a warrior’s greeting, and the man weakly clung to him. He tried to say something, but the words were unintelligible, as if the enchantment had dug into his lungs. But he looked at Jaik as if he were thankful—even as the prince was the one killing him.

Grimly, Jaik handed him up to Lynx and Branok, who leaned back over the tunnel. They caught his arms and hauled him up.

By the time I scrambled out of the tunnel, the man was still.

“Branok, weld the tunnel shut again,” Jaik ordered. He grabbed a shovel and stalked off into the forest.

I picked up one of the shovels and started after him, but Talisyn grabbed my shoulder. He gave a quick shake of his head, warning me off. Instead, I waited with the others as Branok’s flames sealed the tunnel back up. Lynx offered Branok his arm, and Branok used his leverage to haul himself back up out of the ditch.

“I didn’t see signs of anyone coming after us,” Branok said. “Not yet.”

That *yet* seemed to hang in the air as we shoveled load after load of dirt back into the hole.

Jaik came back, lifted the body in his arms, walked underneath the trees. When we’d patted the last shovel of earth back into place, Arren led the way into the forest.

Jaik leaned against his shovel. The grave was unmarked.

“Find his daughter for me, Branok,” Jaik said quietly. “It’s time we returned to the academy. We’ll have to find a way to continue our work from there.”

The mood couldn't have been darker as we carried the villagers' supplies back to the village and piled them outside one of their sturdy wooden homes.

As we walked under the enormous spreading trees of the forest, Tal said, "This has to be the Olds' work."

Jaik cast him a warning look.

Tal said, "There's no keeping Lucien out of it now. He was with us in the tunnels."

"That doesn't mean he's *with us* when we go home." Branok said. "For all we know, he's the Elders' spy."

I glanced around at the hard faces of the men I'd come to love, then jammed my hands in my pockets. "Is there any way I can prove to you who I truly am?"

Only silence answered.

How could I ever prove I was trustworthy when I lied to them every day, anyway?

"Shift," Jaik ordered.

I was always the slowest. The others waited for me in grim silence, then Jaik took wing, leading the way back home.

We weren't any closer to an answer about our hybrids.

All we'd found were bodies.



CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

H*onor*

OVER THE NEXT WEEK, JAIK, AND TALISYN GREW EVEN MORE grouchy, even by Jaik's standards. It was impressive.

Branok, Lynx, and Arren seemed to be impacted by the sour mood settling over everyone too. If anything, Branok and Lynx seemed more vicious in the training yard than ever before, as if that were the backlash to how Tal and Jaik had softened toward Lucien. They were merciless, and I still grinned at them through my bloodied teeth and thanked them before I limped to the healer. I was growing stronger every day, ripping into *them* almost just as much.

"Branok, don't be a hero, you need the healer too," Jaik snapped at him one morning.

Branok looked as if he wanted to argue, but Arren gave him a friendly shove that knocked him halfway across the yard toward the physician.

Jaik and Arren shared a quick look that I was pretty sure I wasn't supposed to catch. I caught the rogue flash of Jaik's thoughts. *I need to figure out how to fix this. Lucien's not going anywhere.*

His voice was tinged with frustration. I almost stumbled, and it wasn't from the pain that throbbed through my side. Now I was hearing Jaik when we weren't both dragons?

Was he catching glimpses of my thoughts too?

There seemed to be a powerful bond between us, something new, and I didn't know what to make of that when I had to lie to him.

“You all right there, Luce?” Jaik called.

“Living my dreams,” I called back.

The physician glanced between Branok and me. “I’m not sure which of you to heal first.”

Branok made a disgusted face and spat blood on the ground. I, on the other hand, couldn’t help grinning, even though it promptly made me wince as I touched the split-open skin over my left eye.



ONE EVENING, I WENT INTO THE LIBRARY—AS HONOR—AND found Lynx there, as he so often was. I knew he’d been searching for any mention of the hybrids or the tunnels; even in our classes, he ignored the instructors, still paging through his books.

When he saw me, he stacked his books, then rose abruptly, the legs of his chair scraping across the hardwood floor.

Lynx’s rejection sent a surprising ache through my chest, and I raised my chin in response. “You don’t need to leave on my account, I’ll get my book and go.”

“No.” He paused, the books clutched in his arms, and made an attempt to smile that didn’t quite work. “You should get the chance to spend time in the library. I’m not angry at you.”

“Really?” I asked, because it usually felt as if he was.

“Maybe this mess isn’t your fault,” he said, “but it doesn’t change the fact that I don’t know how to fix it, and I hate seeing my best friends gut—” He abruptly broke off as if he couldn’t handle having a heartfelt conversation with someone like me.

“Gutted?” I tried to supply the missing word.

He gave me a half smile as he headed for the door. “Good night, Honor. I hope you find something good to read.”

I had spent a significant portion of my life wishing everyone would leave me the hell alone to read. Now, I didn't really want to be alone.

The library felt too quiet when Lynx had gone. I tried to read, but that damned man had ruined the library for me, and I couldn't stop worrying about the effect I had on the royals. They all seemed to be obsessed with me, although some wanted to kiss me and some wanted to kill me.

I wandered the stacks one more time, my fingers trailing over the gilt-and-leather spines, searching for the book that would answer all our questions. None of the royals would open up to me about their relationships with their fathers. Honor had no reason to ask and when it came to Lucien, they had no reason to answer. But something was happening that involved the elders, something dark and sordid. I had the feeling we were unknitting threads that would wrap around us and drag us down, too. I pulled one book out, then another, knowing how unlikely it was I'd find answers.

I turned a corner, and there was Caldren, his dark head bent over a book as he turned the pages. I stopped dead, my heart hammering in my chest.

He glanced up at me, and smiled, his chocolate brown eyes crinkling at the corners. "Oh, good. I don't have to wait till morning to give you this."

"What is it?" I asked.

He reached into the leather bag slung over his shoulder and pulled out a bag, which he held toward me. "This one's too heavy to toss."

The edges of the leather bag bulged with the edges of coins. It was likely enough to pay the rest of Hanna's tuition. "How—?"

"Don't ask how." A mischievous smile touched his lips. "Plausible deniability."

"Did you break some laws?" The teasing note in my voice surprised me. The bag was heavy.

"None of the important ones."

“Really, Cal, you could do something with this...”

“It’s just money. My father tried to use money to control me. I refuse to care too much about it anymore.”

Every mention of his family being awful made my heart lurch a little. But he didn’t seem to notice. He picked the top book off my stack and examined the spine. “Geography of Kingdoms?”

I’d hoped to uncover something, somewhere, about those damned tunnels. “I’m always learning.”

He cocked his head, studying me. “Where have you and the royals been going?”

I hadn’t expected such a bold question. “What?”

He grinned, his smile disarming and boyish. “You’ve been leaving with them on the weekends.”

He was curious where I’d been, but I was curious why Jaik hated him. “Jaik wouldn’t appreciate it if I told you.”

He tossed the book onto the shelf, the movement too casual, then fenced me in with his arms. My breath stuttered in my chest as I felt the heat of his body wash over mine, and something low in my stomach pulsed in response as his lips dipped close to my ear. “And I wouldn’t appreciate it if you didn’t.”

I should be pissed he’d just caged me against the shelves. But my body had suddenly clenched in a way that suggested I liked having him dominate me. His lips were so close to mine, and I wondered what he’d do if I turned my head and kissed him.

Before I could make a conscious decision, my lips brushed his. It was a soft, tentative kiss.

His hand threaded through my hair. He kissed my lower lip, slowly, fondly, then deepened the kiss. My body swayed against his, heat flaring between the two of us.

He pulled away first, his dark eyes smoldering, but the same easy smile came to his lips. “Well. You do know how to change the subject.”

I slid my arms around his neck and towed him down to me, kissing him hard. His breath came out in a surprised puff against my mouth; then he was kissing me back just as wildly. When he picked me up, I wrapped my legs around his waist.

He stumbled with me down the shelves and toward the tables in the front of the library. I was beginning to realize that if the rest of the academy was half as depraved as we were, I should really soap up the tables before I studied.

The doors swung open into the library, and Caldren set me lightly on my feet in one easy movement, his arm around my waist. He managed to look casual, pushing a swoop of dark hair back out of his face. I pressed my lips together, trying not to look bee-stung and half-undone; I wasn't convinced I managed.

Jaik strode into the library, frowning impatiently. He glanced around as if he was looking for someone, and I knew it was me.

Our gazes met, and his eyes widened, his lips turning up just faintly when he saw me. But that only lasted a split second, because he saw Caldren too, and his gaze instantly narrowed.

“What are you doing?” Jaik demanded coldly.

“I don't answer to students.” Caldren's tone was just as icy.

Jaik sauntered toward us, but nothing about the way he walked seemed genuinely relaxed; he reminded me of a prowling predator. Jaik held out an arm toward me. “Come here, Honor.”

His tone seemed protective, and I bristled, glancing between the two of them.

“What the hell is wrong with you both?” I asked. I took a step away from Caldren, but not toward Jaik. “Why do you two hate each other so much?”

“I don't hate him.” Jaik sounded as if it were ridiculous. “I don't think of him.”

Caldren laughed, a short, nasty sound. “Honor’s too clever to believe you.”

I propped my hands on my hips. “Which one of you is actually going to talk to *me* instead of just insulting each other?”

“I will.” Caldren offered me his arm. “Let me see you back to your room.”

“Yes,” Jaik said. “See her back to the servants’ quarters. That’s the best you’ll ever be able to offer her.”

“Jaik!” I chided him. Jaik looked at me as if he were the one wounded, his jaw working impatiently.

“Don’t mind him,” Caldren said lightly. “My brother has always been an arrogant asshole.”

Jaik and Caldren were brothers? I stared between them, horrified.

I’d kissed both Jaik and Caldren. Whatever had gone wrong between them, I was only making it worse.

“Good night,” I said. Both of them tried to stop me, but I dashed for the doors.

The bond between siblings was sacred. I’d do anything for Hanna.

I couldn’t stand the thought that I’d hurt them both.



CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

H*onor*

AFTER THE MESS I'D MADE OF THINGS AS HONOR, I TOSSED and turned all night. I was grateful to be Lucien in the morning.

The next day, I was leaving our afternoon training sessions, covered in sweat and exhausted, when I caught sight of Hanna running up the steps. Seeing her here was somehow surreal, as if she belonged to an entirely different world than my life with the dragons.

