



USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

DELTA JAMES

Wild
Fire

W I N G E D
W A R R I O R S

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Acknowledgements:

Editing: Lori White Creative Editing Services

Cover Design: Dar Albert, Wicked Smart Designs

Proofreader: Melinda Kaye Brandt

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WILD FIRE

A SMALL TOWN DRAGON SHIFTER ROMANCE

WINGED WARRIOR



DELTA JAMES

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*For Chris, Renee, and the Girls:
Who make my life so much easier and better*

And

*For My Readers who make
all the good things in my life possible*

Thank you!

PROLOGUE



In the Age of Dragons, the immortal beasts ruled the skies and the land below. When the Age of Man arose, the prophets foretold of a time when dragons would be no more. Desperate to ensure their viability, they chose a great sorcerer to help them save their kind, but magic always has a price.

The strongest warrior from each of the ruling clans retained their immortality as well as being granted life as a human-dragon shifter. Those twelve banded together to form the Phantom Fire—elite warriors and mercenaries who would ensure the survival of their kind.

But in exchange for this boon, magic demanded an even greater sacrifice—the warriors were condemned to live without a mate until they were willing to give up their immortality for their eternal flame.

CHAPTER 1



WARRICK

*D*ragonwyk

Wind River Mountains

Continental Divide, Wyoming

Three Months Ago

Warrick soared above the clouds that encompassed the Wind River Mountains. He'd been idle for far too long. Perhaps he would request leave and slake his need for action of some kind with a woman. He began to descend to Dragonwyk in a lazy spiral. He could see a lone figure waiting for him. Sobek—second in command to the Phantom Fire.

The urge to head back into the skies was strong. Warrick snorted. *My name is Warrick. I am one of the fiercest warriors of the Phantom Fire, and I am immortal.* He snorted again, this time breathing fire in circular loops as he landed. Sobek waiting for him was not good; not good at all.

A few minutes later Warrick had landed, shifted, pulled on a loincloth, and had his concerns affirmed.

“Slavers? What do we care what humans do to each other?” asked Warrick, who cared little for anyone, least of all humans.

“Normally, we don't,” agreed Sobek, second-in-command of the Phantom Fire.

“Then why are you sending me to Seattle to find some silly cult? The Pacific Northwest is full of them. That some of them have turned to human traffickers to fund their petty schemes should be of no interest to us.”

“Again, in most cases it wouldn’t be, but this is not ‘most cases.’ Two drakaina have gone missing from the Seattle area. Ridley Monroe has been unable to locate them, but word has begun to leak out that there are slavers hiding behind the cult who are in fact trafficking in drakaina, shifters and others.”

“What?” snarled Warrick.

Sobek nodded. “He can’t very well call in the police or the FBI, now can he? You’re our best tracker and have a talent for finding lost things. Things that are precious to our kind. As I recall, you lost one of your sisters to slavers.”

That had been a long time ago. A very long time ago. As in more than a thousand years ago, but still the wound had never healed. Warrick had been destined to join the Phantom Fire when his sire found his eternal flame and left the brotherhood, promising his firstborn son would take his place. That son had been Warrick. Tradition and duty had prevented him from even trying to rescue his sister. Her body had never been recovered after she had died in a terrible place of ice and snow.

“Esme. She was such a kind, sweet thing. Even after all this time...” he let his voice trail off.

That was the burden of immortality—you were left to carry the memories on your own. His sister had been a sweet and biddable thing but had been caught by slavers when she disobeyed their father’s orders and had ventured outside of the castle. Even then, and perhaps more so, the Phantom Fire had been a force to be reckoned with, but their strength and skill had been needed elsewhere. Warrick had been ordered to stay away and his father had been unable to track her past her departure from Britannia’s shores.

Warrick had never forgotten, and when he’d finally been able to track those who had taken Esme from this life, he exacted a terrible revenge—setting their entire village ablaze and watching it burn to the ground while he soared above it,

his large body casting an eerie shadow over the destruction. Circling and roaring, breathing fire and instilling fear until there was nothing left but ash. It wouldn't bring Esme back, but at least she had been avenged, and sometimes that was all a warrior could do.

"If it's too close," started Sobek.

"No. You're right. I'm the best suited to the task. Besides, it's been a while since I made some slavers my sport."

"Hold. You are not to attack. If you can get the two drakaina out with little evidence of what transpired, fine. Otherwise, you report back, and we will lead a small squad of Monroe's men. What we don't want is to give the cops, the FBI, or any human authorities any indication that dragons exist in the world."

"Well, obviously the slavers know."

"That is neither obvious nor a given. The drakaina were snatched in downtown Seattle while they were out with friends. All were in human form so the slavers may not know what they have."

Warrick shook his head. "That makes no sense. If they didn't know they possessed drakaina, the drakaina would have shifted and made their own escape. It stands to reason that they were prevented from doing so, which means the humans must know enough to restrain them with iron. Does Monroe know if there have been other shifters taken?"

"I don't know, and that is a good question. I know you. You don't ask idle questions."

"My thinking is while drakaina would command the highest price, the slavers would have to know and be targeting shifters. If the slavers are shifters themselves, there is the very real possibility they are being backed by those who need money not easily traced to them. The trafficking of shifters, and especially drakaina would take skill, nerve and money."

"I don't think the Council would sink to that level of depravity," asserted Sobek.

Warrick shrugged. “Perhaps not, although you have a far higher opinion of them than I do. But it would be right up the Shadow League’s alley and would give them a funding source not easily traceable and allow them to do whatever it is they’re really up to.”

“I don’t disagree with you, and it would give them another revenue stream, but Falkor is convinced there is someone behind the League pulling the strings.”

“The two aren’t mutually exclusive.”

Sobek nodded. “True. So, in addition to finding Monroe’s two missing drakaina, see what you can find out about who took them and who is ultimately the puppet master.”

Warrick left the following morning, long before Dragonwyk had begun to stir. The primary business of the Phantom Fire was as mercenaries. In order to function, each warrior had numerous identities that were well documented and just lying in wait. Their philosophy was that it was better to beg forgiveness than ask for permission.

Taking on one of their identities as an obscenely wealthy, morally corrupt businessman from Los Angeles, he rented an Alfa Romeo just south of Seattle, checked into a room at one of the best hotels, and proceeded to let it be known in the right circles that he was in the market for a new toy—an exotic, expensive, female toy. No questions asked. It took less than a week before there was a knock on his door.

He opened the door to a lithe blonde who handed him an engraved invitation. Warrick suppressed a smile. He’d been expecting something. His current identity had been under scrutiny for the past two days. The slavers must not have seen anything amiss.

“That’s it?” he purred, seductively. “Have you nothing more for me?”

“The masters have invited you to a special preview of a select offering at the end of the week. If you’re interested, the invitation contains instructions.”

“Will you be among those offered?”

She blushed and barely repressed a shudder. It would seem she too was among their victims, just one given a longer leash. “I serve as the masters wish me to serve.”

He subtly scented the air that surrounded her—human, but terrified. Warrick imagined she had learned of shifters and that the auction offering this week was for shifters, either on the buying or being sold end of the spectrum.

“Tell your masters you served them well, and I will consider their invitation.”

That Friday evening, in accordance with the instructions on the invitation, Warrick was picked up in a stretch limo outside his hotel. The limo drove around in what seemed to be an aimless pattern until it settled and headed toward the waterfront. It pulled into an access alley between two tall warehouse buildings.

The driver hopped out, opening the car door and indicating a door Warrick should use to enter. As he approached the warehouse, the beat of techno-dance music throbbed and seemed to make the entire building pulse. He paused as he entered, allowing his eyes to quickly adjust to the light and his hearing to filter out the din of the music.

He quickly surveyed the room. Little had been done to try and disguise what the warehouse was: a slave market. There might be comfortable chairs for the patrons, but those to be sold or auctioned off were on display—some chained to the walls, some in cages, and some suspended from the rafters so their feet only barely touched the floor.

Warrick sucked in his breath, holding it until he could get a rein on his temper. There must have been twenty or more females—all shifters. Most of the buyers were shifters, as well. A few humans, but the vast majority were shifters. How could they? Hadn't they all been raised with the fear that if humans found out about their true nature, they would all be enslaved? Had the Shadow League—the boogeymen of legend—made their worst nightmares come true?

He scented the air. There was the faintest whiff of drakaina. He inhaled again, trying to pinpoint their location.

Before he could move from the entry, a beefy guard handed him an iron wristband. “To ensure everyone’s safety,” he said.

Not everyone’s, thought Warrick—only those who had created and maintained this perversion. Nodding, he enclosed the iron cuff around his wrist. Easy enough to get off if he needed to.

“All of those on offer tonight have a small pedestal sign, giving their vital information and their auction number. You may touch but cannot mark or in any way damage the merchandise. The old ‘you break it, you buy it’ rule applies,” the guard said with a smile, impressed by what he believed was his own cleverness.

Warrick wanted to ask about drakaina, but as some shifters didn’t believe they existed, he decided it was best to search for them himself. Warrick began to wander through the various displays, noting each female had either a wrist or ankle restraint made of iron. The slavers knew what they were doing.

As he wandered, stopping to speak to other buyers, he noticed a group of humans dressed in a kind of uniform—white pants, white shirts, and a purple vest. Emblazoned on the back of the vest was a silver dragon and the name ‘Servants of the Winged Serpent.’ The dragon was of Chinese design and to Warrick’s mind resembled a snake more than the dragons he knew.

“Who are they?” he asked a man standing in front of a lovely deer shifter whose doe eyes, even in her human form, were captivating.

The man gave a brief snort. “They’re the cult that started all of this. They’re all human, but I suspect their leader is one of us. Probably some kind of snake-shifter with delusions of grandeur. I would say I thought dragons had long ago gone extinct, but rumor is more than one female dragon-shifter might be up for bid tonight.” The man gave a bitter laugh. “I wonder if they can breathe fire in their human form?”

Warrick wanted to snap the man’s neck. “Doubtful, but I’m not sure I’d want to find out.” They couldn’t, but he saw no

reason to calm the man's fears.

Like the other buyers, Warrick wandered through the displays until he came upon the drakaina. Their eyes widened imperceptibly. As discreetly as possible, Warrick crushed the lock on their wrist restraints. "I am Warrick of the Phantom Fire. I will see you set free," he whispered.

He turned and motioned to one of the attendants. When the man made his way to Warrick's side, he said, "May I be of assistance, sir?"

"I was told more private examinations might be made in more secure surroundings. I would like to examine these two."

"These two have garnered the most interest among discerning buyers..."

"But none, I would guess, with my financial or physical prowess."

The attendant nodded. "Yes, sir. We'll move them to the privacy room at the end of the warehouse. If you'll just step this way."

Once inside the private room, Warrick maneuvered the two drakaina into position before slamming his body into the three attendants and shouting, "Door at the back; shift and fly free."

The drakaina ran as Warrick spun, kicking one of the attendants in the gut and sending him stumbling backward and onto his ass. He grasped the head of the one closest to him, giving it a quick jerk and snapping its neck. That one would not get back up to fight again.

The doors to the outside opened and the two drakaina spilled out into the night, casting their shackles to the ground and becoming encompassed in the swirling mist of the shift. They were free. Now to do the same for himself. He would need to find a place to fall back to and figure out how to stop the cult, the slavers, the League, and whoever was ultimately behind this travesty.

The third attendant landed a hard punch to Warrick's jaw, momentarily stunning him as he used his communication device to call for reinforcements. Warrick struck back, hearing

a satisfying crunch as his fist connected solidly with the last man standing. He tossed away the cuff and called forth his dragon.

Just as the mist dissipated and before he could make his escape, he was hit with an icy blast of water. Normally cold water wouldn't be enough to deter a dragon, but this wasn't just any water—it was water he presumed they were pumping directly from Puget Sound. In other words, it was seawater or salt water, one of the few substances toxic to dragons and capable of burning through their armored hides.

Warrick roared in pain, lashing out with a plume of fire only to be doused by the water again. His fevered and primitive brain could process the danger he was in and that the water that now sizzled along his hide had been diluted with fresh water, but it was poisonous nonetheless, leaving him weakened and fighting to remain conscious.

“Damn it. He cost us the two drakaina,” snarled the man who had appeared to be in charge of the auction.

“But he's a warrior. Think of the fee he'll command.”

“I am. It's the only reason I mixed the salt water with fresh. Otherwise, I'd have given him a lethal dose. Slap iron around his neck and all four limbs. Keep the salt water handy. Douse him every so often to keep him half-comatose. If he so much as looks like he's going to breathe fire, stick a hose down his throat. I'm sure the boss will know how to keep him under control.”

The sickening mixture of salt and fresh water misted over him—painful, but not so painful as to help him maintain consciousness. In his weakened state, he felt his knees buckle as he collapsed onto the cold concrete floor.

As he felt the iron shackles being fastened around his neck and four legs, he didn't have the strength to fight back, and so allowed the peace of unconsciousness to take hold. His last thought was: *I am Warrick. I am one of the fiercest warriors of the Phantom Fire there is. I am immortal, and I will survive.*

CHAPTER 2



DANICA

*W*arehouse District
Seattle, Washington
Present Day

Leaning against one of the warehouse's concrete pillars, Danica Morris cursed the unseasonably hot Seattle summer, grabbing the water bottle from her utility belt and slugging back a good, long drink. She was feeling every single year of her life, every single month she'd spent as a member of the Seattle Police Department, every single week she'd spent as lead investigator, every single day she'd planned this raid, and every single minute since they had burst through the doors. It had all been worth it, and yet it was so much worse than they had imagined.

There'd been a time—what seemed to be a long, long time ago—when she was new on the job, that she was young and hungry. She'd lived for the job—not just because she was ambitious, not just because she felt called to help others and to see that victims were given justice, but because she loved the steady stream of adrenaline that came with it. There were spikes within it, but she fed off the need to be vigilant at all times, and it had paid off. She was the youngest woman to ever make detective. But that laser focus on her career had cost her—friends, family, a fiancé—and time she would never get back.

Last year on her twenty-ninth birthday, sitting alone in her condo with a red velvet cupcake and candle she'd bought for herself, she'd begun to question her choices. With thirty creeping up on her, she had to admit she was exhausted, completely without a social life, and beginning to wonder if it had all been worth it.

Shaking her head, she banished her morose thoughts and focused on what yet had to be done. Tonight, a nearly year-long investigation into a cult-led trafficking operation had come to fruition. Young people, mostly girls, were leaving home, joining the cult, and never being seen again. They called the cult members 'human traffickers.' They weren't. They were slavers, pure and simple.

At first, the bust had gone down like clockwork. Her team, along with the FBI, had moved in, surrounded the building, and burst into the warehouse, which was filled with cultists, victims in cages, and enough paranormal paraphernalia to make the City of New Orleans look downright normal.

Taking another long drink, one of the FBI agents, whose clumsy advances she had been studiously ignoring for some time now, placed his hand on her shoulder. "Good work, Detective Morris. This should prove to be a real feather in your cap. I daresay the FBI or the DOJ might come looking to make you an offer to switch over to where the real action is."

Dani snorted. The sheer arrogance of the guy was not unexpected. Many in federal law enforcement felt that they were the elite law officers and that anyone who worked locally should be flattered just to be noticed, much less invited to join them.

"Thanks. I think between my team and yours, we've got these bastards rounded up. I'll just wait here for CSI and maybe make another sweep."

"I can stay and help," he said, a little too eagerly.

"No. I've got this. But thanks for everything."

She turned away before she could see the disappointment in his eyes. He was a nice guy, but the last thing she needed

was an affair gone wrong with a member of the Bureau. If she ever did want to join the feds, a past liaison could hurt her chances for advancement in the long term.

Dani began to move through the deserted warehouse—at least that's what the infrared readings showed—by herself, gun drawn. It never hurt to be careful. She began a methodical sweep of the building, going through each doorway, her SIG with its attached tactical light/laser held in two hands, sweeping the room and behind the door before retreating, closing the door, and moving on.

She advanced slowly up a set of stairs to an observation and communications/electronic room. After ensuring it, too, was clear, she looked at the read-outs on the various computer screens. One screen seemed to have eyes on each of the rooms as well as outside. Donning evidence gloves, Dani used the keyboard's directional arrows to scan the various rooms. She recognized all the ones on this main floor and the one that lay at the bottom of the ramp. But as she scanned, she noticed a doorway she couldn't remember on the blueprints of the building or from their first sweep.

Noting its location, she exited the control room, locking the door behind her and then headed across the warehouse and down the ramp. Turning on her taclight, she made her way to the doorway that had seemed to elude their notice. Carefully, she opened it and quietly stepped onto a small landing on the other side of the doorway.

“Seattle Police Department. Is there anyone here?”

She knew at this point she should probably call for backup. That was standard procedure. She'd known more than one cop to die in the line of duty because he or she ignored that very basic rule. But she also knew her team had to be exhausted, and she would be damned if she called in the Bureau boys and let them take credit for finding the room and whatever it might contain.

She listened intently and could hear some muffled movement and faint rattling of chains. Dear god, there were more victims trapped down here. She hit her comm unit. “This

is Detective Morris. I need backup at the scene. I believe we may have more victims.” No response. “I repeat; this is Detective Morris I need backup at the warehouse, lower level, northwest corner. Have discovered a lower level we missed.” No response.

Just as she turned to head back out to get to the main level where her comm unit would work, she heard the scraping of chains and a muffled moan. Someone was in trouble. What if the moments she delayed in getting to them to call for backup cost whoever was down there their life?

Deciding on a compromise, Dani stepped through the doorway to re-enter the level the team had swept before. She spoke into her comm unit, “This is Detective Morris. Requesting backup lower level, northwest corner. Sounds of someone in distress. Heading down to a previously unsearched level to assess the condition of possible additional victims.”

Returning to the doorway, she called, “Seattle Police Department. I am armed and I have backup coming. Please move to the center of the room, lie down on the floor, hands and arms stretched out before you. If challenged in any way, I will fire.”

No one answered, and she didn’t expect anyone to comply, but still, it needed to be said. She made her way down the stairs, glad the steps were concrete and not made so that anyone could reach through them to trip her up. Dani took each step carefully, sweeping the staircase and the surrounding area with her tactical light.

What the hell had this place been? She had to be substantially below sea level.

Unlike the cavernous but dry warehouse above, this place was dark, wet, and ominous. A kind of haunting sound came from up ahead. She rounded a stack of metal cages and then stopped short—her meager light directed at the sound. Her eyes widened in surprise and for a moment she forgot to breathe. Closing her eyes, she shook her head, and then re-opened them. The noise stopped, but the unbelievable vision

remained. Dani found herself staring into the darkest eyes of any creature she'd ever seen.

Creature being the correct term.

Staring back at her, massive chains of iron pinning it to the floor and a band of iron wrapped around its muzzle, was a *dragon*. A real-life scaled and winged, mother-effing *dragon*.

“Holy shit,” Dani uttered, her voice echoing in the chamber.

Slowly, painfully, the dragon lifted its head. “Help me,” it whispered—the voice emerging from the dragon’s mouth was that of a man.

Dani turned her back on the creature and swept the room again.

“We are alone,” it said, the voice laced with pain.

She spun around to face it. “Are you sure?”

“Very. Release me.” This time there was less plea and more command.

Dani didn’t care. Last time she checked, she didn’t answer to dragons. She moved to its side to take in the sheer enormity of the beast. An honest-to-god dragon. Well now, what the hell was she supposed to do? Although it wasn’t precisely the motto of the Seattle Police Department, weren’t all cops supposed to serve and protect? How the hell was she supposed to do that with a dragon?

“If they find me, they will kill me. Let me go, and I will leave you and this place in peace.”

“And if I don’t?”

The thing made a sound that was eerily reminiscent of a chuckle. “Not much of a threat, am I, when I’m trussed up like a Thanksgiving turkey?”

She cocked her head sideways. “You know Thanksgiving?”

“Not exactly the most pressing point. Do you have backup?”

“I called for it.”

It grinned. She would swear the damn thing grinned. “Not what I asked, but I suppose it is an answer, nevertheless.”

“Let me be honest. I’m not really sure what to do in this situation. I’ve read the police manual, and I am pretty damn sure there are no sections or provisions covering dragons. On the other hand, I’m also pretty damn sure if I tell people that you’re here, bad things will happen to you.”

“You are correct.”

“I need to think. Are you thirsty? I have water. Not much, but at least it’ll let you wet your mouth.”

She walked over to it and helped it tilt its head so she could pour water down its throat. The texture of its skin was extraordinary. It felt like armor, but armor that had been polished to a silky sheen and warmed—it was very, very warm and *alive*. She remembered being made to hold a snake when she was a child and disliking the cool, clammy feel of its skin. But this was very different.

Foraging around in her pockets, she found a couple of protein bars and fished them out. “Probably not very substantial for something your size, but they’re pretty tasty. Would you like them?”

It eyed the wrappers. “Salted caramel peanut cluster. I love those things.”

Dani grinned at him, unwrapped the bars and slid them into its mouth, past its enormous white teeth, watching as it closed its eyes and seemed to enjoy the snack.

“Thank you. Now, release me.”

“Not so fast. I’m not sure I’m okay with doing that, but I am sure I don’t want anything bad—or at least anything worse than what’s already happened—to happen to you. So, here’s the plan. I’ll go make sure no one is coming for backup. I’ll make sure the forensics team has done their thing for the night. I’ll close up and head back to the precinct and make sure everything is clear. Once it is, I’ll come back for you. Does that sound good?”

“Not particularly, but you have me at something of a disadvantage.”

She grinned. “I’ll bet that’s not something that happens very often.”

“Never.” She quirked her eyebrow at the chains. “All right; rarely.”

“I’ll be back as soon as I can. I’ll bring more water. What do you want to eat?”

“Never ask a dragon who’s been denied the company of a drakaina for months what he wants to eat. I know your legends say we ate virgins, but trust me, more often than not their screams were ones of pleasure, not pain.”

Dani could feel the blush start at the base of her throat and rise all the way up to the roots of her hair. It didn’t help that he made that chuckling sound again.

“That’s not on the menu,” she said primly.

“How very disappointing. But if that’s the case, a side of beef wouldn’t go amiss.”

Dani shook her head and ran up the stairs, pausing at the landing and looking back at him. She was now convinced the dragon was a male. He had ceased to struggle with his restraints and did seem a tad bit more comfortable. Not immediately calling for some kind of team to come get him was a mistake—a big mistake and she was sure of it, but she just couldn’t do it.

The forensic team had only just arrived when she made her way up the ramp to the main floor. They were working mainly on cordoning off the scene, securing the computers and electronics—thank god they hadn’t revealed the presence of her dragon—the dragon—he was not *her* anything. They were also intent on securing any evidence that might be compromised overnight.

It took a little more than an hour for the team to complete their work, and afterward she accompanied them back to the station.

Once inside, she went into the women's locker room and dunked her head under the cold spray of one of the showers. Blotting her hair dry, she pulled it back and did a quick French braid. She was just headed out when her lieutenant called to her.

“Morris? Get your ass in here.”

Dani rolled her eyes, but turned back toward her boss' office, slipping inside. “Yes, Lieutenant?”

“Damn fine job tonight.” And she'd thought the dragon was going to be the biggest surprise of the night. “I didn't think much of your theory, but you stuck to your guns and put a huge dent in a major human trafficking ring. Well done.”

“Thanks, Lieutenant. I just did what you always tell us to do. I wish we could have saved them all, but I'm glad we got the ones we did. Maybe we can get the information we need to find more of the missing girls.”

He nodded. “Let's hope. Of course, you know the Feds, Interpol, and everybody else and their brother is going to try and weasel in on the credit, but you and I know were it not for you, none of this would have happened. I'm putting you in for a commendation and promotion.”

Another shocker. “Thank you, sir. I appreciate it.”

“Think nothing of it. It's well deserved. I've marked you out for the next three days. If you need or want more time, you just let me know.”

“I will and thank you for believing in me and letting me take the lead.”

“Your case, your lead, your collar—all deserved. Now, get out of here. If we need anything, we'll let you know, but forensics will take over for a while.”

With forensics taking over and planning to be in the warehouse, she needed to get that dragon out of there. Or did she? What the hell was she going to do with a dragon? Why did she believe so strongly that if she didn't help him, bad things would happen to him? Why did she care? Dani didn't know the answer to any of those questions; she just knew she

couldn't abandon him to whatever fate had in store for him without her help.

“Yes, sir. Thanks again.”

Dani ducked out the side door to the parking lot away from the throng of reporters out front. Finding her Jeep, she started it up and headed back to the warehouse. She needed to get back to the dragon. If nothing else, she needed to know his name. She needed to know a lot more, but that was a good place to start.

As she drove away from the station, Dani called a friend, a woman butcher she had befriended her first week on the job. Someone had tried to assault Julie. Dani had been able to stop the assault and put the guy away for a long time. The two had forged a bond that had proved strong and true. Julie was always offering Dani the best cuts of meat for free or at a greatly reduced price.

“Hey, Dani! Are you all right? I heard about the bust. How terrible.”

“It was pretty grim. We saved a lot of girls tonight; I'm not sure how many of them will make it all the way back. I need a huge favor: no questions asked; not a word to anyone.”

