

ELLIE HORN



CENTAUR
SOAR



WARRIOR HEARTS ACADEMY

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INTRODUCTION

SOAR is **not a standalone** book. It is the final book in the second Warrior Hearts Academy trilogy. If you have not read the first two books, *RIFT* and *BOLT*, you must do so before reading this.

The Warrior Hearts Academy trilogies are dark (but sometimes humorous), slow-burn, paranormal/fantasy romance where the strong female main character has many love interests that she doesn't have to choose between.

Within the pages of this book, expect graphic sex, violence, abuse, and other scenarios that some may find triggering. To prevent spoilers—if you have specific sensitivities, contact us at abducted@lehorn.ca and together we can figure out if this is the right book for you. Providing you with a positive reading experience is important to us.

Ellie and Ellie Sue



I

MARCUS



I gently held her limp body in my arms, but it was the demon inside me that tilted my head back and shrieked.

A rumble of thunder answered, but my focus was on what I cradled. My human body wasn't strong enough to do more than hold my mother's torso off the floor.

Whatever had been in those darts had taken her down so fast. Isobel had also used poison on my father. My heart constricted, and the thing inside me clawed to be set free.

Iskar's frantic voice echoed through my head. *You can't let it break loose here—Marcus, you have to breathe. Just breathe.*

Our would-be rescuers shot around the corner and skidded to a halt as they saw me. Two male teachers, and the elderly groundskeeper who had been a warrior in his own right, once upon a time. He held a rake, while the other two were unarmed.

Triss was barely breathing. And I was seriously losing it. My arms were rippling with new size and muscle, and they were covered in dark scales. The crystals around my neck glowed as Iskar desperately pulled power from them.

By the expressions on the Centaur's faces, my features were no longer recognizable. I didn't care. My mother could be dying. Rafael and his cursed Sorceress had *taken the children*.

We need Cara, Iskar insisted.

“Get the Watcher,” I rasped to the Centaurs.

“What happened?” a teacher asked.

I focused on him through the rage that clouded everything in black. “Someone kidnapped the children by creating a gate, but it is gone now. I need the Watcher. Go to the academy and fetch her. Now, or my mother may die.” I could only hope Cara or Bess were there, because they could be involved with assessing Isobel’s hideout. But the Bellati at the academy gate would know how to find them.

When the teacher stared at me in growing horror, the elderly warrior snapped at him. “Go! Now!”

The barked command in his voice snapped the other Centaur into action. He vanished up the hall.

“But the children—” the other teacher began.

“We can’t go after them, we don’t know where they were taken.” Coherent thought was dissolving fast, and Iskar’s lack of running commentary was proof of how hard he was working to stop the monster from emerging. I needed it—my arms had grown huge. And they weren’t lengthening to form wings—they were doing something else.

Maybe they would be strong enough to carry my mother to the Watcher—even the thought of it elicited a panicked warning from my inner gatekeeper.

Dammit, Marcus. If it emerges, it’ll be more focused on shredding than saving. Your mother’s life depends upon you remaining human. So fight it.

I closed my eyes, and a shudder ran through me as I tried to shove it back.

It didn’t want to go back. It wanted to roar.

The other teacher had vanished, but the caretaker gently arranged Triss’s legs to lie in a more comfortable position. His calm gaze assessed me as I trembled with the effort of holding it together while supporting my mother.

“Anything I can do to help?” he finally asked.

I shook my head, just as the floor quaked and a group of Centaurs, the teacher among them, appeared around the corner.

These ones were armed. The monster in me reacted, and as the wind drove rain through the shattered window, I gritted teeth growing sharp.

“I sent him for a blanket,” the caretaker growled. Then he straightened, and barked, “Check the building, confirm who is missing. Send word to the governor, she will need to know the details and notify parents.” He gestured to the teacher, who did, indeed, hold blankets in his arms. “Give me those.”

The armed Centaurs trotted off to inspect the building, and the caretaker bustled to tuck blankets around Triss. She was shivering now, her breathing terrifyingly shallow. The teacher stood a distance away, his fingers tangling and untangling themselves as he stared at me.

I was likely worth the view. My human skin streamed sweat as Iskar and I forced the scales back, one by one.

But if what I held in my arms succumbed to whatever Isobel had shot into her—all bets would be off.

And I wasn't sure I would care, then, what happened, one way or the other.

RILEY



Carrying my food tray, I walked among the council's chosen warriors as their blood dripped onto the grass at my feet.

What the hell was I doing here? I felt out of place.

Whether they be Dragon or Sabre or Dire, these warriors had all thrown themselves into the fight without regard for personal safety. Whereas I'd spent most of my life looking after me, myself, and I.

What was it like to care so much for a cause that you were willing to die for it? Was this what it meant to be a Shade operative? It made me feel—inadequate. Not up to the task.

Sacrificing for others was so commonplace for this crew that not only did they stand around in the meadow as they bled, but they were also *chatting*. Discussing life as though they hadn't just risked losing it.

Bess and Cara had been joined by three other Watchers that spread out to heal those patiently waiting for their turn. Most students were at breakfast, but a few had come down to assist—although there wasn't much to do, other than feed those coming through the gate or help them limp to the healers.

Fang vibrated from her spot. She was well hidden, but she kept activating those stiffer hairs on the nape of my neck, sending little unhelpful zings through me.

“I’m heading back for a reload,” Vali said, brandishing her empty tray.

“I’ll be a bit yet,” I answered. I’d spent so much time gawking that mine was still over half full.

I watched her pick her way through the scattered warriors toward the building. Male eyes followed her. She seemed totally unconscious of her natural way of moving that was seductive as hell.

Somehow, I thought Vali would step up if asked. She had that quality to her.

Lost in my thoughts, I continued to stump around with my tray of dumplings. I offered it to two muscley guys I was pretty sure were Sabres. The shoulder of one had been torn open—four distinctive, parallel lines. The wound was deep and still bleeding. But he broke off his blow-by-blow description of how he bested the Dire who’d done it, and grinned at me.

Or rather, at Kiko, who was trailing me with another tray.

“What do we have here?” he drawled, as his nostrils flared.

Kiko did her usual assessment from crotch to hairline—fortunately, the shifters had redressed in pants, at least, when they’d returned—and smiled back. “Just a selection of delectables,” she purred.

I rolled my eyes and offered my tray to his friend, who took a dumpling and inhaled it in one bite. The shifter ability to pack away food had sent us to the kitchen multiple times. A scattering of other students had been pressed into service. We were all getting an up-close-and-personal look at what it might mean to be a Shade.

These warriors—I wasn’t this kind of fighter. Fang tickled again. Was she trying to communicate? Too bad I didn’t speak Webspinner.

The Sabre leaned closer to Kiko. “Delectable is about right.” His voice was a seductive growl.

“Students are off limits.” The deep voice came from over my shoulder, and Cody hove into view. The tall Sabre was clad in sweats, but his naked torso was covered in blood. He’d forgone his own healing to let his men go first.

“Damn,” muttered Kiko.

The reprimanded Sabre appeared disappointed, but his friend just shrugged and snagged another dumpling. I rather gratefully offered one to Cody.

He grabbed three. “Killing is hungry work.” He twitched me a smile and crammed one in his mouth before turning and striding away.

My own smile froze on my face. I didn’t think I could ever view killing in such a cavalier fashion, but what did I know? Maybe if you did enough of it, it altered your perspective.

At the edges of the group, I saw Tareal and Lora. They weren’t helping, just standing there, staring.

It was a bit unsettling. But a lot of other students were doing the same thing as they glimpsed the grim realities of what they might face someday.

Off to one side, Cara was bent over a Dragon. Kiko sidled up to me. “Heard that some got shot with those parasites.”

I stared at her. “What parasites?”

The Satyr wrinkled her nose. “They are really nasty. Dragons shot by darts are eaten so fast from the inside out that they drop from the sky.”

That would certainly explain why the Dragon being treated was bleeding from every orifice. “Can they save him?” I asked.

Kiko grimaced. “I think so. The healer has to get to them fast. The blasted things were bred to decimate the Dragon Legion. And they almost wiped them out.”

My stomach churned. Where was Havoc?

Kiko interpreted my expression and almost looked contrite. “If he’d been hit, he’d be here. There were just a few

that got it, from what I heard.” She leaned close to me. “These guys are delish.”

No. They were covered in blood and had spent the early morning hours risking their lives for—what? We still didn’t have Isobel. Those kids were still just as gone as they’d been hours ago.

Was Havoc okay? He must be. Kiko was right—he’d be here already if he needed a healer.

Or would he? The Dragon was fiercely independent and accustomed to doing his own healing. My worry intensified as I glanced over to the cluster of captured and battered mercenaries. Had all this been worth it? Maybe Isobel’s lackeys had the information we needed. But maybe not.

The gate lit up. I’d been watching for Havoc all morning, but so far, there was no sign of him. According to Cara, his Deranger had kept the superior numbers of the mercenaries from overwhelming our smaller forces. Had he decided to leave Fang with me, and take off after the battle ended?

It wasn’t Havoc coming through. A rather frantic-looking Centaur burst into the meadow, and a chill traveled through my core.

Kiko balanced her tray on one arm and wrapped her free hand around mine. “Something’s wrong.”

Not far from me, Cara was working on a Dragon, and the Centaur headed over there. I handed my tray to a Sabre yakking with three of his buddies, and went there, too.

When I arrived, he’d already finished talking, and Cara’s expression stopped me cold. She locked it down in a hurry, but there was no mistaking what I’d seen.

Rage.

She paced the Centaur as they headed for the gate, but I grabbed Cara’s arm.

“What is it? What’s wrong?”

“I have to go, Riley. Isobel has attacked the school at the Richin colony. She kidnapped Centaur children and some

older students. In the process, she's darted Triss with something that might kill her."

Children? *Marcus's mother.* My heart twisted, and when Cara went to turn away, I grabbed her arm.

I'd been there once already, after all.

As I pumped emotion into that secret inner place, another set of hands attached themselves to my arm. As the white noise took us, I heard a startled squeak.

Snap.

We arrived in a blaze of golden light.

My butt hit something much harder than meadow grasses. By the multitude of little sure-to-leave-bruises protrusions, cobblestone was likely.

And wet, too. It wasn't raining now, but the clouds overhead swirled as though they were thinking of causing further trouble. Or maybe it was just my head that was spinning. I couldn't be sure.

"Awesome!" Kiko let me go and picked herself up from her faceplant, looking a bit disheveled but with her eyes gleaming with excitement. "That was incredible!"

I managed to focus enough to determine that we were outside the Centaur school. Unfairly, Cara had landed crouched on her feet.

When I released her, she straightened and scolded me. "Riley, I thank you for the quick trip, but you have to stop acting on a whim." She touched my arm—sending a pulse of pure energy that cleared my head—before she turned away and jogged to the front doors.

I wanted to follow, but my legs weren't cooperating. I managed to turn toward Kiko, who now examined a scrape on her elbow. She did, however, grin at me.

“Serves you right for hitching a ride.” My legs shook as I rose. I needed more crystal dust if I was going to be doing all this Jumping. I felt a bit more off than usual for my post-Jump malaise—more achy and chilled, like I was developing a fever.

At least my hands were still human. Fang spun a little circle beneath my hair, drawing attention to the fact my head itched. When I reached up to rub it, I touched something rough and hard as bone above my ear. Startled, I raised my other hand—it was above the other one, too. Horns—only about an inch of them, but definitely there.

“You feeling okay?” Kiko finished brushing herself off and raised a brow at me.

I snatched my hands away before she could comment.

“I’m fine,” I lied.

She tilted her head to regard me. “Is Havoc’s little friend okay?”

“She’s fine, too.” I headed after Cara. I had *horns*. Fuck. How had that happened? Did Jumping scramble my cells? It seems Kiko’s unexpected partnership had brought us closer than was healthy.

We entered the school, hurrying down a few halls until we bumped into someone and could ask where Cara had gone.

The older Centaur opened his mouth to answer, but when he inhaled prior to speaking, his head lifted and his eyes glowed. But it wasn’t Kiko he stared at. It was me.

Dammit. I seem to have acquired more than just her horns.

“Please,” I repeated. “We need to find Cara.”

He straightened, and directed us down another hall.

Our view of what lay on the floor was obscured by a group of Centaurs. Wind gusted through a large broken window at one end, carrying a strong scent redolent with their panic and rage. A few wept openly. Others were demanding, angrily, to know what had happened.

A deep voice carried above the general hubbub, one I recognized immediately.

“Please,” Emmanuel said. “I know we all need answers and want to know where our children have been taken. We will look for those answers, and find those who took them. But we must pull together. I suggest we set up a crisis center in the cafeteria for family support and information, as well as a headquarters for a strategic team that will reclaim our children.”

The Centaurs fell silent. My gut twisted—I knew how difficult reclaiming them was going to be. Then an older Centaur stepped forward.

“He is right. Let’s put our efforts into getting everything together to make this possible.”

The voices rose again, but the hysteria level had dropped. As the group broke up, I eased past them.

Just beyond Emmanuel, Cara was leaning over a Centaurina with the distinctive red hair of Marcus’s mother. She lay disturbingly still.

Then I looked through the shattered window, and saw Marcus.

He stood in the large courtyard beyond. I knew it was him, but it was hard to tell. His face and body were changing back and forth, dark scales erupting along his arms as they swelled with new muscle, and then falling off as they shrank again.

I hugged the wall to get past the crowd to where his mother lay in a heap. All I wanted was to reassure him. To hold him and tell him it was going to be okay.

As I went to step through the window, he uttered a strangled sound.

The moment my eyes met his, I knew I’d made a mistake in coming. The rage and pain in them flared, his struggle accelerating.

I was only making things worse.

“Is that really Sixey?” Kiko breathed it, shock in her voice.

A large hand dropped on my shoulder, and I looked up into Emmanuel's face. His eyes, however, were locked on Marcus.

"He's having a hard time," he rumbled softly. "It might be best, for now, if you go."

It was so hard to turn away. But I did, grabbing the Satyr by the arm and towing her along behind me. Emmanuel paced with us down the hall.

"Will Triss be okay?" I asked him.

His rugged face twisted with worry. "I have had some experience with the poison in those darts, but I was given the antidote to counteract it." He looked toward his mate, lying so still on the floor. "Cara said she can heal Triss, she wouldn't say that if she couldn't." Despite his brave words, pain and uncertainty ran beneath them.

"Did Isobel really make off with the children?" Kiko asked.

He stiffened. "I was looking for clues at her old stronghold, and while I was there, she came here. I *felt* Triss collapse..." His voice broke, then deepened. "When I find that Sorceress, I will skin her alive."

I'd give everything I was to see Isobel flayed by Emmanuel. I didn't doubt his words. But Isobel wasn't going to be taken down that easily, and he knew it, too.

I glanced back at Marcus, but he had paced to the far side of the courtyard. One hand waved as though he spoke with someone. Iskar, I guessed.

Emmanuel followed my gaze.

"You'll look after him?" I asked. Stupid question, of course. Emmanuel was Marcus's father. But I didn't know how else to express what I felt inside.

The Centaur answered that, rather than my question. "He needs time."

I swallowed. "Could you tell Cara we'll make our own way back?"

“Of course,” he said, but the empathy in his voice spoke volumes. My eyes filled with tears that threatened to spill, and I turned away.

Fang began to vibrate again beneath my hair. It helped keep the waterworks at bay. I managed to walk more or less steadily until we’d exited the school, but when I stumbled on the cobblestone path, Kiko took my arm.

“Are we going to the market?” She sounded hopeful.

“Well, we’re going *through* the market,” I corrected, rubbing my eyes. I couldn’t stop thinking of those children, now in Isobel’s hands.

I was barely aware of walking through the colony gates. My legs shook, and the world occasionally spun—I kept my gaze focused on my feet. Kiko gently directed me to turn right when I would have gone left.

“Market is this way,” she murmured.

“We’re headed for the gate,” I insisted. “Do you have your crystal?”

“Always,” she said, pointing to her left horn. I hadn’t noticed that she’d hung the crystal from it—it was partly hidden in her hair. That was excellent, because I really had to get away from Marcus, and I didn’t want to hang around waiting for Cara.

“Embellishes the *five*.” She patted the thickest part of her horn, before lifting her head, and sniffing. “You smell—different.”

Terrific. I resisted the urge to raise my hand to my head—were the horns still there? They hadn’t grown, or she’d have noticed. But she was staring at me with narrowed eyes. I sighed. “You Jumped with me. I picked up some of your qualities that are less desirable.”

Now her eyes widened. And then, she grinned. “Don’t think *less* desirable is the right description. You do smell good. Any other additions?”

“Nothing you’d be interested in,” I grumped. I so didn’t want to talk about horns.

But as we entered the market, Kiko’s brain connected dots I’d rather not discuss. “So... You’ve been a Dire. A *guy* Dire —” I shot her a glare, and she moved on. “A Dragona on cycle, and now you’re me.”

Well, there were a few scaly things beyond that—“Yeah, that sums it up.” More or less.

She frowned as her brain cells went into overdrive. “But—how do you pick that stuff up? You didn’t Jump with a Dire.”

My shaky-as-hell stride hitched. “No. Not sure how that one happened. Maybe I was close to one when I Jumped?” I had been when they netted Marcus and me. But I hadn’t changed to a Dire until I came to the academy.

I had other worries that were more important than my weird beastly shifts. Like whether my legs would hold me up until we got back to the academy.

Or whether Marcus could ever be in my presence without turning into a monster.

A group of three young males paused their perusal of a metalsmith’s booth to watch us pass, and Kiko’s stride slowed as she assessed them.

“Kiko, no.”

Her eyes gleamed and her scent intensified. The young males’ focus sharpened. And my entire body went on full alert, noticing details—the pleasing width of their shoulders, their musky male scent, and yes, embarrassingly, my eyes dropped to peruse their goods.

What the fuck.

Kiko leaned close. “You’re weak. You have absorbed some of me. Why not use it to re-energize?”

“Because I’m not you,” I said loud enough that the guys’ focus shifted to me. More quietly, I added, “I have enough guy issues without adding to them with random sex.”

Her brows wagged. “Sex is never random.” She let go of my arm and, as I swayed into a stand filled with cloaks, walked up to the guys.

Dammit. She had the crystal, and I wasn’t going to get anywhere without it. I heard her giggle, and a deep voice murmured. It did something to my insides that I didn’t want to examine, and heat flushed straight through me.

I turned and fought my way through the cloaks, deeper into the booth.

To my horror, Kiko and the guys followed me into the maze of display racks. When I glanced back, the Satyr met my eyes, and her grin was purely predatory.

Who ever thought Satyrs were creatures of peace and love? Now that I thought of it, my books hadn’t painted them that way, either. But although my borrowed Satyr craved a party, my temporarily disabled Riley knew it would be a big mistake.

I retreated past cloaks in every color and texture imaginable, as well as silky-soft but distinctly unsexy garments designed to be worn close to the skin. For warmth, not looks. Maybe if I dressed in those, the guys would be so turned off they’d leave me alone.

I aimed for the rear of the booth, and arrived to see a partitioned area with what appeared to be changing rooms. From her perch behind the back counter, the booth’s owner raised a brow at me.

“Did you wish to try something on?” she asked.

The changing rooms looked to be the only safe haven in this storm. So yes. Yes, I did. I grabbed a few things off the closest rack with no attention to identity or sizes and ran along the rooms. Chose the one at the very end, and ducked inside. Latched the door behind me, and sank to the rustic bench within, clutching the garments to my chest.

Even Fang seemed frozen as we hid there, hanging on a precipice that was not of my making.

“Back again, I see?” I heard the owner say.

To my horror, I heard Kiko reply. “Won’t be long.”

“Same price,” the merchant insisted.

A few moments later, a male voice murmured from distressingly close. The next booth, in fact. “Not much room.”

“We’ll just have to huddle, then,” the Satyr purred.

Fuck. And she’d been here before? I held the clothes a little closer and moved away from the walls. I’m sure a black light would reveal a distressing quantity of bodily fluids.

When another sexy male voice growled, “No problem, beautiful,” it reverberated clear through to my core. I clenched my knees together and gritted my teeth. Could I bolt past them? Not likely. No way all three could fit with the door closed—their party had to be spilling out into the narrow aisle.

I was stuck here. Listening.

The words ceased, but what came from them left little to the imagination. I’d never appreciated how sex sounded—the soft smack of lips, the slithering of tongues soon giving way to groans and moans, and small noises in which wetness and friction played significant roles.

Kiko’s scent drifted over the top of the booth walls, powerful and compelling and totally decadent. And matched by my own.

I could have stood all that—maybe—if it weren’t for the final gift Kiko had given me. The energy generated by their lust pummeled me like a living thing, until I writhed beneath the undergarments, rubbing myself on the edge of the bench. It was similar to being a Dragona on cycle, and yet, not—sharper, more intense in the moment, but every bit as desperate for something hard—other than furniture—between my legs.

But much as I panted and moaned along with them, I wasn’t a Satyr. Sex, for me, mattered as something more than a meal. And so I hugged the clothes to my chest as my pelvis ground against the bench, and I climbed with them to paradise.

With them, but alone, I gasped and shattered. I breathed heavily as the guys laughed softly and Kiko sent them on their

way.

Fang finally moved. I'd rubbed myself to completion on a bench in the presence of Havoc's pet. My face couldn't possibly get any redder.

After a bit, there was a tentative knock on my changing room door.

"You okay?" Kiko asked.

I really didn't know. But when I stood up, I did feel stronger. I might not be Satyr, but the energy had helped.

The door swung open to reveal her satisfied smile. "That was—delicious," she said. "How was it for you?" Her eyes gleamed.

I pushed past her. Handed the rather crumpled garments to the merchant with a murmured "Sorry, they didn't fit," and kept right on going.

Kiko jogged to catch up. "We're going home?" she asked.

Home? Back to the academy, anyway. Where else was I going to go? But whether it would ever be home—without Marcus, how could it be?

My mind drifted to Havoc. But he didn't want me, either.

The little legs tickled from beneath my hair, but I ignored them. To hell with men, I decided.

I lifted my chin, and said, "We're going home."

MARCUS



I vibrated with rage.

Isobel. The children. *Riley*.

I sensed Iskar's hold over the demon was slipping. My arms contorted, growing thick and powerful as the black scales chased over my skin.

Lightning struck the tree behind me. The power surged through the branches before forking straight into me until I glowed like the sun itself.

Emmanuel stood not ten feet from me, one hand outstretched, but I backed away. One touch, and I could kill. I knew it.

A small form pushed past him and came at me. Cara moved so fast that she had her hands on me before I could blink.

I snarled, and lightning hit the ground around me—but she held on—feeding me her calm energy as mine crackled and flashed. Iskar seized hold of what she offered and used it to push the monster back. It fought every step of the way, clawing and snarling as the clouds broke and the rain pounded down.

“Marcus,” said a feminine voice from beyond Cara and my father.

Emmanuel spun, and with one agile leap, he was supporting my mother. She was deathly pale, and wobbly, but

alive. She beseeched me with her amber gaze as she rasped, “It will be okay. You just have to breathe, son. One breath at a time, you will get through this.”

She’d told me that long ago, when I’d been a child whose entire world had gone up in flames. And it resonated through me now. I took a deep breath, and everything Iskar and Cara were doing suddenly gained strength.

Together, we forced the demon back into the depths. Not gone. But caged. For now.

I stood and trembled as my arms reverted to normal and the pain slowly faded. The rain slowed, and then stopped, as the clouds drifted away.

Cara squeezed my arms and smiled at me. “Welcome back, Marcus.”

Emmanuel brought my mother over, and Cara moved aside so the Centaurina could fold her arms around me. “Knew you could do it,” she said, but her voice trembled.

I tried to avoid her gaze, but somehow, Cara captured mine anyway. “That was closer than I’d like,” she stated. “You can’t stay here, Marcus.”

The words were like swords through my heart, but I gritted my teeth at the truth in them.

I glanced to the smoldering tree and the blackened grass around us. I could have killed everyone.

My mother’s arm tightened around me. “Cara will help you get control over that thing. Then you can decide which path your life will take.”

But to return to the academy meant facing Riley. Besides, we had other concerns...

“What about the children?” My voice didn’t sound at all like my own. Hoarse, raspy. “Isobel has them.” And I knew what she’d do to them.

My rage rose again. Cara folded a hand around my arm once more, sending another pulse of her soothing energy into me.

One breath at a time, Iskar reminded me as he pushed back on the demon. *We will face all that when we must. For now, let's just get you back to Cara's. Where we are going to eat as much crystal dust as you can stomach.*

“Emmanuel!” An elderly Centaur pushed through the small crowd of onlookers. He slowed as he approached, casting wary glances at me. Then he handed something to my father.

It gleamed dully beneath the overcast sky, but I recognized it instantly. Because I'd created it.

“That's Tuli's,” I said. “Trey's was silver. Hers was copper.”

“It was on the floor, outside where they built the gate,” the Centaur said.

Emmanuel examined it. “The clasp is broken.”

The twins had worn those necklets from the moment I'd gifted them. Black scales erupted along my forearms as Iskar frantically worked to lock things down again.

I put my hand out, and my father gave it to me.

My fist closed around it. I turned to Cara and took a deep breath. “If we are going to go, let's go now.”

She measured me with her steady gaze. “Okay.”

When Bess arrived at the colony, she helped Cara in the courtyard.

“I'll see if I can track anything from where Isobel created her gate.” Bess glanced sideways toward me. “Or will you need my help back at the academy?”

Cara answered her, “No. Once we get to my stash of crystals, we'll be fine.”

Hopefully, Iskar added. He knew as well as me that although the academy meant access to crystals, it also housed

my major trigger.

Don't even think her name. My inner scholar was rather emphatic.

The Watchers spread their glowing hands, and the air in front of them started to dance. As it did so, Cara said, "Maybe Isobel was in too much of a hurry to terminate all the traces, but I wouldn't count on it."

"I'll do my best," Bess replied.

Emmanuel and my mother stood with me as the Watchers built the gate. When it was ready, my mother hugged me goodbye.

"You've endured worse," she reminded me. "You will conquer this too."

I managed a weak smile and hugged her back before Cara took us through the gate.

It spat us out in the meadow. Black scales formed and fell off me as we walked. At one point, Cara bent down and scooped one off the ground, before dropping it into a pocket.

I had lots more where those came from. They continued to pop out along my arms as we passed the stares of curious students and entered the building. And I even sprouted a talon. When it dropped free, I handed it to Cara.

She examined it with interest. "I have no idea what this belongs to."

"Well, I'm minutes from providing you a set," I said through gritted teeth.

She pulsed me more energy through the hand on my arm. "Let's get you united with some crystals, shall we?"

It frustrated me that we needed to worry about this at all, considering Isobel had the children. I wasn't just useless like this, I was a liability.

The stairs seemed to go on forever, but finally, she escorted me into her suite and immediately dug both crystal and dust out of her drawer. I swallowed the dust and clutched

the crystals, sinking into a chair as their power coursed through me, sighing in relief as Iskar pushed back on the demon.

The Watcher's eyes caught on the chain I wore. I let her pull it over my head. She took the drained crystals off, added fresh ones, and then examined the ring.

"Riley used that to find me." I put the crystals down long enough to dig Tuli's necklet out of my pocket and toss it on the table. "She might be able to use that to find the kids."

Cara's brows drew down. "Is this all she used?"

I shook my head. "I don't know. She did meet me in a dream—I was in the spot she Jumped to, but I couldn't tell you if she used those visual refs for the actual Jump."

Her mouth twisted. "Riley is playing with fire, Marcus. What she is doing is extremely dangerous."

My pulse pounded as I stared at her, torn between fear for Riley, and for what I knew Isobel would do to those children. "It may be our only chance to get them back."

"Well, we'll see about that. The Dragons have had enough time to get preliminaries from the mercs they captured at the old hideout. With any luck, they know where Isobel has gone." She regarded me closely. "Ask Iskar whether things are in control."

"I'm fine."

Her eyes narrowed. "Ask him."

I ground my teeth and did so.

If she needs to go, I can hold things down here, Iskar replied.

I passed that on, and added, "But if you are going to meet people about the children, I want in."

Her brows rose, and she counted things off on her fingers.

"One: You can barely stand. Two: You are too personally connected to stay objective. Three: You lose your temper at an

alarming speed. Four: You have an impressive creature inside you who emerges when you do so.”

Listen to her, Marcus. We almost lost it this time. It was too close. Iskar’s mindvoice was solemn.

I swallowed my frustration. “You’ll bring back news? Before they do anything?”

She patted my arm. “I’ll be back. Just take it easy. Spare room is all yours. Help yourself to my food. Rest up and practice your deep breathing.”

“Yeah. Right.”

“We’ll figure it out. Try not to worry.” She smiled at me, and departed.

Iskar might have the demon back in its cage, but the after-effects were nothing to sneeze at. I shook all over, and when I pushed myself to my feet, I swayed.

Ready for action, I see, Iskar stated innocently.

When a point has been made, it’s just freking rude to keep driving it home.

He fell silent as I grabbed bread and foraged through the fridge, coming up with some sliced meat. I managed to inhale three sandwiches before staggering to the shower and letting the hot water course over me. I avoided the mirror and its memories, before returning to the table.

I sat there and ran my hands over Tuli’s necklet. Could Riley use it to find them? My mind fixated on her beautiful green eyes, her face, the way she’d felt wrapped around me...

Marcus, Iskar warned.

I grimaced, and focused on thinking without remembering, about a woman who could Jump through realms.

And about the children, who were in the hands of a true monster.

4

HAVOC



I wasn't accustomed to jerking off.

Slaughtering Isobel's lowlife mercenaries had left me harder than rock and with fucking few avenues for relief. A lithe Dragona would have been preferred, but they were in short supply at the Isobitch's abandoned stronghold. As in, there weren't any. Which left me with few choices.

Well, only two, really. Return to the woman who waited for me at the academy—and finish what both my monster and my beast so urgently pushed me to do. Or sit up here above Isobel's fortress, and jerk off.

If I wanted to be free, the last one was the only possible solution. So I closed thick fingers on my throbbing dick and tried not to think of fierce green eyes, soft breasts, or lips that could take me to paradise.

This was actually the sixth fucking salute to whatever gods you believed in. Painfully engorged, I'd already finished five times.

Thoughts of a certain hot tongue took me there for the sixth. No Dragona sex had ever felt like this—lightning zinging from the base of my spine to shoot through my dick, leaving me gasping and thrusting as I sprayed the rocks around me.

As my heart rate slowly returned to normal, it seemed that six was the magic number. I felt the Deranger relent,

temporarily giving up on the nutzoid thoughts of sinking itself into the Dreambitch.

Of *mating* her.

My Dragon hadn't given up on it, but my beast was less direct than my monster, more willing to bide its time. I embraced my wings with a sense of relief, and took to the sky.

I would go back to the academy and retrieve Fang. That meant facing the focus of all this chaos, but once it was done, I could decide what I was going to do from there.

So long as Brock and Isobel were free, my choices were limited. The assassin Dragon had made a good point by suggesting I stay at the academy—they would be unlikely to come after me there.

But I wasn't about to join any fucking academy. Especially one with *her* in attendance.

I soared just below the clouds, looking down at the activity below. Legion Dragons and Sabres prowled the grounds around Isobel's hideout, searching for clues to her whereabouts. I was sure the interior was even busier.

I wanted Isobel caught so I could roam the realms without looking over my shoulder. That's all. Isobel's carnage-strewn mission meant little to me.

As I debated vacating the premises, I swooped low over the palace. Those below looked up, and many watched me. They were warriors, after all. And the lack of trust went both ways.

The Watchers had built a gate in the trees just to one side of the courtyard. It fluoresced as I soared past—the traffic through it was almost nonstop. I observed the groups waiting to leave and decided to stay aloft until the activity slowed.

I banked, and the palace slid by beneath me. Behind it was the valley wall that housed the cave network. It rose above the building and extended back about a hundred dragon lengths before dropping off abruptly.

I had just decided to head back toward the gate when I spotted something. I reversed direction and dropped lower.

The early morning sun had been struggling to break through the clouds, but now it sent stray rays through. They revealed a hole in this side of the wall close to the ground—and just below it, the rays glistened on something else.

I could ignore it. They'd find it eventually, once they were done with combing through the palace itself. But the thought of Marcus, and his struggles with whatever the Isobitch had put inside him... Fucking hell.

And it tweaked my curiosity, too. Because I had no idea as to what I'd seen jumping through his fucking skin.

I turned and winged back over the wall and the palace, searching those below—

When I dove to the ground, the surrounding warriors all snapped to attention, assessing me for risk. I ignored them, landing with my customary screw-you thump.

While those further away crouched or drew their tailspikes, neither Talakai nor Tyrez even flinched. They just surveyed me with raised brows.

“Haves somethings to shows yous,” I said. Without waiting for a reply, I launched again.

Talakai joined me when he was only half transformed, and Tyrez was right behind him. They followed me to the far side of the valley wall, where I hovered over what I'd found.

I didn't need to see their faces to sense their shock.

Bones. *Thousands* of them. And worse.

We landed on a small rise that was relatively clear. And looked around us to carnage.

Without a word, we all shifted to human. There simply wasn't enough room to walk through this as a Dragon, but we all were uneasy enough to keep our wings.

The smell was appalling, but not as bad as it could have been—the bodies had been partially burned, and the remains

picked at by the local scavengers.

No one said anything as we walked among them. I'd seen carnage in my life—been the cause of most of it—but this was something else again.

Tyrez spun around and then pointed to a skull. “That’s a Tuluviian cave bear, I think.”

“I’ve counted five Wyverns so far. And a Karstian wolf.” Talakai’s wings were half-spread, an unconscious expression of his desire to leave this place in a hurry.

“How is she doing what she’s doing?” I growled. My gaze focused on a skeleton with long finger bones stretched out around the body, and a triangular skull—Wyvern. “She’s putting them into the Centaurs? But how?”

Tyrez shook his head, sending his long dark hair flying. “Cara doesn’t know exactly how Isobel is doing it. But there are a lot of species here.” He grimaced as he looked around. “The Watchers will have to analyze this. It will tell us what we might be facing, if Isobel was successful.”

I walked away from him, taking a narrow gap between the Wyvern and another—a Basilisk, I thought. And then, I stopped.

“Legion,” I called.

Tyrez glared at me as he followed. “I’ve told you. I’m not Legion—” he broke off.

Talakai trailed after him, and froze. “Is that…”

The skeleton before us was large but not the size of a Legion dragon. The flesh was mostly gone, although a few scales remained on the mummified skin of the hindquarters. Four legs, and wings—but the wing bones were surrounded by bright feathers, and the naked skull ended in a beak.

“Hellfire,” whispered Talakai.

I shared the sentiment. Bad enough that the witch had killed all these creatures. But what lay before us was as much a thinking, reasoning, speaking creature as any of us.

My eyes fell to the pile of feathers, and my gut tightened. “I’ve seen those feathers before.” The words escaped me before I’d even thought about them.

“What do you mean?” the Legion Dragon asked.

“The Centaur sprouted them. A few times.”

His turquoise eyes gleamed. “Marcus sprouted feathers?”

I glared at him, not wanting to get any more pulled into this. But I’d already blown that by bringing him here. So I nodded. “Yeah.”

Talakai walked up beside him. “Did he change into a Gryphon?”

I transferred the glare to him. “No. He was part Wyvern. But he had feathers, too. And I’ve seen something else in there, no idea what.”

Tyrez exhaled hard as we paced past the Gryphon and saw what lay just beyond it—the contorted wreckage of skeletons caught in the middle of vicious transformations. I saw a long-haired tail in the midst of it, and legs ending in hooves.

I might be a vicious killer, but this was beyond anything I’d ever done. Twisted. Wrong.

Evil.

And this was what had been done to Marcus. Something stirred within me that I decided not to contemplate.

“Over here.” Tyrez had wandered off along the gruesome display of twisted bodies, and now stared at something else.

We came up alongside him, and stopped. Stared.

“What the shards was that?” Talakai asked.

It wasn’t quite as big as a Dragon—at least, not as big as our beasts. The bones looked like they belonged to a heavier creature, with ridges for the attachment of more powerful muscles. The wing bones were far too small to ever hoist a creature that size into the sky.

All around it lay bits of skin and scales. I stared down at them. They were black, with clear spikes in the center.

I'd seen those scales before. I walked right up to the skeleton. The skull lay twisted, the lower jaw knocked askew. I reached to grab a giant spike that crested it.

“Maybe you should leave it for Cara—” Talakai began.

I braced myself, and wrenched the skull clear of the pile. It was fucking heavy, roughly the length of one of my arms, but I hefted it high for the others to see.

We all froze, staring at it. There were spikes up the center of what would be the muzzle, as well as radiating from the top to the jaw. They weren't bone—they were clear.

“Those spikes almost look like crystals,” Talakai said. “We can bring it back to Cara. Maybe she'll know what it is.”

Tyrez's gaze drifted again over the twisted bodies before he met my eyes. “This has to stop.” His voice was so hoarse, the words were barely decipherable.

As we took again to the sky, I fought not to agree with him. Because I had my own fucking problems to solve.

The gate energy danced over my skin.

I barely noticed it. My focus was on two things—get Fang back from the woman. And put realms between me, and her.

I didn't come through alone—the assassin Dragon was with me. We'd both shifted to our human forms.

We stepped into a meadow, and I glared toward the building. Off to one side, a Watcher attended to a group of injured. The grasses nearby had been trampled flat. Four Dragons waited for us to step away from the gate before vanishing into it themselves. They gave us curious glances—mostly because of what I carried.

“Think you can lift this?” I handed the skull over to the assassin.

“No problem.” He hefted it with a grimace. “Much heavier than a Dragon skull.”

I supposed he’d have cause to know. Students lounged on the front steps and on the beach along the lake—classes must be in suspension. Didn’t surprise me, as their instructors were otherwise occupied.

Part one of my plan hit an immediate hitch when there was no sign of any green-eyed bitch woman waiting for us in the meadow. She could be anywhere in this godforsaken place.

And yet—even as I had that thought, I got the impression of a structure covered in vines. I was peering out, through them.

What the fucking hell was that about? A weird psychic thing?

“So, are you here to stay?” Talakai asked.

Bloody pushy assassin Dragon. “No. I have to find the Jumper.” When he arched a brow, I growled, “She has something of mine. Then I’m outta here.”

“I see.” His metallic indigo eyes regarded me calmly. “They’ll find you, you know. Brock has eyes and ears everywhere.”

“I’m not staying here,” I snarled.

“Whyever not?” The Dragon shrugged, juggling the skull a bit in his hands. “A place to sleep. Free food. A safety net until Isobel and Brock are stopped.”

“I’m not going to be a sharding *student*.”

He snorted a laugh. “I doubt there’s anything this place can physically throw at you that you don’t already know. And as for the theory bit—well, information is power.”

I glowered at him. “Is there a wooden structure covered in vines around here?”

He opened his mouth to answer, but then his eyes started flashing like mad. His wings sprouted free from his back.

“Gotta go, something’s up.” He thrust his chin toward the forest. “There’s an old arbor about a five-minute walk along the path—it’s part of a derelict homestead. That might be what you’re looking for.” With that, he launched into the air, shifting to Dragon as he did so. He banked toward the building, the skull dangling from his claws.

Did I want to know what was going on? *No*. I had my own issues, and it was high time I focused on them. Starting with retrieving the one thing I most cared about.

From another that I was determined not to.

Did this vine-covered structure actually exist? I hoped that once I found it, I would find it empty. Because if she was inside it, I was in bigger trouble than I thought.

I gritted my teeth as I embraced my beast and launched in the direction he’d indicated. As soon as I did so, it felt—right, somehow. The sensation was not unlike a tether, tugging on me.

It confirmed that there was no fucking way I could stay in this place.

My beast eyes spotted an old building, half rotten, in a clearing rapidly being consumed by forest. And behind it—a structure covered in vines.

Fucking hell.

I spotted movement outside it, and my lips peeled back in a snarl. I braked just above, folded my wings, and dropped to the ground.

It wasn’t the Dreambitch. The horns were pretty distinctive, even if my nose wasn’t screaming her identity. A Satyr. I wasn’t sure what to think of her being there—but then I sniffed again. She wasn’t alone. Two other distinct scents, one of which set my beast to purring like a bloody Sabre.

The Satyr planted her hands on her hips and glared up at me. Considering I could shred her in an instant, it was pretty

damned brave.

“Why are you here?” she sniped. “She doesn’t want to see you.”

I snorted steam at her. It was surprising that she knew anything about me. “She has somethings that is mine.”

The Satyr waved. “She’ll return it when she’s ready. She is resting now.”

“Hello, Havoc.”

I spun to see the Dragona rising from beneath a tree.

“What the fucking hells are you doings here?” Although I’d suspected, of course. Because of what the Dreambitch had become when she’d Jumped to us.

“I am a student now,” she said. “Don’t think we’ve been formally introduced. I’m Vali.”

“Don’ts care,” I said.

She tilted her head to regard me with amber eyes. “You should, considering I am here because of you.”

“You two know each other?” The third voice came from inside the arbor, and it sent a tremor straight through me. The Dreambitch appeared through the vines with a blanket wrapped around her shoulders. She looked exhausted, with dark circles beneath her eyes.

“Havoc saved my life.” Vali tucked her hair behind her ears.

“I lets you go,” I growled. “Nots the same thing.”

She shrugged.

The Satyr’s mouth was hanging open, but the Dreambitch dropped the blanket and walked forward, her gaze locked on me. The Dragona might have a seductive beauty, and the Satyr’s scent struck straight to my dick, but to both my monster, and my beast, there was no contest.

Good thing my human was in control.

“I take it you’ve come to fetch Fang?” she asked.

“Yess,” I growled.

She walked straight up to me and glared. “If you’re here to say goodbye, the least you can do is say it as a human.”

Bloody woman. “Just gives me Fang.”

She crossed her arms. “No.”

I briefly contemplated pouncing on her, but when both my monster and my beast proclaimed it an excellent idea, along with fucking raunchy visuals, I ground my teeth together, and embraced my human form.

Her glare didn’t soften one bit. “So you’re leaving?”

“Yep,” I growled, trying to ignore how damned good she smelled.

“What about Isobel and Brock?”

“I’ll take my chances.” Better out there with them, than here with her. Her scent swirled around me, and I clamped my jaw shut. It was compelling—and yet, different, too.

There was something new in her aroma. The slightest hint of ozone.

Fucking hell. I needed to get out of here. “Give me Fang.”

She tilted her head, and her gaze narrowed. “Isobel has run off with all the children at the Centaur colony near Richin.”

My reaction surprised me—it took all the breath from my body as though a giant fist had me in its grip. The Isobitch had stolen children?

Why did I care?

I clamped down on my emotions, and growled, “Fang. Now.”

Disappointment flitted across her face. What did she expect? If she wanted someone to run after Isobel and rescue kids, she had her ex-Centaur monster-shifter do-gooder. Or any one of several other annoying types who hung out around this place.

Stolen children were not my problem.

Both the Satyr and the Dragona were openly glaring at me now, too. If they wanted a hero, they were looking at the wrong fucking Dragon.

The Dreambitch raised her hand to her neck, and a familiar fuzzy form walked out onto it. I waited a beat, sure the Webspinner would leap onto me—but when she didn't, I grabbed her off the offered hand, and placed her on my neck.

I was unprepared for the fangs to sink in. I'd been bitten before, but not like this. She worked them deep, back and forth, injecting as much venom as possible.

I made a grab for her, but she squirmed away, and then, she bit me *again*.

I might have supernatural healing ability, but there were few things as toxic as Webspinner venom. It wouldn't kill me, but the next few hours were not going to be pleasant.

This was what I got for having a pet with fucking opinions.

I took two steps away from Riley, and my legs buckled. A split second later, the darkness took me under.

5

RAFAEL



Isobel and the coven escorted me down the hall.

I was so wrapped in the bloodmagic that I could barely see straight, but only if I'd been blind could I have ignored the things we walked past.

Brock's primary palace reflected the tremendous wealth his mother had accrued over her years as an overlord, as well as her brutality. The hall was lined with shallow alcoves, each with an item displayed on a pedestal. They lacked any symmetry in theme or design. The objective was simply to flaunt a valuable object to the viewer. Everything from antique weapons, to sculptures, to mummified heads mounted on stakes.

I shuddered as we passed by the shrunken, sightless eyes. Isobel paused our group in front of one, and I couldn't help but stare at the Dragon head. The flesh had long dried beneath the scales, and the lips had pulled back from the sharp teeth in a death grin.

"He thought he could steal from my mother," boomed a deep voice. "He was wrong."

Brock came up from behind us, and I ripped my gaze away. The bronze Dragon gestured behind me. "You might recognize that one. I took his head after Havoc was done with him."

I turned and my stomach clenched—the head mounted behind us was far from mummified, and I recognized him as

the Dragon shifter that had tried to build his own empire at Brock's expense. I'd witnessed Havoc rip him apart, right before he'd flown after and mated the shifter's enslaved daughters.

I turned away.

The bronze Dragon's lips twitched as he dismissed me and wrapped a muscular arm around Isobel instead.

"So, have we caused a stir at the academy?" Isobel asked him.

The question made me wonder about their bond. Could they not communicate telepathically like most fated mates? Mindspeaking required openness and honesty—neither of which were qualities they possessed.

I winced as he ran his tongue along the side of her neck and groped beneath her robe while he rubbed at his own crotch.

They certainly didn't have issues with the physical side of their relationship.

He answered as we resumed our progress up the hall. "Oh, yes. The place is a hive of frantic activity. Good thing you brought the horse brats here—even the council won't be stupid enough to come after them." He frowned as he rubbed a noticeable welt on his arm. "I need a fresh venom dose from my contact, though. We met at the Richin market last time, but since they've cracked down on student travel, I haven't been able to arrange a meet."

Isobel frowned. "That's an issue. We need that connection."

Brock nodded briskly. "I'll see what I can do, but it might take time."

She regarded him intently. "How strong is your hold on him?"

Brock offered a leer. "Sharding rock solid. He'll find a way."

We paused outside the room where the Centaur children were being kept, and Brock pulled Isobel in for a kiss and enough of a grope that I averted my eyes. With the bloodmagic wrapped around me, I couldn't do much more.

“Enjoy playing with your baby horsies, Icefire,” he growled to her, before he stalked off down the hall.

We entered the room. The children gathered around the oldest of the females, Bree. She had just entered adulthood, along with her friends. But young enough, still, to be impressionable. The children cast uncertain glances at us, but they didn't bolt away. Bree had obviously been working on them.

The room was spacious, with bookshelves along one wall and multiple cushions for sitting or reclining scattered throughout it. A set of large double doors led out to a garden just beyond. All very inviting, if you ignored the guards stationed around the perimeter.

Bree gestured to us. “This is Isobel and Rafael.” She turned to regard Isobel. “I've been telling them how they can help save the realms.”

“She kidnapped us.” One of the youngest pointed to Isobel. “I don't like her.”

I stood behind Isobel, with Aurora and two other coven members around me. The young male Centaur, Vic, had come in with us. His eyes glittered brightly as he moved to stand beside Bree. He placed a hand on her shoulder, and the possessiveness in the gesture had me searching the female's eyes.

When she leaned into the hand, and then turned to smile up at him, I had my answer. I didn't sense the energy of a mate bond, but they had a relationship.

Then Isobel reached for my power, and cast it out over the children.

“I am sorry that you had to go through such a frightening experience,” she told them, using it to soothe their worries. “Your teachers and parents would not have understood that we

needed you. Once we have trained you, you can return home if you still want to.”

“Train us to do what?” One of the redheaded twins spoke up. “Weren’t you the one who took away our cousin’s equine half?”

Isobel didn’t even flinch. “I tried to make him into a superhero,” she said. “To help save the realms. But instead of embracing his new powers, he fought me.”

“What new powers?” the other twin asked, her voice laced with skepticism. “Human legs are not as strong as equine ones.”

Isobel smiled. “I gave him wings,” she said. “All he has to do, is call upon them. But he refuses.”

They all stared at her with wide eyes, and the male twin asked, “You turned him into a Dragon shifter?”

“A Wyvern, actually,” she said. “But that isn’t all I can do. Vic here is going to embrace a few different beasts, and he will be able to change into any of them at will.” She gazed out over the small group. “How many of you would like to be a superhero?”

With my power smoothing their minds bare of concern, I saw interest flare in a few eyes. The male redhead spoke again. “You can do that? Make us into superheroes?”

Isobel’s eyes gleamed. “I can make you into something that will make your parents proud.”

Before she could continue, Vic left Bree and stepped closer to Isobel. “Not just your parents. The realms will know who you are. They will know your names.”

I tried to meet Bree’s eyes, but they skittered away from me. She put her arms around two of the children’s shoulders. “You will all become famous. Not to mention powerful. No one will ever be able to tell you what to do or where to go. You’ll be part of an elite group.”

My gut twisted. What child didn’t want to be special? To have superpowers? The reality of it was horrible, but they

didn't know that. Likely wouldn't believe it, even if told.

“How can we possibly help?” Another child spoke up. There was doubt on her face, but also guarded hope. “We're only children.”

“Even as children, Isobel can make you powerful,” said Vic.

The female redhead regarded him with narrowed eyes. “My ma says you are as bad as your pa was. And they expelled him from the colony.”

A muscle jumped in Vic's jaw. “My father was unjustly accused.”

“What his father did or did not do has nothing to do with this, Tuli,” Bree cut in. “This is about what *you* can do.”

The male twin eyed Isobel. “So Marcus can shift to these other things, but refuses to?”

“He is too old to embrace something new,” Isobel replied calmly, feeding my energy to them.

“What other beasts will we be able to change into?” another Centaur child asked.

Isobel pointed to the walls, where she'd taped up images of different animals. “I can make it so that you can become any one of these. If you try really hard, you might be able to mix them up, and create your own beast.”

I sensed how their fear had turned to wonder, and I shook with the effort of trying to break free from the coven's grasp. But they had me locked down so tight, I could barely even breathe.

Vic paced along the wall, looking at the images. “How many can you implant in one person?” he asked.

“It is one of the things I want to experiment with,” Isobel replied, as though that experimentation hadn't already killed Centaurs.

When he glanced back at her, his eyes had a feverish look to them. Then he grinned.

“When can we start?” he asked.

Isobel’s smile broadened. “Whenever you like,” she purred.

To my surprise, when the Bellatis were hauling me back to the dungeon, Brock appeared out of nowhere. My guards fell in with him as he took us on a different route than usual—through a door I didn’t know existed that led us down a narrow hall lined with cells.

When he caught me peering into them, the bronze Dragon sneered at me. “If you see something you like, let me know. I can arrange an upgrade for you.”

The cells were squalid, with rotting cots and moldy straw. The torture chamber I resided in was, at least, kept clean.

What surprised me was the number of occupants. I recognized a few—this was where they were kept between sessions in the same chamber as me. None of them looked up as we passed, but rather shrank against the damp stone walls.

I didn’t blame them. Avoiding attention was paramount in this place.

Then we came to one that was a little larger, and cleaner. It had actual furniture, and a primitive washroom off to the side. The resident surprised me as well—it was a small, slim form with long red hair twisted into ropes and tied back from a narrow face with purple eyes. It appeared as though he wasn’t a stranger to Brock’s torture chamber—his clothing hung in shreds. He was collared, and regarded the bronze Dragon with a mixed expression of resignation and scorn.

Considering most regarded Brock with terror, it was a brave front.

“Can he meet me, or not?” the Dragon shifter demanded, rubbing his arm. “I can barely hear him now. This needs to get done.”

Something waved behind the prisoner—to my surprise, it was a tail, thrashing like an angry cat's. As I stared, his eyes flashed. Was he talking to someone telepathically?

The creature straightened and replied, “This evening. Jana’s jewelry booth, east side of the market. He won’t have long, it’s hard enough to get permission to go there these days.” He glared at Brock. “Needs to know if you want the one to the Centaur refreshed too.” He hesitated. “Every extra bond will weaken the one with you. It takes energy to sustain them.”

“I know that, you fuckhead,” Brock snapped.

“I am not a fuckhead,” the prisoner snarled.

Brock’s eyes narrowed. “Watch it, Hitzu. I’ve had a hankering for tail, as of late. You aren’t above another session in the torture chamber.”

I’d heard of Hitzus, but never met one. He stiffened, but I thought I saw fear spasm across his features, and his eyes flashed again. “He will meet you just before the booth closes this evening.”

Brock nodded. “Very well. Tell him to discontinue the bond with the Centaur, for now.”

The big Dragon gestured for the Bellatis to move me on, while my mind raced. Nothing I’d just heard made sense—except that the Hitzu had been talking telepathically to someone. Who?

Before we exited the hall and entered the torture chamber, Brock stopped us once more to haul a young man out of another cell. As the Bellatis fastened the chain fixed to the wall on me, the bronze Dragon pinned his struggling captive into an apparatus.

His mating to Isobel hadn’t dampened his enthusiasm for his other pursuits. I lay down on the cot and turned my back to the sounds coming from the other side of the room. There was nothing I could do for either his fresh victim, or for myself.

I wished I could lay my hands on Brock, and finish him for good. The Dragon, however, wasn’t stupid. He took Isobel’s

warning to heart, and kept his distance.

The woman herself arrived when he'd been busy with his victim for almost an hour. She wasn't alone—she came with Laila, and my heart sank.

Brock had worked himself up into quite a state. “‘Bout time you got here, Icefire,” he complained. “My sharding nuts are ready to explode.”

I rolled to a sitting position and faced them. Isobel's eyes flashed, but she didn't look at him. Instead, she approached me with a twist to her full lips. “Thought we'd give your recharge a personal touch today.” She stopped a few feet from the cot, and Brock came up behind her, pressed his hips into her while his hands grabbed at her breasts. He tugged on her loose blouse, exposing her nipples to his touch, and growled as she arched her back, pushing her buttocks into him.

The entire display sickened me, but my inner Satyr didn't care about my sensibilities. I closed my eyes as my blood surged. I fought it, but it was a fight I was destined to lose.

It created a schism destined to rend my soul in two, and Isobel knew it. She saw it in my eyes. Her hand reached back to cup Brock's substantial balls, and her lips curled into a sneer. She gestured to Laila.

Laila. If only I could bring myself to hurt her—but she was an innocent, doing her mentor's bidding. Now, the blonde coven member hurried to kneel before me and unfasten the laces on my breeches.

What lay within had appreciated Isobel's display, and leaped free when she stroked me.

No. I was losing myself to this evil.

If I reached out with my manacled hands, Isobel would be onto me in a flash. So, I focused on the physical connection already in place instead.

Her hot mouth closed around my shaft, and I extended the power within me—the lethal blend of Liberi and Satyr—chasing along her veins. I didn't want to hurt her, but maybe I could shut her down.

So I left her heart alone, instead tracing the arteries from it to her throat, and I pinched them off.

The tongue hesitated in its laving. Then she choked on me, coughing. When she pulled back, I made one last, desperate push, and she slumped to the floor.

“What have you done?” Isobel pulled free from Brock, who snarled as his swollen member was suddenly left high and dry. She rushed to Laila, and lifted her.

The woman was already coming around, her eyelids flickering. But Isobel set her back down and rose to face me with flashing eyes.

I got to my feet. “I will do it again,” I promised. “Every time she touches me.”

Isobel’s breath hissed from between her teeth, and she grabbed me by the throat. I closed my hands around her arm, and what was inside me crashed headlong into the bloodmagic within her.

I pushed to reach her heart, or her brain—anywhere I could do damage. It was a desperate attempt, and I knew it. Bolstered as she was, I stood little chance of prevailing.

With those resources—she could grab control over my talent, and finish me herself.

I was too valuable to kill, but this wasn’t about that kind of death.

Brock moved to stand only two feet from me, his metallic bronze gaze blazing. He put his big hand on Isobel’s arm.

“Get him, Icefire,” he growled.

The pulse of energy that was their mate bond was the final straw. She smashed through my attempt to hold the line, and sent the bloodmagic coursing through me.

My mouth opened in a soundless scream of agony. I was peripherally aware of Brock seizing hold of her hips, and plunging into her from behind. His thrusts transferred through her to her hands on my face, and through the pain she was inflicting, I experienced their lust.

It climbed and climbed as she sent pulse after pulse into me, scorching me even as my Satyr responded. I was helpless to stop myself from pushing into the hand she dropped, and her lips curved into a cruel smile as she stroked.

Brock was grunting now, his thrusts becoming more rapid and deeper. With her face only inches from my own, I witnessed her pupils expand—and then they, too, began to pulse.

The bronze Dragon roared as she contracted around him, and he exploded. To my shame, the surge of raw, primal emotion brought me with them.

Isobel didn't care that I soaked the front of her gown. I burned with humiliation as her crimson-hued gaze glittered in triumph.

To further add to my shame, she laughed.

6

RILEY



Havoc was an enormous guy, even as a human.

The big Dragon shifter's lower legs and shoulders hung off the cot, despite the fact that it was designed for larger species. It had taken five Dire shifters to carry him here, and they had panted and sprouted fur as they'd done so.

We were in a room in the academy basement that had served as a prison cell. When I'd asked why there was a prison cell in the basement of a school, Cara had merely stated that it hadn't always been a school.

Kiko had told me some of the history of this place. I vowed to discover more of it.

The enclosed space made it oddly intimate, sitting here with Havoc. Only I wasn't alone in my vigil. Kiko sat beside me, while the Dragona leaned on the wall.

"You two don't have to stay," I said.

"Cara told you to leave." The Satyr planted her hands on her hips. "And as you are clearly not going to listen to her, I'm not leaving you alone here with him."

Vali looked around her and shuddered, but added, "That goes for me, too."

I appreciated their support. Wasn't sure I deserved it. I tried to offer them a smile, but it only translated to an upward twitch of my lips. It was all I had the energy for. If it hadn't

been for Cara giving me a boost after she'd worked on Havoc, I'd be as flat out as him.

The Watcher had pushed for me to leave with her. I'd asked for a few more minutes, and she'd granted them. After all, this was the blasted Dragon that had bitten me.

I had questions, and some revolved around Vali. "How do you know Havoc?"

When she hesitated, I hurried to add, "You don't have to tell me. I was just curious."

She tucked her hair behind her ears. "It wasn't really Havoc I knew. It was his twin brother."

I stared at her. "Havoc has a twin brother?"

Her full lips twisted. "He *had* a twin brother. Ace—died." She blinked and looked away.

The undercurrent beneath the words—I didn't know what to say. "I'm sorry."

When she looked back at me, her eyes were luminous with tears. And then she told me. About two Dragons bred to be monsters. About their powerful bond. And about Vali meeting Ace when he'd escorted Xumi to a session with her father.

She stopped, suddenly, and when she continued, her voice had dropped to hardly more than a whisper. "We knew from the first moment our eyes met. But I was an underlord's daughter. And he was a slave."

My heart slammed against my ribs. She was talking about Fate.

"I convinced my father that we should try to buy Ace off Xumi, that he would be a valuable asset. My father agreed—of course, now I know why. He was planning his own bid to gain power. But Xumi wouldn't sell him..."

Her voice broke, and she wiped angrily at the tears threatening to spill over. And then she told us the rest of it. How her push to buy Ace had led to Xumi's experiment to discover the secret behind Havoc and Ace's success as Derangers. Of Ace dying, horribly.

“We’d already started the bond, although he refused to bite me until he was free.” She choked. “But it was far enough along that I felt the moment when he died.”

The only sound in the room was Havoc’s heavy breathing. Vali’s pain-glazed eyes met mine. “A big part of me died with him. Fated mates rarely survive the death of one half. Yet when Brock’s pinions took my family—Havoc was supposed to mate me, to make me a breeder... a womb. When he came for me, I was prepared to die rather than let that happen. But he set me free.”

I stared at her. Havoc? *This* Havoc?

“Havoc blames me for Ace’s death,” she whispered. “But he still let me go. I don’t know why, but he did.”

My heart hurt. So much pain and death. And that stuff about fated mates—what happened if instead of one dying, they left? Never completed the bond?

I remembered what she’d said to me. That if I lost them—there would be a hole inside me that could never be filled.

“Was Ace a lot like Havoc?” Kiko’s voice was hoarse, and there were tears in her eyes, too. I got the feeling that she already knew Vali’s story. Knowing Kiko, she’d likely kept at it until she’d wrestled it from the Dragona.

Vali shook her head. “No. They were like two sides of the same coin. Ace had the monster inside him, you could feel it, but he was ashamed of it. He loved to read—” She swallowed. “The monster is stronger in Havoc.” She shot me a look. “But they were close as can be, and there must be something of Ace in him, for him to have set me free.”

I looked away. Havoc had seemed to be a creature ruled by his monster—and if that was the case, I shouldn’t be here when he woke up. I glanced at my watch—a few minutes down here had stretched into half an hour.

I swear I sent a signal to my feet to stand, but nothing happened. Fang’s beady little eyes stared at me from her perch on Havoc’s chest. My mouth opened, and words dropped out.

“You two should go.”

Kiko stared at me. “Vali says he’s a monster—and you want us to leave you here?”

“You’d leave if you weren’t afraid of missing out on possible gossip,” I accused.

She snorted. And then said, “Of course.”

Vali rubbed her face. “He’s going to be in a very bad mood when he wakes up, and that could be a problem.”

I met her eyes, and read the genuine concern in them. “He won’t hurt me.” I didn’t know that, not really. But he’d bitten me. That had to count for something. “As you pointed out, I have to see this through.”

I saw the acknowledgment in her eyes—that I had a chance that she’d not been given. I swallowed, and added, “If he wakes up with you guys here, he’ll be pissed for sure.”

“Pretty sure he’s going to be pissed, anyway.” Kiko gestured to our surroundings. “This is a dungeon, after all.”

“It’s a prison,” I corrected.

“Bars. Stone walls. Dim lighting. Wet as... Well, definite dungeon accoutrements.”

I raised a brow. “Accoutrements?”

She transferred her frown to me. “Did I not use that right?”

“Would you rather we left?” Vali kept her focus.

Trust the Dragona to be the astute one. “It would be best, I think.”

Kiko grimaced. “I don’t want to leave you alone down here.”

“I’m hardly alone,” I pointed out. “Cara asked Eli to stand guard at the top of the stairs. And it seems that Fang is on my side.”

The Satyr glanced to where the Webspinner sat on Havoc’s substantial chest. “Why did she bite him? I thought she was his pet.”

I didn't know why, really, but I went with my preferred theory. "I don't think she wanted him to leave."

Kiko pushed herself to her feet. "Are you sure he won't shred you?"

I dredged up a tired smile. "I'm sure. Go get something to eat."

"I have been enjoying the chocolate from the vending machines," Vali admitted. "Humans create the most wonderful dark chocolate. Not too sweet."

Kiko's expression brightened as she gestured to me. "I can fetch you something. We missed lunch, but I'm sure Borji can scrounge us up some dumplings."

Borji? "Were you *interrogating* the kitchen staff?"

She grinned. "Maybe."

I was hungry, but I needed time alone. Or rather, time with Havoc. "It's okay. I'm fine."

With a last concerned glance to the sleeping giant, the Satyr and Dragona left me to it.

It was very quiet after they'd gone. Was Havoc's breathing a little lighter? The bite mark on my shoulder seemed to pulse in rhythm to it. Cara had healed the wounds, but it had started throbbing when Havoc had appeared in that clearing, and hadn't stopped since.

Damned Dragon.

I rose and walked over to where he lay. It was damp here, but they'd brought the cot down from an upper floor and placed it in the cell. At least it was dry.

I'd argued against bringing him down here, but Cara had said that until we knew that Havoc was going to wake up as himself, this was the best place for him. I supposed having a deranged Dragon loose on the dorm floor would put a damper on morale. And Amadeus would be pissed.

Havoc's reputation was the reason Cara had instructed me to leave him, too. But I'd meant what I'd said to Kiko—I

wasn't afraid of Havoc. And my heart told me that Vali was right.

I had to fight for him if I didn't want holes in my soul.

Deeply asleep, and with all the planes of his face relaxed, he looked younger and far less fierce. My eyes drifted to the tag on his ear—Cara had revealed the truth of it. It was a slave tag. Designed to proclaim him as property.

Owned.

Vali's ear was scarred because she'd ripped hers free. My gut twisted. There were reasons people behaved as they did. Havoc's life couldn't have been easy, and he'd lost his brother. Sometimes prickly asshole behavior was a way to keep others at a distance. I was familiar with that strategy.

But then again, sometimes people were just prickly assholes.

I rose and moved closer to Havoc. He hadn't bothered to grow his scales over his torso in the clearing, no doubt intending to change back to Dragon the moment he'd reclaimed Fang. He was cut like glass, with huge pectoral and shoulder muscles, and I admired not only that, but the intricacy of the tattoos across his skin. The theme was a little boring—Dragons of all kinds and descriptions—but beautifully rendered. They suited him. My fingers itched to touch him. His skin, where it was bare of scales, was smooth. Not a hair in sight.

Fang wandered closer to me, and without thinking, I lowered my hand to her. She hopped onto it, her fuzzy little legs tickling as she ran up to my shoulder.

I should have been afraid of her after what she'd done to him. But I wasn't. Maybe because I was grateful to her, for stopping him from leaving.

It would only be a temporary reprieve, I was certain. He'd likely be gone as soon as he woke up. My heart ached—how could he dismiss me so easily?

There was no room left on the cot, so I selected a dry-ish spot on the floor and sat down with my back to it and Havoc,

leaning against the frame as I stroked the Webspinner. Despite Cara's boost, my entire body trembled.

Fang began to vibrate softly, and my eyes drifted closed, my thoughts becoming fuzzy...

I woke up to a hand in my hair.

A huge hand. When it moved to cup my face, it spanned from my jaw to the top of my head. The fingers were touching me so lightly, it was almost as though I felt their heat rather than any pressure at all.

I stayed very still, afraid to ruin the moment. The cot creaked, and I sensed him looming over me. And then I heard him inhale.

I turned my head then, pushing my nose against his wrist. He smelled of spice and ozone, a warm scent that resonated through me.

He rumbled, but it wasn't a growl. More like a Dragonian purr. When I looked up, I gazed directly into molten copper eyes.

I stopped breathing. Then, I slowly rotated my head, and sucked his thumb into my mouth.

His eyes ignited, and the rumbling grew in volume. I wasn't sure what looked back at me from Havoc's face, but I didn't think his human was home.