I started toward her, then realized that I was still Lucien. I couldn't talk to her the way I was now. I swore as I raced to change, then again when I finally emerged and she was nowhere to be seen.

Hanna wouldn't be coming here if it was good news. What had happened to her?

I rounded a corner into the courtyard, and there she was. She was talking to Caldren, and he had his arm around her shaking shoulders. When he looked up and saw me, he said lightly, "Well, you two have found each other."

Then he was gone, disappearing into the crowd of students.

I glanced at her distraught face, then caught her elbow, and pulled her into an emptier space between two outbuildings.

"What's going on?" I asked her. "Why did you come here?"

"I didn't know if you'd be home again soon," she said, "You've been gone so much lately."

Guilt instantly curdled in my stomach. I was doing the best that I could. But the best that I could was clearly not good enough.

“Well, we’re together now. What is it? What’s going on?”

“I made a terrible mistake,” she said, and my heart dropped.

But I just smiled at her. “Well, I’ve made tons of those. Tell me about it. What’s going on?”

She chewed her lower lip. “I was thinking about what you said at the wedding. About Alis hurting Father.”

My heart was already sinking. “I shouldn’t have said anything about that. I was being stupid. I’m sorry. I don’t think she hurt Father.”

“Don’t lie to me.” She sounded exasperated. “You said it because you meant it. You do think she did it. And we both know that she’s capable of... anything. Anything to get what she wants.”

“Fine. Maybe. But that doesn’t mean I want you in any kind of danger, and that’s what would come from confronting her and Henrick. What did you do?”

“You remember how Alis keeps a diary?”

“Yes,” I said. “And I also remember that Alis—as much as I dislike her—isn’t stupid enough that she’d record a murder attempt in her diary.”

“She has it enchanted to protect it. And you never know, there might be something in there that would be helpful.”

I groaned. “Tell me you didn’t steal her diary.”

She shook her head, and I exhaled in relief before she went on. “I didn’t get her diary. I didn’t want her to realize what I was doing in her jewelry closet. So I pretended that I was trying to borrow a pair of her earrings. You know the emerald and diamond ones that I’ve always admired. The one shaped like waves.”

“That’s certainly something Alis would consider a sin, but it’s not nearly as bad as trying to take her diary.”

“Exactly.” Hanna’s face was taut, little lines along the corners of her eyes.

I hadn’t seen her so worried since she was a little girl visiting our father’s corpse, and protectiveness flared in my chest. “You’re scared?”

I’d have expected Hanna to deny it.

“I am.” Her voice came out in a whisper, and the fact she acknowledged it told me she was beyond terrified. “She said she’s going to let Henrick punish me.”

She chewed her lower lip, her gaze dropping to her toes as she hugged her chest. Softly, she said, “It’s going to be something far worse than being confined to my room or missing dinner.”

For a moment, I was silent. Part of me wanted to tell her she must be exaggerating her fears, and yet, even though I had no evidence Henrick and Alis had darker plans, I was sure they did. I couldn’t let him touch my little sister.

“Honor?”

I’d been silent too long, and there was a quaver in her voice.

“I’m going to come home and fix this,” I told her, even though I had no idea how at the moment. “We’ll work through it together. It’s going to be okay.”

She frowned. “How?”

I had the same question, but I had to be strong for my sister. “There’s always a way to fix things. Do you know when he’s going to do it?”

“No, they’re making me wait. They said he wanted time to plan something appropriate.”

“He’s not going to hurt you, I promise. I won’t let him.”

Her eyes filled with fragile hope.

“I just have to tell someone where I’m going, and then you and I will head back to the house together.”

“Maybe I should go back ahead of you,” she said softly. “They don’t know that I left my room. This way, they won’t get angry that I went to you if you just pretend you came home for dinner.”

The idea that I would come home for dinner seemed extremely unlikely, given how little love was lost between Alis and me at the moment. “I’ll come up with something.”

She nodded and started to run off, before she suddenly rushed back and hugged me.

Even though, at twelve, she seemed to think half the time that she was full grown, it reminded me how little she still was. Then she was gone, my arms closing on empty air as she ran back toward the stairs, threading between academy students.

As soon as she’d vanished down the stairs and I turned back to the academy, Caldren fell into step alongside me.

“What’s going on? That didn’t seem good.” He didn’t seem to notice he was walking with me into the servants’ quarters, someplace that was beneath him even now.

“It’s not great,” I answered. I gauged him, knowing how unhappy Jaik would be to see us talking, but Jaik’s happiness didn’t make my top-ten list of priorities at the moment. Maybe Cal could help. “My little sister’s in trouble and our creepy new stepfather seems far too excited to exert some *discipline*.”

“Does she deserve it?” Caldren asked.

The implication that I was overprotective made me instantly furious, but my voice came out level. “I don’t think she could do anything to deserve what he’s planning.”

“Are you in trouble yourself?” His light tone salved my irritation. Something about the way he asked implied he’d help if I were ever in trouble.

“Always.”

He stopped and turned to face me. “Do you need me to go with you?”

I desperately wanted him to come with me, but I knew it was irrational. This was a family matter, and Alis and Henrick would be furious if I brought a witness—especially a member of the royal family, even if he were a disgraced one. “I don’t think you’re going to make things better.”

“Well, what are you going to do?”

I finally stopped to face him. “Cal, I really do not have all the answers right now.”

“By *all the answers*, you mean you don’t have any answers, right? No plan?”

I wouldn’t have been so irritated if he weren’t correct. “That’s right. A new problem was presented to me forty-five seconds ago, and I don’t yet have a perfect fully formed plan.”

“You’re acting as if I’m the crazy one,” he said mildly, falling into step beside me again as I paced toward Calla’s room. “But if you don’t recall, you are usually the one that goes off all half-cocked and reckless.”

“I’m not being reckless today. I just don’t know what else to do but protect my little sister.”

He gave me a long look. “Promise me you’ll tell me if you need me, Honor.”

“You’ve been a good friend, Caldren,” I said.

“I think I could have been a better one,” he answered.

For some reason, I thought that I really wanted a hug. Just like Hanna had wanted one from me. I felt like I’d been able to loan her a little bit of my strength when I squeezed her tight.

And now I sure could use some strength. Because the truth was, something about my stepfather sent a shiver of nerves through my body.

Was it too late to go to Jaik and Talisyn and tell them to take me away, as long as they would take us both away? There

was a creeping sense of something terrible coming that I couldn't shake.

"I'll come up with something," I promised as I came to a stop outside Calla's door. A startled serving girl stared at Caldren with her lips parted, then scurried away.

He didn't seem to notice, his gaze fixed on me. "I don't doubt you will. You are endlessly resourceful, Honor." He sounded so confident, and I wished I shared that confidence in myself.

I smiled at him. Maybe something in my face showed just how hard it was for me to smile, because suddenly he folded his arms around me in a tight, warm hug.

"Promise me that you'll come talk to me tonight and tell me about how it's gone." His breath was warm against my cheek, and I clung to him a little harder than I should.

"At the Twisted Pines again?" My voice came out breathless.

He nodded.

"I'll probably need a drink after seeing those two."

"I'll buy you all the drinks," he promised.

"Well, I'll definitely have to survive tonight so I can run up your bar tab."

Cal brushed his lips against my cheek in a soft, tender kiss. He squeezed my arms, gave me a wink as he backed away.

I stepped into Calla's room feeling certain that I'd be able to manage Henrick and Alis. If I could manage the five dragon royals and the wolf shifter, then one nasty man and a grasping woman should be easily overcome.

But I couldn't show them just how dangerous I was. Henrick and Alis didn't know I was a dragon shifter.

The toughest part of the night would be protecting my secrets as well as my sister.



CHAPTER
FORTY-THREE

H*onor*

I QUICKLY WASHED UP AT THE SINK IN OUR ROOM, SINCE I'D dragged my dress over my sweaty skin when I was in a rush to get to Hanna, and changed into clean clothes. Then I headed off to face my stepmother and my new stepfather.

The trip along the cobblestone roads felt lonely, especially when the streets were full of people rushing home, children racing through the crowd causing chaos as they played tag, and vendors shouting their wares. I wished I'd let Caldren come with me, no matter how impractical.

As I walked towards the big coral house, guards watched me from where they were stationed in the shadows. Hanna wouldn't be climbing those big trees anymore or surprising me by slipping out of one.

I hadn't realized that time in our lives was coming to an end. I hadn't had the chance to appreciate those days before they ended, just as had happened half a dozen times in my life already.

One day I'd been a girl with a newborn sister, my mother gathering us both into her lap; I'd loved Hanna from the beginning but felt anxious they'd love her best. The next thing, my mother's maid was tying black ribbons in my hair and I rocked Hanna against my shoulder.

I'd missed my mother, worried over Hanna, trying to make up for her loss as I chased her through the long marble halls in our house. Then Alis was in our home, her presence like an unpleasant odor in every room even I couldn't see her.

I'd hated half of being a Posselbaum girl, then I was rocking in the carriage as it turned up this long drive, my trunks loaded onto the back, wishing I could return. And with every turn, I'd had no idea I was about to lose something I loved until I wished I could twist the hands on the clock back to where they'd once been.

Those guards worried me. Maybe Henrick had enemies. Maybe I'd be lucky and one of those enemies would take him out. Or maybe, his enemies meant Hanna'd be in danger from outside the house and within.

As much as I thought Alis was a villain, Henrick seemed to put her to shame, judging from the fear in Hanna's eyes, and it made me feel guilty that I hadn't been home much lately. I felt torn between my role as one of the dragon royals, now responsible for hunting down the hybrids, and how that had kept me far away when my sister needed me.

The house was quiet as I walked up the front steps, but a prickle up my spine made me feel I was being watched.

A servant whipped the door open and half bowed as I stepped into the entryway, though the gesture never seemed all that respectful. "You may go to the conservatory."

"Thanks," I said dryly.

Two guards stepped into the hall, their boots ringing across the floor, and followed me. I glared at them over my shoulder, which didn't seem to faze them one bit. Why was I being stalked by guards in my own home?

I reached the old addition, which always seemed a little warmer than the rest of the castle, and stepped into my mother's conservatory—which Henrick had so rudely invaded.

In the doorway, I almost collided with Alis. She carried her gloves, and she seemed to be on her way out.

"Why Honor, what a nice surprise," she said lightly. "What are you doing home?"

"What's going on?" I asked tightly, looking between her and my sister, who sat perched at the edge of one of the wingback chairs, her eyes half wild.

“You didn’t tell me why you were back yet, Honor,” Alis said, ignoring my question.

