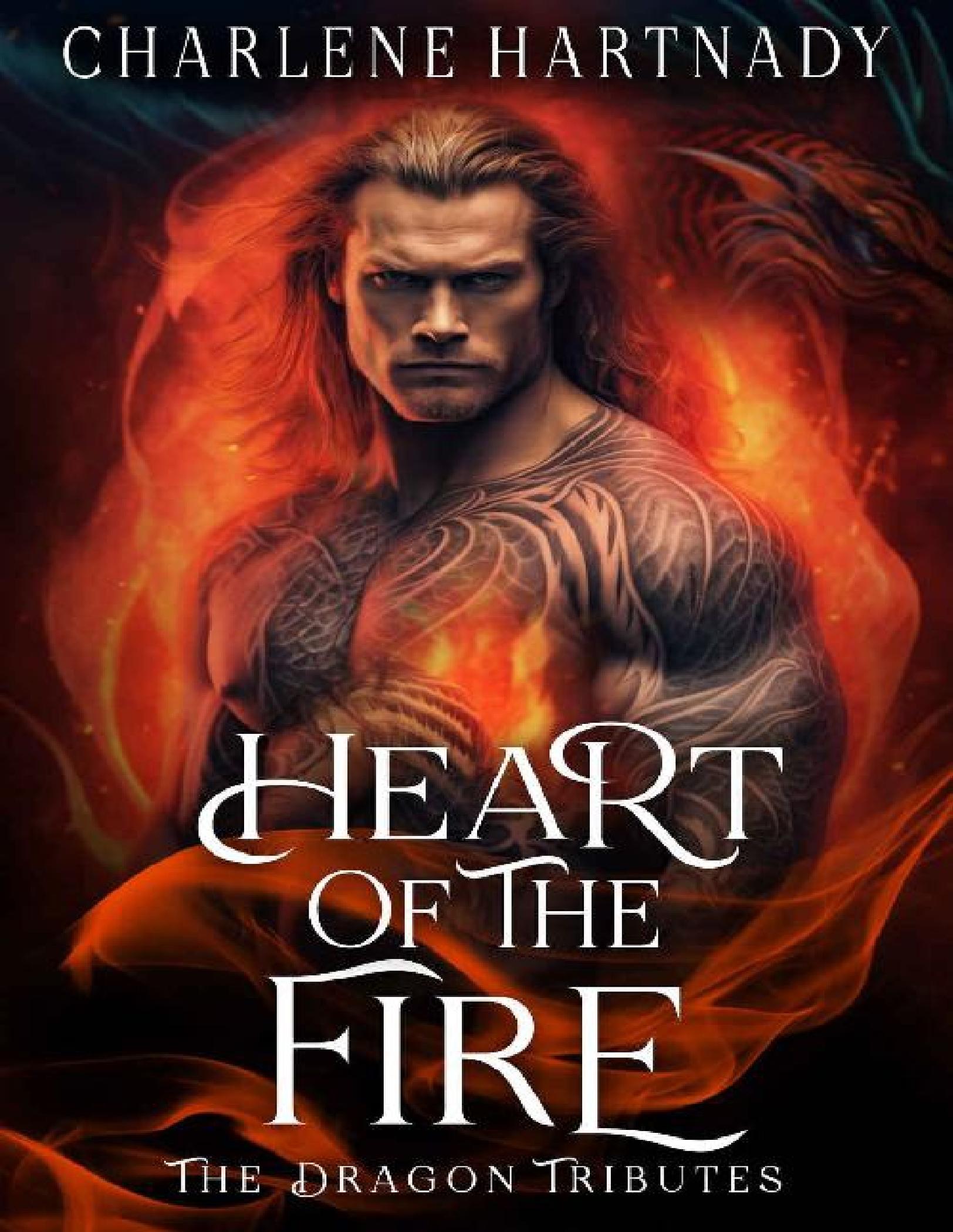


CHARLENE HARTNADY



HEART
OF THE
FIRE

THE DRAGON TRIBUTES

HEART OF THE FIRE

THE DRAGON TRIBUTES: BOOK 3

CHARLENE HARTNADY

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Cover Art by Melody Simmons

Copy Edited by Brigitte Billings

Proofread by Jessica Meigs & Ash P Reads Editing Services

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FOREWORD

Trigger warnings:

Violence - Graphic

Domestic abuse - There is a small scene that is not too graphic. All other abuse happens off-page but is spoken of in detail

Rape - It doesn't happen

Please note that the main characters in this book are both flawed and broken. It's a little dark at times. There is a rainbow after the storm.

I would like to dedicate this book to all the wonderful men out there. The men who care, who protect and who nurture.

Kim

Ross opens the door to the bungalow. “After you, babe.” He winks at me.

How can he be so calm? We just saw someone who we know die. He literally died right in front of us. Incinerated by one of the dragons. I still have the cloying scent of smoke in my nostrils, on my clothes, my skin, my hair.

All over.

He died.

Gone.

I’m sick to my stomach.

I thought that Halbert was a friend of Ross’s. I mean, I didn’t particularly like the guy much, but still. It doesn’t mean he deserved to die. I’m on the verge of panic, but hold it in. I cling to shock instead. It makes me feel like all the blood has drained from my body. That I’m hollow inside.

I walk into our small, comfortable bungalow. *Our*. It doesn’t feel right at all. I’m not sure I want to be with Ross. Since when did he become my boyfriend? Why are we living together? It feels like it just happened. Like one day, it was me, and now it’s we. The days and weeks blurred into one another, and now here we are. A “we.”

He smiles at me. Smiles. How can he be smiling at a time like this? It irritates me, so I look away.

My heart is racing yet again. I think it's been this way since I first arrived on the island.

I glance back at Ross, who is still freaking smiling. To think it was his carefree attitude that drew me to him in the first place. Ross is charismatic and outgoing. The kind of guy who makes friends easily. He's charming, tall, and nicely built. Not like our instructors...make that, the dragon shifters.

Shit!

I drop my bag at my feet and sit on the edge of the bed, trying to get my racing heart under control. My mind is reeling, trying to process everything. Our instructors can shift into dragons. When they do, they turn completely feral. They're killers.

We have to attempt a mind-bond with them again in the morning. Some of us could very well die. Some of us *will* die. How did my life become this?

"You look like you're about to burst into tears," Ross says. I hear humor in his voice. Once again, irritation surges to the fore.

"I'm scared." I'm not sure how I keep my voice even. "Did you see what that monster did to Halbert? It took less than a second for him to die."

"Heeeeeey." He sits next to me and puts his arm around me. "It'll be okay. What happened sucks."

Sucks? It sucks? We watched someone die, and that's all he can say?

"But it's important to take note of the fact that Halbert crossed the line. We were warned, and he broke very clear rules. I feel terrible for him." Funny, he doesn't look like he feels terrible. "It won't happen to us. I'm willing to bet that neither of us bonds with a dragon. That we'll be in a chopper, headed for home before sunset tomorrow. Then we can start living our life...together." He plants a kiss on the side of my head.

"Our." It's another one of those words that doesn't sit right.

"Or we could die," I say.

"Nah." He shakes his head. "We'll follow the rules, and we'll be just fine." He rubs the side of my arm. "Stay close to me. I'll protect you, babe." Then he cups my jaw. "I love you so much, Kim. You know that, right?"

I'm left cold. I feel absolutely nothing when I look into his sage-green eyes. Shouldn't I feel something? We're sharing a bungalow. Everyone thinks that we are in love. It's all moved so fast. Too fast. At the same time, it crept up on me. All of a sudden, I feel smothered. I feel...numb.

He starts to move in for a kiss, and my whole body tightens. "I need to shower," I blurt, standing abruptly. "I can smell the smoke on me. I'm

sorry...” I start to say and then suck back the words. Why am I apologizing? So what if I don’t want to kiss him? I shouldn’t have to apologize. I make up my mind at that moment; if we both have to stay on Draig, I’m asking for my own bungalow and ending things with Ross. If we’re both leaving, I won’t be giving him my number. This is not the right time to rock the boat, so I hold my tongue.

His eyes harden for a second before his stance eases slightly. Then he throws me one of his signature smiles – when did it stop working on me? – and gives a nod. “Of course, I get it. You jump in the shower. We’re meeting the others in half an hour.”

“We’re going to hang out tonight?”

Ross nods. “Yeah, why not?” He shrugs.

Because someone we know just died right in front of us. “I guess I thought we would—” I start to say.

“Let me guess,” he interrupts. “You thought we would fixate on what happened. No!” Ross shakes his head. “Halbert was an idiot. That doesn’t mean that he deserved to die, but it also doesn’t mean that we should stop living life.”

“Aren’t you even a little afraid?”

He shakes his head, putting on fake bravado. I know he’s scared, but for some reason, he doesn’t want to show it. “Nope. Like I said, we’ll get through it.” He shrugs again. “I’m living my life, babe. We’re young. We’re still breathing. We may as well hang out and enjoy ourselves. Sharon still has the booze she stole when we were at the academy. We’re going to eat, drink, and have a good time while we can. You never know what tomorrow brings.”

The very last thing I feel like doing is partying, but I nod anyway. If we stay here, Ross will want to have sex. I’ve been making a ton of excuses lately. Maybe it’s better that we go out. I really need to end things between us. The thought of him touching me makes me feel ill.

I go over to the closet and grab fresh underwear and a dress since we have the afternoon off, and, as usual, it’s really hot and muggy. I’m not sure if it’s my imagination, but it seems worse on this side of the island. We’re definitely closer to the ocean since I can smell the salt in the air.

Ross looks at the dress in my hand, touching the fabric. “What’s this?” he asks, frowning.

“A dress.” I frown as well, not sure where he’s going with this.

He takes the garment out of my hands and holds it up. “It’s a bit

revealing, isn't it?"

"It's a dress... No, I don't think it's revealing at all." I shrug and shake my head. It's about mid-thigh, with straps over my shoulders. I mean, it might show a hint of cleavage, but it's hardly revealing. It's comfortable more than anything else.

"Are you trying to impress someone, Kim?"

For a moment, I am sure that he is joking, but then he narrows his eyes, cocking his head. They've hardened and are boring into me, making me feel uncomfortable.

"Ummm...no! What do you mean?" I push out a breath. "Who would I want to impress?" It's such an idiotic question.

"I saw the way you were looking at Ethan yesterday." He takes a step toward me. His voice has this edge to it.

"I wasn't looking at Ethan." I sound shrill. "What the hell is this?"

His jaw is tight. His eyes are blazing. He's standing his full six foot two and towering above me.

"No!" I tell him.

"No, what?" he spits.

"You don't get to do this." I shake my head.

"I don't get to do what, Kim? Get angry when my girlfriend is trying to impress other men? Is that it? Because if it isn't Ethan, then it's Finn you want looking at you. Are you fucking around behind my back?"

"You didn't just say that!" I yell. "Of course, I'm—"

Before I can deny it, Ross grabs me by the throat and slams me into the wall so hard that I see black spots dancing through my vision for a few seconds. I can barely breathe. I make this weird noise in the back of my throat. I'm standing on my tippy toes to try to alleviate the pressure. I grab his wrist with both my hands, but he doesn't let go. Ross is a big, powerful man. I don't stand a chance against him.

This isn't happening.

It isn't!

The wet tears running down my cheeks tell me that it is.

"You're going to take your shower, and then you'll wear something more appropriate." His voice is calm and at total odds with the look in his eyes. "Wear something that doesn't make you look like a little slut. I know you're not a slut, Kim. Act like it."

He lets me go.

I choke out a few coughs, my hands going to my throat. I don't think he had me tight enough to cause bruises. I suck in air, taking stock. The back of my head hurts. I put my fingers through my hair and feel a lump starting to form. I'm mostly fine...although shaken to my core.

I watch Ross storm over to the trashcan and dump my dress inside it. Then he goes and stands on the other side of the room. He is looking out the window. He's still tense. I think I hear him grind his teeth.

My heart is racing. I want to say something. I want to tell him that he has no right to treat me this way, but the words stick in my throat. I'm afraid of him.

I go to my closet and choose a pair of jeans and a black T-shirt. I'm going to sweat wearing this, but at least it will keep the peace.

One more day. I just have to make it through to the end of the mind-bond session tomorrow, and I'll be home free.

K im

The thick jungle opens up to reveal a wide expanse of grass, so tall it looks like an emerald sea. We stand on the edge, looking down at where our instructors have gathered, preparing to transform into fire-breathing beasts. I keep my eyes on them, even though I feel Ross's gaze on me.

"You're not still mad at me, are you?" Ross asks as we start to walk toward the fields.

"No. I told you that I'm fine." Mad doesn't even begin to cover it.

He takes my hand and turns me to face him.

Holy crap!

I hold back an eyeroll because I could do without this right now. He's apologized about ten times since yesterday, starting with when I emerged from the bathroom. Ross proceeded to play the doting boyfriend at the party at Sharon's bungalow. He held my hand and kept his arm around my shoulders. He said everything right...did everything right, but his hand held mine more tightly than necessary, and his arm around me felt stifling rather than comforting.

I'm ashamed to say that I tried to avoid both Finn and Ethan. I gave them one-word answers when they spoke to me. I felt like I was walking on eggshells the whole time. I could feel his eyes on me then, too.

I know how this goes.

I know only too well.

I know men like Ross. How did I miss the signs?

I need to get through this, and it'll be over. I don't care if I mind-bond a dragon at this stage, just so long as Ross doesn't and has to go home. Anything to be rid of him. I refuse to become like her. To be her...my mother. I won't!

"Did you hear anything I just said?" Ross squeezes my hand tightly. So tight it hurts a little.

"Don't." I try to pull my hand away, but he holds it firmly. "I'm afraid, okay? That's all. It has nothing to do with you." It is partly true. "Can we just get this over with already?"

His gaze stays firmly on mine.

"I'm fine," I whisper. "I swear. Can we not do this right now? We need to focus on staying alive."

"We'll be fine. Don't run or try to touch one or anything. Oh, and we shouldn't get too close to them," he tells me.

I want to roll my eyes again. Does he think I'm an idiot?

"I remember everything Shadow told us," I assure him, and we start walking again, rushing to catch up with the others, who are watching our instructors shift into deadly reptiles. Dragons who could very well kill us. Wings appear where there were once arms. Tails whip in the air, and the scent of sulfur on the wind is immediate. One of the beasts rears up and roars loudly. Scales and horns glint in the morning light.

I shiver.

"It's okay, babe. We're going to be fine." Ross puts his arm around me.

I catch Emily looking over at us with longing. She gives me this smile and then sighs. I'm sure she wishes she was me right now, but little does she know that Ross isn't as perfect as he seems. He's good-looking, charming, and sweet...on the surface.

I shiver again.

"We'd better go," someone yells.

"Before they get rowdy," Emily mutters.

We all start walking again. It's tough putting one foot in front of the other. We need to be strong...*I* need to be strong.

Someone whimpers down the line. A couple of people are sobbing as well.

I go from feeling terrified to being numb. I don't feel Ross's arm around

me. I don't hear what he is whispering to me. Probably more bullshit about how we're going to be just fine.

"Try to stay calm," someone murmurs. "It's dangerous to show them fear," the same person says softly.

"I can't help it." The sobbing grows louder.

"Don't listen to them," Ross tells me. "We have to stay calm."

I keep my eyes on the dragons on the field just below us. Eight are potentials for mind-bonding, and there is one with a rider on its back, keeping the dragons from coming at us. From killing us before we even try. Dagger isn't here. We think that he and Hunter mind-bonded yesterday.

I try not to recall how her nose bled...how she fainted. We weren't sure she would make it, but she did. She's supposedly fine. They won't let us see her to be sure.

I look at the dragons, trying hard not to notice their huge claws and wide mouths filled with razor-sharp teeth. Their tails are barbed at the end. They're massive killing machines. One of them roars. Another one of them paws at the ground. Smoke wafts from their nostrils.

Then there is actual fire. I stop walking because we feel the heat from here. The woman down the line to my right sobs louder.

I don't blame her one bit.

"It's okay," Ross tells me. "All good."

What planet is he from? Not this one; that much is apparent.

"You're going to get us killed," Ella tells the person down the line who is sobbing louder. I glance over there. It isn't Skylar as I expected. It's Sharon, who is suddenly looking a touch green. She drank a ton of wine yesterday, so I can well believe it.

"Try to stay calm, Sharon," I tell her.

"Don't," Ross whispers. "Ignore the others. If the dragons are too busy killing them, they'll leave us alone."

What an asshole.

I can't believe he just said that. It's super selfish, but I'm not surprised.

As we get closer, the dragons become more agitated. They rake the ground and rear onto their back legs. They whip their tails. They snarl and growl and roar. The scent of smoke is thick as it wafts from their great mouths and nostrils.

We cautiously approach the dangerous creatures. I can feel my heartbeat quicken with every step we take toward them. Our lives hang in the balance.

Don't show fear, I remind myself as I take each step, knowing that it may very well be my last if I falter.

There is a flash of blinding light and a sudden, searing heat. We all duck, turning away, and someone to the right of us starts screaming shrilly.

“Sharon! Sharon! It got Sharon. Holy shit! Noooooo, Sharoon!”

I'm staring at the blue dragon who just killed Sharon. It's the same one that got Halbert. Then my eyes are drawn to a charred black spot on the ground. It's all that's left of her. I get the acrid scent of smoke and something else I care not to identify. It's just like what happened to Halbert yesterday. Now it's happened again. I can't believe it. We were with Sharon just yesterday, and now she's gone.