Frankly, I didn't give a damn. Fang jumped to the ground and skittered to the far wall as I pushed myself to my knees. I placed my hands on each side of his handsome face, pulled it to my own, and kissed him.

As our tongues tangled, I felt a shudder pass through him, and then his hands dipped down to fasten on my waist, and he lifted me until I straddled his hips.

There was no mistaking the heat and rigidity of what now nestled between my legs. I ripped off my tee shirt, and then my bra. His gaze riveted on my breasts as his fingers drifted to the small of my back. They found, and played with, the little cluster of stiff hairs—

I moaned and squirmed, rubbing myself with wanton and totally out-of-control abandon as my hands roamed eagerly over his torso.

I wanted him. And I wanted him *now*.

His scales had fallen away, leaving him gloriously naked. But there was too much clothing between us. I broke away and rolled off him, tugging impatiently at my leggings to yank them off. Stripped my panties away and turned to climb back onto him—

I met his copper eyes and saw the exact moment when Havoc came home.

He ripped his glowing eyes from my breasts, and met my own. “What the fucking hell, Dreambitch.”

“If you want me to stop, say so,” I whispered. When he hesitated, I reached, wrapped my fingers around his huge dick, and dropped my mouth straight onto it.

His hands tangled in my hair and pulled, but I resisted the first hard tug, flicking my tongue beneath the burgeoning head, before shoving as much of it into my mouth as I could, and *sucking*.

The second hair tug was barely discernible. Then his fists tightened in my hair, his hips bucked into my mouth, and he rumbled. His entire body vibrated with it, and it resonated clear through me.

The ache between my legs became almost unbearable. I cupped his balls, one at a time, and squeezed them. His dick jumped so hard I almost bit him.

I lifted my gaze to meet his glowing copper eyes, and the conflict within them robbed me of breath. They flashed erratically, as though he were at war with himself.

He wanted me, but he didn't. Why was he resisting what so clearly was meant to be? Should I stop? Yet his hand flattened against the back of my head, and his fingers caressed my scalp.

Talk about mixed signals.

I hesitated, and then I rolled my tongue over the huge head and engulfed him as far as I could, sucking again. His growl rolled through the rumble, and the hand behind my head helped me with the rhythm. Reassured that he was fully committed, I cupped his balls, and squeezed again.

His breath caught as his fingers dropped to play with the hairs on the nape of my neck. Pure electricity zinged to my core.

I lost it. Pulled my mouth away, and climbed him like a tree. He grabbed my wrists—was he going to pull me off?—but then, he let go. I reached for his hands, to pull them to my breasts.

His rumble returned as they spread to encompass them. The thick thumbs rolled over my erect nipples as I poised myself over that which begged to come home. Then, inch by blissful inch, I eased myself onto him.

It was easier this time. Almost as if I'd grown to accommodate his tremendous girth. And each time I moved, he shuddered, the rumble hitching, his eyes closing, and then slitting open. I spotted gleaming copper between the auburn lashes.

Until, at last, he was there. Fully seated, and his big hands moved to my hips as I began the dance. Sliding off, and on, twisting and grinding. His vibrating sound increased as it filled the tiny cell, and small pebbles dropped from the walls. His hands helped set the pace, but he let me lead.

“Rileeee...” It was growled rather than spoken, a deep vibration that accelerated my heart. It was the first time he'd said my name.

And suddenly, I wasn't just me anymore. A part of me broke away, and I was seeing myself through his eyes. *Feeling what he felt.* The velvet softness of each liquid slide, the tightening friction as he swelled within me. Then I was back in my body, the thick length of him rubbing and bumping in all the right places—sending zings of pure pleasure through me.

All of it pushing us closer and closer to the edge. Tighter and tighter, until with a roar, he arched up off the cot and exploded deep inside me.

He took me with him. Wave after wave. It was so intense I thought I would faint.

I collapsed on top of him, and we lay like that for a few precious seconds.

Then his hands closed around my waist, and he lifted me off him. Once my feet hit the ground, he pulled away as though scorched.

“What the fucking hell, Dreambitch.” His gaze was hostile.

Disbelief warred with rage, and rage won. “You started it,” I accused.

“What?”

“I was sitting there.” I pointed to the ground beside the cot. “And you touched my hair. And then, you sniffed me.”

One brow rose. “That wasn’t me.”

“What the fuck. That is the flimsiest excuse I’ve ever heard. That hand,” I pointed, “Ran its fingers through my hair. Caressed my face—”

“It fucking did not!” His voice had risen.

“It *fucking* well did!” I shouted back. “And then you lifted me onto you. And your *fucking* dick was *very* interested in what I had to offer.” He’d grown his scales mostly over it, an impressive feat considering it seemed ready for round two.

It wasn’t me, dammit.

The words, along with the emphatic denial, rang through my head. And without thinking, I answered him there.

Then who the hell was it?

His eyes widened. And suddenly, he was on his feet, backing up to the wall with his wings sprouting from his back to crash against the ceiling.

“Is everything all right down there?”

Fuck. It was the Bellati, Eli, coming to check out the shouting. And here I was, stark naked and arguing telepathically with a damned prick of a Dragon.

As I lunged for my clothes, I was shocked to see Havoc plant himself in the doorway to the cell, blocking Eli's view of me.

"We're okay," the Dragon rumbled. "Just having a—discussion."

I abandoned my underwear and went straight for maximum coverage. Shoved my bra beneath the cot, and yanked my leggings on with such force I heard the seams threaten to give way. Managed to get both arms through the tee just as Eli said, "I want to see Riley."

His voice dripped with suspicion. I moved up alongside Havoc, ignoring the way he recoiled, backing toward the cot.

"I'm fine, Eli," I said. "We were having an argument."

The Bellati's eyes traveled from me, to the Dragon, and then dropped to the ground.

My panties lay on the cell floor.

While my brain came up with a dozen ridiculous reasons I could state for them being there—wasn't sure he'd believe a butterfly-patterned thong belonged to Havoc, and the guy grew scales, anyway—my face flushed beet red. I then casually stepped so that my body blocked his view of them.

"Thank you, Eli," I said. "But as you can see, we are fine."

The Bellati's brows danced. "I can see that. I'll be at the top of the stairs. If you need me, just yell. Again."

He spun and left. I glared at Havoc as he bent to retrieve my bra, tossed it to me, and glowered back.

"So, am I a prisoner, then?" he demanded.

I gritted my teeth. "Cara says you are welcome to stay in these lovely accommodations for as long as you like. This is the best hiding spot for you until Isobel and Brock are dealt

with. But you are also free to fly away and get yourself killed if you prefer.” I turned away, hell-bent on a dramatic exit.

A scuttling motion revealed itself as Fang, racing toward me. Havoc’s glare turned to a glower as the Webspinner climbed up my leg and my torso to hide beneath my hair.

“Fucking hell, Dreambitch, she’s *mine*,” he snarled.

“She seems to be able to make her own choices,” I corrected. “And I must say that so far, I approve of them.”

I snatched my panties off the floor and stalked from the cell, disappointed that there wasn’t a door to slam.

My panties almost fit in my pocket. The bra was another matter. I tucked it beneath my arm.

Eli said nothing as I passed him in the hall, and I couldn’t even look at him. Fang curled up against my neck and vibrated as tears pricked my eyes.

Fuck. After all this, be damned if I was going to cry.

I pelted up the stairs all the way to the fifth floor, pushing past students with single-minded determination and ignoring the stares that followed me. Damned shifters and their noses.

When I got to the top in record time, I realized that I was barely breathing hard. What was up with that? I fuck an asshole Dragon, and suddenly I’m superwoman?

I can’t believe I fucked him. And he’d treated me worse than shit. I’d just decided I was sooo done with men when I slammed through the doors to the dorm level and almost ran into a wall.

Not a wall. A man.

Marcus.

RILEY



Marcus. The dark circles around his eyes and the hollow cheeks only emphasized the strong bones of his face, adding a dangerous intensity to him.

Why hadn't anyone warned me that he'd returned to the academy? Had he been hiding in Cara's suite?

Fuck. He was still so gorgeous. As he stood there staring back at me, I ached to touch him.

So much for my no-more-men resolution. It had lasted, what, five seconds?

Then his eyes dropped to my bra. *Crap*. Where were the million reasons why I was wandering around with a bra in my hands?

His head lifted, the nostrils flaring. Just as suspicion bloomed in those star-shot eyes, I blurted, "Gift from Constance."

It derailed him beautifully. Constance had every reason to furnish me with a sports bra. The fact my girls were swinging free at the moment had nothing to do with it.

Neither did the fact that I reeked of Havoc and sex and other unmentionable things that were making me wish I'd had time to put my panties back on.

Dammit. Like we needed any more awkwardness.

As other students pushed past us, Marcus's gaze remained fastened on my chest, and I was careful not to move. The jiggle would *so* give things away. Perhaps there was more than one reason the other students had been staring as I belted up the stairs. I pushed to engage his brain in other directions. "I thought you were still at the colony?"

His eyes rose off my chest, and his mouth twisted. "Cara brought me back."

I scanned him. "Don't see any scales."

He pulled on the familiar chain around his neck, and in addition to his ring, four blue crystals popped free. "They're currently under wraps." But his eyes said otherwise—darkness scudded across them, and they changed color with every blink.

"So..." I swallowed. "Why are you up here? I thought you'd be staying with Cara."

"I am," he said. "I came looking for you."

My heart leaped as he grabbed me by the elbow, guiding me over to the window at the end of the hall. His touch was electric, pulsing straight through me. Had he rethought what lay between us?

He released me as soon as we reached our goal and then pulled something from his pocket.

It gleamed in the light from the window. A long metal piece, intricately carved with what looked like hieroglyphics. It was vaguely familiar.

His fingers traced the patterns. "I made this," he said, "for my cousin, Tuli."

His cousin? Then images flashed in my mind—of two young Centaurs, each wearing a necklet.

As my world came crashing down, his pleading eyes met mine. "You found me." His other hand lifted the ring on the chain. "Can you find the kids?"

Fuck. He hadn't forgiven me. "Let me get this straight—you called me a slut and walked away, but you are willing to use what I can do to rescue your cousins?"

His brows drew down. “What’s a slut?”

“Someone who sleeps around with lots of guys.”

“I didn’t call you that!” His eyes had gone midnight dark.

“You certainly implied it.”

Fang chose this inopportune moment to wander out from beneath my hair.

Dammit.

Marcus moved in close to me, and his expression could have frozen hell itself. “You *have his pet*. You *stink of him*.”

“I am following my heart.” I poked my finger into his chest with each word. “And it is telling me that you and Havoc and Rafael are my future.”

His eyes ignited. “*Rafael*, too? You don’t even know him! Maybe you *are* a slut.”

The word pierced me like a red-hot sword, and my reaction burst from me. “What I am is destined to die alone, because Fate has given me two pure assholes that want nothing to do with me, and a third who is held captive by a Sorceress no one can find.”

He leaned closer. “My heart would bleed for you. Except my nose is telling me you haven’t exactly been alone.” His eyes flashed silver, and as dark scales erupted across his cheeks, he waved the necklet. “Are you willing to help me, or not?”

I glared at him. “I don’t know if I can Jump to them without a location reference.”

He frowned. “Did you use a location with me?”

“I was in your dream, remember? So, yes.”

His brows dropped even lower. “But you’d never been there.”

“I saw it pretty clearly.” I struggled to get a grip on my temper. “Is Cara in on this idea? Or are you flying solo?”

“I don’t know.” His gaze skittered away from mine. “She’s in a meeting about the children right now. But if they can’t figure out where Isobel is, those kids are doomed—I know what that bitch is capable of.”

So. He was the one asking me, not her. Did he know how risky an ask this was? I’d just basically told him, and he wasn’t backing off.

I guess that told me where I stood in his worldview.

His mouth pulled straight, and he looked down at the necklet. “If there is even a chance—I can get you a photograph of my cousins, too.” His eyes locked on mine. “I’m not asking you to take the risk alone. Us going after them may be their only chance.”

My pulse raced. I didn’t know if what he was asking was possible. But it pissed me off that he’d push for it. “I don’t need a photograph. I met them when I asked your mother for that ring. Back when I cared enough to come after you.”

We crossed glares like some would swords.

“Lucky for you, I want those kids back too,” I said. “But if this ends up being the only way—my helping you changes nothing between us.”

His eyes flared white. “I am in full agreement. If we do this, then we go our separate ways afterward.”

I stalked past him. “I need to recharge, or there’s no hope of me doing this.”

I didn’t look back as I walked away.

And he didn’t try to stop me.

When I opened the door to our room, Vali and Kiko were sitting on the Satyr’s bed. Kiko had her arm around the Dragona’s shoulders, and their heads were close together.

They both visibly startled when I came in. While Vali rubbed at her eyes, Kiko rose and came toward me, her expression reflecting her concern. “Are you okay?”

I guessed I looked a little frazzled. I threw down my bra and plunked onto my bed. Kiko’s eyes riveted first on the bra, and then on me. “Things went well? Or—not?”

I dropped my face into my hands. “How can I have two men in my life, and both be such assholes?”

She transferred to my bed, and went to wrap her arm around me, but then Fang came out from beneath my hair. The Satyr moved over a bit, before saying, “Havoc seems to have a reliable effect on women.”

“It’s not just him. I bumped into Marcus just now. He hasn’t forgiven me for Havoc. Refuses to see that we could all be together.”

“Yep,” Kiko agreed. “That puts him into the asshole category, for sure.”

Vali’s red-rimmed eyes regarded me steadily. “They don’t know what they’re doing. What lies between you is fated—and Havoc has already bitten you.” She shook her head.

“Marcus can’t even come near me without morphing into a monster,” I growled. “And he refuses to consider Havoc as anything other than a rival. Maybe he doesn’t want me at all.”

“Nope,” Kiko assessed. “This is definitely chest-pounding male crap going on.”

“Well, Havoc doesn’t want me,” I pointed out. “He made that clear.”

Kiko’s eyes drifted to the bra. “Um...”

“*After* we fucked.”

Her eyes darkened. “Okay, that puts him into the extreme-bastard category.”

“Claims it wasn’t him.” I spoke through gritted teeth.

Vali moved until her legs were off the bed. “Havoc may be an ass regardless, but he also might not have been lying. Ace

always referred to three entities within him. The Deranger monster, the Dragon beast, and his human. Sometimes when he woke up, his human wasn't home."

I stared at her. Havoc had been serious when he'd said it wasn't him?

"So look at it this way," she said. "His monster and his beast want you. It's his human that is holding back."

I rubbed my face. This shifter thing was complicated as hell. "So, it was his monster and his beast that screwed me?" It would mesh with conflict I'd seen in his eyes. Had I been wrong to push? My heart twisted.

"That's a lucky thing," Kiko exclaimed. "Better that, than the other way around. If the monster didn't like you—"

It did make me feel better, but only marginally. Did Havoc's human not want me at all? But he'd wanted to keep going even after the human in him had woken up. I was sure of it.

And that made him a grade-one asshole for not admitting to it. But that was okay. Because I didn't want him either, after his reaction.

He could fly off into the great unknown, for all I cared.

"What did the other asshole want?" Kiko asked.

So I told them.

"That sounds way too dangerous," the Satyr protested once I'd told her. Her eyes flashed dark fire.

"I want those kids away from Isobel as badly as Marcus does." I would have tried to help, even without Marcus.

Kiko was keeping one eye on Fang, who prowled around on my bed, humming to herself and poking her fuzzy legs into the cracks around the edges. Perhaps looking for web-building opportunities? It was a curiously reassuring activity. "I did a little Jump test with Jacques before I went to find Marcus, but it wasn't a good one. I'm really not sure how much the surroundings matter."

The Satyr stared at me with wide eyes before stating, “He has a *ton* of nerve asking you to do this.”

Her level of piss-off was helping to ease the hurt, just a little. It stung that Marcus would put the kids above my safety, even though I knew why he did so. *I know what she’s capable of*, he’d said.

That bitch had torn him apart. I couldn’t imagine her doing that to *children*.

“He has to know how risky this is for you.” Kiko sounded surprisingly outraged, for her. Likely because we were currently without any male company to provide distraction.

He’d seen its effects on me. I’d Jumped to this room during my first training session, and been damned shaky afterward. Then there was the disastrous swimming incident. And finally, the Jump to him, where I’d basically dissolved into a Dragon.

One would think it was pretty clear that Jumping wasn’t for the faint of heart, but who knew. “Maybe he thinks it’s like creating a sword—you get better with practice.”

She arched a brow. “And you’ve created how many swords, exactly?”

I grimaced. “Okay. Point taken.” My mind was already occupied with logistics. “If I find them, I don’t even know how many I can bring home at once...”

Her mouth opened, and then closed again, before she rose. “Well, you need to eat if you are planning to be a superhero. I will once again pillage the vending machines.”

Vali shot me a look, then said, “I’ll come, too. Two of us can carry more provisions. And this might be a long undertaking.”

Kiko held the door open for the Dragona, but hesitated before adding, “I will remind you that superheroes rarely get to have any fun. They are usually too busy saving the world.” With that surprising declaration, she followed the Dragona out.

I think the proper noun to use was superheroine. Although considering my Dire adventure, who knew.

I scooped Fang up. She vibrated happily as I stroked her, then I rose and went to the window. From here, I noticed how the meadow looked a bit trampled close to the gate, but all the injured were long gone. Still, with classes suspended for the day, the front meadow was a busy place. The sky had cleared, and the sun encouraged sunbathers on the beach. There was enough muscley naked flesh revealed to give Kiko palpitations.

I noticed that those braving the water were staying in the shallows. Cowards.

Fang crawled along my arm and nestled in her usual spot beneath my hair. I should be exhausted, but instead, I felt as though I had little jolts of electricity running through me, followed by flushes of pure heat. My skin prickled with sweat, and my head spun. Was I getting sick?

Sick.

A chill traveled through my core. The asshole Dragon had bitten me. And Dragons could transmit their virus at any time.

But surely it took longer to incubate? My mind raced. Human viruses could develop damned fast, but I had no idea about shifter ones.

Perfect. Like I needed anything else to worry about. I should ask Cara about this one. Except Marcus was staying with her...

Dammit.

I shivered, and rubbed my fingers over arms covered in goosebumps. The room suddenly felt confining, like a trap rather than a safe haven. The stone walls, the dampness—they couldn't keep me here. I'd lose my sharding mind. Fuck Fang. I needed to get to the roof, spread my wings, and get the hell out of here—

Sharding? Fuck Fang? Wings?

I blinked, my eyes telling me I stood in the dorm room, while my brain was most definitely seeing the cell where I'd left a certain hostile bastard of a Dragon.

Get the fucking hell out of my head, Dreambitch.

Havoc?

I had the sensation of being shoved away, and the images of the stone cell vanished. But the craving to vacate the premises did not, and my pulse accelerated.

Despite my resolve to tell him to take a hike, I found myself stating, *If you run now, they will find you. And you know it.*

I do not need anyone to fucking tell me that. The words seethed through my mind, and I swore they left scorch marks.

Then why are you even considering leaving? If you insist on being an idiot, you deserve to get caught.

I. Am. NOT. An. Idiot. This time, the mental shove actually sent me physically reeling across the room, and the link cut off so rapidly it was almost painful.

Swell. Now to top things off, I had a grumpy Dragon *prick* in my head. Or not in it, depending on his mood. I hadn't realized that telepathy came with so much drama.

He managed, however, to leave his restlessness behind. The room did feel confining. As I hugged myself, I remembered the rush of air over my wings. As well as Havoc's huge Dragon, looming protectively over me...

Kiko and Vali breezed in through the door, their arms laden with goodies. One look at my face, and they froze.

"What's happened now?" Kiko asked.

I grabbed the Satyr by the arm and towed her, along with the delectables, out the door. Vali followed, juggling several meatroll packages.

I headed for open air. "Let's make this a picnic."

Kiko, Vali, and I sat on the ground outside the old arbor and had an early supper.

We weren't exactly alone. The occasional student—furred and otherwise—popped out along the trail, only to vanish once again once they spotted us. The arbor might seem off the beaten track, but it was obviously a popular spot.

Luckily, we'd claimed it first.

"We could sit on the bench inside," Kiko pointed out for the third time.

I sighed and finally explained my issue. "I forgot to bring a blanket. Did you, or did you not, screw Scott in there?"

Her eyes gleamed with mischief. "Not just Scott," she confessed.

"It's a lovely afternoon to sit on the grass," I said.

She glanced around. "Well, actually—"

I stared at her. "Is there anywhere you haven't screwed a guy?"

She shrugged. "I am a Satyr. And you are absolutely no fun."

That seemed the consensus, all right.

Vali bit her pinky nail. "You mean you've—how many guys have you—oh, never mind."

The Satyr pointed to the grass beneath a certain tree. "Untried, at least by me, because it's uncomfortable over there." Her lower lip stuck out in an impressive pout. "Honestly, it has *rained*. At least once. It isn't like we spray fluids everywhere." She reconsidered. "Although—"

"TMI." I rose to head for the designated spot.

"What?"

I enlightened her as Vali and I settled beneath the unused tree. I could see why it wasn't prime real estate—its roots ran along the surface, and I had to squirm to find a grassy softer spot big enough for me. If it kept it unsex-smear'd, I'd put up with it.

“Oh.” The TMI concept seemed foreign to Kiko, as was evidenced by her confused expression. She plunked herself down beneath the comfy tree with a sigh, and stared up through the branches to the late afternoon sky.

Vali managed to find enough grass to stretch out, looking much like a Playboy centerfold. What would it be like to be born like that? Every move, every curve, perfect.

It didn't matter if you had a hole in your soul.

The thought popped into my mind and lodged there. Now that I knew what to look for, the pain of Ace's death was in every gesture, every word. It didn't matter how beautiful Vali was. I didn't want to be in her shoes.

Didn't want to become like her.

I closed my eyes. Now that I was aware, I could sense Havoc at the fringes of my consciousness. All I had to do was imagine him to catch snatches of his thoughts. That was one royally pissed-off Dragon. He was muttering curses and pacing, at the moment. In and out of the cell, as though convincing himself that he could leave.

But at least he was still down there. And safe.

Marcus was here, too. Safe in Cara's suite. Or as safe as he could be, considering the monster that prowled within him.

I should be grateful. And I was. But although both men were close in terms of proximity, they'd made it pretty damned clear they wanted nothing to do with me.

It was definitely time for chocolate. I sighed and reached for a bar.

My heart might be in a shambles, but I physically felt better out here in the open air. My energy buzz had subsided, and I had a powerful urge to nap. I consumed the last of the

chocolate and tried my own version of stretching out. It was more like *camp counselor* than *centerfold*, though.

“We have supper in half an hour,” Kiko said. “If we fall asleep, we’ll miss it.”

“I’m good,” purred Vali without opening her eyes. “This day off might be for all the wrong reasons, but I needed it.”

I was, at the moment, replete, and said so. We fell silent, mesmerized by the breeze moving through the leaves. Even Havoc pacing in my mind had settled, for now. He’d shifted to a small version of his Dragon, and curled up in the larger chamber beyond his cell.

I needed to rest if I was seriously going to try rescuing those kids. I knew what the twins looked like, and I had the necklet. It was worth a shot to save them from Isobel.

But if I was going in after them, I was going after another, as well.

My third moon. Rafael.

How was I going to get to him? They’d kept him in chains at the other place. Even if I found him, how would I free him? Could I Jump with him if he was attached to something else?

If he was chained, it might pull him apart.

I’d once seen through his eyes. I’d been dreaming, but was pretty sure he’d been awake. Which was different from what I’d experienced with Marcus and Havoc.

Could I manage that again?

I didn’t know if my dreams could be targeted. There might be another way to connect with him—but for that, I’d need Cara’s help.

I stood abruptly, and Kiko peered up at me. “Is it time for supper?” she asked halfway hopefully.

“I’m going to see Cara.”

Vali sat up. “Isn’t Marcus staying with Cara?”

“He is.”

The Dragona stood and brushed herself off. “Okay then. Guess the day was too dull, by far.”

“You guys don’t have to come.”

The Satyr sighed. “Yes. Yes, we do.”

MARCUS



By the time I bolted through the door into Cara's suite, I was in a bit of a state.

A lot of one, actually. You need to calm down.

Impossible, really, with what I'd smelled all over Riley. My nose wasn't as good as a Dire's, but she'd reeked of sex.

Of Dragon sex.

Freking hell. Cara wasn't back yet, and I was losing it. I stood in the kitchen as scales chased over my arms. But it wasn't just rage, not this time. The scent of another male on Riley's skin—and clear evidence of what she'd been doing—had inflamed other things, as well. Painfully. Even the academy's substantial sweatpants were now far too tight.

Iskar cursed incoherently in my mind, but I wasn't listening. I felt as though I were about to explode into a thousand pieces, many of which featured claws and teeth. All that raw savagery pulsed straight to my throbbing cock.

Cara was due back at any time. I barely possessed the presence of mind to spin and head for the bathing room. As I pushed through the door, I yanked the sweats off my pulsing member.

Shower, Iskar commanded.

Well, okay. No towel was going to cope with this. I ripped off my clothes so rapidly the seams protested, and I stepped into the stall.

I didn't need the lubrication, but I turned the water on anyway, and cranked it to hot. It cascaded over me as I folded my fingers around myself, and began to stroke.

Havoc's scent was so intertwined with Riley's that it swirled through my brain and instantly had me thrusting hard into my hand, my head falling back, lips pulled away from my teeth. I was so hard it was painful, my balls already pulled up tight. My arms had gone black with scales, the extra ridging along my fingers adding to the delicious friction as I added a twist to the swollen head—

And came apart. I roared as I pulsed against the shower walls in huge, rhythmic pulses, over and over and over again, until I thought it would drain me of every fluid I possessed.

I slowly became aware I was leaning on the sidewall, the hot water coursing over skin that now appeared human.

Wow. Iskar sounded breathless. *If you could bottle that, you'd make a fortune.*

Great, I answered. *Eau de fiend.* I redirected the spray to clean off the wall. Iskar was right. It was much easier than towels.

Fifteen minutes later, I staggered onto Cara's balcony, sat in a chair, and watched the sun reflecting off the lake. I thought about Riley swimming, and the aftermath of being attacked by a giant fish.

The closest I'd ever come to—well, coming inside Riley.

Cut it out, Marcus. Just because you've masturbated to dubious male fantasies and loaded up on crystal dust, doesn't mean you can think about her like that and not suffer the consequences.

I gritted my teeth. *This is never going to be over, is it?*

When Iskar didn't answer, I put both my feet on the table, wiggled my toes, and stared at them. They were only now beginning to feel like they were a part of me.

You need to set up sparring matches with Cody, now that you aren't tripping over them constantly, suggested Iskar. No

doubt he was trying to encourage any thoughts other than the one that most occupied my time.

The shower thing picked at me. It hadn't been just about Riley, and I knew it. The sex scent—Havoc's—had driven a lot of it. Did male Dragons have pheromones, too? Why had it sent me over the edge?

There is a reason, but you don't want to hear it, Iskar stated.

Riley's words about multiple mates echoed through me, and I pushed them away. Yet the rage they summoned didn't quite ring as true as it once had. I shelved it—because I had bigger concerns.

I asked the primary question that was bothering me. *How dangerous is it, if Riley Jumps without knowing the place where she is going?*

Not much is known about Jumpers, Iskar said. *I have heard of others—well, one, really—that Jumped without a location reference. But all the texts talk of how important it is to have it.*

I swallowed. *Could she die?*

Yes, she could. I already told you that. You just weren't listening.

Dammit. He had, and I wasn't. The thought of those kids in Isobel's hands was driving me wild. Then I'd pushed the idea on Riley. No wonder she was so damned mad. *But she didn't say no.*

She is brave. She came after you.

Yes. Yes, she had. And if Cara couldn't find Isobel's location, she'd go after the kids, too. I knew it.

But then I remembered the way she'd smelled. The underwear she had tucked under her arm.

They are mated, Marcus. Get over it.

Get over it? This time, the rage rose pure and raw, and the thing within me stirred.

All right. We'll have to leave this conversation for now. But you are being a fool.

The entrance to the suite opened, and the Watcher herself came through. From where I sat, I could see her through the window.

She looked exhausted. She pulled a beer from her fridge, came through to the balcony, raised a brow at my feet until I put them back down, and then lowered into a chair.

I'd never seen her drink beer. I thought the brews were only for visitors. I took it as a sign. "They don't know where the kids are, do they?"

Cara took a long pull from the bottle before answering. "Actually, the Dragons have questioned the mercenaries we captured, and apparently Isobel is now hiding in plain sight. She is staying in an underlord's stronghold. A Dragon named Brock owns it. He now runs the empire once owned by his mother, who was very powerful. But the stronghold the mercenaries were headed to was not the same one where she was going. Nobody seems to know exactly where Brock took her."

"Can Jacques track them down?" I asked.

Cara frowned. "They have him working on it. But even if they find where she's keeping the children—Brock is very powerful, and his strongholds are well protected. The Dragon Legion is not what it once was. To pit them against Brock's pinions would be reckless."

"So a direct assault won't work." Again, a statement, not a question. I had an idea of where this was headed.

After all, I'd already been there.

Cara rubbed her face. "If they find where the children are—the council will try to get a visual from inside. They want to send in a strike team, with Riley."

I straightened. A strike team? My gut twisted. "They're not going after the kids. They're going after Isobel."

The Watcher pressed the cold beer bottle against her forehead. “I spent most of my time arguing that even if we figure out where she is, we don’t have anything we can send that can take her down.”

My gut twisted tighter. “What did they say?”

“They pointed out that we do.”

I stared at her. “We do?”

She closed her eyes as a bead of condensation from the bottle ran down her cheek. “They want to use the Perditor against her.”

Ice traveled down my spine. “But if they send Nikolai—”

“Yes.” She sighed. “I warned them that a battle between Isobel and Nikolai would take out whatever realm it occurred in. Using him as a weapon would be foolish in the extreme.”

“Did they listen?”

The Watcher scowled. “I’m not sure. It’s a moot point unless we can figure out exactly which of Brock’s strongholds she is holed up in.”

My mind raced. “We also don’t know how many people Riley can Jump in.”

“There is also that. I’m hoping that reason will prevail, and we can focus on getting the kids out before they try anything else.”

“I’ve already asked her about the children,” I confessed.

Cara shot me a surprised look. “So much for staying here and resting.” She massaged her temple. “That’s also impossible unless we can get a visual.”

I grimaced. “I asked her about Tuli’s necklet. If she could use it, to Jump to her.”

Cara went very still. “And she said?”

“She didn’t know, but she was game to try.”

The Watcher’s face went rigid. “Not a good idea.”

My heart twisted. “So Iskar has pointed out.”

Cara hesitated, and then rose. “We can discuss this with Riley. She appears to be on her way—”

Someone knocked on the door, and my pulse shot through the roof.

“Stay here,” Cara ordered, and went to open the door.

RILEY



Cara didn't seem surprised to see me and my BFFs.

I peered past her, wondering where Marcus was hiding.

"He's on the balcony," she said, closing the door behind me. "And it is likely best if he stays there."

But he wasn't on the balcony. Not anymore. He stood in the doorway.

"Too late," I said.

Cara planted her hands on her hips and glared at him. "If you start to lose it, you have to leave. Is that clear?"

He didn't answer, only nodded. I assessed him—so far, he seemed scale-free. Cara turned back to me as I sat down at the table. Kiko shot him a wary look and perched on the chair farthest from him. Vali took a leaning spot against the wall.

I'd noticed that Dragons weren't big on sitting.

"So," I said. "Did they find Isobel?"

Cara's lips pulled straight as she took the seat across from me, which gave me the answer before she spoke. "No. They know she is staying in an underlord's stronghold, but they don't know which one."

Unexpectedly, Vali weighed in. "Xumi had favorites—she regularly hosted social gatherings to impress the inferior underlords and make sure everyone knew she *owned* them." When I stared at her, she chewed on her pinky nail, before

adding, “There are many different types of slavery. But I’ve been to some of her places. I might be able to help.”

Cara sat up straighter.

I pounced on the possibility. “If I get a visual—could you identify it?”

“It’s a long shot, but maybe,” Vali replied.

My pulse accelerated. For the first time, this didn’t seem quite so much like a needle in the haystack. “Is Rafael likely with them?” I asked.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Marcus stiffen.

“I think she is using him to control them, so, yes,” the Watcher answered.

“I told you that I dreamed of him,” I said. “But it was powerful, because I was seeing through his eyes. And I wondered—if you hypnotized me, might I be able to connect to him again?”

“You *dreamed* of him, too?” Marcus asked.

I met his eyes. They had gone inky black. “Yes.”

“Do you think you can target a dream like that?” Kiko asked.

I shrugged. “I don’t know. I just thought it might be worth a try.”

“It might work—if you had something of his,” Cara stated. “Emphasis on might. But—we don’t have anything of his.”

Marcus swayed from one foot to another, then he growled, and Kiko shot him a startled look.

“You don’t,” he said. “But I do.” He vanished down the hall. As he passed me, he gave me a wide berth. As though I were contagious.

I tried not to mind.

I didn’t succeed.

He returned quickly and handed Cara a crystal hanging on a leather cord. “This was his. He gave it to me to get through

the gate, the first time he helped me escape.”

I recognized it—it had been tied into Marcus’s hair in the cornfield. It seemed so long ago, now. My heart twisted.

He glanced at me. “Rafael got me out of there.” He sounded as though he spoke through gritted teeth. “Twice, actually. I owe him.” He skirted me and returned to the balcony.

Cara handed me the crystal. “It might help. Okay, I will put you under and push you energy. But the rest is up to you.”

I took a deep breath and went for it. “Do you have any crystal dust? It’s been helpful to boost my talent, and might help with this, too.”

She frowned at me. “When did you start taking crystal dust?”

I shrugged again, aware that everyone was staring at me. “A little while ago.”

“It is an essential supplement for some.” Vali had an edge to her voice. “Many just get a boost from it, but others have to be careful.”

I thought about the hot flushes and the dizziness. But there were so many possibilities for a cause. And I would need the crystal dust if I were going to rescue those kids.

Cara watched me closely. “How have you been feeling?”

“I’ve been tired, and a little off, really. But—” I glanced at Marcus.

“It sounds like the Dragon virus,” Vali finished my thought.

Marcus went completely stiff, and then he spun and left through the balcony door.

“It could be.” Cara sighed. “It is a little soon, though. And we do not know if you are susceptible.”

“Satyrs aren’t, thankfully,” Kiko said. “I don’t need wings. I like my feet firmly on the ground.”

I looked from her to Cara. “I might not be either?”

The Watcher shook her head. “Without knowing your lineage, we have no way to be sure.” She rose and went to a kitchen cupboard.

“The Dragon virus is pretty virulent,” Vali said. “Not many are truly resistant. There are some that just gain strength. My father used those species, sometimes, as mine workers.”

She sounded so nonchalant about it, but it was enough to label her father as a true underlord—not worried about the lives of others, so long as they benefited him in some way.

Cara pulled out a large jar filled with a white powder, and offered it to me with a small scoop.

“Only one for now. This is quite pure.”

I obediently took one scoopful. It tingled its way down as she settled across from me and grabbed one of her braids, holding the crystal woven into it aloft.

“Okay,” the Watcher said. “Here we go.”

“No chicken noises,” I warned her.

“What’s a chicken?” Kiko asked.

“A rather silly-looking bird that can be ultra-fierce,” I said. “And they make ridiculous clucking sounds.”

Cara snorted. “I make no promises.” And she started to swing the crystal.

It sparkled in the late afternoon light, and I clutched Rafael’s crystal in my fist, struggling to keep my mind focused on him. After a few minutes, my eyes drifted closed.

The first thing I became aware of was the sound of wind moving through the trees.

As I glanced up, the rustling leaves softened and then died off altogether. The trees weren’t familiar. This wasn’t the forest around the academy.

The trunks stood like pillars holding up the night sky, unfettered by smaller bushes from their crowns to the roots

flaring into the ground. The moonlight, dappled by leaves, penetrated straight down.

I walked through the woods and arrived at a house.

It was less a house and more a cabin, small but sturdy, with flat stones set into the overgrown grass to create a path. The entire place had an air of abandonment, from the tall scraggly weeds growing up against the foundation, to the cracked windowpanes.

I wandered around it, wondering why it had found its way into my dream. Glancing up through the branches, I saw three moons. The clouds scudded across two of them, but the third shone bright as day. And my heart accelerated.

Behind the house, I found him.

He was on his knees, with his back to me. A lean form with broad shoulders, dressed in a loose tunic and what looked like breeches. From behind, the most prominent thing about him was his hair. It was long, at least as long as Havoc's, down to his butt. Even at night, it blended with all the earthy tones of the forest, muted reds and browns and golds that shimmered in the moonlight as though it had metallic flecks running through it.

Kiko's hair, although I'd never seen hers loose. Part of his Satyr heritage.

"Rafael."

He stiffened, and then shot to his feet, smoothly rotating until he faced me. Graceful, was my first thought. His power contained, much the same way his muscles hugged his bones. Not overly tall, but perfectly proportioned, with long legs that looked built to run.

My eyes searched for horns that were not there. I looked up into a narrow face with high cheekbones and a determined set to his jaw. A face almost as beautiful as it was handsome. Yet not a surprise. Somehow, I'd known he'd look like this.

One look into his eyes, and my world spun to a halt. They shone, one gold, one a pale silvery blue, but it was the pain in

them that seized hold. His skin might be whole, but his soul was in pieces.

This was him. The final piece to a quad already in shambles.

Somehow, he knew me. "Riley," he breathed.

He knew who I was? My mouth opened, and said something totally inane. "Where have you been all my life, handsome?"

He had the most expressive mouth, wide, with lips perfectly formed, not too full, or too thin. And now, one corner quirked upward. "Nowhere good," he admitted.

I reached for him, but he flinched away. And then took a step back.

No. Not him, too. I couldn't bear it.

He read something of it in my eyes, and halted.

I took a long step into his space and, before he could move, grabbed onto his hand. The fingers were long-boned and lean, and I wove my small ones into them. The surge through our contact took my breath away. I held him still through the link, and stepped in close.

He raised a hand to touch my hair so lightly, as though he expected me to shatter in an instant. "You are so beautiful," he whispered. "And so real."

I smiled up at him. "There is a theory around that," I said. "Some would say that this is real."

His arched brows drew down. His face could have been an artist's masterpiece, the features so perfect they were almost angelic. "A dream is a dream," he said, but he didn't sound too certain.

He'd never heard of the shifter mate thing? "I've been told that Fate plays with your dreams. That sometimes, they are real."

He stiffened. "This can't be real."

I offered a sly half-smile. "I used to think so too. But recent events have shown me otherwise."

His beautiful bicolored eyes gleamed at me. "So you're really here?"

"I think so, yes. As are you."

"I don't dream much," he confessed, "Because I don't sleep much." Something altered for just an instant, deep within his eyes. There, and then gone. "And you don't want to share anything with me," he whispered.

"I think Fate has other ideas."

He snorted in contempt, his gaze skating away from me. "Fate has never done me any favors."

Following it, I finally saw what lay beyond him. Two mounds of earth, each with a wooden cross at one end.

Graves.

"My parents," he said, then added. "The ones who raised me. My birth mother is dead, too."

The words were laced with pain. "I'm sorry," I said. "What happened?"

"Isobel." He spat the word. "She killed them all. Except for my biological father. But he is dead, now, too."

Isobel. My own rage rose. "That woman is evil to the core. And she has to be stopped." I stepped closer to him, waiting until his eyes came back to mine. "Rafael. Do you know where Isobel is keeping you?"

His mouth twisted again. "No. But she has the children now. They are in the same place I am. A stronghold belonging to Brock, a Dragon overlord."

"But you don't know which stronghold?"

He started to shake his head, but then he stopped. "It's in the mountains."

I squeezed his hand. "Have you seen the children? Are they okay?"

“So far.” He swallowed. “She’s convincing them that they can become superheroes and rescue the realms. Hasn’t told them yet that some will die in the process.”

I took his other hand, too. “I am a Jumper. I might be able to rescue them, but I need a visual reference. Can you tell me anything that might help?”

His eyes widened at that admission, but then his brows dropped, and he answered. “The children are being kept in a large room that might have been a library, lots of shelves along the walls, although many are empty. And it opens through double glass doors into a garden, so they have room to play outside.”

It surprised me. “They aren’t chained?”

His expression sagged. “No. But they are closely guarded. She wants their consent. Their willing participation.” He hesitated, and then added, “She’s using my talent to get them to agree. I can—convince—them.”

Everything about him radiated shame. “Is she forcing you?”

He looked away. “The bloodmagic is too strong. I can’t fight it.”

My gut twisted. He sounded so defeated. I released one hand and ran my fingers along his jaw, persisting in turning his head back to me when he tried to flinch away. “None of this is your fault, Rafael.”

His eyes closed. “Maybe not. But she can do these things because I exist.”

I stood on my tiptoes, and kissed him.

With his eyes closed, it took him completely by surprise. He froze, and then, suddenly, his hand rose to the back of my head, and he leaned into it. Lips, teeth, tongues—he plundered my mouth with desperation, as though it were his last hold on reason.

It set my entire body on fire, but I had a mission in mind. I wrapped my fingers around the back of his neck, and broke

away from him. He was breathing heavily as he bent, laying his forehead against mine.

“You have to show me exactly where they are keeping you,” I said.

“No.” He tried to pull away, but I held on.

“Show me.”

“There is nothing you can do for me, Riley. Leave me be.” He spoke through clenched teeth.

“I have seen it before, in the other place. I know what they are doing to you.”

His entire body went very still. “You’ve seen that?” I could barely hear him. He shuddered beneath my fingers.

“This is on them, not you,” I insisted.

His head pulled back, and a muscle jumped in his jaw. “The Satyr in me needs to feed. They have it so twisted with their perversions—I don’t know where I start, and they end.”

“Show me,” I insisted. I released his hand, and before he could move, reached up to place both on each side of his face. “Because You. Are. Mine. And I will come for you.”

I saw it then. The hope, warring with pain and fear. But he nodded, and closed his eyes.

In that moment, the clearing, the forest, and Rafael all vanished. I blinked, and looked out into a room.

Not a room. A dungeon, complete with creepy stone walls and indecipherable apparatus along them. This time, I lay on a cot. A chain ran from my ankle manacle to the floor. My hands were also bound in metal.

My heart sank. How could I jump him out of there if he was chained? I had, in the past, picked a simple lock. Could I handle these, too?

Rafael seemed to understand what I needed. He sat up and looked around the room. He was alone, but my stomach clenched when I saw bloodstains on the floor and across the machines that lined the walls.

Then, the heavy door along one wall swung open, and a tall, thin man with red eyes and black teeth walked through it.

Panic surged through Rafael, and suddenly I was shoved away so fast that everything spun around me...

I blinked at Cara. I was breathing as though I'd just run a marathon.

“What did you see?” Kiko was watching me with wide eyes.

Had I seen enough to Jump to Rafael? My brain scrambled to set in stone what I'd witnessed. “I saw through Rafael's eyes where they are keeping him. With his crystal—it might be enough to Jump to him. But even if I managed it, it won't matter if I can't break him free from the chains and manacles.” I twisted my fingers together. “And my only chance of getting to those kids is to Jump right in with them. No way I can fight my way through their guards.

Vali pushed herself off the wall and moved to lean on the table. “Has he seen where they are kept?”

“He gave me a visual description of the room.” I told her about the library and garden.

Her eyes lit up. “I think I've been in that library. It used to be full of books, and the double doors opened into a garden. Not many strongholds had gardens, and most libraries were on the upper floors.”

I stared at her. “You visited their libraries?”

She chewed vigorously on her pinky nail before replying. “Xumi wasn't much of a reader, but the books in those places were ancient, accumulated by generations of underlords. When I was younger, she let me collect some to take home.” Her fingers curled and uncurled. “I know of only two libraries that open onto a ground floor. And only one has a garden. It's near Rannkin, in the heart of the Hunnite Mountains, in the Briatic realm.”

We knew where they were. But before I could get too excited, Cara asked, “How deep in Brock's territory is it?”

Vali's lip curled. "Pretty deep. No way you'd fight your way to him."

"I have a visual for Rafael," I said. "But I need to Jump right to the children. Are there any photos of this library?"

The Dragona shook her head. "Not likely."

"Havoc might have seen it." The deep voice came from the balcony entrance, and I met Marcus's eyes. "He was Brock's Dragon before the bastard gave him to Isobel."

"If he's seen it—" Cara straightened. "How far along is the bond between you?" she asked me.

I was hyperaware of all the eyes in the room fastened on me. And suddenly, I understood what Marcus was getting at.

I closed my eyes, and reached.

He tried to ignore me. Pushed me away.

To hell with that.

Dammit, Havoc. I need your help.

Ask someone who cares.

I gritted my teeth. *Have you been in the stronghold near Rannkin? In the Hunnite Mountains, realm known as Briatic?*

He didn't answer until I imagined my mental self as a spear and shoved it into his consciousness.

Nothing in life is free.

Taking a deep breath, I persisted. *I need a visual on the library in that stronghold. What will it cost me?*

A pause. And then, *Fang. And freedom.*

First, Fang has to make her own choice. Second, it isn't me holding you back from freedom, it's Brock and Isobel. And this is the only way to ultimately defeat them.

Silence. This was one stubborn Dragon. Our link pulsed with his rage, and something else I couldn't quite pin down.

Then, suddenly, he blasted an image at me. Of a large room lined with bookshelves. In his memory, they were filled.

But I memorized the room's structure, not the books. Its dimensions, the location of the shelves, the double glass door, and the way they opened to a garden beyond. Finally, he showed me the garden itself, with its clusters of flowering bushes and plants, along with a metal arbor in the middle.

He pushed it to me for a few seconds, then shut it down.

I want Fang, he snarled through my mind. And then, he was gone.

I opened my eyes and met Marcus's. They were the color of ink, and then they flashed. Outside, thunder boomed.

Cara went to him, but he backed away.

"I'm fine," he growled, and then he spun and walked outside.

The Watcher turned back to me, and I nodded. "He gave me the visual. I know where to go." But this was more than I could handle on my own. If I wanted to rescue Rafael and those kids, I needed serious help. "I'm going after Rafael too."

She hesitated. "He has been immersed in Isobel's world for a long time now."

"I'm not leaving him there," I insisted.

"I agree," Cara said. "But I need you to be aware that he might not be what you think he is. I don't know what he would do if put under pressure. Everyone has a breaking point." Her gaze darted toward Marcus, and away again. "So I am asking you to be careful."

"I will. But we need someone who can unlock his chains," I said.

The Watcher tapped her chin with a small finger, before she smiled. "I have the perfect person." She rose and went to the kitchen, pulling a piece of paper from a drawer. She scribbled something on it, handed it to Kiko, then gave her a room number.

After the Satyr left, I said, "I don't know how many people I can transport at once. How many children are there?"

“There are seventeen youngsters and six teens,” she said. “Numbers are something that might build with time. Like training to lift weights, you get stronger.”

“Doesn’t help us now,” I pointed out. “The last time I Jumped to Marcus—it led Isobel’s Dragons right to us. As soon as I get the first groups out, they are going to know I’m there.”

She grimaced. “That is a big issue. When you Jump realms, it is like a beacon for a Watcher, and the Bellatis will sense it too.” The Watcher tapped her fingers on her chin. “The shorter the Jump, the less energy you disperse. If you are just hopping a mile or so, I can feel you, but only because I’m attuned to you. If there is a lot of competing energy sources in an area, a short Jump would be difficult to sense.”

“But I’m going to have to Jump realms to get to them.”

“Not if you gain access to the realm like everyone else,” she said with a wide smile.

“You want her to gate in?” Vali asked.

Cara grinned. Not a mild expression, but a full-on, I-have-a-brilliant-idea, full-tooth beam that reached and illuminated her eyes.

It scared the fuck out of me. Before I could ask for details, though, the suite door opened and Kiko entered, followed by a young man I’d never seen before.

About Vali’s height, he was slender, with a whipcord kind of wiry strength. He had short black hair and eyes rimmed in brilliant green. I was so mesmerized by them, it took me a moment to notice the freckles running across his temples. That, and his black scaled bodysuit.

He had to be a Dragon shifter. But he was much smaller than any I’d seen so far.

“Riley, this is Lucas,” Cara stated as though she were unveiling the latest in super weapons. “Lucas is a Morph.”

“A what?”

Vali was staring at him with interest. “Morphs can absorb the DNA of others and then shapeshift to their form.”

Cara elaborated. “Most shifters have an animal side, but Morphs do not. They can shapeshift to almost anything, so long as it is close to them in size.”

“Cool,” I said, and I meant it. “That is quite a talent.” I glanced at his scales. “So—you’re not really a Dragon?”

He smiled this time. “I am a Dragon now, too. One of my mates is one, she gifted me with it.” He held up his arm. “The big muscles don’t automatically come with it, sadly.”

My gut twisted. His fate could easily be my own. “So, you can turn into a Dragon any time you like?”

“Yep,” he answered, looking wistful. “Which definitely has its perks, because one downside of being a Morph is that we can’t stay in our borrowed form for very long. It takes effort to maintain. But I can fly as a Dragon for as long as I like.”

“I flew once,” I said. “It was wonderful.”

While Lucas looked confused, Cara cut in, “Back when he used his powers for evil, Lucas was a thief,” she said. “Now, he is the perfect spy. And there isn’t a lock he can’t pick.”

Ah. Now I got where this was going. I met his eyes. “The guy I want to rescue is chained and manacled. You think you can set him free?”

He nodded. “As sure as I can be, without seeing it.” His gaze slid to Cara. “Are we going into Isobel’s stronghold?”

She nodded. “It belongs to Xumi’s son, actually.”

Lucas hesitated. “Even if we Jump in, we could use Maddy. She can Block us once we’re there.”

“Block?” I asked.

“Maddy is a Blocker,” Cara explained. “She can convince people that you aren’t there. Won’t fool a Watcher-level Liberi, and the Bellatis will be tough, too.”

“Still sounds pretty useful,” Vali said.

“It is another person for Riley to transport, though.” The Watcher looked concerned.

“I once Jumped a full-sized Dragon,” I told her.

Her eyes widened. I didn’t add that I’d been a Dragon myself at the time. Instead, I stated, “I think the crystal dust pumped my ability.”

Her eyes narrowed, and her mouth twisted. “Well, we have no shortage of that. But once this is over, I need to do an assessment of you. I don’t like people taking it without supervision.”

“Okay,” I said. Once this was over, she and I did need to talk. There were more than a few things I needed to understand about my ever-changing body.

I turned away from Cara, and met Marcus’s gaze. The big guy was leaning on the balcony entrance. I longed to be doing this with him, but until he got control over what was inside him—

Well, that was at the crux of everything, it seemed. I looked back at Cara, and asked the obvious question.

“When do we go in?”

IO

RAFAEL



Isobel's new laboratory was a definite step up from her last one. Bright and airy, it was located in the stronghold's upper level, with windows along the entire length of one wall. The ceiling soared above us—there was no doubt that this had been built to accommodate Dragons.

The setting sun sent questing rays through the panes to reflect off the bright metal bars of the shiny new cage in the room's center. Brock had spared no expense—adjoining it was an even smaller one, especially for me, with room for the coven around it. They could sit if they so desired. Cushioned chairs stood ready, a boon for the three that were heavily pregnant.

As I paced circles in the tiny cage, I didn't want to contemplate what manipulating the bloodmagic would do to a developing child. Whatever those three spawned would not be shining examples of Liberi goodness.

They'd given me a chair, too, which was bolted down. Twitchy and restless, I didn't sit. They'd pumped me so full of bloodmagic that I thought I would explode, but then they'd given me crystals loaded with the blue lifemagic. The two energies were at war within me, crashing around and setting every nerve on fire.

They needed something from me today that I wasn't sure I could still provide. And because of that, they had recruited another—a young Liberi healer, powerful enough to be in the Watcher training program. She shone with a healthy blue glow

that made me hunger for a time before the blood energy had corrupted us all.

She stood near my cage, looking nervous but buoyant. A true Isobel convert. I shouldn't be surprised. After all, I'd been one, too.

It was only a matter of time before she was as polluted as the rest.

Our victim for today was more than willing—the Centaur Vic. He strutted into the room with his torso and tail both held erect. A good-looking young specimen just entering maturity, with a promising breadth to his shoulders.

His four hooves clopped against the stone floor as he walked straight up to Isobel, but his eyes were on Brock looming beside her.

“I want one of mine to be a Dragon,” Vic said.

Isobel smiled at him. “We haven't collected a Dragon yet.”

“Can be done,” Brock rumbled with a shrug, as though they weren't discussing draining a Dragon to death.

Isobel stepped forward. “First, we have to split your human and equine halves,” she said soothingly. “Once that is done, we can start inserting other possibilities.”

Vic's mouth twisted, but he nodded.

Isobel gestured to the cage. “For everyone's safety, it is best if you go through the process in there. It is more crucial for the bestial insertions, but we might as well get the protocol in place today.” She pointed to me and the new Liberi healer. “You need to stay next to the healers. They will guide you through. It won't be pleasant, but it is necessary.”

The young Centaur straightened. “I understand.” Then he paced into the cage, and Isobel shut the door.

What was coming would test Vic's commitment. Of that, I had no doubt.

Isobel raised hands that glowed red, and the coven followed suit. Specially designed bins along the side wall

responded—they were filled with crystals primed with the bloodmagic.

I tensed as the light shot out to envelop the Centaur. Linked to the energy, I sensed how Isobel wielded it like a sword, slicing into Vic.

He collapsed to the ground, and his pain hammered at me. I leaned against the bars, placing my hands on his human shoulders, while the healer wrapped hers around his arm. I had to fight to call upon my own healer through the red haze. But the young woman's power was pure, and I could both tap into it, and direct her.

Vic endured the agony until I saw the schism appear in his life essence, and then, he started to scream.

The healer flinched, never having experienced this. “Hold onto him,” I said through gritted teeth. “If you don't keep him stable, he'll die.”

She nodded, and I sensed her reach out to support his heart, while I focused on guiding his body through the transition. It was a complicated process, and as I knew all too well, not one guaranteed to succeed.

But there was a major difference with Vic—he wanted it, and understood what we were trying to do. When I told him to take deep breaths and focus, he listened. When his equine half started to fall away, he didn't fight it.

As a result, by the time he lay naked and trembling as a human, he hadn't skated with death like the others. But when he raised his gaze to my own—I saw the first frisson of doubt within it.

Isobel sensed it, too. She refocused the bloodmagic and grabbed hold of my Satyr self. My scent exploded from me, and she took and twisted it. Boosted it with the bloodmagic's natural high, and pounded it into Vic.

It shouldn't have worked on him, but mixed with the bloodmagic's power—he gasped as the surge hit him, his entire body stiffening. The red mist expanded like a tidal wave through the healer and me, to the Bellatis guarding the door. I

closed my eyes and gritted my teeth, but the lust seized hold of me, too.

The guards humped whatever hard object they could find, and Vic grabbed hold of the young healer. She was more than happy to comply.

Any sign of reluctance within Vic had vanished. As I pushed against the bars of my own cage, and rode the wave of lust, I acknowledged that Isobel had been right.

If they were willing, it could work.

She already had six other new recruits panting to try.

The surge that passed through the others took me with it as well. I trembled as I sank to the chair in my cage.

No one could stand against that. Vic turned rapturous eyes upon Isobel. Another convert to the cause.

If she continued to use me on the children, she'd have seventeen more.

So if Riley was going to try rescuing them, she'd better hurry.

II

HAVOC



I stood near the meadow gate and wondered what the fucking hell I was doing.

Why was I helping with this nutzoid scheme? I'd put a lot of effort into escaping the Isobitch, and now I was heading straight back into her lair?

Well, not exactly into her lair. I was part of the group that would receive the children at a gathering point near the stronghold, as the Dreambitch got them out, one group at a time.

If she got them out.

She was going after Rafael, too, and I had mixed feelings about that. The Isobitch kinda valued him. She wouldn't let him go easily. But if I were honest, I wanted him outta there too. I owed the do-gooder for helping me escape...

In a battle between Riley's team and the Isobitch, there was no contest. Even the mere thought of Riley failing—and what that might mean for her—had both my beast and my monster agitated as fuck. Which brought home the real reason I was doing this.

They were giving me little choice.

There was nothing uglier than an internal civil war.

I ground my teeth together as I scanned those waiting in the meadow. Only some of those skulking around us were part of tonight's fucking party.

Us big Dragon dudes were included with the so-called catch team. The retrieval team was going into the stronghold with Riley, and the only Dragon going with her was Lucas, a little skinny guy.

He didn't look like much. Certainly not someone who could provide her with any true protection. But she'd insisted that stealth was their aim. That big muscles were just more dead weight she'd need to lift.

Fine. I didn't want to get within spitting distance of the Isobitch. Problem was, my two inner partners didn't want *her* there, either.

The whole bleeding meadow was a regular tender farewell scene. Lucas was currently being seen off by his mates—a drool-worthy red-haired Dragona who moved like a fighter, and a big Bellati guy who radiated a scary kind of energy. Not far from them was the Blocker that would be going with the retrieval team. She was Dire and surrounded by her three mates. They were pawing each other, and I looked away. Dires were always an emotional mess.

I scanned those present and mentally checked off my catch team. It included the Legion Dragon, Tyrez, and the assassin Dragon, Talakai, along with two of his mates, Rafael's twin, Anna, and the Dire that was now a Dragon.

We'd packed the muscle onto my team, but we needed to keep this mission as light as possible, or Brock's eyes and ears would be all over us. We couldn't take any Sabres or Bellatis—their scent might give us away. In the underworld, Sabres meant the council, and the only Bellatis around Isobel were her own.

As it was, we Dragons were a risk. We'd stay cloaked, but our size would draw attention. Only the fact that the town was full of Dragons made it possible, even if few were our size.

Marcus was lurking in the back of it all, but he apparently wasn't coming with, for which I was grateful. That was one wild card we didn't need. We bloody well had enough of them.

The focus of all this attention approached me. Her bosom bitches, Kiko and Vali, trailed along behind. I took a deep breath and looked down at the Dreambitch.

Imagine my surprise when she handed Fang up to me. “She’ll be safer with you,” she said.

Safer. *With me.* The simple sentence set off both my monster and my beast all at once. I glanced over to the Dragon that would be on her team.

“You need more protection than him,” I growled. Not the first time I’d expressed that opinion. And like the last five, she ignored it.

The Webspinner didn’t seem all that keen to come over to me, but when I scooped her off Riley’s hand and raised her to my neck, she kept her fangs to herself.

“If we need protection at all, I’ll Jump us out before anyone can blink,” she pointed out. Again.

The Satyr planted her hands on her hips and glowered at me. “Are you even going to stick around for this?”

Vali glared from beside her. Clearly, neither had a high opinion of me.

It was an excellent question. Now that I had Fang, I could stage an exit at any time. But even considering it was a declaration of inner war. I winced when my fingers sprouted talons.

“She needs you.” Marcus had moved up on us, and I hadn’t even heard him do so. Not a promising start to a mission.

I was the only one who had the images of this stronghold and its surrounding town in my brain, and our cursed link provided me with the means to deliver them. “I’ll be there until it is over.” I clenched my teeth. “After that, I’m outta here.”

I saw her flinch, and Marcus’s eyes went jet-black. Fucking freaky. Made the glowers from the Satyr and the Dragona look like something from a two-year-old.

“You *bit* her,” he snarled.

“Yeah. I did.”

“And you’ll be leaving?” His eyes flared white.

I could swear the night suddenly got a lot darker. I didn’t let it dissuade me. “Yep. I will.”

“It’s okay, Marcus,” the Dreambitch said, wrapping a hand around his bare arm, as if to hold him back.

He transferred his glare to her. “Frek. It is *not* okay. How dare he *mate* you, and then leave you—”

She glared right back at him. “Before you point fingers about being an asshole, take a long look in the mirror.” She let him go and stalked off, leaving him fuming hot. I could smell the rage radiating off him.

Her two friends shot me a last glare before hurrying after her.

For a moment, Marcus stood there, completely rigid, with black scales popping up along his arms. The bones shifting beneath his skin sent chills down my spine. It wasn’t until he turned and strode stiffly away into the night that I realized the green-eyed bitch had called me an asshole.

I glared over to where she, Kiko, and the Dragona were now standing with the Blocker. Dammit. Fucking *bitch*.

Takes a bastard to know one, came the flippant reply.

Stay the fuck out of my head, I snarled.

She didn’t look over at me, but she held up her hand with only the middle finger extended. What the fuck did that mean?

Grumbling to myself, I turned away and created my customary spot for Fang to curl up against my neck, before covering her in scales. If things got crazy, I wanted her protected. It was surprising that Riley had given her back—Fang was the strongest hold she had on me.

Well, maybe not the strongest. But a good one, anyway.

We assembled at the gate, and I glanced back to where Riley stood with the skinny Dragon and the Dire woman. She'd be okay. My human tried to believe it, but both my monster and beast were still clamoring for me to abandon my team and go with her.

No fucking way. If anything, I needed more distance, not less.

Myself, the Assassin, and Rafael's twin sister all pulled together, raising the hoods on our cloaks before the Watcher sent us through.

The gateway spat us out in a back alley in Rannkin. I took a deep breath of the cool mountain air. It was night in this realm, too. But this was a city that never slept.

We didn't even glance at the gate guardians—they were on Brock's payroll—but unless we did something odd, they wouldn't pay us much attention. I sensed them scan and dismiss us.

We kept moving. I had suggested a target along the ocean—Rannkin was an old, well-established city with a protected port. It was lined with warehouses, some of which were derelict and basically empty. Perfect for our purposes. As I led our group past the wharf—busy even at this time of night—and through the crates that lined it, I was aware of the eyes watching us. Assessing every detail. And deciding that we were not good targets.

It was mostly the assassin and myself that stood them off. I didn't know Anna's strengths, but there was no way the indigo Dragon would let anyone near her, anyway.

I kept going until we came to a warehouse that was almost falling down. Perfect. The lock on the walk-in door was almost as decrepit as the building itself, and the assassin had no trouble using his talons to slice it in half.

And we were in.

I left them there and returned along our route, found the other half of our team—the Dire Dragon, Cara, and Legion—and led them to our destination.

We had a lot of deadly Dragon flesh, but I wasn't delusional—even with me, we weren't enough to go up against Brock's horde. But if all went according to plan, we wouldn't have to. We were there to keep the other predatory bastards—the ones who lurked in the shadows—away from the children.

So many things could go wrong. And going after Rafael was ballsy. But I hadn't objected to her trying.

Because I owed the guy.

No one mentioned our other purpose. That if the retrieval team got into trouble, we were their only possible rescue.

It wasn't mentioned because if things went to hell, even all this Dragon muscle wouldn't stop any attempted rescue from becoming a one-way ticket to the other side.

The Watcher glanced my way. I gritted my teeth and thought of a certain green-eyed female with a sharp tongue.

We're in, I told her.

She answered with, *We're on our way*.

RILEY



I stood with Kiko, Vali, Lucas, and Maddy, and we watched the last group of the catch team pass through the gate.

Cara had watched me take a few more scoops of crystal dust before those chosen to be on the teams had arrived. In the ensuing chaos of planning, I'd managed to score a few more. Then, loaded some into a zip-top bag and tucked it into my pocket.

I already felt as though I floated rather than walked, but I sneaked another mouthful, feeling it tingle its way through me. I'd need every bit of what it could offer, if I were to get those kids out of there.

My second team member, Maddy, raised a brow but said nothing. Fortunately, Kiko was so distracted by the presence of all the muscley men that she didn't notice. I sensed Vali's eyes on me, though. Then they lifted to someone else.

"Remember that the doors are glass. Those guards will be able to see you if you aren't careful."

The deep voice was hardly recognizable, and when I turned to Marcus, the bones of his face shifted beneath his skin.

Maddy answered him. "I can Block us from their view," she said.

"I may not be much of a fighter," Lucas added. "But I am a master of distraction."

“And I can Jump us out in an eyeblink if it all goes bad,” I reminded him. “The risk is worth it, if we can get the children out.”

“I know.” Marcus gusted a sigh, his eyes flashing silver. “Just wish I was the one taking it.”

I took a small step closer to him, and stopped. “Until you come to grips with what is inside you—”

“Have you thought about setting it free?” Vali suggested.

His eyes widened. “If I do that—how can I control it?”

Control. It always came down to it. Or rather, to knowing when not to try.

“Sometimes these things are a negotiation,” Vali said. “Shifters learn control over their beasts from a very young age, but it takes time to do so.”

Maddy straightened. “There is tons of trial and error,” she said. “We screw up regularly.”

Marcus stiffened. “Shifting into a Dire is a little different from what I’ve got happening.”

Maddy shrugged. “Shifts are shifts, though. And our early ones are pretty wild. The beast inside us is exactly that—and we go a bit crazy when we are young.”

“I’m not changing into a fluffy puppy.” Marcus held up his hand, and the fingertips revealed glowing talons. “This thing inside me is lethal, I can feel it.”

“So are Dragons,” Vali said. “And we breathe fire, too.”

“Fire is a tricky thing.” Kiko grimaced. “Trust me when I tell you—it tends to emerge when least expected.”

“I can shift to whatever I touch—some forms get pretty interesting, because along with the physical changes comes some psychological ones, too,” Lucas said. “I’ve gotten good at suppressing them, but still find myself with some residual effects.”

Fascinated, I stared at him. “Like what?”

He grinned. “I hated Hiimna fruit until I shifted into a Guina lizard once. Love it, now.”

Marcus’s hand curled into a fist. “I doubt that what is inside me eats fruit.”

Maddy shrugged. “Same principle. Whatever wants out, will get out, sooner or later. You have to accept it, and let it happen, in order to form a relationship with it.”

He hesitated. “What if it changes me in the process?” His voice was hardly above a whisper.

She snorted a laugh. “Of course it will. You will have to find the new you.”

His eyes slid back to me. I could see the flashes of white amid the dark. He reached a hand out, and the fingers—now human again—drifted through my hair before he pulled them back.

“Come back, okay?” he requested.

“I plan to bring the party back with me.” My voice shook.

He looked like he wanted to say more, but he turned and walked away.

“He’s skating close to the edge,” Kiko said.

“If you mean he’s losing it, I agree.” Vali turned to me. “Be careful out there. You tend to leap before you think.”

