



Sacrificed to the Dragon King

A SHIFTING HEARTS NOVEL
LIORA ROSE

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Sacrificed to the Dragon King



Never make a deal with the Dragon King...Unless you want to get burned...

But I have no other choice.

My father's life is on the line and the only way to save him is to trade my body and bear the dragon pince's offspring for one priceless drop of dragon blood.

No heir, no cure. Those are the rules.

But the arrogant, sexy prince I'm supposed to mate with doesn't want me.

He leaves me desperate to convince him otherwise.

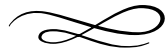
Now I'm stuck living with the royal enemy, learning their dark secrets, and falling for the wrong dragon. The very one who could lead the entire realm to war.

Yeah, I'm caught in a dangerous game of manipulation and deception with deadly stakes. One wrong move and I could lose my heart, my father...even my life.

With the mating ritual approaching with the cruel prince, things couldn't be worse.

And I couldn't be closer to death...

One



I hid in an alleyway in downtown Frostford, the city known for having the highest death rate.

It shouldn't come as a surprise since the place *was* ruled over by the asshole, King Daxlan Brantley. Ruler of dragons. Torturer of humans. Devourer of fun.

The man had officially banned all nightclubs in the city after one of his sons was found sneaking into the establishment and got so drunk that he burned down the whole joint. So, his kind lost control, and it was us humans who were punished. Story of our lives. That happened six months ago and was the least of my problems at the moment.

I peered out from behind the brownstone storefront that had shut down weeks ago. The store acted as the new underground meeting place for all the scum in the city, starting with the king himself. His black Bentley remained parked out the front. I'd been here most of the day, watching him and his crew arrive, then shuffle out and into the store, keeping their master protected between them.

The longer I scanned the quiet sidewalk with no one around, with the descending sun casting the street in shadows, the more my time was running out. The king and his men had been inside the building for over fifteen minutes, and with no show yet, I was going to bet they weren't going to appear for a while.

Show time for me.

The king was going to help me out of a shitty situation.

He just didn't know it yet.

My stomach squeezed, nerves dancing up my arms. A quick check of the street, and I emerged on silent steps, moving like the wind. Rounding the front of the Bentley, confirming there was no driver in the car, I took one last look from behind my lashes at the store. Windows were boarded up, the front door still locked, and unless I'd seen them walk in there, I wouldn't be the wiser that anyone had gone inside.

So, with no one in sight, I threw myself toward the back door, keeping the vehicle between me and the store to avoid being spotted. On my knees, I tugged at the door handle. It was locked, of course, but I'd be stupid not to try it. Thankfully, the alarm wasn't on, probably not engaged. Who would be stupid enough to mess with the king's car?

The window tint was impossibly dark to see inside, and illegal... unless you were the king. He got away with everything, and all protests were incinerated.

Wasting no time, I grabbed the screwdriver out of my back pocket and placed it in the door slit near the window. Pulling on it toward me created a small gap between the car frame and the door. Holding it with one hand, I hastily snatched the thin rod from my pocket and slid it into the gap. Now the fun part.

Moving the rod to find the unlock lever, my hands shaking, the grunt of an engine had me flinching.

Fuck!

Panicked, I twisted around just as a car farther down the street was pulling up into someone's driveway.

"Come on, you piece of crap, open up," I mumbled under my breath, pushing the rod that skirted around in there.

The king was the kind of man who never turned away an opportunity. He might not agree with what I had to offer him, but there was something inbuilt into his dragon DNA that made him all starry-eyed when it came to negotiating and gaining himself something he didn't have. It came from the need for dragons to hoard all the treasure for themselves.

So, I was ready to convince him I had something he wanted. Biggest problem was he was impossible to get near. The guards beat down anyone who tried getting to him, and I was under no illusion the king made sure they behaved that way. He enjoyed feeling important. Egotistical bastard.

All I needed was his attention, those few moments where he'd have to listen to me. Trust me, risking my life to see a monster of a king wasn't my ideal way to spend a Saturday afternoon, but after my father fell gravely ill, there was only one way to save him.

The answer lay with the dragon king.

After growing up without a mom, I sure as fuck wasn't being left alone in this goddamn world without my father. So, I did what I had to do.

While the dragons lived in the mountains in the Salty Moon Forest in their kingdom, mere humans weren't permitted in their woods—death on the spot by the guards. Too many had perished testing this theory. However, the king made frequent visits to the city, and I'd been tracking his movements, overhearing conversations to track him down.

My plan was simple.

Wait for him in the back seat of his car, and he'd have no choice but to hear me out—if I spoke quick enough before his guards killed me.

Sweat trickled down my spine. I was an only child, so it became my responsibility to care for my father, and I wouldn't let him down. I couldn't.

The car lock gave a click, and I might have cheered...a happiness that died instantly when the front door of the storefront pushed open at the same time.

Sucking in a panicked breath, I dropped the tools and ripped open the car's back door, peering over the top of the Bentley. Bulking guards emerged in their black suits, looking ready to wrestle bears. The heady rush of fear flushed over me, but no pain, no gain, right?

Throwing myself into the back, I shut the door behind me, only to find I wasn't alone.

Oh, fuck!

Adrenaline flooded my insides with the urgency to run, fear weighing down on me.

His fiery blue gaze hardened as my fingers danced over the smooth leather of the door handle, my mind torn between getting out of there and sticking it out.

Maybe breaking into his car was a terrible mistake...

"Are you lost, girl?" the older man said in a deep, raspy voice.

With reluctance, I twisted in my seat toward him, instantly knowing I sat with the king himself, though by looking at him, you wouldn't know it. In his perfectly fitted tailored pants and white button-up shirt with golden cufflinks and buttons, he had his legs spread. Gold rings covered his fingers, which were holding a glass half-filled with what smelled like whisky. The man appeared more amused than anything in my presence.

He was huge, taking up more than half the back seat, but all male dragons were big. It was also why there was a growing number of fan girls down on earth drooling to get into their pants. I cringed on the inside, kicking myself that I'd so easily been fooled into believing he went into the building.

"You don't seem too surprised. You must be used to girls breaking into your car." I attempted to sound as unthreatening as possible, not that the king would see me as anything but an ant in his presence. I figured by playing the flirty card, he might be less inclined to kill me on the spot.

"Very rarely by a human female," he scoffed, and there it was. The hatred toward us and why he treated my kind like scum under his expensive Dolce and Gabbana shoes.

Was it getting hot in the car?

My gaze caught the approaching guards, so I swallowed back my nerves and rushed my words.

“Well, I’ll keep this short and not waste your time, your majesty.” I fidgeted with my hands in my lap.

He tilted his head to the side, eyes narrowing on me, the fire behind them burning. A flare of heat suddenly filled the car, and I panicked, well aware of his fiery breath.

“Go on,” he grumbled. “Seeing you’re such a pretty little thing, I’ll hear you out.”

I raised my chin high, bristling.

“I want to strike a deal with you. My father was attacked and bitten by a mud dragon, and nothing the doctors give him is working, but I heard even one drop of royal dragon blood could cure him.”

He’d been working in our yard, which backed into the forest, a place not just protected by the king’s guards but where deadly animals lived. The mud dragon broke through the fence and charged at him.

The damned thing was the closest cousin to the dragons. A wild creature that resembled an oversized lizard with a long tail and thick neck, claws that tore tree bark, and a yellow forked tongue. They were a stone color, covered in scales, and their oral glands secreted venom into every bite they took.

With my father not responding to medicine, he was getting worse daily. My throat thickened at losing him, and I turned my fingers over one another in my lap once more.

“That has nothing to do with me,” he snorted with an exhale.

The door behind me suddenly opened, and large meaty hands locked around my arm, wrenching me backward.

Panic struck.

“Please,” I pleaded loudly. “I’ll give you anything you want. I’ll do whatever you need. Just one drop of blood.”

Hauled out of the car, I landed on my ass when the brute locked an arm around my throat and yanked me to my feet.

“Put me down!” Panic came at me in waves, and I clawed at the guard’s arm, fingernails tearing at his skin. I kicked and raged, my heels connecting with his legs. I must have gotten lucky and struck him in a weak spot because his hold around my throat weakened. Shoving against him, I freed myself and threw myself back into the car, practically on my knees in front of the king.

“I don’t normally beg, but you’re my last hope. I’ll give you whatever you want. I can break into anything for you. My skills are unmatched.” I held his gaze, drawing in heavy breaths. “I’m offering myself as your slave for a single damn blood drop.” Hearing myself, I cringed at my desperation but knew if I didn’t make this work, my father would die.

The heaving monster shoved back into the car after me, snatching me by my hair, when the king raised a hand. Released from the guard’s grip, I found myself under the scrutiny of the scarier monster in front of me. I froze with my heart in my throat as the king’s gaze traveled down my body and back up.

He gripped my chin, lifting it to study me, and I tensed. I fucking loathed the man. I’d seen the devastation he’s caused in our city, the lives his decisions took. He pinned me with his hard glare.

“Maybe I can make use of you after all.”

My pulse skipped, and I shivered at the way he examined me, but I’d asked for this. I came to him, giving myself to him for the sake of my father’s life. So, I wore my bravery, holding his gaze.

“What do you need?” I asked, void of emotions.

For my father, I’d do whatever it took.

“Yes, I think you will do nicely.” His grasp on my chin tightened, his fingernails digging into my flesh. “You’re fiery, so this might work out better than I thought.”

“What’s that?” I sat there, unable to move, and he watched me trembling, my fear created for his amusement. I expected

the worst, my mind pulsing with images of him taking me as his sex slave.

A savage growl rumbled in his chest. “You will give my son a child.”

I flinched, his eyes consuming me. “Wait a second. What?” Mate with a dragon? I shuddered, pushing down the bile that burned the back of my throat.

“What’s not to understand?” His voice hardened. “You said you’d do anything, so if you want to save your father, you will bear a child for my eldest son, then the child will be ours. Otherwise, get the fuck out of my car.”

Breaths rushed, and the inside of the car started spinning around me. He wanted me to get pregnant and have his son’s child?

What the fuck!

“I-I’m human, and I can’t carry a dragon baby.” My mouth was dry as a desert, and fear plunged deep into my soul. Rumors spread like wildfire of women who tried and ended up losing the baby.

“It’s forbidden in my kingdom for a dragon to mate with a female. Without our magic ritual, humans can’t birth dragon babies, but don’t worry. You will undergo our ritual first.”

I shivered at the dark tone his voice took and must have forgotten to breathe because I was swaying with shock.

He released my chin and leaned in closer, his breaths suddenly raspy. “Do we have a deal?” He gave a low, guttural growl.

“W-Why not match him to a female dragon?”

“That’s not your concern. Now tell me your answer.” His voice was like gravel.

Dread punched deep in my chest, my mind spinning with all the scenarios. I had just turned twenty-two, and having a child was the last thing I wanted to do, but to carry one and give it away... made my stomach hurt.

“This is madness. I can’t just have a stranger’s baby.” I was shaking, shock squeezing me.

The muscles in his jaw flexed, and frustration flared in his wide eyes, lips peeled back, teeth bared. “Get out of my car.”

A heavy hand landed on my shoulder, the grip painful as the guard pulled me backward out of the car.

“No, stop, please.” All I could see was me burying my father. “I’ll do it on one condition. I still get to be in the child’s life, so they know I’m their mother and that I didn’t abandon him or her.”

“I’ll consider it,” he snarled. “Now, get the hell out of my face. I have your scent, and someone will pick you up in two days’ time. Tie up any affairs you have. You will be staying with us until you have a child. Whatever it takes, you will keep your word.” He lifted his gaze to the guard, still holding me half out of the car, and nodded.

The guard dragged me out of the Bentley and dumped me in the middle of the road before climbing in next to the king.

I scrambled to my feet. “Wait, what about healing my father? He won’t survive until after I have a baby.” Doctors had told us two weeks tops, and that was four days ago. My stomach clenched, waiting for the king’s answer.

He huffed heavily. “I’ll take care of him, keeping him alive just enough until you complete your promise. Then he’ll be healed completely.”

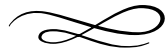
The door slammed shut in my face, and the car took off down the road.

Stumbling to the sidewalk, I rushed over to a trashcan, where I heaved out all the food I’d eaten.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

I was royally fucked... literally.

Two



Two days had passed, and my time had run out.

Today, I was being picked up to go live in the dragon kingdom in the mountains—to lose my freedom, my life, my sanity for the next nine months at least. I felt like I was going to be sick.

“Why do you look so glum, gumdrop?” my dad asked, using his nickname for me because I grew up devouring the candy. Lying in bed, he wheezed, and I sat next to him on the side of the bed, waiting until he caught his breath. “You should be happy. You’re the only human to be accepted into the dragon king’s court.”

“Right.” Grinning, I shoved down emotions that felt like shattered glass and hugged my father. He felt so fragile and weak.

I didn’t tell him about the deal I had made with the king involving having the prince’s baby. I’d lied, saying I gained a job there as their nanny. I couldn’t break his heart or let him know what I was sacrificing, or he’d never let me go through with it. It was better this way... better he thought I was safe.

“I’m just going to miss you so much,” I said, smiling, so he didn’t worry about me.

“Hey, you’ll see me a few times a week.” He smiled brighter, something he always did when I was down. “They can’t lock you up for the entire year.”

“I can’t make any promises.” I forced out a chuckle, my throat closing up. “I have to follow their rules, and I hear they

are super strict. On the bright side, they're going to give you medicine to start healing as part of my payment."

Nodding, he cleared his throat, looking deathly ill. His face was pale as milk, his eyes were hazed over, and his leg was swollen and purple from the bite mark.

"Just be careful." He hugged me back, but it was so frail, I blinked back tears.

"I promise. And I'll be fine. One year is nothing. We'll be back to playing tennis together in no time."

"You bet."

I rubbed his arm, hoping so much that would be the case.

While I was away, our neighbor said he would look after my father, and I would try to visit whenever I could. I was hopeful I'd be permitted to see him once or twice a week until I started showing and couldn't hide the pregnancy. It ate me up inside, imagining not being with my dad for so long, but I'd make it work if it meant he didn't die.

Someone banged on the door. "It's time for you to go, human."

I flinched. Must be the wonderfully polite dragon guard... not.

"Looks like my lift is here," I murmured to my dad, trying to hold back tears as I picked up the small bag of things I'd packed. "I'll miss you, Dad, but I'll see you soon."

"Give them hell, gumdrop. I'm so proud of you."

Nausea rolled in my stomach, but I nodded, going back in for one last hug, not wanting to release him. I hadn't spent time away from him... ever. Something sharp in my chest stung that I wouldn't hear his cheery voice or taste the best scrambled eggs he made. I touched my mom's locket that she gave me just before she died, tears blurring my vision. So, my dad was all I had left in the world.

For him.

For him, I was doing this.

Be brave, Asha.

A growl came from the front, and I pulled back from my father, giving him a final kiss.

“See you soon.” My voice quivered.

“Bye, gumdrop.”

At the front door, I threw it open to find a scale dragon’s yellow catlike eye, which was bigger than me, staring straight at me. I yelped at first because it wasn’t every day that you were greeted by a giant eye. It belonged to a monstrous iridescent, green-scaled dragon, and dread snaked down my spine.

“About time.” The dragon’s words streamed through my mind, yet his huge, razor teeth-filled mouth didn’t move.

I’d heard that dragons were able to project their thoughts onto others, but it felt strange experiencing it, like cobwebs in my mind. His voice in my head freaked me out, as though my mind was too crowded with my own thoughts to have a random dragon speaking inside my skull, too.

Suddenly, large claws came at me, and I shrieked, seeing only death. I leapt away from them.

“W-Wait,” I stammered, realizing if there was a huge dragon in my front yard, there was only one way to travel. That earlier terror came knocking into me once more. “I’m not flying with a-a dragon. Where’s the plane?” Or hell, I’d even take a long car ride.

“Hurry up, human girl. You don’t want to keep the king or the firstborn prince waiting.” His voice was gruff, rasping across my head before he bared razor-sharp teeth.

God, they were so huge and sharp.

Blowing out an exasperated exhale, the steaming hot air buffeted me, sending me back a few steps. I grabbed onto the wall to stop from falling over, nearly dropping my bag.

He tilted his giant head to the side. “Have you been drinking?” Dragons were bred to be arrogant cocks. It was fed into their cold blood before birth.

I straightened my shoulders, threw my bag up on my shoulder, and marched outside, shutting the front door behind me. I didn't need my dad to overhear why I was really going to the dragon court.

"Fine. Let's go," I said, resigned there was no way I could go back on the deal. I wasn't ready to have a baby, but for all I knew, the prince might see me and fall madly in love with me, then I'd be fine with it. I almost laughed out loud at my delusional thoughts.

Glaring up at my ride, I straightened and took a really good look at him. My heart was pounding a hundred miles a second. God, he was bigger than the house—green iridescent scales reflecting every color under the sun, spikes circling behind his ears, sharp talons ready to shred someone with one strike, and a long nose with flaring nostrils. Tucked at his sides were dark wings.

All of it was a bit overwhelming. The giant reptile in my yard could easily rival Godzilla—if he was real. My neighbors were emerging from their homes to stare at the eyesore. The only time a dragon made an appearance was when you were in a crap-ton of trouble.

They were scary fuckers.

The one they'd sent to pick me up was larger than others I'd seen, and he had golden eyes that looked more human than monster. His enormous tail had a spiked tip that spread out across my next two neighbors' yards. Pipi, next door's Pomeranian, was barking his little head off at the dragon, which was amusing.

"Not every day a human gets invited to court. What makes you so special?" His tone was condescending and hostile, not that I expected a warm greeting. His golden gaze pierced right through me.

I lifted my chin, feigning confidence.

"That's not your business, is it?" I was all about faking it until I made it. Sure, I was dancing a dangerous game by

poking something that could eat me in one gulp, but the king wouldn't want me dead... not yet, anyway.

He let out a loud, hot breath that fluttered through my hair. It smelled of ash.

Suddenly, long talons rushed at me, snatching me up before I could jump out of the way. I cried out in surprise as he grabbed me around the waist and lifted us both off the ground. Powerful wings snapped outward, blotting my street with a great shadow as we rose higher, bobbing up and down with his beating wings. It was going to be a bumpy ride. The wind buffeted against me as we picked up speed. The talons scraped against my body, squeezing me. I winced and struck it in the leg with my fist.

“Loosen up. You're going to break me!” I yelled at the dragon, the wind stealing my words.

He must have heard me because his grip loosened, but he went too far. I was slipping, and I panicked, scrambling to hold on to those long, black fingers. Screaming, nearly falling, my sack of clothes and possessions tumbled down to the forest below.

“My stuff!” I shouted, my feet dangling in midair, my hands holding on to him for dear life.

His massive head tucked down to watch me with what I swear was a smirk. “This better, royal concubine? And you don't need human possessions. The empire will provide everything you need.”

I clung to him, wishing I could flick him off, but I was too scared to do much more than glare at him. *Asshole.*

So, he knew the purpose of my visit. Big deal. How hard could it be? I mean, dragon shifters were renowned for being the most beautiful species in the world, and I'd seen some of them in human form to know I wasn't going to be matched up to some gross guy. At least, I hoped that was the case.

The green dragon's eyes twinkled with amusement, and I hated that I looked away and felt embarrassment burning over

my cheeks. He closed his talons slightly, but I still felt as if I was going to fall to my death at any second.

“Stop staring at me,” I said, closing my eyes briefly. “How can you fly with your head bent like that? The king would have your head if you accidentally killed me.”

“If you think so, human girl.” His laughter streamed over my mind. “Your kind is a dime-a-dozen.”

“How about you focus on flying straight?”

“Would you rather I fly upside-down? You on top, concubine” The sexual innuendo didn’t pass me by, and my eyes snapped open.

“No! And I don’t think the prince would appreciate you mind-talking to me like this. For a delivery dragon, you have zero respect for your king. For all you know, I might mention to him what a shitty job you did and that maybe he ought to clip your wings.” I was completely bluffing, but this dragon was irking me.

“If you think so, concubine.” He chuckled, the sound of his mirth like sandpaper inside my head. I really hated this dragon.

