

DIZZY HOOPER



REJECTED BY DRAGONS

EMBER: QUEEN OF DRAGONS BOOK 1

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CHAPTER
ONE

EMBER

*L*ife isn't always a fairy tale, you know...

It doesn't matter that it's been over a decade since I've seen her. My mother's voice floating back to me makes my heart squeeze just as strongly now as it did the day she dumped me in this godforsaken town.

My gaze goes unfocused for a second. I can almost see her—can almost feel her warmth and smell the wood fire and orange blossom scent of her skin.

We used to read together every night when I was a kid. My father—fuzzier in my memory than my mother—used to read to me, too, but it was my mom's and my *thing*, even long past the age when I could read perfectly well myself. My favorite books were the ones where knights in shining armor rescued damsels in distress. I knew full well that a girl could take care of herself, of course—and it was more than a little ironic to love reading about being rescued from a dragon, of all things.

But there was always something so romantic about a guy on a horse riding up and plucking some poor, mistreated maiden out of her misery.

My mother would indulge me, shaking her head fondly as she let me choose from my most beloved stories, again and again. She still felt the need to remind me, though. Fairy tales weren't real.

The tightness in my chest releases, only to be replaced by a bitterness that floods the back of my tongue.

Yeah. At this point I know that all too well.

Swallowing the taste of bile, I close the book I'd been paging through, waiting for my shift to end. The second-hand store where I work never gets too busy, which is great. I'm earning my degree online, and being able to cram in some assigned reading between customers is always a plus. The place is practically deserted today, though, the racks of vintage

clothes and shelves of used books, records and knickknacks practically untouched. Honestly, sometimes I'm not even sure how—or why—Maude keeps the place open.

Everybody in Wynrath Crest needs some sort of occupation, though. It's the Air Dragon King's decree.

I roll my eyes, even as my stomach does a nervous flip. By habit, I glance around the empty store.

King Zephyr has been in charge of the Air Realm for the better part of a century. Wynrath Crest may look like a dot on the map to most people, a tiny speck in the mountains perched over miles of high desert. But any dragon shifter knows better. It's the seat of power for one of the three remaining clans, and it's ruled with an iron fist.

A hint of a shiver travels down my spine.

I'll never understand why my mother abandoned me at age twelve.

But what I'll *really* never understand is why she abandoned me here.

With a rough exhalation, I shake off my momentary paranoia. Dragon shifters have a wide range of powers, but telepathy isn't one of them. It's not even like I was thinking anything particularly bad about the Air Dragon King, anyway. Just because I chafe at his incessant micromanaging of the dragons in his kingdom doesn't make me a dissenter.

And I have way bigger things to worry about when it comes to my problems with the royal family than a little grousing.

Turning, I re-shelve the book that sent me on my little trip down memory lane. Sliding it home, I let my fingertip trail down the fabric-covered spine, a wry half-smile curling my lips.

It's an older volume—maybe actually worth some money, compared with most of the paperbacks that fill the shelves. Humans would call it fantasy; hell, your average shifter might, too. There are definitely some fairy tales in there.

So many fairy tales have their roots in myth and lore, though. Some of the stories in this particular tome touch awfully closely to ones I heard from my own parents, back so many years ago. Stories about a dragon who would unify the kingdoms and bring light to shadow.

Nonsense, probably.

But what can I say? I always have been a sucker for a good, old-fashioned story about a hero.

I take a minute to straighten the other books on the shelf. When they're all in good order, I force myself to continue on. It really has been a slow day, so there's not much to tidy, but I put away a few items that got left in the dressing room. I stop to admire a little black skirt with some cool, silver zippers on it that must have come in the other day. In another life, maybe I'd consider it. As is, clothes that will make me stand out—or that I care about at all...

Well. They're just not important, is all.

With that taken care of, I head back to the front and peer out through the big glass window. Things seem quiet enough. I wave at Mr. Mulligan, out walking his dog. Mr. Mulligan waves back. Like about half the population of Wynrath Crest, he's human, and blissfully ignorant about the true nature of the other half of his neighbors. One glance at me, and the dog shies away, though. Animals know what I am—even if sometimes, the rest of my kind forget.

Taking mercy on the poor creature, I direct my gaze away.

The cafe across the street seems to be doing a decent business, considering it's not quite five. Outside the gas station next door, a couple of old-timers are shooting the breeze.

Above it all, the sky shines, bright and open and blue. The tiniest hints of red and gold sparkle at the horizon, and for a second, my lungs ache. The spot between my shoulder blades crackles, and there's a hint of power crawling just beneath my skin. For the briefest instant, I imagine I could summon it forward. Let the beast within take flight.

But then, just like every other time I've tried, the feeling is gone.

Scowling, I drop my gaze.

Before I can get too pissed off about it, my phone buzzes in my pocket. I pull it out, and my pulse races when I see who the message is from.

Storm: You free after work?

Instinctively, I move away from the window, and even I know that's stupid, but I can't help myself.

Ember: The usual?

Storm: Y

My heart flutters.

Other, more interesting parts of my body do, too.

Ember: Can't wait

I shove my phone back in my pocket before I'm tempted to text back anything more. Storm keeps our messages brief for a reason. He sends them on an encrypted app, so no one should be able to see them, but you never know. If anyone found out, I hate to imagine what might happen—to him or to me.

At this point, it's basically time to close up, so I head to the register and start counting out. Fortunately, no one else comes in before it's time to flip the sign over and lock the door. I turn off all the lights and head to Maude's office to grab my stuff. I sling my bag over my shoulder, and with a lightness in my step, I let myself out the back.

Anticipation bubbles inside of me. I haven't seen Storm in days. His schedule is all over the place, and it's tough to find time to be together, what with all the sneaking around. I have to work hard to keep my expression neutral as my mind darts off to what we'll do together. Warmth gathers, low between my hips, as particularly dirty visions invade my thoughts.

I'm so distracted that, for a second, I don't register the voices up ahead.

By the time I do, it's too late.

I round the corner, only a few quick blocks from the garage where I'm supposed to meet Storm, when suddenly I have to pull up short to stop from running headlong into a wall of muscle.

“And where do you think you're going?”

My senses instantly roar to high alert, the beast that's remained locked inside me all my life lashing her tail.

For all the freaking good that's going to do me.

“Just—” I start.

Prince Fury—the eldest of King Zephyr's two sons—shoves me backward.

He's gorgeous, of course. An imposing figure at six and a half feet tall, he's all solid muscle and golden skin. His tousled, dark hair glints red in the setting sun.

If he weren't such a complete and total asshole, I'd almost find him attractive.

Cruelty flashes in his raven black eyes as he looms over me. “Are you talking back to me?”

Flustered, I'm caught between fight, flight or freeze. Not for the first time, I wish that I had claws, only I don't. “Of course not.”

“Oh, leave the little defective reject alone,” his girlfriend, Jasmine, simpers. She turns her hand over to check her nails, showing off exactly how bored she is by my very existence.

“Someone's got to keep her in line.” Fury's friend Sebastian glowers from just behind him.

I glance around wildly, counting four more of Fury's cronies, and another half-dozen of Jasmine's friends.

The entire nest of them is out today, and I curse myself in my head. How could I have gotten so lost in my own thoughts as to have not noticed them? How could I have been so stupid as to even walk this way? Sure, it's the most direct path, but I know full well that this crew likes to hang out on the steps of the town hall.

As if any governing gets done there. It all happens at the mansion on the far end of town where this asshole and his family live.

I swallow hard.

“I’m just trying to get to the library,” I lie. The words roll off my tongue. I’ve practiced them enough times, always ready in case anybody catches me heading toward the garage. I have a book in my bag at all times anyway, so it’s plausible enough.

“Nerd,” Jasmine groans.

Apparently I haven’t had my fill of being stupid today, so I narrow my eyes at her. “I mean, you could try reading a book. Or wait—can you read?”

Her disinterest flips on a dime, and oh shit, why can’t I keep my mouth shut?

“You’ll watch your tone.”

“Or what?” I ask.

Her squad of bitches makes *ooing* sounds at that. Advancing, she puts a hand on Fury’s biceps, and he steps aside.

Now real fear claws at my chest. Fury likes to push me around and remind me that I have to follow his every command, but deep down, I’m pretty sure he’d never really hurt me. His girlfriend, on the other hand?

I take a step back, and then another, but I come up against the brick of the building behind me. Jasmine crowds into me. Her pupils flash from round to vertical slits, her dragon at the surface of her skin. My own hisses, but it’s as useless and ineffective as ever.

She reaches out and grabs my hair.

Tears spring to my eyes at the sting, but I try my best not to let the pain show.

“Now listen here, you *freak*.”

And yeah. Okay, she’s not wrong.

I am a freak. A broken-winged dragon who got dropped here in the Air Kingdom out of nowhere when I was twelve. Awkward and bookish and reeling from my mother running away in the middle of the night. No explanation. No goodbye.

One day I was a beloved daughter. The next, I woke up to my aunt staring down at me and welcoming me to my hellish new existence.

And what an existence it's been.

I didn't fit in. Clearly. My mother may have been an Air Dragon, but she and my father raised me out of suitcases. We traveled every inch of this earth. She worked as a translator and a mediator, trying to help the remaining dragon kingdoms find a kind of peace.

Whatever my father did before he disappeared, I never entirely understood.

But it didn't matter. We were happy. They showed me the world. Taught me every language and every culture. Introduced me to fire dragons and stone dragons, and I got to live in a fantasy where the three kingdoms were, in fact, one.

And then I was here.

And I got to see firsthand exactly how much of a fantasy that was.

Forget air, fire and stone dragons living in peace. I dared to raise my hand in class and question my teacher when she lectured us about the attacks allegedly being carried out by the 'savage' fire dragons in the lands across the sea. To push back against the off-handed, offensive jokes everyone made about the dragons of the stone realm.

To ask what King Zephyr could possibly be thinking, forbidding the dragons of the air realm from displaying any symbols of the other kingdoms.

To cry when my aunt took the only pieces I had left of my mother—of my father—of our time together and our life and travels...

And made me watch them burn.

A long-simmering rage fuels me, making me stupid and bold. “Just because everyone in this backwater town is an ignorant, small-minded—”

The rake of claws against my cheek stops me cold. My eyes go wide in shock as I whip my head up. Jasmine’s sneer has morphed into white hot anger. She’s still human—mostly—but the talons on her fingers flare outward, razor sharp. My heart pounds, my dragon bellowing steam inside my chest.

“Just wait, welp,” she growls.

Sebastian laughs, ugly and mean. “She’d have to be a dragon to be a welp.”

The fire behind my ribs is so hot I can hardly stand it, but it’s trapped inside. Useless as always.

“Maybe we could cut her open,” Jasmine’s friend Bianca suggests. I catch a glimpse of her over Jasmine’s shoulder. Her teeth are showing, and my pulse rate spikes even higher. “See if there’s really a dragon in there or not.”

“Guys,” Fury chides from over to the side. There’s no heat to his warning, though.

A different kind of anger bubbles up within me. A colder one.

The crown prince of the Air Kingdom can barely muster the interest to stop his girlfriend from flaying me open.

As if to remind me exactly how close she is to doing that and more, Jasmine shoves me harder into the wall. She traces her claw down my throat, and I can’t breathe.

“One day, Zephyr will step down,” she reminds me. “Fury will be king, and I’ll be his queen. You think you’ve had it bad this past decade?”

“Um, I wouldn’t exactly call this a picnic,” I manage, but my voice is strangled.

She digs her nail in, drawing blood just above my collar, and I suck in a ragged breath.

Quieter, even more darkly, she hisses, “King Zephyr may have forbidden any harm coming to you. But his protection won’t last forever.”

His protection. I just barely keep in my snort.

The king outlaws any citizen of the realm from doing any irreparable damage to another. The fact that murdering me is off the menu is a happy side-effect, at least from my perspective. But I’m well aware that that’s all it is. King Zephyr isn’t looking out for the welfare of his most downtrodden, vulnerable subjects. He’s just trying to keep temperamental dragons from killing each other off and reducing our numbers.

If I got hurt, he wouldn’t care.

No one would. Except...

Well.

Jasmine draws her claw farther down my sternum. The fabric of my shirt splits open, and tears well up in my eyes. Maybe she’ll keep going. Maybe she’ll shred the thing and leave me naked here in an alley, blood welling up from the line she’s carved into my skin.

It wouldn’t be the first time.

Today, she stops an inch away from the center of my bra, leaving me some scrap of dignity, but her point is made. My shirt is ruined.

And my place at the very bottom of the food chain has been established yet again.

She flicks her nail against my cheek, and I feel droplets of my own blood spattering from the impact. “Run home to Mommy, welp.” One corner of her mouth draws up into a twisted, cruel smile. “Oh, wait, that’s right. You don’t have one.”

My chest wants to cave in. My vision blurs.

Somehow, I keep it together as she takes a step back. Every part of me is shaking.

“Come on.” Jasmine reinserts herself by Fury’s side, and he curls a possessive arm around her. “Let’s go.” She glances at me in disgust. “Something here reeks.”

“Sure thing, babe.” He leans down and kisses her, clearly proud of her cruelty.

I want to be sick.

I stand dead still, glued to the wall as the gaggle of them saunters away. It’s pathetic, standing here after they’ve had their fun tormenting me. My eyes and heart both burn.

What am I supposed to do, though?

And shouldn’t I be used to this by now?

Fury, Jasmine and their band of sycophants have been torturing me since the moment I set foot in this town. It’s fun for them, I guess. They get to assert their dominance and work some sadism out of their systems. I’m easy pickings. An outcast. Defective.

I swab at my face.

How many times have I fantasized about running back to my aunt’s house, packing my bag and just...going? For a second, I indulge the idea. I don’t have a car, but I know where my aunt keeps the keys to hers. I have enough money saved up to leave her a few grand for it; that’s all the rust bucket is worth, anyway. I could put down the windows and drive and drive.

Freedom bubbles up inside me.

There’s always been a tug. This strange instinct, pulling me south and away from this hellhole town. I could follow it. I could find a place beyond the Air Kingdom’s borders. The neutral territories to the south of here are supposedly filled with the outcasts and criminals and rejects of the shifter world, but what do I care? I might fit right in.

Only...

My phone buzzes in my pocket.

I hadn't realized I'd closed my eyes, but I snap them open. I find myself in the deserted alleyway, Fury, Jasmine and the other assholes long gone. A shiver races along my skin, and I reach for the ragged edges of my shirt. I pull them together over my naked cleavage, cursing Jasmine all over again. I actually liked this top.

With my other hand, I pull my phone out. The text from Storm is pointedly short.

Storm: Where r u?

I suck in a deep breath. My thumb shakes as I tap out a reply.

Ember: On my way.

Blanking the screen, I force myself to stand up tall.

The idea of running away from my shitty life as Wynrath Crest's town punching bag is just a daydream. When my mother dumped me here, she told me to stay. Even now, I'm reluctant to disobey her.

I have a home here. Responsibilities. Maude would need someone else to help out with the store. My aunt would probably care if I just up and left; she'd definitely care if I took her car. My cousin Brynn would miss me terribly, and I'd miss her.

And Storm...

Well.

Let's just say that Jasmine isn't the only one who has a dragon prince on her side.

CHAPTER
TWO

STORM

The instant Ember slips in the back door, rage fills my gut. My dragon flares, on the verge of losing his shit. It's only an entire lifetime of practice that allows me to keep him under control.

I can smell the blood.

Holding on tight to my restraint, I set down the exhaust pipe for the '67 Camaro I've been "fixing up" for over a year now. It's not like I was really working on it anyway, what with Ember being on her way.

It's not like I've made much progress on it at all.

Between my dad constantly bossing me around and the vigilance required to keep the people I love safe, I don't have a lot of time for tinkering. At this point, I hold on to the garage more as a meeting spot for me and Ember than as a place to work on the car.

I stalk around the rear bumper of the Camaro and out into the back office. Ember has her back to me as she sets down her bag. Angry as I am, my body can't help but react to finally having her in the same room with me after days without seeing her. She's fucking gorgeous. Slim but curvy in all the right places, with pale skin, her hair hanging in long, black waves to half-way down her spine. Dark blue jeans hug her hips, making me want to put my hands on them and tug her close. Grind my rapidly hardening cock against her ample rear end.

Then she turns around.

My dragon hurls himself at my ribs again, and a growl escapes my throat.

She's a mess. She doesn't use a lot of make-up, but the black stuff around her eyes is smudged. A line of blood runs down the center of her chest. The dark gray, beaded T-shirt she's wearing is torn, and I don't even have time to notice the fact that I can see the tops of her full breasts.

I curl my hands into fists at my sides. “What did they do.”

She shakes her head, but her eyes shine with unshed tears. She’s always been so fucking strong. So intent on keeping her pain inside.

“It’s nothing.”

“Bullshit.” I cross the space to her and curl my hands around her shoulders. I have to stop myself from grabbing her too tightly, from hurting her when all I want to do is keep her safe.

Guilt churns deep in the pit of my stomach.

Hurting her, when all I want to do is keep her safe. That’s basically all I ever seem to do.

The reasons I had for texting her today fly out of my head. I wanted to see her, of course. Needed to touch her and feel her soft body against mine. But I needed to talk to her, too—to warn her.

The only thing I can focus on right now is what my asshole brother and his friends did.

“This is *not* nothing,” I growl.

She swabs at her eyes and lets out a dark ghost of a laugh. “It’s nothing new.”

My heart squeezes. I’ll never understand why everybody in this town seems to love torturing her so much. Can’t they see she’s special?

Or is that exactly why they do it? Ember practically gives off light, she burns so bright. She’s different, though. Ever since she appeared out of nowhere a decade ago or so, she’s stuck out. Part of it was just who she was. Beautiful and strong and worldly in a way that nobody around here could ever hope to be. It was how she acted, too, though. She dared to question people. And for that, she’s still paying the price.

Wrapping my arms around her, I pull her in. I kiss the top of her head and clench my eyes shut tight. “I’m so sorry they do this to you. If I could...”

“You can’t.”

It kills me to hear her say it like that, so matter of fact. Even though we both know it’s the truth.

Ember’s been an outcast since the moment she arrived, and I’ve been drawn to her for exactly that long. I couldn’t let on—at least not publicly. My brother Fury is the Air Dragon King’s heir, and he announced open season on her within days of her showing up. I had to seek her out when no one was around. We met up in the library, when only old Mrs. Grady was around to notice us bonding over books and stories, doing our homework together and just...talking. Even then, I could tell her things I couldn’t share with anyone else. My hopes for the future, my conflicts with my brother and my father. I couldn’t tell her everything, but she knew more about my fears than any other person on this planet.

It started out innocently. Then slowly, a handful of years ago, something between us changed. She started blushing whenever we got close. It wasn’t as if I hadn’t known she was a knock-out, but around the time she should have had her first Emergence, the sight of her sent me over the edge. Even after what happened, her spell on me remained. When my own dragon came to me, the fire of passion became too much to resist.

One night, my possessive instincts—and my hormones—got the best of me. I pressed my mouth to hers. Not only did she let me, but she pulled me in, wrapped her arms and legs around me and tackled me onto the floor. Our clothes melted away beneath the flames of our need. Nothing has ever felt so right as sinking into her for the very first time.

And now here we are. It feels impossible to be separated from her, but I’m captured by my own golden cage.

Fury may be the heir, but I’m right behind him in line for the throne. Our father has expectations.

He also has a temper that puts the Fire Dragons to shame.

Not that anyone would dare to say that to his face.

I hold her tighter, breathing in the scent of her hair. “One day... My brother...”

But it’s useless. How many times have I tried to convince Fury not to take his bullshit out on Ember? I can’t draw too much attention to what she means to me, so I’ve had to couch my language. Argue for the fair treatment of every dragon in the Air Kingdom.

It all falls on unhearing ears.

Ember pulls back. Her eyes are clearer now. “One day, your brother will be king.”

“Fuck.” I wish that she were wrong.

Putting her hand to my cheek, she shines a small, sad smile at me. “Maybe then we can finally just run away together?”

For half a second, the fantasy grips me. Somewhere far away, we could be free. We could find a little place in the mountains and disappear. Live our lives without fear, no need to sneak around or lie. I could kiss her anytime I wanted.

I could do a whole lot more than kissing, too.

Even as I’m tempted to get lost in the idea, reality forces itself onto me.

I have responsibilities here. I can’t keep Ember safe, but there are others who rely on me. I can’t turn my back on them.

“Ember...”

She waves me off, laughing, but I can feel the hurt beneath her facade. “Just kidding.”

She’s not.

“I wish...” Fuck, there are so many things I wish, and not one of them is in my power.

“I know,” she says quietly.

Words barrel their way into my throat. I ache to tell her exactly what she means to me. To explain all the dangers lurking around us. To tell her the truth about why I have to stay.

But I can't.

All I can do...

All I've ever been able to do...

Is take her in my arms.

And try the best I can to show her how I feel.



EMBER

The pain in Storm's eyes breaks my heart. For the thousandth time, I wish he'd tell me what was going on. His family is the worst—obviously. He's shown me glimpses of the terrible burden he bears as the second son of King Zephyr, but he's always stopped at that. Glimpses. Never the full truth.

I want to shake him. Beg him to confide the rest in me. Doesn't he know that I'm his? That he can trust me?

I stare up at him, pleading with my gaze.

Despite the serious nature of the moment, I can't help but be distracted by the sheer presence of this man. He's tall, of course. All the men of the Air Kingdom's royal family are. He has Fury's strength, but less of his bulk and menace. Instead, his gray eyes are warm with kindness. His fair complexion is golden from the sun, his short-cropped hair thick and dark. Hints of stubble line his razor-sharp jaw, and the exposed forearms beneath his athletic T are corded with tight muscle.

How can I feel such longing for him when he's right here? Close enough to touch. And yet still, eternally, so far out of my reach.

I open my mouth, bracing myself to be brushed off yet again.

Before I can get any words out, though, he seizes the opportunity to crush his lips to mine.

Immediately, my mind goes blank. The overwhelming *rightness* of his kiss consumes me, and I'm lost to the feel of him. The hard muscles of his chest beneath my hands, the towering height of him. The heat of his mouth and the taste of his tongue.

I moan, my body going to liquid as he grasps my waist and hauls me up against him. He's hard already, that enormous, thick length pressing into my lower belly and making me wet for him. "Storm," I groan.

“*Ember.*”

He’s lifting me, then. I go so willingly, curling my legs around his waist. The breath is knocked out of me at the press of his cock against me through our clothes. He lets out a noise of his own that’s pure sex, and deep inside, I pulse.

The force of my desire bowls me over every time. Ever since that first moment, right before my dragon should have shown her face. I looked at him, and a gravelly voice deep inside hissed *MINE*. Before everything went to shit, I half imagined he could be my fated mate. The one created for me by the gods to be my other half, but, well... Only a dragon can have a fated mate, and my status remains—ahem—*undetermined*.

After Storm’s dragon Emerged—right on time, naturally—I hoped that things might change, and they did. Sort of. He came to me, his eyes full of desire. But it wasn’t the fire of destiny. He may have claimed my body and my heart that night, but he’s never felt that deep, impossible pull. The possessiveness I imagined I felt remained, but it never grew into the bone-deep knowing that the elders talk about.

Not every dragon finds their fated mate. Not everybody has one, even. Meeting mine at age twelve in this shitty town that my mother abandoned me in would have been too much to ask for.

I still dream of it. I imagine that someday, my inner beast will Emerge, our eyes will meet, and I’ll *feel* it. With both of us transformed, he’ll feel it, too. A fated mate connection is impossible to ignore. Even King Zephyr wouldn’t be able to keep us apart.

A pang squeezes my heart. I grip more tightly to Storm’s shoulders as he sets me down on the workbench in the corner. A tool of some sort jabs into my ass, but I shove it away. I kiss him harder, scrape my teeth against his lip, and he groans.

As it is, I’m no one. Nothing. Barely even a dragon. Prince Fury and his bitch girlfriend and their cronies remind me of my pond scum status every day. King Zephyr would never

allow his son to take a defective reject like me as his mate. Our only option to be together would be to run away.

I swallow my laugh and close my eyes against the threat of tears.

When I suggested doing precisely that a few minutes ago, I was joking. Or at least that was what I told him. In my heart of hearts, it's the furthest thing from a joke imaginable.

He'll never leave, though. He's made that clear. I don't understand his reasons, but I know that they're important to him. And as it stands, we can't be together for real here.

So we're left with this. Stolen moments and secret encounters, and it's nowhere close to enough. But it's what I can have.

So I take it.

Threading my fingers through his thick, dark hair, I clutch him closer to me. He responds in kind. He can't know all the thoughts rampaging through my head, but he seems to feel the same desperation, somehow. The kiss is all teeth and tongues. His muscular chest presses to mine, the heat of him making my nipples go tight and needy. I arch into him and run a hand down his side. I shove the hem of his shirt up and squeeze my legs around him harder at the smooth, hot muscle I find beneath.

"Need you," I gasp. "Please—"

"Anything," he growls, and we both know that that's not true, but we pretend.

He reaches behind his neck, and we break our kiss just long enough for him to pull his shirt off over his head. I scramble at my own ruined top, tossing it on the floor.

He pauses. I follow his gaze to the ugly cut running down the center of my chest.

But I refuse to let him get derailed by that. Jasmine's done way worse to me before. The girls' locker room was a nightmare for me for years.

I tug him back in, kissing him hard and letting my teeth scrape against his tongue. Feeling his bare chest against mine makes the flames inside me flare hotter. Wetness floods my pussy. I grind against him, moaning at the pressure against my swollen clit, but the emptiness within howls.

“Baby,” he says, voice rumbling and low.

He tugs off my bra and flings it aside with the rest. My achy breasts fall free. They’re not huge or anything, but they feel ripe and full—and even better when he cups them in his hot, strong hands.

“Yes,” I groan as he twists my nipples, sending sparks of desire shooting down my spine.

“So sexy.” He kisses me again, needy and sharp. “Love seeing you like this. Love how you feel...”

What he doesn’t say, what he’ll never say, is that he loves *me*.

I bite his lip and reach between us for the waist band of his shorts. I manage to get them untied and push them down over his hips.

I gasp when his thick cock springs free. It’s hard and huge, already leaking at the tip. I wrap my hand around it the best I can, drinking in his sounds of pleasure with the first, long stroke.

From there, it’s a mad scramble. He shoves his shorts the rest of the way down. Getting my jeans and underwear off is a hassle, but we manage, and then I’m there. Naked on a grubby workbench, probably getting splinters in my ass, but I don’t care. I pull him in, and he rubs the fat head of his cock all up and down the length of my cunt before he lines himself up.

“Please,” I beg him. “I need it—need you—”

Need him to block out all the pain. The longing and the petty cruelties. The knowledge that I’ll never fit in and I’ll never be loved and I’ll never be whole.

He shoves inside in one hard thrust.

I howl, tipping my head back. Sometimes, we meet in riskier locations where I have to keep the noises he rips from my body inside, but not here. Here, I can let them all out.

And it's a good thing, too. I'm so slick with need that he glides in easily. He still growls as he bottoms out. "Fuck, Ember. So tight. Feel so good."

Not as good as he feels to me. I'm torn apart by the size of him, filling me up. I tilt my hips, grinding my clit into his pubic bone and crying out again at the waves of pleasure building inside me.

It's always like this. Too much and not enough, a desperate rush to try to get as much of each other as we can before we're torn apart again.

Just once, what I wouldn't give to be able to go slow. To make love over and over, and to sleep in his bed all night long.

As he starts to move, I feel insatiable. Like I could take him half a dozen times and still be hungry for more. I squeeze him, and he thrusts in faster. He hits that delicious spot inside of me, and I rake my hands down his back, probably leaving marks.

Orgasm crashes over me out of nowhere. He fucks me through it, moaning as I squeeze him, but he doesn't stop. The workbench I'm perched on slams into the wall with the force of his pounding, and I never want it to end. My first peak crests, and another one begins to gather.

"So good," he groans, "fuck, can't believe how it feels when you come on my cock."

"Make me do it again, then," I taunt him.

"Shit." He's never been one to shy away from a challenge. He manages to quicken his pace, fucking me fast and raw and so hard it hurts, but it also feels so *good*.

"Yeah." I cling to his shoulders, staring up at him, so in love I can hardly handle it. "Yeah, that's it—that's—"

"Ember—" He slams his mouth to mine again and pounds into me, over and over. Something crashes off the workbench,

and I don't care. I don't care about anything outside this room. I'm untouchable. Perfect and ecstatic and wanted.