Fair assessment. I smiled at her. “I will.”

Kiko hugged me. “Will what? Be careful? Or leap before you think? Just come back, bestie. Wish I was going with you this time.”

“If we thought Isobel’s Bellatis would drool for you, we would,” Lucas offered.

Kiko shot him a brilliant smile that had him flushing bright red. It only endeared him more to me—Lucas was so much like the boy next door. Only this one shapeshifted to weird things.

So maybe I needed to work on my analogies.

The Satyr and the Dragona walked over to the bench and sat down to watch us as we waited for the signal. To eliminate the energy surge caused by a cross-realm Jump, Lucas, Maddy, and I would be gating to Rannkin, rather than Jumping.

I dug the crystal dust out again and took some more.

Lucas saw me, and his eyes widened. “How much of that stuff are you taking?”

I shrugged. “It helps with the Jumping. I’m going to need it.” I offered him the bag. “Did you want some?”

He waved it away. “Morphs can’t tolerate it at all. It’s only because I am now part Dragon that I take it regularly.”

I opened my mouth to reply, when Havoc’s voice sounded in my head.

We’re in, he said.

We’re on our way, I replied.

Before we stepped through the gate, Lucas reminded Maddy and me—“Remember, just slouch, don’t look at the guards, pretend we belong. Stay focused.”

I nodded to him, and we went through with our cloak hoods up. Walked past the guards with slouched postures, as though resigned to life.

Rather than adopting scales that would have revealed him as Dragon, Lucas had dressed in an old set of breeches and a tunic, then covered it all with a cloak. He turned to Maddy. “You can start Blocking as soon as we leave the alley.”

“Stay close,” Maddy murmured as we swung onto the street. Her brows dropped low, but I didn’t notice anything different. Until a hulking person almost plowed right into me. Lucas grabbed me by the cloak and pulled me sideways before the collision.

“They can’t see us. So we’ll have to work around them,” Maddy said.

Wow. That was quite a talent. Lucas took the lead as we progressed along the street, keeping us clear of the larger groups. There were a surprising number of locals out and about.

When I muttered something about that, Lucas replied, “Rannkin is a typical underworld city. There is almost more that goes on under the cover of darkness, than during the day.”

“Have you been here before?” I asked.

“Once. A long time ago.” He gazed around. “Can you Jump from anywhere?”

“Yeppers. Let’s just find a spot where someone won’t accidentally wander into us.”

He led us into another alley. I already had the first Jump point etched in my brain, but to my surprise, Havoc sent it again without being asked.

I still felt like I was floating on a cloud. *Have you been lurking in my brain, Elliot?* I asked.

Who the fuck is Elliot?

My favorite Dragon when I was growing up. He was furrrier than you, though, at least in the live-action version. And not nearly as grumpy.

Live action version? What are you on about, Dreambitch? You knew Dragons when you were young? And they had fur? I sensed his disbelief.

Well, they weren’t real.

He hesitated. Then, he went with, *My name is Havoc.* Even his mindvoice was snarly.

Whatever.

Amazingly, shooting steam through one’s nostrils had a mental equivalent. I ignored him and focused on the image he’d given me.

“Hold onto me,” I told Lucas and Maddy. “We likely won’t land on our feet, so be ready for sprawl.”

They each grabbed onto my arm through the cloak, and I reached deep within. My adrenaline had fear and a strange sense of daring pounding through me, so finding emotional incentive wasn’t difficult.

White noise.

Snap.

Maddy gasped as we were engulfed in golden light. We landed on our knees—painful as the courtyard target was paved in stone. But it was, as Havoc had theorized, empty at this time of night.

When I glanced at my hands in the darkness, nothing but normal fingers wiggled back at me. I caught Lucas giving me a strange look as we quickly scurried into the shadows, and waited to see if the energy surge attracted any attention.

If it did, we had a big problem. No way I could do the multiple Jumps necessary if Isobel, her coven, or her Bellatis sensed my initial one into the library.

After a few moments when no one showed up, we breathed easier.

“Does that light happen every time?” Lucas asked.

“I think so,” I replied.

He glanced to Maddy. “Can you Block us fast? That light will attract attention, for sure, if the guards are alert and nearby.”

Maddy’s mouth straightened. “I’ll be as quick as I can.”

Lucas didn’t look happy, but then, I’d already figured out he was a serious kind of guy. “Ready to go?” I asked them.

In answer, they took my arms again. The library was currently full of young Centaurs. To avoid us Jumping blindly into one, Havoc had given me a spot near the arbor in the garden. I took a deep breath, focused, and...

Snap.

We landed on our butts this time. But on the grass. Not quite so painful.

Lucas immediately dragged us into the bushes, and a second later, I heard voices.

“Maddy?” he whispered.

“On it,” she answered.

We pressed ourselves into the shrubbery, but the light that lanced out at us would have easily revealed us to those approaching, if it hadn’t been for Maddy’s talent.

Two Bellatis raised their lanterns as they pushed their way into the bushes.

“What could it have been?” one asked.

“Who knows? There are many strange things in this garden. Xumi was a collector of odd plants.”

The first Bellati slapped a branch out of his face. “It’s a bit wild back here. I don’t see anything. Must have been an insect.”

“Pretty big insect,” the second said, but he’d already turned away.

We waited as they retreated, and then Lucas led us in their wake. We ended up at the fringes of a row of prickly bushes, staring at a set of glass doors. They were closed, and the two Bellatis had regained their stations on each side of them.

I tried to see into the darkened room beyond, but it was hard to make things out. There might be room for us in the center... “How close can we get?” I asked.

“Little closer,” she whispered. “They might smell us if we’re unlucky. But they aren’t Dires.”

Smell. Right. Lucas moved us into the clearing. It was eerie as hell sneaking up to within twenty feet of the guards without them batting an eye.

From that distance, I could see through the glass to the large cushions scattered across the library floor, with

distinctive forms stretched out on them. The young Centaurs, asleep.

I tugged on Lucas's cloak, and we retreated into the bushes. I kept going for a ways in.

"Good," Lucas said, clearly understanding my motives. The guards were facing the garden. If they came to investigate a second flash of light, they might not notice the one inside the library.

I folded my fingers around Tuli's necklet in my pocket. I had a good enough visual that I likely didn't need it, but it could only help. "Ready?" I asked.

They hung on to me, and I took us in.

The floor was much harder than grass. I winced as Lucas yanked on my cloak to encourage me to my feet. Maddy was frowning as we scuttled between the sleeping Centaurs to hug the wall between two banks of shelves.

We waited to see if the guards had noticed the light or sensed anything. But the glass doors, as well as the ones to the inner hall, remained closed.

"Is there someone there?" the words, uttered in a harsh whisper, came from one supposedly sleeping form, two over from where we huddled.

"Let him see me," I told Maddy, before I picked my way over to where the young Centaur pushed his torso upright.

"Stay low," I whispered to him.

His eyes went wide. "You visited Aunt Triss at the school."

I breathed a sigh of relief. It was Trey. "Yes. I am here to take you home."

He started to roll to his feet, but then froze when I held up a hand. "I am a Jumper. But I can only take about six of you at a time, so I have to make multiple Jumps. I will need your help to keep things quiet while I do so. Can you help me organize the kids into groups?"

He nodded vigorously. On the other side of him, Tuli straightened. “Are we going home?” she whispered.

“Yeppers. But you have to be very quiet, and listen to what I need you to do. Can you do that?”

She nodded. The Centaur on my other side yawned. They were waking up, and if one said something out loud—

Lucas began to strip. I couldn’t help but stare—it wasn’t my usual go-to for facing a tense situation. He whispered to Trey, “Do any of you ever talk to the guards?”

Trey rolled his eyes. “Tuli gabs to them every time she takes a piss.”

“I do not!” Her protest was a little loud, and I hushed her.

“Where do you go to pee?” Lucas asked, and then pointed to the garden. “Out there?”

Trey nodded. “We are using the garden. We can’t use the little rooms the Bellatis do.”

I guessed that good gardening practices weren’t high on either Isobel’s or Brock’s lists. Lucas was now stark naked, and I was trying very hard not to look. He was a very good-looking young man, and Maddy glanced over to me, before complaining to him, “You’re messing with my concentration.”

“Sorry.” But he didn’t sound particularly sorry as he moved gracefully over to where Tuli lay. “I’m a Morph,” he said. “I need to borrow your body.”

Her mouth opened and closed.

“He needs to touch you, silly,” Trey whispered urgently.

“Oh.” Tuli reached out a hand, and Lucas took it.

A moment later he straightened, and we all watched in amazement as his body contorted and writhed its way to that of a young Centaur.

I wasn’t the only one with my mouth hanging open. A young *female* Centaur.

“All right,” Lucas said. He even sounded like Tuli. “I’m going outside for a pee, and I’ll start chatting up the guards. Maddy, hide yourself against the wall—you’ll need to Block what Riley is up to. Trey and Tuli—you guys will need to wake up your friends in groups of six, so that Riley can Jump them home. Tuli, go with the first group, so that there aren’t two of you here. Keep it quiet, or we’ll attract the guards—there’s sure to be some in the hall, too. Everyone got that?”

We all nodded obediently, and he minced his way past us, moving a little oddly as he adjusted to having four long legs.

“Do I really look like that?” Tuli asked in amazement.

“Don’t let it go to your head,” her twin muttered.

Lucas opened the glass doors, and closed them behind him. A few moments later, his faux Tuli voice was in conversation with the two Bellatis.

Trey looked at me. “You need six of us?”

“Yes.”

Maddy Blocked him as he sneaked around, waking five young, befuddled Centaurs, and quickly explaining what we needed. They rose and stood in a circle around me.

“But”—one beamed—“we are going to be superheroes.”

She was a little loud, and Trey hurried to shush her. “Isobel is lying to you. What she is doing—it’s wrong.”

The little Centaurina blinked up at him. “But Bree says—”

“Bree is being lied to as well,” Tuli said. “We need to run away before it’s too late.”

The little one’s gaze moved to me. “Where are you taking us?”

“First, to where my friends are waiting. Once you are all together, the Watcher will take you to the academy, and from there, home.”

When that seemed to reassure her, I put out my arms. Six Centaurs, even though they were little, had to jostle to get at least one hand on me. “Hold on and don’t let go. Ready?”

I waited for the various nods, and then I reached for Havoc.

He was there so fast I knew he'd been following along. And he sent an image of a large open space with moonlight filtering through cracked roof panels. I looked out through his eyes, noticing large puddles on the floor and the other team members standing well back to give me space.

I reached for my talent, and fed it a burst of my anxiety. This was the fourth Jump in a tight timeline, but the crystal dust zinging through my veins enabled me to grab the kids and take us all away.

Snap.

We splashed down in a puddle.

I landed on my butt. Figures. My stories never mentioned staging a rescue with soggy underwear. Ugh.

I glanced quickly at my hands as the young Centaurs scrambled to their feet. A few dark scales had erupted along my wrists.

Cara came forward before the kids could panic, and as I stood, I hid my hands in my cloak.

“Welcome, children,” the Watcher said. “Come with me, we will wait over here for the rest of your friends.”

Tuli turned to me. “Will you bring back Trey?”

“Oh, yes,” I reassured her. “I certainly will.”

“Are you okay?” Cara asked me as she escorted them away.

“I’m good.” I found myself looking for a tall red-scaled Dragon, and found him. Havoc’s copper eyes gleamed at me from the darkness.

Sure you can’t bring the next lot back all at once? he asked.

Don't think so. Six is all that can hang on at once. I envisioned the library and did my thing.

Snap.

When the golden light faded, I was on my knees in the middle of the library. Perhaps I should invest in kneepads.

Maddy stood against the wall with one hand slightly lifted, blocking my bright arrival and the small group of Centaurs around Trey.

They were all up now, and huddled near Maddy. I glanced to the glass doors, and saw Lucas, looking like Tuli, talking with many hand gestures to the rather exasperated-looking Bellatis.

Trey had the remaining children split into two groups. I did a head count.

“Aren't there more?” I asked him. “What about the older ones?”

“Bree, Vic, and their friends have their own rooms. But they wouldn't want to go home. They want to help Isobel.” Trey's expression reflected his disgust.

My stomach twisted. “Are you sure?”

He nodded. “Vic and Bree have already been altered. They look human now.”

I swallowed. Regardless of what they thought they wanted, I'd try to Jump them back, if I could find them. “Do you know where they are?”

He shook his head, and I gritted my teeth. Nothing for it. I couldn't exactly go traipsing around looking for them.

I pulled the bag of crystal dust out of my pocket, and swallowed a bunch more. My entire body tingled. Then I moved amid the next group of six.

“Okay, everybody, hold onto me.”

As soon as the little hands took a grip, I reached, and the white noise engulfed us.

Snap.

Another spectacular landing in the puddle. I hoped it didn't contain anything toxic. This time I barely waited for Cara to approach before leaving again. Because I'd caught a glimpse of my arms. And there were black scales popping up all over them.

Where the hell were they coming from? They looked like what I'd seen on Marcus. What the fuck? But I had more pressing issues.

I kept my arms beneath my cloak as I popped back into the library. Trey and the last four children waited for me, but Maddy and Lucas needed to come too. We hugged the shadows as Lucas slipped through the doors. A Bellati stepped just inside to scan the room.

We all held our breath, and I heard Maddy hiss through her teeth, but whatever the Bellati saw, it wasn't a huddle of nervous Centaur children with me and Maddy. He withdrew again, and I was able to breathe.

Lucas shifted back to himself and pulled on his clothes. Then the kids held onto me, along with him and Maddy.

Snap.

This time, I face-planted. Spluttering, I pushed myself upright amid Centaurs jumping to their feet, and stared down in horror at arms covered in scales, with fingertips sprouting talons.

I quickly rolled over, sliding my shaking arms beneath my cloak. Caught Lucas frowning at me, but then he was distracted by an approaching Tuli.

"Trey!" Tuli trotted to her brother and embraced him.

Havoc grabbed me by the elbow and lifted me to my feet. "You good?" he asked.

"Yeah. I'm good." I shook him off before walking to the twins and handing Tuli her necklet.

"I thought that was gonzers," she said.

“Nope. Only misplaced.”

Her happy grin gave me a much-needed confidence boost. Because the children were the easy part of this mission.

The next time the Bellatis looked into the library, they’d see empty cushions.

We had minutes, no more, to get to Rafael.

I quickly explained about the older kids. Cara’s mouth pulled straight as she and Anna gathered up the children. Rafael’s twin spoke softly to them, and I saw how their tense little faces relaxed around her. I’d wondered why she’d made the mission list, now I had my answer.

“We will gate these ones to the academy first,” Cara said. “And take them home in the morning.” Her concerned eyes met Lucas’s. “If things don’t go according to plan, you will have to abort Rafael’s rescue. And you can’t do anything about the teens. If they see you, they’ll sound the alarm.”

My heart twisted, but it was all true. I met the concerned bicolored gaze of Rafael’s twin.

“We’ll get him. Don’t worry,” I reassured, even though I really didn’t know if we would.

“As soon as I fully activate this gate, Isobel is going to feel it,” the Watcher said. “I will delay for a few minutes, to give you time to get to Rafael. It will help distract them from you.”

“Perhaps you should take one of us with you,” Havoc growled. “What if one of her cursed coven is with Rafael?”

I noticed he didn’t volunteer for the privilege. “We’ll deal,” I said. “And I’ve already done a lot of Jumping—taking anyone else is going to be a stretch.”

Tyrez loomed up beside him. “No one here can stand up to what Isobel can throw at us,” he said. “And that includes Cara. Stealth is their only option. And they aren’t exactly defenseless.” He held his hand out to Lucas, and the Morph took it.

Took me a moment to remember just what that was all about. So now Lucas could turn into Tyrez?

“Handy talent,” I said.

“Yeah, I’ll look impressive, and be strong as an ox,” Lucas said ruefully. “But my fighting skills will leave something to be desired.”

Tyrez raised a dark brow. “Should I be insulted to be compared to a cow?”

“An ox is not a cow,” Lucas protested.

“You know what a cow is?” I asked Tyrez, surprised.

“I worked in Winnipeg,” Tyrez stated. “So I know the human realm quite well.”

I stared. Winnipeg had Dragon shifters? I refocused my confused brain, facing Lucas and Maddy. “You guys ready?”

As Cara started to pull the gate together, they grabbed onto my arms. I called up the image from my dream...

And suddenly, Havoc was there in my mind. Providing small details about the dungeon to flesh it out.

There was no way to ease into this one like we had the library. I had to hope that Rafael was alone, and that they hadn’t decided to redecorate the dungeon by moving everything around.

I pulled his crystal from my pocket. He’d rescued Marcus twice and Havoc once, putting himself in chains. I thought of the desperation and despair I’d sensed in him during the dream. Skating so close to the edge—had he fallen over it, or was there still something left of who he could be?

An image of his handsome face popped into my mind, with his unusual bicolored eyes framed in long hair streaked with the colors of the earth and shimmering like starlight, and his body with a runner’s lean muscles...

Snap.

MARCUS



I left the meadow gate behind, along with the woman who should have been my future, and the Dragon who'd stolen it from me.

My human legs found a rhythm I'd not expected. Not as fast as my equine ones, but still, I ran.

That I even could, surprised me. Hadn't really tried until now. But it seemed that my body had finally decided it could operate on two human legs.

Hooray.

I pushed them hard. Along the path first, and then veering onto a game trail.

What exactly are we doing? Iskar asked.

I didn't answer him. Wasn't sure I could, really. I only knew I needed to get as far away from the academy as possible.

Riley was gone, off on a mission that put her in the lair of that evil Sorceress. The demon within hammered at me. I didn't let my mind focus on it. Kept my thoughts vague as I pushed my way along the trail, and my breath started to come in gasps.

I didn't care. Just kept going. And at some point in the push for speed, I started to think of four legs and hooves.

I tripped and fell. Lay there, and then stripped off my sweats.

What are you up to? Iskar asked.

I didn't answer. Instead, I *reached*. Wanting the equine. Wishing for it.

And Iskar came on board. Guided me through, until I rolled to my feet, shook my mane, and snorted.

And then, I embraced running as though my life depended on it. Which it didn't, but perhaps my sanity did. I thundered along the trail with strides that ate up the ground. Pushing myself faster and faster, until everything around me was a blur and the sweat ran off my body, whipping to foam beneath my mane.

And it felt glorious.

The trail climbed beneath my hooves, and the trees gave way to a plateau. I slid to a halt beneath a sky roiling with clouds.

What are you doing, Marcus? Now Iskar sounded nervous.

I ignored him, and reared. Running on four legs reminded me of what I had lost—but I was no good to anyone like this. Riley was off on a dangerous mission, without me. She didn't need a freking horse. And everything I had been, or could be, screamed that I needed to be with her.

Yet she was mated to another.

If you'd only listen to me—that doesn't have to matter.

I mentally shut Iskar down. Because I couldn't contemplate any of it, so long as I failed to control this thing inside me. Not only could it kill her—why would she want to be mated to a man that couldn't look at her without growing scales?

She has given you no indication that even matters to her, Iskar stated. *You are wallowing.*

Wallowing?

Yes. Avoiding the issue by creating reasons why it could never work.

I pushed him away, again. Regardless of what I might want, the warrior in me screamed to be set free, just as much as the demon did.

Nothing that I wanted was possible until I conquered this.

Marcus, I applaud your sudden desire to tackle the creatures inside you, but there is no one to help us here. You could lose yourself to this, without it.

I am losing myself to this, anyway. I am tired of running from it. I need to freking face it.

I'm not sure—he began.

I opened the doors to everything I held inside, and blasted him with it. All the frustration, the anger, and the angst. Not fair to do so, but I'd had enough. *There is no point in living like this. And I will not risk anyone else with my demons. So let them fly.*

I sensed a burst of panic. But then he took a mental breath, and relented. *I might not be able to stop this once we start,* he warned.

Iskar, let it go. This time, I almost pleaded.

He hesitated. Then, he did so.

And the demon came for me. It rolled over me like a tidal wave. I couldn't have stopped it if I'd tried, and the power of it proved what Iskar had warned—once started, there was no stopping this.

I fought my fear as it swept the equine form away, thickening my legs and arms with great ropes of muscle, my hooves giving way to strong fingers tipped with razor-sharp talons that glowed silver. I expanded, packing on muscle around a powerful body with a whippy tail. Silver spikes erupted the full length of my spine, each one flickering with an eerie light.

As they formed a crest around a skull with heavy, powerful jaws, the fear gave way to something equally primal, but more savage. I tilted my head back and roared.

And the sky responded with an answer, forking lightning across restless clouds as thunder rolled.

Hellfire, Iskar stated, breathlessly.

Then the lightning blasted straight into me, dancing between the spikes in the center of my scales, and forming a glowing, flickering crown between those on my head and my small wings. Far from burning as it did so, it flushed me with energy.

I reared up on powerful hind legs as the wind drove rain against my scales. It sizzled as it hit, as though I were that heated.

I felt powerful. Invincible.

Then the wings over my shoulders expanded, and bright purple feathers sprouted from them.

Iskar, I protested.

A few feathers never hurt, was his strained reply.

As lightning hit me again, raw energy pulsed through my brain. The demon's rage hammered at me, looking for an elusive focus.

This was all very informative. Iskar sounded more than a bit panicked. *Now let's put him back in the box, shall we?*

I breathed out steam. It didn't want to go back. It wanted to live and breathe and throw lightning at its enemies. But I negotiated, promising that it could come out again. That I wouldn't strangle it any longer.

Since when are you such a diplomat? Okay, breathe. Think of Marcus. Big guy. Kinda stubborn.

If I don't think equine, it's a long walk back, I pointed out.

All right then! Think horse.

Not horse. Equine.

Just anything other than this, he grumbled.

The monster snarled through my mind as we focused on putting it back. It spun unhappy circles inside me, and

lightning ripped across the sky.

And then, Iskar began to sing.

It startled me, but it also caused the demon to pause and listen. I picked up the beat, and began to hum to it. Then my Centaur love of music took over, turning Iskar's Gryphon healing chant into a war ballad.

The heavier rhythm seemed to pacify the demon, and I sensed its anger diminish, until it reluctantly curled up and relinquished its hold. Iskar guided me back to my equine form.

Can we go back now? He sounded tired.

I stared up at the stars. My equine body shook like I had the plague, but my heart soared. For the first time, I believed that I could do this. That I could let loose what lay deep inside and make it do my bidding.

Well, we are a ways from doing that. But this was progress, no doubt about it.

I turned, trotted off the plateau, and headed back to the academy with the war ballad still echoing through my head.

RAFAEL



Aurora and Finn arrived at the dungeon for recharging.

I'd concluded that Finn was vicious shortly after meeting him, and nothing I'd seen or experienced since then had shown me one bit of anything redeemable about him. If he was an example of a typical Torshin, it was no wonder the Dragon Legion had worked so hard to eliminate the species.

The Torshin directed the Bellatis to string me up in the chains, and as usual, I debated trying to kill them. That it would be entirely pointless, considering that Aurora, Finn, and Laila were right there, stopped me.

After the last round with Isobel, I was done with pointless rebellions. I now concentrated on hanging on to whatever bits of me I had left.

Then Finn pulled out the icefire whip and started dancing it over my skin. The cursed whip instantly sliced my tunic to shreds, and my skin along with it. He seldom used it directly on me, preferring to torture helpless prisoners and feed my Satyr their pain instead. But after Brock and Isobel had finished with me, Brock had killed the victim strapped to the apparatus. He'd left the body where it lay, and the Bellatis had not yet disposed of it.

So, I was Finn's only source of entertainment for tonight. Oh, joy.

"Let me," Aurora purred.

Finn grinned as he handed the whip over. He was all about pain. But Aurora preferred finesse.

She dialed the whip down to its lowest setting and gestured to Laila. “Get him revved.”

Laila pushed her blonde hair back off her face and slowly peeled her robes off by degrees, as if I would find her striptease irresistible. I ignored it, but Finn moved in to run his hands over her newly exposed breasts and butt.

Meanwhile, Aurora began to drift the whip over my skin. Everywhere it touched, it was like getting jolted by an electric charge, painful, and leaving nasty welts, but not breaking the skin.

“Let me,” Laila begged. “I owe him.”

Aurora’s lips pulled straight, but she handed the whip over. Laila went to work. First over my chest and arms, but then lower, over my belly, and finally, licking what hung between my legs.

“That’s what you get,” Laila crowed, “For messing with me.”

I could do so again—but there was no point, really. So I tried not to show anything at all, but I couldn’t help the flinching, or my grunts of pain. Aurora’s mouth fell open, and her eyes glazed over as Laila hit me, again and again. Finn came up behind Aurora, sliding his hands up beneath her robes and humping her butt like an animal.

Aurora took the whip back from a totally naked Laila, who presented her bare buttocks to Aurora’s renewed efforts and uttered little moans when the tip of the whip kissed between her legs. Laila bent, folded her hot, wet lips around me, and began to suck.

The lust traveled on the bloodmagic from Finn and Aurora, through Laila—it flooded into me, and my Satyr reached for it. A familiar battle now, but one which I continued to fight, even though I knew I would lose. I gritted my teeth as it began to feed, and my body responded to Laila’s tongue. Within seconds, I was thrusting into her mouth as the schism between my physical self and my psyche deepened.

It all fed the rage that grew within. Fueled by despair and desperation, it seethed through my mind, unraveling coherent thought or memory.

Break him, Isobel had said. So they had. There was very little left of who I'd once been. And nothing of who I'd dreamed of being.

Why did I hold on to what was left with such desperation? Wouldn't it be easier just to let the rage scorch it all away until I was only a shell that housed the talents Isobel needed?

The answer came to me on a mental glimpse of green eyes—Riley.

Why did she hold a permanent spot in my heart? Foolish of me to hope that she'd meant what she'd said in that dream. That she would come for me.

Yet somehow, I believed she would.

Finn had rucked up Aurora's robe and was taking her savagely from behind. She gasped and moaned with every thrust, the icefire whip forgotten as he dug long fingernails into her breasts, leaving bloodied trails. The sordid lust from them surged, right before he threw his head back, and shouted. Aurora cried out, too.

Laila's mouth and tongue closed tight around me and took me with them. I bucked hard in her mouth, hating myself but unable to stop. And then, as I flew high, something else ignited within me.

Rage. That they would, or could, do this to me. And it all focused on the woman whose mouth was currently wrapped around me.

In a flash, my inner fiend reached for—and *into*—Laila. Raced along her veins, to her heart.

And before I could stop myself...

Her mouth dropped from me in a wordless scream, even as the life faded from her eyes. She slumped to the ground.

My rage left me between one blink and the next. I glanced desperately to Aurora. "Help her, or release me, so I can!"

Aurora stalked up to me, pushing Laila's body aside, her eyes gleaming with triumph. How had I ever thought she cared, even a little bit? But I was desperate to help Laila...

"Not so pure and innocent now, are we, Rafael?" Aurora crowed, as if one of her coven wasn't dying at her feet. "You are just as depraved as the rest of us." She reached down to my breeches—pulled them up and grabbed the laces, jerking them viciously tight. I couldn't help the grunt of pain. Taking care not to touch me, she tied them until I could barely breathe.

"Help her," I pleaded.

Aurora merely shrugged. "She knew the risks." Then she turned, linked her arm through Finn's, and left.

Laila's body lay in a heap. The dungeon lights were never turned off, so I was unaware of the passage of time in any ordinary sense. My skin healed, but sluggishly. The pain in my arms and shoulders was so familiar that I barely noticed it. I hung in a daze as the last of the blood energy coursed through me, and the rents in my skin closed over.

I hung there for an indeterminate amount of time before I became aware of a tingle of raw energy—so electric all the fine hairs on my arms stood on end. I raised my head, tossing it back to get the long strands out of my eyes, and saw the golden light dance in the center of the room.

And then, suddenly, three forms appeared within it. They landed in a sprawl on the cold stone. As the light faded, I saw a slim young man, a dark-haired woman, and another—who straightened and looked at me with fire in her gold eyes.

Gold? But even as I stared, the gold faded and was replaced by green.

Riley.

I closed my eyes, and opened them again. But she was still there.

She'd come for me.

I opened my mouth and managed to croak, "Riley."

Her eyes dropped to Laila's body, and then rose to meet mine for a second. I caught a glimpse of her horror. At what I had done?

She dropped to check Laila, and then pulled her off to the side.

"I did that," I whispered. "I lost control..."

The slim young man's doubt showed in his eyes, but Riley didn't hesitate. "We are here to rescue you," she said. Then they darted to my wrists and ankles. "Dammit. Lucas, can you deal with those?"

He moved close to peer at them. "Yeah. It will take a bit to do, though." His gaze rose to my neck. "Can't do a thing about the collar, though."

"Just get him loose, and Cara can deal with the rest when we get him back," Riley said.

Lucas looked at me. "Are there guards outside?"

I had to swallow twice before I could speak, and even then, I was so hoarse it was barely decipherable. "Yes, usually two. But—the ones who strung me up left a while ago. Shouldn't be back for a few hours."

The other young woman gazed around the dungeon. "I've got it," she said after a moment. "But if they come in and start crashing around, it will unravel in a hurry."

When I stared at her in confusion, Riley provided, "Maddy's a Blocker."

A Blocker? Seemed like I had a pretty exclusive team of rescuers.

The young man pulled something out of his cloak pocket—an oilskin cloth that he unrolled to reveal a set of wicked-looking metal instruments. He stood before me, peering into the manacles.

Riley pulled a bag out of her pocket and upended it into her mouth. I saw a sparkle of white—crystal dust? When she swallowed and looked up at me, her eyes glowed emerald. "Hello, Rafael. You're taller in real life."

“Stretched,” was all I managed. My voice refused to do anything but croak. Had I been screaming? It was all a bit of a blur. But the one thing I wanted to forget, I couldn’t. Laila’s body lay in a heap off to one side.

I’d killed her. My mind kept sheering away, and then returning to it, unable to block it out.

As Lucas bent over my right wrist manacle, Riley’s eyes chased over me. “What have they done to you?” she whispered.

I shrugged. “I will heal.” And I would. Was starting to already. Physically. Just wasn’t sure about anything else.

The spark of understanding in her beautiful eyes almost undid me. I didn’t deserve it, not after what I had just done. I set my jaw and fastened my gaze on the ceiling, struggling to hold it together.

Maddy looked at the bodies and the various apparatuses, she looked like she wanted to vomit.

I understood that sentiment. Perfectly.

The right manacle fell free, and Lucas bent to my right ankle.

“You’re good,” I croaked.

“Don’t lack for experience,” he replied. “These are fancy ones, though. Nothing but the best for you.”

“Yeah.” I didn’t quite know what to do with my right hand, now that it was free.

Riley reached out and folded her own around it. “We’ve got you.”

Hellfire. Her touch sent zings straight through me, but it was the empathy in her words that almost catapulted me straight over the edge. I shuddered. Her fingers tightened in mine, and I held on.

Barely.

Her skin felt odd beneath my fingers, and when I glanced down—I saw scales running along the back of her hand, and

up her forearm. She'd been a Dragon when she'd mated Havoc. But I thought her scales had been gold.

These were black. And her fingernails were elongated, as though partway to forming talons.

I shot her a look, and one corner of her lip twitched upward.

"Occupational hazard," she said.

The right ankle was now free. The relief when I could step down and take the weight off my left arm was immeasurable. Riley just quietly stood there, holding onto me, while Lucas kept working. Maddy paced nervously, shooting glances at the door.

I couldn't help but groan when my left foot touched the ground. When Lucas moved to my left wrist, I sensed something. Someone, actually, moving through the building—coming down the basement stairs.

"Better hurry, we're about to get company," I said.

"I can Block—" Maddy began.

I spoke through gritted teeth. "It's Isobel."

Lucas cursed, and Riley's fingers tightened in mine. "Come and grab me," she told Maddy, placing her other hand on Lucas's shoulder. "We'll be exiting in a hurry."

Maddy rushed over and took hold of Riley's shoulder.

I tracked Isobel as she descended the stairs. Her energy swirled uneasily. Had she sensed something when they'd Jumped in? She didn't usually visit in the middle of the night.

She wasn't alone, either. Brock's energy reflected rage.

"Maybe they know the children are gone," Maddy said.

I didn't sense that kind of frantic energy. "You got them all out?" I asked.

"Except the older ones." Riley frowned.

"What's her ETA?" Lucas was working his metal picks in my wrist manacle. Despite the tension in his voice, his hands

remained steady.

“She’s almost here,” I said. “There’s been no alarm. I don’t think they know about the kids yet.”

“I might be able to buy us some seconds, anyway,” Maddy stated. “Enough to confuse her.”

Maybe. Isobel was so powerful—she’d see through the illusion in a heartbeat.

“She’s in the hall,” I said. “If you’re going to Block, make sure she’ll still see me.”

“Right,” the Blocker said.

Lucas inhaled, and the manacle clicked. “Almost there...”

We all heard Isobel tell the guards something—it sounded like an order. And running footsteps headed back up the stairs.

I had a pretty good idea where she sent the Bellati.

Lucas cursed softly beneath his breath, twisting the metal pick—

Maddy’s brows drew down and Riley went rigid. Golden light started to dance around us.

The dungeon lock rattled, and Isobel entered.

HAVOC



In my head, the skinny Dragon worked to free Rafael from his chains.

My pulse pounded, and talons sprouted from my fingertips. *Hurry the fuck up!*

Not helpful, Riley came back at me. We are working as fast as we can. Are the kids gone?

Almost. The exchange had distracted me from the Watcher opening the gate. When I finally glanced that way, I saw the meadow with the fucking academy building in the background.

Rafael's twin sister led the Centaur children through the pulsing gate. Tyrez was already through, in case Isobel got wind of what we'd done and made an attempt to reclaim what she so clearly considered hers.

Linked to the Dreambitch, I was only half aware of them leaving.

And then, it all went to fucking pieces when Rafael sensed the Isobitch coming their way.

My human didn't stand a chance. The Deranger surged within me, and brought my beast with it. I was halfway to my Dragon when a hand folded over my writhing forearm. I glared down into the Watcher's vivid-blue eyes.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Isobel's coming." I snarled the words as my wings arched over us.

The last Centaur brat had stepped through the gate and vanished. I had no intention of following them.

The assassin sprouted his own wings in response to me embracing my beast. His deep indigo eyes assessed my every move.

He was worried about *me*. I ignored him. I was worried about the Dreambitch. *My* Dreambitch.

No. Dammit. Not mine.

Mine, insisted both my beast and my monster.

Oblivious to the war being waged within, Cara pushed at me. “Riley will get them out, Havoc.” Her voice was intense. “There is nothing you can do.”

“I can kill.” The words were barely decipherable.

“And be killed. Even you cannot go up against so many of Brock’s best pinions and survive. You know it.” She pulsed calming energy through to me, and I growled at her. “Riley will get them out. She will bring them to the meadow. We have to meet her there.”

Fang’s little fuzzy feet tickled at me. I had no idea whether she wanted me to go after the Dreambitch, or go with Cara. The Deranger didn’t bloody care, it was all for throwing itself at anything with fangs and claws. And my nutzoid Dragon just wanted to save the fucking Jumper, and then mate her. Again.

The Watcherbitch injected her vivid-blue energy into this swirling mess, and when I next blinked, I was standing in front of the gate.

“This is the only way, Havoc,” she said.

Only because my human knew it to be the truth, did I follow her through.

RILEY



As I reached deep inside for my Jumper power, my first crazy, irrational thought when Isobel entered the room was that she was shorter than I expected.

She might even have been attractive, if it hadn't been for the eyes blazing straight at us. They were the color of fresh blood.

She wasn't alone. An enormous guy with bronze scales was with her. He blinked as though having issues seeing us, but then he lifted his head and sniffed. "Rafael's here. But so is the Jumper, isn't she? He was *right*."

Fucking hell. Havoc, clear as a bell in my head.

"Dammit," Maddy whispered.

"Got it," Lucas said, and I grabbed his hand.

Go, go, go.

I didn't need the red Dragon's encouragement. The crystal dust zinged through my veins as I reached deep—there was no shortage of fear to tap into.

For just a split second, I saw the meadow outside the academy...

And then Isobel enveloped us with a blast that replaced the white noise in my head with blood-red energy that scorched, turning everything to agony.

Snap.

My feet touched solid ground, and then the red wave ripped it all away. My brain and body burned. Everything was bathed in crimson light. I thought I heard Maddy scream, or maybe it was me. Her hand was torn from my arm, and then I was flying. We seemed suspended for a very long time—

Something seized hold. I was aware of a desperation that grabbed my power and took us—somewhere. But Isobel's energy pursued us like a blood-crazed hound, scrabbling at my mind and body.

And then we crashed.

When we hit—hard—she was still there, clawing at my mind as blackness hovered at the edges of my vision. Pain enveloped me, and I struggled both to hold on to wherever I'd landed, and push the invading presence away.

Instead of leaving, it seemed to shift to someone else near me. The groan sounded male.

The world spun, I couldn't focus on anything. I lay on the ground—but I was seized by excruciating pain.

I heard another groan that sounded torn from the throat uttering it. I thrashed through the agony, but even the effort of opening my eyes was too much.

Maddy's here. But where the fucking hell are you? Havoc sounded frantic, something I didn't even think was possible.

I struggled to answer him. *I-I don't know.*

Movement nearby drew my attention. "Riley!" A shadow hovered over me. A narrow face framed in long, sparkly hair. Rafael's eyes peered at me from dark orbits, haunted and weary. Even his cheeks appeared gaunt. But he'd made it here with me, wherever that was. And behind him—Lucas.

Tell me where you are.

I had other worries. *Maddy? Is she okay?*

She's here. In the meadow. Unconscious, but alive. Havoc's mindvoice had very little of its usual snarl.

I looked up into Rafael and Lucas's eyes, which were huge.

Dammit, where are you?

I don't know, okay? Stop fucking shouting at me. Wrapped in agony, I tried to push myself up—and failed. Something was horribly wrong with my lower half—my legs were contorting, and something new sprouted from my lower torso.

New *arms*. Only they ended in hooves...

What the fuck? Rafael reached out to grab my hand.

“What’s happening?” he demanded of Lucas.

“I have no idea,” the Morph said. “I didn’t know she was a shifter.”

“Not a shifter,” I hissed through clenched teeth. My voice didn’t sound like my own, it was higher pitched. “This happens when I Jump. I’ve been a Dire, a Dragon, and a Satyr.”

I could see a forest around us, but I didn’t think this was the one near the academy. Where the hell were we? The trees seemed familiar—their trunks were like pillars, with no underbrush at all, just bare to the ground.

Then another bout of anguish made the point totally moot.

What the fuck is wrong with you?

I just wanted Havoc to stop yelling in my brain.

Lucas’s brows dropped so low I couldn’t see his eyes. “You’ve shifted to different things when you Jump?”

“Yesss.” The word came out as a hiss, as the bones in my body contorted, developing a second ribcage that lengthened to accommodate four long equine legs, the first two of which extended out over the waistband of my rather stressed leggings.

The agony robbed me of breath, and I was barely aware of what I was saying. “Was even a boy, once.”

I heard a mental curse from Havoc. And suddenly Lucas was front and center, pushing Rafael aside. “She’s changing into a Centaur.”

A Centaur? How was that possible? It sure hurt, and hurt bad.

Lucas gripped my hand. “Focus on me, Riley. You have to think of yourself as *you*. How you look, how your body feels, even how you smell. Get that impression fixed in your mind.”

That’s what Kiko had said, too. But I was in so much pain, I couldn’t even think.

“Riley!” Lucas shouted at me, gripping me by my shoulders. “Focus! Think of you. And only you. You have to ignore the pain.”

Easy for him to say.

“Listen. I’m not sure why this is happening to you, but it’s still a type of shifting, and the way you are doing it is dangerous. Focus on who and what you are as a human.”

All I wanted to do was curl up and die.

“Do. It. NOW!” Lucas insisted. His fingers dug into my skin.

Behind me, someone else lifted my upper body into his lap. Cool fingers stroked my brow and soothed away some of the pain. And a scent wrapped around me and sent my pulse to pounding.

“Breathe, Riley,” Rafael said. “Let me help you.”

Let the wizardling do his thing, Dreambitch.

I’m not a dream anymore. As nicknames go, it’s lame. But I had no problem following directions. I’d let Rafael do anything, frankly.

It should have surprised me, but it just seemed so *right*. After the rejection from my two other men, his gentle touch penetrated straight through my turmoil. And he smelled like sin itself. I couldn’t find the words to describe it adequately—

warm and musky with overtones of spice—I only knew that I wanted *more*.

“Let me in, Riley,” he whispered.

In answer, I turned my head against his arm, and breathed him in. He bent over me, and his energy reached—wrapped around the piece that was purely me. And then he pulled it to the surface.

Reversing the changes hurt even worse than before, and I writhed in his grip, my four equine legs lashing out and almost nailing Lucas.

“I’m sorry,” Rafael apologized. “My healing power is in pieces. I can control, but I can’t do much for the pain.”

Iskar had said that he’d been *controlled* by Rafael. It sounded so sinister, but he had hold of that which was me, and I wanted his help. Two of my equine legs altered into my human ones, the other two vanished into my torso, and the long body shrank, then wrapped in smooth human skin.

Every inch of it was excruciating.

Rafael’s fingers stroked my brow. “That’s it. Just breathe.”

I did, grateful for the retreat of pain.

Isobel taught him well. Havoc didn’t sound quite so frantic now.

I was too dizzy to come up with something snappy. *Isobel is a bitch*.

Isobitch, he agreed.

Rafael’s fingers continued to trace circles over my temples. “So, you’ve changed shape before?”

I nodded. “I think it has something to do with the Jumping. I must absorb forms from those I’m near.”

“From those you are *near*,” Lucas asked, “Or from those you *touch*?”

I considered. “I touched the children.”

“You also touched me when we Jumped,” he pointed out. “And I recently morphed into a young Centaur.”

The note in his voice had me pushing myself upright. I shook all over. “I got that from you?” My voice emerged as a hoarse croak.

“I think so.” His eyes were boring right into mine. “It is possible the Jumping is the trigger, but not the cause.”

I frowned at him. “What do you mean?”

“Perhaps we should sort this out later,” Rafael suggested. “Because I think Isobel might have gleaned where we’ve gone.” He sounded ashamed. “She has her claws deep into my mind, and followed us through for long enough. As long as I am wearing this cursed collar, she can track me.”

Where are you? Havoc repeated.

“Where are we?” I pushed myself away from Rafael. The world spun.

As soon as I gained the higher vantage point, I knew where we were. To one side of us were two graves, each with a wooden cross. And beyond them, in the center of the clearing, the old cottage.

It was Rafael’s dream. His home, before Isobel had come for him.

“It was you,” I whispered. “You brought us here.”

“I guess so,” he said. “It wasn’t really a conscious thing. We got nailed by the blood energy, and as everything was swirling away, I thought of this place.”

Lucas’s expression was grim. “But Maddy didn’t make it?”

“She’s okay,” I said. “Havoc says she’s in the meadow. When Isobel zapped us, it split us up.” I rubbed at my head. “I just need a minute or two, and I should be able to Jump us there, too.”

Lucas rose and offered me a hand, but Rafael beat him to it, rolling to his feet and bending to hoist me to mine. Which

was when I discovered that I needed my four Centaur legs back.

I couldn't stand.

Rafael caught me as I stumbled and almost fell. "I'm okay," I insisted, even though I clearly wasn't.

I pushed his hands away. Took two steps.

And the darkness rose to claim me.

MARCUS



Tuli and Trey could barely contain themselves as they told me of their misadventure.

I barely heard them. I was focused on Havoc.

“You’re sure she’s okay?” I asked the red Dragon.

“She’s alive,” Havoc snarled, “and with the wimpy Dragon and Rafael. I just can’t fucking get her to tell me where they are.”

The demon was no longer lying quiet. I had to look away from the Dragon as Iskar took a firm hold on it.

Not far from us, Bess was talking to the other young Centaurs, preparing them for their final gate trip home. Cara stood with a groggy Maddy, surrounded by her three very concerned mates.

The Bellati gate guard came over and engaged the Watcher in conversation. I caught a mention of the headmaster.

“He has enough Seeing ability to have detected our departure,” Cara told the Bellati. “But he only foresees a tiny bit at a time. Fortunately.”

“He was angry,” the Bellati said.

Cara thanked him for letting her know, and bent over Maddy. Bess came and guided my cousins over to the others.

Which was when Havoc went completely rigid, turning toward the gate.

“What is it?” I asked, my pulse suddenly accelerating. Riley was out there, somewhere, with Lucas and Rafael.

“She’s gone,” the red Dragon said.

My mind spun. “Where did she go?” My voice had deepened to a hoarse growl.

The red Dragon glowered back at me. “I don’t fucking know. She was there. And now, not. I think she passed out.”

Black scales erupted over my arms, but I no longer feared them.

Easy, Marcus. If that thing regains control here, it could get ugly. Riley’s alive, and with Rafael and Lucas.

Something is wrong if she’s blacked out.

She’s done it before when she’s pushed her talent, Iskar stated calmly. She just needs to rest.

But Isobel is after her—

If you don’t stop and breathe, I’m just going to let things rip in here.

As threats went, it was effective. When I inhaled, Iskar started his chants.

Not my favorite music, but it seemed to work on the beast.

“Is Rafael okay?” It was his twin, Anna. Her bicolored eyes, so much like her brother’s, were filled with worry.

Havoc transferred his blazing stare to her. “I think so. He seemed okay.”

“At least she got him out of there,” I said.

She nodded. “Will she be able to Jump him back here?”

“Not sure,” I said. “Depends on how weak she is.” I straightened and glared at Havoc. “Do you really think she’s passed out?”

The Dragon peeled lips back from teeth grown sharp. “Wouldn’t have fucking said it if I didn’t,” he growled.

“If you two will stop spitting at each other, we can come up with a plan.” Cara approached and placed a hand on my arm. The flood of calm energy helped to steady my breathing.

“If she’s that weak, she won’t be able to Jump them back here,” I said through gritted teeth.

“No. She’ll have to recharge, first,” Cara said. “They will have to avoid Isobel on their own, unless we can find out where they are.”

“We have to go after her,” I said.

“For sure,” Anna agreed. The big Dragon, Talakai, loomed up behind her.

The Watcher patted my arm. “If she is really too weak, then yes. So long as Havoc can determine where she is, and I can find us a gate.”

I frowned at her. “Can’t you gate us right to them if Havoc can get a location?”

She grimaced. “Creating gates isn’t all magic and fairy dust, my young friend. A Watcher has to have been somewhere before she can create a gate to it.”

That surprised me. “But Isobel creates them all the time.”

“Yes,” Cara said. “And to do that, she has traveled extensively and memorized locations. Not unlike what Riley does in order to Jump. Watchers, however, need more than visual references—they need the life energies that flow through the area. The most talented of us can sometimes use photographs or even descriptions to channel a gate, but it is very risky and not guaranteed to be successful.” She took a deep breath. “Once a gate has been formed in an area, it leaves a residue even after it has been shut down. Sometimes I can use that to connect to it.”

Frek. I hadn’t realized.

Watchers are incredibly powerful, Iskar said. But they still have their limits.

“When Riley wakes up, Havoc can get a location, and I will pinpoint the closest useable gate,” she said. “Then we will

go and find her.”

“Where is the Jumper?” The voice came from behind me. I turned to see the headmaster, Amadeus, approaching. His expression was, at best, thunderous.

Cara faced Amadeus. “Something went wrong with her last Jump. She is alive and unharmed, but currently unconscious and unable to tell us where she is.”

The headmaster’s eyes flashed yellow. “How did she get a visual on where the children were kept?”

Cara’s eyes narrowed. “She had a dream in which they were featured, and took a leap of faith.”

I stared at her. That wasn’t the full truth of it—she was holding back on key bits of information.

Amadeus looked and sounded livid. “You had no right to send her after the Centaur children. You knew the council wished to use her to get to Isobel.”

“That plan was not feasible.” Cara’s hair lifted off her shoulders. “You cannot use Nikolai’s power in that fashion. The consequences would be unacceptable.”

“That is your *opinion*,” he snapped. “You voiced it at the meeting. It is not the consensus of those who make the decisions.”

“It is not an opinion. It is a fact,” Cara stated. “As Nikolai’s primary instructor and mentor, I am in a unique position to know.”

“It is not your decision to make,” the headmaster repeated as he straightened himself to his full height. “You have overstepped your bounds for the final time, Watcher. And I am not the only one who believes that to be the case.” He glared at her, before he spun, and stalked off.

“Who the fucking hell was that?” Havoc demanded.

“Trouble.” Anna exchanged a worried look with Talakai, and their eyes flashed like mad.

“Does Amadeus have any power over you?” I asked Cara.

Her lips twisted. “Not for most things. But this is bigger than most things.” She shrugged. “Until Riley wakes up and speaks to Havoc, we are treading water. So let’s go eat.”

We followed in the headmaster’s wake, toward the building. But predictably, Havoc dug in his heels.

“I ain’t part of this fucking academy,” he said, standing his ground.

Cara turned and regarded him calmly. “Until Riley is back safe and sound, we need your link to her. That means you are stuck with us for a while yet.”

Havoc’s eyes ignited. But apparently, he wasn’t ready to tackle a Watcher. When Cara turned her back on him and continued, he reluctantly fell in behind us.

For now, anyway, the Dragon was ours.

The rising sun lit the academy building with golden rays, making the stone look like molten metal.

As we approached the doors, Riley’s two female friends appeared. Kiko’s brows were drawn down, and Vali was biting her nails.

“Where is Riley?” Kiko asked.

“She is okay,” Cara said. Which I thought was not entirely the truth, but also not a lie. The Watcher gestured to the Satyr and the Dragona. “Come with us, ladies. We are going to get something to eat, and I will explain everything.”

Minutes later, we were sitting at Cara’s table while she explained what had happened. Well, Anna, myself, and Kiko did. Havoc stalked straight through to the balcony, while Talakai and Vali found walls to lean on.

Cara wasn’t tolerating looming Dragons, at least with those she could sway. “Sit down, you two.” She pointed to the empty chairs.

Vali obeyed. Talakai positioned himself behind Anna, hands on her shoulders.

“So—we’re just waiting for Riley to talk to Havoc?” Kiko asked.

“Yes,” Cara answered, setting a fresh pot of tea on the table and returning to the kitchen.

Vali shot a look toward the balcony. “Is she talking to Havoc?”

“Not at the moment, but she will be,” Cara said from the kitchen. She bustled around before returning with a plate of muffins. “The potstickers will be ready in fifteen, but help yourself to these first.”

My stomach was in knots. I couldn’t eat, not with Riley out there. But when Cara set the plate down in front of me, it growled loud enough that Kiko raised a brow.

“Is that you, or your inner monster?” she asked in a slightly snide tone.

“Both,” I conceded, snagging myself a muffin.

She is surprisingly devoted to Riley, Iskar stated.

The Satyr rolled her eyes at me, leaving me in no doubt that I’d angered her. We all jumped when there was a loud knock on the door.

“Figures he’d be fast about this,” Cara muttered as she went to open it.

Two people stood in the doorway. The headmaster and a tall, thin woman with the trademark long white hair of a Watcher.

Cara bowed her head, but I didn’t think our Watcher friend was particularly surprised. The rest of us gaped at the newcomer.

“Councilwoman,” Cara said.

I peered at the other Watcher. This, then, was an Elder from the Liberi council. I’d never met one before. She halted near the table, but her eyes were only on Cara.

“We wish to speak with you in private,” she said.

“Anything you have to say can be said in front of these people.” Cara straightened and stood her ground.

The other Watcher’s eyes flashed brilliant blue. “Very well. It has been brought to my attention that you have overstepped your authority. It is not the first time I have received complaints. In the past, other Elders have agreed with your decisions, and I have been forced to conform.” A muscle jumped in her jaw. “But they cannot defend you this time—you have acted in direct conflict with our plans, and that of the Cryptid council, to remove Isobel as a threat. As a result, I have been instructed to relieve you of your duties here at the academy.”

Ice traveled down my spine, but Cara didn’t seem at all phased by it. “If that is what you wish.”

“No!” exclaimed Anna. “Cara only did what needed to be done.”

Amadeus stiffened. “She disobeyed direct orders.”

“But she made the right call,” Kiko protested.

“I’m sorry. Who are you?” the Elder scowled at the Satyr.

Kiko didn’t even flinch. “A friend of the Jumper, and her teammate.”

The Elder looked away, her entire demeanor a dismissal, but she answered the Satyr. “It was not Cara’s decision to make.” She drew herself up to her full height and regarded Cara. “You will move back to your station in the human realm.”

“Isobel is very powerful,” I growled. “What is your plan for taking her out?”

The Elder stiffened. “She is Liberi. We will not be ‘taking her out’ because we intend to capture her and bring her back to Elandriel for an appropriate trial.”

As my mouth dropped open, Anna spoke up. “Capture would be far more difficult than the alternative,” she said

incredulously. “I have seen Isobel’s power firsthand. And based on what she did to Marcus, it has only grown.”

“The power of the Perditor will ensure her capture,” the Elder stated.

Cara’s mouth pulled straight. “Pitting Nikolai against Isobel is a mistake.”

“It is no longer your concern. He will be accompanied by a team of Watchers and Bellatis,” the other Watcher said. “They will assist him in maintaining control.”

“You will be playing with fire,” Cara argued. “His power is difficult to control, and Isobel will push every button.”

“Both the Liberi Elders and the Cryptid council have decided this is the only way to proceed.” The councilwoman’s tone rang with finality. “Isobel has done enough damage. It is time to end it, and the Jumper gives us the ability to do so. As soon as she returns to the academy, we will launch our mission.” She fastened her ice-cold stare on Cara. “And you will no longer play a part in it. Is that clear?”

She and Cara matched gazes for a moment, and in my mind, I heard the clash of steel. But then Cara bowed her head and stepped back. “Yes, councilwoman.”

The tall Watcher and Amadeus turned as almost one unit, and left, the door slamming behind them.

Cara’s mouth twisted as she met my gaze.

“They are out of their fucking minds,” Havoc said succinctly from the balcony.

“They are desperate,” the Watcher stated. “First Galeran, and now Isobel—the Liberi Elders want this over.”

“As do we,” Anna said. “But not like this.”

“I agree with you.” Cara turned to Havoc. “When you do establish contact with Riley, say nothing to anyone other than me.”

“We can’t allow them to boost you from the academy.” Anna sounded stricken. “You have many friends here, if we all

band together—”

“No.” Cara’s single word stopped her cold. “I will not allow this idiocy to jeopardize what they are building here.”

Anna stiffened, “But—”

Cara cast her stare over all of us. “The realms desperately need what the academy offers. Without it, the underworld will take over. My concerns are minor compared to that.” She glanced between Talakai and Anna. “Do you two trust me?”

“Of course,” Anna said.

“Then I need you to leave, and go back to your classes. Do not worry about me. This isn’t over yet.”

She fixed her stare on Anna, who looked as though she might protest, until Talakai moved forward and put his big hand on her shoulder. Then she straightened. “You will call us when you need us?”

“I will,” Cara affirmed.

They left, but not without Anna sending a glance back to me. “Rafael will need your help.”

I stared at her in confusion. *My* help? Riley had gotten him out, not me.

“He—” she hesitated. “He will be in a bad place.”

“I don’t know how I can help him,” I stated with a sense of desperation. I couldn’t even help myself.

Her gaze penetrated straight through me. “You can help each other,” she said.

As my mouth opened and closed like a stranded fish, she turned and left. After they passed through the door, I snapped it shut and regarded Cara warily. I had the distinct feeling she was up to something.

It was confirmed when she twisted to regard Havoc. “You are our secret weapon, my big friend.”

“Not your friend, Watcherbitch,” the Dragon growled.

Cara shrugged. “Been called worse. But it all hinges on you. Because if Riley is too weak to Jump with Rafael and Lucas, I need you and Marcus to find out where they are, and go get them.”

Havoc glowered at me. “I am not working with him.”

“Fine by me,” I snarled at him.

The Satyr’s eyes narrowed as she glared at the red Dragon. “Riley needs you to step up. I realize that will be a challenge for a jerk such as yourself, judging by the way you have treated her already.”

“I agree with the Satyr,” I stated.

Kiko shifted her glare to me. “You also treated her like crap.”

Fair point, Iskar noted.

I ignored him and focused on the issue at hand. “But as soon as we bring Riley back here, they’ll use her to enact their plan.”

Cara nodded. “Which would be why we’re not bringing her to the academy,” she said.

“And where are we bringing her?” I asked.

“I will decide that,” she hedged, standing up. “But I have to go and put out some fires. As Anna suggested, once word of this spreads, my friends will want to spring to my defense. Which, at the moment, will not be constructive.”

“So we just wait here?” Havoc sounded incredulous.

“Until Riley wakes up, we are kind of stuck,” Cara pointed out. “So, sit, and eat.”

Maybe we all need a vacation in the tropics, Iskar said. *Tell her*, he insisted.

Wondering what the frek he was on about, I did so. “Iskar says the tropics would be an idea.”

Cara’s eyes lit up as if she’d taken it seriously. “Mountains would be good too.”

What the frek is she on about? What mountains? I asked Iskar.

The only reply I received was mental humming. Damned Gryphon.

Havoc had other concerns. “Who the hell is Iskar?” he demanded.

“The Gryphon who lives inside Marcus.” Cara stated it as if it were commonplace.

Perfect. As if the Dragon needed more ammunition against me. “At least it explains the feathers,” I pointed out.

The diversion tactic only worked with the Satyr. “What feathers?” she asked, her eyes bright with curiosity.

Cara walked over to Havoc. “The important thing is—Riley cannot Jump back here. I will have to give her an alternative.”

Havoc’s narrowed eyes blazed. “This just keeps getting fucking better and better.”

“It’s too late for you to back out now,” Cara told him.

The red Dragon pulled his lips back in a snarl. “All I want is to be free. Free from Brock. From Isobel. From *her*. And from this fucking place.”

Cara fixed him with a steely eye. “You should have thought of that before you bit her.”

In the highly charged silence that followed, she slipped out the door, and closed it behind her.

RAFAEL



The wind blasted through my hair, whipping it across my face.

I couldn't spare a hand to push it away. Both were wrapped firmly around Riley's unconscious form. She shivered sporadically, so I cradled her tightly. When her head rotated against my neck, her warm breath drifted across my skin.

It felt so *right*, having Riley lying in my arms. As if I needed further proof that she was fated to be mine.

My pulse pounded at the thought of her in Isobel's hands. My nemesis had gated in shortly after we'd fled, and by the energies I sensed surging behind us, she wasn't alone. We weren't far ahead, and we'd never outrun her, not with Lucas's Dragon being so small. The best we could do was to find somewhere to hide. Until Riley awoke.

I hadn't confessed my doubt to Lucas that she was going to be in any shape to Jump us out of here, and I was pretty sure he knew, anyway. His awareness was in every desperate beat of his jet-black wings.

I did my best to prove us both wrong. My hands were tucked beneath the hem of her tee shirt, resting on bare skin, and I attempted to pump my currently feeble healing talent into her.

She shivered again, and a qualm shot through me. This seemed more than just exhaustion—her skin was burning hot beneath my touch, and sweat beaded her forehead. Why was she so sick?

I closed my eyes and tried to find the cause. Riley's body was in chaos—it was almost as though she had more than one thing going wrong. Perhaps I was just unable to track it properly.

It was all I could do to soothe away her pain.

When Lucas banked and dropped, pushing me against his neck spikes, my eyes shot open. We flew level with the clouds, the vapor trailing around us. Lit with pinks and oranges by the rising sun, they were beautiful.

And suddenly, just like that, with the clouds, my hair flying in the cold wind, and the woman I held in my arms, I was filled with joy. It struck me out of nowhere, a deep visceral kind of thing. So foreign, it took me a moment to assess it.

Isobel had spent my lifetime hammering home the concept of fate. That I was destined to help her save the realms once my power matured. I had taken great pride in that. That I would use my powers to serve a higher purpose.

Things had not spun out quite as I'd anticipated. And now, of course, I knew why.

Because it had all been a lie.

Now, flying on the back of an undersized Dragon, and pursued by a Sorceress determined to own my talent, Fate reached out and seized hold of my heart. And it told me that my destiny lay in my arms.

I'd never been more certain of anything in my life. And it wasn't just Riley, either. Havoc and Marcus were tied into it, as well.

I was hardly free—Isobel pursued with vengeance in her heart—but I was where I belonged.

The problem was, Fate was lying to me too.

It was simple, really. Riley wasn't a Liberi. And as a result, I could never be her mate. Because my love killed anyone who couldn't pull from life essences to sustain themselves.

If I tried to mate Riley, I'd kill her. I'd fight to stop it from happening, of course. But in the end, my inner fiend would have its way.

I was both damaged and dangerous, and I had a Sorceress who would do anything to reclaim me. The best thing for Riley, was for me to walk away.

The concept took hold. If I did so, Isobel would come after me, not her.

My grip on Riley tightened. For this moment in time, holding her unconscious body against my own was a balm to my tortured soul.

Lucas dropped us lower. His wings flapped hard to keep us in the air—his Dragon was barely large enough to carry one rider, let alone two. When he turned his head, I saw that his eyes were flashing like mad.

I leaned forward. “You are mated?”

He snorted steam. “My mates wants tos come fors us.” The wind whipped the words by me.

I hesitated, unsure of what he meant. “How would they do that?”

“One ofs my mates cans builds gates.”

It surprised me. “One of your mates is a Watcher?”

“Ones of my mates is the Perditor. He’s trying tos gets a good enoughts image froms me to do its.” He straightened his head, and added, “He can’ts comes here.”

Lucas was mated to the Perditor? I knew what that entity could do. If he came here, and faced off against Isobel—

There would be nothing left standing.

“Don’t let him come,” I said urgently.

“Exactly.” Lucas’s eyes flashed. As he banked again, his black scales gleamed metallic in the first rays of breaking dawn.

With Isobel closing in, it was so tempting to ask for such a rescue. Riley was out of commission, and our only other chance to flee Isobel's minions was to head for the nearest gate. Which was many miles from where I'd spent my last months with my parents.

"Can he just build the gate, and let us use it?" I called into the wind.

Lucas shook his head so vigorously it traveled through his entire body. "Destroying is ins his blood. He is a creator only by effort, not will. And he is very angry."

Hellfire. No help from the Perditor, then. We were headed for the closest city. It didn't have a gate, but Lucas thought we could hide among the population until we came up with a better plan.

But we weren't going to make it. The energy signatures behind me were closing on us. As a dragon, Lucas could likely sense them too.

He turned his head to regard me with one green-rimmed eye. "They're going to catch us." The wind whipped at his words, but I understood him. "Is she still out?"

The undercurrents spoke to me—Riley was our only way out of this mess, if we stayed together.

I gritted my teeth and held her a little tighter. I had a precious few moments left with her. "Take us down."

His eyes narrowed.

I called on the power within me, and said it again. "Down, Lucas. Now."

He dropped a hundred feet before he leveled off again. "Dammit," he exclaimed. "Don't do that again."

"Then land."

His lips peeled back from his long sharp teeth, but then his head turned away, gazing down into the forest. It would hide him and her—for a few crucial minutes, anyway. Long enough for me to put some distance between us. I could draw Isobel

away, and Lucas could wait until Riley recovered enough to take them home.

I glanced back over my shoulder, in time to see three Dragons drop below the clouds. They were mere dots in the distance, but if I could see them, they could see us.

Lucas folded his wings, and took us into the trees.

Even for a small Dragon, it was a bit of a squeeze. Branches snapped, and I had to shield Riley until he thumped down amid the trunks.

I extricated myself from between the Dragon's spikes and slid to the ground, cradling my burden. I bent to set her down at the base of a trunk—my fingers lingered over her face, and my heart twisted.

I turned around, and flinched. Lucas's Dragon face was inches from my own, his dark wings mantled above him.

“Wes didn't gos tos all this troubles tos rescue yous, tos lets Isobel haves yous now.”

Okay, so much for fooling the Dragon. “It's the only way.” My voice was calm, but my pulse raced.

“Nots the only ways. Cans yous heal her? Gives hers the power to Jump?”

Could I? “Maybe. No guarantees. And it won't be the best thing for her.”

“No others choice.” His gaze bored into my own. “Isobel's nots likely to ignores us, even ifs she gets yous. And ifs she comes afters me—I won't be able to holds Nikolai backs.”

A dark form swept over us, more heard than seen, and we all crouched. They likely couldn't see us below the branches, but Isobel and the coven riding the Dragons wouldn't just be tracking my collar—they could sense our life essences. It wouldn't take them long to track Lucas and Riley, as well.

“Dos it,” he hissed.

I cursed the spark that blossomed within me as I crouched over Riley. It was a false hope, but I so desperately wanted the

life I'd glimpsed. If she faltered, however—I would have no option but to attempt to lure Isobel away.

The thought of the Perditor ripping everything around us to pieces in an all-out battle against Isobel spurred me on. I gathered Riley back up in my arms and told Lucas, “Shift. It'll be an easier Jump.”

I was only dimly aware of him writhing his way to human as I fought to find the healer within me. I found the smallest trace of energy, laid my hands on her bare arms, and shot it to her...

HAVOC



The Watcher's fucking balcony was not designed for pacing Dragons.

I'd shoved the furniture back along the wall, but it didn't help much. I banged into things every time I turned around.

I should just go. Launch myself off the bloody thing, even if there wasn't enough time for me to shift before I hit the ground, I'd heal.

Of course, I could just take the inner route. But that meant getting past the Centaur-who-wasn't. Who apparently had someone else living inside him.

Could my life get any crazier?

Fuzzy legs tickled against my neck. Fang kept trying to provide me with a conscience. But it was like planting seeds in a freaking desert. She should just give up.

A rumble reverberated from me. I'd had enough of this entire fucking scenario. Was ready to take my chances with hiding in the underworld. Would be vastly better than this shit.

Marcus was as nutzoid as they came. Why was I the only one who could see that? He'd dreamed up something else inside him, and done it so well it had convinced the Watcher.

I didn't want to have anything to do with him. And now that they'd managed to get Rafael out, that was one more thing I could toss to the wind. He'd set me free, and I'd owed him. Now he was free, too.

Free, and with Riley.

The growl that escaped me wasn't from my human. Or, at least, didn't start there. It finished there, though. Damned monster. And beast.