“That sounds ominous. But whatever you want, if I have it, it's yours.”

“Got a side of beef?”

Julie met her at the shop and helped her load the side of beef into the back of Dani's Jeep. Giving her friend a quick hug, Dani drove out of the alley and headed in the opposite direction of the warehouse. Once she was certain she wasn't being followed, and her police scanner was quiet and picking up nothing of concern, she drove back to the building in which a dragon was chained to the floor of a subterranean level.

She opened one of the doors to the main floor, carefully moving the yellow crime scene tape out of the way, backing inside and then down the ramp, parking by the door that led to the basement below, *which contained a dragon*. She shook her head at the absurdity and insanity of that statement. Could she

be losing it? Could the stress of the last year have led her into the depths of madness?

Dani opened the door to the stairway. Taking the bolt cutters she kept in the back of her Jeep and using one of the tarps she kept back there as well, she leveraged the side of beef out of the back and onto it before making a controlled slide to the bottom of the stairs.

The dragon lifted his head as she approached—well, lifted as much as he could. Seeing no padlock, she wedged one side of the bolt cutters under the band wrapped around his muzzle and using all her strength managed to cut the thing away.

She noticed a small spot of blood. “Shit. Sorry about that,” she said, dabbing at it with her shirt.

“It will heal quickly. What did I hear thumping down the...” he sniffed the air and grinned. “Beef. You brought me beef.”

“That’s what you said you wanted to eat. I also have a couple of gallons of water back up in the Jeep.”

“That isn’t what I said I wanted to eat,” the dragon teased, “but as it’s all that’s being offered, I’ll take it. I am Warrick.”

Dani rolled her eyes and proceeded to cut through the links of the chains used to secure the dragon to the floor. “I’m Dani.”

The dragon got to its feet and then turned towards the side of beef, moving its tail to block her path so she was shielded when he inhaled deeply and roasted the entire side of beef in one breath.

She was now convinced she was mad as the proverbial hatter. She’d just seen a dragon barbeque a side of beef... a fucking, fire-breathing dragon.

CHAPTER 3



WARRICK

Not hours before Warrick had thought he would not live to see the sunrise. Those who had placed him in chains and bonds of iron had not fully anticipated the hazards of keeping a dragon or a warrior prisoner. Certainly, they had not recognized the danger in imprisoning one who was both. Regularly spraying him with a solution of salt water mixed with fresh, they had kept him weakened.

Then, when he'd thought all was lost, she had shown up. She, of the dark hair, doe eyes, and luscious figure. She, who he could gobble up in a single bite or feast on for days. Never had a female called to him the way she had—not in all the centuries he had trod this earth. Neither drakaina or human had ever made him want to dominate and possess the way she did.

Was she some cruel jest of fate here to show him what he might have had if he'd only ignored his arrogance and contacted his brethren for assistance?

Warrick had figured out early on how to ignore the deep ache that accompanied the continual contact with even diluted salt water. The sea was toxic to dragons and those who had imprisoned him had been well aware of that fact.

They had trapped him in his dragon form and fed him just enough to keep him alive. Their master, whoever he was, had not deemed Warrick the great prize his captors had thought he might be—not that he wasn't valuable, but having to imprison a dragon was not for the faint of heart. Besides, who would they sell him to? They couldn't very well sell him to a human. Even the military would have questions other shifters wouldn't

want to answer. The only shifters who might be able to make use of his legendary prowess were other dragons, who wouldn't want to incur the wrath of the Phantom Fire or the Ruling Council itself. The problem was that there were far too many weaklings on the Council for it to hope his captivity could be kept a secret. The only group he could think of that might be able to use him as a weapon was the Shadow League or, more likely, whoever was behind them pulling their strings.

Normally, Warrick didn't pay much attention to the environment in which he found himself. It was pretty much all the same to him. But this latest hellhole had begun to get to him—dark, dank, and with the sound and smell of fear permeating the air from up above. They had chained him down close to the floor. He couldn't rise up at all, much less stand. They'd added another chain at the base of his neck and right behind his head to ensure he couldn't raise his head to get a better idea of where he was being held.

The restraints and chains not only held him captive in the building, but in his dragon form. Iron kept him from making the shift, but Warrick wasn't sure it wasn't overkill. They kept him weakened with the use of the diluted seawater. Even if he was free of the shackles and chains, he wasn't sure he'd have had the strength to shift from dragon back to man. At first, he had worried that even if he was able to free himself, how would he escape without being seen?

They'd moved him several times since his captivity, but this was the first time he'd been held in the same place as the other slavers' victims. He wished he could have saved them all, but at least he had accomplished his mission and saved the two he had set out to find.

As the chance of freedom began to diminish and his physicality began to deteriorate, he accepted that if he had any chance at all to break free, he had to take it and damn the consequences of being seen as a dragon. Even if he was pursued by military jets, better to plunge into the cold and fatal embrace of the sea than to die as some unknown entity's prisoner.

And then she had appeared before him. At first, he'd thought her an apparition—perhaps the angel of death come to spare him with her sweet salvation. It wasn't as if she'd appeared like sunshine on a bleak and cloudy Seattle day. No, she was more like the goddess of the moon, parting the dark clouds of the night sky and shining down her shimmering light upon him.

All Warrick knew was that when she had appeared, hope had sprung anew. She might well be his way to avenge those the cult and the slavers had condemned and to make them pay for what they'd done. He knew that if he were able to escape, his first duty was to return to the Phantom Fire and report what had been done, but duty was not the fire that burned within him. No, he would name that spark that had kept him alive for the past three months for what it was: revenge.

His captors had to have been watching him long enough and known enough about dragons to have prepared and executed their trap with such precision and skill. On the other hand, he had been focused on freeing the drakaina, and, if he were honest with himself, on the unexpected decisions made by Falkor and the rest of his brethren.

Warrick could understand, and even tacitly accept, that a change in leadership at this time would not be to their advantage, but Falkor had taken a human to mate—a human that he had impregnated prior to her being transitioned to a drakaina. That alone had made for a cautionary tale amongst the warriors of the Phantom Fire. In all the millennia in which they had lived, not once had a dragon been able to successfully plant his seed in a human female. Falkor, Sobek, and several others had deemed it to be because she was his eternal flame, but still, the idea of siring a child on a human had been sobering.

His captors had been returning like clockwork every three days to douse him with the diluted salt water and had then begun carving small chunks of skin from his back, muttering incantations, and jeering at him.

“What are your plans for me?” Warrick had demanded.

The slaver dangled a piece of scale-covered hide in front of him and snickered. “We will use your magic until it is of no use to anyone.”

“And then?” Warrick had asked, knowing all too well what the answer would be.

“Then we will have no more use for you.”

Warrick had watched the slaver skitter away as if he were afraid Warrick would somehow slip loose of his chains and devour him. Keeping him prisoner as a dragon had to be far more difficult than if they’d allowed him to shift and become human once more. It must mean, therefore, that his being in his dragon form was important to whatever it was they had planned for him.

Not knowing what that might be and what role they saw him as playing in their nefarious schemes was what kept him awake. Whoever or whatever was behind them had to be powerful and old. Only with great age did great knowledge and wisdom come. So whoever was pulling the strings was old, powerful, and possessed of a dark magic of its own.

Warrick shook his head, not only to clear the memory of his captivity but of the cobwebs that seemed to crowd his thoughts and ability to reason clearly. He rattled the chains to remind himself that he was still a prisoner and that chains that could be rattled could be broken. He watched the moonlight filter through the egress windows into the subterranean level. Warrick could only imagine that the light came from glass prism sidewalks found in Pioneer Square and some of the surrounding neighborhoods. The glass prisms were built to provide natural light to the passages constructed below the sidewalks after the Great Fire of 1889.

His prison was still dark, but the windows did cast enough light for Warrick to be able to see his surroundings. It also allowed him to keep track of the days as they came and went and thus know when to expect his captors. If the woman didn’t return before sunrise, she might well be in danger of being captured herself.

Warrick went from rattling his chains to shaking them, testing the strength of both the restraints and himself. He could not allow her to be captured. The sound of the doorway at the top of the stairs being opened roused him from his musings and brought him back to awareness. Something tumbled down the steps, but he could not turn his head enough to identify what it was. Whatever it was, she was with it. He could smell her fresh scent and inhaled deeply.

She approached him with bolt cutters, leveraging it between his muzzle and the band that bound it and using all her strength, cut it away. It pinched and he could feel a small spot of blood welling to the surface where she had nicked him with the instrument of his freedom.

“Shit. Sorry about that,” she said, dabbing at the spot on his muzzle with her shirt.

Had she not seen his enormous size or the razor sharpness of his teeth?

“It will heal quickly,” he intoned. “What did I hear thumping down the...” He sniffed the air again and grinned. “Beef. You brought me beef.”

She shrugged. She was adorable and her fragrance was far more intoxicating than any side of beef, but if he hoped to get them out of here, he would need the beef to get his strength back.

“That’s what you said you wanted to eat,” she said, sounding a little confused. “I also have a couple of gallons of water back up in the Jeep.”

“That isn’t what I said I wanted to eat,” he teased, “but as it’s all that’s being offered, I’ll take it. I am Warrick.”

The woman rolled her eyes, and the faintest blush stained her cheeks as she proceeded to cut through the links of the chains used to secure him to the floor. “I’m Dani.”

Warrick got to its feet, shook his massive form and then turned towards the side of beef, blocking and shielding her with his tail as he inhaled deeply and roasted the entire side of beef in one breath.

“I’ll bet you’re handy at a barbecue,” she quipped, trying to keep the nervousness out of her voice.

“For many reasons,” he agreed, wolfing down the side of beef in just a few gulps.

“You really were hungry...”

“Yes, and fortunately for you, this left little room for a tasty virgin.”

“Hot news flash, Warrick, I haven’t been a virgin for a very long time.”

“Good to know,” he said, managing to waggle his eyebrows and making her laugh. “Now stand back, here’s where the real magic comes into play.”

“There’s more magic than a talking dragon?” she asked skeptically as she stepped back.

“So much more,” he assured her.

Deciding to go for a dramatic effect, Warrick rumbled low in his throat and bade his dragon to relinquish its hold and rest. A maelstrom of thunder, lightning, and color that sizzled with electricity and power whipped through the room. Normally painless, the shift from dragon to human after so long a time being held in captivity was excruciating. Warrick raised his muzzle to the rafters and blew a plume of smoke into the air.

When the mist dissipated, he looked around to find Dani had fainted and crumpled to the floor. He probably should have anticipated that. Warrick stood and noted the only thing his cock had registered was a beautiful woman lying at his feet. He might have thought to make more of an argument out of what needed to happen next if it hadn’t been for the sound of a vehicle pulling up outside the warehouse—the same vehicle that had come every three days like clockwork.

His captors were back. Warrick had only a small chance to get himself and Dani out of this alive, as he had no doubt they would kill her should they find a cop lying passed out on the floor.

“Time to go,” he said scooping her up in his arms and heading for one of the egress windows that would lead out into Seattle’s famed, but mostly unknown and unmapped, underground.

CHAPTER 4



DANICA

“Come on, Dani, up we go,” Warrick said in his deep, warm, melodic voice.

She only knew it was Warrick because of the voice. The dragon had disappeared in a swirling, chaotic mist that had spat fire at the ceiling of the room. When it dissipated, the aftermath had revealed a man—a very naked man with a massive hard-on.

Dani tried to avert her eyes, but he was, without a doubt, the most gorgeous man she’d ever seen. He was powerfully built and towered over her even though she was tall for a woman. He had massive arms that had lifted her up as if her weight was nothing, and she wasn’t a small girl. He had angular features with high cheekbones and a patrician nose under blond hair that was close cropped on the sides and back and spikey on top. His neck tapered down to broad shoulders and a sculpted chest with a set of washboard abs that led down to thick, muscular thighs. He looked like some romance novel’s cover of the perfect hero.

“Huh?” she answered, coming to the realization that she was being propped up against a damp wall and lifted out of a small egress window.

“I need you to see if you can push yourself up.”

Strong hands that had been holding her by the waist released her and she started to slide down the wall, unable to stop her knees from buckling.

“I... I can’t,” she said, wanting to burst into tears.

“None of that,” he commanded softly. “You’re a cop, not a helpless virgin. I need you to lean against the wall. I’ll climb through and pull you up. It seems we aren’t as alone as we might be.”

“No...”

“What do you mean, no? You fainted; I took over as leader of the rescue. We’re going out through the Seattle Underground.”

“Not as easy as you think. There are parts of it, especially down here on the waterfront, that are completely blocked. Besides which, my Jeep is right at the top of the stairs. If we can get to it, we can drive out of here. If we leave it behind, they’ll know where I live.”

Warrick seemed to consider her words and nodded. “They usually take a bit of time making their way back here. If we get to your Jeep, is there another way out other than the street level of the warehouse?”

“Yes, at the back of the building there’s a door. Get me into the Jeep, and I’ll show you where it is. You can go open it; I’ll drive out, and even if they hear us, they won’t be able to get there before you can close it and get in.”

Warrick smiled at her. “Good girl.”

Before she could protest, he scooped her back up and made short work of the distance between where they’d been standing and the top of the stairs. Setting her down, he cautiously opened the door, as Dani found her footing, and put her arm in front of him to block his way.

Drawing her revolver from the holster in the small of her back, she tried to precede him through the door. He gripped her firmly and started to move her behind him. Dani stomped on his foot—hard enough to make him step back—and pushed past him.

“I’m the cop and the one with the gun,” she hissed as she eased open the door enough to be able to see that there was no one on the lower level.

“And I’m the dragon,” he muttered.

“Yeah. We’re going to have to talk about that, but for now, can you just let me get us out of here? I might add that will be a whole lot easier with you in this form.”

“I can and will explain everything, but we have to leave. The people upstairs are dangerous.”

“I know, they’re human traffickers. I took them down earlier this evening.”

He shook his head. “And that may require some thinking to ensure your safety. They are far deadlier than you can even imagine.”

There was no doubt that transporting a man—even a gorgeous, gloriously naked man—would be easier than transporting a dragon, but the whole thing was a bit mind boggling. She was torn between the idea of confronting and arresting whoever it was that was left and had come back for Warrick, but reminded herself at this time, she had a civilian to get out of harm’s way. She wondered if a dragon could even be a civilian, and who could actually harm him? For that matter, how had they kept him captive? She’d seen the manacles and chains as well as what looked to be multiple healing wounds where hunks of his hide had been removed.

“I don’t know. I have a pretty good imagination.”

“Did you ever imagine a man who could shift into a dragon and back again?”

“Point taken. The door is over that way,” she continued, indicating a roll-up door, “in the southwest corner. That’ll take us into the access alley for the warehouses.”

Warrick nodded. “Those who held me captive would come back periodically to try and keep me weak. They are still upstairs. We need to be quick.”

“The minute you open that door, I’ll start the Jeep and pick you up. We’ll be gone before they can do anything.”

Warrick ran towards the door. Dani took a moment to watch his muscular butt and legs running to get the door open. He really was a hunk—and a dragon. Somehow, he was a dragon, and she couldn’t forget that.

Warrick sprinted across the floor to the door and turned to ensure he had her attention. Dani hopped in the Jeep and flashed her headlights at him. He hit the button to raise the roll-up door and Dani started the engine, throwing it in gear and flooring it. She slid to a stop to let Warrick in as the first shots were fired their way.

Looking in the rearview mirror, she could see them as they flipped on the bank of lights closest to them. The group was an interesting mix; some of them looked like cult members—punked-out thugs—and two others were far more conservative. The thugs appeared to be higher than kites, screaming and firing randomly at them. The others merely observed but did not engage. She'd found indications that the cult wasn't acting alone and had begun to believe the human trafficking operation was far too sophisticated and organized for the cult to be acting independently. This seemed to support that theory.

She engaged her Jeep's rear camera and snapped several pictures, hoping the tech guys could both enhance and enlarge the image quality. She'd like to get a better look at the entire gang, but especially the two newcomers to the party.

Dani careened out the door, the Jeep fishtailing before the tires caught hold and she roared down the access road. Up ahead, she could see lights approaching the side edge of the building. Someone was moving to cut them off.

“Here, keep us going straight,” she said, rolling down her window as Warrick reached over to grab the wheel.

Dani leaned out the window, leaning on the accelerator and using it to steady herself. She brought her SIG up and opened fire at the very front end of the vehicle that she was sure was going to try and block their exit. She fired at the tires and as they popped, at the hood of the SUV, hitting the engine and taking a kind of pride when the thing caught fire.

Slipping back into the Jeep and sliding down into the seat, she set her SIG into the holster she'd had specially made and attached to the side of the console between the front seats. “Thanks, I've got it,” she said taking the wheel in her hands.

“You should be able to reach some of the water in the back. There’s some elastic net-like thingies and there’s three or four bottles in each.” She looked over to see him watching her. “What?”

“Fire-breathing dragons that can shift into men, slavers, people trying to kill us, and you’re still concerned with getting me food and water. By the way, whoever sold you the side of beef sold you an excellent grade. It was delicious even if I did have to wolf it down. I’ll reimburse you.”

“No need. I have a friend who’s a butcher. She wouldn’t let me pay for it. We need to get you to a hospital.”

“Let’s think that through. Do you really believe there are any hospitals that have the experience or capability to deal with a dragon shifter?”

“Is that what you call yourself?”

“It is. There was a time when purebred dragons walked this earth. Then we were known as human/dragon hybrid shifters. But since our purebred kin roam no more, we are simply dragon-shifters.”

“Are there more of you?”

Warrick chuckled. “Far more than you would care to believe. But to ease your mind, I am already healing. We heal much faster in our dragon form, but the beef you gave me will help, as will not being doused with a toxic solution and having bits of flesh cut out of my hide every three days.”

“Were they torturing you to try and make you talk? Wait, did they know you could talk? Did they know you could become human?”

“Their torture was only for their amusement and to keep me weak enough so that their iron bindings could hold me. We cannot shift when our skin is in contact with iron.”

“Kind of like your Kryptonite?”

“Something like that.”

“What were they spraying you with?”

“A diluted form of seawater.”

“Seawater? There’s nothing toxic in seawater.”

“Not unless you’re a dragon or a dragon-shifter in his dragon form. Pure seawater acts as a strong acid and given in a sufficient amount can kill a dragon.”

“And you live by the ocean?”

“Some of us do, but not all. May I say you’re taking this remarkably well for a human with no prior knowledge of shifters.”

“I didn’t think I had much choice. When you say ‘shifters,’ do you mean there are other kinds?”

Warrick nodded. “Many. Most have purebred counterparts but there are some, like dragons, where only the hybrid exists.”

“Please tell me there are no T-Rex or Velociraptor shifters.”

Again, the deep, sexy chuckle filled the Jeep. “Not to my knowledge.”

“If not the hospital, do your people have any doctors or vets or whatever?”

“We do, but I am uncomfortable trusting or involving anyone else in what’s going on at the moment. I should heal with just a bit of rest. It might not hurt to have the cuts cleaned and dressed. Any good drugstore should have what we need. If you would spot me the money, I would be appreciative and will see that you are reimbursed.”

Warrick leaned back into the seat as Dani sped through the streets of Seattle, doubling back and taking a circuitous route to find a pharmacy and pick up the supplies Warrick had indicated he would need. Deciding he would need some clothes, Dani found the men’s section of activewear and purchased a pair of sweats, sweater, socks, and sneakers she thought would fit. He could go commando until he could shop for himself.

Tossing her purchases in the back, she could tell Warrick had been dozing by the way he startled awake.

“It’s okay, big guy. Just me.”

He smiled wanly. He looked as if he were in a lot of pain and that he had reached the end of his reserves.

“There is no ‘just’ you. You have proven yourself to be more than enough and a capable warrior.”

“Thank you very much. Can I assume then that you won’t be having me for a crunchy snack with ketchup?” making a reference to a popular meme.

“Of course,” he said with a drowsy smile. “I prefer my humans with a side of ranch.”

Dani glanced over at him, saw the smile, and shook her head. “Not funny, Warrick.”

“It was a little funny,” he cajoled.

“Well, maybe, but only a little.”

Warrick’s answering smile and exhausted sigh made Dani peaceful and happy. He seemed to instinctively know she wouldn’t betray him, and she wouldn’t. She drove out of the city, checking her rearview mirror to ensure they were not being followed. She thought she saw a battered truck behind them, but it faded away and she continued on her journey—to where and to what end, she had no clue, but for now they were reasonably safe, and it would have to be enough.

CHAPTER 5



WARRICK

There had been a tremendous thundering in his head since early evening. It seemed his tasty snack—what was he going to call her? A companion? A comrade? A friend? Maybe it was easier to stick with tasty snack and he wouldn't mind making a tasty snack of her. At her request, he'd managed to pull on the sweatpants and sweater she'd purchased for him.

“I think I should mention that dragons don't normally wriggle into clothing in the front of a car.”

“It's a Jeep, and better you look at least presentable if a taller vehicle drives by.”

“You humans do have a hangup regarding nudity.”

“Do dragons just wander around letting it all hang out?”

“Unfortunately, no. We've been forced to conform to some human eccentricities during the last millennia.”

“And before that?”

“Dragons mostly wore loincloths, while our drakaina were not allowed to cover their beauty until they were bonded and mated.”

Dani snorted. “Good to know men are men be they dragon or human. I suppose you much preferred having the women around you naked.”

“Much,” he agreed. “Women are creatures of beauty and grace and should be admired.”

“Well, we women also won the right to vote, drink, and have our own money,” she said, shaking her head. “And what do you mean by ‘the last millennia?’”

“Dragons existed long before humans began recording time,” he answered evasively. While dragons in general enjoyed a longer lifespan, his brethren among the Phantom Fire were immortal. “Where are we going? I assumed you lived in the city?”

“I do, but if they caught my license plate, I worry they can track me to my home. I’m headed for Issaquah,” she said checking the rearview mirror. “There’s a guy that owns a place that sits right on the border of Tiger Mountain State Park. I’ve stayed there a couple of times. I texted him when I was waiting in line at the store. I also picked up enough groceries to last for a couple of days—at least, I hope there’s enough. You seem to have an appetite. Anyway, there’s a lot of ways in and out of the area, whether we have a vehicle or not.”

“I can always fly.”

Dani did a double take. “Really? I mean I saw the wings, but I didn’t... You’re huge!”

“As are my wings, and they’re strong. Don’t worry, Dani, if needed I will shift, and you can climb on my back.”

“And if I don’t want to?”

“Then just like when you fainted, I’ll pick you up and carry you.”

“You won’t have arms or hands.”

“No, I’ll have talons, so much better to keep a sacrificial female from falling.”

“I told you I’m not a virgin.”

“Good. I think virgins are highly overrated. I much prefer a woman who knows what she wants and how to enjoy her pleasure.”

He barely managed to conceal the smile that lifted the corners of his mouth as she blushed. Her face was turned away

from him so he couldn't really see the telltale pink stain, but everything in her body language said she was blushing.

"Did you see the two guys who didn't look like cult members?" she asked in a not-so-subtle topic change.

Choosing to ignore both her discomfiture and her inelegant change of subject, he answered, "Yes. I wondered if you saw them."

"Were you going to mention it to me? Do you know who they are? Are the punks the same ones that tortured you?"

"We've been a bit busy escaping and getting out of the city. Do I know who they are? Not specifically, but I have an idea of what group they might be with, and no, I do not think they belong to your little cult. Yes, the punks are the ones who cut pieces of my flesh away and doused me with seawater. And for the record, I don't think they had a clue as to what they were doing."

"What makes you say that?"

"They showed no fear of tormenting me. Even bound, someone who knows what a dragon is capable of would be wary. They weren't. They will pay for their insolence."

"Hey! None of that eye-for-an-eye shit with me. I'll arrest them and put them on trial."

"Really? In what court of law do you think anyone is going to believe they held a dragon prisoner?"

"You can just show them?"

"Show them what, Dani?"

"That you're a dragon. You know that you can shift back and... shit, that won't work. You can't do that."

Curious as to how her mind worked, he asked "Why not?"

"Because if anyone official finds out, they'll have you wrapped in seawater bandages and strapped down to an examination table. There's no way our government or anyone else's lets dragons roam the earth, even if part of the time

you're human." She took the exit off the freeway. "You're not going to kill me for knowing, are you?"

"No. You saved my life and for that I owe you and am responsible for you."

"I'm a cop. I can take care of myself."

"Yes, a beautiful female cop..." he rumbled seductively.

"Stop right there, Warrick. I'm not getting naked for you."

He doubted that. He had every intention of getting her naked and had so many ways to do it. One of his favorites had always been to heat the threads of women's clothing just to the point of disintegration but not to the point she was burned. The fear and shock often proved most arousing. Warrick growled under his breath. The only thing more annoying at the moment than his throbbing cock was the thumping in his head that had yet to abate. He'd thought the intake of the beef would have made it subside, but so far, no luck.

"I mean it. You're right; I saved your life. There's not going to be any funny stuff."

"I can assure you, Dani, I intend to take my seduction of you quite seriously."

"Knock it off. I'm not some human plaything for your amusement. Right now, I could be home tucked into my own bed safe and sound, and you could be on a plane to some place they won't care about your rights. But I'm here..."