He slips a hand between us. His big thumb shoves into my clit, and I'm lost. A second orgasm sweeps me away, and this time he follows. His cock kicks inside me. Hot seed shoots into my spasming pussy, and I squeeze down, wanting it all. A dragon can't get pregnant before their Emergence; we can't spread disease. It still feels illicit and wanton. I take his come and savor the heat of it, filling me up. I dare to imagine that someday he could be filling me in a different way. Making me pregnant with his whelps. That we could be happy together.

Forever.

"Storm," I whimper, hopeless, even as I'm rocking with aftershocks and clenching my pussy around his cock.

"Fuck, Ember..."

He thrusts into me a couple more times, his muscles straining with the force of his climax. When it's done, he slumps over me, spent. I wrap my shaking arms around him and hold him close.

Of course, we never get to linger in the afterglow.

Returning to himself, he drags his mouth to mine. I cling to him, trying to prolong the slow, soft kiss. Too soon, though, he pulls away. I whine at the sudden emptiness, closing my legs the best I can in a futile effort to keep his come from leaking out of me.

"Sorry," he mutters, reaching over my head to grab a clean rag off the pile of them stacked on a shelf. They're soft; he switched out the rough old shop towels he used to use for these shortly after we started meeting here, and I don't think it's a coincidence.

"Don't be," I tell him.

I knew what I was getting into coming over here. I knew what I was getting into, the first time I let him touch his lips to mine.

Dropping my gaze, I clean myself up and start pulling on my clothes. He does the same. We're silent for long moments.

He clears his throat. "I thought you should know. The Oracle set the date for the next Emergence."

All at once, a cold sweat breaks out on the back of my neck. I jerk my head up to find him staring at me, his expression somehow both hard and soft at the same time. Sympathy colors those gray eyes of his, but there's a firmness to the set of his jaw.

"When?" My heart pounds against the inside of my chest, and my pulse races, but I try to stay calm.

"Two weeks. The first day of the Shadow Moon."

Of course. The Oracle always has had a flair for the dramatic.

The Shadow Moon is the darkest day of the cycle. Normal people just call it a new moon, but whatever. Dragons have been telling their young for ages that the bright crescent in the sky disappears every month because it's been eaten by the Shadow Dragons.

I can't wait to hear King Zephyr repeat it as he invites the young shifters of the Air Kingdom to step forward and bring forth their beasts.

"Great," I say, my voice tight as I pull on the tattered remnants of my shirt. "Can't wait."

Turning my back to Storm, I reach for my bag and open it up to look for a couple of safety pins. My aunt is going to give me so much shit for coming home with ruined clothes again as it is. The least I can do is try to walk in the door looking like slightly less of a mess.

Storm doesn't let it drop, of course. "You can't do this again, Ember."

"Pretty sure I can."

I've read the old texts time and time again. Any member of the kingdom who has yet to have their dragon Emerge is free

to step into the flames. It doesn't matter if it's their second, third, fourth, or—yes, even fifth try.

Even as I say it, I subconsciously rub at my palm. The rough, mottled skin there is one of the only scars I bear that isn't from Fury or Jasmine or one of my other torturers. It's one that I inflicted on myself.

At the last Emergence, I was so determined to call my dragon into my body. I stood in line with all the others. I didn't let it bother me that I was older than them. That the onlookers were jeering, just waiting for me to fail again.

That I couldn't even so much as glance in Storm's direction, because it would destroy me to see the pity in his eyes.

King Zephyr himself scowled at me. Then he looked away. He gave his speech and shifted. His black, horned dragon rose into the air on a gust of wind called into being by his magic. He opened his mouth and breathed fire onto the line of tinder.

I sucked in a breath and blinked the smoke from my eyes. I walked forward.

The flames consumed me, and deep inside, there was a rustling of wings. I felt the hiss and the spark. I reached out for anything to hold on to. Around me, newly conjured dragons roared, until the air was rent with the beating of their wings, and still I remained, calling my own beast until I was hoarse, my fingers stiff and aching. The magical blaze couldn't hurt me, but it felt like it would sear me through. The stake I clung to turned red hot, my skin seared, and still I refused to move.

Finally, the Oracle herself took pity on me. She unleashed a torrent of wind that snuffed the fire out, leaving me there, covered in ash and destroyed in spirit.

What would my mother have thought of me? Would she have turned away like everyone else?

I dropped to my knees and sobbed.

“Ember...” Storm puts a hand on my shoulder.

I pull away. Flicking my gaze to his, I snap, “Don't.”

We may share these precious moments together. He may fill a hole in my soul; deep inside I yearn for him and for the shred of completion I feel when I get to be with him.

But he can't be *with me* with me.

So he doesn't get to tell me what to do.

"I've felt her stirring," I tell him. Just the occasional hint. That warmth between my shoulder blades. That fire in my gut when the bullies dare to get too close.

His voice is low and soft. "That's what you said the last three times."

"Because it was true." The stirring is stronger now. I know it is. This is my chance.

"But what if it's not?"

He doesn't shout it. I almost wish he would. If he got mad, I could fight him. Instead, he just sounds...sad. And that makes this whole ordeal so much worse.

Sucking in a breath, I summon my resolve.

"I'm going to find her," I vow. My dragon is a part of me. I can't give up on her. I won't.

Because if I did...

I'd have to give up on myself.

CHAPTER
THREE

EMBER

“You’re late.”

I bite my tongue and put all my willpower into closing the front door of my aunt’s house without slamming it. I toe off my shoes and grip the strap of my bag, hoping maybe I can hide the state of my clothes if I hold my hand over my chest just so. “Sorry,” I call out.

I head up the half flight of stairs and into the kitchen, where my aunt Helena is waiting for me, her arms crossed.

Aunt Helena isn’t an ugly woman, but she isn’t an attractive one, either. If it weren’t for the pictures of her with my mother, taken when they were children, I’d hardly know they were related. They have the same nose, I guess, and more or less the same pale coloring. My aunt’s dark eyes have a hardness to them that mother’s never did, though. She’s bonier, too, her cheeks sunken in and her hands practically skeletal. Her once black hair has gone salt and pepper. Sometimes I wonder if that’s how my mom’s dark locks would look now, too.

Too bad I’ll never know.

Aunt Helena takes one look at me, and a scowl twists her mouth. “What kind of trouble have you gotten yourself into this time?” she asks, her voice harsh.

So much for keeping my altercation with Jasmine to myself.

“Nothing.” I hate to lie, but she never listens to the truth.

She scoffs and turns toward the counter. “Go clean up, and take the trash out while you’re at it. Then you can come back here and make yourself useful for once.”

I curl my fingernails into my scarred palm. “Yes, ma’am.”

Aunt Helena’s never been outright cruel to me. I’ve never had to live in a cupboard under the stairs, and I’ve never feared for my physical safety.

That's about as much as I can say, though. My mother and father were warm and kind. They gave me snuggles and kissed my boo-boos, and they told me they loved me so much that I thought it was annoying.

If only I'd known then what I know now.

My aunt has made it entirely too clear that she has no affection for me. I'm little more than a burden to her, and I had damn well better earn my keep.

Once I'm finished with my degree, I'll be out of here. I'll be able to get a real job—maybe online, or maybe elsewhere. Surely King Zephyr won't protest if I petition him to leave. I'm an outcast here. The Air Kingdom may miss having their favorite punching bag around, but otherwise, they'll be happy to have me gone.

I'm not afraid of hard work. But having my aunt always bossing me around, trying to extract some sort of penance from me for the crime of simply existing has ground me down so low. I hate having to rely on her. The truth is that, for now at least, I can't afford to get a place of my own. So I'm stuck.

Gritting my teeth, I slip past her and grab the garbage. It's overflowing, and it stinks to high heaven. It should have been taken out hours ago, but clearly Aunt Helena can't be bothered with such menial tasks. She bumps into me as I'm trying to tie the bag, jostling me so that a gross glob of something brown and smelly tips out and onto my shoe.

She *tsks* me. "Clumsy. Clean that up."

She doesn't bother to apologize, and I'm not naive enough to think it was an accident. I taste blood as I sink my teeth into the inside of my cheek. I'm not going to rise to the bait or talk back.

All I want is to go to my room. Maybe scream into my pillow for a while, then get started on the paper I have to write for my communications class.

For now, I wipe the muck off my shoe. It leaves a stain, and I blink back the stinging sensation at the corner of my

eyes. That's yet another piece of clothing spoiled today. I swab the floor, too, just to prevent an argument about how lazy I am.

I manage to escape after that. Flies swarm the trash bin outside, and I have to hold my nose as I add the new bag to the pile. I return to the house via the back door after that and slip upstairs. I make it almost all the way to my room before I hear footsteps in the hall.

“What on earth happened to you?”

The voice this time is the opposite of harsh. I turn to find my cousin Brynn standing just outside her door. Real concern colors her expression, her blue eyes wide and her brows high.

Brynn's always been my best friend. Well, ever since I landed in this godawful town, in any case. We're about the same age, and despite our mothers' differences, both in appearance and temperament, we're family. Sure, I've occasionally resented her prized place in the household. Aunt Helena treats me like a servant, but she treats Brynn like a princess. Brynn deserves it, though. She's kind and thoughtful and always happy to help.

At the softness in her gaze, I deflate. “Just the usual,” I promise her, rolling my eyes, as if being pushed around by the town's elites on a daily basis is no big deal.

Brynn grimaces. “Jasmine?”

“Who else?”

Brynn is basically the only other person besides Storm who knows the extent of the bullying I'm dealing with. “One of these days...”

I shake my head hard. “I won't have you getting involved.”

Somehow, despite being my family and my friend, Brynn has managed to avoid becoming an outcast like me. I intend to keep it that way.

Frowning, Brynn takes me in. I instinctively tug at the ripped neckline of my shirt. The safety pins aren't doing much

to keep it closed, and there's nothing I can do to hide the gross stain on my shoe.

Brynn lets out a sigh. "Come on, then. Let's get you cleaned up."

I know better than to protest. I let Brynn lead me to the bathroom, where she heads to the medicine cabinet for the alcohol and bandages. Shame burns in my chest. She's helped me out after scrapes with Jasmine and Fury and their friends enough times that this is routine.

I drop my bag and tug off the tattered remains of my shirt. Brynn winces as the slash down my sternum is revealed. "Ouch."

"No kidding."

It hurts even worse when she swabs it with the alcohol. Despite my dragon's stubborn refusal to Emerge, I am still a shifter. I'll heal up fast enough. For now, though, we bandage the cut the best we can.

"Leave your shoes here," she tells me. "I'll see what I can do."

"You don't have to—"

Brynn casts her gaze skyward. "I heard my mom bossing you around down there." She's firm when she reminds me, "This is one thing I can do to help."

I bite my lower lip but nod. It's hard to accept her taking care of me, but I know it's something she does out of love. "Okay. But seriously, I can handle it."

She smiles. "I never doubted that for a second."

With that, she shoos me to my room. Safe inside, I head to my dresser. It's slim pickings, both because of my run-ins with the mean dragon squad and because nearly everything I own is second hand, and usually a little worse for the wear by the time it gets to me. As I pull on an old band T-shirt, I count my pennies in my head. I've been working hard for years to try to save up enough to get my own place. It's been tough; working for Maude at the shop doesn't exactly pay a lot. It does come

with a tiny employee discount, though. I'm reminded of the cute skirt I saw on the rack today. I still don't think I can justify the expense, but maybe I'll luck out and find a few other, more practical items in the used clothing section tomorrow.

Once I'm dressed again, I head downstairs, where Aunt Helena barks at me to get to the kitchen already. While I make dinner, she puts her feet up and pulls out one of her mystery novels. Brynn joins us and silently takes her place by my side, helping to peel carrots. I shoot her a silent glance of thanks.

Eventually, my aunt looks up, and she glowers. "Don't you have better things to be doing?" she asks her daughter.

"Better than hanging out with my favorite cousin?" Brynn replies, all sweetness and light. With her back to her mother, she catches my gaze and rolls her eyes.

"I am your only cousin," I remind her.

"What I said is still true."

Together, we get dinner finished in no time. Brynn sets the table while I serve up. Aunt Helena grumbles as she puts away her novel and takes a bite of the balsamic chicken we made. She grunts, unable to find fault in it. That's about the best compliment I'm going to get, so I take it.

As we eat, Brynn makes pleasant small talk about her day. Aunt Helena complains about her job at the bank, then moves on to gossip. It all floats over my head at first, until she stabs at a chunk of glazed carrot and holds it in front of her face. Her brows rise as she looks to Brynn. "I hear that Ortez boy down the road is starting to show signs."

Jimmy Ortez is hardly a boy. He's only a couple of years younger than me and Brynn. He's also become a solid wall of muscle over the course of the past few months—a fact that has definitely not escaped my cousin's attention.

Brynn perks up, then visibly tamps down her reaction. Her crush on Jimmy is deeply embarrassing. "Already?"

Aunt Helena pops the carrot into her mouth and chews slowly. Wiping her lips, she nods. "Practically bit off Mary's

head the other night. She said she saw it in his eyes.”

My stomach does a little dip.

“Well, I suppose we’ll find out at the next Emergence,” Brynn says coolly. Wincing, she darts her gaze to me. “Sorry.”

I don’t know what’s worse. Talking about the upcoming Emergence or how Brynn always feels like she has to protect my feelings around it. I wave her off. “It’s fine.” I push the last little bit of rice around my plate, glancing between Brynn and my aunt. “Actually...” I should probably keep this to myself, but it’s not like they’re not going to find out tomorrow anyway. We had might as well have our fight about the fact that I’m going to try to summon my dragon again now. I curl my fingers tighter around my fork. “I heard a rumor it’s coming up soon.”

“Oh?” My aunt tries not to sound too interested, but she does love rumors.

“Yup. Next Shadow Moon.”

Pinching her brows together, she frowns. “Asking for trouble, that is.”

She’s not wrong. I half think that’s the point, though. King Zephyr’s rousing speeches are always at their best when he’s fear-mongering. Who cares that the Shadow Dragons haven’t been heard from in over a decade? Despite their disappearance, it’s still easier to rile up public sentiment against the scary boogeyman of the dragon world than against the other clans we were once allied with. Not that he hasn’t done a damn good job of that, too.

“We haven’t had an Emergence during a Shadow Moon in ages,” Brynn muses. Stars shine in her eyes. “I bet it’ll be incredible—all those new-born dragons soaring through the darkness.”

My heart twists. The night of my first Emergence, the moon was brilliant and full. Even as I sank to my knees, my bones aching and the fire searing me through, I stared up at the sky as the others of my kind blazed their way into the heavens, bright light glinting off their rippling hides.

While I was left there. Broken and alone.

Aunt Helena stabs at a piece of chicken too hard, her fork scraping against the porcelain plate. “Well, the festival had better be well lit, is all I’ll say.”

Every Emergence, the town comes together to throw a giant party. Dragons from all across the Air Kingdom come to enjoy it, celebrating the night their young find their wings and take flight.

“I’m sure it will.” Brynn’s still got that starry look in her eyes. “Lanterns and fairy lights everywhere. It’ll be so romantic.”

I take a drink to stifle my laughter. Fingers crossed she can find some time to enjoy that romantic atmosphere with Jimmy Ortez.

While me? Well. Maybe Storm and I can sneak away together at some point. Otherwise, it’ll be another fun night of pretending we hardly even know each other.

“We’ll have to go into town and find you something special for it,” Aunt Helena tells Brynn, her expression softening. Not even the harshest harpy can stay cynical in the face of Brynn’s sunniness. Believe me, I’ve tried.

“Ooh.” Brynn claps her hands. “Can we?”

“Of course.”

Brynn shifts her gaze to me. “We’ll have to pick out a new dress for Ember, too.”

I blink, nearly dropping my glass I’m so surprised to have the focus back on me. “Um...”

Brynn smiles. “You’re going to be flying, aren’t you?”

Spontaneous dampness floods my eyes. My skin prickles.

I flash back to Storm begging me not to try again. I was all geared up for a fight here at home, too.

But no. After all this time—after all my failures...my cousin still believes in me. So I’m going to keep believing in me, too.

My heart swells. “Damn right I am.”

CHAPTER
FOUR

EMBER

“You know,” I say, running my hand along the silky black fabric of a particularly cute dress I’ve been eying. “In the Fire Kingdom, they hold their Emergence Ceremony over the lava fields.”

Over on the other side of the rounder, Brynn laughs. “Well, there’s some motivation for you.”

My aunt Helena mimes spitting on the floor, just at the name of the dragon clan across the sea. “Savage beasts.”

I huff out a sigh. “Oh, please.” This is an argument I have no desire to revisit, but apparently I can’t help myself. “As if we aren’t descended from them.”

Everybody is, if you go back far enough in the family tree. Once upon a time, dragons made a pointed effort to interbreed. Fated mates were found among the other clans more often than not, leading many to believe that the gods intended us all to be mixed. The legend of a descendant of all four dragon kingdoms bringing light to Shadow had parents working overtime to breed a whelp who might win the Shadow War.

To hear my mother tell of it, our family actually managed to achieve it. She claimed to have the blood of all four clans running through her veins.

If she was right, then my aunt does, too. Try telling her that, though.

Helena hisses, looking around to make sure no one overheard me pointing out the uncomfortable truth about our heritage. “We can’t be held accountable for what our ancestors did a century ago.”

“Really? I thought holding grudges was what dragons did best.”

My aunt goes a little red in the face. She lowers her voice even further, her eyes narrowing to slits. “Believe me, if it

were, I never would have taken you in.” She shakes her head. “Not after what your mother did to me.”

She pulls away, and for the first time in years, I’m tempted to reach out and draw her back in. I knew she and my mom had some bad blood between them. Helena disagreed with my mom’s decision to leave Wynrath Crest. She sure as hell disagreed with her choice of mates. But the vehemence with which she’s speaking now is different. I want to know more.

She stalks off before I can ask, though, and Brynn comes around, clearly unaware of the bombshell my aunt just dropped. Her eyes light up when she catches sight of the dress I was admiring.

“Ooh!” She pulls the hanger off the rack and holds it up against me. “This would be perfect!”

She steps a little bit out of the way, and I glance past her to find a mirror hung directly across from me on the wall. Warmth rises in my chest.

She’s right. The dress would be perfect. It’s knee length, sleeveless, with a cinched waist and pleats, made from a gorgeous fabric with just the right amount shine. Black on top, its hue shifts in a stunning ombre effect to a deep red skirt.

It’s also way, way out of my price range.

“I don’t know...”

“Just try it on,” Brynn urges.

I waver, tempted. Oh, what the hell. I take it from her and turn to look for the fitting room.

What I find instead is freaking Jasmine.

She’s standing right behind me, her hand wrapped around an iced coffee cup. She takes a sip from the straw and sneers. “I didn’t know they let people bring their dogs in here.”

My face burns with humiliation, but as usual, the fire inside me flares. “Well, they must, or a bitch like you wouldn’t be allowed in, either.”

Sebastian steps out from behind a pillar, his eyes wide with mock shock. “Oooh, burn.”

I glance around and spot a few more of their friends beside him. It’s not as big of an entourage as the would-be queen of the Air Kingdom usually has following around behind her, but still enough that I’ll be in trouble if this gets out of hand.

Which it definitely seems like it might.

“Now listen, you little shit—” Jasmine takes a step closer, anger rising to her surface. I can almost smell the smoke of her dragon breathing into her lungs.

I take a step forward, too, gripping the hanger of the dress tight enough to hurt my palms. Other than my aunt being xenophobic and weird, it had been a nice day out. It’s not that often that I get included in family outings, but Brynn insisted. I’d been having a good time.

But the elites of this town can’t let me have a single moment to myself, can they?

I’m ready to tell Jasmine off in no uncertain terms.

Then the bell over the door rings. In walks Fury and a few other of their friends, and fine. Whatever. I was already outnumbered. It’s not like it’s going to make a big difference, adding a few more assholes to the mix.

Or so I think, until a familiar frame darkens the door. My breathing stops as that unmistakable face comes into view. Those dark eyes and dark hair and chiseled jaw.

Shit.

Storm’s gaze meets mine across the length of the shop. My heart takes off, the same way it always does when he’s near. But a deep pit of dread opens up just below it.

Storm and Fury are brothers, and he’s never tried to hide the fact that sometimes they hang out. It’s been ages since I ran into them all together, though.

An impossible hope forms behind my ribs. Maybe Storm will step in. He could intervene and tell Jasmine and Fury to lay off. Maybe they’d even listen.

He darts his gaze around the store, spotting Sebastian and the rest of their friends. His jaw hardens when he catches sight of Jasmine, getting ready to square off against me.

But then he looks to me again. Any hope I might have harbored pops like a balloon, leaving me deflated and sinking. An apology smolders in his black eyes.

He can't do anything to help. Not without exposing himself to the same ridicule. I might be able to take it, but the stakes are higher for a prince. He has too much to lose.

A part of me wants to curl up and die, but I force myself to return my attention to the bitch in front of me. Cruelty sparks in her eyes. She always has been a sadist.

Instinctively, I put my hand to my heart.

The line she scratched into my chest the other day hasn't quite healed. The broken skin burns, but not from the memory of the pain.

It's from the memory of Storm putting his lips to my breast. Looking at the wound and cursing his friends and promising to try to talk some sense into them.

But he's powerless. Trapped.

Just like me.

Refusing to look at him again, I focus my gaze squarely on Jasmine. "Look, I'm just here try on a dress for the Emergence ___"

Too late, it hits me. I've given too much away.

"The Emergence?" Jasmine cackles. She cranes her neck to Fury, who's come to join her at her side. "Did you hear that? The reject is going to the Emergence again."

Fury's laugh is even darker. "You haven't embarrassed yourself enough?"

Behind them both, Storm is a tightly coiled ball of rage, but they don't know it.

"Apparently not," I retort, my bluster going into overdrive.

Fury brushes past Jasmine. He looms over me, and I swallow hard, trying my best not to give him the satisfaction of seeing me cower. “Watch your tone,” he warns.

Sarcastic rejoinders rise to my lips, but before I can get any of them out, he leans in closer.

“Or we may have to watch it for you,” he growls. “King Zephyr’s had his eye on you, you know.”

An involuntary shiver runs down my spine. “I am pretty hard to look away from.”

His nostrils flare, and I’m pretty sure he’s stopping himself from slapping me.

“You’re an embarrassment to the entire kingdom,” he spits. “You don’t belong. You never have. And if you want to prove to everyone what a worthless reject you are again and again —”

“*Enough.*”

Fury and I both whip our heads around. Pride and relief twine together inside me. Of all the people to speak up in this encounter, the least likely was sweet, kind, quiet Brynn.

But here she is. She swoops in and puts her hands on her hips. “Ember belongs here just as much as anyone else.”

“She’s an outsider,” Jasmine taunts.

“She’s one of *us.*” Brynn’s dragon is usually as shy and quiet as she is, but when the beast is provoked, she can be as protective as the most fearsome in our clan. “We took her in. She’s of our blood.”

“Half,” Fury growls.

Somehow, I find my voice. “Which makes me twice as good as the rest of you.”

Brynn elbows me in the side, but she doesn’t lose her focus. She opens her mouth to give Fury and Jasmine an even bigger piece of her mind.

Before she can, though, Storm interrupts. Quiet and dangerous, he says, “This isn’t the time. Or the place.”

I glance around. He's right. The shop is bustling, and we've attracted more than our fair share of attention. Fortunately, the only folks close enough to hear are dragons. Lord knows what a human would make of this all.

That said, a few of those dragon shifters have their cameras out. It's not every day you get to see the two princes of the Air Kingdom putting a couple of peons in their place. It's even rarer to see those peons talk back.

Undeterred, Jasmine snaps, "We do what we want, when we want."

But Fury sees the same situation I do. He puts a hand on Jasmine's arm, silently telling her to shut the hell up. Returning his attention to me and Brynn, he narrows his eyes. "Think twice before you make a fool of yourself at the Emergence." His gaze focuses intently on me. "*Again.*"

I keep my voice in check, but in my heart, I'm undeterred. "All I'm thinking about is the look on your face when I show you all."

My dragon may be in hiding, but she's as fierce as any other. The day she shows her face will be the day I prove myself to everyone who's tormented me these past dozen years.

It has to be this time. It just has to.

Fury raises his brows. Ominously, he tells me, "Fail or succeed. It doesn't matter to me. But make no mistake—the king won't suffer you bringing shame on the Air Realm a sixth time."

The warning in his tone takes me aback. "What—"

The rules are clear. Any member of the Air Dragon Kingdom who's yet to Emerge can face the flames to bring forth the beast within. While no one's ever had to try as many times as I have, the ancient texts don't specify a limit.

"The Air Kingdom has no room for broken dragons," Fury growls. "Fail again, and you can find another kingdom to bring your shame to."

My eyes fly wide. He wouldn't. The king—

He couldn't.

Unable to help myself, I look to Storm for a denial. But all I see is the harsh truth.

He did try to warn me.

If I subject myself to the trial again... If my dragon still refuses to Emerge...

I won't be a member of the Air Dragon Kingdom anymore. I'll be banished.

I'll never see Storm or Brynn again.

My heart cracks, but I refuse to let the fear inside me show. The idea of letting an Emergence pass me by and *not* trying to bring forth my dragon is absurd. I can't turn my back on my dragon.

I can't admit that I'm broken. Not after everything this town has put me through.

Exhaling hard, I stand up tall. "Well, then. I guess I'll just have to make sure that I don't fail."

Jasmine laughs out right.

Fury simply sneers. "Good luck with that."

With that, he tips his head toward the door. Again, I glance at Storm. Regret and fear swirl in his eyes. For a long moment, our gazes hold. I don't know what I'm waiting for. Some kind of acknowledgment. Some kind of defense.

He looks away, and my lungs constrict.

It's not until they're all gone that I can suck in a full breath.

"Assholes," Brynn mutters.

Seriously.

To my surprise, my hand is still clenched around the hanger of the dress.

The beautiful, amazing, perfect, way-too-expensive dress.

Well, fuck it. I turn toward the register.

If the Emergence is going to be my last stand, then at least I'm going to face it looking fabulous.



LATE THAT NIGHT, long after I should be in bed, my phone chirps. I glance at the screen.

Storm: Sorry. Wish there was more I could do.

My vision fogs, but I blink the dampness away.

Ember: Yeah. Me, too.

CHAPTER
FIVE

STORM

The morning of the Emergence, I wake with an itch under my skin. My dragon twists behind my sternum, as restless as I am. I grumble when I catch sight of the clock. It's almost nine. Considering that I slept like shit, I shouldn't be surprised to be up so late, but it still makes me feel even more unbalanced.

Throwing off the covers, I pad to the window and push back the curtains.

A heavy fog hangs over the world. The Oracle promised a clear night for the newly Emerged dragons to take flight, but I don't feel any easier for her assurances—or her magic.

Letting the curtains fall closed, I turn back to my room. It's huge, by anyone's standards. Probably bigger than some of the houses on the outskirts of town. Decorating it probably cost as much, too. I told my father's people I didn't care, I just wanted it to be comfortable. They swooped in while I was out one day and re-did the place in sleek, contemporary furnishings. Now it's all white walls with bright green and navy accents. Dark teak wood and polished chrome.

Heaving out a sigh, I scrub my hands through my hair. Every luxury imaginable is at my fingertips.

So why do I feel as if my life is slipping through them?

Over on my night stand, my phone buzzes.

My heart leaps for a second, impossible hope taunting me as my gaze darts to the lit-up screen. I've barely heard from Ember for the past two weeks. I've touched in with her a couple of times, but I haven't been able to sneak away for a rendezvous, and I'm too paranoid to put everything I want to say to her in text.

My heart constricts as I cross the room. The last time I saw her was in that stupid boutique when Fury dragged me along to go shopping with his friends. I hate those assholes, but I

have to play my part. Pretend to get along with the elites of this town. It's my only way of holding onto what little power I have. If Fury suspected where my allegiances really lay, he'd cut me out of the inner circle. I can't speak for my people—can't protect the ones I love—can't do anything to curb my father's most tyrannical impulses. Not from the other side of a slammed door.

I've learned that much the hard way already.

And yet...

I nearly threw it all away that day. Ember's look of betrayal is burned into the backs of my eyes. The worst part is that she wasn't even shocked by my failure to defend her. She was just fucking *resigned*.

And then when Fury threatened her... When he told her she faced exile if she dared to stand for the flames again and failed...

My blood boils even now. The useless, impotent rage wants to burn me to ash. I need to talk to her. I need to convince her to stay away from the Emergence. She may be forsaking the chance to summon her dragon, but she'd at least have a place here. A home.

The thought of her being banished... Of losing her, when she's the only thing that makes my life bearable in this bullshit town...

Pulling my phone off its charger, I flick open the message. My hopes are crushed as quickly as they'd appeared.

Fury: Dining room. Now.

"Good morning to you, too," I mutter, setting the phone back down. It's bad enough that the message isn't from Ember. My brother doesn't have to be such a dick of a communicator, too.