“Don’t call me that.” I shuddered, thinking that the word reminded me that I was whoring out my body to the bloody dragon king’s son. Was that what all the guards and servants at the royal palace were thinking about me? It was none of their business why I agreed. I’d do whatever it took to heal my dad. No matter what, I would do it.

“You may soon find out that being a royal concubine isn’t so bad. It may even be enjoyable.”

I scowled, but he said nothing more, only turned his head and focused on flying us to the dragon court.

“You owe me a new wardrobe and books” My stomach twisted with nerves, and I tightened my grip on his talons.

“Is that all? Couldn’t have been more than a couple of hundred dollars’ worth.” He cocked his head, turning it slightly to look at me out of the corner of his eye. We swooped

close to powerlines, and I stopped breathing. He didn't even seem to notice. Obviously, he was used to flying at this speed and so low to the ground. I squeezed my grasp until my fingers turned white.

“Well...” I squirmed, swallowing the fear that clawed up my throat when we flew a breath's distance from the treetops. “Not all of us have amazing jobs, like being the dragon king's horse to transport people around, to afford more than the basics.” I clamped my mouth shut, thinking this dragon could report me to the king and have me executed for such treason.

As though sensing my tension, his grip on me tightened slightly. Or maybe he was eager to get me to the king so he could advise the whole court on my blasphemy. I gulped, afraid of what was going to happen.

The trees brushed by in a soft blur of greens and browns as we streaked through the canopy. The midday sun beat down on us as my heart thundered in my ears. He remained silent.

Great going, Asha. Already putting myself in more danger and I hadn't even set foot in the dragon court yet.

When we began ascending, I lifted my gaze to the kingdom that rose up before us.

My mouth fell open at the sight in front of me. I couldn't help but be awestruck by the grand palace. It appeared to be made from pure white marble, with crystal decorations that glinted in the sun. It was located on top of an oversized rock formation, meaning there was only one way to get up there—flying.

It was an expansive kingdom with dozens of buildings, the most prominent two rising above the others, layered like a wedding cake. Gold and emerald, its towers and spires stretched high into the sky, disappearing beyond the clouds. Gardens laden with flowers and trees peppered the grounds, and one side of the kingdom had an enormous waterfall cascading into a river that fed back down to the city.

“Wow.” I'd never seen anything so breathtakingly beautiful.

At the top of the palace was a regal red and gold flag with a dragon breathing fire, showing off its pride and majesty as their royal seal.

Was I really going to be living here?

In the distance, half a dozen dragons flew wildly, practicing battle maneuvers, by the looks of it. They swooped and growled, slamming their tails into their opponents. I guessed even ferocious dragons had to defend their empire against other dragon families in the world.

We landed in front of the palace with a great slap on the stone floor, and I was immediately surrounded by dragons. They were towering creatures with scales and wings that appeared more like rough leather than scales. I glanced up at the dragon who brought me here for support, but he yawned, then stretched his wings and tore off into the sky, leaving a cloud of dust behind. For the best... he was an arrogant dick.

Two gray dragons strolled over to me, smaller than the delivery guy and with an elegance in their walk.

“You must be the human the king ordered?” the bigger of the two asked.

“Um... yes.” I wasn’t sure if I was admitting to being an appetizer. I was suddenly touching the chain around my neck, relaxing that at least I hadn’t lost that in the crazy flight here. The locket was irreplaceable along with the little bit of herbs inside I only used during super-stressed out ties. Like now.

The pair shifted into their human forms right before my eyes, their forms shrinking, a spark of dust sparking from them. I was once told that a dragon’s ability to transform was connected to magic. Many said they were part fae, which was where the sparks of enchantment came from.

I might have gasped with shock. I’d never witnessed them changing.

Seconds later, two females with long, silver hair, wearing gray servant dresses, stood in front of me. They resembled runway models more than maids, and I felt plain in my jeans

and t-shirt, with my long chestnut hair pulled messily into a ponytail.

“This way.” The shorter woman flipped her hair over her shoulder, giving me a look up and down as if she’d already decided I wasn’t worth anything.

Irritation burned through me, but I reminded myself that any of these dragons could kill me, and the king might not even blink. I had to be careful and watch my damn tongue.

“This way,” the shorter one said.

Biting my tongue, I followed them through the gates into the castle, then down a great hall that sparkled with crystals and jewels in the walls. Even the floor sparkled with the precious stones embedded in the marble. I hurried to keep up with them and not gawk at everything. We entered an enormous room with grand arched ceilings and precious jewels. All attention was drawn to the steps at the back wall that led to a golden throne that looked like it was made of flames in design.

King Daxlan Brantley lounged on his throne, wearing a black suit with gold trimmings, along with a crown. He scoffed at my appearance, wearing that asshole expression he had back in his Bentley when we struck our deal. He barely acknowledged me as he waved my entourage forward. I guessed I was just another pawn in his world, but in truth, everything was becoming a bit too overwhelming for me. My head still swam from the fast ascent to the mountains, how enormous the palace was, and believing I was actually here to give birth to one of them. The room suddenly tilted, but I caught my footing before I fell over. The king barely noticed, and I had to stand there like a fool until he finally barked at his guards.

“Where’s my damn son?”

With a wave of his hand, two uniformed guards marched out of the throne room. I was left standing there with my stomach churning. The two servant girls stood farther behind me, not making a sound. After what felt like forever, the guards returned, dragging in a man with wild, copper-colored

hair. He wore leather pants and a torn V-neck top, and he was dusty all over. Sapphire eyes caught my attention, and he was sporting a smirk that I was sure was meant to infuriate the king.

My breath stilled at the sight of him—tall, built, and oozing power and sex. Even disheveled, he had butterflies bursting through my stomach. I'd heard that dragon men were gorgeous, but this guy was something else. Before I knew what I was doing, I was squeezing my thighs together. He was fucking stunning—muscled, strong jawline—the kind of man I expected to walk off the cover of a men's fashion magazine. My insides melted.

He wiped a bit of blood and sweat from his forehead, and I realized he must have been one of the dragons fighting outside.

“Leandre!” The king roared so loudly, I swear the pillars in the place shook. “You dare to refuse my summons? I told you to be here immediately.”

The prince strolled across the great hall like nothing could touch him, his shoulders so broad, he could probably carry the world. My attention slid up and down his body, doing a horrible job at concealing the impact he had on me, but sweet hell, why was his crotch so huge? Was it suddenly getting hot in here? I had to sleep with that god...

Reaching the steps, he propped one leg up on the first step and leaned a hand against it as he glanced up, looking his father directly in the eye, then bowed his head ever so slightly.

“This must be the human,” he said in a clipped, monotonous tone. He didn't even look my way but stared at his father.

The king grinned, and I felt like a piece of meat they were debating purchasing rather than a person.

“Show her around, then take her to your chamber to get her comfortable before we arrange the ritual to prepare her.”

I was lost for words, still dealing with how completely minuscule I felt in front of them.

“You’re wasting your time.” Leandre swung his attention to me, his glare piercing right through me. “Nothing will come of this, so don’t get your hopes up, human girl.” His nose scrunched up as if he smelled a foul order.

I tried not to let my emotions get the best of me, but it was hard not to feel hurt by his cold demeanor, especially when, seconds earlier, I was drooling over him. Wasn’t like I had signed up for this all on my own. All I wanted was a damn drop of dragon blood, and this was the price the king had set in place.

“Maybe you shouldn’t get ahead of yourself,” I blurted, knowing I should keep my mouth shut, but he was making me furious. “We’re both in a situation we don’t want to be in. Trust me, I’m not happy about being with someone like you, but I’ll take one for the team for what I need.” I was blushing hard because, fuck me, I was over the moon to see someone like him naked, yet I was starting to really hate him, especially the sexy frown he’d perfected.

Clearly, I was losing my mind.

“This is a joke,” he snarled under his breath, swinging his attention back to his father. “There’s no way I’m going to bed it... her.”

My stomach dropped. Sure, none of us was happy about the situation, but did he have to make it so humiliating in front of everyone that he rejected me? Fuck him and his sexy body.

“You will do exactly what I say!” the king shouted, shooting up from his throne. His voice boomed across the throne room. “This is not something to defy me on. You know our situation, so do your fucking job as the eldest son.”

I took a step backward, debating what to do. It was clear the prince wasn't eager to do anything with me, and if these two dragons shifted and fought each other, I sure as hell didn't want to be in the middle of them.

The king's face was purple as he pointed to the prince.

"Show her around, and you will bed her. That's an order as your king."

Kill me now. My entire body was trembling, and fire swallowed me. I hadn't expected to be rejected so openly or at all, in all honesty.

"Now!" the king gave a two finger salute as though that ended the conversation.

The prince held his father's stare for a long moment, and I expected explosive fire. Instead, he snarled, then begrudgingly swung away.

"Come, human girl," he ordered.

"Just fucking great," I mumbled, figuring this was my cue to be treated like a dog. When the king gave me the 'go on then, follow him' look, I started to do just that. The prince didn't even bother to slow down.

Despite looking like a god, he was a monster in disguise. My stomach tightened, and I was glad I hadn't eaten anything before being flown here.

Instead of showing me anything, Leandre threw open two large wooden doors carved with scenes of dragons engaged in battle.

"This is my room," he said, dragging me into the room by my arm. "We'll be sharing a bed." Leandre gestured toward the bed.

Sunlight streamed through a large window with red velvet curtains and warmed the room. A four-poster bed with red sheets took up half the room. On the wall above the bed was displayed an image of a naked woman lying on her side on the back of a dragon seductively. Okay, I guessed that was like dragon porn.

It was becoming too much, too overwhelming. Leaving my dad, being here when no one wanted me, then having to carry a child. Reality was finally catching up with me, and I had major doubts about doing this. Fright came at me in waves, my breaths racing that I'd share a bed with a man who detested me.

Eyes prickling, I burst into tears, terrified by everything that was happening. I didn't want to be there, but I knew I had to fulfill my end of the agreement for my father's sake. When I quickly wiped my eyes with my hand, Leandre watched me with a sour expression.

"Humans are so weak. Tears and crying whenever you run into trouble." He leaned against the marble wall, with rippling arms and powerful thighs, watching me as though he was sizing up a tasty morsel. His deep reddish hair caught the sunlight from the open window nearby, making him appear like the devil.

Handsome as sin, a million girls would die right now to be in his presence, and I had to tear my gaze away not to stare at him anymore.

"So, you and your father guarantee I'll stay alive and healthy through all of this?"

"Sure." The prince looked at his nails as if wondering how fast they'd slice through human flesh, and I shuddered. "If that's what the king promised, then my dad won't go back on his word." His eyes met mine, narrowing. "See that you don't break yours."

Guess I might as well get this party started. The lump pressing in on my throat was only getting harder to swallow back.

"We haven't been formally introduced," I said, extending my hand. "I'm Asha."

He crinkled his nose in disgust. "Why would I care what your name is?"

"B-But we're going to have a child tog—"

“That’s a deal you and my father made. I have no desire to mate with you or any other human. All any of you are good for is being servants.”

I bristled, irritated by his condescension. I wasn’t weak, yet I had made the choice to be that way for the sake of someone else.

“So, you will get your father to honor his word?”

The prince eyed me up and down, and I fought the urge to cover myself, feeling like I was naked, even though I was fully clothed. Wandering over, he reached out and ran his hand down my side. I clenched my fists to keep from hitting him. His nostrils flared, and I wasn’t sure if that was a good thing or not. I was so tense and had no idea how we were going to do this.

“Get cleaned up. You reek of humans.” Without waiting for an answer, he turned on his heel and sauntered out of the room.

I wanted to let out a frustrated scream, but at least I knew what kind of dragon brat prince I was dealing with. A sense of dread plunked down in my gut. Nine months of living in this dragon kingdom alone... nine months of living in this castle with a prince who would rather insult me than look at me. And that was if I fell pregnant right away. It could be longer, which had me exhaling loudly.

I was on my own with only the clothes on my back, thanks to the stupid dragon guard, but I wasn’t going to sit in my room twiddling my thumbs. If I’d call this home for the foreseeable future, I had to make myself fit... somehow. So, I slipped out of the room, deciding to do some exploring.

The place was a maze of winding hallways, dozens of rooms, and closed huge, gold-plated doors I dared not peek inside. Any person who passed either ignored or glared at me as if they’d rather rip me open and paint the white marble with my blood than have me here.

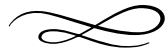
I had known this arrangement could be dangerous, but I’d thought the prince would go along with his father’s wishes.

That in less than a year, I'd be done and back with my father and my friends, not worrying about death and dying. Though I had asked the king to let me be part of the baby's life, which I would insist on.

I sighed, feeling alone again, but I knew if I wanted to keep my vow and get Dad a permanent cure, I had to hold my ground. With my life feeling like I was walking on a tightrope, I continued to hunt for the royal baths to take a much-needed shower and prepare for my new life in the dragon court.

The sooner I could get all this over with, the better.

Three



The castle was enormous, at least double the size of the largest city I'd ever been in. Rooms that could take up an entire block were crammed full of such beauty, it took my breath away. Grand ornate doorways and windows seemed to stretch for miles. The walls were filled with intricate carvings, statues, and artwork that made it feel like I was standing in the middle of a scene from a fairy tale.

Everywhere I looked, there were breathtaking pieces of furniture and decor. Enchanted was the best word to describe it. There was even a crystal ballroom with an ethereal glow as though it was carved from cool-toned colors and a polished opalescent floor that could be a gateway to another world and reflected a swirling pattern of ice and fire locked in etched glass.

The only places I'd danced in were clubs, nothing as ornate as this ballroom. Feeling small just looking, I turned away from the grander. I needed to get cleaned up and wasn't even sure if I was allowed in there.

After two more corners, I found the bathroom, which was like a hot spring but indoors. Seriously. The dragons had carved marble around the springs. Steam rolled off the water in white wisps and looked so inviting, I wanted to jump in. I bit my lower lip, thanking the heavens there wasn't anyone nearby.

The prince said I had to get cleaned, so I could blame it on him if I got into trouble.

Quickly, I took off my clothes and locket, tucking the piece on top so it didn't get wet, and slid into the water that enveloped me in warmth. Tense muscles I didn't know I had relaxed. I sank deeper into the water, sighing in pleasure. I really should wash and get out fast, but I couldn't seem to get my body to listen. Glancing up, I studied the light reflecting off the ceiling, which was part of the mountain and colored in reds, oranges, and a deep cream. It was beautiful. I could stay here all day.

"You make yourself at home fast," a rumbling voice in my mind had me shrieking, covering my breast and dipping further down until the water lapped at my chin.

I flinched, splashing myself in the face in my attempt to twist around toward the door. "Who's there?" I asked, my voice shaking.

The iridescent green dragon who had brought me here pushed his head deeper into the cavern. His yellow eyes glittered in the light, and his scales were like polished, dark jade.

"Get out," I yelled. "I'm bathing."

"Is that what you call it?" He snorted, flames shooting across the floor, and I scooted farther back in the hot spring to avoid being burned to a crisp. "You might want to use soap and actually clean yourself."

Instead of flicking him off while I was covering my breasts, I glared at him. "I don't see any soap."

He grinned, showing me all his teeth, and I shrunk deeper into the water but lifted my chin instead of cowering. If I was at the dragons' court, I was going to have to play their games and not show any weakness.

"There's soap in the seashells. Water dragons' specialty."

Seashells? I frowned, looking around, and spotted the oyster-type shells at the far corners of the hot springs.

"Thanks." I motioned. "Now, if you don't mind—"

“I don’t mind at all.” He lowered his head as though getting comfortable.

“The prince won’t like you staring at me while I bathe. And why are you in your dragon form while everyone else isn’t indoors?”

“I prefer it this way.” The dragon guard yawned, his huge mouth and razor-sharp teeth on show.

When he didn’t budge, I glided over to the oysters. Liquid soap, the color of a pearl, glistened inside. I scooped some up, marveling at the smooth as silk texture.

“Here.” The dragon opened his talon hand, revealing a gold and white gown, which he placed on a rock near the bath. “Should fit you. Consider it a gift to replace what you lost.”

From here, the material looked like silk and glittered in the light. It was probably more expensive than everything I had in my bag, but I would never admit that.

“One garment doesn’t equate to all my clothing and books you made me lose, but thanks for the thought,” I said because I didn’t want to gush over the gown and make him think I was easy to please. I was going to be the mother of the future king of dragons, so I had to act like the part, right? Or at least let these dragons know I couldn’t be bought so easily, or they’d break me in a heartbeat.

“Noted.” He tilted his head in a slight bow. “Enjoy your bath, concubine.”

“Don’t call me that.”

He turned away and left.

Fuming, I scrubbed the soap into my hair, then rinsed. I washed my body as fast as I could before the dragon guard returned or someone else came in, considering there were no doors to the baths.

I wrung the water out of my hair, then got dressed. The gown fit perfectly, light and thin, yet hugging my curves. It reminded me of the togas from ancient Greece but in a sexier

way. The material dried my skin and the part of my hair that touched it.

Magic.

There were a pair of golden sandals with the dress, so I slipped them on.

Guess I was going to have to get used to that, too. Quickly, I refastened my mom's locket around my neck.

I made my way out, grabbing my old clothes and taking them to my bedroom... or the prince's rooms, I should say. I cringed. I continued walking around the palace. Most who passed me took a wide berth, and I tried not to take it personally, but it was hard.

Walking to the east side of the castle, I spotted a balcony with the door slightly opened as though inviting me. After a quick glance around to make sure I wasn't barging in somewhere I shouldn't be, I headed to the door. Outside, the cool night air tickled my skin, and I gasped at the garden below me, full of thick trees, swings, and crammed with dahlias in every color imaginable. They were all lit up by dozens of fairy lights and lit lanterns swaying lazily in the breeze.

I wanted to run barefoot through the thick, soft grass in the open area. It was the perfect location to read a book during the day, but how could I get down from the balcony? Glancing around for a stairwell or something, I spotted movement in the corner of the garden.

At first, I thought it was just a deer or a small owl, then I squinted to get a better look. The shadows began to move closer together, letting out soft moans of pleasure. I held my breath as my heart skipped, realizing it was a couple making love in the garden. My gaze dropped to the huge, half-naked man, pounding into the woman bent over.

Heat rose to my cheeks and tightened my nipples. My heart raced with a forbidden sense that I shouldn't be watching, yet I couldn't look away. I wasn't a virgin and knew how good sex could be, but it'd been a while since I got any

action. There was just something carnal and sexy as hell watching them fuck like animals. Clenching my thighs together, a tingle started, teasing me.

Their bodies moved in a hypnotic rhythm, and fire pooled low in my belly. The man grunted, plowing into the woman over and over while she moaned. A wave of heat surged through me, and I gripped the banister to keep myself steady. I was so turned on, a whimper slipped past my lips.

I shouldn't be watching them, yet I didn't want to move away. It was wrong, and I should leave. I twisted away when I spotted the green dragon down in the garden, near the flowers and away from the couple. From his location, he could easily see them amid the trees, but he was staring straight at me with his intense fiery eyes glinting wickedly.

Fuck!

A blush erupted over my entire body. Oh my God, he saw me watching the couple. Was that some kind of law against that in the dragon world? I didn't need the guard spilling his guts about me to the king. Maybe that was why I kept bumping into him. The king sent him to spy on me. That was just great.

Spinning on my heels, feeling like I was going to die of embarrassment, I darted back to the prince's room, panting.

When I reached the room, my heart was pounding hard, and my face was still burning. I glanced around to make sure no one saw me, then slipped inside the room, feeling a wave of relief I was alone. Would the green dragon tell the king what he saw?

My stomach churned, and I paced, waiting, half-expecting him to follow me and tease me about gawking at that couple. The portrait of the naked woman seemed to glare accusatory at me.

Sitting on the bed, I let out a deep sigh. Dragonfire and smoke floated in from the windows, bringing with it the aroma of something delicious roasting, and my stomach rumbled. I hadn't eaten anything since lunch.

The door suddenly opened, and I turned around to find the prince had joined me. He huffed at my presence. Well, too bad. We had to make a baby together after the ritual, so we needed to get to know each other. I took a deep breath, my body still humming from the sight of the couple making love in the garden.

Okay, focus and make small talk.

“So, on the day I arrived, were you and the other dragon fighting or training in the air?”