Dead.

“No,” I choke out, feeling my eyes sting.

“Keep your eyes up ahead,” Ross says, his arm closing more tightly around me. “Remember, every one of them that dies means that we have a better chance at survival.”

“Stop saying that,” I tell him.

“It's true,” he whispers.

“It's a shitty thing to say.” I see Simon turn around; his face is a mask of utter terror.

Don't show them your back!

Don't do it, Simon!

“No! Wait—” I start to call to him, but Ross shushes me, holding me against him.

“Stop it! You're going to get us killed,” he whispers. “Stay calm.”

Calm?

Has he lost his damned mind?

I see a bright green dragon go after Simon. I whimper. Poor Simon. I like him. He's a sweet guy.

“One less dragon we have to worry about,” Ross tells me as we keep advancing on the dragons.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Skylar go after Simon.

No! Shit!

I like Skylar. She keeps mostly to herself, but she seems genuinely nice. It would be terrible if she was killed as well.

I'm shocked when she starts to scream at the beast, trying to lure it away from poor Simon. She's so freaking brave. I'm in awe of her.

“Don’t look!” Ross says. “Keep your eyes on the dragons in front of us.” For once, he gives me half-decent advice.

“Fuck off, you bastard!” Skylar screams behind us. I wish I was that brave. I was taught to run and to hide. To stay hidden, no matter what. I was taught to be submissive. I thought I’d moved beyond such behavior, but it seems that old habits die hard.

I turn back, wanting to see what’s happening with Skylar. The creature has its sights set on her.

Crap!

No!

Skylar holds her ground.

“Kim,” Ross practically growls at me. He grabs my arm, his fingers digging into my skin. “You’re going to get us killed.”

Skylar’s bravery must spark something in me. “You’re holding me too tightly.” I try to pull away. His harsh grip will give me bruises.

“Stop it,” Ross says. “Behave!”

I snort. “I’m not some child.” I’m picking the wrong time to stand my ground, but it can’t be helped. I refuse to accept this treatment any longer.

“You sure are acting like one,” he hisses.

“Let! Me! Go!” I whisper-yell, trying to yank my arm free. “You’re right. I’m not fine. I’m not okay with what happened. You and I are done.”

“We’ll talk about this later. We’re *not* done, though. You can get that out of your pretty little head.” His grip tightens, and I wince.

Then I look up and realize how close we are to the dragons, about fifteen feet, give or take. I see their slitted eyes. The glint on their sleek scales.

I stop fighting Ross.

I’m breathing heavily. I can’t believe this is happening. The one dragon has the most beautiful electric-blue scales. Its eyes are a gorgeous bright green. I forget Ross’s bruising grip. I forget him altogether for a moment. All I can do is stare. We didn’t get this close yesterday. I’m in awe and no longer afraid, even though I should be.

I gasp. My eyes widen, and I make a strangled noise.

It feels like a large hand has tightened around my brain and is squeezing gently. It doesn’t hurt. It feels more like a massage than anything else. It also feels...weird...wrong, somehow.

I make a choking sound, and my eyes widen further.

“What is it?” Ross asks.

I can't answer him; my eyes are locked with the dragon's eyes. I know it's this dragon before me.

'Human.'

"Yes," I whisper. I know that it is talking to me and directly into my brain.

Are we mind-bonded? Is that what has happened?

Its eyes glint with humor, and smoke wafts from its nostrils.

'Yes...bonded... Yes, human.'

The massaging sensation continues. It isn't unpleasant. In fact, I'd go so far as to say the opposite is true. It's relaxing, like having your back massaged, only it's my brain. "Wrong-weird" has turned into "good-weird."

"Kim!" Ross is whispering. "We're leaving. Come with me." His hand is clenched so darned tightly.

It hurts.

I whimper.

'Come to me!' the dragon commands. His voice is piercing inside my brain.

I flinch away, making a choked noise. I stagger and almost fall.

Ross grips my hip. "We're leaving. Now!"

'Help you.'

It's more of a caress this time. Warmth floods me. I'm standing in the shadow of a fire-breathing dragon, and yet, this is the safest I have ever felt. I do a crazy thing. I trust my instinct and stagger toward the dragon.

"Kim! No! What the fuck are you—?"

It rears back and lets out a blast of fiery heat. I feel the hair on my arm singe. For half a second, I am sure that the target is me...that I am burning.

Then I hear Ross's terrified scream. It lasts for all of a second before being cut off. I smell smoke and blackened flesh.

'Good! Human!'

I get that massaging feeling again. I do my best to keep him out of my head, but it doesn't work. He's there. He's everywhere. I can feel the dragon in every pore. I'm not sure how I could feel safe before. I'm not safe.

It feels like I've gone from the frying pan into the fire, and I don't like it one bit.

I know we're not supposed to give them our backs, or run, or any of that other stuff, but I don't care. I turn, and I run. I run as fast as my legs will take me.

B laze

My stomach is in knots. It's not in my nature to feel nervous, so I struggle a little with the emotion coursing through me as I approach the bungalow. *Her* bungalow.

Kimberly Ashton, known as Kim to her friends...the ones I killed.

I swallow thickly. My hands feel a little sweaty, so I rub them on my thighs.

I have a horrible feeling that this isn't going to go well. I wouldn't blame the human if she hated me. I killed her boyfriend and two of her friends. I mean, I would hate me too if the tables were turned, and yet, I have to try to speak with her. Miracles happen sometimes. Today could be one of those special days. A miracle kind of a day. Maybe she'll allow me to explain how it is that my dragon killed three people she knows. I can't place all the blame on him. I have to take ownership because I killed them, too. I killed her boyfriend.

Holy fuck, but this isn't going to go well.

Just thinking about it makes me stop in my tracks. She was right there when I killed him. She witnessed me killing them all. Every human who has died thus far this year. I am solely responsible for their deaths.

I run a hand through my hair and push out a heavy breath.

My dragon sure as shit felt justified for each of the killings, just like a cat

feels justified when it toys with a mouse until it dies. Predators never have to justify killing their prey. It's always understandable, isn't it? That's just it; humans are technically prey to us. That mindset changes once we mind-bond. Well, it mostly changes, but the instinct is always still there...at least for me.

Especially for me.

Maybe it's better if she goes. No, it's definitely better. I've hurt her enough.

I groan softly, shaking my head as I close the last of the distance to the bungalow door.

I stare at the wood for half a minute. Bottom line, I have to try. I have to go back to Shadow with something concrete. I need to give it my all before giving in.

I knock softly on the door. This isn't me at all, so I stand taller and knock louder.

"Go away!" Her voice is soft.

"I need to speak with you...please," I say in my nicest voice. It still comes out sounding gruff.

Fuck!

I'm not exactly nice, though, am I? Not in my dragon form. I'm not too bad in my human one...surely? I know ornery shifters, and I'm not one of them.

When she doesn't answer, I go on, "Please, Kim. It would only take a minute. Less than a minute."

"Go! Away!" she shouts.

"I'm afraid that isn't possible. I can't leave until I've spoken to you."

"I know that it's you," she shouts. "I can sense it. I have nothing to say to you. I'm not interested in becoming a rider. I want nothing to do with you."

I feel it, too, a tugging in my brain like a gossamer thread. Kimberly Ashton and I are mind-bonded. It's a strong connection, much stronger this time around, which gives me hope that my previous disaster won't happen again. Even now, I feel our connection grow and blossom. It's happening just from standing here, even though I am in my human form.

"I get that you would feel that way. Please, can I explain?"

"There is nothing to explain. You're a monster! Go away!" she shouts.

I shut my eyes for a second and let out a sigh. I really can't blame her.

"For what it's worth, I'm sorry." I inject meaning into my words.

I hear her sob. It's a heart-wrenching sound that I feel inside. It has every

part of me feeling guilty. She isn't being overly loud, but I hear it anyway. Sometimes, our superior senses are nothing more than an irritation. It's that, and I'm beginning to feel her emotions. We're tightly bonded, alright.

I bow my head and give the rough surface of the door the barest of touches. Then I turn around and walk away. I have inflicted enough on this poor female. I could stand there and push the issue, but I refuse to do that to her. I've done enough!

Instead, I head straight for the section of the building that houses our offices. I go to Shadow's door and knock.

It takes a good ten seconds for her to answer. "Come in."

I do, nodding in greeting.

She leans back in her chair. "Why the glum face?"

I stay standing since she hasn't invited me to sit. I get the distinct impression that she isn't going to be doing that anytime soon. That's fine. I don't plan on staying long, anyway.

"My Tribute refuses to accept that we are bonded."

"She isn't a Tribute anymore, Blaze. Let's start right there. She's a rider and bonded to your dragon, whether she likes it or not."

"I would say not. I killed her boyfriend and two of her friends. Suffice it to say, she hates me."

"Are you done with the pity party?" She narrows her eyes when I don't answer.

"Yes, I'm done," I grumble.

"You sure?" She lifts her brows. "I can see that there is more you haven't said yet."

I shrug. "That's just it... I still can't believe you accepted my application for this year."

"This again." She rolls her eyes. "Believe it! You're a good dragon. A great dragon for our war against the Reds. I'm thrilled you mind-bonded again. You told me yesterday that it's a strong bond."

"It is." I nod. Even stronger than I thought. It gives me hope, but I have no right to feel hopeful. Not after the things I have done.

"Well, you more than likely have nothing to worry about. It's normal to be a little apprehensive after what happened last year."

"My dragon kills humans. He's responsible for three-quarters of the human fatalities year on year since I started attempting to mind-bond."

"Then it's good news that you've mind-bonded already with only three

fatalities, one of which was highly justified. Cut yourself some slack. We are dragons. We're apex predators, and your dragon happens to be right up there. It is what it is. Move on."

"I can't." I sigh. "The human wouldn't even open the door to talk to me. She was petrified. I would be fighting a losing battle."

Shadow puts her tongue on the roof of her mouth and eyes me for a while.

"You can't blame her. I—"

She holds up a hand. "Fine!"

I start to relax.

"But we're not going to just give up on a perfectly good bonding. They're too rare nowadays. Give the female some space for a week or two and then start checking in on her every couple of days."

"Everyone knows that you can't force a mind-bond, Shadow. It won't work." I heard that she's pushing those who made tenuous partial bonds to fully bond. It's almost impossible, as is this request.

"We're not forcing anything, Blaze, since the two of you already have a full-fledged, really strong bond. Give her some space, and then get her on board. That's an order."

Great! Just great.

I nod.

"I mean it." She points a finger at me. "What happened is not your fault. How do you expect the human to ever move on if you won't do so yourself?"

"It's a lot to ask of her, that's all I'm saying. They're not wired like us. She seems...timid." There is no way that female is having anything to do with me anytime soon.

"She's a Sky Warden and a rider. There is absolutely nothing timid about her. I suggest you get that out of your head right now. I don't care if it takes months. Make it happen. There is plenty to do around camp, so you can keep busy. I expect a report in two weeks on the progress you have made and then every week thereafter. I expect this partnership to work, come hell or high water. Do you understand?"

"Yes," I say, even though I'm not buying it.

"You can go."

Shit! Shit! Shit!

This couldn't be worse. Bottom line, the female is right to be afraid of this...of me. I am a monster.

Kim *Two weeks later...*

There is a soft knock at the door. My mind tugs and pulls. There is an immediate connection. It's stronger than the last two times, but still on a superficial level.

I think it is because he is in human form. I break out in gooseflesh. Bumps rise on my arms and legs, quickly spreading to the rest of my body.

There is another knock. "It's me," he says in a deep voice. "Please, can we talk? I'd like it very much if you could open the door."

My scalp prickles, and for a few seconds, I almost do as he says. I even start toward the door but stop myself at the last second.

"No!" I practically yell. "Get out of my head." I press my fingers into my scalp.

"I can't make you do anything. It doesn't work like that. I know that you're anxious and upset, but I can't read your mind. You have nothing to fear."

I choke out a laugh. "Yeah, right. I watched you kill three people in cold blood. It took you less than a second to do it. I have a whole lot to fear from you," I shout through the door.

"Not me, Kim. I swear it."

I feel waves of guilt. They're coming from him.

I take a step back, trying to get away from the emotion. He feels bad...

and so he freaking well should.

I feel bad, too.

I feel terrible.

“You have nothing to feel guilty about, Kim,” he tells me, sounding confused. “It’s me...all me.” His deep voice is soft.

“I told you to get out of my head!” I scream. “Go! Away!” I’m panicking a little. As much as he says he can’t get inside my head, I feel like he can, at least enough to know my emotions, which are all over the place.

“Okay. If that’s what you want. But know that I am here if you need me.”

“I won’t need you,” I say, injecting venom into my voice because there is a small part of me that wants to believe him.

Why? I guess believing bullshit is in my blood after all, and what happened with Ross proves it. I won’t make the same mistake again. No damned way.

Blaze finally turns and leaves. I don’t have to see him to know that he does because our mental connection pulls tight for a few moments and then breaks once he gets too far. I get the feeling it wouldn’t break as easily if he were in dragon form. It’s a theory I never plan to test.

Then I go and sit on the edge of my bed. I’m still feeling guilty. I hate that I do.

“Stop!” I tell myself. “Just stop!”

It isn’t my fault Ross died. I can blame Blaze and his dragon for that.

I drop my face into my hands and groan. The only thing I felt when I saw that blackened spot on the ground was relief. It flooded me and warmed me. My reaction horrified me. It still does.

Maybe I’m a monster too.

Blaze
Ten days later...

I finish rewiring the CCTV camera and then spend a minute screwing the cover back in place. After inspecting my handiwork, I get out my cellphone and double-check that the feed is working with an unobstructed view in both directions.

It's all good, which means that I am done for today. I leap from the tree, landing in a crouch. It doesn't take me long to clean up my tools. I sling the bag on my back and make for our camp.

As I walk, I check the time and decide to swing by Kim's bungalow before heading back to my place to shower. It's become a thing. I go and visit with her twice a day. At first, I just sat on the steps leading to her door. During the last couple of days, I've started to tell her things about myself. I'm not sure why. I know she hates me, and I can't blame her, but I also want her to understand that there is more to me than my killer dragon.

I feel our connection as I near her door. That now familiar tugging on my brain, which grows stronger with every step I take. I push out a breath as I turn to sit, my back to the wall.

At least Kim isn't shouting for me to go away. Perhaps I am making progress. If I'm being honest with myself, it's more than likely wishful thinking.

"I know you're probably sick of the sound of my voice, but I'm going to

talk to you anyway. Is there anything you'd like to chat about?"

I get nothing. I wait a little longer, just in case. You never know.

"I always knew I wanted to be on the frontline. Even as a small boy, before so much as a scale had come in, I'd already made up my mind. My mother wasn't happy about my decision. She'd hoped I'd go into something less dangerous." I smile, thinking about my parents. They live on the other side of the island. I haven't seen them in a couple of months. I need to visit with them again. "My father is a builder. I have three sisters, so it was always assumed that I would work for my dad and then later take over from him one day. You can imagine their shock when I decided to become a fighting dragon." I smile again. "This despite always maintaining what I wanted to be." I chuckle. "My mom wouldn't speak to me for weeks. My dad would only give me one-word answers. They eventually came around. It will be a great honor to be a frontline dragon. To serve Draig and the humans on the mainland. We are a little like your movie stars...I guess."

I'm sure I hear a snort from behind the door. My ears prick, but I don't hear anything more. She's definitely paying attention. I can feel it.

I pause for a short while, listening to a bird singing in a nearby tree. It's a beautiful turquoise with bright purple plumage on its breast. The little guy flies away, darting from tree to tree before taking flight over the canopy of green.

"They finally got used to the idea, and things got back to normal. I went through all the years of training. Many attempt it, but only an average of one in ten make it. My family was proud at my graduation." I chuckle again. "My mother cried. I know that part of it was fear for my life. It was mostly pride in my achievement, and it felt so good. It took years to mind-bond a human. I became the running joke of the family. They teased me relentlessly whenever I visited." I look down at my boots. They're covered in dust. I sigh. "I finally mind-bonded someone, but it didn't work out. I lost my rider. Imagine my surprise when I mind-bonded you the very next year."

"Do you expect me to feel sorry for you?"

I am shocked to hear her voice. I've grown used to one-sided conversations. I wasn't sure she even listened.

"No. Not at all. I don't want your pity."

"Good, because you can save it, Blaze. It isn't going to work. I want to go home, and I'm not going to change my mind. You can bond with someone else."

Blaze.

She said my name. I must be a serious idiot because I smile as soon as she says it. A couple of weeks ago, I was a monster. Now I have a name. Maybe these sessions are working.

“I’m afraid that Shadow isn’t going to let you go home, and she isn’t going to let me stop trying...at least for now. So, we’re stuck with one another for a little while longer.”

Mind-bonds don’t grow on trees.

I wait, but Kim doesn’t say anything.

“All dragons love shifting and flying. I just happen to love it more than most. All dragons are permitted to shift and fly, but it’s done under the strict watch of dragons with riders to ensure that everyone stays in line. They’re only allowed to take to the skies once a week. If you have a rider, it’s different. You get to fly all the time. It’s amazing, Kim. You can’t imagine the feeling of the wind over your skin and through your hair. In my case, it’s over my scales. The feeling of being far up above the world. It’s magical and unlike anything you’ve ever felt. It’s freedom in every sense of the word.”