Just as a fuck you to my brother, I'm tempted to climb back into bed. I'm the opposite of sleepy, though. A run might help clear my head. A trip into the canyon to let my dragon stretch his wings would help more. No way I can sneak out of the mansion without somebody noticing, though.

My phone lights up again.

Fury: Seriously. Dad's here.

Shit. All thoughts of brushing off my brother flee my head.

Our father is a constant presence in our lives. He summons us into his office or his study on a whim. He has his talons in so many pies, they're honestly hard to keep track of. Some dragons hoard gold. He hoards power and influence. In his dealings both within our realm and with the Fire and Stone Kingdoms, he sends us as his emissaries.

What he doesn't do is just randomly show up for breakfast.

Another message comes through.

Fury: And he's not alone.

That makes me both more and less worried. Maybe this is just another pointless political meeting. There's something about Fury's urgency that says there's more going on than Dad dragging one of his economic advisors to brunch, though.

I get dressed in a hurry, chucking my pajama pants for a pair of well-fitting jeans and an ice blue, button-down shirt that Ember told me brings out my eyes. A quick tousle of my hair and an expensive watch strapped to my wrist and I'm out the door.

Downstairs, a few people from the house staff shoot me glances that are a mix of caution and sympathy. That really makes me feel great. I jog the last few steps to the formal dining room and throw the doors open. The cavernous space is set up as elegantly as ever, with the good china out and the crystal chandelier overhead blazing.

But I can't concentrate on the linens. My father has taken his place at the head of the table, and in any other family, you'd think it was a normal morning.

Only nothing is normal. My father is King Zephyr of the Air Kingdom.

And beside him...

All the air leaves my lungs.

Beside him is a face I haven't seen in years.

She's as beautiful as ever, with the same gray eyes and golden hair. Unlike the last time I saw her, her pale complexion has some color in it. Her cheeks aren't so hollow, the circles under her eyes so pronounced.

"Aria," I manage to force out.

Her gaze meets mine, and I flash back to when we were kids. When I'd sit by her bedside and read to her for hours. We'd tell each other stories about what our lives would be like someday.

Little did we know.

"Brother," she says. Her voice is deeper.

It's also strained.

My phone buzzes in my pocket. I don't dare pull it out, but I glance at my watch to see the preview of the message.

Fury: You can't protect her.

I jerk my head up. Fury's seated at our father's right hand. He shifts his weight, placing his phone on the table beside him. Pretending he wasn't just texting me some bullshit warning under the table.

"Ah, Storm," our father says, either oblivious or indifferent. In the end, it doesn't really matter. He gestures at the empty seat beside my sister's. "Join us."

I grind my teeth so hard they hurt.

It's not like I have a lot of choice in the matter.

I don't have a lot of choice about anything, it seems.

Except one. Years ago, I failed to protect my sister. Since then, I've lived with the regret until it burned a hole in my chest.

Today? I don't care what my brother says. I don't care what it may cost me.

I won't allow myself to fail her again.

2

EMBER

“Helena! Helena, hold up.”

I look over to find one of my aunt’s friends calling out to us from across the festival fairgrounds.

I groan as Aunt Helena changes course immediately to join up with her. I pull at Brynn’s hand, catching her eye and gesturing toward the funnel cake stand up ahead. But Brynn shakes her head, following her mom, which leaves me with little choice but to follow her, too. We grind to a halt some ten feet inside the gates, and I roll my eyes so hard I see the inside of my skull.

At my obvious impatience, Brynn chuckles and squeezes my hand. “Be nice.”

I am being nice. Or at least I was, the first three times we got side-tracked.

As one, my aunt and her friend ask each other, “Have you heard?”

“Literally everyone’s heard,” I mutter under my breath. This time, Brynn jabs me with her elbow.

And okay, fine, maybe I’m being a little crankier than is necessary. Considering what everybody’s gossiping about, though, I think I’m acting positively cheerful.

“Princess Aria,” my aunt’s friend whispers, her eyes wide.

Aunt Helena nods like a bobblehead. “Back here after all this time.”

Yup. Nothing like finding out about what’s going on in your gentleman caller’s personal life than through your shrew of an aunt’s rumor mill.

Is Storm even my gentleman caller anymore? Ever since that day at the boutique, I’ve been resisting the urge to reach out. He didn’t have any choice that day. He couldn’t step in

and protect me without risking exposing our relationship. I didn't expect him to.

I deserve more than some crappy apology text, though. I deserve to be held and consoled. I deserve for him to give a shit about the fact that I might be getting kicked out of the Air Kingdom tonight.

I deserve to be told about the most basic aspects of his personal and family life.

Sighing, I scrub a hand across my eyes. That last part isn't fair. By all accounts—and wow, have I heard a lot of accounts today—Storm's sister showed up out of the blue this morning, smuggled into the royal mansion before dawn. Where she was before that is anyone's guess.

“I heard she was in rehab,” my aunt says, scandalized.

The official story was that she'd been at a mystical sanctuary, working with a team of sorcerers to restore her health after a mysterious childhood ailment left her bedridden. I never really thought to question the king's word on it. Why would I? She'd disappeared shortly before I arrived, and I had bigger things to worry about at the time.

Storm never said anything to contradict the official narrative. Honestly, he never really said much of anything at all. The handful of times he brought up his sister, it was while recounting stories from his early years. Her name always brought a smile to his lips. But dark clouds would fill his eyes moments later. When I prodded him about it, he changed the subject, and I never felt like I was in any position to press. Whatever had happened, it was clearly painful. It was also firmly in the past.

Until now.

As Helena and her buddy finish up their conversation, I cross my arms over my chest. It irks me that I don't have any better information than the local gossipmongers.

It also irks the hell out of me that I'm stuck standing here when I could be off wandering the festival. I glance around.

Emergence Ceremonies only happen once or twice a year. When they do, dragons stream in from across the kingdom. We gather here, at the top of Wynrath Mountain. A powerful combination of witch and dragon magic shields us. The humans down in town have no idea that the most powerful shifters on the continent are basically having a giant party up here. There are tents and carnival rides, booths selling treats and children running around with ice cream smeared on their cheeks.

A shiver courses through me as my gaze lands on the huge rock cairn set up in the very center of the scrum. At twilight, King Zephyr and his sons will alight right there. Maybe his daughter, too. He'll give some speech about the mighty Air Kingdom.

Then he'll take to the skies once more. He and the members of the royal guard will swoop out over the field of stone and coals set out at the edge of the cliff. They'll set it all ablaze. The Oracle will invite those of us who've felt the stirrings of their dragons to face the flames.

And I'll find out exactly what I'm made of. One way or another, my fate will finally be decided.

All week, I've been preparing for that moment. It doesn't matter that I've stood for the trials four times before. I've pored over every book in the library, reading every word ever written on the Emergence, desperate to find some hidden nugget of insight, buried in some dusty tome.

The end result: bupkis.

I'm no closer to understanding why my dragon won't Emerge. I'm no more confident than I have been the last three times I've tried.

But I won't be deterred. I won't abandon my dragon—even if she's abandoned me. And if I fail to summon her... If Prince Fury carries through on his threat to force me into exile, so as to stop me from “embarrassing the kingdom”...

I swallow hard.

Well. I suppose we'll cross that bridge when we come to it, now won't we?

For now, I'm here, looking as fierce as possible. Despite its steep price tag, I bought the black and red dress I fell in love with at the store. It's easily the nicest piece of clothing I've ever worn, the fabric soft against my skin. The fit is a dream, too, accentuating my figure. With my hair up in a high bun and my eyeliner extra dramatic, I look like a million bucks. I'm determined to act like it, too.

At long last, Aunt Helena and her buddy part ways. "Come on," she says, scowling at me. "Keep up."

Right, I was definitely the problem.

We stride farther along the main drag of the festival. I try to steer us toward those funnel cakes, but Aunt Helena spots someone else across the way. "Oh Brynn, look, it's your cousin Draco."

She grabs Brynn by the hand and takes off. I hesitate. Draco is Brynn's cousin on her father's side. While Aunt Helena is no fan of her long-lost ex-husband—apparently, he took off with some Fire Kingdom hussy when Brynn was five years old—she's been pretty decent about making sure Brynn knows the other half of her family.

Draco is no relation of mine, though. Aunt Helena reminds me of it, shooing me away. "You don't have to follow us everywhere, you know."

I take my lip between my teeth. I definitely know that. There's safety in numbers, though. Sticking with Brynn in a crowd always helps me feel safer. Especially in a place like this where I know Fury, Jasmine, and all those other jerks are bound to be lurking somewhere.

That said, I can take a hint. Clearly I'm not wanted right now. I step back. It's all the opportunity Aunt Helena needs to dump me.

As Helena hauls her off, Brynn shoots me an apologetic look. "I'll catch up with you?"

I manage a smile that's more confident than I feel. "Sure."

They wander off, and I know better than to just stand there. Besides, there's plenty for me to do here, even on my own.

Namely, shove a funnel cake in my face.

I make it over to the stall unaccosted. As I munch on my sweet, sweet fried goodness, I wander around the festival. It's gorgeous as always—exactly as romantic as Brynn hoped it would be. Twilight is closing in, and strings of lights flicker on, creating a soft, almost magical glow.

I finish my snack and go searching for a trash can to ditch the plate. I find one over by the tent where royal guard members seem to be setting up for King Zephyr's big entrance. I nod at one or two of the guys working, but they ignore me. Typical.

Wiping my mouth with a napkin, I put my back to the tent and survey the crowd. My gaze catches on the handful of young faces milling about. The ones a little younger than me—the ones with stars in their eyes and a restlessness in their bones. They've felt their dragons stirring. Hopefully, tonight, they'll take to the skies.

Hopefully, I'll be with them.

I give myself just a moment to envision it. To really believe that maybe this could be my time. For a second, I can feel my dragon, sleeping deep inside. Fire rises in my lungs. The flapping of vast wings replaces the beating of my heart.

And then it's gone.

Only I don't have time to mourn.

At that moment, there's rustling in the tent behind me. Out of nowhere, the flap flies open, and a hand reaches out.

“Hey—” I start.

Big, rough fingers curl around my arm.

Before I can so much as scream, the person inside there grabs me. And I'm yanked, backward and into the dark.

CHAPTER
SIX

EMBER

The one thing I'll say for getting stuffed into gym lockers and jumped by girl gangs about a million times is that it's given me some pretty damn good reflexes. I twist around in this asshole's grasp and slam my head backward, clawing with my nails at the guy's arm. Something crunches.

"Jesus Christ, Ember—"

All at once, I stop. That deep rich voice pulls me out of the red haze of fight or flight. The warm scent of skin and sandalwood soap and ash hits me.

Shit.

"Storm?"

I pull away, and he lets me go. It's dark as hell in here, but enough light seeps in from the gaps in the fabric that I can make out Storm's handsome face. He wiggles a hand at me in a half-hearted wave. His other hand covers his nose, which is bleeding.

"I'm so sorry—"

"It's fine." He shakes his head, half his mouth curling up into a wry grin. "Pretty sure I deserved it."

As the adrenaline starts to wear off, I let out a shaky laugh. "I mean, grabbing a girl like that is kind of a dick move."

"Sorry, I just—" With his free hand, he gestures at the opening of the tent. "I saw you, and..."

He lets go of his nose. The bleeding seems to have stopped, but he's still a mess. I reach for my bag and find a couple of tissues. Without thinking too much about it, I snag one and close the distance between us. I dab at the blood.

He puts his hand, gently this time, on my wrist.

All of a sudden, I realize the position we're in. I'm all but on top of him, my chest grazing his. The undeniable connection between us sings. His scent surrounds me, and it

doesn't matter that I'm mad at him. I've only seen him at a distance these past two weeks. I've *missed* him.

“Ember...”

My knees wobble, the low timber to his voice having its usual, irresistible effect on me. I glance up, meeting his gaze.

He looks like shit. Even with the blood more or less cleaned up, there are hollows beneath his eyes. Shadows flicker inside them, too. There's a wildness—a desperation to him that I've never seen before.

“Are you okay?” I ask.

A raw echo of a laugh colors his tone. “No. No, I'm not okay, Ember. I am the farthest possible thing from okay.”

My stomach lurches. I cast about in my mind—and then I remember. “Is this about your sister?”

“Yes. No—It's...” His eyes squeeze shut for a second. When he blinks them open again, they're shining and red, but his jaw is hard. “I can't do it. I want to be strong enough, but I'm not. I can't—”

“What?” He's not making any sense. I've never seen him like this. “Storm...”

“I can't protect the people I love.” His throat bobs, and mine goes tight.

Love.

I can't get my hopes up. After all this time... After the way he stood idly by while his brother and Jasmine taunted me... After his silence of the past two weeks. I can't expect that this is some kind of declaration.

“I tried,” he promises. “I tried to keep her safe, and I failed.”

There goes my stomach, plummeting toward the floor again. “Aria.”

“Back, before. When the walls fell and my mother died, and Aria's illness got worse. I tried to keep her here and close, but we were all reeling.”

My heart clenches. These are the secrets I always wanted him to share with me. The pain I knew dwelled in his heart but that he never showed.

Now here it is, and his finally opening up to me doesn't feel like a victory. It feels like he's been torn open. Like he's still bleeding and savaged, and I'm just here. Peering into the open wound.

"I said something stupid, pushed back against one of Dad's bullshit decrees, and he sent me away. When I got back..." He's choking on the words. "She was gone."

I drop the tissue and put my hand to his face. His unshaved stubble scrapes my palm. "You were a child."

"So was she." He clears his throat and blinks a couple of times. When he looks to me again, he's calmer. "And now she's back, and our father has this plan, and..."

"Plan?"

"I can't." He shakes his head. "I'm trying to keep her safe, but it feels like I'm driving without any brakes, and I can't—I can't lose her again. I can't let him..."

"Storm, it's okay." Is it? I haven't the faintest clue what the hell he's talking about. But I assure him all the same, "You'll figure it out."

"I have to," he says, and the pain in his voice cuts me through. His grip on my wrist tightens. "Ember..."

I'm breathless. "Yes?"

"I can't lose you, too."

Anger and loss and pain swirl in his eyes. My heart clenches painfully.

"Storm..."

"You could be happy here. *We* could be happy here."

He might as well have slapped me in the face.

I jerk back. He loosens his grip, but only by a fraction. "Happy? Storm—Do you have any idea how miserable I am?"

“I know, I know. But we could find a way to make it better. I’ll talk to Fury and Jasmine—”

“I’m a dragon.” My throat grates. Fire burns deep inside my chest. I feel the edges of talons and scales scraping against my insides.

Maybe he sees the flickers of flames in my gaze. He lets go, but I don’t move to put any more distance between us.

“Of course you are,” he assures me.

But does he really believe it? Does anyone in this awful town?

My voice trembles, but there’s strength inside me. Untapped, but flowing close to the surface. “I have to call her. I have to stand for the trials.”

“But if she doesn’t come...”

And I don’t have to listen to this. I won’t. “Fuck you—”

“No—” He snags my hand again as I turn to go. “Ember, I believe in you. I know your dragon is inside you.”

I face him full on. “Then how can you tell me to ignore her? Could you leave yours buried beneath your skin?”

He visibly recoils.

“It’s exactly the same for me.” Except mine’s been dormant for even longer. There’s some key I haven’t found. Some opening inside of me that I can’t seem to unlock. But I can’t stop trying. I won’t.

I won’t resign myself to some sort of a pathetic half-lived life in this hellhole. I’m already unhappy enough. The idea of it stretching out forever and ever, with these beating wings stifled inside me...the elites of this town never letting me forget my place as the most wretched, despised creature...

It’s unbearable.

The only thing that even competes is the idea of a life without Storm.

“Don’t make me choose,” I beg him.

“But you are.” His voice is gravel and blood. “You’re choosing exile.”

For a moment, there’s only static in my brain. He may say that he believes in me, but deep down in his heart of hearts...

Storm thinks I’m a lost cause, too.

His eyes widen as the implication of what he’s just said sinks in. “I mean—”

“I know what you mean.”

Damn, but I do.

We stare at each other in silence for moments that seem to stretch on and on. The sounds of the celebration going on outside filter in, but it’s just noise. My heart is breaking, and there’s nothing I can do.

But say goodbye.

I’m not sure if he moves first or if I do, but we crash into each other with force. Our connection has always been passionate. An illicit affair between a reject and a prince can only live in stolen moments. Desperation and urgency are nothing new.

And yet the clash of tongues and teeth is on another level. He kisses me hard, and I tug at his clothes.

His hands are everywhere, pawing at my waist and hips and breasts. He pushes me backward, and I go without argument, trusting him even after he’s betrayed me on the deepest, most emotional level possible.

There’s not much to work with, here in this empty tent, but we find a folding table that seems sturdy enough. He sits my ass on its edge, and I shove everything off of it. Papers and signs and extension cords land in a heap on the ground, and I don’t care.

“I can’t,” he growls, pushing up my dress. “Ember...”

“I know.” I get the buckle of his belt undone and pop open the button his pants. There’s no time to do more than pull his big, thick cock out. I give it a stroke, and he groans.

Wet and aching, needy and sad, I spread my legs for him. He steps between them and cups my eager cunt, shoving the panel of my underwear out of the way. He strokes up and down my gash, but neither of us has the patience for foreplay. I'm slick enough, and we both know it. I bite at his lip with the rough press of his fingers inside me.

My eyes roll back in my head for a moment, but it's not enough.

"Come on." I pull him in, brushing aside his hand and lining him up.

Our gazes meet.

And then he's shoving inside.

I have to clench my jaw to keep from crying out. *Fuck*, he's huge. Perfect. My body stretches to accept him, but the fullness and the burn are exactly what I need right now. I don't want loving and tender; we've never had time for that anyway. I want rough and raw and painful and real. I want to feel him for days—even after—

I can't think about after.

Grasping him by the neck, I pull him closer. His open mouth mashes to mine. He grinds in a couple of times, putting just the right pressure on my clit. With his weight, he bears me down onto the table until I'm flat on my back. I wrap my legs around his waist and my arms around his shoulders.

"Can't," he groans, and he *keeps saying that*. He can't fail his sister, he can't help me, he can't *lose* me.

The only thing he can do, apparently, is fuck me.

I spur him on with my heels. He takes the hint, withdrawing in a long, slow glide. My body clenches around nothing, trying to pull him back in, but I'm at his mercy. He shoves in to the hilt again, and my head slams into the table.

"Fuck—" It feels so good and hurts so much.

He pulls back and thrusts home faster this time. Every stroke is punishing in its intensity, brutal even.

“Harder,” I gasp.

“Ember—” He obeys, pounding into me now.

I tilt my hips and let out a sound that’s too loud, but I can’t stop myself. The thick head of his cock hammers at that delicious spot inside of me. I sneak a hand between us to mash my fingers against my achy clit, but he shoves me away. His own rough thumb takes my place, and yes—yes, that’s even better.

With every deep, battering thrust into me, I push myself up into him. Wet, filthy sounds of raw fucking fill the tent. His balls slap into my ass, and I’m dripping all over him. My entire body clenches, hurtling toward an oblivion too deep to imagine.

And then I’m there.

“Storm, Storm,” I pant, “I—”

I slam my mouth shut to keep the treacherous words inside. The ones where I would tell him how I really feel about him. We’re already a tragedy. No need to make it worse, now.

“I know, I feel—”

He kisses down to my jaw and sinks his teeth into my neck. Electricity shoots to my toes, and I pulse around him, squeezing him.

“Come,” he begs me, “Need to feel you—”

I barely stifle my scream, the intensity of my climax too much. It sweeps me away, and he’s shouting my name into my hair, battering my spasming pussy over and over until I crest again. His thick cock grows impossibly thicker, and then he’s shoving in a final time.

“Ember...”

Hot come fills me to the brim, and a third orgasm rocks me, and how can I do this? How can I leave him?

How can I stay?

He slumps over me, still spurting his seed deep into my womb, and I hold him tight. A single tear forms at the corner

of my eye.

I open my mouth, all my fear and despair and love too
much to hold back anymore.

Only I don't get a chance to say a thing.

All of a sudden, the tent flap flies open.

In strides Prince Fury.

Followed by none other than King Zephyr himself.

CHAPTER
SEVEN

EMBER

Out of a million “worst moments of my life”, somehow this one has to be the worst. I’m spread out on this table, my dress hiked up to my waist, my body shaking from three brain-meltingly good orgasms, a thick cock still pulsing inside of me. My lips must be kiss-swollen, and I’m pretty sure Storm left a mark on my neck when he bit me. If there were a picture in the dictionary next to “wanton slut”, it would have to be this.

“Jesus Christ,” Storm rumbles in the intruders’ direction. I look up at him. Instantly, the love-sick, stricken expression on his face is gone, replaced by a hardness I’ve only seen a handful of times before.

Inside, I go cold.

“A little privacy, maybe?” he requests.

Voice dripping with disdain, his brother scoffs and steps farther into the room. “Maybe don’t fuck in a public place, if privacy’s what you’re looking for.”

King Zephyr snorts out his agreement.

Storm pulls out of me with a wet sound. I shudder uncontrollably, his seed leaking out of my fucked-out pussy. My limbs are jelly, but I struggle to sit up. Storm steps away, not looking at me. Shame rushes through my veins, icy and hot in turns.

“Storm,” I try, quiet.

“Shut up.”

I try not to visibly recoil, but the pain lancing through my chest is too much. I thought things were bad a few minutes ago, when he basically told me he didn’t think I could summon my dragon. When I thought we were saying goodbye on our own terms. I couldn’t abandon who I was, and neither could he.

The stone wall he's suddenly erected between us is so, so much worse.

He puts himself away and refastens his pants and belt. There's not much I can do but stand and fluff out the skirt of my dress. My own wetness and the huge load of come Storm just blasted into me soak through my underwear immediately. I can feel the slickness down my leg, and I feel dirty, but not in a good way.

Movement at the entrance of the tent pulls my attention away from my own humiliated state.

"Why is everybody just standing there?" a feminine voice asks. A girl I've never seen before squeezes her way in. She takes one look at me and Storm and blinks owlishly. "Oh."

"Wait outside, Aria," Fury orders.

The pieces click into place. Of course this is Storm and Fury's long-absent sister. The resemblance is undeniable, her hair the same dark shade, her eyes the same striking gray.

"But—" she starts.

"You heard the prince," King Zephyr intones, and I shiver.

I've seen our glorious ruler before, of course, but never so close up. He's an imposing figure, tall and rugged, with dark, thick hair, gone silver at the temples. He has his sons' handsome face, only more chiseled and wizened by the years. His eyes, though, are blue, the pupils slits. His tongue is ever so slightly forked, his dragon never far from the surface. The effect is chilling.

Princess Aria huffs in annoyance, but she obeys, retreating back to the other side of the tent flap.

Prince Fury, on the other hand, strides closer. He sneers at me in absolute disgust. "Honestly, Storm, if I'd have known you were so hard up, I could have hired an actual whore." He wrinkles his nose. "It probably would have been cleaner."

Finally, the tide of hot shame inside of me hits a boiling point, tipping over and into anger. I look to the king. "Your highness—"

King Zephyr booms, “What makes this creature think it has permission to speak?”

Fury circles me. With his back to his father, he whispers, “Now you’re really going to get it, worm.”

I don’t doubt him. Everything inside of me is trembling.

“You can go now,” Storm says, dismissing me like so much trash.

“Not so fast.” Fury shakes his head as he moves to stand beside their father again. “I think the reject has some explaining to do.”

King Zephyr’s eyes spark with recognition. “So this is her then? The defective would-be dragon who’s brought so much shame to our kingdom.”

Bristling, I curl my hands into fists, my nails digging into my scarred palm.

“None other,” Fury sneers.

King Zephyr clucks his tongue. “I thought you had better taste,” he says, shaking his head at Storm. He raises a brow. “This is why I’ve said we need to purify the blood lines.” His mouth twists into a grimace. “Not propagate them.”

“She’s sterile,” Storm assures them, and wow, okay, fine. Throw salt into the wound.

“Yes, your one saving grace,” King Zephyr agrees. He tilts his head to the side, looking me up and down, and I quake inside. I felt dirty before, but there’s something to his stare that makes me feel like he can see past my—admittedly rumped—clothes. “We men have needs. Finding a suitable receptacle to slake them can be a challenge. Wouldn’t want too many little bastards running around, trying to make a claim for the throne.”

“Unless this is more than blowing off steam...” Fury says, one eyebrow raised.

I hold my breath. This is our chance. It’s Storm’s opportunity to finally assert himself, even in the face of his

brother and father's obvious disapproval. For a half a second, I dare to imagine that he actually might do it.

I'm a fool.

"She's nothing." Storm's cold, dead voice lances me through all over again. His rejection tears me in two.

I can't help but look at him. I try so hard not to let the pain show on my face, but how can I, when my heart is breaking? We were always so afraid of getting caught. I knew he'd have to deny me if we did.

So why does it hurt so much to watch it unfold? "Storm—"

Storm finally looks at me, his eyes bright with the same pain I feel. It doesn't show in his voice, though. "Silence," he spits.

"Still," King Zephyr muses. "We have much business to attend to. I wouldn't want my second heir getting distracted by an open pair of legs..."

"I hardly think they're that tempting." Storm shifts his gaze away from me, but I can't bring myself to do the same.

King Zephyr narrows his eyes. "Best to remove them all the same."

"Wait—" Storm starts.

A new kind of venom enters the king's voice. His whips his head toward Storm. "Does my son wish to question his king *again*?"

Storm visibly shrinks, and my broken heart aches. How can I be empathizing with this man after he just rejected me and let his family call me a glorified Flashlight?

I worked so hard to try to get him to open up to me, though. He never told me everything, but in our most intimate moments, he shared the pressures he was under. The quiet cruelties of his father and the indignities of serving beneath his brother's superiority. The helplessness and the frustration of trying to help guide the kingdom, without the power to see anything through.

Tendons stand out in his arms and neck. “No, your highness,” he grits out.

“I didn’t think so.” King Zephyr waves a hand at me. “You are hereby banished.”

“No—” I cry out, as the breath is punched out of my lungs.

He can’t— He wouldn’t— Not mere hours before the Emergence ceremony. I fought too hard, spent too much time preparing.

My cries fall on deaf ears. “Fury, remove this *thing* to her home.”

Fury comes over and grabs me by my hair. “With pleasure.”

Bright pain lights up my scalp as he tugs.

“This isn’t necessary,” Storm argues, cool and calm and like he doesn’t even care that I’m being thrown out on my ass.

“She was going to be exiled after the ceremony anyway.” Fury starts dragging me toward the exit. I kick and fight, but it’s no use. “Honestly, he’s doing you a favor, saving you the embarrassment of failing again.”

“Let me try,” I beg. Hot, angry tears overflow my eyes. I dig my heels into the ground, but Fury’s grip is too strong. “I can feel my dragon, she’s in there—I know it—”

I just can’t unlock her. Without the Oracle’s magic, I never will.

King Zephyr holds up a hand, his talons showing. “Get her out of my sight.”

I crane my neck backward, pleading with Storm this time. “Please—Please, Storm, don’t let them—”

But whatever reprieve I might have been hoping for, whatever connection I imagined we shared...

Any illusions I might have had about Storm are shattered in an instant.

“There’s no point fighting,” he growls, putting on a good show of finding me pathetic.

But I hear what he’s saying with his eyes.

He can’t save me. He won’t. He rejects me and what we had together. Everything he promised about us being happy together, someday, was a lie.

All the fight goes out of me at once.

“You have until midnight to make it across the border,” King Zephyr warns me. “If you’re still here after that, we’ll see if my Royal Guard find you as tempting an outlet as my sorry excuse for a son did.”

My stomach twists.

His threat is real. I wouldn’t be the first exile to be thrown into sexual slavery at the hands of this depraved tyrant. The gleam in his eyes makes me shudder with revulsion. He might even use me himself, forcing himself on me as the ultimate act of subjugation.

Anger boils inside me. I smell smoke, my insides burning with fire.

Let him try. He and his guard—they’d have to kill me before I’d let them inside me. I’d fight and bite.

I cast one last, hopeless, furious glance back at Storm, but his betrayal is absolute. Seemingly indifferent, he turns his gaze away as Fury wrestles me through the gap in the tent.

The crowd outside parts. A few whispers go up, followed by a gasp.

“What—” My cousin Brynn rushes in my direction, but the entire mob is pushed back as Fury flexes his muscles. He doesn’t release me, even as his bones snap and his flesh morphs.

His dragon roars as it’s released. He’s huge, the color of ice and covered in spikes. Leathery wings flap, and then his enormous talons circle my waist. I shriek as he lifts me into the sky.