"Which begs the question, why are you here? Why come back and save me? Why not call the authorities?"

"I... I don't know," she said honestly. "There was just something in your eyes and in the way you said, 'Help me.' I knew I just couldn't turn away. Besides, I have questions..."

"Such as?"

"Why were you there? Why were they holding you?"

"Why not ask them before you helped me?"

"Because my helping you was not dependent on the answers."

Warrick nodded. “Then could we postpone the interrogation until morning?”

“Yeah. You’re probably beat. The yurt has a really nice outdoor shower.”

“A yurt?” he said brightening.

“Yeah, it’s like a kind of tent used by the Mongolian people for hundreds of years.”

“Thousands, and I am well aware of what a yurt is. My home is one.”

“Really? Where?”

There seemed no harm in telling her. “The Wind River Mountains in Wyoming.”

“The Winds,” she said with a smile. “I’ve always wanted to go hiking there. They say there are parts of those mountains no man has ever seen.”

“I have seen them all. When whatever it is that we seem to be caught up in is finished, I will take you there.”

“I think I’d like that.”

“Where do you live? I mean I know you live in the city, but do you live in a house? A condo?”

She laughed. “You’d hate it.”

“I’m sure if it was yours, it would be warm and inviting.”

“It is. It’s also a houseboat in a marina on Puget Sound—you know seawater.”

Warrick groaned, and Dani laughed—a light, melodious sound that reminded him of fairies at play, dancing in the summer sky. They rode the rest of the way in a kind of companionable silence, and Warrick had to admit to himself it had been a long while, if ever, that he had enjoyed the company of a woman quite so much.

Finally, they made their way to a packed dirt road that would be easy to miss as it had no markings. They wound their way back several miles off the highway until they reached a

sizeable yurt. Warrick noted his own was slightly bigger, but this one looked comfortable enough. They got out of the Jeep, and he could hear water rushing somewhere close.

“River water. The yurt sits perched above it with a deck that extends out over the river.”

“Fish?”

“Yes. I think there’s some equipment.”

“Trust me, I can catch more fish as a dragon than you’ll ever catch with fishing tackle.”

“Do you have a license?”

“No. Are you going to arrest me?”

“Why, do you fancy having me handcuff you?” she teased.

“That could prove interesting,” he all but purred at her, watching her body react to the way his was beginning to call to hers. “However, I think I would prefer having you bound to my bed.”

“Inappropriate, Warrick. Knock it off. We have to work together.”

“My apologies, my lady.”

As they got out and retrieved the rest of Dani’s purchases from the back of the Jeep. Warrick found the exhaustion that had been creeping up on him almost overwhelming. She must have sensed his fatigue as she laid her hand on his arm, the spark that ran through him lighting up every nerve ending.

“Take it easy big guy. The bed is really comfortable. I have a couple of steaks for tonight and grabbed the last of the store’s potatoes au gratin. If you can light the fire in the stove and the heater, that would save a lot of time.”

He chuckled. “I can get those steaks grilled faster too.”

“Good enough. I’ll do a quick perimeter check...” she held up her hand to stop him from protesting, “...just a precaution, but then I can reset the alarms. There’s an inner and outer one. I’ll show you how they work come morning. There is an

indoor sink and toilet so no need to worry about setting them off.”

Warrick didn't like it, but he had to admit, Dani was more than competent, and she was armed. Once she handed him the groceries and two more guns—a shotgun and another handgun—she left him to do a brief tour to ensure their lodgings for the night were secure.

He felt funny being the one left behind to do the domestic chores but had to agree that with his state of exhaustion, she was better equipped and as she pointed out—she had a gun and had proven to be an excellent shot. By the time she joined him and set the alarm, he had the two fires lit, the steaks grilled, and the potatoes not only warmed but had added additional butter and cheese.

He set out the plates loaded with the steak and potatoes at the small dining table that looked out over the river where he'd lit a small lantern that cast an intimate glow. Holding out the chair for her, he waved her into it.

“Thank you. This smells divine.”

“I'm used to mostly cooking for myself, but I prefer to actually sit down and have a meal as to just consuming one.”

“And I prefer takeout, a beer, and a Kraken's game.”

“Krakens have organized games?” he asked and laughed as she dropped her fork. “Just kidding. A little mythological beast humor. Krakens are far too rude to have organized games.”

“I can't tell if you're teasing me or not. Are there real Krakens?”

“No. That is truly a mythological beast. But what is a Kracken's game?”

“Seattle's ice hockey team is the Kraken. I love ice hockey.” When they were finished, Dani grabbed both plates. “Why don't you take the big bed? The sofa pulls out into a comfortable bed, but it's also pretty comfy the way it is.”

“You could join me.”

“I don’t think so, and remember, I sleep with a gun.” She said the last with a grin, but Warrick could tell she was only half joking.

“Duly noted. I think I’ve been remiss in not expressing my gratitude for your intervention on my behalf.”

“I’m a cop. It’s kind of my job.”

“I doubt they covered saving dragons in any of your manuals. The fact that you accepted who I am and that I even exist...”

“Kind of hard to ignore what’s right in front of me. Now go on, get in bed. Try and get some sleep.”

“And you?”

“I don’t generally sleep well, especially around strange men. And being a dragon, you qualify as the strangest.”

“Then I would submit for your consideration, that you’ve been sleeping with the wrong men.”

She searched his face for a moment and then slowly shook her head. “You’re exhausted. I’m beat, and we both need our rest. Tomorrow, we have to figure out what the hell is going on and come up with some kind of game plan.”

Warrick nodded. He wasn’t sure what kind of game plan she was envisioning, but once he’d realized why his head had been thundering from the time she’d entered the subterranean basement his plan became pretty simple—keep her safe and destroy those who would think to harm her. He crawled into bed and watched as she sat in the large rocker by the window, her service weapon on the small table beside her, and looked out into the night sky.

He closed his eyes and inhaled her scent, a ghost of a smile playing on his lips. He’d never thought to find her. He’d thought that unless he was killed in battle, he was doomed to be immortal for all time. Only fate had smiled on him at last—much to his chagrin, his eternal flame had finally struck—a beautiful, curvy human female with long dark hair, soulful eyes, and a smile that had melted the icy shell that had formed around his heart.

CHAPTER 6



DANICA

Dani watched the clouds and moon move across the night sky. She often forgot how much brighter the stars were once you got away from the ambient light of the city. Out of the corner of her eye, she watched as Warrick finally succumbed to his exhaustion. He slept fitfully at first until finally she went closer to check on him. When she placed her hand on his forehead, his hand wrapped around her wrist in a powerful grip.

She started to pull back and found his strength far outmatched hers. “Warrick, it’s Dani. Everything’s okay,” she whispered.

“Dani,” he murmured but seemed to settle a bit.

“That’s right, big guy, Dani. We’re safe. The bad guys don’t know where we are. I’ve got guns, and you’re a fire-breathing dragon.”

She couldn’t believe she was saying or even thinking that without believing she was going insane. But as she’d said, it was hard to argue with what you saw with your own two eyes. At her slight jest, he smiled, and his breathing evened out.

She did truly believe they were safe enough for now, but he needed to rest. If part of those they were up against were shifters like Warrick or some other kind of fantastical creature, their very survival might depend on Warrick being at the top of his game. Tonight, she would keep guard while she let him sleep.

In the morning when he was awake and rested, she would grab a couple of hours of sleep. She was glad the lieutenant had insisted she take at least three days. She hadn't really had a day off in the past eighteen months. She figured once she and Warrick had a game plan, she'd see if she needed to take her boss up on more days off.

She went over everything that had happened that had brought her to sharing a yurt with a sexy dragon-shifter. He turned in his sleep, but now his movement seemed more relaxed and natural as opposed to fitful. She couldn't even imagine the torture those bastards had put him through. They must have wanted him for something. He didn't think it was information, but if not that, why keep him alive?

Could he be valuable as some kind of slave? Maybe they wanted him as a breeder for some kind of super soldier. That actually made some sense. A whole army of dragon-shifters could take over the world if they wanted. She glanced over in his direction. He'd removed his clothing before getting into bed. She had to admit, she'd watched him once his back was turned. Even from behind, the man was a beautiful sight—the musculature of his back and butt were second to none. She could easily imagine the kind of powerful thrusting he could give a woman he was intent on pleasuring.

She shook her head, dismissing any thoughts of Warrick breeding anybody, including her. It was all too easy to imagine being held in his powerful embrace, her back to his front. Easy to fantasize about those strong hands caressing her body, cupping her breasts as he played with her nipples, one hand slinking down the front of her torso to cover her mound before his hand would delve between her legs, splaying her labia so he could work her clit and stroke her opening.

Dani chewed on her bottom lip and had to fight to keep her hand from relieving the ache and arousal that had come unbidden, and from where? She'd never responded to the mere presence of a man the way she did to Warrick. Yes, he was sex on a stick, but she was no untried girl and men who looked like gods tended to favor women who looked like supermodels. Dani had no problem with her looks. For one

thing, she carried more muscle than most. That had come in handy on more than one occasion, but she was never going to fit into those tight skinny jeans that some women favored. Well, she might fit, but the look wouldn't be a good one.

For some reason, it was far too easy to imagine what it might be like to be sharing that bed with Warrick without worrying that someone—and someone who meant them harm—was looking for them. He would want her naked. He'd already indicated a preference for naked women. If she closed her eyes, her mind conjured up a picture of his muscular physique covered only by a loincloth.

She could imagine being pinned by him up against something, his front pressing into her back, that enormous hard-on she'd seen pressing against her backside as he nuzzled her neck, his fingers circling and swirling around her engorged clit, sliding from clit to slit and back again. He would stroke her until she came, bucking her hips and covering his hand in her cream as he leaned against her before lifting her up and taking her back to the bed, covering her body with his.

There was a slight movement out of the corner of the window and the fantasy faded in an instant, all of Dani's senses coming online as she peered into the darkness and found the source—a doe and two small fawns grazing close to the river. *Not good, Dani. Not good.* The worst part was Warrick was soundly sleeping on the other side of the yurt, unaware that the woman who had helped him escape his captors indulged in sexual fantasies about him.

Dani kept watch for the rest of the night, getting up every so often to splash cold water on her face or just to prowling the interior of the yurt. She did it more to dispel the sexual fantasies that kept plaguing her than to keep from falling asleep.

As the sun's light began to kiss the sky, she heard Warrick waking.

“Good morning,” he said, getting up and pulling on the sweatpants and nothing else.

It wasn't a loincloth, but it was close enough and did little to hide the fact that he had morning wood. That wasn't a term she particularly cared for, but at the moment anything she could think of that she didn't like was good. He stretched, his muscles rippling and making him look every bit the predatory beast.

"Did you sleep well?" she asked.

"Not at first, but then I seemed to fall asleep deeply and slept like a rock. You must be tired."

"No, I'm fine."

"Dani. I'm now well rested and mostly healed. They came every three days to cut me and douse me with seawater so what they did to me was already waning when you showed up. Let me take watch, and you can sleep for a while."

She smiled. "I should argue with you and tell you all the reasons that's not a good idea, but I'm not going to. You're right. I'm beat and could use some sleep. Just promise me..."

He held up his hand. "I will not leave this yurt until you're awake, and we have a plan. I would not leave you unguarded. As you watched over me, so will I watch over you. Sleep; I command you." He added the last with mock severity.

"I don't take orders from you."

"Not yet, but you will."

Dani snorted. He was an arrogant bastard, but he was also good company, and she knew, to the depths of her soul, that she could trust him. Taking off all but her bra and panties, she climbed into bed.

"Not fair," he teased. "You got to see me naked."

Afraid that he had somehow guessed she had stared, probably longingly, at him or somehow knew her fantasies, she blushed but quipped "Yeah, not much to see."

Warrick laughed but let the matter drop. She could hear him humming some ancient song that she'd never heard before but seemed to understand. Dani felt the tension of the last eighteen months begin to fade away. The fact that she was

practically naked with a practically naked dragon-shifter drifted away as a kind of resonant peace settled over her and sleep came forward to claim her. Her last conscious thought was that she hoped her dreams would not involve sex with said practically-naked dragon.

Sometime later, she woke to the smell of bacon—the amazing thick-cut, apple-smoked bacon kind—wafting through the air. She opened her eyes to see Warrick staring at her.

“Wake up, Dani. Even if you want to go back to sleep, you need to eat something.”

She realized she was quite refreshed. “I think I slept better than I have since I started running down this cult and realized I was onto something much more. Do I have time to take a quick shower?”

“Absolutely. In fact, the time should just be about perfect.”

“Thanks.”

Dani keyed off the interior alarm, but let the exterior remain on. It wouldn't be tripped unless someone stepped onto the deck that surrounded the yurt. Removing her bra and panties in the bath, she opened the door from the bath to the outside shower and hissed at the cold. Fortunately, the shower water was heated almost instantaneously because of its design and the wood fire that warmed it.

She stepped under the showerhead and sighed as the hot water cascaded over her body. The frigid air had done little to eradicate the growing arousal that had reared its ugly head. She thought about turning the water to cold and immediately dismissed the idea as a bad one. She had a choice—spend the rest of the day aroused with no way to soothe that particular ache or take care of the problem herself.

Closing her eyes, she ran her hand down the front of her body, imagining that it was Warrick's. His hands had been rough and calloused—not like the manicured hands of the metrosexuals she'd long ago given up on dating. They were

either repulsed by the fact that she was a cop or were far too interested.

Dani brought her hands up to cup her breasts, flicking her thumbs across her nipples, pinching and squeezing them as she arched her back, allowing her greater access. She could almost feel his stubbled beard as it brushed against her delicate skin before his sensual lips sucked one nipple between them as he continued to play with the other.

One hand slid down from her breast to her clit. It was swollen and needy, and she could feel her pussy was soft and ripe. Dani hated that she was out here in the shower alone while the object of her fantasy was inside cooking breakfast. What might it be like to have him handling her instead of having to do it herself?

That he was an alpha male wasn't even a question. If she were his woman, would he even ask if he could fuck her, or would he just take what he thought to be his and pleasure them both? She worked her clit up and down, harder and faster as her breathing sped up and she stifled the little whimpers that threatened to become moans or, worse yet, cries of ecstasy as she bucked her hips and came on her hand, her pussy spasming as she imagined it clamping down on his hard cock before he thrust into her a final time and filled her with his cum.

Dani leaned against the shower wall, panting and allowing her body to savor the endorphins that seemed to wash over her like the hot water streaming down. She grabbed the natural sea sponge, soaping and rinsing her body. Stepping out, she felt clean and that she should be able to cope with Warrick's presence without making a complete fool of herself.

Stepping into the bath, she screamed as he leaned against the counter, holding the towel out to her with a knowing smile.

“That would have been a lot better for both of us had we done it together. But no matter. One thing dragons learn is patience. Get dried off. Breakfast is ready.”

CHAPTER 7



WARRICK

So, his savior had been having a moment. Warrick knew he should have turned away and left her in privacy, but he couldn't seem to do so any more than he could strip and step into that shower with her. Instead, he'd watched her with rapt attention, imagining what it would have felt like to have his hands doing the exploring. Although, he'd have used more than his hands; he'd have used his mouth on her, suckling her nipples before nipping them and moving lower to suck, lick, and nibble on her clit as well as the petals of her sex. He'd have much preferred making a meal of her.

He wondered if it was him Dani had imagined pleasuring her. If it wasn't he'd make sure that was the last time she imagined anyone but him. God, he'd ached for her last night. At first when he'd shifted, he'd chalked up his massive hard-on to being released from his dragon form with a shapely wench close by. But as the night had gone on, his erection had shown no signs of letting up. These were the times when he longed for the 'good ole days,' when a member of the Phantom Fire could have his pick of nubile beauties. They had kept pleasure girls within their camp, finding them mates after a year or so of service to the warriors. The girls were treated well, and the rich dowry provided for them by the brotherhood increased their chances for a happy bonding and future.

Normally when he was attracted to a female, Warrick had no problem imagining her walking around the Phantom Fire encampment naked and being used by his brothers as they saw fit. However, the idea of anyone even looking at Dani naked,

much less making use of her bountiful charms, was enough to enrage him. No, she was his, and he would do whatever was necessary to make it so.

Falkor had taken a mate—taken a mate who was now heavy with his child. He had no plans to leave the brotherhood, and Warrick had been among those leading the charge to keep Falkor as alpha of the Phantom Fire. Not only was Falkor the last remaining member of the original twelve, but he was also an exceptional leader, and his loss would have been felt keenly. What now occurred to Warrick was if an exception could be made for their leader, might not it be made for all? Wouldn't the brotherhood be stronger if the Phantom Fire became more like other clans—banded together and raising families and new members within the brotherhood?

Wasn't that all being just a little self-serving, though? He knew his new enlightened attitude had more to do with his current predicament than it had to do with some altruistic notion for the good of the order. Warrick didn't mind giving up his immortality—there were times it was more of a curse and a burden than it was a boon or a blessing—but he also knew he would not give up his firstborn son. He knew what that could do to a young man; to be given no choice in his destiny and to be taught that his only value was to uphold the family's honor by giving up everything. Warrick didn't blame his father, not really. His mother had been his eternal flame, and Warrick's father had held to the old code, taken his mother to mate, and then given the Phantom Fire his replacement—his firstborn son.

Any child he sired on Dani would not share his destiny. His son would make his own choices and choose his own fate. Life among the brotherhood was not easy and aside from his brethren, it was lonely. The idea that the Phantom Fire was beginning to evolve into something Warrick believed could benefit them all was the only thing worth the price he had paid to remain with his brethren.

He'd convinced himself that fate had no eternal flame in store for him. He liked women and he loved to fuck. He'd led more than one drunken revelry of warriors finding

accommodating maidens with whom to spend time. There were times Falkor made Warrick feel that he alone was responsible for the ban on having pleasure wenches in camp. Perhaps he was. More than once he'd been roused from his bed, having shared it with more than one female, to fly into battle. But he had always proven to be the bravest and most capable of the brotherhood's warriors.

Dani, however, was different. From the moment he'd caught her scent, her beauty, the sound of her voice, the touch of her hand had thundered around in his brain. Thoughts of her had crowded out everything—the pain, the impending sense of doom, the belief that he would find a way out. Dani was not just his salvation, not just the woman who had removed the chains of his captivity, but she was his eternal flame. She burned bright in his heart, mind, body, and soul.

“Do you always sneak up on people when they're in the shower?” she asked, walking out of the bath.

“Not generally, but I wanted to let you know breakfast was almost ready. Besides had you not been preoccupied with your own pleasure you probably would have heard me approaching.”

“Oh god! I can't believe you said that.”

“Why? It's true. Let's make a pact, you and I, shall we? I propose we never speak anything but the truth between us. We may lie to others, but between us there will be only truth.”

She eyed him up and down, slowly nodding her head. “Next time, I'll close the door between the bath and the shower room, and next time, you knock.”

“Next time,” he said with a cheeky grin.

What he didn't tell her was that he meant to ensure there would be no next time for her to be playing with herself. Warrick intended to be the only one taking care of that need for her, and he meant to take care of it so often and so well that not only would she find it difficult to walk, but she would question why she'd ever wanted to.

“What's that look about?” she accused.

She wanted truth? Let's see how she handles the truth.

“That look stems from my knowledge that I could have seen both of our needs better met had you given me any indication my attention would have been welcome.”

She stared at him, seemingly dumbfounded. “Wow, you really just put it out there, don't you?”

“I have learned in my long life that many people spend far too much time not going after what they want. As you had saved my life, I thought I was putting your desires and needs ahead of my own, but from what I observed, I made an incorrect assumption. I won't do that again. Now, come and eat; breakfast is getting cold.”

Dani chased after him. “You can't just say shit like that to me and walk off.”

He whirled around and stepped into her space—something she clearly had not anticipated. He hauled her into his body, lowering his head and kissing her with his feelings wide open, allowing them to overwhelm her. His tongue dove deep, exploring the recesses of her mouth, tangling with hers. At first her body was stiff and resistant, and then she pushed away her fear—he could feel it when she did so—wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him back. Her tongue dueled with his for supremacy. Warrick was sure most, if not all, of her human lovers would have allowed her some semblance of control, but he was not most men. He was a dragon; she was his mate and his eternal flame; she would learn to yield and follow his lead.

Winding his fingers in her hair, Warrick deepened the kiss, dominating her senses and commanding her body to submit. Dani moaned, tried to pull back, and when he refused to let her go, she bit his lip—not a little love nip, but a full-on, sink her teeth in hard enough to draw blood kind of bite. He tugged her head back in response, wrenching her mouth away from his as he nipped his way down her chin and throat, fisting her hair and keeping her body arched back, but exposing her to him.

He brought his mouth back up to hers, his lips capturing hers as his tongue surged like an invader entering dangerous

territory to stake his claim. His tongue slid over and around, dominating the kiss as the hand not tangled in her hair snaked around her waist, pulling her closer, allowing his hard length to throb between them.

Warrick needed to make Dani understand that he wasn't playing and that he was no schoolboy to be satisfied with any meek offering. He would force her submission from her, and it would be well and deservedly taken. He wasn't merely kissing her; he was declaring his intentions in no uncertain terms. He would possess her in every way that word could be interpreted.

When she finally sagged against him with a sob, he lifted his head and glared at her. "Do not test or tempt me again. You will find me far easier to deal with if you don't leave me guessing. Trust me, from this moment on I will assume that you want the same thing I do."

He turned away but stopped short when she asked, "What is it you want?"

Without turning back to face her, he answered. "You."

That ought to give her something to think about. The answer was short and succinct and there was really no way for her to misinterpret it, especially given the fact that he had just kissed her thoroughly.

He'd never thought he would have an eternal flame. His father had been one of the first to leave the brotherhood. Warrick had been with them since he'd come of age and that had been more than two millennia ago. He'd fought in every major battle since the first war with the Cherufe, but he'd been there for the second. There would not be a third. Other than Falkor, Warrick had been a member of the brotherhood longer than anyone. He'd seen members come and go; generations of the original twelve had passed before his eyes, but not once had he felt called to a female. He had convinced himself it was not to be his destiny.

And now after scores of dragons had tried to convince him one of their drakaina was his eternal flame, he was called to a human female. Not just any human, a cop. Someone sworn to uphold the law. In some ways they were well suited—they'd

both sacrificed a lot to fulfill their duty, but how would it play out? Would Dani feel she needed to report his existence? That he could not allow. Of course, keeping her as his personal captive and bed slave wasn't the worst idea, was it?

Warrick had no more completed that thought than he recalled his sister's enslavement and that she had most likely endured the fate he now thought to impose on Dani. He shook his head. Eternal flame or not, he would never allow that to be her fate. He might have to hold her captive, but neither he nor any other dragon would ever share her bed without her invitation. He chuckled to himself. That didn't mean he wouldn't be as charming and seductive as he could be to wrangle that invitation, but he would ensure Dani was no one's slave.

Perhaps, he thought, he was imagining a worst-case scenario. She had seemed to grasp the idea that telling the authorities about his existence would be to invite the destruction of his people. He wasn't sure the humans would win that war, and there were rumors that a growing number of shifters were becoming disenfranchised with the idea of hiding in plain sight. He had been party to several discussions with Sobek and Falkor about the true puppet master of the Shadow League. Those of the Phantom Fire were convinced it was no longer the Ruling Council that held the leash on that particular pack of mad dogs.

Warrick was only glad his brethren weren't here to witness his weakened physical state and his unwillingness at this point to push things too far with his eternal flame. Drakaina could be notoriously fractious, but Dani was not drakaina—at least not yet. She would make the most glorious drakaina, and he would teach her to fly and fight at his side. The three dragon queens had all been warriors and were warriors still, but Dani would outshine them all.

Dani possessed the keen intelligence, grace under fire, and true beauty that only the fiercest of drakaina possessed. She was tough and noble with a sense of honor and duty second to none. But Warrick had sensed the soft, sensual, sensitive creature who dwelled behind the walls he was sure she'd been

forced to build in order to survive as a woman in what was still seen as a mostly male profession.

He held her chair for her as she joined him at the table overlooking the lake.

“This looks delicious,” she said, eyeing the breakfast tacos he’d made. “I guess I never thought dragons could cook.”

He chuckled. “Did you give much thought to dragons before last night?”

She returned his grin, the sexual tension between them being taken back to a slight simmer. “Point taken.” She took a bite. “Oh my god, this doesn’t just look delicious—it is. What do you call it? I mean it’s some kind of riff on a taco, but does it have a name?”

“I call them breakfast tacos. They’re pretty simple, just corn tortillas, scrambled eggs, left over steak from last night, some of the chorizo that I found in the bag, as well as cheddar and Monterey jack cheeses I found in the freezer. There was a ripe avocado, and I made a little pico de gallo.”

“Where’d you learn to cook?”

“Mostly watching Julia Child and the Food Network.” That made her almost spit out the bite of taco she’d just poked into her mouth. “It wasn’t so much that I wanted to learn to cook but after a long time eating basically the same meals in the dining hall with the other members of the Phantom Fire, I located a wood-burning stove and learned to cook things that appealed to me.”

“How long have you been with the Phantom Fire?” she asked innocently.

Warrick grinned. The detective had returned. “For a number of years.”

