

CHARLENE HARTNADY



RIDING
THROUGH
FIRE

THE DRAGON TRIBUTES

RIDING THROUGH FIRE

THE DRAGON TRIBUTES: BOOK 1

CHARLENE HARTNADY

Copyright © September 2023 by Charlene Hartnady

Cover Art by Melody Simmons

Copy Edited by Brigitte Billings

Proofread by Jessica Meigs

Beta reader - Shelley Charlton

Produced in South Africa

charlene.hartnady@gmail.com

Riding Through Fire is a work of fiction and characters, events and dialogue found within are of the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events or persons, either living or deceased, is purely coincidental.

With the exception of quotes used in reviews no part of this book may be reproduced or shared in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including but not limited to digital copying, file sharing, audio recording, email and printing without prior consent in writing from the author.

✿ Created with Vellum

CONTENTS

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Excerpt of Royal Dragon](#)

[Also by Charlene Hartnady](#)

Hunter

I trudge up the third flight of stairs, winded by the time I reach the top. You would swear I'd be fitter after living in the same apartment building for years, but I'm not. Not even close.

I sweep a strand of hair from my face and start down the lengthy hallway that leads to my apartment. There is a long, open balcony on one side, and the wind is howling. Tugging my coat more firmly around myself, I keep my eye on the prize, namely the second-to-last door at the end. The icy wind feels like it is blowing right through me, and my purse feels like it weighs a ton. I look down at the tan leather, grumbling to myself about how I need to clean the thing out. I swear I'd keep the kitchen sink in it if I could.

Finding my keys in my sea of stuff takes me a minute or two. There's half a granola bar – *why didn't I think of you earlier?* – my wallet, my sunglasses, a pen, Kleenex, a lipstick I thought was lost forever, headache tablets, an almost empty pack of gum, a notebook, a half-filled bottle of water, and then, squeezed in next to my makeup bag and a tube of toothpaste, are my keys.

“Finally,” I mutter, yawning as I unlock the door.

We just finished audits on a major company. Today was D-day to return the files to our client, so we had to work late...

again. It's the third day in a row, and I'm beyond pooped. As if to prove a point, I yawn again.

My stomach growls loudly. It started eating itself a good couple of hours ago. My cheapskate boss wouldn't order in, but even worse, he wouldn't let us get takeout, either. He said it would take up too much time. Talk about being a slave driver. There must be laws against that, surely?

I push open the front door, hoping to be greeted with the aroma of home cooking, but the apartment is dark. I groan. My roommate has been dating a guy for over a year now. It might even be longer than that. She spends more and more time at his place lately. A part of me is waiting for her to tell me she's moving out. Don't get me wrong, Tyler is a nice enough guy. The two of them are so in love it makes me sick, but only because I'm so damned jealous. I'm sure it's just a matter of time before I have to look for a new roomie, which makes me a little sad, even though I'm happy for her. I am! I'm also dreading it. Who can blame me?

Carmen and I have been living together for seven years, ever since we started college together. She studied psychology, and I went into accounting. Considering how chaotic I am, my parents couldn't believe it, but what can I say? I love crunching numbers. I love my job. My only wish is to pay off my student loan already and actually live something of a life. It sucks being buried under financial debt.

Once inside, I fumble for the light switch. I must be more tired than I realized. I'll probably make myself some two-minute noodles and hit the sack.

I groan as I pull off my boots, wiggling my toes before heading into the living room. When I see it, my heart literally stops for a few beats. I think I make a strange noise, but I can't be sure. I'm freaking out. It's full-blown panic, only not on the outside. My eyes feel huge, and I realize I am clutching my chest. I can't breathe.

Oh no!

Ohhhhhh no!

Noooooooo!

This can't be happening. I take a few steps back and blink a few times as if the scene before me might magically change. It doesn't.

I'd almost forgotten about this. Once again, I'd started to feel like I was in the clear. Apparently, I'm an idiot because I have been fooled twice.

Twice.

I take a seat on our overstuffed sofa and sink down deep. This particular piece of furniture needs to be overhauled. Reupholstered and re-everythinged. It needs help. I need more help right now. I can't take my eyes off the envelope on the kitchen counter. We have an open-plan living, dining, and eating area. Yes, I live in an apartment the size of a postage stamp. Having said that, I love it anyway. I love my overstuffed, shitty sofa. I love my life. I mostly love my life.

My life, as I once knew, is over.

It's over!

Craaaaaap!

The envelope is a gorgeous sage green and made from expensive paper. It's embossed with a golden dragon that wraps itself around front and back. Scales, tails, wings, and all. It would be beautiful if it wasn't from the Tribute Council.

Holy shit, I'm freaking out!

An envelope.

A thick envelope.

Arghhhhhhh!

It could be to say that I didn't qualify. If that's true, it's a very long letter telling me I didn't make it. The envelope is thick and double the size of the one they sent me calling me in to give a blood sample. It's too thick.

Please don't be what I think it is. Please!

No!

Three months is a long time. That's how long it's been since I gave my sample. I fretted like crazy for the first few weeks. It was on my mind often over the next few, and then...I got complacent. I started to relax. What's wrong with me? Why did I relax?

I don't want to open the envelope. Wait just a second. I realize that Carmen didn't message me about that ticking time bomb on the dining room table. She clearly picked up the mail earlier today and put it neatly on the table, but couldn't send me a little warning text. It would have been helpful. I could have prepared myself mentally for this moment.

I root through my bag. Then I dig through it again, realizing I have left my cell phone at work. It's in my top drawer. My boss, Derick, doesn't like seeing us on our phones when we're on a deadline. He doesn't want to see us on our phones, period. I can't believe I left it at work. Then again, I *can* believe it. I'm brain-dead after the last few days. I even dreamed about profits and losses the whole of last night.

I heft myself up and off of the sofa with a huge sigh. It takes some work, but I'm finally standing. I drop my purse on the floor beside my feet with a thud. It lands on the red wine stain we haven't been able to remove since we first moved into this place. Carmen broke a bottle while trying to open it. We were drunk and disorderly at the time. I remember how much we laughed and laughed. There may even have been falling. Then we went to bed, only surfacing late the next day. The stain had fully set by then. In fact, the stain seemed to have had stain babies during the night, and so my passable secondhand rug was ruined. We've both had good intentions to replace it since but haven't gotten around to it. I drag my eyes off the stain and back to the envelope.

Arghhh!

I go over to the table and pick it up. It's heavy. I may as well get this over with, so I rip up the edge, sticking my finger inside to tear it open. With a huge sigh, I pull out the contents, unfolding the cream letter on top. It's also made from thick, handmade paper with the same gold dragon embossed on the

right corner. It looks exactly like the one that invited me to give a sample.

Invited. Hah! That's hilarious since it's a crime not to go. There is no turning down the Tribute Council. I would have needed a doctor's letter, and the date would have simply been rescheduled. If you are called, you attend or end up in jail like a convict. The average sentence length is two years, up to five. There is talk of increasing the sentence to a much longer term.

Not pitching up after you've been called as a Tribute is a whole other ballgame. You are hunted down like an animal. A price is put on your head. Every bounty hunter in the country looks forward to this time of year because there is serious money to be made. Once caught, you are dragged to the island, kicking and screaming, if need be. There is no escape. No mercy. No option. If this letter is to tell me that I am a Dragon Tribute, then I have to accept my fate. There's nothing else to it.

I take a deep breath and unfold the letter.

Dear Miss Foster,

Congratulations, you have been selected to be a Tribute...

It's like the floor falls out from under me. I grab the table, my lungs seizing. It feels like everything seizes. Like the world stops. My world certainly does. I'm sucking in air like a crazy person, but still feeling like I might pass out from lack of oxygen.

This isn't happening.

How?

Why me?

Of all the tens of thousands of samples given, only thirty candidates are selected to go to Draig Island each year. I'm twenty-five years old – that's the cut-off age. I would not have

been called or selected after this. I almost made it. Almost... I'm devastated. My life, as I know it, is over.

I suck in a deep breath.

"Hunter?"

I turn. It's my roomy Carmen. She's standing in the hallway. She looks stricken. "What is it?" Her eyes move to the letter in my hand. To the envelope on the table where I left it and then back up to meet my eyes. "Oh, my god! Please tell me that you haven't been... Oh god! You have, haven't you? You've been selected as a Tribute?"

I nod mutely.

"No!" she practically yells. "I came back to check in on you. Why haven't you answered any of my texts? I tried calling. I knew it. As soon as I saw that envelope, I knew it." She looks at the letter in my hand again. "When do you leave?" A tear tracks down her cheek. Before I can answer, she goes on. "You've really been selected?" She slowly shakes her head in disbelief, swiping at the tear with the back of her hand.

I nod, looking down at the letter, now slightly crumpled. I clear my throat as I take in the words, letting my eyes track across each sentence. "I have a month. One lousy month to get my affairs in order." My voice is shaky.

"What does that even mean?" Carmen asks, her voice a little shrill. "Get your affairs in order?"

"I don't know. A month is nothing." Great! Now, I sound shrill, too. "I guess I have to plan for in case I never end up coming back." I hold back a sob.

She walks into the kitchenette, grabs two shot glasses from the cupboard, and digs the vodka out of the bottom of the freezer. It's the one we keep for emergencies, and this constitutes an emergency. I notice that the bottle is already three-quarters of the way down. It's been a rough year. Kevin and I broke up six, make that seven months ago. Now this! I would say that this is worse, which shows that I'm finally

moving on with my life. Although when I envisioned moving on, it didn't include bloodthirsty dragons.

"Pour fast," I tell Carmen. My heart just about beats out of my chest.

Carmen nods and fills the shot glasses all the way to the brim. She slides one of the glasses across to me.

We down the contents in one go. The clear liquid burns all the way down my throat, and I feel instantly warmer. I wince because it tastes revolting. We really need to get caramel flavor next time.

Next time?

There won't be a next time. I'll be eaten. Gone. Dead. Worse. No one knows what happens to the Tributes who are forced to go to Draig Island, those who never return.

"Another one?" Carmen asks, holding up the bottle; she must see something in my expression. It's thoughts of death. My eyes must have clouded with worry, and I'm clutching my chest again, which feels tight.

"Definitely," I bark out.

She pours again, only going halfway this time, which is good since I only have one fucking month to sort out my whole entire life, and I can't afford to get drunk. I might do something stupid, like run away. I grab and down the shot again before Carmen gets a chance to lift hers halfway to her mouth. I don't wince this time. The burn feels good.

Slightly buzzed, I keep reading the stupid letter. "I will be taken to the island by helicopter. Oh joy, I need to do a full medical, which is scheduled for tomorrow. Derick is going to freaking kill me."

"It's not like he can fire you." Carmen points out the silver lining in all this.

"Nope, I'm going to have to quit." I pull in a deep breath as panic rises. The law states that I may leave my position of employment without giving notice. I mean, I have affairs to get in order and shit to do.

“When do they put on the ankle bracelet?” Carmen asks me, her voice barely a whisper.

“Tomorrow, straight after my medical.” I visibly shiver at the thought. The ankle bracelet will make running infinitely harder. That’s why most runners do so as soon as the letter arrives. Now is my chance. I feel sick.

“That sucks.” My roommate gives me a pitying look, then she brightens up. “Maybe you’ll fail your medical exam.” Carmen jumps up and down. She’s grinning.

“That wouldn’t be a good thing, babe. I would need to have a life-threatening condition to fail. In fact, there is almost no way to get out of this that doesn’t involve me dead or dying.”

“Of course. I’m sorry! I’m an idiot.” She shakes her head.

“You’re not an idiot. You’re sweet and kind and...” I make a sobbing noise, putting a hand over my mouth for a moment. “I’m going to miss you.” We hug for a few minutes. Both of us are crying. “I’m not sure how I’m going to tell my parents. They will be so upset,” I say as I pull away. I sniff, wiping my face with my hand.

“You might end up coming back. You never know,” Carmen says. “You could be one of the lucky ones.”

I nod. “You’re right. I need to be strong. I can get through this...whatever this ends up being in the end. I can do it. I can survive fire-breathing dragons.”

Carmen takes my hands. “Of course you can. You’re one of the strongest people I know. Smart, too.”

“That’s sweet of you, but I’m only five and a half feet tall.” Which makes me slightly taller than Carmen. That’s why she thinks I’m so strong because, compared to her, I am. Compared to the rest of the world, not so much.

Hopefully, the dragons won’t eat me on account of my size. Although I might be short, there is still quite a lot to me. I’m not tiny by anyone’s standards. I look down. I’ve picked up weight since the breakup. I’m out of shape. I won’t be able to run or fight.

Double crap!

I'll start working out right away. I'll eat healthy, too, and shed a few pounds. I've got this. Then again, I stress eat. Nooooo! I'll be a prime target for those winged beasts.

I force myself to take in a deep breath because I need to stop thinking like that. The dragons are not going to eat me. They might be nice. We might not be food to them.

What could they possibly want with us? Other than the obvious. We probably make tasty human snacks.

Stop, Hunter!

Back to the part about that kind of thinking not being helpful. Some of the Tributes come back. A lucky few. Never the same number, mind you. I need to make sure that I am one of them, that's all.

"At least you'll get the money." Carmen looks at me from under her lashes. "At least there's that. You have to try to look on the bright side, Hunter."

"Yep, it's all here." I tap the booklet that was inside the envelope. "I'll receive thirty thousand dollars as soon as the ankle bracelet has been secured. Then a further thirty if I am sent back home."

"That's fantastic money."

"You're right." I nod. "I'll be able to pay off my student loans. My credit card debt, too. If I end up coming back, I'll have money in the bank."

"Exactly. You'd have enough to put a deposit down on a place for yourself." She gets this sheepish look, biting down on her lower lip.

"Are you going to move in with Tyler?"

She nods. "Tyler asked me weeks ago, but I haven't been able to tell you."

I force a smile. "It works out then." I sigh. "We'll have to let this place go. At least I won't have to find another roommate. You said it; we have to look for the positive aspects

of this.” I lick my lips. “I’m going to go on a little adventure. One I’ll have no recollection of when I return...and I *am* going to come back. I’ll find a new job – a better job – and get on with my life.”

I’ll keep telling myself that until I’m blue in the face. In fact, it’s going to become my mantra.

Survive the dragons.

Leave Draig Island.

Move on with my life.

Unless, of course, I get eaten first. I squeeze my eyes shut, trying to banish the thought. It won’t go, no matter how hard I try.

Hunter

One month Later...

“Only Tributes are allowed past this point,” a security guard says, stepping in front of us. He looks down at the tag hanging on a lanyard around my neck. The one that has my photograph and information on it. The one that tells everyone here that I am a Tribute. “Only you are allowed through, Miss Foster,” he adds in a soft voice that is at odds with his combat security uniform and rigid posture.

“I guess this is it, then,” I say, turning to face my family.

I hug my mother, who is crying softly. I manage to hold back the threatening tears, but only because I have cried so damned much over the last few weeks that my eyes feel dry. Next, I hug my father and, lastly, my brother, Rebel.

My parents gave us strange names, although I think Hunter is better than Rebel. Especially considering that my brother is on the small side for a man and quite nerdy. Not that I’m judging, because I’m not. He is currently doing his last year of residency as a plastic surgeon. He’s one of the most intelligent people I know and a really great guy, as well. He’s going into plastics to help burn victims and victims of car crashes and accidents in general, who are left with scarring and dismemberment.

I feel my eyes prick. No, dammit! We're not going to start with the waterworks. Rebel tries to let me go, but I cling to him for a few moments longer, trying desperately to regain my composure. I finally pull away, looking at my family. No more Sunday lunches or random messages from my mom.

We aren't allowed to communicate with anyone from home. We'll be cut off entirely from the world. Marooned on an island with dragons.

Not freaking out.

Not!

I'm fine.

It's all good.

"We'll see you in a couple of weeks." My dad puts on a smile. He touches the side of my arm, pulling me out of my wayward thoughts.

I nod once.

My mom waves. "Yes, hon'. We'll see you very soon." Her eyes start to fill with tears.

"Absolutely," I say with gusto, even though I'm not sure I believe it. Then I look over at Rebel because if I keep my eyes on my mom, I'll start to blubber. If that happens, I won't be able to stop.

I pick up my purse, noting that it is just as heavy as it was a month ago. Nothing has changed. I start to walk away; once I get twenty feet across the tarmac, I turn and wave. My family waves like crazy. They all have stupid grins plastered on their faces. I know I have a similar one. It's all a lie, but it's still better than crying.

I turn back, making a tiny sobbing noise, which I suck back. Security personnel are dotted along the tarmac, directing recruits to the various stations. Beyond that is a whole regiment of gleaming black helicopters. I do a quick count and come up with twelve.

I arrive at the first station. There is a guy around my age already there. "Halbert Grynne." A man writes on a clipboard.

“Welcome.”

“Thanks.” He sounds chipper. Like he’s actually enjoying himself. “Good to be here.” How strange! He must be the only one who feels that way.

I can hear sobbing behind me. That and sniffing, which is a far more typical reaction to being a Tribute. One I can fully relate to.

The guy with the clipboard points behind him using the pen. “You can make your way to the next checkpoint, where you must hand over any electronic devices such as cell phones and laptops.”

“Okie dokes,” Halbert says.

“Morning. Name, please?” the older man with the clipboard asks me. The pen is poised.

Halbert turns around. He’s smiling, but his smile turns into a smirk as he takes me in. “They made *you* a Tribute.” He snorts out a laugh. “*You?* You’re about five foot nothing and won’t last half a minute.” He laughs. “I guess it gives the rest of us a fighting chance.”

“Do you know something I don’t?” I ask him. I’m still living in the hope that I won’t be hunted and killed within hours of being dropped off. That there is something else to this.

Halbert nods. “We’re about to be dropped off on an island with ferocious dragons. I hope you packed weapons, camping gear including flint, and—”

“Don’t listen to him,” the guy with the clipboard says. “He’s full of hot air.”

“See!” I tell Halbert. “John over here happens to know what he is talking about.” I read his name from the silver badge on his pocket. “He’s an employee and has insider information.” I pray that’s true.

“Do you have insider information about Draig Island?” Halbert asks John. “Or are you just trying to be nice?”

Security guard John shuffles his feet, looking from Halbert back to me and then back again. “You would have been told to bring gear if it was necessary. Any weapons will have been confiscated,” he finally says. “The Tribute Council is very organized. If it wasn’t on the list, you don’t need to have brought it along.”

Halbert laughs, making a big show of it. “So, you’re just being nice, then. That’s what I thought. John over here doesn’t know anything about where we are going. I’m bummed about my weapons, but I will make myself new ones when I get to Draig.”

The crying starts up again from the woman behind me. I hear she’s trying to hold it in but failing miserably.

“Neither do you,” I throw back at Halbert.

“Actually, we do know we’re going to an island inhabited by dragons. We were told that. We know that some make it back and that some don’t. I see it as a kind of *Hunger Games*. I plan on coming out on top. I only hope there are more losers like you getting onto those choppers. It helps my odds of making it out alive.” He winks at me and then saunters off, laughing all the while. I note that Halbert is tall and muscular.

“Actually, I heard that dragons like the taste of asshole, which would put you at the top of the list,” I shout after him. I hate bullies.

Halbert turns. He’s still smirking. He walks backward while he talks. “I think they prefer soft and chubby.” His eyes drift to my waist. “A tasty little girl who can’t run for shit.”

I flip him the bird.

Halbert laughs as he turns and walks away, taking brisk steps. Why are there such mean people in this world? I don’t get it. We’ve all been dumped in this mess; you’d think everyone would try to stick together and help each other.

The girl behind me makes a soft, sobbing noise. “I don’t want to be eaten.” She says the exact thing that is running through my mind.

I turn. She's about six feet tall and both lean and toned. Great! I really am dead if the bozo over there is to be believed. There's no way I'm outrunning either of these two. If the rest of the Tributes are like this, I'm dead, for sure.

I shove my thoughts aside because I can see that she's on the verge of falling apart completely. "Heeey," I say, touching the side of her arm in an awkward fashion. "It's going to be okay," I lie through my teeth. "Don't listen to him. We don't know anything yet. It would be silly to jump to conclusions."

She covers her mouth with one hand, closing her eyes. I see silent tears trickle down her cheeks. She nods a few times but still can't seem to pull herself together.

"That guy was a jerk. A total asshole. What's your name?" I look at the tag around her neck, but her arm covers her name.

"I-It's Jennifer, but my friends call me Jen," she pushes out, wiping her eyes. "It's just that...that...I'm terrified. I wish we knew more. I can't believe this is happening. I keep expecting someone to jump out and yell, 'Surprise, we got you!'"

"Jennifer Harris?" the guy with the clipboard asks.

"Yes." She nods, turning her tear-soaked eyes to him.

"The two of you can head to the next checkpoint, please." He holds out a box of Kleenex, and Jennifer takes a few.

"Thank you," she mumbles, blowing her nose.

We start walking. "I know what you mean," I tell her. "I'm afraid, too. I'm freaking petrified. As that jerk pointed out, I'm not in the best shape." I look down at myself. "We can't drive ourselves crazy with thoughts of what ifs. We just need to be positive and wait and see." I am shocked to find that it is how I really feel about this. I wouldn't have gotten through the last few weeks otherwise.

"You're right." She nods. "Absolutely one hundred percent correct." She wipes her eyes and blows her nose again. "I had just gotten my dream job. I was well on my way to..." She shakes her head. "I can't think about that right now. I need to

get through the next few weeks. Hopefully, I'm one of the lucky ones who gets to go home."

That is my mantra, exactly. I'm sure all thirty Tributes are telling themselves the same thing.

"You should hold on to thoughts of home. They'll help get you through and give you strength."

I think of my own job and my boss, Derick. Nope! I won't be going back if I make it off the island. *When* I make it off the island. I'm making a few changes. There is one thing I learned in all this: I was wasting my life. I was just going through the motions. If I make it through, I'm going to start living.

"Maybe we can be friends and help each other through this." Jen looks at me with big blue eyes.

"I would love that." I smile, instantly feeling so much better.

We arrive at the next station just as two Tributes, a man and a woman, walk away. Although taller than me, the woman is short. She looks young. They take Tributes from the ages of twenty to twenty-five. The guy is slightly overweight around the middle. It gives me hope since almost everyone else I can see looks tall and athletic.

Not going there.

A severe-looking woman in a security outfit gives us the once-over. Her hair is pulled back into a tight bun, and her face is devoid of makeup. "Do you have any electronic communication devices, such as cell phones, laptops, or iPads?"

I shake my head. "Nope."

"Me neither," Jen says.

The woman levels us with a stare. "Do not attempt to smuggle a device on board the helicopter. If you are caught, you will be penalized."

"We don't have anything," I say, shrugging. I left my devices with my parents. The instructions we received were thorough.

She still doesn't look appeased but continues, "Please note that the luggage you checked in yesterday will have been thoroughly searched, and any items on the banned list will have been removed, bagged, and held for you until such time as you return or are declared as lost."

Lost.

Holy crap.

Jen whimpers. I grab her hand and squeeze before letting go. "It'll be fine," I say, trying hard to believe it.

She nods, swallowing thickly.

"I will need to scan each of your purses, and then you will proceed to the final checkpoint, where your ankle bracelet will be removed just before boarding the helicopter."

We both nod, looking at one another for support. I widen my eyes, and Jen does the same.

"Perfect. Please place all items in this container, including any watches." She points at plastic containers.

Jen and I do as instructed, and we place our things onto the conveyor belt. Another security person is looking at a screen.

"You may step through the metal detector," the woman says, pointing at the device. We each walk through. I half expect the thing to go off, but it doesn't. I pull in a deep breath.

This is it!

I see more Tributes up ahead. Some are waiting to remove their bracelets, while others have just started to board the first chopper. Halbert turns and waves. I'm unsure if it's directed at me or his family still waiting at the gate behind us. It feels like his eyes are on me, which is crazy. I get an uneasy feeling. This guy might end up being trouble for me. I can feel it, and I hope I'm wrong. I hope he's just a big bully and that it will end there.

Once the guard is done checking our purses, we start walking toward the next station. My feet feel heavy. My heart does, too. What is on Draig Island? What is this all about? It

won't be long before we find out. My stomach clenches tightly.

Hunter

There are three of us in the helicopter with the pilot. Thankfully, Jen and I were permitted to stay together. There is another woman with us, as well. Her name is Skylar. She hasn't said very much. I keep glancing her way because she's breathtakingly beautiful, with sleek black hair and green eyes. She's wearing what looks like designer jeans. Her shirt is plain, but it's expensive-looking, nonetheless. Even her white sneakers look like they're straight out of a glossy magazine.

There are sparkly stones in her earlobes that I suspect are real diamonds. Her hair and makeup are impeccable. Her lips look a little too full to be real, but that might be my jealousy talking. Back to the part about her being drop-dead gorgeous.

Frankly, I'm not gorgeous at all. I'm short, with far too abundant curves to be considered sexy. I have ordinary brown hair. It definitely can't be described as chestnut or rich in chocolate tones or any of those fun descriptions you find in books. It's plain, muted, and dull. It falls just past my shoulders. I can't get it to grow. It just won't. I trim it every so often to keep the ends from getting ratty, and it stays just past my shoulders.

My eyes are brown, so nothing special. I have freckles on the bridge of my nose that smatter across my cheeks. I hate them. I wear makeup to cover them up. I brought ten jars of

concealer just in case I end up stuck on this island. Makeup, in general, isn't important to me, but concealing my freckles is of major importance. I don't mind my curves or anything else about myself, but my freckles... Oh boy, don't get me started. They make me look young and dumb, and I don't like them. The end!

Otherwise, I'm comfortable in faded jeans and a sweatshirt. I have a tank top under this. My sneakers were once white. They're not anymore, but they're comfy, which is way more important. If I'm going to need to run, these are my best bet.

I hope it won't be necessary.

No, I *pray* it won't be necessary.

I didn't bother with anything more than a quick coat of mascara – and the concealer – for the trip here. I washed and brushed my hair, so there's that. I figured, why go to all the trouble with anything more? The dragons won't give a shit about how I look.

We're flying over the ocean and have been doing so for over an hour. Altogether, we've been in the helicopter for over two hours.

“Look!” Jen yells, pointing. “That's it. That looks like an island in the distance.” We hear her through the headphones we put on when we first got into the chopper.

“Holy crap! I think you're right,” I tell her. It sure looks like a large landmass up ahead.

“It's bigger than I thought it would be,” Jen says. I have to agree with her. The island is massive.

Skylar doesn't say anything. She barely even looks up before staring back out the window in the opposite direction.

“Wait a minute,” Jen whispers. “Is that...? Do you see it?” She points.

I squint into the distance. “Yes.” It's little more than a black dot in the far distance.

“Do you think that's a dragon?” she asks, squinting.

“It’s probably one of the choppers,” Skylar says, sounding bored.

“I think Jen is right,” I say. “It’s headed away from the island, in the opposite direction to us, and it’s moving fast.”

“Sooooo fast,” Jen whispers so softly that I barely hear her. I get her trepidation. If they move like that, we don’t stand much of a chance. Not even Halbert, the asshole, will be able to run from the likes of that. Maybe it is a chopper. It can’t be one of ours. I don’t think a chopper could move that fast. I keep that particular thought to myself.

As we draw closer, the island begins to take shape. It’s huge. The dense jungle stretches out as far as the eye can see. The sandy beach is a pristine white and goes on for miles. There is a glint of water, and my eye is drawn down a long, winding river that mouths at the ocean. If this wasn’t Draig Island, I might be tempted to believe we were here on vacation. It has that kind of a feel. As we draw closer a few minutes later, I see that there are buildings in the distance and a large tarmac area with vehicles parked in a neat row. They’re the off-road kind. I also see people. They also stand in a neat row, with several feet between each person. They look to be all male, but I can’t be sure as we’re still too far away. They’re all pretty big and dressed in black.

“What the hell?” Jen says. “The island is inhabited. I wasn’t expecting that.”

“Thank God!” Skylar sounds relieved. “Daddy was right,” she mutters to herself.

I’m not sure how I feel. Who are those people? What do they want? Where are the dragons? I scan as far as I can in all directions and don’t see anything out of the ordinary.

The chopper slowly descends. It takes half a minute before I feel the bump as we hit the tarmac. Then, the helicopter blades slow to a stop, and my stomach clenches as I hang up the headphones and unclip my harness.

This is it!

We’re here.

It's time to find out what the hell is going on.

The chopper door is opened, and the heat hits me like a wall as I jump out. Sweat beads on my forehead, and I wipe it away with the back of my hand. Jen and I exchange a look as we take in the people before us who break from their line.

“Holy moly!” Jen yells to be heard over the noise of the choppers.

I'm inclined to agree. They're huge. I count six men and one woman. She's almost as big and muscular as the men. They're all dressed in tight black leather, from their boots to their sleeveless vests. The men are crazy big, with bulging muscles.

My mouth has fallen open. I feel rooted to the ground. My hair whips about my face as more choppers land behind me.

One of the brutes runs toward us. “Move! Move!” he shouts in a deep voice that shakes me. “All Tributes follow me. Do it now!” It's a deep rasp.

One of his thick arms is covered in tattoos. The other has a tattoo sticking out from his shoulder. He must be six and a half feet tall and built to within an inch of his life. His hair is longer than mine. So this is how people who survive dragons look. Scary as fuck. Almost as scary as the dragons themselves. Not that I've seen a dragon, but I can well imagine.

My first instinct is to run in the opposite direction, but that would take me directly under the landing helicopters, so it's not an option. Also, why is he shouting for us to follow? Are we in danger? We must be! Perhaps there is a dragon in the vicinity. Maybe he is trying to save our lives here.

Jen starts running after the big guy, as do the people from the chopper directly next to us.

Not wanting to be left behind, I give chase, trailing behind them, even though I do my best to keep up. Yep, I'm going to be eaten, alright.

I'm looking skyward to see if one is on our tails when I fall hard into the dirt. I manage to get my arm up just in time, or

I'd have face-planted. As it stands, I'm winded. My right arm and my left knee hurt immediately, throbbing in time with my heartbeat, which is fast. I groan, trying to decide if anything is broken. I tripped over the lip of the tarmac, I realize. Good thing, too, or I would have hit solid ground.

Hands clamp around my waist, and I am hauled to my feet so quickly that my stomach lurches. The hands stay where they are. They're big and warm and holding me tightly.

"Are you okay?" The voice is gruff.

It's one of them. I don't have to look to know it.

"Um...yes," I squeak. It hurts, but I'll live...maybe... hopefully.

He lets me go, and I stay upright, which is a win. *Go me!* Then I turn around, trying to avoid putting weight onto my knee, which is still throbbing.

My heart starts to thud as I take him in. He's even more terrifying up close. His eyes are a gorgeous azure blue. That's where the niceties end since they bore into me with disdain. His arms are covered in dark tattoos. I think they're called sleeves when they cover a person's arms like this. The guy has sleeves. His biceps are huge. His hair is longer than the last guy. My length, only his locks can be described as a deep, rich, gorgeous chestnut. Lucky him!

I whimper a little, only I'm not sure if it's pain, fear, or something else that makes me do it. By something else, I mean the feminine side of me reacting to the pillar of masculinity before me because that's what he is.

I'm beginning to think that the dragons are the least of my worries.

"I see you've chosen your first recruit, Dagger." It's the lady who talks. It's weird; her hair is cropped almost to her scalp, it's so short, yet all the leather-clad men I have seen have long hair. Each to their own, I guess. She's tall and muscular, yet feminine and beautiful, as well.

"I haven't picked anyone yet! Definitely not this one!" he growls without taking his eyes off me. His brow is furrowed.

He almost looks like he wants to pounce on me. “Besides, she isn’t a Tribute yet.”

Not a Tribute yet?

What is that supposed to mean?

Hunter

“I *am* a Tribute,” I choke out. “Wait a minute, did that lady just call you Dagger? Is that your name?” I hold back a snicker by biting my lip. I think I might have hit my head after all because who in their right mind would laugh at a time like this? My life should be flashing before my eyes.

“You wish you were a Tribute, recruit. You’re not.”

“What? Of course I *don’t* wish I was a Tribute. Being a Tribute is the very last thing I want. I wish I—”

“I don’t care what you wish or what you think. I definitely don’t give a rat’s hairy ass what you want,” the big guy says. “You can call me Sir.”

“Why? Is this boot camp? Are we in the army? Or is it some weird BDSM club? Are you going to spank me, Sir?” I did not just say that! What the hell is wrong with me?

Way to poke the bear, Hunter!

His eyes widen, and his jaw tightens. Oh shit! Note to self: don’t piss off the scary-looking people. Especially this one.

I stand a little taller, an apology on my lips. I can’t seem to get it out, though.

“You’ll find out soon enough,” he says in that deep baritone that has the hairs standing up on my arms.

“Are you okay?” Jen hands me my purse. “You dropped this.”

“Yes.” I nod. “Thanks.” I take my purse from her, giving her a tight smile.

“Do you know what’s going on?” she asks me under her breath, her eyes on the big guy whose name is more than likely Dagger.

Not his real name. It must be a nickname of sorts. Thankfully, he doesn’t seem to have any weapons. Although I’m not sure how good that is, considering we’re on a dragon-infested island. Perhaps a few weapons would be a good thing.

“Shouldn’t we be running for cover?” I ask the big guy. “I mean, we are on Draig Island. Draig means dragon in Welsh, if I can recall correctly.”

He just looks at me like something nasty that fell off the back of a broken-down pickup truck.

“Um...running on account of the bloodthirsty dragons.” I look up at the sky and don’t see any. Then I peer into the jungle just a couple of yards away. It’s thick and dark. “I wouldn’t like to be eaten. None of us would.”

His eyes narrow. His brow furrows even further. He somehow manages to still look attractive despite his mammoth size and brooding disposition. “What is your name, recruit?”

“It’s Hunter.”

He looks confused for half a second before schooling his emotions. “Hunter?” He looks me up and down. I’m sick of people looking at me like that. It makes me feel prickly, to say the least. “Your name is Hunter? You?”

“Yes, me!” I sound just as prickly as I feel. Good! I’m getting sick of this.

“A tiny thing like you. Hunter. It doesn’t fit. You’re no hunter.” He shakes his head.

“Says who?” He’s right, I’m no hunter, but I’m pissed off at his quick assessment of me. He clearly finds me wanting. My knee still hurts, and my pride hurts even more.

“Says me. You couldn’t kill anything, even if it was half dead already.” He snorts.

“Screw you, assho— Sir,” I quickly say when his eyes darken. “It’s my name. Sorry if it makes you feel uncomfortable. I know a good therapist who could help you with that. Besides...” I shrug. “You’re Dagger, and it’s not like you have a pointy end.”

Jen giggles.

His mouth twitches again. It looks like he wants to laugh and is holding back. That can’t be right. The guy who just stepped up next to me chuckles until our *Sergeant Major* glares at him, and he shuts right up. I notice that Skylar has also joined our group. She doesn’t look impressed at all. She isn’t winded or red-faced. She looks just as impeccable as she did in the chopper. I think she took her time walking over here from where we landed and that she is the last to arrive.

“You have got to be kidding me, Shadow.” He locks eyes with the buzz-cut lady. “So, I get these four? I always get the stragglers.”

“Heeeeeey,” Jen says, looking put out. “We’re not stragglers.”

Our Sergeant Major ignores her. Clearly, he thinks that we are, indeed, stragglers. When I look across at the others, they are all standing in groups. The jerk, Halbert, is among them. He smirks at me. It’s five of us to one leather-clad sexy Neanderthal.

What?

Wait!

Since when do I find “Neanderthal” sexy? Since never freaking ever. Certainly not now. I refuse.

The buzz-cut lady, Shadow – what is it with these names? Maybe they don’t want us to know their real names? Anyway, Shadow nods, running her hand over her short-cropped hair. “I’ve told you not to waste time helping them. You’re too damned nice. It doesn’t do you any favors.”

Nice! Sergeant Major is nice?

Hah! If he's nice, then I'm the Easter Bunny.

"Where's my fifth recruit?" Sergeant Major asks Shadow before looking around us. "I'm not sure I want to know." His jaw tightens.

"Still MIA." She sighs. "It won't be long before they find her."

MIA, which stands for "missing in action."

Missing.

Someone made a run for it, and they're still at large. Holy shit! That's great. I silently cheer this woman on, wherever she might be. I know that the odds are stacked heavily against her, but still.

"Great!" Sergeant Major rolls his beautiful eyes and groans in a way that has my belly tightening. I wish my ovaries would stop already. I doubt that I will ever have sex again, so they may as well shrivel up and die.

I look down at the ground at my feet and grumble before giving the dirt a little kick. Why didn't I try to get laid before leaving? I was so busy tying up my affairs I forgot about the important things like sex. Kevin and I broke up eight whole months ago. We hadn't done it in a while before we broke up, if I'm being honest with myself. It's probably been close to a year. A whole year! My coochie has cobwebs.

I make another sound that is halfway between frustration and irritation. "Dammit!" I mutter under my breath.

"What is wrong with you, recruit?" Sergeant Major asks.

"It's Hunter." I set him straight. "Just something important I forgot to do before coming here. That's all."

"You're nameless to me until you become a Tribute. And even then, if you make it – and it's a big if," he shakes his head, "I won't be calling you by that name. I'll come up with something else. Something more...fitting." He gives me the once-over with those sexy, asshole eyes of his. The disdain is back in full force.

I think I hate him.

No! I do! I hate him!

I also want to climb him like a pole and impale myself on him until I orgasm, but I'm going to suppress those thoughts until they go away.

Please let them go away!

Someone chuckles to the left of us. Nope! That's not chuckling. It's straight-up laughing.

I look that way, and it's him; it's Halbert. He makes an "L" sign for loser and keeps on laughing.

I'm stuck on an island with bloodthirsty dragons and a handful of humans. Just a handful, mind you, and so far, there are too many assholes for my liking. Assholes who seem to have decided that they hate me on sight. What did I do to them?

Jen shoulder-bumps me. "Don't listen to him," she whispers. "Either of them," she mouths, moving her eyes in the direction of Sergeant Major Asshole.

I nod once in thanks, feeling better. There are assholes, but there are also great people out here. I have to focus on the positives.

"I'm Tommy," the only guy in our little group tells us. He smiles. He's wearing chinos and a suit jacket made from linen. His forehead is sweaty, and his cheeks are bright red, probably due to the extra weight he is carrying around his middle. I get that. I'm pretty sure my cheeks are red, too. He won't get a judgmental attitude from me.

"Hunter and Jen," I tell him. "That's Skylar." I nod in the woman's direction, but she either doesn't hear us or pretends not to hear us. I'm going with the latter.

"If I can have all of your attention," Shadow says. "I am head of the Draig Academy."

Academy? What the hell? What Academy and why is one needed out here?

I keep my mouth shut in the hope that she will explain what the heck is going on. There are a few murmurs, but they quickly die down.

“Welcome to our island. Before any formal induction, you need to pass a test,” she goes on.

“What kind of test?” I ask.

Everyone starts talking all at once, either to one another or asking questions pretty much in line with the one I just asked.

“Follow me,” she tells us, “and you’ll all find out.” She starts walking.

“Behind me,” Sergeant Major grunts at us. “Get in line.”

We all fall into line. We are last...of course we are. We’re the stragglers, after all. Skylar takes up the rear. She looks bored. I’m not sure what’s up with her.

“What do you think this is all about?” Jen asks.

“An academy?” Tommy says. “I don’t think I like the sound of that.”

“Me neither,” I say.

“I guess we’ll soon find out,” Jen whispers.

“I hope the walk won’t be too long,” Tommy grumbles. “I’m not dressed for any kind of exercise.”

I’m overdressed for this humid climate. It isn’t long before my hair is sticking to my face and the back of my neck. I can feel sweat drip down my spine and from under my arms. I need a shower, and I’ve only just arrived. Thankfully, my knee feels okay. The throbbing has subsided.

We walk down a well-worn path. At first, there is a lot of chatter as all the Tributes talk among themselves, and then, as we keep walking, everyone grows silent. There is jungle on either side of us. It’s dense, with a riot of colors, including a luminous green canopy broken by ferns, flowers, leaves, vines, and smaller trees. A flock of birds fly overhead. I take in a deep breath and get the scent of organic matter and decay with floral undertones. It’s not unpleasant since, once again, it

reminds me of the kind of scent you would get on a tropical holiday.

I wish!

I could do with a mai tai around about now.

Something squawks in the distance. It could be a monkey or a parrot, perhaps. I pull up the sleeves of my sweatshirt as high as they will go. Once again, I find myself wishing I'd worn something a little cooler. Or that I'd put a T-shirt under the sweatshirt instead of the tank top. I don't like being that exposed. I'll keep the sweatshirt on until it becomes unbearable. We keep trudging on. It's been fifteen minutes. We make our way deeper and deeper into the jungle on the well-used path.

Where are they taking us?

What test?

I hear it before I see it. Water. It's moving fast. A few minutes later, we arrive at the banks of a river. We spread out, our eyes on the view before us.

The water is murky and brown, churning with powerful currents. I can feel the spray of mist on my face as I walk closer to the water's edge. It's not all that wide – twenty-five, maybe thirty yards. From what I can see of it, the river is long and deep.

I get a bad feeling in my belly, which clenches tightly. Please don't let this test include this river or swimming.

“Do you think they want us to cross it?” Jen whispers, looking scared.

Skylar stands a few feet away from us; her eyes are on the steady current. Tommy has gone completely white.

“I hope not.” I swallow thickly. “I'm not the strongest swimmer.”

“I hate swimming,” Tommy mutters.

“The test is simple.” Shadow raises her voice above the sound of the water. “You will need to swim—”

Everyone starts talking at once. Our group remains silent.

Crap!

One of the women puts up her hand. “I don’t have my swimsuit.”

“Me neither,” another woman shouts. There is more chattering among the groups.

Shadow patiently waits for the din to die down. “You can swim fully clothed, in your underwear, or naked. I don’t care.”

The talking starts up again. There are horrified gasps.

“Enough!” Shadow yells. “This isn’t a debate or a discussion. If you want food and shelter, you will need to swim. You are all capable of far more than you think. Far more than you ever thought possible.”

What does that mean?

They’re insane.

“Yeah, but those are rapids. It’s dangerous,” I can’t help but say. I know I’m pointing out the obvious, but it has to be said.

“Yes. I don’t want to swim,” one of the others says, folding her arms.

“No one is forcing you,” Shadow says. “You are welcome to stay here, but it will mean that you will have to fend for yourself for the night. We know this island like the back of our hand. We know the dragons inside and out. Their movements, their behavior, all of it. Your best chance of survival is to swim the river. It’s a mile of rapids and then two miles where you will have to swim mostly on your own steam. Easy!” She smiles.

“That’s not easy,” Tommy says. “I’ll never make it.”

“With an attitude like that, you’re right, you won’t,” Shadow says. “Avoid churning water, white water, and objects floating in the river.” As she says it, a log sweeps down the river. It’s thick and could hurt a person if it smashed into them. “Use the current to help you. Go with it. Save your strength as

much as possible for the two-mile swim. There is no time limit, but know that if your feet touch the ground, you will have to start again. The swim is downstream. You will have a light current at your back helping you. Look out for flags on the right shore. That's the opposite side of the bank to where we are right now. You will need to pass the flags marked "End" before swimming to the shore. If you hit the shore before the flags or emerge on the wrong side of the river, it will be deemed a failure, and you will have to swim again tomorrow. We will be watching. We have eyes everywhere. We will know if you cheat, and the consequences will be severe."

I see what looks like a small red light on the opposite bank and decide that it must be a camera.

Eyes.

Holy shit!

"What the hell?" Tommy mutters. "I can't believe this."

"This is terrible," I groan.

"I would suggest that you strip down to your underwear," Shadow says. "Wet clothing will drag you down."

"This isn't right. We need the right equipment. Swimsuits and lifejackets, at the very least," one of the women says.

"There won't always be equipment at your disposal out there." Shadow points behind her at the jungle. "We need to know that you can survive on your own steam. This is a basic test to ensure you are ready for your training."

What kind of training?

"What happens if we fail?" a guy asks.

"Those who don't try will need to stay here. You are welcome to hike, but it's a full day to make it around the river, and that's if you know where you are going. There are wild animals out there and, of course, dragons. I would give you a fifty-fifty chance of survival. If you make it, you will qualify to move to the next level. Personally, I would take my chances with the river. It is your best bet. We've had several people try

the hike, and none have made it.” She shrugs like it’s no big deal.

Mutters run through the crowd. I feel horror as a sensation like a rock lands in my belly.

“Has anyone ever died in the water?” Jen asks. She’s been silent the whole time. Her blue eyes are wide.

“Yes, we could drown in there,” another woman yells, pointing into the water. “It’s dangerous!” She has what looks like a tattoo of Mickey Mouse on her arm.

“We lose roughly one recruit to the river every three years, so your odds are pretty good,” Shadow deadpans, making my blood run cold.

“So, people actually do die out here.” Tommy raises his voice, sounding horrified.

“You’re on Draig Island, recruits. Yes, people die out here. Get used to it! You can’t possibly have thought that you were coming to a resort. You’re recruits, and once you make it past the flags, you’ll be Tributes. Your life as you knew it is over. The sooner you accept that, the better. That’s enough chit-chat. In the water and swim. Win or lose, as long as you at least try, you’ll be taken to the housing facility. For those of you who don’t make it, you’ll swim again tomorrow and every day after that until you succeed or until you die.”

Hunter

Ice hits my veins. I knew that there was a distinct possibility we would die on this island, but stupidly, I held onto the hope that everything would be okay. Especially after seeing humans and signs of life.

Apparently, I'm an idiot.

"What happens after we make it?" a pretty blond woman asks. She's small but looks quite fit.

"Once all of you make it – or die trying – we'll move on to the next stage. Then and only then will you be inducted to the Tribute Academy, and your real training will begin."

"Training for what?" a guy asks. He's tall and wiry. He looks like he might be a runner.

"You will find out everything you need to know in due course. You need to earn the information."

More people start to ask questions all at once.

"Enough!" Shadow holds up a hand. "Get undressed and in the water. Your test has begun." She glances at her watch.

There are those who strip down to their underwear and jump right in. Skylar is one of them. She's wearing a pretty powder blue lacy set. She could be on the cover of any magazine.

Halbert strips down to his jocks. Just as I expected, he's muscular and looks like he works out all the time. He flexes his muscles like the asshole he is.

Then he salutes me. "Good luck, Chubby. I'm looking forward to this." He smirks. "I'm pretty sure you could tie one hand behind my back, and I'd still make it."

"Don't tempt me," our Sergeant Major growls, taking a menacing step toward Halbert, who quickly jumps into the rapidly moving water. I hear him laugh as he is swept away.

Our instructor takes another step, his eyes narrowed on the figure being swept away in the water. Maybe Dagger isn't that bad after all.

I'm terrified. People have died doing this. They've freaking died.

No one is going to save me if I get into trouble. Shadow said as much.

"I suggest you get it over and done with, recruits," Dagger tells us. "You need to try to learn from your experience so that you will do better next time." He looks pointedly at Tommy and me, making me prickly all over again. He assumes that we won't make it. It's probably a fair assessment, but I don't like it.

I don't want to strip. Not in front of everyone. What choice do I have? I note that Jen is already in her underwear. She hugs herself, waiting for me. She looks great. I'm sure she'll make it. I pull off my sweatshirt.

Arghhhh!

This sucks so badly.

Sergeant Major is looking at us, wearing his usual look of disdain. "Put your clothing in a neat pile. I will make sure you get everything back at the housing facility. If you feel like you are in trouble, swim to the side, and you will be collected. Do not cheat! If you think you can get away with it, you are sorely mistaken. Undress!" he growls at me.

“I am,” I mutter. With reluctance, I remove my sneakers and socks.

I see that Tommy has stripped down to his jocks and socks. “I’ll keep them on, if it’s okay. My feet are sensitive.”

Dagger looks up at the sky as if asking for help before looking back at us. He doesn’t say anything.

With a soft sigh, I peel down my jeans. I can’t believe I’m doing this. I’m white like newly fallen snow, only more doughy than snow could ever be. My tank top comes to my panties. Both the tank and my underwear are white. If only I had known about this.

“You should lose the shirt, recruit,” Dagger says, scowling at me.

“I’m good.” I doubt that a little tank top will weigh me down too badly. I shudder at the thought of standing here in just my bra and panties. I don’t have perky little breasts; they’re pretty out there. Then there’s my belly. We won’t even get started on that. I’m not some tall, toned, lithe thing. I’m the opposite of that. Although, I prefer the term “curvy” to “chubby.”

“Suit yourself. Remember, we can’t save you. Avoid rocks and floating objects. If you’re in trouble, make for the shore. Now get your asses in the water.” His voice seems to have lowered a few octaves. His icy blue eyes seem to bore into each of us.

I look up the shore. There are only three others still looking into the water with fear. The rest have all disappeared down the river, which curves sharply to the right. I hear a scream that is quickly swallowed by the sound of moving water.

“We may as well get it over with,” Jen says, looking from me to Tommy.

He nods. His face is pale. His mouth is set.

“Is there anything in there that might eat us?” I ask Dagger.

He narrows his eyes. “What is it with you and being eaten?”

“We’re on an island with wild creatures, including dragons. The last thing I want is to be eaten, thank you very much,” I tell him.

“Worry about drowning, recruit. Now get in that river unless you plan on sleeping out here tonight.”

Jen is already at the shore. She sticks her toe in the water. “It’s warm,” she tells us.

Tommy and I head over to her.

“On three,” Jen says.

Tommy and I nod. My throat is too tight to talk. My hands are shaking. I don’t want to die.

“I haven’t had to swim in any capacity since school. That was years ago. I’m also not very fit,” I admit to them.

“Don’t worry, neither am I,” Tommy says.

“You heard Shadow,” Jen says. “You need to let the current take you. Only swim if you have to get out of the way of rocks or objects in the water. The longer we think about this, the worse we’re going to make it in our heads. We just need to jump in already.”

“Okay,” Tommy and I say in unison.

“One, two, three!” She and Tommy jump in. I make a leap a few seconds behind them.

Crap! Crap!

I don’t want to do this, but I end up jumping in on a battle yell that quickly turns to the sound of drowning as I go under. I am instantly swept away by the hard current, fighting my way back to the surface, which feels like it takes forever. The water is brown and murky. It’s almost impossible to see under its surface.

I break out, sucking in air, splashing, and flailing like crazy. The water chills me for a few seconds, but only because the air is hot and humid. In reality, just like Jen said, the water

is warm. I am moving at an alarming speed. I remind myself not to fight, but to let myself be swept by the current. I have to swim at times because the current threatens to pull me under. Just when I start to think that it isn't too bad, I see white water ahead, with only a small gap between the swirling white rapids that indicate rocks beneath the surface. I need to get to the gap, or I will be dashed against those rocks.

Double crap!

I fight against the current with all my strength, trying to angle myself toward the narrow gap. The water is relentless, pushing me back with each stroke. I'm breathing heavily. I'm already fighting fatigue, and I haven't even started yet. I ignore it and swim with all my might, kicking my legs and flapping my arms like a lunatic. I feel a surge of adrenaline, but it isn't enough. I'm going to crash at any second. This damned current has me in its grip.

I hit the rocks, and the air is pushed from my lungs as my left shin takes the brunt of the blow. I make a garbled noise.

"Swim!" Jen shouts. "You can do it."

I realize that she's farther down the river, holding onto a log that has lodged itself in some rocks in the middle of the river. She's looking back at me from over her shoulder. "Swim!" she yells again.

White hot pain seizes me, making me groan. The streaming water is pummeling me against the rocks. I feel like a bug on a windshield in a rainstorm. My shin feels like it's on fire.

Ignoring the pain, I use every bit of strength I have and shove off the rock into the gap. I'm coughing and spluttering and flailing. I force my body to keep moving, though it feels like my leg is on fire. I'm out of breath and already spent, even though we've only just started. I let the current take me straight for the log. I make an *oomph* noise as my chest bashes into the stationary object. The water rushes past us. The current threatens to pull me under. I wrap my arms around the thick log, and Jen follows suit. The bark is rough against my hands.