Terrified and delirious, I look down at the field of timber and coals where even now, would-be dragons are assembling. Bitter tears pour down my face, only to be whipped away by the wind.

I should be down there. I clench my eyes shut tight and try to will my dragon into being, but she curls in on herself even further, out of reach.

Forever.

There are legends of dragons transforming for the first time on their own, but they're just that: legends. I've never heard of anyone achieving their first shift without the magic of the Emergence rites. The chances of a failure like me managing it alone? Through my tears, I laugh, ugly and raw.

I've lost my chance at ever connecting with my dragon. But that's not all I've lost.

Sobbing, I look down again. Brynn stares up at me, one hand reaching into the sky after me, but she knows better than to risk herself, trying to chase after me. I spot Storm, standing just outside the tent, his gaze haunted and pained.

Well, good. He deserves the pain. If he feels half the devastation I feel, he's still gotten off easy.

And then we're flying. Fury's talons grip me tight enough to hurt, but I don't fight his hold. I imagine him letting go and watching me splatter against the mountainside. It would almost be easier if he did. What am I supposed to do now? I hated Wynrath Crest—hated the Air Kingdom and the assholes who conspired to make my life a living hell there.

My mother's words echo back at me as we soar over the village.

Stay hidden, Ember. Stay safe.

I've done neither.

She'd be so disappointed in me.

After what feels like both moments and years, Fury dives downward. I hold in my scream as we hurtle toward the ground near the edge of town, only to pull up at the last

second. His great wings beat hard against the sky as he slows to hover right outside Aunt Helena's house. He releases me from his huge claws, and I land hard on the lawn. The fabric of my dress tears, my arms and legs getting scratched and bruised to hell at the impact.

I stagger to my feet just in time to watch Fury transform back into a human. He stands before me, glowing with energy and strength, his dragon still dancing in his silver eyes. "You heard the king. I'll hunt you down myself if you even think about remaining on our lands."

The loss hits me all over again. Where am I supposed to go?

Hell if I'll let him see me shed another tear, though. "Good riddance."

He stalks closer, eating up the space between us in a move that's impossibly fast. I stagger backward, terrified and trying so hard to keep my shit together. "It's only my father's mercy that spares your life tonight, you hear? If I were king, I'd have ripped you open where you stood."

"Charmer," I mutter through gritted teeth.

He spits on the ground at my feet. "What my brother saw in you, I have no idea." Cruelty flashes in his eyes. "But remember what Storm said: you're nothing."

Stabbing pain lances through my chest. I must not be able to hide it, because he grins, showing his teeth. Rage screams inside of me. I want nothing more than to lurch forward and wipe that wicked smirk from his face, but it's all I can do not to collapse into tears.

Clearly knowing he's won, he draws back. A swirling gust of wind surrounds him, talons and scales replacing flesh and bone. His great wings unfold as his dragon manifests completely. He launches himself into the sky, not sparing a backward glance.

I still wait until he's gone to burst into tears. Betrayal flays me open, and I can't get enough air into my lungs. The past

few minutes wash over me like a terrible dream, only it was real.

I want to laugh, but I don't have the breath in my body. Sobs rack my frame. I spent all this time and energy preparing to give Storm up, but now I've lost both him and any chance of ever connecting with my dragon in one fell swoop. I've lost my home and what pitiful excuse I had for a family as well. Aunt Helena won't care that I'm gone, but I'll have to find a way to get word to Brynn that I'm all right, wherever I land.

The fact that I'll never see my cousin-slash-best-friend again is another blow, nearly as painful and difficult to swallow as the rest.

I don't have time to dwell on any of it right now.

I have mere hours to flee the kingdom. Thankfully, we took a shuttle to the festival, so Aunt Helena's car is parked in the driveway. If I want to make it to the border by midnight, I don't have time to be dicking around, trying to figure out transportation.

Upstairs, I rip off the dress I loved so much and throw it in the trash. Even if it weren't ruined, I'd never be able to wear it again without thinking of this night.

I wish I had time to take a shower. My body still smells like Storm; his kisses are bitten into my skin. Vivid memories assault me of the way he held me and touched me and fucked me hard into the table. Of his moans and shudders of pleasure as he emptied himself inside of me. But those memories are all ruined now, tainted by the aftermath. By the cold distance in his voice.

She's nothing.

I blink furiously, willing him out of my head.

Once I've changed into jeans and a plain black tee, I start ripping apart my room. It's not as if I own much, but I can't take everything. I end up chucking a week's worth of clothes into a trash bag. A handful of my favorite books go in an old shipping box, along with a few keepsakes I can't stand to leave behind. The rest of the essentials go in my backpack.

After a moment's hesitation, I stash a hunting knife in there, too.

With the clock ticking, I shove a hand under my mattress. The envelope full of cash is a lot thinner than I'd hoped it would be when I imagined my escape from this town in my head. It's even thinner by the time I drop a thousand bucks on the kitchen table to at least try to compensate my aunt for stealing her car. I scribble a quick note, thanking her for everything, even if the last decade under this roof was deeply shitty.

My phone buzzes in my bag, and I pull it out. I wince when I see at least a dozen messages from Brynn, asking in increasingly frantic tones what happened. Am I okay?

Ember: I'm fine.

Shit, I hate lying, but what can I say? I'm heartbroken and furious. With Storm, his brother, his father.

With myself.

Ember: Sorry to leave without saying goodbye. Love you
X

I type send before I can think too much about it, then silence my phone. I take one last glance around the house that I called home for years. Closing my eyes, I breathe in deeply.

In my heart of hearts, I always knew it was impossible. But there was always this part of me that dreamed my mother would come back for me. For years, I saw her every time I opened my eyes. I imagined what it would be like. She'd take me into her arms and tell me she was sorry, she was *so sorry*. She loved me, and she'd done what she had to to protect me, but it was all over now. We were safe and together, and she'd never let me go again.

Now, even if she did come back...

She'd never be able to find me.

A final tear escapes my eyes. I flutter them open and swipe my hand across my face.

The door to my aunt's house slams shut behind me. I get behind the wheel of her car and fire up the engine.

For a second, as I peel out into the road, I imagine I see a dragon in the distance, flying after me. Its silver shape disappears into the clouds, though. Any fantasies I might have had about Storm trying to follow me evaporate.

I know better than to think I'm truly nothing to him. He loved me as much as I loved him.

Somehow, that knowledge makes his rejection so much worse.

Blinking furiously, I hit the open road and slam my foot into the gas. I'm going too fast, but I don't care.

Wynrath Crest, the Air Kingdom, my family, Storm... They're all behind me now.

And the Gods alone know what might lie ahead.



STORM

An hour later, I alight on the stone overlooking the field of flames and transform back into my human self. The flapping of wings and snapping of bone herald the rest of my family doing likewise around me.

“Finally.” Cracking his neck with a gruesome popping sound, my father gives an exaggerated sigh of relief. “A successful Emergence.”

“Thank the Gods the reject wasn’t here to fuck it up,” Fury sneers, and I force myself not to punch him in the face.

Aria looks up at me in concern, but I refuse to react.

All around us, the festivities are reaching their apex. We did our usual bullshit, flying in with Dad and then standing around like assholes while he shifted into his human form and gave a rousing speech about the mighty Air Kingdom. The young dragon hopefuls all stepped forward, and it took every ounce of my strength not to lose it right then and there.

Even now, as they move through the magical flames, their flesh and bone giving way to scales and wings, I want to summon my own dragon back to me and rise into the skies. I want to scream and unleash hell on earth. I want to watch my father and my brother burn.

Unbearable agony rips me in two.

They sent Ember away.

It was painful enough when she was willing to face exile for another chance at calling forth her dragon. At least that would have been her choice.

This?

It’s so fucking unfair. She should be up there, facing the fire and unfurling her wings. Instead, she’s gone.

And there wasn’t a thing I could do to stop it.

I stand there in wretched, miserable silence, glaring with barely masked rage as the last of the newborn dragons Emerge. The orange of the flames reflects off their wings as they glide upward into the moonless night. Around us, our people whoop and cheer.

One of our father's aides approaches him and whispers something in his ear. He claps his hands. "Come along, children. Our guests have arrived." A smirk curls his lips as his gaze darts to Aria. "I know you're impatient to meet your betrothed."

It's my turn to dart my gaze to my sister. She tilts her chin up, brave as ever.

This is the moment I've been scrambling to prepare for. Ever since my father whisked my sister home after years away.

Ever since he announced he'd made a match for her that would ensure our kingdom's power for ages to come.

My father leads the way down from the edge of the mountain. I take Aria's hand in mine, reminding her of what I swore to her.

We arrive at a tent set far apart from the rest of the festivities. It's a large one, with a thick tarp and a dozen of my father's best men and women guarding its perimeter. The hairs on the back of my neck rise, and inside my chest, my dragon flexes its wings. I keep him firmly in check as I squeeze my sister's palm.

The guards lift the flaps of the tent. My father strides in, and we follow. I expect the interior to be brightly lit, but there's a darkness that surrounds me as I enter, a deep black even more oppressive than the night. I squint, struggling to see.

And then I realize. There's nothing *to* see.

Only Shadow.

And my blood turns to ice in my veins.

CHAPTER
EIGHT

EMBER

I drive and drive, the windows open and my hair blowing wild around my face. Beyond Wynrath Crest is a huge world. I saw it once, as a child. I'm heading back out into it with nowhere to go and no one I can rely on.

I blink back tears and blame them on the whipping wind, but I know better. I wish my mom and dad were here. I flash back to all the trips we took. Our nomadic lifestyle often lacked creature comforts, but we had love and laughter and the thrill of learning about all of dragonkind, and it was enough. So, so much more than enough.

After an hour or two, the descent through the mountains gives way to the sparse land beyond. My headlights cut a bright swath through the darkness. There's dry grass and brush to both sides of the road. Off in the distance, closer to the river, fields of corn and wheat grow, but the greenness of them is lost to the moonless night.

I let out a humorless chuckle through gritted teeth. I'm not missing much, not being able to take in the view. The Air Kingdom is more desert than anything else. The most powerful magic wielders of our kind manipulate the currents in the atmosphere to bring rain to the parts of the realm that need it. Everything else is left to turn to dust.

A chill settles into the air, out on the barren plains. I barrel on, my sights set on the border. It's an invisible barrier, imperceptible to all but the most sensitive of dragonkind. I brace myself, remembering the subtle shift in the air that I used to feel, crossing boundaries with my parents.

In the end, it's deeply anticlimactic. A ghost of a shiver ripples across my skin, a quicksilver flash of constriction in my chest and the faintest ripple in my vision.

And then it's done. The tears that spring to my eyes this time can't be held back. I'm officially homeless. If I try to cross back into Air Kingdom territory, it'll be at my own peril.

The wards will alert the king's sentinels to my transgression. Only powerful magic could hide my presence, and without my dragon, I have no hope of tapping into such abilities.

I swab at my face, my other hand white-knuckling the wheel. There's so much loss to process. My chance at Emerging, my home, my family.

Storm. That treacherous, uptight, masochistic, doormat... *asshole*.

I shake my head fiercely. I can't process any of that right now.

Eventually, I'm far enough away from the border that I feel the surge of adrenaline leaving me. Exhausted, I look for a safe place to pull over.

At a little one-stoplight town, I use the restroom, then fill up my tank and buy some greasy convenience store food. It's tasteless on my tongue, but I need my strength, so I force myself to eat it anyway. Another mile down the road, there's an empty parking lot a decent ways away from the road. I park in the far corner of it, under a tree. When I turn off the engine and the lights, silent darkness descends around me.

All at once, the grief and rage I've been holding back slam into me with force. An ugly, rattling sob shakes my entire body. I give in to the sea swell of emotion, letting it carry me away. A dam breaks inside me. I cry and scream and try to let it all out, but it's too much. I miss Storm and Brynn. I miss my mom. Terrible as that shit hole of a town was, I miss knowing I had a place in this world.

What will become of me now?

I don't know, but after what seems like forever, the tears dry up. My chest heaves with shuddering breaths, my throat painful and raw. I've nowhere near cried myself out, but the crushing misery of it all seems to have reached an ebb. At least for now.

The best I can, I make myself comfortable, pushing back the seat and wadding up a sweatshirt to use as a pillow. Just in

case, I stick the hunting knife I brought between the seat and the center console, within easy reach if I end up needing it.

I lean back and close my eyes, praying to the gods for the oblivion of sleep.

It takes a long, long time to come.



I WISH I could say that I pick myself up gracefully. If I did, I'd be lying.

For days, I just sort of...wander. I drive for hours at a time, taking turns more or less at random. The tug I used to feel toward the south re-emerges, but it's weak. It's hard to hear your heart when it's been crushed under some asshole dragon's foot.

When my eyes start to cross, I find places to rest. There's not much to see out here in the middle of nowhere, and the world's biggest ball of twine doesn't exactly have a lot of appeal. Little towns have their little diversions, though.

I'm grateful as hell for local libraries, where I can borrow the Wi-Fi long enough to keep up with my coursework. The papers I write, camped out in my car overnight, are terrible, but they're good enough to earn passing marks, which is all I need. I'm tempted to give up and withdraw, but the tuition's already been paid for the term. Who knows when—or if—I'll be able to finish my degree, but at least I'll have a few more credits under my belt.

It's something to do, in any case. Otherwise, I feel like a zombie. Random crying jags hit me out of nowhere. I barely sleep.

I just keep thinking about how everything went wrong. The pain of what I've lost is too much to bear. The blankness of my future is somehow even worse.

My exhaustion only grows as time goes on. I'm constantly on high alert. Everyone knows that this is lawless territory. The neutral lands beyond the Air Kingdom's borders are

crawling with low lives and rejects. I'm one of them now, but scum likes to prey on its own.

One night, trying to sleep in my car, I feel a clawing inside my chest. I snap to alertness at the hiss of my dragon, somewhere deep beneath my consciousness. Overhead, a shadow eclipses the silver sliver of the moon, and I suck in a breath and reach for my knife.

The great beating of wings ripples the air.

If a rogue dragon found me, I don't know what they would do. Could it be any worse than what Fury and Jasmine used to do to me daily? I shudder, remembering King Zephyr's threat if I refused to leave. Being robbed and murdered would be a mercy, compared to the fate I would have faced if I'd stayed in the Air Kingdom.

Fortunately, the dragon keeps flying on into the night. It takes a long time for me to relax, though.

I spot more signs of shifters in the next few towns. Familiar sigils spray-painted on an abandoned building. Suspicious burn marks on a roof. The scent of dragon-kind lingers in the air.

I have to find someplace safe to land. At least for a while. I've been conserving my savings, paying only for gas and food, but eventually, I'll need to find a job and a place to stay.

Maybe I should actually start paying attention to where I'm going. I've ignored the tug inside me, telling me to head south, for half my life. I could do it again. A few hundred miles west, there are cities where dragons are few and far between. I could disappear there. Live a normal human life.

But every time I think to do just that, my entire being rebels.

Hands firm on the wheel, I continue deeper into unclaimed territory and farther from civilization. It's so far between towns now that I worry I'll run out of fuel and die alone on the side of the road, but I press on and on.

Until one morning, the sun blazing overhead, I feel the pull inside my chest yank me with a viciousness that takes my

breath away. I slam my foot into the gas, shocked and confused. A tremor runs through me, and there must be a reflection off something by the road. For a second, I'm blinded.

My engine sputters.

"Shit—" I turn the wheel hard, managing to steer to the shoulder before the car gives out. I try the ignition a half dozen times, but it's no use.

A new kind of pointless, exhausted rage threatens to swamp me.

I get out of the car, fuming as badly as it is. The door slams behind me, and I pace to the front. I pop the hood, but fuck if I know what's going on under there.

Despite the heat, a shiver racks me. If Storm were here, he'd know what to do. How many times did we fuck in his garage? He offered to show me how to change my oil, but I didn't even own a car. What was the point? Our time was so limited, anyway. I wanted to spend it focused on each other, not on some boring, greasy engine.

Thick tears flood my eyes.

How could I have been so *stupid*?

I pull my phone out of my pocket. I've been keeping it off as often as not. Other than a few brief reassurances I've sent to Brynn, I haven't needed it, and the reception out here in the desert is shit.

Of course, I have zero bars.

I squeeze the thing so tight I fear I'll crack the case. I shove it back in my pocket and lift my face to the sky.

The scream that leaves my lungs shocks even me. A raw, hopeless anger seizes hold of me. I kick the tires and bang my fist on the roof before sagging to the ground. I take my head in my hands. A sob rises to my throat.

Before I can let it out, a sudden shadow passes over me, though. I jerk my head up. The air stirs with the sound of

leathery wings, and my heart goes into overdrive, slamming itself against the inside of my ribs.

Then, out of nowhere, a man drops down out of the sky.

CHAPTER
NINE

EMBER

The panic that overwhelms me is so complete that there's a clarity to it. My senses sharpen until I'm seeing the dust motes floating in the air, smelling the ash and fire of this stranger's skin, hearing the low, steady thumping of his heart.

I blink rapidly, lifting my hand to shield my eyes from the sun.

He's handsome, of course—all dragons are. His complexion is a rich, medium brown, his lips full and his nose broad. His black hair has been buzzed short, and a serpentine tattoo snakes up his neck and over his head. More dark ink decorates his bare, muscular arms. He's dressed in a black leather vest and loose, copper-colored pants, and a part of me wants to climb him like a tree.

The other part is more reserved. There's something about him—some aura that tells me to keep my distance.

Which is probably for the best, considering.

"Well, well, well." He tips his head to the side, staring at me like a bug under a microscope. "What have we here?"

My throat is dry, my palms sweating. Too late, I realize that in my rush to check my car, I left my knife behind. Stupid—letting my guard down for even a moment out here.

Instinctively, I try to make myself small and non-threatening. Even as I do, I force myself to look beyond his attractive exterior, hunting for weaknesses. If he thinks I'm harmless, maybe he'll come close enough that I can get in a sneaky blow. Buy myself enough time to run.

But where? I'm in the middle of the desert, miles from civilization. He's a fully grown, Emerged *dragon*. If he decides to pursue, I have no chance of escape.

I curl my hands into fists and try to keep the trembling out of my voice. "I'm no one. Nothing." The irony of parroting

back the most painful thing Storm ever said to me is a bitter pain, but I can't get distracted by that now. I shake my head. "Just passing through."

The stranger's eyes narrow, and he sniffs the air. "I don't know about that last part." He raises his brows. "But the first two are definitely bullshit."

With that, he closes in on me. I flinch hard, flashbacks assaulting me of every time Fury shoved me into a wall, or Jasmine dug her talons into my skin, only this is worse. They were constrained by King Zephyr's laws. Out here? There are no laws. He could kill me in an instant.

Instead, his eyes widen. He retreats. "I mean you no harm," he promises.

"Right." There's no keeping the shaking from my voice now. "Dragons sneak up on defenseless women out of nowhere for good reasons all the time."

He could have his way with me just as easily as he could murder me. According to the stories, rogue dragons rape and pillage at will out here in the wilds.

He must catch my meaning. His nostrils flare, and outrage flashes in the darkness of his eyes. "I'll excuse you this once for questioning my honor and my dedication to my True Mate. I won't do it again."

Oh. The aura that surrounded him when I was checking him out a few seconds ago—it makes sense now. He's one of the rare dragons who's found his True Mate. The one fated to him in the creation of the universe. Outside of my parents, I've never met anyone who shared that bond before.

Now that I recognize it, it's written all over him. He has no eyes for anyone except his other half. He would never force himself on anyone.

Still, it's not as if that's the only danger he poses.

"I'm not kidding about being no one," I remind him, still defensive and stiff. "I have nothing to steal, and no one will pay you any ransom for me."

“And *I* was not kidding about no harm coming to you.” He makes a strange gesture, drawing what reminds me vaguely of the sigil for protection from the Fire Realm, only with an extra stroke at the end. I squint, my recollection of the other kingdoms’ traditions having grown rusty after a decade of disuse—and in some cases, from outright, xenophobic, Air Kingdom suppression. “All those who come in peace are guaranteed safe passage while they are in Unity.”

I squint harder. “Unity?”

Dropping his hands, he smirks. “You’re from the Air Kingdom, aren’t you?”

Was it that obvious?

Despite myself, I let down my guard, just a fraction. My nervous talking thing where I act braver than I am kicks in. “As in, are they the assholes who tortured me for years and then kicked me out for no good reason?”

“Oh, child.” That wicked smirk deepens, becoming an outright smile. “Welcome to the neutral territory of Unity. I have a feeling you’re going to fit right in.”



IF ANYONE HAD TOLD me that I would end up being carried around by not one but two dragons in as many weeks, I would have laughed in their face.

And yet, here I am.

The good news is that this new dragon—Jett, he introduced himself as—let me ride on his back instead of gripping me in his claws. His dragon form is as huge as I imagined, his hide a rich, almost iridescent black. As I grip onto his neck, I remember being a child and clinging to my father in much the same way. He would dip and swoop and swirl through the sky, and I would laugh, exhilarated by every loop and twist. My mother was horrified, of course, but I never felt safer.

I feel a lot less confident now. The ground seems miles away, and while Jett has given me his word that he'll keep me safe, I've been through too much shit to trust him completely.

Before long, the desert gives way to brush and grass. We soar over scattered homes. My mouth gapes as another dragon swoops past us. Jett roars in greeting, and if I'm not mistaken, the other dragon—her hide a brilliant red—belches out a fiery laugh. Deep inside, my own dragon stirs inquisitively. I silently scold her. If she'd just Emerged when she was supposed to, we could be flying alongside them, engaging in their conversation instead of just listening in with my useless human ears.

The houses and roads grow more plentiful until we reach the center of what is clearly a thriving little town. Unlike Wynrath Crest, with its crumbling streets and aging brick, this place practically shines. The shops and homes along the main strip are immaculately maintained, everything freshly painted, with colorful flowers planted in window boxes and containers. People mill about, families with children and older couples, as well as lone adults, sitting on benches reading or just out for a stroll.

I do a double-take when I spot a handful of giant wolves playing what looks like tag football with a team of bears. Their shifter nature reveals itself when one of them returns to human form to trash talk the others. My mind reels. Dragons, wolves and bears all living together in one place?

As we descend, I stiffen further, catching whiff of some unknown magic—something I felt back when I wandered the globe with my family, but that I haven't sensed since.

I wish I could give it my full attention, but Jett swoops down to land in a central square beside a fountain. He drops his neck, allowing me to slide—less than gracefully—from his back. In a smooth ripple of dragonflesh and a flap of wings, he transitions back to human form, just in time to be barreled into by a young woman with bright pink hair, dressed in a long black sundress with tons of chunky, beaded jewelry around her neck and wrists. At first glance, she's human, but in this town, who knows?

“What did you find? What happened? Tell me everything,” she demands.

The corner of Jett’s mouth quirks up. “See for yourself, sister mine.”

As he gestures toward me, the girl releases him and turns her gaze my way. She’s about my age, with pale skin and deep brown eyes. With her coloring—and with zero obvious signs of her being a dragon shifter—I never would have pegged her for Jett’s sister, but there’s a passing resemblance, once I know to look for it.

“Hi,” she says, coming right over to me. I flinch when she opens her arms. Too late, I realize it’s to give me a hug.

“Um. Hi.”

She holds up her hands. “Sorry, got it, not a hugger.”

“Most people aren’t, when it comes to perfect strangers, Amy,” a voice says from behind her.

I look up to find another, slightly older woman approaching us. She’s tall and slim and drop-dead gorgeous, her complexion fair and her shoulder-length hair a mix of rich umber and silver. Her dark eyes have a reptilian glint to them, and raw power rolls off of her in waves. As I look between her, Amy and Jett, the family resemblance is instantly clear.

“You must be...” I start, even though it’s absolutely none of my business.

“Our mother,” Jett confirms. He glances at her with mock annoyance that hides a deep fondness. “You and Amy were both supposed to stay inside until I confirmed the visitor poses no threat.”

Amy scoffs. “You wouldn’t have brought her here if she were a threat.” She narrows her eyes at me. “You’re not a threat, are you?”

“Oh, she’s definitely a threat,” their mother says thoughtfully. I squirm inside as our gazes meet. There’s something penetrating to her stare. Like she can see more deeply into me than makes me comfortable. Whatever she’s

looking for, she must find it, because she nods. “But not to us. Isn’t that right, dear?”

“I don’t want to hurt anyone,” I promise.

“Well, that settles that.” Amy claps her hands. “I’m Amethyst, but you can call me Amy.”

“I’m Ember,” I tell them. My throat feels raw. How long has it been since someone has been so open and friendly to me?

Then again, stuck in Wynrath Crest, it’s not as if I had a chance to meet very many people.

I suddenly can’t remember why I stayed there, abused and miserable for so long.

Oblivious to the moment I’m having, Amy gestures at her mom to continue the introductions. “This is Rhiannon. You’ve clearly already met Jett.”

“And I’m Freya.”

I turn to find a platinum blonde bombshell of a dragon shifter striding toward me. I’m about ninety-five percent straight, but even my jaw wants to drop at her knockout figure. She’s not only hot, but clearly a badass, too. Her hair is chin-length on top but buzzed on the side, and her pale skin is decorated with colorful tattoos that highlight the dips and ridges of pure muscle. Studs gleam in the shell of her ear, and her red leather pants and black tank top only add to her general aura of being someone you shouldn’t mess with.

She comes to a stop in front of me. Jett moves to stand by her side.

Oh.

Even if Jett hadn’t told me he’d found his True Mate, I’d know. The energy of the bond between the two shifters is so strong it tugs at my chest, permeating the air. Old legends I’ve heard of warrior mates drift back to me—magically linked pairs who laid waste to their enemies with fire, claw and sword.

I swallow hard, remembering how King Zephyr and Fury always promised that the Air Kingdom's security lay in vigilance and fear.

I'd take love and a couple of fated mate champions, any day of the week.

With absolute confidence, the new woman, Freya, tilts her chin up and regards me. To Jett, she says, "This is the one who set off the wards?"

The ripples of light and heat I felt moments before my car broke down make sense now. Strong protective magic surrounds this place, alerting the citizens to intruders.

"She was alone," Jett reports. "The wards remain intact."

Freya nods. Addressing me this time, she smiles, but the hint of warmth in her expression doesn't make her any less fierce. "I hope you'll forgive my partner's dramatic tendencies. They do scare away some of our visitors."

"Really?" I ask, dripping sarcasm. I'm getting a little bit of my breath back, and with it, apparently, a healthy dose of sass. "You don't say."

Freya's smile twitches, coming closer to reaching her eyes. "Welcome to Unity. I'm the...mayor, I suppose you could say."

"Four terms running," Amy adds. "She was just re-elected unanimously last month."

I blink hard. A democratically elected leader in a shifter town? Is that even possible?

Apparently so. Not skipping a beat, Freya continues, "Ours is a peaceful, neutral territory. If you're just passing through, we're happy to offer you supplies and rest. Or if you're looking for a place to stay, we welcome all of magic-kind with open arms."

Clearly. We've attracted a bit of a crowd, including a burly bunch who I'm pretty sure I recognize as the football players, now that they've all returned to human form.

“So long as you follow our rules,” Jett hastens to add. “All violence is strictly forbidden. Even minor infractions—”

“Good grief,” Amy interrupts again. This time, she nudges both Jett and Freya aside, approaching me directly. The fact that they allow her to speak volumes. “You all can read her the riot act later. Can’t you see she’s been through something?”

She reaches out for me, more tentatively this time, merely putting a hand on my shoulder.

And it doesn’t make any sense. That small touch shouldn’t mean anything—not from a person I met literally three minutes ago. But there’s a compassion and a kindness in her gaze, and I’ve been working so hard to hold it together for so long. I’ve been going and going and going, running from the Air Kingdom. I’ve been running from my feelings as well. Sure, I’ve indulged in my nightly crying jags, reliving Storm’s rejection and mourning the loss of what’s passed for my family and home for the past decade. But otherwise, I’ve been white-knuckling it, just trying to survive.

Suddenly, I see myself through these strangers’ eyes. I’m a mess. I’ve been wearing the same clothes for days. I packed deodorant, but I still must smell like someone who’s been living out of her car for a couple of weeks. My exhaustion feels like it’s pouring out of my skin. It must be written all over my face. The sheer force of will I’ve been exerting to keep myself standing is suddenly threatening to fail on me.

“Amethyst...” Her mother warns.

Amy holds up a hand. “This girl needs a hot shower, a decent meal, and a good night’s rest. Then you can give her your history and civics lessons. She won’t kill me in the meantime.” She looks to me. “Right?”

Drawing a fingertip through the air, I make a weak effort at re-creating the Fire Kingdom sigil for protection that I saw Jett making earlier. “No murder. Promise.”