I leaned over the rail, itching to spread my wings to the morning's bright rays. And almost toppled over it when pain radiated through me. Sweat pebbled my skin—what the fucking hell was going on?

I closed my eyes, and saw trees.

Riley! She was awake. I sensed her gathering energy and knew what that meant.

No! I yelled into her mind. *Do not come back here. They will use you to do something really fucking dumb.*

Well, I didn't know that for sure. But it seemed Cara thought so, and somewhere along the line, I'd decided to believe her.

What do you mean? Riley's mindvoice was filled with pain.

My pulse raced. *Are you in any shape to Jump at all?*

We have to. Isobel's right on top of us.

Fucking hell. Cara wasn't back yet, I didn't know where Riley should go. She needed somewhere to hide until we could get her where Cara wanted her.

We?

Fuck no.

Hang on, Dreambit. Give me a minute.

Dreambit? Then, *That's about all we have.*

I immediately thought of the cave—but could she Jump underground? I didn't know. And they'd never be able to feed themselves. Those eels were a handful even for me.

Hurry up, Elliot.

Dammit. My mind raced and came up with another possibility.

A flat rooftop, lit by the morning sun. It reflected off storage units and the stair accessway, as well as the cracks and divots and loose shingles, all of which I knew well. I'd spent a lot of time in this city.

I sent it to her. But followed it up with, *It's a vicious place. You'll have to watch your back. But with Rafael's power—you should be okay until Cara gets things right on this end.*

I hoped I was right. Sometimes the best place to hide was in plain sight. *As soon as I can get you a new destination, I'll send it to you. Until then, you'll have to fucking lie low and blend.*

Okay.

Her exhaustion carried through the single word, and my gut twisted. *Are you sure—*

But power surged through the link, distinctive and chaotic. My brain filled with white noise and golden light.

And then, no matter how hard I reached, I couldn't find her.

RAFAEL



I held Riley tight as the golden light swirled around us.

Isobel tried to grab on. The bloodmagic reached for me, its tendrils seeking...

The Sorceress was still far enough away that when I pushed back on them, hard, I succeeded. Just before Riley yanked us all away.

Or tried to. She was so weak that I sensed her falter. My hands were folded around hers, and I pumped her everything I had to give. It wasn't much, but she grabbed hold, and the surrounding trees vanished.

I landed, hard, on my knees, with Riley still cradled in my lap. Lucas's fingers loosened from where they'd held onto her arm. I heard him exhale in surprise as he rolled to his feet.

What materialized out of the golden fog wasn't the academy as I'd seen it in a dream. Instead, we landed on a rooftop in what was clearly a city—and judging by the poor state of repair of what we lay upon, not exactly a shining example of one.

“Where are we?” he asked.

Riley stirred sluggishly in my arms. Sweat poured down her face, and her eyes seemed unfocused. When they first blinked open, they were gold. I stroked my fingers along her damp brow, and when I pushed her hair back—I saw shiny black Dragon scales along her temples.

They were on her arms, too. And when she spoke, her voice was hardly more than a whisper. “Cara doesn’t want us to come back to the academy.”

Lucas’s eyes flashed like mad. When he saw me staring, he said, “Nikolai is losing it. Aria has been calming him down. She’s pretty much the only one who can when he gets to that point.” His lips quirked. “Works on me, too.”

I got the feeling the conversation had just slid into X-rated territory.

“But Cara’s with him now.” He frowned and then cursed. “The council wants to use Riley to take Nikolai to Isobel. Are they nuts? I know Isobel is powerful, but Nikolai—” His voice cut off like someone had grabbed him by the throat.

I felt as though my insides had turned to ice. “That’s why they don’t want us back at the academy?”

Lucas swallowed. “Nikolai says he’s going with Cara. They’ll get Havoc to send Riley a visual when they have one.”

“I can Jump us there,” Riley whispered.

I met Lucas’s gaze over her head. She wouldn’t be Jumping us anywhere, not like this. Then Lucas saw the scales.

He cursed and dropped to his knees beside her. “Riley. Focus on being your human self. You’ve absorbed my Dragon, this time. You need to think of you as you.”

She groaned. “I just want to sleep.”

I touched her and pushed what I could find of the healing energy into her. It wasn’t much, but I sighed in relief when the scales dropped away.

“Can we gate?” I asked, meeting Lucas’s concerned eyes.

“Depends on whether we can find one.” He rose again, and turned to survey our surroundings.

The morning light cast a golden glow over what was definitely a large city. We looked to be about seven stories up, which was high enough to see over many of the neighboring

buildings. I followed Lucas's gaze to a distant archway of stone.

"Hellfire," he said, planting his fists on his hips. "We're in Sarti."

I wracked my brain for why that name mattered. It was a place associated with darkness...

Lucas interpreted my confusion. "Sarti is in the deepest part of the underworld. Here, the underlords rule supreme. It is, without question, one of the most depraved and dangerous cities across the realms." He stared at Riley with some incredulity. "Is your Dragon friend trying to get us killed?"

I brushed Riley's hair back off her face. Her skin was hot to the touch, dry everywhere except on her face, and flushed. I didn't know her well, but I was pretty sure the fact she hadn't yet tried to rise spoke volumes.

"He thought it would be the best place to hide from Isobel until he can give us another Jump point." Her voice sounded a little stronger, but only marginally.

"This is the last place Isobel would think to look for us," I said.

A muscle jumped in Lucas's jaw as he continued to stare out across the city. But finally, he nodded. "You might be right."

His gaze drifted from Riley to me, and I said, "There must be a gate nearby."

His mouth pulled straight. "There are no gates here. Or anywhere in this valley. Sarti and her sister cities were built here for a reason. We are in a valley created by an extinct volcano."

My eyes widened. Places where the earth's molten core came to the surface pushed the rivers of life energy away. They were magical dead zones.

"What does that mean?" Riley whispered.

My arms tightened around her. "It means that gates can't be built here. Gates rely on lodestones, or places where life

energies converge. The farther they are from them, the more difficult the gates are to create and maintain.”

“There are no lodestones around volcanoes,” Lucas added. “Which is why Sarti was built in this location. Watchers are connected to every gate that exists, they can use them as their eyes and ears. Therefore, the underlords have free rein here.” He gestured out across the city to the distant mountain peaks. “The closest gate is on the other side of that mountain ridge. Five days travel by Trantil. Almost two by Dragon. I’d have to stick to the passes as the mountains are tough to fly over.”

The note in his voice—“You’ve been here before?”

He looked away. “Yes. Swore I’d never be back.” His shoulders rose and then fell. “Should’ve known that would dare Fate to do otherwise. She is quite perverse.”

No gates meant that unless we committed to that trip, we were trapped here until Riley recovered.

Lucas was following the same trail of logic as me. “We need a place where we can hole up, so you can heal her properly.”

I grimaced. “My healing talent is damaged. I need crystal energy, or there isn’t much I can do.”

“I just need to rest.” Riley, finally, struggled to sit up. But she was so weak, she swayed. She met Lucas’s eyes. “Do you have any crystal dust?”

His mouth clamped shut for an instant, before he said. “One thing at a time. First, we need to find a safe place to lie low.” He turned around and surveyed the city. “Think I know where we are. Can you boost her enough to walk?”

In answer, I put an arm around Riley’s waist and lifted her to her feet. She swayed into me.

“Sorry,” she said. “Dizzy. Dust would help.”

Lucas’s lips pulled back from his teeth. “I’m sure it would,” he stated. “But I don’t have any.”

He headed for the ladder that would take us down to the street, and we staggered after him.

MARCUS



“You sent her *where*?”

I couldn't quite believe what I'd heard. The red Dragon glared at me, and snarled, “You heard me.”

My jaw had been resting on the floor, and now it snapped shut. “That place will rip her to shreds. What were you thinking?”

My voice had hoarsened, and black scales chased along my wrists, but I didn't give a damn. If there was a hell on earth, it was Sarti.

Havoc's copper eyes ignited, and his fingers sprouted talons. So did mine.

Calm down, Marcus. It isn't the worst idea. Dangerous, yes, but so is Isobel. Sarti is a pale second compared to her.

“Isobel won't think to look for her there,” Kiko offered into the deadly silence. “And Riley can Jump them out when Cara gives Havoc a new destination.”

“She has to survive Sarti first,” I growled.

“She's with Rafael,” Havoc reminded me. “She'll be fine.”

I stared at him. “He's a *healer*, you idiot. How is he going to protect her?”

“Rafael is much more than a healer.” The Dragon's voice had dropped to a dull rumble, and his eyes glowed. “And. I. Am. NOT. An. Idiot.”

“What shape is she in?” I asked.

Havoc's lips twisted. "Not great."

My arms turned black with scales, and outside, thunder rumbled.

"You two need to calm down." Vali stepped forward, her gaze darting from me to Havoc.

"I'll calm down when I can fly the fucking hell outta here," Havoc snarled.

Breathe, Marcus, Iskar coached.

I tried, dragging air in past a constricted throat.

Vali stiffened and her eyes flashed. "You *bit* her, Havoc. You can't fly away from that."

The red Dragon clenched fists that hadn't lost their curved, pointy ends. "Just watch me."

The Dragona drew herself up tall. "Sometimes I look at you, and I see Ace. And other times—I wonder how you could have ever been born to the same mother."

Who the frek was Ace? Did Havoc have a brother?

Did I give a damn?

Havoc's eyes narrowed. But then he said, "I'm still fucking here, aren't I? I don't need an uptight Dragon bitch to tell me what to do."

"Well, then don't make me do it," she sniped back at him. "If you think you can fly away from what Fate has decided for you—you *are* one very stupid Dragon. Yes, you're an idiot. And you would condemn Riley to a lifetime of pain."

The note in her voice had both of us staring at her. Her eyes were blazing, but also suspiciously bright, as though she held back tears. She turned and walked down the hall toward the bathing room. I heard the door slam shut.

Havoc's mouth opened and closed once, before he spun and stalked back out onto the balcony.

I continued raking in deep breaths as I watched him through the door, worried he might sprout his wings and leave

anyway. Without him, how would we get Riley, Rafael, and Lucas out of that cesspit of a city? But he seemed content with pacing, for now.

A series of clinks announced my own claws falling free to the floor. I bent to retrieve them, and tossed them on the table. Kiko's eyes widened as she picked one up, but she dropped it as soon as her fingers touched it. "It tingles." She shook her hand.

Tingles? I hadn't noticed that.

The suite door opened, and Cara walked in. She stopped, her eyes sliding to track Havoc as he stepped back in from the balcony.

"The situation has changed," I growled, before telling her where Riley was.

I expected the Watcher to share my initial reaction, but all she did was purse her lips before saying, "At least she's out of Isobel's reach." Cara's eyes slid to Havoc. "Although she's now out of mine, as well." She rubbed her temple, her gaze sliding over Vali, who emerged from the hall. The Dragona's face was damp, as though she'd splashed water on it.

"I want Havoc and Marcus to meet me at the forest gate in the next twenty," Cara added.

"What about us?" Kiko glanced to Vali.

Cara tilted her head as she assessed the Satyr. "You are due for special abilities class, which is in about thirty minutes."

Kiko planted her hands on her hips. "Is Riley going to be able to Jump out of there? Or are you going after her?"

"We will come up with a plan," the Watcher promised.

"She's still in bad shape," Havoc growled.

Thoughts of a weakened Riley at the mercy of that city—

Breathe.

I breathed. It helped, a little. But it didn't change the facts. "That isn't a place to linger. We have to go get her."

“Sarti’s not easy to get to, that was the entire point,” Havoc growled.

Cara’s fingers tapped against her leg. “It might be worthwhile sending you two in, regardless. We can always pull you out again if she recovers quickly.”

“You send those two in, and they’ll kill each other,” diagnosed Vali.

“I don’t need the Centaur bastard. I can do this alone,” Havoc insisted.

The scales came back.

Cara met my furious gaze. “You going along at all hinges entirely on your ability to control yourself.”

“Maybe Havoc and I can go,” Vali offered.

“And me,” Kiko said.

“No one is going after Riley without me,” I snarled. Then I took a deep breath, and dropped the scales. “I can control it.”

Cara’s gaze moved from me to Havoc. “I wouldn’t be considering this if I didn’t think Fate had a hand in it. But you and Havoc need to do this.” She waved a hand at me. “You’re not going, though, unless you prove you have control over that creature inside you.”

I gritted my teeth. “I have some control now. Better than I did before, anyway.”

Cara raised a brow. “I’ll need more than your assurances.” She glanced at Vali and Kiko. “You two would be useful at keeping these idiots from killing each other.”

“I ain’t part of this, or any, fucking team,” hissed Havoc, before he transferred his glare to me. “And you’d better be able to sprout wings because I’m not fucking carrying you.”

I concentrated on breathing, aware of Cara’s assessing gaze.

“We love you, too.” Kiko blew a sarcastic kiss at Havoc.

“They will notice if Kiko isn’t at her special abilities class,” assessed Vali.

“Yes,” the Watcher agreed. “I am taking Nikolai with us,” she finally said. “So my cards will be laid out for all to see, anyway. If you two wish to join us, you are welcome to do so. But it is important to realize you may not be accepted back at the academy afterward.”

Kiko shrugged. “I’ve got better control over my firebug than I had. I’m sure I can refrain from igniting most things.” Her eyes shifted to me. “Unless they deserve it, of course.”

I rubbed my face. “Great.”

Cara’s eyes moved to Vali.

The Dragona raised her chin. “Not sure I’ll be much help on a mission.”

“Is your fever gone?” Cara asked. When Vali nodded, the Watcher said, “Then you can shift to your beast. Which will be useful, as Havoc doesn’t carry riders, apparently.”

The red Dragon’s eyes narrowed.

“Vali also does a good job of pointing out to Havoc that he is an idiot,” Kiko noted. “Which is useful, as if I try, he might eat me.”

The red Dragon snorted steam, but his eyes now had a desperate glimmer. “I repeat—I don’t need any fucking team to do this.”

The Watcher’s eyes flared, and the ends of her hair lifted ever so slightly. “I say you do.”

For a moment, their eyes locked. Then, to my surprise, Havoc looked away, rubbing at his neck.

Cara nodded, as though he’d spoken. “Okay. Come separately to the gate in the forest. Just follow the path past the fence, I’ll leave the access unlocked.” She checked her watch. “But be quick. And travel light.”

The Watcher spun, and disappeared out the door.

Travel light. Right. What the frek did that mean?

I shoved a change of clothes into a pack and emerged to an empty suite—the others had already gone. My gut twisted—would Havoc meet us at the gate? Or would he take this opportunity to leave?

If he took off, I'd go to Sarti myself. Turn over every stone until I found her.

Have you ever been to Sarti? Iskar asked.

No. Emmanuel refuses to serve the market there. How about you?

Once. Swore I would never return.

The Gryphon fell silent, and as I pelted down the stairs, I didn't press for details. The building was filled with students filing out to their special abilities classes—some were going out front, others out the back. A few took notice as I strode through them, but most ignored me.

I didn't see any sign of Havoc, but I spotted Vali just ahead of me. The Dragona slipped through the fence and disappeared down the path, carrying a small pack.

I felt conspicuous walking to the back of the field while many students milled around the doors. When I glanced back over my shoulder, a large figure was watching me.

Tyrez.

But the big Dragon just stood there with his arms crossed. He might be an instructor, but he was also Cara's friend.

The Elder's decision will not be popular among the instructors here, Iskar said. If Cara hadn't intervened, they would have protested. The entire academy would have been in chaos.

Removing Cara was a stupid move, I growled.

The Liberi Elders are now driven by questionable motives, the Gryphon admitted. They are more concerned with saving face than saving the realms.

The wrought iron gate in the back fence line was unlocked, and I slipped through, breathing easier once the forest closed around me. I moved up to a jog, worried about Havoc—

When I rounded a bend in the path, there he was. His expression could have peeled paint off a wall, but then he always looked like that.

He wasn't alone, although he stood apart from Cara and Vali as though he'd really like to be. Next to the Watcher stood a guy who rivaled the red Dragon shifter for size, only he had the long white hair of a Bellati. The way Havoc and Vali kept staring while trying to not stare told me they were in awe.

I couldn't say why he made me wary, except there was only one person this could be—Nikolai. The Perditor. I'd seen him when the teams had prepped to go after the children, but not up close.

A red-scaled Dragona stood very close to Nikolai—was she his mate? Lucas was, too, I'd thought...

They form a mated triad, Iskar affirmed. With strange emphasis on the triad.

The Dragona ran her hands over a big skull in Nikolai's hands. One look, and the demon inside me stirred to life.

"What is that?" My voice sounded strangled even to myself.

Cara turned to me. "Something found outside Isobel's abandoned stronghold. Bess has been trying to identify it, without luck. I have older refs where we are going, so I thought I'd give them a try."

Vali's eyes lit up. "I love researching. I might be able to help with that."

Cara smiled at Vali. "Excellent. You can search the refs, for as long as I run Marcus through his paces, anyway. We won't have much time."

Vali tentatively approached Nikolai, her gaze on the skull. “It looks really interesting.”

“It doesn’t belong to any animal I am familiar with,” the Watcher admitted. “But the books you’ll have access to in my hideaway are rare, and maybe you’ll find something in them.”

Kiko bounced into view carrying a substantial pack, and slid to a halt, staring at Nikolai.

I gestured to the bag. It looked heavy. “That’s packing light?”

She stuck her tongue out at me. It shocked me enough that I just stared at her. Riley had done that, too. My heart twisted.

Kiko rubbed vigorously at her arm. I noticed a bright red welt on it. Vali leaned forward to examine the mark.

“What is that? A bug bite?” the Dragona asked.

“I bumped into Tareal in the building,” Kiko stated, “and he scratched me when he grabbed my arm. Didn’t mean to, he was very apologetic.”

“He nailed me once too,” I said. “He needs to be de-clawed. He’s a bit”—I searched for the word—“weird.”

Cara moved closer to Kiko. “Lore on the Hitzu is scanty. They are a secretive species.” The Watcher frowned as she took a look at Kiko’s welt. “I have heard that their scratches can cause infections—doesn’t look too bad, though. I’ll heal you when we get to where we’re going.”

“Infections? It’s burning like mad.” Kiko peered at her arm. “Does that mean they’re poisonous?”

Cara tilted her head. “I would think if that were the case, he’d be much more careful with his claws.”

Kiko wrinkled her nose. “I almost set him on fire, stupid bastard.”

Vali’s lips twitched. “Would have served him right.”

Cara clapped her hands together. “Alright, kids,” she said. “We’ve gotta go. To hinder any pursuit, I’ll be taking us

through a few gateways. So we'll have to hold hands for a bit." She glanced at Havoc. "Can you handle that?"

The red Dragon peeled lips back from his teeth. "Let's just get this done."

Cara held out her hands, and I took one. The red Dragona, the big Bellati, and Kiko all joined in before Vali, who then offered her other hand to Havoc.

"I'm not toxic," she said to him when he hesitated. "And this mission is moot unless you're with us."

He snorted, and folded his huge hand around hers. A muscle jumped in her jaw, and she looked away.

The big Dragon shifter growled at her, and said, "Let's just do it."

And we stepped through.

RILEY



Even in daylight, Sarti was a city of shadows.

I was so wobbly I could barely stand. Rafael helped me descend to an alley that was almost as dark as night, using a switchback system of ladders that, in places, left narrow gaps we had to leap across.

My leaping efforts were dismal at best. Rafael literally plucked me from certain death every time. No matter how I swayed and staggered, his arm was always there, supporting me. I walked in a cloud of his intoxicating scent. At times, it was almost as though my feet never touched the ground.

He was half Satyr. For the first time, I truly absorbed what that meant. I wanted to wrap my entire body around him and invite him in. Would have taken the thought further if the world wasn't spinning and I wasn't burning up. Was this the Dragon virus taking hold? I couldn't remember ever being so sick. Did anyone ever die from this infection?

Damn that fucking Dragon, anyway. Or was I damned because I'd fucked the Dragon? My spinning mind wouldn't settle on which was more accurate.

By the time we made it to ground level, I shook so hard I could barely stay upright. Rafael kept his arm around me as we skulked along in near-perfect darkness. Skyscrapers weren't an option with Sarti's primitive architecture, but the buildings on each side of us were multi-storied, with the irregularities in each level speaking to the upper ones being added as needed. Many overhung their foundations, so that

they blocked whatever stray sunlight might attempt to filter down.

The alley itself was littered with debris that I didn't want to examine too closely. Mostly because it stank of something I was pretty sure was death, and my stomach threatened to rebel. Lucas led us through, pausing at every corner to evaluate before we moved on. Several times he backtracked, not liking whatever his observations showed him.

I got steadily weaker until leaning hard on Rafael wasn't just a longing, but a necessity. Finally, Lucas stopped and pointed to an alcove.

"I am going to get us a room at a nearby inn, but I need you to wait here. Everyone in these parts sells information, so the fewer people that see you, the better."

"Do you need your cloak?" Rafael asked. He was still wearing it because his tunic was in shreds.

Lucas was clothed in his scales. "No," he replied. "Keep it. You look a little too—exotic for this place."

To my surprise, he then sprouted wings from his shoulders and let them arc over him. With his black scales hugging his lean form, he looked rather dangerous.

He held up a hand, showing wicked hooked talons. "Lots of advantages to being a Dragon."

"That isn't exotic?" I asked. With Rafael's long hair and narrow face, he resembled the fae heroes from some of my favorite stories. But Lucas had *wings*.

"Lots of Dragon shifters around here." His eyes flicked over me, before he added, "I'll be back for you."

With that, he turned and left.

I longed to sit, if only the ground didn't stink of pee. And other things. With any luck, Lucas would be fast. I leaned against the wall while Rafael peered around the stone framing the door. With his hood up, all I could see was the gleam of his eyes.

They locked onto me. "How are you feeling?"

“Like crap. I think the Dragon virus is making me sick.”

He hesitated. “Havoc bit you.”

A statement, not a question. “How did you know that?”

He shrugged uncomfortably. “I’ve been getting glimpses of him. And Marcus. And you. For a while now.” He swallowed. “I saw him bite you.”

I stared at him. Considering that bite had come at a deeply intimate moment, my face flushed. “You saw that?”

His mouth twisted. “I did.”

Maybe he hadn’t really been there in that moment, but just dreamed of it, somehow. But—“I dreamed of you.” The words popped out before I’d considered them.

“These weren’t dreams,” he stated. “They were more—visions. And in one, Havoc bit you.”

“But we were—”

“Yes.” He cleared his throat. “I saw that, too.”

My face couldn’t possibly get any redder. And yet, the thought that Rafael might have been with us in that most intimate of moments resonated with me. Like I would have wanted him there. I swallowed, and admitted, “He did bite me. Which is why I can talk to him in my head. And it’s why I’m so sick.” As if to drive home the point, a chill shot through me, and I shivered.

Rafael tilted his head. I found my feverish gaze tracing the few perfect lines of his face that I could see beneath the hood. He really was a gorgeous man. A photographer’s dream.

His lean body suddenly stiffened, and he turned away from me while pushing me farther back into the shadows. His body blocked the view of the alley.

“What—”

He cut me off by lifting a hand. Irritated, I pushed myself off the cold stone and peered around him.

There were three, and any hope that they didn't know we were there died when one's teeth flashed in the dim light, and he said, "Well, boys, which should we try first? I prefer male meat, but she looks tasty."

Fuck. This wasn't good. The situation wasn't improved when Rafael stepped out of the alcove and pulled back his hood.

The leader's grin broadened. "She looks tasty, but he'll be delicious." He pulled a wicked-looking knife from his waist. "Come here, boy. And we'll show you a good time."

The bastard backed Rafael against the wall. The other two moved toward me. There wasn't any way past them—and no way was I going to leave Rafael anyway.

"You want a good time?" Rafael's voice was—odd. Deeper than usual, with an undertone I'd never heard before.

The leader pressed into him, holding the tip of the knife against Rafael's throat. "Oh, yeah."

Rafael lifted a hand to the man's face. "This will be more fun if all three of you take me at the same time. The girl isn't worth it."

What? What was he doing? I pushed myself off the wall, my legs shaking. "I am *so* worth it," I protested.

But no one even looked at me. "It would be more fun," the leader agreed. His eyes were strangely unfocused, and now, the other two moved closer. Rafael placed his hand flat against the leader's cheek, and the man went completely rigid.

I wasn't prepared for Rafael's other hand to shoot free from his cloak, and grab the advancing thug around the throat. The leader sliced the knife along Rafael's collarbone, but he didn't even flinch.

"Drop it," he boomed.

To my shock, the knife spun from suddenly nerveless-seeming fingers. Which was when the other two thugs seemed to snap out of it, and jump to assist their leader.

I flung myself at them. Tackled one around the waist, and twisted him away from Rafael.

His friend turned toward me, also brandishing a knife. I released my thug and spun to face the knife-wielder.

Which was when their leader made a strangled, high-pitched scream, and we all froze.

Rafael had lifted the much bigger man by the throat, and held him against the wall. The man's hands scrabbled at the hold, but it was his face that riveted me—his eyes bulged from a skull that seemed to become more prominent with every second. Veins stood out on his temples and along his jaw. He started making horrible, high-pitched squeals, his feet kicking at Rafael. The acrid scent of fresh urine wafted off him.

Then his eyes rolled back in his head. Rafael dropped what was so clearly a dead body and spun toward the remaining two. My breath caught—his eyes glowed in the darkness—one gold, the other a pale silvery blue.

“Who would like to be next?” he asked, in a deep voice that echoed through the alley.

The two thugs bolted for the exit, flying right past Lucas. One black wing shot out, clipping a thug in the throat and sending him careening off a wall, before he picked himself up and departed.

“Ouch.” Lucas shook his wing. “Gotta stop doing that.”

I dropped like a sack of potatoes onto the filthy alley stones. Rafael was there in an instant, boosting me back to my feet.

Lucas stared at the body, and then at Rafael. “You just killed that guy with your *mind*.”

“Yes,” Rafael said.

“You are very much like your sister,” Lucas stated.

Rafael stiffened. “What do you know of my sister?”

Lucas measured him with his gaze. “I was with her when she killed your father.” He glanced back up the alley. “Look,

we can talk about this later. We've got to go. I booked us a room for the day."

The surge of adrenaline had finished me, so I couldn't get my legs to cooperate. Rafael pulled his hood back up, wrapped an arm around my waist, and all but carried me along behind Lucas.

We left the alley and entered the crowds walking the main street. Despite the fact most street walkers wore their hoods pulled up, I was hyperaware of the stares as we walked. They set off every alarm bell I possessed, and I forced my legs to move, keeping my body upright. Rafael shifted his grip so that his entire forearm aligned with mine, supporting me while having it appear as though I walked freely.

But I didn't think we were fooling anyone. I sensed rather than saw two cloaked figures fall in behind us.

Rafael leaned closer to Lucas. "How much farther?"

"Not far," the Morph answered through clenched teeth. His wings had partly spread, as though he wished to take off. "Just keep walking. Eyes straight."

Instead, Rafael handed me off to Lucas, spun around, and walked right up to those following.

Lucas cursed and stopped.

Rafael drew himself up tall, and those around us scattered, sensing trouble. The two he faced froze, and one pulled a knife-wielding hand free from his cloak.

"Leave," Rafael said. "Now."

His voice had deepened again, and it rang with authority. The two cloaked figures turned and fled, vanishing into the crowd.

I met Lucas's gaze. Rafael rejoined us, taking my arm. But the crowd now maintained a respectful bubble around us.

"They would have been trouble," Rafael said.

"They would have followed us and waited for a chance to strike," Lucas agreed. "Some of these lowlifes regularly case

the inns for marks.”

Rafael sighed. “I am running low on reserves. I need crystal power if I am to be of any use.”

I perked up. Crystal dust would undoubtedly help me, too. But the request died on my lips when Lucas shot me a dark look, and said, “No more dust.”

The comment startled me enough that I said nothing at all as we crossed the road. Lucas took us past a group lurking in the shadows, and through the entrance of the dilapidated building that apparently housed the inn.

Beady eyes tracked us as we approached the front desk. The clerk handed Lucas a key, and we mounted the stairs. I forced my feet up them, but by the end of the second flight, Rafael was all but carrying me.

The hall seemed endless. Lucas let us into a tiny room with a single window, an even tinier washroom, and a double bed against the wall.

Lucas went straight to the window and glanced out. “There’s a shed roof about ten feet down,” he said. “We can bail out that way in a pinch.” He spun, looked at me, and pointed to the bed. “Sit. We need to talk.”

My automatic reaction was to resist him, but when Rafael sat, my legs refused to hold me, and I folded up next to him on the bed.

Lucas winced as he retracted his wings into his shoulders and stood opposite us with his arms crossed. “Morphs have many talents. We can shift to any form we touch. But we also have weaknesses.”

Why was he telling me this? It really seemed to matter to him, though, you could see it in his expression.

“My stepmother craved crystal dust,” he explained. “I also have had my own brushes with the issue. So I recognize the signs.”

“What are you saying?” Rafael asked.

I looked from one to the other. “I took it to help me Jump, that’s all. I don’t *need* it. Not like that.”

“You are addicted to it,” Lucas corrected. “That is why you are so sick. Or, one of the reasons.”

I stared at him. “There’s also the Dragon thing.”

“Yes. As well as the refusal of your thick-headed mates to culminate the bond. But I know the symptoms of crystal dust addiction rather well. And you have them.”

My heart constricted when he mentioned mates. I hadn’t realized he was following along with my issues quite so well. I just wasn’t sure why it mattered to me being so sick. I crossed my arms. “You can’t know for sure.”

“I can, and I do.” He took a deep breath. “Morphs are particularly sensitive to crystal dust.”

I snorted a laugh. “But I am not a Morph.”

“That,” he said, “Is where you’d also be wrong. The shifting to multiple forms is pretty unique to my kind.” His gaze fixed on me. “Do you have large freckles on your skin? Little clusters of stiff hairs along your spine?”

I stared at him, my mouth suddenly dry. Then I reached a hand up to the nape of my neck.

Rafael’s hand moved with mine. When his fingers touched the little cluster of stiff hairs, I swayed.

Lucas turned around and bent, showing me the back of his neck, and the long row of identical hairs that marched down his spine to disappear amid his scales. Only there was way more of them than what I had.

“How can I be a Morph?” My voice was hardly more than a whisper.

“You aren’t full Morph. And I don’t know,” Lucas admitted, dropping to a crouch to regard me with his green-rimmed eyes. Suddenly, I realized how much they looked like mine. “Humans aren’t supposed to be fertile with my kind. But with all the strange hybrids popping up now, it seems the old rules no longer apply.”

“Does the Jumping talent run in Morphs?” I asked.

Lucas shook his head. “No. You got it from somewhere else. Could have been a random mutation, too.” He rubbed a hand over his face. “Cara’s been investigating the sudden rash of hybrids that are appearing at the academy. Species that never used to interbreed, apparently can now.” He assessed me. “How much dust have you taken?”

I swallowed. To get those kids out, I’d gulped a ton of the stuff. “A fair amount.”

His mouth straightened. “Not good.”

“If I don’t take any more, I’ll go through a withdrawal? Is that what this is?” I asked.

Instead of answering, he exchanged a look with Rafael. “If I get you a charged crystal, maybe you can help her through.”

I sensed the uncertainty in him, and Rafael did too. “I may need more than one.”

“Won’t that cost money?” I asked.

“Yes,” the Morph answered.

“Do you have any?”

“No. But here, that isn’t a problem.”

Rafael regarded him solemnly. “Won’t that be dangerous?”

“What?” I looked between them. “Won’t what be dangerous?”

“Before I met my mates, and became an academy instructor,” Lucas said, “I was a thief. A rather good one. I can pick pockets better than most. It is a useful skill at times like these.”

My mouth dropped open. “You’re going to steal from the bastards we saw on the streets? They’ll slice you to pieces.”

He laughed. “Only if they catch me,” he said, standing. “Get some rest. With any luck, we won’t be staying here long. I’m going to call in a favor and get us somewhere more secure.”

“Once I’ve rested, I should be able to Jump us out of here,” I stated. “Havoc will send me a location—”

“You won’t be Jumping anywhere like this,” Lucas said with certainty in his voice.

Rafael removed the cloak and handed it to Lucas. I found myself staring at the smooth skin revealed through his torn tunic. He was built like a dancer, sleek and graceful.

The thug had been right. He was delicious.

Lucas walked to the door and paused, pointing to the chain latch. “Won’t stop anyone determined, but it might give you time to get to the window.”

Rafael stood and walked to the door. “We’ll use it.”

When Lucas left, he attached the chain. Then he turned around and met my gaze.

A flush of pure heat coursed through me, making me suddenly aware of just how ready I was to wrap myself around him. But reality intruded when his eyes dropped below my chin. I was suddenly aware that I was filthy, and really, really needed to have a shower. But first, and more importantly, I needed to pee. Badly.

I waved a hand at him. “Loom closer, Valentino. I need to get to the washroom.”

He raised a brow. “Who is Valentino?”

“The world’s greatest lover. Or so I’ve heard.”

The other brow joined the first. “Was he a Satyr?”

“Just get over here, will you?” I said. “Or I’m going to pee the bed.”

His lips quirked, and he offered me an arm.

The washroom added new dimensions to the word scary.

It may have been wiped down sometime in the last month, but hardly cleaned. I averted my eyes as I used the toilet, telling myself that Rafael was a healer. Surely he could cure me of anything I might acquire in this place.

The fact it was recognizable as a toilet spoke volumes to the state of averages regarding elimination techniques. I decided that was a factoid I didn't need to contemplate.

My skin crawled as though infested with lice, and I was desperate for a shower. Getting my clothes off was an exercise in determination, and my reward once I managed to turn the taps was a spurt of lukewarm, milky-looking fluid that dropped half-heartedly into the bottom of the tub.

Ugh.

Rafael rapped on the door. "You okay in there?"

"Yeah. Trying out the shower."

A hesitation. Then, "Don't fall."

Well meant, but not particularly helpful. I minced my way over the tub lip and into the water. Where I surveyed the bar of partly used soap.

Nope. Not touching that.

I braced myself against the wall and did the best I could with the situation. There was half a bottle of something that formed suds, and I used that all over. It had a powerful floral scent that tickled my nose. Stifling a sneeze, I spun myself around, trying to rinse it off in the pathetic trickle. Finally gave up in disgust and started to climb out—

Mid-leg lift, and the sneeze won. A thunderous explosion that literally knocked me off my shaky feet. I landed with a thump and a sprawl on the other side of the tub.

The bathroom door opened so fast that I knew he'd been standing just outside it. "Hey!" I protested, attempting to cover the basics by coiling in a ball.

He crouched over me. "Are you okay?"

“I’m fine. I just—sneezed.” The word drawled as his scent hit me. Hard. Crawling into his lap suddenly became my burning desire.

Instead, he grabbed a towel off the rack and wrapped it around me, then picked me straight up off the floor.

This guy wasn’t muscley like Marcus or Havoc, so it surprised me how easily he scooped me up. With the towel pinned neatly against his body, my arm was free to wrap around his shoulder as I leaned into him. I pushed my nose into his throat, and then, inhaled.

A part of me—a very small part—wondered just what the hell I was doing. I already had more male trouble than I could handle. But when Rafael’s arms tightened, I shook with the power of what coursed through me.

He was *mine*. I knew it. And I wanted him with a desperation that stole my breath.

He carried me to the bed and released me with one arm as he flung back the covers. So far, so good. I was so overheated that we wouldn’t need them, anyway.

But then he lay me down on it, and tried to release me. I clung to him, attempting to pull him down with me.

“No, Riley,” he whispered.

I hadn’t expected another rejection. I released him like he’d scorched me, and looked up into his eyes.

They glowed. His scent swirled around me, and I ached for him.

“I have Satyr in me,” he said. “And right now, it wants you. Badly. It is convincing you that you want me, too.”

“Doing a damned good job of it,” I growled at him. “But I don’t think it’s just the way you smell that’s attracting me.”

He backed away. “You are not well. And therefore, not making the best decisions.”

“How about I decide whether I’m making the best decisions?” I pushed myself up and let the towel fall away.

His eyes widened. And then, the bastard ripped them away from what I so prominently displayed. He strode to the window and looked out.

“I will stand watch until Lucas returns,” he said. The only sign that I’d affected him at all was the hoarseness in his voice.

My track record couldn’t be worse—why were all the men in my life such assholes? I thought Rafael would be different.

My body chose that moment to stop sweating, and start shivering. I lay down, yanking the covers up to my chin.

And shook.

If this was withdrawal, bring on the dust.

HAVOC



The Watcherbitch took us through enough gateways that my head started to spin. Which, I guess, was the whole fucking idea.

We ended up in a forest so humid that condensation formed on the surrounding leaves. The ground was sloped, and behind us, cliffs appeared through the dense foliage.

“Nice place.” My voice dripped sarcasm as I shook water off my scales.

“This is among one of the few wild gates in this realm,” Cara replied, unfazed. “But not our final stop. They might think to look for us here.”

Wild gate? I looked around. None of the usual crap that came with a gate—this one sat in the middle of a forest. I’d heard that if the lodestones were strong enough, gates sometimes spontaneously appeared. “Looks like the end of the fucking world,” I noted. “Who’s going to look here?”

“This is very close to Tyrez’s home,” she explained. “Nikolai and I have been working on a little project out here in secret. Think that will work nicely.”

“Kinda stands out right now,” the big Bellati said. His voice suited him well. He and I could have bass singing contests.

Or we could, if I ever fucking sang.

“We will need to disguise it better,” Cara said.

“It’s beautiful here.” Marcus stepped in a puddle. “Just a little—damp.”

Well, at least he and I agreed on something.

Cara moved to the end of the ledge we stood upon, and raised her arms. Nikolai moved up behind her, set the skull down, and put a hand on her shoulder. The air before them glowed and swirled. Then snapped into a gate.

Vali held her hand out to me, and I glared at her.

“One more time,” she said.

I doubted that. But Fang did her tickle thing—did the damned Webspinner really think that calmed me?—and I took it, Nikolai picked up the skull again, and Cara guided us through.

To more fucking wet forest.

This time, though, my mouth dropped open. Because standing amid the others were three massive trees. So huge that at first, I thought they were cliffs, not something alive. Their buttressed roots spread out for more than a hundred feet in each direction from trunks that couldn’t be spanned by several Dragons standing nose to tail.

Fang emerged from beneath my hair to sit on my shoulder. Even her beady little eyes blinked repeatedly.

“My retirement home.” Cara smiled. “Not that I’d intended to use it quite so soon. But we need to cloak it better than this.”

She nodded to Nikolai. He’d picked the skull up again, and set it down before moving to stand beside her. His tremendous height made her look like a child.

He raised his hands. Fang darted back into her hidey-hole and vibrated against my neck, before my hair started to rise into the air.

I wasn’t alone. Everyone was in the same boat. Nikolai’s long hair writhed as though it had come to life, and from deep below us, I felt something stir.

Fucking hell. A rising, seething maelstrom of chaos. The violence in it spoke to me, but it was far too powerful to be at anyone's beck and call. Yet Nikolai took it, and twisted it to do a task for which it wasn't suited.

The trees *moved*.

Not the three giants, but those all around it. They grew before our eyes, their branches and roots intertwining and expanding. Until we were surrounded as far as I could see into the dense foliage.

It wasn't just the trees. The plants that relied and grew upon them expanded too, until the ferns had fronds taller than me. Everywhere you looked, birds, insects, and animals flew, buzzed, and leaped through the leaves. We were engulfed in life.

I sensed the moment Nikolai finished channeling the power and started wrestling it back into the earth. It didn't want to go, but Cara helped him return it. Until finally, it lay quiet again. For now.

Fang shook against my neck, and my jaw hung open. Nikolai took a deep breath and lowered his arms. I'd never sensed anything like that before, and I never wanted to again. Suddenly, I understood why no one should ever unleash this guy. He was fucking dangerous, and coming from me, that said a lot.

"This way," Cara said. The others followed her amid the massive trees. I trailed along behind.

The Watcher led us between two giant buttress roots, and where they met the central spire of the trunk, there was an opening.

Only then did I realize that the trunk wasn't solid. The buttress roots supported upright trunks running straight and true for a few hundred feet before they sent branches and leaves to the sky. They leaned and interwove with each other to frame a large, hollow center.

Other roots had been grown to create stairs that took us between the levels. Flattened living wood formed the floors.

What we'd seen from the outside was only the surface of what Nikolai had done—he'd grown Cara a multi-level home. *From living fucking trees.*

As we took the stairs, I saw that each level had a slightly different purpose. The second and third were lined with shelves of books, and Nikolai placed the skull on the third-level table.

Vali was rapt. "These look old," she said.

"They are," Cara affirmed. "Very old. We've pooled a lot of resources at the new academy library, but I held these back. Each is one of a kind, and very valuable." She walked to the shelves along the far wall and gestured to them. "These are the references I thought you could look into. Don't bother with the books on the topmost shelf, those focus on animals long extinct. And the ones with red dots on them have copies at the academy, so don't worry about those, either. The ones on the middle shelf are exclusive copies and ancient, I'd start there."

Vali's eyes lit right up, and we left her standing before the books, her fingers twitching as though she didn't know which to select first.

I'd rescued a bloody book nerd. No wonder Ace had liked her.

Maybe Fate had known what she was doing with Ace and Vali. If so, she'd been cruel to put them together and then rip them apart.

But then, I'd always believed that about the Fate bitch.

Cara led the rest of us up to the fourth level that had been outfitted as a kitchen. I stared at the oven, fridge, and freezer combination in shock.

I wasn't the only one. "Do those work?" the Satyr asked.

Cara pointed to the wires that disappeared between the ridged walls. "Solar panels linked to crystals," she said, and led us through an archway.

Nikolai had woven branches together to form a balcony, and others to form a walkway to the next cluster of trunks

framing yet another living house. “The guest bedrooms are over there,” she said.

Guest bedrooms? She expected to have *guests*? Well, this was one guest that wasn’t staying.

“Are we going after the Jumper, or not?” I knew she had a name, but I just couldn’t bring myself to use it.

“Have you fixed this place in your mind?” she asked. “Because the best plan is for her to Jump here.”

“If she can,” I growled.

“If she can,” Cara agreed. “And if you give her the image, she will try. Which means you will need to evaluate if she is ready for it before you send it.” She fixed me with a hard stare. “So do not send it without determining that.”

Great. Based on what I’d sensed from the Dreambitch, I would be part of this circus for longer than I wanted to be.

“If she cannot recover quickly,” Cara said, “You will have to get her out of that volcanic dead zone on your own power.”

“You aren’t coming?” Kiko asked.

The Watcher shook her head. “Nikolai and I will stay here.”

“I don’t need a babysitter.” Nikolai looked at his mate. “Aria and I can stay here alone.”

“Maybe not a babysitter,” Cara said. “But until Lucas is home safe, you are going to have enough triggers.”

Fucking hell. She was talking about keeping him calm. I sooo wanted out of here.

I looked around, taking note of details. A platform a hundred feet in the air would not be the best Jump destination. Ground floor forest would have to do.

“I’m on it,” I said.

“Excellent. Then, as soon as I run Marcus through a few little tests, you can go.”

I trailed after them as Cara took us back through the treehouse. When we passed through the kitchen, Aria and Kiko diverted to the fridge. Nikolai stayed with them, his silver eyes watching after us as we continued down the stairs.

“I don’t need an audience,” Marcus growled at me.

“You’re the one who’s all ‘go team’,” I snarled back. “If you’re going to bloody lose it, I should know.”

“You’ll have to take his word for it,” Cara said. “For this session, anyway, I would like some privacy.”

I snorted steam, but hesitated on the library level, and with reluctance, let them go on without me.

Vali was sitting at the table. The skull we’d found in Isobel’s boneyard sat before her.

After a moment, she glanced up. “Why don’t you make yourself useful?” She tapped at the pile of books she had beside her.

“I ain’t no bookworm.”

She focused her intense stare on me. “Seems like you aren’t a lot of things. Including useful.”

I sank my bulk down on the chair across from her with rather more force than necessary. “I fight. It’s all I know. It’s what I am.”

That admission popped out before I’d even thought about it. But by the way she looked at me, I’d hit a nerve.

“Ace didn’t think so,” she said.

I peeled lips back from my teeth. “Ace was a fucking dreamer. He saw things that didn’t exist.”

“You could be so much more than what Xumi created you for,” she said.

This conversation was going nowhere fast. I picked up the skull. “Any luck so far?”

She pushed two books toward me. Both had spines four inches thick, and leather covers that were falling apart. “See if

you can find anything in these. But be careful with them.”

I held up my hands and wiggled thick fingers. “Careful ain’t exactly my thing.”

Her mouth pulled into a line, before she pulled the offered books back to her, she shoved another one to me instead, and said, “This one is more your speed.”

The Dragona was fucking pushy. But I found myself opening the bloody book and paging through.

It wasn’t as boring as I’d thought. It had vivid illustrations of many animals, including lots I had never heard of. Soon I was far more engrossed than I’d ever admit. Nothing I found, though, had those weird long, clear spikes in a crest around the skull.

Vali uttered a disgusted sound and closed her book. She stared at the shelves, and then her eyes traveled up to the top one.

“The Watcherbitch told us those ones are useless,” I said.

“But it’s weird that so many books have no reference to this thing.” Her fingers tapped on the table. “The Watchers pretty much know everything that breathes across the realms. Why doesn’t Cara know what this is?”

“She can’t know everything,” I said.

Vali stood and headed for the ladder. “Maybe it’s because it isn’t supposed to exist. At least, not anymore.”

“Extinct means no longer living,” I growled. “Whatever this thing was, it was alive until Isobel got hold of it.”

The Dragona pulled the ladder over to the books on the top shelf. “Concealed can be confused with extinct.”

Climbing the ladder brought her figure into full reveal. Tall and graceful, with luscious curves to her hips and breasts, she was every inch a Dragon.

Vali was beautiful. And she did nothing for me.

She should have. I’d had many Dragonas over the years, but very few were as gorgeous as Vali. Yet not even a fucking

growl from either my monster or beast. They clearly regarded themselves as taken.

It was up to me to prove them wrong.

Balanced on the ladder, Vali scanned the line of ancient books on the top shelf, before selecting three and descending with them. I returned to paging through my colored illustrations, unsure whether I really wanted to know what the skull belonged to.

Because based on the scales I'd seen around it, and what kept erupting on Marcus, I was pretty damned sure I knew where the Isobitch had put the creature's life essence.

Vali sat herself down with the books. A few minutes later, she tapped at the page she had opened.

"This one talks about the ancient Drakonian lines," she said. Her finger traced a lineage chart. She pointed to the longest line. "This one led to us. But look at these."

She rotated the book so I could take a closer look. There were multiple branches. One led to the two-winged, two-legged beasts, of which there was the Wyvern, with another sideline for the Sphinx. The first of the six-legged lines—one set of wings, four legs—led to the Gryphon. Ours also branched from that line.

I examined the illustrations of the wingless serpents—mostly aquatic, but more closely related to us, as they used to have wings as well. A side branch just off the main one led to the Basilisks—who had wings that were used only for display as they couldn't fly. I tapped a finger on a branch labeled "Elementals", which also included the simple statements "artificially enhanced" and "extinct".

"Never heard of elementals," I stated.

"Me neither," admitted Vali. She spun the book back around and flipped through the pages before pausing, and then reading aloud. "Elementals were developed from an ancient wingless Dragon native to a single volcanic island chain in the Riikan realm. Torshin mages infused eggs from this species with crystalline power to create four strains of Drakes who had

the power to manipulate the elements—fire, water, air, and earth. They used these Drakes against the Dragon Legion in the great Torshin-Dragon War. The Elemental Drakes were powerful living weapons that the Legion considered abominations, and therefore eliminated the breeding populations after the Torshin defeat.” She shook her head. “They exterminated them? I can’t see the Watchers of the time agreeing with that. But by then, the Liberi Elders might have pulled them from the fight.”

I had never heard of Elemental Drakes, but then, I’d only heard rumors about that Torshin-Dragon War. The past held little sway over me.

Vali fell silent as she continued flipping pages. “Wow, look at this one.”

She lifted the book, and I gazed at a creature that resembled a Dragon, but had a much heavier body and tiny wings. The spikes around its head and down its back were jagged, and it appeared to spout flame from its entire body.

“Fire Drake,” she read.

“I’m sure fucking glad I’ll never have to meet him,” I said.

Her lips twitched as she lowered the book again. “Says here that its fire can even burn through Dragon scales.”

My eyes narrowed. “Nothing can burn through Dragon scales.”

She shrugged, flipped the page, and showed me the creature on that one. It sat on what looked like a frozen pond. It was more streamlined than the Fire Drake, but still heavier than a Dragon. Its spikes were almost fin-like, especially down its spine. The entire animal had been sheathed in icy blue scales. She didn’t turn that one around for me, but just read off the title. “Ice Drake.”

Ice was water. And Fire. What was next? Earth? Air?

One more page flip, and she froze. Before spinning the book around again.

The image was just a pencil sketch, really, but the creature was incredibly fierce-looking, with long spikes sticking out all around its head and down its back. Huge jagged forks of lightning had been sketched around it.

I'd forgotten that air could be damned temperamental. Some Dragon I was.

But the savage head was unmistakable.

"Fucking hell," was all I said.

MARCUS



I followed Cara through the treehouse.

It was just me and her, now. If she didn't think I could control myself, would she really hold me back from going after Riley?

Could she?

You don't want to mess with Cara, Iskar said. You've never seen her dark side.

She has a dark side? I found that hard to believe.

What Isobel tapped into resides in them all, he said in a constricted tone. It takes fortitude to hold the line, and not let the power corrupt.

I thought of Nikolai, and a shiver passed through me. That the wise and gentle Cara could even guide that kind of power was a warning in itself.

She led us outside and away from the three structures that'd grown into her retreat, pausing near a trunk that had been grown horizontal for about ten feet.

It wasn't until she sat on it that I realized it had been done deliberately to form a bench. She crossed her ankles and dug around in a pocket, emerging with four crystals on cords. She handed them to me.

"For Iskar," she explained. Once I took them, she added, "So show me what you can do."

This time there was no Dragon hanging over us in case I tried to eat her, but she didn't seem concerned. Perhaps because there was a demi-god hanging out in the kitchen and an insane Dragon—the Deranger—in the library.

Between them and me, we were a damned scary bunch.

I had stretched the truth a bit with this control thing. And if I tried setting the demon inside me free, she would surely determine that.

I took off my tee shirt, but froze when my fingers curled into the waistband of my sweats. Modesty wasn't something Centaurs had issues with—came from having one's genitalia dangling on a whim—but now that I was human, I'd acquired a certain appreciation for clothing.

She arched a brow at me. “Nothing I haven't seen before, my young friend.”

My face flushed scarlet. But I still turned away as I stripped. And kind of stayed that way as I asked Iskar, *what now?*

Time to try something new, Iskar stated. Do you trust me?

I-I think so.

You don't sound too sure.

Usually when someone asks that, they are about to do something really dumb. Cara was staring at me with one brow still raised, and I offered her a sheepish smile. *Whatever you are going to do, let's do it. She's got that look in her eye.*

Okay, here we go. And he started to chant.

The rhythm spread through me, and I embraced it—up until the moment when the pain ripped through me.

Hold on to this image, Iskar paused his chanting to say. And he flashed an image into my mind—of a creature with the head of an eagle, the front end of a lion, and the hindquarters of a lizard. With wings clothed in purple feathers...

I focused for all I was worth on it, and with her watching, I managed to keep the screaming to a dull roar. But it wasn't

easy when the wings sprouted from my shoulders. My face lengthened to form jaws, and the very tip hardened into a hooked beak.

Cara's eyes widened, and for a moment, I saw pain echoing in them. "You look just like him," she whispered. Then her lips quirked. "Only younger. And you have dapples."

Tell her she's getting on, too, Iskar chided.

I refused to even go there. I stared down at my forelegs covered in black fur dappled with gold, and long-fingered paws ending in wicked hooked claws. My tail curled around them, and it was sheathed in purple scales. Feathers, fur, and scales.

Gryphons are a real mix, all right. Iskar sounded rather smug.

As Cara had said, I was Iskar.

Well, the dapples are definitely you, he stated.

But I could still think like myself, I hadn't lost control. A knot that was twisted tight inside me loosened, just a little. *Does this mean I can fly?*

I can fly. You would undoubtedly crash.

Probably. But I spread my wings and admired the sensation of the wind tugging at my feathers.

Cara watched me. "So this is your third form—you have the equine, the Wyvern, and now, a Gryphon."

There is one other. But I can't identify it, Iskar said.

I passed it on to Cara. "I've called on it once," I confessed.

She stared at me. "You let it emerge?"

I nodded. "And managed to get it to go away again. But it wasn't easy. And it tries to take control when I get upset."

Her mouth twisted. "But Iskar still doesn't know what it is?"

"No."

That troubled her, I could tell. “If it starts to emerge, do you think you can stop it?”

I swallowed. “I don’t know.”

She rubbed her temple. “Maybe Havoc should go alone.”

No. I needed to go on this mission.

Tell her this is fated, Iskar stated emphatically. *That you must be a part of this, and she should not interfere.*

When I passed that on to her, she eyed me. “Did Iskar tell you that?”

I nodded.

“You know this can go all kinds of bad,” she said.

“Havoc has mated her. Riley believes she is linked to Rafael,” I said, and then paused.

“And what about you?” the Watcher asked.

“I just want her safe,” I whispered.

“To think I used to consider Dragons stubborn.” She rolled her eyes. “They’ve got nothing on Centaurs.” She stepped in close to the creature I’d become, and grabbed me by the tip of my beak.

“You’d better be right about this, old man,” she said.

I am neither old, nor a man, Iskar huffed.

I didn’t pass it on, but held my breath until she released me, clapped her hands together, and said, “Okay, put the feathers away. You have a mission to go on.”

I exhaled in relief. “I’m good to go?”

The Watcher nodded. “The Gryphon will be your go-to, though. The Wyvern will fight you until the ends of time. I doubt it will ever be reliable. And until you get back, hold back on the mystery option. If you can’t visualize it, you run the risk of losing yourself when you shift.”

“Okay.” With my mind at ease now that I knew I was going to help Riley, I realized that I would have found a way to do it, regardless of how Cara might have felt.

Hold onto your butt, Iskar warned me. This might sting a little.

Great—The first paroxysm shot through me, and all coherent thought evaporated as my body writhed its way back to human.

At the end, Cara very kindly did not mention the sounds I'd uttered.

I'd just pulled my sweats back on when Vali and Havoc appeared through the foliage. Vali clutched an open book to her chest. She froze when she saw me, and something in her face sent a shiver through me.

"I think we've found what is inside you," she said. "It's something called a Storm Drake."

Cara went very still. "That's impossible."

Vali handed the book to Cara, who took a long look, and then came over to me. When I stared down at the drawing, Iskar said something in an unfamiliar language. It sounded like a curse.

I read the concern in Cara's eyes, and said, "So, this is what is inside me?"

"It appears so. The scales are pretty distinctive," she replied. "Even though we thought the Drakes were destroyed over a thousand years ago."

"But what does it mean?" I asked.

She grimaced. "For now, nothing. I will do as much research as I can while you are gone. Just go, and get them, and come back. We'll tackle it then. In the meantime, do your best to avoid situations that might trigger it to emerge."

Not reassuring, really. "And if I can't, and it does?"

Her mouth straightened, and she said, "Then your purple-feathered inner counselor had better tap into his experience—and his wisdom."

RAFAEL



As Riley lay beneath the covers, I leaned against the wall and looked out the inn window.

The building next door cast a heavy shadow across it. It wasn't much brighter in daylight than it would be at night.

But the reality was I didn't see the city at all. I shook with the power of what coursed through me.

Her scent filled the room. But so did mine. More powerful than it had ever been, and I couldn't even begin to shut it down. My Satyr wasn't interested in excuses, not with her lying only feet from me, naked beneath the thin blankets.

It shouldn't have been so strong. After pumping energy to Riley, and trying to heal her, and then killing the man in the alley—I was depleted, and in need of a recharge.

If she'd been safe here, I would have left the room. Or tried to. I wasn't sure my feet would have obeyed me.

Very few creatures could resist a Satyr in full heat. It was our main superpower, and the fact that I was only half Satyr hadn't affected my ability to seduce. My Liberi blood only seemed to pump more power to it.

I didn't want to do that to Riley. At least, not with the trickery of pheromones. Not when it might lead to her death.

I now knew of the damage I could do. And I was dangerous, especially when I was famished. It completely overshadowed the fact that I also didn't deserve her. Not after what I had done.

I needed to leave. To find another way to fully recharge. And I couldn't—not until Lucas returned, anyway.

I opened the window. There wasn't much air movement, and the cool, damp breeze that drifted past me was hardly what anyone could call fresh.

So I stood there in the dimly lit, squalid little room, and focused on trying to reduce the output of my pheromones. Usually, I had some degree of control, but after a few minutes where I concentrated so hard sweat broke out on my brow, I conceded that they were determined to rampage out of control.

It wasn't just the pheromones, either. My entire body ached with the need to have her.

It knew the truth. That she and I were fated to be together. But why would Fate send me someone so vulnerable to my power? And she would find out, eventually, all that I had done. The pleasure I had taken in others' pain, to feed the fiend I hid inside. Why would she want me, then?

Why would anyone want me?

Riley had freed me from the woman who had caused it all, and for that, I would be forever grateful. But the best thing for Riley would be to let me walk away.

I managed to convince my feet to carry me to the bathroom to fetch her clothes. I laid them gently on the bed, and she didn't stir. She wasn't asleep, her breathing was too rapid for that. Curled tightly into herself, legs drawn up and arms around them, she seemed determined to ignore me. But the blankets trembled slightly.

She was shivering.

I pushed the window closed again and sat down by her feet. "Here, put on your clothes. It will help."

"I just need to warm up. That shower was pathetic." But her teeth chattered all the way through the sentence.

I clenched my jaw. "Sit up."

She clutched the blankets to her as she did so. I sifted through the small pile of clothes and extracted what I thought

was the upper body undergarment. “Here. Put this on.”

Her eyes met mine, and I couldn’t begin to interpret the emotions that flitted through them. Then her chin lifted, and she dropped the blanket pinned to her chest to snatch the silky bit from my fingers.

As I had noted before, her breasts were perfect. It was like being punched in the gut—all the breath left my body in a single, violent exhalation.

Her eyes never left me as she lifted her arms and pulled the undergarment over her head. But slowly, her breasts giving little jiggles as she squirmed inch by inch, until the black silk finally slipped over them to hide them from view.

But not from my imagination. I opened my mouth, but I couldn’t speak. Instead, I picked her tee shirt up with fingers that ached to touch her skin, and handed it to her.

As she took it from me, her eyes drifted down my body, and I shifted a bit away from her. Not even the dim light in the room could hide her effect on me, and when her eyes returned to mine, they gleamed.

“There are better ways to warm up,” she said.

I swallowed, and gave her the truth. “You don’t want me, Riley. It’s my Satyr calling to you—and it would devour you in an instant. If you knew the things I’ve done, you wouldn’t want to be in the same room as me.”

Riley tilted her head to regard me. “That was Isobel, not you.”

She was only hoping that was true. She didn’t know, not really. With a breaking heart, bracing for the condemnation I knew would come, I said, “Not always.”

I watched her gaze darken. Was she remembering the man I’d killed in the alley? I hoped so. It would help her to recognize the demons I hid inside.

Her hand shook like she had the plague. I longed to fold my arms around her and give her my body heat. But that wouldn’t be all that I would give her if I touched her.

Finally, she sighed and slipped the tee shirt on. I reached for the remaining clothes, and lifted what were clearly her panties.

As she took them from me, our fingertips brushed, and a shudder ran straight through me. She froze with her fingers still in contact, looking straight into my eyes.

My scent surged wildly.

The door lock turned, followed by a soft rapping. "It's me, Lucas."

Riley actually cursed. The fact that we could have been going at it like animals upon Lucas's return didn't seem to enter the equation.

I stood up, rather stiffly, and made my way over to the door. Rustling behind me indicated Riley was climbing into the rest of her clothes.

"You decent?" I asked, without turning around.

"Fuck." More rustling, followed by a, "Yeah."

I undid the chain, and Lucas came in. He carried an armload of cloth and a pack he hadn't left with, and lifted his head to sniff.

"Effing hell," he exclaimed, eyes widening. "Is that all from you?"

It must be strong, to be noticeable by a male, too.

Lucas handed the pack to Riley. "Got us some food," he said. Then he strode to the window and pushed it open.

"She's cold," I pointed out.

"Better now." Riley did appear to have stopped shivering.

Lucas looked from her to me. "I still have to track down my acquaintance," he said slowly. "What she owes me should earn us lodging, but crystals are expensive here. She might be able to help us acquire some, but I will probably need more cash."

No freaking way I would let him leave again, not with me in this state. Which he had undoubtedly noticed, as Lucas wasn't the type to miss much. "You have to stay," I said. "I need to go out for a bit."

Riley's brows dropped as she stared at me, and Lucas glowered. "You can't go running around out there. It's dangerous as hell."

"So am I," I stated.

Lucas assessed that, and came up with, "At least eat first. And I got you a cloak." He tilted his head. "Which reminds me. When you leave, turn right. The cloaks came from two buildings down to the left."

He placed them on the bed and picked up the larger one to hand to me. As I took it, my gaze traced the pleasing lines of his face, the lean body with its whipcord strength. He was a very good-looking young man, and my Satyr flashed me an image of him and Riley and I entwined... Then it altered, the male in the equation growing in height and breadth.

And dusted with scales.

A shudder passed through me as my body ramped up to aching, rock-hard status, and my scent spiked again.

Lucas's nostrils flared, and his pupils dilated.

I needed to get out of here. Like, now.

"I'll be back," I ground out, and fled.

Despite having the cloak hood pulled up, I turned heads everywhere I walked.

My scent wafted off my skin, strong enough to set my own teeth on edge. It was attracting far too much attention, although not of the deadly kind. I needed to deal with this, and fast.

But I wouldn't find a Liberi here. The next best solution was numbers. So I sent my senses on a quest. Looking not for one, but for at least two. And preferably more.

I sensed a large conglomeration of life essences, and swung that way. Moments later, I strode into the main Sarti marketplace.

Late morning, and it was bustling with customers. All ages, species, sexes. The perfect hunting ground for a ravenous Satyr.

Still, this was far from the Richin market. No cheerful families out for the day's shopping. If Sarti possessed coddled children, they certainly did not spend their time here.

Booths had their most valuable merchandise behind thick glass doors. The average marketgoer was hooded and hyperaware of everything that went on around them. And, I was sure, well-armed.

I navigated the booths like the predator I was. The cloak hid my rigid, aching condition, but my scent was a dead giveaway for anyone familiar with my mother's kind.

Finally, I found what I was looking for. Sensed them lurking in the shadows near a jeweler's stall—two young females and a male. Watching the clientèle. Judging, no doubt, the weight of their change purses as they pulled them out to pay for a glittering bauble.

I drifted along the buildings that framed the market, toward where they hid. Walked right by them, letting my scent permeate the alley. Then I stopped and swung toward them.

Three sets of eyes stared back at me from the depths of their hoods.

I reached out with my power. "Let me see you," I ordered.

They pulled down their hoods. Wutins, I thought. Very human looking, but with ears tipped in tiny tendrils, and arched brows that joined between their eyes. They were adults, but young.

The women's eyes were already glazed. The male's wary hostility faded as my power enveloped him.

A woman stepped forward, her three-fingered hand reaching out. I took it, letting my scent loose. She inhaled, and her pupils dilated so wide you couldn't see the pale pink irises.

"Never had me a Satyr," she purred.

For just an instant, her features blurred, and her eyes were replaced by those that glinted green. My stomach twisted as I asked, "Is there somewhere more private we can go?"

"Come with us," said the other female. "We have the perfect place."

They took me on a trip through the alleys. I kept alert—they were under my sway, but they could still try to betray me. Not that I had anything of value, but they didn't know that for sure.

My scent continued to do its devious work, but with each step I took, my nerves got worse. Was I afraid I could kill them, even if there were three? It was a risk...

The problem lay not in that, but back in the bed at the inn. My Satyr might be ravenous, but it ached for Riley. And I did, too.

My preferences diminished my scent, but didn't eliminate it. By the time we reached our destination, both females were draped over me—their hands already groping beneath my cloak—and the male was nibbling on one of the female's necks.

The room they took me to was tiny, but relatively clean, and it had a large bed that undoubtedly served all three. I was just happy not to be humping in the filthy alley. The females stripped their clothes with a languid seduction that should have had me quivering in seconds. The male, already sporting an impressive erection, pulled one over to the bed.

I was starving for fulfillment, but my Satyr refused to rise to them. As one of the females lifted my cloak and undid my laces, I closed my eyes and let my imagination roam. It wasn't three fingers that stroked me, it was four. The eyes looking up

at me as she closed her hot, wet mouth around me weren't pink, but rimmed in green.

But although my body started to respond to the imagery, my hands pushed her away. This wasn't right. I might not be able to have Riley, but I couldn't betray her like this, either.

I redirected the female toward her friends. Her brow wrinkled in confusion as I backed away.

And then, I fled. Through the door, and back out into the alley. I didn't even pay attention to where I walked. My only aim was to get away.

I was in real trouble here. The bloodmagic had changed me. Increased my need, and what it took to satisfy. To fulfill. Until I fed, I was a risk to all around me.

If I had been an ordinary Satyr, it would have been no big deal. But dancing with my power had a much higher price tag—I could suck someone dry of every ounce of their life essence and leave them with smiles on their faces, but very, very dead.

There was no shortage of willing partners in this place. But now that I'd met the one Fate had decreed for me, I was destined to never find what I sought.

Completion of heart and soul and mind.

Something that would only come with the power of *four*. Because I had no doubt that Marcus and Havoc were part of it. But even with all of them, I might still end up lethal.

There was just no way to know for sure.

That left only one other option. I turned down an alley, and then another. Slowed my pace, added a slight stagger.

It didn't take someone long to respond to the bait. He came out of the deeper shadows of a doorway and palmed a knife from his waist.

Seconds later, the knife dropped from his fingers. I pinned him against the wall with my hands at his throat.

And the fiend within me sucked him dry.