“You’re doing great.” Jen is clearly lying because I am not doing great at all.

I struggle to catch my breath so that I can answer her. You would think that living on the third floor would have helped me get into shape over the years. It hasn’t. Not one damned bit.

“Thanks,” I finally push out. “I’m not going to make it.” I shake my head.

“Don’t be so hard on yourself. You need to stay—”

“I’m not being hard on myself; I’m being real with myself,” I pant out. “I’m an accountant. I like chocolate and cookies...oh, and pizza. I love pizza with ham and pineapple.”

Jen smiles. “No! I’m not sure we can be friends anymore.”

I laugh. “Don’t tell me you’re against pineapple on pizza.”

“I’m half Italian, and my Nonna would kill me if I ever so much as thought about pineapple on pizza.” We both laugh. Jen sobers first. “We’ll get through it together.”

I shake my head. “I’ll hold you back.”

“We’re friends. If pineapple on pizza is your biggest flaw, I think we’ll be okay.”

“Trust me, I have plenty of flaws.”

Jen has a real chance of making it through. The last thing I want is for her to stay back for me and then not end up making it herself. I would hate that.

“I’m grateful to have a friend out here.” I have to shout a little so that she hears me over the rushing of the water. “I’m going to insist that you go on without me.”

“We’re together now. Let’s see how far we get.”

I nod once. “Sounds like a good idea to me, as long as you leave me when the time comes.”

“We’ll argue about it later. Are you ready to try again?” She lifts her brows.

I nod. I'm no longer out of breath. We both let go of the log, pushing around it and back into the strong current. I'm not sure why, but Jen quickly leaves me behind.

We float down the river, the jungle passing by quickly on either side. The pain in my leg slowly recedes, and I start to relax. Just like before, it doesn't take long to hit the next set of rapids. We need to work hard to dodge rocks. I don't hit any, but my strength is gone by the time we make it through. I'm breathing heavily, trying hard to stay afloat.

How much farther?

I can't take much more. I concentrate on getting my breath back while I drift in a slightly calmer section.

Let the river take you.

I'm still a little out of breath when we reach the next patch of white water. This one is worse than the last two. It's a whole stretch of churning white. I quickly lose control as the current pulls me under. I try to get my bearings, but the swirling water makes it difficult. I'm quickly disoriented, my body tumbling and twisting in the current. I feel like I'm drowning; my lungs are burning for air.

Hold on!

Hold on!

Just a little longer.

I have to fight my way back to the surface. My whole body prepares for impact as I am flung about like a ragdoll. There are rocks all around me; it's just a matter of time before I hit one.

I break to the surface and hear Jen, who is shouting something, but her words are lost in the sound of the rushing water. I strain to hear her, but all I can make out is the tone of her voice. It's panicked, desperate even.

I try to open my eyes, but a wave crashes over my face, and I'm pulled under again. I fight to the surface, my arms flailing. I see it just as I collide with another floating tree trunk. Even though we are moving in the same direction,

thankfully, it is moving away from me, so the impact isn't as bad as it could have been. Nonetheless, the top of my right arm screams with pain, but it isn't debilitating, so I keep swimming.

I scream in triumph as I make it out of the rapids and into the quieter waters. It isn't long-lived when I think of the two-mile swim ahead of us.

I see Jen up ahead. "You made it." She grins. "Now all we have to do is swim two miles, and we're home free," she says as I drift closer.

I can't say anything back to her; I'm gulping in air. There is still a current, and I let it push me the last few feet toward Jen. I feel like my limbs are made from lead. My shin and arm are throbbing in time with my rapid heartbeat. I really hope that there are no alligators in this section of the river, or we'll be goners for sure. I'm pretty certain that I'm bleeding. It feels like it. I can't take stock just yet because I can't catch my breath. I'm in hell, and it isn't over yet.

I move onto my back, trying to get my strength back. I think it's a lie that people can float in water. Either that or it doesn't apply to me. It feels like I am weighted down. If I stop swimming, I sink like a rock.

"Jen!" I manage to gasp.

"We can do this," she tells me. I note that she's not even out of breath. Aside from her mascara being a little smudged, she still looks great.

I don't bother trying to argue; instead, I get on with the business of swimming. Jen has been paddling water for a while now. I don't want her to get tired waiting for me. It isn't fair. We start swimming...and swimming...and swimming...and freaking swimming.

I'm slow. Slower than slow, but Jen refuses to leave my side. I know she's hanging back for me. She could probably be done by now. My limbs go from feeling like lead to feeling like they have rocks tied to them as well. I can barely sweep my arms through the water, let alone kick. There are no pieces

of drifting wood in this second stage of the river, which is strange since we saw a couple of them in the rapids. There are no rocks, either. Not even one. It would be great if I could take a break. Just five minutes. I'm not allowed to put my feet down on solid ground, but I can hang onto something. There were no rules against that. If only there was something to hang onto. There isn't. The current is almost nothing at this stage. I'm having to propel myself forward very much on my own steam.

What steam?

There is next to nothing left in the tank.

"I see a flag." Jen sounds upbeat.

I feel my heart beat faster. Could it be? Maybe we've made it. Stranger things have happened. A little voice inside tells me not to get too excited. There are two people a little farther up from the flag. One of the guys in leather is with them. I squint. It looks like it might be Dagger.

"Come on," Jen urges. She picks up the pace.

I struggle to keep up. I must look like a drowning heffalump. Actually, I think even a drowning heffalump would look better than I do right now.

It takes a while to get to them. Once again, Jen holds back. I know she does. I can see the two Tributes and our lovely Sergeant Major on the shore. Both swimmers have towels around their shoulders. One of them is Tommy. He waves. Jen waves back and then keeps swimming. I have two choices: to wave and drown or to keep swimming. I choose the latter.

"It's good news." She grins. "We're at the halfway mark," she tells me, trying to sound upbeat. "Only one more mile to go."

My heart sinks, taking me down with it. My head goes under, and I have to kick my useless legs to try to get back up.

She grabs my arm and yanks me up. "Okay?" There is concern in her eyes. I note that she keeps a grip on my arm. I gasp for air.

I'm done.

Depleted.

I shake my head. "I'm proud of myself for making it this far." I didn't think I had it in me. "But I have to be realistic, Jen." I gulp in air, tilting my head back to keep my nose and mouth above water. Holy shit, this is bad. I'm so pathetic.

"No!" She shakes her head. "You're not quitting. I won't let you."

"I'm holding you back. I'm not going to make it. I have to face facts." I'm going to drown if I try to go on. I'm afraid that Jen will quit, too. I would hate for that to happen.

"You can do this. I'll help you. Lean on me and rest for a minute or two. Then we'll carry on. You've got this."

Everything in me swells. Jen doesn't even know me, and she's being so sweet. So kind and utterly selfless. I wish she was right about me making it. I meant it earlier when I said that I had to face facts, and I do.

"I owe you for helping me get this far. I can't feel my legs anymore. They're like dead weights. My arms, too. If I keep going..." I pant for a few seconds, trying to catch my breath. "If I keep going, I won't have anything left for tomorrow."

"Okay, so we'll get out and—"

"There is no 'we.' You're finishing today. Tommy and I will tackle this beast again tomorrow." I go under again, and Jen pulls me up.

Shit! At this rate, I might not make it to the damned shore.

I come back up, coughing and spluttering and gasping. Yep, worse than a heffalump.

"I can't just leave you." Jen looks stricken. "We've formed an alliance. A friendship."

"You can...and..." I suck in some breaths, "...and you will. I...I insist." I pant a few times. I can't freaking wait to be on solid ground.

She shakes her head.

“That way, once Tommy and I make it through, you’ll be in good shape to help us out with the next phase of our training. We’ll need you.”

Jen’s eyes brighten up. “I could do that. I’ll even help you train for this.” She looks down the river. “We won’t even need equipment.”

“It might take a few tries for me to get it right.” I huff and puff. “But I will, and then we’ll be back in business as a team. We’ll need you. So, I insist that you go on...please.”

“Are you sure?”

Holy shit! I need to swim to shore before I freaking drown. If I don’t swim there soon, I won’t make it, and Jen will have to help me, which means she’ll forfeit herself, and I can’t have that. I refuse to drag her down with me, potentially quite literally.

“Go already,” I growl.

“Okay.” She smiles and then thankfully starts to swim, but she slows and turns her head back to me.

“Go on! Go get ’em!” I yell, almost going under again.

She gives me the thumbs up and heads off at a fast pace. I knew she was holding back. I knew it!

I start swimming toward the shore. It isn’t far, but it may as well be a mile, because I’m hardly moving. I inch forward. I’m slower than slow. I keep going. I push myself, reminding myself that no one will save me if I drown. It would be typical of me to drown a few feet from the damned shore. Forget that! It isn’t going to happen.

Finally...finaaaaaallllly my feet touch the muddy bottom of the river. I make a choked noise of pure relief. Dagger is looking at me with disgust. I would stick my tongue out at him, but I need every bit of energy to walk. Also, my starving lungs need air.

Tommy is smiling. I see pity in both his face and the face of the blond lady.

It takes me forever to wade to the shore. I'm breathing heavily. I stagger a few steps and fall face-first into the muddy water. Why am I surprised?

I lift my head and barely have enough strength to get to my knees, which puts Dagger's leather-clad crotch just about eye level.

Abort! Abort!

Move away! Get up!

I can't do any of those things. All I can do is stare at the large bulge in his pants. My mouth is gaping as I pull in deep lungfuls of air. I'm sopping wet and muddy, to boot. I must look absolutely disgusting.

"On your feet, recruit." The deep, sexy rumble has goosebumps breaking out on my arms. My nipples tighten.

No! It's not his voice. I'm cold. That's it! I'm cold, dammit.

Dagger

The female must be dazed because she doesn't respond.

For the second time today, I lift the recruit to her feet. She sways, but doesn't fall. I mistakenly let my eyes drift down her body. Wet and muddy never looked so damned good, especially since she's dressed in white. A white scrap of nothing underwear and a white tank that does nothing to hide her curves.

Not a damned fucking thing.

My reaction takes me by surprise. I've never felt any kind of attraction to a Tribute before. Let me take a step back; she *isn't* a Tribute. Not yet. I'm not so sure this one has it in her to become one. She's smaller and weaker than most, but her spirit is strong. I'll give her that.

The female suddenly staggers back, and I grab her arm, helping her to stay on her feet. Her eyes are dazed; she looks like she might pass out at any second.

"Snap out of it," I growl at her. "Recruit!" I give her a little shake. "Hey!"

Just as I think she might throw up or pass out, she gives her head a little shake and lifts her eyes to mine.

"Well, that was a barrel of laughs." She's breathing heavily, her chest rising and falling in quick succession.

I release her, but she nearly falls again, so I grip her by the shoulders. “Get a hold of yourself,” I tell her. “Breathe more slowly. In through your nose and out through your mouth. That’s it. Slowly, slowly. Easy,” I urge. I give her a few beats to find herself.

I see the color return to her cheeks, and she eventually stands a little taller.

I let her go.

“Thank you for helping me.” She smiles. A couple of dimples pop up around her lush mouth. I see freckles smattered across her nose and cheeks. Sexy and adorable all rolled into one.

What the fuck?

I’m not into Tributes. Never have been and never will be. Recruits? Fucking forget it.

“I wasn’t helping you, recruit,” I push out a little too harshly. “I didn’t want to have to carry your unconscious ass. That’s all!”

She gets a hurt look, as if my words affected her. If they did, she’d better toughen up quickly. Then her eyes narrow. “Of course. You’re too big of an asshole to actually do or say a nice thing to someone. Heaven forbid it.”

“Heaven?” I snort. “You’re in Hell, sweetheart. Best you get used to it.”

Sweetheart? I’m going to have to cut out my own tongue for saying something like that. I certainly didn’t mean it as an endearment. Not a chance. Even if her tits and ass have everything going on for them. Even if I can see her tight, plump nipples right through her white clothing. Even if I can see her pussy through that scrap of white fabric.

Fuuuuck!

I need to get a grip, and fast. I stomp over to where the towels are lying, grab one, and throw it to her. It lands in the muck at her feet with a sploosh.

“Can you do nothing right, recruit? Not a damned thing,” I growl at her. My reaction is harsh, but I don’t give a shit.

She picks up the towel and throws it back at me. “Forgive me for being tired, asshole.”

The towel hits my chest with a wet thud and falls to the ground. I’m tempted to tell her that she isn’t going to get another one, but then I’ll have to keep my eyes averted for the foreseeable future. Even now, I’m fighting the urge to take in her delectable body. Those lush-as-fuck tits.

Also, I notice how the male is staring at her curves, and I have to hold back a growl.

No! This has to stop. What the hell is wrong with me?

I grab another towel, walk over, and hand it to her. “It’s ‘Sir’ to you, recruit. The quicker you learn that, the better it will be for you, since I control your privileges.”

“Yes, Sergeant Major, Sir.” She gives me a mock salute; her eyes burn with defiance.

I want to fuck her.

I want to bend her over, rip off her panties and fuck her until she forgets her own name. Until she submits to me in every way. My cock goes rock hard.

I turn and make for the shore, pretending to look for more recruits, struggling to get my dick situation under control.

“You shouldn’t say things to piss him off,” the male whispers.

“You really shouldn’t,” the other female whispers.

“I can’t help it that he’s a colossal asshole,” the sexy recruit says, keeping her voice even.

My mouth twitches. I like her attitude. I can’t help it, even if it pisses me off that I like it. I just need to get my dick under control, and everything will be hunky-fucking-dory. If all else fails, I’ll swap her with another Tribute if she makes it through. I can’t have a female on my team that I am attracted to. It won’t work.

The recruits make small talk for a few minutes, introducing themselves and talking among themselves about how difficult the challenge was. If they think that was difficult, they haven't seen anything yet.

When I turn back, the curvy woman has the towel wrapped firmly around her. I notice her bleeding arm. The other two are also pretty banged up, with scrapes and bruises. The male has a cut on his leg that is still leaking blood.

"Let's go." I gesture toward where my Jeep is parked.

"What about the others?" the sexy recruit asks. I need to stop thinking of her as sexy.

"They will manage just fine," I tell her.

"What about Jen? We can't leave her. She's part of our team. I'm going out on a limb, and assuming that Skylar already finished?" She lifts her brows in question.

I nod once. "She was one of the first to finish." I admire her loyalty. It is a good trait to have. "Your friend will be just fine. There are still three trainers working the river. One of them will see that she makes it back to the housing facility. I suggest you get cleaned up, your wounds taken care of, and some food in your bellies. It will be tomorrow altogether too soon. You need to conserve your energy for your next swim."

"I can't believe you're going to make us do that again tomorrow. I'm going to be stiff and sore, and I think I speak for everyone who didn't make it," the male says, rubbing his thigh absently, careful to avoid the gash.

"It's up to you, recruit. Up to all of you to decide what you want to do. Perhaps a better strategy would be to sleep under the stars for a night or two before trying again."

"Is that what you are suggesting...um, Sir?" the tiny blond human asks me. She's timid and unsure, not even daring to make eye contact with me.

"That's not what I'm suggesting at all. I'm giving you some options. You need to decide for yourself. Remember that you will be given no supplies. You'll have to sleep outside on the hard ground. There will be no food, fire, or any of the

other conveniences you are used to. You will have to contend with the elements and the creatures of the jungle. Your other option is to swim.” I shrug.

They mutter among themselves as we walk to my vehicle. I don't pay much attention to their griping. It is what it is, and complaining won't help. The sooner they realize that, the better.

The three recruits sit at the back. As I'm reversing, the curvy recruit leans forward and asks, “Is it true that we're really going to have to wait until everyone makes the river swim before we find out why we are here?”

“Yes, that's correct,” I tell her.

“Can't you give us a little hint?” she says as I put the Jeep into gear.

“No,” I tell her, looking back in my rearview mirror.

She gives me this smile. “Not even a little nugget? Nothing?”

“Nothing.” I shake my head, pulling off onto the winding dirt road that will lead to the housing facility.

“Is there nothing I can do to persuade you to change your mind?”

Such a loaded question. I can think of at least half a dozen answers, and they're all filthy. I doubt she means it in that way, and even if she did, I would never take her up on it.

“I'll even call you Sir.” She laughs in a husky way that has my balls tightening. “I might even let you spank me.” She laughs harder, like it's one big fucking joke.

“Hunter!” Tommy says under his breath. When I look in the rearview mirror, his eyes are wide, and he's shaking his head at her, mouthing, “Don't!”

I growl, sounding pissed off. I *am* pissed off. My dick is hard again.

The female rolls her eyes. “I'm only joking.” Her eyes lock with mine in the rearview mirror before she turns to the

male. “Sheesh! If I’m going to die, it may as well be while I’m being my jokey self. Of course Dagger over here doesn’t want to spank me. It’s a joke. I mean, who in their right mind would use spanking as leverage?”

Little does she know that I am tempted to take her up on her offer. I would love nothing more than to spank her until her full ass is bright pink. Until her pussy is glistening and ready for me.

Fuck this! I’m going to have to swap her out as soon as she makes the swim. I can’t have her on my team. She’s small yet plump in all the right places and sassy as hell. It’s a lethal combination. I’m attracted to one of my recruits. It’s fucked up in every way.

Hunter

The sleeping facility has a large, open space featuring several comfortable zones for relaxing.

It has a vaulted ceiling with raw wooden beams and huge windows overlooking the jungle. The floor is made from polished concrete. This whole building is nothing like I expected. It's comfortable, with all of the modern conveniences. Hell, it's better than my apartment by a mile. There are sofas and chairs grouped together throughout the space in various muted earth tones. The walls are adorned with colorful and vibrant depictions of native animals and jungle flora. There are pristine rugs under each of the hard oak coffee tables. Nothing is threadbare, or stained, or old.

We are sharing bedrooms, with all five of us to a room. At least we all get our own single bed, and there are two bathrooms, so we should get by okay. Those who made the swim take turns to be on either kitchen or cleaning duty, even though there are staff working here. Staff who refuse to answer any of questions about anything of importance like why we are here. And where are the dragons? The rest of us have to focus on getting through the swim, so no chores for us.

"Well done to all of you who made it today," Shadow says to the larger group of people standing to the right. Like children, we have been separated. I'm with the smaller group

of naughty kids. The ones who didn't make it. I catch Angela's eye, and we smile at each other in greeting since we know each other after catching a ride back to the housing facility today.

We're all standing in an open section of the general area. Shadow and the six training officers are all here. Dagger has a scowl on his face. He isn't looking at us. He doesn't seem to be looking at anyone in particular. I'm certainly trying hard not to look at him.

I take in the group who made it instead. I must say that I'm amazed at how strong and fit most of the recruits are. Although, some of them have graduated to Tributes now. I never thought I would long to be a Tribute, but here we are. I want to make the swim. I want to be a Tribute. More than anything, I want to find out why we are here.

There are only nine of us who didn't make it. Nine of us who are still recruits. Ten if you count the woman who is still missing. I silently cheer her on. It takes some guts to run since most people never make it very far or last very long. Her face will be plastered all over the news, with large rewards offered for her capture.

Jen shoulder-bumps me, bringing me out of my thoughts. I give her the thumbs up. I'm proud of her. Skylar also made it, but she's standing on her own. I make a note to myself to have a talk with her. Despite making the swim, I get the feeling she isn't coping very well with being here.

Halbert high-fives the rest of his team. It seems that everyone in his group made it. When he sees me looking, he makes the "L" sign for loser and holds it up against his forehead.

I ignore him.

"Dinner will be ready in an hour," Shadow goes on. "And then I highly recommend that you get to bed early tonight if you are swimming again tomorrow. Think carefully about your swim," Shadow tells us, making eye contact with all of us one at a time. "There is no doubt in my mind that all of you will make it."

Eventually.

She doesn't say it, but that's what I hear. I wonder how many times I'm going to have to make the swim before I get it right. I put up my hand.

"Yes, recruit?" Shadow narrows her eyes, looking a little put out at being interrupted.

"What is the average number of swims it takes to make it?"

"That is a good question." She nods a few times. "The average is three, but that takes those who make it first time into consideration. The most times it took for a recruit to make it was ten. Not so bad."

Not so bad.

What?

If I have to swim ten times, I'm not sure what I'll do, especially since each time a person gets into that water is dangerous.

"We'll see you all tomorrow," she says.

I watch them walk out. They have their own separate wing in the housing facilities.

Jen walks straight over to Tommy as soon as Shadow and the other trainers walk away. "Are you guys ready to hit the gym?"

"Excuse me? I'm pretty sure I heard you say we were going to hit the gym." I cannot have heard correctly. "Have you seen how bashed and bruised we are?"

"I'm not sure I can walk out of here, let alone go to the gym." Tommy shakes his head. "The gash on my thigh needed four stitches. I'm pretty sure I shouldn't be allowed to get that wet, let alone be hitting the gym right now."

"They said that the salve they gave us will help our wounds to heal and keep infections at bay," Jen says.

Tommy snorts. "A cream? Really? I doubt it. I'm seriously considering taking my chances and sleeping out there

tomorrow night.”

“We can talk about this after our gym session. I promised to train the two of you, and I meant it.”

“Jen, I’m not so—” I start to say.

“It’s important that we stretch. Particularly the two of you, since you have to try again in less than twenty-four hours. You’re going to get stiff otherwise.”

“You’re too late. I’m already stiff,” I tell her.

“Me too,” Tommy moans.

“All the more reason to get some stretching in. Come on.” Jen starts to walk, and we follow her.

The gym is state-of-the-art, with every conceivable piece of equipment available, from treadmills to weightlifting machines and everything in between.

“Grab some mats,” Jen tells us.

We do as she says and then take a seat on the mats. “I’ll go easy on you.” She smiles. “Try to copy what I do, okay?”

Tommy and I nod.

We get started, and it isn’t too bad. The stretches are simple. Jen doesn’t make us hold them too long. We do several reps and then move on to a different muscle group. We’re about fifteen minutes into our stretches when someone walks in. The door clicks shut, and there are footfalls.

We’re all on our knees doing back lifts. I look up to see who it is, and my mouth unhinges.

It’s Sergeant Major Hottie. Holy crap! I try to concentrate on what I’m doing, but I can’t. I gawk at him instead.

Dagger is wearing a pair of gray sweats and a white T-shirt. It stretches tight over all of that muscle. I make a small noise that sounds a little like dying. At least I’m kind of in the middle of a backlift, so I can blame the stretches.

Oh, my word, but he’s fine in every way. Even the dark look he gives us is sexy. All of that black ink against white

cotton... Holy shit! My ovaries are popping off like fireworks in Times Square at midnight.

Jen giggles. "See something you like?" she whispers.

"No." I shake my head.

"Liar."

"I'm not into beefcakes," I deadpan. "Much prefer brains over brawn." I say it with such calm conviction that I almost believe myself.

"If you say so." Jen clearly doesn't believe me. "You have some drool on your chin, hon'." She giggles.

"Can we go on to the next stretch, please?" Tommy says. "My thigh is starting to throb. It pulls in this position."

"Actually, I think that's enough for today, but we're meeting here in the morning after breakfast to do this again. You'll thank me when you hit the water."

Tommy grumbles something unintelligible. I get it. I feel the same way. I can't believe they are making us swim again so soon. It's inhumane.

My eyes drift back over to Dagger, who is doing a couple of stretches of his own. Only he does them standing. I cannot believe how much balance he has. He's supple, too. Crap, I think Jen is right. I might just be drooling.

"Thanks for your help," Tommy tells Jen. "Sorry, I'm a little cranky."

"Anytime."

"Yeah, thanks." I smile at Jen. "You're a lifesaver. I think I feel better than I did before." I stretch out my arm to test it. Yep, it's somewhat improved. That's amazing.

We stand, packing away the mats.

"Maybe we'll make it tomorrow," Tommy tells me. He doesn't put much weight behind his words.

Despite feeling slightly better, I'm still stiff. My arms and legs still feel weak. I have a feeling that it won't be much

better tomorrow. I think that it will be worse, even if we stretch it out after breakfast. Logic tells me that if we didn't make it today, we definitely won't make it tomorrow. Not feeling as we do.

"I don't think it was a coincidence that you-know-who," using my thumb, I point at Dagger, using my body to shield the gesture, "spoke about strategy before," I whisper.

"What do you mean?" Tommy narrows his eyes.

"We'll talk later. I have a plan."

Tommy lifts his brows and nods.

Granted, it isn't a very good plan, but it's all I have. We leave. I keep my eyes away from Dagger. I have far more important things to focus on. Things that involve staying alive.

Dagger

We're standing next to the river in the same spot as yesterday. I fold my arms, waiting for the clock to strike one o'clock. The recruits have been instructed that they can hit the water any time after that. I check my watch. Half a minute to go.

"So, you know exactly what to do?" the sexy recruit asks the male on her team, speaking under her breath.

"Yep." He nods. "I still wish we didn't have to swim so soon."

"You and me both, but what can we do?" She shrugs.

I like her attitude. I heard her speak of a plan yesterday at the gym. I'm glad that they have one; I only hope that it's a good plan. Everyone is more suitably dressed, including Hunter. She's in a full, black bathing suit and tight Lycra pants that cover her legs to her ankles. The male is in swimming trunks, which are less suitable. The fabric will weigh him down. It's up to him to figure it out on his own.

Fang counts down in a bored voice, and everyone jumps into the water except for my two recruits.

Brutus chuckles beside me. “You sure know how to pick ’em,” he says to me under his breath.

I don’t say anything. I watch as Octane starts jogging down the riverbank, his eye on the seven recruits now in the water.

“Shouldn’t the two of you be on your way?” I tell the other instructors.

“I’m interested to see what they do,” Brutus says. Although Fang doesn’t say anything, it is clear that he feels the same.

We stand there for about half a minute. My team members don’t look like they’re going anywhere anytime soon.

“You’re supposed to swim, recruits,” Brutus growls at them. I can hear that he’s smiling.

The sassy little recruit looks back over her shoulder and levels him with a scathing look that makes my mouth twitch with the start of an unwanted smile. “We’ll go when we’re good and ready, thank you very much.”

“Just get in! What are you waiting for? The water isn’t getting any drier,” Brutus chides. “The river isn’t getting any shorter, either. Best you get it over with.” He chuckles.

“Wooooow!” Hunter says. “That’s some excellent advice. Your mother must be so proud that she raised such a highly intelligent individual. I’m not sure why I didn’t think of that myself.” She turns back. “Don’t listen to him,” she tells the male at her side.

That shuts Brutus up.

Fang starts laughing. I’m smiling, but I manage to get myself back under control.

“It isn’t funny,” Brutus says in a deep voice.

“I think it’s hilarious.” Fang laughs harder.

“It’s insolence,” Brutus mutters. “I have a good mind to—” He stops there. I think he can feel me bristle. I grow about half a foot, both taller and wider.

“A good mind to what?” I push out in a rasping voice. When Brutus doesn’t say anything, I go on. “That’s *my* recruit. You don’t get to give her instructions or to dish out any kind of recourse; that’s *my* job. Are we clear?” I continue to bristle from my head to my toes.

“Fucking touchy,” Brutus says, lifting a brow.

Before I can retaliate, my recruit says, “Ready?”

The male nods.

“I’m going!” She jumps into the water. I watch her start swimming as soon as she gets back to the surface. The male jumps in ten seconds behind the female.

I think I know why they waited and why they didn’t jump in together, and it is smart. I watch them both immediately start swimming to the right. I smile as I pick up an easy jog, following them from the shore. I hear the thud of boots behind me and see Fang head up the shore at a run so that he can catch up with those already in the water. Brutus stops next to me. He also has his gaze on my recruits.

Yep, just as expected, they position themselves well for the first set of rapids, ensuring that they are where the narrow gap is before the currents make it more difficult to swim to it.

Since they waited a few minutes, any congestion at this spot has cleared. They immediately start swimming for the shore as soon as they are through the first set of rapids. The male makes it; he holds out an arm and helps the female. Then they clamber out of the water.

“They didn’t even try.” Brutus sounds disgusted.

I think swimming for the shore was the right move to make. I don’t tell Brutus that. This is his first year training Tributes, and he still has a lot to learn. Sure, it takes strength and stamina to make it through the various tests, but it also takes some brains and strategic thinking. He’ll figure that out soon enough for himself.

“Swimming for the finish isn’t always the best approach,” I tell him. Both recruits bend over slightly at their middle as they try to catch their breath. The female holds her injured arm cradled against her chest. Yep, it would have been a waste of energy to have attempted the swim today. They would never have made it. I would give it another day or two. Give themselves time to heal, and then go for the flags again.

I smile to myself for a moment. The little recruit did well.

“They just need to get it done!” Brutus grumbles. He probably sounds like I did a number of years ago when I first became an instructor. Now I’m up to get Shadow’s position; it all depends on what happens with this group of Tributes. So much is hanging up in the air right now.

“You can save your opinion for those in your command,” I tell him.

“Why so touchy?” he says, frowning. Then he looks over at my recruits, a knowing smile spreading across his face. “She does have a great pair of tits.”

My back goes up, but I swallow back a reply and force my fists to unclench.

“I didn’t think we were permitted to have...dealings with the Tributes,” he adds.

“There is no rule against fraternizing with them, but it is frowned upon. Personally, I think it’s wrong. You would be setting them up for possible failure, which, in this environment, could spell death. You know that, right?”

“You would need to fraternize heavily for it to become an issue.” He shrugs. “A quick fuck would get it out of your system.”

I set my jaw, trying to keep my cool. “I’m not fucking one of my students, and I would urge you to keep your dick to yourself as well.” It almost sounds like he’s giving it some serious thought. “There are plenty of others on the island, Brutus. Don’t be stupid! Make sure you keep your eyes off *my* recruit.”

“Seriously touchy.” He laughs again. “Relax! It probably isn’t the best idea to mess around with them...” His greedy eyes are back on Hunter, and it’s pissing me off. *Probably*. I hate that word. They’re doing those stretches again. She’s bent right over, trying to touch the ground between her splayed feet. Her ass is bobbing in the air.

Fuck!

“More than just great tits, I see,” Brutus comments.

She’s mine!

At least, she’s mine until she dies, graduates, or is sent back home. My pupil. My responsibility. Mine. I won’t let Brutus fuck with her, or any of my students, for that matter.

Brutus gives a rumble of approval. It comes from deep in his chest.

I snarl and elbow the male in the face; there is a crunch as his nose breaks. Blood spurts. Brutus staggers away, his hand clasped to his face. His eyes are wide with shock.

“Not my students, asshole! Let this be your first and hopefully final warning!” I turn and jog back to the start. I’m headed to my vehicle so that I can pick up my recruits.

I had my reservations about bringing a hothead like Brutus on board. Looks like I might have been right. This has absolutely nothing to do with my sassy recruit. I would have reacted the same for any of the others.

Hunter

One Week Later...

The river is moving swiftly. I watch the brown churning surface, broken only by ripples where the rapids tumble over rocks, creating white water. My stomach twists in a knot. You would think I would be used to this by now, but I'm not. Not by a long shot.

I let my eyes drift across the water to the bank on the other side, which is strewn with tangled greenery and rocky outcroppings. A spider monkey swings on a branch, quickly disappearing into the dense jungle. The only reason I know it's a spider monkey is that Angela is clued up on these things, and she mentioned it a few days ago.

My gaze moves up to the sky. I find myself constantly looking for signs of the dragons that are supposed to inhabit this island.

Where are they?

Do they even exist?

Why haven't we seen any of them?

Perhaps that fast-moving thing we saw the first day we arrived was a jet or a helicopter. Perhaps it wasn't a dragon, as we first thought.

I hope that more will be revealed once we all make this swim.

I'm going to do it!

Mind over matter.

I can make it.

I will make it, dammit.

“Ready?” Dagger asks us, bringing my attention back to him and the other instructor here today. His name is Octane. Another one of those weird-ass nicknames. He’s also got long hair and is tattooed to the nines. His eyes are a golden color, the likes of which I’ve never seen before. Lots of the ladies have the hots for him. I’ve heard them talking.

Dagger turns his azure gaze onto me, and my stomach twists. I try to tell myself that it’s the upcoming swim, but I would be lying. Apparently, I’m attracted to someone who looks at me like dog doo-doo under his shoe. That’s if he looks at me at all. It’s all good, though. I’m here to survive. I’ll find a nice guy to have sex with when I get home.

There are only three recruits left, including me.

We nod in unison. Angela made it yesterday, and I was happy for the shy, blond girl we met that first day here. She worked really hard to finally finish.

By now, we kinda sorta know the drill.

Although we’ve swum every day, we haven’t actually tried to make it all the way each time. That would be impossible. It’s something the others cottoned onto as well. We swim only the first rapid on rest days. And try for the whole three miles on the others. Today is our ninth day on the river, but only our third actual attempt at swimming the whole thing.

I feel a little sick.

Shadow told us that ten days is the longest it has taken any recruit to make this swim. That means that if we don’t make it today, we’ll have to wait a day or two to get our strength back before we try again, which will put us over the ten-day mark. I don’t know why it bugs me so much that we might...make

that, that *I* might end up setting a new record for the recruit who took the longest to get through the swim. I guess that no matter how hard I try, I keep seeing Halbert's loser sign in my head. Just great. That asshole managed to worm his way into my brain, which I hate.

I will make it today!

I will.

Worry gnaws at me, and I have to work to squash it down. Jen would get mad if she knew that even a shred of negativity was in my mind.

Aside from stretches, we've started training in the gym, too, it's lightweight training to get us stronger. Jen is a lifesaver. My jeans are already looser, so I think it's working. If nothing else, this is going to make me fitter and stronger. Every day, I inch closer to making this swim. Tommy has lost more weight than I have. I can see it on him, and he's had to borrow a belt from one of the Tributes. I doubt that I will ever have an athletic build, but I might end up surprising myself and actually getting fit. I've been promising to do it for years, and here I am. Yay, me!

"We've got this." Tommy takes my hand and squeezes it for a second before letting go.

"Yeah, we do!" Kerry says with animation; she fist-pumps the air.

Kerry is the third recruit who still hasn't made the swim yet, either. Despite being out in the sun every day for over a week, she's still pale and super skinny, with tattoos of cartoons all over her body. She's big into gaming. Before coming here, she spent all her spare time in front of her computer. Since she was a check-out clerk at the local grocery store, she used to sit all day there as well. I can see that she's getting stronger. Her arms are more defined than they were. She almost made it the day before last.

"I know you'll make it," I tell Kerry, meaning it.

"We *all* will!" Tommy says with conviction.

“You can go now,” Dagger says, looking at his watch. “Don’t disappoint me.” He looks right at me when he says it. I do something really childish and stick out my tongue at him. I’m gifted with a scowl.

Lucky me!

Kerry jumps in. Tommy waits ten seconds, and he goes next. I feel Dagger’s gaze boring into me while I’m waiting.

I turn back to look at Dagger and frown because his eyes are on my ass. Then he lifts his gaze, and I see that there is no desire there, just contempt.

Of course.

Why would I think any differently?

“I’ll miss you too.” I blow a kiss at him and jump into the water. I’ll show that asshole!

The first two sets of rapids are fairly easy to negotiate. The third set is where it gets tricky.

Anyway, I’m not going to think along those lines. I’ve got this.

My heart starts to race as I see the white water ahead. It’s a churning mess of rocks and currents. Once again, I can’t see a way through that doesn’t involve becoming a drowning human ragdoll. I see both Tommy and Kerry being tossed around and pulled under. All too soon, it’s my turn.

Lord, help me.

I say a silent prayer as the current grabs me, immediately pulling me under. I want to pull myself into a tight, protective ball, but I can’t. I need air. I need to find the surface, so I kick and paddle, breaking through the turbulent water, gasping for air.

But just as quickly as I surface, I’m pulled under again. It’s like being in a washing machine. Once again, I can’t tell which way is up or down; my body twists and turns in ways that aren’t natural.

My lungs scream for air, and my body begs for relief. My left hip scrapes over a smooth rock. It hurts, but is tolerable. There's no real damage, as far as I can tell. A few agonizing seconds later, I break free, mostly unscathed, pulling in as much air as my lungs will take.

How am I alive and unhurt?

I'm lucky.

So damned lucky.

I know my luck can't possibly hold out a fourth time. I need to make this swim. I have a feeling that I will be dashed on the rocks or break an arm like Susan did a couple of days ago. Her arm is in a cast. I think she's badass for finishing the swim with a fractured bone.

I see Kerry and Tommy just ahead of me. They are both swimming hard. I do the same while there is still a current at my back. I know that all too soon, I will have to propel myself forward on my own steam. Two miles is quite the swim if you're not used to it.

The current gets less and less, and I slow down more and more, but I keep going at a slow but steady pace. Once again, it feels like I swim for forever.

I heave a sigh of relief when I see the flag that signals the halfway mark. I'm tired, but not nearly as exhausted as my first attempt with Jen. It feels like a million years ago since then. One of the guys, Simon, told us an interesting fact. Apparently, your body tells you that you are tired well before it is truly fatigued. It's a safety mechanism to prevent overexertion, but it is also a lie. A person needs to push through the pain. Ignore that little voice that tells you to stop – you can actually go on. Once you've pushed through, you start to feel better for a time and even get what is known as a second wind. Right now, I'm feeling the burn and praying that my second wind will come to me soon.

I need to keep going.

Push!

Push!

Push!

Tiny Angela made it. We can, too. I keep going and going and going. When the fatigue hits me like a wall, I keep going. I'm going to push through.

Push!

Push!

Push!

It feels like forever but, just as Simon said it would happen, I get my second wind. I can hardly believe it. I'm tempted to pick up speed, but I don't. He also warned that the second wind won't last as long, and once gone...you're pretty much done.

I try to keep my legs together and just kick my feet. I am a torpedo gliding through the water. A torpedo? Hah! That's laughable.

I hear hollering, and I stop swimming. I wonder what's going on. Is one of the others in trouble?

Holy crap!

What?

No!

I see Tommy and Kerry. They're both sopping wet. Kerry has a towel draped around her.

Tommy waves. The flags. There they are, about a hundred feet in front of me. We made it! I made it. I almost can't believe it. If you had told me two weeks ago that I would swim through dangerous rapids and make a three-mile swim, I would have laughed in your face. Yet here I am. Pride bubbles up inside me. It warms me.

I laugh, and then, with a shit-eating grin on my face, I swim the rest of the way and head toward the shore. I have to say that my limbs suddenly feel heavy. I'm panting hard, but it is nothing like the first day I attempted the swim. It hasn't been that long, and already I am fitter. Perhaps it's in my head, too. I'm stronger than I thought I was.

“We made it!” Kerry yells, jumping up and down. I see that her shoulder is scraped and bleeding. It’s already forming a bruise.

“Are you okay?” I ask her, frowning.

“Yes! I’m better than okay.” She laughs.

“We totally made it!” Tommy shouts, taking a towel from Octane. Dagger isn’t here, and I’m oddly disappointed he didn’t see me finish.

“You need to go to see a medic when you get back,” Octane tells Kerry, who nods.

I slowly make my way out of the water. Tommy grabs me in a bear hug. Kerry is grinning from ear to ear as she accepts a towel from Octane. I do the same, wrapping it around myself.

My legs feel like Jell-O. I’m tired to my bones.

We all hear it at the same time – footfalls heading up the shore toward us. All of us look in that direction. It’s Dagger. He’s jogging toward us, his eyes on the river.

I hate to admit it, but for a few moments, I’m mesmerized by how such a big man can move so easily. I would even go so far as to say that he is graceful despite all his masculinity.

“Who’s that?” Tommy asks.

“Yeah, I see them. There is someone in the water,” Kerry says.

I follow their gazes, and sure enough, it’s a person. From their stature, I would say that it’s a woman.

“It must be the missing Tribute,” Tommy surmises.

“The one who ran,” Kerry adds on.

Crap!

That means she was caught. It was only a matter of time. I think she did well, all things considered. I feel bad for her.

She’s a strong swimmer, that’s for sure. We all wait the few minutes it takes her to get to us. Dagger makes it to us

first.

“They all made the swim,” Octane tells him as he arrives, not even slightly out of breath.

“Good,” Dagger says, watching as the woman emerges from the water. Her hair is cut to just below her chin. She’s wearing cotton underwear briefs and a sports bra. She’s tall and toned and scowling hard.

“Hi.” Kerry smiles and waves. “Congratulations on making the swim.”

“Um...hi, I’m Tommy.” Poor Tommy puts his hand out, and the new girl ignores him flat, giving his outstretched hand a cursory glance.

“Well done! You made it. We’re Tributes now,” I tell her, unable to curb my enthusiasm.

“So, they’ve already got you brainwashed into thinking it’s a good thing. It isn’t!” She shakes her head. “We shouldn’t be here.” She directs her remark at Dagger.

“At least we get to find out what’s going on and why we’re here,” I say. “There must be a good reason.”

She shrugs. “Whatever the reason, it can’t be good.”

“You should wait to find out before passing judgment,” Dagger tells her.

She snorts in disgust and shakes her head. “I don’t have to. I already know. You can literally tell me anything. In fact, I fully expect to be spun some or other tale.”

“Give it a chance, newbie,” Dagger tells her.

She’s about to hit him with a retort when a Jeep pulls up in a spray of dirt.

“It’s time to head back to the housing facility,” Dagger says. “Pack your things because we’re moving by the end of the day.”

“Where to?” Kerry asks.

“To the training grounds. They’re closer to the dragons. That’s why you’re here, after all,” Dagger says.

“See?” the newbie says, rolling her eyes. “Nothing good can come from this. Mark my words.”

A thousand questions run through my mind, but I don’t ask them. I know we won’t get answers. Not yet, anyway.

Dagger

The Tributes jump around, squealing and congratulating each other. All except for the new female, who looks like she is going to be a handful. The runners normally are. Once they find out the real reason they are here, it often gets worse. She's one of mine.

I love my fucking life.

I find my gaze lowering to Hunter's ass, so I quickly avert my eyes. What the fuck is wrong with me? She caught me staring earlier. Thing is, I wasn't just looking. I was ogling the fuck out of her, imagining all the things I wanted to do to her. My balls tighten. I feel like a testosterone-riddled youngster again, and I don't like it one bit.

I watch the Tributes pile into Fang's Jeep. Hunter gets in last. Her hair is wet. Her tits... Holy fuck, I've jacked off about a hundred times to thoughts of how she would look naked and on the end of my cock. I know she'd be loud and extremely receptive.

That does it!

Octane is about to get into the passenger side when I jog up to them. "Hold up," I tell him. "Drive back with me. There is something I want to ask you."

Octane nods once. He taps the roof of Fang's Jeep and closes the door, getting into my vehicle instead. I slide into the driver's seat and start her up.

"What's going on? Is it serious?" he asks. "You look..." He scrutinizes me. "I'm not sure. I can't place it. Concerned? Worried?" Then he laughs. "I guess I would be worried if I had a team like that. Your newbie is a piece of work."

"I think I'm going to have my hands full with that one," I tell him, playing it down. "I was hoping we could swap. One of mine for one of yours. I'd like to offer the newbie. She's strong. I'm sure you saw her swim today." I wouldn't mind getting the runner off my hands, but that's not the swap I actually want to make. I don't want to seem too desperate to get rid of Hunter. I don't want Octane to know I'm attracted to the female. He's also not into humans at all, even though they fucking love him. He'd find it hilarious if he found out about my problem, so I don't want him to know. It's not like I can help who I'm attracted to. It just...happened.

Just as expected, Octane laughs his ass off. "You're fucking hilarious. Not happening." He shakes his head. "I saw her swim, but I also heard her mouth off after getting out of the water. She's a problem, and you know it. I'm expecting her to be our longest holdout."

The newbie is nothing I can't handle. "Fine, what about one of my others?" I glance his way.

"Who did you have in mind?"

"Hunter. Do you want her? We don't get along at all. She insists on calling me...weird names. I think that she and the newbie will be huge trouble together." Stop fucking talking. Why did I have to say so damned much?

As expected, Octane barks out a laugh. "You can't handle the little lady? She's calling you names." He laughs harder. "What kind of names?"

Sergeant Major Asshole.

Major Asshole.

Fuuuuck! I should have done something about that. Her latest is even worse. Holy shit!

“It’s not important,” I settle on.

“It clearly is important to you. Did she hurt your feelings?” He laughs so hard I think he might be crying because he wipes his face.

“You can stop that, asshole! Of course I can handle her.” That right there is the fucking problem! I need to play it cool, or he’ll figure it out. Brutus did, and he doesn’t even know me. If I think that Octane is laughing now, wait until he finds out I’m attracted to Hunter.

No!

It can’t happen.

“Hold up!” Octane stops laughing. “I know what’s going on, and I have to say that I’m disappointed in you.”

I don’t say anything. Fuck! He knows! How?

“I’m seriously disappointed. I didn’t expect this from you,” he goes on.

“It is what it is,” I grumble. “I can’t help—”

“You’re being a lazy bastard!” He chuckles. “You don’t want to put in the extra effort. Just admit it. Unfortunately, that’s what it’s going to take. I think the male, Tommy, will shape up pretty quickly, but you’re going to have to spend extra time prepping Hunter. Lots and lots of extra time. One-on-one time.”

Does he know?

“Yep, and I would quite literally rather put needles in my eyeballs.” This is true.

“You dislike her that much?” He narrows his eyes.

I shrug. “She’s fine. Maybe I’m getting too old for this.”

“What the fuck are you talking about? You’re not old. I’m sure you didn’t expect to be back so soon, is all. I’m sure things will work out this time around.”

I nod. "You're right."

"Put the work in," Octane says. "You know the drill. Some Tributes need more time than others. Put the effort in, and you'll get the reward."

Reward.

Not happening! I need to keep my head out of that particular gutter, even if it kills me. It won't do either of us any favors.

Hunter

After hastily packing our things, the drive to our new place of residence takes about half an hour on a well-used dirt road. As Dagger said, it's closer to the other side of the island. To where the dragons live?

Dragons!

Despite casting my gaze to the sky every few minutes, I have yet to see one. The jungle is too dense on either side of the road for dragons to move freely. Maybe they don't fly. Why have wings if they don't take to the sky? They must fly. It's weird; when I first got here, I prayed hard not to see one, and now I'm praying for the opposite. It's laughable.

We drive for a few more minutes, and the terrain opens up. Now this looks more like dragon territory. Open plains with low mountains in the distance. Dragon territory? Maybe. The truth is that I know nothing about these creatures. Hopefully, we will learn more in the coming days.

We turn down a long, paved road that leads to our new home, and I mean the term loosely. The architecture of the building is similar to the one we just left. It's all exposed beams and glass with stainless steel cables. Super modern and even bigger than the last facility. We've been told that we won't all have to share one room anymore. It's two people to a bedroom. One person in each team will get their own

bedroom. It has to be earned. Since Skylar made the swim first out of those on our team, she gets her own space. She didn't look too impressed either way. At least those of us sharing get to pick who we share with. Jen and I picked each other. Poor Tommy has to share a room with the new girl, who still hasn't told us her name. She looks completely pissed off at having been captured and brought here. It's clear from the perpetual scowl on her face that she hasn't accepted her fate yet.

“Oh, wow!” Jen gushes as she takes in the sight that greets us.

“We're dead,” I say.

“Dead and buried,” Tommy grumbles.

“Don't be so dramatic.” Jen laughs. “I'm sure there will be harnesses and other safety measures in place.”

“Look at that thing,” I say, pointing. There is a huge obstacle course in the front of the building. I see mud, obscenely high nets, and logs of death. It's the real deal. I note that the climbing net is much higher than the building. Surely they wouldn't expect us to get all the way up there? Maybe it's optional. I start to feel a little ill just thinking about trying to make it through that thing. I'm sure we won't be expected to climb it for quite some time – if ever. I'm not going to think about it right now. I don't even want to look at it, so I don't. I'll bury my head in the sand until I'm told otherwise. It's better for my mental health.

There is also a jogging track that surrounds the whole of the grounds. I'm sure that Jen will make us run it every morning before the parrots can squawk.

“We have half an hour before the induction meeting,” Jen says as we climb out of the vehicle. “Let's go and explore.”

Tommy and I nod in unison. Skylar and the new woman walk away in the opposite direction. I guess they're not interested.

When I asked Skylar why she wasn't very interested in being here, she said that she wasn't going to be here long and that there was no point in getting to know us or anything about

this place. She wouldn't say how she knew this to be true. Maybe she'll open up one of these days. Who knows?

After taking a walk around, we note that the gym is bigger and even more state-of-the-art than at the last place. It's clear that they want us fit, which scares me just a little. There is a large industrial kitchen, just as at the other facility; people work here as cooks, cleaners, and gardening staff. I note that they are all middle-aged or nearing retirement. Are they old Tributes? They're friendly but, just as before, they refuse to divulge any useful information, so we don't even try anymore. They arrive in SUVs every morning, leaving late afternoon. I'm not sure where they live. It's all a mystery.

We were told to convene in the communal area, which is very similar to the one in the last building.

"Hi, Hunter."

I look over and see Simon's telltale mop of red hair. "Hi." I wave back. "Thanks for your advice. It got me through today."

"You hit your second wind."

"Sure did."

"Good for you," he says before joining his group.

I keep walking, looking at the artwork in awe. They're semi-abstract paintings of dragons, using broad, thick brushstrokes. Dragons flying. More proof that they do, indeed, fly. A dragon breathing plumes of fire. A close-up of the eye of a dragon. Another of the scales. A wing close-up. They're impressive and slightly terrifying.

"It isn't called Draig Island for nothing," Shadow's words run through my head.

Someone shoulder-bumps me quite hard. I stagger a step or two. It's Halbert. He's smirking at me.

What does he want?

I wish he would leave me alone.

"I'm shocked you made the swim," he tells me. "I'm glad you did, because I get the feeling that things are about to get

even more difficult.” He chuckles. “I’m going to enjoy watching you fail.”

“Why are you being so mean?” I’m sure that Halbert was a bully at school. He’s probably a bully in the workplace now. Much like my ex dickhead boss, Derick, who used to get off on using his power over us. People like this get a kick out of it. I’m not sure why I’m engaging with him at all. It’s useless to even try. In fact, all I’m doing is feeding the ogre. It’s best to ignore him, no matter how irritating he gets.

Halbert’s smirk grows wider. “In this world, you get winners and losers. Those of us who are of strong mind and body and those who are weak.” He looks me up and down.

“I’m assuming you put me in the latter category.” I fold my arms tightly across my chest.

Stop engaging!

“You were born to lose, Hunter. The sooner you accept that, the better.” He winks at me. “Not everyone gets to go home. Some of you will end up in a body bag.” I hate how convinced he is that he will succeed. It must be nice to be confident like that. I try not to think about a body bag.

Nope.

I stand my ground and keep my eyes on his. “Actually, I quite like a challenge.” I shrug. I don’t particularly care what Halbert thinks. He can go to hell. I am afraid of what is to come, but I don’t plan on giving him the satisfaction of showing my fear. I’ll fake it till I make it.

Halbert chuckles loudly as I walk away. *Screw him!* I join Jen and Tommy.

“What did he want?” Jen asks me.

“Nothing. He was just being his usual charming self.”

Jen rolls her eyes. “Ignore him.”

“I am.” I smile, pretending my stomach isn’t caught in knots as I watch the instructors walk in behind Shadow. They take up their places in front of us.

This is it.

Now that we are here, I'm not sure I want to know anymore. I prefer keeping my head firmly in the sand.

"Can I have your attention?" Shadow says in a projected voice. I note that the instructors are wearing their full leathers.

"Are you finally going to tell us why we are here?" Kerry shouts through cupped hands. There is a buzz of excitement in the room. I stand taller. Despite being nervous, I'm all ears.

"It's on all of your minds. You want to know what the deal is. You want to know why you have been selected and brought to Draig Island. Why we have Tributes sent every year," Shadow says. "We've already told you that this is an academy and, therefore, I think it is fairly obvious that you're here to train. To become better versions of yourselves. Stronger, fitter, more forward-thinking individuals. Congratulations to all of you for making it through the first leg of your journey. You are all Tributes now. It is an honor."

Some of the crowd rejoice while others grumble. Jen, Tommy, and I don't say or do anything. We're waiting for the rug to be pulled out from under us.

Why are we here?

Why?