“I had some free time tonight, and I thought I’d come get some of my things out of my room,” I said. “It’s been hard to leave so many of my treasures behind. The doorman asked me to come into the conservatory.”

The lies fell easily from my lips, as they did with anyone who wasn’t all that worthy of the truth. I missed my things, but I’d leave them all behind for Hanna.

“I see,” Alis said. “Well, don’t let me stop you. We have missed you so, Honor.”

That was entirely insincere. “What’s going on?”

“It’s none of your business,” Alis said with a smile to soften her words; she might’ve been trying for kind, but she never quite hit that mark.

“Now, sweetheart,” Henrick said, his voice saccharin. “Honor is a very bright girl. Doubtless she can tell that her sister is anxious right now. There’s no reason not to tell her why.”

When Henrick faced me, his gaze seemed to rake over my figure in a way that made me stiffen, even before he said, “Your sister has made some poor choices. She stole from your mother.”

“Stepmother,” I said automatically before realizing that might not be a helpful distinction to draw at the moment.

Henrick inclined his head. “Stepmother. Though it hardly seems necessary to note that as insistently as you do, when Alis has been nothing but good to you.”

Bullshit.

“I’m sorry,” I said, because I didn’t want to make things any worse for my sister. My heart galloped at the sight of her teeth digging so hard into her lower lip, it was beginning to bleed. “What exactly are you planning to do, because I don’t like seeing my sister so anxious.”

“Neither do I, my girl,” he said. “But punishment is supposed to be painful.”

“Is it though?” I asked. “Can’t we guide and teach without there being any pain involved. I think my father and mother did a pretty good job with me.”

Alis offered up a small derisive laugh. I ignored it, for the moment.

“When you have children, you can raise them how you see fit,” Henrick said. “I know how I was raised and it worked just fine for me. Your sister obviously needs a firmer hand, given that she’s started stealing. I intend to make sure that she doesn’t continue forward along a path that will only bring her pain.”

“Right, but this path is bringing her pain because you’re deciding to inflict pain *on* her.” I pointed out.

“Honor. This doesn’t concern you,” Alis broke in firmly. “I understand you want to protect your little sister. But this time, you can’t.”

I stared between them, cognizant the guards were just on the other side of the door. Even if I went to Talisyn and Jaik now, and asked them to help, we wouldn’t get back before they’d hurt my sister. I couldn’t help my gaze from flickering to the enormous cross on the wall.

Henrick looked at it too. “It looks odd, but it’s nothing so terrible. It’s simply to make sure no one gets hurt.”

“To make sure no one gets hurt,” I echoed.

“A strap or a cane can break fingers if someone puts their hand in the way,” he said. “But properly applied, those instruments cause no lasting damage.”

Instruments. Gods, I wanted to turn into a dragon and rip his head from his body. Maybe I could get over my distaste for eating people.

Hanna blew out a long shaky breath.

“If Hanna is so much trouble, why don’t you just let her come with me?”

“You’re going to play mother as well as maid at the academy? You don’t even have a place for her to stay.” Alis’s tone was dismissive. “You seem to think you’re full grown and ready to take care of a child yourself, but I assure you that you are not.”

As I searched for what I could say to persuade them, she sniffed. “I wish your father had taken a firmer hand with you.”

The words lit a feral gleam in Henrick’s eyes. I had the feeling that the one they both really wanted to hurt was *me*. Henrick desired me for entirely creepy reasons, and Alis had hated me as long as we knew each other.

That hatred at least gave me an idea of how to protect my little sister, even if it was one that made something slick rise in the back of my throat.

“It’s my fault,” I said. “I asked her if she could get those earrings for me. They were my mother’s, and I hated to see you wearing them.”

Henrick and Alis glanced at each other. Some silent communication passed between them, and I begged them to take my bait.

Alis said, “I’m glad you told us that.”

“It’s my fault,” I repeated. “So you shouldn’t punish her. I’m the one that did something wrong. I shouldn’t have put my little sister up to it.”

“Be that as it may, she’s the one who made the poor choice.” Alis said loftily.

They knew what I was offering, and they wanted me to beg. My lips tightened in frustration, but I tried to force my shoulders to slope, to look shaky instead of strong.

Trying to sound weak and afraid, I whispered, “Please. I can’t stand the thought of her being punished for something that was my fault. If you have to punish anyone, punish me.”

I cast the bait, knowing Henrick would take it. The way he looked at me made me sick, but it was better than having him look that way at my little sister.

Alis narrowed her eyes as if she knew I was playing a part. “Ridiculous.”

Henrick turned toward the window, pretending to observe the garden, and I almost choked when I realized he was hiding his erection. “Well, Alis, she does have a point. It seems so much of Hanna’s bad behavior comes from the example set by the older sister she idolizes.”

Alis frowned. “Are you considering entertaining this idea?”

“I think it does have a certain justice,” Henrick said.

“No, no.” Hanna suddenly bolted from her chair, as if she’d leap in front of me. “Honor, this isn’t fair. I don’t want to see you hurt any more than you want to see me hurt.”

“How touching,” Henrick said, finally turning from the window. I forced my gaze to stay on his smirking face. “But this is hardly as serious as you girls make it out to be. It’s a sign of how lacking discipline your lives have been that you are so deeply horrified by such a simple matter.”

“I want Hanna to go,” I said quietly.

“No,” Hanna said, breaking for me. She threw her arms around my waist, clinging to me, and I hugged her back.

“It’s all right,” I whispered into her ear. “It really doesn’t matter. I take worse beatings all the time in the training yard. This isn’t going to be a big deal for me.”

There was no mistaking the wicked gleam in my stepfather’s eyes. He thought I was telling a lie. But no matter what he did to me, I could limp to the healer tomorrow. This was hardly worse than anything Branok and Lynx had done to me.

“I do admire your bravery,” Henrick said. “You might lack for discipline but certainly not for spirit.”

I could happily live the rest of my life without ever hearing a man commend my *spirit* again after knowing Henrick for a few months.

He seemed to consider for a moment. “Come, have a drink with me, Honor. Perhaps you’re right, perhaps it would be most fair to allow you privacy.”

Alis looked dissatisfied, and he added, “She is growing into a young woman.”

Gag me. I wanted to get it over with. I leaned toward Hanna. “Why don’t you go out to your tree in the garden?”

“It’s ruined now,” she whispered. “There’s always guards everywhere.”

“I just want you to get out of the house.” I gripped her shoulder, keenly aware that Alis and Henrick were listening to us both. “I’ll get through this for now, and I’ll come up with something for the future, I promise.”

She gave me a long look. “Honor, I didn’t want you to take my place. I’m not a coward. I wouldn’t try to have you be the one who gets hurt instead of me.”

“I know that,” I promised her. “But you’re my little sister, and I want to protect you. I am far older and far more capable of dealing with this, I promise. You know I train with Caldren. He does far worse things to me, I promise you.”

My false mirth only seemed to make Hanna’s eyes well with tears. “It’ll be all right.” I said again, helplessly. “I promise.”

She looked as if she were on the verge of tears as Alis took her elbow and tugged her toward the door.

Henrick went with them as Alis guided Hanna into the hall. The guard in the hall moved out of view, too late. Henrick smiled warmly at Hanna and said, “When you hear your sister screaming, I hope you’ll remember never to steal from me again.”

The last glimpse I had of Hanna was of her tear-streaked face as she ran forward, too late.

Henrick closed the door, shutting her out.

Then he turned that eager smile on me.



CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

H*onor*

ALIS SENT FOR THE SERVANTS TO BRING IN TEA. SHE HAD SOME of my favorite vanilla cakes with strawberry compote on the tray, and I had to wonder if that was intended to mock me, since there was no way I could eat with my stomach curdled the way it was.

But then she didn't know that Hanna had come to find me, or that I'd come running to Hanna's rescue.

Unless she *had* known. Unless she'd watched through the lacy curtains as Hanna fled past the guards, who should have been able to catch even my clever sister.

The thought chilled me. Maybe my stepmother had guessed how I would react. Maybe she'd always known that I'd try to rescue my little sister. I didn't much care for the sense I was being manipulated this whole time for Henrick's pleasure.

One of the servants handed me my cup of tea. I smiled up at her. "Thank you."

Alis gave me a second glance. My father had believed in being decent to servants, but they'd been window dressing to him. I loved the man dearly, thought he hung the moon, but he hadn't been perfect. Being a servant myself had certainly given me a different perspective.

One thing I found surprising and charming about the dragon royals was the way they treated servants with kindness and respect. Given how they often didn't treat their fellow nobles with kindness and respect, their politeness stunned me.

My tea was far too sweet, just the way that I liked it. The servants must have remembered how I still liked my drinks prepared, even though I rarely ate meals with my family—or what was left of it—any more.

“Oh, Honor, what are we going to do with you?” Alis asked me. “Just like your sister, you make terrible decisions, but you have such a kind heart. Look at how you’ve come to your sister’s defense. I hardly would’ve expected anything else from you.” She paused as if she expected an answer.

“Thank you.” My tone was guarded. Normally, I would’ve been far more sarcastic.

“But you do make terrible decisions.”

“Yes, that’s been pointed out to me a time or two.” Both Lucien and Honor seemed to share an affinity for making terrible decisions.

Henrick and Alis seemed intent on making small talk, discussing the weather, as if I wasn’t waiting with bated breath.

Finally I asked, “What exactly is your plan, Henrick?”

“The anticipation is part of the effect, my dear girl.” He sipped his tea, then set the cup and saucer down on the table. “You didn’t ask what was involved before you volunteered for your sister’s punishment.”

“Because I would do anything for her,” I said, which was certainly true. “But I’m still very curious.”

“Drink your tea,” Alis chided me. “You’ll need your strength.”

I wished that strength came from tea.

Every other time I’d faced trouble recently, the dragon royals had been by my side, even if they hadn’t been entirely willing participants. Even when Branok and Lynx were beating the hell out of me, I knew that Jaik or Talisyn would step in if things went too far, if there seemed any chance that the physician wouldn’t be able to fix me after, and indeed, the twins had never even begun to cross that line.

I was never comfortable with the dragon royals, but I was safe.

Now was something entirely different. It wasn't too hard for me to imagine Henrick going too far, and the guards carrying my body out, rolled up in the fancy rug.

I swallowed the last dregs of my tea and bitterness shot through my mouth, accompanied with a jolt to my nerves. I looked down at my cup as fear hollowed my stomach.

“Something the matter, my dear?” Alis asked.