That isn’t exactly true. We’re not completely free. Those of us with riders are under the influence of them. The others are watched, herded, and controlled by dragons with riders. It’s all planned, mapped, and regulated.

It’s still wonderful.

I would love nothing better than to have a rider. To be almost completely free. To be more in control of myself so that I am less of a threat.

“I’m prone to motion sickness. I wouldn’t make a good rider. If you feel any kind of remorse for your actions, you’ll speak to Shadow about letting me go.” She sounds sad. I feel her heaviness.

“I will try again.”

Then, I unpack my bag. “I brought you a few things.”

“I don’t want anything from you.” Her voice is clipped.

“It’s nothing much. Nothing special. I thought you might be going a little nuts holed up in there day and night. You don’t have to take them if you don’t want to. Up to you.” I take out the last of the items. “Hope you have a good evening,” I tell her.

I stand. There isn’t a word or a whisper from inside the bungalow. Our connection is strong, but all I feel is animosity. There is also a hint of curiosity.

I look down at the meager items, hoping she isn’t disappointed.

6

Kim *Four days later...*

I hear sobbing and sit up in bed.

It's still fairly early. I just finished breakfast, the remnants of which are sitting on a tray next to my bed. The plan was to finish reading another chapter of my book before starting on my exercises.

The others should have left for training, but they clearly haven't. I hear someone running, as there are loud footfalls on the ground.

There is more crying, followed by murmurs. I think I recognize Hunter as the person who is upset.

There is something going on. Jen and Luke arrived yesterday after completing Sky's Edge. Perhaps they already had a mind-bond attempt, and maybe something went wrong. It wouldn't surprise me much. Especially if Blaze was there. I feel a pang of jealousy at the thought of Blaze trying to bond with someone else. I push the emotion aside because it is clear to me that I have been brainwashed to some degree. It's insane that I would feel jealous after what he did.

There is another sob, and I put my book down. I'm so close to finding out who the murderer is that I'm reluctant to leave, but there is definitely something going on outside. I glance at the paperback; it's from the pile of books that Blaze left for me, along with a sketchpad and graphite pencils. I look over at the pad, still closed on my desk. I wonder how much he knows

about me.

I hear talking from somewhere outside my room. It sounds frantic, but I can't make out what the person is saying. I'm almost positive, at this point, that it's Hunter.

I walk over to my door and stick my head around the wooden structure. Both Natasha and Skylar are trying to comfort Hunter, who is red-faced, with tears rolling down her cheeks. Kerry is standing to the side, rubbing her hands up and down her heavily tattooed arms.

"What's going on?" I ask, leaving my bungalow for the first time since I accidentally mind-bonded with Blaze. I squint because the sun is glaring.

"Jen is missing," Hunter sobs.

"We don't know that yet," Skylar says.

"I know it," Hunter sobs.

Skylar gives me this look filled with trepidation. It tells me that she is in agreement and worried about their friend, too.

"Why don't we go back to your bungalow to wait for news?" Natasha says. "Dagger said that he would meet us there. You should come, too, Kim. It might not be safe for you to be home alone. Not until we know what is going on."

Skylar shoots me an anxious look.

Hunter nods, wiping her face. "I can't believe this is happening. Poor Jen."

"I know," Natasha says. The two ladies flank Hunter. Both of them have an arm around her, trying to console her as they walk. Kerry hangs back with me.

Hunter cries all the way back to her bungalow, which isn't too far from mine. I trail behind them.

"How do you know she's missing?" I ask as Skylar opens the door.

"She didn't come to breakfast and isn't in her room. I know something has happened." Fresh tears roll down Hunter's cheeks.

"It's very unlike Jen," Kerry says, glancing at me.

Once we are inside, I take a seat in the corner, out of the way. Skylar stays with Hunter, hugging her.

"What could have happened to her?" Skylar asks, her eyes on the far wall.

Hunter pulls away. "I don't buy for one second that Jen ran away. Did she seem like she was getting ready to run to you?" she asks Skylar, who shakes her head.

“Nope. I don’t think she ran. That explanation doesn’t sit right with me, either.”

“Jen is *not* a coward. She was petrified last night because she planned on facing the dragons today. Live or die, she was going to do it,” Hunter says with determination.

“I agree.” Kerry continues to absently rub her upper arm, almost hugging herself. “Besides, Dagger said that all of her things were still in her closet. Her toothbrush and toothpaste are still in the cupholder in the bathroom. Surely you would take your toothbrush if you left?”

“This place isn’t safe for any of us,” I say, trying to hold back tears of my own. “Why won’t they just let me leave?” Shit! All of the pent-up emotions from the last few weeks seem to bubble to the surface. I can’t hold back, and tears start to fall.

Damn!

Kerry closes the distance between us, handing me some tissues, which I readily accept.

I need to stop already. This isn’t even about me since I hardly know Jen, but it also brings home the danger we are all in. The constant threat is oppressive.

“Let’s all just calm down,” Skylar says, sounding like the voice of reason. I wish I could listen to her, but my heart is going nuts in my chest. “Let’s wait to find out what’s going on before jumping to conclusions. Or we can sit here going around in circles for hours, driving ourselves crazy. Dagger and Fang are with Shadow right now. Atlas is going over the camera footage from around camp. Hopefully, they will find something.”

They will.

I know they will.

That knowledge has adrenaline coursing through my veins.

“I can’t calm down, Skylar,” Hunter says. “I might not have known Jen for very long, but she has become my best friend, and if anything happens to her...” Her voice chokes up, and a tear runs down her cheek.

“Something has happened to her,” I say, unable to hold back. “The dragons have happened to her, that’s what. They’re all evil, bloodthi—”

“Stop talking!” Hunter throws at me, wiping her face. Her eyes narrow. “What happened to Ross is heartbreaking, but it doesn’t make all the dragon shifters on this island bad. It really doesn’t. Some of them are good. In fact, I would go so far as to say that most of them are great people.”

“Maybe in their human forms, but not once they shift,” I throw right back at her. She can’t refute that.

“I’m only partially bonded, and I agree with Hunter,” Skylar says.

“That’s because you’re both sleeping with them. It’s blinded you to their true natures. What did Sharon ever do to anyone? Why did she have to die like that?”

I think that Blaze the dragon may have been protecting me from Ross, but Sharon...

Wait a minute!

Wait just a minute!

Protecting me from Ross? Where did that thought even come from? No! It isn’t true!

Skylar frowns. “That we have relationships with shifters has got nothing to do with it, I assure you,” she says. “I’ve never felt anything malevolent from any of them...not ever. Although I was very nervous about meeting the dragons for the first time, I soon relaxed. I never felt like I was in danger. Even when the Reds were coming at me that day, I still didn’t feel like they would hurt me. I know it’s crazy, but it’s true.” She shrugs.

I guess I didn’t feel in danger either. Not once I got close and looked into their eyes...into his eyes.

No!

Blaze killed them, all three of them. He is dangerous! He is!

“You’re completely biased. I can’t listen to a word you say.” I shake my head, reminding myself of each and every death. How quick and deadly the dragons are.

“Suit yourself, I—” Skylar starts to say, but is cut off when Fang walks in, followed closely by Dagger. They look tense and bristling. I’m instantly on my guard. What if one of them accidentally shifts? Can that happen?

“What is it?” Hunter jumps to her feet; her eyes are wide, and she’s clasping her hands together. Her chest is rising and falling in quick succession.

Dagger and Fang give each other a look that has me leaning forward a little in my seat.

“Tell us already,” Kerry says in a tight voice.

“Don’t sugarcoat it,” Skylar’s tone is clipped.

Fang is closest to me. His jaw tightens. His eyes are blazing.

My heart hammers in my chest. I look down at my lap, clasping my hands

tightly. It can't be good.

"I'm sorry to have to tell you this, but Jen was taken," Dagger says, looking at Hunter when he delivers the news.

"Who took her?" Hunter says in a high-pitched voice.

"Four men came into camp last night. We think they may have gained entry through her open window since we explicitly told everyone to lock the door," Dagger goes on. "They got in through the window and then unlocked the door to let themselves out, leaving the door unlocked. That makes the most sense."

"No one expected them to just walk into camp like that," Fang says. "Right under our fucking noses," he adds under his breath, looking livid.

"Was it them?" Skylar asks, her eyes wide.

"We don't know for sure," Dagger says.

"Yes," Fang says in a much softer tone. "It was more than likely the Reds."

"We can't be one hundred—"

"It was them," Fang says, his voice clipped. "Who else would it be?"

Dagger sighs. "Yes, chances are good that it was them."

"What do they want with Jen?" Hunter asks.

"This makes absolutely no sense," Kerry adds, her eyes hazy with thought.

The Reds were here, in camp. More dragons. Even worse than the Draig Dragons. Feral creatures. I concentrate on my breathing. I can't hyperventilate. I pull my legs onto the chair and hug them.

Not safe!

Not safe!

"We have no idea," Fang says. "We need to up the security measures. For now, no one is permitted to leave this camp. All doors *and* windows are to be locked. No one is permitted to be alone at any time. Bonded females need to move in with their dragon shifter."

"No!" I yell.

Move in?

With Blaze?

"I want to go home. I refuse to be anywhere near that monster." My voice is shrill. It would mean a whole new level of control and dominance. We share a mental connection.

"It is for your own safety," Dagger tells me.

“My safety? Are you insane? No!” I yell as panic rises. “I won’t. I refuse.” I shake my head, my hand going to my throat for a second. I can still remember how it felt to have my air cut off. To be strangled. I touch my arm and shake my head harder. I feel my flesh start to burn like that day when Blaze killed Ross. The heat, the smoke, the smell of charred flesh.

“The orders have been given,” Dagger says in a soft tone that isn’t helping.

These guys are huge. Far bigger than Ross, and he completely dominated me. I don’t stand a chance. Blaze can squash me like a bug without even breaking a sweat.

“Well, they can be ungiven,” I tell him.

“It isn’t up to me,” Dagger says. “I’m sorry. I can only assure you that you will be safe with Blaze.”

Right!

“He’s a killer!” My voice is panicked, but it can’t be helped. I remember all of those nights running, hiding, praying. I can still hear her screams. The bruises. The mop sliding across bloody tiles. “You can’t make a promise like that.” I start crying. It isn’t Blaze I see; it’s my own father. I wasn’t safe in my own home. There is no way Dagger can make that statement.

“This is serious,” Fang says. “It’s pretty much life or death.”

I’m trying hard to calm myself down. It isn’t working.

Not safe!

Not safe!

“That’s how it has been since we first arrived on this island!” I practically scream because it’s all too much.

“A dragon shifter needs to accompany you at all times, with a second dragon shifter positioned outside every bungalow housing a human.” Fang says more, but I don’t hear him. I don’t hear any of them for a few seconds.

Calm down!

I’ll fix this. I won’t let him in. No!

“Why Jen? What do they want with her?” Hunter’s voice is shrill; it cuts through my thoughts.

“It’s baffling. We have no idea.” Dagger goes over to Hunter and wraps his arms around her, pulling her against him.

“The Tribute Council has been alerted. An urgent meeting has been called at HQ to discuss the goings-on of late,” Fang says.

“HQ?” Kerry frowns. “What the hell is HQ?”

I force myself to listen because this is information that I might be able to use.

“It’s our head office here on the island. We have various settlements and even a town on the other side of the island, where our head office is situated. HQ liaises with the Tribute Council and is the heart and soul of our frontline. They make all of the major decisions surrounding our Tributes, as well as our defenses against the Reds.” Fang folds his arms.

“What will happen next?” Skylar asks him.

“We need to wait to hear back from the team investigating the disappearance, but,” Fang sighs, “it’s been hours and hours since she was taken. It’s not looking good.”

Hunter makes a sobbing noise and buries her head deeper into Dagger’s chest.

“I’m sorry, sweetheart. We will do everything in our power to find her,” he tells her, stroking her back.

“What happens if they’ve taken her back to Mistveil?” Hunter asks with tears streaming down her face.

“Then I’m afraid she is lost,” Dagger says.

“Lost?” I say. My voice is a touch panicky, but who can blame me? “That isn’t good enough.”

Skylar nods, looking very much like she agrees. Kerry does, too.

“Even if it wasn’t forbidden – which it is – for any of us to go to Mistveil would be suicide, plain and simple,” Dagger tells Hunter, talking gently.

So that’s that, then. Jen is gone...more than likely dead, but nothing more will happen.

“So, what? You just do nothing?” I jump to my feet, standing next to Kerry.

“We’re doing everything in our power right now,” Dagger says. He is still rubbing the back of Hunter’s head as she sobs. “We have to follow the rules. We may not cross the mist surrounding the island.”

“Who made these stupid rules?” I ask, my hands on my hips.

“We report to HQ. And HQ reports to the Tribute Council, and the Tribute Council reports to the secretary of defense, who reports to the vice president, who then, in turn, reports to—”

“The President of the United States.” I can hardly believe what I am hearing.

“Yes,” Fang and Dagger say in unison. “We have to stay in line, or we

could face dire consequences.”

“We’ll do our best,” Dagger tells Hunter.

“It’s not good enough.” I’ve heard plenty. I’ve seen enough. I’m not interested in any of this. I walk out. I don’t mean to, but the door slams behind me.

I hear footsteps behind me and see Fang, Skylar, and Natasha, who hasn’t said so much as a word. Her face is drawn, and there is worry written in her eyes.

“I can’t believe this is happening,” she whispers.

“Me neither,” I tell her.

“I mean, I like Hulk, but I don’t want to live with the guy. I’m sure they won’t make you live with Blaze. Dagger must have it wrong where you are concerned. I wouldn’t worry.” She shakes her head.

“I hope you’re right. Good luck with everything,” I tell her.

“You, too.”

I nod. Then I wave at the others before practically running to my bungalow.

Nope, I will flat-out refuse to live with any of them. I meant what I said; they are violent killers. Blaze is the biggest monster of them all. I march back to my bungalow. I’m deep in thought. I’ll barricade myself in. I’ll—

I stop in my tracks when I notice that Blaze is standing outside my door. My eyes lock onto his. They are such a vivid green. I’m instantly reminded of when I looked into the eyes of his dragon. It happened just before he killed Ross in a fiery blast. Panic hits. Adrenaline floods my system. I do the one thing I was taught to do ever since I was a little girl.

I run. I run fast. I run hard. I run!

B laze

I'm standing outside the bungalow as I watch her approach. Kim is walking fast; she's looking around like a jaguar might pounce out at her at any second. Then again, I don't think it's the regular wildlife she's afraid of.

Her forehead is marred with a frown. She's wearing a long, flowing summer dress with a floral design on the front. The majority of the dress is a pretty blue that matches her eyes. Her shoulder-length blond hair is loose about her shoulders. It's longer than when she arrived a few weeks ago.

Kim takes one look at me, and her step falters. Her eyes fill with fear. Her mouth tightens.

I start to put up a hand. I want to tell her that she has nothing to fear, but before I can even take so much as a breath, she turns tail and runs.

For someone who has been holed up in her room for weeks, she's fast. She heads straight down one of the many paths into the jungle. Into the freaking jungle.

Crap.

I have to go after her.

I drag in a deep breath and run after her, pushing aside tall grass and branches as I enter the forest. My heart is pounding in my chest, and I feel sweat trickling down my back. The jungle is dense, and it's easy to lose sight of Kim in the thick foliage.

She moves like a jackrabbit on steroids, and I find that I am in awe of her speed and agility. I watch her leap over a fallen tree, dashing ahead as we move deeper into the forest. I leap over the same bulky trunk just moments behind her when I see a sandal in the rich soil. I bend and pick it up, running after her once again, just in time to see her leaving the path. That's when I lose sight of her completely. The jungle is thick. She could be anywhere within the dense vegetation. I pick up the snap of a twig and move in that direction.

"Kim!" I call out, hoping she'll respond, but she doesn't. I feel that familiar tug on my mind, so I know she's close.

'Where are you?'

I go toward the sensation, getting closer and closer. The tugging increases. She's close.

"Get out of my head!" she growls, tearing out from behind a thick bush to the far left of me.

"Wait!" I yell. "It isn't safe out here."

"From you!" she yells as she picks up pace, darting through the undergrowth.

I groan as I take off after her. Of course, by chasing her, I'm fueling her belief that I am the predator and she the prey, but I can't very well abandon her out here now, can I?

I see her in the distance, a blur of movement as she weaves through the heavy undergrowth, her beautiful dress tearing as it snags on branches. I can almost hear the frantic drumming of her heart as she runs. She glances back; her eyes are wide with fear.

I hate that she is so terrified of me. I can't blame her, but neither can I give in. Instead, I pick up my pace, pushing myself to keep up with her. I'm much bigger, but my height and muscled frame are a hindrance out here. I push myself harder because I can't let her get too far ahead. I don't want her to get hurt. The Reds could still be hiding out here. Anything could happen.

I would never forgive myself. Fuck no!

Case in point: as I close in on her, she trips on a thick tree root and goes crashing to the ground. I rush to her.

"Are you okay?" I ask, reaching for her, intent on helping her up.

Kim turns onto her back and scrambles backward. "Don't touch me! Don't you dare."

"Let me, at least, help you up, dammit. I'm trying to be nice."

“It isn’t working! Go away!”