It's the question on everyone's minds. We've all wondered since the day we found out that we were being sent to this island, and finally...finally...we're going to find out. At least, I hope we will. As much as I don't want to know, I have to know. It's time to face my future head-on. Only then will I be able to figure out how to get back home.

"Once we get the induction out of the way, there will be champagne and snacks set out on the table behind us for all of you to celebrate what I hope will be the first of many victories. Do not overindulge, because tomorrow will be your first day of training." She gives the ghost of a smile. "The river was the first of several challenges you will need to endure if you are to graduate from Draig Academy. None of them will be easy."

“Why do we need to train? What is the Draig Academy?” one of the others asks.

“That is an excellent question. Please listen carefully, and I will explain everything to you.” Shadow pauses, but everyone keeps their attention on her. “There was a time when dragons and humans lived alongside one another in harmony. We knew of one another’s existence, but kept to ourselves. The dragons lived as one clan between the two islands.”

“Two islands?” Simon shouts. “Since when were there two?”

“There’s only one island,” Halbert says, clapping his hands behind his back.

Everyone starts talking at once. The room erupts in chaos. I’m questioning the need to talk about peace. As far as I know, there *is* peace. Dragons and humans *do* live in harmony, don’t we?

“I thought there was only one dragon island,” Jen says, frowning. “That’s this one, surely? Another island?” She shakes her head and rubs her chin.

“I also thought that there was only one,” Tommy says, along with questions from several others in the same vein.

I widen my eyes and shrug.

“I can assure you that there are two islands,” Shadow goes on, holding her hand up. Everyone goes quiet. “Dragons and humans lived in harmony because dragons ruled the skies and humans the land. As long as the dragons stayed on their islands and surrounding oceans, all would be well. But the dragons became unhappy. You see, humans had invented hot air balloons, airplanes, and even helicopters. They began encroaching more and more on the dragon territories. The two species clashed. There was loss of life on both sides during these clashes. The dragons grew angry and quickly became restless. They wanted their skies back, but we humans did not listen.”

“How do you know all of this?” Angela asks. Her voice is soft, but Shadow hears her.

“Now, that is an excellent question.” The leader smiles. “Many, many years ago, long before any of our time, there was a band of humans who also lived on the two islands. They called themselves the Sky Wardens. They lived here together with the dragons, completely at peace with them. I’m not going to get into all of the very boring details, but suffice to say that most of these humans had the ability to communicate telepathically with the dragons.”

“Bullshit!” Halbert laughs. He looks around him, expecting the others to follow suit, but none do. “That can’t be right.” He shakes his head. “Come on.” He sniggers some more, quickly going silent when he realizes that he is alone and that Shadow is waiting for him to finish his outburst.

“I assure you that it is true and very real. Many of the Sky Wardens had this rare gift of dragon telepathy. With some, it was stronger than with others.” She pulls in a deep breath, licking her lips. “We’re not sure why, but many of the Sky Wardens left the islands to go to live with their own kind on the mainland. This happened before the discord between humans and beasts. The human clan who used to live here was very important in keeping the tenuous peace between the two species. We believe that things started to fall apart when they left. We suspect that there was a falling out, but we are not sure. You are here because you are all direct descendants of the Sky Wardens.”

There are shocked cries, and everyone starts talking again.

“You mean that the Tributes are related? As in, we’re family?” The guy talking looks like he might throw up. I think he and the girl next to him have been sleeping together since they landed on the island over a week ago. I would also be concerned if that was the case. Everyone looks from one to the other, trying to see a resemblance. Yeah, no, I’m definitely not related to anyone here. Not closely, at any rate. Halbert...give me strength. Nope, I don’t believe it. I look over at him and see him looking at me with horror. I choke out a laugh. I hope we *are* related.

Asswipe!

Shadow shakes her head. “No, relax. You’re not family. You share markers, but nothing like family members. None of you are close enough to even be called very distant cousins.”

The guy heaves a sigh of relief. The girl does, too. Yep, they’re going at it all right.

“You’re all here because you may have the ability to communicate with dragons.”

Once again, the whole room goes nuts. My heart goes wild. My jaw unhinges for a few seconds.

“Holy shit!” I finally whisper.

Dragon telepathy?

Really?

“It’s all fucking lies!” the new girl yells, but she doesn’t look too sure of herself.

“Is this for real?” Tommy asks. “It can’t be.” He shakes his head, looking confused and shocked in equal measure. “Dragon telepathy. Sky Wardens. No! Surely not! Do you mean that we can talk to dragons with our minds?” he asks Shadow, but his voice is drowned out by a barrage of questions coming at her from all sides. I think I may have flung one or two at her myself. This is freaking insane.

“Come on!” Jen says when the noise dies down. “This has to be a joke. Dragons are big lizards. You’re telling me that I can communicate with reptiles? My brother had a pet snake once, and I swear I couldn’t talk to it.” She laughs, but it sounds shrill, like she’s panicking a little, and I can’t say I blame her. I knew a bomb was going to drop, but I didn’t realize it would be this big or this weird of a bomb.

Shadow laughs. One or two of the other instructors crack a smile. Not Dagger. He just stands there looking as dark and brooding as ever. I wonder if he can talk to dragons. If all of them can communicate with the creatures. I suspect they can.

What would you even say to a dragon?

“The dragons are like nothing you have ever seen before. Certainly not comparable to your brother’s pet snake or any

other reptiles you know of.” Shadow brings me back from my thoughts. “Although you are direct descendants of the Sky Wardens, you might not have the ability to communicate with the dragons. Some don’t. Most who can, only manage to mind-bond with one dragon at a push. It takes skill, concentration, and raw talent. It takes practice and determination. Most of all, it takes guts. Whether or not you have the ability remains to be seen.”

“What difference does it make if we can talk to dragons or not?” a guy called Peter asks. “Why do you want us to communicate with them at all? Shouldn’t we just leave them alone?”

“We can’t leave them alone.” Shadow shakes her head. “Nearly sixty years ago, half the dragons declared war on the humans. The other half were willing to work with the humans to try to come to an amicable solution. They were willing to share the skies. They wanted peace. The two factions were split to the point where the dragons wanting war took what is now known as Mistveil Island. The rest stayed here on Draig Island. They were a species divided. The dragons who left turned completely feral. They were preparing to launch attacks on human settlements. Many from both sides would have perished. The humans would have countered by bringing aircraft and bombs and guns. In the long run, the dragons would have been exterminated, but not after the humans suffered significant losses as well. There would have been the equivalent of a World War III between us and them.”

Murmurs go around the group.

Why have we never heard of this? Surely it would have made the news? It can’t be! It can’t! And yet, deep down inside, I know that Shadow is telling the truth. We wouldn’t be here otherwise.

“Again, I’m not going to bore you with all the details, but an agreement was signed between the humans and the dragons from Draig. The last remaining Sky Wardens acted as mediators. The humans agreed to send thirty descendants of the Sky Wardens back to the island annually as Tributes to be trained.”

“What do you want us for?” Peter asks. “What could we possibly tell these creatures that would stop them from declaring war?”

“Are we expected to talk the dragons into submission?” someone else asks. “I can’t even get my dog to heel back home.” He laughs.

I don’t have much experience with pets, either. I had a hamster when I was little. Does that count?

Holy hell!

There’s been a mistake. I shouldn’t be here. I couldn’t talk a daisy into submission.

“No, you will not be expected to talk the dragons into submission.” Shadow shakes her head. “You couldn’t, even if you tried. The dragons are still very much divided. The Red Dragons still want war, while the Draig Dragons want to keep the peace.”

“That still doesn’t explain why you want us here.” The newbie folds her arms, glowering at the instructors and at Shadow. “I’m not saying I believe you, but so what if some of us can talk with dragons? What then?”

“All dragons are feral. They’re all wild and untamable. It’s only when mind-bonded to a Sky Warden that they are halfway to cordial and relatively calm. Somewhat controllable.”

Dagger growls a little. “I wouldn’t use the word controllable.”

“It’s a shitty word.” Fang shakes his head. “It’s more of a partnership. A close bond of give and take.”

“So, you want us to bond and control...partner with dragons so that they won’t attack our people?” I ask. “I’m sure that all they want is to be left alone. That’s how the trouble started in the first place. We encroached on their space. I say leave them alone. Let them be. We shouldn’t be here.”

“That’s a sweet concept, Tribute,” Shadow tells me. “It won’t work in the real world since the Red Dragons are still

out to get the humans. They haven't forgotten their vendetta against us. If anything, their anger has grown exponentially over the last fifty-nine years. You see, they were banished to Mistveil. They may not fly farther than thirty miles beyond the beaches of their island...beyond the mists that are ever-present there. They cannot be trusted. It will be your job – those of you who qualify, that is – to make sure that they remain where they can't be of harm to themselves or others.”

“How?” I ask. It seems like an impossibility.

“Wait a minute; are we expected to control the dragons here on Draig Island? Or the ones on Mistveil? It's not making much sense,” Jen says. Lots of people are shouting questions. I hear Kerry ask something similar. Angela looks like she's going to faint at any second.

“You will be expected to bond with the one in order to control the threat from the other,” Shadow says, making absolutely no sense. “Mistveil dragons cannot be tamed or bonded with. They need to be subdued. You will be expected to patrol the mist border. You'll need to stop any who try to break free, apprehending those who do, even if that means taking them down. Leaving the mist border of Mistveil is an offense punishable by death.”

“That still doesn't answer any of our questions,” I say, my voice drowned out by all of the questions that are asked around me. Every Tribute is talking at once. “How would a mind-bond with a Draig Dragon keep the Red Dragons subdued on their island?” I shout. I feel like we are missing an important piece of the puzzle. “Can we see through the eyes of the dragon we're bonded with?”

Shadow looks at me for a few moments with a strange look on her face, then she holds up a hand, and we are instantly silent and waiting with bated breath for the other shoe to drop. “Those of you who successfully form a mind-bond with a dragon here on Draig will become true Sky Wardens. You'll become dragon riders, protectors of the weak.”

Everyone goes insane. All I can hear is the beating of my heart.

Holy shit! A dragon rider. I had to have heard wrong. That really can't be right. We'll be expected to ride them...all the way up there.

No damned way.

Dagger

I toss off the covers and sit up in bed. It's three in the morning, and I can't sleep. I've been trying and failing for over an hour. My skin feels too tight. Unspent energy courses through my veins.

I pull on some running shorts, grab a water and a hand towel, and head outdoors. The air is muggy with humidity. It hits me like a wall after being in an air-conditioned environment. I more than just like it; I revel in it. I pull in a noseful of jungle air, picking up scents of forest floor, decay, and hints of something floral. Smells like home. I walk to the running track and pick up a fast pace from the get-go. We're not permitted to leave the academy. Not during these early stages of Tribute training. Soon though, and I can't fucking wait. I hate being cooped up like this.

I run until the sweat drips. I run until I'm out of breath. Then I do some stretches and run some more. I chase calm and keep going until I find at least a semblance of it. Tomorrow, I will do weight training. It's good to keep a balance. I need to work it off. One way or another, this buzzing inside me has to go.

Using my towel, I wipe myself down, drinking all of the water in one go. My stomach rumbles.

Shit!

It's the one bitch about hard exercise; it makes me ravenous every single time. I'll make myself a sandwich or four, and then I'll hit the shower, ready to start the day. There will be no more sleep for me. I've never needed more than a few hours a night.

I walk into the kitchen, narrowing my eyes when I hear a noise. It's coming from the pantry.

Yep, true enough, someone has a flashlight in there. I can tell from the glow of the light as it moves about. I can hear them moving around in there.

I yank the door open. "You'd better have a good explanation for being here."

Hunter gasps, dropping a bag of bagels. One escapes and rolls to my feet, where it lands unceremoniously.

"Holy shit, you gave me a fright. What the hell?!" She clutches her chest, where her T-shirt strains. "What's wrong with you? Do you always sneak up on people like that?" she snarls like a little hellcat, bringing my attention up and away from her braless tits.

This is great.

"I should be saying the same to you. What the hell are you doing here, recruit? You should be in bed, not stealing food."

"I was brought to this island pretty much against my will. Made to swim a river with rapids where people die. I just got told that I have to ride dragons...dragons! And you accuse me of theft." She puts her hands on her ample hips, thrusting out that incredible chest.

Eyes up!

Then she walks over to me, bending over and picking up the bagel, which she puts in my face. "I've earned this. Do you hear me? I've earned it. I'm at this stupid academy so that you can teach me how to communicate with dragons. I'll be expected to ride one. A dragon. Ride! I don't want to ride a dragon. I've never ridden anything in my life. I've never even been on a horse. Why? Because I'm fearful of large creatures

that can kill me...let alone eat me. Now I'm expected to ride a couple of dragons."

"What makes you think a dragon would want to eat you?"

"I'd make a good snack. Shadow kept saying that they're feral. That we need to be brave." She's panicking a little. "Holy crap! I'm not brave. I can't ride dragons." Her hair is mussed. Her freckles are out in full force, as are her tits. My eyes drift back down like a depraved asshole.

I force myself to keep my eyes on hers. "You'll only have to ride one...that's if you qualify."

"One dragon? Just the one?" She laughs.

"Yes, and only if you're lucky enough to make the cut and actually complete a mind-bond, then it will only be with *one* beast. You were talking about riding dragons, plural. I wanted to set the record straight there."

"One, ten, what difference does it make? Back to the part where I've never ridden anything...ever." She gets this look as if she's thinking it over. "Maybe I rode my ex once or twice, but that wasn't very successful." She widens her eyes. "Sorry, that's overshare. Point being, I can't ride. Can't! Just can't!"

Couldn't ride her ex? I doubt that very fucking much. I think that a female like this would be plenty successful at riding just about anything. I'd love nothing more than to prove it to her, but that isn't going to fucking happen.

No.

Just no!

She flaps a hand. "So, you'll excuse me if I'm ravenous right now. It's because I'm stressed. I couldn't sleep...back to being stressed. So, I came here and found myself some bagels. They're delicious with cheese and mayo, toasted to gooey perfection. See, I'm feeling less stressed by the second just thinking about it."

I hate to admit it, but gooey perfection sounds good. "I'm not so sure about the mayo."

“I’m sure enough for the both of us. Outta my way, beefcake. I need to eat.”

“It’s Sir,” I growl. “Why do I have to keep reminding you of that?” The Tributes are normally afraid of us. That tends to make them obey us. Not this one.

Beefcake. I don’t fucking think so.

“Just so you know, my name is Hunter. I’m a Tribute, not a recruit. Get it right, and maybe I’ll get yours right. How’s that?”

“I’m your superior. It isn’t a negotiation. I can call you whatever I like.” I step out of her way.

“Sorry, but I disagree. Let me remind you about me having to ride fire-breathing, bloodthirsty creatures against my will. I’ll call you cupcake if I feel like it. Get used to it.” She stops as she reaches me and sniffs.

My cock takes note, which irritates me.

She makes a noise of enjoyment, which doesn’t help my dick situation one bit. “You smell good. Are you wearing aftershave? I mean, who wears aftershave to bed?”

“It’s sweat. I went for a jog.”

She gives me a look that tells me she thinks I’ve lost my mind. “That really isn’t fair. You get to smell that good after exercise. You don’t want to smell me after exercise.”

Actually, I do. Smell, taste, fuck...all of it. I want every last bit of it and then some.

She gives me a dirty look that is just plain sexy on her. Then she angles the small flashlight at my chest. “Wow! You sure like your tattoos...and muscles. You must work out every spare second you get.”

I sort of smile. “I work out a lot, but I’m also naturally big.”

“I’d say. I haven’t seen you at the gym since that first day.” She frowns.

“I like to work out at unusual hours.” And seeing Hunter with her ass in the air while she does stretches was not my idea of fun. I’d rather steer clear. It’s safer. I should grab a quick snack and leave, but she intrigues me. It’s that and the thought of gooey perfection that keeps me here in the line of danger.

“You can stop standing there looking all cute and grate some cheese,” Hunter says as she walks over to the counter with the bagels.

“I am not cute,” I tell her. “I might be a lot of things, but cute ain’t one of them.”

“Another thing we disagree on. How many do you want? I’m having two, but something tells me that two might not be enough for a big guy like you.”

“Four.”

I see a big hunk of aged cheddar already on the counter with a grater sitting next to it. Hunter has been busy. I go over and get started while she cuts the bagels and smears them with plenty of mayo. We assemble the snacks, and she puts them into a couple of air fryers. Again, I’m a little skeptical, but I’ll go with it.

“You look worried,” she says, catching me eyeing the air fryers. There’s a whole line of the things. “Don’t be. I know exactly what I’m doing.” She gives me a wink that makes me tighten my jaw. Is she flirting? Maybe it’s just how she is. No, it’s definitely how she is. I’m reminded of her spanking joke. Fucking hilarious. Not!

“I have no doubt that you know exactly what you are doing.” I lean back against the counter, and Hunter does the same. We look across the dark kitchen. The only light is from her flashlight. All is quiet except for the whir of the air fryers.

“Should we be worried? I mean, are things going to get more difficult for us now that we’re at the academy?”

“Train hard. Follow the rules, and I think you’ll do just fine.”

“So, the river was the hardest part, then?”

I can feel her looking at me. I keep my eyes facing forward.

I pull in a deep breath. “In some ways, yes, but in others, no. The hardest part is yet to come.”

“Why do you guys speak like that? What does that even mean?” She turns to face me, resting her hip on the counter.

“Leaving your old life and moving forward into the unknown is incredibly difficult. Some say that it is the most difficult part of this journey. The river swim will be easy in comparison to what is to come. You will need to make a big choice soon enough. That will be tough. Getting strong, both in body and mind, will be a major challenge. You will need to push yourself in ways you never knew possible.” I turn to look at her.

“What choice? It doesn’t feel like we have a choice in anything.” Her eyes are big and bold as they hold mine. There is not a shred of fear in her, which is interesting. Most instinctually fear me, since I give off certain signals.

“You *do* have a choice.”

“And if I wanted to leave right now?” She cocks her head, narrowing her eyes.

“No one would stop you. The doors are unlocked.”

She rolls her eyes. “Yeah, but I would be eaten before I made it very far.”

I laugh. I can’t help it. “You’re so damned convinced that everything out there wants to eat you.”

Hunter laughs as well. “You have to admit, I’d make a good snack.” She looks down at herself.

“Yes, you would.” We both stop laughing. The air becomes charged. Fuck! Did I just say that? It sounded very much like flirting. I don’t flirt. Certainly not with Tributes in my care. My jaw tightens. My whole body tightens.

Hunter bites her lower lip. “I mean for a dragon. A good snack for...um...a dragon.”

“Yep, for a dragon,” I agree, nodding.

“So, do they eat people?” Her eyes widen.

“Not very often.”

“I’d be—” she starts to say, but there is a ding signaling that the food is ready. The first air fryer switches off, followed by the second.

“Once you’ve made it through the training.” *Provided you don’t die.* I don’t say it because I don’t want to ruin her appetite. “Once you make it, you will be permitted to choose whether you want to proceed and attempt to mind-bond a dragon or whether you want to return to your family.”

“There are those who return each year, so people do choose to go back home, I take it?” There’s hope in her eyes.

I nod. “Yep.”

“Why would anyone choose to stay? I don’t get it.” She shrugs.

“Because Sky Wardens are all there is standing between enormous, enraged, fire-breathing, bloodthirsty dragons and your family...between them and the home and life you once knew. Sky Wardens are the only barrier, the only protection against the Red Dragons. If they escape, there would be bloodshed, the likes of which you have never seen. The problem is that every year, there are fewer Tributes who choose to stay and even fewer who are able to form a mind-bond. Our numbers grow thin. We need you, Tribute. We need all of you.”

I see her throat work. “Are you a Sky Warden?”

“I was once.” I nod. “I lost my...partner.”

“Oh, no!” She puts both hands to her mouth, her eyes wide. “Was your dragon killed?”

I nod once.

“Can’t you form another mind-bond?” she asks, her eyes so filled with innocence. She has no idea.

“It gets more difficult each time a partner is lost.”

“You’ve lost more than one?” She gasps. “I’m so sorry, Dagger.” She steps in and puts her arms around me, hugging me tightly.

What the fuck!?

Her breasts mash up against me. Soft meets hard. Her small hands are splayed on my back as she holds me tightly. Her scent envelopes me. Jasmine and sunshine. Fuck, but she smells so good. I hold myself rigid for a moment before peeling her off me because this is highly inappropriate.

“Thank you,” I mutter.

“Oh, shit! Sorry! Did I cross a line? It was only a little hug. Oh crap, I did, didn’t I?” She rubs her face. “Of course I did. I felt really bad for you. I—”

“I’m essentially your superior. Your trainer. The coming weeks will be fraught with danger. It’s best we keep things... strictly professional.”

“Look, I didn’t mean anything by that. I was just being nice. We’re very affectionate in my family. Even my grandparents were... You don’t need to hear all of this. I wasn’t thinking.”

“I know, but it needs to be said. We’re not friends, Tribute.”

“Of course. Understood.” She nods once.

“I mean it.”

“Get a life, cupcake. I know already. It was just a silly hug. It’s not like I put my hand in your pants or anything. I apologized. Can we please move on?” She doesn’t wait for me to reply. “Anyway, that’s enough talk of doom and gloom. Let’s eat.” She puts four bagels onto one plate and two on the other. I see cheese oozing out the side. “Come to Mama.” She blows on a bagel and then bites into it. There is a cracking noise. The outer shell of the bagel is crunchy. I can scent the tang of the mayo coupled with the salty, cheesy goodness.

My mouth waters, but not from the food. Hunter lets her head fall back, and her eyes flutter closed. She groans low and

deep, like she's having an actual orgasm.

My cock goes hard in an instant. It irritates the shit out of me.

“Thanks for the food,” I say, grabbing my plate. Then I turn and walk away while I still have my faculties intact. Before I do something stupid, like put my hand down her pants.

Hunter

“Concentrate!” Dagger sounds irritated. “This isn’t a game, Tribute.” He glowers at me.

“I know that,” I tell him with irritation laced in my voice. His blue eyes are boring into me. “It’s hard, that’s all, and I guess I don’t quite believe that I can do it.” I sigh. Why is he being so bullish with me? I enjoyed our talk last night, at least up until Dagger ran away. That’s what it felt like. Like he had burned his fingers and couldn’t get away quickly enough. All I did was hug him. It’s not that big of a deal. Now, he’s either ignoring me flat or moaning at me. It’s getting on my last nerve when it really shouldn’t.

“Of course, it’s difficult,” he pushes out. “I never said this would be a walk in the park. You *can* do it! You will have to trust me on that one. You all have a level of telepathic ability.” His eyes move to Jen and then to Tommy. “Some of you will have more ability than others, but you all have it. It’s imperative that you concentrate and that you at least try.” He glares at the new girl. We have since found out that her name is Octavia. She looks sullen and disinterested. Skylar isn’t much better. She recently admitted that she’s waiting for her daddy to save her. “Daddy.” That’s what she called him. Apparently, he’s rich and connected. She told us his name, but we’re not all that clued up on rich business moguls, so none of us knows him. I think she’s living on false hope. No one gets

off this island early. I've never heard of it happening, at any rate.

I look at each of my team members. We are a group of misfits. I almost feel bad for Dagger. At least, I would if he wasn't so moody, so damned hot and cold.

Hot.

Yes, he is.

"Thing is," Tommy says, making me pull my eyes off of the man in question, "we have to concentrate hard while remaining calm." He frowns. "That's tough!"

"It is." Dagger nods. "Again, I never claimed that it would be easy. Stress and tension will interfere with your telepathic skills."

"It's almost impossible." Tommy frowns deeper.

"It really isn't," Dagger rasps.

"I'm getting a headache," I grumble, rubbing my temples.

Dagger looks at the clock on the wall. "Who else is battling with mental fatigue?"

Everyone puts their hands up. I could kiss Jen, since I know that she is just fine. She already guessed the number I wrote down twice out of ten times, which is more than I can say for anyone else.

"Give it one more minute," Dagger says. "One last attempt, and then we'll go for a walk. You need to try to visualize the number. See it inside your mind. Let it come to you. Be open to it."

Yeah, yeah!

"Ready?" Jen asks me. She has her hands on a piece of paper that is face-down on the table. "I'm picturing the number," she says. "You need to visualize it, too."

I nod. I do as Dagger said – I let my mind wander. I try to clear it of all thoughts. Especially thoughts of my hunky instructor in a pair of running shorts and nothing else. Holy moly! I almost swallowed my tongue when I saw him last

night. I'm surprised I didn't all out drool. His muscles paired with those tattoos. Good golly, but he had my tummy tied in all kinds of knots. It felt naughty sneaking around in the dark, even if it was because of stolen food.

When he gave me the hint of a smile, I swear I almost fainted. We chatted, and it felt...kind of nice. Then he up and left after that damned hug. I can understand his reaction because I should never have done it. I wasn't thinking. He'd just told me that his dragon had died. I can't imagine how that must have felt. When my hamster died, I cried for a whole day straight. Even though I loved Donut dearly, he was just a hamster. Dagger lost a whole dragon. Actually, it was more than one.

The hug was my natural reaction because I could sense sadness in Dagger. I barely touched him, and he pulled away. I do get it; I do. I was out of line.

We talked it through like adults, and it's over. Only it's clearly not over. Unless his attitude can be attributed to something else. I can't seem to get a read on him. I mean, why point out that we can't be friends? What was that? I know that we can't be friends. I don't want to be friends with him, anyway.

The hug might have been short and totally on instinct and meant with absolutely good intentions, but I liked it a little too much once I was in there. I've never felt anything like it. He's huge and hard and hot. Literally, as in his temperature. So damned hot. Fiiiine, I've decided that my hug-on-instinct was a bad idea. I hope that cupcake over there gets over it, or I'm going to have to—

“Earth to Hunter,” Jen says, followed by a whispered, “Hey!” as she taps my shin with her foot. “You're staring at Dagger.” She mouths the words.

“I'm trying to decide if he's nice and trying to be an asshole or an asshole who is trying to be nice,” I whisper back. I didn't even realize I was staring.

Oops!

My bad.

“What difference does it make? I’m pretty sure there are rules against messing around with our instructors.” She grins.

“I don’t plan on—”

“What are the two of you whispering about?” Dagger asks, walking over to us. “Is one minute of concentration too much to ask, recruit?”

“No! Sorry!” I tell him.

“What is the number written down on that piece of paper?” He looks at Jen’s hands.

“Ummmmm...” I follow his gaze, looking at Jen’s hands, too. I wish I could see through them. I try to picture a number. I try harder. I imagine her writing it on that page. “Twelve?” I don’t sound sure. That’s because I guessed. My brain has gone completely blank. I can’t be a Sky Warden person. I think they mixed up the blood samples. I’m just not built for it. Not wired that way. I have other attributes. Good at cooking, great at eating, fantastic at number-crunching. Oh, and I’m amazing at binge-watching television programs. I can hold a pee for the longest time. There are more things I could add to that list. Loads more, but not this, though. Not anything Sky Warden-related. No! Nope.

Jen makes a face. She turns the paper around and, big surprise, it’s ninety-nine. I was wrong!

“I was close.” I roll my eyes and groan.

Skylar claps her hands. “I got it! I said twenty, and it’s twenty.” She beams. I think this is the first time I’ve seen her show any emotion. “I saw it in my head like you said,” she tells Dagger.

He nods once. “Well done, Skylar!”

“Lucky guess,” Octavia mutters.

“You read my mind,” Tommy tells her. “That was incredible.” He looks in awe.

“Let’s go outside,” Dagger says. “Everyone, take off your shoes. I want your feet in the soil. It’ll help you to meditate.”

“Meditate?” I instantly regret saying the word in such a flat tone.

“Unless you’d like to stay right there and try again?” He lifts his brows.

“I love meditating.” I fake-smile. I would rather stand outside in silence than have a number come to mind through mental telepathy.

Mental freaking telepathy!

My life has gone to the dogs. Make that, my life has gone to the dragons, who still might eat me before my time on this island is up.

We head outside and do as Dagger said; we stick our feet in the rich jungle soil. We close our eyes and breathe in deeply. We concentrate on freeing our minds without letting them wander into noisy chaos. I’m not sure what that means, but okay.

“We will keep our sessions short. Breathe in and out.” Dagger pauses. I hear him do as he tells us by breathing in and out as well. When I crack open my lids, I see him with his eyes closed. Octavia just stands there, staring at us like we’ve lost it. I quickly shut my eyes and breathe, trying to do as he asks.

“In and out,” he says again. “You need to be mindful. Go inward. Start with the top of your head. Then, slowly and deliberately, move down your skin one inch at a time. Your scalp, then your face, mouth, chin. Slowly...slowly. Your ears, your neck. Inch by inch, down every part of your body until you reach your toes. Breathe in and out. Relax. Think of each muscle letting go. Be still. Let calm take you,” he says in a quiet voice that is deep and melodic. Unfortunately, he has a great voice to match everything else.

We stand in silence for a minute or two. I try really hard to do as he says.

“Okay, that’s it for today. I urge you to practice this. Keep it to a few minutes, even just one. Try it two or three times a day, every day. Outside is best. Take your shoes off and stand under a tree, feel the breeze against your skin, but anywhere will work just fine. Practice being quiet, inward, and mindful. Practice being still. We will try again tomorrow.” Then he claps his hands together. “Get your shoes back on. It’s time for your introduction to the obstacle course.”

Octavia makes the sound of a buzzer. “Pass! I won’t be running the course. I don’t give a shit about the dragons. In fact, I call bullshit on the dragons. Even if they do exist – and that’s a very big if – this isn’t for me. I’d like to go home now, please. You can keep your money. I refuse to be brainwashed.”

“Every year, there are one or two Tributes who arrive with that kind of attitude,” Dagger says, keeping an even tone.

“Deal with it because it isn’t going to change,” she deadpans.

“Here’s the thing—” he starts to say.

“I don’t care.” She shakes her head. “You can say anything, and I quite literally will not care. I want to go home. You can’t keep me here.” She folds her arms.

“The law states that I can.”

“I don’t care what the law states. It’s wrong! Send me back.” She gets in Dagger’s face and pokes a finger in his chest. Even though Octavia is tall for a woman, she is still small compared to him. Even though she is being forward, I still see a flash of fear in her eyes, like she’s holding her ground, but only just.

“Didn’t you hear a thing that was said yesterday? We’re trying to prevent a war. Trying to prevent bloodshed,” he rasps, keeping his eyes on hers. “Don’t you have people at home who you love? People you wish to protect?”

She takes a step back, clasping her hands in front of her. “I don’t believe all of the crap about war. Where are the dragons? Why haven’t we seen any?”

“You will see a dragon when we say that you are ready to see one, and not a second sooner. You need to earn that privilege.”

“See!” She looks at us. “It’s all bullshit! There are no dragons.” She takes a few steps away from Dagger, turning to look at us. “This is all designed to brainwash us. Sky Wardens and mental telepathy.” She snort-laughes. “It’s crazy talk.”

I have to say, she is making a strange kind of sense, even though I want to believe Dagger. Why would they brainwash us, though? For what purpose? I can’t think of a logical reason.

“You’ll find out the truth soon enough, Octavia. For now, you need to trust us,” Dagger says more to the rest of us than to her.

Octavia laughs. The sound doesn’t hold a shred of humor. “That isn’t going to happen.”

“The problem is that there is no moving forward until every single Tribute makes it through the obstacle course on their own steam. Then and only then will you be offered the choice to mind-bond with a dragon or to return home.”

She rolls her eyes and snorts. “Of course. That way, you get all the time you need to fuck with our minds. What’s next, waterboarding? Other forms of torture? Sleep deprivation?”

Water-whating?

“None of that. There’ll be meditating, more telepathy classes. For those of you who choose to stay and attempt a mind-bond, there’ll be a class or two on the dragons so that you understand them better before meeting them. There could be exercises that will help you prepare for making the obstacle course, depending on the severity of your weaknesses. Sometimes, even one-on-ones with us. Everything is designed to get you through in one piece. Then you can choose.”

In one piece.

Eeeep!

“You must know that a couple of the Tributes make it back home every year,” I tell Octavia. I heard some of this from Dagger last night. “Cupcake over here must be telling the truth.” I point at Dagger.

The big guy growls at me. He’s quite cute when he’s mad. I wink at him and mouth, “Hunter.” I point at my chest. “That’s me.” He insists on calling me Tribute, even recruit at times, though I’ve noted how he calls the others by their names. It’s annoying. I won’t accept it.

“You can go home as soon as everyone makes it through. There have been years where it’s taken weeks and others where it’s taken months for everyone to get through it, but once you all make it, you will get to go home and not a minute sooner.”

“You told me not so long ago that we had choices,” I tell him. “Why can’t Octavia just go home now?”

“You do have choices, *recruit*.” He puts emphasis on the word. “Octavia is most welcome to sit on her ass while the rest of you practice, but unless *everyone* makes it through, *no one* goes home.” He shrugs. “You have one week to run the Sky’s Edge as a team. Then you need to try to make it on your own. There is a time limit. Work together while you can. You will need all the help you can get to learn the ins and outs of the obstacle course.” He glares at Octavia. “Give it your all every day. Understand that any extra excursions will be to help you make it out there.” He points a finger at the obstacle course. “You will need to put in hard work. You might hate us in the end.”

“Or sooner,” I grumble.

I get a hard look from Dagger but ignore it because I’m thinking about the obstacle course and possible death.

The Sky’s Edge. The name makes me shudder, and not in a good way.

“Will we get to meet the dragons once we make it?” I ask him.

He turns his blue eyes onto me. “If you choose correctly, you will.”

“But you might live to regret it,” Skylar says with fear in her eyes. “If I never see those dragons, I’ll be happy.” She shivers, even though it’s not remotely cold.

Hunter

For the first time since arriving here, I force myself to take a good look at the course, and my heart sinks. Up close and personal, it's unlike anything I have ever seen before. What did Dagger call it again? How could I forget? The Sky's Edge. There are half a dozen ways to fall or break yourself out there. That much is clear since it comprises large, complicated obstacles that many people would fail to complete. Even as a team, our chances of getting through this seem slim. As an individual? Hah! I don't think so. I'm five-nothing. I'm a weakling. In the real world, that isn't much of a problem. Out here? I'm in shit! Ask me to prepare a budget forecast or to conduct an audit. Need a financial statement? No problem. But that course out there? Forget it.

I'm afraid just looking at the walls at the start of the course. That's walls plural. One would be bad enough. There are four in total. Two look doable, then there's one that has to be at least six feet tall, followed by another one that is higher than that. I don't see nets or footholds. How am I supposed to climb that? Little old me.

After the walls, there's a narrow balance beam. It looks to be at least twenty feet long and leads to a rope bridge strung between two trees, where you have to balance on one taut strand of rope while holding onto another one. That will take

some serious balance and coordination, which I'm not so sure I have.

"Oh, brother," I mutter to myself.

"We'll get through it," Jen says, but even she doesn't look too sure of herself.

"From the frying pan into the fire," I grumble.

"You're telling me," Jen says. "I'll take the river any day. The Sky's Edge is a good name for that monstrosity."

I make a little snorting noise.

"Look at that. Adult monkey bars," Tommy says, looking horrified.

I'm looking, all right! I notice that they are set wide apart. There are ten of them, which doesn't seem like all that many, but it really is. I look down at my dumpy arms and legs. Holy crap! I'm in trouble here.

"I'm good with numbers, always have been. This...not so much," I tell them.

"I'm great at taking care of kids. Helping them fingerpaint and learn to count to ten. They love me. I want to be a teacher again," Jen mutters.

"I was all set to take over my father's hardware store. I love working there. I started on the cash register when I was sixteen. It was just weekends until I went full-time after school. It may sound boring, but it gets in your blood," Tommy adds, sounding wistful. "I love hammers...and nails...and—"

"Those logs are swinging fast," I say, looking at the next obstacle.

"If you get the timing wrong on those, you could break a rib or worse," Jen practically whispers.

"Why is there a net on the ground?" Tommy asks, sounding panicked. "I don't like the look of that." He's peering over there, putting a hand over his eyes to shield them from the sun.

“That’s the mud pit,” Dagger says.

“Noooooooooo,” Tommy groans.

“Mud pit?” Holy shit! Of course it is.

“You crawl under the net and through mud,” Jen says. “As you can see, it’s wide enough for two to go side by side.”

“It’s at least forty feet long...if not more,” I say.

“The net looks tight. You’d barely have your head above the mud.” Tommy looks like he’s going to be sick. “I’m a little claustrophobic.” He has gone pale.

My eyes go to the final obstacle, and my stomach clenches tightly. “How high is that?” I finally take a good, hard look.

“It’s high,” Dagger says. “We’re not going to put a figure to it. It would not be a good thing for you mentally.”

“Not putting a figure to it is worse,” I squeak. “That’s high. Is this a good time to mention that I’m afraid of heights?” I swallow thickly.

“You’re a Sky Warden, Tribute.” Dagger’s eyes lock with mine. “That’s impossible.”

“And yet it’s true.”

The obstacle in question is a rectangular wooden structure that goes straight up, perpendicular to the ground. It has a net strung up on it. A taut net that goes up and up and up. A net we will be expected to climb up on and then down the other side of. Sky’s Edge is a very good name for it. “Just thinking about going up there has my stomach in knots. I feel sweaty and lightheaded.”

“You’re here to form a mind-bond with a dragon. To become a dragon rider,” Dagger tells me. “As a rider, you will have to fly up there.” He points at the sky. “High up there.”

“I know, and yet I’m afraid of heights. Why didn’t you check before bringing me here?”

“Sorry, Tribute.” He doesn’t look in the least bit sorry. “It is an impossibility that you have an actual phobia. I repeat, you’re a direct descendant of the Sky Wardens. This is Sky’s

Edge, and it's all that separates you from the academy and your future, whatever that might entail. You will complete the Sky's Edge within the allotted time, and it is my job to get you over the line."

"You might just kill me doing it." It was supposed to be a joke, but it doesn't come out sounding like one. It feels like all of my blood has left my body. "Two questions." I hold up two fingers, my eyes still on the three-story obstacle. It might even be higher than that. In fact, I think it is.

"Only two?" Dagger asks. There is an edge to his voice that makes him sound both angry and sarcastic.

We have everyone's attention glued to us.

"Do we get safety gear?"

Dagger looks at me for a few long seconds. "You're asking if you'll have safety gear on the back of a dragon?"

I shrug, hoping that the answer is yes, even though I know deep down I'm being overly hopeful.

"No. The answer is no," he deadpans. "Not on the dragon and not up there, either." He points at the net of doom.

Not thinking about it. "Ummmmmm...has anyone ever died attempting to complete the obstacle course?" I look up at Dagger. I am afraid of what his answer might be.

For a moment, I'm not sure he's going to answer, and then he nods. His eyes soften for a moment. "We lose an average of three Tributes on Sky's Edge every year. There was a year where we lost five, but that is unusual."

An anguished sound escapes me.

"Holy shit!" Tommy blurts. "Three? That's insane. Surely this can't be legal?"

"I'm going to say it for the last time: you are here to mind-bond with dragons. They're feral, fucking huge, and breathe fire. You've said it a few times, *recruit*," he says to me. "They're bloodthirsty hunters who eat people on occasion. Unless you can form a bond with one of them, there is a real chance you will die trying. Let's say that you get it right. You

will have to learn to ride your dragon without falling to your death.”

I put a hand over my mouth. “I think I’m going to be sick.” My voice is muffled by my fingers. I can leave, I remind myself. I just have to get over the netted tower of doom.

Dagger rolls his eyes at me. “Stop. You are not going to be sick. You’re fine. My point being,” he points at Sky’s Edge, “this is like child’s play in comparison to facing the Red Dragons in combat. You will have a week to practice the course. My advice would be to do so in bite-sized chunks. We won’t time you...yet,” he adds after a beat.

Gee, what a sweetheart. Does he want a gold star? He isn’t getting one from me.

“That brings me to my second question. How much time do we get?” I ask.

“That’s a third question, but I’ll answer because it’s a good one,” Dagger replies.

Gee, a compliment. I sure am lucky.

“There are seven elements. Only seven,” he says, like he’s doing us a favor.

“May as well be a hundred,” I grumble.

“Are we done, *recruit?*” Dagger deadpans.

“Yes, *cupcake*, we’re done.” I wink at him.

Dagger scowls at me. “You have five minutes to complete the course,” he growls at me before looking at the others.

“That’s insane!” Jen blurts. If Jen thinks it’s insane, the rest of us are done for.

“It’s doable...at a push,” Dagger says. “We never said this would be easy.”

“I’m not doing it.” Octavia folds her arms.

“That’s up to you,” Dagger says. “I’ll say it for the last time. It will be easier to learn the course as a team. You have a week as a team, then you’re on your own after that, and we

will begin timing you. There will be practice days and attempt days, as well as extra training sessions to help bolster your weak points.”

“I’m still not—” Octavia starts to say.

“I don’t care what you do or don’t do. We stay right here at the academy until every single Tribute makes it through that course in under five minutes,” Dagger states.

“Makes it or dies, you mean?” Octavia yells.

Dagger nods. “Exactly. You’re finally catching on.”

“Holy shit! This is bad,” Tommy mutters. He wipes his hands on his pants. Come to think of it, my palms are feeling sweaty, too.

I swallow thickly.

“Five minutes. That gives you half a minute for each of the elements, except for the mud crawl – you’ll have a full minute for that – and the last element. You’ll have one and a half minutes for the climb.”

“It’s impossible to do in one and a half minutes.” Jen shakes her head. “That’s a huge fucking climb.” It’s the first time I’ve heard her swear. “You would need to be careful because falling to your death is a distinct possibility. I wouldn’t rush the last obstacle.”

“You’re right, Jen. Here’s the thing: You don’t need half a minute for most of those obstacles, which means you will have longer than a minute and a half for the last one. Where you gain time is dependent on you. On your specific strengths and weaknesses. You need to get intimate with this course and learn where you can shave off needed seconds. You have to be quick, careful, and strategic.”

“You make it sound easy,” Skylar scoffs.

“It isn’t,” Dagger admits. “We’ll do a few elements today and the others tomorrow. I don’t expect you to master them all. We’ll be lucky if you get one or two. Day three or four, we’ll put them together. You can help each other, lean on each other, encourage each other. *Learn* from each other.” He speaks to

Octavia but lets his eyes lock briefly with each of us. “Everyone will watch on attempt days. See it as a learning opportunity. How are other Tributes tackling the course? Perhaps a Tribute has a good idea of how to get through an obstacle. Take notes, observe, learn, and most importantly, improve. I don’t mind if you fail, but you have to at least try.” He looks at me.

I nod once.

“Let’s get to it,” Dagger says.

We head to the start of the course, and Dagger points at a large digital stopwatch clock on the wall. It’s big, with all zeros. “That’s the timer,” he tells us.

“I thought we weren’t going to do this for time today.” Jen lifts her brows.

“You’re not, but I am,” he says. “It wouldn’t be fair to expect you to complete the course without me proving that it’s possible first.”

“Yes, but look at you,” Skylar says. “You’re tall and strong.”

“In some ways, it’s a hindrance and, in others, a help. My height makes me less stable on the beam and a bigger target for the logs. I find the mud pit the most challenging. I have to get all of this through there.” He pushes out a breath as he indicates his body. “But my height and strength help me on the other obstacles.”

“What about short, weak, and dumpy?” I giggle. I’m nervous. No, that doesn’t describe it; I’m petrified. I make stupid jokes when I’m scared. It helps relax me.

“The beam and logs will be easier for you,” Dagger tells me. “The mud pit, too, since you’re so tiny.”

Dagger thinks I’m tiny. I get warm inside, which is stupid, but it happens anyway.

I’m tiny.

Tiny.

I never thought anyone would call me that, but here we are. I smile stupidly for a few seconds, even though I am still scared to freaking death.

“Except your...your...you know...your breasts,” Tommy whispers the word, “might get in the way—” He stops abruptly when Dagger growls at him. An honest-to-god growl. It sounds like the noise a vicious animal would make.

“Don’t go there!” Dagger says in a deep rasp that has the hair standing up on my arms.

Tommy holds his hands up. His face goes pale, and his eyes widen. He takes a step back. “I didn’t mean anything, I swear. I was making an actual observation...as a friend. I was going to recommend a...” He looks at Dagger. “Never mind. I’m sorry if I crossed the line, Hunter. I swear I—”

“I know you didn’t mean it like that.” I snort-laugh to try to clear the air. “It’s all good. Besides, you’re right. They do get in the way. I’ve been threatening to have a reduction for years, but I never got around to it. I digress. Please go on,” I tell Dagger. My cheeks are flaming hot, but I’m not sure why.

Oh yes, we’re discussing my boobs, but that doesn’t normally faze me.

“Let’s move on.” Dagger looks pissed off, although I’m not sure if it’s me or Tommy he’s angry with. I didn’t do anything. Neither did Tommy. I’m not sure what got up his ass. “The timer will start automatically when I cross that line and stop as soon as my feet hit the other side of the final obstacle. I want to prove to you that it can be done. Ready?” he asks us. “Watch and learn.” Then he sprints for the first obstacle.

The clock starts ticking.

He gets to the first of the four walls and jumps over it like it’s nothing. Same with the second one. The third and fourth, he has to do a running jump and hoist himself up, but he makes it look effortless, landing easily on the other side with that same masculine grace I’ve come to expect from him.

Next is the balancing beam. It's very narrow and, thankfully, not too high. A big man like Dagger should find it difficult, but he doesn't. He dances across all thirty-odd feet, moving quickly and confidently. Tommy cheers when he leaps off the other side. Again, he makes it look like child's play.

"Show off!" Jen mutters.

The next challenge is climbing onto the rope bridge suspended in midair between two trees about twenty feet apart from each other. It's literally two ropes, one for walking on and one to hold on to. I suppose we should feel grateful it wasn't just the one. He climbs the footholds in the tree trunk and walks onto the rope, holding tightly to the one above and walking carefully across. The ropes are not as taut as I thought they were; there is just enough give and swing to make the task tricky. I note that Dagger takes his time. He moves with rhythm and care, making it to the other side seemingly easily.

The monkey bars pose no challenge to the huge, strong man. His muscles bulge as he moves through them quickly and efficiently. It must be nice to be so damned tall. He leaps from the last bar, running even before he hits the ground. I look up at the clock, noting that he has only taken fifty-five seconds.

"You're right. He is a showoff," I agree.

We watch him negotiate the swinging logs like a pro. There are eight of the things. One miscalculation would cause serious injury.

Once he is through, he runs for the mud and drops onto the ground, quickly slithering beneath the tight net. The mud is clearly slimy and thick. His head dips below the muddy surface at times, then later, just his face emerges for a few moments for air. He doesn't panic. He keeps moving forward. I'm not sure how long it takes, but eventually, he's out the other side, his leathers now covered in brown gunk like a second skin.

"That is worse than I thought." Tommy shakes his head. "I'm not sure I can do that."

Dagger jumps up onto the three-story net of doom, not hesitating for even a moment. His powerful arms grip tightly as he starts to climb. He moves quickly but carefully up the net, again, making it look easy. I notice that he doesn't look down. Not even when he reaches the top.

Mud drips from every limb but doesn't deter him in the least. Once he makes it down the other side, he hangs there for a moment just feet from the ground. "Easy!" he yells before dropping with ease back onto solid ground.

I turn to the stopwatch and gasp. "Four minutes and two seconds."

"Could've done it in less," Tommy grumbles.

"I assure you that you are all capable of doing it in five," Dagger says in his deep rumble of a voice. Then he walks over to the building and pulls on a faucet. Water cascades over him. It's an outdoor shower. We watch him clean the muck off himself. I hate to admit it, but I'm mesmerized.

He's sexy, covered in mud, even though he's fully clothed. I force myself to look away and at the obstacle course. I do feel a little more hopeful. Maybe I can do it after all.

H unter

What was I thinking?

There is no way in hell I'm getting through this damned course when I can't even make it over the first freaking wall.

I try and try again. I do a running jump, but my arms are too weak to pull myself over. The wall is about neck-high to me. I can see over it, but I can't get my plump ass over the thing.

I suck!

No, *Dagger* sucks! He made it look easy when it's anything but.

"Here." Tommy holds out his hand. "Let me help you."

"I'll help you too," Jen offers, making a web with her hands and going down on one knee next to me. "Use my hand as a step, and Tommy will pull you up."

I nod. "You guys are lifesavers." I gingerly step on her hands, and Tommy gives me the boost I need to clamber up onto the wall. From there, I hop off onto the other side. I want to cheer, but I can't. This is so depressing because I have no idea how I'm going to do these on my own. At this moment, it seems impossible.

“We need to add more strength training to our program,” Jen remarks as she hoists herself up, making it look easy. Her ponytail bounces as she lands on the other side.

“That sounds like a great idea,” I agree. “Will I be able to pull myself up by the end of the week?”

Jen laughs. “Baby steps, but you never know. You might surprise yourself.”

I look back over the wall, noting that Octavia isn’t even trying. She’s just standing there, looking sullen.

“They’re brainwashing you!” she shouts when she catches me looking her way.

“I want to go home. If this is how to do it, I’m doing it,” I tell her, rolling my eyes as I turn back to the others. My attitude might stink at times, but I’m not giving up. I refuse.

I look ahead and see Skylar on the rope bridge. She’s wobbling, clinging desperately to the line, which is swinging wildly. A few seconds later, she falls, giving a loud wail followed by a thud as she hits the ground.

Ouch!

“Are you okay?” Tommy shouts between cupped hands.

It’s a good six or eight feet up. You can break yourself if you land wrong.

Skylar sits up. “I hate this!” she yells back. “I’m okay.” She nods, getting back up to her feet. She starts to dust herself off.

“Let’s focus on the job at hand,” Jen says, drawing our attention back to her. “We still have three walls to go.”

The next two walls are fine, and I make it over easily with help. The last wall is tricky and takes a couple of tries, but I finally make it over. Tommy has to pull hard to get me up. Then it takes Jen three run-jumps before she makes it.

“You are amazing,” I tell her. “You, too,” I tell Tommy, who grins.

“If you’d told me I’d be doing this a few weeks ago, I would have told you that you were crazy.” He beams.

“It’s time to do the beam. Do you want to go first?” Jen asks me.

I nod. I might as well get it over with.

“If you feel like you are going to fall, jump clear,” Dagger shouts from the sidelines. I had almost forgotten that he was even here.

He expects me to fail.

I ignore him and everything else around me. I concentrate on putting one foot in front of the other. I can do this. I have small feet. I splay my hands and use them to balance. I start walking. I take it slow and easy.

Skylar screams, and I hear another thud. I stop, breathing slowly. I don’t look in her direction. I’m assuming she fell, but I need to keep going. I need to concentrate.

I take another step and another until I am on the other side of the beam. I jump off and fist-pump the air. “Whooo hooooo!” I yell. I can’t believe I made it, and all by myself. It feels great!

“Well done!” Jen gushes.

“That was great, Tribute,” Dagger adds. “You will need to work on speeding it up.”

“Don’t be a buzz kill!” I tell him.

“Just giving you the facts.”

Jen goes next, making it in half the time it took for me to get through it. It takes Tommy two attempts to make it, but he does in the end.

Skylar is having a go at the rope bridge for a third time when we arrive.

“Do you need help?” Jen offers. “We could—”

“I’ve got it!” Skylar says through gritted teeth. It doesn’t really look like she’s got anything, but what can we do if she

doesn't want our help?

"Let's try the monkey bars," Tommy says, looking up at them.

I groan. "I've got two chances of making it across – little and none. I can't see how either of you will be able to help me, so you may as well go first." I gesture to the obstacle. "I'll observe and learn," I repeat Dagger's words. It doesn't matter how much I observe, it won't help one damned bit.

It takes some effort and determination on both their parts, but they both make it through, high-fiving each other on the other side.

"Here goes nothing," I mutter to myself as I jump up, reaching for the first bar. I get air. I try again, forcing myself to jump higher...to reach higher, but it's only on my third attempt that my hand just makes it around the bar.

Finally!