“Not important.” He shrugged and toed off his boots.

Okay.

“What’s your favorite food? Mine is pasta. I could eat it all day long.”

“I’m not in the mood for chatter. Get in bed and go to sleep.” He took off his shirt but kept his pants on and climbed under the covers, turning his back to me like I’d been dismissed.

Irritation swam in my gut as I slid under the covers, sticking to my side, feeling awkward as hell sharing a bed with a stranger who hated me. On the bright side, the bed was so big, he might as well be on the other side of the room. Each dismissive gesture and word from him felt like a stab in my chest, a reminder he had no real interest in getting to know me. My chest constricted, and I blinked back tears. I shouldn’t care, just like he didn’t. We weren’t getting married, but it was difficult to ignore the emotions associated with having a baby together.

I needed this to work—to make a baby dragon prince for the king—but even with the ritual, how the hell was I going to do that when the prince didn’t even want to speak to me, much less touch me?

Curling up into a ball, my mind drifted to the green dragon watching me and just thinking about him, knowing what I saw had my blood rushing with excitement, and warmth spread through my body.

I laid away for hours, my mind replaying what I'd seen outside. Despite feeling embarrassed, an overwhelming sense of desire stirred deep within me, and I couldn't help but imagine being in that place together with the prince-making love under the starry night sky surrounded by nature's beauty. I also hated myself for craving a gorgeous asshole who hated me.

Tears pricked my eyes, and I wiped them away. I'd never felt so alone and lost in my life.

The next morning, the prince was gone, and my stomach tightened with dread. Still, I dragged myself out of bed. No matter what the prince thought of me, I could make this work.

At breakfast, I lifted my chin and grabbed a bowl of steaming oatmeal and toast, taking a seat at a crowded table. I found one with two seats open in the corner—perfect!

I quickly sat down, but as soon as my ass hit the chair, everyone else moved their chairs away noisily as though I was contagious, with a horrible sickness. One girl didn't leave, and I offered her a smile.

“Hi, I'm Asha.” I dunked my toast into the plate of honey on the table. “Wha—”

The dragon girl shot me a look of disgust, then she also got up and went to another table. Three other servants came in, and I pasted a smile on my face, but they grabbed their food and squeezed into an already crowded table. My stomach clenched, and I couldn't finish my breakfast. I was beginning to really hate these dragons more than I already did. Getting up, I threw my breakfast in the trash.

I spent most of the day wandering around the castle, trying to find something that would keep me busy or distract my mind from the fact I was trapped in this strange castle with a man who kept his distance and didn't give any indication of having any interest in me whatsoever. Maybe I ought to find the king and find out what was taking so long for the ritual to

begin. I attempted to sneak into the dragons' library, but each time I tried, dragon guards shooed me away.

Outside, the gardens were lush and inviting and filled with exotic flowers, luscious fruit trees, and fragrant herbs. I walked the paths until I knew them intimately.

At night, I found myself back in the prince's bed, lying next to him as he slept. He didn't seem interested in touching me or even communicating. Well, it was going to be awkward on the ritual night.

With my mind full of random ideas about how to get his attention, I finished dinner early and returned to his bedroom.

When I opened the door to find him standing there with a towel wrapped around his hips and water glistening down his muscled chest, a strangled gasp rose in my throat. Why was it so unfair that the biggest dick in the kingdom was built like a god, with a body carved with muscles and his towel sitting so low on his hips? I had a hard time keeping my eyes on the V muscles. I had no idea what they were called, but they made girls stupid.

"I thought you were eating dinner," he growled.

"I-I was. I finished." Lame. I cleared my throat, shaking my head to meet his dark eyes.

"Well, I'm not done," he snapped. "Leave and close the door behind you."

He hated me. I blinked stupidly at his rejection, irritation quickly replacing my sadness. Instead of obeying him, like I'd done every night since I arrived, I stepped inside before closing the door.

"No." The word dragged from my throat with a flush flaring over my face. I held his gaze, doing my best to stop drooling over his body. All those rumors of dragon males being more endowed than humans weren't exaggerations.

"Look, I don't want this either." My heart was pounding in my chest so hard, I was sure he could hear it as I swallowed. If he told me to get naked, I'd rip the dress off. "I know you probably hate me 'cause I'm human, but your father ordered

this.” I gesture between him and me. “He wants us to have a dragon baby together, and it would go a lot easier if we tried to get along.”

A cruel snarl ripped from his lips, and I backed up a step, hitting the wall behind me.

“The king doesn’t always get what he wants.”

Leaving me gaping at him, he grabbed his clothes and strode out of the room. The whole night, I waited for him to return, but he never did, and I slept alone... knowing I’d make this work for my father.

The next morning, I rubbed my eyes, which felt like sandpaper. The prince’s side of the bed was empty and cold. When I opened the door to go to the bathroom, a bag of clothes with my name sat inside. My heart raced as I pulled out elaborate gowns, pants, shirts, and even underwear. I picked out a pair of khaki pants and a blue shirt, the most casual clothes in the bunch.

After I took a quick bath, I dressed in the new clothes, which fit perfectly. It must have been Leandre who got me the items as his way of apologizing. With that thought and the promise there was hope yet, my footsteps lightened.

I wandered around the hall and found a maid in a plain apron dusting the dragons’ furniture in the great hall. She had her head down and hummed to herself. I felt the urge to talk to her, so I approached, waiting for her to acknowledge me. To my surprise, she stopped her work, looked up, and smiled.

“May I help you, miss?”

“Yeah. Um... is there a shop nearby? I’d like to buy some things.” Like coffee and more books. Not that I had any money. That had been in my bag, too. I figured I could use my position with the king to get some items.

“Oh, yes, miss. We have a town across from the castle near the mountain cliff. There are plenty of stores and even a bar,

but there's no charge for royalty, and under the king's rule, that includes you." She continued wiping the chair she was cleaning. "Lots of us live in town. There's even an incredible tailor who can mend better than anyone. He's especially paid by the king, too."

"Thanks." Seeing an extra pile of rags at her feet, I grabbed one and started polishing the chair next to her. No one had spoken to me except the annoying dragon guard who hadn't shown up since my first night here and the dragon prince who seemed to hate me.

"Miss, no." The girl's eyes widened with shock, and she hastily grabbed the rag from me. "I could lose my head if I let you do my work. You're to mate with the prince, and you can't get your hands dirty."

"Ah, okay. I just wanted to help, but I don't want to get you in trouble. How long have you worked here?"

"All my life."

I gasped, and she shrugged.

"No big deal. I'm part of the servant class of dragons. My mother and my mother before her cleaned the castle, and I'm honored to carry on the tradition."

"Don't you want to do something else?"

Her cheeks blushed a pretty pink. "Nah, I wouldn't know what else to do, and this is my duty. I enjoy my job. I learn so much from my good friend, Reginald. He works with fancy materials, and he is amazing. His hands are blessed with the creations he makes for the royal family. Me, I'm so clumsy, I'd probably sully them." She giggled and was adorable.

"You could always try something different. You should be able to do whatever you like." Though I was one to talk. I was here waiting for the dragon prince to impregnate me, and even though I agreed to this, it wasn't something I had planned or wanted.

"So, tell me about the court?" I asked. "What do I need to be aware of that's taboo? I don't want to embarrass myself in front of the king or prince."

“Normal stuff.” She shrugged. “Let them think they’re smart. Stroke their egos. And show your neck if you ever piss them off and think they might kill you. It’s a sign of submissiveness.”

“That doesn’t sound good.” I swallowed, thinking again I needed to watch my tongue.

“So, Reginald?” I asked, changing the subject. “Are you two dating?”

“Oh, no, he’s out of my league, but I swear he likes me. He sends me little patches of clothing he made for my younger sister to dress her dolls with. And I have a collection of gowns I’ll never wear from him.”

“Oh, that’s so romantic,” I said with a smile. “By the way, I’m A—”

“I’m Lillian,” she said, cutting me off. She continued to talk about Reginald as she cleaned.

“Why don’t you ask him out?”

She giggled again, her cheeks blushing. “I couldn’t possibly.”

We spent the next hour with her excitedly talking while she dusted the entire grand hall, including the baseboards and crown molding along the ceiling, thanks to a ladder that looked ready to fall apart any second.

“I’m sorry,” I said when she paused to take a breath. “I haven’t introduced myself. I’m Asha.”

“Lillian.” She beamed.

“Lillian and Reginald has a nice ring to it. Just let me know where to send the wedding, then baby gifts.” I grinned down at her as she climbed the ladder to dust the chandelier. I held onto it for her.

“Oh, female dragons haven’t been able to conceive for years.” She hiccupped, coming down the ladder. “Everyone is in a panic about it, but the king has declared he will have a solution soon. We’re so grateful for his guidance... and hopeful. He’s never let us down.”

I thought about Lillian's words and how she seemed to have complete faith in the king, that he would come through for them. It was similar to how I felt about my father—blind confidence.

"Thank you for talking to me," Lillian said, packing away the ladder.

"My pleasure." I gathered up the dust rags and handed them to her. "It was nice chatting with someone. It's very lonely here."

She dipped into a curtsy. "I have to prepare the meal for tonight. Maybe we can talk tomorrow? I'll be cleaning the ballroom."

"Sounds like a plan."

Then she paled, bowing low. I touched her shoulder, thinking she'd hurt herself.

"Don't you have somewhere to be?" A dark-haired man leaned against the open doorway, yawning.

My breath caught. He looked like a cross between a tough motorcycle guy and a GQ model. He had a straight nose and a full mouth that seemed to curl up in the corner on one side more than the other. His midnight black hair fell into his eyes, and my heart skipped a beat when his bright violet eyes lit up with a wicked smile. Even from across the room, the breezes flowing into the room carried his masculine, earthy scent, and his carved muscles bulged under his Henley black shirt. His appearance had me trying not to fan myself. My God, did every man living here have to be so sexy, they melted my panties?

Who was he?

"Yes, of course." Lillian righted herself and hurried out of the room like she was on fire.

"That was rude." I couldn't hold my tongue.

His eyes sparkled, freezing me in place as he sauntered into the grand hall, never looking away from me. His thick, dark hair was windswept and gave him a just tussled out-of-

bed look. His shirt was messily untucked over his leather pants, which hugged every inch of him.

“What are you doing with the servant?” His deep bass sent shivers down my spine, and heat pooled between my legs. As if sensing the spike of desire in my voice, his black eyebrows arched as my face flamed.

“Nothing.” I tucked my hands into my pockets. “We were just talking, and I was keeping her company.” *Please don't let him be her boss.* Like a head servant or something? No wonder Lillian looked uncomfortable. I hoped I hadn't gotten her into trouble.

He strode over to me, and it felt as if he had taken all my air away. My knees weakened. When he reached out, I forced myself not to flinch. His fingers touched my hair, pulling something out, then he blew on his fingertips, sending a dust bunny twirling in the air.

“Why are you harassing the service staff?”

“Your description of harassment must be very different from mine, and what I do is not your responsibility.” I didn't know who this handsome stranger was, but whoever he was didn't give him the right to criticize me, even if he was Lillian's boss. I had enough of silent disapproval from everyone in this place to last me a lifetime.

“You're right. You're not my responsibility.” He straightened, but there was a smirk on his face. “Nor are you mine to bed, unlike the prince.”

My shoulders tensed, pushing back. “Do I know you that you so carelessly speak to me? Or am I to believe this is normal dragon behavior? To speak rudely to humans?”

He dragged the corner of his lower lip into his mouth in a ridiculously sexy move that caught me off guard, all while he stared me up and down. My knees were melting as if the oxygen in the room had been replaced by an inferno. I was burning up. Why did he have to bite his lip that way? God, he was beautiful.

Stepping closer still, the space between us was barely a sliver. I swallowed, aware of how close we were standing. One step closer and I'd be pressed up against him. He reached over and curled a lock of my hair around his finger.

"If you were mine," he paused, his voice dipping lower. "I'd have you chained to my bed and screaming my name every night."

I gaped at him, certain I'd lost the ability to talk. Breathing was hard enough. When he lowered his gaze to my mouth, I was burning up with unbearable desire. By some miracle, I found my voice, fighting the urge to throw myself at this arrogant man.

"So, you have to chain women to your bed to get them to submit?" I teased, my heart thumping in my throat.

His violet gaze slid down my body, and I swear I felt the heat of it as though he traced his tongue over every inch of me.

"You're unusual for a human."

"I'd like to say you're unusual for a dragon, but nope, you're arrogant like most of them."

Instead of raging as he should because of me and my big mouth, he rubbed his chin.

"What do they call you?"

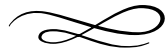
"Asha," I rasped.

"Well, Asha..." He nodded, grinning way too deliciously. "Good luck escaping this prison."

With a salute of his two fingers to his head, he turned on his heel to leave me gaping after him. Then I realized he never gave me his name. What a weird guy, not that it mattered.

I was here for one reason and one reason only—to bring the dragon prince's heir into this world.

Four



For the entire day, I didn't see Prince Leandre anywhere. He wasn't in the great hall for lunch, nor was he in his bedroom or the throne room. When I walked past a group of dragon courtiers in fancy dresses and jewels, they whispered to each other, stopping when they saw me and gave me saccharine smiles before continuing after I walked past. I wasn't an idiot. I knew they didn't like me because I was human and doubly so because I was here to give the prince an heir.

I chewed on my fingernail as I hiked back downstairs to the main floor as the storm that had been raging all day boomed overhead with thunder. Pausing at the bottom of the stairs, I found three women chatting. They were all dressed in designer jeans and matching Bardot neckline shirts that exposed their shoulders.

"Tonight, Steelheart is performing at the bar." One of the women with dark hair bounced on her toes and clamped her hands together. Her gold bracelets clinked from the movement. "I've heard they're getting a record label."

"The lead singer is fine, not as fine as the prince, but I wouldn't say no to him if he asked." The blonde batted her eyelashes with a ditzzy smile on her face.

A strong drink and music sounded awesome in my book, especially if it meant getting away from the stiff palace. Now, where was this bar they spoke about? I cleared my throat and approached them.

“Hi, I couldn’t help but overhear you. Where did you say the bar was?”

Neither of them answered but continued in their conversation as if I wasn’t even there.

“I’ve memorized all their songs,” the blonde gushed. “I could have him autograph my boob.”

With my chest tight and a knot in my throat, I turned away and headed into the first room I saw, the dining room, and thankfully, it was empty. Clanks sounded from the kitchen, and I peeked inside.

“Asha,” Lillian called with a wave. She was polishing silverware with another dragon servant, who rolled her eyes when I approached.

I didn’t want to get Lillian in trouble, so I nodded to both of them.

“Hey, I was wondering if you could help me out. I hear there’s a bar nearby. Do you know where it is?”

“Oh, there’s a path through the rose garden in the courtyard. Take the main gate, follow the cobblestone road, and it’ll dump you right out into the town. You’ll love it.”

“Thanks.” I gave her a smile and turned on my heel. I was two feet away from the duo when one of them clicked her tongue.

“How can you stand her? She’s a human and is going to defile the royal bloodline with her taint.”

“Asha’s my friend, and I swear, if you say one more bad word about her, I’ll stab you with a fork.”

My heart swelled with pride that Lillian would take up for me, but I knew no one else would. Why should I give a fuck what others thought? I wasn’t here to socialize or win a popularity contest. Clenching my jaw, I stared into her eyes, willing myself not to show any sign of vulnerability.

“Thanks.” I nodded to Lillian before leaving the kitchen.

It was too early to go to the bar and I needed to pass some time. So I walked the halls, really wishing I could go for a jog, but rain splattered against the windows ruining my idea. Hopefully, by this evening the storm would pass and I could check out the town and the local bar. Cause wandering the halls wasn't very engaging when it was every day. I didn't even have my cell phone or I'd call my dad. I missed him so much already.

I brushed my fingers over my mom's necklace and decided to make some tea to calm my nerves.

After walking around the castle, and nearly having the place memorized, I went to the kitchen thinking I could keep Lillian company while she worked. But I hesitated, drawing back, as I heard a group of dragons both male and female, talking and laughing, but I wasn't going to be intimidated.

I entered the kitchen, the king and several people were gathered at the table. They played a game of chess and the females cooed and gushed as the king made a move against his opponent.

Ignoring them, I moved into the other room which held one of a dozen kitchens in this castle. I began to open several cabinets before I found a tea kettle next to the last cabinet in the kitchen and set it on the stove. Then took down a cup hanging from the side of another cabinet.

I filled the kettle and set it to boil, my gaze drifting over to the game.

Just hearing their voices in the other room made me feel uneasy. I took a calming breath, my fingers touching the necklace again. I couldn't wait to get out of this castle and all the dragons' gawking and snootiness. What if there was a bookstore in town? I could spend my days there.

The familiar shrilling whistle of the kettle echoed through my room, bringing with it a wave of nostalgia. I poured the water and added honey, mixing it in. I fumbled with the chain around my neck, the cool silver locket grazing my fingertips as I opened the clasp of my mother's locket and pinched out a little bit of the herb. There wasn't much left as I'd made tea

the last two days I was with my dad before I got picked up and brought here. He had no idea where she got the mysterious herb, said it was a family secret passed down.

Besides, it worked and it was mine. I only used it in emergencies and really wished I could find out what it was. But part of me believed if I did have it analyzed, then the magic of its calming properties wouldn't work anymore. Silly, I know. Except what if the power was in my head and my belief in the unusual herb—like a placebo effect? And I kind of liked the idea of it being special between my mom and me. Something I could remember her by like she was helping me even now that she'd died over three years ago. My throat tightened at the thought of my mom and her gentleness. I swallowed back the lump of tangled emotions creeping into my thoughts.

After a few minutes of letting the tea seep, I stirred it, as always, the herb had disintegrated and fuzzed into the hot water.

I added a dollop of cream to cool the tea faster and took a few sips, sighing in pleasure as the warm flavors hit my mouth.

The door opened behind me, and one of the women at the table, a ginger-haired one with emerald eyes glared at me, then strolled towards me.

“Is that tea for the whole table?” she asked in an accusatory tone.

“No, I'm sorry, I don't have enough for—”

“Well, that's rude. What's so special about it?” She walked over to me and snatched the cup from my hand, tea spilling over the side and my mouth dropped open in shock. She guzzled it down quickly, her nose scrunching up as if she was drinking spoiled milk. Then she slammed the cup down on the counter with a loud clank.

Then she smiled, her eyes sparkling. “It tastes like shit. Not surprised though.”

She spun away from me and the table erupted in laughter. My cheeks flushed and the king didn't bother to say anything.

"It couldn't have been that bad if you drank it all," I snapped.

"I was thirsty."

Who was this woman and why was she being such a bitch?

I didn't bother to say anything, no one would listen to me anyway. The tension from her outburst shifted their conversation outside the kitchen to silence, then a few words about how fragile and weak humans were.

Not wanting to drink the tea after what she did, I dumped the remainder in the sink and cleaned both the kettle and cup before putting them away. The whole time I worked, my hands were steady and I was proud I had remained unfazed on the outside to her at least as she watched me the whole time like she was ready to say something to me.

But the words never came, and I marched out of there, not meeting anyone's gaze all the way back to Leandre's room. There, I leaned against the window, my gaze out on the stormy sky.

Tears stung my eyes remembering the outburst in the kitchen. How many felt like I didn't belong here and honestly, I couldn't say I disagreed with them. Everything here was huge and I felt like a flea on the back of a dragon. Insignificant.

I wanted to think I was tougher than them, but I was just a human and they were dragons, powerful, magical creatures.

I looked out the window at the fading storm and the sun drilling down through the dark clouds. At least the weather was clearing. I couldn't wait to get out of here and drown my troubles for a night. I closed my eyes, breathing in the moment, and letting my fear and anger dissipate off me. No matter what happened, I would get through this. I wouldn't allow anyone to stop me from reaching my goal, and certainly not some arrogant dragon woman.

I opened my eyes and smiled, feeling much more relieved. I brushed my fingers over my mother's necklace, pushing aside the scene in the kitchen. I was going to make it. I knew this was only the first of many irritations I would have to endure, but I was sure I could make it through.

With renewed determination, I combed my hair, pulled it up into a ponytail, and slipped my feet into my boots. It was time to explore.