It was the way she said it that cemented my suspicions. “What was in it?”

“Merely a simple tonic that will make you more compliant.” She smiled at me thinly. “For once in your life.”

My fingers were already going numb. I tried to set the traitorous teacup on the table, but I missed and it fell on to the thick rug, which kept it from breaking. I stared down at it, wishing it *had* broken. It seemed unfair that the fragile little teacup was still in one piece, but its contents were causing me to already start to fall apart.

I rose to my feet and swayed, my knees weak beneath me, but I still managed to lurch a few steps. The door seemed a mile away.

“None of that,” Henrick said, taking my arm. He pushed me back onto the couch.

“Now,” Alis said cheerfully, “we can begin.” She sounded more pleased with me than she had at any point in the eleven years we'd known each other.

“Begin what?” I expected my words to come out slurred, but my tongue was agile, unlike my numb arms and legs.

And then I remembered. They wanted me to be able to scream so Hanna would be able to hear it.

Alis said, “You mustn't be able to shift out of your bonds. Imagine you turning into a sweet little mouse or an angry bear right in the middle of things. Wouldn't be safe for anyone.”

Beyond her smiling face, I glimpsed Henrick, who'd risen and gone over to the fire. At first, I thought he was poking at it absently, but then he drew out a branding iron.

My mouth had gone dry with real fear. The sour taste of it sickened me.

"This has been used to prevent shifters from being able to shift or heal a time, many, many times over the years," he said.

I thought of the mark on Jaik's body, the one that had kept him from being able to heal, so that his father could hurt him in ways that lasted. Some people chose to have themselves tattooed or branded to try to give themselves permanent enchantments, but it was considered cheap magic, judged harshly by better shifters. And yet, the Elders and their lackeys seemed to embrace this nasty magic.

"Of course, it will fade in time," Alis said. "You'll only lose the ability to shift or to heal for a few weeks."

"A few weeks," I repeated in horror, thinking about how I wouldn't be able to shift into a dragon.

But there was nothing I could do about it now. I couldn't move from the couch and I had a feeling Henrick was getting what he'd really wanted. Henrick and Alis had known all along what Hanna would do and how I'd react. They knew my weakness.

No—my love for my sister wasn't a weakness. I'd get through what was coming next, and then I'd find a way to save her. I'd tell Jaik and Tal that I'd go north with them as long as I could bring Hanna; I just had to find a way to reveal how much danger the Elders might pose.

Anything would be better than leaving her with these monsters, even if she lost her inheritance. I'd never value our childhood home and our parents' treasures over her safety, but I hadn't realized how dire things truly were in this house.

Alis reached for my décolletage and began to draw my gown down so that my chest was exposed. I shoved her away, but my arms were weak, and she easily pushed them out of her way.

“Now don’t put up a fight, my dear,” Henrick said. “You asked for this, after all. The servants will even be able to attest we were doing our duty as parents, fulfilling our parental rights, and you stepped in. This was your choice.”

I felt a jolt. He’d spoken in front of the servants as they were serving our tea. “You think of everything,” I gritted out.

“I certainly do.” Henrick smiled as he bent in front of me, his gaze falling on my breasts, half-heaving out of my gown now that Alis had wrenched the front. “It’s best you recognize that you’re hopelessly outclassed.”

We’d see just how *outclassed* I was if I got the chance to transform into a dragon.

But apparently I wouldn’t be a dragon again anytime soon. If it weren’t for my dread of the next coming moments, I’d have mourned the loss of my dragon wings for even a day. I loved flying. And as I thought of all those moments I’d lost before without realizing they were coming to an end, I knew I’d come to love being one of the dragon royals.

Henrick and Alis, working together, heaved me off the couch. Their fingers dug cruelly into my arms as they half-dragged me toward the cross.

“She’s heavier than she looks,” Alis complained. “She’s trim enough for a girl. But my God, her weight.”

Leave it to my stepmother to make snide remarks about my femininity while she was torturing me, as if *that* weren’t redundant. She’d tortured me with those remarks for a decade.

They bound my wrists and ankles to the cross. Then Alis clicked a pair of scissors behind me, and I shuddered. The thought of being naked in front of Henrick drove me half mad.

“No, no, no.” I struggled against my bonds helplessly, each movement of my body a twitch too long after I’d willed it. My body wouldn’t obey my brain. “Stop, Alis, please...”

The pleading note in my voice disgusted me, and it didn’t matter anyway.

She cut my dress up the back, the metal scissors cold against my spine as I tried to yank away. “I’m the one who bought this for you. It’s mine to take away if I wish.” Her voice took on an even more venomous tone. “You own *nothing* in this house. It will never be yours.”

“Get away from me.”

She gripped the back of my neck and shoved my head forward, slamming my forehead into the polished wood. “If you dare come into my house, you’ll act as if you’re still my child, you ungrateful little wench.”

My mother had a fond smile and sharp wit and she would’ve gouged Alis’s eyes with those scissors. “I was never *your* child.”

Alis yanked my gown to either side, and my back was bared to the cool air. A shudder ran down my spine.

Henrick let out a cold laugh. “You might watch your attitude, Honor. This is hardly the right time for your antics.”



CHAPTER
FORTY-FIVE

H*onor*

“ALIS HAS TOLD ME THE MOST INTERESTING STORY.” HENRICK stepped to the other side of the cross so he could see my face as he sipped from a teacup casually, as if I weren’t half naked and bound in front of him. “She said you have no memory from your childhood, just as we discussed on the dance floor the other day.”

I pressed my lips together tightly.

“Isn’t that true, Honor?”

I didn’t bother to answer him.

Then suddenly, his hand was low on my bare back, just above the crest of my ass. My whole body tightened in response as he leaned in. His lips grazed my ear, and I tried to jerk away as he murmured, “I do expect you to answer me respectfully every time I speak to you.”

“Fine.” I’d play his stupid little game if it made him so happy. I wasn’t sure anything I said would make him any less brutal. “I don’t have any memories before I was nine.”

“Because your father enchanted you.”

He sounded so sure of himself, and it made me rage. Henrick hadn’t known my father... or had he?

My anger boiled in my voice as I corrected, “Because I hit my head.”

“I don’t think so,” he said. “Your father was a liar just like you. You might not be his natural daughter, but you did inherit some things, didn’t you?”

“Don’t you dare talk about him like that,” I said fiercely.

He ran his fingernails up my spine, tracing slowly along the skin, his nails digging deep enough to hurt.

I tried to look at him over my shoulder.

“Your father lied to you,” he said. “He took your memories.”

The thought that my father could’ve lied horrified me, but I didn’t want Henrick to see the doubt squirm into my mind.

Father had always said that it was a blessing I didn’t remember what had happened to me before. But sometimes I thought that even though I didn’t remember the darkness, it had marked me anyway, wrapped its tendrils so deep under my skin that I’d never cut it loose. I had fears that went deeper than conscious thought, like my terror in the labyrinth.

And I felt a similar sense of terror now as, despite my best efforts to look calm, my wrists kept yanking at the restraints, my panicked body swaying.

No one had ever tied me up to hurt me before that I remembered. But my body seemed to remember. I didn’t feel like a grown woman or a dragon royal anymore, like someone who was easily equipped to handle whatever cruelties life could throw at me.

I was exposed and vulnerable, and the punishment hadn’t even truly started yet. A child’s blind, desperate terror blurred my vision before I shook it off.

“But I’m going to do you a kindness, Honor,” Henrick murmured in my ear, so close I could smell the sour tang of his breath. “I value honesty far more than your father. I’m going to help you get your memories back.”

“You planned this.” A ragged edge of fear broke through my voice. Because I was afraid of being hurt? Or because I was afraid of the memories?

I couldn’t stop myself from trying to fight loose of the leather. Every time I shifted, the brand pressed against the wood, burning me all over again.

“There is a story,” he mused, wandering behind me, just out of my sight, “about a very rich nobleman who lost his position once.”

Oh my gods. Were we really going to have story time now, while my flesh turned to goosebumps in the cool air of the drawing room?

“He had a young daughter, and she was the only one who knew where his treasure trove was.”

My breath froze in my chest. Was that little girl supposed to be *me*? Because my first parents had been cruel peasants who hurt me and abandoned me. They weren't rich nobles.

Unless Mother and Father had lied...

I shook my head, rejecting that idea, as Alis walked in front of me, and a cruel smile carved her lips upward. She must have seen that just questioning my parents struck a blade to my heart.

I forced myself to listen to Henrick as he strutted behind me, forced myself to stay still despite the urge to twist to look for him over one shoulder, then the other. Alis wandered around the front of the cross, her teacup held in her delicate hands, looking as if she'd gotten lost at a society luncheon.

“Now the people who'd usurped his position very much wanted to get their hands on that treasure. He and his wife had both died trying to protect their young daughter. She was supposed to be taken out of the castle through a great labyrinth.”

I started at the mention of *labyrinth*. Luckily neither of them saw my expression at another mention of the tunnels. Were the tunnels tied to every sordid thing in this kingdom?

“But her family was betrayed. Aww.” He sounded mock sympathetic. “They took the little girl, and they tortured her, trying to get her to reveal her father's untold riches.”

Was that supposed to be why I was so afraid of being bound? It was ridiculous, and yet the way my body wrenched at the bonds, the way my back arched helplessly as if I were

afraid already of the falling lash, felt like the tattered remnant of another life.

Alis moved back into sight, and this time, she carried a silver tray, and on it was a coiled whip. Some of my terror cleared given how ridiculous she was, and I could've rolled my eyes at her theatrics.

Alis smiled at me, though there was nothing kind in it. "This silly little girl knew where all these incredible magical treasures were stored. But despite best efforts to persuade her, no one could pry those secrets loose. Then she disappeared."

"I do believe someone hid those treasures away when they hid her memories." Henrick caressed my lower back, and I jerked away, but couldn't escape. "It wasn't a merciful act, but a mercenary one. Someday, they had every intention of claiming those treasures."

My mouth gaped. "What are you saying?"

"You can be far more useful than being a good little maid, Honor." She smothered a huff of condescending laughter. "Though knowing you, I cannot imagine you're much good as a servant, for that matter. You fail at everything you attempt... and yet, I think there are great secrets stored in that ridiculous brain of yours."

"Is that why you married my father?"

She glanced at Henrick, as if the two of them were sharing a laugh at my expense. "Well, I certainly didn't marry him because I was so charmed by him and his little snot rags."