I hang there for a few seconds. Crap! This is worse than I thought. The next bar may as well be a world away. I have to try. I use everything in me and reach for it, but my hand at the back has to release, and I fall short of the next bar, dropping to my feet. Thankfully, it isn't ridiculously high. It could be worse. There could be a pit of alligators below the bars. Then again, if that was the case, they'd lose far more Tributes than they do already, and they need us. Someone has to ride those dragons. Someone has to keep those pesky Red Dragons in line. I'm a Sky Warden. I still can't quite believe it. I still think they might have mixed up the blood samples.

"Give it another try," Dagger says.

I do it again, and the same thing happens. Then again, and...yep, the same thing.

Craaaaaaap!

"Oh, no!" Jen puts a hand over her mouth. "How can we help you?" she asks, but I'm hitting blanks. I think the bars are a little high for them to help me in any way.

“Do you know the definition of madness, Tribute?” Dagger asks me as he walks over to us.

“No, but I’m sure you’re going to tell me.” I’m feeling prickly again, and it’s evident in the tone of my voice.

“Do either of you know?” Dagger asks as Skylar falls for a third time, cursing loudly as she lands, this time on her feet, before staggering and falling.

“Screw this bullshit!” she yells.

We watch as she clambers to her feet and stomps away, heading back to the housing facility.

“The definition of madness, Tributes?” Dagger lifts his brows.

“The definition of madness,” Tommy says, “is doing the same thing over and over again, expecting a different result.”

“That’s correct. If it isn’t working, change it up. Try something new.” Dagger turns his eyes back to me. “Try something new, Tribute.”

“Like what?”

“Anything. Just try.”

I nod once as I look up at the bar. “Okay, then,” I say. “Something new.” I jump up, catching the bar easily this time. Sweet progress, and I’ll damn well take it, thank you very much.

I need momentum. I start to swing my legs back and forth, back and forth. It hurts to hold the bars while gaining the momentum I need, but I suck it up. On the next swing forward, I let go of the bar behind me. My fingers make contact with the bar in front. I almost keep my hold on it. I’m so damned close, but the momentum that helped me get there also tears me away from success, and I go down on an irritated-sounding groan.

“Nearly!” I look at my hand, which is now red. “I so very nearly had it.”

“Again, Tribute,” Sergeant Major Asshole growls at me.

I give him what I hope is a scathing look, but I nod anyway. I'm cognizant of the fact that he's trying to help, but Skylar is right, this sucks.

I rub my hands together, then loosen my shoulders by swinging my arms, then I jump up, grabbing the bar, noting how this first part of the equation is getting easier and easier. I go through the motion of picking up momentum, and I'm about to attempt to go to the next bar when warm, strong hands grip my hips.

I yelp and let go, but I don't hit the ground. I stay up there.

"I'm helping you," Dagger says in an almost bored voice. "Grab the bars. Less drama this time, recruit."

He's gone back to calling me recruit, which grates. I want to call him cupcake with a smart-ass response, but I can't. Not right now. He could dump me on my ass. I marvel at how warm his hands are through the fabric of my shirt. At how strong he is. I might be short, but I don't weigh nothing. Not by a long shot.

I make a noise of agreement and grab the bars again.

"I'm letting you go, but I'm going to help you, so no reacting this time. Concentrate! Ready?" he asks.

I nod. "Yes."

He lets go, and I start to swing, back and forth; as I make a grab for the next bar, I feel his hands. They're there, but he doesn't do anything. I'm not sure if it's the knowledge that I'm not going to fall, but I manage to get the next bar this time. Not only that, but I hold on to it.

"Yes!" I shout.

"Keep up the momentum," Dagger instructs, his hands still on my hips. "You're going to get tired otherwise."

I keep going, making a grab for the next bar. I get it and keep going, but by now, my arms are, indeed, getting tired. I can hardly feel my fingers, and it's no surprise when I can't manage to keep my grip on the next bar.

I don't fall. Dagger holds me in place. He slowly lowers me, letting me go as my feet touch the ground.

"Thanks," I tell him.

"You did good. You'll do better next time and the time after that." Then he looks over at Jen and Tommy. "My suggestion is to try one more obstacle and then to hit the showers. I recommend that you go for the one you are most afraid of. You can attempt the others tomorrow."

That's both great and terrible advice. "Is it really a good idea to try the most difficult obstacle today?" I ask him.

"Yes, the sooner you conquer your fear, the better. The only way to conquer something is to face it head-on."

"That makes a horrible kind of sense," I grumble.

"It does." Tommy nods. "For me, it's the mud." He looks over at that obstacle and swallows thickly. "I don't know..." He shakes his head.

"Mine is definitely the net of doom." I look over at the final obstacle sticking up into the sky.

"Be careful what you name something," Dagger warns. "You could give it power over you."

"What should I name it then?"

"That's up to you," he says. "Try something different. Something better. Net of hope has a good ring to it."

I bark out a laugh. "Hope. Really? Was that the best you could do, cupcake?"

He narrows his eyes. "Don't!" He shakes his head. "You're going to get yourself into trouble one of these days."

The way he says it, coupled with the words themselves, has my belly tightening. I'm not sure why because I think he meant it as a threat and not in a good way, but my lady bits have decided that it would be good to get into trouble if Sergeant Major over here was dishing out the punishment.

"Are you just going to stand here all day, Tributes?" he barks at us.

“No, Sir!” Tommy yells. He runs for the net, drops onto the ground, and wriggles under it. “Tight!” He makes an odd noise, somewhere between a groan and a yell. “Holy shit, it’s even tighter than it looks.” His eyes are wide. It looks like he might already be panicking, and he hasn’t even touched the mud yet.

He wriggles in deeper and deeper, making a strangled sound. He panics as soon as he hits the mud, worming his way straight out. “I can’t! I can’t! I can’t!” he chants over and over again.

“It’s okay,” Dagger says. “You will get better. I did. The mud isn’t my favorite, either.”

Tommy is sucking in air like he just ran a marathon. He looks up at Dagger and nods.

“What about you, Tribute?” Dagger asks Jen. “Which obstacle is worrying you the most?”

“The net of hope.” She giggles.

“See?” Dagger turns to me. “It’s a good name.”

“If you say so, Sergeant.” I give him a two-fingered salute.

His eyes darken. “It’s Sir, Tribute. Get it right!” He sucks in a breath.

“You call me Hunter, and I’ll call you Sir. How’s that?”

“No can do because you’re no hunter.” He turns back to Jen. “Give the net a try. It might not be as bad as you think.”

Jen nods. She jumps onto the obstacle and starts to climb. She makes slow but steady progress. I have to say, as per usual, I’m impressed. Unfortunately, she makes the mistake of looking down as she gets halfway.

“Eyes up!” Dagger yells.

Jen does as he says but doesn’t move.

“Deep breaths, Tribute,” Dagger shouts. “In and...out. In and...out. Slowly. That’s it.” He pauses for a few long seconds. “You’re doing great.”

“I’m not doing anything!” Jen shouts, sounding panicked.

“You’re not as tense, and that’s good. Now, slowly come down, one step at a time.”

“I don’t know if I can.” She sounds like she’s starting to panic again.

“I can go up and get you,” Tommy yells.

“Jen can do this,” Dagger says.

“You got this!” I yell. “I don’t know anyone as strong and brave as you.” I glance at Dagger. “You don’t count.”

His mouth twitches. “Just one step down. One is all I ask,” he calls to Jen.

As instructed, Jen moves first her foot and then her hand. “M-maybe I can do it,” she shouts, sounding excited.

“You can!” Dagger insists.

“You absolutely can,” Tommy shouts.

Jen slowly comes down. It takes three times as long as going up, but she does it.

“You go up one rung higher each time. Just the one,” Dagger tells her. “One more is not so much.”

“One more,” I whisper. It’s pretty good advice.

Jen shakes her head. She’s white as a sheet and breathing heavily. “No...no, it’s not too much. It’s doable.”

Dagger gives her a light pat on the back. “You did well, Tribute. You did really well.” He turns to me. “It’s your turn, recruit.”

“Stop calling me that. I’m a Tribute. I earned it.”

“Prove that you deserve the title.”

“I already did. I made the damned swim. Stop being an ass, cupcake.”

Dagger grinds his teeth. I hear his molars grind together. His eyes narrow and darken. For a second, I think he might pounce on me.

Dagger pouncing on me.

Oh, yes, please!

Then, he seems to force himself to calm down. “Up!” He points at the net.

I walk over to it and look up. My heart starts racing, and I break out in a sweat. “I told you, I’m scared of heights.”

“If you keep telling yourself that, it will always be true,” Dagger says. There is a softness to his voice. “I believe in you.”

Holt shit, I warm right up. My mouth wants to smile. My body wants to swoon, but I won’t let any of that happen. Nope! Not happening.

“Okay, fine,” I groan. “Where did you learn all of those cute sayings?” I ask him. “Do you have one of those diaries with cute little self-help passages inside it? There’s usually one for each day. It’s like you memorized a whole lot of them ready for when you need ’em.”

“Cute self-help sayings?” He cocks his head and looks at me like something just crawled out of my nose or my eyes, my face in general. “No! I say what comes into my head. I learned them out here while living life. Now get your ass up that net... not too far. Try for ten rungs.”

Only ten?

Is this a trick or something?

“Don’t look at me that way. It’s not a trick. How do you eat an elephant, Tribute?”

“You don’t!” I gasp. “I love elephants. I would never eat one.”

“It’s a saying...not literal.”

“Another saying? Really? Is it cute?” I flutter my lashes because I know it will irritate him, and for some reason, I enjoy irritating Dagger. It might end up being my new favorite thing.

“No, it’s not cute.” He sounds frustrated. “You eat an elephant one bite at a time, never all at once. That’s how you’re going to tackle the net of hopes and dreams.”

I lift my eyes. “Now that I like.” I chuckle. “You’re hilarious, cupcake.” I groan as I hoist myself up onto the net. It swings, and I groan again. I already feel like I’m going to fall, and I haven’t started climbing yet.

I start going up, but the thing swings every time I move. It’s worse than I thought, and my thoughts were baaaaad.

I count to eight. Eight rungs, and then I freeze in much the same way that Jen did. Only I’m not coming down. Dagger’s speeches are not helping me. I can hear him talking, but I have no idea what he’s saying. He’s either shouting at me or giving me more of those cute sayings. I don’t care either way. I feel like I’m going to fall and die. I know deep down that it isn’t logical, but it’s in my head, and I can’t get it out.

I’m going to die.

I’m dead and freaking buried.

I wrap my arms through the bars, hanging on for dear life. Yep, I’m definitely going to die if I let go.

Then Dagger is there, right next to me. I know because I feel his heat, and he puts a big, warm hand on my back.

“Hey...Hunter... Hey...do you hear me?” He has made his voice soft and coaxing. It’s still deep, though. Is it bad that I notice how good he smells? It probably is, considering I’m mewling... Oh crap, and crying. My cheeks are wet. No! Noooooooo! I think that there is something coming out of my nose.

Dagger’s arm is now around me, gripping my hip. He has turned to face me. “I’m going to help you down. We’re not even that high...I swear.”

I’m not looking down. Forget it. “We are,” I choke out. “I’m going to fall.”

“I won’t let you.”

I open my eyes. His face is an inch or two away from mine. “That’s it. Breathe, sweetheart. Keep your eyes on me. Breathe and—”

I grab onto him. I put my arms around his neck and my legs solidly around his body. I hold on to him like a damned koala in a hurricane.

“Or that works, too,” he says. I think he’s smiling, but I can’t be sure. It’s weird; I’m petrified and want to dry-hump him all at once. I don’t do the dry-humping thing because A) He’s my instructor, and B) I don’t want to die. He might drop me if I slide up and down his body, specifically his mid-region.

I stay very still, clinging to him for all I’m worth, keeping my face pressed against his chest. He climbs for all of three seconds, and we’re on the ground.

His hands go to my hips. “You can get down now,” he says.

Oh!

Crap!

That felt a little too cozy for a second there. Comfortable. Safe.

“Recruit!” he barks.

Oh shit!

I slide down him...slowly. “Thanks,” I mumble when my feet hit the ground. “That was embarrassing.” I try for a smile, but it doesn’t work. I keep my eyes on the ground.

“It’s going to take some work.” Dagger clears his throat. “One bite at a time.”

“Bite? What am I eating?”

“The elephant, recruit. Pay attention. One bite at a time. There is your elephant.” He points at the net.

“All of my hopes and dreams in the form of an elephant that isn’t an elephant.” I look up.

“Exactly,” Dagger says. We stand in silence for a few moments. Then he adds, “We’re done for today. Bring your A-game tomorrow.” Sergeant Hottie walks away. His meaty ass moves up and down, up and down with each step.

Hunter

Someone bumps my arm.

The knock hurts a little. “What?” I bark, rubbing the limb.

It’s Jen. She’s looking at me strangely. We’re still standing at the net of hopes and dreams. Hah! As if.

“Where’s Tommy?” I look around us because we’re alone all of a sudden.

“He said goodbye, but you ignored him. You couldn’t get your eyes off Dagger’s ass. Dagger, our instructor. You know him, right?”

“I know who Dagger is,” I chuckle, “and I wasn’t looking at his ass. Did you think I was looking at his ass? I was doing that thing where you stare at a point because your mind is elsewhere. If my eyes were on his ass, that was purely coincidental. I’m in shock. I nearly died.”

“You made it ten stinking feet up the net. You did not nearly die.” She puts her hands up. “Granted, you are nervous of heights and were freaking out, so I’m not judging you or anything, but I have to ask, what is up with the two of you?”

“Two of whom?” It’s my turn to give Jen the look.

She folds her arms, and the look is back on her. Only, I think hers is better than mine because I cave first.

“Fine. Okay...fiiiine! I’m attracted to Dagger. I was, in fact, staring at his ass. So what? It’s not a big deal. That’s all.” I shrug.

“That is not all. He is your superior. He is in full control of us and of our futures. He can literally make or break us. Do not overcomplicate things by going down that very windy, dangerous road. Don’t do it!”

I start laughing because...oh my word! She’s so darned cute. I love Jen. I laugh a bit more and then decide I’d better stop because she’s going to hit me soon if I don’t.

“Nothing is ever going to happen between Dagger and me. Don’t worry. He’s soooo far out of my league it’s scary. I mean, look at me, and have you seen him? Have you actually looked?”

She doesn’t seem impressed with me. “Dagger happens to be attracted to you, too, I’ll just have you know.”

I give her the side-eye and then laugh some more. “He is not.” I shake my head. “Guys like that want tall and toned, with a perfect ponytail despite a hard workout. Guys like that want gorgeous women like you, Jen. You’re his type, I’m telling you. You’re seeing things that aren’t there.”

“Are you kidding?” Jen puts her hands on her hips. “You’re hot. Have you seen your curves? Women pay money to get half of what you’ve got and still don’t pull it off like you do. Have you seen your boobs? Do me a freaking favor. And your ass? Move over, Kim K. Dagger has noticed, believe you me.”

“Puh-leeeeeease, Dagger hasn’t noticed anything.” I shake my head. “Sure, I have curves. I have them everywhere.” I gesture over my whole body. “No! Just plain old no. He doesn’t even like me. Did you see how moody he was with me earlier? All snappy. I’m sorry, but I think you’re wrong. Very sweet, but wrong.”

“He’s extra snappy with you because he’s attracted to you and doesn’t want to be attracted to you. It’s pissing him off.”

I doubt it very much, but I nod anyway.

“You don’t look convinced,” Jen says. “What about his reaction to Tommy earlier?”

“What reac—?” I rub my lips together. “Oh, you mean when Tommy pointed out that my boobs might get in the way during the mud crawl?”

“Yep.” Jen nods. “Dagger’s reaction was over the top, like he was jealous.”

“I think it was more about sexual harassment.” I’m not sure what that was, but I doubt that it was jealousy.

“Right!” Jen laughs. “It’s okay if we die out here, but sexual harassment is a no-no. I don’t think so. Besides, anyone can see that Tommy is a real sweetie and that he wouldn’t mean it like that. Anyone in their right mind, that is.”

“I doubt very much that Dagger is jealous of Tommy.” I shrug. “I don’t see it. I just don’t!” I shake my head a lot.

“And all that touchy-feely business on the monkey bars?”

“He was doing his job. There was nothing touchy-feely about it.”

“He let Skylar fall repeatedly. You didn’t see him run to her aid like he did you...twice, I might add.” She holds up two fingers.

“Skylar wasn’t being a team player. Dagger insisted that we work together. The three of us were doing as he asked, and therefore, he helped *alllllll* of us, not just me.”

“HMMMMMMMM.” Jen taps a finger against her chin. “I have a feeling. Call it whatever you want, but I’m telling you that Sergeant Sexy has the hots for you. He wants to bang you until you can’t walk straight.”

I snort-laugh. It’s funny. All of it. “There will be no banging.” I sound depressed when I say it because being banged by Sergeant Sexy Pants is not the worst thing I have ever heard of happening to me.

“Good!” Jen says. “I’m glad to hear it. Sleeping with him would be a terrible idea. I promise you that it will. My best friend, Kyra, accidentally had sex with her hot boss, and it did

not work out well for her. In fact, it was a total mess. She ended up being transferred and had to move to Tallamindy.”

“I’ve never heard of Tallamindy.”

“Exactly.” Jen widens her eyes. “She very nearly lost her job. He came out clean as a whistle. Kyra and I spoke just before I shipped out to Draig, and apparently, he got a promotion while she’s in a dead-end position in Tallamindy. It sucks for her, but at least it wasn’t life or death. Out here.” She looks around us. “It’s life or death. As much as we hate it, Dagger is a lifeline to us. Don’t go messing with our lifeline. Even worse, you could end up burning it, and then you’ll be in real trouble.”

“That’s great advice. If – and that’s a really big if – but *if* you’re right, I’ll tell him where he can stick it, and it won’t be in me until I can’t walk.” I sigh.

“You’re disappointed.”

“Have you seen him?” I point in the direction he just left.

“He’s something, but not your something. Maybe once you get over hopes and dreams over there,” she looks at the net, “you can let him bang you, but not a second earlier.” She wags a finger at me.

I nod a few times, and then I remind myself that Jen is delusional. Not normally, but in this instance, she’s delusional. Dagger isn’t attracted to me at all.

As if!

Hunter
Six Days Later...

I go at the avocado with my fork like it did something to me personally. It feels oddly satisfying to smash it all up.

“What are you making?”

I squeal and drop the fork. It clangs on the floor at my feet; avocado smooch spatters. I suck in a deep breath and turn.

It's him.

Dagger.

Crap!

He's in another pair of those tiny running shorts and nothing else. Even his feet are bare...and sexy. Who has sexy feet? No one, that's who. But apparently, he does, and it's really not fair. I look back up but fail to make it past his abs. Holy shit! I have to tell myself not to stare and definitely not to drool.

I force my eyes up. It's tough, but I manage it.

Play it cool. He isn't interested in you.

Jen is delusional. Even if, by some miracle, he is into me, I can't go there.

I can't!

“Let me guess. You went for a late-night run?” I go for casual, and I think I succeed.

He nods once. “I did, indeed. And you’re snacking again?” He bends and picks up the fork. One side of his mouth is lifting into the start of a smile.

I’m not looking at his mouth, though. No, Siree!

“Yep.” I make a face. “Guilty as charged.” I hold up one hand.

“You’re stressed about tomorrow?”

I nod. I’m dreading doing the obstacle course with everyone watching. “I don’t want to look like an idiot,” I admit.

“Who cares how you look?”

I shrug. “I shouldn’t care, but I do.” My mind goes to Halbert. I hate that it does. I hate how his taunts might have gotten to me. I’m dreading his smirk. What he’ll say when I fail...because I will fail. I’m not saying that I’ll never be a success, but it sure as chips isn’t going to happen tomorrow.

“I still can’t get over that blasted first obstacle, Dagger,” I mutter.

He smiles. “You’re not going to call me cupcake?” His eyes dance with humor. It almost feels like he’s flirting with me. But he can’t be.

“Please be serious. I’m crapping myself here. I’m not even sure I can eat, which is a first for me.”

“Well, stop. Many Tributes will fail—” he starts to say.

“But the very first obstacle? Literally the first?”

He shrugs. “You won’t be alone, and if you are, who cares? You really shouldn’t. It’s just you and Sky’s Edge. It’s about you conquering your fears and...accepting your future.”

“As a dragon rider?”

“Easy there, tiger. You have a long way to go before you ride a dragon.”

“If I decide I even want to ride a dragon.”

“Don’t think about dragons. It isn’t about dragons or any of that stuff. Not yet, anyway. Give it your best shot. Try to figure out what you can do differently in order to succeed. If not this time, maybe for next time.”

“In other words, I shouldn’t be the definition of insanity and do the same thing over and over?”

He smiles, and holy cow, but he’s gorgeous. Drop dead. Help me, Jesus!

“Now you’re catching on, Tribute. Don’t be so tied in knots that you don’t observe others. That you don’t learn from others. Someone might have figured out an easier way.”

“What are the rules? I don’t remember you giving us rules.” I narrow my eyes in thought. “I can’t believe we didn’t ask this sooner,” I mutter to myself, and then look over at him.

There is a glint of humor in his eyes. “You have to complete the course on your own. So, no one can help you. And then, the main one, don’t die.” He gives a one-shouldered shrug...and what a shoulder it is.

“That’s it?”

“That’s pretty much it. Of course, there is the odd individual who gets badly injured. Badly enough to disqualify them from being a Tribute. You don’t want that to happen either.”

“No...that would be awful.” I’m thinking through the rules. There aren’t many. I have to think laterally. “So, if I chopped down the net obstacle and then climbed up it and—”

Dagger barks out a laugh. It’s deep and rich. I like hearing him laugh. I smile.

He shakes his head. “Absolutely not. You can’t damage or alter the actual course in any way. It wouldn’t be climbing if you were still on the ground.”

“So, three rules, then?”

“I guess so.”

“There are probably more that will come out of the woodwork.”

“None that I can think of, but I like this path you are on. It’s good thinking. Out-of-the-box thinking. Enough about the course. Follow my instructions, watch others. Learn from them! Do your best. If you make it to the net of hopes and dreams, do not, and I repeat, do not attempt to climb it. You’re not ready. Go up to where we practiced, and then come down.”

“There is no way in hell I’m climbing that thing.” I can still only climb ten feet, but at least I can climb back down on my own steam now. It’s seriously embarrassing.

“Good! Then we’re good. You’ll be fine. We will keep practicing, and you will get higher, I promise.”

“Yep...sounds amazing,” I say, grinning because I hate how it sounds. Although, on the bright side, I’ve lost a little more weight, and my arms are getting stronger. I can also guess the number correctly in our telepathy class...finally. I’m pretty sure it was a guess, though, and not really telepathy. But I’ll take it.

“What are you making over there?” He tries to look around me.

“Why? Are you hungry?”

“Fucking starving, and those bagels were epic.”

I grin. “I told you so.” Then I make a face. “I hate to disappoint, but Jen has me eating healthier food. I’m not allowed cheese. Actually, she’d kill me if she knew I was having a midnight snack at all, even though it’s avocado on seed bread with a squeeze of lemon.”

He frowns. “Sounds boring. I thought that bagels and the like were your typical stress food. Why does she want you eating healthier? The food we serve is plenty healthy.” He shrugs.

“She said I might navigate the course a little easier if I lost weight. I mean, she didn’t say it like that, but I know she meant it like that.”

“You do *not* need to lose weight.” He shakes his head. “You’re tiny.” He sounds a little affronted.

There’s that word again. *Tiny*. My reaction happens again, too. Warmth floods me, starting in my belly and moving outward through my body.

“Thanks, but...” I shrug. Jen is right. I do need to lose a few pounds if I am going to make it through the course.

“But nothing. You do not need to lose a shred of weight. You mentioned a reduction...” He glances at my chest.

Shoot! I realize that I’m wearing a T-shirt sans a bra. Hello, nipples. I force myself to keep my arms at my sides. Besides, it’s too late to cover up.

He clears his throat, and his eyes lock with mine. “You don’t need to be altering your body in any way. Just an observation. Take it, leave it.” He shrugs. “I just... Just my two cents, is all.”

“You’re sweet to say it.” I feel myself go all gooey inside.

“It’s not sweet. Or nice, it’s merely an observation. That is all, Tribute. Back to the food. Are we having a real snack? Am I grating cheese?”

“I have to heft myself over a nine-foot wall tomorrow, or I’m going to look like an idiot, so no cheese.” I shake my head.

“Stop that, or I’ll be forced to spank you.” He gets this look like he did something wrong or said something wrong, which he did.

Spank me?

I laugh because it’s funny. “Really, cupcake? You’ll spank me?”

“Oh yes, recruit. I’ll put you over my knee and spank you until your ass is pink and so fucking hot you won’t be able to sit for a week. And do you know what else?”

“What else?” It comes out all breathy because the thought of Dagger spanking me like that is oddly arousing. I never

thought I would see the day since I'm purely vanilla, but here we go. "What else?" I ask again more firmly when he doesn't respond.

"And...you'll fucking love every firm crack," he grits out. "You'll love it so much you'll... Fuck!" Dagger cusses, scrubbing a hand over his face. "Get some sleep," he growls as he spins and walks away. "And eat the damned cheese!" he shouts, sounding seriously pissed off. Then he is gone, but not before I see it.

My mouth has dropped open. My heart is racing at a mile a minute. There is this buzzing in my ears and a tightening in my lower belly. My clit is throbbing between my legs, which I squeeze together, but it doesn't help.

Dagger had an erection. Or at least the start of one. It was massive and, therefore, difficult to miss. Holy crap! Oh, my word! Jen was right. Dagger is attracted to me. He wants to spank me and then bang me until I can't walk, and I want it, too. I want it so badly I feel something leak out of me just thinking about it. But I can't. We can't. Jen was right about the flip side of that particular coin. My life is in his hands. Sex, although I know it would be amazing, would complicate things.

I have a solution.

I need to get through Sky's Edge, and then I can bang Dagger as a reward. But not a second sooner, even if it kills me.

Hunter

After raining all morning, the sun has come out, and it's another glorious day in the jungle.

At least it would be if my stomach wasn't tied in all kinds of knots.

Out of the sixteen Tributes who have already gone, only one has made the whole course from beginning to end. They had a time of over six minutes, so they were not successful. Skylar finally made it past the rope bridge, but the mud pit now has her stumped. For others, it has been time constraints. Once you reach five minutes, you need to stop, unless you're already on the last obstacle, then you may finish.

Halbert is the sixteenth Tribute to make the attempt. He is halfway through the mud pit; he's having some trouble, and I'm secretly glad. I know it's wrong on all levels, but he sailed through everything else, so this makes me...inappropriately gleeful. It would have been terrible if he had made Sky's Edge on the first attempt. Apparently, that's only ever happened once. I would hate to see his smug smirk at every attempt if he makes it early. It would kill me. I'm not sure why I'm letting him get to me, but there it is.

I watch him crawl through the mud, making slow progress and gasping for air whenever his head comes up above the mud.

I have to admit, it isn't fun being under there. I can well imagine how the bigger guys would seriously struggle. As it stands, I am only just able to get my mouth above the mud in sections. It doesn't help that it rained for hours today. The mud pit is all the more muddy for it. He finally slithers his way out, leaping onto the net. Clods of thick mud fall to the ground below.

This is the part where he turns into a freaking spider monkey. I think he does it better than Dagger. Nope, he definitely does this better than Dagger did. He's quick. So quick that my mouth gapes open just watching him.

"Wow! That's pretty impressive," Tommy says. He's still covered in muck from his attempt at the pit. It's started to cake and dry.

I feel bad for poor Tommy. His claustrophobia is probably on a par with my fear of heights. He is barely able to make it more than a few feet under the muddy part of the net before having to clamber back out. Yet he can make the climb, no problem. He needs to get through the mud and to be slightly quicker on the net, and he'll make it.

It's weird how we all have our issues. Although, some of us have more than just the one. My two weaknesses are the last wall on the first obstacle. *Argghhh!* And the net of hopes and dreams.

I feel my stomach clench so tight I feel sick.

I fold my arms as Halbert clambers down the final section of the net, jumping the last six or seven feet and landing on his feet with a roar. Again, I know it's wrong, but I huff out a sigh of relief when I see that his time is five minutes and twenty-three seconds.

He nearly made it. Why does the bastard have to be so good?

His team goes wild. It is, so far, the best time of the day. I force myself to clap for him, too, because I refuse to be "that person." I'm not going down to his level, even if I want to sometimes.

“Excellent work, Halbert,” his team leader, Atlas, says. “Shave off some time in the mud pit, and you’ll make it, for sure.”

Halbert grins broadly through the smeared mud. He fist-pumps the air using both arms and then gives a loud battle cry. Then he turns to me, and I see his hand make the L-sign. He does it quickly, but I see it. His message is loud and clear.

Loser.

Then he chokes out a laugh and shakes his fists in the air; mud goes flying as he joins the rest of his teammates.

“Next to go is...” Shadow checks her clipboard. “Hunter.” She looks at me and smiles.

No! Really?

I have to go straight after Halbert.

I need to stop getting into my own head. I need to forget that asshole. I’m not going to let him cramp my style.

I pull in a deep breath and nod once at Shadow, trying hard to smile.

Jen touches the side of my arm. “You’ve got this.”

Tommy also says some words of encouragement, but I don’t hear him. I’m freaking out a little. The thing about an attempt is that you can’t move on to the next obstacle if you fail. If you get stuck somewhere, you have to keep trying until your time runs out. If you don’t make the climb before your time runs out, then you can’t attempt it.

What if I don’t make it past the first obstacle? Chances are I won’t. I haven’t managed that last wall on my own in training. What is different today?

“Ready?” Dagger asks. He hasn’t even looked at me once all morning. I think this is the first time he’s spoken to me. After last night...

I’m not thinking about that. I’m going to pretend it never happened. I haven’t breathed a word of it to Jen. I mean, she’s right about Dagger being attracted to me. Holy shit! I still

can't believe it. I'm still reeling. I keep thinking that it must be a mistake, but it can't be. I know what I saw. It was unmistakable.

"Remember what we spoke about?" Dagger asks.

Shit, I really need to get my head in the game.

I nod. Which conversation is he talking about? Last night? Yesterday? Both? Crap! Does it matter?

"Focus, Hunter," Dagger says. His use of my name brings me back, and I nod again.

"You're doing this for yourself and for nobody else. Drown them out. Forget about them. You will have every opportunity in the coming weeks. How do you eat an elephant?"

"One bite at a time."

"That's right. One bite today and another one next time. Remember the rules," he says, giving me a look I can't quite decipher. Is he trying to tell me something?

What about the rules? Is it the lack thereof? I still can't believe that there are only three of them. I can't quite recall what they are right now.

I walk up to the starting area. The white line is drawn onto the ground. I jog on the spot for a few moments. I know that the timer won't start up until I cross that line. I have to get going soon, or the next Tribute will be chosen while I get my head together.

I don't want to wait anymore. I need to do this now. The longer I delay, the more my nerves are going to get the better of me.

"Break a leg," someone sneers from behind me. I don't have to look to know who that person is.

Prick.

I grit my teeth with determination, and I start the course at a run. I scale the first two walls easily, thinking to myself how I couldn't do that a week ago. The third wall takes more effort

because it's a little taller, but I get over it. My arms are definitely stronger than they used to be. I sprint faster toward the final wall. I can very nearly get myself up. I just fall short by a couple of inches, and I'm not quite strong enough yet to make up for where I lack in the height department.

I can feel everyone's eyes on me as I jump, using every ounce of momentum to pull myself up, but as always, it isn't enough. I fall short, and my arms burn with the exertion of trying, but it just isn't enough. I can't make it.

I wish I could use a chair or a— I look to my left, and there's a wheelbarrow parked under the tree. The gardener must have left it there.

Wait a minute!

Only three rules. If you keep doing the same thing, expecting a different result, that's the definition of insanity. Think laterally. Only three rules.

Holy fucking crap.

I run and push the wheelbarrow in place. A few seconds later, I am over the wall. I can hear everyone going nuts, especially Halbert.

"That's cheating!" he yells, followed by more variations of that same protest. He's not the only one, but I don't listen to any of them. I made the first obstacle in thirty-five seconds, which means that I am behind. I need to make up time.

I hold my hands out for balance and cross the beam. Next is the rope bridge. I'm happy to say that I'm pretty good at it. Dagger says it's because my center of gravity is lower on account of my being short.

It seems I am a natural at more than just figures.

Who knew?

Then it's onto the monkey bars. This is hit or miss; I don't always make it across. My arms get too tired, but I usually practice the wall more before, and today I feel better than I normally do, so I have a good feeling about this.

I jump up, grabbing the first bar easily. Then, I swing my legs until I have enough momentum; the trick is to use each swing for the next one. I give a yell of triumph as I make it to the end. Everyone cheers, telling me to keep going. Even our instructors are cheering. I think I might be doing well. I also think that using items like the wheelbarrow is not against the rules.

That's why Dagger told us to watch what others do. To take notes. I never expected they'd be the ones to take note of anything I did. This is wild. I'm starting to feel confident.

I run to the swinging logs. These are all about timing; hesitate, and you will get knocked. If you're too hasty, you'll meet the same fate. I quickly find the rhythm and go with it until I'm on the other side. Then I'm under the tight net. I wriggle my way to the mud, moving quickly. I keep my cool, even though the mud is cold, wet, and, just as expected, deeper than normal. The trick is to move fast, breathing where you can and holding your breath where you can't, with the knowledge that it'll be over soon.

Maybe that's the mistake I've been making on the net. Maybe I need to be quicker, faster than my brain. Perhaps I should be running from my fear instead of trying to conquer it.

I emerge from the mud to huge cheers. I don't think the crowd was even cheering this loudly for Halbert.

"You can make it!" Jen screams. "You're only on three minutes and a few seconds. You can do it."

"Climb!" someone else shouts. I think it might be Tommy. There are other words of encouragement.

"You'll fall, Chubby!" Halbert taunts me. "Don't do it!" He laughs.

I hate his laugh. It spurs me on. It makes me fucking mad, and I'm going to use it.

Screw that asshole! Screw him!

"Go, Chubby! I want to see you go splat." He laughs again.

I jump onto the net and start climbing. I'm looking up. I can do this. Deafening cheers go up from below. I'm in with a shot.

I keep going. I climb and climb. Who's the spider monkey now? I reach the top in no time. I can't believe it. I can't. I put my leg over the wooden pole at the top and make the mistake of looking down. Alllllllllll the way down. It's far. So far that my eyes instantly water. So far that my throat seals, and sweat instantly beads all over my body, which has gone cold. So high that the people down below look small. They're shouting, but I can't hear them. All I can hear is the rush of my blood.

What have I done?

More of that icy-cold fear hits me like a slap to the face. My whole body clamps around the wooden pole. I squeeze my eyes closed and whimper. I can't seem to catch my breath.

I'm afraid of heights. Deathly afraid. Death. If I fall now, I'm going to die. Why did I do this? To show Halbert. I'm such an idiot. I should never have done that. Outrun my fears. It's impossible.

I'll be okay.

I'll be just fine.

I will.

Then I remember where I am and whimper again. No! I can do this. I have to. I'm going to take a little break. I'll go through some meditation. I'll calm myself down, and then... I whimper some more and clutch the pole tighter. The thought of letting go, even to come down, is too much for me to take, so I don't think about it. Not right now. One step at a time.

Just one.

I hear Dagger's voice inside my head. Then I'm meditating...meditating. Only I can't remember how.

Breathing! I have to breathe. Yes! Breathe.

I'll meditate, and when I'm feeling better, I'll take the next step.

It won't be long before I'm down. I'll show Halbert.

Dagger

Octane looks up at the net and then at his watch. “It’s been three hours,” he mutters. “When is your Tribute coming down?”

Fuck!

This is a mess. I’m pacing at the base of the final obstacle and can’t seem to stop. I want to climb the net to save her. I could do it easily, only I’m not permitted. On attempt days, they’re on their own. It’s all up to them. My hands are tied, or may as well be.

Why didn’t she listen to me? I told Hunter not to climb farther than she does in practice, yet she climbed the whole damned thing...all the way to the top. Adrenaline will only get you so far. It’s a fucking shitshow right now. I pace faster, trying to come up with a plan that does not involve Hunter falling to her death. At this point, that possibility is looking more and more likely.

I’ve tried calling to her. I’ve tried to get her to listen to me, but she seems to be completely shut off. Her eyes are closed, and she’s holding onto that pole as if her life depends on it, which it does.

Fuuuuuck!

Everyone is milling around and chatting among themselves. They've all since given up being interested in what is going on above. They're tired, hungry, bored.

Everyone, except the rest of our team, who are all still looking up with worry in their eyes. I growl softly to myself as I pace back.

"I think we can safely say that we're done for the day," Shadow says, drawing my attention. "Any Tributes who didn't get a chance at a run today can try tomorrow." She sighs. "Who's staying with Dagger?"

It's so that I don't break down and help Hunter. Someone has to watch to make sure that I follow the rules. That I allow the outcome to happen, however the chips may fall.

Fall.

Fuck!

I run a hand through my hair. My mouth is bone-fucking-dry. My mind is racing.

Hunter!

I look up, willing her to snap out of it already, but she doesn't. Big fucking surprise.

"I'll stay." Octane puts up his hand.

"Where do they keep the body bags?" one of the Tributes says, and his whole team laughs.

I grind my teeth but ignore the taunt.

"I would be happy to fetch one," he adds, making me turn to look at him. It's that prick, Halbert. He cups his hands around his mouth, looking up. "Don't let go!" he shouts up to Hunter. "Whatever you do, keep holding on or splat." They all laugh again. "What a loser," the asshole mutters. "She may as well fall. We don't need her," he says, louder this time.

"Shut the fuck up, Tribute, or I'll make you," I grind out, my hands fisting at my sides.

Octane shoulder-bumps me, shaking his head.

Don't.

“Get yourselves cleaned up,” Atlas tells his Tributes. “All of you!” he growls, giving his team a hard look, particularly the male, Halbert. “This isn’t a joking matter. Every single Tribute is important. We can’t afford to lose any of you.”

“Chubby won’t be missed. There’s no way she’s riding a dragon.” He cracks up laughing and garners a few sniggers from others on his team. The prick can’t help but get another snide remark in, and my blood fucking boils.

I rush forward, but Octane grabs one arm and Atlas the other. I growl low in my throat, my eyes narrowing on the prick. If I touch him, I might accidentally kill him. It wouldn’t take much. It wouldn’t be fair, so I let them hold me back, but I put up a little bit of a fight and snarl to scare the fucker. It works.

Halbert’s face morphs into terror as his eyes open wide. He runs away like the scared little puppy he is. It’s always the same with bullies. When the favor is returned, they always scurry away like the rats they are.

Jen and Tommy keep calling out to Hunter, but she doesn’t respond to them either.

“What are we going to do?” Jen starts to cry again. She’s been crying on and off since Hunter got stuck up there.

Tommy puts his arm around Jen. “She’ll be okay. You’ll see.”

“I don’t know.” Jen cries louder, using a hand to wipe away the tears. “I’m afraid that if she stays up there much longer, she’ll fall.”

It’s becoming a real possibility.

“Yeah, she’ll get tired or fall asleep, or one of her legs will go to sleep,” Skylar says, also looking worried. “Can’t you do something?”

I shake my head.

Jen starts to cry louder still, and Tommy tries to comfort her, but it doesn’t help much.

“Oh, for god’s sake,” Octavia huffs. “I’ll go and get her.” She hoists herself onto the net.

I grab her wrist and shake my head. “No one can help Hunter. She’s on her own. The rules say that no one can touch her. She has to come down on her own steam. There won’t always be someone to help her out there.” I look out over the jungle.

“That’s complete bullshit. She’s going to fall. She’s been up there for ages!” Jen yells. Her face is wet and red and contorted with anger.

“You have to do something,” Octavia repeats.

“You can’t!” Octane growls at me.

“I can’t touch her, but I can go up there and talk to her.”

“No, you...” He looks up, clearly in thought. “I guess there are no rules against that, but you can’t so much as lay a finger on her, Dagger. If she falls, you have to let her go. It’s the way it is. You know the penalty for helping a Tribute on an attempt day.”

I nod once.

“Why?” Jen yells. “I don’t get it. We don’t want to ride dragons. We don’t want to be here at all. We never asked for any of this.”

“We don’t always get a say in how things go...in where life will take us,” I tell her, using a soft voice. “Don’t you think I have better things to do than to be out here? To be training you?”

“That’s different.”

“How?” I ask her.

“I don’t know, it just is,” Jen says. “You chose to be here.”

“I didn’t choose anything. Destiny chose for me, just like destiny chose for you, too. We don’t get a say, sometimes. I was born with the blood that runs through my veins, just as you were born with yours. We are who we are. And we must endure.”

“Always with the damned riddles.” She doesn’t sound impressed. I didn’t expect her to be. “You’d better get Hunter down in one piece, or so help me...” A threat. She sounds like she means it.

Tommy puts an arm around her. “He’s trying to help, Jen.”

“Well, he isn’t, is he?” She starts to cry again. “None of them are helping. They’re happy to just let us die.”

“Go!” Octane tells me. “Get your Tribute down.” He sucks in a breath and is about to lecture me about following the rules, I can tell.

“I know. I won’t touch her,” I say.

I carefully climb onto the net. I’m going to take it slow so as not to shake it. I don’t want her to panic and fall to her death because of anything I do. I won’t be able to forgive myself if that happens.

I’ve never lost a Tribute. I don’t want to start today. I fucking refuse.

As I get to the top, I’m sure to keep my distance from Hunter, who looks like she might be sleeping, except for how tightly she’s clasping the obstacle.

“I thought you weren’t allowed to help us?” she says, keeping her eyes closed.

“I’m not. I’m here to talk.”

“That’s help, isn’t it?” She sounds surprisingly calm.

“I’m not permitted to physically help you, Hunter, but I can be here for you.”

She opens her eyes; without moving, she turns them to me. I see fear and panic etched into her features. “Have you come to give me a couple of those cute sayings? Because if you are, I’m not sure it will help. Not this time.”

“No cute sayings.” I shake my head.

She makes a little noise. “That’s a pity. A cute saying might not help much, but I do like them.” She shuts her eyes

again, and a tear drips down. It falls and falls and falls. A small glint that gets smaller and smaller.

Fuck!

“You don’t need cute sayings. You were the best Tribute on the course today.”

“Until I choked.” Her voice is small.

“You tried to eat the whole elephant in one sitting. Why the fuck didn’t you listen to me?”

“You’re going to lecture me now?” She makes a little whimpering noise that almost kills me. I have to tighten my hands on the net to keep from reaching for her.

“It is as good a time as any. You disobeyed me.”

“Whatever, cupcake. What are you going to do about it? It’ll be hard to spank me up here.”

I chuckle. “There she is! The sassy woman I’ve come to know,” I rasp. “Of the first eighteen Tributes to tackle Sky’s Edge, only three of you made it to the last obstacle within the time limit. Three out of eighteen. That’s pretty impressive. It isn’t very many. It—”

“Sixteen point six six percent of us made it. It’s okay, I guess.”

“Okay?” I growl. “Don’t piss me off, recruit. It’s more than just okay. That was fucking amazing! Do you hear me? You were fucking amazing.”

“Yes...except I’m stuck up here. I’m stuck, Dagger. I can’t move. I feel frozen or something.” The panic is back in her voice.

“You got yourself up here, and you can get yourself down.”

“I don’t know if I can.” Her voice has gone back to being soft.

“Good thing I know enough for the both of us,” I tell her, using her own words on her.

She gives a soft snigger. “Yeah, when I said that, it was concerning mayo on a bagel...not falling to my death.”

“There will be no falling to any death. It’s a simple fact that if you climbed up, you can climb down. It’s science. Let’s take it one rung at a time. I’ll be here with you. It is time to go. Time to be brave.”

“But you can’t actually help me?”

“Not on an attempt day,” I tell her. “I’ll talk you down. I’ll be here for you, Hunter.”

“Do you really think I’m one of these Sky Warden people? That I can ride a dragon?” I think her voice is wistful.

“You are a Sky Warden, or you wouldn’t be here. Come on, Tribute. You’ve been up here long enough. It’s time to come down.”

“Oh my gosh...oh my gosh.”

“Don’t think of what can go wrong. I need you to think of all the things that will go right. Do you know that saying... How does it go again?” I mutter to myself. “What if I fall? Oh, my darling, but what if you fly?’ It’s time to come down, sweetheart,” I whisper the last, but I know that she will hear. We’re close enough.

Sweetheart.

I really need to stop calling her that.

Hunter smiles and fuck, but even through all the dried-up mud, it’s a beautiful smile. “See, I knew you had a cute saying in you. And what do you know? It worked.”

I watch as she eases her legs over the side. She starts to breathe rapidly, and her eyes widen in fear.

Her hands clutch the top pole tightly.

“Slowly. Easy. Get your footing. Keep your eyes on the net in front of you.”

“Do not look down,” she says, her voice high-pitched.

“Excellent advice,” I say, followed by, “Grab the net, one hand at a time. Listen to me and do exactly as I say. We’ll go very slowly.”

She nods and then swallows thickly. It takes a long time before she complies and does as I ask her. I can be patient, so I wait.

“Good,” I tell her when she starts to move. There is hesitancy and trepidation. A Sky Warden with a phobia of heights. I’ve never seen it before. Some fear, sure. This level of fear? Never. It’s normally the mud pit that stops them in their tracks.

“One step down,” I tell her. “That’s it, Hunter.”

“O-okay.” She does as I say and steps down. Then she moves one hand down, followed by the other leg and the other hand.

“There,” I say. “You’ve got it.”

“One rung at a time.”

I nod, and we slowly start to inch our way down. I keep seeing fear flood her face, and her hands tighten on the net. That’s the thing about fear; it can grip you for no real reason. It could end up being her end today. I need to get her mind off anything else but the next rung.

“Tell me something about yourself,” I blurt.

“I’m an accountant. I used to w-work for a m-major auditing firm. We—”

“Something more interesting, recruit,” I say as we take another slow step down, and she follows me while her mind works.

“What do you want to know, c-c-cupcake?” Her face is pale, and she very nearly looks down.

“Eyes on me,” I growl at her. “Tell me about this ex-boyfriend...or is he your ex-husband?” A growl enters my voice when I think about her married to someone.

“My ex. My ex-b-boyfriend. When did I tell you about Kevin?” Her cheeks turn a little red as she remembers. It’s nice to see color in her face.

I step down, and so does she, carefully moving each limb.

“Oh, yeah...the whole being bad at riding thing.” She giggles, but it comes out sounding tense and high-pitched.

She told me that she had unsuccessfully ridden her ex once or twice. I still find that hard to believe.

“Another step. Tell me about Kevin,” I say in a commanding tone.

“There isn’t much to tell.” She steps down. Once she’s secure, I do the same.

“I’m sure there’s plenty to tell. How long did you date for?”

“Almost three years.”

I push out a puff of air. “That’s a long time.”

“It is. I thought he was the one. We were great at first. It was bliss. We did everything together. The sex was amazing.” Her cheeks heat again. “Sorry!” She makes a face. “That’s too much information.”

I take a step down, and she follows without really thinking about it.

“What happened?” I ask her.

“Year two was good, but not as good.” She shrugs. “I mean, we got along well. We had fun together...but the relationship didn’t progress. I was the one who asked him about the possibility of moving in together. Kevin said that he couldn’t afford it. That I needed to be patient.”

“Let me guess, you weren’t so great at that.”

She gives me a scathing look, and I laugh.

“Are you saying I was too pushy? Because I’ll have you know that we were together for two years when he got a promotion at work...but nothing. No moving in together. No

ring. No...talk of the future. The sex wasn't so great anymore. He stopped trying."

We go down a few more rungs, slowly and easily, and all while she's talking.

"I mean, we women don't...you know...get there as easily. But it wasn't the sex. It was the lack of any kind of... I don't know. Things got stale. He'd stay at my place. I'd stay at his. It was like we were going through the motions. We stopped having sex entirely. I mean, then you know it's done, right? We still hung out, though."

I take a step down, and she follows.

She laughs, but it holds no humor. "I was shocked when he broke it off with me. I mean, how stupid am I? I didn't even see it coming. He told me we had grown apart and that maybe we should see other people. I was devastated." She laughs. "I guess I thought that we'd work it out. I'm a hopeless romantic."

We take a step down, together this time.

"There's nothing wrong with that," I tell her. "Did you love him?"

"Yes, I did." She nods. "Only, in the end, it was more like a friend than a partner. It took me a good couple of very lonely, very sad months to figure that out. It didn't help that my roommate Carmen had hooked up with a really nice guy. The two of them were hopelessly in love. I had to watch them. Sometimes listen to them." She makes a face. "It was nauseating – and wonderful – but mostly nauseating. They've just moved in together, and I couldn't be happier for them both." She smiles.

We've just crossed the halfway mark.

"It's better that you ditched that guy," I tell her.

"He ditched me."

"Semantics." I shrug. "Has there been anyone since?"

She looks at me for a long time – too long – and then shakes her head. "That's why I was a little pissed when I

arrived here.”

I frown.

“I was pissed because it’s been over a year since I last had sex, and I might actually die with cobwebs in my vagina.”

I choke out a laugh. I love how straight she is about things.

“It’s really not a good idea to sleep with anyone here, so...” she clears her throat, “I guess I’ll have to gather a few more cobwebs.”

I nod but don’t say anything.

“What about you?” Hunter asks as we take another step down.

“What about me?” I frown.

“I told you about Kevin. Is there anyone special in your life, past or present?”

“No.” I shake my head.

“Just no? You’re not going to give me anything more? I just told you all about my ex. I went into detail. You can give me something.”

“There is nothing to tell.” I take a step down, and she follows.

“Come on! You’re holding out on me. I swear I won’t tell anyone. I would cross my heart, but it isn’t possible right now. You must have dated someone at some point. If you tell me that you’re a virgin, I won’t believe you.”

I laugh softly. “I’m not a virgin. It’s just that I don’t date. I never have.”

Hunter narrows her eyes. “So, what do you...? How do you...?”

“I fuck,” I tell her, deciding to be candid.

Her mouth drops open for a few seconds, and then she nods. “Oh...okay. I...um...see.” Then she looks at me through narrowed eyes. “Not even one date? Not ever?”

“Not even so much as one.”

“You fuck?” She sounds incredulous.

“Yes. I used to fuck a lot. All the time.”

“I’ll bet.” She lifts her eyes for a moment before they meet mine. “Like different women? Are you some kind of player?” She cocks her head.

“No.” I laugh. “I’m not a player. It’s not always different women. Sometimes the same woman for a while, but only ever fucking. Never more, and not as much, nowadays.”

“Why not more? Why don’t you date or get involved?”

“I haven’t been...in the right place in my life for a relationship. It’s as simple as that,” I tell her. “I’ve been busy, and I work a lot.”

“You do realize that you will never be in the right place for a relationship? Just like it will never be the right time for kids. It’s just one of those things in life.”

“Is that so?” I lift my brows, a smile tugging at my lips.

“You haven’t met the right person yet. When you meet her, you’ll know. You won’t be able to stay away...to stop yourself from falling. It’ll just happen. When you realize that you’re in love, it’ll be too late, and you won’t be able to live without her.”

“Really now, Tribute?” I’m smiling. “Is that your cute saying for the day?”

She laughs. “I guess it is.”

I realize that we haven’t moved in a while and take a step down. She does, too.

We climb for a short while in silence. I don’t see the same debilitating fear in Hunter anymore, even though she couldn’t make it this far in training yesterday.

“I’m proud of you,” I tell her as we near the bottom.

“Why? That was terrible.” She laughs. Her face is covered in dry mud that has cracked and peeled off in most places, but she’s still beautiful. At least she can laugh. I admire that.

“You defeated your biggest fear. You did it. You climbed the net. It took far too fucking long, but you climbed it.”

“I’m not sure I can do it again.” Her face tightens, and her eyes darken.

“Stop! You *will* do it again. It’s already conquered. You’re fucking amazing.”

She smiles. “Thank you. Are you still going to call me recruit? Or have I finally graduated to Tribute?”

“Are you going to call me Sir?”

“Not on your life.”

“You have your answer.” We both laugh. I climb down the last section, leaving her to do the rest on her own.