I followed Lillian's directions, finding the courtyard of roses by the scent alone. The sight was something out of a fantasy world, with every color rose imaginable stretching up trellises and forming a mini-labyrinth of petals and thorns. In the middle of the rose garden were a marble fountain and a statue of a dragon with a crown, its mouth opened fiercely. As though I needed a reminder of how I was an outsider here.

The rain had eased to a small trickle, the garden glinting like crystals as the descending sun peeked out from behind the storm clouds.

I kept walking as the sun dipped low on the horizon.

The white roses opened up to a well-worn path that led out of the courtyard. Dragons flew overhead, some growling, and two started to battle each other in the sky. My heart hammering in my chest, I hurried along, my gaze making sure one of them didn't fall and crush me.

Several people strolled to and from the town, none of them giving me a second look. One man catcalled me, but before I could say anything, a woman smacked him in the face with her purse. When he bellowed at her, another young dragon leapt between them, and the two males started fighting.

I hurried down the street. The buildings were spaced apart, with thick stone walls and roofs. Guess it made sense not to have anything made of wood with dragons around.

At the edge of the town, I took a deep breath, allowing the fresh scent to fill my lungs. The air was thick with the smell of rain-soaked pavement, damp earth, and a hint of green from the nearby trees. I moved down the street, taking in the sight

of the buildings with raindrops still clinging to their windows. The stone buildings glistened in the soft light of the streetlamps, their rough textures appearing smoother under the rain's touch. The air was so fresh and clean that I couldn't help but smile, feeling grateful for the opportunity to experience the aftermath of a storm on this beautiful mountain.

My gaze was drawn to a shop window whose owner must have had an affinity for green and red baubles and trinkets because it was full of them; there was even a painting with those colored swirls which reminded me of my favorite holiday—Christmas.

Loud thumping music came from the building at the end of the street. I hurried to the bar with a sign, *The Dragon's Lair*. I almost guffawed at the name, shaking my head as I pushed the door open.

Inside was dark, with lanterns lining the walls, casting shadows. The place smelled heavily of smoke and booze. Tall, high-back stools sat in front of a bartop that was polished to a high gloss. Small tables peppered the room, where patrons laughed and drank, and a few booths lined along one of the walls. On the stage, a band of dragons played their instruments, and a male sang in their language. I only picked out a few words of heartache and fire.

Taking a seat at the bar, I waited for the bartender to finish serving one of the dragons before asking for a glass of wine. Maybe I should have asked for something stronger, but at least I knew I could watch the band without getting too drunk or embarrassing myself in front of the whole court.

There was a decent crowd, mostly of other dragons. I was nearly done with my red wine when I spotted the rude, dark-haired hunk from earlier. He was seated in the corner across the room.

His lips curved into a slight smile when he looked at me and lifted his glass in a toast. I smiled before I could stop myself, and he made his way across the bar, straight toward me. Oh, that hadn't been my intention. Realizing I was staring

at the way he strode like a panther, I turned away, facing the bar.

“What do you think of the liquor here?” he asked, one corner of his mouth curling up.

I cleared my throat, a tingle of something racing up my spine when his arm brushed mine.

“I’ll tell you once I try it,” I admitted. As if on cue, the bartender brought me a long-stemmed glass with the brightest burgundy colored wine. Yep, nothing suspicious about this. With the guy watching me, I decided I ought to at least taste it. The moment the wine touched my lips, it was like an explosion of flavors. Sure, it tasted like wine, but unlike any I’d ever tried. It was as though I was tasting the fermented drink right off the veins—a crisp, fresh, powerful flavor.

“Oh, this is good,” I murmured, then drank half the glass.

He laughed, the sound full and deep. “And the company?”

I shrugged a shoulder, turning in my seat to face him more, and eyed him up and down as he’d done to me earlier. “Mmm, that’s a bit subjective.”

He chuckled and leaned against the bar, his arm casually resting against mine. For some reason, I didn’t want to move away.

The band stopped playing, taking a five-minute break as they headed to the bar to grab some beers.

“If you like dragon wine, you should try some bourbon,” he suggested, his voice soft and intimate.

“Oh, yeah? I could use a stronger drink.” I twirled my wine glass on the cocktail napkin before finishing off my drink.

His eyes sparkled like the stars, and I had to remind myself that he was dangerous. All dragons were.

“So, have you ever slept with a dragon before?” He winked. “You know everything they say about us being huge is true.”

My blush heated my face, and I cleared my throat. “Oh?” I glanced down, letting my eyelashes drop before glancing back up at him. “Well, you know how rumors are... always an exaggeration.”

He laughed and the tension between my shoulders eased.

“So, you must be excited about your *date* with the prince?”

That time, I almost choked on my breath.

“Date? You’re hilarious. I’m here at the king’s request.” Lillian’s comment about the dragons not being able to have offspring flashed in my mind. Was I a guinea pig? The possible solution to having more dragon babies? Would other humans join the foray if I could get pregnant and carry the half-bred baby to term? Whatever the reason, I wasn’t sure blabbing about it to this guy would win me any favors.

He frowned. “The king ordered you as a plaything for his son?”

My face heated, but I shrugged, polishing off the last droplets of my wine. “I guess.”

He leaned closer and motioned for the bartender, who left the customer she was working with for him. “Four shots of your best bourbon on my tab.”

She beamed at him, giving me a sideways glance, as if she wanted to rip my head off. After pouring the four drinks the color of sunrise, she placed them all in front of him, then returned to her waiting patron.

He placed two of the glasses in front of me. “Let’s make a toast,” he said, lifting one of the glasses. “To the brave and beautiful human who dares to defy the might of the dragon court.”

“I’m... I’m not,” I stuttered, but he continued.

“Stop living someone else’s life and start making your own destiny.” He seemed to understand what I was going through, as if he knew about the conflicting emotions raging inside of me.

I lifted my shot glass and clanked it with his. “To our dreams,” I said before downing the drink, holding my breath as the strong bourbon slid its way down my throat. The aftertaste was sweet, slightly smoky, and absolutely delicious. There was no burn, which I’d once heard somewhere was a mark of a great drink.

He smiled, tipping his glass against mine once more. “May you get what you’re looking for.”

My heart fluttered in my chest. I knew this wasn’t a real date, but at that moment, sitting there with him, I felt like he was opening up more than most at the castle.

I nodded and took a deep breath. “Hey, you know my name, but I don’t know yours.”

Something flickered in his eyes that I couldn’t catch. “Just call me the Big Dragon.”

I burst out laughing, heat spreading through my body. “Should I even ask what that’s in reference to?”

When he smiled devilishly, I had my answer, which only had me laughing more. His shoulders eased, and I wished more than anything that he was the prince. There was a connection between us, something that soothed me, made me laugh, and turned me on. I wanted to learn so much more about him, which of course was a mistake seeing my purpose at the castle. He was one of the few who actually treated me like a normal person, and I appreciated it.

The band picked up their instruments again and started something more upbeat.

“Come on,” he took my hand, tugging me off the bar stool. “Let’s dance.”

I wanted to say no, but the bourbon was giving me more courage. I giggled as he led me onto the dance floor.

Other women shot me with dagger looks, but I didn’t care as he spun me around. We moved to the music, our bodies in sync, and for a moment, I didn’t feel like an outsider. I belonged here—even with all the odds stacked against me.

The song ended, moving to a ballad, but this gorgeous dragon shifter didn't drop my hand. He looked at me with an amused expression.

"What?" I asked, breathless.

I moved to step away, but he reached out and cupped my face, tilting my head back. His eyes searched mine, and I couldn't tear my gaze away.

The moment stretched on, and I knew what he was thinking. I could feel it in the way he stared down at me, in the way his eyes seemed to be speaking without words. Fire sparked where his fingers rested on my skin. When he leaned forward, I panicked. It was happening too fast. Jerking backward, I pushed past the dancing dragons to get back to the bar.

My hands shook as I downed my second shot. Then I turned to get the hell out of there, but Mr. Big Dragon pinned me against the bar, with his hands on either side of me.

"Don't go." He leaned in, his breath tickling my ear. "You're not alone, Asha," he said, before stepping away and pulling me closer. "We both know what we want, but neither of us can have it."

His presence overwhelming me, I blinked, feeling lightheaded. We were inches apart, so close there was no space between our bodies. His sexy, masculine scent made something inside my chest unfurl.

"Allow me to buy you a meal as an apology." He bowed his head and stepped back to his stool. "You can't go back to the castle on an empty stomach."

I hesitated, then had second thoughts. It wasn't as though Leandre was waiting for me.

"Fine." I slid onto the bar stool. "I'll take you up on that offer."

"You won't be disappointed." He grinned, showing off a dimple in his left cheek. "The crab cakes here are the most delicious you've ever had."

“Oh? I have pretty high standards. My dad and I used to make them when we went deep sea fishing on holidays.” My stomach tightened, hoping Dad and I would get to go to the beach after all this was over.

“Dad?” He arched an eyebrow. “Just you and him?”

“Yeah.” I nodded, swallowing against the tightness in my throat. “My mom died in a traffic accident, so it’s just been the two of us.” I still remembered the screech of brakes, the terrible sound of metal on metal. In my mind, I saw her crushed in the wreckage while I screamed from the backseat. That night had haunted me ever since.

Absently, I touched the gold wing on the chain around my neck that once belonged to my mom.

Without having to be asked, the bartender slid him two more shots of bourbon. While he had the brunette’s attention, he placed our order for the crab cakes with a grin. The gesture left her blushing to the roots of her hair.

“You’re lucky you’re an only child,” he said with a laugh after a moment, turning his attention back to me.

I shook my head, not sure what answer he was looking for. Not sure if I should even be here with him. Staring at the cocktail napkin, I fingered the glimmering fabric, grateful he seemed to be leaving me to my thoughts for the moment and pushed back down the pain of that rainy night.

“What’s so bad about having a sibling? Some days, I wished I had one or two.”

He sat back in his seat, slouching against the bar, and he was deliciously gorgeous, his button-up shirt hugging all his muscles. The guy was broad and huge, bigger than most of the other men in the joint.

“For one, he stole my stuff, then usually ended up destroying it. As the younger brother, he beat me up a lot, and my parents always took his side. Doesn’t matter how old you are, things never change.”

“I struggle to believe anyone can beat you up. I mean, have you looked in the mirror lately? You’re a beast.”

“That’s what she said.” He chuckled, and I rolled my eyes at his lame joke.

“Order up,” the bartender said, pushing a plate full of steaming crab cakes in front of him. She completely ignored me as if I didn’t exist. Even when I gave her the evil eye, she didn’t notice because of how hard she was batting her eyes at the guy. Then she zipped away, not even bothering to ask me if I wanted anything.

“I think she wants to sit in your lap,” I teased.

“Been there and wasn’t a fan.”

“Wow. You have the whole arrogant thing packed down, haven’t you?” I twisted toward the crab cakes, their smell enticing me closer. They smelled divine.

“When you have the magic touch, it’s no use wasting it.” He moved the plate between us. “Now, let’s dig in, they’re best hot, like sex...”

Lust swirled in my gut from his comment and the sexy looks he gave me. Grabbing a crab cake, I blew on it to cool it off, and his gaze lingering to my mouth. Feeling self-conscious, I took a nibble. The savory, spiciness hit my tongue, and I started coughing.

“Oh, shit.” He pushed his bourbon toward me. “I should’ve told her to lay off the dragon spice.”

“No, no, it’s fine.” I wheezed, gulping down the drink. “I really like it... just wasn’t expecting it.”

He leaned his elbow on the bar, studying me. It should have left me feeling self-conscious, but around him, I felt more flirtatious.

“You’ve never had dragon cuisine before?”

“Not like this.” I coughed, waving my hand in front of my mouth. “Just the imitation, cheap stuff.” I finished his bourbon, and he waved to the bartender for two more drinks. Taking a huge bite of the crab, its delicious spiciness gliding down my throat and warming me all over.

“This is so good, I could marry it.”

“You’re making me crazy jealous right now of that crab cake,” he purred close to me.

Heat danced down my body, collecting between my thighs, burning me up. My panties were completely drenched at this stage from all his side glances and remarks. I’d never had a man flirt with me in such a way, especially someone who was crazy handsome.

He picked up a cake and nearly inhaled it. As he chewed, he watched me, so I had another. The band played in the background, and I enjoyed the music, tapping my foot along with the beat. This was turning out to be my favorite night in the dragon empire. After my fourth, I was bursting at the seams.

“No more.” I pushed the plate back to his side of the bar. “I’m going to explode if I take another bite.”

He flashed a grin at me, and I couldn’t help but smile back. I watched him finish off the plate. There was something absolutely sexy about seeing a powerful man love the meal he was eating.

“Welcome to Dragon’s Lair,” the lead singer boomed from the stage. “How about all the ladies come up here for a wet t-shirt contest?”

The crowd erupted in whistles and claps, which had me grinning at the commotion.

Soft fingers brushed my elbow and tingles spread up my arm. “You should try it.”

“No.” I shook my head vigorously. “Are you crazy?”

“Come on, with your body, you’ll blow them all away.” His hand traced down my arm sending shivers through me. Then he pushed another drink in front of me. “One more before you go show them how it’s done?”

“You make it sound like I’ve done that before.” I collected the shot glass sloshing over with the bourbon, my head already spinning.

“I just believe in you.” He chinked his glass to mine. “You’re a refreshing air in the empire.”

It felt good that a dragon shifter admired me. So, I tipped back the drink, all of it rushing down my throat, then I plunked it down on the bar.

“You know what. You’re right. I’m going to do it.”

“I often am.”

I grinned, then eased out of my bra underneath my shirt and handed him the lacy fabric. “Hold this for me, will you?”

When his violet eyes darkened, I realized what I’d just done in the middle of a bar. I should be mortified, but whatever was in those drinks had me floating with confidence.

“I got it,” he said, lifting it to his nose to sniff.

“Hey, hold it, not smell it.” The grin on his lips after inhaling did something to me and left me tingling all over. Without hesitation, I hurried to the stage and stood in line at the end of eight beautiful women.

“All right, ladies.” The lead singer gestured to us. “To make it fair, all of you will be given a white shirt to wear.”

The servers handed out a shirt to each of us, and I could have sworn the fabric was paper thin. As if they practiced this, the women turned their back on the audience and took off their tops and bras. The three women gossiping about the band were in line, too, one of them giving me a smirk after she looked me up and down.

I took off my shirt and pulled the new one over my head. Across my boobs was printed Dragon Lair in gold. I smirked to myself.

“Ladies, are you ready?”

We all turned around to face the audience, and every single eye was on us, the men appearing starved. My attention swung over to Mr. Big Dragon, who reclined against the bar, watching me.

Several male waiters came by with pitchers and tossed the water across our chests.

I burst out laughing at the cold. My nipples poked against the fabric. I gasped, feeling a thrill. I glanced up to find him staring at me with a lustful gaze and something exciting came over me.

Was it bad that all I could picture were his huge hands touching my breasts?

“I think we need another dunk of water,” the lead singer announced in a teasing tone. “We need these shirts wetter.”

The girls were all giggling, sticking their chests out, a couple of them even bouncing on their toes, jiggling for the audience, who roared their approval.

The waiters came around again with water, this time, with ice cubes in it.

I laughed, feeling elated from the freezing water and sexy. The top was glued to my body, following every curve, my dark areolas so clear, I might as well be standing on stage with no top.

Compared to the other girls, I was slightly on the bigger size. Not the largest but enough to notice a lot of men drooling as they stared at my chest.

“All right,” the announcer said. “Let’s hear it for contestant number one.”

The blonde from earlier stuck out her chest even more, her lips pursed in a pout.

Cheers and catcalls ensued.

“And number two.”

One of the brunettes yanked her shirt up, exposing her midriff, and tightening the material around her boobs.

I glanced out at the audience while I waited for my turn, super nervous, but ready to show them I was just as good as they were.

“And now we have a human competing. Everyone, give her a hand.”

Laughing, I stepped forward to the edge of the stage, and I lifted my hands in the air, doing a snake wriggle with my body because the girls weren't the only ones who could work their milkshakes.

The audience went completely wild, deafening me.

My giddiness stuck in my throat at the sight of copper hair in the audience—at the man who glared at me.

Oh, fuck!

Leandre.

A dragon girl with ginger hair sat across from him. She was gorgeous with a splattering of tiny freckles across her nose. Their body language showed that they were familiar, maybe even more so.

He reached out and took her hand in a gesture that had me nearly falling off the stage. He had never even tried to touch me. I shouldn't be jealous because he wasn't mine. His gaze lazily shifted from the woman he was with to me. Then his expression turned red, and I could almost feel him seething.

“Time to vote. I'll hold my hand over each woman's head. Only make noise for your favorite, and remember, we can only have one winner.” The announcer held his hand over me.

The bar erupted in whistles and claps, some dragons standing up, and I blushed at the attention. The prince never took his eyes off me. I lifted my chin, refusing to cower.

The announcer held his hand over each of the other women. “Let me check one more time.” He went over each of us again, stopping when he reached me.

“I think we have our winner.” He pulled me to the front of the stage. “Contestant number eight has won a pitcher of dragon beer on the house.”

“Thank you.” I bowed, feeling a bit wobbly. My gaze shifted again to the prince.

His arms were crossed, and he glared at me as if he wanted to burn everything to a crisp. Let him be furious. I huffed, but unease coiled in my gut that I'd fucked up.

Exiting the stage, I made a beeline for Mr. DBFig dragon at the bar, but Leandre blocked my path and dragged me aside to a small passage behind the bar.

“What are you doing?” he growled, his fingers digging into my skin.

“Ow, you're hurting me.” I jerked out of his grasp.

“How dare you show to others? What is meant to be mine. You're supposed to be with me, and instead you humiliate me out there.”

“What are you talking about?” I was shaking from how mad he'd gotten me. “We're not together. You don't talk to me or spend time with me except to lay in bed with me a football field apart as though I have a plague.”

He took a huge step toward me, and I recoiled, hitting the stone wall behind me.

“You want me to fuck you, little human? Is that what all this is about?” He pressed his body to mine, and I felt every hard muscle of his body. Heat rushed through me, my breasts aching for his touch, which was so wrong. He leaned down until his lips were a breath away from mine. “Maybe I should teach you a lesson.”

Staring into the icy depths of his blue eyes, my heart raced.

He pressed his lips on mine, tasting of beer and heat. His tongue explored my mouth, caressing and tasting. His hands slid over me possessively, but not like I was treasured, more like I was an object.

I pushed against his chest, and he pulled back, breaking our kiss.

“Hold on a minute,” I panted.

“What? Now, you're playing hard to get?” A deep chuckle erupted from his throat.

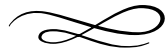
“No.” I shoved at his chest once more, irritation boiling in me. “I don’t know. But I’d like there to be something more between us if we are going to have a baby together. At least where you know my name and like me a fraction.”

“Go home, human.” He shook his head, backing away from me, shadows slithering over his face. “The court is no place for you.”

Turning on his heels, he strode away without even glancing back, dismissing me as if I was a common whore.

I touched my finger to my lips, but his kiss told me there was more than he was letting on. Oh God, I was so confused and had no clue what mess I’d gotten myself into.

Five



I hated Prince Leandre. Loathed every fiber of his being, including that smug, dickhead face. I wanted to punch it.

Stumbling across the dark cobblestone street in the dragon town, I left the bar behind. I couldn't stand being in there a second longer, not when he remained there. Every time I looked at him, his words swirled in my mind.

You want me to fuck you, little human? Is that what all this is about?

“I didn't choose this, asshole.” Angrily, I wiped away my tears. “Your father forced me into it so mine wouldn't die,” I mumbled under my breath. My head swam. The dragon brew was starting to go to my head. Between anger and feeling sorry for myself, the drink was really doing a number on me. I felt more lightheaded now than I had in the bar. Which said a lot, considering I just did a wet t-shirt contest in front of the prince. I didn't care.

Fuck him!

I'd love to be back home right now and away from this place, watching TV with my father and laughing at his terrible dad jokes. But to ensure I could continue to enjoy such moments with him, I had to suck it up and see through this crazy plan.

Exhaling loudly, I cleared my eyes free of tears, refusing to be a weak person or let Prince Dicknose get to me.