“I’m not going anywhere. I’m also not going to hurt you. You really need to try hard to believe me when I tell you that. Sure, all bets are off when I’m in my dragon form, but I’m not in my dragon form right now.”

She starts to get up and I reach for her again.

Anger flares in her eyes. “I told you not to touch me. I know that you’ve been ordered to babysit me. Not just that, we have to live together or some such bullshit, but I need you to know that it isn’t going to happen.” She winces when she tries to put weight on the foot that’s missing the sandal. “Dammit! Now look what you did.”

“Ummmm...you ran away from me. You would never have hurt yourself if you hadn’t taken off half-cocked like that. There was absolutely no need for that kind of reaction.”

“You kill people,” she says under her breath. “You’ll excuse me if I struggle with that.”

I want to blame my dragon, but I don’t. We are two halves of a whole. Doing so would be wrong. “Can we move on from that?” I scrub a hand over my face. “Okay...I see how that might be difficult for you. I understand, but —”

“Do you? Have any of your friends been killed while *you* were watching?”

I nod. “Yes, I’ve lost friends to this war. I know how it feels. I do understand; more than you know.” I look down at the foot she just tried to stand on. It’s already puffy around the ankle. “That looks like it might be broken or, at the very least, sprained.”

“It isn’t broken.”

“How do you know? It’s already blowing up.”

She shakes her head. “It doesn’t feel broken.” She wriggles her toes. “I’ve had a couple of breaks over the years. My leg, both arms, a rib, a couple of fingers. That’s a sprain.” She points at her ankle, which seems to be puffing up more and more by the second.

“We need to get you back to camp. Your foot needs to be elevated and could do with an icepack.” I gesture to her ankle. Then I frown. “How is it that you’ve broken so many bones?”

She shrugs. “Playing sports. As a kid, I liked to climb trees and play rough. I guess I was a little clumsy.” Her cheeks go red, like she’s embarrassed about it.

Kim

Why did I tell him about my broken bones?

Idiot!

It's not something he needs to know about. It's far too damned personal. He's looking at me quizzically, as if he's not quite buying it. I shouldn't have said that I was clumsy. Isn't that what they always say?

She's so clumsy, always tripping over her own feet.

I'm such a clumsy clot. Hahahahaha!

All bullshit!

"I was somewhat of a tomboy...that's all." It's far from all, but it's all he's getting from me.

Blaze is huge. I have to crane my neck since he towers over me. He's wearing shorts and a T-shirt. His legs are right in front of me. They almost rival the tree trunks they're so long and thick. His shirt is pulling tight over hard muscles. His eyes are bright green; they're focused on my ankle again. I see worry, which helps calm me down just a touch.

"Since I'm not allowed to offer you any kind of assistance, can you stand on your own?" He looks at me with concern.

Nope!

No!

I'm not buying the charming, sweet vibes he's projecting.

"Yes! I can stand on my own," I say in a clipped tone that's dripping in false confidence. *I think* I can stand. No, *I can!* *I will!*

Blaze goes down on his haunches a few feet away from me; his eyes are still firmly on my foot. "Also, it looks like you've sliced the underside of your heel. It's bleeding a little."

"Oh!" I bend my knee, taking in that part of my foot. I wince when I see the slice on my very dirty foot.

"Didn't you feel it?"

I shake my head. "I have a high pain tolerance. And it really isn't that bad," I quickly add.

He tilts his head, looking slightly surprised by my response. "I'm not

convinced you can get up on your feet, let alone walk on that, but you will need to try. We have to get back.” He looks around. “It isn’t safe out here.”

“I’ll manage,” I say as I take in a deep breath, trying to steady myself. “I’m fine. Just... give me a minute.”

Shit!

My ankle has started to throb with every beat of my heart. And now that I know about the wound on the underside of my foot, it has started to sting.

Shit!

Shit!

Why did I run like that? I choke out a laugh because I know exactly why. Old habits never really die.

Run!

Hide!

Go! Go! Go!

He’s in a mood.

He’s been drinking.

Ruuuuuuuuun!

“You’re laughing?” Blaze frowns, looking confused. “Seems odd. Did you bang your head? How many fingers am I holding up?” He holds up three fingers.

“I didn’t bang my head. I’m fine. It’s nerves, that’s all.”

“You laugh when you’re nervous?”

I shake my head. “Not normally, but this hardly constitutes normal, so I think I can be forgiven.”

He gives me a half-smile, and three dimples break out. His jade eyes dance for a few moments. For just half a second, I find him attractive. I get this warm feeling inside, and it catches me off guard. I quickly look away from him, my smile disappearing.

Don’t fall into the trap, Kim!

“Nope, this whole situation isn’t normal at all.” He sighs. “You get two chances at getting up on your own, and then I’m helping you, whether you like it or not.”

Blaze stands and takes a step back, giving me some space.

With a loud groan, I try to stand on my own. The moment I put my weight on it, my ankle buckles under me, and I fall back down onto my ass with a grunt.

“I can do it,” I insist, but it’s halfhearted since we both know it isn’t true.

I've gone and hurt myself. I can't believe it.

Blaze lifts his brows and folds his arms. He doesn't say anything. He just stands there looking down at me, waiting for me to try again so that he can pick me up.

My ankle is now swollen. I touch it gingerly and feel heat. Yep, it's badly sprained. Blaze is right; it needs to be elevated, and ice would help get the swelling down.

I push out a heavy breath. "Okay, maybe I do need some help," I admit, feeling defeated.

He bends down and lifts me up onto my feet – or rather my foot – effortlessly, as if I weigh nothing. I notice the muscles in his arms bulging as he holds me up, and I can't help but feel a flutter in my chest.

No!

What the hell?

I refuse to feel any kind of attraction to a monster. Blaze clearly has a sweet, charming side, but I know that there is more than meets the eye.

I pull away and immediately start to fall. Quicker than a flash, he grabs me by the hip to keep me from crashing to the ground.

I grip his muscular forearm – apparently, this part of the body can be well-muscled, too – because I'm on the verge of landing back on my ass.

"Stop fighting me," he says in a soft voice. "You're not going to be able to walk on that."

"I'm fine. I..." I sigh instead of finishing my sentence. It sounds as defeated as I feel.

Crap. He's right. There's no way I will be able to put weight on my ankle. It's swollen and starting to go blue. The cut on my heel won't help, either. I'm starting to seriously feel the pain. My whole body bristles at the thought of him carrying me, but what choice do I have?

"You're tiny. I can carry you with one arm strapped behind my back. I swear to god that I won't hurt you in any way. I promise."

I promise it won't happen again.

I promise I won't drink again.

I promise.

"You can save your promises," I tell him. "They mean nothing to me."

"You're getting anxious again."

"And you're doing it again...getting inside my head." I hate it.

"I sense your emotions. That's all. I can't read your mind. I most

definitely can't make you do anything you don't want to. I need to pick you up now. We'll take it slow, Kim."

I swallow thickly and nod once because what choice do I have?

"Breathe and try to relax." *Yeah, right!* "If you ever decide you want to move forward and become a rider, the first thing we would work on is you putting up mind-walls. That way, we wouldn't be privy to each other's emotions quite as easily."

"I'm not interested in becoming a rider. I want to go home now, more than ever."

"I take it you left friends and family. A whole life. I can't imagine how hard that must be for you."

I don't say anything because he's wrong, but he really doesn't need to know that.

"Shadow won't let you go just yet. Our HQ is encouraging successful pairings more than ever. We need every rider we can get. I'm going to pick you up now."

"Okay, but can we talk about something else?" I yelp as he crouches slightly and lifts me into his arms. One of my hands flattens on his chest.

"I've got you. You're safe."

I do feel safe, which is false. Completely untrue. No! Just nope. I refuse to believe it.

My heart is racing. My hands go clammy. At the same time, I feel his warmth seeping through our clothes. His body feels like it's been carved from granite. He smells good. Really good. Like soap, citrus, and mint. Oh, and man. All man.

I give an involuntary shiver. A few goosebumps have broken out on my arms, but that's because I'm afraid. And it's all it is.

"You're going to be just fine," he says in a low voice as he starts to walk. "I'll have you back home safe in no time."

I look up at his face for a second and see a hint of worry in his eyes. It looks like he's genuinely concerned about me. I sense it, too, and I can't help but feel a twinge of guilt for thinking the worst of him. Maybe he isn't so bad in his human form.

No!

I can't let my guard down. Not for a second, even if he is attractive and seemingly attentive.

Right now, I don't have any choice in the matter, so I let him carry me.

He moves quickly but carefully through the jungle. Maneuvering me in such a way that my foot doesn't get bumped or bashed.

I try hard to focus on the jungle instead of on him. On the birds that trill a sweet melody and on how the leaves rustle in the light breeze. The sun filters through the thick canopy, casting dappled light on the forest floor. I have to say that it's beautiful. It might be deadly and dangerous living out here, but there are a few perks.

We step out of the thick jungle onto the path that leads back to camp and catch sight of a group of spider monkeys who screech in terror as soon as they spot us. I watch in awe as they flee into the depths of the forest.

"You good?"

Yes.

No!

Crap!

Blaze chuckles. His chest vibrates. His arms tighten ever so slightly.

"This isn't funny," I say.

"Everything is better when you try to look at the positive side," he says.

"Not everything," I say, sounding like a pessimistic bitch. I sigh. "Fine, some things are better when you look at the positive side. It's just that I'm struggling with finding positives right now."

"I'm sorry about your boyfriend." His jaw tightens. His eyes stay on the path ahead.

"Ross wasn't my boyfriend," I blurt. *Shit!* Why did I say that? Once again, I sound like a colossal bitch.

He looks at me, eyes narrowed. I sense his confusion. It comes off him in waves.

"I had actually just broken up with him," I mumble. "I shouldn't have told you all that, especially since...he's gone. I just... It's—" I drop it because what else can I say?

"Is that why you feel guilty about his death?"

"Yes... No... Mostly. It's just that your dragon told me to come to him. To move away from Ross, and I listened. You might not have killed him if... if I—"

"Stop there! If my dragon wanted Ross dead, then Ross would have died, regardless of what you did or didn't do. You can stop taking the blame and place your anger back on me, where it belongs."

"Oh, I haven't suddenly forgiven you, Blaze. Your dragon is a ruthless,

cold-blooded killer. Ross was an asshole, but he didn't deserve to die." I shake my head.

"My dragon clearly decided otherwise. I'm not trying to make excuses, but he's generally a good judge of character." He winces. "I'm making excuses."

"You're right, you are. Sharon was a nice person. Yet you killed her."

"My dragon didn't like her much, either. Look, we think differently in our dragon forms. We're predators. We kill far more readily."

"You don't say. I'm sure that whatever she did or didn't do would never have been enough to warrant her death."

"Agreed!" He sighs. "As I said, our dragons are highly aggressive, temperamental bastards. All I know is that when he takes a dislike to someone," Blaze shakes his head, "there is nothing I can do to stop him. I try not to hold on to the guilt. When it came to you, I got this overwhelming desire to protect you once we mind-bonded. I'm not sure why. Dragons are logical in their thinking, but we don't view things like humans do. We're hugely different and mostly governed by instinct."

"Your instinct just happens to involve killing people."

"I suppose," he mutters as we arrive back at camp, but instead of walking to my bungalow, he goes in another direction altogether.

"Where are you taking me? Is there a doctor on site?" I don't know much about the goings on here since I've mostly stayed in my little bungalow.

He shakes his head. "We would need to call for one to come out from the Academy."

"That's not necessary. I'll be right as rain in a couple of days."

The look that Blaze gives me tells me that he disagrees.

We arrive at a bungalow that is much bigger than mine. There is a leather-clad guy standing outside the door. From his size and long hair, I would say that he is one of the shifters.

Blaze greets him with a nod. "Devil this is Kim."

"Good morning," the guy says.

Devil. Really? I have to say that it does suit him.

"Relax. Devil is a good shifter. One of the best we have."

"Let me guess; all bets are off when in dragon form."

"As long as you still follow the basic rules, no one will touch you now that you are bonded to me, but you should always be wary of unbonded dragons. They are unpredictable."

Devil nods. He opens the door for us. “Good advice,” he says in a deep voice.

“What is this? Why are we here?” I frown as the door is shut behind us. I see bags on the floor. “Those are my things. Why are my things here?” I don’t like where this is going.

Blaze walks inside. Then he pushes out a pent-up breath as he puts me down on the sofa. “I’m truly sorry, Kim. I know you’re very much against it, but orders have been given. We need to live together until this issue with the Reds is resolved or until you are given permission to leave, but that isn’t going to happen anytime soon. Until then, you’re stuck with me.”

I already had this information, but I somehow thought I might somehow be exempt. My heart sinks as reality sets in.

B laze

Kim falls back on the sofa, with a bewildered look on her face. She shakes her head. “No. Forget it. Surely, I should have some sort of say in this?” she asks, sounding frustrated. I can’t say I blame her. “If I have to share the bungalow with a shifter, then I want it to be Shadow...or another woman, at the very least. Actually, anyone but you.”

“I’m sorry, Kim, but neither of us has a say. I’ve been given my instructions, and they’re very clear. If anything happened to you and I wasn’t at my post, I would be put to death as punishment.”

She gets this horrified look. “Holy shit, but you guys are barbaric.”

I shrug. “We take our duties very seriously, particularly when lives are at stake.”

Kim starts laughing. It looks a touch hysterical. “Yes, but then you shift into your dragon form, and we’re fair game. How does that even work? I don’t get it.”

Yep, she’s definitely leaning toward hysterical.

“You’re right; if a human were to be killed during a sanctioned shift, there would not be a penalty. It would be like penalizing a lion for taking out a gazelle.”

“Hardly comparable, but okay. I want to talk to Shadow about this.”

“I already have, and it would do no good. The orders have been given by

our HQ. It's out of her hands. Out of all of our hands. I'm afraid you're stuck with me."

The human groans, and her eyes flutter closed. "This isn't fair."

"Reds came into our camp last night. They took that female right out from under our noses. They did it easily and efficiently. We don't know why or where she is. Trust me, you don't want that happening to you." I look at her ankle, which is blowing up by the freaking second. "We need to get your foot elevated. I will send one of the guys to fetch a first-aid kit. I'm sure you'll want a painkiller before long."

Kim touches the side of her leg. From the pinched look on her face, I would say that she is in pain. She shakes her head. "I'm okay. I would rather not take anything, thanks."

"You need to take something, ideally with an anti-inflammatory, to help get that down."

"Not if it's going to dull my senses." She keeps her eyes on mine. "There are Reds out there, after all. I need to have all my wits about me."

I get the feeling she isn't talking about the Reds. That she is worried about what I might do to her if she is out of it. I get it, I really do, but if we are going to be sharing a bungalow, I need to change her mind about me and fast.

"Here." I grab a few pillows from the other sofa, piling them on top of one another. "Put your foot up."

Kim tries to hide a wince as she does what I ask.

I give her another pillow. "For your back."

She nods, taking the pillow from me and sliding it behind her.

I go back to the front door, cracking it open. Devil turns, brows raised.

"I need you to fetch a first-aid kit as well as a couple of painkillers. I will also need a bag of ice or some frozen peas, something that will help a sprained ankle. Ask June. She'll help you."

"Sure thing." Devil leaves at a jog. He is going to the rear of the bungalow. I know that it is to inform the shifter on duty that we will be alone for five or ten minutes.

Next, I go into the bathroom, grabbing a washcloth and a towel, which I place on the coffee table. Then, I collect a large mixing bowl from the kitchenette and fill it with warm water.

I take it and head back to Kim, carefully placing it on the table. I dip the washcloth in the water and gently clean her foot, starting with the congealed

blood on her heel. I am careful to avoid the actual injury.

“You don’t have to do that,” Kim says, pulling her foot away.

“It needs to be cleaned up and disinfected. Stop fighting me for half a minute.”

Her shoulders sag, and she puts her foot back on the pillow. “I know you’re trying to help, and I’m grateful...but this is hard, that’s all. Also, I don’t think you’re qualified to be a medic.” The side of her mouth twitches.

I can’t help but smile. It seems that Kim is trying, which means a whole lot to me. “Trust me when I tell you that I’m hugely qualified. I’ve done this plenty of times. I haven’t just had to deal with cut feet but skinned knees and elbows, too,” I tell her as I clean.

“For your sisters? You mentioned them a few times during your talks.”

I nod. “That’s right.” I smile. “I didn’t think you listened.”

“It’s not like I could leave or anything. I think you said that they’re all younger than you.” She looks at me with interest. “All three of them?”

Interesting. So, she *was* listening to me.

“Yep...for my sins.” I laugh. “Actually, I love having siblings. They could be thorns in my sides, but they are mostly fun. The older we get, the closer we get. What about you? Any brothers or sisters?”

Kim shakes her head, looking deep in thought. “I nearly had a younger sister, but my mom had an accident while she was pregnant. She was already quite far along. I remember her having a large belly. Then she fell down the stairs.” She shrugs. “She just lost her balance and fell. They couldn’t stop the bleeding. They tried hard to save the baby, but...” She bites down on her lip and shakes her head; her eyes are on the far wall. Her face is pale. I’m not sure if it’s the memory or the pain that has caused her to lose color like that. She pulls in a deep breath and locks eyes with me. Her blue irises seem to have darkened. “They couldn’t save my sister. My mom couldn’t have kids after that. She said that she was glad, that it was for the best.”