Octane is looking at me strangely. I ignore him.

Hunter gets to the bottom and is quickly surrounded by her friends. Jen is now crying, but they are tears of joy. They all embrace and laugh and embrace some more. Even Octavia joins in one of the hugs. She is still refusing to take part. She will come around when she realizes that there is no way off the island unless she runs Sky’s Edge within the time limit. I have the feeling that she will be a natural. I’m not worried about her.

Hunter looks my way. Our gazes lock.

“Hit the showers, Tributes,” I growl at them, and then I turn and walk away.

Octane follows. Fuck! I don’t need this.

“Thanks for your help,” I tell him.

“What was that?” he asks when we are far enough away. He stops.

I stop, too. “What was what?”

“That looked far too fucking cozy up there. Is there something going on between you and one of your Tributes?”

“No! I was just distracting her to take her mind off the task at hand. She was so petrified that I was afraid that she might

panic and fall. I did what I needed to do to get her off that obstacle. The female has potential. It would be a shame to lose her.”

“Are you sure that’s all it is?” he asks, his eyes firmly on mine.

“That’s all it is,” I say, injecting as much sincerity as I can into my words.

Octane holds my gaze. “Good! Because a relationship with a student would be a huge fucking problem.”

“I know that.” I keep my voice even.

“Good work today.”

I nod and walk away, feeling like shit. I’m thankful that Hunter made it down without incident. I meant what I said. I’m fucking proud of her. But it doesn’t feel good inside. Nothing about this feels good. I need to swap Hunter out. I know that any of the others would take her now that she’s made the course. It doesn’t have to be Brutus. There will be options. I have to do the right thing and put some space between us. Otherwise, I might slip up.

Hunter

Three Days Later...

I toss the bag of bagels on the counter and then just stand there in the dark kitchen like an absolute loser. Maybe Halbert is right, after all. Everything I need to make a gooey cheese bagel is on the counter before me.

I take the cheese out of the wrapper. I look at the grater for a while but don't actually start grating the cheese.

Who am I kidding? I'm not even hungry. This is the second set of ingredients I've taken out of the pantry tonight. I'm stalling, hoping against hope he'll come, and yet knowing deep down that he won't. I'm pathetic. This is the third night in a row I've been standing here waiting for him.

It's official; Dagger is avoiding me. He's there when he has to be there. Says what he has to say, going through the motions, but otherwise, he's been cold and indifferent. He's pretty much ignoring me, and I hate it.

What did I do wrong?

Is it because I didn't listen to him and tried to climb the last obstacle? Is it because we spoke about things that were personal while up there, and now he feels weird about me? I felt like we connected. I felt...something, but I guess I was wrong.

I push out a sigh and then get to work, packing everything away again. He isn't coming. I shouldn't be here. This is tantamount to chasing him. I don't chase guys. I don't have them banging down my door or anything, but I don't chase after them either. I refuse! Yet here I am.

I walk back to my room and gently open the door, using the keycard. I tiptoe into the room. The good news is that Jen is a heavy sleeper. I'm just slipping back into bed when she sits up.

Okay, so she's mostly a heavy sleeper. Not today, apparently.

"Where were you?" Her voice is groggy. "I woke up earlier, and you were gone." She switches on her bedside light.

"The toilet," I lie through my teeth.

"I went to the toilet, and you definitely were not there." She quirks a brow. Her hair is mussed, but she still manages to look amazing.

"Um...fine, okay, I'll tell you...I've been sneaking to the kitchen for a midnight snack to calm my nerves. I'm a stress eater, and tomorrow is another attempt day."

"What? Eating within three hours of sleep is really bad for you. You're messing up your circadian rhythm." She rubs her eyes.

"My circadian what now? Sorry?" I frown hard.

"Your sleep hygiene is being affected by your bad eating habits. It isn't good for your metabolism, either."

"I thought regular small meals were good," I try, knowing it won't work.

"During the day, Hunter." Then she takes a long look at me. "What's going on with you? You seem... I don't know." She really scrutinizes me, and I sit on my bed. "You haven't been yourself the last few days."

"I don't know what you mean. I'm fine." I smile and then flop down into bed.

“You’re not fine. I can’t give you anything definite. Perhaps that you’ve been a little quiet. Not as mouthy to Dagger. You haven’t called him ‘cupcake’ once. There has been no banter between the two of you. What is going on? Did you sleep with him? Tell me you didn’t sleep with him.”

“I didn’t sleep with him.” I shake my head.

She narrows her eyes at me.

“I swear to God up above that I did not sleep with Dagger.” I put force into my words, hoping she’ll believe me because it’s true, dammit.

“Then what is going on? You’ll feel better once you get it off your chest.”

“Okay, fine. I think you might be right about Dagger being attracted to me.” I don’t go into detail.

“I knew it!” Her face becomes serious in the next instant. “But you haven’t slept with him?”

“For the last time, no, I haven’t. I just... We... I guess we had a moment up on that net a few days ago, and now he’s mad at me or something.”

“What kind of a moment?”

“Just a moment. I thought we might be...friends,” I land on.

Jen laughs. “You’re not friends. Not even close. You’re both attracted to each other, and he’s your superior. I told you about my feelings on that. I’m not going to harp on about it. I’d say that he’s keeping his distance because it’s the right thing to do. It’s not like you can be together or anything.”

“I know.” I nod. That’s especially true since he mentioned that he doesn’t even date, let alone go down the relationship route.

I have lived a little. I had a one-night stand once, and I didn’t like it much. I meant it when I said that I’m a romantic. If I went down that road with Dagger, I might end up developing feelings for him. That would be bad. Really, really bad.

Firstly, because he seems like he's somewhat of a commitment-phobe, and secondly, because my whole future hangs in the balance. I don't know where I'm going to end up. If all goes well, I'll be going home soon. I don't need my heart to complicate things. Even worse, I don't want to be hurt.

Nope!

Just no!

"I mean it, Hunter. The two of you would never work."

"*I knooooowwww*," I say with animation. "I swear! Besides, he isn't really the relationship type."

"How do you know that?"

"We've chatted a few times, and I know because he told me."

She frowns. "Wait, what? A few times. So, not just on the net then. When did you chat? When have you had the chance?" She scrutinizes me.

Crap! Why did I say that? "Ummm...I've run into him once or twice on my late-night snack runs."

Her face morphs into shock, and her mouth drops open for a few seconds. "What? You've been meeting with him at night? Did you see him tonight?"

"No. I told you he's been avoiding me. And we haven't been meeting. It's coincidental."

"I don't believe in coincidence. You need to stop this, Hunter. I know that it's lonely out here, but Dagger isn't the answer."

"Like I said, he's avoiding me completely. You don't have to worry. Besides, my focus right now is to get through the Sky's Edge."

"If you mean that, then you need to train even harder. No more midnight snacks. No more Dagger."

"I'm going to make it."

“You’ll make it before the rest of us. You’re good, Hunter. Better than you think. I mean, you still want to get home, don’t you?” Her whole demeanor softens. “We’re going to still have Draig Island Reunions like we planned? The three of us?”

Jen, Tommy, and me.

“Of course. I can’t wait to have reunions with you guys. We’re friends for life,” I say, injecting a whole lot of emotion into the words. “I want to go home. I miss my family...my friends, too.”

“Okay, good. I’m sorry to say it, but I’m glad the two of you had a fallout. It’s better this way.” She gives me a sympathetic look. “Get some sleep. You said it earlier; tomorrow is another attempt day.”

I nod once and get under the covers. Jen turns the light off. I turn over, pulling up my blanket more firmly over me.

I’m trying hard not to think about tomorrow or about Dagger and how awkward things have become. I realize that I haven’t thought about the obstacle course or the climb once today.

Sweet progress. I’ll hold on to that. Jen, of course, is right about everything, as per usual. I’ll ignore him back. Two can play at that game. I’ll work harder at making the course. The sooner we all get this over with, the sooner we can leave. I can’t wait for that day.

And yet, I have this weird feeling inside me. This weird thought. I want to meet the dragons. I want... I shove those wayward, insane ideas aside. That isn’t my future. I’m an accountant. I have a family who loves me and a big-ass bag stuffed full of shit I don’t need, like toothbrushes and half-eaten granola bars. The real world, Netflix binges, all of it, it’s waiting for me. The niggling thought is back – I’m never going to make a difference in this world if I go back home.

I would need to stay if I want to see the dragons. If I want to make that difference. I would need to be brave.

Hunter

I take a step back. “Say that again,” I say, my eyes widening and my heart thumping hard against my rib cage.

“This is Fang.” Dagger points at another of the instructors.

“I got that part. It’s nice to meet you,” I tell Fang, looking over at him. He’s probably considered more good-looking than some of the others. His hair is longer than the rest, too. His eyes are a vivid cobalt blue. Although he has a ton of ink, there’s less than the others, and although huge, he isn’t quite as big as Dagger.

“It’s the other part I’m not sure of,” I add, my voice laced with frustration. I really hope I heard wrong. It can’t be. Dagger can’t do this to me.

“You are now on the same team as Fang. I’m taking Susan. Fang and I are swapping the two of you out.”

“Susan with the broken arm?” I ask, sounding incredulous. I *did* hear correctly. What the hell!? Why? What did I do wrong?

He nods once. “I felt that our progress had stalled. I think that Fang will—”

“You would rather have someone with a broken arm over me?” I ask him.

“It isn’t like that. I’m doing this *for* you, Hunter.”

“That’s complete bullshit,” I say under my breath. “I need to have a word with you so that we can talk about this, please. You can’t just spring this on me. It isn’t fair.” I look around us, noting that we are standing between all the assembled Tributes. We’re waiting to start with attempts at Sky’s Edge.

“There is nothing to talk about, Tribute. I feel that this is the best thing for you,” he deadpans. “It is my job to ensure that you get over that finish line in under five minutes.” He jerks a thumb in the direction of the last obstacle.

“Handing me over to Fang isn’t going to achieve that. I have a good relationship with my team members.” I feel my eyes sting with tears that are threatening to fall. “I need them. They are my support. My—”

“You need to do this on your own,” Dagger says. “Your team can’t help you.”

“They *do* help me! Don’t do this, please. We can put our differences aside.”

“What differences?” Fang asks, narrowing his eyes. “I thought you said—”

“There are no differences between us,” Dagger tells Fang. “I put pressure on my Tributes. This is not a walk in the damned park. If this Tribute wants to see that as differences, then so be it.” He shrugs, like I’m being overly emotional or something. I want to slap him, but I hold back on account of how it will bolster his argument. My hands are tied. I need to take a different stance on this.

“Did Dagger tell you that I’m terrible at mental telepathy? That I can’t guess any of the answers, let alone see images in my head?” I roll my eyes. “I get absolutely nothing, zilch, zero, nada. I suck at meditation, too. I can’t keep still for more than a minute at a time. I’m a shitty Tribute. We’ll soon have to start learning about the dragons themselves, but I’m sure I’ll suck at that, too. I was terrible at biology. Don’t get me started with physics. Oh boy, my teacher in high school would have fired me if he could have gotten away with it. I’m pretty good

with numbers, so if you need someone to handle your taxes, then I'm your girl. Only I don't think it will help much out here. Back to being a really shitty Tribute." I can't think of anything else negative to say about myself. "You don't want me," I throw in for good measure.

"Are you done?" Fang asks me.

"No, I feel that I would do better if I stayed with my tribe. Jen, Tommy, Skylar, and even Octavia are my tribe. They are helping me through this, just as I am helping them. Tommy is getting better at the mud pit. He—"

"You can stop right there," Fang says. "I'll take her," he tells Dagger like I am a pair of shoes or something.

"No!" What the hell? How can this be happening? "Don't do this. Please, Dagger. I beg you. Don't I have a say in this?"

"I'm doing this for you, Hunter. Understand and accept it."

"Well, I don't." I step toward him. I'll beg if I have to. Perhaps I should have worked harder at mingling with the other Tributes, but that has never been me. I don't have a hundred friends; I have a couple of really great friends. That's how I roll. Maybe I was wrong. I'm about to be put on a team whose members I know in passing. "Please, we can—"

"It's done!" He nods once, glancing at Fang, then he walks away. Walks. Away.

I start after him, but Fang takes my arm, gently pulling me back. "You heard Dagger; it's done." He lets me go. "Now leave it alone. As Dagger advised, you need to accept it and move on. I won't be soft on you like he has been. Dagger might be tough as nails and the strongest I know, but he is soft inside. Like a giant teddy bear. That ends with me. Your life is on the line, Tribute. I take my job very seriously. Do as I say, and we will get along just fine."

"Dagger takes his job seriously, too." I don't know why I feel the need to defend that prick, but there it is.

"Without a doubt, or you wouldn't be on my team now. Once you're done making your attempt, you need to go and pack up your things; you're bunking with Luke from tonight."

He points to a preppy blond guy. I've seen him around. He's talking with the rest of his team...my new team. He's the kind of guy who would have been popular at school, a jock who dated cheerleaders. He looks shallow and self-serving. The kind of guy I steer clear of. I'm stereotyping. I need to give him a chance. Maybe he won't be so bad.

"Okay." I nod, feeling my heart sink. There was a small part of me that hoped I would be able to stay with Jen. Wishful thinking. It catches me every time.

"Okay, what?" my new instructor says.

"Okay, Fang." I quirk a brow.

"Sir. You need to call me Sir."

"What is it with you guys needing your egos rubbed all the time? Are your dicks unusually small in comparison to the rest of your physique?" I blurt before I can stop myself because I'm pissed off.

His jaw tightens, and for a few seconds, he looks taken aback. "I am your superior. Your life could very well hinge on your respect for me and your unwavering following of every instruction I give you."

"What if it doesn't make sense? If you tell me to jump in a fire, I will question it." I shrug. "Sorry."

"Don't be smart, Hunter. You can drop and give me twenty." He points at the ground.

"Twenty what?" He can't be serious. Is his ego this big?

"Twenty push-ups." His eyes have narrowed. He doesn't look happy.

"Push-ups?" I know I'm repeating everything he says like an idiot, but I can't quite believe what I'm hearing.

"Yes, Tribute. Right now." He points at the ground again, this time in a jabbing motion.

I get down on the ground and start with the push-ups. Thankfully, Jen has had us working on our upper body strength, or I wouldn't be able to do more than a few of these.

My new team sees me on the ground, and they crowd around to watch. I hear sniggering.

My preppy roommate is all-out laughing and pointing at me. “Look at the new girl. I pity us. I would rather have the one-armed bandit back.”

I take it that’s poor Susan.

What a jerk!

I ignore them and keep going. I only just make it to twenty. I’m breathing hard when I stand. I can already feel sweat bead on my brow.

“Are you done with the attitude, Tribute?” Fang asks me.

“Yes, Sir.” I make the mistake of giving him a two-fingered salute like I do to Dagger.

“Still a smart-ass, I see. I’ll take another twenty.” He glances at the ground.

My teammates laugh. “Not very bright,” one of the women says. I think her name is Beth.

I get back down on the dirt and start counting. These take me much longer than the first twenty. Thankfully, everyone loses interest, and they start to wander off.

I finally finish and collapse in a heap on the ground. I’m breathing heavily and sticky with sweat.

“Just for good measure, you should do another five, Tribute,” Fang says.

I’m lying with my belly on the ground, unable to catch my breath, and he thinks I should do more push-ups?

Oh my gosh, he really does have a tiny dick. Poor Fang. I feel sorry for the guy. I will do my best not to hate him. Maybe he can’t get it up either. Small and shriveled. I bite back a giggle. He would kill me if I laughed now.

I get started on the last five, but have to take a short breather between each one. I finally finish and stand. I’m panting and must look terrible. Red and sweaty. I start dusting

myself off, since I'm covered in dirt as well. I can feel that my hair is sticking to my face and neck.

"We'll have you fit in no time, Tribute," Fang tells me, like he's doing me a favor or something.

"Yes, Sir," I say, trying hard not to show my true feelings, namely that I think he is a gigantic prick. I'm pretty sure I fail, but he nods and saunters off, which makes me happy. Maybe I'm finally getting a handle on my resting bitch-face and snarky tone. I'm pretty sure he knows that I couldn't do another set of push-ups if I tried, so he's calling it a truce...for now.

I look over at Dagger, but he is talking to my team...my previous team. Susan is there, too; her arm is in a sling. I feel a stab of jealousy.

Jen looks over at me. There is horror in her eyes. She starts to argue with Dagger, but he cuts her off. Jen says something else, her eyes narrowed. Dagger starts talking, but she turns, and then she marches over to me.

"I can't believe this." She folds her arms.

"You and me both."

"We have to fight this. They can't do this. *He* can't do this." She glares at Dagger. "What got up his nose?" she whispers.

"I don't know. All I know is that it's done. There's nothing I, or any of us, can do about it." I feel my eyes sting, and my throat clog, but I suck it back. I'll make Jen feel worse if I cry. Besides, I don't want the assholes among us to see me vulnerable and weak. They'll swoop in, and I'll never hear the end of it.

"Can I have your attention?" Shadow says. "It's time to begin with attempts for the day. First up is..." she hesitates for a moment and then goes on, "Hunter."

Jen and I give one another a look.

I put my hand up. "Please, can I go later on?" I've just done a whole bunch of push-ups. My arms are burning. I still

don't quite have my breath back yet.

Shadow starts to nod and is about to say something when Fang steps forward. "My Tribute is ready to go now." He walks over to me. "You need to toughen up," he tells me under his breath.

"I just did forty-five push-ups, which means that there is no way I'm making the attempt." I'm still not climbing all the way to the top of the final obstacle, so I wouldn't make it anyway, but I want to see how well I can do on the rest. "Surely you want to set me up for success? Please give me ten minutes to—"

"I refuse to baby you. You can go right now," Fang insists. "Forty-five push-ups isn't very many."

"That isn't fair," I say to him.

"Life isn't fair. Suck it up. Go now, or I will show you what unfair can look like. I'll take your mattress. I can take away everything that is important to you."

"You already have," I mutter. I give Jen's hand a quick squeeze to let her know that I am okay, and then I walk away toward the start.

"Good luck!" she shouts after me. I can hear a waver in her voice. Skylar is standing behind her. She's chewing on her lip.

I glance back, smiling at them. My eyes are still stinging. Jen's are filling with tears, so I quickly look away. I really can't afford to cry now. Not in front of everyone. I take deep breaths, trying to calm down. My goal is still the same, even if the view has changed. I need to complete the obstacle course and then help others do the same so that I can go home.

"Good luck, Chubby!"

I don't look, knowing that it's Halbert the jerk. I don't care about him anymore. I've moved on. That is the one major uptick in all of this. I mean, you have to look at the silver lining, after all.

Halbert can kiss my ass.

I make a show of loosening my muscles when all I'm really doing is trying to buy time so that I can rest a little. Especially my arms, which still feel a bit shaky. When I know that I really can't delay anymore, I set off at a run.

I get over the walls, only I'm slower than normal, but I do okay. I note that there happens to be a chair close by for me to use as a step. I know that others have followed suit; any one of them could have put that chair there.

The beam and the rope bridge pose no difficulty, even if I am, again, a little slower on the bridge.

Unfortunately, I do not have enough strength in my arms for the monkey bars. I keep trying until my time runs out.

Big surprise.

"You will need to work on upper body strength, Tribute," Fang tells me. "On your strength and stamina in general. Meet me after everyone leaves so that we can work on it."

"Yes, Sir," I say.

"I didn't hear you, Hunter."

"Yes, Sir!" I shout, my voice is laced with anger. My eyes are on Dagger, who is looking at me. His gaze softens. I think I might see pity. I level him with what I hope is a scathing look that holds every bit of my anger and resentment. I'm boiling with the emotions. Then I walk away.

H unter

I dish up some spaghetti next to the generous helping of salad. First, the pasta and then the rich-looking ragu. Lastly, I sprinkle some grated parmesan over all of my food...even the salad. That's how I roll.

I'm ravenous since I couldn't eat much last night. I was too tired after waking up the last few nights to semi-stalk Dagger. Fat lot of good that did me. I couldn't eat much breakfast this morning since my stomach was tied in knots just thinking about having to face my ex-instructor, and for good reason. On top of all that, Fang kept me for close to two hours with some brutal one-on-one training. Now I'm freaking starving.

Big cheers sound at the table directly behind me. I hear glasses chink together.

"To the best Tribute at Draig Academy," one of the women says. "To you, Halbert." She sounds all flustered.

I roll my eyes, glancing at them for half a second, and instantly regret it. I wince as I look forward again. Crap! I was so deep in my own thoughts that I wasn't paying attention and stumbled into the viper's pit. Halbert and co. have shoved two tables together.

“Thank you,” the man of the hour says. I start to walk away when he says, “Hey, Chubby.”

I know he’s going to keep shouting “chubby” louder and louder, so I turn around like an asshole.

“Look at that; she knows her name.” Halbert laughs.

I don’t say anything.

“I hear that Dagger kicked you out of his team because of *differences*.” He laughs some more. “He took Susan over you,” he sneers.

“Fang isn’t too happy about a chubby being on our team.” It’s my roommate, Luke. How nice. It seems that he and Halbert are all buddy-buddy. I should have known, since they’re cut from the same damned cloth.

“Should you be eating all of that?” Halbert asks.

“You should probably stick to salad,” Luke adds.

I roll my eyes, turn, and walk away. I’m not going to give them the satisfaction of responding to any of that bull. Next time, I won’t even turn around. I can’t believe I did that. Lesson learned.

“I bet she dies first,” one of the women says.

“Beth!” someone gasps. “Don’t say that.” I turn and see that it is a pretty lady with long braids. I think her name is Natasha. Beth has long, blond hair. She gives me a sweet smile and a wink.

Bitch!

They all laugh. Everyone but Natasha, who is frowning. I’m not sure what’s so funny or why they even want to pick on me. I don’t understand it. We’re adults. This might be an academy, but we’re not in school anymore.

On my way to the table, I am intercepted. I almost groan out loud. I don’t feel like having this conversation. Also, my arms hurt after my grueling workout. Even carrying my plate is an effort. All I want is to eat and to hit the sack early.

“I just wanted to tell you that I’m sorry,” Susan says. She looks down at her plate and then back up at me. “I feel terrible that we were swapped. I’m secretly glad to be out of that team, but I feel sorry for you. So very, very sorry.”

“It isn’t your fault,” I tell her. “I promise I don’t blame you. How is the arm doing?” I look down at the cast. Susan is holding her plate in the other hand.

“Thankfully, it was just a hairline fracture. I can start exercising again next week. Hopefully, I’ll be able to start work on getting through Sky’s Edge the week after that. I don’t want to hold anyone back or anything.”

“Next week already? That’s great.” I’m trying hard not to feel jealous of her. Trying not to be angry with Susan. None of this is her fault. She seems quite sweet. “You can’t think like that. The fracture isn’t your fault at all. It could have happened to any of us. I must say, I can’t believe I got through the swim relatively unscathed.”

“Your new team is really... They’re...” She makes a face and starts to squirm a little.

“They’re a bunch of assholes,” I offer.

She laughs. “Yes, that’s exactly right. They’re assholes. Natasha is okay, but she doesn’t want to rock the boat, so she just goes along with everything the others say. Beth is a colossal bitch. Stay away from her. And then, don’t get me started on Luke. He’s such a dick, it isn’t even funny. He’ll leave his shit lying everywhere, and that is not the least of it. He’s a selfish pig, and I’m being kind right now in my assessment of him.”

It’s my turn to laugh, even though it really isn’t funny at all.

“Then there’s Ross. He spends a lot of time with Kim from Octane’s group. They’re seeing each other. Kim is sweet, so when she’s around, Ross mostly behaves himself. But when she’s not, he’s one of the boys and acts like a jerk. They recently started hanging out with Halbert’s team, and now

they're much worse than before. I'm so glad to be away from them, but at the same time, I'm so sorry for you."

"Thanks for the heads up, and once again, it isn't your fault."

"No problem. Let me know if I can fill you in on anything else or if there's anything that I can do to help you." She gives a one-shouldered shrug.

"I will." I smile at her.

"See you around." She starts to walk to an empty table.

I push out a breath. "Hey, Susan."

She turns; her face is filled with expectation and a little hope. I see her chew her lower lip, and her eyes widen.

"Why don't you join us?" I gesture to where my tribe is sitting.

"You sure?" She beams.

"Of course. You're one of us now."

She grins, and it fills her entire face. "That would be great."

We walk over to the others. "Hi, guys. I take it that all of you have been introduced to Susan?"

"Yes, of course." Tommy jumps up and grabs a chair from another table. Susan sits, and he scoots her in.

Before I can do the same, Jen asks, "Are you okay?" She stands. Her napkin falls onto the ground at her feet. "I saw them talking to you. What did they say? Do you want me to go over there and—"

I put my plate down but stay standing. "It's not worth it." I shake my head and give a small laugh. "It's the same old crap, and quite frankly, it goes in one ear and out the other." I laugh. "I really wish they'd come up with new material."

Jen gets this look of concern. "Are you sure?" she asks. "I can go over there and give them a piece of my mind."

I nod. “Absolutely sure. Don’t waste your energy on those jerks.” I roll my eyes to drive the point home.

Jen hugs me. “I’m sorry all of this is happening to you.”

I hug her back. “I’ll get through it. It’s fine.”

“Are you settled in your new room okay?” Jen asks as we sit.

“Yep.” I nod. Poor Jen cried when I packed my things earlier. She’s such a sweetheart.

“We can still be friends and support each other.”

I pick up my fork, but my hand shakes. Shit! That asshole Fang had me do the monkey bars over and over and over. I have blisters on my fingers, and my arms are not just sore but tired to the point where my hands are actually shaking. I’m trying to hide it from my friends. I don’t want them to worry. I lean over and very quickly shove a forkful of food into my mouth.

I groan because yum.

“I see that your new roomy, Luke, is friends with Halbert.” Tommy gets this disgusted look. “And you have to share a room with him.”

“Luke is harmless. He’s not that bad when he’s away from his cronies,” I tell them. Luke was an asshole when I brought my things across to the room. He told me not to speak to him unless addressed.

Unless addressed. Who does he think he is? The fucking King of England? I don’t think so.

He told me to stay on my side of the room and not to so much as look at him. I didn’t respond. I don’t plan on talking to him. The whole silent thing suits me just fine. I don’t plan on hanging out in my room with him, anyway. I’ll sleep there, and that’s it. Susan was right; he’s a pig. He left his wet towel and briefs on the bathroom floor after showering earlier. They’re still there. If he thinks I’m picking up after him, he’s sorely mistaken.

My plan is to make it through Sky's Edge. To do it first out of everyone in my asshole team. Then I'll get the single room. It will give me great pleasure to give them all the proverbial middle finger, especially Fang. I've decided that he is the biggest bully of them all. I won't rise to their baits, but I will beat them. *All of them*. I'll make Dagger sorry he ever swapped me out. I plan on using my anger to my advantage.

"Come hang out with us after dinner," Jen says as she takes a sip of her orange juice.

"That sounds good." The only way I will keep my sanity is by spending plenty of time with my friends. "Not too late. I need my rest...we all do." I'm exhausted, but I don't want them to know it. We normally hang out together after dinner, so I need to keep up appearances.

"Please pass the salt," Skylar asks, and Octavia obliges.

"Have you heard anything from home?" I ask Skylar, who shakes her head.

She sighs. "No, nothing. Daddy told me to hang tight. He promised he would get me off this island," she tells Susan, who hasn't heard the story. "I really thought he would get it right, but..." She shakes her head. "It's starting to look like it's not going to happen."

"Who is your father?" Susan asks. "He must be important if he thinks he can get you out of here."

"Zack Jefferson."

Susan drops her fork. "As in *the Zack Jefferson* from J&J Mines?"

Skylar nods. "Yep, that would be him. The mines have been in our family for generations," she tells us. This is news.

Mines plural.

"Oh, my god. You're rich...like richer than God rich. I think your dad made the top fifty richest people in the world last year. I'm talking billions. Sorry to be rude..." She grimaces. "I'm not normally this blunt. It's just that wealth happens to be a hobby of mine. I'm hoping to make it big

before I hit thirty. At least, that was my goal before all of this. Right now, it's making it out alive." She shakes her head. "Your dad must have some clout. How is it that you're even still here?"

All righty, then. Skylar said they had money, but this is insane. Top fifty in the world!

Skylar shrugs. "Daddy worked hard at getting me scratched as a Tribute before I had to leave, but it didn't work out. I mean, we've dined at the White House. He knows everyone who is anyone in a position of power. I really thought I would be out of here within days of arriving, since he promised he would redouble his efforts after I left. I'm an only child and heir to the mines. I can't reside here long-term, but I've pretty much accepted that I'm here to stay for now. I just need to get quicker on that damned rope bridge, as well as the mud, and then I'll make Sky's Edge. Then I can go home."

"It's the right attitude to have," I tell her, quickly shoveling more food into my mouth.

"I know I'm going to hold everyone back," Octavia says. "But I can't bring myself to do the course. I just can't. It would go against everything I believe in. I don't believe that dragons exist. I still think it's all bullshit."

"There's camera footage of them," Tommy says.

"Yes, and photographs," Jen adds, taking a sip of her juice.

"It's all fake." Octavia shakes her head.

"Why are we here, then?" I ask her. "Surely you must have a theory on that."

"I don't know that yet, and quite frankly, I hope never to find out. I still believe that they are brainwashing us."

"This is delicious," Tommy says, rolling some pasta onto his fork. I think we all sigh with relief that he's changed the subject. I don't think that anyone wants to hear about all of the conspiracy theories all over again. Octavia is a nice person, but it gets a bit much.

"You did really well today," I tell Tommy.

His face darkens, and his jaw clenches. He swallows down his food. “You’re saying that just to be nice,” he grumbles. “I was terrible.”

“I’m not just being nice. I mean it,” I insist. “You’re making it further and further each time.”

“I barely get into the muck before I panic and have to get out. I tell myself I can do it, but when I get down there, into that awful sludge, I...I feel like I’m going to die.”

“I feel exactly the same,” Skylar says.

“You might feel the same as I do, but you keep going all the way to the end,” Tommy tells her.

“I’m sure I would choke, too,” Octavia says, giving a shiver.

“Me too.” Susan looks petrified. “I’m worried about both the mud and the last obstacle – the net.” She has yet to make a single attempt. She really is at a distinct disadvantage with her arm.

“We have time,” Jen tells us. “I know that we all want to get home as soon as possible, but it can take people months to make it through, and for good reason.”

Months. I’ll die if I have to be here for months.

“Everyone is getting through. Everyone is giving their all,” I say, looking at each one in turn.

I note that Octavia looks down at her plate.

I yawn. I don’t think I’ve ever been this exhausted in my whole entire life. On the plus side, I can brush my teeth, wash my face, and fall straight into bed. I should be able to get right to sleep despite having a jerk in the bed next to mine.

I hope I don’t snore.

My ex never mentioned snoring, but you never know. Wait a minute... What if *he* snores and keeps me up all night?

Why do I overthink things?

I'm going to stop doing it right now. I'm sleeping soundly, and that's that. I'm too tired to care. I can barely keep my eyes open. I don't give a rat's ass what Luke thinks.

I yawn again as I round the corner that leads to my new digs. It takes me two attempts to get my keycard into the slot. The light turns green, and a soft click sounds as the door unlocks.

I walk in and see Luke naked from behind. He's kneeling on the bed. His ass releases and contracts as he pounds into someone from behind. He's grunting with every thrust. He's... he's...having sex in our room!

I drop my bag and my keycard. Then I scramble to pick them back up. This cannot be happening. It just can't. But it is.

He keeps fucking whoever it is and casually looks over his shoulder. "Do you mind, Chubby?" he grunts, sinking back into her again and again.

Holy shit!

The woman has her ass in the air. She's still wearing her shirt. Her jeans are wound around one ankle. She looks back, and I see that it's Beth.

"Three's a crowd," she remarks, looking a little bored for someone who is getting pounded into like that because Luke sure keeps at it.

"Fuck off, Chubby!" Luke yells at me, fucking Beth faster.

I manage to grab my things. "Put a sock on the handle next time, asshole!" I yell as I leave, slamming the door.

What the hell was that?

I almost can't believe what I just saw. I wish I could unsee it. How rude! That's my room too. What now? Do I just sit here? I could go back to Jen and Susan's room, but they'll be in bed by now. I could ask to sleep on the floor in Skylar's room, but after the hell Fang gave me today, I really need a soft bed.

This sucks!

I cannot believe that Luke and Beth would be so damned selfish. Especially since Beth has the single room all to herself. They could've easily been at her place. They really don't give a shit about anyone but themselves.

I decide to sit outside the door and wait. It looked like things were hotting up in there. Maybe they'll get done soon. More like *he'll* be done soon.

Please let them be done soon.

I sit there and sit there and sit there. I wait and wait and wait. Next thing, I'm waking up with a crick in my neck and a dead right leg. I'm slumped against the wall in an awkward position. I have drool coming out the side of my mouth. I wipe it off with the back of my hand and then rub my eyes as I sit up with a groan. They feel like sandpaper as I blink a few times. I look at my watch. It's two in the morning.

I limp a few times as I stand, shaking my leg to get the blood flowing. Then I stretch, hearing something crack in my neck. I'm sure that can't be good. Then I walk to the door.

"You have to be kidding me," I mutter.

Surely not.

I blink a few times and even rub my eyes, but it's still there. There's a sock on the door handle.

A freaking sock.

What the actual...!?

They can't still be busy. For a few really long moments, I contemplate going in. I even get my keycard ready. Then I remember Luke's clenching ass and his grunts as he had sex with Beth.

Three's a crowd.

Well, it sure as shit is. I don't want to walk in on them again. I would have to wash my eyeballs in battery acid. My brain, too.

What am I going to do now?

A gooey cheese bagel sounds amazing, but I need to have more willpower than that. I promised Jen. Besides, I plan on getting through Sky's Edge sooner rather than later. I'm going to find somewhere relatively comfortable to sleep so that I'm in top form tomorrow. I'm going to need my strength.

I make my way to the spacious public living room space. I choose a big three-seater sofa that overlooks the obstacle course. I think better of it, deciding to take one of the sofas in a different position. One that is wider. As I stand, I catch movement outside. I duck down behind the sofa, using the backrest to hide behind.

I gasp. "Are you serious?" I mutter to myself.

It's Dagger and Susan. They're jogging together on the track. Running slowly but steadily side by side. They're talking to one another. Sheesh! They have a whole lot to say, I think to myself after watching them for a long minute. Susan says something, and Dagger laughs. He's wearing those barely-there running shorts of his but with a T-shirt. His tattoos contrast with the white of the fabric. He fills his clothes like I've never seen before, and I've drooled over a couple of copies of *GQ* in my day.

Dagger laughs again. This time, Susan does, too. They have a good old laugh together, and Susan nudges him with her elbow. They laugh some more.

A stab of jealousy hits me like a bolt through my body. I had this small voice telling me that the whole reason Dagger cut me from his team was because he was attracted to me and didn't want to act on it. But it turns out that my very first thought was the right one. He's an asshole, just like the rest of them. A big, fat dickhead asshole.

They stop running as they reach the path that leads to the building. Susan is talking with animation. I can't see Dagger's face, but he nods a few times. I think he says something back. I wish the lighting was better, but they stopped just outside of the brighter light.

Susan reaches over and touches the side of Dagger's arm, rubbing her hand up and down...once...twice. Dagger doesn't

pull away.

What the heck?

This looks intimate. Are the two of them...?

I make a small snorting noise because I can't believe it. This is more than just a student-teacher relationship. This is more than just a late-night exercise session.

I get another bolt of jealousy, but this time, my face goes hot with anger as well.

Dagger says something. Susan says something back, and then she turns and leaves. Dagger watches her for longer than is necessary. For a moment, I think that he is going to go after her, but he starts running around the track at a fast pace instead. His legs eat up the track in long strides.

I'm briefly shocked at just how fast he is going. Then I feel the anger return. I need to forget about Dagger and focus on me. On my future. I force myself to lie down on the sofa. I need to sleep. I need to leave it alone. I need to leave *him* alone.

Only, he's the reason I'm having to sleep on the sofa tonight in the first place. He's the reason I have blisters on my hands. He's the reason I can't be on my team anymore with my friends, surrounded by people who actually like me. My eyes sting, and a lump forms in my throat, but it doesn't last because, just as quickly, the anger floods back.

I sit up. I'm breathing hard, and my face is burning up. My whole body feels hot with rage. I'm pissed. I don't think I've ever been this angry in all my life.

I need him to explain to me very carefully why he swapped Susan and me. His reason had better be really good, or he is going to have to watch his back because I will get him, and I will hurt him.

I look out of the window. One thing that I won't do is catch him, so I'll have to wait until he's stationary, and *then* I will hurt him. Perhaps in his sleep.

I make a small growling noise, not unlike the ones I've heard him make. I deserve an explanation for my whole damned world being turned on its head. I will not accept the one he gave me earlier today.

It's what's best for you.

Well, it's not.

I know what's best for me. I'm an adult. I'm old enough to know what's good for me and what isn't. Luke and his buds are toxic. Fang is even more fucking toxic.

I walk out onto the jogging track and fold my arms across my chest. I wait for the bastard to come to me. This had better be good, or else.

Dagger

It feels good to run. I love being out here this time of night. I have so much energy to burn, it's obscene. Once I'm done out here, I might go and pump iron. I need to do something to get rid of this buzzing inside of me.

I round the corner and stop dead in my tracks.

What the...?

What is she doing here? I have to try not to jump to conclusions.

I jog the rest of the way to her, a frown forming on my forehead. "What is it?" I ask her. "Is something wrong?"

I note that she is wearing a pair of sweatpants and a light pink tank top. She looks fucking beautiful standing in the soft light, which is spilling over her from the lamppost above. Her eyes are blazing with...anger. Her jaw is set. She's tapping her foot. Her arms are wound so tightly across her chest that her tits are just about under her chin. Insanely sexy.

"Oh yes, something is very wrong."

"Is someone hurt? Did something happen?"

"Yes, something happened, and someone might get hurt before long. Just to be clear, that someone is you."

My mouth twitches, but I hold back a smile. This woman. The fire inside her stokes my flames.

“You had better have a damned good explanation,” she pushes out.

Hunter is clearly still mad at me for swapping her out. “I told you that the swap was—”

“For my own good. I’m not buying it, Dagger.” She gives a hard shake of her head. “That’s such bull. I want a better explanation from you. I deserve a better explanation.” Suddenly, the anger is replaced by glistening eyes and a hitch in her voice.

No! Dammit! Fuck!

Anger I can take. I can deal with that particular emotion, but I can’t take it if she cries. I don’t want her hurt.

“I’m sorry, Hunter. I’m going to have to ask you to trust me in this. I swear to you that it is for your own good that you are off my team.”

Just like that, the fire is back in her eyes. “You say that I must trust you! You seriously want me to trust you?”

“Yes.” I nod. “I can’t give you an explanation. Nothing that will make any real sense.”

“I have an explanation for you.” She takes a step toward me, getting right in my space. I pick up her scent and have to stop myself from inhaling deeply it’s so fucking good. “You want an explanation, Dagger? Well, here goes: you have a thing for Susan. That’s why you wanted her on your team. That’s it, isn’t it?” Her hands fist at her sides, and her eyes blaze even more.

Holy shit, but she’s mad and jealous.

I can’t help it. I laugh. That does it. She steps forward and slaps the side of my arm, then she shoves my chest. “Admit it already, you asshole. You ruined my life so that you could bonk Susan.” Her voice is animated. Her breasts strain against her top. Stray hair has dropped out of her ponytail. Her freckles are out in full force.

So damned gorgeous.

“That’s not it.”

“Yes, it is. You might as well admit it.”

“I don’t need Susan on my team to fuck her.”

Her eyes widen, and her lush mouth falls open for half a second. “So, you admit it. You’re sleeping with her. You’re sleeping with Susan.” Her eyes start to fill again, but she blinks the tears away. “You asshole. I thought you swapped me because we were getting too close, because you wanted me, but I guess I was wrong. I was stupid, and you’re a giant dick.” She comes in to push me on the chest again, but I grab her hands before she can.

“I’m not sleeping with Susan.” I pull her hands against my chest, holding them there. “I don’t have any inclination to sleep with her.”

“I saw the two of you not five minutes ago.” She tries to pull away.

“Stop just a second and listen to me.” She does. I keep my hands over hers, pulling her closer. Her jaw tightens, and her eyes narrow. She leans back, having to tilt her chin up to lock eyes with me.

“I’m listening, but make it fast. You’re about to lose your balls. I’ll be sure to get both of them at once. I have wide knees, you know.”

I laugh again. “Sorry. Wide knees?”

“It’s not a joke. I’m serious. One knee and both of your balls are goners. Don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

“Got it.” I bite back more laughter. “I was helping Susan —”

“Helping! Is that what they call it nowadays...helping?”

“Not that kind of helping. Shut up for a few seconds.”

“Yes, Sir.” She rolls her eyes.

“Susan has not been cleared by medical to start exercising yet, even though her legs are perfectly fine and even though the fracture is healing well. She’s worried she’ll struggle if she doesn’t start now, so I agreed to meet with her for a one-on-one session, but it—”

“*One on one.* I’ll bet. You two looked really...” She must realize how jealous she is sounding and bites her lip. Fuck, I want to bite down on that lip. My eyes stay on her mouth for far too fucking long. “Never mind,” she finally says. “Just forget about it. For the record, I think you’re a prick. Sleep with one eye open, buddy. I’m coming for you.”

It takes everything in me not to laugh. Hunter might be a lot of things, but a stealth nighttime assassin is not one of them. Maybe one day, but not anytime soon. It’s adorable and sexy, all rolled into one.

“Are you threatening me, Tribute?” I decide to play with her, just a little.

“Yes, I absolutely am threatening you. What are you going to do about it?”

Every-fucking-thing.

I don’t say it. My Adam’s apple works and my cock goes hard as nails. “Susan is sweet, but here’s the thing: You can stop being jealous of us because there isn’t anything to be jealous of.” I shake my head.

Her eyes widen, and then her face morphs into an expression of shock. “Um...no...um...that isn’t it at all. Jealous? No way!” She snort-laughs. “I’m pissed off, Dagger. And hurt. I thought we were...that we... I thought... Just tell me why, please. Why did you swap me out? Give me the really short version if you can’t give me the long one. There must be a short one.”

“I want to fuck you.”

It takes several long seconds for her to register what I said. I see a whole range of emotions play on her face while she figures it out: confusion, doubt, shock, anger, followed by desire.

Fuck me.

Tons of desire. Like molten lava in her veins. Then, the confusion is back, followed by more shock. “I don’t think I heard you correctly,” she chokes out.

“You did.” I let her go. “You heard me loud and clear. I want to pull down your sweats, make you good and wet and then fuck you until you can’t remember your own damned name. Until you can’t walk straight. I want it almost more than I want my next breath. But you already know that. These shorts don’t hide much.”

She looks down like she did the other night, and greed fills her stare. She makes this soft whimpering noise that has me leaking in my pants.

Fuuuuck!

I put my hand over my erection for a few seconds, willing it to go down. It doesn’t. “We can’t, Hunter. That’s why I swapped you out. I needed to put distance between us. Otherwise, it was just a matter of time before it happened. I can’t keep saying no to you.”

“I haven’t ever asked you,” she whispers, still looking at my cock. At the wet patch that has formed at the tip. She might not know that she’s doing it, but she licks her lips.

Holy fucking shit!

I’m in trouble here. Hunter might not realize it, but she’s in more trouble than she’s ever been in in her whole damned life.

“Oh, you have asked me. You’ve asked me plenty. You’re asking me right now. You’re begging me.”

I look down at her chest, rising and falling in quick succession. At her tight nipples, pleading with me to suck on them. She’s squeezing her thighs together, trying to quell her need. I know it isn’t working. I know she’s wet. Soaking for me.

I groan. “Go,” I tell her. “Leave right now. It can’t happen. We can’t do this.”

For a few moments, she just stands there. Then she juts out her chin and sticks out her chest. That's when I realize that I am well and truly fucked.

"Is that an order?" she asks.

"Yes, and for once, please fucking obey me."

Her eyes narrow, and she shakes her head. "No. I won't." Of course not. Why now?

"No." I groan again and run a hand through my hair. "Just go. Please. Hunter... Fuck!" My voice is gruff.

"No. I'm a grown woman, Dagger. I can decide what I want and what I don't want. You don't get to decide for me. Right now, and at this moment, you are not my superior. In fact, I take that back; you're no longer my instructor at all. You have no more say over me. You gave that privilege away. I want you to pull down my sweats. I want you to make good on your promises and to fuck me thoroughly. I don't want to die with cobwebs."

"Cobwebs?" I frown.

"Yes, I—"

"Wait a minute, what is this talk of death?" I bark out.

"You said that an average of three people die attempting Sky's Edge every year. I could end up being one of them."

"You won't!" I bark. The thought is abhorrent.

"But I could be. I don't want regrets. Look, I'm not going to beg you. There are other guys at the academy. Others who..." She points at the housing facility.

I close the distance between us and grip her hand in mine. "Not a fuck!" I growl. "No one else gets to touch you."

"Who's jealous now?" She smiles at me and then giggles when I frown. "I was only teasing about looking for sex elsewhere, you idiot, and I mean that in the nicest way."

I laugh. It's short-lived. "Are you sure about this? It isn't a good idea." My balls are throbbing. I want her so badly.

“I’m sure.”

I pick Hunter up, marveling at how soft and small she is. “Are you opposed to fucking in the jungle like an animal?”

She groans, and I hear need. Holy shit, Hunter is a kinky little thing.

I start walking deep enough into the trees to be sure that we are not seen or heard. I walk until I reach a clearing. I want to see her naked body bathed in moonlight.

I set her down on her feet and move back a few steps. “Undress for me.”

Her throat works, but she toes out of her trainers. Then she takes off her socks, shoving them into the shoes. Hunter looks at me for what feels like a long time, then she shoves down her sweats.

Her thighs are made for wrapping around a man. She’s wearing plain white underwear. There’s a tiny bow front and center. Next to go is the tank, which she pulls over her head. Her tits are barely confined in a cotton bra. It has a tiny lace edge. I can just make out her nipples through the fabric. They’re still tight little nubs. Her hips are made for gripping. I want to grip them so fucking badly. I want my prints to be there in the morning.

I realize that she is just standing there. “Your underwear, too.”

“Ummm...” She chews on her lower lip, looking down.

“Now you’re shy?” I smile at her.

Hunter looks into my eyes, keeping her gaze there. Brave and courageous. One of the things I really like about her. Then she reaches back and unclips her bra, letting it slowly... slowly...slowly fall. Dropping it on the ground at her feet.

I make this choked noise because she’s just that beautiful. I need to suck her and bite her. I need more than we have time for. More than I will allow myself to take. I close the distance between us, putting one arm around her and cupping her sex.

“So fucking wet for me. You’re soaking, sweetheart.” The whole bottom panel of her panties is wet.

There’s that word again.

Sweetheart.

I’ve never used it before. Yet, with her, I forget myself. We’re doing this, but there needs to be distance. This is a one-time deal. It can’t happen again.

I rub my finger over her clit through the cotton, and she moans. The sound shoots straight to my balls, which pull tight.

I yank her panties to the side and put a finger on her clit. I rub a few times before stopping to apply light pressure, keeping my finger on that tight nub but holding still. She’s panting hard. “You can still say no to me. You can say it now or at any time.”

She nods, rocking against my hand and whimpering.

I take my hand off her pussy and grip her ass, squeezing softly. “I don’t do the whole soft and sweet vibe. I fuck, Hunter. Do you understand that? I fuck!” I go on before she can answer. “I won’t hurt you, but it will be far from gentle. You’ll feel me tomorrow...everywhere.” I slide my hand back between her legs, slipping two fingers inside her tight-as-fuck heat. I almost come in my pants, she feels that good. “I will wreck this pussy.” I start pumping softly, looking for her spot.

Her head falls back, and she groans.

Right there!

“You won’t be able to say another man’s name ever again. It’ll be me. My name. You need to be sure this is what you want. Do you want to get fucked, Hunter?”

“Yes,” she chokes out. “It’s exactly what I want.”

Hunter

What did I just agree to?

I will wreck your pussy.

Wreck.

To break. To ruin. To destroy.

Do I want that? Do I really want that to happen to me?

His fingers move in and out of me, touching me in a way I have never been touched before. His eyes are locked on mine, and like a moth to a flame, I can't look away. My mouth is slack, and I'm panting hard, arching up to him. I can feel wetness drip down the side of my leg. I'm on the verge of coming, and he has barely even started.

I groan deep.

Holy shit!

Wrecked after this. Yes, I'm sure I will be, but I can't wait to be destroyed. Ruined has never felt this good before.

"Do you want to come?" Dagger asks me.

"Yes." I'm now making these little noises every time his fingers dip inside me. I'm in awe of how good this feels. It's just his fingers...nothing else. He isn't even touching my clit, and I'm on fire.

I want more.

I want it all.

I want him inside me. Deep inside me.

“Shit!” I say through my moans. “I don’t have a condom. Please tell me you have one.”

“Fuuuuck!” Dagger groans. “Me, neither. Not even back at my room.” He keeps fingering me, slow and steady. I’m losing my mind. I’m burning up. “I wasn’t...expecting this,” he adds.

“I am on birth control, and I’m clean.” I moan and rock into his hand. “I mean, I just did a whole medical.” I make a weird-sounding noise. “I need to come, and I want you inside me. I want this... Please,” I beg.

Holy hell! I’ve been reduced to begging status, and I don’t care.

“I’m clean, too,” he says, taking my mouth in a searing kiss that has my mind blanking. His mouth is warm. His lips are soft. Those fingers. “Bareback,” he says against my lips when he pulls back a little. He says it like it’s a romantic notion. Then he says something odd. “I get to mark you.”

Before I can ask him what that means, he drops to his knees and puts one of my legs over his shoulder. He looks up at me. “You were right about one thing all along, Hunter. Something out here most certainly wants to eat you all up. That something is me.” He gives me a half-smile and buries his face between my legs. His mouth is hot and insistent.

I’m dying!

When he adds his fingers into the equation, I come apart on a long, hard wail that will surely bring a couple of wild animals this way. They’ll think that some poor creature is being eaten alive. There’s some serious dying happening.

And it’s the best kind of death. My pussy clenches so tightly it almost hurts. Holding on to his shoulders, I tilt my head back, looking at a blanket of stars above as my orgasm rushes through me in waves that are relentless. He holds me there, insisting that I give him more, demanding it with his hot

mouth and clever hands. I don't just break. I shatter into a million pieces and all for him.

My throat hurts when he releases me. He stands, keeping his hands on my hips. He licks his lips like I'm the best thing he has tasted in the longest while.

"I'm going to let you go now," he warns.

I nod, unable to speak. I can only breathe, only feel.

There's also want.

Desperate need courses through me. This, despite coming harder than I ever have before. I still want him...need him with a viciousness that is surprising. I've always enjoyed sex, but it's never been like this.

Wrecked.

Yes.

I am, or soon will be.

Dagger keeps his eyes on me. It's dark, but I can see him well enough because the moon is out. And those stars... I will never be able to look up at the night sky again without thinking of him.

Ruined.

Yes.

Dagger looks angry. There are lines on his forehead. He's so intense it takes my breath from me. My nipples are so tight they hurt. My clit is still throbbing from the orgasm he just gave me. And between my legs, I'm slick with need.

He pulls his shirt over his head, and I allow my gaze to roam his body. He's all hard muscle. I've never met anyone more masculine and yet so incredibly beautiful. This man is utterly gorgeous. Devastatingly so.

He pulls down his shorts, keeping his eyes on me. His cock is huge. I knew it would be, but seeing it out and in all its glory is something else.

I'm not in the least bit afraid. I want him more. I can't wait.

I've read in romance books where the heroine's womb clenches. I always thought it was complete bullshit until right now. My entire channel and lower belly clenches when I see him standing there.

I bite down on my lip to stop myself from groaning, or begging, or both all at once.

I'm not sure if he's also enjoying the view or if he's giving me time to change my mind. If that's the case, he'll wait a very long time. We *are* finishing this.