Hitting an uneven cobblestone with the toe of my sandal, I tripped forward, arms pinwheeling, my heart in my throat. I

caught myself just in time, stumbling a bit, then spun around quickly. Did anyone see me almost kiss the ground?

With no one around, I breathed easier. They didn't need more excuses to dislike me for being clumsy too and not as pristine as them. The fact that most left me alone told me the king made it clear no one was to hurt me. No other reason a human would be permitted to wander through their empire.

Which gave me an idea...

What if I got dressed all fancy like the dragon women and started acting just as arrogant? It was clear back in the bar that jealousy got him riled up, so he must feel something for me. I just had to warm him up leading to the ritual, then we'd spend one night.

Wham, bam, thank you ma'am.

Then I'd ask to be in another room and care for my growing baby, then work on the king to confirm I would still be part of the baby's life. The more I thought about it, the more I knew couldn't be apart from him or her. I squared my shoulders.

I could do this.

Staggering down another street, I recognized the yellow house on the corner from my journey to the bar. I then came upon more gardens, filled with trees, flowers, benches, and tiny stone paths. Like in the castle, lanterns lit up the place, as well as the streets. I stared at how magical it appeared at night, tempted to explore... then I remembered I wasn't back home or in a fantasy world. In Vallen Woods, where the dragons lived, I was public enemy number one and most disliked me. So, I wasn't going to risk fate.

One step into my journey back to the castle, I tripped once more, this time, not as lightly. About to make fast acquaintances on the floor with my face, someone crashed into me from behind, and a strong arm swooped around my middle and swung me back around. A cry flew from my lips, then morphed into a laugh because I could have sworn I was flying for those few seconds. Did I mention I was really drunk?

When my feet touched the ground, I twisted around, freeing myself of the strong arm, coming eye to eye with the dark-haired Adonis from the bar. Instantly, my heart did that thundering beat it seemed to do around this annoying guy.

“You should watch your step,” he murmured, standing there all proud and beautiful.

What was he grinning about?

“Then you shouldn’t have let me drink that stuff in the bar or encourage me to enter the wet t-shirt contest.” I had to do a second take, looking down at myself to ensure I had actually changed into my top. To my relief, I had. Being tipsy made me forget things.

He laughed. “I don’t regret a thing. I enjoyed every moment.” His gaze slipped down to my chest, pausing for a long moment.

“Hey, Casanova, eyes up here.” I swayed, and he went to catch me, but I batted his hands away. “And for your information, you should regret your actions since it ended up with that prick prince dragon abusing me for showing my breasts. He kissed me, then insulted me.”

You want me to fuck you, little human? Is that what all this is about?

I cringed.

“Did he hurt you?” the guy asked, taking my hand into his almost possessively, but I noticed he wasn’t exactly steady on his feet either.

I lifted my gaze to his violet ones that looked so familiar, so gorgeous. They gave me a false sense of security, feeling calm and safe around him.

“Just between us,” I began. “I didn’t want to come here and sleep with the prince or have his child. He can go fuck himself.” My eyes suddenly flew open, and I slapped a hand to my mouth before I said something worse.

“Tell us how you really feel,” he teased, his eyes grinning, then he started walking into the gardens, stumbling.

My mind was racing with panic that he'd tell the king what I said. I'd heard of him killing people for far less.

“Hey, what's your name... you never told me.” I chased after him into the empty gardens where everything felt like a dream—the tiny fireflies, trees swooshing in the light breeze, the perfume of flowers filled the air. “Wait up,” I called out as he moved fast, hands in his pockets. My eyes were on his cute ass. Damn, who was this guy who had me losing my head around him? “Promise me you won't tell the king what I said, okay?”

Within a span of seconds, he spun around and came at me unexpectedly, and I yelped. Before I could make sense of his actions, he pushed me against a tree and pressed into me. My breath caught in my throat.

“And what will you give me if I keep my word?” He was grinning, seemingly enjoying putting me into a state of panic.

“Wh-What would you like?” My response came out almost as a purr, the opposite of the strong words I had intended to deliver. Apparently, being pinned between a tree and a hunk of a dragon shifter melted my brain. The spicy scent of the drink we enjoyed flooded my nostrils, too.

Muscles were all I felt, including the one against my lower stomach, and his sexy masculine scent was doing things to my insides. I couldn't deny how incredibly attracted I was to this stranger, who still hadn't told me his name.

Chuckling, he stroked my cheek before dropping to the bare skin of my collarbone. I'd lost the ability to find my words again. Leaning in, I placed my hands flat against his chest, but I wasn't resisting him, even though I knew I should have been. Whatever was going on between us would end up with the king pissed and our deal terminated.

“What if someone sees us... like the prince?” I peeked around at a silent and empty garden. Only trees surrounded us, and we were completely out of view from any homes nearby.

“To paraphrase you, fuck him.”

“Oh, you're going to get us into so much trouble.”

“Too late for that,” he teased, those violet eyes glinting in the moonlight.

The exhilaration in my stomach had butterflies savagely beating their long wings. I wanted whatever he was offering. Maybe it was the alcohol talking or just my libido, but I was prepared to wait a bit longer to see what he was going to do.

His lush lips found the tenderness beneath my ear, and electricity danced through me. His hands were on my hips, pulling me closer to him.

“I want it all, little mouse,” he whispered. “I want to strip you down and lick you all over, then taste your pussy and hear you scream my name. Since I first laid eyes on you, I’ve dreamed of how I was going to fuck you once I got you alone. I’ve jerked off so many times, and I’m ready to sink into you. Are you ready for me?”

I gasped, feeling sexy as hell, but not sure how to respond. My heartbeat was a heavy thud in my veins, and my panties were drenched.

With his brow pressed to mine, he stared into my eyes, so deep I knew I’d long lost myself to him. Back in the bar, when he flirted with me, opened up to me, he’d won me over.

“You’re such a tease,” I mumbled under rushed breaths. He hadn’t even kissed me yet, and my body was on fire, longing for his touch. He made me feel beautiful, desired, and I craved all of him.

With savagery behind his eyes and a growl in his throat, his lips crashed against mine. We came together as though the world depended on it, as if I’d never been kissed before, and he was showing me what a real kiss meant.

Curling my toes in my shoes, I fisted his shirt, wanting more. His tongue plunged into my mouth, tasting me, tangling with mine, dominating me. His hands snaked up my shirt, roughly pulling the fabric of my bra. With a growl, he ripped from my kiss, leaving me breathless. His gaze lowered to where he tugged up my shirt, revealing my breasts.

“Even more beautiful up closer. Do you have any idea what it did to me to see you up on that stage, your shirt drenched, your nipples hard, the material clinging to your round breasts?”

I had intended to tell him he should enjoy them while he got the chance, but when his mouth closed around a nipple, my words turned into moans. He sucked hard as his hand pinched my other nipple. He filled his mouth with my breast and groaned.

Watching how much he enjoyed himself, I writhed against him, my hands in his hair, I loved how incredible he felt. When he pulled back, his hands fell to my pants, unbuttoning them, already pulling them down my hips.

I was under no delusion of what was coming or how terribly I craved to have a hunk devour me. I thought about the prince and my deal with the king, but right now, I loathed the prince and wanted this so badly to spite him.

“Spectacular,” he said, lifting his gaze to me as he knelt in front of me, yanking my pants and panties down to my ankles. “I don’t hear you telling me to stop.”

Leaning lower as I kicked off my sandals, he helped me step out of my pants. He kept his attention on the apex between my thighs. His gaze went primal and wild, and I adored the way he stared at me as if he could barely hold himself back.

“I love it when a girl doesn’t shave her pussy. I want to feel the hair against my face. The strip looks sexy as fuck, and your sweet lips are glistening for me.”

“Is it customary for dragon females to completely shave?” I asked, trying to be brave while a hunk was kneeling in front of me, studying the burning fire between my thighs.

“Everyone I’ve been with has been.”

I wanted to ask him how many he’d been with, seeing he sounded like a player in the dragon world, but when he blew a breath across my pussy, I lost my mind. His hands were on my thighs, pushing them wider.

“Maybe you shouldn’t...” I tried to push him away, but he snatched my wrist.

“Little mouse, if you try to stop me again, I’ll spank you until your ass is cherry red.”

Was it bad that his dominance made me flutter with excitement? I’d had sex before, but no guy had ever gone down on me.

When his tongue pushed between my folds, I cried out, my hands grabbing hold of the tree at my back. I’d never been more turned on in my life, but when he pushed my legs wider and latched his mouth onto my offering, going to town on me, I completely lost it.

My hips rocked, my breathing coming in heavy, while his mouth was heaven. His tongue flicked my clit, and the slurping sounds made me grow wetter. It wasn’t every day you had a dragon shifter with his head between your legs.

I glanced down just as he looked up at me, his mouth sucking on my lips, his eyes grinning as he enjoyed seeing my reaction.

Moaning, I tried to curb being too loud, which was close to impossible when I’d never felt this good. When he pushed a finger inside me, my world spun out of control, and my orgasm came at me quickly. An inferno pulsing through me, I cried out and shuddered as he savagely ran his tongue along the length of my pussy, licking up everything. Bursts of pleasure zapped me, over and over, when his mouth slid to my inner thigh. Next thing I knew, teeth grazed my skin and bit while he kept fingering me.

I was scared and ridiculously aroused. Was this how dragons did it? Biting one another during sex?

I’d barely come down from the most amazing orgasm when he released my inner thigh and pulled out his fingers, then got to his feet.

“Fucking delicious. I love how wet you are for me.” He stuck the two fingers into his mouth, licking the juices.

God, who was this man? I braced myself for a second orgasm from just watching him enjoy my taste. It was crazy arousing to see him turned on by me.

“That was everything,” I murmured, barely able to catch my breath.

“We haven’t even started.” He peeled his shirt up and over his head, then tugged at his belt, dropping his jeans. Of course, he went commando. Once he got his gear off, I was captivated.

Every girl wanted to know what a dragon packed downstairs.

I might have gasped... or maybe passed out.

“Wait.” I blinked a few more times, then looked down at him again. “Do you have two heads on your cock?” He was erect and upright, way too thick and long. That alone would have worried me, but I was too distracted by his two-headed cock.

“Every dragon does.” Reaching down, he palmed his thick flesh, the tips both coated in slick precum. “We are all about balance. One head is for our human side, the other for dragons. Or some bullshit our elders tell us. You know what I think?”

“What’s that?” I gasped, unsure how in the world he was going to get that into me.

“It’s so we can ejaculate more cum. We’re known for producing a huge amount of the stuff, and it needs to come out fast.”

“Nothing you’re saying is putting me at ease. First, that’s not going to fit, so I can only imagine dragon females have huge vajayjays.”

His laughter was like a hand caressing me, calming me. Moving closer, he cupped my cheek and kissed me. My scent was heady and strong, and my taste on his lips somewhat sweet, which surprised me.

“I promise that you can take it. Now, are you ready, my beautiful human?”

Nodding, I blamed the dragon brew back at the bar because my head still whirled with pleasure.

There was no pause, just his powerful arms on my waist, turning me around.

“I’ve found your first time, it’s best to take you from behind.”

With me turned away from him, slick still dripping down my inner thighs from my orgasm, I got stuck on his words.

“So, you’ve been with human girls before?”

“You’ll be my first human, little mouse.” Tracing his hand up my spine, he pushed me forward, so my ass was in the air, and widened my stance.

I could only imagine this guy had been with lots of the women in the empire. He was drop-dead-gorgeous, so I bet he had no trouble picking up anyone there. Considering the number of staff I’d seen running around, plus those who lived in the town, he’d be busy.

I didn’t want to think about him with another woman while he pushed the bulbous ends of his cock against my entrance, rubbing them up and down.

Grabbing hold of the tree, I breathed quickly.

“Just relax. I promise it will be incredible.” There was no pause in his actions as he pushed into me with what felt like one head. I shifted to lift my ass higher, and he adjusted himself, pulling me open as he crammed his second tip into me.

I didn’t remember sex feeling this crazy hot or being stretched to the point I wanted to cry out that it felt incredible. By some miracle, he got them both into me and pushed deeper.

“If you could see the view from my side, you’d go mental. You look fucking beautiful, stretched and sucking down my cock. Fuck, your pussy is delicious.”

I groaned as he started moving faster, in and out, his hands on my hips. His grunts escalated the faster we moved. I found my rhythm, moaning louder each time he thrust into me.

My pussy spasmed with his plunging as stars danced in my vision. I lost all ability to keep quiet in the growing crescendo building inside of me. He fucked me, growling like a demon, the friction of his cock igniting a fire between us. The guy moved fast, and when I glanced back at him, his violet eyes were almost glowing, their animalistic side showing through.

There was no stopping him as he took me harder, my body tight and aroused.

“You’re clenching on my cock so much, I can’t get enough of your greedy little cunt, Asha.” His voice was raspy.

My knees were about to give up. As if sensing my body growing fatigued, he swept an arm under my stomach and lifted me, so my back was flush with his chest.

“Let me carry you,” he whispered in my ears, his cock still pumping into me.

I wrapped my legs back around his, leaning against him.

“Play with your tits for me.”

His command sent a thrill through me. Doing as he commanded, my climax came forward quickly. When I felt him growl deeper, his hips thrusting quicker, I knew he was close to coming undone, but with it came a slight panic.

“You didn’t put on a condom. You have to pull out.”

“I don’t think so.” His breath was on my neck as his lips grazed my skin. “I want you all to myself. Besides, there’s a high chance you won’t fall pregnant.”

“A chance?”

The moment passed as he thrust into me so deep, I cried out. He pushed inside of me, flooding me with his cum.

“Squeeze my cock. Fuck me, you’re strangling my cock. More!”

My body betrayed me. Heat flushed over me, my body tightening, and I screamed out my second orgasm. He placed his hand over my mouth to catch my scream.

“A bit too loud there, sweet little mouse,” he rasped, bumping into me.

Writhing in his arms, I tried my best to keep quiet, but every inch of my body tingled. I had never been made to feel so insanely good.

When we finally came down from the euphoria, both of us sweating and panting for breath, he pulled out, leaving me feeling empty. Setting me on unsteady feet, he held onto me.

“How are you feeling, beautiful?”

I turned to face him, catching the admiration in his eyes. “Like I’m going to be sore tomorrow.”

He ran his thumb along my cheek. “You have no idea how beautiful you are.”

I blinked at him, still coming down from my high and coming to terms with what we’d just done. With it rose a fast-growing burning anger.

“That was incredible, and I’m in no way disappointed, but did you have to come inside me? You could have pulled out.”

The side of his mouth pulled into a grin. “How am I going to claim you for myself if I don’t mark you as mine?”

“I can’t be yours.” I blew out an incredulous exhale. “At least not now since I have a child to bear for the prince.”

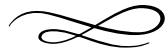
A dark flush flared over his face. “Get dressed, and I’ll take you back to the castle. But don’t think for one moment I’m giving up on you.”

My chest ached. My life was complicated enough, but I wasn’t in the right headspace to talk about his growing obsession. Grabbing my clothes, I got dressed quickly, feeling confused. I just had the best night of my life, and now I felt sick to my stomach. What if I fell pregnant from one of the castle servants before the prince got his chance?

On the way back to the castle, I barely said a word and kept telling myself there was a reason the king was holding a ritual. It was the only way humans could carry dragon babies. I

held onto that. Otherwise, I'd fall apart from the stress of thinking I'd ruined my chance to save my father.

Six



Guilt gnawed at my insides, like an animal with an insatiable appetite, as I stood in the castle gardens, my head still spinning from last night. My fingers brushed against my locket, the cool metal reassuring.

The prince never came to his room last night, so I meandered down to the gardens to get fresh air. I found a perfect little bench surrounded by dahlias, and the sun warmed my shoulders while my mind was on overdrive.

I had sex with Mr. Big Dragon, who very much lived up to his name. He had two heads on his cock, but I was digressing. Instead of sexing up the prince, I fell against a tree with a gorgeous stranger and let him fuck me.

The moment our bodies collided, I had no control over my actions, no matter how hard I had wanted to resist. His kiss and his touch were intoxicating. I had two orgasms, which was huge, seeing no other guy had done that for me.

However, I was annoyed with him for not using protection. I felt like he purposefully wanted to come inside me, to try to make me pregnant. Which was crazy, right? I just prayed nothing would come of it since the king insisted a ritual was needed to make that possible.

God, I shouldn't have had all those shots. They messed up with both our heads. He'd lost control as much as I had.

"Asha," Lillian called, waving at me frantically from the other side of the garden.

Oh God, did she and the whole court know I had sex with her boss? I swallowed against my tightening throat and forced a smile.

“Hi.” I got to my feet.

“You need to get cleaned up. Now.” Her expression panicked, she kept glancing over her shoulder.

“Why?” My stomach dropped. “It’s not time for breakfast yet.” Oh, no! Did Leandre tell the king about me entering the wet t-shirt contest at the bar last night?

“The king has demanded an audience with you and Prince Leandre in the throne room.”

My heart stopped. The king had to know something. Someone could have seen me having sex in the gardens.

Covering my mouth with my hand, despair rolled over me like a semi-truck. The king was going to punish me and my dad. I couldn’t let that happen. I had to do something.

In a panicked rush, I started to move past Lillian. “I gotta go,” I said quickly and hustled to Leandre’s room before I threw up.

In his chamber, I paced, debating stealing dragon blood to save my dad and us running away and begging the king for mercy. My mind ran in a hundred different directions. What if dragons could smell sex on a person?

Quickly washing, I changed my clothes, then combed out my hair and stuck it into a ponytail. If I didn’t go to the king, he’d send guards to drag me there. So, after a few long breaths to calm myself, I followed the golden tassel rugs in the hallways to the throne room.

Leandre was waiting at the entrance. His gaze locked with mine, searching my face before giving me a tight nod, and my stomach clenched. He wore black pants and a wrinkled shirt as though someone had just woken him from wherever he’d fallen asleep.

We walked to the throne together, then bowed before the king. This was perhaps the most amicable the pair of us had

been.

“Rise.” The king tapped his fingers on his arm of the throne. “Well? What do you have to say for yourself?”

I licked my lips as my heart hammered in my ears. My mouth opened and closed, but I couldn't get any words to come out.

The king slammed down a hand on the throne, and I flinched. Beside me, Leandre didn't even react.

“Enough. We're close to the ritual, and I would have expected that by now, you two would have been having sex, getting to know each other, but I'm hearing something else.”

“Father,” Leandre commanded, cutting me a glare as if I had reported him to the king. “You can't expect a human to—”

“You're right. I've been too lenient, leaving it up to you.” His father cleared his throat. “Tomorrow night, when the moon is full, we'll do a fertility ritual to ensure she gets pregnant, then you will claim her and breed her for an heir.”

Breed? My shoulders shot back at the selection of his words.

Leandre inclined his head, but I remained frozen until he grabbed my hand and tugged me down with him into a proper bow.

“She will be prepared, your majesty,” he growled, his fingers digging into my arm.

“We want everyone in attendance,” the king said. “Including your brother, Jonah.”

I raised my head, trying hard not to tremble so hard.

“When you say everyone is to attend, you mean the ritual part, not the part where the prince and I have sex, right?” I wouldn't put anything past them.

The huge double doors opened, stealing his chance to respond, and I needed an answer. I kept picturing being under the sheets, fucking a guy who despised me, while the room

was filled with everyone watching to ensure we did it. My face burned at the thought.

Footsteps echoed behind me, and I twisted my head around, startled to see Mr. Big Dragon sauntering into the room. He wore black fitted pants, shiny boots, and a collared jacket done up with gold embroidery down the front, something I'd expect royalty to wear.

I blinked at him, confused at first, studying his stoic demeanor, but he wasn't even glancing my way. His brown hair was pushed off his face messily, with those violet eyes focused on the king.

Seeing him, staring at those eyes I'd never seen on anyone else in the kingdom, reality crashed into me. A reality I'd been blind to or too drunk to see. He'd been the green dragon with violet eyes who picked me up from my home. Then he kept hanging around with me. Everyone seemed to be putty around him. He walked with such confidence as if nothing in the world could touch him.

I didn't want to think about it, but it flared in my head so fast, it left me dizzy.

Was Mr. Big Dragon the king's other son? Leandre's brother?