Freya’s eyes widen in surprise at my hand gesture, and Jett tilts his head to the side.

Amy's not taken aback in the least. "That's settled, then. Come on. I'm taking you home with me."

Still, I hesitate. "My car." I shake my head. "All my stuff —"

"Carl will head out and look at it this afternoon," Jett promises.

An older gentleman with a white, bushy beard and more than a few missing teeth steps forward. He's barely five feet tall and dressed in greasy overalls, with a long, slender wand sticking out of one of the side pockets. He tips his cap, revealing a pointy ear. Part gnome then, probably, which makes sense given his general vibe as a magical tinkerer. "I'll have her fixed up in no time. Probably just overheated. That happens to a lot of vehicles just this side of the wards."

Carl winks, a mischievous gleam in his eyes. Clearly, the wards are designed to *make* cars overheat and break down, giving the town's guardians a chance to assess the newcomers' intentions.

"I'll drive it into town before supper," he promises.

"Thank you," I say, though it's not as if I have a lot of choice.

"You park it by our place," Amy tells him, tugging on my hand again. I can't think of any reason to delay, and really, it's not like I want to.

I follow her, glancing around as I do.

Stepping out of our way, her mother crosses her arms over her chest, that same piercing look in her eyes as she regards me again. She doesn't voice any opposition to Amy taking me home, though. Our gazes linger, and while I feel like I've passed some sort of preliminary test, I'm well aware that I'm still being scrutinized.

That doesn't deter me from letting Amy lead me out of the gathering crowd. After a decade of being treated like dirt by pretty much everyone in Wynrath Crest, I keep my guard up; for all I know, this might be a trap.

But she wasn't wrong. I'm exhausted straight down to my bones. So long as the trap comes with a shower and a decent night's sleep?

It's a risk I'm willing to take.

CHAPTER
TEN

EMBER

“So,” Amy says, glancing back at me as we cross the square. “Boy troubles?”

I somehow manage not to trip over my own two feet, but that doesn’t stop me from tripping over my words. “I—boy—what? No.”

It’s a bald-faced lie, of course. My boy troubles are so big they practically caused an international incident.

“Right.” She rolls her eyes. “So then what sent you running away from the Air Kingdom like a bat out of hell?”

I swallow, my throat grating. “It’s...complicated.”

“I’ve got time.”

And really, is there any reason to lie? “I never fit in there. I had, like, two friends.”

“Uh-huh.”

I sigh. “One of whom happened to be a boy.”

She bounces and squeezes my hand. “I knew it.”

“We were a secret. His family didn’t approve.” Understatement of the year.

“Assholes.”

A laugh escapes me. It’s too high and loud, but I can’t help myself. I haven’t told her that I’m talking about the royal family of one of the last three remaining dragon kingdoms, but it doesn’t matter.

“*Such* assholes,” I agree. Have I ever been able to say that out loud before? So flippantly and so freely? “Anyway, we got caught. They told me to get out of town or they’d destroy me.” I shrug, like one of the worst in a long series of shitty things that have happened to me was no big deal. “So I ran.”

“Wow.” Amy whistles. “And I thought my last break-up was bad.” She tilts her head side to side. “To be fair, my ex-

girlfriend was a wolf shifter who accidentally ate my pet gerbil.”

I laugh again, only to stop myself when I realize she’s being serious. “Yikes. Sorry for your loss?”

“It’s okay. But seriously. Keep small rodents you care about away from shifters who haven’t learned to control their inner carnivores yet.”

“Noted.”

“Not that I broke up with her for the gerbil thing. She also cheated on me and stole my favorite pairs of earrings. Refusing to apologize for eating Squeakers was just the last straw.”

“That sounds like a nightmare.” It also sounds delightfully normal—aside from the part about her ex eating her pet. I’m honestly envious.

“It was.” Wincing, she glances back at me. “I mean, not running-for-your-life-across-a-desert levels of nightmare. But still. Not great.”

As we’ve been talking about romance fails, she’s taken me to the opposite corner of the town square and down a little alleyway. My first impression of this place continues to be borne out. Even this tiny side street is clean, the red brick of the backs of the buildings decorated with colorful murals of flowers instead of graffiti.

Seemingly arriving at our destination, she drops my hand and grabs a key out of a hidden pocket of her skirt. She fits it to the lock in a heavy wooden door. The instant she grasps the handle, the key glows blue, and the door opens.

“Enchanted lock,” she explains, confirming my suspicion.

I’ve heard of them before, but the witches and wizards who create them are rare in the Air Kingdom, so I can’t remember ever seeing one in action like this. “Neat.”

“It’s coded just to my family, and to people we invite into the protection spell.” She casts her gaze skyward. “My mom’s kind of a security nut.”

I'm not surprised. It's completely consistent with the appraising look Rhiannon gave me earlier. Considering how open Amy is, I can't help wondering what her mother has to fear—or to hide.

As Amy holds the door for me, I peer past her into the dimly lit space within. There aren't any obvious traps. Then again, they wouldn't be much good as traps if they were labeled with glowing signs. Warily, I step across the threshold. Amy closes the door behind me, blocking the light from outside.

My eyes adjust to the relative darkness quickly enough.

I find myself in a tidy but cluttered kitchen. Pots and pans hang from a rack on the ceiling, and there's a massive, vintage stove in the corner beside a cast iron sink. The cabinets are dark wood, and the walls a pale green. Plants grow in pots on half the available surfaces, some spilling vines down the fronts of drawers while others reach their thick, sturdy leaves toward the window's filtered light.

A cookbook of some sort is open on one of the counters, and there's a mortar and pestle and a few sprigs of green set beside it. "Sorry." Amy waves a hand in that direction. "I'm trying to figure out how to brew up a locator potion. I haven't been able to find my phone charger in days, and my mom's starting to give me crap about borrowing hers."

I blink. That's...the most frivolous use of magic I've ever heard, but maybe it's more common around here than it was in the Air Kingdom. "You brew potions?"

"I dabble," she says, deflecting, but it sounds like more than a hobby.

Dragon magic and witch magic have little in common. Even in my travels with my parents, I never heard of anyone who was proficient at both. Amy's mother is definitely a dragon; Amy herself doesn't give off strong dragon vibes, but she has to be one, too. I want to ask a million questions about how she's able to cross the lines, but she doesn't give me a chance.

“Come on,” she says, grabbing me by the hand again to drag me down the hall.

We pass a cozy living room with a big TV, comfy leather couches draped in afghans, and tables and shelves laden with books and plants. At the end of the hall are a couple of big brass doors, protected by what I’m pretty sure are more magical locks.

“What’s over there?”

“We run the local occult shop,” she says breezily. “You know, spell ingredients, magical artifacts. Lots of creepy, weird stuff.” She grins. Clearly, creepy and weird are her jam.

My eyes widen. “Cool.”

“I’ll show you around it later,” she promises. For now, she takes me up a flight of stairs.

At the top of the landing, I glance around. To my left is a huge, stately bedroom decorated in tapestries and art. Definitely Amy’s mom’s. There’s a smaller room beside it that appears to be a study of some sort. Down the corridor to my right, I spot what has to be Amy’s room. Through the open door, I can make out purple walls and band posters and an open closet crammed full of eclectic clothes.

She guides me in that direction, pointing at other doors as we go. “Linen closet. Bathroom. Torture chamber.”

“Um—”

“Just kidding, it’s my mom’s workout-room-slash-craft-room. It used to be Jett’s before he hooked up with Freya and got his own place on the outskirts of town.”

“Oh.”

“And this...” She steps aside, dropping my hand to gesture with a flourish at the room next to hers. “Is the guest suite.”

I peer around the doorframe. The room inside is nice, with light cream walls. Bright light filters in through the gaps between copper-colored curtains. Opposite the windows are two large canvases, depicting vast landscapes, the stormy skies filled with dragons in mid-flight, and something pulls inside

my chest at the sight. I move in to take a closer look, unsure what it is about the images that calls to me.

As I gaze at the bold brushstrokes, Amy bustles past me. She pats the bed, which is made up with crisp white sheets and an invitingly squishy down comforter.

“This is where you’ll sleep,” she informs me.

I start to shake my head, but she won’t have any of it.

“You’re dead on your feet,” she tells me, and okay, fine, she’s not exactly wrong.

I sway slightly. The bed is way too tempting. I’ve slept like crap ever since I left the Air Kingdom, haunted by memories of my last moments there. Missing Storm and Brynn and home, and mourning my chance to connect with my dragon at the Emergence. Terrified of what might find me in the unclaimed lands. Helpless and exposed in the dark.

The fact that I was roughing it in Aunt Helena’s car didn’t exactly help, either, of course. The idea of lying down for real, in an actual bed? In a house protected by magical locks?

If Amy or her mother wants to pull a plot twist and try to murder me in my sleep, honestly, it might still be a decent trade.

“Okay,” Amy says, catching me before I can face-plant into the perfectly fluffy pillows. “Shower first.”

“But...” I make grabby hands toward the bed.

“Shower,” she repeats, firm.

She’s right, of course. I feel gritty and gross, days’ worth of sweat, grime, sand and tears having soaked into my pores.

I allow myself to be steered past the bed and the closet toward a full en suite. I could cry at the rush of running water as Amy gets the shower going. I suddenly feel like there’s dust jammed into my eyeballs. I kept myself going across hundreds of miles of desert, but now that there’s finally relief in sight, I’m desperate to wash it all away.

“I’ll leave you some clean clothes on the bed. Take your time.”

I start to tug at my filthy clothes, but I pause just before she can close the door behind me. One question won’t leave me alone. “Why are you being so nice to me?”

Everyone in Wynrath Crest took one look at me and decided I was an outsider. Part of that I probably brought upon myself, but the cruelty of their constant exclusion, their bullying, their plain old meanness...it broke something inside of me. A random stranger showing me so much kindness doesn’t make sense.

Amy smiles and shrugs. “Because you look like you need a friend.”

With that, she closes the door.

I strip naked. I want to burn the things I was wearing, but instead, I kick them into a pile in the corner. Hopefully they’ll let me use their washing machine before they send me on my way.

I step under the spray. It’s heavenly. Hot and clean and incredible. I lather my hair three times and wash my body about four. Only once I’ve scrubbed myself raw do I allow myself to bask beneath the falling water.

The second I close my eyes, the past couple of weeks crash over me. I see Storm and hear Brynn, and I cower in my rusted, old, stolen car, watching a winged figure in silhouette against the sky.

The first sob takes me by surprise. I don’t know what I’m mourning anymore. I must have cried myself out over Storm by now, but his rejection is still a hole in my heart. And then there’s everything I’ve lost. I release the fear and tension of being an exile, traveling alone and unprotected through unclaimed territory. The relative safety I find myself in, here, in this moment, won’t last. But I allow it to take me away. For a few, precious minutes, I don’t have to be strong. So I fall apart.

The shower washes my tears to my feet, where they flow down the drain.

Finally spent, I soap my face up once more. I turn off the tap, and the silence echoes around me with force. Shaking, I get out. There are soft, fluffy towels set on the sink, and I'm so grateful I can scarcely stand it. I dry myself off, wrap a towel under my arms and open the door.

The guest room is empty, the door shut. A small pile of neatly folded clothes sits at the foot of the bed, along with a bottle of water, a sandwich, and a toothbrush. I set the clothes aside and devour the food. Once my belly is full, I brush my teeth, reveling at feeling clean and full and safe.

Then I drop the towel on the floor. I push back the covers of the bed and sink into it. I have half a second to wonder if I can sleep with it so bright outside, before my eyes flutter closed.

Between one blink and the next, I'm out.

CHAPTER
ELEVEN

EMBER

When I wake up, it's still light outside, though it's shining in from a different angle, so I must have been out for a while. I stretch my body out long, reveling in how good I feel. My back doesn't hurt at all, and I feel rested for the first time since I left the Air Kingdom. Hell, maybe longer.

I rise and make my way to the bathroom where I find my phone in the pile of dirty clothes I shed. It's critically low on batteries. Here's hoping Amy got that phone-charger-finding potion working, because I'm going to need to borrow one, too. It'd be great to have a full battery before I hit the road.

I go to blank the screen. Then I spot the time.

The phone slips out of my hand. I curse and flail, just barely managing to catch it before it smashes into the tile floor.

It's seven-thirty. *In the morning.*

I blink rapidly, setting my phone down on the counter. Well, I guess that explains how well-rested I feel. I just crashed for sixteen hours.

Shaking my head at myself, I take care of business, then wash my hands and splash some water on my face. I regard myself in the mirror. Dark circles still linger beneath my eyes, though they're dramatically less deep than they were. My usually fair complexion is sun-kissed from a couple of weeks in the desert, and it's possible I've lost a bit of weight, but not in a good way. Exhaustion, dehydration, and losing your will to live are a shitty diet plan.

I sigh as I run my hands through my hair. It's a tangled mess; I really should have done something with it before crashing, but oh well. I finger-comb it out the best I can.

I return to the bedroom and sort through the neatly folded stack of clothes that Amy left for me. I got a glimpse at her

closet on my way in yesterday, and it was packed full of items in every color and style. Somehow, she's picked out a variety of basics that are exactly to my taste, not to mention in exactly my size. My eyes sting for a second. She's really been so kind to me. I don't know how I'm going to repay her, but I resolve to find a way.

Dressed in a cropped black T and dark green pants, I open the door and peek outside. Both Rhiannon and Amy's doors stand open. Everything seems to be quiet, but I think I hear movement downstairs, so I head in that direction.

Sure enough, Amy's in the kitchen, wearing a thin, off-the-shoulder, charcoal sweater and black and white plaid pajama pants. Her pink hair up in a messy bun, she's standing over a little copper pot that's simmering on the stove, muttering under her breath as she sprinkles in a pinch of blue powder.

Not wanting to startle her, I do my best to make some noise as I approach. She glances over her shoulder, grinning when she spots me. "Good morning, sleepy head."

I feel a little self-conscious about crashing so hard yesterday, but she clearly doesn't mind. "Thanks again for insisting. I really was exhausted."

"Duh." She holds up a finger. "Give me just one second."

Returning her attention to the pot, she stirs it in a circle three times before turning off the heat. She checks what I thought was a cookbook yesterday, but which is apparently a spell book. Nodding to herself, she decants a dark, blue-green liquid into a glass vial and sets it aside.

"Trying the locator potion again?" I ask.

"Yup, just need to let it cool for a bit." She looks to me. "Can I get you some breakfast? Coffee?"

I want to demur, but my growling stomach gives me away. "Coffee would be great. And maybe a little something to eat, if it's not too much trouble."

She waves a hand dismissively. "No bother at all." She grabs a mug from the cupboard over the sink and fills it from a stainless steel carafe. She sets the mug down on the island and

pushes a ceramic jar of sugar, a little pitcher of cream and a spoon my way. “I promise my coffee brewing is better than my potion brewing.”

“Not having much luck?” I ask, eyeing the vial.

“Well, this is batch four, so...”

I wince sympathetically and doctor my coffee with a spoonful of sugar and a splash of cream. I take a sip and sigh with contentment. It’s perfect. “In any case, your coffee sets a mighty high bar.”

“Glad you like.” She’s migrated over to the other side of the kitchen and gently scooted some vines out of the way to open a little pantry. “Cereal okay?” She rattles off a couple of options, and I choose my favorite. She hands me a box and gets me a bowl. “Milk is in the fridge.”

“Thank you.” I help myself and take a seat at one of the stools beside the island. As she returns to puttering around the kitchen, I poke at my cereal with my spoon in contemplation. Yesterday, it occurred to me how unusual it is for somebody of dragon descent to even dabble in the witchly arts. I furrow my brow and choose my words carefully. “How did you get into that?” I ask after a beat. “Potions and all.”

“Oh,” she says, matter of fact. “My dad was sort of a wizard.”

I manage not to spit cereal all over her nice countertops. “Was he, now?”

“Weird, I know.” She rolls her eyes and gestures out the window in the vague direction of the town center where I made my grand entrance. “You probably guessed that Jett and I are only half-siblings.”

“I mean...”

He is Black, and she’s white. That was kind of a tip-off, but I didn’t want to be weird about it.

“My mom was in this, like, commune-type thing back before the wars. Very hippy-dippy free-love and all. She talks about it like it’s no big deal, but she was in this open

relationship with five guys.” She starts counting on her fingers as if this is all very normal. “A Fire Dragon—that was Jett’s dad, by the way. An Air Dragon, a Water Dragon, a bear shifter and a wizard.”

I blink rapidly, trying to keep my voice even, but it’s a losing battle. “Wow. That’s quite the assortment.”

“Right?” She laughs and shakes her head. “I think they had some ecstasy-potion-fueled dreams about fulfilling those ancient prophecies about uniting the dragon kingdoms and ‘bringing light to shadow’ or whatever.”

My heart skips a beat. I set my spoon down.

For a second, I’m in danger of getting sucked deep into old memories. Those were the stories my own mother and father used to tell. The kind you find in discarded books of fairy tales. No one takes them seriously.

And yet... Those were the stories my mom recited the night before she left me. For years, I blanked it out. I thought it was a coincidence. She loved those tales and so did I. Why wouldn’t we share them on our last night together?

A pang fires off in my chest. Did she know? Even then, sitting in that little room in my aunt’s house, was she aware that she might never come back?

Was she preparing me?

That doesn’t even make any sense, and yet... This feels like a clue. The first one I’ve had in a long and lonely decade.

“Did they really think that was possible?” I ask, my throat tight.

She catches the odd tone in my voice, looking at me with a furrow between her brows. She doesn’t call me on it, though. “I don’t know. I mean, banging a bear and a wizard definitely weren’t part of the myths, so they clearly weren’t taking them too literally? But maybe. You’ll have to ask her.”

Right. I want to roll my eyes. That’s absolutely the kind of thing you bring up with someone you barely know.

Even as I'm mentally scoffing at the very idea, there's another, competing spark inside my chest. The strange looks Rhiannon was giving me out in the center square yesterday take on a new meaning. If she believes in those old stories...

Could Amy's mom have some of the answers to the questions my own mother left me with when she abandoned me as a child? It seems too much to hope that she could give me any insight into what happened to my mom and dad, and I try not to let myself get too carried away.

Besides. It's impossible to miss that everything Amy is saying is phrased in a firm past tense.

Again, taking care with my phrasing, I ask, "You said this was all before..."

I wave my hand around expansively, trying to encompass everything that's happened since we were kids. *Before the wars, before the walls went up, before an entire kingdom disappeared off the map and the Shadow Dragons retreated underground...*

"Yeah." It's her turn to swallow. She turns to take her pot off the stove and carry it over to the sink. Facing away from me, she says, "I was really young when all of that went down."

I was, too, but I remember bits and pieces. Flashes of memory—needing to leave the Fire Kingdom in the dead of night. Explosions in the distance and a stern warning from my father to stay silent and still.

The look in his eyes when he grasped my hand and told me to be brave for my mom. When he kissed my forehead and promised me he'd see me again soon.

My mother's tears.

"We were really close to the border," Amy says, her voice far away. "The commune or whatever—it was on neutral land, but when the fighting got to us, there was no way to escape it."

"How *did* you escape?"

"We almost didn't." She clears her throat, turning on the tap and starting to scrub the pot with an intensity that doesn't

match the amount of residual potion it could still have clinging to it. “My mom wanted to stay and fight, but the others—they all convinced her that she needed to take me and Jett and get out. They said they’d follow as soon as they could, but...”

Her words hang in the air, ominous and weighty and so familiar to my own sad story that my chest aches.

After another few moments of scrubbing, she turns off the tap and sets the pot aside. She rubs a wrist over her eyes.

When she turns to look at me again, her composure has returned, but ghosts linger in her gaze. “My mother spent ages trying to find out what happened to them all. She even went on a trip herself, once, a few years ago. But the commune had been burned to the ground, and no one could say what happened to the people who lived there.”

“I’m sorry,” I grit out.

“It’s okay.” She smiles, but it’s weak. “I mean, who knows, they might be totally fine on some island somewhere.”

“Fingers crossed.”

I’ve entertained those sorts of fantasies myself from time to time. They have a jagged, dark edge, though. I pray my parents are alive and well. But in the deepest, most painful part of my heart, I also hope they’re dead. If they survived and chose not to return for me... If they’re off living their best lives in some secluded corner of the globe...

Well. Then they wouldn’t be the dragons I remember them to be. And on some level, they had might as well be dead.

I swallow hard, my throat tight. Dropping my gaze, I try to let it go and focus on my cereal and my delicious coffee. But I can’t.

“I lost my dad, too,” I blurt out. “Not in the war, but right after.” My vision threatens to go misty. It’s been so long since I’ve talked about this with anyone. “Then my mom, too. She went looking for him—or so she said. But...”

“Right,” Amy says, grim, and the understanding in her tone is almost too much. She’s quiet for a couple of beats, but I

can almost hear the gears grinding in her head. She picks up the bottle of potion she just brewed and holds it up to the light, inspecting it. “I’m not just making this for the phone charger, you know.”

“Oh?”

She shakes her head and places the vial back down. “It’s a teeny tiny baby step, of course. But if this works, I can move on to more advanced finding potions.” She flicks her gaze my way. “Ones that could even find people. Maybe. Someday.”

“Do you really think that’s possible?”

“I’m focusing on the phone charger first. My spell work is pretty wonky. As often as not it backfires.” She frowns, both corners of her mouth pulling down. “My mom always says to keep at it, but there’s a part of me that wonders... Being a half breed... It’s like I’m too much dragon to be a witch, and too much witch to be a dragon.”

Something in the way she says it catches my attention. “How so?”

“I mean, I’m, like the only dragon I know who can’t actually fly.”

My eyes go wide. “You can’t?”

“I’ve tried to Emerge every year, and bupkis.”

I rise. “Me, too.”

“Wait, what?”

Her incredulous expression is a mirror to my own, and my heart rate climbs. “I’ve stood for the trials at the Emergence ceremony in the Air Kingdom four times.” My throat raw, I admit, “I was going to try for a fifth the night I left, only...”

Only everything went to shit. The tender bruise inside my chest throbs, remembering.

Then it occurs to me. “Wait. That means they have Emergences here?”

King Zephyr and the Oracle told us that the magic had been lost to the unclaimed territories. That the dragons who

lived there fought and clawed and snuck their ways into civilized kingdoms in search of their dragons.

I should have known it was another lie, but we were so cut off from the rest of the world.

She nods vigorously. “Twice a year. There’s one coming up in just another month or so.”

My head reels. “You know the date?”

Our Oracle announced them with a couple of weeks to spare, claiming she needed to search the stars.

“They can happen any time, silly.” She rolls her eyes, clearly unaware of how she’s rocking my world. “All you need is a little magic and a clear view of the stars.” Her face lights up. “Will you stay for it? I won’t have to be the only twenty-something-year-old with all the babies trying to connect with my dragon for the first freaking time?”

Dampness gathers at the corners of my eyes, but for once it’s out of sheer happiness. When I was banished, I thought I’d lost any chance at ever summoning my dragon. The spark of hope I felt earlier only grows.

I don’t know what the next couple of months may hold for me, but if there’s an Emergence happening here, you bet your ass I’m going to show up for it. I was willing to risk everything for the chance to call my dragon forth in the Air Kingdom. That hasn’t changed now that I’m in Unity. “Absolutely.”

A new smile glows on Amy’s face. Gone is her bitter, crestfallen expression. Gone is the loss and mourning in her voice. “I *knew* we met for a reason,” she exclaims, crossing the kitchen toward me.

She holds out her hand, and I allow her to grasp it.

“You showed up yesterday, and I could just *feel* it. This, like, connection.”

I didn’t feel the same, but then again, I’m not half-witch.

Then it occurs to me—there’s something else I’m not.

And I hate saying this, but I have to be sure. After all her talk about her ex yesterday...

I wince. "You know I'm straight, right?"

She rolls her eyes, instantly setting me at ease. "Obviously, tragically straight," she agrees, squeezing my hand tighter. "I promise I'm not trying to make a move."

"Okay." *Phew.*

"I mean connected like friends." She grins harder. "Best friends."

A warmth blooms in my chest. I've only ever had one best friend before. A part of me worries I'm betraying Brynn, but it's not as if Brynn won't always be special to me. I had to leave Wynrath Crest, and that means making new connections out here in the larger world.

"I'd like that," I agree.

Amy squeals and lets go of me to open her arms. She stops herself before actually hugging me, but I grin and tug her in.

"I thought you weren't a hugger," she pouts, wrapping her arms around me tight.

"I mean, we'd barely met when you tried the last time."

"Details, details." She pulls back, dropping her arms to her sides, a self-effacing smile curling her lips.

I sit back down, but before I can pick up my spoon again, the back door swings open.

Rhiannon enters, her gray hair up, and her clothes casual, like she was out getting in a bit of morning exercise. She whips off a pair of sporty sunglasses and blinks owlshly. When she spots me, she flinches momentarily. It only takes her a beat to recover. "Ember, good morning. I trust you slept well?"

"Like the dead," I agree. "Thank you so much for letting me stay."

"Of course," she says, poised again, even if her regal posture is quite the contrast to her attire. She gestures behind

her, toward the door. “Your vehicle is parked in the alleyway. I heard from Carl that it’s good as new.”

Well, that’s a relief—if also, probably, an exaggeration. “It was a ten-year-old rust bucket when I got it. If it runs at all, he’s worked a miracle.”

“Not that you’re going to need it,” Amy interrupts. To her mom, she announces, “Great news—Ember’s decided to stick around for at least another month.”

Rhiannon’s brows rise along with her voice. “Has she now?”

I clear my throat. Yesterday, it felt like Rhiannon was peering into my soul. I was so exhausted, I wondered if I was imagining it, but today, there’s no mistaking the intensity in her gaze. “I’d like to, in any case. Assuming I can find a place to stay. And probably some work.”

“You’re staying right here, silly.” Amy says it so matter-of-factly, like she doesn’t understand why I would even think of going anywhere else.

“Oh, no—I couldn’t—”

“Stop.” Amy holds up her hand. “I won’t hear any arguments. We have the space, and you need a soft place to land after everything you’ve been through.” She glances at her mother. “Isn’t that right, Mom?”

Gently, Rhiannon says, “I think it’s up to Ember to decide where she would like to stay.” A soft, impossibly fond smile curls her lips as she regards her daughter and her over-the-top enthusiasm. It only fades slightly when she addresses me again. “But you are welcome, if you do decide to take Amy up on her generous offer.”

I hesitate. I really don’t want to impose on these kind people. Amy and I are apparently best friends now, but I’ve been burned too many times to just magically assume everything will be one hundred percent great.

That said, she’s right—I have been through a lot. My savings won’t last long if I end up putting them all toward rent or a security deposit. Plus, I have no idea how long I’ll decide

to stay. Until the next Emergence is a no-brainer, but beyond that, who knows?

I bite my lip before releasing it. I glance between the two women. “If you’re *sure* it wouldn’t be too much of an imposition—”

“Great.” Amy clasps her hands in front of her chest. “I’m so happy that’s settled. And as for a job—Mom, haven’t you been saying you need to hire an assistant now for ages?”

Wrinkles appear between Rhiannon’s brows. “I have...”

“I used to help out a bunch around here,” Amy explains, “but I got this cool job as a virtual assistant for a wizard in the Fire Kingdom, and Freya hired me to do event planning for the town, and I’ve just been so busy, with all of my—” she gestures vaguely toward her potion-making supplies “—experiments. Mom said it was cool that I cut back my hours, but she really does need another person to help her run the place.”

My heart leaps. This is really all much too good to be true. “I want to earn my keep. You could take rent out of my wages.”

“You’re our guest,” Rhiannon says firmly. “But Amy isn’t wrong. I do need another set of hands in the shop...”

“I have retail experience,” I offer.

“Oh?” Rhiannon tips her head to the side. “This isn’t a typical store. There would be a lot to learn.”

There’s a hint of skepticism in her tone. The weird masochistic part of me that was always standing up to bullies takes it as a challenge. “I’m not afraid of hard work.”

“Just give her a shot,” Amy urges her mom. “She’ll do great.”

Rhiannon eyes me up and down. I stand up straighter under her inspection, tilting my chin up and meeting her glinting, black gaze straight on.

“I suppose we can bring you on,” she finally allows. “On a trial basis, of course.”

I nod, relief flooding my chest. “And if it’s not a good fit, I won’t take it personally.”

Amy squeals, clapping her hands and bouncing. She throws her arms around us both. “This is going to be so great! Just wait. I can already tell you’re going to get on brilliantly.”

Rhiannon smiles indulgently, but doesn’t waste time extricating herself from Amy’s hold. She pats Amy’s arm. “Here’s hoping.”

Amy pulls her phone out of her pocket. “I have to tell Freya and Jett. They’re going to love this.” She starts typing away, still babbling about how amazing everything is going to be.