She put down her taco. “You said we weren’t going to lie to each other.”

“I haven’t lied.”

“You also haven’t answered my question. It’s not the first time you’ve tap danced around my wanting to know about

your age.”

Warrick thought a moment and deciding she was right, he said calmly. “I have forgotten how old I am. Everything gets a little hazy back before the Romans ruled the world.” She stared at him but said nothing. “I am immortal, Dani.”

CHAPTER 8



DANICA

She searched his face, looking for any signs of deception or amusement and saw none. Okay, so she'd just fantasized about an immortal, fire-breathing dragon who could shift between his dragon form and his human form. She was sure there was some kind of kink that covered that, but she really didn't care. His dragon had seemed sad, but then that should be expected of someone held in captivity, but the man was gorgeous.

"Are all dragons immortal?" she asked.

He shook his head. "No. Most have an extended lifespan but only those of the Phantom Fire were granted immortality. The other dragons sacrificed it to become shifters and live alongside man."

"Why did the Phantom Fire retain it?"

"We were tasked with keeping the other dragon clans safe. The Age of Man had begun to rise, and we felt it was easier to blend in. The same is true of most other shifters. The Ruling Council wanted to have dominion over the Phantom Fire, but we refused. So, in order to have a specially trained group of warriors, the Council created the Shadow League."

"That sounds kind of ominous."

"It is. For years the League existed and acted as a vanguard for all shifters. Little-by-little their duty to protect was whittled down from all shifters to just those on the Council. When the Council was questioned, they said they had disbanded the League, but no one believed them. There are

those who believe the Shadow League has gone beyond protecting even the Council to pursuing an agenda all their own. One theory is that they now seek, with tacit approval of certain members of the Council, to establish a new world order.”

“I take it the Phantom Fire opposes their actions?”

“Correct. Long ago, they were warriors and fought in the open and with honor. Now, they’re a group of highly trained thugs. The Phantom Fire has always opposed their actions, and there are now those among the shifter population who are forming a resistance.”

“Would it be so bad if the Phantom Fire took their rightful place amongst the other shifter communities and had representation on the Council?”

“Yes. We are separate, even from our own kind, and have to be. Dragons are feared by most other shifters and with good measure. Our kind has not always acted with honor. The Phantom Fire was created not only to protect dragon-shifters but to protect others from the dragon clans. You assume the League would simply want to be recognized as its own entity. In that you are wrong. They have far darker ambitions that the Phantom Fire would oppose.”

“Like what?”

“Like what you call trafficking and we call slaving. Most shifter species for some reason produce far more males than females. Given that most can turn a human female into one of their own kind...” Warrick let his sentence trail off, leaving her to draw her own conclusion.

“Shit. Warrick if there are shifters seeking to rise up and rule the world, not to mention turning human females without their consent just to make them breeders, and I have no reason to think you’re lying, I have to tell somebody.”

He leaned over and took hold of her hand. “And tell them what? They have no frame of reference, and even if they did, they would attack, and that would only serve to unite the shifters in an all-out war.”

“You think they’re involved in the human trafficking...”

“Let’s call that what it is: slavery. Yes, I think the slavers are using the sale of those people, most of whom are women of breedable age to raise money and start their own breeding program.”

“They wanted you to sire dragons on them—create their own army to fight the Phantom Fire.”

“You pick up the nuances of their schemes, and yes, that’s precisely what I think. Not only did they cut patches out of my hide and douse me with salt water, they tried inducing me with aphrodisiacs and then put terrified or unconscious girls in a room with me.”

“They didn’t know you too well.” He quirked an eyebrow at her. “I haven’t known you long at all, but I know you wouldn’t do that. You are far too honorable. But what does worry me is them having your DNA.”

Warrick nodded. “I thought the same, but I don’t think they have the sophistication or set-up to do any kind of cloning. I do mean to report back to the Phantom Fire to let them know what happened, though. Which leads me to ask, do you think we’re safe here? Given they have your license plate number and you’ve been here before...”

“I think we were safe last night...”

“And you remained on watch to let me sleep. The fact remains that you are now a target for their revenge, and they’d do just about anything to retake me.”

“I have three days off before I have to report back, but my lieutenant said I can have whatever time I need. I’ll call in before we leave and ask for a couple of weeks at least.”

“That would be best. I don’t mean to rush you...”

“No. Let’s get this place cleaned up and get out of here. I think you’re right. If this Shadow League is behind the cult, they are more of a threat than I imagined. I’ll let my boss know so he can warn the other members of the task force, but it sounds like we’ll be on their radar more than anyone else.

We need to figure out where we can go, and we'll both need more clothing and supplies.”

“I have an idea—the Phantom Fire has a number of properties spread out all over the world. There will be clothing and pantry staples. I can hunt and fish and we can gather wild, edible vegetation.”

“If you'll take care of the kitchen, I'll get the rest of this place squared away. Are we close enough to hike? I'd like to put my Jeep in storage so they can't track us.”

Warrick grinned. “I'm a dragon, remember? I can fly us wherever we need to go...”

“Radar?”

“I love how quick your mind is. But organic things are far more difficult to track than those created by man. Besides, it's fairly easy to stay above the clouds and avoid aircraft. I agree, ditching the car would be best.”

Warrick carried their plates into the kitchen and started to clean up. Thankfully there wasn't much to pack or get ready to go. Dani couldn't believe how much pleasure she had taken in him calling her intelligent, and he treated her as an equal. As she packed their bag, she couldn't help but notice the predatory grace with which he moved.

She called the lieutenant. She knew she should tell him what was really going on, but there were two problems. The first was that he wasn't going to be inclined to believe her—dragons? Yeah, that wasn't going to go over well. And the second was that she was convinced if Warrick was taken by the human authorities, he wasn't likely to fare much better with them than with this Shadow League.

Her phone call to the lieutenant made, she couldn't believe she was actually considering running off with an honest-to-god fire-breathing dragon. Had she lost her mind? She was human. If he was right and there was a war coming, they'd be on opposite sides, wouldn't they? And yet the small, frightened girl who'd hidden from her truly evil stepmother and escaped to Narnia and played in the woods, casting them

as Terabithia and other magical places, thrilled at the idea of this wild, unexpected, and truly fantastical journey.

The practical side of her nature reminded her she had a job to do, but wasn't her higher duty to protect those in need of it? No one ever said to protect only the humans. No, her duty and her honor demanded she band together with Warrick and help him and the Phantom Fire take down this Shadow League.

No longer would the fairytales and fantasies of her childhood be something of the past or merely of her imagination. Instead, she would be living those adventures. Accepting that her fate may now well lie with the sexy dragon shifter and his people, she felt her heart pumping stronger, setting the blood in her veins singing with emotion and power. She felt the oxygen coursing through her body, imbuing her with a kind of magic. It was as if a veil had lifted, and she was seeing life for the first time.

Warrick was glaring out the window. Before she could ask what was wrong, he muttered a curse under his breath, grabbed her arm, and started out through the bath and the outdoor shower. She grabbed the bag as he dragged her past it.

"They're here," he whispered. "Time is up. They found us. Do exactly as I tell you. To do otherwise could get us both killed."

"Maybe you should go without me."

Shooting her a look that let her know in no uncertain terms that wasn't about to happen, he kissed her soundly and then tossed her over his shoulder as if her weight were nothing. Swiftly and silently, he moved across the small scrap of open ground between the outdoor shower and the surrounding woods. As sexy as that looked in real life, it was damned uncomfortable bouncing around on his shoulder.

Once they had cover, he stopped and set her down. They watched as the cult members milled around, pacing back and forth as if waiting for something or someone. They didn't have long to wait as a black, luxury SUV drove up to join them.

He grabbed her hand and pulled her after him. “We need to get far enough away that they can’t see or hear me shift, or at least that I’ll have time to shift and get airborne and out of reach of any weapons they have. You need to climb up and sit at the base of my neck in front of my shoulders. Grasp the spikes along my neck and grip with your thighs and knees. I’ll try to keep the acrobatics down to a minimum, but you can’t hurt me, so hold on as tightly as you can.”

They ran through the woods, coming out in a clearing dissected by the river. They made their way across a bridge that had seen better days.

“That bridge was a little scary,” she said, trying to minimize her own fear.

So far there had been no sign they were being followed.

“That wasn’t a bridge; that was a piece of Mezo-American architecture that should be preserved for posterity, not used for foot traffic.” She couldn’t help but laugh when he grinned at her. “Good girl. Give me some room, and as soon as I emerge, you get on and hang on tight. I won’t let you fall.”

“But...”

“Dani. I won’t let you fall. I will keep you safe. Let’s go.”

Warrick stepped back from her, and she could hear the rumble of thunder as a maelstrom of lightning, color, and electrical sizzle enveloped him. In the distance she could hear those who were looking for them begin to head their way. She turned and was staring at the trees when a brilliant flame of brightly colored fire streamed past her, setting the bridge ablaze.

When she turned, Warrick had bowed down and she was able to scramble up his leg and hoist herself onto his back. He turned away from the river, taking several galloping steps as he beat his enormous wings and then she felt them leaving the ground. Behind them she could hear shouting but she was too caught up in the wonder of flying to pay attention—not in a plane, which she loathed, but on the back of a winged dragon as he climbed into the sky.

Dani wasn't crazy about heights, but knowing it was Warrick who carried her, she felt safe and began to laugh—not with maniacal fear but with pure joy. This was every childhood fantasy she'd ever had. She was riding a dragon. *Game of Thrones* had gotten it all wrong, but Anne McCaffrey's description of being a dragon rider was pretty damn close.

They soared through and over the clouds, and Dani felt as if she'd been doing this all her life. It was as if she had been training for this from the time her mother died and her father had married that 'awful woman.' It was the only thing she ever called the woman he'd married—that 'awful woman' or her 'evil stepmother.' It had finally driven a wedge between her and her father, creating a breach that neither had been willing to cross.

They flew for hours, with Warrick ducking into or below the clouds or hugging the ground or a water feature to avoid detection. Dani felt as if she was seeing this country for the first time—not from a plane or passing by in a car or train but like the birds experienced it—having far more freedom and space than mere humans or other earth-bound creatures.

Finally, Warrick began to spiral down toward what looked to be a deserted mill of some kind. It had a huge water wheel and upon closer inspection, she could see that the building was sturdy and intact but had been made to look as though it were decrepit and in ill repair. Warrick touched down with a dexterity and ease that impressed her. He stopped in front of the building, extending his foreleg so she could step down.

Once more the chaotic storm of sound, color, and light enveloped him and then the man emerged once more. He was kneeling on one knee and seemed far more tired than she imagined he normally would be.

She ran to help him stand and he tried to shake her off. "Don't be a jackass. You just carried me how many miles after being held captive and tortured for months? If it helps, I am suitably impressed with your skills, abilities and stoicism. I'm sort of hoping this place is nicer on the inside than the out."

He grinned. “It is indeed. We should be safe here. No trace of us should be spotted unless someone knows what to look for. The wheel works and will provide the electricity we need, but this place and the three closest towns were abandoned more than a century ago.”

With Warrick leaning on her, they entered the building. It was far smaller on the inside than she’d imagined. As if reading her mind, he continued, “Most of the building is used to house the fortifications and the things we’d need if we have to make a fight of it. There are also extensive computer and other networks that are untraceable, and an alarm system that is as deadly as it is hidden. Do not leave the building without me until I have had a chance to show it to you.”

“You’re kind of bossy, you know that?”

“I am dragon,” he said, grabbing a pair of faded Levi’s off a hook just inside the door and pulling them on. It didn’t do anything to hide his gorgeous physique, but at least it seemed to contain his massive hard-on. God, did the man ever get truly soft?

She rolled her eyes. “Well sit down before you fall down. Let me get you some water and something to eat. Is there anything?”

“There should be meat in the freezer. Last time I was here I made and sealed some lasagna and other things that will be easy to prepare. The freezer is on a separate low-voltage generator. You look after the food, and I’ll get the wheel started.”

“Won’t that draw attention to us?”

“I wouldn’t think so. For one thing, it moves very slowly. The actual wheel that produces the electricity we need is beneath the surface. Besides, we have it on a timer to go off randomly throughout the year. People believe it to be haunted.”

“Oh my god, this is the haunted mill of Silver Creek.”

“It is indeed,” he said with a smile.

“I always wanted to hike up here, but everyone said it was far too dangerous to hike alone and I couldn’t get a guide or anyone else to come with me.”

“Some of our perimeter alarms will give someone a good zap.”

“Sneaky,” she said admiringly.

Dani went into the kitchen and began to bring food out, selecting a freezer bag labeled “beef bourguignon” with a date that seemed safe. There were instructions to put it in the red dutch oven and set it to low to allow it to thaw and come up to temperature.

Warrick glanced at what she’d selected. “Good choice. It was the first recipe of Julia’s I really perfected.”

They enjoyed their meal but as night fell, exhaustion began to quickly overtake both of them.

“So, what are the sleeping arrangements?” she asked.

“I’m afraid there’s just the one, extremely comfortable, large bed, a very uncomfortable loveseat, an even more uncomfortable cot, one of the kitchen chairs, or the floor.”

“That’s not happening Warrick.”

“We’ll see,” he said with a mischievous grin. “As you pointed out, I am still healing and have expended more of my reserves than I should have. I am sleeping in the bed. I would like to remind you it is quite large and very, very comfortable.”

She wasn’t sure how something that big and that fierce could have a mischievous side, but he did.

“That doesn’t work for me.”

Warrick shrugged. “Suit yourself, but you’re welcome to join me at any time.”

CHAPTER 9



WARRICK

*H*e should have known it wouldn't be that easy. If he'd learned nothing else from his more than two thousand years on this earth, he'd learned nothing worth having ever come easy—or maybe it did, but rarely and never for him.

Warrick lay with his back turned toward her as he listened to her try the loveseat—too soft and mushy. He could hear it sinking under her and had to bite the inside of his cheek when he heard her muttering as she tried to extricate herself from it. He knew from past experience that trying to get out of that thing was a bit like trying to escape from quicksand.

Hearing her wrestle with trying to get the cot open was even more amusing. He supposed he should have told her that Sobek had broken the damn thing and it wouldn't even open anymore, but where would be the fun in that?

Then came the kitchen chairs. They weren't too bad to sit in for the length of the time it took to eat a meal, but they were hardwood with straight backs that only came up to one's shoulder blades. Not exactly conducive to sleeping in. When the chairs proved to be unworkable—although he gave her credit for trying to get them to work—she tried the floor. It was cold, hard, and warped.

Finally, cursing under her breath, she crawled into the bed with him—on top of the covers and clinging to the very edge. It was hard not to laugh, but he knew from the tales of others that laughing at one's eternal flame when she was being stoic and fighting her fate tended to produce violent results.

Granted, Dani wasn't a dragon, which meant she couldn't blow fire at him, but still.

Warrick was fairly sure that laughing at her might just send her over the edge in terms of temper or worse yet, make her cry, and that he wanted to avoid at all cost. What he wanted was to take her in his arms and soothe her distress before seducing her and spending the night making love to her. God knew he was already hard as a rock, but that wasn't likely to help her either—at least not at first. Although there was something to be said for giving her so much pleasure all she could do was scream his name and go limp in his arms from exhaustion.

He continued to listen with every fiber of his being. Eventually, her breathing deepened and she rolled away from the edge of the bed. Waiting until he was sure she was asleep, he slipped out of bed, pulling the covers on his side back to make moving her under them easily. He crept around the end of the bed and began to quietly undress her, whispering kisses across her skin when her breathing was disturbed, soothing her back to sleep before continuing to undress her. Finally, she was naked, and he eased his arms under her, lifting her out of the bed and carrying her back to the side he'd been on where he could settle her down and draw the covers up and over her.

Gazing down at her, he smiled as she slept. Just seeing her peaceful filled him with a kind of quiet joy, and the knowledge that it did would have given his brethren cause for riotous laughter. Warrick had long ago given up on the idea that he would find an eternal flame, and so he had told any who would listen that he believed it was a myth. Some of his brothers had pointed out that many believed the Phantom Fire was a myth, and yet they weren't.

Easing off the mattress, he moved back to the other side of the bed, pulling the bedclothes back so he could slide into bed beside her. He gathered her close and spooned himself against her back, fitting her to his body. Had any woman felt as perfect against her man as Dani felt against him? He had no rational explanation for it. All he knew was that nothing felt as right as holding her close and allowing the rhythm of her

breathing to fill him with peace, which was absurd because they were on the run, and if he was right the cultists had some serious firepower behind them.

Dani settled back, burrowing closer with a little sigh and making his cock that much harder. His cock wanted relief and it wanted it with the woman he held within the circle of his embrace. But his cock would have to wait—at least for a while. Closing his eyes, Warrick tried to let her warmth lull him to sleep.

It must have worked because when she thrashed in his arms, calling out and fighting to be free, he came instantly awake. Dani was still on her side, still had her back against his front, only she was punching and kicking in the throes of some nightmare.

“No. Stop,” she cried out, low and desperate.

He recognized the fear in her voice and in her actions. Something had happened to her. Something bad, and she was reliving it.

“Stay away! Stay away!” she groaned, fighting with some unknown attacker.

Warrick was caught somewhere between anger and sympathy—anger at whoever had done this to her and sympathy for whatever it was she’d had to endure.

“Dani,” he said soothingly, but in a deep, firm voice. “Dani; it’s okay.”

“No. Fuck you. No.”

He wrapped his arms around her, trapping her in his embrace and provoking a more violent response from her, but he was much bigger and much stronger. “Dani, wake up.”

“No. I’ll fucking kill you.”

“No, sweetheart, you won’t.”

She wriggled and squirmed, trying desperately to get away from him. Perhaps holding her wasn’t the best idea, but he couldn’t think of a better one that didn’t result at best in the nightmare continuing. Dani clawed at his hands and arms as

her legs kicked, but he held firm. He nuzzled her neck, which seemed at first to work and then sent her into a frenzy.

Sinking his teeth into the juncture of the base of her neck and the top of her shoulder he bit down slowly and firmly, waiting for the discomfort to increase to enough pain that it would break through whatever hell she was caught in. As he increased the pressure, she ceased to struggle and then went rigid before he sensed she was returning to consciousness.

“Shit, that hurts. What do you think you’re doing?” she snarled.

He kissed the wound.

“How did I get over on this side of the bed? Wait, how did I get naked?”

“You joined me in bed and then turned towards me. I simply relieved you of your clothes and eased you under the covers. Then you had some kind of nightmare. Want to tell me about it?”

“No. Who said it was all right if you took my clothes off?”

“I suppose I could tell you I thought you would be more comfortable, but the fact is, I like having you naked in my arms.”

“You’re lucky I didn’t hurt you,” she said, trying to pull away.

Warrick held fast. “There was never any chance of that.”

“Think not?” she said warningly.

“Me dragon; you human female. Dragon wins every time—read the fairytales.”

“Usually, it’s the knight in shining armor with the big sword that wins.”

“Lies. Scurrilous lies,” he teased.

“You can let me go.”

“I could,” he agreed with a nod, “but I prefer you where you are.”

While one hand still trapped her against his body, the other moved down to stroke her soft skin. Dani squirmed and moaned as his hand drifted down to cup her sex, his fingers parting the petals of her sex and slipping through the honey he found there.

“Warrick, don’t,” she said softly and with little conviction.

“Whyever not? You are gorgeous and we both know this is what you want; what we both want.”

“You don’t know that.”

“But I do,” he said as he flicked her clit with his thumb. He used his fingers to massage her pussy, teasing the opening to her core with his middle finger.

“You don’t fight fair,” she moaned as he withdrew his hand from between her legs and her hips arched as if to follow his withdrawal.

“No. I fight to win, but it isn’t much of a battle if you want it as much as I do.”

Warrick knew he should stop; knew this was a bad idea, but he didn’t care. The primitive creature that he was at his core had awakened, and all he could think about was how much he wanted to sink into her and hear her call his name. He wanted to maneuver her onto her back and suck her distended nipples into his mouth, suckling her breasts before nipping and sucking his way to the juncture of her thigh where he could make a meal of her.

He made a space between them and tipped her shoulder backward, grateful that she rolled back without seeming to think about it. She hadn’t said yes, but she hadn’t said no. Warrick didn’t want to risk asking permission. He needed her like his next breath and before either of them could think much more about it, he lowered his head, capturing her mouth in a kiss that was as sweet as it was dominant.

Dani sighed in tacit surrender as her lips softened and parted. He’d forgotten what it was like to want a woman this much—not just physically, but so much more. He brushed his lips across hers, enjoying the way she yielded. They were safe.

There was no way for those who pursued them to track where they were. He would enjoy her, bring her pleasure and deal with the consequences when he was forced to. In the interim, he would revel in her response.

She rolled towards him, sighing as her body came in contact with his, her hard nipples grazing his chest. A flash of lightning illuminated the night sky, and a loud clap of thunder shook the room. Dani shivered, but not from fear. She brushed her body against his, eager in a soft, quiet way that told him she wanted him as much as he did her.

The need to take her in the savage way of his ancestors possessed him as lust surged through his system and the kiss morphed from tender to dominating. Warrick let the beast within off the leash, turning the kiss into a carnal exploration of her mouth. His tongue thrust into her mouth, finding hers, sliding along it, and encouraging hers to dance and tangle with his.

And while he had felt her yield, Dani was not shrinking violet; she gave as good as she got and her arms came up to tighten around him, raking her nails lightly down the skin of his back. Warrick growled; he wanted more and needed this woman in a way he never had before.

“How long has it been for you?” he whispered against her lips.

“I’m clean and have an implant if that’s what you’re asking...”

He chuckled. “Not what I was after but good to know. I, too, am without disease.” He didn’t think he’d tell her that dragon seed could overwhelm any human means to prevent pregnancy—Falkor had proved that. “I don’t care how many have come before me, but if it’s been a while, I’ll need to be more careful the first time.”

Her nails raked his back with more intent. “I can take whatever you dish out,” she answered.

He fisted her hair in his hand, wrapping his fingers around the dark, silky strands. “We’ll see about that. I’m going to fuck

you long and hard. I'm going to use my hands, my lips, my mouth, and my tongue to bring you to a fevered pitch. Then I'll spread your legs for me and make a meal of your pussy. I'll feast until I've had my fill, and dragons have a ravenous appetite. When I have you slick and hot and ready for me, you'll beg me to mount you."

Dani moved restlessly beneath him as he covered her body with his. Her hands traced his shoulder blades, moving down his spine until she could grasp the globes of his ass. He nuzzled her throat, licking and nipping as he began to move his way down. He moved down her body, stopping at her breasts to pay them homage and to suck her pebbled points into his mouth, swirling his tongue around them before giving them the edge of his teeth and making her hiss.

"Mine," he murmured as he began to work his way down her body, settling between her thighs and making a place for himself as he lifted each of her legs to hook them over his strong shoulders.

CHAPTER 10



DANICA

Warrick trailed his lips down her body, leaving a trail of fire in their wake—not a real one, but her skin felt sensitized with a kind of sizzle she'd never felt before. She was finding it hard to do anything other than breathe, and even that was questionable. All she could feel was the way his hands and mouth played her body.

What was wrong with her? She didn't know anything about this man. Well, that wasn't true; she knew he was a dragon. What the hell? She was going to let a dragon make love to her? Her mind rejected the idea in its entirety, but her heart, body, and soul welcomed his mastery, and that's what it was. Not only was Warrick a dragon; he was an alpha male, a predator with protective and possessive instincts he seemed to give free rein.

Dani'd had plenty of sex in her life, but nothing she'd ever experienced compared to what this man—this dragon—was doing to her. He wasn't just engaged in foreplay or an exploration of her body, he was worshiping it, learning every nook and cranny as if committing them to memory. Lust and longing flooded her system as he nuzzled her sex and took her breasts in his hands, cupping and squeezing them before focusing on her nipples which were sensitive to the point of being painful. She writhed beneath his touch, moaning and yearning, striving for more.

She closed her eyes and could feel hands around her throat—not his hands, but those of the people who had given her nightmares.

“No,” she said, thrashing her head back and forth.

Teeth closed on her engorged clit, nipping it and bringing her back to him. “Stay with me, Dani. Nothing will hurt you when you are in my arms.” He chuckled. “Nothing except me.”

He nuzzled her aching nub before settling down between her legs, running his tongue along the folds of her sex. All the darkness and fearful images fled as Warrick latched onto her clit, sucking it into the warmth of his mouth. She grasped his head with her hands, sinking her fingers into his spiky mane as he rolled his tongue around her clit before nipping it. That nip sent a fresh surge of arousal straight to her pussy and she could feel she was on the cusp of a powerful orgasm.

“Warrick,” she pleaded, tugging on his hair to get him to move back up so he could join her body to his.

“Patience, Dani, patience. I haven’t heard you call my name as your body climaxes. I want you soft and wet, ripe for the taking, and I will have what I want.”

Her body shuddered with pleasure, and she let everything go except for the way he made her feel. For the first time in years, she could think of nothing but the man with his head between her legs as he rolled his tongue and speared her pussy over and over, flattening it out to drag her honey out from the depths of her core and lap it up.