Then I dropped him. I didn't waste power on killing him, but rather left him lying in the disgusting alley. I prowled another alley, finding another victim.

And then another.

I stopped at four. I tried to ignore the way this made me feel—where was the creature of love and lust that I had once been?

Maybe it had only ever existed in my mind. Maybe Isobel was correct. I'd always been this, and just never acknowledged it.

A creature of death.

MARCUS



The Watcher collected Kiko on our way back into the treehouse and showed us that her retirement stronghold held even more surprises.

She took us to the ground floor of the guest house—which, as it turned out, was an armory.

We came down the stairs, and I was instantly rapt. Because I recognized Emmanuel’s handiwork hanging on the walls. Knives, mostly. But a few swords, too.

I regarded Cara with astonishment. “I thought you were a healer.”

She smiled at me. “I am. But I am not a pacifist. Sometimes you have to fight for what you believe in. And I like to be prepared.”

I gestured to a sword. “You know how to wield that?” It looked almost as long as she was tall.

She snorted a laugh. “No.” She pointed to a much shorter narrow blade with a slight curve. “That one’s more my style.”

I tried to imagine her with a weapon of any kind, and failed.

Kiko lifted the big sword down off the supports and almost dropped it. “It’s way too heavy.”

I took it from her and laid it on the table in the center of the room. Then I selected a long knife from the collection.

“Would you prefer it against your arm, your ribs, or your thigh?” I asked.

She regarded me with wide eyes. “Are we talking about the knife?”

Satyrs. I stifled a sarcastic reply, and said, “Yes.”

She pouted. “Oh, well, then. The thigh, I think.” Then she waggled her brows. “I have very strong thighs.”

Vali smacked her hard on the arm. “Seriously. Your mind and libido are one and the same.”

“Thigh is easy to reach, but harder to hide,” I said. “If an assailant can see it, they can block it. Under the arm is well hidden but a more difficult draw, depending on how you are dressed. This harness is designed to hold it upside down, so you can draw it more easily with the opposite hand.” I held it against my arm to demonstrate. “The waist is the most common, because it draws easily, but can be hidden by a cloak.”

Kiko stared at him. “You know your stuff.”

I shrugged. “Had it drilled into me from a young age.” I ran my gaze over the available assortment. “You can do all three if you like. Where we’re going, you might need them.”

“Don’t want to clank when I walk.” She frowned for a moment, then looked at Vali. “What do you think?”

The Dragona snorted and held up her hand, sprouting talons. “I don’t need knives. So it’s up to you.”

Kiko tapped a finger on her chin. “The underarm one is cool. So long as I don’t slice myself trying to pull it out.”

I handed the knife to her, along with the harness, and then showed her how to attach it. Which necessitated leaning close to her.

As I fiddled with the little buckles, my fingers brushed her skin, and her scent wafted around me. It stiffened every fiber.

I pulled away, fearing the emergence of my inner scaly demon, but it remained silent.

Interesting, commented Iskar.

Great. I can fuck every woman except the one I want.

No need to be profane.

I think it is a perfect time to be profane.

As Iskar fell silent, the Satyr said in a throaty purr, “Maybe I’ll get a thigh harness too.”

Vali rolled her eyes.

“Enough,” Havoc snapped from the doorway. “Get your pointy sticks, and let’s go.”

His eyes gleamed copper. The guy was always so damned hostile. How could Riley have let him—

The scales slithered as *it* stirred deep within. *Marcus—*

Yeah, yeah. Got it.

I picked up the sword and spun it, my eyes scanning the harnesses and scabbards along the wall—and I found it. Emmanuel’s tried and tested system for a shoulder harness, with the newest embellishments provided by me.

I grinned at Cara. “Only the best for your armory.”

She smiled back. “He insisted.”

I pulled it off the wall and put it on, adjusting the straps, then sliding the sword in and out. The scabbard released the sword at mid-draw, permitting even a long sword to be used this way. Very few systems worked as well as his. I tweaked it until the hilt sat exactly where I needed it.

“Are we ready yet?” Havoc snarled from the doorway.

Kiko had managed to strap a second knife to her thigh without my help. I grabbed two more, attaching them to my arm and waist.

“You do have talons,” Havoc hissed.

“Happier with these.” I added a short knife to my calf. I hadn’t trained for that one—Centaur legs weren’t suited for it. But it seemed a good idea for human ones.

“Okay,” Cara said. “Cloaks on the rack along that wall. I suggest you all use them—sometimes it’s a good idea to disguise that you’re a Dragon.” She glanced at Vali. “Or female. I’m going to send you through to the town of Drundas. Its gate is the closest to the volcano valley.”

Havoc took a cloak. “Disguising the Dragon is a good idea. That’s Claw territory. Grista might be better, it’s more neutral.”

The Watcher shook her head. “Another day’s Dragon flight away.”

Kiko frowned. “What’s a Claw?”

Havoc snorted as he pulled on his cloak. “Small-time Dragon gang.”

“Well, if it’s small time, then what’s the big deal?” Kiko asked.

Vali adjusted her cloak. “I’ve heard of them. They own that city. Vicious bunch. We don’t want to run into them.”

Kiko shot Havoc a look. “And you call them small time?”

“Small time compared to Brock,” the big Dragon said. “They only control that one city.”

It was a reminder of the dangers that lay ahead. I adjusted my cloak so that the sword hilt was accessible.

Had a feeling I was going to need it.

The Drundas gate spat us out into a building.

We were instantly surrounded by guards that, by their size, could only be Dragons. Although the wings that sprouted from their backs upon our arrival were a dead giveaway.

A particularly large specimen stepped directly in front of us. “What’s your business in Drundas?”

Havoc charged right into his bubble, and snarled. “It’s no business of yours.”

I thought the guard did a good job of looking unimpressed, considering the menace radiating off the red Dragon. But a dead guard wouldn’t get this mission off to a good start. I shoved my shoulder between them, and said, “We are just passing through.” I shook the pouch Cara had given us. It clinked invitingly, and I poured out a selection of coins.

The guard grabbed them from me and scanned the two smaller members of our little team as he weighed them in his palm. Then he raised his head, and sniffed.

With Kiko’s and Vali’s hoods up, he was limited to his other senses.

“What are you doing with the Satyr?”

I shrugged. “What does anyone ever do with a Satyr?”

The diminutive cloaked figure drew herself up in indignation, but I raised a cautionary finger, and she subsided.

“Know someone that will give you good coin for her.” The guard perused Vali from head to toe. “Maybe the other, too, if I can get a look at her.”

He was guessing, and I knew it. The cloak hid Vali’s curves well. “He’d stick a knife in you if you tried,” I replied easily. “And the Satyr is a done deal. We’re just delivering her.”

Well done, Iskar said. A Satyr female and three males guarding her. Enough to give this cretin pause.

Hopefully.

The guard exhaled. “Too bad. Could use some entertainment around here.” He backed away, cradling the coins, but continued to trade glares with Havoc as we left the building and entered the streets of Drundas.

Clouds hung low in the sky, and the drizzle, so fine it was more a mist, had every surface dripping. I pulled my hood as far forward as it would go.

“You usually kill the gate guards when you come here?” Vali asked Havoc.

The red Dragon glared at her, but to my surprise, he answered. “They don’t dare bother Brock’s pinions.”

That was an important distinction. Havoc knew this world well, but he wasn’t used to flying solo in it.

It will color everything he does, Iskar cautioned. So it’s best if you take the lead.

I doubted that Havoc would agree, but I wasn’t about to ask him, either. There was more than one way to lead.

“What’s the fastest way out of town?” I followed, but scouted for alternative routes.

Havoc turned us to the left.

“Do the Claws run the entire city?” I asked.

“Yep.”

I gazed at the mountain range in the distance. Their snow-covered peaks disappeared into the clouds. “We’re going over those?”

He snorted. “Not over. Through.”

Vali chimed in. “I read that this mountain range averages 25,000 feet. Too tall to fly over.”

Havoc shrugged. “I could do it.”

Kiko stared at him. “You’d suffocate. The air’s too thin up there.”

“Might freeze first. Didn’t say I’d be comfortable,” Havoc growled. “But there’s no need, not when there’s a pass through them.”

I glanced around. “So I am assuming it would be best not to sprout wings until we are clear of the buildings?”

His copper eyes flicked my way. “You planning on growing wings?”

“Don’t need to. Not with two Dragons on the team.”

He snorted, this time with steam. “No one rides me.”

“Seriously?” Vali’s tone was acidic. “That is your response?”

When he said nothing, merely stalking a step ahead of the rest of us, she continued. “I can carry two. But we’d be faster if each carried one.”

“I will take one in my talons,” Havoc insisted. “Not on my back.”

Vali’s hood turned toward him. “They can’t hang from your talons for hours, you idiot.”

“I. Am. NOT. An idiot.”

“Then prove it,” she insisted. But he just kept splashing through puddles without comment.

Can we change to Gryphon? I asked Iskar.

He hesitated, before saying, *I’d rather keep that in reserve.*

“I can be carried in his talons,” I sighed. “I’ve done it before.”

“For hours and hours?” she asked.

“Uh—no.”

“Better to ride me. You’ll be sore enough doing that.”

I had done a fair amount of cursing with the previous experience. So I merely nodded as we followed the asshole Dragon along the road.

And wondered what it would be like to sprout my own wings, without losing my freking mind.

RILEY



Lucas had done remarkably well, scoring us some meatrolls and fresh fruit.

But sitting at the diminutive table with him, I found I didn't have much of an appetite. Which was odd, really. In the past, I'd eaten like a horse after Jumping.

"It's the crystal dust," Lucas diagnosed when I mentioned it. "Your body only wants one thing. It's no longer interested in food."

I eyed him. "Was your stepmother like that?"

He looked out the window, which was now cranked wide open. It took him a moment to reply. "Yes."

"Did she get over it?"

He shrugged uncomfortably. "She—died."

My stomach clenched. I could die? "I'm sorry," I managed.

He saw my expression. "It wasn't the dust, although it would have done so eventually. Nikolai killed her."

My eyes widened, and he hurried to add, "She betrayed me, and he killed her by accident. His power isn't easy to control."

I made a mental note to never betray Lucas. But I wasn't entirely convinced addiction was my problem. "I was bitten by Havoc. I think it could be the virus that's causing it."

His eyes met my own. “I did get a fever with my Dragon bite. But I wasn’t as sick as you.”

“You aren’t me,” I pointed out.

“I don’t know how being only part Morph will affect it,” he agreed. “Your talent is different from mine. You can tap into the animal halves of shifters without touching them directly.”

My brows lifted. “You can’t?”

He shook his head. “I change to whatever I’ve touched. If I touch their animal side, that’s what I become. But if I haven’t touched their human—I don’t know what they look like, you see? And vice versa. I need to visualize, to become something.” His gaze was troubled. “You are shifting without that visualization, and that is damned dangerous. I don’t know how you are doing it.”

“So—you can’t just change into whatever you’ve touched?”

“No. You said something about changing into a male?”

My already-warm skin flushed. “It was—embarrassing.”

He snorted a laugh. “Yeah. The first time I shifted to a female was disconcerting, to say the least.” He pinned me with his gaze. “But the Morph crystal dust addiction thing is very real. And I hope I am wrong. Because when my stepmother was off the dust, she was crazy.” He reached into the pack and pulled out, of all things, chocolate bars.

Human-realm candy makers had no idea just how far-reaching their influence was.

Oblivious to my preoccupation with chocolate, Lucas continued. “But she wasn’t as sick as you. Which either means I am wrong, or that you might have been damned close to a lethal dose of the stuff.”

Hmm, that didn’t sound good. “I was thinking if I took just one more dose, I could Jump us out of here.”

He stopped peeling the wrapper off a bar. “That could finish you off. I wouldn’t recommend it.”

“What if this is just me changing to Dragon?” I said.

He broke off a hunk of chocolate. “If you get worse in the next day, I’d say it isn’t that.”

But he couldn’t really know. And we needed to be out of here sooner rather than later. “Do you have a stash of crystal dust, just in case?”

He took the time to melt the chocolate in his mouth before answering.

“Not yet,” he said. “I need more resources before I can score Rafael’s crystals. Because if it is addiction—you’re going to need his help.” His eyes flashed as they flicked to me, and then away. “Nikolai says you are destined to be mated to Rafael, as well as Marcus and Havoc. According to Cara, anyway.”

My heart fluttered in my chest. It was an odd sensation, and as I answered, my head swam along with it. “Yeah, well, Fate is not only a bitch, but she has a twisted sense of humor,” I said. “Because none of them want me. Even Rafael pulls away.”

Lucas was silent for a moment, but then he said, “You know he has a twin?”

I nodded. “That stunning Anna woman.”

He grimaced. “She almost killed one of her mates by having sex with him. Drained him of his life essence. He would have died, if she hadn’t given a bit of it back.”

I stared at him. “Which one?”

“The one that used to be a Dire, but is now a Dragon,” Lucas said. “Dragons and Bellatis are resistant to her power. They think that is why the Dire can now safely be with her.”

She’d almost killed him? “Could Rafael do that to me?”

Lucas rubbed at his face, and I realized how tired he must be. But all he said was, “He likely could. He’s as powerful as her, if not more so.”

It certainly helped explain some things. A shiver ran through me, but it wasn't due to any kind of dread—because suddenly, instead of too hot, I was freezing.

I was no fucking use to anyone like this. “Where are you going to get money for the crystals?”

His mouth twisted. “I don't know yet. My acquaintance in Sarti who owes me can get us a safe place to stay, and maybe hook me up with a score so I can buy crystals. As soon as Rafael returns, I'm going to track her down.” His gaze measured me. “If that's all you can eat—try lying down for a bit. I'll keep watch.”

“You don't have to watch over me,” I protested.

“Actually, yes, I do. Very few females remain free in this place for long. The underworld is ruled by slimy bastard males.”

I stared at him, but he seemed deadly serious. So I peeled myself out of the chair and staggered to the bed.

The covers were a dilemma—either not warm enough, or boiling hot. My body couldn't seem to decide which. But eventually, I slipped into a fitful doze, and the world faded around me.

I wove my way to consciousness by degrees, threading my way through unsettled, feverish dreams.

Something smelled delicious. Wasn't until the ache centered between my legs, rather than my stomach, that my muddled brain connected the dots.

Rafael.

I blinked my eyes open, to see him standing by the window. The light coming through it was even dimmer than before. How long had I slept? He'd pulled his long hair back into a loose knot at the nape of his neck. I stared at his profile, noting how his brows were drawn low, and his expressive lips

were clamped. Whatever he was thinking, it wasn't about puppies and roses. A deduction confirmed when a muscle jumped along his jaw.

Where had he been? And what had he been doing? I had a pretty good idea that I didn't want the answers to those questions.

Instead, I asked, "Where's Lucas?"

His awareness of my awake state was revealed when he didn't even turn his head. "He's been gone all afternoon. Should be back soon." Finally, he glanced at me. "How do you feel?"

"Ready for the spacewalk, Captain." I even managed a shaky salute.

His frown deepened. "What is a spacewalk?"

I had no idea why I had said that. My thoughts careened and crashed into each other so much it was a miracle I could string together a coherent sentence at all. "A walk in outer space," I answered.

He didn't move from the window, but his expression said it all. As did his next comment. "If Lucas can find us some charged crystals, they might help me heal you."

The word "might" wasn't encouraging. I pushed myself up onto my elbows and moved on to other concerns. "You guys don't have to stand guard over me. The room is locked."

His brows rose. "You think that door would stop anyone? Havoc's Webspinner could kick it in."

"Yeah, but why? I'm not really a desirable commodity at the moment."

His mouth straightened. "You underestimate the street value of a female slave in Sarti. The only ones who walk free have earned that right.

I momentarily lacked any ability or sharp, pointy things with which to prove my point. I returned to my original line of thought. "You need to sleep."

“I don’t need sleep to recharge,” he said, looking away. “I’m fine.”

And just like that, it confirmed my suspicions. Through my association with a certain BFF, I knew that Satyrs needed sex like I needed food. My heart hurt, as though something had pierced it clear through. He’d gone out to the streets and fucked some female he didn’t even know. Rather than recharge with me.

There might be reasons he’d done so. But did I really believe Rafael could kill me with his power?

I didn’t have an answer, so instead I pushed myself to my feet, and swayed. He took one long stride toward me, but I held up my hand.

“Did you kill her?”

His brows dropped. “None of them were female.”

Them? Not female? I had no idea how to respond to that. So, I turned and staggered to the bathroom, with him following a couple of paces behind.

I closed the door in his face, used the toilet, and then leaned on the sink, staring at my reflection in the cracked mirror.

Fate had given me three gorgeous men.

And none of them would even touch me.

My life since finding Marcus in that cornfield had been nothing but one big chaotic mess. Now I was an addict and changing to a Dragon. Maybe.

Frankly, I could use a bit of boredom. But my heart had had enough. My yearning for these guys was a thing of the soul—not something I could easily turn my back on. Yet all I saw ahead for me was more of the same pain.

If this was all they offered, I was better off without them. Despite what Vali had said. Her fated mate had been killed. Mine were alive, and surely that made a difference?

I had to make sure Rafael was safe. Once I'd done that—I was going to stomp off and become a motherfucking Dragon all on my own. If I turned into one, that is. But as a Jumper, surely I could hire myself out as needed. What underlord wouldn't want to be able to pop in and out at will?

The eyes staring back at me had pupils so dilated all I could see of my irises was a thin ring of green. They stared out of darkened circles. Even my cheeks were gaunt. I shook like a leaf, and the edges of my vision danced with things I was certain were not there.

Stomping off anywhere on my own seemed an impossibility at the moment. Dragon or no Dragon.

A soft knock on the door. “Riley, are you okay?”

No. No, I was not. And how could his voice reflect such concern, when he was so obviously reluctant to even touch me? Did he feel the pull of Fate—that we were meant to be together—but not wish to indulge it?

I cleared my throat past the choke hold my heart had on it, and answered him. “I’m fine. Be out in a sec.”

I ran some water and splashed it over my face. I rather desperately needed a comb.

Two more knocks on the room door, followed by a, “Hey, it’s me,” and the rattle of chains as Rafael let Lucas in.

I emerged from the bathroom. Rafael regarded me with concern, but when I waved him off, he backed away. I managed to stagger to the bed.

Lucas watched me, too. Did he think I was about to shatter into a million pieces? Hmm, I sort of felt like I would, if I were honest.

“Nikolai says there is a team coming to get us out of here,” the Morph said.

I squinted at him. For a moment, there were two Lucases. “I’m not Jumping us out?” Only then did I realize that the asshole Dragon hadn’t given me a Jump point.

I pictured Havoc in my mind, and shouted. *Hey!*

Ouch! Fucking hell, woman. I almost flew into a cliff.

Where are you?

On our way to Sarti. To get you out.

What happened to me Jumping?

You in any shape to Jump?

No. No, I wasn't. But that wasn't his call to make.

Apparently having him cruising through my mind meant he could pick up thoughts not directed at him. *The Watcherbitch made it clear I'm not to give you the location until you are ready.*

Lucas and Rafael were both staring at me. "Havoc won't give me the Jump refs."

"Smart Dragon," Rafael said approvingly.

"You can't Jump in your current condition," Lucas stated.

"So Havoc is risking himself to come here and get us out?"

I'm not alone, Dreambit, he said in my mind.

Dreambit?

You didn't like Dreambitch. Not that what you like matters one bit to me... Anyway, I have fucking company. He sounded royally pissed off.

Lucas responded before Havoc could clarify it further. "He's got Marcus, the Dragona, and the Satyr with him."

I stared. Marcus and Havoc *together*? "Hmm, that's bound to end well."

Lucas's lips twitched. "Nikolai said much the same thing. No love lost between those two guys. But maybe working together is the best thing for them." He cast a look at Rafael, but the other man didn't respond.

"Or it will get one of them killed," I stated.

"Or that," Lucas agreed.

"This is all so stupid. If you just give me some crystal dust, I can Jump us out of here, and go into rehab when we arrive."

“You were pushing it as it was,” Lucas said. “And there is no rehab for Morphs. Once addicted—without the help of a healer, it’s a one-way trip.”

Rafael’s entire body went rigid.

“A trip to where?” I asked.

Lucas’s eyes flashed, but he didn’t answer me.

“And if I keep taking it?”

“Same destination, only a slower journey.”

A chill traveled through my core. “So—what will happen to me?”

Rafael seemed to share my panic. “I need access to a crystal, so I can cure you,” he said.

“You didn’t sound too sure before,” I pointed out.

He grimaced. “My healing talents have been—damaged—by the bloodmagic. I am not sure they will be sufficient to cure you.”

When I stared at him, he continued, “What I have left should be enough to hold you until we can get you to Cara.”

Lucas crossed his arms. “There is another option.”

I raised my brows at him.

“You have the Dragon virus in you. Dragons rely on crystal dust as a supplement. If the virus can be accelerated, it might turn the addiction into a normal craving.”

“Would that work?” Rafael asked.

Lucas met his eyes. “It did with me. But we aren’t sure that Riley will transform into a Dragon shifter. She’s only part Morph. Whatever her other part is could be resistant to the virus.”

I focused on the bit that had almost slid by me. “You were an addict?” I asked.

“I took the dust to break Nikolai free from a bad situation,” Lucas said. “And in the process, I became addicted. But the Dragon in me cured it.”

I'd started to shiver again, and my interest in the topic was waning. Rafael frowned when he looked at me, and then to Lucas.

"I can help with finding her Dragon, if it is there. But I need those crystals."

Lucas's mouth pulled straight. "I've managed to score us a safe place to hide. The owner's wife said she will get me the crystals, but I have to do something for her."

I peered at him through narrowed eyes. "What do you have to do?"

But Lucas brushed me off. "Nothing I haven't done a million times before."

I didn't like the sound of that, but my shivering was getting worse.

Rafael glanced at me, and then back to Lucas. "If you've got somewhere better for us to go, we'd better get there. She's losing ground."

I wanted to argue with him, but he was right.

I was getting worse.

And it seemed that Havoc's bite might be my ticket out of this mess.

I almost reached to tell him that, but pulled back on it. He hadn't expressed one ounce of regret for what he'd done.

Be damned if I was going to admit I might have reason to be grateful for it.

Lucas opted for Dragon wings over the disguise offered by his cloak. I watched them sprout from his shoulders with fascination, despite my bleary-eyed state. Would I be able to do that?

It looked painful, but my pulse raced at the memories of soaring through the sky with Havoc's huge Dragon hovering

protectively over me.

My heart gave a single, mighty pang, and the longing that swept through me made it hard to breathe.

Between the wings and the black-scaled bodysuit, Lucas looked lean and dangerous. When I told him that, his lips quirked.

“I’m a master of deception.” His gaze traveled to Rafael as he helped me up off the bed. “If we get into trouble, I’m good with a knife, but we might need what you can do.”

Rafael stiffened. “I need one on one, and a bit of time, to take them down. Even the control thing takes breathing room. Not great in a combat situation.”

“Most lowlifes here are not that organized.” Lucas paused by the door. “But I must also warn you about our would-be host. I have not given her any details about us, and it is important that she be kept in the dark. Or she will sell the information to the highest bidder.”

“You don’t trust this person?” Rafael asked.

“I trust very few people,” Lucas confessed. “And basically no one in Sarti. Speak to her as little as possible, and do not answer any of her questions. If we can disguise that Riley is female, even better.”

I gaped at him. “Does everyone in this city deal in slaves?”

He didn’t even blink an eye. “My contact’s mates are among the biggest slavers in this city. And she isn’t above turning a profit, no matter how small.”

She? Just where was Lucas taking us? He turned and led the way into the hall. A few seconds later, I deduced that walking remained an issue.

With my hood up on the cloak Lucas had scored for me, no one could tell for certain if I was male or female. But not appearing debilitated was a big part of staying alive in this place. So Rafael had his forearm beneath mine as we walked, holding me upright.

Lucas tossed our key to the innkeeper behind the counter and took us out the door. The sun was now so low in the sky that the light barely penetrated to street level. I sensed how those passing assessed us from hairline to boots. My skin crawled, but Lucas led us through the crowds with the air of someone who shouldn't be messed with.

And they left us alone.

Rafael's arm was like rock beneath my own, and he managed to hold me up and still walk as though he owned the place. I did my best to look dangerous, but I knew if he let go of my arm, I'd drop into a puddle on the pavement.

Lucas took us away from the main drag and down a dimly lit side street. On each side of us were twenty-foot walls interspersed with armor-clad gates. Those walking past us were even more intense than before, and my pulse pounded.

Lucas stopped before an entry gate and hit the intercom mounted on the stone. When it beeped, he stated his name.

A whir from above directed my attention to what was clearly a security camera pointed straight at us. There was a deep grind from within the gate mechanism, and it swung open.

Just inside stood two hulking guards with thick muscular bodies and weird eyes—the corneas were red around brown irises. I supposed having them on the other side of the entry made sense and cut down on staffing shortages. They assessed us, and then one escorted our group to the palace doors.

I had no idea of whether it really was a palace, but it sure had the breadth and scope. Obviously, when someone did well in Sarti, they did very well.

The entrance was guarded by two more of the same species as the gate guards. But waiting between them was a diminutive figure in a glittering robe.

When her tail twitched into view, it confirmed my startled assessment—she was a Hitzu. Her skin was darker than the twins at the academy, but she had the same red hair. In her

case, however, it didn't hang loose, but was tied in an intricate knot on her head and held in place by pins that glittered.

"Laresse," Lucas greeted with the slightest bow of his head.

Her purple eyes assessed Rafael and me with interest. "Yatik and Lika will be back tomorrow. It would be best if you and your friends were gone by then." She rubbed her arm as she spoke. It was an odd kind of nervous mannerism. "Can you complete your assignment within that time?"

Lucas grimaced. "I'll be going in cold. But I've been there before. I'll do it tonight."

The Hitzu pouted prettily. "I've missed you, Lucas. Haven't been able to replace you, you know. It's put a real dent in my income stream."

"But we'll need the crystals *and* crystal dust right away," Lucas added.

Her eyes narrowed. "That isn't the usual deal."

Lucas's wings opened and closed. "We are low on options, with Yatik and Lika returning so soon."

Laresse rubbed her arm again as her gaze moved to Rafael and me. "I guess I have sufficient collateral if things turn bad."

Rafael stiffened, and I ground my teeth. I only seemed to be valued by the wrong fucking people.

"They are not on the table," Lucas insisted. "And I don't fail, you know that."

She shrugged. "We'll see."

Not exactly words of encouragement as the Hitzu turned away to lead us into the building. The interior was even more impressive than the exterior, with a soaring ceiling and walls made from polished white stone.

Artwork was everywhere. Sculptures on display stands, paintings on the walls. Laresse stopped to stroke the erect dick of a naked figure—a Satyr? Carved in what looked like dark

wood. The artist's interpretation of his equipment would have given Kiko palpitations.

"One of my favorite pieces," she purred, her eyes sliding to my hooded face. "Nothing like a good piece of wood, don't you agree?"

When I didn't respond, her gaze moved to Lucas. "I mean what I said. I've missed you."

"This isn't my life anymore, Laresse."

She offered another pout before taking us straight through the house and out the back entrance.

The grounds were also impressive. Centered in the garden was a small cottage, its architecture designed to complement the sculpted trees that surrounded it. It wasn't lost on me that while the twenty-foot walls around the compound kept us safe from the locals, they also kept us at the mercy of someone very powerful.

Laresse opened the front door and said, "I've included you in the roster for meals, so the staff will run them out to you while you are here. You've missed end meal, but there's fruit and cold meatrolls on the counter for this evening. Make yourselves at home." She glanced at Lucas. "The guards know you will be leaving for a bit. And I will send over the crystals this evening."

He nodded, and she stared hard at me before she left.

"Are we safe here?" Rafael asked as soon as she'd shut the door behind her.

"Yes, and no," he said. "Laresse owes me. And I know her well enough that she does honor her debts. Doesn't mean I trust her."

"What does she have you doing?" I swayed, and Rafael took me to the couch and sat me down.

"A small job." Lucas shrugged. "It should be a quick in and out, easy."

"You shouldn't do this alone," Rafael said.

“I most definitely should do this alone,” he said. “I can Morph and slip in as someone who belongs. Anyone with me will only get in the way.”

Rafael’s mouth pulled into a grim line, but he didn’t argue. Instead, he lifted the plate of meatrolls and brought them to me. “You need to eat.”

They might as well have been covered in slime. My stomach heaved, and I pushed the plate away. “I can’t even look at food.” I was shivering again, uncontrollably.

Rafael put the plate back on the counter and disappeared down the hall. I slumped on the couch while my head spun.

“You look like crap,” Lucas observed.

“Believe me when I tell you I feel even worse,” I said. “Do you really think Rafael can fix this?”

His eyes flashed so wildly that I had to shut my own, it was making me dizzy. But then he said, “Cara has sent you a message. She says, when it comes to miracles, never discount the power of Fate.”

I opened my eyes again and stared at him. “If I ever meet Fate, I swear I’m going to punch that bitch in the face.”

Lucas grinned. It transformed his entire face.

“I felt that way once, too. But it turns out, Fate was right. And so is Cara,” he said. “She believes Rafael can fix you. And so do I.”

RAFAEL



As Riley spoke with Lucas, my pulse pounded in alarm.

She had lost all color, and had beads of sweat dripping from her brow. Until the crystals were delivered, I could do little to help her. There was, however, one thing... I prowled down the hall, searching for the washroom.

It was everything I could have hoped for—huge, with a large freestanding tub on a raised platform at one end, and a shower and toilet around the corner.

After relieving myself, I approached the tub and turned the water on full blast. The water was deliciously hot, and as I stood over it and admired the plasterwork on the ceiling and the murals on the walls, I noticed a shelving unit loaded with interesting things.

Moments later, I returned to the tub with an armload of possibilities, and began experimenting. Some were fragrances, some colored the water itself. My personal favorites were those that caused a cascade of billowing bubbles in bright colors.

I worked the water into a froth of color and scent before turning it off and heading back into the hall.

Riley was now lying on the couch, with Lucas sitting on the chair across from her. Although neither were speaking, I was pretty sure they had been.

I loomed over Riley. She looked up at me from dark sockets, her eyes bright and feverish.

I held out my hand. “Come with me.”

She rubbed her forehead with shaking fingers. “Do I want to live?”

Ice traveled down my spine. “You’ll be fine, Riley, I promise.”

She spread her fingers, peering at me. “It’s from a movie,” she said, “Although you aren’t exactly the Terminator.” She pulled her hand away and waved it. “Never mind.” She attempted to push herself upright. And almost swayed right off the couch.

I didn’t wait for permission, the move was instinctual—I scooped her up in my arms.

“Hey!” she protested.

“I won’t make a habit of it if you don’t.” I headed for the washroom.

The comment seemed to flummox her. For a moment she lay stiff, but then she slumped into my arms. My heart did a triple somersault as her warmth nestled against me. But she was warmer than she should be, and shivering violently.

“J-just this-s once.” Her teeth chattered through the words.

I neglected to point out that I’d held her before. It didn’t seem like the time. But as we entered the washroom, she lifted her head.

“It smells nice in here.” She pushed her nose against my neck, and added, “You smell nice, too.”

My heart wasn’t the only thing throbbing. I gritted my teeth and set her down on the cushioned chair along the wall. She removed her arms from around my neck with extreme reluctance, and I was grateful for the cloak obscuring some things from view.

Her eyes widened when she spotted the tub overflowing with bubbles. “You poured me a bubble bath!”

“You need a long soak in a hot tub,” I explained. “Until we get the crystals, and I can start working on you.”

Riley blinked up at me, and what I saw in those feverish eyes—I backed away, and something inside me twisted as the hope in them died. “If you need me—I mean, if you need help, I’m just around the corner.”

She wouldn’t even look at me, now. She waved me away again. “I’ll be fine. Don’t need you. I promise not to fall this time.”

As I turned to go, she called me back. The pain in her eyes froze me in place.

“I need to know something,” she whispered. “Do you feel this thing between us?”

I swallowed. “I do.” My voice was husky.

She hesitated, biting her lip, before she asked, “Do you want me?”

Hellfire. She had no idea. But all I could say was, “Yes.”

She examined the hands that gripped her knees, and I noticed that the fingers were white, they were holding on so hard.

“Lucas says that Anna is powerful enough to drain a person when she has sex with them. That she could kill someone. Can you do the same thing?”

I closed my eyes and turned my head away. “I have done far worse things than kill with what I can do.”

Riley let go of her knees and interlocked her fingers. “Everything tells me that we belong together. You and me and Havoc and Marcus. Yet none of you can even touch me. Well, two of you can’t. The third won’t.”

I couldn’t imagine being able to touch her, and not doing so. “Havoc is a fool,” I ground out.

“What none of you seem to get,” she growled, “Is that it is *my* choice, not yours. My life, my risk. You are all treating me like a fragile flower that will wilt at first frost.”

It was a valid point, but she didn’t know, not really. “From your perspective, it might seem so. But you don’t really

understand what I can do, or what Marcus has lurking inside him.”

“Then tell me,” she pleaded.

Panic blossomed within me. I couldn't do it. Couldn't look her in the eye, and tell her what I'd done. Couldn't watch the horror dawn, and see the death of the dream I needed to preserve for as long as I possibly could.

I backed away. “I can't,” I gasped out. I escaped around the wall separating the toilet and shower from the bathing chamber, and leaned against it with my pulse thundering and my body aching.

My angst only increased the scent wafting off me in waves. I wanted her that badly. I hoped the perfumes in the bath would disguise it.

She shuffled around, cursing softly under her breath a few times. And then water sloshed as she lowered herself into the tub.

The thought of that lovely body lowering into the bubbles—I almost couldn't breathe. I pushed myself off the wall and stripped off first the cloak, then the remnants of the tunic. And finally, my breeches, before stepping into the shower stall.

I was so filthy I longed for heat and steam, but with my body aching, I gritted my teeth and turned off the hot water altogether.

It had absolutely zero effect. I shivered as the icy cold water cascaded over me, and my teeth chattered, but I was as rigid as ever. Worse, maybe.

I bent to twist the hot water tap, and glorious heat pulsed over me. I slathered myself in three different kinds of soaps, trying to mask my scent. My hand slid over my slick skin—

Dammit.

Before I'd formed the conscious decision to do so, my hand stroked along my shaft. Riley was so close, lying naked in a fragrant bath—my breath caught, and I started thrusting hard. My fingers twisted over the swollen tip as lightning

raced through to the base of my spine, and back again. I was so aroused it took only seconds for my balls to pull up tight, and then I was biting my lip to suppress my shout as the pulsing surges passed through me, splashing heat into the cascade of water.

I stood amid it, and rested my head against the wall. Even the thought of her in that damned tub had me growing hard again. But she was so sick—if she fell asleep in there, she might drown.

The thought had me squeezing the water out of my hair, and stepping out of the stall. I sneaked a peek around the corner—

She had her head back on the small cushion inlaid in the tub wall, and her eyes were closed. Was she asleep?

I slipped into my breeches—but couldn't stomach the tunic. It was stiff with dirt and sweat, torn, and stained with blood. The cloak was in much better shape, but far too warm to wear inside.

There were robes hanging on the wall just outside the shower area, and I tiptoed around the corner to pull one on. Grabbed another, and approached the bath.

Riley didn't stir, and as I drew near, I saw that her shivering had stopped. When I dipped my finger in the water, it was already cooling. Should I wake her?

I padded in bare feet out into the hall and found a lavish bedroom. I pulled down the covers and returned to Riley.

“Hey,” I said. “Time to dry off.”

She moaned, and her head moved from side to side, but although her eyelids flickered, they didn't open. I leaned over and touched her face.

She was burning hot. The fever was worse.

Now concerned, I leaned over, sliding my arm around her torso and the back of her legs. She moaned again, and her eyes opened. But by the glazed look in them, I wasn't sure if she really saw me.

I lifted her out of the water, and her teeth immediately started to chatter again. I sat her on the tub's edge and took a step away to pull a towel off the rack.

That she was not fully aware became obvious when she swayed. I snagged the towel and lunged back to catch her, just before she slumped to the ground.

Her wet skin gleamed beneath the lights, and I hurried to rub her dry, trying—and not succeeding—to avoid looking at the softness so appealingly displayed. But the heat coming off her was not a healthy thing, and I sensed how far she'd slipped in the half an hour she'd been in the tub.

I toweled her as best I could. She mumbled and reached for me—I spent as much time removing groping hands as drying her, and I finally gave up. Wrapped my warm robe around her, and lifted her against my naked torso.

Her small hands slid over my skin as I carried her down the hall, and she mumbled things under her breath that I couldn't decipher. Placing her on the bed was an exercise in extraction—she grabbed onto my shoulders, my face, my arms, and even something that had once more become distressingly prominent. That took careful peeling back of fingers to remove myself from her.

Finally she muttered and rolled away, and I pulled the covers up around her before laying my palm against her shoulder, and reaching deep inside to find the last stray bits of my healing ability. I pushed what I had left into her, and it eased her into sleep.

Then I stood by the window and stared out at the garden. She was getting worse at a scary rate. If I couldn't heal her—it wasn't just about getting us out of here. Riley *mattered*.

Something tickled at my senses—not something. Someone. Not Lucas. And whoever they were, they were right at the door to the house.

Not they. She.

And then, she was inside.

I gave Riley one last glance, and then eased out the door. Closed it behind me and headed for the living room, and whoever awaited there.

When I emerged from the hall, Laresse was sitting on the couch.

She'd changed into an even more skimpy, glittering gown that was slit high up the seams and cut low to show off skin to maximum effect. When she crossed her legs, slowly and deliberately, it revealed the full length of her smooth thigh and hip. She'd pulled her tail up between her legs, and it beckoned my gaze—

I ripped it away, but not before she noticed. Her full lips curved into a come-hither smile. There was no denying her effect on me—after being with Riley, my inner Satyr was both frustrated and desperate. And she'd obviously decided to seduce me. If only she knew how she danced with death, she'd be screaming.

Her gaze drank me in, scanning my head near my ears, and her lower lip jutted in a pout. “I was sure you were a Satyr. Your scent is—intoxicating.”

I crossed my arms over my bare chest, regretting that I hadn't diverted to the bathroom to collect my cloak or another robe. “I am only part Satyr.”

“Ah.” Her gaze dropped to my crotch, and widened. “Looks like you got the best parts.”

I heartedly wished Lucas was here. This kind of verbal dance was not my forte—she'd already got a look at me and knew one of my secrets. I needed to be smarter if she wasn't going to decipher them all.

Laresse patted the couch beside her. “Come. Sit with me.”

“That is not a good idea.”

“I think it's a wonderful idea.”

She squirmed on the couch, grinding her pelvis into the cushions as though she were already astride me. My inner Satyr responded to the arousal in the air, and with a sense of desperation, I searched for something that might derail it.

“I belong to another.”

Surprisingly, that gave her pause. It did me, too, but even as I said the words, the truth of them soothed something inside me.

Laresse sat up a little straighter and glanced down the hall. Then her gaze returned to me, and I could swear that sadness radiated through her energy.

“If you value her,” she said, “be gone by the time my mates arrive home.” All trace of desire had vanished from her voice.

She rubbed at her arms. It drew my attention to them. Each forearm had a strange fold, about two inches long, which was a brighter color than the rest of her skin. My eyes rose from them to her face.

“They know about you three being here,” she said.

A chill passed down my spine. “You told them?”

She shrugged. “They can look through my eyes whenever they want.”

“Do Hitzu mates speak telepathically?”

She snorted a laugh. “Telepathy is a common power among my people. When we mate, both males inject these glands with the venom in their claws.” She rolled her arms out toward me and rubbed at the skin folds. “It means my mates can enter my mind anytime, use my senses, and even, in extreme cases, force me to do things.”

My eyes widened. “It doesn’t work both ways?”

“Only if they want it to. They can block me easily.” She sighed and rose. “They don’t care if I entertain myself, but maybe this is one pleasure I’ll forgo.” She gestured to a bag I hadn’t noticed at her feet. “I brought you the crystals Lucas asked for. He’d better complete the task I’ve given him, or my

mates will demand restitution.” Her glance returned to the hall. “We are very active in the slave trade.”

My stomach clenched. “Thank you for the warning.”

Laresse’s lips twitched. “I don’t offer many. Hitzus are not known for generous gestures. But Lucas has a rare quality among thieves—integrity. And he’s helped me out a time or two. So, I owe him.” She offered a wistful smile. “Just not enough to pay for those.” She pointed to the bag before turning away.

I closed the door behind her and picked up the bag.

MARCUS



Once out of Drundas, we flew until the sun dropped below the mountains.

It was difficult to determine the exact moment of sunset, considering the dense cloud cover. We'd flown as much through them as under them. Our cloaks shed the worst of the constant drizzle, but the wind drove the moisture past the fastenings at the neck and whipped it up beneath the hems.

The forest and road below were cast in perpetual shadow as the two Dragons followed the route that snaked through the trees and the peaks that towered on each side. It was hardly a straight path—this range was rugged and rough. I couldn't imagine the effort it had taken to blast through.

I pushed my face into the damp wind and reveled in every moment. If this was what it meant to have wings, bring them on.

You are a Gryphon at heart, Iskar said approvingly.

We'd put Kiko behind me on Vali's neck, as hours of sniffing Satyr pheromones might have led to scaly consequences. Although I now had my doubts about it—the demon inside seemed to have a singular focus.

The Satyr clung to Vali's neck spikes as though her life depended on it and uttered little gasps whenever the Dragon banked or dropped. If carrying two was slowing Vali down, I couldn't tell.

"Are we there yet?" Kiko moaned, for at least the twentieth time.

I turned my head to answer her. “I think Havoc has a destination in mind.”

As if on cue, Havoc slowed to a hover ahead of us, and Vali drew close. The big red Dragon pointed his talons into the forest below.

“Inn,” he said, and took us down.

He barely fit between the trees on each side of the road. Vali landed behind him with a sodden thump. It elicited a startled squeal from Kiko.

“Sorrays,” the Dragona said. “Nots used to passengers.”

“Ground, ground, ground, ground, ground—” chanted Kiko as she slid down the Dragona’s side and landed in an untidy sprawl on the dirt road.

I followed her with what I hoped was more decorum, stretching once my feet were firmly planted. I was stiff, but riding Dragonback for hours was infinitely preferable to being carried.

I looked around. No inn.

“It’s arounds thats bend.” Havoc pointed. “This iss the overnight station between Drundas and Sarti. We’ve stopped earlys enoughts, shoulds be room.”

“Can’t we keep going?” I cast an eye to the dying sun. “Dragon night vision is good.”

Vali even managed to make shifting to human a graceful thing. “Not good enough for this terrain,” she said. “Too much cloud cover at night. We’ll fly right into a mountain.”

Havoc’s copper eyes swung to her, and then away again. The red Dragon seemed uncomfortable around Vali. I guessed that mating Riley when she’d adopted Vali’s Dragon form had messed with his mind.

It certainly messed with mine.

Breathe, coached Iskar.

I eyed Havoc. He didn’t seem inclined to shift to human. “Aren’t you coming with us?”

He snorted steam. “Prefers to sleeps in forests.” His eyes narrowed. “Yous are slowings me downs.”

Vali tucked her hair behind her ears. “If you’d just carry someone—”

The red Dragon shook his long head. “Nope.”

He’s even more stubborn than you, Iskar noted. *Remarkable, really.*

I ignored him and addressed Havoc. “We’re safer together.”

“You’re safers withs me. I’ms fine withouts yous.” He turned and stomped off into the trees, snapping off branches as he moved through them.

“He really is a *difficult* Dragon,” Kiko said.

Vali watched Havoc leave. “His twin was so different...”

“In what way?” I asked as the Dragona led us along the road.

When Vali remained silent for a few paces, I reconsidered. “Sorry. You don’t have to tell me.”

“It’s okay,” she said, although the note in her voice indicated it wasn’t, and Kiko moved close on her other side, taking her arm. “We were destined to be together,” the Dragona finally said. “We shared a love for discovery, among other things. Only he was a slave, and I was an underlord’s daughter.”

An underlord’s daughter. She’d been part of something my parents had fought so hard against before they’d paid the ultimate price for their courage.

Unaware of my own dark thoughts, Vali continued. About an evil Dragona underlord, and Ace’s death. About how her father’s greed had destroyed her family. Her voice hoarsened as the story came out in bursts, as if it were too painful to talk about.

By the time we walked up to the inn, scales had popped out all along my forearms. She’d had a narrow escape from a

vicious world, but had, by some miracle, survived.

That miracle had red scales and preferred to sleep in the forest rather than a bed.

People are who they are for a reason, Iskar stated. Even Dragons.

The pain in Vali's voice shook me. Was this what the death of a fated mate did to you? What if the mate didn't die, but you never finished the bond?

Mates are meant to be together, Iskar said in a subdued voice.

I'd had my own share of issues in my life, but I'd been lucky to land with Emmanuel and Triss. They'd shown me that the world still possessed beauty. Without their guidance, I'd be dead inside, and quite likely dead in reality.

Havoc had never caught such a break. And Vali endured a different kind of pain.

We paused on the steps. A few cloaked figures drifted along the deck that ran the full length of the building.

"Havoc doesn't seem much like his brother," I commented.

Vali's full lips straightened. "He isn't anything like Ace. But they were all each other had. And when Ace died..."

"Doesn't excuse Havoc being such a jerk." Kiko narrowed her eyes.

Vali looked at me. "But he set me free," she said. "He didn't have to do that."

She turned and led us toward the inn.

My eyes widened as we entered the inn. I was not expecting such a large structure. Judging by the crowd within the restaurant, it was a popular stopping point along the journey to and from Sarti.

Which was both good and bad.

The clientèle were hardly families on vacation. Most were so hooded and cloaked that they could have had six legs, and you wouldn't know. While I was dubious on the leg count, I was pretty certain they were armed to the teeth.

Generally, places as crowded as this frowned upon killing your fellow vacationers. Not always, though. As we entered, there was a scuffle in the corner, and a small hooded figure darted out the door, trailing drops of blood. The crowd merely parted to let him pass, and then it closed in again.

I decided impressions counted, and tugged my hood back, exposing the hilt of my long sword in the process. I met every gaze that snapped my way, and stared them down. Such direct regard screamed volumes.

They all looked away.

We approached the front counter, where a very square male figure eyed us from his perch on a tall stool.

“We need two rooms,” Vali stated.

The innkeeper assessed her—or what he could see of her, considering her hood was pulled well forward—and then his eyes slid to me. The rather spectacular eyebrows rose as he directed his answer to me rather than her. “Don't have 'em. One's as good as we can do. And if she's yours, you're better off in one, anyway. Or she won't be yours come morning.”

The advice was well meant. But Vali stiffened.

Before she could give the innkeeper a blast, I stepped forward. “We'll take it.” I tossed coins on the counter.

His eyes scanned me, assessing. I kept my gaze focused on him. “If anyone comes after her, it will be the last thing they do.”

His expression altered, subtly, as he acknowledged that I could be trouble, but wasn't interested in starting any. He picked up the coins and handed us a key.

“Includes supper. It's being served for another hour.” He pointed to the restaurant. “Drinks available all night.

Reasonable prices.”

Kiko tugged Vali in that direction, and I followed. The restaurant was large, low-ceilinged, and slightly smoky—a fireplace in the corner took the chill off the evening. Heavy wooden tables and chairs filled the room, most of which were occupied. My greater height enabled me to spot four rising from a table along the far wall. When I squared my shoulders and stepped forward, others moved aside, and I was able to snag it for us.

Size mattered in a place like this. Although I’d lost most of mine, I still owned my space like a Centaur.

I put my back to the wall, Vali and Kiko took the chairs opposite me. A rather harassed-looking waitress came over to offer us one of two choices for supper.

As she made her way to the kitchen with our order, she was grabbed twice by patrons who manhandled her with clear intent. The man behind the bar bellowed at them, and they let her go, but with reluctance. I noticed more than one assessing look being shot at Vali and Kiko. And a few raised their heads to sniff.

I leaned closer to Kiko. “If you have any control at all, turn it off.”

Her eyes gleamed at me from the depths of her hood. “It is off. Or as off as it gets.”

“I suggest we eat fast.” Vali glanced around.

I agreed. If Kiko stayed here for any length of time, we’d have a riot on our hands.

The food came fast, and although it wasn’t anything special, it was at least hot. As I polished mine off, I wondered what Havoc was doing for supper. Remembering the eel, I decided I didn’t want to know.

I’d just swallowed the last mouthful when five newcomers entered the restaurant. They were as cloaked as the rest of us, but the way they moved as a unit immediately had me on high alert.

I pulled my hood back up and watched as the five hugged the wall, their hooded heads turning this way and that. Then they lifted them. And almost as one, they swiveled their heads toward us.

All the hair on the back of my neck stood on end. Dires. I knew it as certainly as I knew they were in hunt mode.

And I thought of Havoc, alone in the forest. Why I should suddenly perceive him as vulnerable, I had no idea.

But I did.

HAVOC



The fish I'd plucked from the nearby river steamed gently, wrapped in damp leaves.

As I stared down at the stones, I cursed. Because even if I left right now, right this minute, the damned Centaur had left his mark. Not that long ago it would have been sufficient to breathe fire over the pieces, and I would have eaten the singed but half-raw results with lip-smacking satisfaction.

The realization was almost as upsetting as the voice in my head. Well, not really. That was so infuriating that I couldn't even begin to classify it.

Fang tickled my neck beneath the scales. I ground my teeth. Okay, maybe infuriating wasn't the right word. Every time the Dreambitch popped into my head, my pulse raced, and both my beast and monster leaped to attention. They wanted her there. They also wanted her, period.

And that scared the fucking hell out of me. Me, who wasn't afraid of *anything*.

That her words and thoughts could pop into my mind due to something I had done, and done voluntarily, only made it a thousand times worse.

I'd put her there.

She must be asleep now. I'd not sensed anything from her for a while. What had last pulsed at me along the link had not been good. Was she sick from the Dragon virus? All I had to work on were rumors—and those said that while some barely reacted to it, others didn't survive the transformation.

Mate, both my monster and beast kept insisting. My anger flared, provided with its true focus. They'd bloody kicked me and her into the abyss by sinking my teeth into her. Now we were both seriously fucked.

My only solution seemed to be to run. As soon as this was over, I was going to put as many miles, and realms, between her and me as I possibly could.

The thought generated a storm of protest from within that I brutally choked off. Not an easy task, as the beast was, at the moment, fully expressed. My wings spread in an arc over my body, and a low hiss escaped my jaws.

Something winged by overhead.

The distraction was welcome. My Dragon eyes scanned them as they passed—something about a few seemed familiar, but seeing how I'd met so many pinions in my time with Brock, that was not unusual.

They vanished in an instant. Were they landing nearby? Many Dragons preferred sleeping outside to being confined in the smoke-filled, crowded inn.

I just hoped they kept to themselves. I was in no mood for company.

I was never in a mood for company.

My stomach growled. If I'd just blasted the bloody fish, I'd have eaten by now. Marcus had seriously screwed with my brain.

I'd just poked the steamed fish with an exploratory claw when I became aware that I was no longer alone.

They stepped from the surrounding forest, eyes glowing gold and bronze against the shadows. Dires, in beast form, with their long tongues hanging down and their gazes fastened on me.

I snorted steam. "Fucking wells gets lost." They'd be nutzoid to mess with me. I could wipe them from the face of this realm in the first few minutes.

So, I ignored them, returning to my fish. Which was when the first dart shot from the darkness to sink into my hide.

It hurt, damn it. By the time I spun, snarling, a dozen more had followed in its path. Their tips must be crystal, or they'd never have penetrated my scales.

I roared, more indignant than angry. That any mere mortal could think to drug and capture me was ludicrous. These bastards had no idea what they were dealing with—my healing ability disabled most drugs before they had a chance to do anything at all.

My wings were useless in this forest. I could have launched for the sky, but the Deranger in me wanted blood.

It wasn't until I charged at the Dires that I noticed the figures darting away through the bushes—human forms, holding the dart guns against their chests. The braver ones stopped to shoot more at me. A few sank home.

It spurred me on. They underestimated how fast I could move while supposedly under the influence of their fucking drugs. I snagged a Dire with my claws and ran right over him, shredding him as I did so. Then I lunged sideways and caught a human form in my teeth.

The energy released by their deaths flowed into me, and the Deranger soaked it up. I took out another Dire frantically dodging through the trees, and hooked a foreclaw into the cloak of the next human form running beside him.

I'd just dropped him from my jaws when the first pain ripped through me. Savage and piercing, it drove the breath from my body. I almost collapsed, but pushed myself upright, only to have another wave nearly drop me to the ground.

I'd never felt such pain, not even when swords had been run clear through me. It took all my strength just to snap at the Dires that now closed on me, ripping at my legs with their sharp teeth.

They couldn't penetrate my scales, but they leaped for my wings to shred the sensitive membranes. I shrieked at them,

trying to spin and snap, but another spasm lanced through me

It took the strength from me, and even the Deranger couldn't power through it. For the first time in my life, I was truly *vulnerable*. I twisted, desperately trying to get them away from my wings, but my legs failed me.

A tiny fuzzy form emerged from her protective scale pocket and launched herself at the closest Dire. For once, Fang aimed true, landing on the beast's shoulder before sinking her fangs into his neck.

He screamed and immediately spasmed, falling to the ground. I flung myself forward, trying to grab her—but she was on a mission. She leaped to another, and bit him, too.

A Dire sprang for my wings, claws sinking deep—

Suddenly, thunder rolled from the skies above, and a blur of metal flashed through the air, slicing the Dire's head clean off. The face that emerged through the darkness was hardly human, it had long jaws and dark scales chasing over its skin. But recognition hit me. Marcus, swinging that long sword like it was an extension of his arm. He moved so fast that the metal was barely visible.

A Dire leaped at him from behind, and he somehow reversed the grip, extending the blade behind him. The Dire ran straight onto it, uttered a strangled gasp, and Marcus used both hands on the pommel to rip the sword up and sideways, gutting the beast.

Then a burst of fire shot past me to hit a human form charging at us, yelling as he swung a battleaxe. It blasted him back ten feet, and he began to scream, thrash, and beat at the flames.

Frantic, I grabbed for Fang, and this time she jumped onto my scaled foreleg and scampered back up to her secure perch. Just as Vali arrived with a crash of breaking branches. The yellow-scaled Dragona dropped from above to land on yet another hapless Dire, who she shredded with her talons.

As the next wave of pain drove me to my knees, Marcus flashed by. He fought like a demon, swinging that sword with lethal fury as the lightning ricocheted across the night sky.

When a bolt hit the tree alongside him, it was the final straw. My assailants retreated into the forest, leaving the bodies of their comrades behind.

I tried to straighten, but the agony was all-consuming. The energy from the deaths should have cleared any drug out of my system, but I seemed to be getting worse, not better.

Marcus stood among the trees with his blood-covered sword, looking down at a shredded human body. He poked at it with the tip, then looked at me. His face writhed as his human reasserted itself.

I attempted to straighten. “Whats the fucking hell are you doing out here?”

“Dires came into the restaurant,” he said. “They were clearly hunting, so I got worried.”

“I didn’t needs your helps.” A fresh spasm drove the breath clear from me.

He raised a brow. “Yeah, you look like you could only tackle a Fairy. Maybe. What the frek did they do to you?”

“I don’ts knows,” I gasped. “Theys shots me with darts. Buts this isn’t likes any drug I’ve evers experienced before.”

He bent over the dead human form, pulled off the cloak, and peered at the tattoos on the skin. I’d seen some of them before—

Ice traveled down my spine, and I beat him to it. “Mercs.”

“Why would mercs be after us?” he asked.

“No ideas,” I gasped. The pain in my gut was all consuming, but my brain sifted the facts and came up with one conclusion.

His eyes met mine.

“Isobel,” I snarled.

“But how would Isobel know where we are?” Kiko appeared out of the shadows.

“I don’t know,” I husked, clutching my stomach. “Buts theres were Dragons, befores the Dires appeared.”

Marcus bent and picked up the merc’s dart gun. “If these are Isobel’s mercs, then what? They tried to drug you?”

My mind raced. Because I knew Isobel had something else in her arsenal. “Nots a drug. Its the damned parasites.”

“But—that kills Dragons,” Vali whispered.

Yep, that felt like what they were trying to do, all right. They were chewing through me, and my body was healing in their path. It was a race to see which would win.

“But Isobel isn’t here,” Kiko protested. “So maybe it wasn’t her.”

“She’s not dumb,” Marcus snarled. “She sent them to slow us down while she goes after Rafael.”

And Riley was in the way. I gritted my teeth against the pain and answered Marcus’s question before he could ask it. “She’s ins no shapes to Jump.”

“Fucking hell.” What I read in Marcus’s eyes reflected the panic in my own.

Isobel no longer cared about Marcus and me. Her only worry was to stop us from reaching Rafael first. And from what chewed through my guts, she’d succeeded. But I’d never been one to heed the obvious.

“Mounts up,” I told them.

“But—it’s too dark to see,” Vali protested.

“The onlys ways to stop them,” I snarled, “is tos gos after them.”

The Dragona’s mouth opened, and then closed again, before she offered her leg to Kiko.

“Can you beat the parasites?” Marcus asked.

“I don’t know,” I spat.

“You should go back to Cara. She can help you.”

My wings were damaged, but healing. I could fly. My gut spasmed, but there was no doubt in me. “No,” I said. “I’m going after Riley.”

Marcus didn’t try to dissuade me. Maybe the guy was smarter than he looked. “Iskar just mentioned,” he said, “that Gryphons see very well in the dark.”

My eyes narrowed as I stared at him. “This is the voice in your head?”

“Iskar was a scientist and a scholar before he was inserted into me.”

Fucking hell. Phantom Gryphons. Just what we needed. When I didn’t answer, Marcus straightened and sheathed his sword. He handed it, his significant knife collection, cloak, and clothes to Kiko.

Her mouth hung open, but she closed it with a snap. She wrapped the sword and knives into the clothes, and tied the cloak around it.

“I’ll take them.” Vali folded her talons around the bundle.

Kiko climbed up onto Vali, just as Marcus fell to his knees. His features contorted and his body writhed. It looked incredibly painful, but as I had bugs gnawing their way through my insides, I had difficulty appreciating his anguish.

Still, the sounds coming from him were impressive examples of attempted stoicism. He uttered a strangled cry when the feathered wings sprang from his shoulders. Feathers also sprouted from his face and neck, where they blended to fur, and then, halfway down his torso, to gleaming scales.

Within moments, what crouched amid the trees was a creature I’d only ever seen from a distance. It was smaller than a Dragon, but looked as though it could do serious damage with its powerful hooked claws and sharp beak.

Gryphons were elusive and not something that ever associated themselves with the underworld. I’d always

considered them arrogant do-gooders.

Sort of fit Marcus, to be honest. But despite our differences, he'd come to save my scaly hide.

Dammit. Why had he done that? First Rafael, and now Marcus. For a guy that didn't need saving, I'd managed to accumulate do-gooders eager to do so.

I didn't want them. But it seemed I had them anyway.

Marcus shook his wings, blinked an amethyst eye at me, and tilted his hooked beak upward.

"C-come." he clacked his beak, and launched himself into the sky.

RAFAEL



I stood by the window and watched Riley sleep.

I couldn't wait much longer. Her life essence was flaring and subsiding as the crystal dust—or rather, the need for it—left her body in a shambles. But she would require her rest for what was to come.

Healing always sounded like a gentle process, but this would not be. From what I already sensed, I agreed with Lucas—I needed to find the Dragon in Riley to save her.

Considering the state of my healing talent, it was a hit-and-miss prospect.

I'd pulled the cloak over my naked torso, the layer of thick cloth shrouding me from the world. In my hands rested the three crystals Laresse had brought us. They glowed with power, and I let it flow into me, trying to channel it to the healer I held inside. But it had been so damaged by the bloodmagic—I didn't know if there was enough of it left to do what needed to be done.

Riley murmured something and rolled over. Her brows were drawn down, her lids flickering. When her eyes opened, they were bloodshot.

“Havoc,” she whispered.

“What about him?”

“Sick,” she said. “He's sick. Someone shot him with a dart.”

I drifted my fingers over her brow, smoothing the wrinkles away. “Havoc can’t get sick. Or if he does, he’ll heal quickly.”

Her eyes rose to mine and then closed again. “Sick.”

I didn’t know if she meant the Dragon, or herself. Using the crystals in my hand, I gave her a pulse of healing energy, and she sighed as she slipped into a deeper sleep. I’d give her another half hour. Then the battle would begin.

A familiar life essence intruded, and I paced out of the room to meet Lucas in the living area.

The Morph had a bruise spreading across half his face. “What happened?” I asked, my mouth agape.

He sighed. “The problem with going in cold is that crap happens. But it wasn’t anything I couldn’t handle. I just hope Tyrez doesn’t plan to visit Sarti anytime soon, because my smaller version of him just punched a pinion in the nose.” He grinned at me. “The real thing would have done a much better job of it.”

I shut my mouth with a snap, and said, “I can heal you.”

Lucas lost the smile. “I’m good, thanks. Did you get the crystals?”

“Yeah. Just letting her get some sleep first. It’s going to be a tough go.”

“You know, there could be something else contributing to how sick she is,” Lucas said. “Once the mate bond is started, not completing it can have physical consequences.”

I stared at him as my mind sheered away. “Havoc bit her, and then rejected her.”

Lucas laced his fingers together. “Yeah. And Marcus can’t touch her without growing scales.” His eyes moved to meet mine. “Then there is you.”

Me. Yes. I’d rejected her, too. I swallowed. “You really think that is what is going on?”

“Not all of it. She’s addicted, I am certain of that. But it’s something to be aware of.”

I didn't want to think that I could be contributing to her pain, and pushed the thought away. There wasn't anything I could do about it—my love came with an unacceptable price tag.

“Laresse dropped the crystals off,” I told Lucas. When he winced, I continued. “I’m afraid she knows I’m part Satyr, and that Riley is female. She warned me that we need to be gone by the time her mates get back, and that they know about us.”

Lucas grimaced. “There are no secrets between mates.”

“Apparently that is quite true for Hitzus.” I told him what Laresse had said to me.

Lucas’s eyes widened. “I’ve heard of that. I’ve also heard that Hitzu males can use that venom to see through the eyes of more than just their mates, only on a more temporary basis. But the one who told me that was hardly a reputable source of information. I didn’t believe it was true.”

Ice shot along my spine. I remembered the Hitzu in Brock’s dungeon cell. How Brock had implied he needed another dose. And how the Hitzu had asked if he’d wanted the Centaur re-venomed.

The Centaur.

“If it were true—and a Hitzu envenomed someone, could they communicate with them?”

Lucas’s eyes narrowed, and he shrugged. “I don’t know. I suppose it is possible. It would depend on the power of their telepathic ability, likely.”

I told him what I’d overheard in that dungeon, and a muscle jumped in his jaw. “The Hitzu’s eyes flashed? Like he was talking to his mates?”

“Yes.”

“Damn it. There are two Hitzus at the academy. Twins, apparently, male and female. They came in from the underworld.”

“What if they’re mated to the one Brock has captive?” My pulse raced.

We stared at each other, and then Lucas rubbed his face. “We may have just discovered how Brock knew Marcus was at the academy. They may have had Marcus tagged all along.”

“But if they have him tagged—” My gut twisted.

“If he was the Centaur Brock referred to, they didn’t re-venom him, remember? According to my source, it would have worn off by now.”

But my mind raced. “Riley just told me Havoc was sick. He’s partway through the pass leading to Sarti, and she said someone darted him.”

Lucas’s eyes flashed wildly before he headed down the hall to Riley.

When we opened the bedroom door, Riley had already pushed herself up on one elbow while rubbing her head.

“Havoc is shouting at me,” she complained, blinking blearily. Sweat beaded her brow. “He says we have to run.”

Before I could ask why, she continued.

“He’s in pain.” Then her breath hitched. “He said something is eating him from the inside out.”

The knot in my gut twisted tighter. “Ask him if anyone in their group has been scratched by a Hitzu.”

“What?” she asked with a frown.

“Just ask him.”

She closed her eyes. When she reopened them a few minutes later, they were clouded with confusion. “Kiko, recently. Marcus, a while ago.”

Lucas swore. “It’s Brock and Isobel. They must have followed them.”

“Havoc says that he was darted.” Riley sounded confused as her eyes flashed. “Something about a parasite?”

“Isobel tracked them, and has a parasite that kills Dragons.” I could barely breathe. “Havoc has amazing healing ability, but it won’t be enough. Not with that. It was designed to kill.”

“No.” Riley’s eyes widened, and I sensed her horror.

Lucas’s brain had already leaped ahead. “If Isobel followed them... That mountain pass leads straight here.” Lucas’s eyes moved to my collar. “She’ll be tracking you.”

Riley sat up so abruptly that she swayed and almost keeled right over. “Give me dust. I will get us out of here.”

Lucas met my eyes. “No. Rafael is going to heal you.”

She blinked at him. “But Isobel—”

“Isobel has to walk or fly into Sarti, just like everyone else. When did she attack Havoc?”

Riley frowned at him, but her eyes flashed. “Within the hour? He’s so angry and in so much pain I can barely understand him.”

“Where are they?” the Morph asked.

She concentrated. “He says just beyond the High Pass Inn.”

Lucas relaxed, marginally. “Even if she flies straight through, we have another four hours, at least, until she gets here. Flying that pass at night is a fool’s errand, but this is Isobel.” He turned to me. “You have until then to heal Riley.”

I met his gaze. “And if I can’t?”

Lucas’s mouth straightened. “Then we’ll run. But with me carrying two, we won’t get far. If they catch us—Nikolai will come for me. The gate rules don’t apply to him.”

I gritted my teeth. “If he taps into the core energy to gate here—”

Lucas’s gaze met mine. “This volcano would no longer be extinct, and that’s just for starters.”

I suddenly couldn't breathe. Then I swallowed, and straightened. Riley looked from Lucas to me, and I offered a tremulous smile.

“Okay,” I said. “Let's see if we can find your Dragon.”

RAFAEL



Lucas offered to help, but I sensed his relief when I sent him away.

“There’s nothing you can do,” I said. “And if it fails, we are going to need your wings. So resting is the most productive thing for you.”

He nodded, his eyes darting between me and Riley. Finally, he said, “Good luck,” and left.

I turned to Riley. She watched me with her beautiful green-rimmed eyes, and my heart flipped right over.