"You always planned this." My mind reeled, trying to imagine why she'd always shown how much she hated me when she'd been maneuvering close. And the other question, the one I'd carried since I was a child, was why hadn't Father cast her out the first time she sneered at me? "Why did it take you so long to spring your trap?"

"You're not the one asking the questions, Honor." Henrick warned.

"You tricked me into coming here so you could torture me." The realization made me pull at my bonds all the more

fiercely—and helplessly.

Caldren knew where I was. How long would it take Caldren to know I needed him? It would take at least a night before anyone at the academy would miss me, maybe longer because I was always hopping from one bed to another. Desperation clawed at my chest as I realized how long it would be before anyone helped me.

“There was no trick,” Henrick said. “Of course we knew Hanna would come running to you to fix everything, but if you didn’t, then she would have received her appropriate due portion. Sooner or later, you would’ve stormed in here and begged us to hurt you—and now, when you babble your nonsense about what we did to you, no one will believe we tortured you to undo the enchantment.”

“Nothing we do will hurt you more than the law allows,” Alis sniffed. “After all, no harm can come to the royal dragons’ current favorite cum-vessel... though I doubt that attachment will last long.”

Tears filled my eyes. Father had brought this monster into our lives, and it felt like a betrayal, but he must have had a reason. “Why did he marry you?”

“Because I figured out who you were, my dear,” she said, “and he wanted to make sure you were always protected.

“Did you hurt him?”

She turned to Henrick. “She has always been convinced that I’m such a monster.”

“Well, I can see why she might have that position at the moment.” Henrick sounded amused, in contrast to Alis’s sharp tension.

I couldn’t see them behind me, but my every sense was keenly attuned to Henrick’s movements. I heard him take the whip, heard the *clink* when Alis set the tray on the table.

I wrenched down on my lower lip. I still wasn’t sure they had the right person. They were going to torture me for my secrets, and I wasn’t going to give anything away.

The whip whispered across the marble floor. Every muscle in my body tensed, waited, trembled from how tightly I was holding together.

Pain ignited across my back the second before I heard the snap. I didn't scream. Then again, and again, then he paused.

My chin was wet. It took me a second to realize I'd bitten down so hard on my lip it was bleeding.

My hands were tied above me, my wrists raw from struggling, and my face was wet...

It was the briefest flash of memory. I tried to hang on to it, but it was gone.

"Do you remember?" Alis demanded.

"Patience." Henrick's footsteps retreated, the two of them leaving me there.

My back burnt as if it were on fire. The sense of their eyes watching me was acute, and I twisted to try to see them. The movement made it feel as if my back were splitting open worse, and my stomach twisted as if I were going to puke.

Henrick took a step forward, and I steeled myself. I wouldn't scream no matter what they did to me.

But the lash fell relentlessly, every blow burning through my skin, shredding the muscle beneath. There was no holding back the grunt of pain that burst from my lungs.

When I started to scream, I started to remember. It was just a flicker at first. My voice, shriller, higher in my screams than it was now, echoed in my ears.

My skirts were wet. For a second, I was afraid I'd wet myself, and the memory of my bladder releasing, of shame flooding me even as I sobbed, rose like bile in the back of my throat. But it was blood. Blood trickled down my lower back and soaked my skirt.

I tried to remember my first parents doing this to me. The harder I tried to form their faces, the more a memory rose of faceless humans, the sense of people leering. Then slowly, the

memory resolved into a blur of strangers' faces loomed above me. A glimpse of armor. *Knights*.

A patient, calm voice: "How did you reach your parents' hoard? Did you walk, fly, take a carriage? Surely you can tell us such a simple thing..."

It was Henrick, and yet... when I squeezed my eyes shut against the constant blaze of pain, I could've sworn I'd left the sunlight-soaked conservatory. I could've sworn I was back in a dungeon.

And Henrick's calm voice blurred with the past, with relentless questions, always the same questions, no matter how much I pleaded and sobbed and shook.

"Such a terrible thing to hurt a child so brutally," Henrick mused, though he didn't seem like he found it so terrible. "Luckily, she's far older now. Far more deserving."

"She always needed it," Alis said dryly.

Wait, Henrick had been there when I was a little girl?

Who the hell was I, really?

I didn't want Henrick and Alis to know I remembered anything about the past, even though I was desperate for the pain to stop. "If I was really tortured like this, I was just a child." The desperate pleading in my voice made me sick, but I forged on. "I would've told them anything."

"I doubt that very much, Honor." Henrick said, "because the treasure has never surfaced. Some of those relics would surely have been put into play. Some of those relics could have helped us fight the Scourge."

He shook his head mockingly. "Your family could have saved thousands of lives if they hadn't been so greedy, hoarding their treasure."

No, my parents hadn't lied to me about my birth family. They couldn't have. They'd loved me. I clung to the memory desperately, trying to ignore the other memories that swirled around me, dark and vague and full of throbbing pain.

Henrick and Alis were monsters—but what if they were right?

If my father had sealed away memories of being tortured, it must have been to protect me. Not to keep the treasure for himself.

But then I couldn't think anymore, because fresh pain lanced across my back over and over. There were drops of blood on my mother's fine carpet, almost hidden in the rose print; it must have splattered all the way in front of me. My flesh was shredded.

I couldn't think straight.

"Why did you wait this long?" I sobbed. "If you knew all along who I was..."

Maybe Henrick and Alis had married for this exact moment in time, for the chance to use my sister and me to make them wealthy beyond belief.

"This is perhaps a marriage of convenience," Alis admitted. "It's not as if my marriage to your father was a love match either."

"Quiet," Henrick told her. "She's trying to distract herself. Trying to remain in control, trying to outsmart us."

He sounded amused by the notion. He was close behind me, then something leathery looped around my throat. I tried desperately to shake him away, but there was no escaping as he pulled back. I choked, then I couldn't breathe, couldn't make a sound. The world faded black at the edges, then suddenly the pressure at my throat relaxed. I drew a ragged, gasping breath.

"You passed out so quickly as a child." He said into my ear. "I always thought the guard had a tender spot for you that he made you pass out. That's why we hung him too when you went missing."

My voice was ragged. "You were there."

"You remember me." He sounded delighted.

A man with his hard blue eyes and a pointed, dark beard. He was just a flash in my memory, just one of a crowd. There'd been half a dozen men lining my cell, listening to me scream with disinterested faces.

He laughed in delight. "Progress. And here I thought you were never going to make any, stubborn child."

"She's very bright when she chooses to be," Alis said. "She just generally chooses not to be."

As the torture continued, I kept having more flickers of my past. But all I remembered was the past, was being hurt; the past and the present seemed to blur together as if all my life had been just these moments of misery.

I didn't remember my first parents, and I didn't remember this treasure. I couldn't even imagine what it was. Gold? Maps? Relics?

"What do you want from me?" I begged.

But all Henrick asked, in his bored voice, was: "How did you reach your parent's hoard?"



CHAPTER
FORTY-SIX

Caldren

I SAT AT MY USUAL TABLE IN THE TWISTED PINES, DRUMMING my fingers on the table, ignoring my sweating tankard of beer.

Honor hadn't come. It wasn't late yet, and I was being irrational, but every minute that ticked by felt like a year.

Nora slid into the seat opposite me, flashed me her usual smirk.

Her smile irritated me at the moment. As much as I appreciated Nora's friendship, I wanted Honor sitting across from me. "What are you doing here?"

The bird shifter frowned at me. Her bones were narrow and delicate, her cheekbones sharp under her pale skin. "You need to work on your manners, Caldren."

I drummed my fingertips on the tabletop again. I'd never apologized much as a royal, and it took me a moment to realize I could apologize to her now. By the time it occurred to me, she'd snorted and helped herself to my beer.

She set it down with a clunk, wiping the foam mustache off her upper lip with the back of her hand. "What's up your ass now? Prince Jaik?"

She only called him *Prince Jaik* when she was pissed at me.

"Honor's supposed to come to the pub."

"When she's done fucking Prince Jaik?"

I leveled a look at her. "You're being a real bitch right now, and you know it."

“I do,” she admitted. “What’s so special about Honor Hannaby, anyway?”

I pushed the tankard across the table toward her. “I’m going to find her.”

“Cal,” she started, then sighed. “Do you need backup?”

“No.” I rose from the table, lifted my sword harness from where I’d hung it on the back of my chair. “But thank you. It does mean a lot you’d help Honor.”

“Judging from your stories, I’d probably like her if it weren’t for you,” she said with a tight smile.

I frowned down at her, debating whether or not to parse that. But there was something tight in my gut, a sense that Honor needed me, and I wasn’t going to waste a moment on anyone else.

I rested my hand on her shoulder as I passed. “See you later, Nora.”

Her hand rose automatically to mine, before she pulled away. She flashed a bright smile at me over her shoulder; I was already moving toward the door. “Not if I see you first.”

I had the feeling I’d just shattered something carelessly, and I knew it would dog me later. But for now, I needed to get to Honor. She was probably fine, and I’d look ridiculous, showing up at her house in the middle of her family drama.

And yet, when I reached the damp cobblestone street, when rain misted across my face, I couldn’t resist breaking into a run as if I were being pulled.

As soon as the tall, wrought-iron fences outside the big coral house came into view, I slowed to a stop.

I walked casually up to the guards outside the closed gate. “I’m here to see Honor Hannaby.”

The two guards glanced me over. Once upon a time, they would have already been opening the gates for me.

“She’s not here.” The guard brushed his cloak aside, his hand finding the pommel of the sword hanging at his hip.

“I’d like to see Henrick, then. I come on academy business.” Everyone knew how dearly my father loved his dragons and their academy.

“The house is closed for the night. Come back in the morning.”

“It’s not closed to me. Henrick would want to see me.” My voice came out with the same confidence as always.

He was studying me, and I studied him back. He shouldn’t have the keys to the gate on his body; basic security would put the keys with another guard inside the gates. I could best both of them, but I didn’t bother.

“You’re not the king’s son anymore, Caldren,” he said coldly. “No one has to listen to you.”

Fuck, he knew me. I didn’t remember the faces of all the guards, but those who had served around my father certainly knew me.

I’d never appreciated how fleeting my power was when I was a prince.

“Fine,” I said, although pretending to obey bit deep into my pride. “I’ll come back in the morning.”

My boots splashed through puddles as I made my way along the road, feeling their stares behind me. I went a few streets away before I stepped into an alley.

I called on my wolf. It was always strange to shift in the city, a million scents assailing my nose and rough cobblestone streets under my paws. I found an unattended place at the fence, jumped, caught it with my front paws and struggled over. Then I slunk through the shadows around the coral castle, looking for a way in.