“Why would she be glad?” I blurt without really thinking. “Sorry, it’s none of my business.”

“It’s fine... She said she wouldn’t be able to live through another loss like that, so it was for the best.” Her eyes are hazy.

“I guess...but you said she had a freak accident. It’s not like something like that would happen twice. It’s—”

There is a knock at the door, and Devil walks in moments later. He recoils when he sees Kim’s ankle. “That doesn’t look good at all.” He hands

her a bag of frozen peas. “That probably needs an x-ray.” He puts a first-aid kit down on the table. “The meds are inside the bag.” He taps the top of the kit.

“It isn’t broken,” Kim insists. “It looks worse than it feels.”

“Could be a greenstick fracture. They’re not always immediately apparent. It’s a pity you guys are so newly bonded, or you might have been able to heal your human. Let me know if you need anything else.”

“Thanks, Devil,” I say as I unzip the first aid-kit, glancing up in time to see him close the door behind him.

“Heal me? How would you do that?” She narrows her eyes. “If you’d need to get inside my head, I’m not interested.”

I take out some antibacterial cream and a large fabric Band-Aid. It’s made for elbows but will work just as well on her heel.

“It’s something that closely bonded pairs can sometimes do. It works best if the shifter heals the human, but it can go both ways if a team is together for many years. I would essentially give some of my energy to you to help you heal quicker. You’ve never so much as climbed on my back, so I doubt it would work with us.”

She doesn’t say anything.

“I could try if you want?” I lift my brows.

She shakes her head. “I’ll be fine...thanks.”

“Suit yourself.”

“I can take over.” She points at her foot. “I don’t mind taking care of that. I’ve also had some first-aid practice over the years,” she tells me.

“Because you’re clumsy.”

Her eyes darken, and her jaw tightens. Then she gives a nod. “Exactly.”

“It’s fine. You relax, I’ve got it. This might sting,” I warn her before applying the ointment to her wound. Kim barely flinches. She doesn’t so much as move while I clean the wound, being as careful as possible. It has to hurt, but you would never tell by looking at her.

I have to say, I find it a little odd. She reminds me of a wounded animal trying hard not to show pain or fear in any way for fear of what the consequences might end up being. I’ve told her numerous times over the last few weeks that I won’t hurt her, but she still isn’t buying it. That much is clear.

I gently secure the Band-Aid in place. “There,” I tell her. “All done. We’ll have to change that in the morning.”

“I’m sure I’ll manage by then,” she mumbles.

“We’ll see.”

“I’m fine.”

“You’re not fine.” I shake my head. “You won’t be for at least a couple of days.”

“What’s next? A sponge bath?” She chuckles to herself. “I swear that I’m quite capable.”

I don’t laugh because my lower belly is tightening, and along with it, my balls. My cock is next to take note. My eyes drift over her body for the first time. Her breasts are not overly large. They remind me of fleshy, ripe peaches. Big enough to bounce but not so big that they would get in the way. Perky as fuck. I suspect that with her complexion, her nipples would be a pretty shade of pink, her pussy, too.

Pink. Blushing. Juicy as—

Kim slaps me on the side of the arm. “You had better not be picturing me naked, buddy. You’re already in my bad books as it is.” Her eyes are narrowed. Kim does not look happy, and I can’t say I blame her.

I wasn’t just picturing her naked. It was so much worse than that. For a moment there, I was picturing what she would look like bouncing on the end of my cock. What the hell is wrong with me? I’ve done enough damage, caused her enough anxiety without being a fucking pervert.

“Sorry.” I shake my head. “I...um... I wouldn’t...um... I... No!” I say with too deep a voice, so I clear my throat. “I have zero experience in the sponge bath department; you would be on your own there. I wonder if we should wrap that ankle.” I quickly change the subject. Kim is an attractive woman, but if she stays – and that’s a big if – it would be as my rider. There can’t be anything more. Although, I’m beginning to think that she’s too timid to be a rider. Too easily spooked. Not that she would ever go for it.

“Nah! It doesn’t need wrapping. I’m fine,” Kim insists. “I’ll keep it iced and elevated. It’ll be right as rain in a few days.”

I take the bottle of painkillers out of the first-aid kit. “You should take a couple of these. I’ll get you some water.”

Kim is once again seriously stubborn because she shakes her head. “No drugs. I don’t need them. Show me which bedroom is mine, and I’ll get out of your hair.”

Crap!

“What is it? You suddenly have this look, and I don’t like it one bit.”

“There is only one bedroom,” I tell her.

“Since I don’t want to be here, and I’m being forced, *I’m* going to take it. This is a perfectly good sofa. It’s pretty comfortable, and it has your name on it.”

“I also didn’t ask for any of this, and I swear that I would give you the bedroom if I could, but I can’t.”

“What do you mean, you can’t?” Her eyes are wide.

“We’ve been tasked with keeping our eyes on our wards as much as possible. I’m not allowed to let you out of my sight, Kim.”

K im

“Are you proposing that we should sleep together...in the same bed?” My jaw feels like it has come unhinged. It can’t be. They wouldn’t do that to us. It’s so absurd. Like completely ridiculous.

Blaze gets that look of concern, and then nods. “Yep, it would be the best way to protect you, especially now that you are injured.”

“I’m willing to bet that those instructions were not literal, Blaze. They don’t expect us to share the same bed. It’s bad enough that we have to share a bungalow. I refuse to share my bedroom, let alone my bed. No!” The last time I shared anything with a guy, it ended badly.

“You stick to your side of the bed, and I’ll stick to mine. There would be no funny business, I swear.” He holds both hands up in a show of surrender. “Think about the positive side of this: at least I would be right there if something happened. If someone tried to break into our bungalow.”

Our bungalow.

Our freaking bungalow.

Our? There is no *our*.

My heart is pounding so hard I can’t hear anything else. My mouth suddenly feels dry.

“Are you telling me that the shifters Natasha and Kerry mind-bonded with will be sleeping with them, too? As in, they’ll be sharing a bed?” I can’t

believe that.

“Yes. Our instructions were very literal and very clear, Kim.”

“It’s insane. You can’t expect women to share sleeping quarters with men they hardly know. It’s wrong.” My voice is gruff, but I don’t care. I’m pissed off.

“We’re on the other end of this as well. Do you think we want this?”

“Yes, I get the feeling that you’re just fine with it.” I know I’m being a little childish, but I’m upset about this.

“I have news for you, Kim. I value my privacy just as much as you value yours. Quite frankly, I’m pissed that you’re insinuating that just because we’re men and you are women, we will automatically want to get into your pants or something. It isn’t like that at all. I’m not some wet-behind-the-ears young buck who wants someone just because they’re in a dress.” He gestures at me. At my torn-up dress. “I don’t date humans. Not ever. I certainly have no interest in being with my rider. You can relax.”

“I’m *not* your rider.” I’m not sure why, but his words anger me.

“Until I am instructed otherwise, you are my rider, Kim. Sorry! Deal with it. And deal with the fact we are now joined at the hip because we are.”

I don’t want to deal with it. I don’t want to even be here. I would rather go back to my two-bit apartment. The one I had to fumigate monthly because of all the unwelcome visitors. I’d rather have my dead-end job. At least it was mine. I didn’t have to rely on anyone. Heck, I’d even give back the money the Tribute Council paid me as well as the check I’d receive if I was asked to leave Draig Island. They can have it back if it means I can leave right now. I don’t want anything from them or anyone for that matter. I’m better off on my own.

I’ve had too much shit go down in my life. The last few years have been tough, but they’ve been good. At least I could sleep at night. At least there was no need to run. No need to hide.

That isn’t the case anymore.

Sleep with one eye open.

Run! Hide!

Run!

I look down at my ankle.

It doesn’t seem like I have much choice in the matter, so I fold my arms tightly across my body. “You stay on your side, or you’re sleeping on the floor.”

“Fair enough, but that goes both ways.” He lifts his brows.

I choke out a laugh. It’s completely against my will. “That’s funny.” Like he has anything to worry about. Please!

I’ve been lying here for ages. I can’t sleep. My ankle is throbbing. It’s elevated, and I’ve used cold packs. I’ve done everything short of taking medication. I can’t sleep. I moan softly, shifting to try to get comfortable.

I don’t like taking meds. I’ve taken Tylenol on occasion, but that’s it. I don’t like alcohol either. I drank a little when I was with Ross, but only because he insisted.

The signs were there.

Arghhhh!

Why didn’t I see them?

“You’re in pain,” Blaze says. His voice is even deeper in the dark. How is that possible?

I want to deny it, but I can’t. It hurts. My ankle is really throbbing. It feels worse lying here in the darkness.

Blaze switches on his sidelight and sits up.

“I’m fine,” I say.

“You’re not fine. You’re in pain, but for some reason, you won’t take anything. The pills and water are right there on the side table. Why are you being so damned stubborn?”

“My father was an alcoholic. My grandfather died from liver failure before I was born. Addiction runs in the family, so I try to steer clear. I know on a logical level that I’m being silly. Two white pills won’t make me a drug addict, but I can’t take them. I can count on one hand the number of times I’ve taken meds. I can count on two hands the number of times I’ve drunk alcohol.”

His whole demeanor softens while I’m talking. “It’s not silly. It’s completely understandable. I hate seeing you in so much pain.”

He gets onto his haunches and scoots down to my feet.

“What are you doing?” I’m trying hard not to look at him, and I’m failing dismally. I’ve never seen anyone with a body like his. No human, at any rate. He’s packed with muscles and covered in tattoos. The pair of black boxers

doesn't cover much. His legs are just as big as the rest of him. His shoulders are wide. His abs have abs.

I realize that I'm staring at his broad back. At the curling, swirling tattoos that cover hard muscles. I look up at an amused expression on his face.

"Sorry, what was that? I zoned out. I'm really tired." I blink a few times to prove a point because I am tired. I really am.

"Tired?" He nods and gives me the briefest smile, like he doesn't believe me.

"Exhausted."

"I see." This time, his smile is wider, which irritates me a whole lot. I was not checking him out. Okay, maybe I was. Back to the part about him being the biggest guy I've ever seen without a shirt, up close and personal.

"Okay, now you look like you're going to start panicking on me again. There is no need."

I might have panicked a little when he wanted to get into the bed. I quickly got over it.

"If you won't take the pills – which I completely get – let me at least try my hand at healing you." He rubs his hands together.

My heart starts to pound.

"All I would have to do is put my hands on the area and try to project healing energy onto the injury. It wouldn't hurt you in any way. It probably won't even work. But I want to try on the off chance it does, even a little. Even if it took the edge off enough for you to sleep, that would be worth it, right?"

I'm instantly concerned about a different kind of addiction. One that would involve his hands on me...healing me. I almost laugh at the absurd thought. Nope, that isn't going to happen. I nod. "Okay. Yes, please, could you try?" I'm desperate at this point.

He gently takes my ankle in his warm hands, and it instantly feels so much better.

I make the softest groan.

"Better?"

I nod. I'm not sure how since it's inflamed, and his hands are so warm.

"Maybe it will work after all," he murmurs.

"I hope so."

Blaze takes in a deep breath. His already huge chest expands further. His eyes flutter closed, and I notice how long and thick his lashes are.

I gasp when his hands get even warmer.

He lets me go. "Are you okay?"

The throbbing starts up again. "Yes. Yes. Please carry on. I think it's helping."

He wraps his hands around my ankle again, and my groan is more pronounced this time. "That feels good," I groan. My cheeks heat because I sound like he's touching me in a different way.

He flashes me a smile. "I need to concentrate."

I concentrate on keeping my lips zipped. There will be no more moaning from me. This time when his hands get warmer, I don't react. They continue to warm up further. He holds my ankle for a few minutes before finally letting go. When he does, the throbbing doesn't return. I look down at my ankle, almost expecting it to look normal. It doesn't. It's swollen and blue.

"It feels so much better," I tell him when I see the disappointed look on his face.

He looks at me like he doesn't quite buy it.

"I swear. It doesn't look great, but it feels almost normal," I say in awe. I can hardly believe it.

"You're not just saying that?"

I give him a look.

Blaze smiles. "Okay...good. I'm glad. Glad I could help in a small way. I can't say how long it will last."

"Thank you," I push the words out. I force them.

"Any time, and I mean that." Then he switches the light off. "Let's get some sleep."

"That would be amazing."

"Wake me up if you need another... If you need me to do that again."

"I will...thanks." I yawn, already half asleep. It's been some day. If someone had told me this morning that I'd be sharing a bed with Blaze, I'd have laughed in their face.

B laze

Her breathing is rhythmical as she sleeps. Her hand is on my chest, splayed wide. One of her legs is thrown over my body. Her injured ankle is resting on my thigh. It's still swollen and tinged with various shades of blue and purple.

Her breasts are mashed against my side, her breath warm on my chest where she has planted herself. I glance over at her side of the bed, which is completely empty. Kim is practically on top of me. All I can think to myself is that she is going to be upset when she wakes up. She'll probably find some way to blame me for this.

I can't deny that I'm enjoying the feel of her body against mine. It's been a while since I shared a bed with a woman. Especially one as incredibly beautiful as Kim. I long to pull her closer. To put my arm around her. I should probably be pushing her away because this is wrong.

I gently try to move her off of me, but she stirs in her sleep and cuddles me even closer, arching her back and wriggling her ass before settling back against me. Her pussy is flush against my thigh. At least she's wearing shorts and a T-shirt. My problem right now is that I'm stuck. I can't move without waking her up.

I close my eyes and let myself get lost in the sensation of her body against mine for a few more moments, even though I shouldn't. The way her soft breaths brush against my skin, the softness of her hair as it tickles my chin,

the warmth of her against my chest.

Then she pulls in a sharp breath, and her whole body tightens.

“Good morning,” I say as she pulls away, scrambling to get to the other side of the bed. She even pulls a sheet up over herself, covering her head as well.

“Please tell me that did not just happen.” Her voice is muffled.

“If you’re referring to you being all over me...weeeellllll...”

She groans.

I laugh.

“It isn’t funny.”

“I think it is.” I laugh some more. “You’re lucky. I’m a nice guy, so I won’t force you to sleep on the floor, but if it happens again, all bets are off.”

She pulls the sheet down, and her hair is mussed. “Don’t worry, that won’t happen again. I’m not sure how it happened this time. I’m not normally a deep sleeper.” Her eyes narrow in confusion.

“What can I say? I’m comfortable to sleep on, and you needed to elevate your leg.” I put my hands behind my head. “You’re welcome.”

“I’ll have you know that you are *not* comfortable to sleep on. You’re hard as a freaking rock.”

“I watched you sleep for nearly an hour, and you seemed quite content.”

Her eyes widen. “You watched me sleep? Firstly, that’s really creepy, and secondly, why didn’t you wake me up?”

“You looked very comfortable. I figured you needed the sleep. I did try to get out from under you without waking you up. And then, for the record, it would have been creepy if I’d cuddled you back.”

Her face morphs into a look of horror. “I did not cuddle with you. Take that back.”

“You were practically on top of me. Trust me, there was plenty of cuddling going on.”

She makes this cute little noise of outrage. “It doesn’t count. I was asleep. Next time, wake me up immediately. Do not be a creepazoid and watch me sleep.”

“Next time? Do you plan on spooning me again?”

She growls. “Don’t you—”

I all out laugh. “I’m teasing you. I know you didn’t mean it. You were sleeping and can’t be held accountable. We’ll leave it at that.”

“Yes, let’s leave it at that.” She falls back against her pillow, looking up

at the ceiling.

“How is your ankle feeling?” I ask her.

“Fine,” she lies through her teeth. “Thanks,” she quickly adds on. At least she’s trying to be cordial, which is something, so I’ll take it.

“How is your ankle really feeling?”

She sighs. “A little sore and a lot stiff, but not as bad as last night.”

“I’m going to try the healing thing again, and then I’ll fetch some coffee. June sent some chocolate chip cookies over yesterday. I don’t know about you, but I could do with a couple of those.”

Kim starts to get out of bed. I grab her wrist, pulling her back. “What are you doing?”

“I’m not an invalid. I don’t expect you to serve me.”

I realize that I am still holding onto her, and I let go. “It’s clear that you’re not used to someone taking care of you, Kim.” The thought comes out of nowhere, yet I know it to be true.

Her eyes cloud and I have my answer.

“I know it’s hard for you, but for the next few days, you need to take it easy and leave it to me. I’m going to take care of you, Kim, whether you like it or not.”

“Yes, but—” she starts to argue.

“Stop. It’s how it is. You hurt yourself running away from me, and now I’m honor-bound to—”

She looks at me like she thinks I’m crazy. “I was being an idiot. You don’t have to be honor-bound to do anything. Who uses phrases like honor-bound, anyway?”

“I do.” I keep my eyes on hers. “You weren’t being an idiot. You got scared, and no one can blame you for that. I could have approached it better. I ambushed you, knowing your feelings toward me. I must say, I didn’t expect you to run. I didn’t expect you to be so damned fast, either.”

“I’ve had practice.” She sucks in a breath. “I ran track in high school.” Her eyes dart to the far wall and then back at me.

“Well, it showed. How about we get your ankle fixed up? Then I can get that coffee I spoke about earlier. I could use a cup.”

She nods once. I can tell that she still isn’t happy about any of this, but at least it feels like we are getting along...at some level.

K im

I wake up all at once because I hear something. I strain my ears. The bedroom is pitch black.

There it is again...a loud wail.