He licked her labia with a slow drag of his tongue before nibbling his way back to her pussy, which seemed to be gushing. She writhed with need, and he gripped her hips, holding her still while his tongue and mouth made a meal of her sex, attacking her pussy, her folds, and her clit. Wave after wave of pure sensation washed over her as he continued his sensual assault.

She tried to hold out—to hold her own against him—but it was a futile fight, and in the end he pushed her over the edge into a well of ecstasy that seemed to have no bounds. Dani cried out as her body seized in perfect bliss before it released, and Warrick moved up from between her thighs and covered her body with his own.

He pressed the head of his cock against her opening, just barely inside but stretching her, nonetheless. He grasped her hips, holding her in place as her body still hummed with the aftermath of her orgasm. She grasped his biceps and intertwined her legs with his.

“Fuck me, Warrick. Fuck me hard.”

“As my lady wishes,” he rumbled, drawing back and then slamming into her in a single, brutal thrust.

Holding her tight, he found a pounding rhythm that took her breath away. Over and over again, he surged into her—forward and back—fucking her with a feral frenzy that her body caught and matched. It was primitive, primal, and pure, and Dani gloried in it. Her body followed his lead to dizzying new heights as the tension, pleasure, and pressure built to a crescendo and she cried out again as he thrust home, his head falling forward as he pumped his release deep within her core.

They lay there for a moment, neither saying a word, just allowing the ecstasy to dissipate into a sated languor that was more satisfying than anything she’d ever known.

“Mine,” he whispered again.

Dani began to believe he wasn’t talking about just for now, or just until they were safe, or just until they brought down the bad guys. For Warrick, ‘mine’ was a declaration of intent, of claiming and of possession. He rolled from her, but pulled her close, cuddling against her as they both fell asleep listening to the rhythm of the storm.

When she woke to the light filtering through the windows, what had transpired the night before came flooding back. It would have been bad enough had she given in to his seductive prowess the first time, or even the second, but as she recalled, it hadn’t been until they spent themselves for the fourth time that sleep had finally claimed them for an extended period.

It had been beyond anything Dani could have imagined. She’d fucked a dragon numerous times, and she had reveled in it. Warrick seemed to take fiendish delight in overwhelming her senses and making her submit to his erotic will. Truth to

tell, she'd loved every minute of it. He didn't mince around, didn't ask her what she wanted, he simply took what he needed, making sure he gave more pleasure than he took.

“Good, you're awake,” he rumbled as he pulled her beneath him.

“Warrick, no,” she protested, although it sounded half-hearted even to her.

“I knew I shouldn't have let you sleep so long, but you're so adorable when you're cuddled next to me, burrowing to see how close you can get.”

“I am not adorable. I am way too big to be adorable.”

His hand snapped against her backside, the sting hurting, but then spreading into a delicious warmth. “You are what I say you are. Besides next to me, your size is nothing.”

He had a point. Tall and curvy as she was, she always felt she was the equal of whatever man she was with, but not with Warrick. With him she felt petite and delicate, but not weak. He had the superior size and strength, but he never made her feel minimized or marginalized.

Arguing with him would get her nowhere. Her body had learned quickly just what her dragon lover was capable of, and it was all in. He breathed across her skin, lighting it up before he rolled on top of her, spreading her legs and driving up into her. Her body arched in carnal splendor as he let her hang off the precipice before striking up a rhythm he knew she could match. This morning wasn't about exploration or subtlety—this was about possession and need.

Over and over he pounded into her, holding her in place while he took his pleasure, ensuring that she found hers, as well. She cried out, raking her nails down his back as her hips bucked up into his, her pussy clamping down on his length, spasming as he drove into her, slamming up inside her until his cock hit the end of her sheath and he bathed her pussy with his warm, creamy essence.

“Come, my sweet girl. You have worn me out. We'll grab a shower and have breakfast.”

“Seriously? You think I can walk after that marathon?”

“My poor baby. Why don’t you wait here; I’ll take a quick shower and then bring you breakfast in bed.”

“As long as I don’t have to move for the next half hour or so, I think that’s a splendid plan.”

Warrick grinned at her as he leaned down to kiss her, and she pushed a lock of his golden hair off his face. She knew she should get up and get dressed before he decided to ravish her again, but she knew if that was his intent, neither clothes nor her own desires would do much to thwart him. The man—or rather the dragon—was seriously addictive.

He showered quickly and only pulled on the pair of faded Levi’s before moving into the kitchen. It wasn’t long before she smelled both bacon and sausage being cooked. Her tummy grumbled, reminding her she’d had a busy night. She thought about getting up and finding something to pull on, but Warrick beat her to the punch as he came back to the bed with an enormous tray, heaped with waffles, meats, butter, warmed maple syrup, orange juice and coffee.

She took the mug of coffee from the tray. “Mine,” she mimicked, making him laugh.

“Then you understand the concept.”

“How did you manage this?”

“As I said, each of our safe houses contains well-stocked pantries and freezers. Waffles are easy to make, and I prefer them to pancakes.”

“Me too—crunchy on the outside, light and fluffy on the inside. These look wonderful and the whole thing smells divine.”

She’d thought to put some distance between them but couldn’t find the will to do so. Flinging back the covers next to her, she scooped over. “Join me?”

He grinned. He was absolutely devastating when he grinned. His angular face had two of the cutest dimples in his

cheeks and they belied the stark lines of his face in the most charming way.

He handed her the tray before sliding in next to her, fluffing the pillows and pulling her close, ensuring the tray was set up properly and Dani was comfortable.

“Want to tell me about the nightmare?”

“Not really...”

“Too bad. Do it anyway. I need to know who to kill.”

She laughed and then realized he was only partially joking. “Okay, you do remember that I’m a cop, right? You can’t just go out and kill anyone who harms me.”

“Want to bet?”

“Okay, you can, but I don’t want you to. That’s revenge, not justice, and I’ve spent my entire career in pursuit of justice.”

“How’s that working for you? Besides, revenge is a whole lot easier to get.”

“But not nearly as satisfying.”

“I don’t know. I’ve always found it incredibly satisfying to have the blood of my enemies on my hands and know they will never rise again to harm someone I care for. Make no mistake, Dani, you are someone I care for.”

She wasn’t sure if she was more shocked by his admission that he had and would kill, or that he had feelings for her. Given that she had no fear of him killing her—or even harming her—the feelings part was a whole lot scarier.

“The cult I’ve been chasing—they kind of know who I am. Well, not me specifically until last night, but I was undercover with them for a while. So, they know a woman who, if they can put two and two together, they’ll know was me. The fact that I rescued you will only piss them off even more.”

“What happened, Dani?”

He wasn’t going to let it drop. “They knew me by another name. I was working vice and had made myself out to be a

new girl in town with no family, friends, or ties to the community...”

“In other words, just the kind of girl that would attract a slaver...”

“You really hate them,” she said realizing the fire that burned within him had more to it than just cults dabbling in human trafficking.

“I do,” he said with a nod. “Not so much these slavers as I was able to free the two drakaina they had snatched up, but all slavers.”

“You lost someone you care about to them.” Not a question. A statement of fact.

“Not these slavers in particular, but my youngest sister a long, long time ago. By the time I knew she’d been taken, there was no trace of her anywhere. We knew they’d taken her north to a land of ice and darkness. She died there.”

Dani wrapped her arms around him. “I’m so sorry, Warrick. I can’t imagine how terrible that must have been for you.”

“What did they do to you?”

“To me personally, not much, but there was a couple that lost a daughter to them. They came with several bodyguards who were not prepared for what they would see or the firepower they would be up against. They found one of the houses where they kept the girls when they first took them. I don’t know what they were thinking. More than half of the people they brought with them, turned on them.” She felt the chill that always accompanied her telling this tale descend like a shroud. “They strung the husband up, and then dragged his wife from the van where she was waiting. They made him watch while they gang-raped her and then slit her throat. I managed to get away and grab the daughter and another girl and get them out.”

She looked at him with what she knew was a bleak stare. “I know what you mean about the blood of your enemies. I killed two men with my bare hands and shoved those girls in

the van and got them out. Later, I found out the other girls at the house, as well as the husband and those he'd hired who hadn't turned on him, had been brutally murdered. I leveraged my way onto the task force and then made sure I worked harder and longer until I was given the lead. This is my case, Warrick, and I won't stop until I know I've gotten justice for those people."

He nodded and pulled her close. "I will keep the nightmares at bay. You are safe with me, and nothing and no one will harm you again."

Dani nestled against him, knowing he spoke the truth. They would end the slavers once and for all. What would happen after that wasn't something she allowed herself to think about. For now, finding the justice she sought might have to be enough.

CHAPTER 11



WARRICK

Listening to the pain and the desolation in her voice and watching as her body went still was enough to break his heart. He'd long ago decided his heart had been encased in ice and nothing would ever thaw it again, but this little human had done just that. Something about her grit, determination, intelligence, and beauty had chipped away at the frosted exterior and made it come alive again.

He needed to make her understand that her fight was now his fight regardless of whether or not the Shadow League was involved, regardless of the stance of the Phantom Fire. She was his eternal flame and she needed to understand to the depths of her soul what that entailed.

Warrick wanted no secrets between them, and he needed her to know he would respect her wishes, but only up to a point. If he deemed the cultists were a continuing threat to her, he would not settle for justice; he would burn them alive to ensure they could never harm her again.

“You’re being awfully quiet, except for this weirdly soothing rumbling I hear coming from you. At least I think it’s you.”

He nodded. She was too clever by half. “It is. You know that I am immortal.”

“You told me. You told me your father gave you no choice but to join the Phantom Fire.”

“It is the way the brotherhood was designed. Before dragons could shift from one form to another, we were all

immortal. After a great battle where our losses were many, but we believed we had defeated our enemy, the original twelve clans of dragons banded together and made a deal with a great sorcerer. The Age of Dragons was waning, and the Age of Man was on the rise. We knew from past experience that humans feared what they did not understand and killed what they feared. The sorcerer gifted us with the ability to shift between dragon and human.”

“But all magic has a price.”

“Yes. The price of the gift was to give up our immortality. But the sorcerer feared we might be needed again and one warrior from each clan was able to retain the gift of shifting as well as the burden of immortality. We live separate lives in service to our kind and eventually to shifters as well and answer to no authority other than our own.”

“So, your Council formed the Shadow League.”

Warrick nodded. “We live without the comfort of mate or family. But if the fates deem us worthy of our soul or fated mate, which we call an eternal flame, the warrior can give up his immortality to build a life with her, but the Phantom Fire must remain, so...”

“The warrior leaving has to give up his firstborn son. That’s horrible.”

“It is tradition, duty and honor.”

“It’s bullshit. Who would condemn their child to a life of loneliness?”

“We are not lonely, and we do not do without the comfort of a woman...”

“Ah yes, the aforementioned naked women.”

He grinned. “Yes. But each of us hopes that one day we will be deemed worthy of the gift of an eternal flame.”

“Why tell me?”

“I think you know,” he said softly.

“Yeah. No. That’s not going to work for me. Can you even get a human pregnant?”

“It was not thought possible until recently, or at least, not until she becomes drakaina. Generally, if the warrior’s eternal flame is not born drakaina, she is transitioned prior to beginning their life together.”

The color drained from her face. “I’m not looking to give up my humanity.”

“I could force you to do so.”

“Not if you want to sleep with both eyes closed,” she threatened.

He shrugged. “I am merely asking that you not reject the idea out of hand. I suppose you could remain human, but when your belly grows round with our child, we will discuss it again.”

“Putting the whole becoming-a-dragon-thing aside, I’m not giving up any child of mine to some brotherhood of dragons.”

This was not going well at all. “I am trying to be honest with you. I don’t know what it means anymore. Recently our alpha or leader found his eternal flame to be human, and she became pregnant with his child. The brotherhood did not want to lose his skill and wisdom, so we changed a fundamental tenet of our order. Falkor will remain with his eternal flame and their children. If and when he or she dies or the children reach adulthood, who’s to say, but there are more options now.”

“What would it mean to become drakaina?”

She was a curious mate. When she thought she had no choice, she was willing to fight for her freedom, but now when she believed she would have a say, her curiosity was pricked. It would be best if she believed she could choose her fate, but Warrick knew the truth: he would never let her go. She might choose between human and drakaina, but in the choice of being his eternal flame and sharing his life, the fates had made that choice for them both long ago.

“It would mean a longer life expectancy, better health, and the ability to soar above the clouds with or without me.”

“But no dips in the ocean...”

“Not in your dragon form, although it is safe, up to a point, as a human. We have work to do and plans to make. We will talk again.”

They finished their breakfast and then he cleaned up while she took a shower and pulled on clean clothes. He was just drying the last of the dishes and putting them away when she walked up behind him, wrapping her arms around him and leaning her cheek against his broad back.

“Do you think we’re safe here?” she asked.

“For a few days at least, but you need to check in with your people, and I need to report back to the Phantom Fire. I want to ensure the drakaina that I managed to get out have been returned to their clan and that we have been paid for our completion of the task.”

“You rescued them for money?” she asked incredulously.

“The Phantom Fire are, to be blunt, mercenaries. Although we are an elite class of warriors, our business acumen as mercenaries is not always as good,” Warrick chuckled. “We are hired by those who are in need of our assistance. The joke has always been that it was good that our brotherhood was blessed with riches beyond compare as we often find ourselves on the side that can’t pay us. At least in this case the drakaina belonged to the clan of Ridley Monroe.”

“The billionaire?”

“I don’t know that he has that much money, but he does command an enormous territory and can easily afford our services.”

“And what if he couldn’t have?”

Warrick shrugged. “I suppose I would have rescued them anyway. We can stay here and check in with those with whom we serve, or we can go to a more secure location.”

“Why is it I get the impression you are not telling me everything?”

“You possess all the knowledge you need to destroy me and my kind. I have trusted you with our greatest secrets. Why would I lie?”

“I didn’t say you were lying, but I’m beginning to sense of pattern of evasiveness, which usually means there’s something you don’t want me to know.”

He kept forgetting she was a cop. A detective, and she was damn good at her job. “Let us table further discussions. We have both given our all to catching these slavers for months—you far longer than I. What do you say we go flying again? In fact, let’s put more distance between us and the slavers. We’ll close up here and move to a place I know I can ensure your safety.”

The most rapturous look came over her face. He was sure he could convince her to become drakaina. What he wanted most now was to remove her from the danger she was in. If she had thwarted their plans—and she had—those backing the slavers would be after her. He wanted her where they wouldn’t find her. He wanted her at Dragonwyk—the stronghold of the Phantom Fire.

They put together the bag that contained clothing, computers, and other things they needed and then closed down the mill so that to a casual observer, it would appear as though no one had been there in more than a century. Taking the bag outside, Warrick stripped out of his jeans and grinned at the lustful look that came over his mate’s face.

She was a good match for him in terms of libido. Once he had her where he knew she was safe, he meant to avail himself of all she had to offer. If Falkor could sire a child on a human, Warrick was sure he could do so as well—at least he was willing to spend a lot of time trying.

He stepped back and called forth his dragon. The chaotic storm of lightning, thunder, color, and electricity swirled all around him, and he could feel his shape shifting from man to

dragon, and with all the power and fire that were at his disposal.

When the maelstrom faded away, he looked down on her and took heart in the fact that she had no fear of him either as man or dragon.

“You’re really quite beautiful in either form,” she said with reverence.

The form of each dragon resembled or echoed the coloring of their human half or vice versa. Warrick’s dragon was scaled in shimmering hues of crimson, gold, and bronze. He had long horns that swept back from his head and a kind of golden mane halfway down his neck that interspersed with the single row of spikes that fanned out into four rows when they hit his back. His wings were enormous and seemed to be spun out of golden gossamer spread across a bronze frame. No one had ever called his dragon beautiful, and the creature preened beneath her praise.

Dani walked up and ran her hands down his silken scales, testing their feel and resiliency. As the scales shivered under her touch, she watched with awe. “Can you feel my touch like you can when you’re human?”

“Very much so. The dragon and I are one. We feel the same and for the most part think the same. I’d like to convince you he is far more primitive than I, but I don’t know that to be the case. Certainly, our instincts are the same.”

“And you can talk...”

He nodded. “We are the only shifters who retain our ability to speak and while many have a bonding link where they can feel one another, dragons can actually send messages down the link. We are, in all ways, the superior species.”

“And not the least bit arrogant,” she teased.

“Perhaps, just a bit,” he said, wrapping his neck around her and bringing her to where she could feel the heated chamber within his chest that produced fire. “But with ample reason. For one thing, our skill as warriors has never been rivaled, nor has our ability to pleasure our mates. Drakaina can be quite

fractious and are more easily soothed when their libidinous natures are kept satisfied.”

Dani began to laugh in earnest. “If all your brothers are as convinced as you are that there is nothing better in bed... Wait; hold it. That part might be true. You do know I’m more than a little bit sore from all your amorous attentions last night.”

“I do, which is why I did not keep you in our bed this morning. I thought to let you rest. Enjoy it. I will not always be so generous. I want nothing more than to get to our destination and take you in my arms and make you scream so loud with your pleasure that you will wake the gods.”

She shook her head, pulled her hair back, secured it with some kind of band and then crawled up onto his back. There was something almost erotic about the way she gripped his neck with her thighs, just the same as she did when she wrapped her legs around his body as he drove into her over and over again.

“Hold tight,” he said over his back as he took several galloping strides, spread his wings and soared up into the heavens.

“This is amazing,” she said, leaning forward to stroke his neck while holding tight with the other hand.

If she thought this was amazing, he couldn’t wait for her to be drakaina and fly amongst the clouds and the stars at his side. They would find their way. Of that, he was sure. But first they would deal with the slavers and those who pulled their strings. Those who had given Dani her nightmares would pay with their lives.

CHAPTER 12



DANICA

She had to admit flying free among the clouds straddling Warrick beat the hell out of flying commercial. She wasn't the world's greatest flyer; nor was she overly fond of heights, but something about being on top of Warrick made all her fears go away. She knew as well as she knew her own name that he would never let her fall. Even if she tumbled from his back, she was sure he would catch her in his powerful talons.

Dani hadn't been lying when she said even as a dragon, he was beautiful. But more than his physical features as dragon or man was the beauty of his heart. He was most definitely a warrior of the old school. As much as she talked about law and justice, she had no doubt that those who had given her nightmares were not long for this world. She tried to find something wrong with that, but she couldn't.

She was beginning to wonder what it might be like to commit to this man. She had given up everything for her career and where had it gotten her? Sure, she was successful with a new promotion and most likely her choice of assignments, but at the end of the day she went home alone. So many dates ended up in lackluster sex, not the kind of incendiary lovemaking that she'd experienced with Warrick. Already he'd proven he could take her to sexual heights she hadn't even known existed.

He was the first man in a very long time—no scratch that, in forever—who had moved her. She'd been so afraid he would be distant this morning, but he had been anything but.

He'd shared secrets with her she was sure would be frowned upon by his brethren. She realized she'd been so lonely for so long, she'd forgotten what it was like not to feel that way. Warrick had given that to her, showing her a different path.

She'd never allowed a man to dominate her, and yet with Warrick, there was no doubt about who was in command and control, and she liked it. Oh, she was sure they'd argue and probably fight, but only because he wanted the best for her and wanted to ensure her safety and happiness. That didn't make him a bad guy.

It made no sense to her. Normally she was reticent when it came to sex. She wasn't easy by any means, but from the first, sexual longing for this man had filled her waking and dreaming hours. Whenever he looked at her, it was as if his eyes left a tingling trail all along her skin. Her nipples peaked and her entire body came alive at the sound of his voice. Yeah, she was kind of gonzo over him. As she tried to convince herself it was just sex, she remembered the way he'd talked about having an eternal flame and his belief that she was it.

Was she? Was it even possible?

He began to fly higher and take dizzying dives in and out of the clouds, beating his strong wings to pick up speed or altitude and then gliding along the air currents as they made their way eastward. Warrick must have sensed her growing ease with his ability to fly with her on his back. She began to let go of him with her hands—stretching her arms open wide as he soared through the sky. There were times she could hear a jet engine in the distance, but they were never close enough to see a plane or be seen.

Warrick dropped down out of the sky and flew along one of the rivers she thought to be a tributary of the Columbia River. As they traveled along, he turned southward and picked up what she believed to be the Snake River further east. Dani recognized if she was going to fly with Warrick, she'd need to brush up on her geography as she was completely lost at this point.

As dusk began to fall, Warrick made a big sweeping circle so that they were flying toward the sunset. As beautiful as he was, Dani doubted she'd ever forget the feeling of flying to and being a part of the sun setting on the western horizon. Far too soon, he banked and came around, once more heading to a destination only he seemed to know.

As the moon began to rise, Warrick flew into a range of mountains. She didn't think they were the Cascades but wasn't sure if they belonged to the Continental Divide. He dropped down following a river that flowed through a pristine wilderness that even in the fading light took her breath away. Dropping down to fly through an arch, he soared over what looked to be a large encampment. How had she missed that from the air? Warrick spiraled down until he landed in a large opening at the center of the camp.

Dani slid off his back and grabbed his jeans. As he shifted, she looked around—yurts were everywhere, including a large one in the very center. This had to be Dragonwyk. Warrick had brought her to his home. Before she could protest or ask him his intentions, he fisted her hair, hauled her close, and slammed his mouth down on hers. Arousal bloomed in an instant and flooded her system. Warrick didn't seem to care that they had attracted attention.

His lips moved over hers: hungry, dominating. This wasn't a kiss. This was possession. He was making a bold statement in front of his brethren. Damn, the man knew how to kiss. His tongue traced the seam of her lips and demanding she open to him. Dani sagged into him, telling herself it was just because she was tired, but that wasn't true. She submitted because he commanded it. Oh, he didn't say it, but the feeling was there, nonetheless.

Warrick's tongue slid inside, stroking hers and invoking her response. He was strong and powerful in more ways than one. Her body went on a high alert of anticipation. It knew what this man was capable of, and she could feel her body softening, her pussy getting wet, ripe, and ready to be plundered by the hard cock that throbbed between them.

He tugged on her hair, the slightest pain lighting up her scalp as she moaned, and her nipples peaked into diamond shards. His tongue coaxed and seduced her as he demanded more. Dani was powerless to resist him. She burrowed closer to him, pressing herself to his warmth.

His other hand trailed down her spine until he was cupping one of the globes of her ass and dragging her even closer. His cock was hard, and she could hear the deep rumbling of her lover as he rubbed himself against her.

“I see you have returned,” came a deep voice, belonging to a man almost as tall and muscular as Warrick but not nearly as gorgeous. “Ridley Monroe sends his thanks, but that was three months ago. Where have you been? We’ve been looking for you.”

The man eyed her up and down, speculatively, and not with an open and friendly face.

“In order to free Monroe’s drakaina, I was forced to stand and fight and was unable to withstand the forces the slavers brought against me. It has taken this long to secure my freedom.”

“And the wench?”

Warrick growled, and Dani stepped between them. “The ‘wench’ is Detective Danica Morris of the Seattle Police Department. We were after the same group of men. They had Warrick bound in iron manacles and chains and every few days came and cut chunks out of his hide and doused him with seawater. It’s a miracle he still lives. He still isn’t fully recovered.”

The other man sniffed the air. “She isn’t drakaina. You’d best teach her some manners.”

Warrick laughed. “I’d be careful Sobek. She packs a SIG, is an excellent shot, and does not lack for courage. But should you try and test my mate, rest assured I will answer any challenge. Were it not for Dani, I am not sure I would be alive to cross words with you. I was in a pitiful state when she found me and instead of turning away or turning me over to

the authorities, her spirit to protect and serve made her free me and get me medical attention.”

“Warriors of the Phantom Fire do not take mates.”

“No, but we do recognize our eternal flames, and Dani is mine. We have recently begun to examine if the old ways still serve us best. I will not be parted from her.”

“Uh, Warrick, we haven’t discussed this,” she said, moving away.

“We have. You just have yet to admit what we both know,” he growled low, pulling her back against his body. “Fate sent you to me that night. You are my eternal flame, and I’m too damn tired to argue with you about it.”

Another warrior joined them, accompanied by a beautiful and very pregnant blonde. The warrior grasped Warrick by the forearm as Warrick did the same. “Warrick, you are returned to us. Welcome home, brother. We had begun to worry about you.” He turned to Dani. “I am Falkor, and this is my mate, Kessily.”

“You both must be tired. Falkor, why don’t you and Sobek save the interrogation for tomorrow and let Warrick and Dani get settled. We took the liberty of ensuring that your yurt has fresh food and firewood. We’re just getting ready to go for dinner with the others.”

Sobek nodded. “You and your mate are welcome to join the others.” Sobek reached out and grasped Warrick’s arm as Warrick returned the gesture. “Forgive me old friend, my concern for your well-being made my tongue sharp.”

“As I am sure mine would have been were the situation reversed,” answered Warrick, the tension seeming to fall away from his muscular frame.

“Could someone help me get him to his yurt? He was severely injured, and I’m afraid the past few days have been rather exhausting and haven’t given him much time to heal.”

“Of course,” said Sobek. “I would be honored to help my brother. Should I send the healer?”

“No,” grumbled Warrick.

Dani rolled her eyes, making Sobek laugh. “I think that would be good. I don’t know enough about dragon physiology to make a good assessment on my own, and he isn’t much help.”