I was going to be violently sick.

"Prince Jonah," a female courtier cooed, blushing as he bowed as he passed.

A stab of jealousy hit me in the solar plexus at the way she stared at him.

So, the devil had a name... Jonah.

I hated when I was right. If it wasn't bad enough to sleep with a stranger, it had to be the prince's brother. Which also explained why the douche didn't tell me his name. I stared daggers at him.

"Leandre," the king saluted with two fingers. "You're dismissed. Take your human out and spend some fucking time

together. You're about to have a child. I need to speak with your brother alone."

He led me out into the hallway, where I snapped back to reality.

Leandre turned on me in the hallway. "You reported on me to my father?"

I squared my shoulders. "Please, as if I have a death sentence. Maybe if you made an effort, he wouldn't have called you out."

With a snarl on his lips, he shrugged as if he couldn't care less and left me standing alone.

Frustration bubbled inside me, building to the point where I couldn't take this anymore. I needed to get some air. I hated Leandre, was terrified of the king, and now I was fuming at Jonah.

My feet flew as I ran out of the castle, dodging curious onlookers. It felt good to feel the wind on my face and the sun on my back, like back home when I went on my daily jogs—when I didn't feel like I carried the world on my back.

I ran until I stumbled onto an old, weathered barn nestled among the trees near the castle walls. The door was opened, and rust covered the hinges, locking it in place. My curiosity piqued, I tiptoed into the barn. The inside floor was covered in hay and movement caught my eye. A small dragon emerged with scales that shimmered in rainbow hues. Its silver eyes sparkled. My heart beamed to see the little guy.

"Hey, little one." I bent down, holding out my hand to it.

The dragon wiggled toward me, its tail bigger than it was, its translucent wings fluttering softly on its back. After it sniffed my fingers, it rubbed its snout against my hand.

"You're friendly." I scratched its chin, and its tail thumped on the ground. It was larger than any house cat, but smaller than a pony. "What are you doing out here alone?" Part of me wondered if I was staring at a baby dragon... except Lillian admitted to females being infertile.

“Never seen that before,” Mr. Big Dragon—or should I say, Jonah—said from behind me. “These dragons are wild animals and aren’t friendly with anyone.”

I twisted toward him as he stepped into the barn, hands by his side, looking more regal than I’d seen him all the time we had spent together.

“What do you want?”

His lips pinched to the side. “I guess I have some explaining to do.”

“You think? You lied to me, then had sex with me.”

He ran a hand through his hair, messing it up more, giving him that sexy, just-got-out-of-bed look.

“If we’re going to be splitting hairs, we both willingly had sex, so you can’t pin that on me.”

I frowned at him. “I can totally blame you for not pulling out. Let’s just hope that nothing happens.”

“If it does, there’s no issue.” He strolled closer to me. “You’d still be pregnant by a royal, and my brother never needs to know.”

“Wow, you really dislike him, don’t you?”

He shrugged. “I’m indifferent. Let’s just say, since growing up with him beating me endlessly, always needing to be the winner, and having that he was the better brother, the next in line for the throne shoved down my throat, it’s been years since we’ve had a civil conversation.”

It grew difficult not to feel a tinge of pity for him for being in a family where he was seen as the second most important person. That would have hurt. I remember hearing stories about the king’s wife dying years ago during childbirth, so I hurt for Jonah and his loss. When I lost my mother, I wanted the world to swallow me up, and I didn’t want to keep on living. When I looked at Jonah, I saw the ache in his eyes, how hard it must be living in a place filled with people yet feeling so distant from your family.

“Now, back to your concerns. I never lied to you.” His voice distracted me, drawing me from my thoughts. He moved closer, his presence towering over me.

“Oh, but I think you did.” The little dragon was curling around my legs, which made it extra hard to be mad when I had the most adorable thing purring against me for a scratch.

“Me not giving you all the information is not lying.”

I narrowed my gaze at Jonah. “Now, look who’s splitting hairs. You purposely not telling me in my books is as bad as lying.”

Sitting down, the dragon curled itself into my lap. I tried really hard to control my flaring emotions—the fear, the hurt, the desire curling inside me in his presence.

Jonah knelt across from me but didn’t make a move to touch the dragon in my lap

“The reason I didn’t tell you who I was is I’m sick of every girl I meet obsessing over me. They didn’t care if I treated them like shit. They’d still beg for me as long as they got to be with a prince. There aren’t exactly other dragons nearby to find someone. So, yes, I didn’t tell you who I was because you were the first person to treat me normally, to speak back to me, and I fucking loved it. Around you, I could be myself.”

I blinked at him, wanting to be mad at him. Damn him for making me sympathize.

“And I saw the way you stared at me once you found out who I was,” he continued.

“Oh, you noticed the anger burning in my eyes?”

He chuckled loudly, sending the dragon scurrying behind my back.

“I don’t think it likes you.” I poked my tongue out at him.

“I can live with that, as long as you still like me.” His violet eyes seemed to glow, the intensity behind them so sincere, it had me losing my breath.

“Well, the jury’s still out on that.” I couldn’t stop the grin spreading over my mouth. The little dragon came skulking back and hopped back up onto my lap. “But don’t think I’ve forgiven you for coming inside me. I mean, there is one way you can make it up to me.”

The corner of his mouth curled upward. “Yeah, and how’s that?”

I suddenly licked my dry lips. “You can give me a few drops of your blood to help save my father.”

His shoulders dropped as he leaned forward. “I’d jump at the chance if it wouldn’t end in you and your father hunted down for the rest of your life. My father is a vengeful bastard, and the moment he senses your father is healed, he’ll lose his shit and make you both pay. He will also find the dragon who helped you and skin them alive, even if it’s his son. So, I don’t suggest that option as much as I know you want it.” Reaching over, he placed a hand on mine, but the tiny dragon nipped his hand until he removed it from mine.

I laughed. “Looks like I got myself a little protector. Has it ever been around humans?” I paused, thinking about what I just said. “Wait. Is this like a real dragon? Not a shifter?”

“It’s an actual dragon. They don’t grow too big, but maybe it just likes to play with its food before it eats it.”

“Well, then, you’re in trouble.”

A smile tugged at the corners of his lips, but his eyes softened a touch.

“Not surprised by his reaction. You’re beautiful, and I’d give anything to lie in your lap, preferably between your legs.”

My blush went from my chest up my neck to my face. The memory of last night came flooding back.

“You’re such a flirt.” I glanced down at the dragon curled in my lap. “But you might have some stiff competition with this little guy.”

“Guess I’ll have to up my game.” Jonah laughed, then reached out and touched my hand again. His fingers skimmed

softly across my knuckles, and synapses fired up my arm.

The small dragon in my lap rumbled like a cross between a purr and a growl.

Jonah smiled, then stood up and held out his hand. “Let’s get you home. The king won’t be happy if he finds you here.”

“Or I could just stay here. Wouldn’t you like that?” I cooed, running my fingers along the dragon’s scales. The creature nuzzled closer, but I knew Jonah was right. Slowly, I eased the dragon from my lap, and it yawned, stretched, and curled up to sleep in a small pile of hay.

“Will it be okay out here?” I couldn’t stop staring at the critter.

“It’s a dragon, not a house cat.” He tugged on my hand. “Let’s get you back to the castle.”

“Do I have to?” I groaned. I wasn’t at all interested in whatever this ritual the king had planned. The closer I got to Jonah, the more torn I felt about having a baby with his brother.

“Hey, I have a question,” I started. “Would it be just as easy if we tell your father that you’ll give me a child, not your brother?”

His hand slid across my back, drawing me toward him. With his hands cupping my cheeks, he stared into my eyes.

“It’s killing me to think that my brother is going to touch you. I want to strike him down and take his place, but my father will only accept an heir from the prince next in line to take the throne.”

I swallowed hard, but Jonah’s lips grazed mine, kissing me the way he had in the woods—possessively. I leaned into him, wanting to drown under his attention and forget everything else.

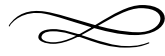
“I meant what I said yesterday,” he said when we finally broke apart. “I want to make you mine.”

It hurt to hear those words because we’d ended up in a tangled mess.

“I don’t even know what to say. I can’t let my father die.”

Silence swept between us as he drew me into his chest, holding me for a long moment, reassuring us that somehow, we wouldn’t end up brokenhearted if anything happened between us.

Seven



“Please. I just need a little more time.” I pleaded with Jonah as we emerged from the barn. “I’m not ready to go back there and deal with everything.”

“How about a ride?”

“In your dragon form again?” I narrowed my gaze at him. “I still can’t believe you kept it from me all this time. Then brought me the dress in the hot springs.”

“And the bag of clothes in your room.”

My eyes widened. “Oh, that was you?” I felt guilty now for assuming it had been his brother being kind.

“The least I could do after losing your bag of clothes.” He led me across the meadow to a dirt road that wound around the mountain. “I was thinking of a different kind of ride.” He led me out to another barn, telling me to wait. When he emerged, he was pushing out a motorbike. Handing me the helmet from under the seat, he climbed on and patted the seat behind him. Once I pulled on the helmet and got on, he revved the engine.

“Hold on,” he said over his shoulder, pulling my arms to wrap around his middle. My body pressed flush against his back, and my legs wrapped around his hips. I really loved being this close to him.

He twisted the throttle, and we were off down a dirt track with the engine purring. Wind whipped at my clothes as he tore down the mountain faster and faster as I clung to him. The trees blurred, and I spotted deer in the distance bolting from us. The engine grunted, and I screamed in both terror and

excitement. We raced down the mountain and I'd never felt as free.

When we finally reached the town, he looped through the streets, passing cars. Then he pulled into my neighborhood, and I tensed. He patted my knee with one hand, easing the bike to a stop in front of my house.

I wanted to cry, I was back home to see my dad.

"Figured you could hang out with your old man before I took you back to the castle."

I got off the bike quickly and removed the helmet, which he took from me.

"Thank you." I threw myself at him and kissed his lips. It was just a quick one, but enough to heat me up and make me realize I should have kissed him on the cheek.

Jonah combed his dark hair back once he got off the bike. I wondered if he was nervous, which didn't make sense.

I knocked on the door, then pressed it open.

"Dad?" I called out. "It's me, Asha."

"Gumdrop?" he wheezed, pulling his wheelchair into the living room. He looked more energetic than he had when I left. The paleness from his cheeks was gone, which was a step forward. "Who is this with you?" He sized up Jonah with a frown.

"This is Jonah. He works at the castle... with me." I ran over to my dad and hugged him, so glad the medicine from the king was working. "How are you doing?"

"Improving slowly." He coughed but smiled. "Are they treating you right?" He looked over my head at Jonah.

"Yes, Dad," I lied. "I've made a friend, too, besides Jonah." Although I don't know that I'd call him a friend since we had sex together, but I wasn't going to explain that to my dad.

Dad nodded and glanced at Jonah, a twinkle in his eye. "Thank you for escorting my daughter home to see me." He

bowed his head. "I'm glad my daughter has a knight in shining armor looking out for her."

"I'm no knight," Jonah muttered. "And it was just a ride."

My dad raised his eyebrow and looked between the two of us.

Clearing my throat, I sat down on the couch while Jonah went into the kitchen.

"Tell me about you, Dad. Do you need anything while I'm here?" It felt so good to see him, I had to blink back tears to keep from crying. I couldn't believe Jonah had brought me here.

"Some days are better than others," he admitted, and my heart squeezed in my chest. "How long can you stay? I can make steaks."

"Not long." I took his hand in mine, holding it for a moment. It was so weak and frail, not at all as I remembered before the accident. "We have to head back to the castle soon." I hated to think what the king would do if he discovered I'd left the castle grounds.

"I'll make something to take back with you then." He gave me a crooked smile. "And we can play a few games of poker."

"Of course." I laughed, pushing Dad and his wheelchair into the kitchen.

Jonah was standing in front of the fridge, looking at all the photos of me my parents had taped there of me. "Braces, huh?"

"Yeah." I blushed. "Three years and eight months of the metal contraption." At least I had burned the photos they took of me in my headgear and when I'd gotten a really, really bad haircut.

"I'll make sandwiches." My dad said, pulling out the bread. "Jonah, get the cards from the drawer to your left."

Part of me expected the dragon shifter to grumble about a human giving him orders, but he did as my dad asked without complaint.

An hour later, we'd finished the sandwiches and played three games of poker as we talked and laughed. Before I knew it, the sun had begun to set, and we had to leave. My dad hugged me tight, and Jonah shook his hand.

"We should get back, Asha," Jonah said quietly.

I blinked a few times, nodding.

"Bye, Dad." I hugged him again, not wanting to leave. Who knew when I would get the chance to see him again? I couldn't visit him while I was so pregnant since my belly would be obvious, but I doubted I'd be able to sneak out of the castle easily.

"Come and see me soon." My dad kissed both my cheeks. "And you can bring the dragon shifter too. He's not bad at cards."

Laughing, I pulled back, then followed Jonah out of the door. We climbed onto his bike.

"Thank you," I said to my dad in the doorway.

"We should sneak out more often," Jonah said in a husky voice.

"I might just love you if you do."

"I'll hold you to that," he murmured, then we were off again, racing against the sunset. The world around us blurred. I had never felt so safe and protected than I did with him around me as we tore up the mountain and back to what was beginning more and more to feel like a prison.

All too soon, we were at the castle.

He held my hand the whole way from the barn to the main castle. I could almost pretend he was the prince I needed to mate with and that he was as reluctant to return. Outside the castle, he pushed me up against the wall, then his mouth was on mine, and the heat of his touch made me desperate for more.

"I want you again," he growled in my ear, and my heart thudded against my chest.

“I’m not sure how this is going to work.” I forced the words out as he buried his face in my neck.

A shiver of pleasure slid down my spine. I wanted him with a desperation that was tearing me apart inside. I pushed him back, and he moaned. Pressing my hand to my heart, I took a deep breath before meeting his gaze and steeling myself for the desire I knew was there and was mirrored in my own eyes.

With a growl of frustration, Jonah yanked me to him, inhaling me deeply, memorizing my scent. Finally, he slowly pulled away, grazing his lips across my cheeks and neck until he was nothing but a whisper.

“I’ll see you later,” he said, flecks of regret in his violet eyes.

He stepped back, eyes still on me, and I bit my lip against a response. I’d see him tomorrow, but what would happen then? We’d pretend there was nothing between us?

Fear crept into my stomach, and I knew I couldn’t think about tonight. I had to focus on what I could control.

One more look and he was gone, blending in with the shadows as he disappeared into the castle. I was left with a warmth lingering on my skin and a thought I couldn’t shake. As much as I wanted to believe that things would work out between Jonah and me, deep down, I knew the dragon king would never approve of us.

After my heart stopped racing, I hurried into the castle, torn between what I was supposed to do and what I wanted. It wasn’t fair, but I knew arguing with the king would only end with my dad hurt and me thrown out without any chance to redeem myself.

Sighing, I rolled my shoulders back and marched to his bedroom. It was time I told him to man up and have a baby with me. The sooner we did the ritual and I got pregnant, the sooner we could both move on with our lives.

A few dragons balked as I walked past them in the grand corridors, but I didn’t even look in their direction.

At Leandre's bedroom, I didn't hesitate to push open the door. Movement under the blanket had my heart freezing in my chest. He was actually in here? The cover slid down, revealing his broad shoulders and bare ass as he pumped in and out of a woman whose hands came up his back, scratching long marks down his skin.

For several moments, I stood there, unable to move, my feet rooted to the floor. He was fucking another woman in his bed instead of me. Anger simmered in my veins, and my blood roared in my ears.

Her ginger hair spilled across the silk pillow. The woman from the bar and who drank my tea! I gasped, my gaze flipping from her to him. He looked up, and the shock in his expression morphed into anger.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” he yelled.

The woman shifted to lay under the blanket, her gaze moving from me to him.

My hands balled into fists, desperate to hold on to all my bottled-up emotions that threatened to ripple through me at any second. This was the same woman I'd seen him with at the bar. A beautiful dragon shifter he had a relationship with—why he pushed me away.

“Go outside, human,” he barked, as if it was the vilest thing he could say. “I'll let you know when I'm done. Lock the door on your way out.”

My lip quivered, and tears threatened. Stumbling backward, I spun on my heels and ran before humiliation consumed me. Down the hallway and out the castle door, my mind spun with all the questions I didn't want the answers to. All I knew was I couldn't sleep in that bed again, that I'd made a horrible mistake and made a deal with the king.

I huddled in the garden near a maple tree beneath the bright moonlight and let myself cry all the tears I'd been holding onto since I got here. I sobbed hard into my hands, my chest heaving for breath. I hated it at the castle. My life was a mess, and I had no idea how to fix any of it. My arms wrapped

around my body as if that would hold in all my emotions—it didn't work.

“Hey, Asha?” Lillian approached me, wringing her hands together. “Are you okay?”

Scrubbing a hand over my face, I shoved the tears back down and nodded. I couldn't tell her I saw the prince with another woman. It would be his word against mine, and even if I convinced the king, something told me he wouldn't care. Not that I cared at all about the prince, but I'd come here with the understanding I'd be leaving in nine months.

I still felt broken, betrayed, and humiliated.

“Yeah, just missing my dad,” I half-lied.

“Oh.” The look of pity on her face robbed me of my breath, so I did the only thing I could do. Reaching out my hand, I took hers and held it tightly between both of mine. She sat down and wrapped her arms around me, pulling me in and holding me close. “It will get better, I promise.”

“I hope you're right,” I said softly, wishing I could believe her.

“And don't worry about not getting pregnant yet.” She pulled back, her dark eyes searching mine. “The king said it couldn't happen without the ritual. So, you have nothing to worry about,” she said with a smile. “The king will fix everything.”

If only it were that easy. I rubbed my eyes and tried to force a smile I didn't feel. She and the king and everyone here just didn't get it. I wasn't sure if I could go through with it now, yet I died on the inside to think by not doing so, my father would pay with his life. My stomach clutched at the thought.

“Do you know what's involved in a ritual?”

“No idea.” She shook her head. “But I heard it's very ancient and powerful.”

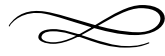
“Great.” One more thing to be freaking nervous about. I hated the idea of all of this, but I wasn't about to tell her that.

Deep down, I knew that nothing would ever be the same again, and it had started when I got into the king's car. My chest felt hot and tight, like a heavy weight that wouldn't allow me to breathe right.

"Thanks, Lillian." I hugged her again, and we sat there in the comfortable silence of the night while I tried to think of a way out of this craziness. I knew I needed to go back inside. I'd ask Lillian for a spare room I could sleep in. I wasn't ready to face Leandre and admit that he was right—that I didn't want him either—because then he'd call it off in a heartbeat.

In truth, I wanted to sneak into Jonah's room and have him hold me until everything felt better, but knowing my luck, we'd get caught, then my problems would quadruple.

Eight



For the next three days, I was in solitary confinement. Really. Something about being purified for the ritual ceremony. A servant brought my food and I always hoped it would be Lillian or even Jonah to sneak in and see me, but they didn't come. The first day there was a stack of books from romance to thriller to SciFi outside the door. The second day, it was a bag of chocolates and a deck of cards. On the third day, someone left a bouquet of dahlias and somehow I knew all the gifts were from Jonah.

On the morning of my freedom from confinement, I hurried past the guard who unlocked the door. I was so ready for fresh air, seeing my room window was locked down that I jogged straight past those in the hallway and outside. For over an hour, I stayed outside. I played with the little dragon in the barn and breathed in the fresh air like I would never see it again. Even the sky was bluer.

When my stomach rumbled for food, I reluctantly made my way back into the castle for breakfast.

"The ritual is tonight," Lillian announced across the breakfast table in the main hall, her eyes sparkling like it was the most wonderful thing in the world, while I wanted to vomit.

It was too soon. "Yeah," I said, my voice trembling slightly.

Lillian beamed. "You're going to look amazing and everyone will be so jealous. I can't wait."

I tried to pretend to be interested, but deep down all I wanted was to be done with all of this so I could get back to my everyday life and see my dad without having to see him in pain and wonder if he'd make it through the night.

“First, you need to soak in the hot springs.”

“Right.” I feigned confidence, forcing a smile on my lips.