Not a promising start.

“This is likely going to be unpleasant and even painful. My skills are not what they could be, and I have to focus my energy on the end goal. If it becomes unbearable, please tell me, and we’ll pause. Okay?”

Riley lifted her chin and her eyes glittered. “Just do it.”

I admired her bravery. But then, she’d never been through anything like this. “Lie back in the middle of the bed,” I said.

She did so, and my stupid Satyr half immediately went where it had no business going, considering I needed to stay focused.

“Move over a bit.” I had to clear my throat in between the first two words, as my voice wavered.

She shuffled over, and I sat down beside her on the bed, pulling my legs up and crossing them.

Riley raised a brow. “You’re limber for a guy.”

“I’m no ordinary guy,” I pointed out. It came out as a seductive purr, my Satyr making a grab for control. I pushed back on it and twitched my lips into a smile.

She sucked her lip between her teeth. But all she said was, “What do I do?”

“First, I’m going to assess which of your systems are craving the crystal dust. Then, if I can find the Dragon in you, I will call it out.”

She frowned. “It’s only been a few days since I was bitten. Doesn’t it take longer than that?”

I swallowed. “That hasn’t been long, but the Dragon virus is virulent. And between fated mates, it can progress very fast.”

She hesitated. “And if we’re not fated?”

“Then he wouldn’t have bitten you.”

“He wants nothing to do with me.” I could barely hear her. “He’s an asshole.”

“I agree that he’s not exactly Mr. Sunshine. His human may have other ideas, but his beast certainly thinks you are his mate, or it wouldn’t have gone through with it.”

She absorbed that. Then she said, “Where did you go when we were at the inn?”

I forced myself to breathe. “I needed to feed, so I went hunting.”

Her eyes met mine, and I saw a flash of anger in them. “You didn’t have to leave to do that.”

“Yes,” I said. “I did.”

“You wouldn’t hurt me,” she whispered.

I met her eyes, and let her see the pain in them, for just an instant. Then I swallowed. “I can’t always control it, Riley. And the thought of hurting you—” My voice broke.

But her eyes blazed at me. “You have no idea what we might be able to achieve, together.”

It wasn't just the risk. It was me. Who I now was. The things I'd done were unforgivable. Evil. Controlling creatures as their life drained away. Feeding off another's torment. Killing Laila. If Riley had any idea—

When I only stared at her, she turned her head away. “I am surrounded by assholes.”

Okay. I guess I deserved that. “Hold on to that anger, it will help you through this.” I took her hand, and her entire arm tensed. “Try to relax. You might not feel this first bit. If you feel sleepy, go with it.”

“Sleepy,” she said, “Wouldn't have been my word of choice.” The look she gave me pierced straight through to something that remained hopeful despite my efforts.

I took a deep breath. “Close your eyes.”

She sighed, and did so. With her hand clenched in my own, it was only marginally better. I closed mine as well and went in search of an addiction.

Minutes later, I was working to maintain a calm façade, because what I found was terrifying. There wasn't an organ or system in her body that wasn't completely breaking down. The subsequent inflammation was out of control.

It was killing her.

I fought back the panic, because I wasn't sure I could help her. Her only chance was to embrace her Dragon, but Isobel had done the calling of the beasts from within the Centaurs. I'd merely done my best to keep their bodies working toward a shift change instead of imploding. With variable success, because they'd fought it every step of the way.

But I'd helped Marcus find his equine, and I could call on that experience to find Riley's Dragon. I imagined what it might look like. Her hair was black, so she'd have black scales. Not solid in color, but like Lucas's, they would gleam with blues and greens in the light. And her eyes—they'd be

green. Sleek, she'd be sleek and beautiful, with a graceful arch to her neck, and talons as black as her scales.

As I imagined it, I projected it through her life essence. Calling to what I hoped would be there, if only I could find it.

And I sensed the merest hint of a response, buried beneath the inflammation. It was only developing, and not yet ready to surface.

My mind raced, searching for ideas. Riley's fledgling Dragon wasn't her only chance to overcome what the dust had done to her. She was also a Morph, or part, at least. She'd been a Dragon once before, and she could do it again. Even holding that form for a short time could help her.

So I added what I remembered from my shared vision with Havoc, the voluptuous and beautiful golden Dragon who had mated with him.

I heard her gasp as the Dragona took hold, surging to the surface.

"Riley," I said. "Your Dragon is not quite ready, but you can call on the yellow one."

"Vali," she whispered. "Her name is Vali."

"Tap into her," I said. "It will help with the addiction until your own Dragon can take over."

Her gaze locked with mine.

"One step at a time, okay? Your body needs to be cleansed of the addiction. This is not going to be easy, or quick. You have to stay with me."

She nodded.

"Do you think you can transform to Vali?"

"Maybe. I think so." Her voice was hoarse.

"Visualize her, and change. I'll support you through." I clenched my hand around the crystals, pulling power from them and feeding it to her.

Her body leaped to devour it, eager for its strength, but I held it back. She needed it to make the shift, and if I let her body absorb it, it would only make her addiction worse.

The muscles and bones began to change, lengthening to someone a little taller as her hips widened and her breasts enlarged. She groaned as the bones of her face shifted, but I closed my eyes and chased through her body.

It was working, but it was a painfully slow, torturous process. Shifting to Dragon reduced the inflammation—the Dragon body knew how to handle the remaining dust in her system. It also knew how to channel its resources when low on it, without the system-wide shutdown suffered by her original cells.

I clutched the crystals and used their power to augment my weakened healing talents, soothing the remaining inflammation, pushing toxins out of her blood. For a while, she cried tears that were almost black.

When I looked down at her arms, they were covered in golden scales, and her face was no longer her own—it was pure Dragona, with the usual perfect features and slight arrogant tilt to the lips. The eyes, though, were still Riley, and gleaming green at me.

I had no idea how long we'd been working, but the sky outside the window was lightening toward dawn.

Riley held up her hand and looked at it. "I still feel like crap. But I think the fever has broken." Then she met my eyes. "Now what?"

Now what, indeed. As a Morph, she couldn't keep Vali's form for very long. It pulled resources with every minute it existed. But what would happen if she shifted back? The addiction would not be resolved, not until her Dragon could emerge.

When I sent my energy through her once more, the inflammation was gone, and her fever had subsided. But the cells were still craving the dust.

I told her that, and a muscle jumped in her jaw. “But we’ve bought you time,” I said. “Your body will seek the crystal dust, but it is no longer shutting down.”

The green eyes glowed at me from Vali’s face. “Will I be able to Jump?”

It was a good question, and I knew she wouldn’t like the answer. “I’m not certain,” I hedged.

She swallowed. “If I take more dust now, will it kill me?”

My rejection was automatic. “Not a good idea. It could put you right back where you were before.”

“But we need this.” Her voice rasped. “Without it, Isobel will find us.”

She would. But I couldn’t condone Riley taking more dust to save us, not when it could do damage. Not when there was another way.

It all made perfect sense now. I was flooded with the calmness I had craved since I’d discovered Isobel had murdered my parents. A true sensation of purpose.

“If you rest, you should be able to Jump at least once.” I hated lying to her, but it was the only way. “You have time before Isobel can reach us.”

We had no choice—she had to regain her natural form. “Are you ready? We are going to take you back to yourself now.”

She nodded, and I kept my voice calm, even though my pulse pounded. “Visualize you as you.”

Agonized sounds escaped from between her teeth as her body changed—I wanted to take that pain from her, and I tried. What used to be so easy for me, now only came with effort.

But what emerged from the form on the bed wasn’t Riley. And it wasn’t until an intoxicating aroma hit me hard that I saw the curved horns peeking through hair the same color as mine.

“What—” I began.

The Satyr I knew had to be Riley pushed herself up to a sitting position. “I figure the only way to catch a Satyr,” she whispered, “Is with another Satyr.” She ran her fingers along my jaw.

It was like being touched by fire. I inhaled her rich scent and fought the urge to kiss her.

She leaned closer. “This could work, Rafael. If I’m a Satyr, your power might not affect me.” Her eyes glimmered with unshed tears. “Please. We have to *try*.”

My heart screamed that this was the last chance I had to hold her. To be with her.

No. It was still too dangerous. I had to walk out of here. Now.

But what if she was right?

It wasn’t until her warm lips moved against my own that I realized I’d already lost the battle. I wanted her so badly I shook. Her pheromones should only cancel mine out, and not entice. But despite that, and her appearance, my spirit, my *soul*—knew this was meant to be.

Fate had chosen her for me.

She groaned against my mouth, and her tongue tangled in mine. My brain screamed for me to pull away, but my hands slipped up beneath her robe.

She uttered an impatient sound, ripped it fully open, and let the soft fabric drift down her bare shoulders. Her Satyr body was soft and luscious and perfect.

Within me, the fiend rose, took its first bite of the rich fare offered to it, and grabbed hold of what flowed between us, drank deep... and reached for more...

Panic shot through me. A Satyr should be immune to my power, but Riley wasn’t really a Satyr. And she was weak, too weak for this.

“Riley. Wait, we have to stop—” I put my hands on her upper arms. I needed to push her away.

“No. We don’t.” She shoved straight into my arms, daring me to be forceful—but as she climbed onto my lap, I couldn’t do it. Her scent wasn’t bouncing off mine—it was feeding into it. Combining until we created an entirely new, blended force of nature that set every inch of me aflame. I found myself pulling her closer, her damp heat rubbing against me with a desperation that I matched. My hips pushed up against her, and she dropped a hand, wrestling with the laces on my breeches.

I pulled back, but only long enough to yank the cloak over my head, and undo the laces myself. Her hand wrapped around my shaft, and I found a new meaning for the word heaven.

Her grip was at once gentle and commanding, and I was painfully hard already. Every stroke made it harder to breathe. My fingers found her breasts, and my tongue danced along her jaw to her ear, tracing the delicate lobe as she shuddered and moaned. Her nipples were already peaked, and as my fingers circled and squeezed, she pulled her hand away and mounted me.

No careful positioning or fumbling, but one sure swivel of her hips that placed me exactly where I needed to be, and then, she took me like she was staking claim, sliding me inch by inch into her liquid velvet. It was so delicious that my teeth closed on first her earlobe, and then I was nibbling along her neck, making noises I’d never uttered, thrusting with no control, like a virgin youngling.

She made me feel like that. There was a purity to her, and to this experience, that momentarily washed away the filth I’d been immersed in. I clung to her with a desperation borne of that, and with the surety that this was what I’d been made for. Not to be a weapon. But to be *hers*.

For those precious seconds, I was whole.

Images flashed through my mind. Of her with Havoc, and with Marcus. With Cara at the academy. Riding Marcus along that road, chased by the machines. Fighting off two young men, hardly more than boys, that wanted to—before I could

fully grasp that, I realized that the thing inside me had its tendrils sunk deep into her.

If she'd been pure Satyr, it wouldn't have worked. But she wasn't.

She *wasn't*.

It was hooked into her life essence, and *feeding*. Her eyes flew open and stared into mine. I saw the exact moment when the lust was replaced by awareness, and then dawning horror.

No.

I pulled her off me. With my body rigid and aching, I rolled away from the bed, and her.

She tried to come with me. And in my panic, I did the unthinkable.

“Stay away from me.” My power rang through the words. I'd never felt so strong. The energy I'd absorbed from her was unlike any I'd sampled before.

She'd been sent to me by Fate.

What she'd given me sang through my veins, providing a glimpse of what I was truly capable of.

And it was terrifying.

My words stopped her as though she'd run straight into a wall. Her eyes widened, and the hurt in them swiftly turned to anger.

I trembled as I stepped toward her, one hand reaching out. “Lie down,” I commanded.

Her face spasmed, but her body obeyed. I hated myself, but she'd never let me do what needed to be done. It was the only way to save her.

“Hold still,” I ordered as I laid a hand on her arm. And I sent a pulse through her, pushing past her resistance. I found what I sought and pulled Riley past the Satyr.

She emerged with her eyes spitting fire at me, and twice she almost broke free. As my potential mate, she was stronger

than anyone I'd yet faced, except Isobel. But I couldn't let her defeat me. Once it was Riley lying there, I traveled along her carotid arteries—and pinched them off, just enough to put her into a deep sleep.

Even then, she fought me. That this would be the last memory she had of me hurt my heart. After all I'd seen and done, this shouldn't have been a big deal. But forcing her to comply was worse than any of it.

It was unforgivable. I told myself that if it kept her alive, it would all be worth it.

Once her breathing stabilized, I released her and rose. She was so beautiful, lying there. She was the life I'd always wanted, and could never have.

The energy she'd given me—I was both engorged, and invincible. With barely a flicker of intent, I reached out with my awareness and found Lucas. He was also asleep, stretched out on the couch.

He stirred as I slid past, but I murmured, "Sleep," to him, and he muttered and rolled over.

I slipped out the door and skirted the main building. Fifteen minutes later, with my body still vibrating with need, I used my power to talk my way past the guards at the front entrance.

I pulled up my hood and headed into the Sarti night.

MARCUS



I was soaring.

Well, technically, I am soaring.

It was true. I had nothing to do with the fact that flapping my wings kept us in the air. If I was the one in control, we'd have face-planted a dozen times by now. But despite the drizzle and icy-cold night air, it was glorious.

I have missed flying, Iskar admitted. But you weren't ready to try it. Might still not have been, if it weren't for Isobel going after Riley. It was why Cara tested you—she wouldn't have listened to me, and let you come on this mission, if you couldn't embrace at least a part of who you've become.

And there was the truth of it. Until Riley was in danger, I'd fought what Isobel had put inside me. And it would have included any attempt to turn me into a Gryphon, just as it had for the Wyvern and for the freking Storm Drake.

On a very fundamental level, I'd rejected them.

It will destroy you if you can't come to terms with it. Iskar's voice was resigned. They are part of you now.

As are you.

Yes, my boy.

Even now, I longed to turn back time. To return to when my four strong legs could run like the wind.

Instead, I was soaring with it at my back. And it was incredible. If only it weren't for such a terrible reason.

Isobel would kill anything that got between her and Rafael. And Riley would put herself there. I knew it.

The adrenaline that coursed through me at the thought had me attempting to seize control of my wings. To make them flap faster and harder.

Instantly, we lost lift and started to fall. A cliff projected on the left—and we narrowly missed plowing right into it.

Your control issues are going to make us go splat, Iskar stated in exasperation. *Stop it. Let me fly. You can do the worrying.*

I yielded to Iskar, and he leveled us off again.

“Whats the fucking hells are yous doing?” Havoc in pain was even more of an asshole than normal. He flew just off my tail, with Vali and Kiko behind him.

I refused to answer him as I let Iskar climb us above the next projecting bit of mountain. It was clear to me why most Dragons didn’t attempt this flight at night—with the heavy cloud cover and drizzle, the winding path was treacherous.

But Gryphon eyes could discern the infrared spectrum, and as such, I could now detect the cold stone of the mountains almost as clear as day. Which worked, so long as I didn’t try to fly.

How is Isobel flying through this? I asked. *We can see, but only because of you.*

I have no idea, Iskar replied. *Dragon night vision is good, but not good enough. But she can do things with that cursed bloodmagic that I cannot fathom.*

My gut twisted. “C-can you sense Isobel yet-t?” I called back to Havoc. My Gryphon beak added clicks to the words.

“Wes ares gaining,” the red Dragon said.

I glanced back to him—and ice traveled down my spine. My vision showed not only that he was warm-blooded—but he was lit up throughout by a brilliant pulsing heat that seemed to be spreading before my eyes.

The parasites, chewing through him. He needed Cara.

He needs a healer, Iskar agreed. But Rafael is one as well. And closer, if we can beat Isobel to him.

This time, I managed to stop myself from trying to take control. Just.

Face it, Marcus. Your issues with control are epic.

The comment gave me pause. Not like I had anything else to do, except worry. Was Iskar right? The Gryphon lived inside of me. He'd seen me at my worst.

Being Iskar, he had more to say. *You had no control over what happened to your family or your life. So you make up for it by trying to manage everything and everyone else around you. Only with this, you need to accept that you can't go back. You can only go forward.*

Forward. I needed to accept that I'd never again gallop across the fields surrounded by singing Centaurs. It hurt to think that, but not with the gut-tearing pain that it once had.

Perhaps because I had the wind riffling through my hair. Or rather, feathers.

Excellent. You are finally getting your brain engaged. Now, about Riley...

I tensed. The conversation was about to devolve into growl-and-sprout-scales territory, I was sure of it.

You have two choices. Embrace the mate bond as Fate intends you to. Or walk away and be forever damaged by its lack. There is no neutral in this.

Put like that, it sounded so damned simple. But he and I both knew it wasn't. Because embracing the mate bond meant accepting both Havoc and Rafael were part of it.

I also had a valid counterargument. *What does it matter, if every time I touch her, the demon inside me takes control? Why would she want to be mated to that?*

You say that like there is no solution.

Is there one?

Acceptance is the key to all.

Acceptance. Acceptance of my demons. Acceptance of the other two males in the bond.

The concept didn't cause quite the rage that it had in the past. Why?

Respect. Iskar dropped the quiet word into my mind, and I seized hold of it. I respected Rafael for putting his life on the line for us. To free me and Havoc. Thoughts of sharing Riley with him only created a mild uneasiness. A question of how that would play out.

Havoc was different. The Dragon was a serious bastard. He'd bitten her, and then tried to *walk away*. And there it was, the rage. I had no doubt that black scales were popping up amid my Gryphon fur, I could feel them.

Havoc is chased by his own demons, Iskar stated. And he's here now, flying to Riley's rescue despite being eaten alive by parasites.

He's flying to Rafael so he can be healed.

So sure are you? Is that the truth, or your jealousy talking?

I didn't know. I couldn't see into the Dragon's head. But the thought of sharing with him—just, no.

Yet the demon within me had become more uneasy than enraged.

As if it were no longer sure.

Apparently, feathers did not shed water quite as well as scales.

Gryphons usually anoint their feathers with oils, Iskar stated. Which you have not done.

Where do I get the oils?

There's a gland at the base of the tail. You dip your beak or claws in it—

Okay, I am not putting my beak in my butt.

It's not in your butt—

We'll stick with wet feathers. I decided.

Tell me that, when we fall out of the sky. Iskar sounded indignant.

I ignored him as we flapped into what had become a driving rain. Havoc stayed right on my tail, but his wings often faltered, and I could almost feel his pain. I couldn't imagine having those things chewing through your body.

It killed many Dragons. Iskar's voice was filled with sadness. *Only his incredible healing ability is keeping him alive.*

Although Havoc was a grade-one asshole, rage surged through me at the thought of him dying. Almost visceral, as though I considered him a part of me...

It was what had driven me out of the warm, dry inn into the cold drizzle. To see if the Dragon was okay, out there alone in the forest.

Before I could contemplate that, he moved up alongside me. His words barely carried to me over the rushing wind, and I slowed to hear him. "I stills can'ts raise Riley."

I didn't understand that. "C-could Rafael have put-t her into a deep sleep?"

He spoke partly through his teeth. "Isobel's nots moving as fasts as us. Buts if we cans feels her, she cans feels us. Ands she's got a groups dropping backs."

His words were a warning. To get to Isobel, we'd have to go through what she'd sent.

"Do you have a head c-count?" I asked.

He hesitated. "Can't tells for sures. Multiple Dragons and Bellatis." He peeled lips back from his teeth. "Wes won't stands a chance, with mes likes this."

Gryphons are far from defenseless, but they can never stand against a Dragon, Iskar warned. *We need a game plan.*

I surveyed the heavy cloud cover above us. *They'll likely conclude Havoc is dealt with. And they won't know I can shift to Gryphon.*

True, Iskar said cautiously.

Can you land us for a few minutes? To Havoc, I said, "I have a plan. C-come with me."

"Fuckings perfect," he growled.

Vali followed us down to a section of cliff where Iskar brought my Gryphon form in for a graceful landing.

Very nice, I said.

Sarcasm will get you everywhere, he sniped.

Havoc had no sooner landed than he curled in on himself, and hissed in pain. He was our best weapon, and at the moment, barely functional.

I turned to Vali and Kiko. "Isobel's sending Dragons with Bellati riders back-k to finish us."

Kiko's eyes widened.

Havoc managed to uncurl himself long enough to state, "One's Brock."

"Brock-k? Xumi's son?" When the red Dragon nodded, I growled. I knew all about the son of Xumi, who had led the underlords to massacre my biological family. The Black Guild had done the deed, but the underlords had sent them.

Brock hadn't led the initiative, but he'd certainly been part of it. I clacked my beak open and closed.

With taloned fingers clutching his middle, Havoc watched me. Despite the wet, all the feathers down my neck had bristled erect. "Brock's a fuckings bastard," he stated. "You had dealings with him?"

"Before I became Marcus, son of Emmanuel, the armorer," I growled, "I was William Stormswift."

Havoc's eyes widened. "Yous are a Stormswift? Buts they were all killed..." he trailed off, and then he snorted. "Guess

nots.”

“The assassin sent to k-kill me had a change of heart.” I clacked my beak. “But I hate Brock-k almost as much as I hated his mother.”

His long head nodded. I wasn’t surprised that revenge was something he understood. “I wants a piece of him, too. But your claim is older than mine. He’s yours,” he promised.

He didn’t seem to notice the fine trickle of blood from one nostril. Ice traveled down my spine. We needed the Deranger, but it was busy enough keeping the red Dragon alive.

What are you up to, Marcus? A Gryphon can't take on Brock as a Dragon. And look at Havoc. He's dying by degrees.

The words twisted something inside me. Getting to Rafael wasn’t just about rescuing Riley.

I turned to Vali. “I need K-Kiko to ride me.”

The Satyr’s eyes widened. “You can carry me?”

“Yes.” Then, I asked. *Can we carry her?*

Yes. But only her.

I thrust my chin at Vali. “How fast c-can you fly?”

The yellow Dragon arched her neck. “I cans outflys any male Dragon.”

“That’s ex-cellent-t,” I said. “Be-cause I need you to be bait-t.”

HAVOC



Over the years, the Deranger had been shredded, stabbed, sliced, and diced in a million different ways.

But it had never skated closer to the edge, than right now.

As I hovered in the clouds, pain lanced through me from my gut and my chest. I tasted blood in my mouth, and it trickled from my nose and ears. I wanted to cough, but wasn't sure it was a good idea. Because once I started, I probably wouldn't be able to stop.

The most disturbing thing, though, was as I lurked here, waiting to pounce, my human was firmly in control. The Deranger was there, and eager, but with a kind of desperation I'd never sensed before. Because it was taking all of its reserves just to keep me alive.

Which meant that relying on me to take out these Dragons was foolish in the extreme. But that was what we were doing. I mean, Marcus had a plan, but it all hinged on me. And if I failed—

If I failed, Isobel would reach Riley.

It was that, more than anything else, that kept me in the air. My beast and my monster would do anything to keep that from happening. And I had to admit that my human was on board as well.

A flash of brightness against the forest's shadows—Vali, flying fast, ducking in and out of the low clouds to keep her pursuers guessing as to whether she had company. On her

neck, Marcus and Kiko had strapped a cloak stuffed to look as though she carried a rider.

Isobel wasn't worried about Vali. She was, however, worried about Marcus, and now I knew why. The Isobitch likely figured I was done for.

She was almost right.

Then the Dragons appeared. Flying hard after Vali, their Bellati riders crouched over their necks with dart guns in their hands. Did they think the parasites would work against the Storm Drake?

Maybe they would. The Drakes were related to Dragons, after all.

In the rear of his pinions, where it was safest, flew the bronze Dragon. Alone.

I tensed, and the Deranger in me screamed—it wanted their lives, no, it *needed* them, with a hunger that I'd never before experienced. But I waited for my cue, like a fucking good soldier.

Which I wasn't.

The Dragons passed beneath us, the clouds swirling away beneath their wings. And just when I thought it would never happen—fire lanced through the air.

It splashed uselessly against the lead Dragon's scales—a Firethrower was no weapon against Dragons.

The next beam hit not the Dragon, but its rider. Bellatis were mighty warriors, but they had no defense against fire. The rider screamed as he erupted in flames.

Kiko didn't wait to see if her firebomb worked, she selected another target, and scored with one shot. Vapor swirled as Marcus's Gryphon swept by me. That was my cue—I plummeted from the clouds.

The pinion below me was a veteran, and saw me at the last moment. He rolled, slashing with teeth and talons.

I smashed into him, and sliced him to pieces. Drank from his life essence. My monster sucked it in so greedily that it almost got me killed, as the other riderless Dragon hammered into me from the side.

I rolled with it, twisting and sinking my teeth into his neck. He thrashed and tore at me, his talons striking deep. But I closed my jaws, and drank again. Dropped the body, and ducked another Dragon—he had scorch marks where his rider had been.

Blood ran down my shoulder where the talons had scored—and it was slow to stop. The pain was absorbed by the anguish of being eaten alive—I barely avoided the Dragon’s snapping jaws. He was smaller than me, but in this state I was next to useless.

But not completely. So long as Kiko kept most of the parasite darts at bay—I curled my hind legs up, buried their talons into the Dragon’s gut, and ripped him open.

The deaths pumped energy to where I needed it most—healing my internal organs as the parasites chewed paths through them. I slashed my way to more power through another Dragon and felt new strength course through me.

Wings beat the clouds to ribbons of vapor as Dragons pursued a fleet, feathered form. Kiko’s firebolts lit the sky and pinions alike as she fired on them—it only slowed the Dragons, but three more had already lost their riders.

A blur of bright color—Vali, diving from above with a shriek, slicing her talons along an exposed flank before twisting away from grasping forelimbs to vanish once more in the clouds.

A dart buried itself in my shoulder. I knocked it free, but not before it had delivered its payload. With a snarl, I lunged at the shooter—his Dragon mount veered away, but I fastened my foretalons around his tail, opened my wings wide—and swung him in an arc around me. The momentum slung the Bellati rider right off to vanish with a thin scream toward the forest below. I released the Dragon, and he slammed into the

nearest cliff. I followed, grabbing its head in my hands and twisting—

And the Deranger fed for the fifth time.

Four to go, two with riders and dart guns. And then there was Brock.

I flapped hard, feeling the strain through my entire body as I climbed into the clouds. Once I leveled off, I listened hard. I needed to get this right. My vision blurred as I stared through breaks in the clouds, searching—

And finding.

I closed my wings and dove straight down, counting on them to break my fall. If I overshot, the cliffs were too close for me to stop in time. The only answer to that was not to miss.

As I flashed past, I caught a glimpse of a swirl of purple feathers as Marcus and Kiko appeared and then vanished into a cloud. And then I slammed into the Dragon immediately behind them.

Another dart hit me point-blank, but I shredded my way through the Dragon and took the Bellati's arm clean off, dart gun and all. Before knocking him from his perch and finishing the dying Dragon by sinking my talons in its throat and tearing it to shreds.

The pulse of essence counteracted the extra dose of parasites. Almost. I swung around—and a green scaled missile hit me hard, almost knocking me from the sky.

Life dissolved in a maelstrom of slashing talons and snapping teeth. I sank mine into a throat, and out of the corner of my eye, saw a big bronze Dragon bank toward us.

Brock.

Talons sliced into my shoulder, and as I closed my jaws, ending the seventh Dragon, a purple-feathered bomb dropped from directly over Brock's head.

He didn't see it until it dug foreclaws into his shoulders, and ripped its vicious hinds through his wings.

It was a hit only another winged creature could have accomplished—and it all but eliminated Brock's ability to fly.

As he tumbled from the sky, Marcus followed him down.

RAFAEL



Sarti was the most sordid place I'd ever been at. And considering the places I'd visited with Isobel, that was saying much.

The drizzle painted the night in a fog that only encouraged the shadow-prowling predators. In the first five blocks from the inn, I was pounced on twice. I sucked both assailants to the point of collapse but left them alive, preserving their energy inside me.

The fiend within me purred. Not that feeding did me a whole lot of good. I'd already gone up against Isobel, and failed. I was determined that this time would be different. I had what Riley had given me, and even if it wasn't enough, I wasn't letting Isobel reclaim me. I would do whatever it took to ensure that didn't happen.

So, as I walked, I reached out. And right away, I found her.

Her awareness instantly latched onto me. She was closer than I expected, and I sensed the bloodmagic swirling around her—was she using it to enhance her speed? I increased my own until I was almost jogging, putting as much space between Riley and myself as I could.

No way I would let her, or Lucas, pay the price for my connection to Isobel. I would protect them both with my life.

When she was almost at the city, I started looking up. She was coming in from above, and a rooftop would be the best place for the final confrontation. I slipped into a back alley, my

eyes fastened on the ancient ladder running up the building beside me.

I was so distracted that I almost didn't sense him coming at me. Another would-be thief, and he wasn't interested in talking. I caught the reflection of the dim overhead light on his knife blade, and his eyes gleamed from the depths of his hood.

I grabbed his wrist with one hand and used it to swing him around, slamming him up against the nearest building with my other at his throat.

His eyes widened in shock—it didn't matter that he was both taller and heavier than me. He struggled, but it was already far too late. The fiend in me took no prisoners. It sank its tendrils into his life essence and drank from it as though it were a fine wine.

His struggles weakened until he hung limp in my grasp. I dropped him as I had the others and headed for the ladder.

When I stepped out onto the breezy roof of the eight-story building, gusts caught my hood. I shoved it back, letting the wind play through my long hair. Closed my eyes and pushed my face into it. It stank of the city, but if I called upon memory, I imagined standing on a mountain cliff, inhaling crystal-clear air.

I felt her. When I squinted up into the darkness, the drizzle ran down my face. She was there, in the clouds. I sensed rather than saw her drop from them.

The Dragon she rode moved oddly, and it wasn't until she coasted in for a landing that I recognized why—it wasn't a Dragon. It was a Gryphon.

The remainder of the coven members were mounted on Dragons who landed first on the surrounding roofs. I'd hoped Isobel would come alone—even ramped as I was, the energy the coven fed her would make this an uneven battle. But if I could take Isobel down with me, I would be content.

I watched as the Gryphon set down rather clumsily. Its eyes flashed chaotically, as though consumed by an inner turmoil.

Isobel slid off, and then, as I watched, it began to writhe unnaturally. And I recognized what emerged.

Vic. It was Vic, in human form.

Isobel grinned at my reaction. “Surprised, my pet? I was as well. It wasn’t until we drained another Gryphon and put it in Vic, that we discovered Marcus’s secret. That he had help organizing those entities I’d put inside him. But then, you knew that already, didn’t you? You have been betraying me for much longer than I thought.”

I glared at her. She’d done that with more Gryphons? “How did you control them without me?” I asked. My voice didn’t sound at all normal.

She shrugged. “It was more of a struggle, I’ll admit. And the results are not at all happy with being inside another person. We could have used your abilities, but Vic has his under control now.” She smiled at the young ex-Centaur. “He’s very strong.”

Vic straightened beneath her regard, but his gaze fastened on me. Scorn was all I read.

“You could have had it all,” he said, “but you threw it away.”

“Maybe I didn’t like to be owned.” I stepped closer to Isobel.

Her eyes narrowed as she watched me come. “What have you been up to, Rafael? You feel different to me. I like it.”

“I’m full of surprises,” I said, reaching a hand for her. “Care to taste?”

“Been there, done that, Rafael,” she stated. I spotted Aurora on one of the dragons beyond Isobel. Her expression was as cold and remote as the rest.

It matched my heart perfectly. I let the leash slip on the rage within me, and the twitch of the thin skin around Isobel’s eyes revealed that my own must be glowing. She raised her hand, and the coven responded in an instant, lifting their own.

The bloodmagic spiked around them, then funneled to Isobel. Her hair rose on a tide of power.

“Care for a rematch?” I asked.

Her eyes flared crimson. “If you’d rather return draped over a Dragon instead of riding, that’s fine by me. So long as you come back, it doesn’t matter to me if your mind is intact.”

I already knew that. What she didn’t realize, was that I had no intention of coming back at all.

She didn’t move as I raised my hands to her face, and unleashed the fiend.

RILEY



I rolled with it, twisting and sinking my teeth into his neck. He thrashed and tore at me, his talons penetrating deep. But I closed my jaws.

And drank again.

I dropped the body and ducked the talons of another Dragon—he had scorch marks over his shoulders.

But something was terribly wrong. Agony radiated through my gut, as though a million tiny knives were slicing it to ribbons. And some of the blood running off my muzzle was mine...

“Riley, wake up!” Lucas’s strained voice roused me.

I woke up on a wave of pain, to find myself hunched in a fetal position, cradling my gut. But the agony faded as my awareness increased.

It wasn’t my pain. It was Havoc. And he was battling Dragons while being eaten by parasites.

I had to get to him. To save him. I looked up into Lucas’s worried gaze.

“Rafael’s gone,” he said.

Rafael. Rage tainted my frantic terror for Havoc. “He—he controlled me. Forced me—”

Lucas’s eyes widened. “He forced you?” I saw the dawning horror in his eyes. “I shouldn’t have left you—”

“No, not that,” I said. “Besides... *I* wanted to.” I stopped, and swallowed. “But he rejected me. Said it was too dangerous, and when I tried to argue, he ordered me to lie down and go to sleep.” It sounded pretty tame when I said it out loud, but my anger was tinged with fear. He’d done it so easily, like it was second nature to him.

My heart felt like it was tearing in two. He’d *forced* me to obey him. Controlled me. It was a betrayal on a level I hadn’t expected of him.

I looked up and met Lucas’s troubled gaze.

“Did we make a mistake, freeing him?” he asked. “Isobel raised him. Maybe—maybe she’s done too much damage.”

Despite my anger and the doubt his actions had caused, I was quick to defend Rafael. “He didn’t have to free Marcus or Havoc. There is good in him.” I was right, wasn’t I? He’d taken control over me so easily. I’d fought him with everything I had, and it hadn’t made a bit of difference.

He’d done it anyway.

But somehow, I couldn’t face the fact that Lucas might be right.

“Where would he have gone?” I asked.

Lucas grimaced. “I think I know, and I have a bad feeling about it.”

“Where?” What Rafael had done must have worked because my fever was gone. I felt weak, but more normal than I had since Jumping to this realm.

But weak. Too damned weak.

“The gate guards say he left over two hours ago.” Lucas shook his head. “I think he’s gone to face Isobel. He must not have thought you’d be able to Jump.”

My veins turned to ice. *No*. But as I pushed myself up to a sitting position, I realized Rafael had been right. I was still too weak to Jump myself, let alone anyone else with me.

I fixed my gaze on Lucas. Despite what Rafael had done—my every instinct said I had to find him. “I can reach him.” I didn’t know why I was so certain. Perhaps it was because I had to be. It was the only way. “I need crystal dust.”

His brows dropped. “You take more now, and you could go right back to where you were. And you have no idea where Rafael is.” He shook his head. “We need to run. It’s the only option. We can’t help Rafael now. And considering what he did—maybe he’s where he should be. His fate will be cast with Isobel’s.”

My heart constricted. “No! I think he forced me because it was the only way he could leave. And I can Jump directly to him,” I said. “He’s destined to be one of my *mates*. That connects us on a deep level. Wherever he goes, I can find him.”

Lucas stared at me. “That’s a hell of a risk.” His eyes flashed wildly.

“Nikolai agrees, doesn’t he?” I pressed.

His mouth straightened. “Both my mates think the Dragon developing inside you will protect you from the dust. But it might not.”

I went for the kill shot. “Rafael isn’t going to yield to Isobel. He’d rather die than go back. I’m right, I know it. If he doesn’t take Isobel with him—she’ll come after us. And we won’t outrun her.”

He rubbed a trembling hand over his face.

“I can do this,” I assured him.

He straightened, reached into the pocket of his cloak, and pulled out a packet of crystal dust.

MARCUS



Until I folded my wings and dove at Brock, I had no idea that I was going to do so.

Kiko uttered a long, thin wail and yanked my neck feathers out by the handful. She'd been a remarkably fierce warrior until that point, hurling insults as effectively as her blasts of fire.

But apparently, jumping onto the back of a Dragon twice my size broke the Satyr's rules of conduct.

Until then, only Iskar's agility had enabled us to evade our pursuers. But the sight of the big bronze Dragon directly below us had snapped something within me. Like the coward he was, he was floating around out here, letting his pinions take the hits. Just as his mother had done when she'd arranged for the murder of my family.

I didn't stand a chance in a direct confrontation in the air. So my eyes focused on the huge beating wings, and I decided to even up the odds.

I seized control, and we dropped from the sky.

Faced with certain death or going along with my plan, Iskar wisely chose the latter. He corrected my uncontrolled plunge, and we landed dead center on Brock's scaly back.

I had no idea how to shred a Dragon's wings, but Iskar apparently did. Brock shrieked as the membranes tore away beneath my claws.

And then we were falling.

Well, he was. Wings beating hard, he managed to keep from a direct plummet, but only barely. I directed one more hit to the big flight muscles on the way down, but when Brock's jaws missed my neck by inches, Iskar took us the hell out of there.

The bronze Dragon crashed through the trees and vanished. Iskar landed a short distance away with nary a branch bent, let alone broken.

Kiko didn't waste any time scrambling off me. "I take it that big bad dude is Brock."

"Yes." I replied.

"I've got your back." She held up fingers that danced with fire.

What now? Iskar asked. *He's down, but far from out. Even without his wings, he can still outfight us.*

He can outfight a Gryphon. But that's not all I have inside me.

Iskar's alarm pulsed through me. *That's not a good idea.*

Every minute we waste here, Isobel gets closer to Riley, I said.

Then leave Brock. He can't fly after us, anyway.

But the ancient rage rose—the hatred for the underlords who'd killed my family. I'd shelved it for so long that its release scorched through me.

And left black scales in its wake.

What strode through the forest toward Brock may not be a Storm Drake, but when I approached him, I saw the glint of fear in his eye. Because I wasn't exactly a Gryphon either.

The beak was still there, but when the feathers stood on end, black scales erupted among them. And the spikes in the centers glowed as the sky went black as pitch. The clouds roiled with thunder.

For the first time, the Drake within me spoke. Not in words, but in sensations.

Memories, Iskar said.

Amid the flashes of lightning and the smell of ozone, strode a figure.

Rafael. And behind him, Isobel.

It showed me a power that reached out, wrapped around will and body, and forced it to concede. To leave the cave that was its home and face a fate too horrible to conceive.

Entrapment. And eventually, death, as Rafael held it in place, and Isobel drained it dry.

But its rage wasn't just for itself. There were others. A community of lost souls, some the last of their kind.

Guide it, Marcus, Iskar cautioned. *Don't give it control.*

I gritted my teeth and fed its rage into my own, struggling to keep it from emerging completely.

Brock lowered his head and stared at me. "Gets away from me, freak."

Lightning shot across the sky, changing the night into day. Black scales chased amid the fur of my forelimbs, and as I raised my head, I realized the beak had given way to a thick, powerful muzzle. The spikes along the center of it glowed white hot, joining the ones radiating around my head. And the sky lit up again.

Brock spread his shredded wings. They'd already started to heal, but they weren't ready for flight yet. He bared his teeth at me. And then he turned, and ran.

I raised my muzzle to the sky. Roared. And called the lightning down.

It came from multiple sources in the clouds, coalescing on Brock's fleeing form. I have never heard anything scream like that. He reared up on his hind legs, and his entire body, wings included, went incandescent.

Horried, Iskar yanked back on the Drake, and shut it all down. And I let it go. The lightning shut off, and Brock slumped to the ground, twitching all over.

With a thump, Havoc landed beside me. And just beyond him, Vali backwinged to the ground.

The red Dragon looked like hell. Blood covered him, and it seeped from his eyes, nostrils, and mouth. His breathing rasped.

But he looked at his ex-master, before he said, “Couldn’t happens to a nicer fucking Dragon.”

RILEY



The dust tingled as I swallowed it, but although I experienced a surge in energy, it didn't quite have the euphoric quality of before.

Was that a good sign?

“Stand behind me, and whatever you do, don't let go,” I told Lucas.

First, Rafael. And then...

Havoc, I pushed along the link. *Where are you?*

His response pulsed with pain. I caught an image—of forest and a bronze Dragon spasming on the ground. The creature standing over it looked like nothing I had ever seen before, but I knew who it was.

Marcus.

Lucas looked tense as hell as he took up position behind me. I closed my eyes and focused on Rafael. On the way he looked... the way he smelled...

And then, I reached.

The resulting white noise was a relief.

Snap.

Miracle of miracles, I landed on my feet. At first, the golden light was so bright I didn't see them. Lucas stumbled into me, and I swayed as I focused on Rafael.

He stood before Isobel with his hands locked on her face. They glowed with red and blue energy, and the power surging around them had their hair whipping as though in a gale. It forced every one of my hairs to become fully erect.

But even as I steadied Lucas, I saw red light flood from the watching coven to Isobel. It swallowed every hint of the blue around Rafael. He shuddered, and fell to his knees. Isobel's eyes lit with triumph, as she placed her hand on his head, and pushed the energy into him until he slowly bowed to her.

Oddly, she didn't acknowledge Lucas and me at all as she released him and backed away. Her eyes flashed wildly, before she sank the fingers of both hands into her hair.

I was totally unprepared when she threw her head back, and screamed a horrible, soul-wrenching shriek.

"Grab Rafael!" Lucas urged.

He startled me out of my shock. Lucas hung onto me as I lunged for Rafael, seized him by the arm—and visualized Havoc. The static swirled around us...

Snap.

When the golden light cleared, there they were. Havoc, his huge Dragon hunched in pain. Vali, in human form, staring at me in astonishment. And on his knees nearby, Marcus, with dark scales dropping off a body that caused my breath to leave me.

Kiko stood beside him, eyes wide. "Riley!" She dropped her cloak, sprinted over, and folded me in her arms.

It pushed me into Rafael and almost bowled him right over. He slumped on the grass, rubbing his head. He avoided meeting my eyes as he asked, "Who is this?"

"Kiko," I said. "She's my friend."

Rafael didn't reply as he wrapped his arms around his bent legs. The fingers clutching his knees turned white with pressure.

Havoc heaved a sigh—relief? Hard to know with the pain pulsing off him. Marcus's head snapped up, and his eyes met

mine.

They flashed white, and then dark, and then purple, before settling on the brown with their sunbursts of gold. My heart flipped right over, and all I wanted to do was run to him.

But all he did was offer a weak, “Hey, Riley.”

Kiko turned on him. “That’s the best you can do?”

His dark brows dropped as he picked up his cloak and pulled it on. “I am deeply relieved that she managed to get herself and Rafael out of there before Isobel got to them.”

Seriously? I crossed my arms over my chest. “Isobel did get to him,” I snapped. “But when I got there, something was wrong. She was in pain, and we managed to get away.”

“This is Rafael?” Kiko interrupted, her gaze sweeping over him from feet to hairline. Pausing, I noted, on the way, but as he was sitting with his knees raised and his face sunk into his hands, it was hardly a prime assessment position. But she still offered a, “yummy.”

I wondered if he smelled as good to her as he did to me. I also wondered if she would still think so, if he’d done to her what he’d done to me.

I kept a full pace away from him and asked, “Did you manage to hurt Isobel?”

He looked up, and I had to remind myself he couldn’t be trusted—because my first reaction to the pain in his eyes was to want to wrap my arms around him.

But I held my distance as he whispered, “I tried. Gave it everything I had. But she took it and laughed at me. And then—everything changed.” His gaze slid past me, to the body of the twitching bronze Dragon. “Brock.”

“Yeah,” Havoc growled. “That bastard won’t be flying ever again.”

“He’s mated to Isobel.” Rafael’s voice was barely more than a whisper.

The red Dragon's eyes widened. And Marcus pushed himself to his feet. "They're *mated*?"

"She felt him dying." Rafael massaged his temple. "She would have taken me, except for that connection."

Kiko glanced over toward the twitching Dragon. "Don't think he's dead yet."

Vali approached the big body and reached out a tentative hand toward his foreleg—pure white energy arced off his skin, and she jerked away. "The Storm Drake's power is still surging through him." She backed off. "If he's not already dead, he soon will be—"

"She'll be coming for his body," Marcus said. "So I suggest we get the hell out of here." His intense gaze—pure assessment, no emotion—might have well pierced a spear clear through me.

It would have been preferable to the tearing pain in my heart.

"Can you Jump us back," he asked, "or are we flying?"

This was far from the reunion I could have hoped for, if I'd been the hopeful sort. I was saved by my annoyance. But then Marcus glanced at Havoc, and I caught a glimpse of something else. Concern?

I shared it, but on a much deeper level, because I could feel the red Dragon's pain through our link. Blood trickled steadily from his mouth, leaked from his eyes, and clotted around his ears. He needed a healer, like, now.

Rafael stood and staggered over to him, but I could clearly see he had nothing left in the tank. I'd just done two Jumps in a matter of minutes—and moving a Dragon was going to take serious mojo. So, I turned to Lucas.

"Give me whatever you've got."

He didn't ask what I meant. A muscle jumped in his jaw, but he pulled out two small packets of dust.

I consumed both of them, and breathed deep as it took hold. And then I walked to Havoc.

His closest copper eye was half-closed, but it rolled toward me. “Don’ts touch me,” he growled.

I put my hand on his massive forearm. “For fuck’s sake, Havoc. Sometimes you are such an idiot. Give me the visual.”

“I. Am. NOT. An. Idiot,” he protested, but it came out as scarcely a whisper. And he didn’t pull away. A moment later, he sent the visual—a dense forest with massive trees.

Got it, I confirmed. To the others, I said, “Everyone grab hold. This might be a rough ride.”

I reached for Rafael’s hand, and after a millimoment, he took it. Our eyes met—and all I read in them was shame. Then he looked away.

A tiny part of me accepted it as an apology, although it was far from one, and not nearly enough, either. I braced myself as Lucas and Vali each grabbed an arm, and Kiko stepped in front of me.

“You can do this,” she said, before she wrapped fingers around my wrist on Lucas’s side.

I waited.

Finally, Marcus’s big hands landed lightly on my shoulders, as though he were afraid I might break.

I closed my eyes, visualized, and embraced the white noise as perhaps the only lover I would ever have.

Snap.

The golden light dissipated, and the first thing I saw was Cara.

A wave of weakness passed through me. Marcus’s hands tightened on my shoulders, and, for a moment, they were all that held me upright. But the second I managed to straighten, he let go.

We stood among the most massive trees I had ever seen. Cara hurried over to Havoc, who took a shaking step back.

“I don’t need a healer,” he hissed. “Just times to heal.”

I rolled my eyes. “You really are a fucking idiot, Havoc.”

He snarled at me. “I. Am. NOT—”

“Can it. If you refuse her help, you most definitely are.” And I added a mental, *This isn’t a sword wound. This is something eating you from the inside out. You need help, and she can offer it. So shut up and let her work.*

He glowered at me. But then he reached a taloned hand up to his neck, and I saw the scales move aside.

Fang jumped out, but when he tried to get her onto his talon, she hunched down.

Come and get her, he said.

He wanted me to take her? But then his copper eyes swung to me, and I saw the worry in them.

Cara interpreted what he was trying to do. “There’s a lot of energy that flies around when I heal,” she said. “The Webspinner would be best off away from here.”

I moved to stand close. His warm, musky odor, tinged with ozone, wrapped around me, and my pulse immediately quickened. But blood dripped from his nose—he needed Cara. Now.

At first, Fang retreated when I stretched my arm toward her. “It’s okay,” I said to her. “He’ll be fine. Just come with me for a bit. I’ll find you a nice juicy bug.”

I had no idea if she understood me. She blinked, and then, suddenly, she was airborne.

As usual, it wasn’t a skillful Jump. It would have missed me entirely, had I not leaned sideways and grabbed her. There was a flurry of me juggling wildly while trying to get a grip, and of her little legs thrashing around while pink hairs exploded into the air. I finally pinned her against my chest, and from there she scrambled up beneath my hair.

Both the Webspinner and me were breathing heavily. Havoc snorted, and the fine spray of blood alarmed the hell

out of me.

Cara put a reassuring hand on my shoulder as she went by. “He’ll be fine. I’ve got him.”

Havoc flinched when the Watcher placed her hands on him. The Dragon was in bad shape, but she would heal him. It was what she did.

I sensed a stillness beside me, and glanced at Rafael.

His gaze was focused behind us. I turned to see the Dragon, Talakai. Beside him stood two others that took me a moment to identify—the Dire-turned-Dragon, Matt, and the tall Bellati, Sebastian. All three were mates to Rafael’s sister. When had they arrived?

An enthusiastic black and white dog bounded over to me, and then all over me.

“Trix!” Anna smiled apologetically as she pushed past Talakai. “Sorry, she’s both a lover and a fighter.”

“She’s beautiful,” I said, and meant it.

“She insisted on coming,” Matt said with a distinctive Aussie accent. “Although carrying the bloody Unicorn along with her wasn’t easy.”

The tall Bellati shot the Dire a glare. “Try holding onto her while crash-landing.”

Nikolai appeared behind Anna, just as she looked past me. She grew very still, but her eyes spoke volumes.

I looked at Rafael again—his face had lost all color, and his eyes darted between them. The surrounding air zinged with powerful energy. Nikolai’s hair started to lift.

Then Anna walked forward and pulled her twin into her arms. Nikolai stood beside them and placed a big hand on Rafael’s shoulder.

Anna’s dog bounced around them like she’d known Rafael all her life.

Family.

The concept came at me like a freight train and trampled my aching heart. Rafael had been essentially alone since he'd lost both sets of parents. Now, he'd been reunited with his half-brother *and* his twin sister.

A family was all I'd ever wanted. And Fate had given me three mates, to form a family of my own.

I glanced at Marcus, who stood a distance away, watching them. His head turned, and his eyes flared white. Before he looked away again.

Fang's little legs tickled against my neck, as though attempting to reassure, but I couldn't take it anymore. Havoc had mated me, but he didn't want me. Rafael couldn't have me without killing me. Or trying to control me. And Marcus—

Who the hell knew about Marcus? Of any of them, he made the least amount of sense.

I straightened my shoulders and took a deep breath. I had my own life to live. Regardless of whether or not I turned into a Dragon, I intended to live it.

I turned and walked away.

"Riley!" Predictably, Kiko ran after me. "Where are you going?"

"I'm going to get Fang something to eat," I said.

The Satyr tilted her head as she looked at me. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah," I lied. "I just need some alone time."

Her lips pulled into a straight line. "These guys are all jerks. They don't deserve you."

I trembled with the need to be gone. "They have their reasons. I just don't agree with them."

Her eyes measured mine. "Someone once told me that Fate makes you work for your future. That she never just hands it over to you."

I forced a smile. "Must be why people call her a bitch."

“But she’s never wrong, Riley.”

If this conversation went any further, it was either going to end with me screaming, or crying. “I just need time to think.”

Without warning, Kiko grabbed me by the arms. I suspect that if it wasn’t for Fang on my shoulder, she would have hugged me.

Having a venomous pet had its advantages.

“You aren’t alone. Just remember that, okay?” she said.

Before I even thought about it, I grabbed and hugged her. “You’re a better friend than I deserve.”

“Your problem is,” she said as I let go, “that you don’t think you deserve much. Go, have your think. When you come back, I’m going to force Cara to let us go shopping. We need retail therapy!”

“In other words, you need a good fuck.” My smile this time was more genuine.

The Satyr’s eyes gleamed. “That too. But shopping first!”

“We’re shopping?” Vali had come up behind her.

“Shopping. Later,” I agreed.

As I turned away, Vali said, “We’ll be in the library, if you want to talk.”

Kiko appeared less than enthused with the idea. “The kitchen is comfy...”

Vali snorted. “I want to look up more info on the Storm Drake.”

“Swell.” Kiko pouted.

I walked away before the tears building in the corners of my eyes could fall, following a trampled path through the trees.

Within seconds the forest had closed in around me. My mind spun as I skirted the massive trunks. I was seized with the longing to talk to Molly, my last foster mom in the human realm. She had always been good at putting things into

perspective. Kiko was more than willing to be a sounding board, but she tended to rate things a little differently from me. And she was pretty damned pissed at the guys.

Cara was the closest thing to a confidant I had in this crazy new world. But even if she wasn't up to her eyeballs healing Havoc, she'd been booted from the academy, and there was this Isobel thing, both of which were infinitely more important than my selfish relationship difficulties.

Fang's little feet tickled again, and I blinked back the tears in an attempt to search for something insectoid and juicy. I finally turned over a rotting log and exposed a full selection of delectables that even a nearsighted Webspinner couldn't miss.

I set her down amid them, and as she stuffed herself, I leaned against a trunk. My heart felt as though it were torn and bleeding. How had I ever let these guys close enough to do that kind of damage?

I really needed to rip Fate a new orifice.

As if to prove that *life* went on despite mine being in a shambles, it flew, hooted, hummed, and crawled all around me. But life's intricacies and beauty were lost on me.

I knew how to Jump now. I didn't need Cara or the academy. And soon, it seemed likely, I'd be a Dragon. I knew how to live on the streets—at least, I had in the human realm. I was smart and tough. I could find my own way.

But something deep within me wailed, wanting culmination, not retreat. Like walking away would shred me, instead of pulling me together.

I respected Havoc's urge to be free. Understood it on a fundamental level. He'd screwed up big time by biting me. But should he be held to what Fate had decreed for him? And Rafael. Destroyed by Isobel, developed into an evil he might never be able to leave behind. I'd touched his power, stared into an abyss that shook me to the core. And then—he'd commanded me. Used his power on me, to make me *obey*. It was a betrayal on a level that I struggled to understand.

My mind sheered away from it. Because there was another that tortured me. Marcus was the toughest to deal with—it seemed he wouldn't even try. Why wouldn't he even look at me?

“I think she came this way. We shouldn't have let her go off alone.”

Kiko, no doubt with Vali, had come looking for me, but they couldn't ease the pain in my heart. And they would try to stop me from what I had to do.

Amid the creepy-crawlies, Fang froze, and then she scampered across the ground and up my body to her usual perch. The move galvanized something within me, and I didn't even consciously make the decision.

My mind filled with white noise.

Snap.

RAFAEL



I basked in an energy that permeated every pore and filled a void in my aching heart.

Anna stood beside me, one hand on my arm, as though she were afraid to let me go. My sister. My *twin*. Looking into her bicolored eyes was like coming home.

She felt it, too, I could see it in her expression. Raised apart, we didn't know each other at all. But on a fundamental level, we knew everything we needed to.

She'd no doubt heard at least part of what I'd done. Not all of it, but some. Would she condemn me once she knew the full scope of it?

I couldn't expect forgiveness, not even from her.

But she wasn't the source of the energy. That was Nikolai.

I'd hoped for a sense of connection if I ever met my twin. That Nikolai—the Perditor—was also family was something I deliberately hadn't considered.

From the first moment my eyes met his, something formed between us. He had the life essence of a Liberi, but I sensed the link he had to the tremendous power of the core. Just a thread, really, that touched the maelstrom, but it trickled through him even when he wasn't consciously accessing it.

Through him. And through me. Every hair I possessed stood erect, even the long strands around my head.

He was my *brother*.

Half, really, but the connection was almost as solid as the one I sensed from Anna. Perhaps it was due to his tremendous power—everything about Nikolai was larger than life.

I bent to pet the canine, who wiggled enthusiastically at my feet, and we watched Cara work on the red Dragon. But after the first few minutes, I knew the truth of it.

Havoc was dying. My heart hurt as though the parasites were feeding on it, too.

The Watcher had her hands on him. Unlike Isobel, her healing power was at full strength, but judging by the blood pouring from the Dragon's ears and nose, she wasn't gaining ground.

"There are too many," she said through gritted teeth. "Nikolai, I need you."

The big Bellati moved to stand behind her, and he placed his hands on her small shoulders. Immediately, the glow of power around them increased.

I had to try—I came up beside him. Put one hand on the Dragon, and the other on Nikolai's arm.

The power surging through me made it difficult to breathe, but it found my small reserve of healing power and tapped into it without effort, pulling it into Havoc's ravaged body.

Cara felt it too. Her eyes flashed to mine, and away again, before she called, "Anna."

Anna moved to stand on Nikolai's other side, and she copied me.

The energy bridged and then exploded between the three of us, pulsing into Havoc like a tide. I sensed the parasites as red-hot motes of energy, feeding greedily until we swept down upon them.

Cara had been down this road before, and she guided us. Showed us how to kill them, and sweep their bodies to the fluid-conducting vessels, and then out of the body.

It was hard, painstaking work. The parasites had invaded almost every part of Havoc's body. Over time, the flow from

Havoc's ears and mouth and nose turned black, and the Dragon began to cough spasmodically. The weakened blood vessels hemorrhaged, and we hurried to seal them.

Havoc's natural healing ability moved in as soon as we moved the parasites out. It was a powerful thing, and it had kept him alive well beyond where others would have perished.

I lost all sense of time, but eventually, Cara probed, searching through Havoc for any that we'd missed, before she shook her head in wonder. "Gone," she said. "They're all gone." Her gaze, when it turned to us, was both relieved and amazed.

Amazed. A Watcher, amazed. At *us*. But as I sensed Nikolai struggling to shut the power down, I acknowledged that what we had just done was nothing short of a miracle.

For me, it was, anyway. My healing talent had been all but destroyed by Isobel's bloodmagic. That Nikolai had reawakened it, gave me hope.

Aria, and Lucas both moved to take hold of Nikolai. I sensed the bond between them flare to help push the chaos back.

I stepped away.

"That—was incredible." Lucas's gaze, as he glanced at me, held calculation within it. "Do you think you can bridge that energy again?"

"Can you channel it if we do?" rumbled Nikolai. "That is the true question. Since you are all so determined to keep me away from Isobel."

I stared from one to the other. Obviously, I was missing something.

Anna moved up beside me and interpreted my expression. "It was how we killed Galeran," she said, as if the man hadn't been her father, too. "Lucas channeled Nikolai's power into me, and I used it to kill Galeran."

My eyes widened.

“It wasn’t enough to kill Isobel,” Lucas stated. “But with you and Rafael—”

“We still need to get them to Isobel.” Cara rubbed a hand over her face. “She’ll be heading back to Brock’s stronghold.”

“Brock is dead.” Havoc loomed over us all. Tremors ran through him, but he was no longer on death’s door.

“Or he was dying when we left him,” Marcus amended.

Cara leaned against a tree. “If he’s dead—his empire will dissolve as others fight over it, unless Isobel is interested in holding it together.”

“Riley Jumped directly to me.” The words were out before I’d even thought it through. But all eyes turned to me.

“She did.” Lucas’s eyes widened. “She said it was because she was connected to you. Do you think she could Jump directly to Isobel, too?”

“She didn’t use a location reference?” Cara’s gaze was intent.

Lucas shook his head. “No. We didn’t know where Rafael was.”

Cara straightened and her eyes fogged. “Where is Riley? I was so immersed in the healing—but I think I felt something.”

“We can’t find her anywhere.” Kiko and Vali walked out of the forest. “She wanted time alone—we let her go, but shouldn’t have. Now we can’t find her.”

“She’s gone,” Cara said, her voice reflecting alarm.

“Not gone,” growled Havoc, as he swung his head toward Marcus. “And she’s okay, but you’re not going to fucking believe where she is.”

Before I could ask for details, both Cara and Nikolai stiffened.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, worried.

Nikolai had also gone very still. “Someone just came through the wild gate near the caves.”

Cara nodded, turned away, and raised hands that glowed as she sketched a new gate between trunks. “It’s Bess. And she’s got both company and news.”

RILEY



I landed on my knees. Hard.

I stared at fingernails that turned to claws, which then fell away only to sprout jet-black talons. Long, curved, and gleaming. My arms sprouted yellow scales, then red, then black with clear spikes in the center, before fresh black scales pushed the other ones away, chasing up my arms.

Seemed my Morph side had decided to commune with my emerging Dragon. But this time, I envisioned myself as me, and the scales yielded to bare, smooth skin. The talons fell away, clinking on the cobblestones.

Fang vibrated against my neck, and a few stray hairs erupted. I sneezed.

“Riley?”

I looked up—and up. From where I rested on my knees, the Centaurina looked huge.

Triss. My damned subconscious mind had hooked into my talent and brought me to Marcus’s *mother*.

I slumped on the road outside their front door, with the sky above us lightening to dawn. I guessed that bright golden light outside one’s front door was hard to ignore. How was I going to salvage this situation?

“Is Marcus okay?” his mother asked, worry written across her beautiful features.

“He’s fine,” I said, and then ruined it all when tears flooded my eyes. In another second I’d be blubbering like an

idiot, in front of the mother of the man I was fated to mate, if he'd ever get his head out of the sand. Fuck.

I tried to get control over the impending tsunami. Nope. Wasn't happening. My cheeks were now wet, dammit.

A helping hand beneath my elbow raised me to my feet. "Come with me, my dear." The Centaurina's voice brooked no rebuttal.

And with his mother supporting my soggy, shaky self, I staggered into Marcus's home.

Triss took me to a chair in her kitchen, hovered while I sat down, and then busied herself pulling things out of the fridge.

I wanted to tell her not to go to any trouble, but I didn't trust my voice. She didn't ask any questions, which I certainly would have if my son's chosen mate had tearfully landed on my doorstep. Her presence was surprisingly soothing, considering her size. Perhaps it was because the kitchen was built for her, and fit her perfectly.

When she placed a handkerchief beside me along with a glass of what could be milk, I realized she was giving me time to compose myself. When her gaze caught mine, I saw the worry and curiosity in it.

As I wiped my face with the handkerchief and attempted to pull myself together, Fang hopped onto the table. She stuck her little front legs into the milk and then proceeded to run them through her mouth, before starting to purr.

Triss's eyes widened. "Isn't that a Webspinner?"

"Yeppers." My voice squeaked, so I cleared my throat and tried again. "She belongs to—a friend."

Her brow rose at the hesitation. "She's a pet?"

I nodded.

"One rather venomous pet," she commented.

“It kinda suits him.” I winced internally at the pain in my voice.

Triss put a plate of sweets down in front of me. As I obediently took one, she settled her hindquarters on a cushion. I noticed that she chose one on the opposite side of Fang.

Couldn’t blame her, I suppose.

“If you don’t want to talk, that is fine,” she said. “But you must have chosen my doorstep for a reason, and I assume it either has something to do with the battle tonight, or with my son.”

I blinked at her. “What battle tonight?”

Triss tilted her head. “Emmanuel is joining his mercenary buddies to assist the council and Legion in their fight against Isobel.”

I gaped at her. “That’s tonight?”

“Apparently. Didn’t you know?”

“I’ve been a little out of the loop.” My mind spun. The council and the Legion were going after her? Brute force wasn’t going to win against Isobel, so long as she was in that stronghold. They’d be slaughtered.

“So I take it, then, that Marcus has done something rather dumb?” she asked.

Dumb was one word for it. I sighed. “Your son is a dick.”

Okay, I hadn’t actually meant to say that. But she snorted a laugh, and said, “He’s fiercely stubborn, opinionated, and exasperating. Also possesses a strong sense of integrity, honor, and an often irrational desire to save the day, no matter what the cost. In short, he’s a typical male Centaur and a prime example of why females need to be in charge.” She smiled at me. “Why don’t you tell me what he’s done, and we can commiserate together?”

I stared at her. And then my mouth opened. And I told her *everything*. Not just about Marcus. About Havoc and Rafael, too.

I hadn't intended to. But once I started, I couldn't seem to stop. By the end of it, the tray had been replenished twice—apparently Marcus came by his sweet tooth honestly—and I was embarrassingly aware of how desperate and needy I sounded.

Those were two labels that I'd never wanted attached to me.

I took a deep breath and began the trek back to sanity. "This has really happened because I screwed up. I believed it when my friend told me I was fated to have all three. But maybe I just imagined that there was something between us."

Triss cocked her head. "Well, the Dragon did bite you."

"Yeah. But he doesn't want to be mated, and I should respect that. Everyone makes mistakes."

Triss almost choked on her mouthful. "On the shifter scale, that's a pretty big one. That bond, once started, cannot be put to bed."

"He wants to be free," I said.

She put down her tart and regarded me intently. "Fate likes to point things out and then make them difficult to achieve. She played games with Emmanuel and me, too."

I'd seen her pain when Emmanuel was taken, and then his when she'd been poisoned. There was no doubt as to the closeness of their bond. Yet somehow I'd missed the obvious. "You guys were fated to be together?"

"Oh, yes. I knew from the first moment I saw him." She waved a hand. "But my father didn't approve of me mating a weaponsmith. And when my he intervened, Emmanuel agreed with him. Even though he couldn't look at me without—well, he was attracted to me, too, of course."

"What did you do?"

She grinned at me. "In traditional Centaur families, the females rule. My mother believed in fate, but she mated to tie two powerful families together. My elder brother was destined for much of the same, but she wanted more for me. She knew

that if Emmanuel was truly destined to be my mate—if he spent any time in my presence—it would be game over. So, she arranged to have him escort me on a three-day journey to my aunt’s colony.” Triss laughed. “He didn’t stand a chance.”

The passion and love in her voice made me smile. “Do you think you can arrange something similar for Marcus and me?”

She leaned her arms on the table. “Marcus is at least as stubborn as my Manny. Maybe more so. And although he doesn’t talk about it anymore, he bears deep scars about the death of the Stormswifts. It has made him reluctant to embrace anything that might eventually cause him pain.” She met my gaze. “But females rule, Riley. And so does Fate. If you really want him, go and get him.”

“I’ve tried,” I said. “But he runs away.” I tipped my milk glass to give Fang access to the last bit at the bottom. She dipped her toes in and purred happily. “But I’ve wondered if he’s running to protect me, or running from me.”

Triss’s chin lifted. “I cannot begin to understand what that Sorceress did to him, and how it must feel to have those monsters living inside. But I promise you that the mate bond can only make those involved stronger. In his case, that is a necessary thing.

Dreambit, stop yakking with the Centaur’s mother and bring back Fang.

Havoc’s voice dropped into my mind, and when Triss raised a brow, I realized she’d figured it out. *I’ll come back when I’m ready.*

Well, things have changed here. The Watcher has a game plan for taking out the Isobitch. And so does the council.