“I do, and I’m fine.” He tried to shrug off Sobek’s help but couldn’t manage it.

“In case you missed it, your mate does not like to admit he isn’t impervious to pain or injury. He is of the opinion that being immortal means he can never die.”

“Doesn’t it?” Dani asked.

“No. If you cut off his head or cut out his heart, he will die. He will recover from anything else, but that doesn’t mean it won’t take time and healing medicines.”

Sobek began to help her get Warrick up a set of flagstone steps carved into the earth that led to a large yurt overlooking the camp.

“I’ll help you get him into bed and get the central fire lit. Let me have the kitchen send you up food. I’ll send the healer, as well.”

“We’re fine,” growled Warrick. “I am recovering, and I can care for my mate.”

Neither Sobek nor Dani paid him any mind. As they made their way to Warrick’s yurt, Dani was quite sure she heard a young dragon humming Queen’s ‘Another One Bites the Dust.’

CHAPTER 13



WARRICK

Over the next few days, they fell into a companionable and comfortable routine. Spending time with his brethren and seeing how quickly Dani fit in was a relief to him. She and Falkor's mate, Kessily, seemed to hit it off and held similar opinions about many things, although they took different routes to get there.

Warrick had never considered himself possessive, jealous, or territorial, but found he struggled with all three where Dani was concerned. More than one dragon was treated to the sharp side of his tongue for doing nothing more than speaking with his mate.

"It is sometimes difficult to remember that these are your brothers and are no threat to your mate," said Falkor as he walked up to stand beside Warrick, who was glaring at two dragons who were speaking to Dani about her exploits as a cop.

Nodding, Warrick said, "I know, and I trust them with my life. I also know Dani; she would never play me false, but still..."

"The blood boils when another dragon gets too close," Falkor chuckled.

Warrick looked at him. "You never felt that way..."

"Didn't I? The instinct to protect one's eternal flame burns brightly in all of us, none more so than those of us who form the Phantom Fire. I have to remind myself that each of you is my brother and would never betray me. Even more than that,

Kessily has never given me cause to be jealous, although it amuses her to tease me. She likes to remind me that if I seriously believed she would be unfaithful to me that she would wallop me upside my head with a frying pan.”

Warrick laughed out loud. “Your mate would be a formidable opponent.”

“As would yours. At least mine doesn’t carry a loaded firearm. Where does it stand between you?”

“Mostly she ignores the subject, and when I press, she manages to deflect my attention.”

Falkor laughed. “Yes. It is difficult to stay on the subject when they have their lips wrapped around your cock.”

“She makes me crazy,” Warrick admitted. “Even when I know what she’s doing and why, I find I am far more interested in taking her mouth than getting the answer I need.”

“You would not be the first member of this order to transition a female without their consent.”

“But it is frowned upon, and wouldn’t it be an affront to our honor to do so?”

Falkor shrugged. “Drakaina, before or after they transition, can be difficult to bend to your will and will often protest just to hear the sound of their own voices. I’m not saying it should be done without due consideration, but if she is simply being difficult, it is not without precedent.” Falkor clapped him on the shoulder. “It is something to think about.” He waited a moment. “What else troubles you?”

“My oath and my duty...”

“Our ways are changing...”

“For us all? Or only for our leader?”

“Alpha has always been a designation only. The Phantom Fire has always looked at one another as a brotherhood of equals. Besides if we were to bend the rules for anyone it would be for the first warrior, not the alpha or beta. While I was flattered to hear my brothers value my council, it was you who was instrumental in the defeat of the Cherufe.”

“I wouldn’t tell that to your sister.”

Falkor laughed again. “Yes, another formidable drakaina. I suspect your Dani would be no different. She has great courage and fears little.”

“Sometimes to her detriment.”

“It is often that way with our most fierce drakaina. But at least your mate has the skill and training to back that up. Kessily often fails to see that bringing an oral argument—no matter how strong—is not the best weapon in a fight amongst dragons. Give Dani some time.”

“I’m not sure we have it. I don’t believe the cult is the only threat behind all of this. Their knowledge of shifters and of dragons in particular only confirms my belief that there are those who are hidden behind the curtain who are pulling their strings.”

“The Shadow League?”

Warrick nodded. “But I think perhaps something even more. The League has always been a group of ruthless thugs—nuances and subtleties are lost on them. They have been somewhat circumspect. I would have expected them to move against those in Alaska who are gathering their forces.”

“Agreed. I have been in contact with the one they call The Finder. He reached out to Cooper, seeking the assistance of the dragons of Denali if it came to a fight.”

“Dragons have rarely, if ever, fought alongside other shifters.”

“True enough, but Cooper, like you, is convinced there’s more at stake than meets the eye. I think it could be a case of stopping them now as opposed to trying to take them on and whatever is gathering strength behind them.”

“I think he could be right. Dani and I talked about and wondered if the League wasn’t planning to breed some kind of super soldier using my DNA.”

“I wondered about that as well. The taking of cuts of your hide and keeping you weak without killing you makes me

think someone is playing a long game.”

“Agreed. While I would prefer to keep Dani up here at Dragonwyk, I think we need her investigative skills to run down some of the clues the cultists and their backers may have left behind. We may well need to take a more active role in casting them into the light.”

“You will leave us, then? For now?”

“If the order has made the decision to allow a warrior to stay once he has found his eternal flame, then I will not abandon my brothers.”

“I know change is hard for some, but I believe in the end, allowing the Phantom Fire to evolve to better care for those who have performed their duties will serve us all. Remaining the same only for the sake of tradition has often proved to be a clan’s downfall.”

“There is a reason our brotherhood did not want to lose you as our leader.”

“Nor do they wish to lose you. If there’s a fight coming, Warrick, we will need your skills more than ever.”

“Then I will return to the outside world with my mate to see what else we can find and to prepare her to return and take her place at my side.”

“She will insist on fighting with you. I might be able to convince Kessily to remain behind, but I cannot see your Dani being kept from the fight.”

“Nor can I. I would remind you that at the greatest height of the Age of Dragons, many drakaina served as warriors, and as I recall, the original twelve of the Phantom Fire claimed a drakaina as his dam.”

“Something to consider,” said Falkor. “Will you go back to the mill?”

“Perhaps. We weren’t there long enough for them to have tracked us, and its central location and easy access to Seattle make it a good place to consider. Dani had a place she liked to

go outside the city, but they found us pretty quickly, which leads me to believe they had a tracking device on her vehicle.”

“If they know she is important to you...”

Warrick nodded. “That will increase her value as a target, but there are records and information that Dani can get to more easily than we can.”

“She is your mate, and you are the one with the most hands-on information, but I can also send others. If you are not sufficiently healed...”

“I am fully restored. We will leave after the evening meal.”

After they had bid their farewells to those who were at Dragonwyk, Warrick shifted back to his dragon and Dani climbed aboard, rubbing his neck before he took to the skies. It was the first time she had flown among the stars, and he could feel the peace and contentment that flowed down the link from her. For Warrick it wasn't a matter of if Dani would become drakaina; it was only a matter of when.

As there was less chance of being seen, Warrick felt the freedom he usually did under the cover of darkness to fly a more leisurely route and to dance among the stars. Dani had become a skillful dragon rider and showed no fear of either heights or aerobatics. Warrick was sure she would make a dazzling drakaina and a ferocious warrior. He would be proud to fly at her side and even prouder to claim her as his eternal flame.

Flying low over the mill, Warrick made several passes and waited until enough of the sun had claimed the sky that they could ensure no one had found the safe house. Finally, Warrick glided down to the meadow before having Dani dismount so he could shift back. Once again, she threw him just a pair of Levi's.

“Why is it you never seem to toss me a shirt?” he asked, teasingly.

“You're not the only one who likes a good visual,” she quipped.

“You’ve been awfully quiet,” he observed as they walked back toward the mill.

“It’s kind of difficult to hold a conversation when the wind is whipping past you as we fly through the air.”

“But you seemed unwilling to talk while we were at Dragonwyk.”

She nodded slowly. “There’s just a lot to think about and to consider before I even know which questions to ask. Everyone seems to think it’s a foregone conclusion that I will consent to be your eternal flame and give up my humanity. But I’m not sure it’s as easy as that. I understand things are changing and Kessily seems convinced that Falkor can and will drag the Phantom Fire out of the dark ages, but still, you have to admit that drakaina often do not have the autonomy that their male counterparts enjoy.”

“True, but I don’t believe I have ever given you cause to think that you would be subjected to any unreasonable demands.”

Dani laughed. “Yes, but by whose definition of ‘unreasonable?’ I think you and I may have very different ideas about what constitutes ‘unreasonable.’ I don’t know about you, but I’m starving. Any chance there’s more of that beef bourguignon in the freezer?”

He had discovered Dani liked leftovers for breakfast, although she had been very fond of his shakshuka.

“Doubtful, but there should be a frozen Quiche Lorraine in there. We can put it in the oven, light up the firepit and have a cup of coffee while it cooks.”

“Don’t you worry about a fire being spotted?”

“At night?” he said nodding, “most definitely, but I think the risk is minimal during the day and the morning is chilly.”

They worked together to get the coffee ready, and the quiche set to reheat in the oven. They walked to the firepit, and Warrick lit the fire before sitting down next to Dani on the bench.

“I know you think I’ve been ignoring the elephant in the room, so to speak...”

“Haven’t you?” he asked, trying to keep his voice casual and non-accusatory.

“I suppose in some ways I have. It would be too easy to agree up at Dragonwyk. The few things I didn’t like—for example those who serve or work for the brotherhood, not being seen as equals, is bothersome, but the more I observed the more I saw that the disparity isn’t as bad as I first thought. Also, the whole leaving the brotherhood and having to give up a firstborn son...”

“Not to mention giving up one’s immortality...”

“Yes, and when I really grasped that concept, I understood just how much you would be giving up...”

“Not as much as one might think. After several thousand years, immortality becomes more of a burden than a gift. I will tell you now, I would give up all the lifetimes to come if I could spend this one with you.”

“I have so many questions regarding if I did choose to become drakaina and that’s only the tip of the iceberg so to speak. Where would I fit in? You talk about a transition, but no one seems to want to answer that question. How does it work? Is it dangerous? What would happen if I chose to not want to do it? What would happen to our children? Could we even have children if I chose to retain my humanity? Do I even want children? I have a career, Warrick—a career I have given my whole life to. You can’t just expect me to give that up without considering all the ramifications.”

In some ways Dani asking the hard questions gave him hope that he would not have to turn her without her consent, but it left him with questions of his own. Questions that had far longer-reaching consequences than either of them could even consider.

Trying to quell his growing frustration, he said, “I suppose I should be grateful you haven’t rejected the idea outright, but we may not have the luxury of you garnering all the answers

to your questions. And as Falkor pointed out, consent has not always been given for a dragon to claim his mate. More than one female has been brought to heel after waking from her transition.”

“Do you have any idea how pissed I’d be at you?”

Warrick nodded. “Angry and resentful in the beginning, but you would accept it, as you would have no choice and would then come to understand why I did it and be grateful for my conviction that we belong together. Your heart, mind, body, and soul would sing for me, as mine already do for you. Fated mate or eternal flame is not a term we dragons throw about lightly. It is something we see as our destiny. We were literally made for each other. There’s an old, dark, and primitive dragon inside me that sees no need for niceties and would claim you completely without a second thought, but I will keep him at bay for the time being.”

“For the time being? Is that some kind of threat?”

“No. A mere statement of fact. At the end of the day, it boils down to one thing—do you feel for me what I feel for you?”

“That’s just it. I don’t know how you feel. I know you believe me to be your eternal flame, but what does that mean to you?”

Warrick stood and dashed his mug against the rocks, circling the fire pit before he stalked toward the house. How could she not know how he felt? Did he not ravish her and make her spirit soar to new heights? Did he not worship her body with everything within him? He could force her to bend to his will, and yet he had chosen not to. Not yet, that is, but the future was always in motion and there might well come a time when the beast that raged within him would win that battle.

CHAPTER 14



DANICA

Watching his back as he headed back to the mill, she realized the hand that was wrapped around the coffee mug was trembling. Unsure of what she was feeling or even how she should feel, Dani sat staring into the flames. She had asked question after pointed question and he had given her no answers whatsoever. Granted, she hadn't given him a lot of time to talk, but he hadn't even tried. He had yet to answer the question that for her was at the crux of the matter. She'd asked him to declare his feelings, and he had refused to do so—wasn't that in and of itself an answer?

He talked about a beast within that threatened to rage out of control. Was he incapable of understanding he'd awakened a similar beast within her? Did he have any idea how difficult it had been to sit and hear him out without thundering at him with either combativeness or lust? His dominance called to something deep and dark inside her. Something so old, she had forgotten it even existed.

The time at Dragonwyk had answered as many questions as it had raised. She believed she had a better understanding of what it was to be a dragon's eternal flame—more than a lover, more than a soul mate or even a fated mate. The dragons believed that an eternal flame was just that—the one you were destined to be with throughout all your lifetimes. Given that at one point all dragons were immortal that was a commitment. Dani could also see where that could present something of a conundrum if one of you was immortal—if your eternal flame

died, would he or she come back and join you again in the life you lived? Circular thinking. It always gave her a headache.

Putting Warrick, his ill temper and his unanswered questions aside, she considered her own needs and desires. No, better not to look at desire. Desire led to one conclusion and one conclusion only—Warrick. Dani had never been so drawn to another human being in all her life. But what about what she'd worked for? What she'd planned for herself? Her lieutenant had indicated there was a promotion in the offing.

She was already a detective gold shield. Her next stop should be lieutenant, then captain, then assistant chief, then chief, and maybe someday commissioner. She'd worked hard to be noticed and to fast track her career, and he just seemed to think she should walk away from her life's work. And she did mean life. Dani was pretty sure her first cognizant thought was to become a cop. It was all she'd ever wanted.

It wasn't just about being a cop—she wanted to be an instrument of change, an instrument for justice, and an instrument for good. She wanted the bad guys caught and punished. She wanted people to be able to walk the streets without fearing for their lives or at least their safety. She worried about all the women the slavers had taken and either killed or worse. Human trafficking and the sex trade weren't something most departments wanted to acknowledge as a problem, but statistics didn't lie. If anything, they were probably understated as a great many cases were never reported.

But couldn't she accomplish those goals as a drakaina?

Warrick seemed to think she should just walk away. She would give up everything to be with him, including her humanity. And what would he lose? *His immortality* whispered a little voice inside her head. As much as he talked about it being a burden, the fact remained he had lived for thousands of years; he had sacrificed as much for that as she had for being a cop and yet he was willing to let it go for her.

Setting the mug down with unsteady hands, Dani massaged her temples. Her head hurt. She picked her coffee

back up and stared across the rim at the water passing by. The problem really boiled down to one thing—was Warrick worth giving it all up for? Her pragmatic side reared its ugly head, reminding her that it didn't have to be an either/or decision. She could choose to spend her life with him and still go after the bad guys.

Dani sat, searching for an inner peace that seemed increasingly elusive. She had a lot to consider. It would have been easier if he'd made some declaration of undying love, but maybe he just didn't have the words to do that. He talked about a bonding link and about how bonded couples could often feel what the other could not say. She shook her head; she hadn't exactly been forthcoming in that department, either.

She didn't have any answers, but as she reached out across the link, she could feel his anguish. Her inability or unwillingness to offer herself to him body and soul had wounded him far more gravely than the slavers. She realized the clarity she'd always had about wanting and needing to be a cop had been replaced with another need just as profound. She needed Warrick—every bit as much as he needed her.

As she walked inside, she could hear the shower running. She couldn't offer him everything he wanted, but she could give him all that she had to offer. Removing her clothes, she moved into the bath where steam encompassed the shower stall. He'd removed the bloody bandages, which showed less and less blood each day. He had fresh ones waiting and seemed to have given up on the idea that she wasn't going to see the wounds cleaned and dressed each day.

The steam hid most of the beauty of his powerful body, but she could still make out the outline through the steamed-up glass. He wasn't moving—just standing with his hand over his head and his forehead leaning against the cool tile. Seeing defeat in the set of his shoulders, her heart ached for him. It might not be all that he wanted, but she could let him know he wasn't alone.

Dani opened the door and stepped in, putting out her hand to stroke his powerful back. She loved running her hands over him—regardless of which form he had taken. She loved how

his skin quivered, and she could feel the muscle and bone beneath it. He lifted his head, his dark eyes locking with hers.

“You don’t have to do this, Dani,” he said as he turned toward her, his cock fully engorged and pointed at her like a compass points to true north.

“Yes,” she said, “I do.”

She sank gracefully to her knees in front of him as he watched her, his breath losing its calm rhythm. So far, he had always been the instigator, always been the giver of pleasure; it was her turn. She was naked and on her knees in front of a man who might be considered a living god and Dani had never felt more right about anything in her whole life.

Gently, she wrapped her hand around his proud member, pumping it lightly and reveling in the sound of his groan. She wanted to make him moan and sigh the way he made her. She wanted to worship his body the way he did hers. She tickled her fingertips all along his dick before leaning forward and swiping her tongue across the tip.

“Don’t play with me, Dani.”

“Whyever not? You play with me all the time. And while I might play with your body, I will never toy with your feelings.” She needed him to know that sex didn’t always have to be so serious, but could be lighthearted and fun and still offer him the intimacy he seemed to crave.

His fingers sank into her hair, winding the wet, silky strands around his hand as he held her still and began to pump gently into her mouth. She smiled and hummed along his length. He might be willing to let her initiate, but it seemed her dragon craved control as much as closeness.

Dani sucked on the head of his cock, swirling her tongue all around it as it pulsed. With her head locked into place and her mouth providing him with some pleasure, her hands moved to the globes of his ass and squeezed. She fought him for the depth he could stroke her mouth, taking him deeper than he’d planned. She wanted to swallow him down and make him give up his seed inside the warmth of her mouth.

She sucked hard and fought him for control so that she could pull almost all the way off him, her teeth grazing him lightly.

The next time she managed to draw back, he let himself come out of her mouth, pulling her up into his arms—his cock throbbing between their bodies as her entire system lit up like fireworks on the Fourth of July, wildly colored, exploding all around her.

“I won’t settle for being your companion or your partner. I want you to be my lover—the one person I can depend on to be my better half. I’ve never wanted that from anyone before. I’d given up all hope that you even existed much less that I’d ever find you.”

“I want that too. I don’t want to lose you. I just don’t think it has to be an either/or kind of situation. Kessily says things are changing, but I know there’s resistance to that and not just within the Phantom Fire itself. I want you in a way I didn’t even know I was capable of.”

“I love you, Dani. I think I’ve loved you from the moment I first opened my eyes and saw you standing there in that dank basement.”

“You love me?”

“Of course, I do,” he growled. “Why the hell do you think I’m fighting every primitive instinct I have that says just force the issue. I have forgotten more of my life than I remember. I am held out as the shining example of what a great warrior should be, sacrificing everything to serve the Phantom Fire and I am willing to give up my immortality, but don’t ask me to walk away from my duty, not when I know there’s trouble coming.”

“You really love me?” she asked him, knowing she sounded a bit feeble-minded.

He chuckled deeply. “Look at the evidence, Detective Morris. It’s the only logical conclusion you can come to. You are my mate, and you will take your vows to me. What our life looks like after that, I am willing to be reasonable, but I won’t

settle for anything less than your surrender to me and my authority.”

“And if I say no?” she teased, beginning to believe that perhaps everything would be all right.

“I am well-trained in the arts of torture and persuasion. Trust me, you will say yes,” he said towering over her, his full, lush lips hovering above hers. His lips found her face and he trailed kisses all over it, kissing her mouth, her forehead, and each eye. He rubbed his cheek along each of hers before kissing them.

He kissed his way along her jaw and down her throat until his tongue swirled around each nipple before sucking it into his mouth and nipping it gently, making heat flare out from the site and making her whole body flush with pleasure as her pussy softened and ripened for him. The hot water beat along her back, but she barely registered it as he spread liquid fire all over her breasts and nipples.

Warrick kissed his way back up her body, capturing her mouth with his as he lifted her up, sliding her back along the tile before stepping between her legs and lowering her onto his hard cock, impaling her as she gasped and wrapped her legs around his waist. He was a snug fit, filling her to capacity and then some. As he lifted her up and lowered her down, her nipples grazed his chest, and she moaned.

Grinding against her, his groin rubbed against her clit. Over and over, he thrust up hard, pulling her down as he did so before lifting her back up.

“Mine,” he growled—her dragon lover was a possessive sonofabitch.

Warrick slammed into her repeatedly—his cock hitting that perfect spot that no other man had been able to find before. Her pussy clamped down, spasming all along his cock as her orgasm swept over her—swamping her system with endorphins as pleasure raced like wild fire through her veins. She contracted her vaginal muscles, coaxing him to give up his cum. His head fell forward, burrowing into her neck as he

thrust up a last time, his arms tightening around her as his heated seed flooded her womb.

“Can you not commit yourself to me?” he crooned in her ear.

“I can only tell you what’s in my head. I can commit my body and my spirit to you, but my heart is another matter, and I need more time.”

She could feel the flow of warmth between them shut down as effectively as if he’d turned the shower to cold.

“But what if time has caught us up, and there is no more time for you to straddle the fence. Search your feelings, Dani. Surrender to me. Become one with me in all ways.”

She could not give him the answer he wanted so fastened her lips to him, letting him feel what was within her heart. He clasped his hands under her ass and carried her out to the bed, where he spent the rest of the afternoon making good on his threat to torture her with pleasure.

Spent and sated, they fell asleep in each other’s arms.

CHAPTER 15



WARRICK

Dani was stubborn. Perhaps more stubborn than anyone he had ever known and given the enormity of his lifespan, that was saying a lot. The only creature he knew who was even more stubborn, proud, and resolved was himself. She might not be willing to concede defeat, but he'd felt it in every moan, sigh, and shudder of her body when he'd made love to her. Sobek had suggested that perhaps he should simply force the issue and claim her despite her protests. Falkor had suggested that was a good way to get shot. Warrick was inclined to agree with Falkor.

He could feel his cock tightening as his body readied itself to go another round with her. He doubted he would ever have enough of her. He only wished there was a way to give her immortality, as well. He would trade any offspring that they might have and all the riches in the world if he could just have her forever.

Perhaps it was knowing that nothing was more important to him than being with her, glorying in her response to him, and knowing that only she could take him to the dizzying heights of passion where they flew free of all earthly restraints. He'd never known such wild and abandoned lovemaking as he had with her—it ran the spectrum from slow, deep, and meaningful to seeing how many times he could make her climax before he came himself—each and every time was better than the last.

The snap of a twig outside the window was all the hint he had that they were no longer alone. The doors to the mill from

the front and the side burst open, and hordes of cult members poured in, flooding their space with their foul stench. Warrick barely had time to even register the danger, much less react when the bed was drenched in seawater, taking his breath away as chains of iron were flung across the bed, rendering his ability to shift moot. The seawater he could have dealt with as he was in his human form, but now being held in place it began to seep into his pores, causing him excruciating pain.

Two of the more lethal-looking cult members seized Dani, one wrapping her hair around his fist while the other grabbed her thighs as they yanked her from the bed. A third member of their troop bound her hands behind her back while another wrapped high-tensile wire around her legs.

“Don’t struggle against the wire. It will only cut you to ribbons if you do,” he managed to get out before a cult member wielding a butcher knife sliced into his shoulder.

As part of the group dragged her out the door, cursing and screaming at them, the others attacked him with all manner of sharp, pointy objects—spikes, nails, knives, and the like. This time they weren’t taking samples—they were looking to let blood and kill him. It was a gruesome, messy way to die, and he vowed not to give them the satisfaction.

“Die, you mutant beast,” one of them snarled.

“I see you,” Warrick rasped. “No matter who else gets hurt, no matter who else dies, I will find you and kill you, dragging my talon across your windpipe, reaching into your chest to rip your heart out and incinerating you until there is nothing but ash.”

The man stumbled back, his false bravado fleeing in the wake of Warrick’s vow.

“Don’t worry about him. He’s a goner. It’ll give the cops something to worry about. We’ve got the girl. The buyer is willing to pay a premium for her.”

Warrick struggled in vain and bellowed in pain as they doused him again with the seawater, which now had open wounds to use to maximize his pain. Between the iron chains,

the seawater and his sudden blood loss, Warrick was unable to move and could only hear Dani's muffled screams as they tossed her into a white van before scrambling in behind her and driving off.

How had they found them? The mill had been off the grid for years. Few people, if any, outside the Phantom Fire knew of its existence, and no one save Sobek and Falkor had known he and Dani would be here.

The other question that had plagued him from his first bout with captivity was how they had known he was a dragon and how to render him powerless. The argument could be made that when he shifted to give Monroe's drakaina time to escape the slavers, he had shifted, and the slavers had been confronted with a fire-breathing dragon. The problem with that was they'd been ready for him. Dani had wondered if the drakaina had been the real target of the slavers or if they had been bait to lure Warrick away from Dragonwyk, where they might have stood a chance to enslave him.

None of that mattered. All that mattered now was finding Dani and saving her. So much for the idea of her remaining human. She would be drakaina, and they would fly into whatever battles they faced as a united and bonded couple.