She let out a giggle and my stomach clenched, threatening to spill everything I'd just eaten for breakfast.

“Here.” She grabbed my hand and placed in it a glass of blue liquid in it from the serving table. “Have some of this.”

“What is it?” I stared at the strange liquid which had bubbles in it.

“Spirits. It will help soothe your nerves.” She handed it to me. “You're as nervous as a dragon flying off a cliff for the first time.”

I took a sip of the tepid liquid. The familiar taste of cardamom and vanilla filled my mouth and my stomach unclenched a little.

“You'll do great,” Lillian said with a smile and we entered the huge bathroom. She took the glass from me as I stared out at the water with millions of rose petals thrown in. Steam rolled off the water in waves.

“Now, you have a full hour to soak.” She lightly pushed my shoulder, forcing my feet forward. “Me or someone else will come back to get you and the preparations will continue. There's bread and grapes in the corner if you get hungry.”

No chance of that. “Thanks.”

She hugged me, then slipped out of the bathroom. Candles flickered along the edges of the rocky bath, and it was calming.

My tongue felt thick in my mouth.

I squared my shoulders and disrobed, climbing down into the water. With the heat of the hot springs and rose petals, the

scent was intoxicating. Slowly, I sank deeper and deeper until the water was up to my neck.

I closed my eyes, slowly exhaled, and tried to relax. To enjoy this bit of freedom and pampering while it lasted.

The drink Lillian gave me swirled in my gut, calming my tense muscles. I'd have to ask her what it was called and take some home with me.

When the door opened, I sighed, it couldn't be an hour up already, could it?

"Ten more minutes," I grumbled.

"I last a whole lot longer than that," Jonah said, closing the door behind him.

My eyes snapped open and I sat up eagerly, the water lapping at my breasts. "What are you doing? You can't be in here."

But he wasn't listening as he yanked his shirt off, revealing his chiseled, tanned skin. He was barefoot and took off his leather pants showing he had gone commando again.

My mouth watered at the sight of his huge double-headed cock and the memory of how he felt inside me. His eyes never left mine and my heart coursed through my body, my nipples already hardening.

He stepped into the hot springs, the water reaching to his hips, and slowly made his way over to me.

"Jonah, you have to go," I said in a shaky voice, though part of me wanted him to stay.

He shook his head, pulling me closer to him. "I have to have you."

He raised his hand and caressed my jaw, his fingers tracing their way down my neck until they found my nipples. I gasped and my body shivered in pleasure.

"Let my father have fucking seconds."

He kissed me then and that was when I let the world fade away. I melted in his arms as his tongue danced with mine,

tasting and teasing me.

My arms wrapped around him, pulling us even closer together until we were one body. Our tongues entwined. Fire burning through me. Nothing else mattered but him and me.

His fingers traced the outline of my breasts until he lazily found my nipples and tweaked them. The sensation went straight to my core, my hips rocking back and forward. He groaned against my mouth, pulling me onto his lap as the water and rose petals caressed us.

I wanted him to make me his in every way. He pinched my nipples. and I gasped in pleasure. My pussy slid back and forth along the length of his monstrous cock.

“So greedy.” He nibbled at my neck, his hand cupping my sex, his thumb rubbing my clit. I cried out as desire coursed through me and I couldn’t get enough. We were moving fast, both knowing time wasn’t on our side, yet I craved him as much as he did me.

He positioned himself between my legs and his violet eyes were so deep and dark in the candlelight that stole my breath. Powerful hands on my hips, he moved me to stop on his hard cock.

“Fuck me, little mouse. Let me be the only thing you remember today, the only thing you feel from how much I’m going to stretch you.” There was pain in his eyes, but never once acted jealous. He was being true to his word to find a way to make me his, and I wished things were less complicated.

He pushed my hips down, slowly working his double heads into me, which took some shifting of both our bodies. Of his finger on my clit, rubbing me to unbearable madness that I more easily opened up to accept his size.

Gradually, he pressed deeper into me, stretching me, filling me. He held my gaze the whole time, while his hands cupped my ass, kneading my cheeks.

“You’re so tight,” he grunted in a low voice.

He began thrusting then, each plunge leaving me trembling. I felt heady and dizzy, my insides turning primal as I moved faster over him, riding his cock.

“Please, more,” I begged. “Make it hurt.”

He grinned, loving my words evidently, because he lifted us up and out of the water. With me still attached to him, wrapped around his body, he threw the bundles of towels on the floor, then lay me on my back, lowering himself over me.

“Your wish is my pleasure.” They were his last words before he started really fucking me like a beast, moving so fast, so savage, that my world exploded with white light.

I wheezed for breath, my hands on his round shoulders as he pumpled me, stretched me. I cried out, my breaths growing erratic. I drew my knees higher, wider, giving him everything.

“Be a good girl and let go for me,” he whispered. “Let it all go.”

He slammed into me faster, harder, and I screamed as arousal flared through me. His mouth was suddenly on mine, stealing my screams. But never once did he pause his assault, not until he growled, his body stiffened.

In one powerful thrust, he came, his hips grinding against me as his deep guttural moan reverberated through me.

It was beautiful, the act of our bodies thrumming high on a climax. So fucking amazing. I didn't remember how long we were locked together that way.

His warm exhales coated my face as he remained over me, kissing my face all over.

He pulled me close and held me tight, our breathing ragged, our bodies still shaking from the intensity of our fucking.

Time seemed to stand still. I wanted so badly to stay here forever. When he pulled out of me, I mourned the loss of him inside me.

He pressed back on his heels, holding my legs spread open, staring down at my swollen pussy.

“Just beautiful to watch my cum seeping out of your sweet, pink cunt. And I need you to do something for me.”

“Anything,” I whispered back. “Don’t wash yourself. I want my cum all over your pussy when my brother takes you. I want your cunt to already be claimed by me. It’s the only way I can bear to survive you with him.”

I nodded because I felt as tense as him about the upcoming ritual and what came afterward.

“Use the rose perfume in the bathroom on your skin as that will conceal the scent of my cum on you.”

I steeled the rise of my savage emotions because of what was coming. Jonah got to his feet, and lifted me to mine with ease.

“You need to go,” I insisted. “Before someone sees you in here.”

He nodded and got dressed quickly, his cock still hard and bulging inside his pants. He came over, cupped the sides of my face and kissed me. “No matter what, we’re going to get through tonight. I promise you.”

Then he was gone, leaving me alone, trembling, burning up on the inside, while he cum dripped down the insides of my thighs.

While I agreed to his request, I had to wipe some of that off my inner legs, which I quickly splashed clean from water in the sink. Then I spritzed the bottle shaped like a rose across my body, the scent strong.

I wrapped myself in the bathrobe as two gray-haired female servants with stern looks on their faces entered.

“We’re here to get you ready,” one of them said, looking like she’d rather be skinning a cat.

“Alright.” I swallowed down the lump prickling in the back of my throat.

“This way.”

And I followed them, feeling like I was being lead to the guillotine.

Tonight would change everything.

I'd never be the same.

But there was no backing away from it...I had to accept my fate, no matter how much it hurt.

I stood in front of the full-length mirror, barely recognizing the woman staring back at me. Shouldn't I feel different? Beautiful? Excited? Except, I only felt numb.

The intricate dragon markings they'd drawn on my skin seemed to mock me, each rune symbol representing the ritual I was about to undertake. There were spirals, lightning bolts, and other designs I couldn't name. I was given a dress to wear that looked like it could have been woven out of gold. Simple spaghetti straps over my shoulders, the fabric shimmered all the way down to my ankles with a slit up to my hips on the outside of my legs. Underneath, I wore nothing.

I was thankful for the little things, like the fabric not being transparent, or that no one smelled Jonah on me.

"Am I ready for this?" I whispered, almost as though asking for permission.

The two maids helping me didn't answer as they finished painting symbols on my arms. They reminded me of henna. It soaked into my skin. My heart threatened to pound its way out of my chest and my stomach was a combination of butterflies and lead. I consciously pushed down the rising panic, trying to quell the fear that maybe I wasn't ready for this.

I squeezed my eyes shut briefly, took a deep breath, and tried to calm my nerves. This was for my dad. I would do anything for him.

And what about Jonah? He promised to be there for me.

“The king will be so pleased with you,” one of the women finally said. “And we’ve heard Leandre knows how to satisfy a woman.”

My stomach churned, and I wanted to snap back that I wouldn’t know and I preferred not to find out. I wasn’t sure I was strong enough to go through with it. I had meditated, focusing on the end result and seeing my dad again, but my mind was a jumbled mess.

“Dab a little bit of dragon pheromones on your neck, between your breasts and legs.” The woman instructed and pointed her chin at the purple vial on the vanity.

I reluctantly anointed my skin with fragrant oils, each chosen for their specific properties, but their scent only made me feel more trapped.

Muted sunlight shone through the window and gilded my skin in hazy yellow light as the sun dipped low in the horizon.

The women tied my hair back in a fancy braid and fastened a dragon horn headdress in place, feeling its weight settle on my brow like a prison.

My reflection gazed back at me with dark, hollow eyes and a nervous laugh escaped me as I forced myself to remember that the fate of my father depended on me tonight.

I turned away from the mirror, my throat tight and my skin prickling with unease. I knew what I had to do, but whether I had the strength to do it... I could only wait and find out.

Guards banged on the door, then escorted me down the hallway to the throne room. I walked on bare feet, the marble floors cold against my skin.

Dragons were packed inside, some cranking their necks to get a look at me. Others muttered under their breath.

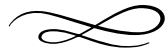
The atmosphere was electric with anticipation, but all I felt was fear. It was too thick to breathe. I approached the dragon king on his throne, who nodded in approval, grinning, leering at me.

But I couldn't shake the feeling that I was making a huge mistake. I felt disconnected yet every cell in my body seemed to come alive.

The prince's face resembled someone going to a funeral rather than having to mate with me. I felt sick to my stomach.

"Let's get this over with," he growled.

Nine



I blinked, hoping this wasn't real, that I was dreaming and would wake up. But nope. When I opened my eyes, I was still here, standing in front of the throne and the dragon king with Prince Leandre beside me. The whole court had been decorated for this ritual. Shimmering tapestries, depicting scenes of dragons soaring through the skies and diving into the depths of the sea hung from each wall. The air was filled with the sweet fragrance of blooming flowers, arranged in massive bouquets around the room. Roses in white, yellow, and purple surrounded us on all sides, filling the room with their sweet fragrance.

I couldn't breathe. It felt like every breath of air was filled with fire that bit at my lungs. My body felt like it was burning up from fever or like I'd gotten a really, really bad sunburn.

In the center of the room, the king's throne carved from gleaming black stone and inlaid with gold and gems was polished to a nearly blinding shine. The balcony doors to either side overlooked a breathtaking view of the dragon kingdom below stood open, letting in the night air that did nothing to cool me.

The king surveyed the room with regal grace. He was dressed in a tuxedo that showed off his gray hair and I saw where both Jonah and Leandre got their good looks from. Everyone else here were dressed in their finest attire as though they were attending a ball or party and I guess to them, it was. To me, it was akin to the end of everything.

Voices boomed all around me as everyone mingled and chatted, their laughter ringing out in the air. A man in scarlet robes stood off to the side of the king and I wondered who he was. Maybe a priest? I guessed it made sense as this was a mating ritual. I tried to push my nerves down as I waited to get it over with.

Soft golden glow flooded the room from the torches along the walls and a crystal chandelier flickered to life, illuminating the throne room, and the song abruptly ended.

There were so many dragon shifters packed in every available space like sardines. Some craned their necks to look at me and my skin crawled. Leandre hadn't accepted me, hadn't tried to mate me, and seemed like he couldn't stand me except for the one time he kissed me outside of the bar. That had been an angry, drunk kiss. Not at all like how Jonah kissed me.

My stomach churned. I wanted to say I couldn't go through with this. Not with Leandre. But I didn't have a choice. Jonah had warned me that the king would want the firstborn to be from Leandre only. And without me fulfilling my part of the deal, the king wouldn't save my father.

"Welcome honored guests to this ceremony to bind Prince Leandre to a human woman," the king's voice echoed off the walls of the throne room like a thunderclap, commanding silence from the court.

It took all my willpower not to burst out crying.

Each beat of my heart was a shackled weight in my chest.

Blood rushed in my ears, and I clenched my fists at my sides, sweat trickling a path down my back. My gaze shifted to Prince Jonah, dressed in a black tux that showed off his violet eyes. He met my stare. His face was expressionless and I died inside to know what he was thinking.

Quickly, I glanced back at the king before I started tearing up. My legs shook and my throat tightened.

"Bring the ceremonial cups and wine." The king waved a hand and two servant girls raced up to him, one holding an

old-looking bottle and another with two golden flutes. With the whole court feeling like it was holding its breath, the king uncorked the bottle and poured fluorescent-colored ruby wine into both flutes.

Prince Leandre stepped closer to the king, and I followed his lead. He took the right cup and I collected the left.

Leandre hadn't lost his stony expression, so I tore my gaze away, holding the cup near my chest. My knees weakened, but I locked them, keeping myself upright. A scent of sweetness and a metallic scent filled my nostrils.

I took a shaky breath, wishing I was anywhere but here.

"You two," the king announced, glancing at the prince and I, "have agreed to join into an unbreakable bond. Under our tradition, you must drink from the cup, from the same wine, to bind your connection."

Unbreakable? My heart was pounding so hard it felt like it was going to burst out of my chest. That hadn't been what I agreed to.

"This wine was fused with the blood of our ancient king, my forefather. A powerful dragon."

Ewww. Wait up? I had to drink blood wine? Wasn't that like a health code violation? And how long did blood wine last...surely it had an expiration date on something.

"So drink deep," the king continued. "From this cup, you will drink your bond, for your love will always find its way."

I held up the cup in my shaky hand and closed my eyes.

"Drink," the king barked, and I flinched, snapping my eyes open and taking a huge gulp.

I coughed, choking on the wine that burned my throat and threatened to heave it back up. It was like acid in my veins, coursing through me. My stomach curled in on itself and I hunched over as pain shot through my midsection.

Leandre growled, yanking me to his side by my arm to keep me upright.

“May your spirits be one, your future a lasting bliss,” the crowd cried out in unison.

Bile twisted in my belly. I was pretty sure the king and everyone would be insulted if I threw up in their little ritual ceremony.

I scanned for Jonah in the throne room so I could see him one last time before whatever came next, but he was gone. Not that I blamed him. I didn't want to be here either. Though my heart felt like it was twisting in my chest that he left. At the king's nod, the man in scarlet robes broke through the crowd and stood beside the king. His hair was silvery-white and his eyes were vertical slits.

“Your Grace,” he said in a bow, his voice raspy like he was a chain smoker. “You honor me to do the magical part of the ritual.”

“And now, with the ancient wine consumed, the runes will be awakened by dragon magic.” The king stepped back for the man.

My heart raced, and I swallowed hard. Really wish they would have given out a cheat sheet for me to follow along with what the hell all this meant and what was going to happen.

Suddenly, the king gestured at me and the elder man shuffled forward.

As soon his hand touched my head, I felt a fiery touch all the way down my body, and all the symbols painted onto my skin lit up. I flinched, pulling back from the intense heat, but the magic person didn't seem to be affected. At the same time, I was in awe with how spectacular my skin looked, glowing from the markings. If only these were for bonding with someone else. Someone who actually cared a fraction about me.

“The ritual is complete,” the king announced with a smile, and the audience erupted into applause and excitement. But for me, it felt like my time to be sacrificed had arrived. I was overwhelmed by my body glowing, and I couldn't shake the

feeling that something wasn't right. I tried to imagine the child I would one day hold in my arms, yet all I felt was a deep sadness and a rising terror that made it difficult to breathe. Regret flooded me as I stood here, exhausted but empty, like I had sold a piece of my soul.

“And now, take your mate to your chamber for all to witness the conception.” The king's voice reverberated off the walls of the throne room.

Hold up. “What?” I squeaked out. My nightmare was becoming a reality.

“The chamber,” Leandre leered at me and super bad chills broke out over my arms. “It's where we'll have sex where everyone can hear us.

The room swayed, tilting like I was going to pass out. God, how could my life have gotten so screwed up so fast? “You're fucking kidding me, right?” Next thing he was going to tell me they were going to watch too. “Why not invite them into the bed with us?”

He snarled, and I backed up. His hand snapped on my elbow, yanking me to him.

“You're the one who wanted this, human.”

“No, no. All I wanted was one drop of blood,” I mumbled under my breath. I jerked from him, my hands out to block him. The marks on my body pierced into my flesh like thorns, and I shrieked in pain.

But he didn't listen. He dragged me down the hallway while I yelled, pleading for someone to help me, but no one listened.

Leandre hauled me upstairs to a circular room with open slots all around where windows should have been and a huge bed.

I was going to be sick. I whipped around, my arms pressed against my stomach.

“We don't have to do this,” I whispered. Tears pricked my eyes. No, I didn't want to be bound to Leandre. I didn't want it

like this...I couldn't. I changed my mind...

"Come now," Leandre tore off his shirt, his cock tenting the front of his pants. "You've been begging for this ever since you got here. The wine and the ritual will make you go into heat, you'll want me even more. Trust me."

I backed up, hitting the wall behind me. There was nowhere to escape. I panted, afraid of drowning in my fear. My hands trembled over my stomach as he stared at me with a mixture of hunger and hatred. I couldn't breathe, couldn't move as terror coiled tight around my chest.

Below the windows, voices rose and someone shouted, "Pound her already."

"Make a newborn prince!" another shouted.

"Please," I begged, my voice breaking. "Please, I don't want this." Not like this, not with me feeling like I was being cooked from the inside out.

"Too late," he snarled, and then suddenly he lunged at me. I ducked, scurrying to the corner and he just laughed.

My scream raked up my throat. All the painted runes on my body burned and twisted.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" Leandre towered over me.

But I couldn't answer him. My back arched as pain surged through my whole body like I'd touched a live wire.

"Enough games." He grabbed me, shoving me on the bed. Everywhere he touched me felt like my skin was being flayed from my bones.

"Stop, please," I pleaded. "Something's wrong with me."

Leandre shook his head, but he frowned down at me like I was finally getting through to him.

"The runes...the wine," he paused. "They're supposed to put you in heat, ready for fucking."

"Then maybe you gave me a bad batch." I groaned, squirming to get out from underneath him.

“Lies,” he spat, spinning me over on the bed, his weight pressing me down and started to tear at my gown.

The pain coursing through my body boiled over and I screamed, my throat raw. Leandre shoved my head down into the pillow like he didn’t want to have to hear me. His other hand yanked the gown over my legs and ass, spreading my legs with his knees.

Oh god, oh god, no.

This couldn’t happen. My insides twisted and I choked on tears. Then he stilled, his hand running on the inside of my thighs. I twisted, gasping for breath.

“The fuck! Another dragon marked you? Who bit you here? Who was it?” His voice grew deadly and cold.

“Wha—” I wasn’t sure what I should do or say.

The door suddenly splintered open. I managed to turn my head enough to spot Jonah standing on the threshold, a storm in his eyes.

“Don’t you fucking touch her,” he snarled, claws extending from his fingers. “She’s not for you.”

“Get the hell out, little brother.” Leandre clenched his fists. “Unless you want to stay and watch?”

With a roar, Jonah rushed forward, tackling Leandre right off me, the air from their movement buffeted against me. They tumbled to the floor with a thud, while I scrambled out of bed in the opposite direction. Pushing down my dress, I swallowed hard, terrified to death.

My heart pounded in my chest and time seemed to slow down. Jonah had Leandre pinned to the stone floor, his claws at his brother’s throat.

“You will not hurt her,” Jonah growled, his gaze locking with Leandre’s.

The crowd outside was silent, so quiet you could hear a pin drop.

Leandre spat in Jonah's face, his eyes wild and untamed. Jonah punched Leandre over and over, blood coating his knuckles.

Then the spark of magic bit into my flesh with Leandre's body changing, growing in size so fast, in the blink of an eye, a gigantic golden scaled dragon crammed into the room. With one swing of his clawed paw, he slammed Jonah into the wall. Stone crumbled around them.'

Leandre shoved his head into the ceiling, going right through me, fire spitting across the walls.