While she’s distracted, Rhiannon catches my eye. Her smile slides away, replaced by a tentative sort of wariness. She clearly wants to trust me, but like me, she’s not ready to jump into anything head-first. “You’ll have to excuse my daughter. She can get a bit...carried away sometimes.”

“I can see that.” There’s a warmth I can’t hide from my tone. I’ve only known Amy for about eighteen hours, but her energy has already endeared her to me.

“People like you and me...” Rhiannon’s voice lowers. Her gaze holds mine meaningfully. “We’re not like that, though.”

The warmth fades from my chest, replaced by a nervous energy. “No,” I say slowly. “No, we’re not.”

It’s strange, being regarded with such intense...*neutrality*. Almost everyone in Wynrath Crest sized me up immediately and found me wanting. Amy decided we were instant friends, and that’s been great, but it’s also so difficult for me to trust.

The way Rhiannon’s looking at me... I have the strong sense that she means me no harm. She wants to see the best in me. But the ghosts in her eyes are all too familiar. Her reservations echo my own. Her trust is something I have to earn.

And maybe it’s just the part of me that loves a challenge that’s egging me on, but I’m possessed by a sudden, driving desire to prove myself to her. To show her that I’m worthy.

I exhale, long and hard.

Apparently, I'm going to be both her temporary lodger and her employee. If I'm looking to prove myself, I'm going to have plenty of opportunities.

CHAPTER
TWELVE

EMBER

A few hours later, freshly showered, her long gray hair up in an elegant twist, and dressed in a flowing black dress, Rhiannon stands in front of the doors connecting the residence to the shop. “I did warn you that this wasn’t your typical retail establishment...”

I nod, sucking in a breath and mentally preparing myself for this place to be seriously weird.

She plucks a key from a hidden pocket in her dress and fits it to the lock. It glows purple, and she turns the handle and pushes open the door.

Lights flicker on as she strides inside. I follow her, craning my neck to look around, and forget ‘weird.’

This place is *awesome*.

It’s enormous, for one thing. I search back in my memory to my arrival in town. Amy led me away from the center square and down an alleyway, and I guess I remember the brick buildings we were skirting behind being big enough. I’m still taken aback by the cavernous space I find myself in now.

“This is the back room,” Rhiannon explains, leading me past shelf after shelf piled high with scrolls and books and jars and urns and boxes in every size, shape and color. “We deal in magical objects, obscure ingredients, artifacts. Special items in high demand by collectors all over the globe.” She glances back at me. “Everything is magically secured, of course. Only once it’s been properly processed through the register can it be removed from the premises.”

I swallow. That’s a very polite way of telling me she’ll know if I get a case of sticky fingers—which obviously, I would never do. “Understood.”

She gives me a brief tour as we walk, rattling off a loose classification system for the vast amount of inventory collected back here.

A set of gray, leather-bound volumes catches my eye at the end of one of the rows of shelves. They have an aura to them that I can feel in my bones. The air around them ripples with power. I squint at the symbols stamped into the spine, casting back in my memory for their meaning. “‘Transmutation of Precious Stones,’” I read.

Rhiannon stops, her head tilting to the side in surprise. She follows my gaze to the old, dusty tomes. “You understand those runes?”

I hesitate, unsure if I’ve messed up the translation. “I’m a little rusty,” I admit. “Stone Dragon magic was forbidden in the Air Kingdom.”

“Breathing is forbidden in the Air Kingdom,” she mutters. Louder, she asks, “Can you read the rest?”

I do my best to decipher the titles on the other spines. Her brows rise with each one I fumble my way through translating.

When I’m finished, she shakes her head and takes off her glasses to rub the lenses on her skirt. “If that’s your idea of being ‘rusty’, you must have been quite the expert before you ended up in the Air Kingdom.”

She says it matter-of-factly, but I hear it as the compliment it is. I warm inside at having impressed her. “My parents traveled a lot when I was a kid.”

“And they taught you the Fire Kingdom sigils, as well, I suppose,” she says, evoking my efforts to replicate the gestures Jett made the day before.

“It was actually a shaman’s son who I met in the Fire Kingdom.” While my parents were parlaying with his father, the two of us were left to our own devices. We mostly taught each other swear words from different dragon clans, but we shared a few other secrets, too.

Rhiannon blinks a couple of times. “Well, you’re just full of surprises, aren’t you?”

There’s no real answer to that, so I keep my mouth shut and follow her as she continues along the aisle.

“No one is allowed into the back room without staff present,” she tells me as we arrive at another door, which she unlocks with the same key. She gestures at an old, corded phone hung on the wall just inside the door. “If you ever get locked in, you can always use that to get a hold of either me or Amy for help.”

“Good to know.”

When I first arrived, Amy made it sound like her mother was paranoid for employing such strong security around their home, but now that I’ve seen the kinds of magical items she deals in, I wonder if she’s being paranoid enough. Those Stone Dragon books alone must be worth a small fortune, not to mention the other texts and artifacts Rhiannon’s collected.

The front section of the shop is no less impressive, for all that it’s less cluttered. The space is dim but inviting, the windows covered with velvet curtains, while amber flames glow in sconces on the walls. Arm chairs flank a slate fireplace. Shelves display artifacts of modest power, and little jars are artfully arranged behind glass. Neatly typed labels proclaim the names of different spell ingredients, and I can see Amy’s hand in the design and curation of the place.

“Casual visitors come in to browse. More serious ones will know what they’re looking for.”

That makes sense, with so much of the inventory locked away.

She clears her throat. “We also have some select clientele with whom I communicate directly. They’ll be aware when we have objects of interest coming through.”

“Got it.” I’m not going to pretend that doesn’t sound a little bit shady, but I’ve watched enough heist movies to understand that folks who deal in high end collectibles have their own ways of doing things.

Now that we’re done with the tour, I scan the space again. Originally, this just seemed like a way to help out and earn my keep. Now, it feels like an opportunity I’d be a fool to pass up.

I roll up my sleeves, prepared to take some initiative. “Where would you like me to get started? I know how a normal register works, but...” I glance toward the front counter. The equipment looks a far sight more sophisticated than the glorified calculator and cashbox Maude trained me on at the vintage store back in Wynrath Crest.

Rhiannon waves a hand. “The enchantments will take some time to get you up to speed with. We’ll worry about all of that later.”

“Okay.” I furrow my brows. “Then the stuff you actually need help with is...”

“New, specialty inventory.” She takes me to the other corner of the store, where she waves a hand. A bookshelf dissolves before my eyes, revealing the entrance to what appears to be a vault of some kind. “With your unexpected skill set, you couldn’t have arrived at a better time.”

She enters in a code, then presses her palm to a scanner that glows with the same purple energy that emanated from her enchanted locks. She turns a dial, and the vault door swings open, revealing a room packed full of unopened crates.

“Um...”

“This hasn’t been widely publicized, but Freya has offered Unity as the site for a peace summit between the Fire and Stone Kingdoms.”

That gets my attention. I whip around, eyes wide. “Here? So close to the Air Kingdom?”

“It was an unconventional, choice, I agree. But Freya knows what she’s doing.” From the sound of her voice, she has her own reservations, but apparently she’s planning to make the most of the opportunity. “Dignitaries from both kingdoms will be arriving in a few weeks’ time, and I’ve had some shipments sent in for the occasion. It’ll all need to be sorted and entered into our system.”

I glance at the crates. Packing labels show that they come from all over. Some bear familiar runes and symbols, and I can

make out text in languages I haven't encountered since my travels with my family as a child.

Rhiannon is really entrusting me to go through them all?

"There are items of power you'll be handling. You must be on your guard," she warns me. "Some of them are seductive. They may call to you. You must never answer."

Well, that's not ominous or anything.

My throat dry, I nod. "Right."

"I'll pre-sort most of the materials. The most dangerous items should never cross your path, but if they do, never hesitate to bring them to me."

"Of course."

And it's not that I'm not taking her warning to heart. I am. Even now, I can feel the power radiating off of some of the crates. I'd be foolish indeed to imagine they posed no risk.

But I don't care.

A low hum of excitement buzzes in my chest. I practically rub my hands together with glee.

All those years in the Air Kingdom, I thought it was just my parents I was missing—and don't get me wrong. Even now, I miss them so much it hurts.

But I missed *this*, too. The chance to learn. Exposure to other cultures. Celebration of otherness and the magic of dragons from all four corners of the four, historic realms.

The repression of everything except Air Dragon magic... It was stifling in ways I didn't even understand until now.

I breathe in the fresh air. It smells like dust and books and scrolls, and I can't wait to get my hands on it all.

"No problem, boss," I tell her. "Just point me where you want me to start."



“So how’s our guest settling in?” Freya asks that night. As she sweeps in the back door, she presents Rhiannon with a bottle of wine before pressing a kiss to her cheek.

She and Jett apparently come over for dinner at least once a week, so their decision to drop by today isn’t anything out of the ordinary. I can’t help feeling like they’re checking up on me, though.

They have good reason to, of course. I’m an outsider, and while Amy and Rhiannon have welcomed me in with open arms, the leaders of the town are well within their rights to want to keep an eye on me.

“So far, so good,” Rhiannon assures Freya.

“For certain definitions of ‘settled,’” Amy scoffs, pointedly snagging the basket of bread I was taking to the table. “Considering she basically passed out for sixteen hours, then spent the entire day slaving away in the back room of the store and then trying to cook us all dinner.”

She’s...not wrong, I guess.

The day has been a whirlwind. Sorting through the specialty shipments Rhiannon had gotten in was a challenge, but one I was delighted to tackle. I may have impressed her with my rudimentary understanding of ancient Fire and Stone Kingdom symbology, but I wasn’t lying when I told her my skills were rusty. I dusted them off the best I could, though, and made a decent dent in cataloguing the backlogged inventory. The pieces I couldn’t identify and the texts I couldn’t decipher I put aside, so I can consult with Rhiannon about them tomorrow. I’ll have to ask Amy if I can borrow a notebook, or if maybe she can point me at a store in town where I can buy one so I can jot things down. I’m sure I have a lot to learn.

I never put this much effort into my coursework for my degree. But obscure dragon languages are way, way more interesting than accounting, so who can blame me?

Eventually, Rhiannon shooed me out of the store, though. I found Amy here, starting dinner, and despite her protests, I

insisted on rolling up my sleeves. Cooking for Aunt Helena was a chore, and I always appreciated Brynn stepping in to lend me a hand.

Cooking today with Amy was straight-up fun. She had a plan, and I let her be in charge, but I found ways to help. We fell into a rhythm, prepping ingredients while chatting and messing around.

“I’m used to pitching in,” I insist, ceding the bread but heading to the silverware drawer to start setting the table.

“Clearly,” Amy agrees. She shoos me away with force this time, pressing a glass of wine into my hands and pointing me at the table. “What you need”—she points at me with a butter knife—“is practice letting other people take care of you.”

My throat suddenly goes tight. A tender achiness squeezes my ribs as I think back to those nights I spent preparing meals at my aunt’s house. She taunted me and put me down, calling me lazy while reclining in her chair.

No one’s taken care of me in a long, long time. Brynn did, here and there. When she could. Storm did, in his own way, too.

Not that I want to go getting sentimental about that jerk.

I haven’t had time to think about him since I arrived, but the wound he left with his rejection is just something I have to live with now. It’s always there, slowly healing, but still raw.

Giving in to Amy’s badgering, I retire to the table, pulling out a seat beside Jett, who’s already helped himself to a beer. He angles it toward me, and I clink my glass against the bottle.

“There’s no sense arguing with them.”

Amy narrows her eyes at him from across the room. “You could actually stand to argue a little more.”

“Shit,” he mutters, pretending to hide behind his beer.

“Go grab the plates for your sister,” Rhiannon orders him.

He gets up, holding his hands in front of his chest as if to profess his innocence. “I was just trying to stay out of the

way.”

“He’s good at that,” Freya says, stealing his chair. She has a glass of wine, too, but it’s in a tumbler instead of stemware, which seems appropriate somehow.

It’s funny, how regal and imposing these people all seemed yesterday. They’re still impressive, of course. Beautiful and fierce and—especially in Freya and Jett’s cases, where they’re visibly armed and rippling with muscle—dangerous.

But they’re a whole lot less intimidating when they’re teasing each other and dancing around the kitchen, working to get a home-cooked meal on the table.

The overwhelming sense of family presses in on my ribs again. Memories of my own parents flood my mind. Is this what our life could have been like? Is this what I’ve been missing out on?

“They’re really something, aren’t they?” Freya muses, her tone low and confidential and clearly directed just at me.

“Yeah.” I swallow, my throat going tight as I watch the loving, happy chaos. “It’s nice.”

Freya hums, inviting me to elaborate.

I shrug. “Where I was staying—with my aunt. Before. It was never like this.”

It was sullen silences and resentment and a constant knowledge that I was a burden, taking up space under an angry, bitter old woman’s roof.

“They welcomed me in with open arms, too,” Freya confides. “The first time Jett brought me home, after we found each other...” Her voice softens. When I glance at her, I find her gaze focused on her mate. The love that shines in her eyes makes her entire face light up. “Rhiannon was guarded at first, of course. Who wouldn’t be, when their son brings home a woman wrapped in leather and knives?”

“Every mother-in-law’s dream,” I agree.

Fortunately, this particular woman wrapped in leather and knives hears my teasing for what it is. One corner of her

mouth tilts up. “Exactly. But she never questioned our bond. She made me feel right at home, while Amy declared me the sister she never had.”

My heart twists slightly. “Sounds like a pattern.”

“It is.” Freya turns to me. “They’re good people.”

Her brow lifts ever so slightly, and I fight to suppress the shiver that runs up my spine. She doesn’t have to threaten me. It’s immediately clear what will happen if I do anything to hurt them.

“They really are,” I agree, holding her gaze.

She continues staring at me for a long moment before finally looking away. She brings her glass to her lips and takes a sip. “It sounds like you made quite the impression on Rhiannon today. Not that many folks speak both Fire and Stone Kingdom tongues.”

I shake my head, glad to be back on at least relatively safe terrain. “My spoken language is basic at best. I read and write much better.”

“No one *speaks* the ancient dialects,” she says, dismissive, “unless they’re showing off or trying to keep secrets. The symbology is far more useful.”

“I’m glad it came in handy today.”

“It may yet come in handy once again.” She casts a glance at me out of the corner of her eye. “How would you feel about me putting your name in to assist with preparations for the summit?”

I suck in a rough breath. “I’d be honored. But you just met me...”

“That I did, but I’m a good judge of character. The rest of this family is, too.” She holds up a hand to interrupt me before I can further demur. “We wouldn’t ask you to handle anything top secret or sensitive to peace and security. But there’s plenty of work to go around, and a passing knowledge of the visiting dragons’ cultures could be useful.”

Grateful for her frankness, I let out an exhalation and nod. “I’d be happy to help, then.”

I smile in thanks to Jett, who reaches over my shoulder to set a plate in front of me. He leans in closer as he places one in front of Freya, too, and she hums in approval, her neck tipping to the side to accept a soft graze of his lips against her throat.

I force myself to look away. Casual intimacy radiates off of them. It’s sensual, too, watching two mates share touches like that.

My own skin prickles, and my thoughts flit toward memories of Storm again, but I try not to dwell. I miss his smiles and his laughs, and dammit all, I miss touching him, too. I miss *being* touched.

An unwelcome warmth gathers, low in my belly.

While I’ve been wandering the desert these past couple of weeks, my sex drive has completely vanished. Now that I’m well-rested and fed and safe, apparently it’s considering a return. Talk about inconvenient. I don’t have time or energy to find a partner. Even if I wanted to get myself off, how would I manage it? Every sexual experience I’ve ever had has been with Storm, and I can hardly bear to think about him, much less fantasize about making love to him.

Blinking hard, I take a sip of my wine and try to keep my thoughts PG-13. Freya notices, though.

“Sorry,” she says, once Jett is safely back on the other side of the room. “You know how fated mates can be. It’s hard to keep our hands off each other.”

“I can imagine.”

Goodness knows I had a hard enough time keeping my hands off Storm, and clearly we weren’t meant to be.

“You left someone behind,” Freya observes. She says it matter-of-factly, but sympathy colors her tone.

“Yeah.” I blink again, unwilling to get emotional about an asshole who refused to be seen in public with me, and who

then just stood there and watched while I was exiled from our home for what we, together, had done. “Yeah, I did.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be.” I turn my head to look at her. “It’s ancient history.”

Or at least someday soon, I tell myself, it will be.



I’M FULL OF SHIT, of course.

Later that night, after a delicious dinner and another round of arguing with Amy over whether or not I was allowed to help with the dishes—which I was, obviously—I end up in my room. Despite my ridiculously long night’s sleep, I’m still exhausted to my bones. I’ve found some comfort here in my first full day in Unity. Some friends, even. Maybe the close kind of friends who will eventually feel like family.

But the idea that my breakup with Storm is ‘ancient history’? That it still isn’t tearing me apart?

Let’s just say that Denial isn’t a river in Egypt.

It’s not that late, but I wash up anyway, and change into a fresh pair of pajamas Amy lent me. I hauled all my stuff out of my car, but I didn’t have a chance to put it through the wash today. Tomorrow, I’ll get around to it.

For now, I luxuriate in the silky soft T-shirt and shorts I’m wearing. They’re so much nicer than anything I own, the fabric sensually draping over my skin.

I fall into bed, assuming I’ll read for a bit, but I struggle to focus. The points of my breasts are sensitive where they drag against my shirt. Between my legs, I feel soft and warm and tender, and I’m reminded again that it’s been weeks since I’ve been touched—even by my own hand.

A scattershot flash of pain dashes through my chest. The last time I was touched, it was by Storm. I can still feel the rasp of his stubble against my throat, the hard, calloused grasp

of his hands on my body and the fullness of his huge cock thrusting into me.

I can feel the ripples of pleasure, see the twisted contours of his handsome face as his mouth dropped open and he filled me with his seed.

I can hear his father.

I can hear *him*.

She's nothing.

I toss my book aside and bury my face in the pillow. It's all I can do not to scream.

I can't think about sex without thinking about him, and about how badly he hurt me. He lied, and he betrayed me, and he left me to fend for myself when his father and his brother decided to kick me out of my home.

So why do I miss him so much?

Worse—why am I so fucking *horny*?

Fuck this. I get up long enough to turn out the lights and double-check I locked the door. I bury myself under the covers and grab my phone. In the past, when I've wanted to get myself off, I've just fantasized about Storm. With his hard body and skilled hands and filthy mouth, he gave me plenty of material to work with. I refuse to think about him ever again, though, so to block him out, I pull up an erotica site I've messed around on a time or two before.

I surf around until I find a story that gets my pulse racing. I read it one-handed, letting the other one finally drift to the needy place between my legs. I have to stifle a gasp at the first touch of my own fingers across my achy flesh. I'm slick already, my clit swollen. As I stroke my fingertip along that sensitive nub, lightning crackles up my spine. I dip a fingertip down to my opening and slip it inside, only it's not enough.

I squeeze down, trying to get the feeling of fullness that I've only ever received from a raw, thrusting cock, but it's no use. I think of Storm and grit my teeth.

I focus on the story. The girl in it is brazen in a way I would never dare to be, waltzing into a bar with sex on her mind. She sidles up to a dirty group of men and bets them she can beat them all in a game of pool, knowing full well she'll lose. They know it, too. When she can't pay up, she acts all innocent and offers them her body.

They descend on her.

Hot pleasure darts to the twin points of my breasts. I've only ever been with one man at a time before—hell, I've only ever been with one man, period. But the idea of taking on three or four has always elicited a dirty thrill inside of me.

As the first man rips off her clothes, I drill harder at my clit. I can feel my orgasm, off in the distance. It's going to be a good one. The man shoves her down and spreads her legs. He pushes into her wet pussy as another of his friends grabs her by the jaw and presses the tip of his cock to her lips. I rub faster and faster, my toes curling at the need in my blood. I chase my climax with determination, rushing hard to get there already so I can go to sleep.

But the moment I swear I'm about to crest, I see Storm's face again.

I swear out loud and squeeze my eyes shut tight.

It's a mistake. There he is again, imprinted on my thoughts. Every memory I have of sex is tied up with a memory of him, and how am I supposed to do this? How am I supposed to survive losing him?

Having him cast me out and tell me that I'm worthless.

I force my eyes open and try again to read the story, and for a minute, I even get into it. The first man shoots his come into her unprotected womb, then steps aside. She's lifted onto hands and knees and entered again from behind, while the guy in her mouth starts fucking her throat. Someone starts playing with her ass, and my pussy ripples. I feel myself starting to rise again. But the emptiness inside me howls.

Again, my orgasm slips away, and I bite my lip to quiet my growl of frustration.

Fuck this.

I let my phone fall to the bed beside me. Determined to keep imagining a giant, hedonistic gang bang, I bring my other hand to my throbbing pussy. A harsh sigh escapes me as I shove two fingers inside my cunt. That's better. I rub my clit over and over and try to place myself in the bar from the story, surrounded by guys who want to use my body.

I remember Storm taking me from behind, his hot cock filling me up just right—and *no*—

I replace him with other, faceless men.

And then suddenly, out of nowhere, I imagine fiery skin and blazing eyes. Ripples of pleasure surge through me as I picture myself being lowered onto this mysterious man's cock, and there's another man behind me. A second cock presses into my back, and I turn and kiss hot lips. I gaze back into black eyes. A broad hand grasps my head, and I find a third cock right there, waiting to press itself into my open mouth. I taste its silky head, and my eyes roll back. It's all so *real*. I grind down onto the enormous cock inside of me and whine.

A voice orders, "Come for us," and fuck—it's Storm's voice, but it doesn't matter.

Orgasm crashes over me with an intensity that steals my breath away. My entire body twists and writhes, my pussy pulsing around my fingers. I throw my head to the side, just so happy to have the pressure inside of me released.

It's only after, when I come drifting back to the surface, that my eyes snap open.

On an exhalation, I breathe, "What the fuck?"



STORM

“What the fuck?” I dig the heels of my hands into my eyes hard enough to gouge them out.

I’ve been sleeping like shit the past couple of weeks, so I went to bed early, hoping maybe I could get a little rest in before the nightmares set in.

Ha.

I woke up after less than an hour, and no—what I experienced wasn’t a nightmare.

But it might as well have been.

I shove back the covers. I sleep naked, a fact that’s never really been an issue before. Except right now, my cock is hard as granite, my balls aching and full, and yeah, okay, I haven’t exactly been taking care of myself very much of late. But I can’t blame the most ridiculous erection I’ve had in my life on a lack of self-abuse.

The dream I had explodes across the back of my eyes.

Ember. Naked and gorgeous, and I was fucking her hard and rough—only we weren’t alone. Other guys were there with us, and is that some kind of metaphor or something?

I was always shit at English class, so hell if I know the symbolism. It isn’t good, though.

Self-loathing churns, deep in my gut.

Ember could be anywhere right now. After what I did, I have no right to try to contact her, but it grates at me that I have no idea what happened to her. Is she okay? Does she hate me?

I growl, willing my erection to go down.

She *should* hate me. I was a fucking asshole to her. She deserves better. She always did.

“Fuck,” I mutter.

My cock throbs, and I curl my hands into fists. *Grandma*, I think to myself. *Maggots and fleas and Fury's old gym socks*.

None of the disgusting thoughts I can usually rely on to get my body under control do any good.

I curse beneath my breath again.

When I wrap my hand around my shaft, it's instant relief. It hurts, too, though, the pressure too high and my skin on fire. More fragments from my dream rush through my brain. It was so real—the taste of her skin and the scent of her desire. The sweat and the slick, hard slide of my cock into her, over and over again. Her moans and the raking of her nails down my back, and those other men, waiting to take their turns—

I grunt as my cock erupts. Come shoots everywhere, my vision flashing white.

The instant it's over, I'm utterly disgusted with myself.

I reach for the box of tissues by my bed and clean up the mess, treating myself roughly. The discomfort is small punishment. How dare I think about her? I lost that right when I refused to claim her as my own. I didn't fight for her.

We were together. We were caught. And she alone paid the price.

So much for getting any sleep tonight.

I toss on a pair of basketball shorts and a T-shirt, then shove on my running shoes. What I probably need is to stretch my wings, but I don't trust myself in dragon form right now. I exit my room, planning to head down the back stairs and out toward the trail that cuts through the woods.

As I do, though, I catch sight of a shadowy figure standing at the other end of the hall.

Ice flashes into my veins. He nods at me, his black eyes glittering in the distance.

I swallow hard and nod in return.

He's not stopping me, though. Just standing guard.

The new security around the mansion grates at me, and not just because I don't like being watched. The dragons stationed around our home are strangers. Once upon a time, they were our worst enemies.

I'm pretty sure, deep down, that they still are.

My stomach churns as I descend the stairs at speed.

My father's made a deal with the devil, and he's sold my sister Aria to seal it.

I hate myself for abandoning Ember, but I was right. I'm needed here at home. I may not be able to stop what's coming.

But I can't turn my back on my sister or my kingdom.

Not without a fight.

CHAPTER
THIRTEEN

EMBER

“That’s it.” Amy literally stamps her foot, her hands on her hips and a determined expression on her face. “You’ve been here for almost two weeks and you’ve barely left this house.”

I glance around, caught off guard.

I’m sitting on the living room couch in Amy and Rhiannon’s house. Like usual, I spent the day organizing stuff in the shop. As promised, more shipments have been arriving every day in preparation for the upcoming summit. Even if they hadn’t been, I would have had my hands full. Rhiannon wasn’t kidding about needing an assistant. There was a massive backlog of inventory to contend with, and I’m only just now starting to get a handle on it.

I figured Amy and I would hang around and watch a movie or something tonight. Most evenings, after work and dinner, I beg off and go read in my room. I’m used to being on my own. But Amy was right, and we’ve become fast friends while I’ve been here. She’s easy to talk to, and we have plenty in common. When she said she wanted to do something together today, I was happy enough to agree.

Apparently, her idea of “doing something” is slightly different from mine, though. Too late, I notice that I’m wearing pajamas and she’s decked out in dark-rinse jeans and a flowy, low-cut pink blouse and heels.

An embarrassed flush warms my face. “I’ve been to the grocery store,” I argue, but I know as well as she does that that isn’t what she meant.

She narrows her eyes at me. “We’re going out. Tonight. With friends.”

My stomach twists with unease. “I don’t know...”

“I promise you, my friends are super nice, and you’re going to love The Dragon’s Flagon. It’s trivia night tonight,”

she pouts, and my resistance starts to crumble.

The truth is that I have been a bit of a shut-in. The past couple of weeks have passed in a blur—in the best possible way. I’ve felt safe, here at Amy and Rhiannon’s house. I have a stable internet connection, and I’m making great progress getting caught up on my coursework. The work I’m doing at Rhiannon’s shop is challenging and interesting. My weird fantasy about getting banged by Storm and a whole bunch of other, anonymous dragons hasn’t surfaced again, and if I can’t decide whether that’s a good thing or a bad thing, well...

None of this has given me any real impetus to get out there, is what I’m saying.

I want to see the rest of the town. I want to meet people and do things.

I also remember how that went in Wynrath Crest. Every time I opened my mouth, it seemed like I made a new enemy. I never would have dared to try to go to a bar—much less to a trivia night.

They’ve always looked like fun on TV, though.

Sensing weakness, Amy holds out a hand. I slip my palm into hers and let her drag me up. “Come on. Go put on something hot, and let’s go.”

Fifteen minutes later, I descend the stairs, dread in my heart, but mixed in alongside it is this tiny, fleeting dash of hope. I’m not exactly dressed up; I don’t own anything that isn’t practical. But my boots are clean, and with ripped black leggings tucked into them, I look a little bit badass. My white tank top is low-cut, showing off the decorative straps of my nicest black bra. A short black skirt, a beaded necklace, a leather wrap bracelet and a ton of eyeliner complete the look.

Amy’s eyes widen as she takes me in. She whistles. “Now that’s what I’m talking about.”

I flick my gaze toward the ceiling. “Thanks. It’s the best I could do.”

“This weekend, we’ll go shopping,” she promises.

I have an instant flashback to that awful altercation I had with Jasmine and Fury at the boutique in Wynrath Crest. When Storm looked at me and pretended he didn't know who I was.

And then I bought the amazing dress that I got completely, totally, utterly fucked over in—in every sense of the word.

“Eh,” I mutter, heading for the door.

“That's not a no,” Amy says in a sing-song voice.

“Let's just get through whatever you have planned for this night first.”