That was all fine and good, but before he could do any of that, he had to rescue himself or at least get himself in a position to get word to his brethren. Fighting off the dizzying blackness of unconsciousness, Warrick managed to roll off the bed, hitting the hardwood floor with a decided thump. The wood was slick with his blood, but he was free of the chains as well as the seawater-soaked bedding.

Painfully, Warrick dragged himself across the floor, clawing at the wood with his bare hands until he reached the hearth. From there he managed to loosen one of the large river rocks that formed it and withdrew an emergency beacon that had been planted for just this sort of scenario.

If he succumbed to his injuries, which was a definite possibility, he would demand that Falkor extend to Dani the same rights and benefits she would have had if they had

already taken their vows. His eternal flame would be taken care of—either by him or his brothers.

With the last of his strength, Warrick activated the beacon and prayed the Phantom Fire could respond quickly enough to rescue Dani.



DANICA

“What did you do to him?” she shouted, kicking at them and landing the occasional hard blow to a vital part and making them keep their distance.

They’d tied her tightly to a pole in the basement of a building. Unfortunately, they had to cut the razor wire in order to move her inside and weren’t able to secure her legs a second time. So, she was able to use them in her defense. They had also been unable to fix her position on the pole so she could move around in a complete circle and rise up and down the pole, making it difficult for them to get to her.

Fuck! Fuck! Fuck! She couldn’t feel Warrick. A part of her wanted to give in to panic and hopelessness, damning herself for her inability to commit. If she had done so, they most likely would be safe and secure up at Dragonwyk.

No! She refused to give into despair at the idea of Warrick being dead. None of their attackers had been wielding a sword, which greatly lessened their ability to sever his head or rip his heart out of his chest. No. Her pragmatism had gotten them into this mess, and it was damn sure going to get them out. She would find a way to escape these bastards and get to Warrick, but how? She had no idea where the mill was other than in the mountains by a stream and she had no way to contact the Phantom Fire—or did she?

Hadn’t Warrick said that the drakaina they had saved belonged to the clan of Ridley Monroe? But she couldn’t simply call him up and say, ‘hello. I know you’re a dragon. My eternal flame and I saved two of your drakaina. Might you

help me save him?’ Yeah, that wasn’t going to fly. She likely wouldn’t get past his receptionist.

Didn’t she remember Monroe had gotten married last year to some fancy schmancy pastry chef who was now the toast of the Pacific Northwest? Wildest Dreams—that’s what her bakery was called. The pastry chef might be easier to run down and get a face-to-face with. Surely, she would understand Dani’s need to get to the Phantom Fire. Didn’t Monroe’s clan owe him that much?

Okay, she now had a clear plan as to what to do once she was free. She just had to figure out how to escape. If only she’d embraced the idea of becoming drakaina. If she hadn’t been so bloody stubborn, she could have shifted and toasted these bastards, gone back for Warrick, and saved the day—not really, but she could have at least escaped and gotten herself to Wildest Dreams, Eden Monroe’s bakery.

But none of that had happened and chiding herself now would do little to help her. Deep breath, calm your nerves, and do what you’ve been taught to do—observe. The concrete floors made sneaking up on someone without being heard difficult if not impossible. Dani focused on what she could see in front of her. She seemed to be in a room within a much larger space. There was a door to a hallway just outside the door where she could see cult members and thugs coming and going, occasionally dragging a girl down the hallway and up a flight of stairs.

On occasion, one of the thugs approached her with a look that said he meant her harm and Dani readied herself to inflict as much damage as possible. She was able to grasp the pole behind her, bringing up both feet to kick out. After she sent the third one staggering back, clutching his middle, they left her alone. That in and of itself was worrisome. What were they waiting for? Muttering amongst themselves, Dani realized it wasn’t so much ‘what’ they were waiting for, but ‘who.’ It seemed someone wanted to deal with her personally.

Dani was no fool, she doubted there would be any polite questions and she was fairly certain that their idea of torture did not reconcile well with Warrick’s. She’d lost time as to

how long she'd been tied here. How had Warrick survived months of being unable to move, with people cutting him and dousing him with toxic substances. Her mate—her eternal flame—was a warrior to be much admired. He had never given up, and when the opportunity had presented itself to him to escape, he had taken it.

The occasional scream or the sound of feminine pleading kept her from lapsing into complete unconsciousness. When she dozed, she dreamed of having the opportunity to see Warrick again and to tell him what a fool she had been. If he asked her to speak of her heart and her commitment to him, she would tell him that she now knew without a shadow of a doubt he was the one—her Terabithia, her magic wardrobe, her eternal flame.

Even though she could not feel him on the other end of the link, she prayed that he would know her heart and hang on long enough for them to find their way back to one another. She could feel the exhaustion and fear surrounding her like a shroud. She could find no way to free herself and get help for Warrick and given the amount of blood he had to be losing, he had to be past the point of saving. If he could be saved, he would have no way to find her.

The last remnants of hope flickered ever so softly, not much more than a small spark. If Warrick was dead, then she would join him in the afterlife. Perhaps this was all they would have in this lifetime—an intense and contained wildfire to be snuffed out so that they could burn bright together in the afterlife.

CHAPTER 16



WARRICK

“Warrick! Warrick! Wake up!”

Falkor’s voice broke through the fog that had surrounded him and dropped like a shroud as soon as he’d activated the beacon. He raised his head.

“There you go. Where’s Dani?” Falkor asked.

“They took her,” Warrick said, trying to rise.

“Who?”

“Members of the cult. They found us somehow. They broke in. I was so busy with Dani, I let my guard down.”

“Easy to understand. When one finds his eternal flame, she tends to take precedence over everything else.”

Falkor had brought the healer, Zahran, who was treating the superficial wounds from the seawater. “We need to get you back to Dragonwyk.”

“No,” Warrick growled, making Zahran step back. “I don’t think Dani has that kind of time. They weren’t after me; Dani was the target.”

“What makes you think that?” Falkor glanced at the bed as he sniffed the air. “Saltwater and iron. They knew what they were doing.”

“Yes,” said Warrick nodding. “But they didn’t even bind me. They burst in, immobilized me, and snatched Dani. Dani was their target. They hate her. They know she’s a cop and that she’s responsible for bringing them down.”

“That makes some sense. Any idea where they’d take her? Can you feel her along the link?”

“Faintly, but not enough to track. They couldn’t have gone far. They had a van most likely with Washington plates.”

“Any idea of the number?” asked Falkor.

“None,” Warrick said getting to his feet. “Their best bets for shipping human cargo out of the Pacific Northwest are Portland and Seattle. They were set up in Seattle, and it’s closer.”

“They could go north up into Canada,” suggested Falkor who was watching him carefully.

Warrick shook his head. “Doubtful. The actual cult members don’t have the brain cells between them to figure out how to cross the border without being arrested. Dani had come to the conclusion even before I got involved that these guys were dupes and someone else was pulling the strings.”

“You think it’s the League?” asked Falkor.

“That makes the most sense. After they couldn’t find the right concoction of drugs to force me to breed females for them, they started taking my DNA. At first, I figured the cuts were just so the seawater would be more painful. Dani was the one who thought of DNA.”

“You think they were going to try and clone you?” asked Falkor incredulously.

Warrick nodded. “It’s what makes the most sense. If they didn’t think I could be of some use to them, it would have been far easier to take my head and then drop me in my dragon form far out at sea...”

“Where the seawater would disintegrate your body,” Falkor finished. “I get trying to use you as a breeder. That’s not a novel idea and has been tried in the past.”

“But the DNA could provide them with an alternative,” said Zahran. “If they could successfully clone Warrick, they could create their own super soldiers. There have been rumors about a group working with the Shadow League...”

“To what end?” asked Falkor.

“World domination, but the Shadow League is made up of thugs. Smarter than the cultists for sure, but they don’t have the intelligence or resources for any kind of cloning project.”

“But what if...” Zahran started and then stopped.

“Speak,” commanded Falkor.

“What if humans are behind it? What if some group has discovered the secret of shifters and more specifically dragon-shifters? What if they want to create an unstoppable force in order to rule over shifters and humans alike?”

The logic behind Zahran’s words, combined with the latest medical advances, made the possibilities endless and terrifying, but right now Warrick just wanted Dani safe.

The effects of the seawater and iron were beginning to fade. Warrick cast aside his concern for his mate and began to try and establish the link. Although at any kind of distance and with Dani both human and unwilling to commit herself, the tether had been tenuous at best.

Dani. He reached out with every fiber of his being—heart, soul, and mind. *Dani.*

Warrick? Is it really you? Are you alive?

Even dragons cannot reach beyond the veil that separates the living from the dead.

A simple yes would have done.

“Can you feel her?” Falkor said quietly so as to not interrupt Warrick’s fragile connection to his mate.

Warrick nodded. *Where are you?*

Seattle, I think, but not in the city. It’s too quiet. And we’re close to the sea. It’s some kind of abandoned building. I’m so tired.

Rest, my love, but don’t sleep—focus on me. We are coming. Stay alive and awake and we will find you.

“You can direct us from here,” said Falkor. “You’re still weak.”

“She is my eternal flame. If I had claimed her, the link might have been strong enough. You’ll never find her without me. Darkness approaches. We will use it to our advantage.”

“I can’t stop you?”

“Could any power on earth have kept you from Kessily?”

“None. Then we fly together.”

Warrick nodded and made his way outside, calling forth his dragon and lifting off from the earth before the maelstrom had fully dissipated. He would allow his brothers to keep him safe and away from prying eyes. All of his energy and strength would be on finding Dani and taking her to safety.

He flew low to the ground, hugging the river and keeping an eye on the road they must have taken. Mile after mile, he felt his energy and power returning as his fix on Dani’s location began to consolidate and strengthen. The night descended as the moon and stars rose to guide their way. Dani was exhausted but continued to reach out to him.

They flew towards Seattle, banking north, but almost immediately, Warrick felt compelled to head south of the city toward the Olympic Peninsula where the Olympic Mountains almost tumbled into the sea. There were many abandoned ports and towns along the desolate coastline. The craggy cliffs gave them excellent cover, as did the scarcity of populated areas.

The small squadron of dragons crossed the tip of the peninsula between Neah and Callam Bays, flying south along the shoreline, close enough to the water that one wrong move, one beat of a wing, could cause grievous injury from the saltwater. But the currents in the night sky were blowing their way, giving them a tailwind to help them along.

Warrick reached out along the tether again, scenting the air as he did so. Had stealth not been among their greatest assets, he would have roared with joy, lighting up the night sky with a stream of fire. Falkor bumped him wing-to-wing, indicating an

abandoned coastal town with a warehouse building sitting right on the dock. Dani and her detective's eye for detail had led them to where they were holding her. Of that, he was sure.

A single freighter and two smaller boats were tied up at the dock. Falkor led them to a place hidden above the harbor at the top of a precipice that overlooked the abandoned town—abandoned by all but the cultists and their masters.

Landing as a unit, Falkor sent out scouts to ensure there would be no witnesses. He then turned to Warrick. “Do we have any idea how many of them there are?”

“Dani had said that while the cult itself numbered close to a hundred, those involved in the trafficking numbered less than half that. Keep in mind many of the women who joined the cult often found themselves victims and sold into slavery. We need to have some of our men shift and ensure we can isolate the victims away from their captors and see what it is we must do.”

Falkor nodded. “We'll check the boats first and then move into the warehouse. Wait for my signal and then move in. We'll let you know where we are. Raze this place to the ground. I want whoever is behind this to know they have made an enemy of the Phantom Fire.”

Normally, it would have been Warrick who led the smaller raiding party in their human form, but he knew Falkor was aware he was still feeling the effects of the attack on him and Dani. He waited as Falkor and several others shifted and changed into black clothing and picked up the automatic weaponry they had brought with them.

Only a dragon's superior night vision could observe as the shifted unit of the Phantom Fire moved like wraiths through the darkness, ensuring that the boats contained no slaves and killing only those slavers they needed to. It wasn't that any would survive this night, it was that they didn't want anyone to raise the alarm before they had ensured all the victims had been secured.

The next half hour seemed to be the longest period of his life. The only thing that allowed him to wait for his brothers to

do their job was the knowledge that Dani was close, was alive and knew he was near. The other consolation was that he would be the one that led the unit that would destroy the slavers and put a serious dent in their operation, if not cut it down completely.

It seemed like forever before he saw the spark in the window at the lower quadrant of the lowest floor.

The four remaining dragons looked at him. “Two of you take out the boats and then the docks. Nothing is to remain. The rest of us will focus on the building, destroying everything but the ground level. We will converge outside and storm the remaining level. Look for an entrance into a basement, I want to ensure we have them and anything we can use to figure out who and what is behind this.

“And the victims?”

“Leave the transport vehicles. We’ll get them loaded in there and take them to a safe spot and have Dani call the authorities.”

“Won’t they want some kind of statement from her?”

“Probably, and they will have it once I know she is safe, and we have something to tell them that doesn’t endanger our own people.” He smiled. “Dani will know how to handle it. My mate is quite adept at giving and receiving information. She will not betray us.”

“No, brother,” said Zahran. “She is one of us in heart and spirit if not body.”

The remaining dragons galloped toward the edge of the precipice and dove off, allowing the wind currents and speed from their descent to propel them up—two banking toward the ships and the other three forming an attack vector and zeroing in on their target. Giving each other space, the dragons began breathing fire in a terrible firestorm of destruction.

Over and over, they swooped down, destroying the building, ships, and dock, level by level. The saving grace for the slavers caught in the web of fire and death was that their brains did not have the capacity to even process their danger

before they ceased to function. Layer after layer of concrete, metal, and building materials were burned to a crisp as they crumbled and fell.

A few slavers were able to flee from the building but the dragon to Warrick's left split off and rendered them ash before they could make it anywhere close to the transport vehicles. The air all around them was filled with sparks, smoke, and the smell of their enemies' defeat. Not since their fight with the Cherufe had the Phantom Fire unleashed the level of death and destruction it had this night.

The five members of the Phantom Fire landed, shifted to their human forms, and changed into the clothing left behind by the advance guard before moving into the building and killing those slavers and cult members still alive. When they found a stairwell down to a lower level, Warrick sent three of those with him to scout below as he and Zahran continued to sweep the ground level as they moved closer and closer to the part of the building held by Falkor and the others.

Finally, they entered the room in which Dani and the others were huddled together behind the members of the rescue team who had secured the area. Dani broke free and charged him, throwing herself into his arms and kissing him with abandoned intensity.

"I thought you were dead. How did you find me?" she managed between kisses.

Fisting her hair, he tugged her head back. "You should have known not even death would keep me from your side. The link, though not as strong as it would have been if I had fully claimed you, was strong enough to lead me to you."

"The slavers? They have something on a downstairs level. Several of the girls were there. They said it was like a combination of a medieval torture chamber and a high-tech lab."

Falkor looked at Zahran. "Go. Salvage what you can. Make sure it is empty and then return to us. We'll start moving the victims into transport vehicles." His gaze moved back to

Warrick and Dani. “We’ll get them moving and on the way. Any idea where we should take them?”

“The Olympic Medical System is the closest hospital and should be able to handle them,” offered Dani.

“Look,” said a woman, stepping forward, “I don’t know who you people are, and frankly, I don’t care. What I do know is that you saved us. I drive transport for that hospital, as does one of the other girls. We can get everyone back to safety and let you do whatever it is you need to do.”

“I’m Detective Danica Morris of the Seattle Police Department.” She handed the woman her card. “Call my precinct and ask to speak to someone with the task force working to bring down the Servants of the Winged Serpents.”

“Won’t you be with us?” asked one of the other victims.

“No. I have things to finish up. Let the lieutenant know I’m in good hands and will be in touch.”

Falkor and the others helped the women outside. No need for them to see anything more of the men who had rescued them than they needed to. As the mostly female victims were led out to the transport vehicles, Zahran joined them.

“The slavers were only the tip of the iceberg. What’s beneath the surface is far, far worse.”

CHAPTER 17



DANICA

She had felt his presence long before they had arrived. At first, she'd thought she was just becoming delusional—or maybe she was dying. But as the feeling increased and she could feel him sharing his strength and his reassurance with her, the small spark that had remained of her hope began to flicker more brightly. And when the tanks on the boats had begun to explode and she saw Falkor and some of the others moving victims out of harm's way she knew that although she might not be immortal, today was not her day to die.

As soon as Falkor was close, she asked, "He lives?"

"He does and wants nothing more than to take you in his arms." He moved swiftly to her and cut her loose, catching her before she had a chance to crumble to the ground.

"I'm fine. Help the others. There's a lower level."

Falkor nodded. "They're going to sweep the area when they've destroyed what they can. We've got all of the girls in here and will hold the slavers off until they are defeated."

"You do mean dead, right? Because I want them dead."

"You're a blood-thirsty little human, I'll give you that," he said with a grin.

They could hear automatic gunfire here and there, and she could feel Warrick's presence growing stronger and stronger. When the door to the large room they were in opened, she

spotted him and rushed across the room, throwing herself into his arms with reckless abandon.

“I thought you were dead. How did you find me?” she managed between kisses.

Fisting her hair, he tugged her head back, gazing into her eyes as if trying to discern the extent of any injuries. “You should have known not even death would keep me from your side. The link, though not as strong as it would have been if I had fully claimed you, was strong enough to lead me to you.”

She didn’t care about how he’d found her or the state of the bond that already existed between them. All she cared about was his mouth claiming hers in a savage kiss that she returned with the same intensity and passion. As he kissed her with a ferocity that left her breathless, he ran his hands all over her body to ensure she wasn’t too badly hurt.

They made arrangements for the women to be transported to the closest medical center and Dani gave several of them her card so they would know who to contact at the Seattle Police Department.

“Once they’ve finished on the lower level, we will return to Dragonwyk,” stated Warrick in a tone that brooked no room for argument.

“I suppose my telling you I should return to Seattle and file a report would fall on deaf ears.”

“It would indeed. Once we are home and Zahran says you are recovered, you can contact your lieutenant, but you will remain at Dragonwyk.”

Once the other women had been led outside, Zahran joined them, holding a leather-bound book. “The slavers were only the tip of the iceberg. What’s beneath the surface is far, far worse.”

“I find that hard to believe... What is that?” Dani asked, pointing to the book he held.

“A book of knowledge—of secret knowledge kept from a time when dragons ruled the skies. Just glancing through it, I see a number of sections about a great many shifters—mostly

the apex predators—and their weaknesses and how to defeat them. There are also ancient spells.”

Warrick shook his head. “Those books or books reported to have great power have been around for thousands of years. If it fell into the hands of humans and wasn’t written off as a hoax, it might be something to concern us...”

“You don’t understand, Warrick,” said Zahran. “Obviously, I haven’t had a chance to make an extensive study of it, but what I had a chance to look at is authentic and, not only that, accurate. There is a great deal of detail, going so far in some species as to list clans and their territories.”

“But how accurate can it be?” asked Dani. “I mean if it’s that old...”

“Some clans still occupy their original territories. Some have had offshoots from their clans, but many have remained basically in one place for centuries or longer,” explained Warrick.

“And that’s not the worst of it,” said Zahran. “There’s a lab down there that would rival those of the World Health Organization and the Center for Disease Control. Only it’s more like the laboratory of some mad scientist. I think you may be right. I think they were trying to devise a way to clone not just dragons but the other, more ancient species—the cave lions and cave bears. Some of their failed experiments are preserved in glass containers. It’s horrific.”

“We have to destroy it,” whispered Dani.

“We will,” said Zahran. “I have the others taking hard drives and anything else we can carry back to Dragonwyk. There’s no way your cultists are responsible for this, and I find the idea of the Shadow League being behind it hard to believe as well. The Shadow Leagues are muscle, not brain. There is a kind of evil genius that is pursuing this. Something or someone who has figured out that shifters exist and that they can be weaponized.”

“Weaponized?” asked Dani.

“You think it’s a human?” asked Warrick.

“I do. It makes the most sense. Even if we acknowledge that there are shifters who would prefer to bring about the downfall of man, this kind of horrific kind of experimentation would be unthinkable. If for no other reason than shifter species, all of them, have never looked kindly on pairings between different species.”

“But humans are okay?” asked Dani.

“Yes, because they are seen as inferior,” explained Warrick. “There are those who think we would be elevating humankind—which to some is unthinkable—and there are others who see humans as decidedly inferior and worthy only of serving shifters.”

Dani stared between the two men. “You do know as fucked up as we are and as much as we fight among ourselves, humans wouldn’t just roll over and accept being enslaved, right?”

“Wouldn’t they? Especially if they thought they could rule supreme? Your history indicates an acceptance of depravity if it means garnering power for the right people.”

Dani started to deny his claims, but realized human history was littered with power-hungry dictators who would send the world up in flames if it meant they would come out on top. “I hate to admit it, but you might not be wrong.”

“If someone like that found out about shifters—specifically those of us who are truly ancient—and could figure out how to harness that power or better yet, create a new line of warriors bent on the destruction and subjugation of humans and shifters alike, they would be unstoppable,” said Zahran.

“And if they could take control of the Shadow League, they’d have their interim bully boys to help bring about their amoral vision. He’d have to be clever and an excellent strategist, but I think whoever it is has proven to be just that.”

“What do you mean?” Dani asked, feeling completely out of her depth.

“It would seem that he or she has already set up a fairly sophisticated network and has, if we’re right, taken over the Shadow League under the nose of the Ruling Council.”

“I think we have time,” said Zahran, “but if he or she is working with geneticists and others, stopping them would appear to be the destiny of the Phantom Fire. Like the Cherufe, whoever this person is needs to be found and destroyed once and for all.”

“Gather what you can. As soon as the transport vehicles are out of range, we will raze this place and then return to Dragonwyk.”

Zahran nodded and then went to find the others.

“This is bad, isn’t it? Even worse than I thought,” said Dani.

Warrick nodded. “But at least we know what we’re dealing with, if not who. It may be that the other shifters focus on stopping the League, but we need to focus on finding out who is truly behind all this and deal with whoever that proves to be. We know how they plan to move, and we can begin to move against them. There is already a growing resistance to the Shadow League and their plans. The League is too stupid to see that they are only tools—a means to whatever is the true end game. We will not let whoever it is plunge the earth and all its creatures into darkness.”

“It wouldn’t do any good for me to return to Seattle and start trying to spread the word, would it?”

“I’m afraid not. At best they’d label you as mad and ignore your warnings. At worst those who plot against us would see you as a threat and seek to kill you. You are safer at Dragonwyk.”

Dani shivered and wrapped her arms around Warrick, who immediately enfolded her in his embrace. “I suppose I should want to be with you because I would be safer.”

“I’m not going to argue with you, Dani. I will have my way in this. I will keep you safe regardless of your thoughts on the matter.”

“Damn, but you’re sexy when you go all protective alpha dragon. And while my safety should be what I’m thinking about, it isn’t. I want to be with you—regardless of what happens or for however long the fates may grant us. I want to be with you.”

The softness in his eyes was something she would always remember. “Then let us return home.”

Falkor joined them. “They had stockpiled explosives down in their den of horrors. I think we level the building and then set them off. There needs to be no trace of what we discovered.”

“The girls will tell the cops...” started Dani.

“They will tell the police only that a group of men worked to free them and that the building and ships were here. There will be nothing left to tell the tale of what transpired.”

Falkor nodded and they began to pack up what they could to take back to Dragonwyk.

As the dragons shifted from man to beast, Dani approached Falkor. “He’s still weak, maybe it would be best if someone else carried me.”

Falkor laughed as Warrick roared into the night sky and blew a stream of flame between where she and Falkor stood. “I believe your mate objects to the idea of another dragon carrying you. He is recovered enough, and if not we will lend our strength to him. Arrogance aside, he will not let you fall.”

Warrick growled again and Dani headed back to him, muttering about dragons and their penchant for foolish pride. Once she had climbed aboard, Warrick galloped forward, beating his great wings and taking off into the night sky.

She chided herself for how blasé she had become about riding on a dragon through the clouds and stars, lit by the full, silvery moon. She was beginning to recognize certain landmarks, not that she could name them, but by their shape and proximity to Dragonwyk. Having realized she was as safe, if not safer, flying on Warrick’s back than in a plane, she could now watch the other dragons fly as they caught the shifting

currents of the sky and glided through the air with a beauty and grace that took her breath away. What would it be like to be one of them?

Once they landed at Dragonwyk, Falkor sent word that the brotherhood would meet en masse in the dining hall in the morning.

“My apologies that you won’t be able to revel and recuperate in the morning, but we will need to know everything both of you saw. I can give you the night, and I’ll have food brought to you. Zahran can attend to both of you.”

“My wounds are well on the way to being healed, and I am grateful for the night and to get my mate settled,” said Warrick, leading Dani back to what she was rapidly beginning to think of as her home.

“I’m fine, as well. They banged me up but didn’t break anything. I’m mostly tired, hungry, and in need of my mate’s attention.”

Warrick lifted her hand to his lips. “Which you shall have.”

Wrapping their arms around one another they walked to their yurt. Once inside he pushed her toward the shower. “Go stand under the hot water while I draw you a bath in front of the fire. I have some herbal balms which will aid us both in healing and rejuvenating our bodies.”