It was lucky for me that Henrick and Alis seemed to prefer to have their guards in their human forms. It was poor security, but it was an affectation among the rich that had become popular lately. And at the moment, it was an affectation I approved of, because it gave me the chance to get past to reach a window that had been left cracked just barely open.

My enormous gray wolf could never fit through the window. But I could scent Honor from here, although faintly, and mixed with her sweet scent was a note of blood.

Raw need raced through me. I had to get to her. I shifted into a human, my heart pounding as I eased the window open. I eased through the sill, found myself in an unused drawing room.

I moved silently down the hall, tempted to shift back again so I could track her scent more easily. The house was still and quiet. I pushed open doors, checking carefully inside each room, knowing at any moment I'd run into a servant and have to deal with them.

But when I pushed open the next door, I found myself in a dim, shadowed room. The windows on the far side looked out on the dark garden. An x-shaped wooden frame stood in front of the windows, leather bindings loose. The scent of blood was strong in this room, even without my wolf, and my stomach clenched.

Alis and Henrick had hurt Hanna, or hurt Honor, in this room. But where were the girls now? I made my way through the house, searching for one of the servants' stairways, then climbed the stairs.

It was beginning to grate on me I hadn't run into anyone. It felt strange, suspicious. I was no longer a royal; I couldn't snap a servant's neck and walk away without a second thought. But the scent of blood lingered in my nose and it made me feel twitchy to hurt someone.

There was a sobbing down the hall. I found the door that was locked. I didn't have the key, and I glanced down the shadowed hall before I began to pick it. I was usually undisturbed by danger, but the thought that Honor was crying past this door made my hands fumble with my urgency.

I pushed open the door. Hanna raised her tear-stained face from the bed, and her gaze widened when she saw me. "Caldren!"

I touched my fingers to my lips, trying to silence her, but she'd already raced across the room and threw her arms around me.

“You have to help Honor!”

“That’s what I’m here for,” I promised. I gripped her slender upper arms, gave her a squeeze. “And you. I’m going to get you out of here.”

“Where are the rest?” she asked, her eyes wide and hopeful.

Shit, she thought the rest of the royals should be with me. That rankled, but I smiled anyway. “We don’t need them. Any idea where Honor is?”

“I heard her screaming, then... she stopped.” She chewed her lower lip frantically.

A chill ran through my blood, then turned to ice. Henrick and Alis would pay for whatever happened tonight. “I’m going to find her. Can you get out of here? Go to the academy and...” The words soured in my mouth. “Find Prince Jaik. He’ll come help her.”

Jaik was a worthless asshole... for me. For Honor, he’d try to be decent. Protecting her mattered more than my pride.

She glanced at the wall of windows behind her, and I realized they’d all been nailed shut. They’d tried to trap her here, and even with the door unlocked, she’d have to escape past the guards.

“I don’t know,” she whispered. “I thought I escaped before, but they always wanted me to... I’ll try.”

“You can do this,” I assured her. “I have a lot of faith in Hannaby girls.”

She smiled wanly. “This is all my fault.”

I shook my head. “Not the slightest bit. This is on Henrick, and Alis, and they’ll pay.”

I saw Hanna to the window, stood guard as she carefully lowered herself out. I watched as she ran for the fence, then I

intended to shift to find Honor.

“Hey,” one of the guards called. “Stop!”

He’d sighted Hanna.

I barreled into him. He never saw me coming until I slammed into him, landing hard on top. He tried to get in a punch across my jaw, but I pressed him down to the ground, slammed my fist across his jaw hard twice. His head fell back against the grass, his eyes dazed.

The next moment, three guards fell on me all at once. I knocked out the first one, grabbed for my sword, pulled it loose just before something slammed hard into my head. I fell to my knees as pain exploded across my vision, tried to get my legs beneath me and pitch myself up.

They fell on me, kicking and punching me mercilessly. The world went red, wobbly.

“I doubt his father will miss him,” one of the guards said.

“I don’t want to run that risk, do you?” The other one demanded. “Let’s throw him in the well with the other one.”

The other one. Honor.

They grabbed my arms, and I tried to cling to consciousness, but pain swallowed me.



CHAPTER
FORTY-SEVEN

J*aik*

“LUCIEN SEEMS TO BE MISSING,” I SAID THE NEXT MORNING, glancing around the amphitheater, when training had started. He vanished often, despite Branok and Arren tailing him as much as possible. They were quite adept and yet somehow Lucien often gave them the slip. “I have to wonder if he’s finally been murdered.”

“Don’t look at me,” Branok raised his hands as everyone’s gazes shifted his way. “I’d tell you, wouldn’t I?”

I’d debated letting Branok and Lynx kill Lucien at the start, given what he’d done to Alina. But we needed every dragon shifter for the war. As Lucien proved useful, though, I’d made it clear that their revenge campaign was almost at an end.

“Perhaps you went rogue when you realized I wouldn’t give into your homicidal whims,” I suggested.

He scoffed at me. I knew Branok wouldn’t be that foolish.

“We’re going looking for him.” I stood.

Damyn frowned, in the midst of addressing students about our upcoming trip north, but he didn’t acknowledge the way we suddenly filed out into the academy’s quiet hallway.

“You cannot be serious.” Branok said slowly, even though he’d followed me; obviously I *was* serious.

“Look, I know you hate the man.”

“Am I supposed to just get over what he did to my sister? Just because it turned out he’s a pretty decent fighter?” Those were words Branok would never have said in front of Lucien.

“No one’s asking you to forgive him, just to work with him. You don’t have to hold hands and skip into the sunset.”

“For now,” Talisyn added, “all we have to do is find him. Make sure he’s not drunk somewhere.”

“With Honor,” Lynx offered crisply.

My heart froze in my chest at the mention of her name. I hadn’t seen her lately either. Staying away from her was tearing me apart.

“It would make sense to check the servants’ quarters.” My tone came out cool. I could almost make it sound as if I wouldn’t want to murder Lucien myself if I found him fucking Honor.

I made my way down the back stairs into unfamiliar territory. It was purely by luck that I ran into Calla.

She glared at me as if I had done something terrible to Honor.

I demanded, “What is it?”

The anger on her face softened. “You don’t know where she is either.”

Worry spiked in my chest. “When did you see her last?”

“She hasn’t been at work. She never came back to our room last night.” She raked her fingers through her hair, pulling random little wisps from her bun. “She comes and goes all the time. But she always lets me know. She always comes back.”

“I’ll find her,” I promised.

We had to search for both her and Lucien. The thought that the two of them might have run away together nagged at me, filling me with a mix of rage and foreboding.

For Honor, the logical place to go would have been her house.

When I went there, I was met by servants who showed me into a drawing room, where Alis smiled at me as she greeted me from the couch.

“What an honor, Prince Jaik. It’s been a pleasure to see so much of you lately.”

I said polite words by rote, no matter how little I meant them, until enough time had passed to demand, “Have you seen Honor?”

For a moment, there was a flash of fear in her eyes. Then she said, “No, I haven’t.”

I cocked my head to one side, studying her. She was uncomfortable, but was it because I was interested in Honor or because she’d done something to hurt her?

My nostrils flared, trying to find Honor’s scent, but like all dragons, I wasn’t any good at tracking by scent. I could’ve sworn her sugar-and-sun scent had been here recently, but it had faded since. There was a faint tang of blood in the air, and... gods, was that *Caldren*? What the hell had Caldren been doing here?

I wanted to tear the house apart. I nodded to my royals, and they spread out, searching every inch of the house.

Alis shook her head. “Did you lose something? This is most unusual, Prince Jaik.”

Everything that happened in my life since Honor came into it was *most unusual*.

Had Alis handed Honor over to my father?

There was only one way to know for sure.

I’d have to go see the old bastard. Some involuntary instinct drew me to glance at the mirror hanging above the fireplace, at the faint yellow bruising that still clung to my face.

Pend would want to know about a missing dragon shifter, if the twins’ father hadn’t made Lucien disappear with my father’s permission. I was curious to gauge his reaction to Lucien’s disappearance....and to Honor’s.

Rage darted like ice through my veins.
If he'd hurt Honor, I was going to destroy him.
Sooner than planned.



IT WASN'T THAT FUN FOR ME TO WALK BACK INTO THE SAME room where I'd had my last meeting with my father.

"To what do I owe this pleasure, Jaik?" He sounded polite, but he was annoyed I was here when he hadn't requested my presence.

"I wanted to talk to you about Lucien."

"Oh? What's he done now?"

"He's gone missing."

He looked mildly surprised but not concerned. "Well, that's one problem sorted, if he's abandoned the academy or died. You'll need to find him, of course."

"Yes."

"If he's deserted, kill him."

"He doesn't seem the type." But I had a niggling sense of doubt. He might have run with Honor.

It had certainly crossed my mind.

My father gave me a pointed look as if I were being dismissed.

When I looked at my father, I tried not to look at him like I was thinking about murdering him for threatening Honor's life.

"Anything else?" My father's tone was mild.

Caldren's scent in the house was still on my mind. Maybe Caldren and Lucien and Honor had all run away together. Maybe the house had been where they met.

Or maybe something worse had befallen all of them.

“Do you ever miss Caldren?” I blurted out.

My father gave me a familiar, dismissive glance. “Who?”

Fuck him. “I’ll find Lucien.”

“See that you do.”

I turned and strode from the house.



CHAPTER
FORTY-EIGHT

Honor

THE ONLY LIGHT CAME FROM THE FLICKERING FLAMES IN MY palm, illuminating the narrow circle where Cal and I were held. The flames seemed to be dying, as if this phase of torture began to leach away my magic.

I shifted in exhaustion, trying to keep my shredded back away from the hard stone wall, and shivered like I'd never be warm. I'd been alone for so many hours down here, and I watched eagerly as Caldren stirred.

Caldren's eyes fluttered slowly open.

"There you are," I said, running my fingers through his dark hair. I'd cradled his head in my lap when they first dumped him down in the well with me. His face was swollen from the beating, and he groaned as if waking were miserable. I chided him gently, "And here you say *I* always get in trouble."

"I was wrong." His voice came out a rasp, and he coughed, his arm crossing his chest as if he'd had some ribs broken. Then he managed, "You don't get into trouble. You *are* trouble."

"Regrets? Coming to find me turned out to be a disappointment?" I asked lightly.

"You stood me up."

"I wasn't aware it was a date."

"Perhaps I just hoped it would be."