My pulse accelerated as he continued. *I’m not getting involved in this fucking craziness. Soon as you bring Fang back, I’m outta here.*

It shouldn’t have surprised me, but it hurt like hell. All I said was, *Fine, then.*

Stupid council is sending the Sabres and Dragon Legion against Brock’s palace. Like that will end well, He hesitated,

and then said, *The Watcher wants me to tell you to get your ass back here. She has a nutzoid scheme that revolves around you. I think you should tell her where she can go.*

My gut twisted. Did I want to see this through to the end? *Unless they have another Jumper, I'm the only option.*

You're too fucking smart to go along with this. It's a one-way ticket to the other side. Nothing can stand against Isobel. He almost snarled the words.

I straightened in my seat. A part of me still wanted to run and never look back. But Isobel was at the heart of all my pain. *Isobel needs to go down.*

Run, run now. He sounded almost desperate. *I'll meet you someplace to pick up Fang. Don't come back here.*

I'm not running, I said, as surprised as he was.

So you're coming back here? Havoc growled.

I gritted my teeth. *I will return when Fang has finished her milk.*

She drinks milk?

Some pet owner you are.

A growl rolled through my mind, and he was gone. I met Triss's sympathetic gaze.

"I take it the Dragon's a bit abrasive," she said.

"He's a grade-one asshole," I affirmed. "But I understand him." And I did. Including why he was leaving.

I just couldn't do it myself.

I sighed. "I get Havoc. Marcus—he is harder."

Her lips twitched, just a little. "The best ones always are."

I Jumped back to the same place beneath the trees.

The only one there was Havoc, leaning against a massive buttress root, his copper gaze rivaling the morning sunlight filtering through the leaves overhead. It was disconcerting seeing myself arrive through his eyes.

He was waiting for Fang so he could leave this place in his dust. When my heart constricted, I decided he could wait a little longer. Fang didn't seem to object when, instead of walking toward the red Dragon, I walked into the treehouse.

His growl reverberated through my mind as I vanished from sight, but he didn't follow me. I climbed the stairs until I found Cara in the library. She wasn't alone, but I was surprised by who she was with.

Bess stood with her. Rafael leaned against the shelves in the corner, and my pulse leaped when his eyes skittered to mine. I squelched my feelings, smiling at Vali and Kiko instead, who both sat at the table.

Across from them were Tareal and Lora.

The Hitzu twins were sitting with their entire bodies pressed together from hip to shoulder. I noticed that their tails were entwined as well.

Any sign of cockiness had vanished—instead, they appeared distraught. Lora even looked as though she'd been crying. I didn't even know Hitzus could cry.

My gaze traveled from them to the Watchers. Who both stared at me.

“Bess has sneaked away from the academy to bring us news. And it turns out we need your help,” the Watcher began.

I reflected that at this rate, Cara was going to need a second guest treehouse. “Havoc says you have a scheme involving me?”

She straightened. “As Nikolai has been taken out of play, the council is moving both their forces and the Dragon Legion against Isobel tonight.”

“I thought that wasn't a good idea.” I looked toward Bess.

“It isn’t,” Bess confirmed. “Brock has a significant number of pinions guarding his primary stronghold. And Isobel’s forces have only augmented it. Our forces will be outnumbered.”

“Are they sure she’s still in the same place?” I asked. “Marcus killed Brock, and that was his stronghold.”

Tareal cleared his throat. “Isobel is back there now.”

I stared at him. “You know this how?”

Lora lifted her chin and her eyes flashed. “Because they have held our mate captive, and he has managed to recruit eyes within the stronghold.”

Things clicked along in my head. “You two aren’t twins, are you?”

“We are mates,” Tareal admitted. “And Brock took our other mate, Jinsic, captive months ago. He forced us to spy for him.”

Hmm, that certainly explained the gropage and bed sharing. Why didn’t we doubt the twin thing right from the beginning? I exchanged a lifted eyebrow assertion with Kiko.

Rafael spoke from his leaning position. “Has he envenomated servants so that he can connect to them?”

Lora glared, but Tareal replied, “Yes. And a couple of Bellatis, but they are more resistant to our claw venom.” His jaw clenched.

Cara steered the conversation back on course. “Jinsic says Isobel has Brock, and she’s got the coven working on him.”

I looked from her to Rafael. “But I thought—”

“Brock was dying when we Jumped,” he affirmed.

“Marcus pumped so much raw power into him,” Vali said. “It would have fried almost every organ he possessed.”

“It isn’t likely she can heal that kind of damage,” Cara mused. “There are limits.”

“She can no longer heal.” Rafael set his jaw. “The bloodmagic has negated that talent in her, and in the coven. They have recently brought in a healer. She’s not Watcher caliber, but Isobel will have her make the attempt, for sure.”

I was confused, and the Satyr’s sexual reference didn’t help. “So—Isobel won’t succeed in saving him?”

A muscle jumped in Rafael’s jaw. “She will be determined to try that... or something else.”

We all stared at him.

Cara’s eyes narrowed. “Was her connection to Brock more than a friendship?”

Rafael’s mouth twisted. “Brock is—was—her mate.”

Cara inhaled sharply. “His life essence,” she whispered.

My stomach clenched. “She’ll harvest his soul?”

Rafael nodded without looking at me. “He is too far gone, but I am certain she will try.”

Cara rubbed her temple. “We need to focus on the advantages this presents for us—her efforts to save Brock’s essence are pinning her in place for the moment.”

“But it sounds like the council’s initiative is doomed to fail.” I tried not to think of all the people I’d come to know, and how they might not survive.

“Which is why we have come up with another idea.” Rafael looked at me.

I avoided his gaze. “Which is why you need me.” It was a statement, not a question.

Cara glanced at me, and said. “Exactly.”

HAVOC



I shouldn't have reacted when Riley Jumped into the forest, but I did.

After all, I knew she was coming. It was the only real advantage to having her in my fucking head. But when she popped into view, I nearly lost it. Both my monster and my beast went flipping nuts. Like she'd been gone for months.

As if I needed any further proof that the Dreambitch really mattered.

Dammit.

I pushed my alter egos back and managed to keep my swagger intact, so at least my body posture wouldn't give anything away. I should be a trembling wreck after the parasites, but the sheer power pumped into me from that freak of nature, Nikolai, had me squeaky clean and healthy. Ready to leave.

I just needed to get Fang back.

But Riley looked right at me. And then she marched into the treehouse.

Fucking hell.

It took the wind clear out of my sails. I'd been braced for the battle I was going to have as soon as I went to leave. But now she'd delayed my departure, and I didn't want to interpret my feelings on that.

Was she going to use Fang to keep me here?

Would it work?

I would just wait. Hang out in the fucking dripping wet forest. She'd be back out, eventually.

Maybe.

Without any clear stalker-type attempt on my part, I sensed her enter the library. And was an unwilling witness to the presentation of their latest nutzoid scheme.

I just wanted out.

But I wanted her out, too. Big problem, with no easy solution.

By the time she emerged from the treehouse, I'd worked myself into something of a state, fighting with the two other entities that lived within me. They wanted to grab her and haul her off without any discussion on the matter. My human was not only pretty fucking sure that wouldn't go over well, but it knew that holding a Jumper hostage was like holding the wind in your hands.

Impossible, really.

But I might try it if she held Fang over me. Mostly because I had no other ideas.

I was still contemplating it when she marched out of the treehouse and straight up to me. Her thoughts were walled off as she stared. Such a tiny wee thing, and yet so strong. Not one iota afraid of my menacing form, or the violence I wore like a second skin.

Dreambit was a good name for her.

I *wanted* her. Not just my twin entities, my human, too. With a desperation that I'd never experienced before. Because she not only matched me, but she'd fill that gaping hole inside me. Every fiber of me acknowledged it.

Dammit. I fucking belonged to her.

My hands folded into fists as I fought the urge to reach out and touch her. I trembled with the power of it, but as I stood

there battling, she reached up beneath her hair and extracted Fang.

She was going to give the Webspinner to me? I couldn't quite believe it.

Fang seemed reluctant to leave Riley. The bloody woman had bewitched the both of us. But the woman took Fang in her hands and extended her to me.

When I gathered her up, my fingers trembled.

"Come with me, Dreambit." The words tumbled out as Fang scampered up beneath my hair. I'd lost control. My hand reached out of its own accord to run thick fingers along her jaw. "You'll be such a bitching Dragon." My voice was hardly more than a whisper. "We can soar to the moon together. And leave this fucking madness behind."

Her eyes met mine, and in them, I saw the longing to be free. Felt it through our link, along with a memory of wind and wings. She wanted it, too, and for just an instant, I thought she'd say yes.

But then, she shut it all down. "They need me here."

"Going up against Isobel is a fucking one-way ticket to—"

"Not if we can tap into Nikolai's power. It might work," she argued.

The Perditor was one scary dude. Having him involved didn't make me feel better, only worse. I hadn't experienced this tearing sensation in my chest since Ace died.

It scared the hell out of me.

"I'm leaving. Whether you come with me or not."

I saw the words strike like arrows, and the pain appeared in her eyes, only to be shuttered. "I know," she whispered. And then she stepped back, pulling away from my fingers. "Be free, Havoc."

I didn't wait to diagnose the twisting, piercing agony inside me—worse than any parasite, but I couldn't let it stop

me. My wings unfurled, and I was airborne before I'd finished the rest of the transformation.

I fled out over the jungle toward the wild gate, while my beast and my monster screamed.

RILEY



I watched Havoc vanish above the treetops, and a piece of me went with him.

To fly away, and leave all this behind—for a moment, I almost called him back. I wanted him so desperately.

But it wasn't just the mission that stopped me. It was Marcus and Rafael. They would do everything they could to end Isobel. And I couldn't leave them until I was sure they were safe.

I reassured myself that I'd already spoken to Havoc across realms, that I would be able to find him again. If he would let me, that is.

But as I stood there, I felt broken. And I didn't know how to fix any of this. Triss had told me to go get Marcus. But he'd only run again, and I knew it.

"Riley?" Vali emerged from the treehouse, holding a book against her chest. "Am I intruding?"

"No." I sketched up a smile. "He's gone."

Her eyes darkened. "He's a bastard, leaving you like this."

My defense of him was immediate. "No. I get it. He needs to be free."

Her full lips pursed. "His brother would never have gone. They were so different."

"Havoc loved his twin," I said slowly. "I think losing Ace broke him."

Vali paused. “Ace believed in Havoc.”

Tears pricked at my eyes, but I refused to let them fall. “They were family.”

“Yes,” she whispered. “They were.” Her own eyes flooded, but she blinked away her pain. “Ace was my mate. We were fated to be together, forever. His death left a hole in me that can never heal.”

Her words pierced me like a knife. Ace had been Havoc’s only family. Rafael and Marcus had lost their families, too. But Vali had lost both that, and her mate.

We were all orphans, searching for a home. That was why I couldn’t leave. They needed me. And I couldn’t walk away.

Not until they, and Fate, let me go.

Vali held up the book. “I have something here—thought it might be useful.”

My smile was more authentic this time. I took the book from her and opened to the marked page.

It was Marcus. Or rather, the creature I’d seen emerging from his skin, I was sure of it. The same dark scales with their distinctive clear spikes in the center, on an animal that looked vicious as hell.

“Storm Drake references are hard to find,” Vali raised her eyebrows. “They were a species magically enhanced by the Torshins about two thousand years ago. Storm Drakes commanded the power of the weather, most often, lightning and thunder. They were supposed to be extinct, but Isobel must have found—”

“So that’s how Marcus took Brock down,” I said.

Vali nodded. “But this reference talks more about the biology. Storm Drakes were hermaphrodites.”

I struggled to interpret this as an important fact. “Hermafro what?”

“They were both male and female,” Vali explained.

I stared at her. “Wouldn’t that get a little—confusing?”

“Yes and no.” The Dragona stared back. “They could, apparently, shift back and forth as needed. I don’t know if they were ever both at the same time.”

“That’s—interesting, Vali.” I was struggling to sound enthusiastic. An interesting fact, but not particularly useful.

“Lucas told us you’re part Morph,” she said. “You’ve sprouted Storm Drake scales before.” When I still didn’t twig, she continued, “He can’t be afraid of mating you, if you can match his beast with one of your own.”

Floored was an understatement. I imagined Triss laughing in the back of my brain. Vali had just handed me the means to claim my Centaur.

The sunlight filtered through the leaves of the massive trees.

I had no idea where I was going, really. After Vali returned to the treehouse, I just started wandering.

She’d said that Marcus was out here, somewhere. I was determined to find him.

I’d just stopped to admire a brilliant-blue flying insect when I heard the singing.

The voice was deep, smooth, and it thrilled me to the core. It was accompanied by a beat that mimicked hooves upon hard ground.

I had no doubt who it was.

Marcus was singing in a language I didn’t know, but the rhythm of the words spoke to my heart. I followed him to a stream trickling through the trees.

Seated with his back to a wide trunk, Marcus had a section of half-rotten log braced between his knees, and was pounding on it with a broken branch to create the hoofbeats.

I froze amid the dense vegetation. He didn’t see me—he had his eyes closed as he sang.

His expression showed how immersed he was in the song. The words flowed from him like the water at his feet. Sweet, and yet sad. And my pulse matched the beat of it as the melody carried me away.

Beautiful.

He was wearing a tee shirt at least a size too small for him, and it hugged his every contour like sin itself. I longed to touch him, and I took an involuntary step forward.

A fallen twig cracked beneath my foot.

Marcus was on his feet in an instant, swinging toward me, and then freezing.

I swallowed. “That song—it was beautiful.”

“It’s a ballad, sung in the old tongue. I don’t even know what all the words mean,” he admitted. His eyes glittered at me. The sunbursts were there, but they were darker than usual.

“It sounded sad,” I said.

One corner of his lips twitched up. “Most ballads are.” He hesitated, before asking, “So, are you going to do it?”

No need to ask what “it” was. “Yes, I think so.”

His eyes flashed white. “You aren’t going alone.”

“I’ll have Rafael, Anna, and Lucas with me.”

He took a long step toward me. “I am coming too. I told Cara I would. You’ll need someone that has your back.”

“Do you really have my back?” I walked up to him. He almost looked as though he’d move away, but stopped himself.

“Always,” he whispered.

Then he did back away, and I said, “I talked to your mother.”

He froze. “Havoc said you’d Jumped there.”

“Havoc is gone.” I winced—my words were laced with sorrow.

His mouth twisted. “He almost paid the ultimate price by coming after you. That matters to someone like him.”

It was true. Nothing mattered more to Havoc than his own life. There was a distinct lack of anger in Marcus’s voice. Did he no longer hate Havoc? “I told him to be free.” My voice choked on the last word.

His eyes flared again. “He should never have bitten you.”

I flinched. But then, I said, “I don’t want to talk about Havoc.”

He hesitated, and then asked, “What secrets did you think my mother would reveal? She knows nothing of what I have become.”

“Maybe not,” I said. “But she knows you.” I didn’t advance on him, but caught and held his gaze. “She said that if I wanted you, I needed to chase you down.”

His eyes flared gold, and then white. “I now know what is inside me. And it’s every bit as scary as I thought. You’re better off without me. You don’t want to be mated to this.”

“That isn’t your decision to make,” I said. “It is mine.”

His eyes were miniature lightning storms, flashing like crazy. “I know what Fate is telling us, but you can’t make me believe you want to be mated to that. Because there is no going back. I will never be what I was. This thing is a permanent part of me. And it’s freking dangerous.”

“Fucking.”

“What?”

“It’s *fucking* dangerous.” I locked my gaze with his. Then I visualized what Vali had shown me in that book.

For just a second, nothing happened. Marcus blinked, and I saw the decision to leave enter his gaze.

And then, the first black scales broke out across my cheekbones and down my shoulders.

His eyes widened. “Riley—”

“I can match whatever you are, Marcus. And Storm Drakes can be either male or female, their choice. So I have no reason to fear you. And you have no reason to run.”

I grabbed the hem of my tee shirt, yanking it over my head and leaving me only in my bra. He froze, and I took another step toward him.

His mouth opened, and then closed, as black scales erupted on his forearms and dark clouds scudded across the sky, blocking the sun. Then his fingers clenched into fists, and he took a single, unsteady step back.

I was close enough to grab his arm. He flinched, and his eyes flared.

“What you don’t understand,” I said, “Is that I am fucking dangerous, too. Do I scare you?”

“Yes,” he hissed. “But not because of what you can do. Because of who you are.”

“And who am I?”

His arm beneath my hand was like iron, and I wasn’t sure he was going to answer. When his lips moved, I couldn’t hear what he said.

I stepped so close to him that I could feel his body heat. “Who am I?” I repeated.

His eyes altered to Iskar’s amethyst and then went dark again. “Mate,” he rasped so low I barely made it out.

“Say it louder,” I demanded.

He exhaled, and the Centaur’s sunbursts appeared. “You are my mate,” he repeated. His voice was steadier this time.

I reached a hand up to his face. “Do you want me?”

He closed his eyes. “You have no idea...”

My fingers caressed his jaw. “Look at me, Marcus.”

When he refused, I let small talons grow from my fingers and pinched him, ever so slightly.

“Let me make one thing clear.” I leaned into him. “I make the decisions here. And you are MINE.”

I felt a shudder pass through him. Then he growled, and reached for me.

His strong arms pulled me into his hard body. The kiss wasn't gentle, but a thing of nipping teeth and tangled tongues. Thunder rolled overhead, and his talons—glowing white—ripped away my bra.

Our scales chased along our bodies, running on the tops of our arms. I slid my hands up beneath his shirt, feeling a line of spikes along his spine, then drifted them around the front to touch those on his belly.

As I stepped out of my pants, he inhaled hard and used his talons to rip his tee shirt away. It revealed an intoxicating combination of smooth skin and armor, and I danced my own small talons between the scales.

He shivered beneath my touch, and lifted the weight of my breasts, flicking his talons ever so lightly over the tips, sending electric zings through to my core. I gasped and slid my hand beneath the waistband of his sweats. Didn't have to go far—he was right there, rigid and eager and huge. And lined with a single, small ridge of smooth scales, right up the center of his shaft, to the very tip.

When I stroked, he shuddered again, and suddenly my fingers slipped and slid. The sky forked with lightning, and thunder shook the earth beneath our feet.

His lips left mine to slide along my neck. The teeth felt sharper than they should be, and they sent a pool of pure heat flooding through me. I growled, and the sound wasn't human.

He pushed his thigh between my legs, and I rubbed along it, humping with a quiet desperation before he hooked a talon along the sides of my panties and ripped them away. I pushed eagerly at his sweats, revealing his glistening length.

His breath was coming out as a rumbling growl with no beginning or end. But despite the scales, we stayed mostly human as we writhed together, desperately trying to become

one entity. His thigh was like iron beneath me, but it wasn't what I wanted. When he lifted me and pushed me up against a moss-covered tree trunk, I wrapped my legs around him and beckoned him home.

That huge dick sliding so deep—the scales activated every nerve ending I possessed, and I squirmed and moaned as I took him, one glorious inch at a time. With a final, satisfied groan, he was fully seated, and it was then that I discovered the extra scale cluster at the base of him. Positioned right where I needed it to be.

I gasped as he began to thrust, at first slowly, and then my hands, spread over his hips, urged him on faster. When I added a twist at the end, he started doing it himself, and that cluster sent me spiraling toward oblivion.

His mouth moved down my throat and across to where my neck joined my shoulder. I shivered as his hot tongue added sensation to what his dick was doing to me. My entire body was on fire. So was the sky—lightning hit the ground all around us, lining everything in a white light.

“Riley,” he groaned my name, and in it was both an urgent request, and a query.

“Yesss,” I hissed.

Centaurs didn't bite to mate. But apparently, Storm Drakes did.

The second he bit down, we shattered. He screamed through the bite as the waves took us, my legs spasming around him as I rode him through it.

And the storm came with us, lighting up the surrounding forest with bolt after bolt of lightning, the thunder rolling in one continuous booming wave.

HAVOC



I sat on the cliffs well above the wild gate, and stewed.

I couldn't see it from where I brooded, but I sensed its power. It called to me, enticing my spirit to pass through.

To be free.

The trees were thinner up where I sat, and the sun's warmth encouraged me to stay. Plus, every time I crouched in preparation to glide down to the gate, Fang's little feet tickled at me.

A suggestion or a warning? I was no longer sure.

Between one eyeblink and the next, the sun vanished. I looked up and saw dark clouds rolling in. Thunder rumbled.

If my scales had been hair, they would have stood on end. Because I knew who—or rather what—was behind that storm.

Nipping teeth and tangled tongues, dark scales rippling over smooth skin...

It hit me hard, striking right through me. I was rigid and aching in an instant, with no way to ease it. But try as I might, I couldn't shut the images out of my head.

Only they weren't images of Riley.

They were images of Marcus, seen through Riley's eyes, felt through first her hands—and then through something that I didn't possess.

Storm clouds were spitting lightning, great long forks struck the ground repeatedly in one area of the forest. It

sounded and looked like the end of the fucking world. And it didn't matter that it wasn't my anatomy, or that it was Marcus—the lust coursed through me, my entire body vibrated with need.

I wanted them.

I was shifting to human before I'd even consciously formed the thought to do so, and my hand folded around my dick while the talons were still detaching. A few scratches didn't matter. My eyes rolled back in my head as I stroked. In my mind, Riley rode the Centaur.

I was one with them. And it felt—right. Like a piece of me I hadn't known was missing, was finally found.

Before I could assess that, he sank his teeth into her.

That Centaurs weren't supposed to do that was lost in the explosive aftermath. It was so powerful that I couldn't help the shout that escaped me, or the fact that my legs couldn't hold me as my body pulsed, sending great streams across the rocks. I fell to my knees and ended up leaning back on my heels as I shook my way to the end.

I sat like that until my breathing steadied. Which was when they started up again.

Time no longer had meaning. And it seemed that the Centaur's recuperative powers were at least on par with my own.

At some point they collapsed, and I leaned against a boulder, breathing like I'd just flown for miles at 40,000 feet.

As I slumped there, panting, something came through the gate.

I felt it open. If I'd still been in Dragon form, the new arrival would have seen me for sure. But I was half-prone between the boulders when a lithe, golden form flew right over my head.

My mind raced. It hadn't been Vali, this was male, with paler, shimmering gold scales. I only knew of one golden Dragon. The Oracle, who saw the past, present, and future.

That he was here meant fucking trouble. He and his mates had their permanent home in a nearby cave, but he'd obviously been elsewhere. And when he banked, he wasn't heading for the mountains.

He was orienting on the forest and treehouse.

Instead of steadying, my breathing increased. Fang crawled out from beneath my hair and blinked her beady little eyes at me. Then, she chirped. Several times in a row.

It was anyone's guess as to what she was trying to tell me. But I was pretty sure it had nothing to do with flying free.

I gritted my teeth and embraced my wings.

RAFAEL



I followed the passageway that went up from the walkway across to the tree that housed the guest quarters.

My heart was heavy. I'd expected to die facing Isobel on that rooftop, and since my rescue, I'd been adrift. Wanting, needing, but knowing that I could never have what I craved.

Never have *her*.

But it seemed that Fate was not yet done with me. I may not be able to have Riley, but Fate had given me a family. A twin sister, and a half-brother.

Two someones to live for.

I hadn't expected that. And now that I had them, I wasn't sure what to do with them.

They were connected to me on a visceral level. Nikolai's power seethed beneath the surface, but I could touch it. And between Anna and I, with Lucas as a conduit, we might be able to use it to bring Isobel down.

If Riley could get us there. I didn't doubt she could do it.

The stairs I climbed fed me out onto a branch grown broad enough to form a platform.

I paused, uncertain. This was clearly where Cara retreated to recharge, and I didn't want to intrude on her private space. It sat nearly three hundred feet up from the forest floor, and as the sunlight shined down upon the golden wood, I recognized the life that flitted and soared and hummed around me.

Then the sunlight vanished so fast that I peered up through the branches overhead. Dark clouds roiled across the sky, and thunder rumbled.

Nipping teeth and tangled tongues, dark scales rippling over smooth skin...

The lust swept through me, and as lightning forked across the sky, everything else—every thought, every sensation—vanished.

Marcus and Riley.

I gasped and dropped to my knees, hopelessly entangled in the two of them. My body moved in silent pantomime to every touch, every breath... One moment, Marcus, the next, Riley. I writhed, stretched out on the platform, my hands ripping at my clothing until I was as naked as them. I'd always needed the touch of another to connect me to the energy, but with these two—it flooded into me, and the fiend within drank it all in. Their lust was more powerful than anything I had yet experienced, feeding into the storm that crashed around me, the lightning scorching through the leaves and branches to mark the trunks.

I shuddered and groaned and thrust with them, and when Marcus sank his teeth into her, I exploded right with them, without having to lay a finger on my pulsing shaft.

I lay on the platform, heart racing and body on fire. And then—they started again.

And again.

By the time they finally lay quiet, I was a complete mess. With shaking arms, I pulled myself away from the edge of the platform, and pulled on first my pants, and then my tunic. I sat with my back to the trunk as the sky slowly cleared, and my breathing eventually returned to normal.

My mates.

If I'd ever had doubts before, I didn't now. They had fed me without effort, and without direct body contact.

They were a part of me.

If only I could be a part of them. I longed for it. It was a soul-deep thing.

But there were only two. The risk was too great.

I'd die before I did that to them.

Something huge and blue rose from far below, to soar past me with fast-beating wings. Talakai. And a moment later, he returned.

The golden Dragon with him could only be the Oracle. I'd heard of him, everyone had.

If he was here, something was definitely up.

I pushed myself to my feet and staggered toward the stairs.

RILEY



I lay in Marcus's arms as the skies slowly cleared.

Every part of me trembled, and I didn't think my legs would hold me. But it was a glorious kind of weak. A part of my heart was no longer aching and empty. It pumped hope where there had been none.

Marcus's arms tightened. I turned my head into the strong muscles of his chest and inhaled. The ozone in his scent was stronger now, and even though the scales were gone, I smelled it on my skin, too.

Storm Drake.

I ran my fingers over the few scales remaining on his abdomen and watched him shiver in response.

"Think I might need to rest a bit if you are looking for another round," he whispered. "Apparently, even a Storm Drake has its limits."

I snorted a laugh. "I won't be able to walk straight. Everyone is going to know what we've been doing."

His own laugh rumbled from deep beneath my cheek. "I think that secret is a lost cause. Lightning is a bit hard to miss."

We lay quiet, enjoying something we'd both almost given up on—the simple warmth of holding, and being held. My thoughts, however, zoomed on. "So, am I going to have you arguing with Havoc in my brain?" I asked.

“I have no idea,” he confessed. “This being my first mating and all.”

Someone swept by overhead. Deep blue, with a huge wingspan—Talakai. A moment later, he was back—and he wasn’t alone. Another Dragon flew with him—and as the sun’s rays finally broke through the clouds, they glittered gold off his scales.

Marcus’s arm moved me to the side as he sat up. We looked at each other.

“That was the Oracle,” he said.

I nodded. “I’ve met him. Once.” But my gut twisted. Why was he here?

“Something’s up. We’d better get back.” Marcus rose and helped me to my feet. Where I swayed. I’d been right about not being able to walk, damn it.

His lips twitched suspiciously as he steadied me.

“I’m okay.” I gave him a playful nudge. “I’ve been in worse states.”

His laugh echoed through the forest, a great, booming sound that had me glancing up at him in surprise.

He lifted my tee shirt and handed it to me. The bra and panties were lost causes, and when I pulled my leggings on, they had four long rents in the fabric. I straightened to see his sweats weren’t in much better shape, and he left the torn tee shirt where it lay.

For a moment, I stared at the broad expanse of chest. As though I hadn’t just spent an untold amount of time feeling it up. Considering my condition, I’d be best off not doing any more of it for a while. For the next hour, anyway.

His eyes rose from where my breasts bounced beneath my shirt, met my own, and then, he smiled.

It was an expression of pure joy, and it lit up my world. Two of my men might be lost to me, but this one—this one was mine.

He folded a long arm around me and guided us up the narrow path toward the treehouse. The Dragons had already shifted to human and gone inside.

We found them packed into the library. I was greeted by Anna's ever-enthusiastic dog, who bounded around me, tail wagging, before sniffing Marcus with intense interest.

I petted her as I glanced at Ash. "Hello, Ash. Are you lurking in forests instead of alleys, now?"

The Dragon shifter's weird gold and silver eyes shot to me, and away again. "Lurking is what I do best," he answered. But the quick smile didn't reach his eyes. Marcus was right. Something was up.

"You two enjoy your nature walk?" Kiko waggled her eyebrows from her chair. Rather than littered with books, the table in front of her showed signs of grazing activity. Including more than a few chocolate bar wrappers.

Vali had one of those, but also, she had maps rolled open in front of her. Not maps, I realized. Blueprints. She smacked the Satyr on the arm. "Leave them alone," she scolded.

I was saved from an answer when Cara and Bess entered together, followed by Lucas, Nikolai, and Aria. Rafael came in last, and he looked decidedly and deliciously ruffled. He tugged his tunic straight, pushed his long hair out of his face, and studiously ignored me.

Marcus tensed beside me, and then folded his hand around mine.

Cara looked straight at us, met my gaze, and then she smiled. There was no doubt as to why she was grinning like a fiend at me.

I tried to ignore the way my face flushed beet red.

The library was now extremely full. It was fortunate that Dragons preferred to stand.

Marcus pulled my chair out, and then stood behind me with his hands on my shoulders. It was a claiming move. I

should have minded, but I didn't. Not one bit. After all the rejection, I rather embarrassingly basked in it.

I saw Rafael stare at the hands, and then Marcus, before looking away again.

Cara turned to Ash. "Not that I'm unhappy to see you, but you must have a reason for searching us out."

Ash sketched a smile. His metallic eyes swirled, and I had a feeling they matched his thoughts. "You are sending Riley in with Anna and Rafael." It was a statement, not a question.

Cara's brows dropped. "I am. Have you foreseen something?"

Ash swayed from foot to foot. If he'd had more room, I was sure he would have been pacing. And his eyes went dark gold.

"What is it, Ash?" Cara kept her voice low, as though calming a fractious horse. "What have you seen?"

His gaze snapped to hers. "The council has pulled together as many warriors as it can to go up against Isobel's mercs and Brock's pinions." He stopped, and I saw him swallow.

"They'll be outnumbered," Talakai rumbled. "We know that."

Ash pushed a hand through his long, golden hair, and I saw that his fingers trembled. His mouth opened and then closed again.

Cara moved close, putting a hand on his arm. "Tell me," she urged.

I was shocked to see tears form in the golden Dragon shifter's eyes. "They'll die," he whispered. "He'll die."

I heard Cara inhale. "Tyrez?"

Ash could only nod. "In every timeline except one. And not just him. Cody. Eli. Neil..." He looked to Anna's Bellati mate, Sebastian. The hand raised to push hair back off his face was visibly shaking now. "I can't stop them. I've told Tyrez. He says if it stops the chaos, it will be worth any price."

My gut twisted as I stared at Ash. What would it be like to foresee the death of someone you love, and not be able to stop it?

“You said in one timeline, he doesn’t die.” I stared harder. “What is different?”

He met my eyes. “You. You go in early. Long before the army is sent in.”

“But our team would have no backup,” Talakai rumbled. “We’d be flying completely solo.”

Ash nodded. “And of the futures I’ve seen—not all end well if you do go in early.” He looked like he was going to be sick. His gaze moved to Talakai and then drifted to Sebastian. “The risks are high.”

Fuck. This didn’t sound good at all. I turned my head and found Cara staring at me.

“Are you game to try?” she asked.

“I’m pretty sure I can Jump us straight to Isobel,” I said.

Lucas spoke from where he stood beside Nikolai. “Considering there won’t be any distracting army attacking—maybe we’d be better off going into the garden where they had kept the kids. From there, we can Jump to Isobel.”

Cara tapped her chin. “I promised Tareal and Lora we would get Jinsic out.”

“If Isobel is working on Brock, she’ll be on the uppermost level,” Rafael said. “The Hitzu was in the dungeon. Opposite ends of the building.”

Vali spoke up. “I’ve been memorizing the blueprints. I can keep us oriented if we have to use our feet to get there.”

“I can Jump a group into the garden off the library,” I said. “And then, we’ll have to split up.”

“How big a group can you Jump?” Talakai asked.

I raised my chin and met Lucas’s worried gaze. “My body seemed to handle the last load of crystal dust. If I take enough

of it—and you Dragons stay human—I should be able to take a small strike force.”

Kiko and Vali looked at each other. Then Kiko said, “Vali might be our walking blueprint, but I can set people on fire. I’d like to go.”

Lucas looked around at everyone. “Me. Rafael. Anna. We’re the Isobel strike force.”

“You’ll need backup. Isobel won’t be alone,” Talakai stated. “I’m going with them.”

“Count me in,” Sebastian said.

“Might as bloody well make it a party.” The Aussie ran his hand through his hair.

Marcus straightened. “I’m in.”

“So am I,” rumbled a deep voice from the doorway.

Every head in the room swiveled, except for Cara’s. One corner of her mouth quirked up.

Havoc. How had he sneaked in here without me knowing? He refused to look at me, but kept his gaze on Cara.

“When it comes to killing, they don’t fucking get better than me,” the Dragon shifter said.

Despite the danger, my heart suddenly felt like singing. I met Cara’s gaze from across the room.

“Can you do that many?” Cara asked me.

I would have to. “No problem,” I said.

I rubbed the sore spot on my arm and stared at the golden rays dancing through the leaves.

The sunlight reassured—the council would not send in its forces until dark. It gave us time to complete our mission. And if we were successful—they wouldn’t need to go at all.

Tyrez and the others wouldn’t need to die.

Of course, Ash had clammed up as to who else he'd seen killed in this effort. But I hadn't been the only one to notice his eyes skitter between Talakai and Sebastian.

The knot in my gut twisted tighter as I stood at the top level of the primary residence, where a huge open window had been shaped to reveal the jungle beyond. It was so beautiful, and the perfect place for me to embrace a few quiet minutes before we left. Time for the Hitzu venom to work its magic, which would connect Tareal to me while we were in the palace.

The Hitzus would be staying here at the treehouse with Cara, Ash, Nikolai, and Aria. Cara and Aria would be tasked with keeping Nikolai's power in check, when he sent it to the strike team.

I was Jumping two teams with me. The strike team was made up of Rafael, Anna, and Lucas, but they would have the protection of Anna's Bellati mate, Sebastian, the Aussie Dragon, Matt, and Havoc. The retrieval team—tasked with getting the Hitzu mate, Jinsic, out of the dungeon, would be me, Marcus, Kiko, Vali, and Talakai.

I got the feeling Talakai would rather have been on the strike team, but Ash insisted he go with us. Anna had placed a hand on his arm—the Dragon had stared hard at the Oracle, before giving in.

Ten adults. It was more than I had ever Jumped with before, but with the help of the dust, I was confident I could do it.

I sensed a presence behind well before I heard the footstep. Strong arms wrapped around and pulled me back against a rock-hard body. One hand opened in front of me, to show me the packet of crystal dust.

“Hope you are right about this, Wiley,” Marcus said. “Or I'll be holding your hand in detox.”

“I am not a coyote,” I protested.

He offered a lop-sided smile. “Do coyotes scream when they have sex?”

I blushed. “I have no idea.”

“Hmm, until we find out, Wiley stands.”

I raised an eyebrow as I took the packet, but it was much better than Dreambitch, even if Havoc had shortened it to Dreambit. And Rafael didn’t call me anything at all. He wouldn’t even look at me.

I leaned back into Marcus as I opened the packet and downed its contents. Again, it tingled, but it didn’t give me that burst of wild euphoria. My Dragon must be growing stronger.

“You good?” His voice was a deep rumble.

“Yeah. Are they ready?”

“Almost. I want you to come with me.” He took my hand, and pulled me to the stairs.

We crossed over to the other treehouse, and he took me down to a room that was clearly a weapon cache.

“I don’t know how to use this stuff,” I protested.

“Going into this without a blade would not be smart,” he said. “So I’m going to find you a stinger.” He prowled the neat rows of weapons. “Or maybe two...”

I frowned at him when he presented me with two thin swords. “You’ve got to be kidding. I’ll stab myself in the foot, or worse.”

He ignored me, pulling a harness off the shelf. “This is one of my designs. Keeping swords on your back means they are out of the way until needed. But scabbards for mounting them there are problematic. I designed this one for a bottom release.” He moved around me, slipping the straps on and then tightening them. “There. Now, the swords slip in upside down. A little tricky until you get a feel for where the guides are.”

I snorted a laugh. “If I need to use them, putting them away will be the least of my troubles.”

“Take one in each hand, and reverse them so the blades are up,” he instructed. “The tips go in halfway up the sheath.”

When I did so, he showed me how to find the guides by feel. “Push them toward you first, and then up.”

I did so, surprised it was as easy as it was.

“Feel the click? That locks them in. The scabbards cross between your shoulders. You should be able to move freely.” He checked that the fit was correct. “To pull them out, push the button near the hilt with your thumb.” He showed me, and I yanked the swords down and out to get them free. When they were halfway out, the scabbard did something odd. I could feel it, just not see it.

“It has to release them at that point, or they’ll get stuck,” he explained. “And you look so sexy with those on.”

Our eyes met, and for a moment, I couldn’t breathe. Then I managed, “You know your stuff, Sasquatch.”

“Sas what?”

“It’s a mythical giant furry humanoid in my home realm.”

He drew himself up. “I am not furry.”

I pointedly looked at his hair, which, at the moment, stood in a hundred different directions.

“That is hair, not fur,” he insisted.

“If you can call me Wiley, I can call you Sasquatch.”

“Fair enough.” And he smiled. Which made me feel like I could tackle Isobel’s army all on my own.

Lucas came in, and stopped, staring at the swords. “Those are cool. Do you know how to use them?”

“No idea,” I admitted. “But they make me look badass.”

Lucas shot Marcus a look, and then said, “I don’t think I’ll comment on that.” He cleared his throat. “We’re ready to roll.”

The knot in my gut twisted tighter, but I took a deep breath.

“Let’s do this,” I said.

The garden had gotten even more raggedy since our last visit, likely due to people searching through it with swords.

Hardly good for the shrubbery.

I arrived out of breath, as though I'd lifted a load slightly too heavy. Which I likely had. And when I looked down at my arms, they were lined with jet-black scales.

Dragon scales.

Marcus noticed. "You might not be Wiley for much longer. Far too scaly."

"Why are you calling her Wiley?" Havoc demanded.

"Because I am," I answered. "Much better than being a Dreambitch."

"I don't call you that anymore," Havoc pointed out.

"Shh," Lucas hissed. We all waited, frozen, but no one came. It seemed we'd managed to sneak in without anyone detecting the energy surge.

Dreambit has bite, Havoc defended in my mind. Which you do, despite being little.

Okay, I'd accept that.

Wiley has meaning. The new mindvoice was a bit faint, but undeniably Marcus.

As I regarded him with surprise, Havoc growled, *Great. Now I have two of you in my fucking head.* The Dragon had a hand up behind his neck, and seemed to be trying to grab—Fang. Why was he trying to grab Fang?

I want her to stay with you, he complained, as she dodged his big hand.

She clearly has her own ideas on that, I said. *If she wants to stay with you that badly, then maybe she should.*

Havoc stopped trying to grab her, but I distinctly heard his teeth grind together.

“Alright, Riley,” Lucas interrupted us. “What does Jinsic say? Is Isobel still in her lab?”

I couldn’t connect to Jinsic, as it was Tareal’s venom I had received, but I sensed a faint affirmation from Tareal, who was following along through me, and I passed it on to Lucas. Then I got an image—shaky, as Jinsic looked through another’s eyes that were skirting the room nervously from the edges.

I committed the room to memory. Its rough dimensions, the windows along the walls, the cage in the center. Which was occupied at the moment. And Isobel herself, stood near it with raised arms.

Behind her lay the enormous bronze body of Brock’s Dragon. We’d been right—Isobel was trying something, the red light danced all over it. The coven members were spread out on each side of her, with the bloodmagic dancing around them, too. Along the back wall were Bellatis, standing with their swords drawn.

Like they expected trouble.

The feed cut off, and I relayed what I’d seen to the others. Then I got another image—this one clearer. The hall outside Jinsic’s cell, viewed through his own eyes.

I paid close attention to that as well. Once things got going, we’d be moving fast. The hall appeared deserted, which I thought was odd for a dungeon. Then I got an impression of walking along the hall to a doorway—and on the other side, a guard.

Marcus approved. *Excellent imagery. I’m a visual kind of guy.*

An artist. Easy to forget that, when he was built like a warrior.

I’d rather be going with you for this first Jump. Marcus’s mindvoice was stronger, but laced with worry.

Don't stress. I'll be back before you can blink, I promised, and rolled my eyes to the three lethal warriors coming with us. *Not like I'll lack for protection*. I ripped my eyes away from him, to see Rafael staring at me.

Their mission was so much more dangerous than what I was embarking on. I would be Jumping them straight into the tiger's jaws.

What the fucking hell is a tiger? Havoc sounded tense even in my mind.

Big stripy cat with nasty claws, I answered.

Like a Sabre? Marcus asked.

Smaller, I admitted.

Doesn't sound that impressive, Havoc judged.

I have to upgrade my comparisons, I said with some exasperation. I needed a clear mind for this Jump, without distractions. So I tried pushing them both out of it, by visualizing building a wall, and shoving them back.

The first sign that it worked was when Marcus protested aloud, "Hey."

I was saved from a response when Rafael approached us. "Can I have a word?" he asked of me.

I followed him as he walked a little ways away from the others.

When he turned back, I said, "We'll come for you guys."

He shook his head. "I don't think you should."

Confused, I scanned his expression. My heart slammed to a halt. "You think you're going to die up there, don't you?"

His mouth straightened. "Isobel is very powerful. She has the entire coven with her, along with the crystals—I don't know if we'll be able to channel enough of Nikolai's power to take her out. Even if we do—it isn't likely there will be anything left of us to bring back."

I remembered Ash, and what he'd said. *And of the futures I've seen—not all end well if you do go in early.*

He reached out, ever so slowly, and touched my cheek with trembling fingers. "You were all I've ever wanted," he said. "And I want you to know, I'm sorry."

My chest hurt, as though my heart was tearing into pieces. "I'm coming to get you," I whispered. "And Havoc, too."

His smile was tinged with sadness as his hand started to drop away. I grabbed it, and held it against my cheek, blinking away tears.

"I'll make sure he doesn't do anything fucking dumb." The deep voice rumbled from over my shoulder.

Rafael gently withdrew his hand and barked a harsh laugh. "What are you planning to do to stop me?"

"I'll smack you one, that's what." Havoc's eyes gleamed metallic copper.

"Okay, then. I won't do anything dumb."

"Fucking dumb," Marcus corrected. "I believe there is a difference."

"Okay, you guys." Lucas moved up on us. "I know you have stuff to sort out, but it's go time."

Havoc's gleaming copper eyes slid to me. I sensed the violence in him that he held leashed. Turning it loose in an enclosed area wasn't going to be pretty.

Make sure you kill the right ones, I told him.

No promises, he growled.

I took a deep breath. "Strike team, form up on me. Everyone take hold."

Our group reassembled. Lucas, Anna, and Rafael with Havoc and Anna's two other mates.

I raised my arms, and they all took hold of them.

"Ready?" I asked.

I waited for the chorus of affirmations, and then I closed my eyes and recaptured the image Tareal had sent me. With my heart pounding, I certainly didn't have to search for the emotional surge. The second I reached for my power, the white noise took over.

Snap.

Miracle of miracles, we landed on our feet. Maybe it was the group-hug thing working for us. They released my arms the second the golden light cleared. I'd brought us in on the far side of the activity, behind Brock's body, the coven, and Isobel.

Go, Dreambit, Havoc urged. We're good.

I caught the merest glimpse of the room, before I reached again, and took myself back.

I blinked against the light. Strong hands gripped my shoulders, and I looked up at Marcus. "They're with her," I whispered. Two-thirds of my heart now faced the Sorceress and her coven.

Isobitch, Havoc agreed from the room above us. I need to kill something.

You always need to kill something, Marcus replied. Out loud, he added, "That's our cue to leave."

Beyond him were Talakai, Kiko, and Vali. My retrieval team.

From his safe berth in Cara's treehouse, Tareal relayed to me the visual of the hall outside his mate's cell.

I raised my arms. They were almost fully clothed in deep-black scales. Took an instant to admire them, before saying, "Let's do this."

Kiko tilted her head as she closed her fingers over my scales. "Is that another of your silly life-affirming statements?"

"Take it any way you want," I said, and thought of hallways.

RAFAEL



I caught the merest glimmer of Riley's worried gaze, and then she was gone.

My pulse raced. She'd Jumped us to a perfect location—behind Isobel and the coven. Our position was partly blocked by Brock's inert body. Although it radiated the blood energy, I sensed no life within it.

Our sudden arrival surprised the Bellatis along the back wall, but they were trained warriors and reacted quickly.

Fortunately, so did Sebastian and Havoc.

In an instant, Sebastian's spiral sword became a blur of graceful and calculated motions. Whereas Havoc roared as his body writhed its way to Dragon. He charged into them, talons flashing in the light. Body pieces flew through the air.

Matt stayed with us, his back to Anna, talons extended, body in a half-crouch. And then my gut clenched as I spotted Finn emerge from a passageway behind the coven. The Torshin blasted red energy bolts toward Havoc, but he saw them coming. Havoc grabbed an approaching mercenary, and threw him into the onslaught. There was an explosion of blood and tissue, and the red Dragon dropped the mess before selecting another.

"Rafael!" Isobel turned away from the cage. She gestured to Aurora, who stood on the other side of her. "Keep going," she commanded.

Aurora raised her hands and increased the flood of red energy toward the form in the cage. I fought to stay calm as

Isobel stalked toward us.

Isobel's eyes glowed red. Her hair floated freely, as though it had come to life.

I now saw her for what she truly was. Evil incarnate. And she was going down.

Lucas's life essence buzzed with both fear and determination as he joined hands with Anna. Who projected nothing but a calm, cold kind of anger.

Isobel's gaze moved from me to them.

"You two again," she snarled. "Back for another go? You weren't too successful last time."

Anna's eyes sparked silver and gold fire. "I have nothing better to do with my time."

Isobel's eyes gleamed. "I'm so much more, now. I look forward to ending you all."

The room vibrated with enough blood energy that it masked the maelstrom building as Nikolai pumped it through Lucas.

We stood in the heart of Isobel's bloodmagic source—the crystals that held the accumulated wealth of many deaths. We'd be lucky to survive this battle. Isobel had beaten me already, more than once. Beaten Lucas, and Anna, too. From what Lucas said, she'd fled before Nikolai had really opened up. Did she sense the trap?

If we went down, I would bring her with us. When Anna's bicolored eyes met mine, it was my cue to step forward, right into Isobel's space.

Isobel and I stared at each other while the coven pumped the red energy into the figure in the cage and Havoc and Sebastian fought for their lives against not only Finn, but also a group of highly trained Bellatis.

Nothing else existed except the two of us.

Her eyes blazed red at me, and her mouth twisted. "It is time to finish this. You could have had it all. Instead, you have

become nothing but a thorn in my side.”

I stood very still. “I am much more than that.” My words rolled from somewhere deep inside. “Because I am your destiny.”

Her brows lowered. “You are a fool. And you will meet your *own* destiny now, of that I have no doubt.”

She grabbed my arm. The bloodmagic hammered at me, pushing my power back. I let it do so, let her think she was overwhelming me. Moved closer, put my fingers along the side of her throat as I bowed my head, feigning defeat.

Meanwhile, Anna smoothly, quietly, sidled up to me and touched bare skin.

In a flash, Nikolai opened the floodgates to bring the maelstrom home.

RILEY



With the usual flare of golden light, we arrived in the hall servicing the dungeon.

The empty corridor didn't stay that way for long. Because Talakai whistled, and then yelled, "Hey, the prisoner is escaping."

Words guaranteed to instill terror in any guard that had once served Brock. If he'd had half a brain, he would have questioned who was in there to make such an announcement, but it appeared intelligent soldiers did not apply for dungeon-guard positions.

The door banged open, and a big burly mercenary belted through it.

Talakai spun toward him so fast I couldn't make out exactly what he did—I saw the flash of light on metal, and then the guard's separated head followed his body down to the cold stone floor.

Talakai peered out into the hallway beyond, closed the door, and returned to drag the body into an empty cell. I stared at the long blood smear left behind.

You okay? Marcus asked. His mindvoice sounded completely calm. I supposed for him it was just another day at the warrior office, and I remembered the shovel he'd used on Kyle the first day we met.

Yeah. I'm good. I turned to peer through the bars of the closest cell. It was empty—as was the next. The third one had a pale-skinned face pressed to the small barred insert.

Talakai sheathed his sword and moved to examine Jinsic's cell door, before touching the scales along his ribs. They retracted, and he pulled out a small pouch, very similar to the one I'd seen Lucas use. He extracted a long, thin pick and bent over the lock.

"I can Jump us in there." I took hold of the Dragon shifter's arm.

The door clicked, and Talakai pulled it open.

"Or not," I said.

Jinsic was a little taller than Tareal, but otherwise very similar in features. He could have told me they were triplets rather than mates, and I would have believed him. My ability to appreciate their differences required work.

Something clanged when he moved—his ankle was chained to a bolt in the wall.

The big Dragon shifter bent over the Hitzu's manacle. "Not as good at these as Lucas," he muttered. "Spent more time *in* them, than getting *out* of them."

I didn't have an opportunity to ask about the comment, because Havoc's rage galloped through my mind. Almost incoherent, it was raw emotion connected to a flurry of vicious images that made the guard beheading look tame.

"Frankel? You okay?" a voice called from the hall beyond ours.

If he made it to the doorway, the bloodstain would tell him that Frankel was definitely not okay.

"There's a room about thirty feet from the door that was marked "Relief Station" on the blueprints," Vali whispered. "He must have come from there."

"Freking hell," murmured Marcus. He'd stationed himself near the cell door as Talakai worked. Now he pulled his longsword and took a step toward the voice.

Kiko ran past him. "Got this," she said breezily and jogged down the hall. Once she reached the door, she stopped, opened it, then leaned herself partway through it.

“Frankel’s been busy,” she purred to the guard beyond. “Want to join us?” And then she vanished.

Marcus muttered another curse beneath his breath and hurried down the hall, coming up against the wall just inside the open door. He held his sword in front of him in one hand, in the other, he’d drawn a knife.

Frankel’s fellow guard was about to have a very bad day, just when he thought he was going to have a bloody good one. Despite the man’s poor choice of allegiances, I almost felt sorry for him.

Kiko reappeared, all smiles, draped over the guard’s shoulder as her hand rubbed his ass. He had a stupid grin plastered on his face. The grin didn’t alter as Marcus drove his knife up beneath the man’s jaw and into his brain.

The guard dropped like a stone. Marcus dragged him into the now less-than-empty cell. He closed the door, and he and Kiko rejoined us.

“Good hit,” Talakai commended him from where he bent over the Hitzu’s ankle.

I stared. How had the Dragon even seen what Marcus had done?

“Knife to the brain leaves no blood trail.” Marcus sounded smug.

“Yes. Requires distraction, though, and unless you can immobilize fast, he had time to shout,” the assassin commented.

“I can be quite distracting,” Kiko affirmed.

My brain was filled with blood flying beneath Havoc’s talons. These guys were masters of the casual dispensing of death.

“How is it going with Isobel?” I asked Talakai.

The manacle finally clicked open. “Nikolai is just getting started,” the Dragon rumbled.

We heard shouts, and feet pounding away from us down the hall.

Talakai straightened. “They’ve called in reinforcements.” His voice was calm, but he’d drawn his sword again.

“We need to be there,” Marcus agreed.

“Everyone, grab hold,” I said.

They all did so, and the Hitzu followed their lead. A moment later, we blinked golden light out of our eyes. We had landed in the garden.

The sky overhead was far from quiet. Dragons glittered in the sunlight, and they headed for the roof. Brock’s pinions were coming to Isobel’s rescue.

Marcus’s gaze slipped over Jinsic, Vali, and Kiko. “We need to get them out, if we’re going in.”

Kiko bristled. “I’m going in, too.”

“If you are trying to save me, it would have been better to vacate the premises altogether.” Jinsic sounded genuinely pissed off.

“We have bigger concerns,” Marcus snapped. “And we didn’t have to free you.”

The Hitzu’s eyes flashed. “I didn’t have to provide your Jumper with visuals.”

Perhaps being annoying was a Hitzu trait. I gritted my teeth and turned to Vali. “Can you get Jinsic and Kiko out of here?”

“That would be an excellent idea,” Jinsic hissed.

Vali’s jaw set as she looked at the sky. “The pinions are distracted, but it’s too clear. I need cloud cover to fly out of here and get them to the city.”

“I’m staying with you.” Kiko planted her hands on her hips and glared at me.

“Vali and Jinsic might need your fire-throwing ability,” I stated. “Having you guys safe would mean three fewer people

I have to Jump out of here.”

Kiko looked mutinous, but subsided when Vali closed her hand around her arm. “We can’t fight like them,” the Dragona stated. “We are most useful, getting ourselves to the city.”

“Safe in the city?” Jinsic protested. “We’d still be too close.”

“We can use the city gate to get back to the academy,” Vali said. “We’ll be okay once I get us away from here.”

Jinsic subsided, but he didn’t look happy. By the way his eyes flashed, his mates weren’t either.

The yellow Dragona once again scanned the sky. “It’s a moot point without more clouds,” Vali said. “I kinda glow in daylight.”

I looked at Marcus. “We need clouds.”

He appeared startled. “Be handy,” he agreed, and then hesitated.

And clear as a bell in my head, I heard another voice. *Put your Storm Drake to work, my boy.*

Iskar? I could hear Iskar?

He seemed similarly startled. *You can hear me? How—interesting.*

All right then, I said briskly. *Clouds. Now. Minus the lightning, preferably.*

Marcus swallowed, and then a muscle jumped in his jaw.

“Are we waiting for something?” Jinsic asked. “Because I would like to vacate the premises.”

He really was annoying. I regretted setting him free. Well, sort of free.

Talakai’s lips peeled back from his teeth. “Things are not going well up there. Dragons are popping in through the elevated platforms. Matt says Havoc and Sebastian are being overwhelmed.”

“We need clouds, and Marcus is going to provide them,” I clarified. I raised a brow at the man in question. “Aren’t you?”

Marcus closed his eyes, his brows drawing down. Nothing happened.

Kiss her, Iskar suggested.

Don’t be ridiculous, Marcus protested.

My mouth opened and then closed again. I stood up on my tiptoes, fisted his hair, and pulled his lips down to my own.

The sparse clouds drifting around darkened in an instant. I employed tongue, and they spread like wildfire across the sky.

Oh, well done, Iskar praised as we separated.

“That’ll work,” Vali said. “I’ve got this. Go.”

Kiko hugged me. “Come back, we have more shopping to do.”

“I will,” I promised, with no idea whether I could make it happen.

“Can we go now?” Jinsic demanded.

Kiko rolled her eyes as I pushed her away. “You owe me, big time, for this,” she warned.

I waved to Marcus and Talakai. “All right, you two. Grab on, we’re going in.”

We almost died in the first second.

I would have, if the Dragon scales hadn’t spread to my breasts. The mercenary’s sword skittered right across them.

With a roar, Marcus ran his own weapon clear through him. Yanked it free as the man fell.

Marcus grabbed my arm and pulled me to a pillar that ran the room’s circumference. “Stay here,” he commanded. “Use your swords if you have to.”

He turned to leave. I looked past him to where Talakai was already an indigo blur of motion, fighting a horde that grew by the second. Rafael, Anna, and Lucas stood near the cage at the far end of the room—they faced Isobel. More than just facing her—Rafael had his hands on her arm and throat. I could barely see them through the swirling mess of Dragon shifters in human form, and mercs, and even Dires in beast form, ducking and diving in a mass.

As I squinted, trying to see, a Dire was thrown high enough to hit the ceiling, before landing only feet from us with a sodden “thunk.”

He was so shredded I could barely tell he had ever been a Dire. For just an instant, I caught a glimpse of red scales through the heaving chaos of the battle.

Havoc.

And then the room lit up with red energy, and I saw the tall, thin man from my link with Rafael. Finn, the Torshin, standing behind the coven. He raised his hands as he flung his energy bolts into the mass of fighting forms, not caring whether he hit friend or foe.

He pulled something from his pocket—a ball of what looked like pure energy. When he flicked his wrist, it spat out a long, sizzling whip.

I’d seen the marks that thing had left on Rafael. And as I watched in horror, he sent it lancing out toward the group. It caught Lucas, and the Morph screamed.

I grabbed Marcus. He was so determined to wade in with his sword and knife that he dragged me a few paces before stopping.

We won’t win by fighting this way, I said.

She’s right, Marcus, Iskar chimed in. If we want to survive this, we need to be smart. We need the Storm Drake.

A few clouds and lightning aren’t even going to reach us in here, Marcus protested.

I didn't have time to roll my eyes. *There is more than one kind of storm*, I said. *And we have more than one Drake*.

His eyes widened as my black scales sprouted clear spikes in the center.

Bring it on, Iskar said.

RAFAEL



I gritted my teeth and held on.

Isobel was linked to both her coven and every crystal in the place. I sensed each individual female within her inner circle, including the one who had once been so familiar.

I'd believed I'd known Aurora. But nothing of my past rang true any longer. And the focus of that stood before me, fighting me with every breath.

The thought fanned the flames of rage within me, and I called upon it to help me hold my ground.

At our backs, Matt kept the fighters away from us. The man moved like lightning, using his body as a weapon. His brown and gold scales protected him from the worst of their efforts to reach us, but he was growing increasingly bloody in the attempt.

Anna's hand on my arm trembled with the strength of the maelstrom as it scorched through Lucas and her, to me.

That power was terrifying, but I sensed it was only a fraction of what the Perditor could deliver. A stream, rather than a river, scaled down to what Lucas could handle. Even then, his pain was palpable.

I took what they offered and pushed my power harder. The tendrils crashed up against the bloodmagic, but it couldn't penetrate. The battle sizzled through me, painting my mind in color—blood crimson, writhing through my pulses of blue and green.

Isobel's lips peeled back in a smile of triumph. "Can't do it, can you?" she taunted. "I am too powerful, even for the Perditor."

"You are delusional, Isobel." I spoke through clenched jaws. "If he were here—you two would take the realm down."

"But he isn't here," she hissed. "And you don't have what it takes."

Lucas screamed as light flashed, and a pulse of agony surged through me.

The power cut off, and Isobel's eyes gleamed in triumph as the bloodmagic reached for me.

"Now," she said. "You will do my bidding!" The bloodmagic scorched through my brain, washing away everything I was...

I screamed, but even as another lash of Finn's cursed whip struck him, Lucas straightened. His eyes flashed green. And then they turned solid silver.

"Not on my watch," he snarled, his voice unnaturally deep.

What came at me then wasn't like anything I'd ever experienced before. It blasted through Lucas—I felt Anna grab at it, attempt to sculpt it, but it erupted straight through her and exploded into me.

No chance to mold it, and it would have been disastrous to even try. I fed the chaos straight to the fiend within me.

It went for Isobel with mental teeth bared—I shook her grip off my arm, and wrapped both hands around her throat as it smashed aside her bloodmagic barrier like it were made of paper. She gasped and her hands snapped to my wrist, struggling to pry me free, but my tendrils thrust deep, and then the fiend began to *shred*. It spun like a disk of lethality, slicing her brain to ribbons.

She shuddered around my hand, and hot blood flowed from her nose, eyes, and ears.

I couldn't have stopped it if I wanted to. I rode high on the core power, my rage and pain coalescing into triumph as her

life essence waned.

Finn screamed obscenities and abandoned his icefire whip, trying to nail Anna and Lucas with an energy blast. They slid behind me, and I kept Isobel as a shield. Still, the power reverberated around us. Anna's nails dug into my arm as she fought to hold on. Lucas was almost ripped away.

I raised one of my hands and let Nikolai's power envelop the three of us. Then I shaped it, elevating it to deflect Finn's attempts at revenge.

I looked toward the cage, and met Aurora's eyes. Glimpsed the hatred before she redirected the bloodmagic at me.

It bounced off Nikolai's power. But we couldn't keep it up much longer. Lucas was gasping in agony, and I braced myself against Anna's pain.

And still, Isobel held on. She clung to the bloodpower, and I sensed that Finn helped her use it to defend the last bit of herself.

I glanced past Aurora to the cage, and my heart stuttered.

The form within it straightened and stood. Its eyes blazed at me, and they, along with the wings sprouting from its back, were *bronze*.

Then the metallic bronze gaze altered to scarlet. It raised hands that glowed as orange as the scales chasing up its arms.

"Now might be a good time to finish this—" Lucas began.

My stomach clenched in dread, just as the flames shot from the creature's hands, straight toward Matt, who stood only a few feet from us.

"Matt!" Anna screamed.

I flung the energy shield I'd erected toward Matt.

And the flames surrounded us...

HAVOC



I sensed the moment Riley appeared in the middle of this nutzoid mess.

And cursed the Centaur for not keeping her away. No time to berate either of them—I focused on fighting my way closer.

Then Isobel's life essence faltered.

And everything went to fucking hell.

Not like it had been an absolute party up until now, although the Deranger was in his glory, the rage pulsing through me and my beast—all three parts of me equally eager for blood. But it was my human that knew we were in a lot of fucking trouble.

With Sebastian at my back, we'd sliced and diced a motley collection of Bellatis, mercenaries, and Dires. Most of the latter were in beast form.

The high ceiling had given me enough room to shift to Dragon, and my scales repelled claws and some weapons—but not the spiral swords the Bellatis wielded, or the tailspikes of the Dragons. More times than I could count, I'd been run clear through, and one wing had almost been hacked off.

But I fed the life energy I absorbed into my rage, and it enabled me to spin, slash, and snap. Bits and pieces of my opponents rained down.

Sebastian maneuvered around me like lightning, his spiral blade flashing in the overhead lights. If the other Bellatis in

the room had a fraction of his skill, I'd be shedding far more blood than I already was.

Finn threw around balls of pure energy. I longed to pull the Torshin apart, but there were about a hundred sharp-bladed bastards between us.

Isobel's energy dwindled further, and abruptly, the coven switched their focus from the cage to fleeing the battle. Finn moved with them, his bolts clearing a path for their exit. Even their own Bellatis screamed and died beneath the Torshin's bolts.

Apparently, it didn't pay to be a friend of Finn's.

When fire—the real fucking thing, not an energy blast—scorched through those I battled, I tried to see where it had come from. Not Finn, not the coven—it had come from the cage? The room echoed with screams, and many broke away from the fight to run.

A burst caught me across the foreleg, and it scorched clear through the scales to the flesh below. As a Dragon, I'd never feared fire. But this was no ordinary flame. Man, beast, and monster all sat up and took notice.

Then the panicked crowd parted, and I saw the cage below—its bars had melted away. Whatever was in the center was engulfed in flames so hot I could feel them from where I stood.

My what-the-fuck moment almost got me speared by a Bellati sword, but Sebastian was there, his own nothing but a bloody blur.

“What is that?” he gasped as he whirled past me.

“No fucking idea,” I answered, just as a new rage bombarded me, only it wasn't mine. It was Marcus's, surging along the link.

I spun away from another gout of flame, and saw him. Or rather, what he had become. And now, I had a name for it.

Storm Drake.

Fucking hell, he was a sight to behold. The thick spikes around his head and down his back flashed white. Each dark scale also had a small, glowing spike in the center, and the white talons were wicked and curved. The small wings arching over his back flickered as arcs of lightning danced between them.

He wasn't alone. Beside him was another similar creature, only smaller and finer boned.

My heart leaped to my throat. *Riley*. Riley was a fucking Storm Drake, too.

Together, they moved up behind Rafael, Anna, Lucas, and Matt. Talakai joined them, standing with Matt to fight a group of advancing Bellatis. He fought as a human, his blade reflecting the flashes of lightning.

Eyeing what Marcus and Riley had become, my heart leaped with new hope. Working toward them, I sank my talons into one of Brock's pinions and shredded him.

Then Marcus flung his heavy head back and roared.

The thing in the cage answered him. And for the first time, as the fighting paused, I saw the creature I'd never wanted to meet—the Fire Drake. It appeared from the self-inflicted inferno, standing amid the melted bars. Flames licked around and over its orange-scaled skin.

As a mass, the mercenaries scrambled away, and when they did so, I saw Rafael. One hand was still fastened around Isobel's throat. The other raised, as he somehow deflected another bolt from Finn. Anna and Lucas clung to him.

The Fire Drake reared up, answering the Storm Drake by blasting a pure superheated flame toward Rafael's group.

Horror infused me. *No!* In that moment, every one of my denials went up in smoke. They *mattered* to me. Not just Riley. Marcus and Rafael—

But Rafael's raised hand held the flames back. He had to be using Nikolai's power to do it. Even from where I battled, I saw how he shook. The flames crackled and snapped like a living thing, and his arm bent as it pushed ever closer...

Above the sizzle came Marcus's roar. It started in a living throat, and was answered by the wind. It was heard from the other side of a stone wall as first a whistle, and then a howl. The entire building shook, and the windows shattered, letting the tempest inside. An instant later, the outer wall disintegrated, and we were all swept up in a storm the like of which I had never experienced.

Fire and wind blended into a lethal tornado that enveloped all of us. It shrieked through the building, taking everything and everyone with it. I flung my Dragon self over Sebastian, letting the flames scorch over my scales as the room filled with screams of anguish.

Havoc! Riley yelled in my brain.

My scales smoked and scorched—I reached up to my neck and peeled one back. Fang tumbled into my talons. I offered her to Sebastian, who cradled her against his chest as I began to push my way through to Riley.

The Drake's fire burned at me, far more lethal than any Dragon flame, scorching away the scales almost as fast as my Deranger could regrow them. The air was so hot I could barely breathe, and Sebastian, sheltered beneath me, gasped and staggered, clutching poor little Fang. I mantled my wings over us, groaning as the membranes burned away.

The agony nearly consumed me.

With the walls down, lightning surged through the room, a continuous barrage of bolts focusing on the Fire Drake. But they bounced off before they got there, as if it were shielded.

Bodies lay everywhere, scorched beyond recognition. And then one rose from the carnage.

Finn.

Standing untouched amid the inferno, he was using his tremendous power to shield himself, Isobel, the escaping coven—and the Fire Drake. His cruel crimson eyes gleamed as Marcus redirected the lightning to him. But they bounced away without harming the Torshin.