His eyes rake over my skin. That frown deepens. His jaw is tight. His whole stance hardens. His biceps seem to thicken, and his abs deepen. He clenches and unclenches his fists. He's huge in every conceivable way. I should be petrified. I should run. I've never been so turned on in all of my life.

I make a small whimpering noise, and he finally decides that he's waited long enough.

Hallelujah.

He stalks me.

It's the best way that I have to describe it. Dagger narrows his eyes, zoning in on his target, and then he stalks me. Once he closes the distance between us, he crowds me with his big body without actually touching me. Then he comes in a little closer. First, I feel his heat. Then I feel his chest against my nipples and the tip of his penis high on my belly. I feel his breath on my neck, in my ear. Goosebumps break out all over my body.

He leans in like he wants to tell me a secret. I get the brush of his tongue against the shell of my ear. He pulls back and kisses the sensitive base of my neck, then inhales more deeply a few times as the very tip of his nose runs up the column of my neck.

"You smell good and taste even better." His voice is deep and rich and does things to me I never thought possible.

“Are you going to wreck me now? Because I’m ready to be wrecked.”

Did I just say that?

I think I did, and I don’t want to take it back.

Dagger chuckles. It’s soft and breathy.

He turns me around. At first, I feel the heat of him on my back, and then he moves away, and I’m cold.

I hear him make a hum of approval. I squeeze my eyes closed when I realize he’s checking me out. “All good things come to those who wait, Hunter.”

“Another cute saying. You’re full of them.”

Dagger grips my panties in his hand and rips. He rips them clean off me. I yelp and then husk out a laugh. That was so sexy. It was... I’ve never met anyone quite like him before. I lick my lips.

Then he moves away, and I know that he is looking at me again. Except now I’m fully naked. I hold my ground, even though there’s a part of me that wants to hide...or cover up... or something, even though I know he likes what he sees. I guess it’s a lifetime of being...abundantly curvy. What can I say? Some guys like it. I’m lucky that Dagger seems to be one of those guys. I stand there and own it.

He proves it to me by cupping my ass in both his big hands; he squeezes my cheeks firmly. Even that feels good. The action pulls my sex open, and the soft caress of the air is enough to have me panting a little again.

“I wish we had more time,” he rasps.

“More time for...?”

“I’ve fantasized about spanking this ass.” He squeezes again, and I moan.

He’s fantasized about me. Holy shit! And the spanking thing. I thought that was just...that it was nothing. Flirting, at best.

“Have you ever been spanked, Hunter?” He rubs my ass gently, and I almost expect him to do it. I even hold my breath. “Have you?” he practically growls when I don’t answer.

I shrug and swallow thickly. The thought of being spanked should not turn me on, and yet here we are. It does. Who am I? Who is this woman?

“Ummmm...”

“It’s a simple question.”

“No...I mean, not since I was a little—”

“Not that kind of spanking. The adult kind. The kind that would turn this ass a very pretty, bright pink. The kind that would make your pussy fucking weep for me.”

I choke out a strange-sounding noise. “Never...um...no.” I can barely breathe or think. I’m so turned on. Holy hell!

“You want to be spanked.” It isn’t a question. It’s a statement. It’s true. I want it. I want all of it.

“Not tonight.” He lets my ass go and puts his hands on my hips in a gentle caress.

Does that mean there will be a tomorrow? I somehow got the impression that this was it. I don’t have time to dwell because he starts walking me forward. He’s pressed tightly against me, his front to my back. I feel his cock, hard against my back. He leaks on me...wet for me, too. I love it. We walk until we reach a huge tree. It’s darker here beneath the canopy of branches. It’s strangely intimate.

He presses my body against the surprisingly smooth bark of a large tree. My breasts smash up against the wood. He’s breathing in my ear. “You’re so fucking sexy, you know that?”

I know he means it. I know from the way he says it. From the way he was looking at me earlier. From the way the hard ridge of his cock is pressing into me now. I know it because of the way he makes me feel.

Wanted.

Desired.

Needed.

At this moment, I am sexy. So hot I'm burning him up, too.

"I can't wait to be inside your tight pussy. To fuck you hard and good."

"Yes." It's high-pitched. More of a moan than a word, but it's all I can manage to get out right now. My voice is that choked with need.

"It's going to sting, but it won't be long before it feels good." He pulls my hips back a little. "Open your legs nice and wide for me."

I do as he says.

"That's good." His finger is on my clit, circling it softly.

I moan. "It's fine," I choke out. "I can take it."

"I know you can." He slides a finger and then two inside of me and then goes back to my clit. "You're ready." Again, it isn't a question but a statement. Dagger knows what he's doing. "Wrap your arms around the trunk."

I obey once more and hug the tree. Gripping my thighs from below, he lifts me off the ground. My breasts rub the smooth bark as I slide up and up.

"You can't... I...I'm too heavy," I start to say.

"You weigh less than nothing," he rasps.

Less than nothing? Okay, then. I have no time to bask in that compliment because he thrusts into me in one hard stroke that takes my breath for half a second.

I give a silent yell that turns into an all-out punchy scream. It's a rough cry into the quiet of the night. It's laced with pain and shock and pleasure. My pussy is on fire.

Sting.

Yes.

Wrecked.

Hell fucking yes.

I'm panting hard.

Dagger groans like he's in pain, too. "That's it. Breathe. Just breathe. You're so damned tight. Fuuuck, Hunter. Fuuuuuck." His hands are clamped tightly on my thighs. "You feel so good. Sooooo...fucking good." He kisses my neck and then nips me there. He suckles my earlobe and then nips me there, too. Then he buries his face in my hair, breathing deeply. He starts moving in slow, easy strokes.

I cry out again. This time, there is more pleasure than pain.

It still hurts, but it also feels really good. A strange combination, to be sure.

"Okay...you okay?" he growls into my ear, still fucking me. I can feel him holding back, though.

"Yes...fine... Oh! Jesus!" I'm rubbing up and down the tree. Trying hard to hold on so that I can stay anchored. "Good. So good." I can't say any more. Having a huge dick thrust deep inside will do that to a person every time. Because, believe you me, his cock is deep and touching me everywhere. I can barely whimper, let alone anything else.

He pulls away a little. At least the top half of him does. We're still very much connected down there. Suddenly, I'm moving fast. Up and down, quick and punchy. He's both thrusting and lifting quickly. So quickly that it's almost a vibration.

Holy freaking hell!

My back bows. My mouth falls open, and my eyes go wide. There is a coiling in my lower belly. How is he moving so quickly? It's like I'm on the end of a giant dildo. I groan.

Then he presses tightly against me again, pressing me into the smooth bark, and starts fucking me hard. It's as deep and as thorough as you can get. He almost takes his cock all the way out and then plunges all the way in...hard...so hard. I might be bruised tomorrow, but right now, it feels amazing. I'm so wet. I can hear the slurpy noises my body is making. I'm crying out with every stroke.

What.

The.

Hell?

Dagger is grunting loudly. Every now and then, he gives a moan that makes my clit throb. I'm close to coming. On the very edge. I can sense my orgasm is close. Right there.

Then he pulls away and goes back to the fast, punchy thrusts that have me shaking and vibrating up against the tree. I make this weird noise. My clit is throbbing. I want to touch it to rub it, but I can't. I want release. I need it. This is both heaven and hell.

"Dagger!" I moan. "Please," I beg.

He pushes against me, squashing me against the tree almost to the point of pain. He's breathing wildly in my ear, sounding like a freaking caveman, and I love it. His thrusts turn deep and needy. We're pressed tightly together, fitting like nothing ever has before. My orgasm takes me by surprise when my pussy all-out spasms, coming out of nowhere. From being close to coming hard.

I don't think I make so much as a sound for the first few seconds. I'm feeling too much. My hands clutch at the bark, and my eyes water. My back tries to bow, but it can't. I'm being held firmly in place by Dagger's big, hard body.

"That's it," he whispers. "Yes...fuck yes."

I yell his name. Then he groans. I feel warmth flood inside me. He groans in a way that is obscenely sexy.

Then Dagger proceeds to fuck a long, hard orgasm out of me. From the noises he's making, I would say that he's right there with me every step of the way.

Eventually, he slows. His soft grunting turns to heavy breathing...even that is sexy. His thrusts turn to easy strokes, which turn to circular motions that are almost firing me up again.

More.

More.

Then he stops moving, holding me there, still buried inside me. My whole body is still on fire. My sex is still clenching him tightly. My clit throbs. Endorphins flood my system with warmth. For a few moments, I think he might say something, but he doesn't. He buries his face into my hair and inhales. He does it like he's taking me in. It's unusual and yet not unpleasant.

Despite his promise to fuck me and despite making true on his word, I have to say that this was the most intimate encounter I have ever had. Even now, with the aftershocks still running through me. With his cock still inside me...it's intimate. I've never felt this close to anyone before.

Just as I think it, he pulls out of me and lowers me to the ground. I expect him to hug me. Maybe kiss the side of my head. I expect some sort of contact, but I don't get it.

Instead, he lets me go completely. Within seconds, I hear him walk away. Back to the clearing. He's walking around.

I turn, leaning back against the tree. My eyes have adjusted to the darkness, and I can see better in the dark than before. He walks back, carrying my clothes.

"Here." He hands them to me. "Sorry about your underwear." He hands me those, too, even though I will never wear them again.

"It's fine," I mumble.

"You should get dressed so that I can walk you back. It's an early start tomorrow. You need your rest."

That's all I get.

Really?

I know I shouldn't expect much. I mean, I was promised a fuck, and I got one. That was all that was on the table, particularly from a man who doesn't even date. Still, I'm taken aback. "So that's it?" It kind of just slips out.

"What more do you want?" He walks away again, groaning softly, and then paces back. "That's all I have for you, Hunter."

At least he isn't calling me "recruit" anymore. That's something...and once, it would have been enough. Not anymore, but I can't dwell on it. I technically have no right.

"Okay. That's absolutely fine." I give a quick shake of my head. "What I mean is, will you take me back, please? On your team...on my team. You know what I mean." I have to ask. It's what I planned on asking earlier but never got around to it.

Dagger just stands there. I can't read his facial expression because it's too dark for details.

"Did you have sex with me just so that I would take you back onto the team?" He sounds angry and...hurt. I'm sure I must be wrong about the hurt part, but it's hard to tell without seeing his face.

Then, his words fully register. "What? No! Of course not. I would never. You know what? Fuck you." I say the last under my breath and start dressing as fast as I can.

"Wait...I'm sorry. I'm sorry, Hunter. It felt that way for a second, but when I think it through, I know that you wouldn't do that," he pleads.

"Damn right, I wouldn't." My sweatpants are on. I shove my panties in my pocket, and now I'm fighting with my bra. It doesn't want to go back on. I'm yanking at it, tugging the elastic.

"I'm sorry." He touches the side of my arm.

"But not sorry enough to take me back."

"I can't take you back." His voice goes gruff. "I was right to have swapped you, and I sure as shit can't take you back now. Not after what just happened. No way." He shakes his head. "You know we can't do that again? There is no you and me."

I snort. "Of course." As if he didn't make that abundantly clear.

And yet, it still hurts a little to hear him say it. I go from hurt to angry in the next instant. I understand his reasoning, but I still hate that he swapped me out. I hate even more that

he won't let me come back. "It's just that Fang is an asshole," I grind out.

"That's what you said about me," he says as he pulls on his shorts.

"I was wrong about you." I roll my eyes, finally getting my bra on. "Mostly wrong. Fang is worse. He's a bully. He made me swing on the monkey bars for nearly two hours after my failed attempt earlier. The only reason I couldn't make the attempt in the first place was from all the push-ups he made me do before I was called."

"Why did he give you push-ups?"

"Why do you automatically assume I did something wrong?"

"What did you do?" He pulls on his shirt, and I do the same. We walk back to the clearing, to my shoes still lying in the dirt.

"I refused to call him Sir. Then, when I did, I might have given him the two-fingered salute. You know the salute?"

Dagger laughs softly. "Why am I not surprised? I let you get away with murder. Fang won't allow such indiscretions."

"I noticed."

"I guess you're going to be doing a lot of push-ups," he says. I hear humor laced into his voice.

"I guess so. Unless you take me back," I plead again.

He pushes out a heavy breath that tells me that he can't, even if there is a part of him that wants to.

"This doesn't have to happen again." I gesture between us, meaning it. My girl parts want more, but my brain agrees that it would be a bad idea. I could easily get attached. In fact, that hurt feeling in my chest is telling me that it is already happening. More intimacy would make it worse. I can't fall for this man. It would be a big mistake.

"If you're on my team, it *will* happen again." His voice has softened. "You know it will, and it can't. Every time we do

this, it pulls you further away from who you could be and what you could achieve.” His face darkens, like he said something wrong.

I have no idea what he meant by that statement. I don’t ask him because I know he won’t tell me. I sit and start putting on my shoes.

“I know you hate Fang right now, but he’s a good instructor. He’s better than me. He’ll get you through Sky’s Edge.”

“He’s a bully.” I stand, done with my shoes. “Look at my hands. Look at them, Dagger.” I hold them out.

“A few blisters won’t kill you. Out here on Draig, there are so many things that will end you, Hunter.” He takes my hands, looking down at them. The light is better, so I can see him looking, moving from one blister to the next. He trails a finger down the side of my palm. Then he kisses each hand, pulling my hands against his chest like he did earlier, keeping his palms over mine. I feel the thudding of his heart.

This is the contact I was seeking earlier. This is it.

His whole demeanor softens. “I want you to listen carefully, and I want you – for the love of Draig – to do as I say, for once.”

I nod.

“Suck it up. Let Fang train you. Lean into it. You’ll make Sky’s Edge before you know it. When the time comes, you choose to go home. Whatever you do, do not stay. Do not choose to become a rider. You go! You run hard and fast.” Then he lets me go, and his whole stance hardens. “Let’s get you back, Tribute. You need rest.” He starts walking.

What the hell?

I’m reeling. That was the last thing I expected. All of his cute sayings and motivations. What was that just now about my full potential?

Don’t get me wrong, I had planned on going home, but I always expected him to try to get me to stay.

My chest tightens in a way I have never felt before.

Dagger stops in his tracks. “Are you coming, recruit?”

Great! I’m back to being a recruit again.

I was wrong. Dagger is an asshole.

Hunter

I arrive back at my room. The sock is still on the goddamned door. What the hell is wrong with people?

Here's the thing: I doubt very much that Luke and Beth are still going at it. There is no way that he has this much stamina. Quite frankly, even if they are still bonking, I wouldn't care. I'm beyond caring. I'm too tired. Too pissed off. Too...tender. And I'm talking about the throb between my legs. I'll get over this whole thing with Dagger soon enough.

I open the door, and all is dark and quiet. The light from the hallway spills into the bedroom, and I note that Luke is alone in his bed and fast asleep. Beth isn't even here. Is this their idea of a joke? I take the sock off the door and throw it onto him. He keeps sleeping. Jerk! I'm almost willing to bet that they put that sock on the door when they saw me sleeping in the hallway. That's really nice of them. Not!

Two can play at that game. I turn on my bedside lamp and close the bedroom door with a bang. Not so loud that it will disturb our neighbors, but loud enough that it will disturb my crappy roommate.

Take that!

He stirs and opens his eyes.

I smile and give him a two-fingered wave, like I'm happy to see him.

"Do you mind?" Luke grumbles in a sleepy slur and turns over in bed, pulling the covers over his head.

I know it's childish, but I give him the bird, even though he is facing the other way. It makes me feel a little better. Then I grab my pajamas from my closet and make sure to close the bathroom door with just as much enthusiasm as before. I hope it wakes him up again.

Asshole.

I shake my head and groan quietly as I take in the sight of the bathroom. The damp towel and briefs are still crumpled on the floor outside the shower. There is another pair of briefs next to the first, as well as a discarded t-shirt. At least he had the decency to throw his jeans over the side of the bath.

I turn and look into the basin and groan again; he spat out his toothpaste after brushing his teeth and didn't rinse.

It's disgusting.

Susan was right. Luke is a selfish pig. I ignore the mess. I will not be cleaning up after him. If that is what he expects, he can go straight to hell.

His toothbrush and toothpaste are lying out on the vanity. The toothpaste hasn't even been recapped, which should be illegal. I ignore all of it and get to work on preparing for bed. I should shower after my sexcapades, but I'll do it in the morning. I need to be up in two-and-a-bit hours.

Crap!

I go back into the bedroom, instantly annoyed when I hear Luke snoring softly. So much for waking him up. I need to try to be the bigger person. Even though I am tempted to make some "accidental" noise and wake him again, I don't. I slip into bed and turn my sidelight off. I'm trying to ignore the soreness between my legs. Even my thighs are a little tender.

I start to play through the events of the night. Then I groan softly and turn over, attempting to think about something else.

Anything else. I can't. All I can think about is him. I hate it. All of our interactions are going through my brain on repeat. I start to think I'm never going to fall asleep, but I do.

I must do because the next thing I know, I wake up, and light is streaming through a crack in the drapes. I sit up, noting that Luke is gone...at least, I think he is. All is quiet.

Shit!

I check my phone. Class starts in five minutes. If I hurry, I might not be hugely late. My stomach grumbles, asking me for a breakfast that it isn't going to get because...I'm late.

I groan. Crap! How did I oversleep? Oh, I know, I forgot to set my alarm. My brain was full of him – Dagger. I need to forget about him once and for all. Let this be a lesson to me. I throw the covers off my bed.

I really need a shower, I think as I climb out of bed feeling...sore. I do feel him. I feel him acutely. There will be no forgetting him all through today...maybe even tomorrow.

I go into the bathroom and see my towel crumpled on the floor next to the rest of Luke's mess. It's clearly been well used and not by me.

He used my towel.

The bastard used my damned towel. Is he going to make a habit of this? What else of mine is he going to touch? It's clear that he doesn't give a shit.

For a few seconds, I am too mad to do anything but stand there with a clenched jaw. Then, I remind myself that I have a mere three minutes to get to telepathy class. Fang is going to be so incredibly happy with me when I show up late.

I fish one of my used towels out of the laundry basket. I refuse to use anything that has touched Luke's body. I quickly shower, brushing my teeth in there. Then I wrap the towel around myself, and I put my things in the laundry basket, including the towel that Luke used. *Bastard!* I leave his shit where it is.

I dash back into the bedroom and throw open my closet. I grab whatever I can find and start back to the bathroom. I see that Luke left his closet open. Surprise, surprise, there is a pair of boxers on the floor. His bed is also unmade.

I walk over and look into his closet, an idea forming in my mind. If I let this prick walk all over me, that's exactly what he will do.

I fling the door open, trying and failing to control my heavy breathing. I mean, I did just run all the way here.

Fang looks at me like something that a rat with herpes just dragged out of the sewer. "You are eight minutes late," he tells me in a stern voice.

A miracle, considering I only woke up thirteen minutes ago. I don't say that. "I'm sorry, Sir."

He stands there looking at me for a few minutes. "Don't you have some lame excuse for me, Tribute?"

I shake my head. I can't give him the reasons. "No, Sir. There is no excuse. I should not be late. I apologize."

"Stay after class," he tells me.

"Yes, Sir."

I look around and see that they are divided into groups of two. Natasha and Ross are facing one another, and so are Luke and Beth. Big surprise there.

Great! That means I'm with Fang. Can this day get any better?

I start to walk to an open desk.

"Actually, I'd like you and Luke to pair up. Beth..." Fang looks over at her. "You're with me."

"Oh, okay." Beth doesn't look too happy, but she nods and gets up.

Oh, joy! I can't wait.

I skip over to Luke, smiling as widely as I can. "Morning, Sunshine." I pretend I'm on top of the world when, in reality, I feel exhausted at every level.

Luke scowls at me as I sit across from him. His scowl quickly turns into a deep frown. "Is that my shirt, Foster?" he addresses me by my last name as he stands, looking affronted. "Is that my fucking Gucci shirt?"

I couldn't believe it when I found this baby in his closet earlier. Then again, Luke is preppy. I had several expensive shirts to choose from in his closet. I think I picked the best of the bunch.

"Oh, this?" I finger the material.

His eyes drop down to where my fingers are working the fabric. He looks like he might give birth to something at any second. I think he'd cut off my hand if he had a sword. "It's *my* fucking shirt, and you're stretching it. Who said you could wear it?"

By now, we have the attention of the whole class.

"I thought we were going to share each other's things?" I frown, pretending to be really confused.

"What the fuck gave you that impression?" he shouts at me, his face turning fifty shades of red.

"What's going on?" Fang asks, taking a few steps toward us, but we ignore him. I need him to leave us alone long enough to get my point across.

"Aren't we doing the borrowing thing? I mean, you borrowed my towel this morning and left it crumpled on the floor, which I'm sure was a mistake. Don't worry about it." I wave my hand. "So, I thought you wouldn't mind if I borrowed a silly old shirt." I snort-laugh.

Make that sixty shades of red. "I'll have you know that silly old shirt is worth—"

"Did you take Hunter's towel, use it, and discard it on the floor?" Fang asks Luke.

I must say, I never expected Fang to get involved. I thought he would tell us to shut up and to get going with class. I'm hoping I don't get into shit for this. Quite frankly, I don't care. Messing with Luke will have been worth it. Especially if he leaves my things alone going forward.

"Answer me, Tribute," Fang grinds out, eyes on Luke.

"No. Of course not." Luke looks convincing.

The lying bastard.

"Oh, so my towel magically landed up wet on the floor after you showered," I deadpan.

"Ummmm...ahhh...um... If I used your towel, it's because I thought it was one of mine." He shrugs.

Liar, liar, pants on fire.

"Oh, I see." I lift my brows. "I didn't know you were into lilac." My mom got me those awful towels. She insisted that I get a color that no one else would have so that this type of thing wouldn't happen. I thought I would be eaten by now. Turns out she was right. I must remember to kiss her when I see her again. A lump of emotion pops up in my throat, but I swallow it down. "Do you also have a lilac set of towels just like me?" I smile and lift my shoulders, holding them up as if in anticipation of his answer.

Make that seventy shades of red. I laugh inside. Others from our team just plain old laugh.

"No. Fuck, no! Of course not," Luke splutters.

"There is only one rule when it comes to living together as team members. Respect the person you have to share with," Fang tells the team. Then, his gaze turns to Luke. "Tell me, is it respectful to take someone else's towel without asking?" Fang asks Luke, who squirms. "And then throw it on the floor?"

"It's really fine, Fang, Sir," I say. "We agreed we could borrow each other's things." I touch the shirt, and Luke's jaw clenches. "It's no big deal." I shrug. "I'm sure he didn't mean for the towel to end up on the floor. Perhaps from now on, to

avoid confusion, we can stop the borrowing thing. And we'll hang up our towels going forward... Oh, and be respectful of one another." I look at Luke, lifting my brows. "I'm sure you agree?" I smile sweetly.

Luke forces a tight smile and nods. "Yep. Absolutely. Respect all the way...and..." he clears his throat, "no borrowing each other's things."

"Perfect. Problem solved," I say.

"Good to hear it," Fang says. Maybe he isn't all asshole. There might be an okay guy somewhere in there; it remains to be seen. "Now, can we please move on and actually start this class?" He doesn't wait for an answer. "Just so that everyone is on the same page..." He glares at me. Oops, for being late. "The assignment was to draw something simple on a piece of paper. An apple, a...cat...anything easy. Make sure you can draw it and that it is easily recognizable. Then, write what it is under the drawing, just to be safe. We're stepping it up, people. No more numbers. Get going, Tributes. You can each take turns."

I grumble internally because I still don't get numbers popping into my head telepathically, despite being good at them in the real world, and we're stepping it up already.

Awesome! Not!

Luke glares at me as we sit. I need to watch my back. He might actually try to kill me in my sleep if I'm not careful.

"I want my shirt back," he mouths, clearly not happy. Then he crumples up the paper in front of him. "I'm going to draw something different," he says, tossing the paper in the bin at the side of our desk.

He sucks in a deep breath and then gets going with the drawing. He's done in less than a minute. "Okay, I'm done," he says, turning it over and placing a hand over it like I'm going to try to see through the paper.

Twenty-two.

Great! The number twenty-two comes to mind out of the blue. We've had numbers this whole time, and now that we've

stepped up, I get a number come into my head.

Typical.

I huff out a breath, “HmMMMMMM...” I rub my chin. “Interesting.” I nod a few times. “You’re going to think I’m nuts.” I giggle. “And rude, but I have to say what comes straight to mind.” I pretend like I’m thinking it through. I even lift my eyes. Then I look at him. “I get a tiny pencil dick coming in loud and clear,” I tell him, making a confused face.

Luke’s eyes narrow.

“I’m really not sure what made me think of a pencil dick. It’s really, really small.” I show him with two fingers just how small. “And narrow and just soooo tiny.”

Luke’s face is turning fifty shades all over again. I think it might be anger this time. Of course, I’m referring to *his* dick, even though I didn’t see it. I’m just messing with him. Aside from the stupid number, it’s the other first thing that came into my mind. Not that I wanted it to, but, hey, it’s not my fault I saw him doing the deed last night, so I can’t be blamed.

The door to our classroom opens just as Luke is about to say something. It’s Shadow. “Morning, everyone. Please, can you all join us in the common room for a quick meeting?” She looks serious.

I glance at Fang, who looks concerned.

Oh, shit!

I get a bad feeling. We go to the common room, where everyone has begun congregating. They’re all talking among themselves, all wondering why we are here and what’s going on.

I see Jen, Tommy, Skylar, and Susan. Susan waves because she sees me first. I head over to them. The rest smile when they see me.

“What’s going on?” I ask as I reach them.

“We don’t know,” Susan says. “We were busy with telepathy class when they called us in.”

“Me too,” I mutter.

I glance over at where the instructors are assembled. My heart does a little somersault when I see Dagger, so I quickly look away. I need to have a good long talk with my body, especially my heart. He’s bad for me. Jen was right.

My eyes linger for a few seconds, but only because I’m trying to figure out what’s going on. At least, I tell myself that. Dagger is talking with Octane, not looking this way at all. He’s in full leathers. Larger than life. The chestnut in his hair catches the morning sun.

I look him over, lingering on his hands. Those hands. I force my eyes away. Nope! I’m not going there. He gave some very sound advice, which I will be taking.

Get through the course and get the hell out of here.

The others are talking among themselves. I quickly regroup, trying to catch up on the conversation, when Shadow steps forward. “Can I have your attention, please?”

Everyone turns to face her.

“Apologies for calling you out of class today. I know that you are all hard at work.”

I want to roll my eyes because telepathy feels like a waste of time to me. I have seen others get it right. Skylar is pretty good. Almost too good for it to be a coincidence. Maybe there’s something to it. I’m not convinced, though.

Shadow clears her throat. “Something happened.” She looks down for a few moments.

My interest is piqued. This is the first time I have ever seen her out of sorts. Crap! I knew that something was going on, but I hoped it wasn’t too serious. It looks like it is.

“It’s bad news, I’m afraid.” She lifts her green eyes for a moment before putting them back on us. She pulls in a big breath. “It’s one of the Tributes. Someone decided to leave last night.”

Leave? I didn’t think that was possible. Leave as in...?

Some of the others voice that exact question.

Missing? Who is missing?

“Octavia snuck out—” Shadow starts to say, but everyone erupts in chaos as they all talk at once.

“Oh, god!” Jen says.

“I told you!” Tommy shouts.

“Where is she?” Skylar adds.

Others shout questions, too, but I’m not listening to them.

How did I not notice that she wasn’t here when I arrived just now? I guess because she is so quiet and rarely participates, it’s not my fault I would forget her. I feel guilty, nonetheless.

What happened?

Did she get away?

How?

“Octavia ran away,” Shadow says, raising her voice. “She left last night, stole a vehicle, and made her way to the landing site where she managed to commandeer a helicopter since she has her license.”

I’m trying not to smile, but I can’t help it.

Go, Octavia!

Everyone goes crazy. There are those who are pissed she got away, but most are thrilled for Octavia. There is clapping and cheering. There is much excitement.

Shadow tries to get everyone to quieten down, but it takes a while. “There is more!” she shouts a couple of times. “I haven’t finished yet!” she adds.

That does it; everyone keeps quiet.

“Now for the bad news.” She licks her lips.

I shut my eyes. I thought the bad news was the escape itself. There’s more?

Oh no, Octavia!

Shadow clears her throat. “I’m afraid that Octavia flew in the wrong direction. She ended up headed for Mistveil Island. The island of the Red Dragons. We lost all comms once she passed through the mist that surrounds the island. We do not know what has become of her. She is considered to be lost.” Shadow’s eyes darken. She swallows once...twice before continuing. “We are—”

“What does that even mean? Lost.” It’s Kerry. She doesn’t look impressed. Even Mickey Mouse on the side of her arm suddenly looks pissed off.

“Lost is just that...she *is* lost. We have no idea what has happened to her, but will have to assume the worst.”

“The worst...as in? That she... That—” Angela is pale. A tear tracks down her cheek.

Jen makes a soft whimpering noise, and I realize that she is crying, too. Many of the Tributes look stricken, even those who didn’t know Octavia.

“We have to assume that Octavia is deceased,” Shadow goes on. “Because she more than likely is...or will be soon.”

My blood runs cold. There is complete silence. Even the jungle seems unusually still. Not even a bird tweets or a cricket chirps.

It’s silent.

“The dragons at Mistveil are feral. She may have crash landed.” Shadow shrugs. “We have no way of knowing.”

“Can’t you go in after her? Attempt a rescue?” I push out. There must be something they can do.

Shadow shakes her head. “No, our agreement with the Red Dragons is that they stay on their side of the mist, and we stay on ours.”

“It doesn’t sound like they honor that agreement much,” someone yells.

“You’re right.” Shadow nods. “But our resources are stretched to the very limit. We don’t have the means to make such a rescue mission. It would be suicidal, and I refuse to risk

any of our dragons or our riders. Octavia was warned. You have all been warned about the dangers.” She looks over the crowd. “It was her choice, and now she must deal with the consequences.”

“That’s not fair!” I shout. “We didn’t ask to be Tributes.”

“Life isn’t fair, Tribute,” Dagger tells me.

“Whatever,” I mutter.

“You are all dismissed. You can have an hour to process this, and then you will be expected to attend your next class.” Shadow walks away, followed by the instructors.

“This is terrible.” Jen is still crying.

“Poor Octavia.” Skylar looks shocked.

I’m shocked, too. Maybe Octavia is still alive. Probably not, but you never know. Maybe she’ll figure things out. I know her chances are slim. Poor Octavia! Even if she was to somehow survive, it would mean living on an island, all alone, with deadly creatures.

“Hunter!” It’s a deep rasp that brings me out of my thoughts.

I look up and see Fang.

“I need to see you back in class.” He walks away without waiting for a reply.

“What was that all about?” Tommy asks.

“I was a few minutes late for class this morning, and now I’m in the shit.”

“Why were you late? I wondered where you were this morning at breakfast,” Jen says, wiping her eyes.

“I overslept, forgot to set my alarm. That’s the very short version of the story. I have to go,” I tell my friends.

“We’ll see you at lunch,” Jen yells after me. Then she sniffs again.

I give her a thumbs up but keep walking. I can’t keep Fang waiting a second time. I roll my stiff shoulders while I walk,

preparing for an onslaught of push-ups. I don't care. He can give me his worst. The stronger I get, the better.

The classroom door is open, so I go in.

Fang doesn't say anything, and his facial expression gives nothing away, either. He walks over to the door and closes it.

Oh shit!

This is bad.

Is he going to beat me? Maybe he doesn't want anyone hearing my screams of pain. I feel oddly numb.

"Take a seat." He gestures to the chair I was in earlier. "I wanted to show you something. I heard you earlier. I heard what you said was under the page." He points at the paper face-down on the desk.

Oh, crap!

He heard me tell Luke I saw a tiny pencil dick. Am I going to get into trouble for that? It seems petty.

"Ummmm... About that... I...um..." I start to say.

Fang puts a crumpled sheet of paper down in front of me. On the paper is a neat drawing of a cock and balls. It isn't elaborate or anything, but it's clearly a penis.

"What is that?" I frown.

"I took that out of the trash. It's what Luke drew for Beth. He tossed it away before starting over. You were right."

Let me get this straight. Luke drew a picture of a dick for Beth, probably his pencil dick. I can't help but smile. "Are you saying I got it right?"

Fang nods. "You were right on the money. I wanted you to know. It's easier to guess when it comes to numbers, but more difficult when we get to pictures. This is incredibly random." He gestures to the sketch. "It's almost impossible that you would guess this. It's good work, Tribute." He looks... impressed.

“Oh, thank you.” I nod a few times, not convinced. I only said “pencil dick” because I wanted to mess with Luke. It wasn’t telepathy.

Fang stands. “Don’t be late again, or there will be consequences.”

“Yes, Sir,” I tell him, still sitting there.

“Close the door when you leave,” Fang says before going himself. It’s kind of nice to be away from everyone and everything for a few moments while I try to process the events of the last few hours. It feels like so much has happened.

I look over at where Luke was sitting and see the piece of paper still facing down. I’m curious to know what he will have drawn for me to guess.

I roll my eyes and then turn the paper over and gasp.

Holy shit!

It’s the number twenty-two.

Luke tried to trick me. He tried and failed.

Twenty-two.

I put a hand over my mouth. Perhaps I am a descendant of the Sky Wardens, after all.

Hunter

I'm still reeling when I leave the classroom. I would say that getting one right answer would be a coincidence, but two? Not so much. I guessed "pencil dick" and "twenty-two," which means I could very well be—

I'm so deep in thought when I round the corner that I bash straight into a brick wall. A brick wall that should not have been there.

What the...!?

I fly backward and land on my ass...hard.

Thankfully, I have some padding, so it doesn't hurt too badly. I make an "oomph" noise as I land. From my position on the floor, I see leather-clad legs directly in front of me. They're long and powerful.

Crap!

No!

Please!

Surely not. Not now. Life doesn't work like this. My eyes move up to a tapered waist and to more leather. To broad shoulders and a stubbled jaw.

Dagger is looking at me with the same disdain as that very first day. In fact, it might be worse than that first day, if that's

even possible. His blue eyes are narrowed. He's frowning darkly.

"Watch where you are going, Tribute," he growls at me like I walked into him on purpose or something.

There is no one else around. It's just us, and yet he's treating me like I'm a stranger. Like last night never happened. He's treating me like I did something wrong because we had sex. It takes two to tango, but I'm clearly getting the blame, and it isn't fair.

I scramble to my feet and mutter. "Why don't *you* watch where *you're* going, fuckcake?"

Fuckcake?

Where did that come from? I like it. It suits him. I'm not taking it back.

"What did you just call me?" His voice has dropped about a thousand octaves.

Holy shit, my nipples tighten as a direct result. We have a stare-down.

It isn't long before Dagger loses. "You'd better tell me. Now." He seems to grow taller as he takes a menacing step toward me. I'm being stalked again. His biceps look thick and pumped. The veins on his forearms are sticking out. His eyes seem lighter and brighter.

My clit throbs, and I get this zing of need that starts in the pit of my stomach and spreads out like thick, warm honey.

No!

No! No! No! No!

My traitorous body needs to stop its shit, and right now.

I pull my shoulders back and stand taller. "*Cupcake.*" I don't want trouble. I just want to leave. I need to get away from him.

"That is not what you called me, and you know it." He grinds his teeth, his jaw clenching tightly. "You and I need to have a serious talk." He grabs my elbow and starts walking.

I'm forced to follow. Forced to be in close proximity to him, and he's both very warm and smells unbelievable. I hate how good he smells. I hate how I break out in goosebumps because of his tightly clasped hand on my arm.

"You're *not* my instructor anymore." I try to break free. "Leave me alone. So, what if I called you fuckcake? It just slipped out. If the shoe fits, buddy...and it does, so get over it." I'm practically having to jog to keep up with him. His legs are about twice the length of mine.

"It just slipped out?" he rasps. "If the shoe fits?" he repeats what I just said, sounding pissed.

"Yes. I'm *not* sorry I said it. You deserve it. You're an asshole."

"Stop talking, *recruit*."

"Stop calling me that, *fuckcake*."

He growls low. So low I can barely hear it, but I feel it. The vibration that moves through him moves through me, too. My nipples tighten even more, and I think I get a little wet. Nope, I definitely get a little wet.

Ohhhh, crap!

My body needs to stop already. We are *not* going to have sex. This is not going to be fun in any way. Even if Dagger wants sex, I'm going to turn him down. Yes, that's what I'll do; I'll turn him down flat.

There!

But it's not sex he wants. It can't be. I'm in trouble. I'm in such serious trouble.

"Where are we going?" I ask him as he picks up speed. I really am jogging at this point.

"To my office."

"You have an office?"

"Yes, I have an office. Can you stop talking? You're already in shit. You're going to make it worse."

“Are you going to punish me?” I realize how it sounds as soon as it comes out, but I can’t very well take it back now, can I?

Dagger makes a strange noise. It sounds angry, frustrated, and turned on.

What?

He opens a door, and then almost throws me through it. I stagger a few steps. The tops of my thighs hit a wooden desk. His office is small. The blinds are drawn. It’s neat. I don’t think he uses it much.

Dagger closes and locks the door.

Locks. It.

Shit!

I’m breathing so hard that my chest is heaving. I turn, and his gaze drifts down my body. If I wasn’t wet before, I’m soaked now.

“Yes, I’m going to punish you. You can’t call me fuckcake or any other name. *Fuckcake*,” he mutters, shaking his head. “That won’t work for me. Turn around and pull your pants down to your ankles.”

I frown. “What?”

“You heard me, Hunter. Turn around, and pull down your pants. Your underwear, too. I want your ass bare for me.”

I can hardly breathe. Holy shit. My clit is doing a happy dance. I’m not sure why, since spanking an ass and playing with a clit are two different things. The little bundle of nerves must be confused. I know I am.

“Do it.” His voice is soft but commanding.

“What if I say no?”

His eyes darken. “You really don’t want to find out. Don’t make this any harder on yourself. It’s going to hurt.”

“What is?” Of course, I know what he has planned, but I want to hear him say it.

“My hand on your ass.”

I swallow hard. “You’re seriously going to spank me for calling you fuckcake?”

He nods once.

“Is that even allowed? Surely there must be a rule against this kind of thing?”

“No rules. Turn around and drop your pants,” he repeats. “I want your hands on my desk and your bare ass in the air. Do it now!” He’s bossy and gruff. Of course, this has nothing to do with Draig Academy. I don’t even think it has anything to do with me calling him names. I’m not sure what this is. I’m not sure whether I like it, even if I am turned on to my core.

I know if I put an end to it, that it will be done, but I don’t want it to be done. My belly is tight, my nipples, too. I shouldn’t be turned on. I should be pissed off. I should tell him where to get off, but I don’t. Instead, I do as he says. I turn and pull my pants down, letting them drop to my ankles together with my panties. My heart is beating wildly. Need is coursing through me.

I hear a sharp intake of breath when I put my hands on the desk and a strangled moan when I lift my ass, sticking it up into the air as he asked.

Then I stand there...and stand there...and stand there. I’m not sure if he’s trying to build anticipation. If that’s his game, then it’s working. I’m waiting for it. Waiting for him...but I get nothing.

My breathing is coming in ragged pants. My clit is throbbing. I’ve never had it do this before.

“Pull your pants up.” His voice is rough.

I turn and look at him over my shoulder. “Excuse me?”

“You heard me, Tribute. Pull your pants up and get the hell out of my office.”

Funnily enough, his words make me feel like I’ve actually been hit. I stand, turning. “Screw you, Dagger. You really know how to make a person feel great about themselves.” I

bend down and pull up my pants. “You can’t do anything right. You couldn’t handle me as one of your students, and now you can’t even punish me right.” I’m so angry at him. I want to lash out and hurt him back. “You—”

He growls low and does that stalking thing over the two steps it takes to close the distance between us. “Are you saying you *want* me to punish you? Do you want to be spanked? Think very carefully before you answer.”

“You keep promising, but you never deliver. Yes, I want you to spank me. I want to be punished. I want all of it.”

What am I doing? I was supposed to leave. Not get all hot and wet and achy.

I don’t want to be spanked. Not at all. I really don’t.

“You’re bruised and sore,” he tells me. “You can’t take me.” He sounds disappointed.

It’s my last chance to walk away. It’s a pity I’m not good at backing down, particularly from a dare. “Do you want to bet?”

Dagger growls again. He turns me around so quickly that my stomach drops for a second. He yanks my pants down. “Hands on the desk.”

I go a step further; I toe off my shoe, lose my pants on that leg, and I stick my ass in the air. “Do your best,” I taunt.

I think I must have a death wish. This isn’t normal. I need therapy. I need help. I need him any way I can get him, and if that’s pathetic, then so be it.

I’m posed for a spanking when Dagger rubs on my clit. I groan because it wasn’t what I expected. The pleasure is intensified because I thought I was going to get pain.

“You’re so wet,” Dagger rasps. “Do you get turned on thinking about being spanked?”

I get turned on by him...period. Instead of saying that, I moan, “Yes.” I pant a few times. “I know, I’m just as shocked,” I groan. Okay, maybe it’s the spanking that turns me on, too. I will soon find out. His finger is slow and gentle as it rubs over my clit.

Rub.

Rub.

Rub.

He keeps that finger there when he spanks me. It's harder than I expected. I make that same "oomph" noise as when I fell earlier. I expect him to soothe me or to give me some words of encouragement, but I get neither. I get another hard smack, followed by a third and a fourth crack, all in the same place.

It stings.

It fucking hurts.

My eyes water. But his finger keeps rubbing on my clit. It's good, so freaking good. My eyes water some more; I'm whimpering. Then he fingers me a few times, and my back bows. I'm already on the verge of coming. I'm a monster. I like being spanked. I like it.

My belly is coiling, everything is tightening, and he smacks my ass again. I yelp. He fingers me again, and I groan. Wet floods my channel. I feel it leak down my legs.

"You good?" he asks. There is tension in his voice, which is hoarse.

"Yes," I moan. It *does* feel good. The pain *does* heighten the pleasure. "More," I demand, opening my legs a little wider.

"You're going to fucking kill me," he groans, his finger slipping over my clit. "I want you naked," he tells me, easing off my nub.

I pull my shirt – Luke's shirt – off and then unclasp my bra. Dagger thrusts his fingers into me again, and I moan.

"Are you sure you're not still sore from last night?"

"I'm sure." I don't care. I want this man, I think to myself as I put my hands back on his desk.

"You can't scream," he tells me. I hear a zipper go down and the rustling of clothing. He must be freeing his cock.

“You wish,” I mutter.

Dagger chuckles. Then his hands are on my hips, and he is deep inside me half a second later. *Holy shit!* He really doesn't waste any time. I grab at the table, making this weird noise. I'm wet. Really wet, but it still hurts because I'm swollen from last night, and compared to him, I'm small.

Once again, though, it's good. So freaking good.

I groan as he starts to thrust into me with hard, punchy movements. My eyes are very wide. So is my mouth. I'm battling to breathe. I'm on my elbows on his desk, so my breasts are jerking hard with each thrust.

I don't care.

I don't care about anything but this. Us.

“Dagger,” I push out his name. “Yes,” I add as the pain subsides, replaced by growing pleasure.

“Fuckcake,” he says as he grinds into me.

I want to answer him, but I can't. Instead, I make a noise of agreement.

He fucks me harder. He's not playing with my clit anymore, but it feels...it feels...

“*Oooohhhhhh!*” I make this strangled noise. Same as last night, I can hear the wet sounds my body is making as he moves inside me. Pleasure thrums through me.

“Fuckcake,” he says again; his voice is strained.

“It's...your...n-name...don't wear...i-it...out,” I manage to get out. It's tough to talk with his huge cock thrusting inside me.

There's a crack. My ass stings from being spanked. I groan in both pain and in...excitement. My pussy weeps. I feel it drip down my leg. What's wrong with me? Did he just...spank me...during sex? Is that even normal? Is it normal that I want more?

“You like that?” His voice is deep.

Before I can answer, he does it again; he spans me...hard. I yell; both my ass cheeks feel hot...every part of me feels hot. The yell turns into a groan when my pussy clenches. Dagger rubs on my clit a few times, and then he pinches the little hood, still fucking me hard. My mouth falls wide open. Like really wide. I'm glad I'm facing away from him because I must look comical.

I groan. My channel spasms again, but I don't come. It feels like I'm about to, and then...my orgasm recedes. More wet drips down my inner thigh. I groan low and deep.

I'm having to clench my teeth to stop myself from begging for more. I want to come so badly. No, I want him to spank me again. Then I want to come. I need to.

Dagger does not disappoint; he spans me one...two...three times. My whole body goes tight. I'm on fire. Burning up. For half a second, I actually start to come, but then I don't.

Holy fucking shit!

This is wild.

I'm a BDSM convert. Yes, Sir. No, Sir. Fuck me harder, Sir.

Now his hands are on my breasts; he tweaks my nipple, and I yelp. It's a sting followed by warmth and pleasure. I feel that tweak between my legs where he's thrusting into me. He squeezes both my breasts and then pinches my nipples harder than they've ever been pinched before. My clit throbs, and I very nearly come again through the sting.

"This okay?"

"Yes...oh! Yes! Dagger!"

"Not too loud, Hunter. Fuuuck!" He pinches my nipples again and then squeezes my breasts in his big, warm hands. "The way you tighten around me..." He groans.

My pussy clenches so damned hard, but still, I don't orgasm. I rock back into him, our bodies slapping together.

"Do you want to come?" he asks me.

What kind of a stupid question is that?

When I don't answer, he spans me...twice. I'm so wet that I'm sure there must be a puddle at our feet.

I groan again. "Yes...Yes," I quickly say. My legs are shaking. My whole body is shaking at this point. "Please."

I plant my elbows on the table to keep myself from being pushed onto my stomach. I'm in danger of being mashed right into the hard wood of his desk, but I don't care.

"Okay, then," he says.

My eyes go like saucers when he sticks a slick finger into my ass. His thumb, maybe. Then he pinches my clit with the other hand, and I go off like several rockets. I think I scream because he covers my mouth with the hand that was pinching my clit. Thankfully, he keeps thrusting into me. I ride my orgasm.

Safe to say, I've never come so hard in my life. Tears are streaming down my cheeks. He jerks into me, moving faster and groaning my name. Just like before, he keeps me there for a long time. His thumb stays in my ass. Who knew? Not me.

Finally, he lets me down...slowly. I slump over the desk. Dagger slumps over me, too. He's breathing hard in my ear. He's still inside me.

"Fuuuuck, Hunter," he whispers. "I can't seem to stay away from you."

"Well, then don't," I choke out.

"I'm bad for you." He kisses me on the side of my mouth. It's tender. "I'm hurting you." He pulls out and moves away. I hear him tuck himself away and zip himself up.

"You're not." I sit up, wiping my face. I don't want him to think I'm crying because I'm not. "I'm fine. I don't break that easily."

"Not physically, although it could end up that way."

I roll my eyes. "I told you I can make my own decisions and take care of myself, and I meant it."

“You don’t have all the facts.” He shakes his head. “You wouldn’t be anywhere near me if you knew.”

“What facts?” I don’t like the sound of this.

His eyes soften. “I can’t tell you.”

“More bullshit. Maybe Octavia is right.”

“I’m sure she’s dead. This place is fucking dangerous.” He walks over to me and cups my jaw. The look he gives me is tender. “You need to get away from here, Hunter.” Then he drops a soft kiss on my mouth and heads for the door, which he unlocks. “I’m sorry.”

Then he leaves.

He runs away.

Again...and I feel like a fool. Why did I do this? The sex was unreal, but was it worth the way I feel now?

I’m not sure it was.

Hunter

One Week Later...

I wipe my eyes and sniff as the chopper lifts up and up. My hair whips wildly about my face.

Jen is crying in earnest. I put an arm around her. Everyone is sullen and either pale and silent or all-out crying. All except for Halbert and his gang. They are talking and laughing. I've come to realize that they truly believe their chances of succeeding increase through the failure of others. What a backward, negative, downright shitty concept.

My eyes stay on the helicopter. My thoughts are with the occupant.

Angela fell.

She fell from the net of doom. I've decided that's what it should be called. The net of fucking doom. She made it about halfway down. I'm not sure what happened, whether she lost her footing or slipped, but the next thing, she was falling and screaming. I will never forget that scream. Especially how it was cut off at the end, together with a godawful thud as her body hit the hard ground.

After that, it was crazy around here. Four medical personnel streamed out of the building with bags. They surrounded her, together with her instructor, Octane, but not before we saw her. I wipe my eyes again as fresh tears fall.

Both of her legs were at odd angles. One of her arms, too. She reminded me of a forgotten ragdoll tossed carelessly onto the floor.

It wasn't long after that the chopper arrived. They strapped her onto a backboard, and now she's gone.

"I'm not sure if a person can survive something like that," Jen says, sniffing.

Through all of the chaos, I found myself among my old team. We huddle together, seeking support. Angela was sweet...*is* sweet. I'm praying she makes it.

"They have to let us know. Surely, they'll fill us in on her condition?" Tommy is agitated.

Susan is also crying. "They told us that there would be casualties, but this is insane." She shakes her head.

"Yeah, and just as we were starting to get more comfortable on the net," Skylar says, her eyes on me.

I nod once because it's true. It's like a switch clicked in my head on the day my telepathy sort of kicked in. I say "sort of" because it isn't an exact science. There are days when I *know* and days when it just doesn't seem to work. Do I have some sort of telepathic ability? I think that I do. Is it reliable? Hell, no. But ever since I realized it was there, I feel more like a Sky Warden. I feel bolder and braver. I probably don't have the physique for riding dragons and waging war, but I feel different inside. I feel more confident and less afraid.

A drop lands on my nose and then another on my cheek. We all look up at the sky, which has been clouded over all morning. It has started to rain. A light drizzle that will, more than likely, stick around for the rest of the day. We get a fair amount of rain in the jungle. There's a reason it's so dense and green. In some ways, the rain is a relief from the heat, but it isn't welcome today because it's an "attempt day."

"Surely they'll cancel." Tommy looks up as the drizzle starts to fall in earnest.

"They have to," Jen adds. "Especially after..." Her eyes fill with tears.

“Can I have your attention?” It’s Shadow, together with the rest of the instructors. She looks solemn. They all do.

As always, my gaze is drawn to Dagger. I hate that it is, but I’ve learned to accept it. As per usual, he doesn’t look my way, doesn’t speak to me. He’s like a blank slate, devoid of any kind of emotion, which is something I’ve come to accept, too.

It’s for the best.

It is.

It hurts a little every time I see him, but I’ll be okay. The pain in my chest only solidifies the notion that it’s better this way. I think I had started to fall for Dagger. Was. Past tense. Not anymore. No, Siree.

“What happened today was a tragedy,” Shadow says, bringing me out of my head. I drag my eyes away from Dagger, who looks good standing in the rain. I shouldn’t be looking at him, anyway. “Angela has been airlifted to the mainland, where she will receive the best medical care available. She will not be returning, as her injuries are too severe. Unfortunately, we see accidents like this every year. It is imperative that you remain vigilant. Do not become complacent, Tributes. Your very lives depend on it.”

“Will Angela be okay?” one of her team members asks.

“That remains to be seen. Again, I assure you that everything will be done to ensure that she makes a full recovery. All of her expenses will be covered, regardless of the outcome.”

Angela looked too broken to ever make a full recovery, and that’s *if* she survives. All I can see in my mind’s eye are her limbs at those odd angles. I’m no doctor, but I don’t have to be one to know that she’ll need extensive surgery and months – if not years – of physiotherapy. Everyone is silent for a few moments. Probably running through the accident in their heads.

The only sound we hear for a few moments is the rain hitting the ground. By now, my clothes are soaked through.

My hair, too. Water is running down my face.

“Can we get updates on her situation?” the same team member asks.

“No, that won’t be possible.” Shadow shakes her head, swiping a hand across her face to clear the water that is dripping down it.

“Why not?” Simon shouts. “We’re her friends.” His ginger mop is plastered to his scalp.

“Angela is considered to be lost. We all need to move forward,” Shadow says.