“But you are going to feed me and then fuck me into oblivion, right? I could use oblivion more than anything.”

He hauled her against his body, rubbing his hard cock against her. “If it is oblivion you seek, my beloved, it is oblivion you shall have.”

“I’m going to need to file that report in a way that lets them know the cult is shut down. I don’t think they can recover from what happened out on the peninsula.”

“You will do what you need to do from here,” he growled low.

She shook her head and smiled. Normally it would have annoyed her for some man to think he had authority and

command over her, but with Warrick it just seemed right. Perhaps it was because she knew he didn't see her as inferior to him, even though the argument could be made that in many ways a dragon-shifter was far superior to a human. He just never let her feel that way. He discussed things with her and if it was something she didn't understand, he stopped to explain it to her, but not in a way that made her feel foolish.

Dani stood in the shower enclosure made of glass blocks, letting the hot water cascade all around her. There were times when she'd been tied to that pole, she wondered if she would ever feel warm and safe again. She began to sponge her body with a natural sea sponge and fragrant soap, washing and conditioning her hair, as well. She could hear him setting up what sounded like a large tub as well as filling it and letting someone enter with food. When its heavenly scent wafted to her, her stomach growled.

Before she could ask him if it was safe to come out, he was reaching in to turn off the water, pop something that tasted delicious made of meat, cheese, and spices into her mouth, and wrapping a large fluffy towel around her.

"Mmmm," she moaned. "I can't decide what feels better—the shower, the meatball, or the towel."

Scooping her up, he returned to the center of the yurt, where he had set up an enormous copper tub filled with fragrant water. He stepped in, sitting down and bringing her into the water with him, before pulling over a large tray filled with all kinds of foods.

Dani leaned back against him. "I think I'm going to enjoy this," she said with a sigh.

"This is only the beginning," he chuckled. "I plan to apply all of my seductive skills to making this a night you will never forget."



He stood on the bluff overlooking the harbor. Damn, that hadn't gone the way he planned. But what could he expect

from fanatics and mutants?

There was nothing left but a smoldering mess. He'd expected his operation to be gone, as communication had been completely cut off, but not this. As he made his way down to the devastation, he could see the dragons had left him a clear message—they might not know who he was, but they knew what he was up to.

He had work to do to reproduce what he had done here. The Shadow League would need to keep the Phantom Fire and the resistance movement occupied with other matters so he could get back to what was important.

He would see that the Phantom Fire paid for their interference. He picked up a handful of the ash. He let it trickle out of his hand; yes, they would pay.

CHAPTER 18



WARRICK

He held her close, breathing in her scent. That she was back here was a miracle. He would not allow her to leave his side again. He would allow her the choice of whether or not to become drakaina, but regardless of that he would claim her as his mate.

“This is nice,” she said burrowing closer.

“You know for a badass cop you sure are a snuggler,” he chuckled, nuzzling her neck.

“I only have to be a badass cop out there. Here in our yurt at Dragonwyk, I can be the mate of the first warrior. I had a lot of time to think while I was tied to that stupid pole, and I made a couple of decisions.”

“Such as?”

“Well, for one thing, I want to be with you. I really thought they’d killed you.”

“They came close,” he said, running the back of his hand along her ribs.

“And all I could think was how stupid I’d been. The whole committing myself to you forever, when I thought I might never have that chance, was such an easy decision. I love being a cop, but there’s no way I can do that and be with you. Oh, I suppose I could if you wanted to live in the city, but from what you and Zahran said, whatever is behind the slavers and the Shadow League is big and bad, and the Phantom Fire is the best defense any of us have against it.”

“I love you, my beautiful eternal flame.”

“And I love you. The thing is, I don’t want to be a human in a stronghold of dragon-shifters. I know Kessily is planning to transition as soon as she can after the baby is born. And you said if I was drakaina I could fight at your side.”

“And to that vow I will hold. Already my brothers talk about the brave drakaina that fought as warriors when the Age of Dragons held sway. There are those among us, especially here in the Phantom Fire, who believe it is time to return to those earliest traditions.”

“Do you think the other dragon clans will go along?”

He shrugged. “It matters not. The Phantom Fire has always followed our own ways, usually leading the way of the other dragon clans. But are you sure? The choice to become drakaina is not to be taken lightly. You have suffered a traumatic experience. You should take a few days...”

Whatever else he might have said was cut off by Dani ramming her sharp elbow into his ribs.

“I got a hot newsflash for you; I don’t make life-altering decisions based on one nasty run in with a bunch of bad guys. I did, however, have a lot of time to think and realized I could do much more to help people—human and shifter alike—as a drakaina.”

“We will leave the matter to rest...”

She splashed water in his face and got out of the tub. God she was gorgeous when she was angry and naked. Who was he kidding; she was always gorgeous; he just liked her better naked.

“You are one of the most stubborn, pig-headed men I’ve ever been around. First you get all pissy because I don’t jump at the chance to be drakaina—keeping in mind, of course, that this time last week I didn’t even know dragons existed outside of myth and legend. And now that I’ve had time to think about things—that you could be dead, that I might not survive, just what’s at stake, and not to mention the fact that I think flying through the air and breathing fire would be amazing...”

Warrick began to chuckle. “What are you laughing at, you arrogant fool?”

“You, my beloved mate. I believe you have always been drakaina. You are as fractious and volatile as a warrior queen. Your transition will be physical only. You already possess the heart, the mind, and the soul of a drakaina. All that needs to happen is for your body to become one, as well. But it is not an easy thing to become drakaina.”

“All right, so enlighten me.”

There is a ceremony, and you will be put into a deep, almost comatose state. Once you are relaxed and calm, I will begin to breathe a molten type of fire over you, beginning at your feet and moving up.”

“Won’t I get burned? Will it hurt?”

“Do you really believe that if I believed you might be hurt I would allow it? All your blustering would not persuade me to do otherwise. If it is done, and the person being transitioned does not want it, it can be terrifying and can result in injury to body and mind, resulting in death. But being encased in your beloved’s eternal flame will feel much like sinking into a hot tub of soothing mud. I will take up a vigil and watch over you with those closest to me. When you awaken from your cocoon, you will be drakaina.”

“Well then, let’s get to it.”

Again, he chuckled. She was so impatient. Once her mind was made up, she was like a steamroller, but he wanted her to be rested and thinking with a clear head.

“I would suggest,” he said standing up in the tub so she could see his engorged cock. “That we go to bed so that I can, as you suggested earlier, fuck you into oblivion. In the morning, we will announce your decision to become drakaina, and you can be bonded to me as my eternal flame. After we have discussed what we found with the rest of the brotherhood, we will return to our yurt, where you will be transitioned.”

She opened her mouth as if to argue and then her eyes slid down to his cock. “Hmm, I think I like your plan much, much better—especially the fucking me into oblivion part.”

“Somehow I thought you might like that.”

He stepped out of the tub, not at all caring that he sloshed water all around himself as he closed the distance between them. He scooped her up in his arms and carried her to their bed. Setting her down on her feet, he fisted her hair, tugging on it to tilt her head back and expose her throat. He nuzzled her jaw until he could begin kissing his way down the long column of her neck. Dani arched her back, offering her beautiful, bountiful breasts with their pebbled nipples to him. An invitation he accepted.

Sucking a stiffened and puffy peak into his mouth, he began to suckle rhythmically, making her moan and squirm in his arms. Lifting her up, he settled her on their bed, only releasing the one nipple so that he could pay homage to the other. She was naked and in his bed—just where she had always belonged.

Dropping down beside her, he kissed and nuzzled his way down her body, tickling her belly button with his tongue before he moved between her thighs. She moaned and writhed beneath his touch. She had accepted and embraced her role as his eternal flame. Warrick could feel the difference in her as she gave over and surrendered herself to him.

He settled between her legs, placing his mouth over her sex, licking her slick folds before beginning to make a feast of her. Dani whimpered and groaned under this sensual attack, but he had her right where he wanted her, and she could do nothing but capitulate to him. He inhaled her deeply as he settled in, tasting her sweet honey as he lapped it up and reveling when her body went stiff, she called his name, and then shuddered.

He tongued her through the orgasm, not letting up on his onslaught until he wrung every drop of pleasure from this first orgasm that he could. Once she was replete, he moved up her

body, giving her his weight before poising at the entrance to her core and thrusting up inside her in a single long push.

“Warrick,” she cried before he cut off the sound with his kisses.

His body moved within her, connecting them as deeply as he could—his cock and tongue moving in perfect synchronicity as he fucked her with a steady, relentless passion that drove her back to the pinnacle of pleasure.

Dani wrapped herself around him, holding him tight, her nails raking his back as he forced her over the edge and into the abyss of ecstasy for a second time.

“Mine,” he growled. “Say it.”

“Mine,” she growled back with a wicked grin.

He couldn’t help but laugh. “Not what I had in mind, but I’ll take it.”

Her acceptance of his dominance—in fact, her embracing it—was all he needed to let go, and he began to pound into her at a furious pace, chasing her back to the top of the precipice so they could freefall together. Even when he flew close enough to almost touch the stars, he didn’t fly as high as he did with Dani in his arms.

Their mutual orgasm crashed together, overwhelming both of them as it flashed through their systems. It caused Warrick to shudder and Dani to tremble as her pussy spasmed all along his staff, encouraging the torrent of his cum to fill her to overflowing. She trembled in his hold and shook with the enormity of pleasure they shared.

The remainder of the night was spent doing more of the same. Neither of them could get enough of the other. Over and over again they sought to pleasure each other. This wasn’t just sex; it was so much more than that. It was a way to allow their souls to meld as one. Even though she would be sealed in a cocoon during her transition, he knew she would not be afraid, for she would know he was with her.

Finally, exhausted, she lay in his arms, sated and happy. Nothing would ever part them again. Nothing would defeat

them. Nothing had ever compared to her, and nothing ever would. Whatever lay in their immediate future was no match for the eternal love and bliss they were meant to share.

CHAPTER 19



DANICA

Dani had to admit, Warrick was a man of his word. She'd lost count of the times they'd made love and was damn sure she couldn't remember how many times he'd made her come. She knew her body would most likely be sore, but she didn't care. Last night had been a balm to her soul and had allowed her to sleep deeply and restoratively.

When the morning light filtered into the room, she'd barely had time to emerge from her deep slumber before he was lifting her up to take her into the shower with him. They'd washed the excesses of last night from each other's bodies and managed to get presentable enough to join the others.

"Is there a specific pattern as to how the yurts are laid out? I notice that there are two others that claim ground as high as ours." When he smiled and lifted her hand to his lips to kiss, she said, "What?"

"I like how observant you are, but more than that, I like how you refer to the yurt that used to be mine as ours."

"Well it's a pretty good bet you weren't going to live on my houseboat with me."

He chuckled. "Ah the houseboat. Puget Sound. Seawater. Probably not a great choice. I think I'd prefer Dragonwyk, don't you? But you should know, my home will always be with you."

He could be an overbearing sonofabitch when he wanted and then turn around and say the sweetest things.

“Yes, I love it up here. I can see why this place appeals to you and your brothers, but you haven’t answered my question about the placement of our yurt.”

“While the Phantom Fire is a brotherhood of equals, it still retains a certain hierarchy. The three ranking dragons hold the highest ground—not so much because we’re better, but because it is our responsibility to look after those with whom we share this valley. Falkor, as alpha, has one of the yurts. Sobek, who is his second in command has the other.”

“And you are first warrior, right?”

“Yes, I am at the head of the vanguard in a fight. I am our best fighter, and you my beloved, will fight at my side. There are some who will question my decision, but there is no other I would prefer at my side, and you would never be content to stay behind.”

“We’re in this—whatever this turns out to be—together,” she vowed solemnly.

“Agreed. Now let us take our place at the high table.”

They took their place alongside Falkor and the other dragons banged their mugs on the tables, setting up quite a row.

“I think they’re glad you all made it back,” she whispered to him.

“No. They never doubted we would prevail. The salute is to acknowledge that your decision to become drakaina is known and is approved of.”

As the Phantom Fire ate breakfast, Zahran led a discussion on what they had discovered and what the most likely scenarios were to come from it. It was a unanimous decision that the fight with the Shadow League and whoever was behind them was one the Phantom Fire would take on as a sacred responsibility. There were those who questioned whether or not a human actually had the capacity to create such a plan, but all agreed that the experiments that had been done, combined with the book they found, bore grave

consequences for all shifters and those responsible would need to be confronted and defeated.

After they finished breakfast, Zahran led Falkor, Sobek, Warrick, and her up to a raised dais. Zahran raised his arms and began to speak.

“In times past we have gathered together to watch one of our brotherhood choose to forsake his immortal life, leave the brotherhood of the Phantom Fire, and cleave to his eternal flame. As you all know, the Phantom Fire has chosen to break with that tradition and will allow those among us who wish to remain here with their eternal flame to do so. Warrick, first warrior of the Phantom Fire, will you choose to remain with your brothers, bringing your eternal flame into our midst?”

“I will.”

Dani raised her hand. “Question. It just occurred to me, does that mean he’s giving up his immortality, and if so, wouldn’t that put him at a disadvantage in a fight, especially as he’s first warrior?”

Zahran smiled. “That is an excellent question, and one to which we do not know the answer. Our ceremony has always included the member of the Phantom Fire acknowledging that he is giving up his immortality, but our new way has not been put to the test.”

“Warrick, maybe you should think about this,” she said to him.

“In the same way you chose to become drakaina knowing you would fight in whatever battle is to come, so will I choose to do the same. My immortality means nothing to me if I cannot have you at my side.”

Shouts of acknowledgement and approval were accompanied by more mug pounding. For a bunch of warriors, these guys were pure romantics, she thought to herself.

Warrick turned to her, taking her hands in his. “Blood of my blood, will you bind yourself to me?”

“You’re willing to give up your immortality for me? Becoming drakaina seems little to give in return. I choose to

bind myself to you, to live and die with you, and to become one with you in all ways.”

Another loud cheer from the brotherhood echoed throughout the encampment.

“Then it is done,” announced Zahran.

Zahran led Sobek, Falkor, Warrick, and her through their people who wished them well and headed for the yurt. Dani knew she should be frightened, but she wasn't. Warrick had assured her she would be fine and that he, Sobek, and Falkor would stand vigil to safeguard her keeping. With such a devoted brotherhood looking after her, what was there to fear?

She stretched out on their bed, and Zahran handed her a goblet from which she drank deeply. Warrick stood at the end of the bed and gazed down at her. “When next you open your eyes, know that I will be with you, and you will be drakaina.”

As Zahran chanted ancient words of wisdom, Warrick began to breathe a white flame that warmed and tickled her but didn't hurt. She wasn't sure what was in the goblet that Zahran had given her but whatever it was created a feeling of calm euphoria, and she felt no fear. Warrick would never hurt her and once she awakened, she would be able to fly with him—not as a rider but as his mate.

She had no awareness of the passage of time, but could see her life passing before her, not as a harbinger of her death, but showing her how meeting Warrick and becoming drakaina had always been inevitable. Dani had forgotten all the books she'd read about dragons either of legend or of fiction. How many times had she lain on her back and seen clouds take their shapes, wishing she could soar alongside them?

How many times had she searched the stars and found Draco, the dragon constellation? It had been the first constellation she had been able to identify. Warrick had said they would make a trip to Seattle to get her things. One of the things she wanted to bring was her vintage telescope—it was bulky and all the adjustments had to be made by hand, but it gave her an incredibly vivid sight into the sky.

She could see Warrick as a young dragon... could feel the heavy weight of responsibility that he'd grown up with knowing he would leave his family to join the brotherhood. She could feel his calming presence and the love he had borne for her for so long, not knowing if he would ever find her. He'd almost given up hope—she would use that to her advantage.

Dani remembered all her hard work to become a detective, often risking her life to stand out. More than one supervisor had commented that it was as if she didn't care about her own life, although she never endangered the life of another officer. All of it had been training for what was to come.

She saw the battle with the beasts of molten rock and fire known as the Cherufe... saw the dragons defeat them once in the dim dark past and once again, far more recently. She watched as the Phantom Fire had acted as back-up to the warrior queens who had led the first offensive, one of whom was Falkor's sister. *I'll bet she has a tale to tell.*

The cocoon in which she was entombed was warm and safe, and she could see where someone might be tempted to remain locked away with pleasant dreams and memories, but little by little she realized that if she stayed here, she would never again be one with her beloved—Warrick—her eternal flame.

Acknowledgement of that in the depths of her soul was the impetus to make her begin to make her way back to the light and to the land of the living. The cocoon began to fade away with the same sizzling, tickling sensation with which it had crept up her body.

“Are you with us, my love?” Warrick crooned as he stroked her hair.

“I am,” she managed to croak. “Water?”

He held a chalice up to her lips. The water was cool, soothing, and had something in it that was refreshing.

“Sobek has gone to get Zahran,” he said, helping her to sit up.

“I feel fine. Is it done?”

Can you hear me? he asked, but not in voice anyone other than her could hear. She nodded. *Try reaching out to me.*

Is this the link? she asked.

It is. While we could sense each other before you were drakaina, now we can speak to one another as if we were talking out loud.

“That’s kind of rude when others are in the room, isn’t it?” she asked.

“It is, but it can also be used to convey our thoughts to each other which are no one else’s business, although it’s easy to tell with Kessily as she blushes.”

“Yes, and she often thumps your mate when he points that out,” said Falkor. “Welcome back, Danica. Your mate may be trying to convince you he was cool as a cucumber, but he wasn’t. I have fought beside him for more than two thousand years and have never known him to be frightened. I do not think he would have survived had you not done so well.”

“For what it’s worth, it just felt like a nice, long rest. In fact, I’m not sure when I’ve been this well-rested.”

“And I will ask that your mate refrain from his overly amorous desires for at least a few days,” said Zahran.

“We might refrain from ‘overly amorous,’ but I got news for you, amorous is going to happen,” said Dani.

Zahran looked at Warrick. “Who am I to argue with a newly-transitioned drakaina?”

“Then we shall leave you to it,” said Falkor as he herded the other two dragons through the door.

“How do you feel?” asked Warrick, returning to climb into their bed next to her.

“You know I expected some big calamitous feeling with my body singing ‘I am dragon; hear me roar!’ but I just feel like me. I feel like the me who’s in love with you but nothing different at all. It’s kind of anti-climactic.”

“What do you say we try shifting and go for a short flight around Dragonwyk.”

“Don’t I need like a learner’s permit or something?”

“No,” he chuckled. “It’s fairly instinctive, and I’ll be with you the whole way. Setting down the first time isn’t always the most graceful, but I have no doubt you’ll be flying rings around the lot of us in no time at all.”

“What’s happened while I was transitioning?”

“Falkor sent out emissaries to the other dragon clans and to some of the more prehistoric shifters. We’re going to be the main target for the cloning experiments. All we can do for the moment is wait. We’re safe here at Dragonwyk. We picked this location both for its remote locale as well as its ease of defense.”

“In that case,” she said with a grin, “let’s take my wings out for a spin.”

He laughed as they walked out of the yurt and were hailed by people’s good wishes.

“What do I do?” she asked.

“Center yourself and look inside. You should see your drakaina. Invite her to come forward and be one with you.”

Dani closed her eyes and almost immediately could see her drakaina waiting. She saw the drakaina spread her wings as she galloped forward and whispered *we are one*.

Immediately Dani was enveloped in a chaotic, localized storm filled with lightning, thunder, and a myriad of shards of color and electricity. She reached out to try and touch it, expecting to be zapped, but only felt energy and joy. Laughing, she felt her drakaina take over and her body morph.

Warrick was right, flying was instinctive. Not bothering to wait for him, she rushed forward, beating her wings and feeling herself being lifted up into the air.

“Damn it, Dani, wait for me,” she heard Warrick mutter under his breath.

Laughing she called back over her shoulder. “Catch me if you can!” she banked to the right but turned too steeply and had to correct to get back level.

Warrick’s laughter trailed behind her. “You’re doing fine, beloved. Use the air currents to your advantage.”

And then he was beside her, guiding her, showing her how to do things more easily. It was intoxicating, and she thought there might be nothing better in the world than to be drakaina and to fly alongside one’s mate. Then she looked at him and remembered the night before their transition. Okay, so maybe there was one thing better than flying with one’s mate. She smiled mischievously, catching Warrick’s eye.

It too started with an ‘F.’

DARK FIRE



WINGED WARRIORS: BOOK 3

*W*histler Industries Corporate Office *Bellevue, Washington*

Delaney Pierce dressed with care this morning—she wanted to portray herself as fashionable but not provocative; professional, but not boring. She was meeting with the tech mogul, Elron Whistler. He'd created some kind of conductive material that made computers and other technology work faster and more efficiently than anything that had come before it. He'd been able to patent his invention and to date no one had been able to duplicate it or even figure out how he'd done it—and Whistler wasn't talking.

He was about to create his new manufacturing facility and he wanted to do so far away from any of the so-called 'tech centers' in the United States: e.g., Silicon Valley and the tech hub outside of Seattle. The first phase of his new development was for the manufacture of his invention, which he was calling Norle. There were also unspecified plans for biotech, pharmaceutical, and artificial intelligence companies.

She was seated in the lobby of Whistler Industries with several other architects, all vying for the same job. She was the only woman and the only one who wasn't part of a large, internationally known firm. They had all been given the same appointment time and were expected to wait for the 'great man' to call on them. After two previous people had left muttering under their breath and a third man was called back, Delaney stood.

“Ms. Pierce,” said the receptionist, “Mr. Whistler wants everyone to stay in the lobby.”

Delaney turned and smiled. After all it wasn't the receptionist's fault that her boss was a jackass. “Mr. Whistler can kiss my ass. He may not value my time, but I assure you I do. This will be a great opportunity for someone, but it's become clear to me that I am not that someone. Please tell your boss I wish him well, and if he doesn't select someone and would like to speak to me in the future, he can call and I'll see if I have time to fit him into my schedule. Have a nice day.”

She turned on her heel and walked to the elevator door. She'd pushed the button for the lobby floor and the door was closing as she heard the receptionist's heels clicking along the marble flooring as she called Delaney's name. She might be making a huge mistake, but she wasn't about to let a man like Elron Whistler get the upper hand.

Delaney ignored her, rode the elevator down, and ignored the building's security guard as he tried to intercept her. Elron Whistler was well known as an arrogant, misogynist sonofabitch, and he didn't deserve her gorgeous concept and design, not to mention the magnificent piece of property she'd found at the base of the Wind River Mountain.

Pulling up to her office, she was a little surprised to see a delivery man with the most interesting bouquet of flowers—cabbage roses, chrysanthemums, sunflowers, hydrangea, and peonies.

“Ms. Pierce?” the driver said, hopefully. Delaney nodded. “These are for you. Mr. Whistler asked that I deliver them personally with his apologies.”

Delaney hid her smile. Perhaps her day was looking up.



Dragonwyk

Wind River Mountains, Wyoming

“Tevryn, I understand you may have been disappointed that I did not send you out as one of our emissaries,” said Falkor.

“I did wonder why others were selected over me but decided that you must have your reasons.”

“Mainly just one. My mate is to give birth to our first child within the week and I did not wish to be parted from her. I needed to keep you close in case Dani was able to start whittling down a list of suspects as to who the man behind the curtain might be. She has come up with the three most likely suspects and I would like you to observe each of them and then report back to me. Dani has composed dossiers on each of them,” Falkor said, handing him a thumb drive. “I would go myself, but time is of the essence and Kessily’s time grows near. I have always valued your counsel and your shrewd observations.”

“I am honored, Alpha. I will gather my things and leave immediately.”

“All three are in King County, Washington. One of them is most likely aware of our existence. I would prefer you not enter Washington State until nightfall.”

Tevryn bowed his head in respect. “There is wisdom in that. I will use the rest of the day getting ready to leave and to find a place to use as a base of operations.”



Thanks for reading Wild Fire. Next up is [Dark Fire](#).



BONUS SCENE



Thank you again for reading Wild Fire (Winged Warriors)! The next book in the series is Dark Fire.

I have an EXCLUSIVE bonus scene for Warrick and Dani a thank you! All you have to do is click the link below or scan the QR code with your phone, sign up for my newsletter, and you'll get an email giving you access!

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ABOUT DELTA JAMES

Other books by Delta James: <https://www.deltajames.com/>

As a USA Today bestselling romance author, Delta James aims to captivate readers with stories about complex heroines and the dominant alpha males who adore them. For Delta, romance is more than just a love story; it's a journey with challenges and thrills along the way.

After creating a second chapter for herself that was dramatically different from the first, Delta now resides in Florida where she relaxes on warm summer evenings with her loveable pack of basset hounds as they watch the birds, squirrels and lizards. When not crafting fast-paced tales, she enjoys horseback riding, walks on the beach, and white-water rafting.

Her readers mean the world to her, and Delta tries to interact personally to as many messages as she can. If you'd like to chat or discuss books, you can find Delta on Instagram, Facebook, and in her private reader group <https://www.facebook.com/groups/348982795738444>.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you to my Patreon supporters.

I couldn't do this without you!

Lori

Carol Chase

D F

Ellen

Tamara Crooks

Suzy Sawkins

Linda Kniffen-Wager

Karen Somerville