I scramble to turn on my bedside light. Maybe I shouldn't do it. Maybe we should stay in darkness. Too late now, the room illuminates. I check my phone. It's almost midnight.

There is more wailing. I think it's coming from the next bungalow.

What the hell is that?

Blaze has one eye open. "Is everything okay?" he asks. He rubs his face, squinting at the light.

"No, everything is not okay. What is going on?"

There's a shriek. It's loud. I jump to my feet; my ankle instantly protests, so I sink down on the edge of the mattress.

"You shouldn't be standing on that ankle of yours."

"I know, but someone is being killed out there. I think the people staying next door to us are in trouble."

Blaze is looking at me like I have a screw loose. He is frowning heavily.

"Why aren't you doing anything?" My voice is filled with frustration.

There's more shrieking, followed by another wail.

"Make that, someone is being tortured to death. Do something, Blaze." I

widen my eyes and turn toward him.

An amused look appears on his face.

“Why are you smiling?” There’s banging and more of that wailing. It’s sounding...worse.

“Lie down,” he says. “Relax. Is this the first time you’ve heard them?”

“Heard who? I’m not relaxing. If you won’t—”

“It’s Skylar and Fang. They’re in the bungalow next to us. No one is getting tortured or killed. They’re fucking.”

“They’re what? Sorry. No, they can’t be. That isn’t—” I stop talking when I realize that the shrieks are rhythmic and in time with the banging, which must be their headboard on the wall.

Oh, crap!

No!

My eyes widen. “Oh, my word, I think you’re right.”

“I know I am.”

“But they’re so...loud.” Just as I say it, the shrieking gets louder. I’m sure I hear growling, too. The banging picks up pace. It’s deafening and hard, too.

“They’re going to break the wall down. Or injure themselves.”

Blaze laughs. “Nah!” He shakes his head like it’s no big deal. “I doubt it.”

“Oh! Oh! Oh!” she shrieks. “There. God...right there. Yeeeesssss, Fang! Ohhhhhh, Fang!”

My cheeks grow hot. I think my nipples have tightened. What’s wrong with me? Please, no! I can’t be getting turned on. This is so embarrassing.

Skylar starts screaming.

“You’re sure she’s not dying?” I ask Blaze because she has to be.

He shakes his head, trying to hold back a laugh.

The scream is followed by a loud roar. It sounds like a caged lion being let loose. The banging gets even louder. Holy crap, any artwork on the walls will have fallen right off. I’m not sure there’ll be plaster left on that wall, which could smash down at any minute.

“Are they for real?” I ask as soon as the noise dies down.

“Dagger and Hunter are only slightly better, but they are farther away, so we shouldn’t have to listen to them.”

I must get a horrified look because Blaze laughs.

“What?” I ask.

“You really haven’t heard two people going at it before, have you?” He narrows his eyes.

I shake my head. “There is sometimes banging on the wall from the apartment next door back home, but it lasts all of two minutes.” There are no screams or yells. Just creaking and soft banging that gets a little quicker before it’s over. It hardly bothers me the once or twice a month it happens.

“I’m going to assume that you’ve had sex before.” He frowns.

We’re not having this conversation.

“That’s none of your business.” I still feel flustered. So much so that I don’t lie back down just yet. I certainly don’t want to talk about my sex life with this man.

“I was just wondering, is all. Your reaction was...” His mouth twitches. “It was...”

“I sound clueless.”

“A little. I didn’t mean to pry. Please, will you lie back down? Unless you hurt your ankle. Do you need me to—?”

“No!” My voice is clipped. It’s an unnecessary response. I don’t want his hands on me right now. I’m feeling wound tight and a little on edge. “No... um...thanks,” I say, softer this time because it isn’t his fault that I’m getting turned on by our neighbor’s sex antics. That’s on me.

“You sure?”

“Very.” I turn the light out and lie down on my back, looking up at the black ceiling. I will my nipples to relax and have to stop myself from fanning my cheeks like I want to. At least that heavy feeling in the pit of my stomach is abating.

Thank God!

There is a soft knocking noise. Over the next minute, it gets louder.

No! Surely not?

I can’t believe it. I refuse to.

There’s a wail.

“What the—?” I blurt, because I don’t want to listen to them again. It was embarrassing enough the first time.

Blaze laughs. “I swear, they’re like rabbits.”

“They’re going to make us listen to that all over again?” My cheeks are getting hot again as the moans pick up momentum.

“Yep, I’m afraid so. We’ll have to pray they don’t go for a round three tonight.”

“You have got to be kidding me.” My blood drains. Surely that isn’t normal.

There is a throbbing between my legs, and squeezing them together doesn't help. I think I've gone a little wet. Why is my body reacting like this? I should be horrified. Actually, I am horrified at my body's response rather than at them.

I'm all too aware of the man lying right next to me. I can hear how my breathing has picked up. I'm sure that Blaze can hear it, too. How did I ever think those moans and wails were of pain? They're clearly pleasure...so much pleasure.

I force myself to calm down. I'm so hot I want to throw all the covers off. I want a cold shower. I want...

"Do they do this every day?" My voice is clipped and weird sounding. Not like me at all.

"They're trying to forge a mind-bond. At least, that's what they're telling themselves. At any rate, they're attracted to each other and only just started having sex, so they're very active. Daily...twice a day, even. Sometimes more." He says it like he doesn't have a care in the world.

"Noooooo!" I wail, putting a pillow over my head for a moment. It doesn't help much. They're that freaking vocal. "I need earplugs. Don't you guys have better hearing than us?"

"Yep. I guess you get used to it."

"Really? How do you cope?"

"Look, it's okay to feel a little turned on. It's a very natural response."

I gasp. He didn't just say that, did he? I'm mortified. He knows! How the heck does he know? Is he turned on right now, as well? I find that the idea makes me feel hotter. I'm burning up.

I clear my throat, trying not to listen to the groans and grunts. The wails and shrieks. "I'm not... I...um..."

"It's okay, Kim."

"It's not okay. I don't feel like it's okay at all. I'm lying in the dark with a stranger. My friends were killed recently...and...and...I'm turned on," I say in a small voice. "I don't even like sex. I just... I don't... I shouldn't be turned on."

"I *am* a stranger, but maybe we can get to know each other better." I hear his sharp intake of breath. "I don't mean that in any kind of weird way."

Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!

"Oooooooh, Fang! Ooooooh, yes!" Now she's screaming "yes" over and over, with hard moans in between.

I think I hear Fang grunting with each hard thrust. I know the thrusts are hard because of the sheer force of the banging.

“They need to put rubber against that wall,” I whisper, then go back to what he said earlier. “I know you didn’t mean it in a weird way.”

“I’m sorry you don’t like sex.”

I frown. “Why are you sorry?”

“Everyone should have good sex at some point in their lives. Hopefully often. How old are you, Kim?”

“I’m twenty-four.”

“Plenty of time, then,” he says as Skylar starts to wail.

It’s laced with so much pleasure that I’m jealous. “Surely it can’t be that good?” The words are out before I can stop them.

My cheeks heat immediately but for a different reason this time.

“Yes, it is that good. You’ll have to trust me on that one.” He sounds a little angry, but I’m not sure why.

I don’t say anything. I’ve only ever been with two men. I dated a guy named Chase for a little while before Ross. Both of them seemed to like sex just fine. They both made noises, turned red, and gasped about how amazing I was after it was done, but I never got the hype. Sex was even a little painful at times, especially at the start, but it was always over quickly, so it was okay. I put up with it. I always thought that it was only good for the guy but hearing Skylar scream, I feel that maybe I have been missing out.

I’ve heard plenty of screams in my life. Never one like the one our neighbor is making right now. It goes on and on. My whole body tightens. My nipples hurt. I’m definitely wet down there. Things I never knew could throb are throbbing.

Then Fang roars, louder this time.

After half a minute of hard banging, all goes quiet.

“Hallelujah,” Blaze says in his deep baritone that seems to have my nipples tightening even more. “Let’s hope we can get some sleep now.”

I make a noise of agreement as I turn and face the other way. My heart is beating wildly. My skin feels too tight. I ignore it. I ignore all of it. I know one thing for sure: I won’t be sleeping for a while. I’m too wired.

B laze
Two days later...

I wake up, and Kim is once again wrapped around me...for the third time in a row. She's going to be all kinds of pissed off when she wakes up.

I would be smiling, but I'm not since I have an erection. It can't be helped. She has this soft little snore that is all kinds of adorable. Once again, her leg is flung over me, and her breasts are mashed against me. It might be my imagination – which is running wild – but I'm sure her nipples are hard. Her lips are parted slightly, and they're so damned inviting.

I look away, trying to think of something else...anything else. I promised her I would wake her up, but not before I get myself under control. Morning wood is perfectly normal, but since that's not what this is, I would choke and burn when trying to come up with an explanation. There is only one, I'm an asshole.

Think of something else.

Anything else!

Something other than what Kim would look like naked and under me or on top of me.

Holy crap!

Stop!

She makes this little whimpering noise that doesn't help my wayward imagination. My cock twitches. My balls feel achy.

Yep, it's not working. It's getting worse.

I need to get the hell out of here, so I move her hand off of me and slide out from under her as carefully as I can.

I hear her gasp as she wakes and realizes the situation. Namely, that it happened again. She's all over me.

"Oh shit! I'm sorry...I—" she starts to say.

"It's fine," I say as I close the bathroom door behind me. If she sees what I am packing, it'll scare her for life. I see myself in the mirror and shake my head. Yep, I'd scare her, alright. My boxers are straining against the biggest damned erection I think I've ever had.

On a hard sigh, I turn on the shower, and it sputters to life. I'm out of my boxers in under a second, my cock slapping against my abs. Before the water reaches the right temperature, I am under the stream, which quickly turns hot, and immediately I palm my straining cock. I groan softly, closing my eyes. This is all kinds of wrong.

All I can think of is Kim.

Her face. Her body. Her smell. *Her.*

I'm a prick.

I picture her eyes hazy with desire. I picture the sounds she would make if I fucked her. I groan, thrusting into my hand. My cock throbs. I imagine how tight she would be as I slid in and out of her wet heat.

Fuuuck!

I picture her surprise when I make her come. I suddenly want that more than I want my next breath.

I can't! I won't!

I sure as hell can picture it, though. She'll moan hard and shout my name. Her body will spasm around me. I look up at the cascading water as my cum explodes all over the tiled shower wall. I grit my teeth to keep from groaning so loud she'll hear.

It's been a while since I was with a female, which is something I need to rectify as a matter of urgency. Difficult, considering our current situation; we're not permitted to leave flight school. Hell, I'm not permitted to leave this bungalow right now. We're stuck...together.

I'm attracted to Kim. I'm seriously fucking attracted to my rider. There is a part of her that will always hate me. I've come to accept that. It will be just fine as long as we can work together. Nothing more can ever happen between us.

Sure, there are no outright rules. Dagger and Hunter are together, but sex can mess things up, especially if things are already complicated. If Kim ever decided to stay – and that’s a huge *if* – we would need to work together for years to come. I roll my eyes at my thinking; it’s not like Kim would ever want to sleep with me. We’ve found some equal ground, but we’re far from friendly. She still doesn’t trust me.

I finish washing and rinse off the soap.

I feel terrible for everything I’ve already put her through; I won’t add this to the equation. I’d be the biggest bastard under the sun if I made a move on her.

I turn off the water and dry off, wrapping the towel around my waist. After brushing my teeth and tossing my shorts into the laundry basket, I go back out into the bedroom.

Kim is sitting like a frozen statue on the bed. She covers her face with her hand as soon as she sees me. She clearly feels terrible. If only she knew.

“I’m so sorry,” she moans, the sound muffled.

I feel like the biggest asshole alive. I just jacked off to a seriously dirty fantasy involving her, and she’s apologizing to me? That’s all kinds of fucked up.

“You have nothing to apologize for,” I tell her, meaning every word.

“No, I really do. I was a total bitch to you. You’ve been nothing but nice. *I*,” she puts emphasis on the word, touching her chest, “told you that if you came near me, I would make you sleep on the floor. But it’s me doing all the damned groping.” Her cheeks are red. She looks down at the bed.

“You didn’t grope me.”

She sighs. “Okay, fine. Maybe it wasn’t as bad as groping, but it was me doing all the spooning.”

I smile. “You are quite cuddly.”

She groans and covers her face with both her hands. “I’m so sorry.” Once again, her voice is muffled.

“Don’t beat yourself up. You were fast asleep, so it doesn’t count. I tried not to wake you, but after you made me promise not to leave you to sleep, I —”

“I’m glad you woke me. You did exactly the right thing. Are you sure it’s necessary that we sleep in the same bed? I mean, it’s been days; surely—?”

“The orders haven’t changed yet. We’re still on high alert.”

“There’s been no sign of poor Jen.” She bites her bottom lip, and I find

that I want to bite on it as well...other places, too.

I've never been like this. Then again, I've never been forced into close proximity with a woman I wasn't sleeping with before. Still, I thought I was stronger than this.

I can't blame any of it on my dragon; he's been surprisingly calm and relaxed, given the circumstances. We're practically caged. It isn't normal. It isn't right.

"It doesn't make any sense." She chews on her lips some more. "I don't think I've ever slept this soundly in my life."

"It might have something to do with the mind-bond." I shrug. "I'm not sure."

"I thought you were mind-bonded once before." She frowns.

"I was, but it was a short-lived partnership." That's putting it mildly. If Kim ever decides that she wants to stay, to be a rider, I will need to come clean about all of it. There is a part of me that hopes that never happens, despite my desire to be a frontline dragon making a difference against these damned Reds. There is a part of me that never wants her to find out. The truth is that she is right. I *am* a monster. Then, of course, there's the fear that I might hurt her. Kim is a good person. She's sweet and timid. I don't want her getting in the firing line of my dragon. I need to speak to Shadow again about sending her home. Perhaps it would be for the best. I will mind-bond with someone again. It doesn't have to be Kim.

It would mean going through all of this again next year. It would mean my dragon having a field day with the Tributes, yet again, but at least Kim would be safe.

"Oh, I didn't realize," Kim says after thinking it through. "How short-lived? What happened to your rider?"

Why did I open my big trap?

Dammit! This is not a conversation I want to have right now, if ever.

"It's a long story. I'm going to put on some coffee and..." I look down. "I think I should probably get dressed."

"Oh!" She looks down at where the towel is wrapped around me. "Of course. Sorry!" She shakes her head. I'm not sure what she's thinking or feeling. Kim seems to be shielding her emotions from me. I still feel that familiar tugging of our minds, but I can't quite get a handle on her anymore. Not like before. It's really good. She's a natural. Pity her mind-bond happened with me.

“You don’t have to keep apologizing to me.” I feel terrible. I’m dodging her questions on purpose because I don’t want her to know that she’s right about me.

“Look at my foot.” She lifts the leg in question, and I’m shocked to see that the swelling looks so much better. The bruising looks worse; it’s gone purple with edges of green. I know from experience that it’s a good thing.

“Wow! That’s fantastic. It looks well and truly on the mend.”

“It happened so fast, too. I’m sure it’s the healing thing you’ve been doing. I’ve twisted my ankle a time or two and never healed this quickly.”

“Did your injuries happen on track?”

She nods. “Yep. I did a ton of running all through my school years. I’d trip right over my own feet at times.” Her cheeks heat, and she looks at her nails, picking at a cuticle that looks just fine to me.

“Did you run in college, too?”

She shakes her head. “I didn’t end up going to college. I decided I wanted a job, that I wanted to be independent. So I did it.”

“What did you end up doing?”

“I worked in hospitality.” Her cheeks are beet red. “You should go and get dressed. How about I make us a coffee? And maybe some scrambled eggs on toast? It’s the right weather for it.” There is a steady drum of rain on the window.

“Perfect.”

Kim gets up and takes a few tentative steps.

“And? How does it feel?”

She turns, smiling. “Good. A little stiff but no pain at all.” She beams. “At least you won’t have to carry me around anymore. No more running around for me, either.”

“I didn’t mind at all. It’s not like you weigh much or anything.”

She points to the bedroom door. “Let me get going.”

I nod once. I watch her leave, keeping my eyes on the door long after it’s closed. I’m not sure what to make of that. I noted the not-so-subtle change of subject. There’s definitely more to Kimberly than what meets the eye. Shadow offered to give me her file to read, and I declined. I’m suddenly burning to find out more about her, but I won’t go about it like that. Except, I’m going to ask Shadow if Kim can be allowed to go home, so there’s no point even thinking about getting to know her better. Hopefully, she’ll be boarding a chopper soon. The more I get to know her, the more I like her. I

don't want her in harm's way.

Kim *That night...*

A terrible screeching fills my ears. It's loud. Like it's right above the bungalow. My eyes flash open, but I still see pitch black since it's the middle of the night.

The sound has adrenaline coursing through my veins. Everything about it screams *danger, alert*.

"Fuck!" Blaze growls; his voice is deep and almost as terrifying as the sound overhead.

"What is it? What's going on?" That isn't someone having sex. I don't care what anyone tells me. I won't buy it.

Instead of answering, he grabs my arm and picks me up as he leaps from the bed. It's during moments like this that I am reminded that he isn't human. He's too strong and too fast. Blaze runs to the living room and sets me down. I hear him moving furniture, but I'm not sure what he's doing.

"Get under here," he tells me. "The desk," he adds just as there's a loud ripping, crashing noise. It sounds like a demolition team is breaking down a house or two.