I rested my palm lightly on his forehead. "Are you sick with fever? Delirious?"

His brown eyes met mine. “I’ve never seen clearer.”

No matter how bad things were, he still lit a warm glow in my chest. If only we could survive long enough to have this conversation in a more pleasant setting. “I don’t know how Alis and Henrick are going to get out of this now. They can claim this was all just part of my punishment, but... now you’re here. and Alis came to see me earlier, and I heard her tell Henrick the royals had been here earlier.”

“And my idiot brother didn’t find you?”

I laughed, a bit shakily. Their bitter sibling rivalry didn’t take a time-out for anything, apparently. “We’re pretty well hidden. We’re in the old well, the one my father built the conservatory over. Apparently there’s a trap door. Look.”

I raised my hand, and the light scattered and glinted over the gold coins surrounding us. My father had apparently dumped treasure down here as if he were a dragon himself.

“Apparently, as a child, I was afraid of the dark,” I said. “They locked me in complete darkness, and I was terrified... they don’t know that now, I make my own light.”

Cal frowned. I was rambling.

“Sorry,” I said. “I’ve been alone with my thoughts for a while, and they’re not the most chipper.”

Light cracked through the trap door above, and I folded my fingers, smothering the flames in my palm.

If Henrick knew me as a child...did he know what I truly was?

Alis stared down at me, along with half a dozen guards. Two of them held crossbows on us, and an eerie feeling crept up my spine at the sight of the arrow ready to fire.

A rope with a small wooden plank knotted to the end—just enough to stand on—landed beside me.

“Both of you, come up,” Henrick ordered, somewhere out of sight. “Any nonsense and you’ll get to watch the other die.”

Caldren gave me a wink, although it was hard to see when one side of his face was a massive bruise. “We’ll get you out of here,” he whispered, giving me a hand onto the board, ever gallant.

I gripped the rope as the guards began to haul me up.

We? Who was Caldren’s *we*? It didn’t matter and yet, it gave me something else to think about.

Henrick caught my arm and helped me off the board before they sent it down again for Caldren. They’d basically rolled his unconscious form into the well to begin with, and I’d screamed, afraid he’d been hurt even worse.

Two servants were struggling in the door, trying to bring the cross in. It must have been hidden when the royals were at the door.

My knees buckled, and I fell heavily on the rose rug. The scent of vinegar rose to my nose; the floor must have been cleaned, but I could’ve sworn there were still spots of my blood on the same rug where I’d once stretched out to read while my mother played the piano.

“I don’t remember anything but being hurt,” I whispered.

But Henrick just smiled down at me. “Patience.”



CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

Caldren

THE GUARDS HAD TO WRENCH ME AWAY FROM HONOR. I started to fight back, desperate to get back to her, then realized I needed to keep from being knocked unconscious again more than anything else. I let them bind my hands. Honor was on her knees, but her gaze met mine, her wide, vivid eyes still defiant, even though her face was blotchy from distress. She was still the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen.

She winked at me, and warmth swelled in my chest.

Two guards gripped my arms, a third walking with a crossbow aimed at me as they took me to a carriage waiting on the white stone walkway outside the front doors.

One guard sat opposite me, the crossbow still aimed at my chest. The carriage rattled into motion, stopped at the gate, then moved again.

"You know they're never going to get away with this," I told the guard across from me. "Prince Jaik will have everyone involved killed."

He had a weathered face, a soft brown beard. Was he familiar? Or was I seeing familiar faces?

He scoffed, but there was something uncertain in his dark eyes. "Prince Jaik's not likely to care much about you turning up dead, Caldren. If anyone ever finds your body."

"Maybe," I said, shrugging as much as I could with my hands bound. "But Honor... that's a different story. He loves the girl."

He laughed at that. "Royals don't fall in love."

I cocked my head, certain that I *did* know him. The cynicism of that statement made me think he'd glimpsed my mother and father, too, once upon a time. Then the memories clicked together for me. "You used to guard the summer palace. When I was a boy."

He looked uncomfortable at the thought. "You know me?"

I didn't remember his name, damn me. I'd never been good at names and faces. "I remember you."

He hesitated. The carriage was still rolling along. I glanced out the window. We were nearing the city gates.

"You went mercenary?" I asked.

He hesitated. "Freelancing. Your father doesn't pay all that well."

Suddenly, he leaned forward, throwing aside the crossbow and drawing his knife. My heart raced, but he sawed through my bonds. He seemed to hesitate even then. "Henrick is a bad man to cross."

"My brother and I are worse," I promised.

I lunged for the door, threw it open, leapt from the carriage.



CHAPTER
FIFTY

J*aik*

THAT NIGHT, THE FIRE BLAZED IN THE FIREPLACE, FLAMES leaping and crackling, forming the only sounds in the room. Even Talisyn was quiet for once, sipping his amber liquid and staring into the flames.

Honor was gone.

We'd gathered in the twins' room. I didn't want to be in my own room, where I could've sworn her burnt-sugar scent still lingered on my pillow, where I remembered throwing her against the wall. Even now, there was a constant quick pulse in my throat.

If my father had hurt her, I'd tear his castle apart to destroy him.

"I think I should point out the obvious. They're both missing at the same time." Branok's voice broke the silence. "Doesn't that seem suspicious to anybody else?"

"I think I'd like you to connect the dots for us, Branok."

Talisyn winced at my tone, and Branok's head snapped toward mine, his eyes widening.

"What exactly are you trying to say?" My voice was ice.

Branok's eyes met mine in challenge. "I think it's obvious that Lucien and Honor have run off together. It's the only thing that makes sense. The only reason why they would both disappear at the same time."

Fury washed over me at the thought. I jerked my head in a nod, reminding myself that it was probably the best option, the one I should be hoping for. Honor, alive and unharmed and happy with Lucien.

But the thought still made me want to snarl, and I pressed my lips together to keep from taking it out on Branok. Honor had revealed to me just how selfish I could be. I wanted her, and damn the costs.

“Maybe not,” Talisyn said.

Imagining that she’d chosen Lucien over me once and for all grated my last nerve, and my nerves were already exposed every time I had to interact with my father.

“Regardless,” I said, my voice cool. “We’ll find them, make sure they’re alive, and we’ll deal with that then.”

“Oh really? And how will you deal with it?” Branok demanded.

He was one of my oldest and dearest friends, but it was still very tempting to hurt him.

“I know this is going to sound strange coming from me, but not with bloodshed,” I said. “If Lucien has been able to pry Honor out of here, then good. She has no sense of self preservation. It’s better than having her underfoot, trying to get herself killed.”

A guilty look crossed over Talisyn’s face. I’d known he was going to the wedding with Honor. Tough as she was, she’d needed someone there to support her, and Tal was a safer choice than I was. But when he’d confessed to me about their time together, I’d been very tempted to punch him into next week. Tal generally made things more interesting, instead of in any way improving them, but that was a low, even for him.

We’d canvassed the area, recruited other students. Tal had turned his considerable charms on the servants as well. Now we had a small army out searching for the two of them, but it seemed as if they’d disappeared entirely from the city. Maybe they had fled through the tunnels...or been dragged through the tunnels.

As soon as I imagined Honor being carried off by someone—she'd probably be fighting then and mocking them and generally making them miserable, if she weren't knocked unconscious—a spurt of fresh, raw energy flowed through my body.

I stood to my feet. I couldn't stay here in the warmth, in front of the fire, when she might be in danger.

“Jaik,” Lynx said quietly. “Rest. You need to be some good when you find her. You haven't stopped moving since...”

“There's plenty of time to rest later,” I snapped.

The door flew open. I spun to face the threat, my heart rising in my chest with the hope it was Honor. No one dared come into the dragons' wing without permission.

Caldren staggered, clutching the doorway. Rage spiked through me at the sight of him. He didn't belong here. His deep brown eyes locked on mine. His face was swollen and bruised, his mouth bleeding, and the rage vanished as quickly as it had come. He tried to say something right before he started to fall.

I vaulted the empty chair between us and caught Caldren. His weight slammed into mine. He was going down, so I guided him to the floor, my arm under his head to protect him from the hardwood.

“What are you doing here?” I asked icily.

He probably deserved this beating. Caldren kept miserable company, between his pub and his rebel sympathies.

At the same time, I wanted to kill whoever hurt him—if nothing else, for thinking they could hurt my family.

“She's in trouble.” His voice came out a broken rasp. “I didn't want to come to you, but... I had nowhere else to go.”

Arren stood over me, a big hand falling on my shoulder. “Where?”

“Fetch the healer,” I snapped at Lynx.

“There’s no time.” Caldren looked up at me. “Henrick is torturing her.”

Branok sighed. “We are never getting rid of that girl, are we?”

“It’s not the fucking time,” Tal answered, smacking Branok upside the head, which prevented me from doing worse.

I was just about done with my friends’ hatred of Honor, and with their hatred of Lucien as well, for that matter, if it turned out that he was missing for reasons that were beyond his control.

“Where is she?” I demanded.

“Henrick’s house.”

I started to shake my head, and he groaned, “There’s a hidden room... I can find it again.”

Arren was already gripping Caldren’s wrist, drawing him onto his shoulder. Cal let out a moan of pain, but no one cared much about that.

“I can walk,” Cal protested.



CHAPTER FIFTY-ONE

T*alisyn*

“I TRIED TO HELP HER,” CAL TOLD US, “BUT THE GUARDS were not exactly welcoming. I’m lucky to be alive...”

“It will be different now,” Jaik said confidently and he didn’t seem to notice the look of pure hatred that flashed over Caldren’s face.

I worried that our old friend, the one that we had all looked up to when we were growing up, was a danger now. He might be one far greater than Jaik realized; Jaik’s arrogance and Caldren’s insecurity had pushed them onto a knife’s edge together, and I wasn’t sure either of them would escape without a fatal cut.

Jaik seemed to think if he showed his brother any kindness, it meant that he wasn’t actually more deserving, that Jaik wasn’t meant to be the dragon royal and therefore the king.

I’d die for Jaik in a heartbeat, but he could be an idiot.

I wasn’t sure that the dragon shifters were ever the ones who were best suited to rule. But even around my friends, I often kept my mouth shut about my thoughts.

The priests considered it heresy to speak about another way, and the dragon elders themselves happened to take the same view. They weren’t eager to face revolution from those that they’d decreed lesser.

But still, I could understand why Caldren so often looked at Jaik as if he wanted to smack him. It just made me sad for the two of them. Those were the thoughts that flooded through my head as we made our way to the coral castle.