Then he focused his bolts against Rafael, and began to fire them rapidly.

I saw them hit Rafael's energy shield. He still had one hand around Isobel's throat, and under the combined assault of flame and energy bolts, the shield *buckled*.

"No!" I roared the denial. I opened my jaws and sent my own fire toward Finn, but it splashed uselessly against the Torshin's shields. And the Fire Drake, sensing its victory was at hand, increased its assault on Rafael. The flames reflected harmlessly over the shield protecting Isobel to scorch his hand, Anna's hair—and the side of Riley's Storm Drake head.

Her pain pierced straight through the link. Marcus sent more lightning licking across the floor, striking Finn's shields and ricocheting off them. The Torshin's eyes gleamed as he flung his head back, and laughed. His people had created the Drakes all those years ago. He was immune to Marcus's power, and now he raised glowing hands and sent another forceful pulse toward my people.

My people. My mates. My beast, monster, and human united in that moment.

MINE.

I needed to rip Finn apart. To get to Riley. But they were too far away...

With a shriek, something dropped from the sky. A yellow missile, talons extended.

Vali. Alone.

She was thirty feet up when the Fire Drake set her ablaze. Her scream rent the air, but she didn't waver. At the last second, Finn diverted his blasts, but he was too late.

Vali slammed into him at full speed. They both vanished in an explosion of dust and flame.

Her own distinctive Dragon life energy snuffed out as she hit Finn. My heart—that traitorous thing that refused to lie quiet—gave a great, pulsing wrench as it did so. Such a brave

sacrifice, and as my last link to my brother was extinguished in flame, I flung my head back, and roared.

For just an instant, everything stopped. Even the Fire Drake paused in his barrage.

When the smoke cleared, I saw that the momentum of Vali's dive had blasted a crater straight through to the floor below.

It was then that Isobel uttered a single, thin cry, and shuddered. Her life essence imploded before vaporizing altogether. A burst of red-hued energy swept through all of us.

When Rafael's hand opened, she crumpled to the floor.

The Fire Drake shrieked.

"Go, go, go," urged Sebastian from beneath me.

When I moved, the Fire Drake sent a tsunami of flame at us. Rafael dropped to his knees and screamed as the flames broke through the flickering shield to engulf his hands.

Marcus bellowed in rage and called the lightning down.

The crack of thunder was like the end of the world, shaking the ground and crumbling the walls. The wind howled, and hail pummeled us as a crackling cage of light enveloped the Fire Drake. I heard it shriek again, before another wall of fire obliterated my sight of him.

I curled my head between my front legs to protect my eyes. Panting in pain and holding Fang against his chest, Sebastian regarded me with eyes that spoke.

This is the end, they said.

Dammit. I wasn't going to fucking let that be true. I gritted my teeth, and pushed on as the wind battled the fire, neither winning.

My lids were burned away and re-healed so many times they no longer opened. I navigated by Riley's eyes, the link showing me where I was relative to the others.

We staggered our way through the inferno to the woman I'd sworn would never be my mate.

I really was an idiot.

Then a heavy head butted mine, and it wasn't only Riley's presence that embraced me. Marcus swept me up as well, his relief that we'd reached them nearly overwhelming.

He kept the lightning and hail coming as Riley pushed into the middle of all of us, her smaller Storm Drake steaming in the driving rain. Anna grabbed hold of her wingtip. Talakai had his big arms wrapped around Anna and Matt, and Sebastian had a grip on him. Riley placed a taloned forepaw on Rafael's shoulder.

As Marcus took her tail in his teeth, Riley's voice wailed through my mind.

Mourning the one who would never soar with us again.

Vali...

And with a flash of golden light...

Snap.

50

RILEY



Despite our victory, the atmosphere at the treehouse hung heavy with grief. I sat in the library, embraced by Marcus's strong arms, and watched Cara heal Rafael's hands.

In places, they'd been burned to the bone. If he were human, he'd have lost fingers for sure. Maybe more.

Despite the pain he must be in, Rafael never did anything more than wince.

At the far end of the table, Bess hovered over Sebastian, who was so covered in blood and blackened skin that it was difficult to tell how badly injured he really was. Matt was a mass of sliced skin, and Anna had her hands on him. I hadn't realized she could heal too. I should have, considering Rafael's abilities. She only suffered a few minor burns, as she had been shielded by Rafael.

Bess had worked on Marcus and me. Our Drake scales had repelled most of the onslaught, but not the Fire Drake's flames. Physically, we were now whole, but we both bore scars that would never fully heal.

The arms that held me tensed sporadically as our grief surged. Kiko had a death grip on my hand, her eyes glazed as she stared off into the gathering shadows. She'd only stopped crying because I suspected she'd run out of tears.

Vali.

When I'd first seen the streak of vivid color diving from above, I hadn't recognized her. By the time I realized who it was—

There was nothing any of us could have done. Marcus's mindvoice sounded as exhausted as I felt. She saw the need, and went for it. Even if the fire hadn't caught her—that was a deathstrike. The impact alone would have killed her.

My heart constricted. She'd intended to die?

Part of her was already fucking dead, Dreambit. The Dragon's slow rumble surprised me—it was filled with pain. It died with my brother.

I caught a glimpse of treetops painted with the sun's dying rays. Havoc was sitting somewhere high up, well away from us. And not all of his pain was emotional.

You need Cara's help to heal, I told him.

I am healing on my own. The Watchers have enough damned work to do.

But—

I had Bess heal Fang. She lost a ton of hair; looks fucking hilarious. But we made it. We're watching the moons rise...

The words trailed off, but I caught the merest glimpse of an invitation in them. I sensed Marcus's surprise. That he'd been following along with the exchange became obvious when he pulled me close and lowered his lips to my ear.

“I think the Dragon has had a change of heart. Maybe we should join him.”

Before I could respond to all the innuendos running beneath his words, Ash walked into the library. He had Talakai with him. The assassin Dragon had forgone his own healing and was a bloody mess.

Neither looked like they brought good news. Cara glanced up.

“Has Tyrez organized things?” she asked.

Ash nodded. “He's dispersed most of the army but has retained a group to assess the stronghold. The surveillance flight has confirmed that the place is vacating as fast as anyone can move. He doubts there will be much left to deal with. He

led a team into the damaged section—the coven and Fire Drake are long gone.” He hesitated, and then said, “They have recovered Vali’s remains. There will be a ceremony for her at dawn.”

My heart constricted, but when Cara glanced at him, he added, “The Dragons wish to honor her sacrifice. It will be a Legion ceremony.”

I didn’t know what that meant, but Marcus’s arms tightened. “That’s quite an honor,” he whispered.

“She deserves it,” Kiko choked out.

Talakai swayed restlessly from foot to foot. “The Cryptid council has also ordered us back to the academy.” His gaze moved to Rafael. “The Liberi Elders want to ensure that Rafael is brought into custody.”

I sat up. “What do they mean, brought into custody?”

Ash’s weird gold eyes fastened on me, but his voice was resigned. “His association with Isobel was a lifelong thing...”

“They are afraid of what I can do,” Rafael said softly. His gaze flicked to me, and away again. “And they should be.”

“You killed Isobel.” Cara’s matter-of-fact voice was convincing. “And that will count for much.”

“The Liberi Elders are not known for their logic.” A muscle jumped in Sebastian’s cheek as Bess washed blood away from a deep shoulder gash.

“What will they do to him?” I asked, my heart in my mouth.

Cara’s lips pulled straight. “They’ll want him brought to our home realm, and kept there.”

My mouth dropped open. “Kept? As in jailed?”

“We don’t jail,” Bess said. “But he won’t be able to leave.”

“They tried it with Nikolai.” Cara took hold of Rafael’s arm. “But he was mated. And in all honesty, they can’t contain Nikolai.”

Rafael's gaze remained lowered to the table. "They might find it hard to contain me, too."

Memories of how he'd commanded me sent a chill through my core.

"Isobel managed you," Talakai said. He watched Rafael closely, and he'd stopped swaying.

Rafael looked back at him, and the big Dragon stiffened. I caught a glimpse of glowing silver and gold in Rafael's eyes. "Isobel had the power of the coven and the bloodmagic," he said in a low voice. "But things have changed. *I* have changed." His voice dropped to a husky whisper. "I'm not certain I can be caged, any longer. Although it might be best if I was."

His words fell into a sudden silence, but Cara kept working, her fingers sliding gently over the ravaged flesh of Rafael's hands. "First things first, so let's get you healed. And then we'll take on the cretins trying to rule the world. Okay?"

Rafael didn't answer, but his gaze dropped again to the table.

Frek, Marcus growled in my mind. *This is not good.*

He should fucking run. I hadn't known Havoc was following the action until that moment.

Running solves nothing, I shot to him.

He hesitated, before replying. *Ace used to say that there is a time to run. And a time to fight.*

He'd so rarely referred to his brother, and now he'd done it twice in the last few moments. *You haven't run from anything in your life, except me.* It was a guess, but a pretty good one, I was sure. *Are you going to run?*

I'm not fucking answering that.

I got a glimpse of Fang sitting on his arm, her beady little eyes blinking at him. *She'll bite you if you try it again.*

Yes. Damned Webspinner. But his mindvoice reflected only mild irritation.

“We’ll fight for your bloody freedom,” Anna’s Aussie mate said to Rafael. “You brought down that crazy bitch. No one else could have done that.”

“We will all fight for you.” Marcus tried to sound reassuring.

Havoc growled through our minds. *If they try fucking caging him, they’ll have to deal with me.* I sensed him stand and stretch his barely healed wings.

When a surge of panic pulsed through me, he said, *I will meet you at the academy.*

Where are you going?

I have something I need before we send Vali off. As he took wing, his mindvoice held a weight of emotion that effectively silenced me.

I’ll be back, he sent.

And as Marcus held me close, I let Havoc go.

We gathered on the beach as the sun rose.

It painted the academy walls in rose and gold, and across the meadow, flowers opened their petals to the warm rays.

We had come together to honor one of our own. Vali may not have been at the academy long, but the sadness of those I stood with confirmed that she’d touched the lives of many.

My heart ached for the Dragona who had so bravely given her life for ours. Taking Finn out of the battle had saved us all.

Kiko stood to one side of me, clinging to my arm like a lifeline. Fresh tears streamed down her face, and I was fighting hard to hold mine in check. Marcus had his hands on my shoulders, and his mental warmth wrapped around and supported me.

True to his word, Havoc had met us on the beach. He now stood on my other side, close enough that I felt his body heat.

Although my heart ached for the reason, it felt right to be standing like this, with them.

Students and instructors alike spread out across the sand. Near the water rested a platform with Vali's remains wrapped in fabric. It was heaped with wildflowers that Kiko and I had helped pick. Long ropes draped over each corner.

Cara came and placed a tiny sculpture of a Dragon next to the remains. I contributed my phone, which contained all the books I particularly loved. Kiko laid a couple of chocolate bars amid the flowers—I noticed one had a few bites taken out of it.

And then, to my shock, Havoc stepped forward. He placed a stone beside the sculpture. The dark rock had a vein running through it that shone golden in the dawn's early rays. It was a pretty thing, and very unlike Havoc to have collected it.

Marcus was following my thoughts and leaned close. "I think that might have belonged to Ace."

Marcus's hands tightened on my shoulders, but he didn't speak as Havoc rejoined us. When no one else approached, four of the Legion's largest Dragons dropped to pick up the ropes, and they lifted the platform into the sky.

Rafael stood apart from us all. Alone. Not even once looking our way. But not far behind him stood a group of Bellatis assigned to guard him.

My heart constricted when a few hundred mini paper lanterns were released. They floated up and up—like a cluster of stars against the dawn.

Just over the water, a thousand tiny, coordinated fairies danced. The light that glowed from them created shapes that shifted as if we watched a movie—of a Dragon flying, and then, falling...

When they dispersed, a phalanx of Dragons dropped from the gold-streaked clouds, opened their jaws, and lit not only the lanterns but also the platform suspended from their brethren.

The sky was painted in flames that fell to the water below.
A fitting tribute for a Dragona.

With the sun rising above the distant mountains, I wept as I
said my goodbyes.

RAFAEL



I walked along the path beside the lake and did my best to ignore the Bellati trailing in my wake.

If the Elders had possessed any idea of just how easily I could control him, they would have never let me leave the academy building. Cara had known, and Anna, too. In fact, everyone who'd gone on our escapade to end Isobel knew how pointless it was to assign me a single Bellati guard.

But the protests of a fan club I didn't deserve had convinced the Liberi Elders that Nikolai's power had ended Isobel—I was just part of the conduit. So, after debriefing me, they'd let me roam while they considered my fate.

Cara and Bess were still in the meeting room. The council reps and the Elders were livid that we'd killed Isobel. They'd wanted her brought to trial.

If we'd tried that, we'd all be dead. I'd told them that, but they didn't believe me.

But while the Liberi Elders were not happy, they were not stupid, either. The academy students and staff were celebrating Isobel's death as a major win. And along with it came the demand to reinstate Cara.

I've never seen such a sour expression on a Liberi female. But the councilwoman had agreed that perhaps they'd been premature in dismissing Cara.

It pleased me that my new Watcher friend would not bear the brunt of their wrath. As I walked, I noticed that the bench along the lake was full—all three Hitzus were upon it, tails

entwined and sitting so close to each other I couldn't tell for certain where one began and the other ended. Their relief and joy noticeable.

I nodded to them as I passed. They glared back. Did they know I'd been part of what had happened? Perhaps expressing gratitude was not a natural thing for a Hitzu. Jinsic had been openly critical of Vali for "dumping him and the Satyr in the city and taking off" as he put it.

Never mind that the Dragona's sacrifice had saved the rest of us. He'd seemed genuinely surprised when Riley threatened to Jump him into the closest sun.

I was surprised the Hitzus were still here. They had made it clear they wouldn't be continuing on at the academy. Team Centaur would have to limp along without them.

I didn't even know where Riley, Marcus, or Havoc were. They'd been debriefed early on and had left before me. I'd half-expected, half-hoped, that they would wait for me until I was released. That they'd try to talk me out of running.

But they were gone. Although my heart ached as though pieces of it had been torn away, I told myself that I was relieved. I couldn't be part of them. The reasons had only grown, not diminished.

I was now so much more than what I'd been. Not Nikolai status, perhaps. But the Satyr and Liberi had combined within me to produce something particularly deadly.

The best I could do was confine myself to feeding off the rancid predators of the underworld. To continue to contribute, while still remaining free. And to stay away from those I loved, to protect them from what I had become.

Whatever the future held in store for me, I must walk it alone. No matter how my shattered heart bled.

I approached the gate, and the trailing Bellati closed the gap. With resignation, I let him catch up, infused my voice with power, and said, "Wait here."

Compelling a Bellati used to be beyond me, but now—Nikolai's power had reshaped something deep inside. The

Bellati's eyes glazed over, and he nodded.

It bothered me that I was only reinforcing the Elder's concerns, but I had no doubt that if I stayed here any longer, they would take me back to their home realm and keep me there.

Couldn't blame them. But I wasn't about to oblige them, either.

The Bellati at the gate stood a little straighter as I drew near.

"Have you heard if they are finalizing Cara's exile from the academy?" he asked. "I'm stuck out here, and want to know."

"They are reinstating her," I said.

The Bellati's face reflected his relief. "They'd be crazy to exile her permanently. Half the instructors would walk. Over half, really. Not to mention that she managed to pull off finishing Isobel pretty much on her own."

"Cara is an integral part of this academy." I smiled at him. "I need a break from the meetings. Thought I would visit the market this morning."

The Bellati shook his head. "Sorry. No one is allowed through until the sessions are over. My instructions were clear on that."

"You will let me through," I said. "And then you will forget I was here."

His eyes grew unfocused, and he keyed the gate open.

I clutched the crystal in my pocket.

"Hello, Rafael."

I turned, and there she was. Riley, her eyes glowing gold from having just Jumped. She smiled up at me, and before I could stop her, she wrapped her hand around mine.

And the world dissolved in white noise.

Snap.

When the golden light cleared, I was standing in a cave.

The huge space had no noticeable entrance, and phosphorescent growth on the walls lit up the interior. Behind me, water lapped upon a graveled beach—by the scent, ocean, not lake.

I stared down at Riley as the gold faded from the air, and from her eyes. “Where have you brought me?” I asked.

The water erupted as a familiar red Dragon rose from the waves. Marcus clung to the spikes on his back, and as I stared, he stabbed down into the water with a long sword.

“Frek, Havoc, you almost fed me to the *fucking* eels!”

Havoc snorted water from his nose as he waded awkwardly out of the water. My pulse hammered. The fact the four of us were in an isolated location alarmed me. What was Riley up to?

Three packs hung from the big Dragon’s foreclaws, and he set them down on the gravel.

Riley crossed her arms and regarded Marcus. “Frek and fuck in one sentence. Impressive.”

Marcus slid off the Dragon’s back. He pulled a large pack off his shoulders and proceeded to undo a number of fastenings designed to make it waterproof. Once opened, he triumphantly held up a candle.

I raised a brow. “Very nice. But we don’t seem to have any shortage of light.”

“These, my friend”—Marcus smiled—“are not ordinary candles.”

“It is wax and has a wick.” Riley rolled her eyes. “Looks like an ordinary candle.”

“Okay. The candles are ordinary. But what we are using them for is not.” Marcus upended the pack, and a bunch of

things fell out. More candles, in different sizes and colors. Wherever they'd gone shopping, they must have cleaned them out. At the bottom of the pack was a bottle, which he caught before it could shatter on the gravel.

"Don't break the booze, idiot," Havoc grumbled. He'd shifted back to human while Marcus rooted through the pack.

"What the hell is booze?" Marcus raised a brow.

"Alcohol," Riley provided. "I'm surprised Havoc knows that."

"Not much to do on some missions except drink," the red Dragon stated. "And talk about drinking."

"Well, it's not booze," Marcus corrected him. "It's for the ceremony."

Ceremony? My mouth opened to ask, but then closed again.

"Not much good if it isn't for getting drunk." Havoc bent and started rooting through the other packs, pulling out bolts of cloth and packages of food. He regarded the last with disgust. "Don't see what's wrong with eel."

"Nothing. In fact, feel free to catch one." Marcus was almost jovial. I'd never seen him like this. When he flashed a smile, my heart almost melted. I swallowed and turned to Riley.

She was so beautiful she made me ache. The perfect match for Marcus. "Why am I here?" I asked.

Her green-rimmed gaze regarded me soberly. "We want you here. Marcus and Havoc and I are mated now. Marcus wants to cement the bond with a traditional Centaur ceremony."

It was like being kicked in the gut by a Dragon. I struggled to breathe. "I can't be part of this," I husked.

Riley's eyes were suspiciously bright. "I know. But you were fated to be ours, Rafael. And even if you can't join the bond, I would be honored if you celebrated with us."

I cast my gaze around the cave. “I don’t see an exit. Do I really have a choice in this?” I did, of course. I could command them to take me out of here.

But if I did that—it would truly be the end.

She swallowed, and there was no longer any doubt that there were tears in her eyes. Tears, and the knowledge that she knew all too well that they couldn’t hold me if I truly wanted to go. “If you really want to leave, Havoc will take you out of here,” she said softly. “He told me you wouldn’t stay.” She looked down at the ground. “I almost didn’t find you—Tareal told me you’d gone through the gate, and the Bellati guard had no idea what I was talking about. So I had to Jump back in time to find you.”

I had no memory of going through the gate at all. She must really want me here. “You should have let me go,” I whispered.

She took my hand and stroked the scars. A spider tracing of raised, silver lines ran along my fingers and the back of my hands. Her touch sent electric zings clear through me as she met my eyes.

Riley used her free hand to pull her hair back along her temple—to reveal a similar, raised series of lines extending back into her hair.

“We are more alike than you know,” she said. “Please, Rafael. Stay. Afterward, you can go, we won’t stop you.”

Did she know what she was asking? But with those beautiful eyes pleading with me, how could I say no?

I looked at Marcus, who now stood frozen, watching. His arms were filled with candles.

“How can I help?” I asked.

He grinned, a flash of white teeth against brown skin, and transferred some candles to me. He gestured to the gravel. “Put them in a circle first, about thirty feet around. So about every six feet or so. And then you can put them on the rocks near the circle until you run out.”

I sighed and started putting them in place.

Havoc stared down at Fang, who seemed to be sampling something on the nearby boulder. She dipped her little legs in, and then carried bits to her mouth.

“She likes nutbutter,” the Dragon shifter said in surprise. “All this time I’ve been catching fucking bugs for her, and all I had to do was pick up some nutbutter.”

Marcus handed him an armful of cloth.

“What the fucking hell do I do with this?” Havoc growled.

“Part of the ceremony involves kneeling,” Marcus explained.

“You too big a baby to fucking kneel on gravel?” The Dragon rumbled.

“I would like some cushion for my knees.” Riley took some candles from me.

“Put the cloth in the center.” Marcus stooped to pick up one of the other packs—only it wasn’t a pack, so much as a package. When he unwrapped it, it revealed a set of small drums and a shiny pouch. “Pile the layers, make it nice and soft.”

Havoc stared at him. “I am not nesting.”

Marcus rolled his eyes. “Just pile the freking cloth, Havoc.”

The Dragon cast a long look at the food. “I could put the grub out instead.”

Marcus snorted a laugh. “Forget that. You’ll eat it all. Stick with nesting.”

Havoc snarled and stomped to the center of the circle, where he started tossing the cloth around.

“Throw me the blue piece,” Marcus told him after setting the drums down nearby.

“Why?”

“Just toss it to me, will you?”

The Dragon growled, very low. But he picked up the blue cloth and tossed it to Marcus.

“They still don’t really get along,” I whispered to Riley as I handed her more candles.

She grinned at me. “You should hear what’s going on in my head. For every sentence they say out loud, there are at least three along the link.”

I raised a brow. “Do I want to know?”

She shook her head. “Let’s just say I am picking up profanity I had no idea existed.”

Marcus stomped closer to where the ocean lapped over the cave’s inner beach, and pointed to a stretch of gravel beyond it. “I need your Dragon to dig here.”

Havoc straightened. “What the fucking hell for?”

“We need a bathing pool,” he replied.

The Dragon shifter pointed to the water. “We have one.”

“We need one minus the freking carnivorous eels.”

Havoc snorted steam, but a few minutes later he’d shifted to his beast and was digging. When he’d gone down about a foot, the water started flowing into the hole. Filtered by the gravel, it was crystal-clear.

“Nice,” Marcus said. “Keep going.”

The look Havoc shot him could have fried eggs, but Marcus ignored him. While the Dragon resumed digging, Marcus gathered together four long sections of wood from a pile along the cavern wall. He used rocks to hold them steady, and draped the blue cloth between them to form a canopy over the nest piled by Havoc. Then he fussed with that too.

“Goods enough for you?” Havoc stepped back to survey his handiwork. Marcus stomped over to him and held up a stick that he’d wrapped a scrap of cloth around.

“Light, please,” he said.

Havoc glowered at him before he breathed a gout of flame that, along with his torch, almost set Marcus alight. The two glared at each other, and Riley grimaced at me while rubbing her temple.

“Now unless you want to experience shrinkage at a key moment,” Marcus said, “I suggest you breathe fire on the pool, too.”

Havoc growled, but he pointed his snout to the water, and opened his jaws. The flames that issued from it had the water steaming in moments. He broke off to lift a lip, before saying, “Goods enough?”

Marcus nodded. “Perfect.”

“I’m so happy.” Havoc hissed.

Despite the apparent hostility, I sensed a connection between the two men that hadn’t existed before. And the glances they shot to Riley—full of longing and lust and a sense of anticipation—set my own body on fire. She was clearly the center of their world.

Working alongside the three of them, I felt part of it, and yet, apart. My heart ached, but what worried me was that my scent had intensified. The cave was large, but without much air movement—the enclosed space would fill with my pheromones.

Riley had paused in her placing of a candle, and Marcus came from behind to wrap his arms around her.

“She’d be happy for us,” he said, and I realized they were talking about Vali.

Riley placed her hands and arms over his. “I know. I just wish... I miss her.”

When Marcus tightened his arms and placed a tender kiss on Riley’s neck, the depth of their emotion threatened to unhinge me. Being here was a bad idea on so many levels. I needed to be gone, to make a clean break. But as Riley pattered happily alongside me, I just couldn’t do it. Couldn’t stand to see her expression when I told her I’d changed my mind and had to go.

So I continued, placing candles on every flat surface I could find, including the rocks that Havoc, under Marcus's direction, moved to frame the bathing pool. Marcus then drifted around, lighting candles with his torch.

When he went very still, I looked up from balancing my candle on a little pile of gravel. Havoc had moved to a flat stone along one wall—it appeared to have a collection of smaller rocks on it. The Dragon gathered up a number of them in his taloned fingers, picking and choosing. When he turned to hobble awkwardly back to the bathing pool, rocks clutched to his chest, Marcus said, “You don't have to do that.”

Havoc didn't answer at first, placing the small stones with surprising dexterity around the bathing pool. They reflected jewel-like tones in the candlelight, projecting prisms of color. Finally, he said, “I wants to.”

With them added to the lit candles, the cave suddenly took on a magical appearance. Even Havoc's spirits seemed to lighten.

“Okays,” the big Dragon said. “So nows what?”

Marcus finished fussing with the cloth and pulled a large bowl from the last pack, along with some filmy white garments and a small bottle of blue liquid. “Now, we wash in the ceremonial water, and then get dressed.”

Havoc arched a brow. “Woulds haves preferred booze?”

Marcus frowned at him as he bent to fill the bowl from the pool. He then moved a couple of candles aside to position it on a boulder, before opening the bottle and splashing a few drops into the water.

A fragrance wafted to me, floral and spicy and not at all familiar.

“Jinga flower,” Marcus said. “Grown for its blooms, but also for ceremonies.”

Havoc's nostrils flared and his eyes narrowed before he turned and waded into the ocean.

“If you come across an eel, we can steam it later,” Marcus called after him. He turned to me and Riley. “Just as well. He was kind of dirty after all that digging.”

I glanced at the pool. “We aren’t using that?”

“That”—Marcus wagged his brows—“is for the ceremony.” He held up bits of filmy white clothing. “As are these.”

“Not much to them,” I noted nervously.

Havoc surfaced from the water and jetted a stream of it at Marcus. Riley laughed. When I raised a brow, she said, “Havoc just accused Marcus of wanting to freeball.”

I stared, and she grinned. “Guess you had to be there.”

She turned away to examine the bit of clothing Marcus held out to her, so she didn’t witness my face spasm when my heart insisted on breaking free, for just an instant. But my scent spiked ferociously, and Marcus’s gaze fixed on me before he handed me my own sampling of white.

“Pants for us guys,” he explained. “Centaur actually only wear vests during the ceremony, so I made do with what I could find.” When I hesitated, he stated, “Witnesses wash too. This is about ceremony, rather than cleanliness.”

Riley held her two pieces up—a vest with a flowing skirt. “Guess I should be grateful for the vest, then.”

I certainly was. This entire thing was quickly getting out of hand. The Satyr in me was already drooling in anticipation, and I was sure the entire cave reeked of me.

And that was dangerous.

Marcus had already reduced himself to just his pants and was standing before the basin. “Head and heart must be cleansed of the past.” It was a recited chant, but also musical.

Riley watched with light in her eyes as he washed first his face, and then his chest with the scented water. As the fluid cascaded down his chest and abdomen, tracing every rock-hard contour, she swallowed. The energy spiking off her wasn’t exactly chaste.

Marcus dumped the basin and refilled it for her, adding the scent. When she stripped off her tee shirt and stood there in her bra, I tried to look away—but my eyes remained fixed on her.

“Head and heart,” Marcus repeated softly, standing beside her as the water spilled over the upper curve of her breasts, glistening in the candlelight.

I ripped my eyes away as I removed my tunic. I shouldn’t have stayed. I should have run as far and as fast as I could.

Riley backed away from the bowl as Marcus prepared it for me. My hands trembled as I picked up the cloth and dipped it in the water. He murmured the words as I washed, the water cold, the scent filling my nostrils.

When I next looked up, Riley was staring at me. For an instant, her green-rimmed gaze blazed with something raw and primal. Then she blinked and picked up her clothes.

I turned away as she started to strip. Havoc emerged from the ocean and shifted to human. Marcus refilled the bowl a final time and held the cloth to Havoc.

“It stinks,” the Dragon complained.

“You afraid of smelling like a flower?” Marcus raised a brow in a clear challenge.

Havoc growled and snatched the cloth from him.

“Head and heart,” Marcus said, only this time it was more an instruction than a ceremonial chant.

Havoc touched the cloth to both places. When Marcus handed him his pants, he growled again.

“Havoc,” chided Riley.

The Dragon sighed, and took them. Then abruptly dropped all the scales off his body to put them on.

The flash of muscled butt had me searching desperately for a screen of any kind—the best I could do was a waist-high boulder. I tucked myself in behind it and carefully unlaced and

pulled off my breeches. The white pants were too loose to bind and too tight to hide the state I was in.

When I emerged with hands semi-casually placed—as though that had a hope in hell of succeeding—I couldn't help but notice that both Marcus and Havoc had similar issues to my own. Were my pheromones affecting them, even though they were male? The scent was so strong...

They weren't looking at me. I followed their gazes, and saw Riley.

She was—luminescent—now in her vest and skirt, and so gorgeous that I stopped dead and stared. The vest was not a vest. It was a low-cut bustier that pushed and held the creamy globes of her breasts elevated, and left her lower abdomen bare. The skirt was fitted to hang low over her hips, exposing the delicate curve of her lower belly.

I was gobsmacked, and when she smiled at me—no hands were ever going to adequately cover my reaction to her.

Run, run, run. The chant began in my head, and continued in rhythm to my heart, but it was already far too late.

I wasn't going anywhere.

I was trapped in a cave with everything I'd ever desired.

And my desire could kill.

RILEY



The lust reverberating along the link between Marcus, Havoc, and me made it difficult to focus on the task at hand.

Saving Rafael.

Even just conversing aloud with Havoc and Marcus, keeping my tone upbeat and relaxed, was difficult. Everything hinged on us. Because Cara's parting words, as we'd left on our mission, echoed through my head and heart.

The Liberi Elders will never let him go. If he runs, they will pursue him to the ends of the realms. And then they'll cage him, like the mongrel beast they think he is.

I'd seen Rafael's true heart—he'd saved Marcus twice, and Havoc, too. But I'd personally experienced his power, and I'd be blind to not acknowledge he teetered on the edge of darkness.

He was raised by Isobel, Marcus said. He held the animals and Iskar frozen while Isobel drained them. Commanded me, and Havoc, too. Enslaved Havoc. Helped Isobel torture the other Centaurs, even as he tried to heal them. Those are only the things I know about, I am sure there is more. He paused. *I think his power has grown, and only time will tell which side of him will win.*

My heart knew the truth—that we had one chance to save him. If he walked away from the mate bond, his life would be forever spent running.

And if he ever decided to fight instead—

I shuddered at the thought.

This will work. A warm reassurance came with the words, as though Marcus had folded his arms around me. He was always coming up with ways to translate a mental link into physical sensation.

I hoped with all my heart that he was right. Certainly the scent coming off Rafael was enough to give a dead man a hard-on. Fuck. It had my body burning to wrap itself around him.

Like we needed any help in that category, Marcus added. I glanced over to him—his white pants rode low on his hips and strained to hold what pushed against them.

I've never needed that kind of help, Havoc growled. *It's all I can do to not hump a boulder. I've been beating off since the battle, and it's not fucking helping.* He now wore identical pants to Marcus's, and had similar issues.

Kiko would be in her glory. *Steady, boys,* I said. *We have all our lives. This is about Rafael.*

Fucking hell. Tell that to my dick, the red Dragon grouched. *I'm a dirty thought away from wrecking these pants. Must be the bloody Satyr vibes.*

You're always a horny bastard. Marcus picked up the drums and moved to a boulder near the canopy.

Are you going to sing? I asked.

Please tell me you aren't going to fucking sing, Havoc rumbled.

The golden sunbursts in Marcus's eyes gleamed. He didn't answer me, but rather gestured to Rafael, who was just emerging from the boulder he'd changed behind. "Rafael, stand here with me. Havoc, stay with Riley, right about there."

I took my Dragon shifter's arm and moved him to where Marcus indicated. But my pulse pounded, because Rafael, in low-hung white pants and nothing else, was heart-stoppingly beautiful.

Men aren't beautiful, Marcus said.

Well, he is, I stated. And, he was. His hair hung over his shoulders to almost his waist, as long as Havoc's, but with a mixture of browns and golds that shimmered in the candlelight. He moved gracefully, his muscles hugging close to his frame, well-developed and defined, but not heavy like a Dragon's. A dancer's body. Or a runner's.

No, I told myself. He'd not be a runner. I would make sure of it.

His expression was difficult to read, the features so perfect they could be an artist's rendition of a Fae soldier, rather than a living, breathing man. I couldn't catch his full gaze. He was definitely avoiding looking at me. But despite strategic positioning of his hands, the pants disguised nothing.

Step one achieved, Marcus commented. *Good to know I'm not the only one in a state.*

You're not the only one in a fucking state, growled Havoc. *Can we get on with this?*

As Marcus started to drum, I saw Fang scurry to a nearby boulder. The Webspinner stood on top, and swayed to the beat, tapping the rock with her fuzzy little feet.

The beat—trust a Centaur to know how to hook into my heart, and take it for a ride. The drums at first trotted, and then picked up a gallop rhythm.

Then Marcus started to sing. And everything—the cave, Havoc, Rafael—vanished as the melody wove around me, and sucked me in.

Because I might not be able to understand the words, but I knew without a doubt it was a love song. Every note in his voice, and the way his eyes fastened on me and never moved away, zinged through my core.

If that hadn't been enough of an indication—the link between us lit up with a surge of desire that brought tears to my eyes and had Havoc rocking from foot to foot, as though he had no idea what to do with it. But he moved closer and a bit behind me, his hard body brushing against mine.

The song wove our hearts and souls together, linking the three of us with a tether that grew ever stronger—and then reached for the fourth. Who didn't seem to respond—but his scent, compelling and powerful, wafted off him.

I raised my eyes from where Marcus sat, to Rafael.

His eyes were glowing. One silver, the other gold. They locked onto me, and didn't look away.

He was trembling. I could see it, even from where I stood. Close, so close to the edge.

I needed to push him over.

I turned to Havoc, reached a hand up to his face, and danced my fingers along his jaw. His metallic copper eyes gleamed before he bent and kissed me.

A powerful pulse of pure lust swept along the link. I tensed a little, unsure of what Marcus would think. His initial reaction to Havoc and me had been so intense.

Havoc had something to say. *I was with you, Dreambit, when Marcus screwed your brains out.*

You were? Marcus's voice faltered just a bit.

Yeah, dammit.

Did you pick up tips? Marcus's eyes had gone very dark, and scales erupted over his cheekbones.

Watch and learn, growled the Dragon. His mindvoice was thick with passion, and Marcus's tone roughened as he continued his melody. I had no idea how he managed to keep singing at all, but the lust running through him added impact to every word, until I was shivering with the power of it.

Havoc's lips were warm, and the tongue he brushed against my own encouraged me to nibble. A strong arm swept me closer. His dick was so hard it quivered when pushed against my belly. I slipped a hand between us, and stroked him through the thin fabric.

He groaned, long and low, and I heard an echo of it in Marcus's voice. His arms had scales now, too, and I was

acutely aware of Rafael, standing rigid beside him. The scent coming off him had me panting.

Close. So close.

Havoc's fingers played with my bustier laces, teasing the top two ties loose. My breasts threatened to burst free from the confinement. Havoc palmed them, his breath hitching.

With a sharp exhalation, Marcus stopped singing and rose, coming up behind me. *She likes this*, he said, as his arms came around, sliding beneath my breasts while the thumbs flicked over the fabric, causing my nipples to tent against it.

Electric zings passed straight through to my core, and I moaned. Pinned between the two of them, I found myself gasping for air.

Once does not make you an expert, complained Havoc. But his eyes glowed as he watched Marcus, and his dick pulsed beneath my hand.

Well, there were the dreams, hedged Marcus.

I looked over to Rafael, just in time to see him take a step away. His eyes glowed, but I saw the panic in them.

I broke away from Havoc and Marcus, walked toward Rafael, and stopped when he took another step back.

"I shouldn't be here," he whispered.

"You are exactly where you should be," I said.

He shook his head so violently that his hair flew outward. "No. I could kill you all. I need to leave."

I sensed the heat of the other two as they came up behind me. "Do you believe in Fate?" Marcus asked, his voice husky. "Because not long ago, I didn't. Not really."

"I thought I wanted to be free," Havoc said. "I thought what Fate wanted for me was nothing more than another prison. I was wrong."

Rafael's panicked gaze drifted between the three of us. "Why does it matter what I believe? Nothing can change what

I am.” He swallowed. “I’m afraid of what I will do once triggered.”

I took another step closer, and this time, his reluctance brought him against the cave wall. “We are different from the others, Rafael.”

He held up a finger. “No, you aren’t.”

“Yes, we are. We are the mates Fate had chosen for you.” Another step. I was almost within touching distance now. But the despair in his eyes twisted something inside me.

“Fate has been a cruel mistress,” he whispered. “She has never been my friend.”

“That wasn’t Fate,” I said. “That was Isobel.” I took the final step. For a second, I thought he would slide away along the wall, but although he trembled, he held his ground.

I took his hand. “Isobel is dead. She cannot torment you anymore. But if you walk from us, you will never know what could have been possible.”

“I could kill you.” His words projected as near-soundless breaths.

“If it seems like that is going to happen, we will stop.”

His expressive lips twisted. “If you really think you can stop, once I unleash, you know nothing.”

“We all have beasts we must conquer, Rafael,” Marcus said softly. “I have learned that some roads should not be walked alone.”

“Can we get to the fucking now?” Havoc growled. “I’ve had sword wounds that hurt less than this.”

I thought Rafael’s eyes were intense before, but now they flashed silver and gold fire. It was the answer I’d been waiting for—I reached up and pulled him down for a kiss.

For just a moment, his lips were stiff, unresponsive. Then he shuddered, and let it go.

My entire body tightened as a result of the scent that flooded over us, and I heard Havoc gasp, and then growl.

“Fuuuuck.”

Marcus captured my hand and towed Rafael and me toward the bathing pool. “In,” he commanded, his voice hoarse.

Havoc’s growl had become a continuous rumble as he waded in. Rafael’s clever fingers were at my waist, and the skirt slipped away, leaving me in only my panties and bustier. His long fingers slid along my thighs, ten trails of fire over my skin.

The water was pleasantly warm, and I slid into it backward, pulling Rafael with me. Nothing was going to make me let go—he belonged with us.

I just had to prove it.

The water rose just past my waist. Marcus moved up beside me, and I immediately appreciated the side benefits of white fabric when wet.

“Ooh, yeah,” I purred. “See-through pants.”

Rafael dipped cupped hands into the water, and dribbled the results over my bustier. Which obliged him nicely, my breasts pushing up against the transparent fabric. He uttered a low sound in his throat before he gathered me against him and sank into the water.

While one arm held me, the fingers of the other glided up along the inside of my thigh and pushed my panties aside. A millisecond later, I arched up as they slipped and slid over that most sensitive nub, before dipping inside to stroke.

I writhed, my breath coming in short, harsh pants. My nose was against his chest, and as I breathed in the delicious scent of him, I tightened helplessly around his fingers.

“Fucking hell,” Havoc groaned. He already had his pants pushed down, and his hand wrapped around the thick shaft of his dick—an image guaranteed to send heat flooding through me.

I squirmed away from Rafael’s teasing hand and rotated in his arms so that I sat in his lap. He nibbled on my neck while

Havoc's hands drifted up along my calves. His copper eyes narrowed as I spread my legs, and Rafael slid his hands beneath my hips, lifting me—

The water made it easy. Havoc moved between my legs, hooked a taloned finger into my panties, and ripped them away. Then, with a guttural groan, slid himself home.

I moaned, caught up in a three-way link between him, and me, and Marcus, who was yanking hard on his balls to keep himself from losing it entirely. Havoc's big hands lifted my thighs with every exquisite thrust. Rafael moved his fingers to my breasts, and began to tease my nipples through the fabric while, one slow step at a time, undoing the bustier.

Something raced along the link. Faint images flashed through my mind—of me, and my life. Coming from Rafael.

“Do you feel it?” he murmured in my ear. “It's feeding. You're so delicious—and it wants more.”

I lifted a hand back to stroke his face, and tilted my head to accept a kiss. “Let it run free,” I murmured. “We have to know what you can do.”

He hesitated, and then the flood of pure lust came with an intensification of his scent, and along with it—questing tendrils. Reaching eagerly for what we had to offer.

“Yes,” I purred. “Let it go, Rafael.”

“You are all mine.” Rafael's voice rang with a power that resonated through us. He groaned, and shifted beneath me, moving so he ran his tongue along my throat, and then up beneath my ear. Fingers had loosened the bustier enough to slide beneath it, where they began to pinch and pull at my nipples. His other hand slipped down to where Havoc swelled within me, and rubbed and swirled...

I arched beneath him, racing toward an edge I longed for, as the images, now more powerful, raced through my mind.

“Not yet.” Rafael's voice resonated through me. “Pull out, Havoc.”

Havoc snarled—but then, to my amazement, he obeyed. It wasn't easy, he was so swollen, so ready. And I tried to hold onto him, rubbing myself on his body, wanting him. Marcus cursed and yanked harder on his balls, eyes rolling in his head as he barely withstood the urge.

Through it all, I felt Rafael *feeding*. Drawing from us. The images I sensed from him were no longer just from my life. But from Marcus's and Havoc's, too.

My Centaur appeared beside Havoc. His eyes were flaring white, and the dark scales had erupted everywhere I looked.

“There's only so much a guy can take.” He pushed the Dragon aside. “Your turn to be a voyeur.”

“A what?” Havoc's lips peeled back to reveal teeth with very large canines.

“To watch,” Marcus clarified.

“No fucking way. I'm going to explode.”

“No, you're not.” Rafael's eyes were blazing, and Havoc uttered a sound I'd never heard him make—a growling whimper.

Rafael looked at me. “Turn over.”

Marcus's hands on my hips encouraged the turn, and I flipped over. Rafael tugged his wet pants down over his rigid dick. He didn't have to say anything—I was eager to get my hands on him. My fingers wrapped around his length.

And I issued a command of my own. “Up.”

His breath hissed between his teeth as I used my unique handle to lift him until he was seated on the edge of the pond, and then, I lowered my lips to him.

The sound that emerged as I laved him with my hot, wet tongue sent a thrill straight through me, and I arched my hips toward Marcus.

“Fuck. Yesss,” he said.

You're speaking my language, I mentally purred to him, as my mouth was otherwise occupied. I wiggled my hips in

invitation.

With an incoherent curse, he took me. Tried to do it gently, but I pushed backward, demanding. Wrapped in the Satyr's pheromones, he lost all control. I moaned around Rafael as Marcus hit every zone I possessed. Then he started to rotate, rubbing those delicious scales against me—and it robbed me of much-needed breath.

Rafael had his hands buried in my hair, guiding my movements. When I glanced upward, his eyes were glowing, but also glazed, as if he were lost in sensation. What came from him now was a chaotic collage of flashed memories.

Havoc leaned back against the pool's side, erect and still quivering. When he reached to ease his turmoil, Rafael held up a finger.

“No,” he said.

His copper eyes ignited. “No one says ‘no’ to me.”

“I do.” Rafael lowered his finger.

Havoc closed his eyes, but his lips were curled in a snarl, and his hand fell to his side.

Meanwhile, Marcus's movements sent little waves cascading over the edge of the pool to lap at my chin and Rafael's balls. Rafael groaned again, long and low, and thrust into my mouth as Marcus's scales rubbed and circled against me, and I uttered another helpless, incoherent sound.

That's it, Wiley. I want to hear you howl.

I was close to that, as well as much more, all while being effectively silenced. And squirming. And arching my butt so high I was almost bent in two.

Marcus leaned his hard body over me and wrapped his big hands beneath my breasts, flicking my nipples...

Holy freaking fuck. My body tightened around him, and his dick kicked deep inside me—

“No,” Rafael said. “Not yet. Wait.”

“What?” I growled around him, poised on the edge of orgasmic oblivion.

“Frek.” Marcus wasn’t faring much better.

“Pull out.” Rafael told him.

It wasn’t a request, but this time the words had an undercurrent of desperation to them. His eyes glowed. As I gazed deep, I saw a flicker of something other than physical anguish.

As my mind struggled to connect the dots, my body ached for culmination. Marcus froze—but his dick was still kicking like a mule inside me, threatening to take me there despite Rafael. Then, with a shudder, he backed away.

“Nice to know I’m not the only one about to die when my balls explode,” hissed Havoc.

In my peripheral vision, I noted that the black scales had expanded across Marcus’s chest. Rafael reached to lay a hand on his arm. “You have to wait as well,” he said, his voice resonating with power. And to my amazement, the scales retreated.

Fuck. The Storm Drake too?

“Stand with us.” Rafael’s eyes closed when he gestured to Marcus and Havoc. “If you so desire, you may touch yourselves.”

Both men immediately put hands to their rigid selves and began to stroke.

“Slowly,” Rafael commanded. “Don’t come until I tell you.”

Havoc’s snarl promised vengeance, and Marcus’s breath sputtered through his clenched teeth.

Rafael’s scent swirled around us. Utterly and completely intoxicating, it struck right to the heart of who and what I was—and all my body wanted to do was submit. But something was wrong...

A chittering sound drew my attention to Fang. The Webspinner hopped up and down on her boulder, waving her little legs in warning.

My eyes snapped back to Rafael, and when I saw the pain in them, things finally clicked in my brain. A test. What the fuck. Rafael was *testing* us. If I caved, he would never trust that he couldn't go too far.

I couldn't let him control me. Reaching for a strength I didn't know I possessed, I sat up, leaving Rafael as high, if not as dry, as the other two.

His eyes flashed. "You're not done."

"I'm your *mate*, not your whore."

His scent spiked again, but I gritted my teeth, grabbed him by the hips, and pulled him down into the water.

He resisted until I shifted my grip to something more sensitive. Then he followed me, but his eyes were locked on my face. And I saw the first glimmer of hope.

Resist him, guys. He needs to know we can.

Do you think my balls would be busting at the seams if I could? grumbled Havoc. He was barely touching himself in an effort to hold back.

We have to do it together, Marcus guessed, but his mindvoice was strained.

The rightness of that spoke to me. *He will yield, if we unite.*

I crawled onto Rafael's lap and poised myself above his rigid flesh. "You are all mine," I said. "And I always get what I want."

"Then mount me." His voice was hoarse, but still had the aura of command to it.

"When I'm ready." I lowered myself only enough to tease. Rafael's hands shifted to my hips, trying to push me down.

A wave washed over us as Marcus moved to stand behind me. He grabbed Rafael's hands and pulled them away. "Let

her go,” he said.

“No,” Rafael replied.

“Yes”—I pulled myself away from the part of him that so desperately wanted me—“or you’ll get nothing.”

“You know I could make you,” he ground out.

“Go ahead and try.”

He inhaled. “You are everything I’ve ever wanted.” His voice was hardly more than a whisper. “But I can never have you alone.” His words took on an urgency that spoke to the truth. “Never alone.”

I sensed his panic. Safety against his power was a numbers game.

“Never alone,” I acknowledged, and then I stood up, turned around, arched my back, and lowered myself until I touched his burgeoning head. He exhaled hard, and his hands tightened again on my hips, but this time, he did not try to force me.

Come to us, Havoc.

You touch me, and I’ll go off like a fucking rocket. But he moved closer. The water barely came to his thighs, and the sight of him wading through it, dick glistening as it extended above the pool, made my mouth water.

I pushed down onto Rafael, he gasped and shuddered. Both Marcus’s and Havoc’s dicks instantly twitched, as though they were the ones sliding inside me. I reached for Marcus, and closed my lips around him.

Rafael arced up beneath me. I sensed his power pulling from us, and we let it go, freely. His head fell back, the sounds coming through his gritted teeth sent electric zings straight through me. Then he leaned forward, and his hands reached for my breasts, pushing the loosened bustier aside. His clever fingers tweaked my nipples, sending bolts of lightning straight through to my core, until my inner muscles began to spasm.

I wasn’t going to last long, he’d brought us so close to the edge already. I rose and fell, sliding him in and out, adding a

twist as his hips arced upward. Marcus had his hands in my hair as he thrust into my mouth, long and slow, his breath hitching as he tried to hold back.

Havoc stood beside him, unable to even take hold of himself, he was so close to an explosion. His presence in the link was pure, raw static.

Rafael's scent carried me and him and them—through every push, shove, thrust, and slide, every tingle and groan and gasp, as his and Marcus's dicks swelled and quivered, and I tightened around the one inside me—

I reached for Havoc and completed one long, squeezing stroke. He thrust into my hand so hard it almost pushed me sideways. Marcus gave three short, swift thrusts and froze. Then Rafael arched his pelvis up beneath me.

And with a shared cry, we shattered.

All other awareness dissolved as we reached supernova status in one united, explosive moment. Wave after wave, reverberating back and forth between us, every twitch of one setting the others off.

And the power flow—reversed. It exploded from Rafael, to flood through us in time to the waves. Filling me in a way that I'd never been filled before.

Time had passed. I had no idea how much of it.

“Here, Wiley. Try these.”

Somehow, I was wrapped in cloth, kneeling on the pile that Havoc had created. I had only a dim memory of being carried there. Rafael sat cross-legged beside me. Havoc was sampling the food spread out on a boulder, and Marcus was bent over, offering me a plate of things that smelled delicious.

Rafael reached past me to snatch a meatroll.

“You still here?” I asked, my voice shaking.

Seems like I'm staying, he answered, his mindvoice still weak.

Perfect. My head is getting far too crowded. For once, Havoc's words lacked venom.

A good fuck solves much. Marcus grinned at me. *But we have to finish the ceremony. Everyone, kneel.*

Havoc growled as Marcus arranged him and Rafael and himself on their knees on the piled cloth.

Stand up, Wiley, Marcus said. *Hold out your right hand.*

I stood and reached out. He bent to undo the shiny pouch he'd placed near the drums. Inside, lay a bracelet woven in metal, with three delicate chains running from it to rings. The rings were large, designed to run between my knuckles. One had a Dragon with coppery crystal eyes. The other, a rearing Centaur whose body encased a gold crystal. And the third had a curled horn with a silver gemstone in the center.

Looking up into his gold-shot eyes, my heart expanded.

"How did you know I'd join you?" Rafael's voice was barely a whisper.

"I believe in fate." Marcus reached to slip the rings onto my fingers, and fasten the bracelet. His eyes locked on mine. "I belong to you," he pledged.

Havoc had lost his snarl. His metallic copper eyes met my own. "I belong to you," he rumbled.

Rafael looked up at me, and smiled. "Until the day I pass, I will always be yours," he said.

From her boulder, Fang uttered happy twittering sounds and hopped up and down. For a creature that was nearsighted, she'd certainly seen through to the truth.

I smiled at her antics and looked back at my men. I didn't think my heart could possibly hold what flooded through me.

Fate had given me three.

And they were now, finally, mine.

RILEY



The mountains looked entirely too close.

Don't let go yet! I told Havoc.

The big red Dragon chortled a laugh, and his talons tightened where they held onto the base of my wings. *You'll fucking tackle an evil Sorceress, but are afraid of a little flying lesson.*

Well, it's my first flight.

Second, he corrected.

That time barely counted, I grumped.

Do not drop her, Dragon, or I will be displeased, Iskar said. The Gryphon regularly participated in our discussions now.

I'll peck your eyes out. Marcus flew in Gryphon form to our right. Kiko clung to his back, looking anything but happy.

Gryphons do not peck, Iskar protested.

“Couldn't I have watched from the ground?” Kiko clutched the spikes tighter.

Marcus laughed. “We are a t-team. And t-teams stay together.”

We were. We'd taken off from the academy building only minutes ago. As a mated quad, the headmaster had grudgingly granted us our own accommodation on the fourth floor. Kiko still had quarters on the dorm level until we finished basic training and moved up to advanced.

I don't fucking need training, Havoc grouched. For only the first time that day.

We know you're perfect, no need to point it out. Rafael was seated on Havoc's neck, his long hair blowing in the wind.

Havoc turned his head to shoot him a look. *Watch it, wizardling. I can get fucking unpleasant to ride.*

Havoc took the fine art of being difficult to—hmm—a fine art. Getting him to classes was a daily chore that Rafael seemed well suited to. He managed to talk the red Dragon out of his temper tantrums, most of the time.

It helped that everyone knew he could make it an order and be obeyed. But Rafael hadn't crossed that line again. And the longer he resisted, the easier it became for him.

The Liberi Elders had reluctantly backed off now that he was mated—so long as we all agreed to attend the academy, under Cara's guidance. I figured she had her fill of powerful people to keep an eye on.

You going to hang around here all day? Havoc asked.

No. No, I wasn't. I needed to get a grip.

If you want to be a real Dragon, little bird, you have to learn to fly. From his perch above me, Rafael shot me what was meant to be an encouraging look, but it was a bit ruined by the death grip he had on Havoc's spikes.

Fang, on the other hand, had decided that flying was fun. She perched on top of Rafael's head with her rearmost legs anchored in his hair. Her forelimbs were spread sideways, as if to embrace her own wings. Every so often, the wind carried her excited trills to me.

Wish I had her confidence, Rafael commented, shifting his grip.

Marcus—or rather Iskar—opened his wings and soared, but it was Marcus that answered. *You pulled out handfuls of my feathers last flight.*

You worry about thinning hair? Rafael asked.

Centaurs do not suffer from baldness, came the slightly stilted reply. And neither do Gryphon.

Did I hit a nerve? Rafael's lips curled upward.

Focus, or she'll go splat. Iskar was excellent at driving home a point.

Okay, Dreambit. I'm letting go on the count of three, Havoc warned.

I nearly panicked. My wings, a glossy, jet-black, stretched out on either side of me, but so far all I'd done was glide along while Havoc did all the work of flying.

Your Dragon knows how to soar, Havoc told me. *All you have to do, is let it.*

That sounded far easier than it surely was.

Havoc let go.

I squawked like a frantic chicken and flapped wildly, instantly losing altitude.

"Flap harder!" yelled Kiko, then she yelped as Marcus followed me down.

Tilt your wings, Havoc instructed.

Close them between flaps. Marcus, as if he was the one doing the flying, and not Iskar.

Soaring is like floating. You just open your wings and let them catch the air. Iskar was genuinely trying to be helpful.

A huge shadow loomed overhead and grabbed onto my wings where they left my body. I hung from Havoc's talons, panting heavily.

You panicked, he accused.

I turned my long, narrow head to glare up at him. *I was falling.*

I would never let you fall, he rumbled through my mind. *I am always here.*

His deep voice reverberated through me, as did the burst of support along the link. It enabled me to take a deep breath,

spread my wings, and nod to him.

Ready to try again, I told him.

Watch me. Do what I do.

She can watch me too, Marcus said. I rolled my eyes. Life was always a competition with these two.

Ignore the fucking Gryphon. Havoc snorted steam. *Feathers work differently from Dragon wings.*

They do, actually, Iskar agreed.

You can do it, encouraged Rafael.

Marcus didn't say anything more, but he enveloped our link with the mental equivalent of a warm hug, sending me a tsunami wave of wordless support.

It lifted my heart, and my resolve. *Let go, Havoc*, I said.

He let go. This time, I squelched my fear of the jagged mountains below us and soared, before tentatively trying my first flap. It didn't achieve much.

Stop thinking and follow me.

He moved just ahead of me, and I watched how his wings opened as they cupped the air, then closed, moved forward, before opening again.

Not unlike swimming, really. I forced myself to relax. Which was when Havoc bumped into me, very deliberately.

Too rapidly for me to even think, my Dragon compensated, banking slightly, then the wings stiffened into another soar. I let go, and the next flap was almost perfect. And then another, better yet.

Havoc banked, and I went with him, the rays from the rising sun chasing along our scales. He rose, and I followed, climbing through the thin cloud layer until we soared above them. They were painted in reds and oranges and golds. So beautiful, I almost couldn't breathe.

It's cold up here, but gorgeous, Rafael commented.

Too cold for Kiko. Marcus encouraged the miserable-looking Satyr to huddle close to his neck.

I closed my wings and dropped back through the clouds, and the others followed. We fell in alongside each other. No one spoke as we glided along, almost perfectly in sync.

It was as though we were alone in the world.

Not alone. *Together.*

I'd finally found what I'd sought all my life. A family.

And as we banked toward the academy building, I acknowledged that I'd also found the other thing I'd searched for. A home.

I'm hungry, Havoc complained. *Time for breakfast.*

You're always hungry, Iskar said with a mental sigh.

Let's go home. Marcus folded his wings and took us there.

BONUS CHAPTER

BREE

The entire palace shook.

I pushed myself upright from the big poster bed just as the wind howled through the large opening in the far wall. Strong enough to whip at the cloth above me and knock things off my dresser.

When the lightning hit the ledge outside, I shot out of bed. The grind of fracturing stone drew my eyes to the ceiling. A crack raced across the interlocked slabs—dust and small chunks broke free.

And then the ceiling crashed down.

I was already halfway to the door, but a chunk of stone the size of a fist clipped my temple and knocked me to the floor. Dazed, I choked on dust but continued to crawl forward.

My door opened before I got there, and through the cloud of powder, I saw two of the young Centaurs I'd grown up with. Only we weren't Centaurs any longer. They, like me, were now in human form.

One of them—Jaimie—grabbed my hand and hauled me back onto my feet. “Come on, Bree! We've got to get out of here.”

I was in full agreement. Together, we ran—my progress was more of a stagger, really—along the hall. Frantic people filled the corridor, all doing exactly what we were—trying to escape.

“Where is Vic?” I shouted to Jaimie.

He shot me a look. “He was with you.”

He had been, until Isobel burst through my door and demanded he come with her. I’d never actually seen the Sorceress look like that before—wild-eyed and covered in blood. I’d risen with Vic, my pulse pounding. Because my dreams had been filled with visions—and a frantic Isobel had been one of them.

“I’ll come too,” I’d said, glancing from her to Vic.

But he’d shaken his head at me. “Stay.” The word was as much a command as an entreaty. “I’ll be back.”

“You’re not needed, Bree,” Isobel had said, before she vanished with Vic out the door.

Now, I shook my head at Jaimie. “Isobel came for him. I don’t know where he is.”

Above us, something screamed. I’d never heard a sound like that before. The wind shrieked as if it had invaded the floor above, and the walls shook. More dust and stones fell. I saw one big chunk flatten a serving maid. I pulled free from Jaimie, but there was no helping her.

“We have to get to the gate,” Jaimie shouted to me.

“No. We have to find Vic first,” I said almost in the same instant.

“He’ll come to the gate too,” one of my other friends said. “He’s not stupid.”

Stupid. No, Vic was not stupid. But I had a bad feeling that he was in danger. Because Isobel’s laboratory was up there...

We reached the stairwell. I started to go up—but another chunk of ceiling came down almost right in front of me. Jaimie grabbed my arm and dragged me down instead.

“But Vic—” I protested.

“He can look after himself,” Todd said from behind us.

Now, the stairs filled with frantic people, pushing and shoving. A Dire tried to force his way past, almost crushing me against the wall. With a hiss, Jaimie slammed his shoulder

into the Dire. As his shoulder was no longer human, but rather rippled with red scales and muscle, it almost crushed the other shifter.

Jaimie glanced at me with eyes that had gone murky green, and he grimaced through a lengthening muzzle, with teeth growing long points. I wrapped a hand around his arm. “Take it easy, we’ll get there.”

My advice hadn’t been well-heeded ever since the Sorceress had turned us into shapeshifters. With every insertion, the young Centaurs I’d known had changed. Become something other than what they’d once been.

But to my relief, he nodded, and I saw his teeth recede. Him shifting into a Wyvern wasn’t going to help us now. We needed to keep our brains engaged.

The milling people carried us out onto the lower level. Most headed north toward the entrance. But the permanent gateway Isobel had created was in the other direction.

Todd shoved past, his body altering—in fits and spurts that had him groaning—to that of a giant cave bear. The crowd parted for him, and we moved into the void he created, running behind as he bounded along.

He brought us to the room that housed the gate. It, too, was packed full of people. They hadn’t come the route we had, but rather were streaming in through an opening in the wall. I gaped at them—mercenaries, mostly, but also some Bellatis among them. All of them were injured, some of them horribly. Covered in blood and what looked like burns. The smell of smoke and death clung to them. The coven member operating the gate used her power to hold it open, letting the injured men through.

The palace was full of secret passages—that one must lead up to the top floor. I took a step toward it. Vic was up there, somewhere. He had to be. What if he was hurt?

Jaimie wouldn’t let go of my arm. “Don’t be stupid, Bree. We have to get out of here.”

“We can’t leave him!” My voice broke on the last word.

Then the mercenaries coming out of the passageway stepped aside, and through them, came the coven. In the lead was Aurora.

I ran to her. “What has happened? Where is Vic?”

“We have been attacked,” Aurora stated. “Isobel is dead.”

It froze all of us in our tracks. Isobel—Isobel couldn’t die. But why was my first reaction one of relief, rather than dismay?

I wasn’t given the chance to assess it. There was a massive explosion above us. The palace groaned like a dying beast, and shook to its foundation.

Aurora grabbed my other arm and pulled me toward the gate. “Vic will follow us. He and Finn are holding them back until we can escape.”

Something about it didn’t ring true, and I dragged my feet. The only reason I didn’t stop altogether was that Vic had told me what he housed within him. It was, indeed, a fearsome beast. It could take on Dragons, and win.

Before I could protest, the coven closed in on us and carried us through the gate.

The energy danced around me, and the gateway took us to a large stone chamber. Empty stalls ran along one wall, but the floor was littered with prone forms, many of them horribly burned.

Aurora and the coven ignored them. Instead, they wove through the moaning forms to get to the sacks of crystal stacked along one wall, before directing some of those still ambulatory to carry them to a table. Due to the bloodmagic those crystals held, only one member of the coven still had the ability to heal at all. She was on her knees in the gore, doing her best to help the victims.

Near us was a young girl—one of the palace staff, with a horrible bleeding head wound. No one was paying any attention to her.

Which was when the healer trapped inside me rose up. He rarely spoke to me, and even now, his hostility carried through his mindvoice.

I can help.

I was torn. What I wanted was to bolt back through the gateway to find Vic. But what could I do against something that could bring down a palace? I couldn't even embrace any form other than a human. The others were there, but out of my reach.

The creature responsible for that pushed at me. *Hellfire, woman. I can heal her, if only you'll stop uselessly throwing yourself after that imbecile and look around you.*

It was the longest sentence he'd ever said to me. The girl at my feet groaned in pain, and I dropped to my knees. Placed my hands on her shoulder, and asked, *What do I do?*

Just don't get in my way. He shoved my mental self aside, and suddenly my hands were no longer my own.

I almost panicked, but I sensed what he was trying to do. Energy flowed from me to the injured girl. Her eyelids fluttered, and then opened, as the wound on her temple stopped bleeding, then sealed.

Behind me, the gate's energy surged, flowing over my skin, making every hair stand on end. A sudden stillness flooded the room, and my inner healer froze. I twisted to look...

And lost the ability to breathe.

Vic stood there, framed by the gate. He held Isobel's limp body in his arms. The muscles in his cheeks jumped as he clenched and unclenched his jaw, and I'd never seen such torment in his eyes. It stabbed straight through to my heart.

Then they met mine, and flared orange with the Fire Drake. Steam wafted off his skin, as though he himself were still hot as flame. The clothes he'd been wearing were long gone, but the scales that covered him weren't orange.

As I struggled to connect the dots, my heart twisted. I shot to my feet, and took a long step toward him.

He dismissed me with a glance. Strode past me to the table and pushed the crystals off it, before laying the Sorceress carefully upon it.

He gestured to the healer. "Heal her."

It wasn't a request. The healer rose, and ran to Isobel. Placed hands upon her, and closed her eyes.

I stood, frozen, trying to hold together the pieces of my heart. Vic had always been arrogant, and sometimes thoughtless, but he'd never ignored me like this. But then I chastised myself. Isobel needed help. That was the important thing.

But after a few moments, the healer backed away, shaking her head. "I can't do anything for her."

Vic growled. A rumbling, visceral thing. Right before wings erupted from his shoulders. Huge, Dragon wings that arced over him.

Hellfire, stated the creature trapped within me. *Where did he get those?*

"Heal Icefire," Vic repeated to the healer, his voice a threatening bass boom that I'd never heard before.

Icefire. My mind spun. Why was he calling Isobel Icefire?

"Her brain is totally shredded." The healer's voice shook. "There is nothing I can do. I'm sorry."

Orange scales erupted through the duller ones that clothed Vic, and his eyes flashed orange, too. He raised a hand, and flames shot from his fingers toward the healer. She screamed as her hair ignited...

I moved faster than I ever had before, leaping between her and Vic. "No, Vic!" I shouted at him. "What the hell are you doing?"

His glowing eyes bored into me, and flames danced on his fingertips. For a gut-wrenching moment, I thought he was

going to fry me, too. His wings spread wide, and my eyes traced the scales reflecting bronze in the light.

Bronze. My gut twisted, even as my mind sheered away.

He glared at the coven. “Harvest her!”

Aurora bent over Isobel, her hands spread. But when she straightened, I read the truth in her face. “It is too late. She is gone.”

Vic threw back his head, and roared. It was a sound filled with pain, and it shocked me. But then he pulled himself straight, folded his wings around his shoulders, and closed his eyes.

I reached a shaking hand out to him. “It’s okay, Vic. We still have Aurora. We’ll give the mercenaries time to heal. We can fulfill Isobel’s mission.

His eyes snapped open, and I took a step back. They weren’t the warm, brown orbs I knew so well. Or even the orange of the Fire Drake.

They were pure, metallic bronze.

“Now that Isobel is dead, the mission no longer exists,” he snarled. “The future, along with this palace, you, and everything else in it, *belongs to me.*”

Take as long as you need to digest all that you have just read, and then continue...

You guessed it, there is more to come in the Warrior Hearts World. The saying ‘love conquers all’ might be true—but when one evil entity is destroyed, another always seems to pop up in its place...

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