I shriek.

"You need to be quiet and stay put."

I pull myself into a ball, feeling like I'm five years old again. "Where are you going?" I whisper. I don't want him to leave me.

“To neutralize the threat. I can do a better job at protecting you out there.”

“No...please...” I hear the front door unlock, open, and close with a light thump. “Stay put,” I whisper to the empty bungalow.

I bury my head between my knees.

Hide.

Stay quiet.

No matter what you hear, don't come out. You hear me, Kimmy?

I hear my mother's voice as if she were here. I whimper softly.

Then there are more of those demolition noises, like walls are being torn to shreds. There is tearing, ripping, the sound of glass breaking. Thumping, bumping, crashing, smashing, and more glass breaking.

Another screech rings out. Then the roar of a pissed-off dragon rends the night, and I know instinctively that it's Blaze. My body lights up. My mind bonds with his...or with his dragon.

Protect.

Keep.

Kill.

Must kill.

I whimper because I feel his sheer aggression, and it both exhilarates and terrifies me. No! It terrifies me. There's shouting from several places around the camp, as well as panicked screaming, again from more than one location. This is followed by more roars and growls. If it weren't for being used to hiding, come what may, I might be screaming too.

Kill.

Blood.

Destroy.

It's Blaze. A shiver runs through me. I'm sure I hear wings flapping – more than one pair – followed by another terror-filled screech, which is cut off. There are more loud roars, this time of victory. I know that one of them is Blaze in his dragon form. I know that he has made a kill...another kill.

It makes goosebumps lift on my arms...my whole body. I feel his elation. His victory. I feel his sheer joy looking down at the felled body of an enemy.

I whimper. I'm shaking.

There are more screeches and roars, but this time, they come from farther away.

Run!

Go back to where you came from!

I hear his voice as if it were in my head. Blaze is shouting after the Reds, who are flying for their lives. Others go after them, but he turns back.

Female.

He is thinking about me. I can feel his sense of urgency. There is still aggression there, but I don't think it's against me.

My heart is hammering in my chest, and my mouth feels dry. I'm not sure how to feel. I'm both afraid and...something else. There is something else there. The fear I am used to. This is different.

Safe.

I feel safe. No, that doesn't make any kind of sense. How can I feel both fearful *and* safe? Blaze was protecting me. His dragon was protecting me. I'm pretty sure of it. At the same time, I've never felt such hatred, such anger, such sheer aggression. Not in all my years, and I've been in a couple of sticky situations. I didn't sense evil or malice coming from him.

I'm terrified of Blaze, but he also makes me feel safe. That's crazy and yet true. I think it's why I've been sleeping so well for the first time in my life.

I feel safe even though I am with a cold, hard killer. My heart is going nuts in my chest. The door slams against the wall as it is flung open, and the light comes on. I slink back under the table, pulling myself tighter, trying to be invisible. I get the acrid scent of smoke and charred flesh. It's a scent I am beginning to know well.

"Kim!" Blaze yells. I hear his footfalls on the tiles as he approaches.

I want to say something, but I can't since I'm freaking out. My eyes are squeezed tightly shut.

He pulls the chair away and crouches down. "Oh, thank god, you're okay." He pulls me out from under the table and envelopes me in his arms, in his whole body. Blaze stands, taking me with him. I'm still wrapped up in his arms against his big, very naked body.

"We think they came for Skylar, but there was one above our roof, too. It took off as soon as I shifted. I went after it. My dragon was seriously pissed."

"I know," I whisper. "I could feel his rage."

"You're shaking." He puts me down, holding my upper arms in his big, warm hands. His face is filled with concern. His vivid green eyes bore into mine. "I'm sorry. You're afraid. I made you feel this way."

"You saved us," I tell him.

His eyes narrow. "You're afraid, though."

“I was afraid of what might happen.” I swallow thickly. “I’m a little afraid of you... Okay, I’m a lot afraid. But...”

“But nothing. You’re right to be afraid. I am dangerous, especially in my dragon form.”

“You were protecting me.” I got that loud and clear, but I don’t want to presume that it was me he was protecting. “You were protecting all of us.”

“It doesn’t matter. I’m dangerous in my dragon form. I probably shouldn’t have shifted. I didn’t think, though. I just acted.” He looks tense and out of sorts. His eyes are blazing, and his jaw is tight. Blaze lets me go. He looks down. “Shit! I should get dressed.”

“Is everyone okay?” I keep my eyes on his. “They didn’t get to Skylar, did they?”

He shakes his head. “No, she’s fine. Everyone is safe.”

“Because of you,” I tell him.

Blaze shakes his head again. “No, it was a group effort.” Then he turns and heads for the bedroom. My eyes drift over his body. Down his muscular back to his meaty ass, down...down... That’s when I see it, the blood. It’s on his feet and spattered up his legs. My eyes go wide. My mouth feels like it is filled with cotton wool.

You’re right to be afraid.

I’m dangerous.

You’re right.

I squeeze my eyes shut. And there it is again. I let my guard down. It took Blaze himself to warn me off this time. What is it with the Ashton women? How is it that we’re drawn to these charming, good-looking men? Upstanding members of society. Protectors.

It’s all a lie, and I’m an idiot. I promised myself I wouldn’t be like her, and yet here I am. I was beginning to like him. I was beginning to relax... To... To what? Beginning to think that maybe I could have a life here. Become a rider.

I shake my head at my own stupidity. No! I need to get back to the mainland and get on with my life.

I will never be my mother. I refuse.

B laze
Three days later...

I knock on the wooden door.

“Enter,” Shadow says.

I go in and sit across from her.

Our leader has her eyes on her computer. She keeps typing for a minute or two. I wait her out. Finally, she closes her laptop, turning her attention to me. “Why are you here? You should be with Kimberly.”

“I left Goliath with her.”

She smirks. “I’m not sure that was a wise move. I hear that the male is trying to steal riders.”

I shake my head. “Goliath is a good male. Besides, there are two others outside the bungalow, helping protect her. As for stealing her...I wish him luck with that.” I start to smile but then stop when I remember why I am here. “The human will be fine for a short while, especially now that Skylar has returned to the mainland. Speaking of which, when are we going to lift these restrictions? They’re fucking stifling.”

“I’m putting in a third request to do just that. HQ has sanctioned a mind-bond attempt for this afternoon. As to the restrictions, I’m hoping to get them lifted today, and if not today, then tomorrow.”

“That would be great.”

“I’m glad you are here since I had planned on calling you in. There are

conflicting reports from the night Skylar was almost captured by the Reds. Both you and Goliath gave chase. He claims *he* took the Red down. In your report, you state that you delivered the fatal blow.”

“It was a group effort. He can take the kill.”

“Since you already have so many to your name.” She lifts her brows.

“I only wish there were more Reds on that list,” I mutter. Most of my kills have been human.

“Let’s face it, chances are good it was you who killed that Red. I’m changing the report.”

“Rather leave it. Dagger and Devil both wrote reports supporting that Goliath killed the Red.” I shrug.

“Because he boasted that he had done it when it was, in fact, you.”

“I used my talons to gore the fucker. He would have died on impact. Goliath then scorched his ass before he hit the ground, killing him, so technically—”

“Technically nothing. You delivered a fatal blow.”

“Semantics. Goliath is fast and strong; he—”

“It was you,” Shadow counters.

I roll my eyes. “Fine! Yes, it was me. Does it even matter?”

“Yes, it matters. Why was that so hard to admit?”

Because for a moment there, I didn’t want it to be me. At times, it feels like it’s always me. Someone dies, and I am to blame. I don’t say any of that. I shove it all aside because Shadow is right. I killed the Red. Goliath helped, and I let him take the glory. I don’t give a shit about any of that. I felt a great need to get back to Kim at the time. To protect her.

Protect what is mine.

My dragon stirs for a moment. Yep, to protect my rider. I still have that same urge, only I want to protect her from me. From this godawful war.

“Why are you here?” She sits back in her chair.

“I hear that a couple of new Tributes arrived this morning. You mentioned that there will be an attempt at a mind-bonding later today.”

She frowns, putting her elbows on the desk, she steeples her fingers, and leans her chin on them. “And this is of concern to you why?”

“I would like to attempt to mind-bond them as well.”

She sits up in her chair, frowning. “You already have a rider. You’re wasting my time, Blaze.” She starts to open her laptop.

“I don’t have a rider. I might have mind-bonded, but it isn’t going to

work.”

“So, you’re telling me that you’re not getting along, is that correct?”

“That is correct, yes. We barely talk.”

That’s completely true of the last few days. Prior to my taking off, shifting, and killing a Red right outside our bungalow, we were getting along just fine. There was a wariness there, an unease, but I felt like we might be on a path to something...to becoming a team.

Then I had to go and play the fucking hero. I had to go and charge off to save the day. It wasn’t exactly like that, but still. I could have sat tight and let the others do the killing for once. Maybe Goliath would have gotten his kill if not for me. After it was done, I had to go and warn Kim off, and I would absolutely do it again. She doesn’t need me in her life.

“Are you even trying to forge a relationship?”

“Of course I am.”

Shadow must see something in my eyes or hear something in the tone of my voice because she says, “Don’t lie to me, Blaze. You’re bad at it. I’d even go so far as to say terrible.”

My shoulders sag. “Fine. I like her. She’s sweet. She doesn’t deserve the likes of me. Besides, when she finds out what happened, she’s going to hate me, and I can’t say that I would blame her.” Even worse, she’ll be terrified of me all over again. She’ll run, and she’d be right to do it.

Shadow’s mouth falls open for a second. “You mean you haven’t told her?”

“I can barely get her to talk to me.”

“Bullshit! I’m not buying it. Either you want to be in the program, or you don’t. Best you decide which it is.”

“You told me to win her over, not to push her away. If I tell her, then the latter will be true. I want in the program, but it can’t be her.”

“You can’t choose who you mind-bond with. Your dragon has chosen already. You’d piss him off if you tried to change now, especially since she is still on the island.”

“That can be rectified today.”

Shadow chokes out a laugh. “You’re delusional, Blaze. The restrictions are still in place. Only flights containing supplies are permitted to leave for the mainland and vice versa. Kim isn’t going anywhere.”

“You said that restrictions would drop once you send that email.” I gesture to her laptop.

“Some restrictions. Not all.” She pauses for a moment. “Do you really want to go through attempts again? With the one Tribute who was already here and the three who arrived earlier, there are four candidates. Only four. I am hopeful that we will get at least one successful mind-bond. It might not happen if you are present.”

I’d probably kill someone. In doing so, I might stop a mind-bond. I’m a liability.

“I’m still not sure why you let me back into the program,” I grumble, knowing full well what swayed her decision and feeling guilty because of it.

“Dragons like yours make the best frontline fighters.”

“Because I’m a killer. It can’t happen again, Shadow. I wasn’t afraid before, but I am now. What if I do to Kim what I did to Sasha; what if I kill her? I killed my own rider.”

“I don’t think it will happen again. You know why that is.”

“You don’t think?” I shake my head. “Maybe this is a mistake. I’m not sure I should be here. Maybe I’m not cut out for this.”

“Talk with Kim. She might surprise you. Tell her what happened. I think the stronger your bond is as humans, the better. I don’t believe you will hurt her.”

“What are you talking about?” I blurt.

Shadow levels me with a stare. “You are protective of her. You went after that Red protecting her, and now you’re here doing the same. You care. I’m willing to bet my position as Academy Leader that you won’t touch so much as a hair on her head.”

“But you can’t guarantee it.”

“You won’t hurt her, Blaze. You need to trust yourself.”

Trust. Hah! No fucking way.

“You can’t guarantee that I won’t take her out. Neither you nor I have any idea what will happen when I face Kim in my dragon form again. I will never forgive myself if I kill her.”

“You won’t!” she insists, pissing me off.

“This conversation is going around in circles.”

“Go back to your rider and await instructions. You will not take part in the mind-bond. You will fix whatever rift you caused with Kim. Stop pushing her away. Embrace this. You are going to be amazing.” Her voice softens. “I can’t wait to see what you have to offer this cause.”

I’m glad one of us has confidence in me because I sure as shit don’t.

Kim

I'm not sure how it happened, but one minute, I'm watching Blaze leave for a meeting, and the next, I'm sitting in front of the sketchpad he left me a while ago, staring at a pencil drawing I just created. I didn't think I had it in me anymore. I used to sketch all the time but lost interest. One day, I just stopped.

There is a knock at the door. "It's me."

My eyes go wide, and I slam the pad shut like Blaze might somehow see my creation from the other side of the door. He was summoned a little earlier to a meeting.

For a moment, I am tempted to pull out the page and crumple up my sketch. Instead, I pack the pad and pencils away to make everything look undisturbed. Then, I carefully put the chair back into place.

"I'm coming," I yell over my shoulder in the direction of the door.

I open a book and place it face-down on the sofa, moving my empty juice glass to the coffee table.

Then I go and open the door, yawning as I do so. "Sorry, it was hard to get up off the sofa," I lie through my teeth, but I can't have him knowing what I was actually doing.

"No problem," Blaze says as he comes inside, closing and locking the door behind him.

“And?” I ask. “Good news, or can’t you tell me?”

“It isn’t classified. Firstly, Fang mind-bonded with Luke this afternoon. The other three candidates are all going home in the morning.”

Of the four, I know Luke and Alice but never really got to know the other two. I’m a little shocked about Luke; he always came across as a jerk. I almost expected him to be incinerated. These dragons are strange creatures.

“So, there’s a chopper leaving in the morning?” I ask, pulling in a breath.

“Yep.”

“Does that mean that these crazy rules have been—” I stop when Blaze nods.

“They’ve relaxed a whole lot.”

“Would I be able to leave with those who didn’t mind-bond?” I ask, already knowing the answer. I edge toward the door. “You said they’re leaving tomorrow, and I want on that chopper. I’m going to speak to Shadow right now.”

“I already did.” He sighs.

“Let me guess; she still won’t let me go.” I scrub a hand over my face. This is so damned frustrating. I roll my eyes and groan in utter frustration.

“Nope. She was adamant. I’m really sorry, Kim. I promise you, I tried.” He looks sincere. His eyes are filled with concern.

All I feel is bitter disappointment. I nod once or twice. “Thanks,” I mutter. “Tell me about the changes.”

“We no longer have to share a bed, but we do have to be in the same bungalow.”

That’s something. I’ll take it. No matter what I do, I can’t seem to stop spooning Blaze during the night. Some nights, I practically climb on top of him. My ex-boyfriend Chase and I shared a bed, but I preferred my own space. There was never any spooning or cuddling. Ross was all over me, and I hated it. Now I’m the one all over poor Blaze, and I don’t get it. It’s embarrassing, especially after my song and dance about not tolerating him doing it to me.

“I will sleep here in the living room. A bed will be delivered shortly. We will still have to share a bathroom since there is only one.”

I nod.

“Trainee riders can’t walk around camp unattended. If I’m not available to accompany you, another shifter will need to do it.”

“But we can leave the bungalow?” Not that I did so before, but that was

to avoid Blaze as much as possible.

I see something flash in his eyes before he looks away. It's gone when he looks back at me. It was so quick I can't pinpoint what it was, only that it gives me an uneasy feeling. "They want us to start training."

"Training?" My mouth goes dry.

"All bonded pairs need to start training together tomorrow. The only people exempt are Dagger and Hunter, who will train with Devil and Goliath. Hunter is still working on shielding other dragons so that she isn't overwhelmed. Luke and Fang have been given a week to strengthen their bond before they take the next step."

"What exactly is the next step?" My voice sounds panicked.

Blaze paces to the other side of the room. He looks tense and very upset, and all it does is stress me out more. His eyes are trained outside the window.

"What exactly is the next step?" I repeat. "Just tell me," I urge.

He turns and looks me in the eye. "We're behind schedule. They want us to fast-track rider training."

"You're not answering the question." My panic is rising by the second.

"They want you all in the saddle, ideally off the ground, by the end of our training session tomorrow."

I'm reeling. I can't seem to breathe. I can't talk. The words "What the hell!" are running around inside my head, but I can't say them.

Blaze closes the distance between us. He puts a hand on my back. "Breathe, Kim."

I pull away, sucking in a hard breath. "Oh, god! How is this happening?" Now I'm panting hard. I bend over, putting my hands on my thighs. This is terrible.

"Breathe more slowly, or you'll hyperventilate."

I stand tall. "I don't want to breathe slowly. I don't want to be here. I don't want to ride your dragon. I'm afraid. I wish I wasn't. I wish I was stronger, but I guess I'm not."

"That isn't true, Kim. You are strong, and it's okay to be afraid. Orders have been given. They've come straight from HQ. There's too much Reds activity. Too much has happened. It isn't what we're used to seeing. Our enemy is controlled and coordinated. They have too much information about what's going on at Draig, at this camp. It's insider information."

"Do they think that Draig people are helping the Reds?"

"It's looking that way more and more. It's got everyone riled up. We're

losing ground. We need wings in the air. We need every dragon we can get. They're going to push hard. They're not going to let you leave." He shakes his head. "I'm sorry, but we're going to have to try." His eyes are dark and filled with dread. Why are *his* eyes filled with dread? It isn't him who is in danger. It's me.

"What if I refuse? Shadow seems reasonable. Surely, she would understand?"

"She is reasonable, but she also has to follow orders. She might let it slide once or twice, but then she would be forced to act."