Caldren had finally fought off Arren, and he was moving quickly, but he was limping, obviously badly wounded.

Jaik's gaze flickered toward him, and despite how tough Jaik always talked, he seemed worried. "You've got to find someplace to wait. You're going to slow us down if we need to fight."

But Caldren's face creased stubbornly. As if he thought his brother was judging him, he hobbled faster.

"Go back and get healed," Jaik ordered roughly. "You're little use to us right now."

"I'm fine," he snarled. "I'm worried about what they're doing to her."

As the coral mansion came into view, Jaik said, "Talisyn, with me." He glanced at Arren and the twins. "Stay out of sight, in reserve, in case we need you."

Caldren took a step forward, and Arren's hand settled on his shoulder like a weight that might just crush him to the ground. But Arren's face wasn't harsh when he shook his head. "You're with us."

Jaik was so fixed on the house—and Honor—that he didn't even notice Arren didn't despise Caldren, as Jaik probably would've preferred. Jaik was already moving ahead. I followed him, glancing back to see our friends melting into the shadows.

Ahead of us, the walls of the castle, the gate, and the trees beyond came into view. There were two guards posted at the gates to Honor's childhood home.

"This whole thing gives me a creepy feeling. After this, we're definitely hauling her off to the northern retreat," I muttered.

Jaik's lips tightened. I couldn't tell if he was annoyed with me or with Honor. Possibly with both of us. He was very good at multitasking his irritation with people.

But for once, neither of us were interested in arguing.

The guards at the gate came to attention, a shocked look crossing their faces when they realized they faced Prince Jaik. That look was quickly replaced with dread. They seemed terrified at the sight of Jaik, and Jaik didn't try to hide the fact that he liked that reaction.

“Open the gate.”

The guards glanced at each other. One of them said, “We aren't supposed to open the gates until morning without permission, your majesty.”

“You have my permission.” Jaik's voice had dropped low, dangerous. Any softer and it would've been a purr—and no less frightening for that.

“I can't—” one of the guards began.

Jaik moved so fast he was a blur. The guard was already drawing his sword—I wasn't sure what he thought he was going to do with *that* against the heir, but it didn't matter anyway. Jaik seized his arm, yanked his knee up, and slammed it into the man's forearm so hard that he dropped the sword.

Jaik was already twisting, using the man's motion to drop him to the ground. He stepped into the other guard who was still wide-eyed and caught his arm, slamming him in the back of the head with his elbow. The man dropped to his knees, then tumbled face-first onto the ground.

Jaik turned his irritated gaze on me. “Are you going to make yourself useful?”

“You didn't need *me*.” I crouched and searched the unconscious guard. “You needed to burn off some fury. He doesn't have the key.”

Jaik snorted and stepped on the guard's back as he headed toward the gate. “Some shred of decent security, at least. I don't like the idea of men like this being responsible for protecting Honor.”

“I don't think they've ever been here to protect Honor.”

His shoulders tensed subtly at the thought, but he was already jumping, clambering over the eight-foot-high gate. It

was spiked at the top and he lightly vaulted over it, landing on his feet.

Two more guards materialized out of the mist. “You all ri—” The first one broke off as he saw Jaik. Jaik made short work of dropping two more unconscious guards to the ground. By the time I’d leapt over the gate myself, he was already pocketing the key to the gate.

“You don’t want to leave the gate unlocked for the others?”

“I imagine they’ll be flying in, if we need them.”

The two of us strode up the long walkway. There was a constant whistle of the wind through the trees that shook above us, dropping white petals to the ground. It had rained and the air smelled fresh.

The servant who opened the door for us looked haughty at first, staring down his nose at Jaik, then a tremor ran through his body when he registered Prince Jaik.

“Where’s Honor?” Jaik’s voice came out even, easy, but his hand was on the hilt of his sword.

“Ah, ahh, she isn’t here,” he stammered.

“Do you want to try that again?” Jaik asked. “Loyalty to your master and mistress might seem like a good quality. But lying to me is a very, very poor one.”

The servant looked absolutely terrified, and two guards from inside came hustling over.

“Can we help you, Prince Jaik?”

“Have you seen a young woman in this house? She stands about yai high.” He held his hand up to his shoulder. “She has red hair, she never shuts up, and she’s under my protection. I try to be an easygoing man, but I’ll maim or kill anyone who threatens her.”

The guards glanced nervously at each other. One of them spoke up, “She was here, but she left.”

“I see,” Jaik said. “Well, I’d like to come in. I’m sure you won’t deny me a little bit of hospitality.”

“This is most unusual,” the servant squeaked.

“I agree,” Jaik said coldly.

The thing that was most unusual was that Jaik, for the first time in his life, seemed to be taking a genuine interest in something besides fighting the Scourge.

“I’m sorry, sire.” One of the guards stepped in front of Jaik. “I can’t let you do that. This is a private residence, and you have no right to intervene here, not without your father’s orders.”

“I’m sorry as well,” Jaik said crisply.

The man staggered and fell before anyone else had even registered Jaik’s movement.

“Does anyone else want to get in my way?” Jaik asked impatiently. “I think something that belongs to me is in this house, and I intend to retrieve it.”

“You don’t get between a dragon and his treasure,” I said to the other guard, who turned to flee, maybe to warn someone inside the house.

But Jaik wasn’t going to hurt him as long as he wasn’t standing in his way. Jaik just watched him go with a bemused look written across his face.

“Your father is not going to like this,” I said.

“I know. That makes it even more fun.” He stepped over the body, and the two of us moved into the house, searching for Honor. Caldren had told us the secret room was under the conservatory, so we made our way in that direction.

He repeated his question to more terrified servants, and one of them gestured toward a drawing room.

But just as we reached it, three guards attacked us. I stabbed one in the chest and kicked him off my sword, barely breaking my momentum. If Honor was in that room, I needed to get to her.

I threw open the door and what I saw stunned me. She was affixed to some kind of wooden structure shaped like an X. Her arms extended above her head. Her head rolled to one side, as if she were weak, and she was murmuring in a childish voice that sounded desperate and broken. Instant rage shot through me. Henrick and Alis stood near her, their faces horror-struck at the sight of Jaik.

No one had realized how much she meant to him.

Least of all him, I imagined.

“She’s here,” I called to Jaik.

Jaik, in my mind, was calling on the others.

All hell broke loose. I dropped the walls in my mind so the guys could see exactly what I was seeing—the number of guards and an injured Honor.

Henrick and Alis gaped at me for a second, and then Alis turned and ran. Henrick was quick witted enough to snatch a burning brand from the fire.

But he was too late to try whatever enchantment he had hoped to scorch into my skin, because I was already transforming into a dragon. Meanwhile, I heard the sound of beating wings above the ceiling.

Alis froze in horror as Arren plunged himself through the roof and it splintered around his body.

Jaik threw himself toward Henrick, transforming in mid-air. His eyes blazed in fury as his flames incinerated Henrick. For a moment, his face was filled with horror—then his mouth was still wide as flames washed over his skin, singing him down to raw red flesh.

Jaik’s powerful jaws snapped out, and Henrick’s head was gone. His headless corpse tumbled to the ground. Alis’s screams rang in my ears like a sweet song as Jaik’s furious, golden-eyed gaze swung to her.

I moved to Honor’s side swiftly, trying to unbuckle the bonds affixing her to the damned cross.

“Talisyn,” Honor whispered. She didn’t sound like herself; she was hoarse and ragged. From screaming? The thought made a murderous pulse thump through my body. But she was begging me with her eyes. “Alis knows something about my family, you’ve got to protect her.”

My desire to kill was leashed by my desire to give Honor whatever she wanted. If she needed to see her stepmother alive, then she would have her.

I threw myself between Jaik and Alis, and Jaik’s massive head drew up sharply, exhaling an irritated huff of smoke. Jaik’s glare was familiar in either his dragon or human form.

“I’ve got her.” I held up my hands. “You don’t need her to be a corpse.”

Branock, Arren and Lynx had crashed through the roof. I wasn’t sure if the guards intended to fight back or flee, but it didn’t matter.

As my friends destroyed the drawing room in their effort to get to her and to help us fight back the swarming soldiers, I grabbed Alis’s arm and dragged her toward the cross where I could protect her. I shoved her to her knees. “Stay. Or die.”

Honor’s eyes met mine. “Thank you,” she mouthed the words.

I had a million questions, but her lashes fluttered, then closed.

And judging from her wounded, injured body, maybe that was a mercy. As I looked at her beautiful, wounded face, rage shot through me.

Under the rage was a thrumming fear. I couldn’t imagine my life without this fierce, sunny, wild girl.

I turned to Alis. “You are about to have some of the worst days of your life. If she dies, I’ll make sure that you’re tortured but kept from succumbing to your wounds, the way she may.”

Alis paled. I turned and looked at Honor and got her down from her bindings. The battle raged around me, but I barely

noticed any of it. I was focused on getting my girl, and my brothers would make sure that she and I were safe while I tried to look after her.

“I don’t understand,” Alis said. “I thought she was nothing to you. I thought you had her and discarded her.”

“I’ll always come for her.” I wasn’t sure if I would have been able to tell Honor those words to her face. But as I said them, I could feel the burning truth of them igniting something deep in my chest.

I glanced up at the sounds of fighting. Arren lopped the head off a guard, and it rolled across the floor. I kicked it away as I unfastened Honor’s wrist, gathering her in my arms and lifting her against my chest.

Her dress had fallen open, and there was a fresh brandmark on her chest. I could smell the scent of scorched skin and it ignited my fresh desire for killing.

“Don’t move,” I growled at Alis. “I want to keep you alive for Honor, but I won’t hesitate to hurt you.”

Her face was pale except for two blotches on her cheeks. “Since when do the dragon royals get involved with a common girl? What are your parents going to say?”

That was perhaps a valid question. But I would overthrow them if that was what it took to keep Honor safe. I’d long thought perhaps we should anyway.

All around us, chaos reigned, but Honor was the still at the heart of the storm.

Then quiet fell. Jaik reached me in a few long strides, his gaze blazing when he saw her. Then he snapped at Arren, “Find her sister.”

Jaik took her out of my arms. “We’re taking Honor north. I’ll deal with her anger later.”

I nodded, but I knew that choice would start a cascade of impacts that went far beyond irritating the girl we loved.

All hell would descend on us when the king knew Jaik had defied him for Honor.

But for now, Jaik turned to the others and said, “Get ready to fly.”

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Hi! May Dawson here.

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Best,

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