I screamed with terror, recoiling when my back kissed the wall. Wide eyes and terrified, I froze as Jonah's transformation. Mid-change he charged at Leandre, both of them slamming right through a wall.

Stone crumbled, dust fell from the ceiling as the whole palace shook.

The dragons burst out of the room and were outside, where those watching were suddenly screaming as two dragons mid battle were falling in their direction.

I charged over to the gaping hole in the room to where two dragons were in a tangle of talons and wings and fire. My heart beat madly as Leandre kicked Jonah and a sickening crack of a bone breaking filled my ears, but Jonah didn't cower in pain. He bit down on Leandre's wing, savagely, ripping a piece off and spitting it out on the ground.

They were going to kill each other.

I shook harshly at the chaos I'd created in their kingdom.

"Asha," Lillian shouted from the doorway, making me jump around. A panicked look flared over her face. "Come with me before you get hurt."

I swallowed down the lump in my throat, scrambled toward her, and tore out the door.

She grabbed my hand, her face pale, and pulled me down the stairwell with her. "You have to leave. Hide. Get out of the castle. Go somewhere they'll never find you."

I struggled to keep up with her. “What do you mean? Because Leandre didn’t mate with me? It was these stupid symbols and the wine.” We reached the bottom of the stairs, the sounds of guards marching echoed down the end of the hallway.

“This way,” she ducked through a door that led to a storage room.

She placed her finger to her mouth, and I nodded, listening as what sounded like countless guards’ boots clomped up the stairs.

A shudder rolled through me, and I wrapped my arms around my stomach.

“You have to leave. Now. Don’t come back anywhere near here.” She clasped my hands, her terror sliding over me like a heavy coat.

“My dad—” I said, a tremor in my voice as warm tears rolled down my face. “He needs a drop of royal blood to cure him. I-I can’t leave.” No, no. I had to save my dad.

She gave me a look that said I was doomed. This was happening to save him. “What do I do now? I can’t leave or my dad dies.” My entire world felt like it was spinning out of control.

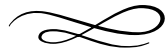
The words sent a chill through my blood. My stomach turned cold, sinking in fear at her words and the grim tone of her voice. Maybe there was something I could do.

“We can try again,” I said in a rush, my voice rising. We had to. “Th-there has to be something. Maybe I had an allergic reaction to the wine or, or the henna stuff they used to draw these runes on me.” My mind raced, desperately grasping to find a way out of the situation.

She grabbed my hands, her touch trembling.

“Asha.” Lillian cleared her throat like what she had to say was hard to do. She glanced up at me, her eyes rimmed red with tears. “You broke the king’s ritual. He’s going to kill you, Asha.”

Ten



Lillian's words hung in the air between us.

"Kill me?" I squeaked. My chest tightened so hard I couldn't breathe. The storage room we were in suddenly felt too small and I pressed a hand to my chest.

"Open up," a male voice said, pounding on the door. "By order of the king."

I glanced around. There was no window, no exit door. Lillian's eyes widened and her face turned even paler.

"Tell me there's a hidden escape panel in here," I whispered.

She shook her head, hugging me. "I'm so sorry, Asha."

The guards broke the door open and Lillian and I jumped apart, my heart hammering in my chest.

"You." The bald guard pointed straight at me. "Come with us."

Maybe this was all a big mistake, but my hope was smashed when he roughly grabbed my arm and hauled me out of the storage room. His grip squeezed hard and bile burned the back of my throat.

I didn't want to die. And my dad would die too without the king's cure.

"No, please. This has to be a misunderstanding."

The guards took me into the throne room, tossing me before the king. I landed on my hands and knees, my whole

body trembling.

“I gave you the greatest opportunity of any human alive.” The king seethed, pacing back and forth before his throne. All the rumors of him burning people alive flooded me and I scrambled back on my feet, fear curling in my stomach.

“Please, don’t kill me,” I begged.

The king stopped and glared at me. “You dare disobey me? You would rather die than obey? Very well. Your wish will be granted.”

My heart thundered in my chest, my head spinning, and I struggled against the numbness that threatened to overtake me. But I refused to give up.

“It’s not my fault.” I took a deep, shaky breath, steeling myself for his wrath. “Something is wrong with the ritual. The marks on my body were burning me, not bringing out arousal. So, how are they meant to ensure I got pregnant? If we could try again—”

He froze for a moment, then growled, the sound sent chills down my spine. “Here I was ready to punish you for rejecting Leandre. He told me you changed your mind about carrying his child, but in truth, you threw it away. For what? Fucking another dragon besides the next heir in line to take the throne.” He roared, his eyes shifting to a bright gold.

He knew! Fuck! He knew.

Faster than I could blink, he grabbed me by the throat, hauling me closer to him. His eyes narrowed, nostrils flaring, smoke curling from them. “The only way the ritual wouldn’t work was if another dragon marked you,” he bellowed, then released my throat.

“Well, actually,” I began, my tongue twisted when I tried to speak.

“Shut the fuck up when I’m talking,” he snapped, his words ricocheting off the walls. “I don’t know how, but you’ve fallen pregnant, and not to my son.” His face was shaking, fury burning behind his eyes.

I swallowed hard, having lost my breath. My mouth fell open. “Wait, I’m pregnant?” Jonah came to mind, the hot sex we’d had against the tree after way too many drinks, him coming inside me. I wasn’t sure how to feel, yet a dozen emotions came crashing through me. Excitement. Fear. Shock.

The king’s eyes rolled hard. “For your marks to react the way they did, it means one thing—another has bitten you and you are already with a child.”

The world was spinning with me.

“If you weren’t already pregnant with a dragon, I’d rip your traitorous heart out here and now.” He sneered, and my heart froze in my chest. “Did you think you could pass off some bastard as my grandson?”

He let go of my neck, pushing me away roughly, and I stumbled on my feet. Suddenly, a loud roar sounded outside the throne room, followed by a thunderous commotion, the floor shaking beneath my feet. Then the doors swung open and Jonah marched into the throne room.

“I will deal with you later,” the king roared at him. “But what the fuck do you think you’re doing attacking your brother today of all days?”

Jonah had his chest puffed out, meeting my eyes, smiling, which melted my knees, completely ignoring his father. His clothes were torn, bleeding gashes covered his neck and arms, but there was savage fierceness in his gaze. My heart sped up at seeing him hurt.

“She’s mine. No one harms my mate or touches her,” he growled, his eyes blazing with fire. “I claimed her, and I’d played along with your antics, Father, long enough.”

“She’s pregnant,” the king stated the word like it was vile and I was the worst whore in the world. “Is this your doing, son?” he chided the question.

Jonah twisted toward me, the look on his face of ultimate joy, the kind of look that made a girl want to start crying because it was of pure love. He wasn’t rejecting me.

“You’re pregnant with our baby?” he cooed softly. He was the father of my child.

I was shaking, tears pricking my eyes.

“I-I...Yes.”

Suddenly I was in his arms, and he swung me around like we weren’t about to face his father’s wrath. He was smiling, saying, “It’s perfect and exactly what I’ve wanted.” I wished we could be anywhere but here to talk and celebrate. Instead, I felt like doom and gloom hung over us.

“Jonah,” the king roared. “Are you making a mockery of me and my court? You would deceive your brother and steal his chance at providing an heir to the court? You are more ruthless than I thought.” The vein in his forehead pulsed and the tension in the air was stifling.

He placed me back on my feet and swung to his father. “You have no idea what I’m capable of because you’re not interested in anything I do. Only my asshole brother, Leandre. So, yeah I took what I wanted and I don’t regret a thing. Asha is way too good for Leandre and deserves better.”

The king scoffed, growing red in the cheeks. “And that’s you? What happens when you’re stripped of your power and wealth?”

“Then we’ll be even happier,” I answered truthfully. If I learned anything, it was that all the riches in the world didn’t bring you peace.

My chest was rising and falling quickly with a kind of joy I never expected to feel at the dragon’s kingdom. I was about to have a baby, and I didn’t have to end up with Leandre.

“Jonah, you’re playing a dangerous game and don’t think you are safe because you are my son.” The king swung towards the guards. “Get the royal mage in here now. Let’s find for sure how she got pregnant. Then you will feel the sting of your actions.” The king was practically breathing fire, hands heavy on his hips, glaring death at me.

Several guards snapped to attention, nearly tripping over their feet to get out of the throne room and obey.

“I don’t see what you’re looking so smug. You, human girl, are about to lose everything.” The hatred and anger in his voice left me shaking, but I ground my teeth, convinced he wouldn’t kill me. But my father would...

“Gerald will be able to tell if you are truly pregnant and how it’s possible. No one has been able to birth a dragon baby in over a decade.”

My stomach was twisting in knots, and I was trembling all over. Jonah stood at my side like a guard, his hand on mine.

It felt like forever when the silver-haired man came in with the guards. His hair stood out in every direction like they’d woken him from a nap.

“Test her.” The king pointed at me like I’m a bug he wanted squashed. “How is she pregnant?”

You’d think the king should be happy seeing his kingdom was facing fertility issues, yet he looked ready to murder me.

Gerald nodded solemnly, then placed a hand on my head, closing his eyes. Zaps of energy surged through me, and I winced. It was like constantly feeling static electricity.

Then he opened his eyes with a frown, and my stomach lurched. “She is indeed pregnant with a dragon.”

“We only just did the ritual. Is that possible?” The king’s face turned purple.

“The pregnancy took place a few days before the ritual. This is a miracle, my King,” Gerald stated. “She was able to fall pregnant, doing what our kind haven’t been able to do.”

Despite the mage’s excitement, the king’s nostrils flared, his glare slicing into me.

“One moment, your majesty,” Gerard interrupted, tilting his head towards me, huge eyes locked on my necklace. “What is that?”

My fingers instinctively went to my locket, shielding it in my hand. “It was my mother’s.”

“I smell magic in there. What is it?” Then he lowered his voice, whispering to me, “let me see it.”

“It’s just some old herbs. I-I make tea from them when I’m feeling stressed.” With shaking fingers, I opened the clasp and he sniffed them.

Gerald’s eyes widened. “Fertility herb. Very potent. And you say your mother gave this to you?”

“Yes, she said it had been passed down for generations.”

“What the hell is going on?” the king shouted, coming around to stare at the locket.

“And you had the herbs when?” Gerald smiled softly at me, ignoring the king’s tantrum.

“Um...the day before I went to the local bar...and um,” my gaze shifted to Jonah. “And we made love.”

Gerald turned to the king. “Your majesty, she had a fertility tea beforehand and got pregnant that day. I suspect that could have helped, but I’ll need to do research into it and some tests. Do you know what this means? It could be a solution for our kingdom.”

The king’s face looked twisted, torn between anger and elation.

Leandre charged into the room, fuming, all torn up, worse than Jonah, drawing all our attention. “Both of them have insulted me. A fight to the death. That is the only thing that will decide this.”

“I accept,” Jonah grunted, turning towards his brother, and my heart squeezed. They were going to kill each other.

What would happen if he died? My stomach churned and I fought back tears. “Please no,” I whispered, my throat was thick and tight.

“How does it feel, brother,” Jonah taunted, looking back at me then at his brother. “To know, whatever happens, I win. That my heir will sit on the throne while you have nothing.”

Leandre's eyes bulged out, staring at my stomach. Then he let out a vicious roar. All the guards crowded in close as the two men lunged at each other, and I felt sick.

I glanced at the king who was just shaking his head like this was an everyday occurrence. "Please, you have to stop them, you have to do something. They're your sons."

But he didn't do or say anything, just watched them tear into each other.

A woman with ginger-colored hair and dressed in a black and silver gown raced into the throne room. Tears streamed down her freckled face, and I recognized her from the bar with Leandre, finding her in his bed. Man, she kept showing up and irritating the hell out of me. I swear if she did anything to get Jonah hurt, I was going to slap her.

She fell on her knees in front of the king. "You're majesty, mighty Daxlan Brantley. I beg you to stop this battle."

"And why is that, Hazel?" He sounded bored, and I wanted to strangle him. Couldn't he see that one of them or both were going to die?

Please listen to her, I prayed.

She looked up at him, her body shaking. "Because...I'm pregnant with Leandre's child." She glanced at me like I was trash and my earlier assessment of her dropped a notch. "Not some half-breed."

The king's expression softened, his eyes expanding, and he took her hand, lifting her to her feet.

"Gerard, tell me if she speaks the truth," he snarled, to which the mage proceeded to test Hazel. He turned to the king, nodded. "Yes, she is with child too. Two miracles in one day. Now tell me child, did you happen to drink herbal tea from Asha?"

She stared at him blankly, and I remember when she stormed into the kitchen and drank my cup of tea I'd just made myself. "Yes, she did. When I first arrived at the kingdom."

Hazel was nodding and even smiled at me. I was slightly shocked to be honest. “I did. Is that a bad thing?”

“No, we believe that might be key to why you fell pregnant.”

Hazel suddenly burst out crying, turning towards me. “Thank you so much for giving me my dream of being a mother. And I was so mean to you. I’m sorry. Can you forgive me?”

“Of course,” I answered. “I prefer not to hold grudges.” I laughed while she wiped her eyes, grinning wider like the news was just sinking in for her.

“We can’t have my sons dying when they are both going to be fathers.” The king suddenly beamed, like he wasn’t going to murder me moments earlier.

“Leandre, Jonah, stop,” his voice blasted through the room and probably could be heard a mile away. “Tell me, is this true, Leandre?”

Both dragons snarled, but obeyed, stopping their fighting. Relief that Jonah was going to be okay shot through me, making my knees weak.

“A wedding is in order.” The king clapped and servants who weren’t in the room a moment ago came bursting in from every direction.

“Wedding?” I wobbled on my feet, the ground feeling unsteady.

Leander rushed to Hazel’s side, falling to his knees, hugging her, kissing her stomach. “Oh sweetheart, this is everything we’ve wanted.”

Part of me pitied him as it was clear he loved someone else, and he’d been forced to be with another woman. No wonder Hazel detested me.

Jonah with blood dripping down his face and a bruise swelling his eye shut rushed over to me, pulling me into his arms, and drawing me away from the commotion.

“You’re hurt,” I whispered, reaching for the purple bruise forming under his eye. His lip was busted, more blood coming from his brow.

“We’re going to have a baby,” he said joyfully, not seeming to care that he probably needed to go get checked in a hospital for his injuries. He drew me into his arms. “That’s all I care about.”

“It’s all happening so quickly.” I had arrived at the palace with the intention to have a dragon’s baby, but I never thought I’d find love and happiness instead. And I wouldn’t change it for the world.

He kissed my head. “Don’t worry, you’ll have time to get ready for it. And now that my father has his heir, he won’t be bothering either of us. He couldn’t give a fuck what happened to me as long as Leandre gave him an heir.” For a change, there wasn’t hurt lining his words when he spoke of his brother. But rather relief.

We glanced back at the commotion to see the king hugging his son and future daughter in law, brimming with happiness. A part of me ached on the inside to see his happiness while completely ignoring Jonah. That made me hug him tighter so he knew he wasn’t alone.

The king was suddenly strolling towards us, clearing his throat. He took my hand, saying, “Asha, I have a lot of apologizing to do, so thank you for giving us what we’ve lacked all these years. As a start to making amends with you, I will provide all the blood your father needs to make a complete recovery, you have my blessing to wed my son, and anything you want, I’ll be indebted to you.”

There was warmth on his face, a smile which was a rare thing to see.

“Thank you,” I said and hugged him.

He and Jonah also hugged, exchanging soft words in their language which sounded like an apology to his son. Then he was back to Leandre and the rest of the party discussing two grand weddings to plan.

I wasn't sure if I was going to laugh or cry at that moment.

"Congratulations," Jonah said, his expression softening. "This is a new beginning for both of you."

Leandre grabbed his brother in a fierce hug, and I knew everything was going to be all right between them. Then Leandre glanced at me and gave me a stiff nod. "I owe you a debt too for helping Hazel and me."

"You're welcome." I held my chin high, appreciating the kind tone which he spoke to me.

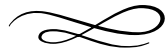
Then Jonah spun back to me, lifting me off my feet, and I squealed in delight before he set me back down on my feet. "I'm so sorry, was that too much...for you and the baby? Are you dizzy?"

I smiled, unable to keep the happiness off my face. "You better kiss me and promise to massage my feet when I'm huge with the baby."

He chuckled. "I'll worship the ground you walk on. And dragons don't believe in divorce." Jonah collected me into his arms, kissing my brow, and I melted against his hard chest. "We mate for life."

I smiled, my throat thick with tears, believing him that everything was going to work out exactly as it should.

Eleven



“Brock, Jazmine come back here,” I laughed as I chased my toddler twins through the castle. Both of their naked butts were on display as they shrieked with giggles.

“Caught one.” Jonah scooped Jazmine.

My dad darted behind a tapestry and grabbed Brock. “And I got this one.”

“No fair, grandpa,” Brock squirmed in his arms.

“Both of you, it’s past your bedtime.” I wiped the sweat off my brow. Tonight was date night for Jonah and me. And I wasn’t going to let two rambunctious children, even if they were mine, ruin that.

“Not tired.” Brock pouted.

“Well, your grandpa can tuck you into bed.” I glanced over at my dad. “Maybe a bedtime story?”

“Or he can finish teaching us how to play poker.” Jazmine beamed.

“What?” I glared at my dad with my hand on my hip. “They aren’t even three yet.”

My dad gave me a sheepish grin. “It’s the only thing that will keep them still long enough to go to sleep.”

“He has a point.” Jonah carried Jazmine by her ankles in the air and she clapped her hands in delight.

I shook my head and threw my hands up in surrender. “Fine, but no betting real money. Got it?”

My dad grabbed both of the kids and put them on his shoulders as he headed off toward their bedroom. “Deal. Now, who wants to hear about the royal flush?”

I rolled my eyes and Jonah burst into laughter. “Come on, let’s leave before he starts teaching them how to bluff.”

“And they don’t know that already?” I arched an eyebrow.

“You’re right.” He grabbed my hand and lifted my fingers to his lips, kissing them. “Best if we leave before they come looking for us.”

My breath caught in my throat, feeling the electricity of his touch even after these few years together. It felt like just yesterday I had fallen for him.

We walked out the door, hand in hand, and headed for our date night. It was going to be a night to remember.

As quickly as we could, we ran through the corridors of the castle like teenagers and out into the garden of dahlias. Jonah had sealed it off and connected it to private chambers for us. Tonight, we would spend our night, undisturbed, under the stars and surrounded by beauty.

The garden was bathed in moonlight and I kicked off my shoes, my feet sinking into the soft grass. A huge swing with ribbons blew in the breeze between two huge maple trees.

“How many times do you want to come tonight?” he said in a husky voice that had my toes curling. “A dozen sound good?”

He stripped out of his clothes and the sight of him caused my heart to leap—he was even sexier than when we first met. His kisses melted me, and he drew me down with him. The taste of his lips were intoxicating. And I knew he could make me orgasm too many times to count.

“Asha.” His warm breath fanned across my neck, and I grinned, leaning into him.

“I love you for eternity.”

“I love you even more,” I eased. “My life wasn’t perfect before, but now I have everything I could ever want.” I was

the luckiest girl in the world.

Hidden Omega

KNOT MY PACK OMEGERVERSE



I was in heat, and my alphas were willing to burn.

It was just supposed to be a good time at the Alpha ball, not the moment my life changed forever.

But it was.

And now danger follows me everywhere.

Every Alpha there was starved for an omega. And I was about to be the main course.

If it weren't for three strangers, I might already be dead.

Shadow, Aspen, and Viper saved me, risking their own lives and violating pack laws by taking me. I didn't want a pack. I didn't want the heat. But at least with them I'm safe for now.

Or so I think.

But these men are hiding secrets of their own, secrets that are as dangerous as the alphas who would have broken me that night.

Only, this rogue pack is all I have. I have to trust their vows to protect me, no matter the cost. Which just might be higher than any of us thought we'd pay. Because there's a killer on the loose, taking out omegas like me, and thanks to that night, I may just be the next victim...

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About Liora Rose

Liora has always been an avid reader who loves all things reverse harem and omegaverse. She decided to give writing a try and Hidden Omega is the result of her passion.

She lives in Australia with her husband, and when she isn't writing, she's either playing video games or has her nose stuck in a book.

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