Outside, it's just past sunset, the air warm but lacking the intensity of the midday sun. The cafe down the way is doing a brisk business, and we get distracted for a minute when Amy stops to say hello to a couple of shifters seated at a table outside. She introduces me, and I smile and wave but keep my mouth shut. The folks she's talking to give me a pass, mercifully, welcoming me to town without asking too many questions.

We're on our way again before long. Amy exchanges quick greetings with a few other people, and I try to remember their names, but it's going to take me a little while.

A few blocks and a couple of turns later, we arrive at a little brick building with an old-timey wooden sign outside. “The Dragon's Flagon” is spelled out in bold yellow letters on a maroon background beside a cartoon picture of a dragon holding a beer mug. By the tilt of the dragon's head and the way its eyes are staring in different directions, it's clearly had a flagon or two too many.

I raise my brows as if to say *Really?*

Amy laughs and ushers me inside. “Just give it a chance.”

Within, it looks like...well, a normal pub, I suppose. It's a little old-fashioned, with wood-paneled walls and low amber lights. There are pool tables and a dart board in the back, and vintage ads for beer and liquor hung up everywhere. They're doing a good business, most of the tables full, and a decent smattering of folks hanging out around the bar.

“Amy! Amy!”

Amy lights up and points toward a young woman with short black hair who’s waving at us from over by the window. She’s seated at a table with a few other twenty- or thirty-somethings, including, to my relief, Freya.

“There they are! Come on.”

“Hey!” The woman with the short hair stands and pulls Amy into a hug.

“Hey yourself.” Amy pulls back. “Nora, this is Ember. Ember, Nora.” She gestures around the table and rattles off a few other names that I try to commit to memory, but I’m resigned to having to ask at least a half dozen times.

“Glad you decided to join us,” Freya says coolly as I take the seat beside her.

“I didn’t exactly get a lot of choice in the matter,” I confide.

Freya laughs. “Amy dragged you here? I’m shocked, I tell you, just shocked.”

We settle in, ordering drinks and chatting. Everybody else clearly knows each other, so a lot of the conversation goes over my head, but I’m okay with that. I listen and try to laugh or nod at the right times.

Slowly, the tension inside of me begins to relax. There’s still a part of me that expects these people to turn on me. I was an outcast for so long that instantly being accepted into a circle of friends seems too good to be true.

“So, Ember,” Nora says, looking to me. “Amy says you just moved here from the Air Kingdom.”

I swallow, unprepared to be addressed directly. “That’s right.”

“That’s so cool,” one of the other people says.

“What’s it like?” another asks.

I shrug and reach for my drink. “I mean, it’s okay, I guess.” As I take a sip, I glance around. It’s second nature to

look for one of King Zephyr's guards or anyone who might be a spy. Then I remember—I'm not under his rule anymore. He kicked me out—which sucked, but there's an upshot. I'm finally free to say what I want. Setting down my glass, I add, "If you don't mind living under a tyrant and being surrounded by assholes who hate everybody who isn't exactly like them."

Freya smiles, and Amy laughs outright.

Grinning, Nora holds up her glass for me to clink. "Tell us how you really feel."

I just did, and it was *amazing*.

Before I can go spouting off any more harsh judgments about my former home, a male voice comes over the speakers. "Good evening, everybody." At the front of the room, a skinny, bald, white man wearing thick-rimmed glasses and an expertly tailored vintage suit has stepped up to the microphone. "Who here's ready for some trivia?"

Whoops go up around the room. People quiet down pretty quickly for the most part, though there's still some chatter over by the bar. At our table, game faces go on. Even Freya sits up taller, and Amy smirks, a competitive gleam shining in her eyes.

I finish my drink and set the glass down.

The MC rattles off the rules. Apparently, we all get a chance to register our teams and receive our answer sheets. There will be three rounds, separated by breaks. No phone use allowed, no calling out answers, and the host's decisions are final.

"Finally," he says, "the theme for tonight is..." Patrons drum their tables in anticipation. The host raises a brow before announcing, "'Under Cover Of Darkness.'"

Reactions go up around the room, ranging from excitement to bewilderment.

"Well, that isn't at all cryptic," Nora moans.

"It's really not," Amy argues. "It'll probably be a bunch of stuff about nocturnal animals."

“Ooh, or maybe spooky stuff,” someone else suggests. “Werewolves and vampires.”

“Harmful stereotypes,” a guy from the next table over retorts. I glance over his way and do a double-take, suddenly recognizing him and his buddies as the wolf pack I saw out playing football the day I first arrived in town.

“It could be Shadow Dragons,” Freya says.

I whip my head around, my eyes going wide. Amy and a couple of others audibly gasp.

“What?” Freya shrugs at our reactions. “It could be.”

Amy lets out a rough exhalation. “Guess we’ll find out soon.”

Nervous energy swims around in my gut. I’m not used to people talking openly about the Shadow Dragon Kingdom. They’re basically the dragon equivalent of the boogey man, blamed for everything that’s ever gone wrong in the history of our kind. The last time they were heard from, it was during the war, when they were agents of chaos, rumored to be responsible for attacks on all sides.

They disappeared along with the Water Kingdom at the end of the last battle, but no one truly believes they’re gone for good.

Weakly, I say, “Or maybe it’ll be about Batman.”

That gets a few laughs out of people, and Amy looks to me in relief.

We settle on our team name—apparently, they usually go with Winged Victory, and despite my lack of wings, I have no objection. Amy heads over to register us and get our answer sheets. While we wait, there’s some more idle speculation about the theme, but no one else has any particularly bright ideas.

Finally, the MC steps back up to the mic again.

“All right, folks, pencils at the ready.” Once he’s checked that everybody’s prepared, he pulls out a stack of cards. “The first question is: Who wrote the *Dark Tower* series?”

“Oh, thank God,” Amy mutters as she grabs for the pencil and scribbles *Stephen King*.

Relief seems to be the common emotion as we go through a whole series of questions about books, movies and TV shows that have the word “Dark” in their title. I crow a little when The Dark Knight makes an appearance, and Freya tips an imaginary hat my way.

We do pretty well, all told, ending the first round as one of the top three teams.

We fare even better in the second round, where the questions focus on things that happen at night; more than a few are about nocturnal animals, which leaves Amy pretty self-satisfied. We inch higher on the charts, ending up tied with the team of wolves seated beside us.

It all comes down to the final round, then. As it gets under way, I hold my breath.

“Last but not least,” the MC announces, “let’s get mythical. All the questions this round will be about dark, magical creatures.”

The hairs on the back of my neck rise, and Freya leans forward.

“Which of the following attacks from the Great War have Shadow Dragons *not* been implicated in?” Surprised murmurs go up around the room, and my heart slams against my ribs. The host is undeterred. “Is it A) Evensong Canyon, B) Howling River Falls, C) Windsor Peak, or D) Black Lotus Ridge?”

I reach for the paper automatically. I write down B. My ears ring.

My father and my mother... They took me to Evensong Canyon, Windsor Peak and Black Lotus Ridge. They’d all been decimated, the lights within them extinguished.

“You sure?” Freya hisses.

I nod.

The next question is about wolf shifters and the moon, and the one after that is about the fae, but after that, he's back to Shadow Dragons, and I can scarcely hear for the static in my ears.

I know the answer to that one, too, and to the one after that. I flash back to memories of symbols I saw in my parents' home, to histories they told me, and places we went.

As we await the final question, all eyes at our table are on me. I try not to squirm. I should probably hand over the paper or pretend to be unsure. It was my outspokenness about foreign kingdoms that first put a bullseye on my back in Wynrath Crest. But I can't seem to stop myself.

"Last but not least," the MC says with flair, "answer us this: this is the Shadow Dragon rune for 'death.'"

The murmur is louder this time. A few folks make the sign of the cross—for whatever good that'll do them here. I suck in a breath of my own, my grip tightening on the pencil as I bring its tip back to the paper.

"How's anybody supposed to know that?" one of the wolves beside us grumbles.

"*Dragons* know that," one of his buddies grouses.

"Only Shadow Dragons know Shadow Dragon runes," someone from another table counters. "It's not like we have an advantage or anything."

They don't. But I do.

My hand shakes as a fresh memory assaults me. I was just a kid, naive and unaware of anything that was going on around me. We were on the border between the Fire and Water Kingdoms. It was dark—late at night or...

I blink hard, the trembling in my hands intensifying.

No. It was the middle of the day. The sun went behind a cloud, and a haze of eerie, inky blackness flowed across the sky. It felt like it reached into my heart.

And then my father was there. He grabbed me and he held me, and then suddenly, there was light. Golden and glowing,

and this sense of absolute safety surrounded me.

When I looked at our house, red paint had been smeared across its face in giant streaking lines.

The symbol is burned into my memory. I write it now.

Death. In that unnatural darkness, that was what someone scrawled across the walls of our home.

“Ember...” Amy gazes at me across the table, concern coloring her eyes. “Are you okay?”

No. No, I’m not.

Where the fuck did that memory come from? Or maybe more importantly—where had it been? Why is it only flashing back to me now?

I have no idea, but I force a smile and drop the pencil. “I’m fine,” I tell her. I nudge our answer sheet in her direction and tilt my head toward the bar, where they’re collecting them. “You want me to take that up or...”

“I’ll do it.” Amy snags the paper and gives it a once over. With a shrug, she rises.

Nora looks at me with appraising eyes. “How did you know all of that stuff anyway?”

I wish I knew. My cheeks warm, and I glance around. The whole table is being casual about it, but they’re hanging on my answer.

“I don’t know,” I tell them truthfully. “My parents were big history buffs, and we traveled around a bunch.”

That’s one hundred percent true, but I know full well that it doesn’t begin to encapsulate all the weird memories that came to me from out of nowhere.

I don’t have too long to ruminate on it. Amy returns, a fresh pitcher of some sort of deep umber cocktail in hand. “They’re doing fifty percent off on pitchers of ‘dark and stormy’. It’s got rum in it,” she says by way of explanation.

“Works for me.” I hold up my empty glass.

She fills it for me, and does the same for everyone else. I give it a sip. It's good—mostly ginger beer, but with a twist of citrus and a spicy burn of dark rum.

Freya holds up her drink. “To the darkness,” she offers, because that’s a totally normal toast.

We all clink glasses anyway, and if a shiver of unease runs through me...well, at least I’m pretty sure I’m not the only one.

Before long, the MC takes the stage again. He has a piece of paper in his hands. He thanks everybody for showing up, then announces he has the list of winning teams.

“Remember, all y’all,” he shouts over the crowd’s murmurs of anticipation. “Stanley at the bar does the tallying, and his decisions are *final*. We won’t be having any arguments tonight.” He glares at a group in the back. “Right?”

The folks seated by the rear exit grumble their agreement.

“Then without further ado...” The host unfolds the page and flicks it out a couple of times. “In third place we have... The Sleeping Bears!”

Apparently, that was the gang in the back, who cheer. Glad they won’t be arguing about the results tonight.

“In second place...”

Amy crosses her fingers on both sets of hands and closes her eyes. Nora leans forward, and Freya sets her glass down.

“The Wolves’ Den!”

The wolf shifters near us let loose some howls that are both triumph and disappointment.

Amy squeals. “That must mean...”

“And our champions this evening, my friends...Winged Victory!”

Amy leaps from her seat and raises her arms into the air, and Freya pumps her fists. The wolves beside us offer begrudging congrats.

“Dude, we were *awesome* tonight,” Amy says.

“We were,” Nora agrees. Then she shifts her gaze to me. “Pretty convenient that you came in with a ringer, though.”

My abdomen sucks in, but I try to play it cool. “I had no idea the questions would be about...you know.” I lower my voice. “Shadow Dragons.”

“You did know an awful lot about them,” Freya muses.

“Which is really cool,” Amy insists.

“Yeah.” Nora looks at me again, and this time she smiles. “It is super cool.”

I release a shaky breath. “Thanks.”

“No,” Amy says, raising her glass in my direction. “Thank you. We couldn’t have won without you.”

“I don’t know about that...”

Freya shakes her head. “I do. You were the star. It’s a good thing you were here.”

My throat tightens, a hard lump forming there.

All those times in Wynrath Crest, I was ridiculed or even punished for having knowledge about the other kingdoms. Here, that knowledge is celebrated. Sure, we’re all a little rattled by so much talk about Shadow Dragons. But the looks people are giving me bear actual, honest admiration. Not suspicion or fear.

I lift my drink. “What can I say?” I manage. “I’m really, really happy to be here.”



IT’S after midnight by the time we get home. To my surprise, the lights are on in the living room. Rhiannon’s usually early to bed, early to rise, but apparently not tonight.

Amy takes it in stride. “Hey, Mom,” she calls. She rolls her eyes and whispers to me, “It doesn’t matter how many times I

tell her I'm a grown woman. She always waits up."

That's...really sweet, actually.

The couch creaks, and soft footsteps approach. Rhiannon appears around the doorway, her gray hair in a loose braid. She's a fearsome dragon and a shrewd businesswoman by day, but by night, she wears a flower-printed robe and bunny slippers.

"Have fun?" Rhiannon asks.

"Yup." Amy hangs up her jacket by the door and skips across the room to her mom. "Beat 'em all in a landslide."

Rhiannon presents her cheek for a kiss, which Amy bestows upon her without hesitation. "Congratulations."

"Thanks." Amy pulls away and heads into the kitchen, where she grabs a jar of peanut butter from the cabinet and a spoon. "Though you should really be congratulating Ember. She was our ace in the hole. She knew *everything* about Shadow Dragons."

It's subtle, but Rhiannon's eye flutter wider, and her breath hitches. She looks to me. "Is that so?"

"Not everything," I rush to counter. "Just, like, stupid trivia stuff."

Amy laughs around a spoonful of peanut butter. "Don't sell yourself short. You were amazing."

I was—it's true. But that's almost the problem. People in Unity might not be as xenophobic as the ones in Wynrath Crest, but the Shadow Dragons are boogeymen for a reason. Their kind terrorized the four peaceful kingdoms for centuries, and in the Great War, they were a powerful destructive force, blamed with the disappearance of the Water Kingdom, along with untold deaths.

What does knowing so much about them say about me?

I shake my head, trying again to demur. "I don't even know where all of that came from. It was like"—I raise my closed fist to my temple and explode my fingers outward—"poof. It all just appeared in my head."

Rhiannon has that *look* on her face again. She tilts her head to the side. “Well, it sounds like it came in useful.”

“Yeah,” I agree, though my chest is tight.

“It is incredible,” Rhiannon says slowly. “The things we find, hiding in the shadows of our minds.”

A tingle skitters down my spine. I force a smile. Her expression is pleasant enough. She’s not intimating anything here, is she?

I choose to take her words at face value. “Yeah. It is.”

CHAPTER
FOURTEEN

EMBER

If my unexpected success at Shadow-Dragon-themed trivia leaves Rhiannon with any lingering doubts about my trustworthiness, she sure doesn't let them affect our working relationship. With the peace summit between the Stone and Fire Dragon kingdoms barreling down on us, the pace of incoming shipments has hit a frenzy.

As we start to fall behind, Rhiannon pulls me aside. "Here," she tells me, wiping sweat from her brow after hauling a particularly heavy set of texts to the back room. "You've earned it."

I hold out my hand, and she drops a cool metal key into my palm. My eyes widen.

"You can come and go as you please now." She narrows one eye, but she doesn't look menacing. "The inventory is still all protected, of course."

"Of course." Nothing can be removed from the premises without being processed through the register. The highest value items require Rhiannon herself to enter them into the system.

I'm still blown away by the trust she's putting in me. The emotion tightening my throat must show in my expression.

She rolls her eyes and waves me off. "There's no need to make a big fuss about it. Now get back to work."

Chuckling and blinking hard, I nod. I add the key to my expanding ring of them, right next to the one that allows me into Amy and Rhiannon's home. I won't "make a big fuss about it," but all over again, I silently vow to prove myself worthy of all the kindness and trust they've shown me.

I redouble my efforts, working from sunup to sundown. Amy makes fun of me for being a stick in the mud when I tell her I'm too busy to hang out. When she pouts, but I assure her that, once the summit is over, we'll have a big girls' day out.

She squeals and starts planning it right away, and I suck in a rough breath, hoping I haven't overcommitted myself.

In the end, worrying about how I'll cope with my overly-energetic new best friend getting carried away with planning things for us to do together takes a major backseat.

The final shipment arrives two days before the dignitaries are scheduled to arrive, and Rhiannon declares the situation "all hands on deck." Amy might not work in the store very much anymore, but she, Freya, Jett and a couple of Rhiannon's most trusted friends report to the stockroom to help out.

"Just like old times," Jett grumbles as he follows Rhiannon's directives to stack a dozen large—and extremely heavy—stone spheres on a big rack in the back.

I chuckle and shake my head, remembering how intimidating he was, that first day when he swooped down out of the sky and asked me what my business was in Unity. Today, he's acting like a petulant son reluctantly carrying out his mother's orders, because if he doesn't, he won't get dessert.

"He's always like this," Freya confides, striding past me with box of glowing crystals in her hands.

Jett turns and glowers at his mate. "I heard that."

She leans in to kiss his cheek, and the touch lingers. "I know."

Something in my chest twinges again at their easy intimacy, but I brush it aside. I may have lost Storm and whatever connection we shared, but I'm so much happier now, surrounded by friends who feel like family. I have absolutely zero reason to be envious of Freya and Jett.

Rolling my eyes at myself, I barrel onward, basically assuming the job of being Rhiannon's lieutenant. Besides her, I'm the one who knows the most about the shop's inventory at the moment, and she seems happy enough to see me taking initiative and helping out with directing traffic.

Everything's running like a well-oiled machine, then, until I pick up a crowbar to open one of the very last crates. I pause,

a sudden tugging in my chest.

For a second, it's like the tug I felt, pulling me south back when I still lived in Wynrath Crest. In that moment, I realize that the urge to drive south has just...disappeared. It grew weaker with every mile I traveled after leaving the Air Kingdom, but its absence hits me all at once.

Because this tug? This impulse to open this crate?

It's stronger. Much, much stronger.

Almost too late, I remember Rhiannon's warnings. From the moment I began working at the shop, she cautioned me that some of the artifacts I encounter in her shop may be dangerous. Seductive, even.

The allure of whatever's contained inside this crate calls to me with an almost irresistible force. I check myself. It doesn't *feel* like a siren song, enticing me to step into deep waters and drown. It feels like...destiny.

So, yeah. It's probably a siren song.

"Rhiannon?" My voice trembles.

She jerks her head up immediately. Her gaze darts to the crate I'm standing over, crowbar in hand, and her eyes go wide.

"Ember," she says quietly. She's never sounded more calm, which is how I can tell she's panicked as hell. "Put down the crowbar."

The entire space goes quiet as I tighten my grip.

Then through sheer force of will, I set the tool down and step away. The warmth radiating from the crate only intensifies as I retreat. It's a swirling, shimmering sort of call. Dark, but in a good way. It promises to wrap me up in an embrace that's sheltered and safe.

For a moment, inexplicably, I have a flashing memory of my father, crouched beside me after a nightmare. Holding me in the dimness of the safest, best, warmest place.

But then it's gone.

“Sorry,” I mumble. The crowbar drops from my hands.

Rhiannon crosses the space toward me, relief on her face. “No need to be, child.” She glances at the crate. “I should have set that one aside. I’ll...handle it. Personally.”

Unfathomable disappointment wells up inside me. I want to snap at her. To step forward and push her out of the way. Whatever is in there is meant for *me*. I can feel it—a warmth that starts in my toes and curls outward through my bones.

The possibility of danger continues to prickle just beneath my skin, but I can’t shake the sense of rightness I have, looking at the plain wood slats of the crate.

“What is it?” I manage to grit out.

“Nothing that concerns you,” she promises, and for the first time, a hint of unease colors her tone. She steps between me and the crate.

My line of sight is broken, but its hold on me is not.

I draw in a deep breath and let it out slowly. Meeting her gaze, I force myself to shrug. To act as if every cell inside of me isn’t tugging me toward the contents of that box. “Okay.”

“Freya?” she calls, not taking her eyes off me.

Freya’s clear on the other side of the cavernous space; she’s literally the farthest away of anybody here.

She pops her head out from behind a set of shelves immediately. “Rhiannon?”

“Take this crate to my office, please.”

Freya’s brows pinch, but she sets aside whatever she was working on to do as Rhiannon asks. As she hauls the crate away, I follow it with my gaze, still trying not to betray how deeply it’s sunken its hooks into me. Which is probably stupid. If it really is dangerous, I should be open about the fact that it’s calling to me.

I part my lips, ready to do precisely that, when there’s a shifting inside of me. An ache between my shoulder blades

and the twisting slither of a tail. My dragon lifts its head, and I can feel her, peering through my eyes.

My heart races even faster. This is the closest my dragon has ever felt to the surface of my skin. I wait for the feeling to pass—it always does. But she remains right there, so close I can feel her scales and smell the ash on her breath.

I blink, and my vision clears, but nothing else has changed.

“Are you all right?” Rhiannon asks, wary and on guard.

“Never better.” My voice sounds as if it’s coming from a long, long ways away. I clear my throat, but the new depth to my tone doesn’t fade.

Amy sidles up next to her mother. She glances between the two of us. Quietly, she suggests, “Maybe it’s time we take a break.”

Rhiannon continues to stare at me appraisingly. “Agreed.”



TAKING A BREAK CHANGES NOTHING.

We all pack up what we were doing and head to the residence portion of the building, where Rhiannon makes tea and keeps shooting me wary glances. I think I do a pretty good job of acting like everything is fine, but I’m not sure I’m a reliable narrator right now.

While my dragon’s presence was startling at first, she quickly becomes a background hum in my mind. I’m aware of her, for sure, but she doesn’t take my breath away, just by existing.

That’s not to say I’m not pre-occupied. She’s flirted with rising to the surface of my consciousness before, but she’s never been this solid or close. If there were a field of flames before me now, would she leap forward and take hold of me? My bones feel ready to explode; my skin is warm and prickling. Could I unleash her at this very moment?

The thought is too tantalizing. It's almost hard to breathe. How many times have I wished for that? And now it feels so close I can almost taste it.

As I accept a cookie and a cup of tea, I curl my hand into a fist. I dig the ridges of my nails into the scar on my palm. It burns almost as brightly as it did the night I stood in the fire at the Emergence and refused to be moved.

There's still something missing, though. Something inside of me that needs to be unlocked.

And I'm pretty fucking sure the key is in that crate.



RHIANNON TRUSTED ME. Rhiannon warned me.

Growling in frustration, I wad up my pillow and throw it across the room. It lands with a soft thud, and I hold my breath, listening for the sounds of anybody stirring in the house. There's not so much as a squeak—of either a floorboard or a mouse.

I flop back onto the mattress, annoyed at myself for tossing my pillow so far away. Not that it matters. I have another one right here. The room Amy and Rhiannon set me up in has every comfort. They've been so kind to me. They're my friends; they're almost like a new family.

How can I even think about betraying their trust?

The problem is that I can't *stop* thinking about betraying their trust. All night long, I've tried to put the crate out of my mind. Over and over again, I've repeated to myself why going downstairs and letting myself into the shop and finding the thing would be a terrible idea. But the instant I talk myself out of trying it anyway, the thought is back. It would be so easy. I have full access to Rhiannon's stockroom. I couldn't remove whatever the item is, but I could at least find out what it is. I could look at it. Maybe hold it in my hands.

My dragon does a swooping swirl behind my ribs, a dark but fiery heat blooming in my chest. She's been quiet for the

most part since deciding to make her presence known, but I haven't stopped sensing her presence.

She really, really likes the part of the plan where I sneak downstairs and try to get a peek inside that crate.

I drag my hands down my face.

Really, what harm could one tiny peek even do?

Before I can talk myself out of it again, I shove the covers back.

I feel like an asshole, creeping through the house, avoiding the couple of spots on the floor in the hall that always creak. At the foot of the stairs, I listen carefully, but the house is dark and silent.

The only time I hesitate is when I'm standing at the door that separates the residence from the shop's stockroom. I glance around, guilty as hell, and despairing of the idea of getting caught. I'm risking so much here. Rhiannon will probably fire me and throw me out of her house if she finds me.

But I feel helpless to the tug inside me. My dragon is egging me on. In some ways, it's like the moment Storm confronted me and begged me not to stand up for the Emergence. I'm putting everything on the line right now, but I can't deny the gut instinct driving me on. I can't ignore my dragon when she's finally, finally, *finally* decided to try to speak.

With my heart in my throat, I unlock the door. I half expect my key to be rejected, or for blaring alarms to start ringing, but the lock glows and releases, the same as ever. Exhaling deeply, I enter and close the door behind me.

Inside the storeroom, it's dark and still. I have pretty great night vision, but I'm glad I thought to bring a flashlight. I shine it ahead of me, not daring to turn on the lights for some reason.

Rhiannon had Freya take the crate to her office. For a second, I'm concerned I may have to do a little bit of actual breaking and entering, but the door to the office is open.

The instant I spot the crate, my heart starts jack-hammering in my chest. The tug inside me is overwhelming. I have no second-thoughts. I don't question my decision to come down here, or interrogate myself for violating Rhiannon's wishes and trust.

At some point, Rhiannon must have come back down here. The top of the crate has been removed, as has at least one layer of packing material, which is piled neatly beside it on the floor. The same warm, dark glow I felt emanating from the box before overwhelms me now as I approach.

I check myself before I can get too close, though. Does a person know she's being seduced by evil magic when she's being seduced? Does anyone really know if they're being manipulated or used? If so, they'd probably back away—right?

Whatever is drawing me toward the contents of this crate doesn't *feel* manipulative. It feels...loving. Right.

That's probably what every idiot says before getting eaten by a demon.

Trying my best to keep my guard up, I move to stand right in front of the open crate. A black cloth rests atop whatever's inside. Energy buzzes through me. It reminds me of the color purple and of summer nights on a distant mountain in the middle of the Stone Kingdom, of gooey marshmallows and songs sung in a soft, deep voice.

With trembling hands, I lift the cloth.

What I find beneath takes my breath away.

It's a bracelet—or maybe a bracer would be more accurate, about six inches long and a little larger than the circumference of my wrist. The metal surface is shiny and black, with intricate details I can barely make out in the dim light. They swirl and dance across the curves of the piece, managing to appear delicate while also radiating power. My gaze caresses the design, its beauty almost too much to bear.

And that right there is my first warning sign.

Blinking, I force myself to inhale and exhale. To keep my wits about me and my defenses up.

Forget being seduced by a magical artifact. This one is wining me, dining me, and offering me a night of pleasure unlike any I've ever known. The overwhelming sense of *rightness* I felt earlier hits me again, but even stronger this time. The bracer feels like it was forged and crafted just for me.

Tentatively, I reach my hand out toward it. Power hums through the air, sweeping across my skin like a lover's touch. A deep purple glow emanates from the black metal, so dark it can barely be seen, but to my inner eyes, it's as bright as the sun. I'm practically blinded, everything else in the world bleeding away into my periphery, eclipsed by the spark of electricity arching between my fingertips and the darkly humming metal.

Until a quiet voice breaks through my haze. "I suppose I should have known."

It's almost impossible to tear my gaze away from the bracer, but through sheer force of will, I do. Its pull yanks at me, but I tug my hand back.

Rhiannon stands at the door behind me. I didn't hear her, didn't feel her or in any way have any sense that she was near. Considering my absolute absorption with this bracer, I guess I shouldn't be surprised that she was able to sneak up on me, but it feels like more than just distraction on my part.

There's something different about her. A sleekness to her features and a wildness to her hair. Her eyes faintly glow, and my dragon lifts its head in interest.

Rhiannon doesn't feel like a threat, but an aura of danger surrounds her, and I instinctively draw up straighter.

A thousand apologies and excuses fly toward my lips, but I swallow them down. Rhiannon's gaze isn't accusing, and it doesn't matter what I say. She's caught me dead to rights. I snuck into her office and peered into this crate that she specifically told me to stay away from.

Instead, I tell her the truth. “I had to. It was calling me.”

“Then you had better answer it.” Her tone is deathly serious.

Surprised as I am by her response, I don’t question it. She’s staring at me levelly; as always, her gaze seems to peer straight through me.

I swallow hard and drop my gaze again to look at the bracer. The swirling energy surrounding it shifts in hue somehow, going even warmer and darker, and I shiver. It’s as excited and drawn in as I am, and I extend my hand once more. I brush my fingertips over the metal, and I hear whispers in my head in a language I don’t know. Sparks of purple energy crack the air.

And then the bracer is flying out of the crate. It snaps itself around my arm.

I barely have time to gasp before the entire world goes black.

CHAPTER
FIFTEEN

EMBER

Nope, I'm wrong. The world doesn't flash to black. It's too deep for black—too layered and complex.

It's dark.

And inside of that darkness is texture and movement. Sinuous, sensuous sliding motion, with glints of scales and hidden musculature. Black flames and ash that swirl through the darkness.