“Lost?” Simon yells. “She’s not lost. Octavia is lost. I get that, but not Angela. We know exactly where she is. I would like updates on her. I know I speak for the rest of my team when I say that.”

“It doesn’t work that way,” Shadow says. “There is and will be no contact with the mainland. This is not up for discussion, Tribute.”

Simon starts to argue, but Octane steps forward and shakes his head. “Enough!” he booms.

“This meeting is over,” Shadow says. I expect her to dismiss us for the day, but she goes on, “Attempts will commence as normal.”

“What?” Jen says.

“No way,” Tommy whispers.

Mumbles and grumbles work their way through the gathered crowd. I can’t believe it myself. We might have watched someone we know fall to her death. It has started to rain, and we still have to run Sky’s Edge. It’s insane, but then again, I’m not sure why I’m shocked. Things work differently on Draig Island.

Angela was only the third person to make an attempt today. All in all, twelve people have made it so far over the course of the last week. We’re apparently doing very well.

Yay us!

“That’s enough complaining,” Shadow says. “Life goes on here at Draig. What happened to Angela was unfortunate, but it doesn’t change things. The Red Dragons won’t stop their attempts at escape. We need to move forward.” She looks down at her clipboard, flipping a soggy page. “Hunter, you’re up,” she tells me.

What the hell!?

I must have the worst luck in the history of Tributes for being called at the worst possible moments. I stand there for a few seconds, feeling the rain on my face, feeling it drip down my back, between my breasts, and down my legs.

Then I suck it up. I’m getting good at doing that. I guess someone has to go first, and that someone might as well be me.

“You’re next,” someone sneers, and I know it’s Halbert. He’s talking about more than just the attempt. He’s talking about falling.

I ignore him. It’s getting so old. I still feel a cold shiver run up and down my spine. I blame it on the rain.

“I can go,” Jen offers to take my place. I know that Fang would never allow it.

He’s still working at toughening me up. At making me stronger. Although, he hasn’t been as bad as that first day. Thing is, I might be getting into his good books, and I’d like to keep it that way. It makes life a little easier.

“It’s fine.” I give Jen’s hand a squeeze.

“Are you sure?” she asks. “I don’t mind.”

Jen missed her last attempt by two seconds. She has a real shot at making it today.

“Absolutely.” I look up at the falling rain. “Maybe this downpour will ease up when they call you. Then you can really go for it.” I widen my eyes and try to look excited.

It doesn’t work because Jen’s look of concern deepens.

“Don’t worry about me,” I tell both her and Tommy, who is looking just as worried. “I’m going to be just fine.”

“Tribute!” Fang shouts. “You’re up,” he adds. In other words, I’m taking too long.

Crap! I need to get going.

“On my way, Sir!” I yell as I jog to the starting line. I’m just putting my hair into a tight bun on the back of my neck when Dagger walks up to me.

It’s him.

I’m shocked, but I try not to show it.

“Take it easy out there,” he whispers. “Do not go for time, Hunter. Do you hear me?”

I understand why he doesn’t want me to make an actual attempt, but my back goes up, anyway. I can’t help it. I feel prickly all over. Who is he to tell me what I can and can’t do? He’s not my instructor, not my friend, and definitely not my boyfriend. He’s no one to me by *his* own choice, and yet he still chooses to insert himself into my life at the most inopportune moments.

“I know what I’m doing. I’ve got this...thank you, *Sir*.”

His eyes darken, and his jaw tightens. For weeks, he’s been wanting me to call him “sir,” and when I do, he doesn’t like it. Go figure! This man will be my undoing.

“Is everything okay here?” Fang asks as he joins us.

“I was wishing Hunter good luck,” Dagger says.

Yeah, right!

Fang gives Dagger a side-eye that tells me he doesn’t like him messing with me before an attempt. He steps forward. “Just as we practiced, Hunter. Don’t let the rain deter you,” he says, clutching my shoulder and turning me so that I am facing Sky’s Edge and not Dagger. “Go for it!” His advice is completely at odds with what I have just been told.

I nod. “I’m ready.” I wipe my face off. “I can do it,” I tell my instructor.

“Good.” Fang walks away.

Dagger mouths, “Don’t!” And he walks away, too.

I go through some stretches. It’s been a while since we warmed up, so I know I’ll get away with it. I need to clear my mind. Only I can’t. I can only think of him.

Dagger.

Arghhhh!

I don’t get him at all. He acts like I’m nothing to him. And then this. It’s almost like he cares and doesn’t want anything to happen to me. Then he ignores me flat. He confuses me like no one I’ve ever met. It’s push and pull. Hot and cold. It’s like he can’t make up his mind.

I keep thinking about when we were together last after we’d had sex. About what he said to me.

You don’t have all the facts.

His words keep playing through my head. Over and over and over.

You wouldn’t be anywhere near me if you knew.

If I knew what, exactly? What is he trying to protect me from? I hate that he’s trying to protect me at all. I also get a warm feeling when he does; it’s like he cares. I glance his way, and he isn’t even looking. He’s talking to Octane. He’s gone back to not giving a shit.

Forget him!

Head in the game.

I jog on the spot for a few seconds while loosening my shoulders, and then I run as fast as my legs will take me. I get over walls one, two, and three and go to grab the ever-present chair, but it isn’t there. A quick scan tells me that there is nothing around that I can use to get myself over the damned wall.

I hear loud laughing. “Now you’re fucked, Chubby,” Halbert shouts.

I growl low, running back to wall three. I suck up a deep breath and do a run-up to wall four. I jump and hoist myself up and over, throwing him the bird as I land. Prick!

I did it! Whooooo hoooo!

One down. I wipe off my face and make my way over the balancing beam, which I cross with ease. Two down.

The rain seems to come down faster as I cross the rope bridge. My hand slips, and I almost fall but manage to get my balance back a few long seconds later. Holy moly, that was too damned close.

A murmur runs through the audience, but I ignore them, finishing soon after. Three down! I make quick work of the monkey bars, even though they are a little slippery. Four down! Then it's onto the logs. As per normal, I pick up the rhythm and then go, making sure I stick to it.

Yes!

Five down!

I worm my way under the net. The ground is lovely and slick from the rain, so I use that to my advantage, sliding into the mud. Once I'm in the cold goop, I forget about the rain completely and make my way through as quickly as I can, breathing wherever I can and holding my breath when necessary. The key is to keep at least one hand on the net and to keep going, no matter what. I get out on the other side.

The audience cheers loudly as I run for the net. The rain is coming down at this point. I jump onto the net and start to climb. I was worried that the rope might be slippery, but it feels fine. I don't enjoy the rivulets of muddy water running down my every crevice. My nose is a little itchy, too. I ignore it. I don't rush, but neither do I dawdle. I consider stopping as I reach the halfway point, but I know that Fang will have my ass if I do. I've been making the whole climb in practices this week. I can do it today.

I need to keep my focus. To keep breathing and to keep my eyes up.

There are more loud cheers as I make it to the top. They come from far below. I'm not going to freak out. I need to keep going.

I am a Sky Warden.

I am a Sky Warden.

I will keep telling myself that because I am, dammit. I can do it. I might not make it within the time limit anymore, but I *will* make it. I climb over the top and then start down. I place one foot below the other. I keep focused. I keep breathing. I watch what I am doing.

Then I am on the ground, and everyone is going nuts. They're cheering like they do when... I look at the stopwatch and see 4:59. I made it by one second.

I made it!

I clutch my chest, a grin forming on my face. I can't believe it. I did it. I made the run. I conquered Sky's Edge. I look over at Dagger. His eyes are on me. He looks angry. His eyes are narrowed. There's a scowl on his face. Then his features soften for a moment, and the side of his mouth lifts in a half-smile. He nods once.

Just like that, everything inside of me lights up. Everything warms.

Next thing, I am surrounded by my friends. I have to force myself not to look back at him, even though I burn to.

Hunter

I am slightly buzzed from drinking two glasses of champagne. Just the two. There was a time when I could handle much more.

Jen says it's because I'm getting fit. I guess there are pros and cons to everything.

"Group hug," Tommy says. He's had three glasses and is tipsy as anything. The good news is that he is a happy drunk.

We all cluster together. It's me, Jen, Skylar, Tommy, and Susan, who is no longer in her cast and officially allowed to exercise. We toss our arms around each other and hug.

"I love you guys so much," Tommy says, slurring the word "much" so that it sounds more like "mush". "You are the best."

"Yes, and congratulations to Hunter and Skylar," Jen says. "You guys were both amazing out there."

We come apart from our group hug. "Thanks," I say, feeling both good and bad.

"I can't believe I actually made it." Skylar shrugs.

"You'll make it next time," I tell Jen, who snorts like it's no big deal, but I can see that it is bugging her that she didn't make it. In fact, she added half a minute onto her time.

“Of course I will.” She laughs like it’s no big deal.

“You’re the best, Jen,” Tommy says, giving her a sloppy kiss on the cheek. “You’re all the best.” He staggers for no reason.

We all laugh. Tommy is going to feel it in the morning.

“Will you help me get him to bed?” Skylar asks Susan, who nods. Susan and Jen are now sharing a room. Tommy has a room to himself since Octavia left. I hate to think of her as dead, even if it is more than likely true.

We say our goodnights.

“Let me walk you to your room,” Jen calls after me.

“That would be nice,” I tell her.

Ross was the first Tribute on my new team to make Sky’s Edge, so he now has the single room. I’ve moved in with Natasha, who is a much better roommate than that asshole Luke. I only just moved in today, but I can already tell.

The funniest part of the whole thing is that Luke and Beth are now roommates, but they recently broke up. All I can say is what goes around comes around. They deserve to be stuck with each other.

We walk in silence for half a minute. I laugh. “Tommy is going to have one hell of a headache tomorrow,” I say to break the awkward silence. Jen and I are never awkward. We get along well. I get a strange feeling, like something is up. Like there is a specific reason for this walk.

Jen doesn’t laugh like I expect her to, which only makes things worse. I’m about to ask her what’s going on when she says, “I wanted to walk you back because I wanted to ask you something.”

Crap. There it is.

“Yeaaaaa?” I sound hesitant because I am.

“Be honest with me, please.”

“Okay, I will.” I look at her. We slow down but keep walking.

She keeps her eyes on the hallway ahead of us. “Are you and Dagger sleeping together?” She looks my way, eyes on mine.

Shiiiiit!

I got the feeling it was going to be about this. She’s going to freaking kill me. I push out a breath. “Yes, twice. It happened a week ago, and we’ve stayed away from each other since. It was a one-time – make that, two-time thing. That’s all. It’s over. It’s no big deal.”

Jen stops walking. “What did Dagger say to you before your attempt today?” This is unexpected. I thought she would lambast me, and I would have deserved it.

I frown. “He told me to take it easy and not to go for time. I’ve come to the conclusion that Dagger is full of shit.”

“I saw the look the two of you gave each other after you finished today,” Jen says.

I shrug. “Where are you going with this, Jen? Do you want me to admit that you were right? Because you were. I will stay far away from him going forward.”

“Nope, that’s not what I want at all,” she says. “It’s too late for that.” She smiles.

“What? I’m confused. Help me out here.”

“Things have changed,” Jen says. “That means that my advice has changed, too.”

“Changed how?” I give a snort.

“I think that Dagger has feelings for you.”

I laugh because it’s funny. Jen is freaking hilarious right now. “No, he doesn’t. I mean, the sex was really good. That’s all and the end.”

“No, I’m pretty sure there’s far more there. It’s not just the sex. I think he cares. He was worried about you today. I watched him while you were making the attempt. He couldn’t take his eyes off you, Hunter. He took a step toward you when

you nearly fell off the rope bridge. He looked like he might puke while you climbed the net.”

“He was probably just pissed that I wasn’t taking his advice.”

“There was that, too.” Jen nods. “The only reason he told you not to do it was because he has feelings for you. The kicker was the look he gave you after you finished. He was proud.”

“Of course he was. Dagger can take some credit for my success, since he did train me for a large chunk of the time. That was the instructor in him.”

“I disagree. I think it was the man in him, but the main reason I am speaking to you is not because of Dagger. Well, it is, and it isn’t.”

“Oh?” I frown. “You’ve been here too long. You’ve also started talking in riddles.”

“It’s the look you gave him when he smiled. Not just then. I’ve seen you look at him in a certain way, and you do it often.”

“Where are you going with this?” I fold my arms.

“You’re in love with him.”

I roll my eyes. “I am not.” I shake my head vehemently. “No way! Do I feel something? Yes, okay, fine, I do. Could it have gone somewhere? I think so. But the L-word?” I shake my head again. “It’s too soon for that.”

“Here’s my unsolicited advice. You didn’t listen last time, so you probably won’t listen now, but I feel, as your friend, that you need to hear it.”

“I told you I’m staying away from him.”

“You did.” She licks her lips. “And here’s the thing, I don’t think it’s the right course of action anymore.”

Say what? This is unexpected.

“You made the run. You did it. Dagger is no longer your instructor. You get to choose your path. You get to go home

when the time comes...or not. Maybe you want to stay.” She shrugs.

I don’t tell her that Dagger’s advice was for me to leave. He was insistent. Told me that Draig Island was a dangerous place, which I already knew. I don’t tell her any of the other stuff, like how they’re keeping something important from us. That I wouldn’t be anywhere near Dagger if I knew these so-called facts.

Why not?

What could be so bad?

“I *am* going home,” I say. “Nothing has changed.” It hurts me a little to say the words because *I* have changed. I’m not the same person I was when I left home a few weeks ago, and yet, everything will be the same when I get back. I’m not sure how I feel about that. There is a part of me that wants to stay. I think that part is growing bigger and stronger by the day.

“You don’t look convinced.” Jen smiles. “Here’s my advice. I think you’re in love with Dagger. For the record, I think the feeling is mutual, but even if it isn’t, it doesn’t change my advice. I’m sure you will have regrets if you choose to go home without exploring whatever there is between you. You need to find out one way or the other.”

“He isn’t interested in me. He keeps pushing me away,” I say.

“That’s because he has feelings for you, or he wouldn’t care, but he does,” she insists. “Keep it casual. Don’t go declaring your undying love for him or anything, but spend time with him. If there is something there, it will blossom and grow. He won’t be able to take it if you go.”

“I don’t know, Jen.” I shake my head, looking down at the well-polished tiles beneath my shoes. “What if I keep on falling for him, and he doesn’t reciprocate? I already told you that Dagger isn’t the relationship type. I’ll be heartbroken by the time I go home.” I touch the place where my heart is. I feel the organ beat beneath my fingers.

“You’re too far gone already. I mean, look at you.” Jen laughs. “You’re already in love with him, my friend. I can see it written all over you.”

“It hasn’t been long enough yet.”

“Love doesn’t go by the calendar or the clock. It’s just something that happens whether we like it or not.” She shrugs. “Haven’t you ever heard of love at first sight before?”

“I have, but I never believed in it until...” *Until now.* I don’t say the words because I’m panicking a little. Am I in love with Dagger?

Shit. I might be. This is bad.

“You need to go after what you want. If you choose to leave without trying, you will always have regrets, and there is nothing worse in this world than regrets. Regrets that keep you up at night. Regrets that eat you whole.” It sounds like she’s talking from experience. “Go!” She taps my arm.

“We’re not at my room yet,” I tell her.

“Haven’t you heard a thing I’ve been saying? Go to Dagger. Spend time with him. Talk, laugh, make love. Fall until you are both in too deep, and then live a long and happy life together.”

“That’s beautiful, Jen,” I whisper. “Makes me hope you’re right. Okay.” I nod. “I’m going to take your advice.”

“Good.”

We hug for a while. “Thank you,” I tell her.

“You are most welcome.”

Then, I start walking toward the instructors’ wing.

My step doesn’t falter because Jen is right. I’m in love with Dagger. I think I have been since the moment I looked into his eyes. I want a relationship with him. I just plain old want him. I don’t want regrets. I start walking faster.

Dagger

There is a knock at my door.

I put down the book I am reading and sigh. Who could it be? Perhaps Octane wanting a beer. Or Shadow with news of my lost Tribute. I doubt it, but you never know. I don't feel like talking or playing nice. I just want to be left alone. It would be immature to pretend I'm not here, though.

"Come in," I shout as I stand, stretching my back. I haven't been sleeping well. I'm tired and—

I make a strange noise in the back of my throat when Hunter walks through my door. It's the very last thing I expected, but trust this woman to surprise me at every turn.

Having said that, what the hell!?

Hunter is wearing a dress, which is unusual. It's dark blue and looks amazing on her curvy frame. It shows off a hint of her deep cleavage and has buttons all the way down the front to where it lands mid-thigh. I want to slowly undress her, one button at a time. I can't!

"What are you doing here?" I rasp. "You shouldn't be, Tribute."

"Don't call me that." I see her eyes flash with annoyance. "We're beyond that now, don't you think? It's just you and me in this room..." She looks around. "Which is awesome, by the

way. You guys have a whole apartment while we have to share.”

My mouth twitches. “We’re the instructors, Hunter.” I sigh. “This is not a good idea. You really shouldn’t be here.”

“I haven’t said anything yet. Sheesh, you need to calm down a little. I haven’t even told you why I came.”

“I can’t calm down because I know exactly why you came. We’re attracted to each other. The sex has been off the charts. Now you’re alone with me in my apartment.”

“Off the charts might be a bit of an exaggeration,” she grumbles.

I smile for a moment and then give her a look.

Hunter rolls her eyes. “Fine, the sex has been pretty okay.”

We laugh because we both know it’s been more than just damned okay.

“We can’t be alone in my apartment with you wearing that dress. You look so fucking sexy. I want to...do things I have no place doing.” I clench my hands to stop myself from reaching for her. I catch her scent – jasmine in the springtime. She smells of rainbows and sunshine. Her scent is sensual, calming, and invigorating all at once. I want to bury myself in her and never leave.

“Here’s the thing,” she tells me.

I groan, turn, and pace away. I have zero willpower when it comes to this woman.

“Don’t get like that. You haven’t even heard me out yet.” She sounds frustrated.

I turn. “My answer is yes.”

Hunter laughs, and I love the sound. It warms me. “Again, you haven’t even heard what I have to say. You can’t just agree.”

“It doesn’t really matter because we both know I’m going to say yes, so I may as well say it now. Fuck yes, to everything and anything you have to say.”

“So you’ll dye your hair pink and wear a tutu over your uniform tomorrow?” She cackles at her own joke.

“You’re so fucking hilarious.” I walk toward her. “You’re here for sex.”

“Maybe I am, and maybe it’s something else entirely.” She pretends to be all coy.

“It’s not something else. This is still a bad idea. You may have completed Sky’s Edge, but it isn’t over yet. Nothing has changed.”

“I don’t care about any of that, Dagger.”

“You should care, and you should definitely stay away from me. Don’t say I didn’t warn you, Hunter.”

“You’re right. I’m here for sex. Not a date or a diamond engagement ring. Just hot sex, and that’s it.” She’s lying to herself if that’s what she thinks. I know Hunter well enough to be able to say that casual is not her vibe. She is a self-confessed romantic. This is more...for her. It can’t be more for me, and this really has to be the last time for us.

If she ever finds out the real truth, she’s going to be broken. If I hurt her, it will fucking kill me, and yet I still reach out and grip her hip.

“You shouldn’t be here,” I try one last time.

“Stop saying that and kiss me already.”

“Undo the top button of that dress.” I look down at the button in question.

“I thought you’d pull it over my head, or better yet, lift it up and start p—”

“I want you naked, and I’d like to get between your legs this time.” My voice is a gruff rasp. I’m so damned weak. Since when did I lose all control? Since meeting this tiny female, that’s when.

“How is it that you make something as basic as missionary sound so damned sexy?” Before I can answer, she goes on.

“You totally rock the whole ‘jeans and nothing else’ look, by the way.” Her greedy eyes take me in.

“Undo the buttons for me. All of them.” I’m getting desperate for her.

“From one to all of them?” She lifts her brows.

I nod and watch as she slowly undoes them, her lower lip is firmly between her teeth the whole time. Then, leaving the dress closed around her, she unbuckles each of her sandals, stepping out of them.

Finally, she shrugs out of the dress, and I groan. She’s wearing a black lacy number that has my balls pulling tight. “I hope you wore that for me.”

“Actually, I hadn’t planned on coming here tonight. I just wanted to feel sexy...for me.” She shrugs, looking self-conscious. This woman has absolutely nothing to feel self-conscious about. Not a damned thing.

“Well, you are. You’re very fucking sexy. You make me lose my damned mind every time. As pretty as you are in this set...” I reach around her back and unhook her bra, watching as her lovely breasts spill out. “Beautiful. You’re so damned beautiful.” I’m in awe. I can’t stop looking at her. I want to touch her everywhere.

If it’s going to be our last time, it’s going to be in my bed. I pick her up, taking her to my bedroom. I walk to the bed and put her down in the middle. The mattress dips as I get onto it with her. I lean down and kiss her, loving how her lips feel against mine. I love the sighs...the moans...the whimpers she makes. I love how she touches me. Like she can’t get enough. Like she’s trying to memorize every contour. I put my forehead to hers for a moment, trying to do the same. Her scent, the way she feels, the way she whispers my name.

I kiss her neck and then take a tight nipple into my mouth. I use my hands, my mouth, and my tongue until she’s moaning and arching up into me.

My cock feels thick and ready. My balls feel tight and so damned heavy.

I carefully slip down her panties, rolling them down her hips and pulling them from her legs, which fall open for me. Her pussy is lovely and pink. I find her little nub with the pad of my thumb and circle it. Then I push inside her with my fingers. I use two, same as before. Hunter is already wet. She's making eager noises. She's rocking into my hand. Her eyes are already glassy. Her mouth is open as she gasps for air. I want a little taste, so I go in and lap at her slit before sucking on her clit a few times. Hunter groans my name, clutching at my hair.

I need her. I don't want to wait, and from the way she is sounding, I don't think she wants to, either. I move over her and pull her legs around my hips. I line up with her opening, keeping my eyes on hers. "Breathe out slowly," I tell her, even though this isn't our first rodeo.

Then I push in just my tip. I grit my teeth. So good. So damned good. I push in a little more, moving my hips in circular motions. Tonight is about feeling. About taking my time. I have to work to keep my baser needs in check. Needs that tell me to fuck...to dominate...to take. How I want to ram into her, lose myself in her. I don't.

Sweat beads on my brow. I can feel it just as I can feel her clenching around me. She whimpers as I push deeper and deeper as I ease in slowly.

Hunter arches her back and mewls as I bottom out inside her. Her eyes are hazy with both pleasure and need. Her fingers dig into my back.

I start thrusting gently, and her mouth goes a little slack. Her pussy hugs me tightly. Being inside her feels like everything. Tight and hot, but there's more... More feelings I don't dwell on.

I lift her legs higher on my back and keep thrusting. I'm gentle and firm. Her eyes are going from wide to half-mast. Her mouth is now open. She's panting and moaning, tossing her head back. My strokes become a little faster and a little punchier. I'm working hard not to come. She makes the most amazing noises. I feel them low down in my belly. She's getting louder. I love it.

Her pussy starts to flutter. Her head rolls back a little more. Her eyes are squeezed shut. She presses her lips together. Then her pussy tightens around me like a silken vise.

I grunt hard as I come. I can't hold back. Not anymore. Her eyes widen at the same time that mine do. I groan, and she yells like before. Her fingers dig into my shoulders. Her yells become deep groans that have my balls pulling tighter. I lean in and bite down on her neck. It's instinctual. It just happens. It isn't something I thought about, planned, or tried to prevent because I wasn't expecting it.

I should have.

I fucking did.

Hunter's whole body stiffens beneath me, and then she screams my name. Loud and shrill. Her pussy clamps down so hard it hurts me a little. My balls explode...my dick, too. I'm either coming again, or the same orgasm has flared back up tenfold. My eyes roll back as I groan so deeply my throat hurts. It's like my balls turn inside out. My mind, too.

Her nails dig in. Her body vibrates under me the whole time. I make sure she comes long and hard before I finally slow, my back bowing each time I push into her.

Holy fuck!

Shiiit!

As I come down, I lower my face into the crook of her neck. I'm breathing hard.

What the fuck did I just do?

I bit Hunter.

I fucking put my teeth in her. I didn't break the skin because I don't taste blood. I want to, though.

This has gone too far. I grunt again because my body is still shuddering and jerking. I'm still rocking into her, even though I'm reeling, too. She's panting.

"What was that?" she moans. "Holy shit, Dagger. Wow!"

I keep my weight on my arms so as not to crush her. I need to pull out, to move away. But I can't. We're both still shuddering with the aftershocks. I can't be that big of a dick to turn my back on her after that. Not that.

Hunter is smiling. It's goofy. It's sexy. It warms me and puts ice in my veins all at once.

I groan her name softly as I take her face in my hands and I kiss her softly. I take her mouth, and own it. I breathe her in. I feel her beneath me. Then I let go and pull out. I move onto my back.

"You're doing it again." She snuggles into me, moving my arm so that it circles her. "You're overthinking things."

"Someone has to."

"You have regrets." She sounds sad.

I look down into her eyes. They're a beautiful chocolate color. "I do, but they're not the ones you think."

"You don't regret what just happened."

"No." I rub my hand up and down her back, slowly painting circles into her skin with my fingers.

"But you're still going to tell me that it can't happen again."

I nod. "Yep. It can't." I pull some hair behind her ear and trail my fingers down her jaw. "You need to promise me that you will go home when the time comes to choose. I know I sound like a broken record, but every time this happens, it becomes more important that you do. No matter what, you must go. Go live your life. Do not stay here, please, Hunter." I sound like I'm begging, but I don't care.

Hurt flashes in her eyes. I hate it. I wish I could open up to her, but I can't.

"Why is it so important?"

I smile because it's a typical Hunter response. Why can't she just agree and do as I say for once? "I told you, it's too dangerous to stay. You need to trust me. Every time we see

each other... Every time this happens, it gets more dangerous for you.”

“That doesn’t make sense, unless you’re married to a psycho killer who will skin me alive for sleeping with you.”

I chuckle. “It’s nothing like that. I’m not married.”

“Yeah, you’d have to actually date to win a woman over.” Then she turns serious. “What are you keeping from me?” she asks, her hand on my chest.

I huff out a breath and cup her chin softly. “I wish I could tell you.” I also hope she never finds out. I’m a coward. “I’m fearful that if you ever did – know the truth that is – that you would look at me with hate in your eyes.” I choke out my second biggest fear. The first is that I would have to watch her die. That it would be me who ended up killing her, even if it wasn’t by my own hand. I need to leave her the hell alone, even if it kills me.

“I would never look at you that way. I couldn’t hate you, Dagger. I couldn’t because—”

I’m not sure what she was about to say, but I silence her with a kiss. “Mark my words, you will, Hunter,” I say against her lips. Then I pull away slightly. “You will if you stay, and I can’t stand the thought of that. More than anything, I need you safe. Please, for the love of Draig, go home. Choose to leave. You think you know me, but you don’t. You never did.”

Her eyes are filled with confusion and with...with something I care not to label. I kiss her soft lips. I kiss her even though I should be pushing her away. And I will be pushing her away all too soon.

Hunter

I yawn for the third time in a row.

“Did someone have a late night?” Jen asks, smiling as she walks up to me.

I grin. I know it must be goofy. “Maaaaybeeee.”

“And?” Jen lifts her brows. “Give me something, please.”

“And,” I shrug, “it was great. He’s so...unlike anyone I’ve ever met before.” I can’t tell Jen about the spanking or the biting or what that kind of thing does to me. When he bit me, I thought I had died and arrived in orgasm heaven. It’s not normal. If I told Jen, I would come across as...weird. Besides, it’s private. Something between Dagger and me. Last night felt special. It felt like we were making love. Even the bite felt... intimate, somehow. I can’t explain it in a way that anyone would understand, and I don’t want to.

“So, when are you seeing him again?”

I make a face. “We ended up...doing the deed...twice, actually. We talked as well, but he’s insisting that was the last time. That we can’t be together again.”

Jen gives me a look. “It won’t be the last time.”

“I don’t know.” I shake my head, feeling disappointed. Once again, I’ve gone back to hurting. “He looked like he

meant it.” It felt like he did.

“I’m willing to bet you he’ll come sniffing in a few days.”

I shake my head again, my heart feeling heavy. “I don’t think so.”

“Okay, then you go to him.”

“I don’t think it will help. I don’t know...” I lick my lips. “He’s told me the same thing before, but I think he meant it this time. He keeps telling me that I don’t know all the facts, that I don’t know him at all.”

“That’s strange. I wonder what he meant by that. What else did he say?” she asks.

“That I would hate him if I ever found out.”

Jen snorts and makes a face. “Yeah, right. Like that’s ever going to happen. Unless...” Her eyes widen. “Unless he’s married.”

I laugh. “That’s exactly what I said, but he assured me that it wasn’t the case.”

Her eyes widen. “An ex-con. Maybe he murdered someone, and they sent him here.”

“I wouldn’t hate him for that. People change. I think he would tell me if he could, but he can’t because of this place. He keeps begging me to go home when it comes time to choose. I somehow think that I will find out after that, but only if I choose to stay. Whoever stays will be privy to the revelation.”

“Perhaps Octavia was right, and the dragons don’t really exist, and they’ve been lying to us all along.” Jen looks deep in thought for a moment.

“Maybe, but if that is the case, I would assume they have good reasons for doing so. I wouldn’t be angry with him. I know Dagger would tell me if he could. It makes no sense whatsoever. I don’t know what would be so bad as to make me hate him. I mean, hate...that’s a strong word.”

“Are you going to stay?”

I shrug, “I haven’t made my mind up yet. Thankfully, we have plenty of time to decide.”

“Gather in everyone,” Shadow shouts, interrupting our conversation.

“My favorite time of the week,” I gripe.

“It’s not that bad,” Jen says.

“It’s my worst,” I grumble. “Who decided that group meditation was the way to go?”

Jen laughs softly. “I see it as half an hour of absolutely no pressure.”

“I see it as half an hour of painful silence. Even worse, I have to not only sit still but *be* still.”

“It’s not so bad. We get several breaks. Don’t be so dramatic.” She laughs again.

I roll my eyes. We spread our mats out on the grass in the large open area. The obstacle course is on one side, and the jungle is on the other.

“I hope you remembered bug spray this time?” Jen asks as she sits on her mat.

I laugh as I do the same, crossing my legs. “I did, indeed.” I forgot to apply it last week and almost died silently while being eaten alive.

Tommy drops his mat next to Jen and falls onto it. He’s white as a ghost. He lies down on his back and groans.

“How are you feeling?” I ask. “Need I even ask?”

“Yeah...” He flaps his hand. “Don’t ask. I might throw up again.” He swallows thickly. “I’m never drinking again.”

I would laugh, but I feel too bad for the poor guy. “It’s a pity you couldn’t stay in bed,” I tell him. A day off once in a while wouldn’t be too much to ask. Apparently, on Draig, it is because war doesn’t take breaks, and therefore neither can we.

“Of course, you will drink again,” Jen tells him. “Besides, you’re too cute when you’re drunk not to drink again.”

“I don’t think I can train today,” he grumbles.

I see that Skylar and Susan are sitting on the other side. Skylar waves when she catches me looking over there. I wave back.

“Can everyone find their places,” Brutus says. “We’d like to begin.”

Dagger and Octane arrive as he says it. My mouth goes dry. I try not to stare but fail miserably. He’s in his leathers. They all have mats, including Shadow, who is already sitting on hers. She’s in the lotus position, which is encouraged. My eyes move back to Dagger. He looks my way; our gazes mingle for a few seconds before he looks away first.

“It’ll work out,” Jen says, tapping my bare foot with hers. “You’ll see.”

“What will work out?” Tommy asks from where he is still lying on the mat. Even his voice is croaky.

“I’m not sure whether I want to go home anymore. I’m thinking of attempting to mind-bond a dragon,” I tell him.

Tommy sits up a little and then slumps back down. “What? Why? They’re dangerous, Hunter. You could die.”

“I know. I’ve heard it all. I could fall, or get squished, or be eaten.”

“Don’t forget burned to a crisp,” he mumbles.

“Yep, there’s that too. I absolutely could die, but I might also fly. I could soar and help keep the world safe from the Red Dragons.” It’s the first time I’m saying out loud what I’ve been feeling inside.

At the same time, Dagger has put the fear of god inside me. I’m also not sure I can just turn my back on my family. Staying here would mean never seeing them again. My eyes sting at the prospect.

As Jen said, I have time. I’ll figure it out.

Tommy starts to say something, “It would—”

“Everyone be seated.” Brutus raises his voice, putting an end to our discussion. “And settle down. It’s important that you are able to still your mind. Especially those of you strongly considering trying to mind-bond a dragon. You need to be able to calm your racing heart, to quiet your thoughts. You can learn to achieve this through meditation. Keep in mind that humans are prey animals to them.”

I hear Jen make a soft mewling noise.

“If you are afraid, the dragons will sense it, and it will provoke a hunting instinct in them. You can’t allow fear to creep in. You need to stay calm. That’s the key.”

This is the first time the instructors have really spoken to us about why meditation is important. How it will help us where the dragons are concerned. I’m intrigued. I want to know more.

I don’t get more.

“You may begin,” Brutus says.

“Maybe I’ll try harder,” I whisper under my breath to Jen.

“Me too,” she says, sounding tense.

“By now, you all know the drill,” Brutus says. “No talking,” he adds.

I do know the drill.

We cross our legs; some go the whole hog with the lotus position. I find it uncomfortable.

We need to be mindful and go inward. Starting with the top of my head, I slowly and deliberately move down my skin one inch at a time. I breathe in and out. I clear my mind. I start at my scalp, then my face, ensuring that my muscles are relaxed. Down, down. Slowly...slowly. My ears and then my neck. Inch by inch, down every part of my body, I breathe in and out. I relax. I think of each of my muscles letting go. I let—

Dagger jumps up. Fang follows as a close second. They look poised for a fight. Then, all of the instructors are on their feet, Shadow included. Their eyes are on the sky above.

We hear it in the next instant.

A roar.

It's deafening, even though it's not coming from anywhere near here.

Dagger looks straight at me. "Run!" he screams as they appear to the right of us and high in the sky. "Get under cover!" he adds.

My eyes are on the dragons. They're still far but moving fast.

There are three of the creatures. They're huge. Bigger than I thought they would be. Far more terrifying.

There are screams. People are talking. Running. All-out gaping. I fall into the last category. I know I should run, but I can't. I'm rooted to the spot. They may be terrifying, but they're also quite beautiful. There is one that is flying maybe a hundred yards ahead of the other two. Their wings are wide. Their massive heads have spikes coming off of them. The one in the front roars, and flames erupt from its huge maw of a mouth. I can see its teeth from all the way down here.

"Run!" I hear Dagger shout again. People listen. The stragglers run. I can't take my eyes off them.

"Move Hunter. Get the fuck out of here!" Dagger shouts.

"We have to go." Jen grabs my arm and tugs. She sounds panicked. "They're headed this way. Hunter!"

That's when I see it. The one in the front has patchy red scales.

A Red Dragon?

Shit! It must be one of them. It's a Red Dragon being chased by two Draig Dragons.

It turns and breathes fire on the other two, which maneuver out of the way at the last second before giving chase again.

"Holy shit." I turn to Jen, who is still pulling at me. "Do you see the riders on the two dragons giving chase?" I point

upwards, realizing for the first time that all the Tributes have left. They're fleeing indoors.

"We have to go!" Tommy shouts. I hadn't even realized that he was still here with us. His face is still white, although I suspect for different reasons than his overindulgence of the night before.

"Hunter!" Dagger roars my name. He sounds closer this time.

The dragons are almost on us.

"What the fuck!?" he growls.

Fang grabs both Jen and Tommy, hoisting one over each shoulder just as Dagger does the same with me. We make for the jungle at a run since it's closer than the building. I would be in awe of Fang and how well he's managing with two adults on his back, if it wasn't for the dragons almost above us.

The Red Dragon screeches; the other two are hot on its tail. I still can't seem to take my eyes off them. I crane my neck from my position on Dagger's back. This could be the last thing we ever see, and it would be all my fault. All because I wanted to watch them in action.

What is wrong with me?

The sky goes dark as they appear directly above us, blocking out the sun. I see both of the Draig Dragons breathe fire onto the Red one. I swear I feel it all the way down here, a dry, searing heat that burns my eyes and my lungs.

I feel nothing but joy.

I'm sick. It's official.

Then we are under the cover of the jungle, and Dagger is tossing me on the ground and covering me with his big body. I hear more screeching overhead and try to get out from under him. I want to see what is happening.

Dagger won't let me. "Hold still, woman. You'll be the fucking death of me," he mutters.

He's probably right, so I hold still. All I hear is the thudding of our hearts and our ragged breathing. I'm holding his huge biceps.

The noise from the beasts slowly recedes as they move away.

"Holy shit! I can't believe it." I can barely breathe. Partly because Dagger is still on top of me, and he weighs a ton, but also partly from excitement. "That was amazing. We saw dragons. They exist." I feel sorrow for Octavia. I wish she had seen this. Maybe she wouldn't have run.

Dagger pulls back. His face is just inches from mine. "That was not amazing, Hunter. What the fuck were you thinking? You could have been killed. Or gotten your friends killed. All of us, for that matter. If you see a dragon, you fucking run. I don't get you. Don't you have any sense of self-preservation?"

"Of course I do." I slap his chest. "It's just...that was intriguing. I've never seen anything like it. They were so beautiful, Dagger. I know they're deadly, but they're also... They're incredible."

"We spoke about this. You need to do as I told you. Fuck! Please, Hunter. You can't become a rider. Don't get stars in your eyes. Dragons are killing machines. Riders die."

"Dagger!" Fang is standing over us, looking strangely at us, which I get, since Dagger is still mostly on top of me, and we're having this conversation.

Dagger gets up. He offers me his hand and pulls me to my feet.

Jen is crying and hugging herself. "That was awful. I've never been so terrified in all my life. I want to go home," she tells Fang. "Please, can I go home? I don't want to be a rider."

"Let's get inside, Tributes," Dagger growls, not looking at me. "They are still out there and could circle back."

Jen's eyes go wide. "Oh, my god!" She looks up.

"They're gone for now," Fang says. "You can relax a little."

“No, I can’t.” Jen starts to run toward the buildings.

“I don’t want to see them again, either.” Tommy bends over his middle and pukes on the ground at his feet. He puts a hand in front of his mouth. “Shit! Sorry!”

“Inside!” Fang rasps, his eyes on me. His gaze moves to Dagger, narrowing.

Crap! I hope I didn’t get Dagger into trouble.

Dagger

For the first couple of hours, I thought that I might have gotten away with murder. Turns out I was wrong. I squeeze my eyes shut and press my fingers into the corners. It feels like I might have a headache brewing.

Then I sigh as I knock on Shadow's office door.

I have to wait a full minute before she instructs me to enter. "You asked to see me," I say as I walk in.

"Close the door." Her voice is clipped.

Fuck!

I do as she instructs.

"What are you doing?" Shadow gets straight to business. "You'd better sit." She gestures to a chair.

"Can I ask what this is about?"

"Do you really need me to spell it out? You swapped out the Tribute. You told us all it's because she needed a stronger hand, or she wouldn't make Sky's Edge. I suspected you were attracted to her at that point. You did exactly the right thing by swapping her out. My question to you is, when did it go wrong? It's clear there's something between the two of you. Clear as day, Dagger."

“We’ve had sex three times,” I tell Shadow. There is no use denying it. “I should’ve had more willpower than to—”

“You should have.” She glares at me. “What were you thinking? I mean, you, of all people? You? Fuck, Dagger! What the hell have you done? Is it serious?”

I hesitate too long before answering. “No,” I say, but she doesn’t believe me. Hell, I don’t believe myself.

“Fucking hell! You might just have signed her death warrant.”

I lean back in my seat. I force feigned calm. “It was wrong. A mistake.” I hate saying those words because it doesn’t feel true. “It’s over.” This part I mean wholeheartedly. “It won’t happen again. Hunter has promised me that she will choose to go home. No harm done. You can rest assured.”

“That’s where you’re wrong. You know more than most how bad it is out there.” She jerks a finger at the window. “The unrest grows daily. Our resources are stretched beyond our capacity. You saw what went down earlier. A Red Dragon almost escaped. It was this close.” She holds her fingers together. “Too damned close. I just got word from the elders. They’ve been trying to get a bill passed with the Tribute Council for several years. In light of recent events, it was just passed. Only half an hour ago, to be exact. It’s effective immediately.”

I feel ice hit my veins. I hate where this is going. “What is it?” I frown, feeling everything inside me bristle.

“The Tributes no longer have a choice. They can’t decide to go home. Going forward, when a Tribute makes Sky’s Edge, they get a crash course in Dragons 101, and then they need to attempt a mind-bond the same day. It’s become mandatory.”

“No!” I growl. It can’t be. It fucking can’t.

“Yes!” Shadow says. “Since Hunter Foster...” She picks up the file in front of her and gives it a small shake. “Since she made Sky’s Edge, she needs to take the next step. Let’s face it, after what you just pulled, there’s a good chance that the

smallest, weakest of our Tributes will end up mind-bonding with the strongest, most feral of our dragons. A dragon who got his last two riders killed with his antics.”

My heart sinks like a rock, and dread takes residence inside me. “Please, can I tell her all of this myself? I need to come clean before—”

“No!” Shadow says. “We follow protocol. We stick to the code. Keep your mouth shut. That is a goddamned order.”

I nod once.

“She’ll find out soon enough,” Shadow says as I slowly die inside.

What have I done?

Hunter

The Next Day...

I hug Jen tightly.

“You’ll be back in a few days,” she tells me, rubbing my back. “No need to get all sappy,” she adds, even though she’s the one who cries at the drop of a hat.

For whatever reason, I have a weird feeling about this sudden trip. “Yep, I wish they’d tell us what this is about,” I say, looking over at Tommy and Susan. “They’re being even more cagey than normal.”

“Some or other training exercise, I’m sure.” Skylar shrugs. “We were told that even though we’ve made Sky’s Edge, we still have to keep fit just in case we choose to stay and attempt to bond.”

Shadow announced last night after dinner that those of us who made it through the course would be going on a trip today. We were told to pack enough clothing to last a few days and to be ready to leave after breakfast. I was tempted to go to see Dagger last night to try to get more information, but I know he wouldn’t have let me into his apartment, let alone speak to me. Not after making it very clear that things between us were over. He wouldn’t even look my way last night when the announcement was made.

Big surprise there.

“At least they managed to capture that Red Dragon.” Tommy still looks a little sick. He keeps looking up at the sky with fear in his eyes. “I wish they’d let us go home already. I won’t be staying, anyway.” He shakes his head. “Not after witnessing that.” It’s all he can talk about since the incident.

“Me, neither.” Jen swallows thickly. “That was one of the most terrifying experiences of my life.”

Seeing the dragons up close had the opposite effect on me. I felt alive and invigorated. I couldn’t take my eyes off the huge beasts, and I can’t wait to see them again. Although... just thinking about it makes me think of Dagger.

Go home.

His words play through my mind.

Do as I ask for once. It’s dangerous on Draig Island. Riders die.

“I don’t know.” Skylar shrugs. “I found seeing the dragons up close like that to be quite exciting. Maybe I have a screw loose or something.”

“You’re not actually thinking of staying, are you?” Susan asks, looking shocked. “I thought you had an empire to get back to.” She lifts her brows. “I read somewhere that you guys have twelve vacation homes around the world. None of you goes anywhere without a host of guards escorting you. You have several chefs preparing your meals. You’re waited on hand and foot.”

“Trust me when I tell you that it gets old rather quickly. Although I have my license, I get chauffeured everywhere.”

“Sounds terrible.” Jen is clearly being sarcastic.

“In some ways, being here has been a breath of fresh air for me. It’s the first time in my life I’ve had some space. No nanny, or guards, or chauffeur. It’s just been me.” She smiles.

“Aren’t you supposed to be taking over from your father when he retires? I thought you were inheriting everything.” Susan lifts her brows.

Skylar gets this strange look and then nods stiffly. “I am, indeed,” she mutters, looking down at her feet.

Susan starts to suck in a breath to say something, but there is a shout from behind us. “Time to get going,” Atlas calls from one of the waiting vehicles. We see other Tributes climbing into the SUVs. All in all, sixteen of us have made Sky’s Edge. So, with Octavia and Angela declared as lost, that means there are twelve staying behind.

Skylar and I lift our bags onto our backs. “We’ll see you guys on the flip-side,” I say, taking a few steps back.

“Be careful,” Skylar tells those staying.

“We should be the ones saying that to you.” Tommy laughs. “You guys must be careful out there.” He points into the jungle behind the waiting vehicles.

“Sky’s Edge is the most dangerous thing out here, except for the dragons themselves, and we won’t be seeing those anytime soon.” Skylar scrunches up her nose. “That’s why I’m more worried about *you* guys.”

“We’d better get going,” I tell Skylar. Most of the others are already in the vehicles.

We wave and then turn, heading for a vehicle that still has space. Ross and his girlfriend are sitting in the back. They only have eyes for each other. I noted that Halbert and his cronies are in another vehicle, so I’m happy I don’t have to put up with his shit.

I don’t care about all the nonsense he has to say to me anymore, but it has grown tedious. Since I’m not sure how long this trip is, I’d rather stay clear of him. I forgot to pack earplugs or painkillers for when my head starts to explode from his bullshit.

I’m a little disappointed when Fang gets in behind the wheel. It looks like Brutus and Octane are staying behind, which means that Dagger will be coming with us. I know it’s silly of me, but that makes me happy. Maybe he and I will get to talk at some point. I’m not giving up on us.

I see Dagger get behind the wheel of another vehicle but quickly look away. I'm not sure if anyone noticed how he zoned in on me when the dragons appeared yesterday. It seems that in all the chaos, no one did, except for maybe Fang. I'm sure Dagger came up with a good explanation for his overprotective behavior. I haven't heard anything about it, so I'm sure it's all fine. I hope so, for his sake.

I need to be careful. I can't stare at him or make my feelings for him obvious. I don't want to cause trouble for Dagger. Sleeping with a Tribute is frowned upon. He's said as much and more than once. There was all that stuff about him being my superior. One thing I know for sure – he can pretend all he wants, but I know he cares about me. He is convinced that he is protecting me by pushing me away. I just need to prove him wrong. I'm stronger than he thinks.

“So, are you going to choose to stay?” Skylar asks me after we talk about mundane shit like the weather.

“Ummm...I'm not sure at this stage. I would miss my folks if I did. My brother, too. Besides, I meant it when I said that I don't think I can ride a dragon.” I shrug. “I've never even been on a horse. I don't think I would be very good at riding a killer dragon. What about you?”

“I rode horses most of my life. I competed in both dressage and showjumping. I gravitated more toward dressage as I reached adulthood. I was quite good at it. I won tons of ribbons.” She looks wistful. “I miss it, actually. Riding gets in your blood. I miss my horses. There are definite perks to being wealthy.”

“You have a horse?” I wanted a horse for five minutes when I was young. I think all little girls go through a phase. My parents bought me Donut instead.

“I have ten horses. Four are retired. Four are under saddle, and two are youngsters. Tristar will be backed next year. Fleurette is still a foal.”

“Oh wow! So, you'll probably be amazing as a Dragon rider,” I tell her. “That's if you decide to stay.”

“Riding a horse and riding a dragon are not the same thing,” Fang says from behind the wheel. “Don’t forget you need to mind-bond a dragon first. Even then, dragons are... difficult, to say the least. They’re opinionated and don’t always take well to being told what to do. In fact, they hate it.”

“It would be almost impossible to ride a horse if they didn’t listen. Horses are big and strong, but they’re mostly agreeable. Most horses are willing and kind. They’re submissive by nature, or we wouldn’t be able to ride them.”

“Dragons are the complete opposite.” Fang chuckles.

“How do you ride them, then?” I ask.

“Yeah, I would struggle with a horse who wasn’t listening, but it would be impossible on a dragon since they’re so huge.”

“Never show fear. Never try to dominate a dragon. You need to work *with* them,” Fang says as we pull up at an open dirt patch that seems to function as a parking lot. “You’ll soon learn all about it.”

We look around, and there is nothing elaborate about this site. There is a small rustic building with round bungalows scattered throughout the jungle around us.

We get out of the vehicle and grab our bags. Ross and his girlfriend do the same. They walk across to Halbert and his friends.

Natasha joins Skylar and me. Her braids are in a ponytail on the back of her head. I smile when I see her. She made Sky’s Edge the same day as I did. “Did you find anything out about why we are here?” she asks us.

I shake my head.

“Nope,” Skylar says.

“Me neither,” Natasha remarks, scratching her chin. The jungle is thicker out here. The scent of damp moss and foliage is stronger, too. A parrot screeches in the distance.

Shadow and the instructors assemble together. “Gather round,” Shadow calls to us. Four new instructors join them, three men and one woman I have never seen before. They are

also all in leathers, and look similar to the ones we know. They're big and built, with longer than normal hair. The woman has tight braids. They all have similar tattoos. There are nine of them altogether.

"Who are they?" Skylar whispers.

I shrug. "No idea."

Kerry also comes and stands with us. She isn't as pale as she was when we first started. Her nose ring glints in the sun, and her tattoos are on display since she's wearing a black tank top. "Here we go again," she says.

"You've also got a bad feeling about this, I take it?" I ask her.

Kerry nods. "Oh yes. Why are there so many of them? Who are the new people? Why do we need them?" All excellent questions I wish we had answers to.

I shrug.

Shadow steps forward, and I get a feeling that's about to change. "I'm sure you're all wondering why you've been called on this trip," she says, clasping her hands in front of her. "I'm not going to keep you in suspense any longer. If you'll gather around, please."

It's the P-word. I believe it is the first time that any of them have asked nicely, which concerns me even more. I think we're in the shit.

I push out a breath. I was half-expecting for there to be a song and dance. I thought they were going to make us climb a mountain or sleep out in the jungle or something else far crazier. That there would be another test or a hoop to jump through before we got answers. And yet here we are. It feels... off. My bad feeling intensifies.

"It's becoming more and more difficult to contain the Red Dragons. And as you saw yesterday, it's getting out of hand. Our resources are stretched beyond our limits. We've lost more riders in the last few years than ever before." Shadow looks over at Dagger, and I'm not sure why. "Dragons, too," she adds, looking back at us.

That must be it. Dagger told me he lost two dragons. I still can't imagine how that must feel. I glance his way, but his eyes are facing forward. His face is unreadable.

“We've reached a breaking point. If something isn't done, and soon, Red Dragons are going to start escaping. They will make their way back to the mainland, and human lives will be lost. It is as simple as that. It cannot be allowed to happen.” She pulls in a deep breath and tugs on the edge of her leather top. Then she swallows thickly, looking down at the ground before looking back at us. “What I am about to say is going to come as a shock. I'm going to ask that you process the information, accept it, and move on. We are on a tight time constraint.”

Some of the Tributes talk among themselves softly. Shadow waits a few seconds for the unrest to die down, which it does. “A bill was passed yesterday. I'm not going to bore you with the details. Suffice it to say that we were ordered to action it immediately, hence calling for this trip today. Attempting to mind-bond with a dragon is no longer a choice; it has become mandatory. You've all made Sky's Edge, and therefore, you're all going to make an attempt today.”

Holy shit!

What?

Wait!

Almost everyone goes nuts.

“This is crazy,” Natasha says. “I don't want to. You promised I could go home!” she shouts.

Others are excited, happy even. Halbert is one of those. “Bring it on!” he yells, fist-pumping the air. Typical!

Kim starts crying, and Ross comforts her by putting his arm around her and whispering into her ear.

“We're not ready,” another person yells. I'm not sure who it is. I agree with them. I'm not ready, either. We were supposed to get more time. Time to decide. Time to prepare.

“Agreed! We could die,” Kerry says. “People die trying, don’t they?”

We all know that by now. Tributes die trying. Riders die, too. Dragons very often equal death. It is one of the major pitfalls of choosing to attempt a mind-bond. There are always those who fail and some who die.

It is a given.

My heart races. My mouth feels like it is filled with cotton wool.