And there. Beneath it all. Hidden far away where I can scarcely see it.

Light.

I reach toward that brilliance with my entire being, my dragon rising upward and out of my chest, her wings flapping through the insides of my ribs, and for a moment, I feel as if the beast who's laid dormant inside me all these years is here, and we are one. My eyes sting, and my heart throbs with a wholeness I've never felt in my entire life.

I blink.

And then I'm back in Rhiannon's office. I dart my gaze around until I find her. She's standing opposite me, leaning against her desk, and she's turned on the little lamp that sits by the wall. Beneath its ivory shade, the tiny bulb casts a warm amber light around the place, but it's not the light that draws my attention. It's the shadows. They're richer than I remember, and I swear they seem to move. I focus in on them, and they go still, but there's this sense, somewhere deep in the recesses of my consciousness that they could come to life at any moment.

I look to Rhiannon again and open my mouth to ask her what the actual fuck is going on, but my mouth closes of its own accord.

Her dragon stares out of her human eyes, majestic and huge and the color of night. My own dragon, still close to the

surface but contained once more, swishes its tail in answer. I can't help the sense that they're having some kind of a conversation, and the envy inside me burns. My dragon's barely deigned to speak to me in more than two decades. Now she's striking up a conversation?

She lets out a rough breath and sinks slowly back into the quiescence, still awake but less immediate of a presence. Rhiannon's eyes brighten, and her posture relaxes, and okay. I guess that's the end of the dragon summit I wasn't invited to.

"What—" I start again.

She cuts me off. "Foolish." She shakes her head and chuckles darkly.

"Hey—"

"Not you." Inhaling, she lets a small smile cross her face. She looks older than she did just a moment ago. A part of me wonders exactly how old she is, beneath the layers of dragon and magic that surround her. "Me."

I crinkle my brows, tilting my head to the side.

"Here I thought I could make the Shadow Bracer choose me."

Her tone stops me cold. "'The Shadow Bracer?'"

And yes, I can definitely hear the fact that she capitalized the letters in her speech.

Instinctively, my hand goes to my wrist, and I look down. The hum of energy radiating off the bracer has gone as quiet as my dragon, but I can still feel it there. It's solid and strong and warm to the touch, clasped tightly to my arm but not so tightly as to be uncomfortable. It feels brand new and like it was always meant to be there.

I feel like *I'm* brand new. But also like I was always meant to be here.

"What is it?" I ask, my breath a whisper.

"Old, old magic." Rhiannon takes a step toward me, and I stand firm. When she reaches for my arm, I extend it out

toward her. She traces her fingertips over the surface of the bracer, but she hovers just an inch or so away from actually touching. “Powerful magic.”

Yeah, I could tell that.

“But it’s not like anything I’ve ever felt.” I shake my head, searching for the words. “It’s...” What? Dark and swirling, rich and deep. Brilliant and seductive.

“Close your eyes again,” she urges me.

I glance up at her to find no manipulation in her gaze. I trust her. I let my eyes flutter closed again, and immediately, I’m immersed in that encompassing darkness. It greets me as a friend this time. It’s not a shock. I feel like myself inside of it, and my dragon remains still and at ease.

Rhiannon gently grasps my hand. “You tell me what it is.”

A soft, gentle magic flows from her into me. New radiance fills the darkness, highlighting every particle swimming through its depths, leading toward the flashes of light in the distance.

I open my eyes to find them damp. “It’s beautiful.”

Her smile this time is bittersweet, and my sense of her long life overwhelms me again. “It is, isn’t it?”

“You’ve seen this before.”

“Yes. Years and years ago.” She lets her thumb brush the very edge of the bracer this time, and there’s more of that gentle flow of magic. “The Shadow Bracer once belonged to the Shadow Queen.”

I want to jerk backward, but somehow I stop myself. I can’t quite suppress my flinch, though.

“But she’s—”

“A myth? Yes.” She’s still staring at the bracer, but her attention feels far away—lost somewhere deep inside the past. Then she raises her gaze to mine. “But most myths and legends have their roots in truth.”

My throat constricts, and my already racing heart speeds further. That sounds like the kind of thing my parents used to say to me.

“You think the Shadow Queen is real?”

“I know she was. Long, long ago, she ruled by the Shadow King’s side. She tempered his most malicious instincts. Helped the Shadow Dragons live in harmony with the rest of dragon-kind.”

I suppress a laugh, but a snorting echo of one still escapes me.

The Shadow Dragons have been the bad guys of the magical world for eons. Some like to believe that they were once the allies of the other dragons, but there’s no evidence.

There’s only a sunken kingdom, lost to the world of dragons. A legacy of war and carnage and manipulation. Cairn after cairn left to mark the fires that burned our dead.

Her eyes narrow, and there’s that flicker of danger and darkness in their depths. “Mind your manners, child.” She digs her thumb into my wrist harder, her nail sharp against my tender sin. “Her legacy is yours, now.”

I glance down at the bracer. Can that be true? Even if it is...

“What does that mean?”

“It means you’ll help bring peace to the world of dragons.”

I have to stop myself from laughing again. She has to be kidding, right?

Only there’s no trace of humor in her expression or her tone.

“Me?” I shake my head. There’s no way. “I’m nobody.” I swallow, my throat rough. “Nothing.”

Storm’s words echo back to me. They shouldn’t have the power left to hurt me anymore, but fuck it all—they do.

One arched brow rises. “Now I think we all know *that’s* not true.”

I wrench my arm away from her and take a single step back. I grasp my own wrist. The bracer feels like part of my body now—like it was always meant to be there. A seed of doubt is sewn. That can't be pure happenstance, can it?

I'm not buying any of that bullshit about 'bringing peace to dragonkind', but there's more going on here than meets the eye. If Rhiannon is to be believed, I have a role to play in something bigger than myself.

Not for the first time since my mother abandoned me in Wynrath Crest, a flicker of hope and longing appears in my chest. Was she more than just my miserable aunt's wayward sister? Did she have a reason for leaving me behind?

Was my father more than just another casualty of the war?

And if so...what does all of that make me?

But there may be an even more important question in play.

"How do you know all this?" My voice trembles. I cup my arm more gingerly. "Why did you think the bracer might choose you?" In a whisper, I ask, "Who are you?"

One corner of her mouth curls upward, a sharp glint appearing in her eyes. "Let's not mince words. What you're really asking is, '*What am I?*' Isn't that right?"

It sounds so cold. I nod all the same.

"Why I'm surprised you haven't guessed." Her posture shifts, an aura of power surrounding her, as dark and swirling as the one I saw when I first touched the bracer. "I'm the Shadow Queen's heir."

All the air is punched out of my lungs.

So many pieces of a puzzle I didn't even know I was trying to solve click into place. I don't know if I believe she's really related to the Shadow Queen—or if the Shadow Queen ever really existed at all. One thing is absolutely certain, though.

She's a Shadow Dragon. A real, live Shadow Dragon.

"But I thought—the Shadow Dragons—"

“All perished in the war? Oh, no.”

Fear scratches at my throat. “They went missing.”

“They went into hiding.” She casts her gaze toward the ceiling. “Or at least the ones who were behind it all did.”

“Are you saying there were others?”

It’s her turn to laugh. “Have you ever met a group of dragons who all agreed on anything? Does every Air Dragon follow Zephyr in lock step?”

“I mean...”

There were always murmurs of dissent, but no one dared to flout him outright.

“Not all Air Dragons live in the Air Kingdom, just like not all Shadow Dragons live in the Shadow Realm.”

Okay, that’s fair. Terrifying, but fair.

A thought strikes me, and something in my chest squeezes in. “Do Amy and Jett know?”

“That they’re part Shadow Dragon?” She scoffs. “Of course not. I wanted them to live normal lives.”

Which they could never have done, if anyone had known. The fear that permeated the air at trivia night put proof to that.

Amy’s ignorance about her heritage makes me feel a little bit better. Ever since I arrived, she’s been so open and kind. If she’d been hiding this from me, I don’t know how I would have handled the betrayal.

I exhale roughly. “So you weren’t part of the Shadow Dragons’ plan to take over the world.” I’m not sure if I believe that, but I can extend her a modicum of faith. She’s not *evil-evil* or anything. But that still begs the question: “Where were you, then?” I ask. “What side were you on?”

“In the war?” Her brows draw together. Proudly, she announces, “My own. With my mates and my family, trying to protect what was important to me.”

And Amy told me this. She explained that her mother lived on a commune and had a whole motley host of mates. It's something else entirely to hear it straight from the source, though.

She lowers her voice. "That's where I am now. That's where I'll be in the battle to come."

"Battle?" I hate the way my voice squeaks.

How am I supposed to sound level and calm right now? The war lasted for ages. The peace was hard-fought-for and hard-won. An entire kingdom of dragons sacrificed themselves to achieve it.

"There's always another battle." She practically spits the words. "Always another war. Can't you feel the rumblings? Can't you taste it?"

I don't know what she's talking about. And yet...

There have always been murmurs. Dragons coexisting in peace is a lovely story, but quiet and calm aren't exactly in our nature.

I shake my head. We can't be headed straight toward another conflict already. Not so soon. "The peace summit..."

"Is a last ditch effort to stave off the inevitable. Poor Freya believes in it, and I hope her faith is not misplaced, but I trust neither side." She lets out a rough breath that's tinged with ash. "The Stone and Fire Kingdoms are on the brink, and Zephyr's war-mongering never stopped. Even now, the Shadow King is moving. Just beyond our sight."

My skin flashes cold. Instinct tells me to curl in on myself.

I never have been very good at listening to my instincts.

I lash out. "So, what? You foresee death and battles, and you just sit here? Importing artifacts and hoarding power?"

"One can never have enough resources in times of strife, child." Her eyes flash black, and her tongue sharpens. "Unity will need them."

“You mean *you’ll* need them. So you can, what? Run away again?”

And that’s not fair. I’m being borderline cruel. Amy told me Rhiannon’s mates sent her and their children away in a mad bid to keep them safe. Rhiannon’s not to blame for that.

There’s a growl on her breath, a scent of dragon smoke in the air. “So I can put an end to it.”

Her gaze drops to my wrist. I suddenly see it all so clearly.

“With this.” I hold up the bracer, and it hums with dark magic. “That was your plan?”

For the first time, her confidence seems to falter. “The Shadow Queen’s blood runs through my veins. The line goes back centuries.”

“It must be less pure than you thought.”

“No bloodline is pure or we’d be like the old human kings. Deformities and inbreeding.” She looks at me through narrowed eyes. “Perhaps mine is more splintered than I realized, though.”

“Wait. You don’t mean—”

I can’t be. There’s no way.

“You’re not no one, Ember. You’re not nothing.”

“I’m not a Shadow Dragon, either.”

“Not entirely, no.” She gazes at me appraisingly. “What do you know of your mother and father?”

Pain rips through my chest. Their absence is a hole inside of me that’s never closed up or healed. Her question only tears it open wider. “Not as much as I thought I did, apparently.”

“Well, I daresay you’ll soon find out.”

“They were good people.”

The best. I refuse to believe that what she’s implying could be true.

She’s undeterred. “Many Shadow Dragons were.”

“There has to be some kind of mistake.” I curl my fingers around the edge of the bracer, planning to tear it off. But when I try, bright bursts of pain shoot down my arm. I look up at Rhiannon with wide eyes.

“Magic like this doesn’t make mistakes.”

As right as it felt to put this bracer on, panic starts clawing at me now. It’s one thing to feel drawn to a magical object—to feel like it’s crafted for you and you alone. It’s another thing entirely to not be able to take it off.

“How am I going to be able to take a shower?” I moan, because clearly that’s the biggest worry I have to face right now. But all I can think about is that time I broke my leg when I was eight and had to wear a cast for a couple of weeks. It itched so much.

“You’ll learn to control it over time.” She says it like it’s obvious, and I guess that for someone who deals in magical items, maybe it is. “Right now, though? With your heart racing? When you’re trying to reject your destiny?”

“I don’t have a destiny,” I argue.

Deep down, though, I can’t help but wonder if at least some small part of what she’s saying might be true.

“You arrived in this town mere weeks before dignitaries from the Stone and Fire Kingdoms are set to descend. The Shadow Queen’s bracer called to you.”

“Coincidence?” I wince. Even I know that’s a stretch.

“You have a destiny, Ember.” She darts her gaze off somewhere in the distance. “Once the Fire and Stone princes arrive, perhaps we’ll find out exactly what it is.”



I SLEEP like absolute crap that night. The bracer on my forearm doesn’t bother me, physically. It doesn’t itch like a week-old cast or impede my movements. If anything, it shifts and molds to my skin, becoming softer and more comfortable.

I still can't get the damn thing off, of course.

My efforts to remove it are half-assed, though. Not being able to take it off makes me feel trapped and claustrophobic. But deep down, it's not as if I want to let it go. It still feels like mine—almost like a part of me. A part of me I didn't know that I was missing until it snapped itself onto my arm.

Kind of like my dragon. She hasn't asserted herself again, but she's definitely there, floating at the edge of my awareness.

At dawn, I give up on sleep. As I soak in the shower, trying not to be annoyed that I can't scrub about a third of my arm, I make a mental note to find out everything I can about Unity's upcoming Emergence ceremony. If I'm ever going to summon my dragon for real and finally shift, it's got to be now—right?

I finish up my shower, towel off and get dressed. My head is still in the clouds as I head downstairs.

Where I find Amy, standing by the counter, eating a bowl of cereal like it's a normal day.

She takes one look at me and does a double-take. "Holy shit."

I blink a couple of times myself, confused. Then I remember my awesome new accessory. "Yeah, uh."

Shit—how am I going to explain this? *Oh, it's no big deal, just some super powerful mythical Shadow Dragon artifact that grabbed my arm. Oh, and by the way, now your mom thinks I'm going to bring peace to dragon kind.*

I really, really need coffee before I can deal with this. Amy's standing between me and the pot, though. I wring my hands, which probably just draws more attention to the enormous black cuff on my arm.

Then Amy smiles. She sets down her bowl and claps her hands. "I love it."

"You do?"

“I’ve been waiting for you to show some kind of personal style. You know, other than ‘recovering from being temporarily unhoused’.”

“Oh. Um...”

“This is *perfect* for you.”

I glance down at myself, still not getting it. I’m wearing black jeans and a black T-shirt. I tucked in the hem and put on a cool, studded belt, but other than that I just look normal.

The Shadow Queen’s Bracer is a pretty serious statement piece, I guess.

Amy approaches, and I try not to flinch as she reaches out to touch the black metal. In my eyes, it’s practically glowing with power.

“Far out,” she murmurs, brushing her fingertips across the surface. She glances up at me.

I swallow. “You like?”

“I love.” Her gaze darts back to the bracer, and her brows draw together. “Though...”

My breathing goes shallow. “Yeah?”

“Nothing. Just. It—uh, reminds me of my mom.”

“That’s because I gave it to her,” Rhiannon says.

I struggle again not to flinch as I glance back at Amy’s mom. She looks extra, super not-threatening in a bathrobe and pajamas, but now that I know she’s a Shadow Dragon, I can’t help the way my heart races.

Amy looks from me to her mom and back again. With her skills in magic, I’m shocked she can’t feel the power the bracer is giving off. Hell—she might not know it, but she’s half Shadow Dragon. This thing should be screaming Shadow Magic at her in all caps.

She seems utterly unfazed by it, though. I don’t have time to wonder why.

She grins at her mom. “Great taste.” Then her attention is back on me. She lets go of my arm to lift her hand. “And your hair. When did you even have time to do this?”

I swallow my instinct to ask *Do what?* I reach up and pull a still-damp strand out so I can see it.

And it’s....

The same. It’s my hair, only darker. And... I squint.

Purple?

I glance around frantically until I find my reflection in the mirror by the door. It’s subtle but undeniable. There are two wide, purple streaks in my hair.

They look great, I’m not going to lie. But my appearance isn’t the issue here. It’s that I didn’t put them in there. Which means...

I meet Rhiannon’s gaze, and she casts a meaningful glance at the bracer. Right, okay. The Shadow Queen’s Bracer decided I needed a makeover. That isn’t weird at all.

Based on my reflection, it may have also cleared up a couple of blemishes I may or may not have been dealing with in my T-zone. And deepened the color on my lips. Not enough to make it look like I’m really made up or anything. It’s subtle, for sure, but it freaks me out all the same.

Amy’s still staring at me expectantly, and I find the presence of mind to finish combing my fingers through my hair and force a smile. “Oh, just, uh. Couldn’t sleep last night.” That’s not a lie. “I’d been thinking about doing it for a while, and you know. No time like the present.”

That’s not a lie, either. I always wanted to do something cool and funky to my hair. Some fresh color was high on my list of options, only I never went through with it. I didn’t need anything else making me stand out in Wynrath Crest.

“Well, bravo,” Amy says, finally stepping away. She reclaims her cereal bowl and takes a big slurping bite. “It looks totally professional.”

“Thanks.” My voice only wobbles a little.

What else has the Shadow Queen's Bracer changed about me? Is it all just cosmetic?

Or are there more, deeper, more dangerous surprises to come?

CHAPTER
SIXTEEN

EMBER

I want to say I keep my guard up, my entire being on high alert, looking for any possible effects the bracer might be having on me. But let's be honest. The peace summit between the Fire and Stone Kingdoms starts tomorrow, and I'm one of Freya's right-hand women, tasked with making sure it all goes off without a hitch. I barely have time to eat lunch, much less think about dark magic. Fortunately, neither Freya nor Jett nor any of the other dragons scurrying around with last minute preparations casts a second glance at the Shadow Bracer—though I do get a few more compliments on my hair, so that's cool.

Finally, everything is done. We share an exhausted family dinner at Rhiannon's house, where Amy alone has the energy to keep up conversation. But even she seems to be lagging. As soon as everyone's finished eating, Freya and Jett take their leave. I help clean up, then excuse myself to bed.

Lying there in the dark, my fingers curled around the bracer, I worry that I'll be up all night again. I whisper a quiet prayer to anyone who's listening that I find rest and peace.

Slowly, a comforting darkness creeps across the edges of my mind. With relief, I drop into a deep and dreamless sleep.



“SUCH A BUNCH OF DRAMA QUEENS,” Freya mutters, her gaze darting between the two horizons.

Amy suppresses a snicker, and I can't help the way one corner of my lips quirks up.

Freya's not wrong, is the thing. Just hours before the Fire and Stone Kingdoms were scheduled to arrive, we received a frantic message from a representative of the Fire Kingdom's delegation, who had apparently gotten wind of the fact that the Stone Kingdom had completed most of their travel the night

before, and were therefore on target to arrive at least an hour before the Fire Nation would.

“Unacceptable,” the delegate had roared.

With the entire summit ready to collapse before it had even begun, we scrambled to set things right. The Stone Kingdom groused about needing to delay their proceedings, but eventually, we were able to find a compromise.

Now here we are, the entire organizing team behind the event arranged in the center square of Unity. We’re decked out in our finest, which in my case involves a long black dress I borrowed from Amy. It has short, sheer sleeves that show off the bold lines of the Shadow Queen’s bracer where it’s still stubbornly yet comfortingly wrapped around my arm. The skin beneath the warm metal prickles.

From both sides of us, a formation of dragons is on the approach.

They’re still little more than specks on the horizon, but even so, their majesty takes my breath away. The fire dragons practically glow with a red aura of flame, while the stone dragons have a solidity that makes their flight almost eerily smooth.

It was a neat bit of logistical maneuvering to arrange it so that both kingdoms’ envoys would arrive at the same time. Even now, two of our team members are telepathically linked to pace setters from each delegation, coordinating their approach.

A shiver hums up my spine.

I’ve seen this kind of showy display before, of course. King Zephyr was fond of putting the Air Kingdom’s royal guard through their paces. They would fly over Wynrath Crest a couple of times a year in full combat mode, supposedly to strike fear into the heart of our enemies, though the fear it elicited in the Air Kingdom’s citizens was probably a pretty great bonus for the tyrant. Even with Storm flying on the formation’s right wing, I couldn’t help the way my stomach

would tighten, all the hairs on the back of my neck rising and my dragon faintly twisting around with agitation in my gut.

My dragon's reaction is anything but faint today. She's practically throwing herself against the cage of my ribs, and the spot between my shoulder blades tingles with electricity. I couldn't bring her forth in any of the four Emergence rites I attended, but there's a part of me that's half-afraid she'll leap out of my skin right now if I'm not careful.

I curl my hands into fists and squeeze my eyes shut tight.

Amy nudges me with her elbow. She whispers, "You okay?"

Opening my eyes, I hold back a deranged little hiccup of a laugh. Of course I'm not okay. My dragon's been going berserk for days, and Amy's mom herself told me that I'm wearing an artifact of a long-lost queen of the shadow dragon realm, before questioning my lineage and then ominously foreshadowing that I have some unknown role to play in the peace talks we're about to host. Two dozen dragons from two tense, warring nations are swooping toward us at speed.

"I'm great," I lie, my tone as dry as the desert that surrounds the independent territory of Unity.

Amy's throat bobs. "Me, too."

I cast my gaze back toward the sky.

The dragons have eaten up the distance. Their individual forms are clearer now, the wide spans of their wings and the glints of their hides.

"Now," Freya intones.

The magical barrier that surrounds Unity falls with a faint shimmer that you could almost miss unless you were looking for it. The dragons soar past the invisible, undefended boundary before that same ripple colors the air once more as the shields are brought back up.

My heart in my throat, I crane my neck to watch the two formations fly a slow circle around our town. Then, as discussed, they hover for a moment, the Fire Kingdom's

delegation on the west side of the square and the Stone Kingdom on the east.

A half dozen dragons from each group descend. The crowd that has assembled to watch the proceedings lets out vague murmurs of unease and awe, and I'm filled with that same swirling mix of emotions as well. As one, the Fire Dragons spread their wings and let out a coordinated burst of flame aimed at the sky. Heat billows out through the square before the dragons fold their wings and transform into a group of human soldiers.

The Stone dragons make their own show of landing in a perfect line, the ground rippling beneath their feet and sending shockwaves radiating around the town.

Freya growls beneath her breath. Both sides signed an oath to preserve Unity while they are here. One crack in the sidewalk or one scorch mark on the grass after these little displays of force, and there's going to be hell to pay.

The Stone dragons shift into human form as well, and a leader from each side gives a signal. More dragons descend, this time with less pomp and circumstance, until finally, only one dragon from each side remains.

What dragons they are, though. I pull in a rough breath through my teeth, and the beast inside of me does, too.

I've been researching them for a week now, of course. That's the only way I can explain the strange feeling of familiarity I have, gazing up at the two enormous winged figures hovering above us in the sky.

On the Fire Kingdom's side is Prince Rafe, the hot-headed youngest son of the hot-headed king. The last time I was in the Fire Kingdom, I was a kid, and even then, the prince had a reputation. Rumor has it that he's been trying to shed that image, taking on more serious duties and diplomatic roles. Privately, Freya and the rest of us fear that his presence alone is a sign that the Fire Kingdom isn't really committed to these talks.

Opposite him, on the Stone Kingdom's side, flies Crown Prince Jianyu. The only child of the Stone King, he's said to be serious and reserved to a fault, groomed since birth to someday rule.

I dart my gaze between the two of them now. In dragon form, Prince Rafe is larger, with brilliant red scales and musculature that ripples with power. Prince Jianyu's silver dragon, on the other hand, is less brawny, but there's a sinewy grace to him that speaks of a different kind of strength.

My inner dragon swoons, just staring at them both.

It occurs to me that I'm not physically unaffected myself, an unusual level of arousal suddenly blooming inside me. I squeeze the inner muscles, low in the pit of my abdomen, and clear my throat. Being attracted to someone in their dragon form is...weird. I crinkle my brows. I don't exactly have a whole lot of sexual experience—or any, really, outside of Storm. But as far as I know, I'm strictly into humans, romantically speaking.

I don't have much time to think about it. The Stone Kingdom guards each raise one leg and one arm in a martial arts pose, then bring them both down, making the ground ripple once more. At the same time, the emissaries from the Fire Kingdom lift staffs toward the heavens, and bright sparks of flame rise from their tips.

The two dragon princes complete one final circle overhead. Freya wasn't wrong—the drama is *a lot*. But the theatrics have their intended effect, instilling a sense of the power of each kingdom's delegation.

By the time Rafe and Jianyu straighten out their wings and come in to land, the tension is nearly too much. They land with a final rush of searing air and surging stone.

The instant they alight, they begin to transform, wings and scales receding in blur of magic, only to be replaced with muscle and flesh.

And okay, yeah. Being attracted to them in their dragon form may have been weird. But being attracted to them now?

There's nothing weird about that at all.

"Damn," Amy whispers. "I may be gay, but even I think they're hot."

"Uh-huh," I mutter, rapt.

It's hard to even know which way to look. At first my gaze is drawn to Rafe. The might of his dragon is just as evident in his human form. He's a brick wall of muscle, towering over me, with warm olive skin and a mane of thick, golden-brown hair that hangs down to his chin in rough waves I long to run my fingers through. His Fire Kingdom military uniform looks obscene on his broad shoulders. It should be all buttons and polish, but there's something about the way he wears it that makes him look like he's just come from debauching some maiden, and goddam if that maiden didn't have the time of her fucking life. He's turned toward one of his aides, so I don't get a full glimpse of his face, but a hint of stubble grazes his jaw, and I want to feel it between my thighs.

Then Jianyu steps forward. New flickers of desire flare to life inside me. Much like his dragon, he's all lean muscle and coiled strength, with a trim waist and a sleek, swimmer's body that I'd climb like a tree if I could. He's of Asian descent, with a sun-kissed, tan complexion, and jet black hair that's trimmed short and neat. My mouth waters at the sharp line of his clean-shaven jaw, and the strong arch of his throat. I let out a whimper that's honestly embarrassing as hell. I'm here to help with the peace summit, not drool over the princes who's come to negotiate a way for their kingdoms to co-exist.

The noise must be louder than I think, too, because all of a sudden, Prince Jianyu jerks his head toward me. Our gazes meet.

And it's like being punched in the gut. Like staring into the sun. Like a whole new world opening up inside me. A knot in my chest unravels, and I swear I'm cracking in two. Light pours out of me, and I'm moving. Pushing past Freya, and I can feel Amy reaching for my hand. In some dim, unhearing portion of my brain, I sense both of them calling my name, but it's all static.

Tendrils of light pour out of Jianyu, too, meeting my own and twining together, and what the hell have I been doing with my life? Who am I, and what did I think was love before this moment?

“Mate,” I gasp.

Deep inside my chest, my dragon smolders with possessive heat. *Ours*.

“You—” Jianyu begins, and his voice reaches into my soul, rich and deep and so perfect I could cry.

“What the *fuck*—” comes another voice from behind me, and it hurts. It physically, actually, sincerely hurts to tear my gaze from my fated mate’s beloved face.

But I do.

And there. Just two feet to the other side.

Rafe’s burning, golden eyes meet mine, and it’s like an explosion. Like fire and heat. I didn’t know there was more feeling inside of me to burst out, more space in my chest or more need in my breath, but it’s there. Licks of flame pour out of him, and my own reach out to meet them, and they’re twisting together. I’m torn in half and in two, and I’ve never been more whole.

“Mine,” he growls.

Jianyu lets out a sound that’s pure, cold apex predator, and he takes my hand in his at the same moment that Rafe clasps his arm around my waist.

Light floods my nerves at their touch. I’m a live wire, burning and melting and freezing all at once, and it’s too much.

This doesn’t happen. It’s impossible. Most dragons spend their entire lifetimes on this earth, and they never find their one true mate.

No one has more than one. It’s heretical. It goes against the very definition of the word.

And yet...

Rightness settles into my bones. The only other time in my life I've felt this kind of conviction is when Storm first pressed his mouth to mine. For a moment, I block out the fact that everything about that "relationship" was a disaster.

The Shadow Bracer burns on my arm, and the dragon locked inside of me swoops in circles within my chest, darting back and forth between our two fated mates. I can't decide which one to look at. Which one to touch. *Both*, the beast inside of me calls out, and suddenly, all my fantasies about being taken by multiple men burn their way straight through to my core.

I have *two mates*. And they just happen to be two of the most powerful men in the whole of dragonkind. Two dragon princes, sent here from opposing kingdoms to try to negotiate some kind of peace.

But at this moment, as they each lay hands on me, they look like they're ready to start a whole new kind of war...

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dizzy Hooper is the pen name of an internationally published author who loves hot guys, cold drinks, and books that make you feel warm in all the right places. If you're looking for a sexy read with just that little something extra — and a guaranteed happy ending, look no further. Sign up for Dizzy's [newsletter](#) and never miss a new story!

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