Skylar looks shell-shocked, much like me. I don’t know what to say. My eyes are on Dagger, but he doesn’t so much as look at me. I get a feeling of dread. I’m about to find out the thing he doesn’t want me to hear. I know it. We’re about to get all the facts, and I’m not going to like it. I’m going to hate him after this.

I find that I can hardly breathe. Prickles go up and down my spine.

“Silence!” Shadow has to ask several times. “I know it is tough to hear. I understand how you must be feeling.”

“Some of us will die today!” Simon shouts. “We were told we had a choice. We were told that we would be properly prepared. This isn’t fair.”

“No, it isn’t,” Shadow says. “And yet it is the way it is. I am sorry. I wish it could be different.”

“I refuse.” Natasha folds her arms.

“There is no refusing. No getting out of this. If you mind-bond a dragon, you have to stay for rider training.”

“So the only way to leave is in a body bag?” someone else shouts.

“Nah!” Halbert laughs. “You don’t need a body bag for a pile of ash.” He laughs harder.

“That’s enough.” Shadow raises her voice. “As I said earlier, the news is tough to swallow, but you will need to process it and accept it because it is the way it is.” She shrugs.

“You might not end up bonding, many humans can’t. Even those who are descendants of the Sky Wardens. If you can’t form a bond and you are not killed, you may leave. My suggestion is that you try. Don’t scream, don’t run. Stand your ground and try. You’ll have a better chance of surviving the attempt if you do.” Her whole demeanor softens. “Trust me when I tell you that there is nothing better than forming a bond with a dragon. You might even find you like it. Once you get through rider training and you are still insistent on leaving, we will consider granting you your wish.”

“Consider it. How nice of you.” It’s a woman called Stacy I don’t know much about her. “That’s not right. None of this is okay. I demand to go home. You can’t keep me here.”

“I’m afraid that we can, and we are. The new bill means that it is now law. Know that we only want willing riders,” Shadow says. “We can’t force you to fight this war, but we can remain hopeful that you will come to love being riders. That you will choose to stay. That you will choose to fight for peace.”

“I have a family who loves me,” Natasha says, her eyes filling with tears. “My sister recently had a baby. I want to go home.” She starts crying. “Please. The thought of never seeing them again is too much. I want to see my niece again.”

“Riders go home from time to time. They get vacations like anyone else. We’re not completely backward.”

“What?” someone shouts. “That can’t be. So, riders are allowed home? To the mainland? I’ve never heard of it happening.”

“Yes. They can’t speak about what goes on at Draig, but our riders do visit home. Both you and your family would need to sign an NDA. I don’t want to get into all the ins and outs because we have too much we need to get through today.”

“Today?” Ross says. “That’s too soon. We need time to process this.”

“There is no time. By the end of today, you will either start your training as a rider, be on your way home, or...you will be

lost.”

Lost. That word again.

Everyone goes nuts all over again. “Lost” is a nice word for “dead.” I feel numb. I feel icy cold as well.

“We’re not ready.” Natasha is still crying. “I don’t want to die.” Her lip wobbles.

“Please,” Stacy begs; her lashes are wet from tears.

Simon covers his face with his hands and makes an anguished noise. Halbert and his friends are chatting excitedly.

“There is very little training we can give to help you with a mind-bond.” Shadow tells us. “Sure, we attempt to prepare you as much as possible. We offer meditation, and Sky’s Edge is designed to make you braver and stronger. The bottom line is that some will have the ability, and some will not. It’s really as simple as that. We will only know for sure when you stand before the unbonded dragons.”

“Dragons that can kill us,” Simon shouts.

“Unfortunately, there is that.” Shadow nods. “Which brings me to the next important piece of information I need to convey. I urge you to remain open-minded.”

Here it is.

I look at Dagger, and his throat works.

Yep, this is it, alright. I’m not sure I want to know. I clutch my chest. My heart is hammering.

“The dragons on these islands are not your regular run-of-the-mill kind. They’re not what you would expect.” Shadow folds her arms.

I frown. I have no idea where this is going.

“Have you ever heard of dragon shifters?” she asks us, looking from one to the next.

Dragon shifters?

Is she serious?

Shifters, as in... Creatures of myths and fairytales?

No one says anything. I see a few mouths fall open. I see a couple of eyes narrowing. All the attention is on Shadow.

“They do exist, but not like you’ve heard in stories,” Shadow goes on.

“A dragon shifter is a man who can turn into a dragon?” Halbert asks. “Is that right?” For once, he looks unsure. He seems confused.

“That’s exactly what I’m saying. The dragons on these islands have the ability to shift between both forms,” Shadow says.

My heart rate picks up all the more. My stomach drops. Can it be? My eyes are drawn back to Dagger for a moment.

Halbert scoffs. “Where are these men who can change into dragons?” he sniggers.

“They are standing before you now,” Shadow tells us. “We are dragon shifters.”

The air thins. I’m struggling to breathe. My eyes are drawn to Dagger. He is finally looking at me. *Finally!*

Dagger is a dragon shifter.

A dragon.

A fire-breathing monster.

Yes, I believe that. It makes sense. The puzzle pieces fall into place. By now, I’m panting. It doesn’t feel like I can get any air. I go down on my haunches and put my head between my legs. I might faint.

I don’t know what to do. This is the very last thing I expected. The very last.

Dagger

I watch Hunter go down onto her haunches. Then she sits on the ground between the others with her head between her knees. She looked as white as a ghost, and I feel sick.

I can't imagine what she must be thinking.

I know she must hate me. I would hate me. I lied to her. I allowed her to develop feelings for me. Even worse, I let myself fall for the sassy human, and now... Fuck! Now it's one big mess. I did this. I am to blame.

I want to go to her, but I can't. Not right now. I itch with the need. I only hope I can get her to understand. Moreover, I hope my stupidity hasn't signed her death warrant, as Shadow predicted.

"I don't believe you," Halbert says. "It's all a bunch of bullshit. There is no such thing as a dragon shifter. Is this some sort of stupid test?"

"Why would they lie?" another Tribute says.

"Prove it," the male snarls. "Show me that you are what you say you are. Shift for us!" Halbert shouts, his face turning red.

"We don't have to show you shit," Fang tells the male.

“Can everyone please calm down? You will get to see us shift soon enough,” Shadow deadpans. “You can believe whatever you want,” she tells Halbert.

“So, you’re telling me that you’ll shift into dragons? All of you...” Halbert points at us.

I growl. Fang does, too. The others somehow keep their tempers from flaring.

“Yes.” Shadow nods. “My suggestion is to take a break; we’ll head for the testing area in an hour.” She looks at her watch. “You can each have your own bungalow. The communal area is over there.” She points at the building where the food will be prepared and served. “You will soon attempt to mind-bond. Make peace with it.”

“Hold up!” Halbert says. “Why is this such a big deal? If you’re humans who turn into dragons, then everything will be fine. I mean, you have the intellect of a human, don’t you? Or do you become stupid animals when you’re in your dragon form?”

This time, most of the group bristle. Some take a step toward Halbert. Others growl or snarl at him.

Halbert leaps back. His arms are up in defense. “I’m only asking.”

“You will not be harmed,” Shadow assures him. “Not while we are in human form. Our dragon side is highly intelligent. Don’t let the fact that we are beasts fool you. Unfortunately, we are governed by instincts that tell us to hunt, maim, and kill. We’re very much animals. Keenly intelligent animals but animals, nonetheless. There’s very little left of our human side. Just like when we’re in human form, there is very little of our dragon side. Sure, we’re stronger and faster. We have better senses than most humans, but I am nothing like my dragon. No scales...” She runs a hand down her arm. “No tail. In fact, you were all shocked to hear of us being shifters. That’s how undragonlike we are. It’s the same when we’re in our dragon form. Our humanity takes a back seat. I may like you very much as a human. I might even be friends with you, but I might kill you, all the same, once I turn into a dragon.

That's where we're nothing like the fairy tales. That's why we need mind-bonded humans to partner with us in order to fight this war. It wouldn't happen otherwise."

"That makes sense," someone says.

"I still don't want to do this," one of the females yells.

"You have an hour, Tributes. Then, you must face us in our dragon form. I'm sorry, but that is the way it is." Shadow walks away.

In the next instant, Hunter is on her feet and walking away at almost a jog. Her friends call after her, but she keeps going. I hear her sob as she grabs her bag where she dropped it. Then, she makes for one of the bungalows.

I go after her.

I have to make this right. I have to at least try.

When Hunter gets to the bungalow, she opens the door and slams it shut. I deserve it.

Once I reach it, I knock. "Hunter. Hunter, please let me in. We need to talk." I knock again. "Please."

I wait half a minute. Then I knock again. "Please, sweetheart. Give me a chance to explain."

Much to my shock, she opens the door and heads back inside without saying anything. She doesn't even look at me, which cuts me up inside. I get it. I really do.

I go in and close the door behind me. Hunter is sitting on the bed, her head in her hands.

"I'm sorry. I'm so fucking sorry. I wanted to tell you." I pull in a breath. "I swear to you. I couldn't, Hunter." I don't sit. I stay where I am with my back to the door. "Please believe me. Fuck! Please say something. I shouldn't have touched you. I shouldn't have been so damned selfish. I couldn't help myself. Hell, from the moment I saw you...I've been drawn to you. I couldn't stay away. I...I just...I know you hate me. I get it. I deserve it."

She looks up at me. “I don’t hate you, so you can stop right there. I’m shocked. I’m a little pissed that you would tell me to go home because of this, that you would think so little of me.” Her voice sounds hurt. Her eyes hold the same emotion for a moment.

I take a step toward her and then force myself to stop there. “That’s not true at all.”

“It is. You assumed I would hate you because you can grow wings and scales and flap around in the sky.” She waves her hand.

My mouth twitches, but I hold back a smile. “I don’t flap around.”

“You know what I mean. I’m not that damned shallow. Don’t you know me at all? We all have our shit. You happen to have a bloodthirsty side. A fire-breathing side. A side that might just kill me when he comes out to play.” Her eyes are big and fearful, but she squares her shoulders, and determination takes the place of the fear.

“That’s just it. That’s why this is such a goddamned mess.” I run a hand through my hair and start to pace.

“Because you might kill me?” Her voice is soft.

“I won’t kill you. The opposite is true, but that has its own pitfalls.”

“What are you saying?”

“I’m in love with you, Hunter. I’m so far gone it’s scary. I mean, fuck. I bit you. I fucking bit you. Do you know what that even means? It’s huge.”

Then she’s on her feet in front of me. “Did you just say that you love me?” Her eyes are narrowed.

“Yes.” I frame her face with my hands and then let her go just as quickly. “This is so fucking terrible. It couldn’t be worse.”

“Why is it so bad? I don’t blame you for lying. I know you didn’t have a choice. I know there would have been big trouble

if you had said anything to me about all of this. It's classified information, right?"

"Exactly. The penalty for breaking the code is death."

"Sheesh, you really don't play around out here." Her eyes go wide.

I shrug. "The rules are in place for a reason, and there are huge consequences if..."

Hunter puts her arms around my waist, looking up at me. "I'm sorry, I'm not listening to you anymore. All I can hear is how much you love me, and that's great because I feel the same way about you. I know it's a little quick, and I realize we haven't gone on even a single date, but..."

"It's a bad thing, Hunter. It's seriously fucking bad." I peel her off me. "I shouldn't have let this happen."

"Why? I'm not understanding. We love each other. I'm staying. Oh, wait just a second." Her eyes go up in thought. "Is there a chance that your dragon could kill me? Surely not? Surely he would know that we were an item?"

"He won't kill you, but he might *get* you killed. In fact, he *will* get you killed. My dragon will mind-bond with you in a heartbeat and then your life would become filled with untold danger. You can't ride my dragon." I shake my head, panic rising.

She grins at me. "What's the problem? I think it's great news. I can absolutely ride your dragon. I know I can."

"My dragon is a big, fierce bastard who loves to fight. He isn't easily controlled, if at all. He got our last two riders killed, and in less than three years. That's unheard of. It's a dangerous profession, but even so, those are shitty odds, Hunter. He's mean and aggressive and—"

Her whole face softens. "You're cute for trying to protect me."

"I'm not cute. I'm being serious."

"And cute. Cut it out! It's annoying. Your dragon is a part of you, so I will love him just as much as I love you. And

furthermore,” she digs a finger into my chest, “he’ll listen to me. I’m not just any old rider. I’m *the* rider. I’m *your* rider. He *will* listen to me. I know it in here.” She touches her chest. “I’m not afraid.”

Her words warm me like a fire has taken up residence in my chest, but I shove down the good feelings. “I was thinking that it might be better for you to try to bond with another dragon.” It kills me to say it.

“Are you nuts?” She hits the side of my arm. “How can you even suggest that? Do you seriously want me to form a bond like that with one of the other guys? To ride one of the other guys?”

I growl, and Hunter laughs. “See, it won’t work. It needs to be us. Besides, one of the others might kill me if I try.”

Everything bristles at the thought, and I growl even louder. My whole body tightens. “That wouldn’t work for me at all.” My voice has become a deep rasp.

“You and me mind-bonding is the only way. That’s how it has to be.”

I nod. “Here’s the plan: we’ll all shift, and then you run to me. You have to be fairly close to form a bond. Once we’re bonded, the others won’t touch you. You’ll be mine. You’ll be safe.”

I don’t quite believe my own words. I’m not sure that even my mate can tame the bastard that is my dragon. If anything happens to Hunter, I will never forgive myself.

Hunter turns us around and then pushes me so that I fall onto the bed. I’m flat on my back. She straddles me. “What are you doing?”

“I’m going to practice riding a dragon.” She undoes the clasp on my pants and then unzips me. Despite the turmoil, I get hard in under a second flat.

“I’m not sure that’s such a good idea.”

“Good thing I’m sure enough for the both of us. We’re going to take all of this one step at a time.” She strokes my

cock and I groan. “So you can relax.”

“Okay.”

“How do you eat an elephant, cupcake?”

I laugh. Fuck, this female. *My female. My woman.* “One bite at a time.”

“Exactly. Try not to overthink this.” She takes my cock out, palming it, and I groan again deeply. “That’s what we’re going to do. We’re not going to worry about anything else but this.”

“That sounds good.” Her hand on my cock feels even better.

“Let me get out of my clothes, and then you’re going to give me my first riding lesson.”

“Fuck, yes!”

Hunter goes on to prove just how good she is at riding, zero lessons required. I knew it all along. If there was a problem before, it was her ex. Not this amazing female. At least for a short time, I forget about mind-bonds and my fuckhead of a dragon. I forget about everything but Hunter. But her. My woman.

Mine!

There was a time when I thought that having her look at me with hate would be the worst thing that could happen. Now, I think I might have been wrong. What if I mind-bond with her and then get her killed?

I’m more fucking petrified than I have ever been in my whole life.

Hunter

We drive down a narrow road that opens up onto a large field. I keep mostly to myself on the short drive in the SUV. I'm thrilled. Dagger and I are in love. I guess I did know deep down that he had feelings for me. I'm glad I know what the problem was. The secret that was keeping us apart. It's out in the open now.

I *am* a little afraid. Something could go wrong. I know that once we are mind-bonded, we will be okay. In fact, I'm sure of it. I can handle one times scaly cupcake. That's what I've decided to call his big scary dragon. *My scaly little cupcake*. I get a warm, fuzzy feeling just thinking about it, which is nuts. Dragons are dangerous. I should be terrified. I'm not. I'm reminded of how Dagger told me to be careful what I name something because I can give it power over me. I wonder if the opposite is true.

Scaly cupcake.

Dagger's dragon might be big, grumpy, and brooding, but he won't be so far removed from his human side that I can't handle him. I've got this. I know I do. We will make a good team. We already do.

The SUVs all park in a line, and we jump out of the vehicles and start walking down to the field below. The instructors go ahead of us. Dagger is among them.

“I see you put old clothes on, Chubby,” Halbert tells me. “Better that way. You don’t want to ruin anything decent with burn marks.” I almost forgot this jerk was here. Typical of him to remind me of his presence.

I give him a cursory glance, and he laughs.

“You do know that there are more dragons needing riders than there are Sky Wardens. We’re not in competition with one another. You can stop being an asshole.” I know I’m wasting my breath.

“Nah! I enjoy it too much. You call yourself a Sky Warden, but I can tell that you aren’t one. I don’t believe it.” He shakes his head. “I mean, look at me and then look at you. How are you going to ride a dragon? You’re weak and pathetic, bottom of the food chain.”

“So you keep saying, Halbert. We’re about to find out once and for all.” I wink at him, and he loses some of his bravado. I am grateful that it shuts him up, which is a huge positive.

Yay, me!

My second win of the day. Now for a hat-trick.

The instructors turn to face us. “That’s far enough. You stay back there until we are done shifting,” Shadow says. “You’ll need to walk up to us and then up and down in front of us. You’ll need to get close. Fifteen or twenty feet is a good distance. No closer than that! Do not run, people. Not even from over there. Do not give them your back...ever. You run the risk of a dragon going into hunt mode, and you *will* die. No doubt about it. Try not to show fear. Do not provoke a dragon.” She looks at Halbert. “Every year, there is at least one idiot Tribute who does something stupid. Don’t do it! Do not be that person.” She’s still looking at him, and I want to laugh. Although Halbert is the type to get away with murder. He’ll probably provoke one and still end up mind-bonding.

Asshole!

“If a dragon decides to mind-bond you, go with it. If you fight a bond, it can hurt you and even cause damage,” Shadow goes on.

“Why would anyone fight a bond?” Halbert sneers.

“Some of us want to go home,” Natasha remarks under her breath.

“The whole process will take ten or fifteen minutes. If you are selected, do not get too close to your dragon, or expect to ride them today. It doesn’t work that way. Do not touch them in any way. Sometimes, a dragon will still lash out at a newly bonded Sky Warden. It happens. It’s instinct. It’s usually fatal, so don’t do it, please. We need riders. We have to stop this war.”

We all make a sound of agreement. Well, most of us do.

“Is everyone ready?” Shadow asks.

I shout “Yes,” but there are those who shout “No.” I can’t blame them. This is a tough pill to swallow.

I look over at Skylar, and she’s surprisingly calm. I smile at her, and she smiles back. Natasha is crying. Kerry is a blank slate.

I look back over at the instructors as they walk out farther into the field. I’m excited to see Dagger in his dragon form. I wonder what he will look like. Will I recognize him? There is a knot in my stomach.

They keep walking. By now, the grass is at mid-thigh. It’s clear that this section of the island has been opened up, probably to accommodate the dragons landing and taking off. Maybe even for this specific reason – the mind-bond attempt. They spread out, leaving a large space between each of them. The dragons are massive, so it makes sense. Dagger turns and looks me in the eye. I nod, and he nods back. Then he winks and turns away.

I smile. I can’t help it. My heart flutters, and then it starts to beat faster as they undress, placing their clothing in a pile at their feet.

This is it.

There is a screech from above, and a dragon descends. It has a rider on its back. I can see from its lack of red markings

that it is a Draig Dragon. Now that the beast is close, I see that there is a saddle strapped to the beast's back. That's handy. I hadn't thought to ask about saddles. I had assumed we would have to sit on their bare backs. This makes it easier...I hope.

The dragon lands beside the instructors. It's huge. Perhaps the size of several large horses. Much bigger than a helicopter.

There are gasps and shouts as we watch all nine dragons shift before us. Bones crack as they lengthen and reshape. Their ligaments, muscles, and sinew do the same. Wings sprout and unfold; they're wide and strong. Scales spring forth where smooth skin used to be. Claws rake the earth, filling the air with the scent of foliage and dank soil.

Within ten seconds, ten huge dragons stand before us. They turn to face us. Dagger roars, and smoke curls from his mouth and nostrils. One of the others screeches loudly. They have huge, sharp teeth. Now I know how Dagger and Fang got their names. Their mouths are wide, big enough to eat a human for sure. I shiver.

Some are agitated, their long, barbed tails swishing. Dagger is among them. He rakes the earth with his massive claws; more smoke plumes from his nostrils and maw of a mouth.

Just as with the man, Dagger is bigger than the others. He's darker, too, leaning toward midnight black with a bluish sheen. He's beautiful. For a few moments, I can only see him. Then I look down the line. Shadow is dark gray with an iridescent tinge. They're all various shades of mostly blues and greens. They're all terrifying and wonderful in equal measure. Just as before, I am fascinated. I want to get closer. I'm not afraid, even though the logical side of me tells me that I should be.

Dagger lunges forward, and several Tributes scream. The dragon with the rider also lunges forward, stopping Dagger from advancing on us.

"Do not show fear," one of the guys says. I think it was Ross.

This happens once or twice more. A dragon tries to break from the line, and the rider moves his dragon in to stop them.

They are as wild as promised. I realize that some of the Tributes are crying. I'm pretty sure I smell the pungent scent of urine. I ignore them all. My eyes are on him.

My Dagger.

Still mine, even in this form. He looks at me, too, and I'm sure I see recognition in his eyes. I touch my neck where he bit me and know that it's going to be okay.

"Come on, Chubby," Halbert says. "Time to meet the dragons."

For once, we're in agreement. "Yes, it is."

We start to walk. There are those who forge ahead. Halbert, Skylar, and me. There are some who hover just behind us. Then there are those who don't move at all. I glance back, seeing Simon, Natasha, and one or two others.

"Show no fear," I tell them. "Be brave." I look pointedly at Natasha.

"Be brave," Halbert mimics me. I swear he acts like a child half the time.

I'm headed straight for Dagger, who is to my left, second-last dragon from the end. My eyes are on him. The dragons keep trying to break free. Dagger breathes fire into the air, and I feel the dry heat. It doesn't deter me. Not in the least.

"So, you and Dagger have a thing going," Halbert says to me. He's matching me stride for stride, which isn't too difficult since he is so much taller than me. "I saw how protective he was of you yesterday. It was interesting how he couldn't get to you fast enough after the big reveal today."

I ignore him. I know he's trying to get into my head, to freak me out, and put me off balance, but I won't let him. I refuse.

"Go away." I sound bored because I am. I'm done with this asshole.

Halbert makes a noise like he's thinking things through. "I would say from the look the two of you just gave to one another that you've kissed and made up. That you have a plan that involves the two of you mind-bonding."

"Leave me alone." I up my pace, and so does he.

"Did you think I was going to just let you go to him? Let you bond with him?" He grabs me and throws me over his shoulder like I'm a sack of damned potatoes.

"Let me go." I start to pummel his back.

"I don't want you around anymore, Chubby. You don't get to mind-bond just because some dragon freak likes what you have between those rather large thighs."

I'm still hitting him, but he won't let me go. Instead, he's carrying me to the other side of the dragon line. Away from Dagger.

If that happens, another dragon could mind-bond me first. Or worse, I could be killed. I fight as hard as I can, but it doesn't help. Halbert just laughs.

When he gets to the last dragon, he puts me down...about ten feet in front of the beast, using me as a shield. I land on my ass. Instant prey.

Fuck!

Halbert laughs. "Let's go, Chubs. You and me. I want you in the front. I want to watch you burn. Then again, maybe you'll get eaten. I'm not sure which I would prefer."

"You're one hell of a bastard," I grit out as I get to my feet.

I consider backtracking, but it won't work. If they think I'm running, they'll kill me. I don't want to bond a dragon who isn't Dagger.

There is roaring and screeching up the line. I see Dagger trying to break free, but the rider won't let him.

"Looks like someone is pissed." Halbert laughs.

"You'd better hope you form a mind-bond before you get that side of the line; otherwise, you are dead," I tell him. "No

need for a body bag...just a pile of ashes.”

“Walk, Chubby.” He knocks into me, bumping me forward. “I will bond soon enough.”

I turn and knee him in the groin. Halbert drops, and he groans loudly.

Bastard!

“You deserved it,” I tell him. “And if you die today, you will deserve that too.”

His brow has formed a light sheen. “Run, Chubby,” he groans. “You’d better run.”

I refuse! I’ll die if I do. I walk. Halbert gets to his feet and staggers after me. I pick up the pace, and so does he.

Then I look to my right and remember the dragons. The whole reason we are here in the first place. They’re even more massive up close and looking right at us. There is intelligence in their eyes. Cunning is also a word that comes to mind.

They stand completely still, like statues. I hold my breath as I keep walking. Then it hits me. Voices. More than one. Why is there more than one? No one told me about this. There’s shouting inside my head. Why are they shouting?

Here!

To me!

Over here!

I’m your dragon!

Is it Dagger? Is it him talking to me?

Forget Dagger.

Yes, I’m here. Come to me, recruit! Keep walking.

Dagger! It’s him. It’s Dagger. I stagger toward him, but my head is on fire. I hold it with both my hands. I need it to stop the shouting. I’m dying. Has someone died like this before? Something drips down my face.

Blood.

I'm bleeding from my nostrils. The voices get louder and louder. It hurts. Blood runs down my chin. I can taste its coppery tang.

Then they come at me. All the dragons and all at once. Every dragon is looking at me. I'm being surrounded by them.

Seren.

A seren.

Mind-bond me.

Me! Pick me!

Here! Human!

"What is this?" Halbert shouts. "I thought you were supposed to mind-bond us? Why are you going to her?" He runs toward a dragon. What is he doing? I want to shout for him to stop, but my mouth won't work. My brain is fuzzy.

I can sense that the dragon closest to Halbert is agitated. They all are. The one right there becomes angry.

"Hey! Hey! Dragons! What the fuck!? Leave her alone. You're supposed to pick me, not her."

There is a blast of white-hot heat. It's over quickly, and all that is left of Halbert is a blackened spot on the ground. A spot devoid of grass. It's just ash. No body bag needed; he was right about that. Then, the dragons turn their attention back to me. The pain is so unbearable I collapse, looking up at the blue sky. Then everything goes black.

Hunter

I squint as I open my eyes.

Dragons.

Bonding.

Pain.

I sit up in bed. “What happened? Did I get to you in time?” I ask Dagger when I see him. He’s sitting on a chair next to my bed. He has stubble on his face and bloodshot eyes. “Are we mind-bonded? We aren’t, are we? Shit!” I cover my mouth. “I’m sorry.” I look down at myself. I’m wearing my pajamas. I touch various parts of my body, checking for injuries. “I’m okay?” I ask it in a questioning manner, followed by, “I *am* okay!” I say this with animation. “I thought I died.”

Dagger smiles at me, and holy shit, but the man is beautiful. “You didn’t die.”

“Oh, good.” I fall back into bed. “That’s good.” Then I sit back up. “Not when I have so much to live for. Did I mind-bond with you? Are they sending me home? I won’t go, Dagger. They can’t make me.”

“Easy there, tiger. One step at a time, remember?”

“One step at a time. No, I don’t remember.” I shake my head. “How long have I been out? Wait a minute! Why did I

pass out in the first place?” I grab his hand, my eyes going wide in my head. “Did Halbert die? I think I saw him get incinerated. It happened quickly.”

“Firstly, you’ve been asleep for roughly twenty-four hours, and then yep, I’m afraid he’s dead.” Dagger doesn’t look like he cares much. “As Shadow said, there is always one idiot Tribute and Halbert took the cake. Hell, he took the whole damned bakery. Don’t feel bad for him.”

I make a face. “I don’t. He did that all himself. I mean, the dragons were pissed at him, and rightly so. He encroached on Blaze’s personal space, which is very important to a dragon. He...” I stop talking. “How did I know all that? Is Blaze the name of one of the dragons?”

Dagger nods. “That’s right, sweetheart. Blaze was the blue one with... Never mind. It isn’t important.”

“Don’t you sweetheart me. I bonded with Blaze, didn’t I? I don’t want to have bonded with Blaze. Who the hell is Blaze, anyway?” Dagger is still grinning, and I want to smack the smile right off of him. “What is going on?”

“You’re a Seren.” His grin gets bigger.

“A what now?” I frown. “I’ve never heard of that. You’d better spell it out and quickly.”

He cups my face with his very warm, slightly calloused hands. “You are one of the most powerful Sky Wardens ever to exist. We usually discover one every ten years, but there hasn’t been one for fifteen...make that sixteen long years.”

“I’m powerful?” I frown. “So I *did* mind-bond Blaze, then?”

“Yes.” Dagger nods, still grinning.

“That’s terrible. Stop smiling. Stop it right now.” I point at him. “I don’t care if I’m a Seren thing.”

Dagger grabs my hand and places it on his chest. “You mind-bonded with all of the dragons. Every last fucking one of us. You’re a Seren, capable of bonding more than one dragon at one time. Nine has never been done before. You are the

most powerful Seren in the history of Sky Wardens. You could turn this war around for us.”

“What? No! How? What me, a Seren?”

“Yes, and I should have known. You *will* keep my dragon in line. You were right. You have us both whipped like fucking little puppies.”

“I can’t possibly ride nine dragons, Dagger.” This is insane.

Dagger scowls. His eyes darken, and out pops my little grumpy cupcake. “You will only ride *me*. *Just me*, whether in bed or in the skies. Me and me alone. Are we clear?”

I get wet in that moment. I know it’s wrong, but I can’t help that he has that effect on me. My panties turn slick, and my nipples harden.

“You will ride me but control three, maybe even four, others. We’ll fly in formation. You will be in charge of a fucking dragon fleet.”

I giggle, sounding nervous. “I can’t wait.” I’m actually being sarcastic. The thought scares me. I was out for twenty-four hours.

My man picks up on my anxiety. “We’ll start with just me and expand. One step at a time, Hunter. One bite at a time.” He brushes a kiss on my mouth.

“That sounds doable.” I scratch my head. I can’t remember much from yesterday. “Did anyone else bond or die, aside from Halbert?” I ask him, still trying hard to remember.

“Nope.” Dagger shakes his head. “You stole all the thunder. Once the dragons got a whiff of you, no one else existed. We all wanted to bond with you.”

“So, no one else died then?”

“Nope.”

I can breathe easier. “Will the rest go home, then?”

He shakes his head. “There is another mind-bond taking place right now.” He looks at his watch. “We’ll soon find out

what happens, but don't worry about all that." He slides into bed with me, pulling me close.

I'm trying hard to enjoy the moment. I'm with the man I love, but all I can think of is Skylar and the others. Someone else is going to die today, I can feel it.

Taming The Fire is on pre-order [now...](#)



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Charlene Hartnady is a USA Today Bestselling author. She loves to write about all things paranormal, including vampires, elves and shifters of all kinds. She lives on a couple of acres in the country with her husband and three sons. They have an array of pets including horses and a gecko named Pickle.

She is lucky enough to be able to write full time, so most days you can find her at her computer writing like mad. Charlene believes that it is the small things that truly matter, like that feeling you get when you start a new book, or when you look at a particularly beautiful sunset.

If you want to be kept updated on new releases please sign up to my Latest Release [Newsletter](#) to ensure that you don't miss out. I promise not to spam you or divulge your email address to a third party. I send my mailing list an exclusive sneak peek prior to every release, as well as info on sales and freebies. You can unsubscribe at any time.

I would love to hear from you so please feel free to look me up:

www.charlenehartnady.com

charlene.hartnady@gmail.com

[BookBub](#)



EXCERPT OF ROYAL DRAGON



Chapter 1

They were damned either way. Whether the lesser kings accepted the proposal or not.

Damned.

The word rolled around in his mind. It made his gut churn and left a bad taste in his mouth. Coal looked at each of the four males, from one to the next. All of them were powerful specimens. Pure royal blood ran through their veins. Their golden chest markings were testament to that. As was his own. He felt such pride at being a royal prince, at being a fire dragon.

Granite, the earth king, had dark hair and even darker eyes, like polished onyxes, much like his own. There were also flecks of black within his chest marking, to show that he was

an earth dragon. Of his personality, it was known far and wide that he was both strong and a hothead.

Then there was Torrent, the water king. His hair was so light it was almost white. His eyes as blue as the ocean itself. Flecks of green could be found in his golden chest markings to represent their element. The male was excessively arrogant but likeable, an odd combination.

Thunder had eyes the color of amethyst jewels. As the air king, the blue flecks within his golden markings were definitely prominent. Though normally calm, the male looked agitated at the moment. This meeting needed to run smoothly. Coal only hoped that the males would accept the proposal put forward by his brother, the fire king. Blaze was the strongest of the dragons. His eyes were like emeralds. He, like Coal and the rest of the fire dragons, could breathe fire, which gave them a superior advantage over the others. Their golden markings were pure.

The air king held the platinum goblet with such a grip that Coal was sure it would crush at any moment. His face was red. Scales were visible through the golden tattoo on his chest, making more blue bleed through. A sure sign that he was moments away from changing.

“No,” Thunder growled. The word was accompanied by a billow of smoke. It left his mouth in a lazy, curling tendril, at complete odds with the male who expelled it. The air king was fire-breathing mad. Such a pity for him that a bit of useless smoke was all he could produce. Thunder had better watch his step. Blaze looked relaxed as he leaned back in his chair, but Coal knew better. His brother was not as calm as he seemed. The slight tic in his jaw was evidence of that.

The air king clenched his teeth together for a few long moments, clearly trying to get himself back under control. *Best he do that, and quickly.* Blaze would not tolerate such outbursts, even from another king. “You can forget about having one of the air females. The agreement was, your sister for one of my tribe. A fair trade.”

The earth and water kings moved restlessly in their chairs, as did the princes at their sides. They were not privy to the arrangement that had been made between the fire and the air kingdoms. Had the agreement worked out, it would have put both fire and air at the top of the food chain, with their own tribe, fire, as the solid leaders over the four kingdoms. As it stood though, they were still at the head of the game despite the deal falling apart at the last minute.

Blaze twisted the ring on his finger. “I will agree to the three of you taking human mates on the condition that I get to have one of the fertile dragon females.” His green eyes blazed. He dropped his hands back at his sides. There was not a single sign of tension in his body. Not true. There it was again, that tic. Only, you had to know where to look and if you blinked you might miss it.

Thunder laughed. There was no humor to the sound. “You are an arrogant bastard.” The male turned serious in an instant. “We are going to take humans whether you like it or not.”

“Do that, and I will destroy you.” Blaze’s voice was even. “That goes for all of you.” He let his gaze go from one king to the next before returning to Thunder.

The other two kings didn’t say a word. Although Coal wasn’t sure if it was because they knew their places. Something was brewing and it was clear that these three had discussed this amongst themselves at length.

Thunder leaned forward in his chair. “You are going to single-handedly destroy our species. Just because some human female broke your heart doesn’t—”

“Say one more word and I’ll kill you, so help me ...” Blaze stood, tension radiated off of him. On the upside, that pesky tic was gone. He and Thunder stared at each other for what felt like a long time. Coal had to work to remain outwardly calm. To refrain from fidgeting like the others. He was the fire prince and heir to the throne, should anything happen to Blaze.

“This is how it’s going to go down,” Blaze said, his voice still calm and even. “I’m going to take one of your sisters; the

rest of you can take humans. If it works out, we'll allow more of our males to take them as well." He sat back down.

Thunder shook his head. He ran a hand through his hair. His blue eyes were bright and filled with a multitude of emotions including anger, frustration and longing.

"Deny the males human females and it's a surefire way to an uprising. Do you want to be overthrown by your own dragons?" Granite's deep voice reverberated around the large room.

"It wouldn't happen. One example and the coup attempt would be at an end." Blaze narrowed his eyes. "We need to make it clear that their turn will come. Patience."

"Their patience is waning." Granite's brother, the earth prince, piped up. "Our males get two opportunities per year to be with a female. They are driven to mate and to reproduce. The testosterone in the air is nauseating. I haven't been with a female for months so I can relate." His neck muscles bulged. He was a second prince, as was the case with the water prince. It was puzzling that he was here. It was protocol for the first princes to be present at such occasions.

"I thought I could scent something odd." The earth king choked out a laugh and some of the tension in the room eased. Even Blaze managed a half smile.

"It's enough to drive even the most level-headed male completely insane." Granite took a sip of wine from his goblet. "They will not wait."

"What do you propose?" Blaze cocked his head and raised his brows.

"We need to stick with tradition. All of our males need to be afforded the same opportunity despite their standing within the tribe," the earth king said.

"The hunt," Coal muttered.

Blaze nodded. He looked like he was deep in thought. Coal couldn't believe that his brother was actually considering this. Human mates. It was absurd. Humans were far lesser beings. So far below the dragon shifter species. They were small and

weak. Coal had never once contemplated going on a stag run. Why, when there were two perfectly good females in their tribe and several more scattered across the kingdoms? He was lucky to have been born a prince. Human females for the lessers maybe, but for the royals, it was a travesty.

Lately, he and Scarlet had been spending more and more time together. The female had hinted about wanting to become his mate. They were discussing the possibility. The only downside was that she was infertile. The female had never gone into heat and probably never would. Granite was right when he said that they had a built-in need to reproduce. Coal wasn't immune to this drive but neither did he want a human. Scarlet would make a good mate. She would keep his bed warm, his hearth lit. He enjoyed rutting her and ... making conversation. She was adequately attractive. No sparks flew when they were together but that wasn't important. What more did a male need?

His mind immediately moved to thoughts of emotions. His sister had often spoken of love. Of long lingering looks. Of one's heart beating faster when in the presence of another. Of lust so all-consuming that it was impossible to keep one's hands to oneself. She spoke of wanting to know everything about another person. What nonsense. He didn't believe that love truly existed. He certainly didn't need it.

No. Once they got out of this meeting, he would discuss mating Scarlet with Blaze. Surely his brother wouldn't refuse him. It wasn't like he planned on taking her for himself. As the fire king, Blaze was destined for a fertile female. There was no other way.

"Yes," Granite paused for a beat. "The hunt. Tradition and lores cannot be refuted."

Blazed laughed. He shook his head. "You speak of taking humans, which is completely against our lores to begin with. Diluting the blood of our species is wrong. Diluting our royal blood is a sacrilege."

"It cannot be helped!" Thunder boomed. "Offer another alternative if you have one. We have no choice." He looked

down at his lap, refusing to meet Blaze's gaze for a few beats.

"I agree." The water king leaned forward. "We need to follow this path. Our warriors deserve mates, as do the rest of us."

"Agreed," Granite added. "We are becoming desperate." He gave a humorless chuckle. Sweat dripped from his brow. There was a nervous tension in the air.

"Taking human mates is the only solution. We cannot take too many at once though, a handful of females. Males who take part in the hunt can win themselves a female. The usual rules will apply, including the no fire rule." Thunder looked pointedly at Coal before turning his gaze back on Blaze. "Equal opportunity for all." The fire dragons were the only dragons capable of producing fire.

The idiot actually thought that he, prince of fire, would lower himself and take part in such a hunt? For a human? Hardly a prize. It was absurd.

"Where will we find these females?" Blaze asked. "The vampires advertised in the local newspapers, and females came flocking in droves. We, however, do not possess such luxuries. We need to remain hidden. Humans are not permitted to find out about our existence. We were all but wiped out by the humans two centuries ago and our numbers were strong back then. Humans have always feared us, and rightly so." He looked thoughtful for a moment.

"We may be much stronger but they outnumber us by at least a hundred thousand to one. In today's age, they have weapons of far greater power. We would be doomed. Back to my original question, where will we find these females?"

Granite smiled. "We'll simply take them."

"No." Blaze shook his head. "We're not animals. We're not in the business of kidnapping females."

"Granite is right," Thunder said. "We have no other option but to take some of these human females. I've had scouts on the lookout for the right ones. Young, strong, fertile and—"

“No!” Blaze hit his fist against the table. “How will it look when human females suddenly start to go missing? Aside from the implications, it wouldn’t be right. We are an honor-bound species, we don’t steal females.”

“What if the females were in need of rescuing? What if they were lonely, hungry, destitute? We can save the females, offer them a better life and in the process, we can save ourselves as well.”

“It’s walking a fine line. Just because someone is desperate and lonely, may not mean that they want to become the mate of a dragon shifter. I don’t like it.”

The water king shifted in his chair. “It’s not ideal,” Torrent conceded. “Though dragon shifters have everything a female could want. We offer them good lives. Females beg me to take them with me when I return from a stag run. It is the same every time without fail.”

Granite shrugged. “Maybe we should forget about the hunt and bring females back with us who express an interest in becoming a shifter mate.” He raised his brows.

“We’ve discussed this at length,” Thunder retorted.

Coal felt irritated at this statement. Proof that the three kings had met privately to discuss this. Why the need for all the secrecy?

The air king narrowed his eyes. “It would not work. Males would fight over females. How would we decide who is eligible to take a human mate? It would be difficult to regulate. A good number of human females would go missing and this would draw attention. What if a female was deceptive and left a mate and children behind? It could be disastrous.”

“Your last two points are probably the biggest concerns.” Blaze looked thoughtful for a second. “It’s a worry regardless of how we proceed.”

“Not if we only take females who are destitute,” Thunder said. “My tribe has already earmarked numerous females. None of them have family or even many friends. They would be perfect candidates.”

“Perfect candidates to abduct?” Blaze sounded exasperated. “Listen to yourself,” he rumbled.

“To be rescued!” Thunder’s booming voice filled the room.

“Let’s just say that I agree to this hair-brained scheme. *I’m not agreeing*, I’m just giving the whole thing some thought.” He sucked in a breath. “Females would need to be in a bad way and in need of saving. They would need to have everything explained to them and would need to be treated with respect and kindness at all times. Even if a male wins one of these females fair and square, he may not force himself on her. Any male found to be forcing a female will pay with his life. The human would need to agree to being mated and later impregnated. She would need to be a willing participant at all times.”

“Females will be afraid initially. It’s a given.” Granite took another swallow of wine.

“If a female doesn’t want to be with a male, no matter how hard he tries to win her ...” Blaze narrowed his eyes. “Then she will be allowed to leave, to return to her old life.”

“No,” the air king snapped. “She would be able to reveal our existence.”

“Let’s hope that our males are capable of winning the hearts of these females.” Blaze smiled. “To be honest though, I don’t like the idea in general, whether they can make them fall for them or not. The bloodlines have to be considered. I’m not ready to commit to a yes to such a widespread mating of human females.”

“It’s not their hearts that we’re interested in.” Thunder smiled even wider.

“Females are emotional, humans are so much worse. That’s why I’m infinitely glad I’m not taking a human mate. Thunder,” he looked the male head-on. “Bring your sisters when you return tomorrow. I would like to meet with them. I hope that one of them will agree to become my mate.”

Thunder's face clouded. He looked both angry and nervous. By the sheen of sweat on his brow and his suddenly pale complexion, Coal would definitely say that he was nervous. "I was very angry when I found out about your sister's pregnancy."

"As was I." Blaze didn't take his eyes off the male for a second. Their sister, Ruby had been promised to the air king. The deal was that Thunder would take Ruby and in return, Blaze could choose a fertile air princess to mate with. Unfortunately, Ruby had other plans and had become pregnant with a vampire male's child. They were mated and happy but things were clearly still heated between the fire and air kingdoms. Thunder had not been happy about the news.

The male in question leaned forward. "I may have made some rash decisions, but you can't blame me." Thunder's eyes were wide and he spoke too quickly.

Oh no.

Coal could sense that whatever Thunder was about to say was not going to be good.

Blaze nodded, urging the other king to continue.

"I gave my sisters to the earth and the water princes, it ..."

No wonder the second princes were in attendance. No damned wonder. Coal clenched his hands into fists.

Blaze slowly stood up. The tic was back and with a vengeance. Blaze banged his hands on the table. "You did what?" His voice was low and deep.

If what Thunder was saying was true, then there were no more available fertile dragon females left in all four kingdoms. The fire dragons were at risk. Huge risk. Thunder sucked in a deep breath. "I did what I felt was right. There will be humans and they—"

Blaze threw his head back and roared. At once, the room was engulfed in scorching flames. Chairs crashed and furniture smashed. By the time Blaze was finished, they all had first degree burns. Thunder was missing limbs and only barely alive.

The laundry room was cramped. Clean linen lined the shelved walls. The low hum of washing machines and dryers could be heard in the background. “Room 211 is demanding a clean.” Her supervisor looked at her watch. “You’ve got twenty minutes to get over there and to get it done.”

Julie had to refrain from rolling her eyes. She pursed her lips together, holding back a choice response. “I was just there. He had a DND sign up,” she finally pushed out. “That’s why I called and asked to be given another room to clean.” As a temp, she only got paid for the rooms she cleaned and then only after one of the managers checked them once they had been returned to the system. If there were any errors in any of the suites, a percentage was deducted from her pay. Julie needed to clean a minimum of sixteen rooms per shift. That gave her an average of twenty-five minutes a room. She couldn’t afford any errors. Literally.

Callie huffed out a breath, looking irritated. “Well, he’s changed his mind.” She raised her brows. “Now, do you want to keep arguing or should I give this unit to one of the ladies on the next shift?”

Callie was the best of the bunch. Most of the supervisors treated the temps like slave labor. They got the worst rooms. They had to work like dogs to earn something of an income. It wasn’t fun and it certainly wasn’t fair but Julie had never had it any other way. This was her life. “I’m on it.” She pushed the brake on her trolley and made her way back up the hall.

“Oh and, Julie,” Callie called after her.

She turned. “Yeah?”

“Pack up and clock out when you’re done. I need to fetch Harry from school today so I can’t hang around to wait on you.”

“No problem.”

“You sure?”

“No sweat.” Julie gave a reassuring nod of the head.

“Okay then,” Callie nodded back.

Julie continued down the hall. Callie was a single mom. She wasn't really allowed to leave until everyone had checked out but her life was one big juggling act. Rules sometimes had to be broken. Julie understood that more than most.

It was a bit of a haul to the staff elevator. Julie walked as fast as the outdated housekeeping trolley would allow. It had one squeaky wheel and if she wasn't careful the door would open and the amenity drawers would fall out. Every minute she had to work overtime to get this room done would be for free. The hotel only paid for time spent on rooms cleaned within the allotted shift and then only if they were perfect. She sighed.

By the end of this month, she'd be up to date with her rent and then she could start saving. Julie had moved plenty as a kid. They were all small towns just like Walton Springs. There had to be more. There was a whole world out there to explore. Big cities. Beautiful views. Breathtaking sunsets. So much adventure just waiting. She was done with small time. Done with small towns.

She'd never flown in an airplane, much less been to another country. Once she saved up enough though, she was leaving. Suddenly the trolley didn't feel as heavy or the lift so slow. One day ... one day soon. She just needed to get out of this hole and ahead enough to be able to save. It was going to happen.

Julie gave a double knock on the door. Room 211. “Housekeeping,” she announced. There was no answer so she tried again. Maybe the guest had gone out.

She cracked the door open. “Housekeeping,” she said again before entering with her spray bottle and cloth in hand. The cumbersome trolley stayed in the hallway. It would be a simple matter of returning to it for new supplies such as bedding and amenities when needed.

“Oh god.” She covered her eyes and backtracked. “I'm so sorry,” she mumbled.

The guy was middle-aged and not bad-looking. He had an athletic build and salt and pepper hair. He was also as naked as the day he was born. Her cheeks heated. *Floor please open up and swallow me whole.*

Why call for housekeeping if you plan on changing just then? Also, when someone announces themselves at the door, respond and ask them to wait.

“Don’t be silly,” the guy said. “Ignore me, do your thing, I’ll be dressed in a moment. We’re both adults.”

Damn. Was he a weirdo? He must be. Then again, he had a good body. Well-muscled. She opened her eyes and he was searching in the closet. His ass was ... not bad. *Not looking!* She snapped her head in the opposite direction.

This was weird. He was far too old for her but he had that whole Richard Gere thing going on. His hair had that just showered look even though it was already halfway through the afternoon. Odd! No, he couldn’t be doing this on purpose. A guy like him could get a date. Surely. Definitely. She relaxed just a smidgen. He was obviously just comfortable in his own skin.

She was tempted to leave and wait outside. Every minute she stood out there would be money lost though. She needed to get up to date with her rent. If she wasn’t so damned desperate ... Julie suppressed a sigh, she ignored him and got to work stripping the bed. She was sure that by the time she looked again he would be dressed or even better, out the door. First she removed the cover from the duvet, then the sheet from the bed and was just removing the first pillowcase when she looked up.

What the hell!

A squeaky noise came out of her throat.

“Keep cleaning,” the guy said looking pinched. His back was to the closed closet door. He wasn’t dressing. He wasn’t even attempting to dress. His hand worked his cock. Up and down. In slow easy strokes. Forget Richard Gere, this guy was a creep with a capital C. Gross!

Out now

ALSO BY
CHARLENE HARTNADY



The Chosen Series:

Book 1: [Chosen by the Vampire Kings](#)

Book 2: [Stolen by the Alpha Wolf](#)

Book 3: [Unlikely Mates](#)

Book 4: [Awakened by the Vampire Prince](#)

Book 5: [Mated to the Vampire Kings](#) (Short Novel)

Book 6: [Wolf Whisperer](#) (Novella)

Book 7: [Wanted by the Elven King](#)

[The Chosen Box Set Books 1-3](#)

The Program Series (Vampire Novels):

Book 1: [A Mate for York](#)

Book 2: [A Mate for Gideon](#)

Book 3: [A Mate for Lazarus](#)

Book 4: [A Mate for Griffin](#)

Book 5: [A Mate for Lance](#)

Book 6: [A Mate for Kai](#)

Book 7: [A Mate for Titan](#)

The Bride Hunt Series (Dragon Shifter Novels):

Book 1: [Royal Dragon](#)

Book 2: [Water Dragon](#)

Book 3: [Dragon King](#)

Book 4: [Lightning Dragon](#)

Book 5: [Forbidden Dragon](#)

Book 6: [Dragon Prince](#)

[The Bride Hunt Box Set Books 1-3](#)

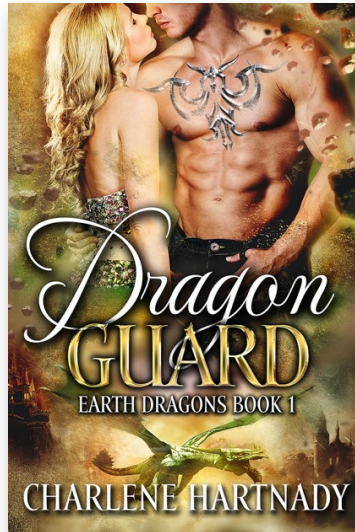
Water Dragons (Spin-off to The Bride Hunt):

Book 1: [Dragon Hunt](#)

Book 2: [Captured Dragon](#)

Book 3: [Blood Dragon](#)

Book 4: [Dragon Betrayal](#)



Earth Dragons :

Book 1: [Dragon Guard](#)

Book 2: [Savage Dragon](#)

Book 3: [Dragon Whelps](#)

Book 4: [Slave Dragon](#)

Book 5: [Feral Dragon](#)

Book 6: [Doctor Dragon](#)

Air Dragons:

Book 1: [Dragon Heat](#)

Book 2: [Dragon Hunter](#)

Book 3: [Dragon Avalanche](#)

Book 4: [Dragon Overlord](#)

Book 5: Dragon Cyclone

Exiled by the Pack

Book 1: [Scarred Wolf](#)

Book 2: [Wild Wolf](#)

Book 3: [Lone Wolf](#)

Book 4: [Wolf Rivals](#)

The Shifter Night Series (Shifter Novels):

Book 1 [Untethered](#)

Book 2 [Unbound](#)

Book 3 [Unchained](#)

[Complete Box Set Books 1 - 3](#)

The Feral Series (Shifter Novels):

Book 1: [Hunger Awakened](#)

Book 2: [Power Awakened](#)

Book 3: [Hate Awakened](#)

Book 4: [Hope Awakened](#)



The Dragon Demigods:

Book 1: [Lord of Fire](#)

Book 2: [Lord of Hell](#)

Book 3: [Little Lords](#)

Book 4: [Lord of Life](#)

Book 5: [Lord of Rain](#)

Book 6: [Lord of Destiny](#)

Book 7: [Lord of Chaos](#)

Book 8: [Lord of Tears](#)

Book 9: [Lord of Death](#)

Becoming the Demon Queen Trilogy:

Book 1: [Cursed](#)

Book 2: [Condemned](#)

Book 3: [Crowned](#)

Demon Chaser Series (No cliffhangers):

Book 1 [Omega](#)

Book 2 [Alpha](#)

Book 3 [Hybrid](#)

Book 4 [Skin](#)

Demon Chaser [Boxed Set Book 1-3](#)