"Act how? What can they do to me? Take away my food? My clothes? Throw me in a jail cell? What?" I don't wait for an answer. "Because let me tell you that none of those things sounds as bad as facing your dragon. You told me he is dangerous. Heck, I've seen it with my own eyes."

"He *is* dangerous. He's a killer. I can't make any promises where he is concerned. I can't assure you that you'll be okay. I won't because I have no way of knowing what he will do."

"Exactly. My understanding is that there are usually quite a few training sessions before a rider is expected to mount their dragon. The first few encounters are always tricky, even for much calmer beasts."

"You have a good memory." He is nodding. "Yes, to all of those things, but we are no longer newly bonded. We do have that going for us."

"I have only been in the presence of your dragon once. You know how that ended. You warned me, Blaze. You're afraid, too. I can see it written all over you. Why are you dreading it? Why are you so afraid? Will you hurt me? Kill me?"

His throat works. "You know why. You said it yourself; you've seen firsthand what my dragon can do. I don't maim. I kill...he kills."

"I'm not doing it." I shake my head. "I'm not! They can't make me."

"You might be wrong about that. We should at least try."

"No! That's not going to happen."

"Hear me out. If you stay in this room after an order is given, there will be fallout, but if you try and fail, Shadow might cut us some slack. She will expect that of us, at the very least. If we are trying and it still isn't working, then maybe, just maybe, she'll push for your return to the mainland, and I'll be given an opportunity to mind-bond with someone else. We can make an attempt at following orders. I won't even shift. We'll go out there, and you can act like you're losing it."

“I won’t have to act.”

“Even better. Look,” he touches the side of my arm for a moment, “I don’t want to put you in a situation where you’re afraid enough to freak out, but it’s the only way. We need to do this, for Shadow to see. To know and understand your feelings in this. I want her to be aware of just how terrified you are. If you refuse to leave the bungalow, she won’t get to experience it, and there will be repercussions.”

I’m inclined to tell him that I don’t give a shit about repercussions, but he is making sense. If we’re seen to be cooperating, they might let me go... eventually. “If I don’t make an effort, they’ll keep pushing until I do,” I say, more to myself.

“Exactly. Shadow is a good leader. She’s very understanding. She protects us from HQ and their sometimes ridiculous demands. She advocates for the Tributes and the riders in training all the time, as well. I’m not sure what we would do without her. You need to give her something. I know her.”

“Okay, fine, but I won’t hang around to see you shift. To see anyone shift, for that matter. I just...I...”

“I know.” He takes my hand for a second and squeezes before letting go. “Shadow will be there; when she sees you genuinely freak out, maybe she’ll understand. Maybe she’ll agree to you going home. I’m truly sorry about putting you through this.”

I see sincerity shining in his eyes. I want so badly to believe he means it.

I nod. “Okay. It sounds reasonable. I can do it.” I fold my arms.

Reasonable would be them letting me go, but that clearly isn’t going to happen without a fight.

“Whatever you do, don’t stay. Even if you have to fake being freaked out. Do not hang around long enough for me to shift. I can’t trust my dragon.”

“Believe me, I won’t have to fake anything. I have self-preservation built into my core. It’s drummed into me. I don’t know any other way. It’s not just how I am; it’s what I am.”

“By self-preservation, you mean that you run.”

I nod. “Yes, I run.”

“Is there a reason you’re wired that way? Did something happen to you, Kim?” He keeps his green eyes on mine. They’re filled with concern and sincerity.

For just a second, I’m tempted to tell him. To tell him everything, and it scares me. I’ve never told anyone. Not a soul and not ever. I’ve had three

things drummed into me since I can remember. Run, hide, and never ever tell or I would be taken away. I was terrified of being taken away. In hindsight, that might not have been the worst thing.

Never tell. They can never know.

“You can tell me,” Blaze urges. “Sometimes it helps to talk.”

Too nice.

Too good-looking.

Too caring.

Every alarm goes off.

Never, never, never tell!

“It’s none of your business, Blaze!” I snap. “Let’s get one thing straight: we’re not friends. I’m not telling you my deepest, darkest secrets. I’m leaving this island soon. I’m not looking back. I don’t need a friend. I don’t need anyone.”

He nods slowly. “Okay, but if you change your—”

“I won’t! Can we drop it, please?”

“Sure. Yes, of course.”

There is a knock at the door, and I can breathe more easily.

“That must be my bed.” He points in that direction. “I’ll just go and get that.” As he turns away, I see a flash of hurt in his eyes.

I’m not going there. I refuse to feel anything for this man. I will do whatever it takes to get home. To get away from him. I can’t let my guard down and trust him. We might have to share a bungalow and work together to make that happen, but it is only until I get home.

Only, I don’t have a home to go back to. I don’t have anything.

B laze

We're walking along a path that leads to a wide meadow. There is a light breeze blowing; it carries the salty scent of the sea. The grass is long and moves like waves in the ocean as the wind caresses the tall strands. The section we are making for has been cleared. If it had been any other day, it would be tranquil and pleasant. It isn't. Not even close.

We have permission to shift. Atlas and Hulk are brimming with excitement. I feel nothing but anxiety.

My stomach is churning with nerves, even though I'm not going to shift. I need to calm down already. Nothing will go wrong. I have nothing to be worried about. We have a plan, and Kim is going to stick to it. She made that abundantly clear yesterday.

She's barely spoken since. She didn't eat dinner and hardly touched her breakfast. I would say that she's already halfway to panic, and nothing has happened yet.

"I'm nervous about this," Natasha says. "I feel like we needed to have practiced a whole lot more."

"How do you practice something like flying a dragon?" the other human asks. I'm not sure of her name, only that she looks excited. There is a bounce to her step. "I'm glad it's finally happening."

"You're nuts, Kerry." Natasha shakes her head. "I don't know how you

would practice flying a dragon, only that there must be something a person can do to prepare.”

“There is,” Hulk says. “Sky’s Edge. It’s designed to prepare you for riding. To prepare you for tackling your fears and overcoming them. For getting you over any height phobias, as well.”

“An obstacle course is hardly comparable to a dragon,” Natasha grumbles.

“You’ll be fine. My dragon will take care of you,” Hulk tells her.

I wish I had that confidence. I wish I could say the same to Kim. My dragon may have been protective over her, but I know how he can turn nasty in an instant.

I glance at Kim, who isn’t saying anything. She doesn’t even seem to be listening to the chatter that continues. There are dark circles under her eyes. I doubt she got any sleep last night, but I can’t be sure since I slept in the living room. I actually missed her body next to mine. Her warmth, her smell. I missed her, which is crazy since we’ve only shared a bed for a few days, and that’s all it was.

I glance her way again, noting that her face is pale. Lack of nutrition will do that. I tried to get her to go to the restaurant for dinner last night, but she wouldn’t budge. Once again, she insisted that she isn’t here to make friends or to be social. She said she tried that once before, but it didn’t work out well for her. I’m not sure what she meant by that. I didn’t pry, mainly because I know she would have shot me down.

I know this from experience because I keep asking her very personal questions. Questions I have no business asking. Kim shoots me down every time, which is fine since she’s leaving soon. I might have insisted on knowing more otherwise.

Her deepest, darkest secrets.

Yes. I suspect that there are a few, and the more I get to know her, the more I figure they’re not good secrets. I don’t think she’s had an easy time of it. I think she’s been hurt before. Someone – maybe more than one someone – hurt this female, and I can’t add myself to that list. I fucking refuse.

We trudge into the large clearing. It’s big enough to allow at least twenty dragons to shift at the same time. For all twenty to be spaced out enough for them all to take wing at the same time.

There is someone standing with Shadow. I’m really glad she came to witness the first ride. I push out a breath. Thank god, she’ll get to see how

terrified Kim is of me, and rightly so.

All of the human's self-preservation drives are accurate when it comes to me. I hate hurting her, but I hope they flare up and all at once as I am about to shift.

"You ready?" I ask her, speaking in a hushed tone.

She nods but doesn't even look my way.

I hate this. I fucking hate it.

"Are those saddles?" Kerry points. There are three of them on the grass to the right of Octane and Shadow. They are very similar to the ones you would find on any horse, only slightly bigger with leg straps and a large horn for holding onto.

"That's them," Atlas says.

"This is really happening." Natasha sounds apprehensive.

"It is." Kerry grins.

Kim's eyes have grown wide. Her gaze is on the three leather saddles.

"Welcome," Shadow says, smiling. "This is a very exciting day. The day you get to take the saddle for the first time."

Octane runs his gaze over each of us; his golden eyes narrow when he reaches me. His jaw clenches, and I hear his teeth grind. He hates me, and I know exactly why that is. It's perfectly justified.

"In case you forgot, this is Octane," Shadow says to the riders. "He just arrived from the Academy but unfortunately didn't get to mind-bond anyone yesterday. Maybe next time." She looks his way.

Octane nods his head once. "You win some, you lose some." He looks at me when he says the last. Yep, he definitely hates my guts.

"He is one of our most senior instructors, so I asked him to join me today," Shadow goes on. "Normally, we would have done a few sessions before mounting, but with the delays caused by the Reds, that hasn't been possible. You have all spent time together, and therefore, we feel that we can proceed straight to this phase."

Kim moves slightly, looking down at her sneakers before locking eyes with Shadow.

"I know that some of you have had it tough," she speaks to Kim before moving her gaze to the rest of the gathering. "But we need to fortify ourselves and do what it takes to keep the Reds in their place. We need to stop them from escaping and getting to the mainland, where they can cause untold destruction. It's up to us. Up to you. All I ask is that you give it your

all. You are among those who were the first to make it through Sky's Edge. You're the top pupils, and I have every faith in you."

She clears her throat, running a hand through her close-cropped, black hair. "A few rules. The same ones still apply: remain calm, do not run. You might spark the hunting instinct, if not in your own dragon, then in one of the others."

Kim shuffles from one foot to the other. She clears her throat but keeps her cool...for now.

"As you all know, our dragons are massive—" Shadow starts to say.

"They're freaking huge," Natasha says. "I'm not sure I'll even be able to get onto Hulk."

"We crouch down," Hulk says.

"Your dragon will go right down onto his belly."

"Still," Natasha says. "Even right down low, that's still one hell of a mountain to climb. I would hate to fall trying to get on." She gives a nervous laugh. "Imagine that: 'How did you break your leg? I fell off on my first attempt at mounting my dragon.'" She gives another nervous giggle.

"I'm going to ask one of you to shift shortly." Shadow's eyes move from Hulk to Atlas and back to me. "I'll be able to demonstrate more easily that way. There are spikes up the side of our dragon's front legs" She touches her upper arm and shoulder. "They're perfect for climbing. Hulk, your dragon is big. Please, will you shift so that I can show the ladies what to do. I'm going to ask all of you to move away. Don't get into the personal space of a dragon that is not yours."

Hulk is fairly placid as far as dragons go. I'm sure that's why Shadow asked him to be the guinea pig in this demonstration. Sure, he's big, but I don't think that has anything to do with her choice of dragon for this little demonstration.

"No problem," he says.

"Octane, can you get the saddle?" Shadow says. "You will be taught how to tack up your dragon. It's something you will practice. In order to qualify as a rider, you need to be able to tack up and mount your dragon in under ten seconds. I would suggest that you all start strength and fitness training again. That you hit the gym to improve on your strength."

While Shadow is talking, Hulk walks a little away from the gathering and starts undressing. If Kim is going to have a panic attack, now is the time. She needs to do it before Hulk shifts. Except she's not.

Why the fuck not?

Once he shifts, he won't shift back, and then she'll need to obey the basic rules, namely, remain calm and don't fucking run. I happen to know that she's really great at doing exactly the opposite.

I give her a little nudge with my elbow.

She looks at me, and I widen my eyes. I can't say anything because Shadow is standing right there, as is Octane. Everyone is now watching Hulk as he turns around and removes his pants. If I so much as say a word, they'll hear.

"What?" Kim mouths.

"Run," I mouth back.

"Is everything okay over here?" Shadow asks, her brows raised.

Fuck!

"All good," I say too quickly.

We agreed that Kim would have her panic attack just before I shift, but this changes things. Kim needs to freak out. It needs to happen now. If she's going to run, it needs to happen now, dammit.

Only problem is she doesn't look worried. Shadow continues to watch us, not buying my reply at all. I can't say or do anything.

React, Kim.

Do something.

Fuck! This is a mess.

I wince at the sound of bones cracking. I look over at Hulk, who is shifting, his body contorting as it grows. Scales sprout from his skin, and his once-human face elongates into a snout filled with sharp teeth. His hands and feet morph into talons, his body stretches and expands until he stands before us in the form of his dragon.

Kim whimpers, the sound coming from behind me.

I look her way and note that she is, indeed, behind us. She backpedaled the whole time Hulk was shifting. Her eyes are filled with fear as they take him in.

Now, she panics. Now, when it's too damned late.

"No," I tell her. "Stay where you—"

Hulk roars, rearing up on his back legs. Smoke wafts from his nostrils.

"No! No! No!"

Kim doesn't listen. Of course, she doesn't. She runs. She gives Hulk her back and runs. Even the most placid of dragons will have their hunt instinct

sparked by a fleeing human. Natasha has had minimal training on how to influence her dragon and won't be able to do a damned thing to stop Hulk. This is fucking bad. Worse than bad.

"Hulk! No!" I roar, but his sights are already locked onto Kim. I see death in his eyes. I see it in his whole damned body. Hulk roars again; it's different this time. It's the roar of a predator hunting its prey.

"Noooooooo!" I scream, but my voice turns guttural as I shift. It just happens. It happens against my will. I, too, am a danger to the human, but I can't stop Hulk any other way. I keep my eyes on Hulk. My vision zones in on him as my eyes change, becoming slitted. My sight improves dramatically. I can see every scale in minute detail as my body cracks and reforms in under two seconds.

Mine! my answering roar says. It's loud and clear. The human is mine.

Mine!

By the time I am fully shifted, Hulk is already airborne. I leap up, bashing into him with my scaled body. We both crash to the ground in a tumble. My dragon claws at him. Before I can stop him, my dragon arches back and breathes fire, catching Hulk on his chest and neck.

Mine!

The scent of smoke and burning flesh fills the air, along with the terrified roar of the dragon beneath me.

Suddenly, I am knocked from my perch on top of Hulk by another beast. Its gold and black speckled scales glint in the sun. It's Octane.

Kill! my dragon says.

No! The small vestige of human left in me, screams.

My dragon doesn't listen. Why would he start now? I leap back up and send a plume of fire toward the golden-eyed bastard.

Octane snarls and leaps to the side, howling as the edge of his arm is singed from my blast.

Not quick enough. Kill!

No! Fuck! Stop!

My dragon has never listened to me, so why would I expect anything different today? He is raging and out of his mind. I rear back, preparing for an onslaught, when I am attacked from behind.

Atlas. It has to be.

I howl in rage. Hulk staggers to his feet. The scales on his chest are charred and blackened. All three dragons come at me, pinning me down. I

growl and snarl, working hard at breaking free. I can't! I try harder but to no avail. My dragon finally lets me take over, and I shift.

"Get off me!" I snarl; my throat is still changing from dragon back to human. The bitter taste of ash lingers on my tongue as I swallow, and my mouth is dry from the adrenaline still coursing through my body.

The three of them have also shifted back, and they now stand around me. Octane towers over me, his fiery golden eyes on mine.

He is frowning heavily. "Still as fucked in the head as ever, I see."

"Octane!" Shadow warns.

"No! He shouldn't be here." Octane looks pointedly at me. "Look what he did." He gestures to Hulk and then glances at his own arm. "Why did you keep him in the program?" he asks Shadow. "He's a fucking liability."

"It's not your place to question my decisions," she calmly states.

"No, but it is mine." A male steps out into the clearing. He's wearing full leathers. The silver star on his breast tells us that he is of a high rank. A nasty raised scar cuts across his forehead, all along the top of his bald skull.

He takes a step forward, looking disgusted. "The first one I have for you is what the hell is going on here?" He narrows his eyes on Shadow.

From the look on her face, I would say that we're in deep shit. And if this is who I think it is, I *know* that we are.

K im

Oh, my gosh! Oh, my gosh!

I hear a commotion behind me. Roars and growls. Then, a great body crashes to the ground, and another rage-filled roar almost makes me want to turn back around, to see what is happening. I know the sound was made by Blaze. I know that he is in his dragon form, which...makes me feel better. Why? What's wrong with me?

I want to go back, but that's crazy talk.

Instead, I pick up the pace. I run and run and then run harder. My arms pump. My breath comes in pants, and adrenaline surges through my body. Sweat drips from my brow and runs between my breasts and down my back.

I don't stop, not even when I hit our camp. I run straight into Luke, who is standing in the parking in front of the restaurant area.

"Whoa!" he says, eyes wide.

"Sorry!" I pant out.

"Are you okay?"

I don't answer him. I keep going until I'm inside the bungalow. I lean back against the door with my eyes closed until my breathing is back under control.

I'm still standing there when I feel a tugging on my mind that tells me that Blaze is close.

He knocks on the door.

Damn! Damn! Damn!

I don't feel afraid anymore. Not at all. I feel stupid. I'm mad at myself. I don't want to face him, but I know I have to.

"Kim!" He knocks again. "I can hear you breathing. Let me in!"

I take a few steps away from the door and turn. "It's open."

Blaze walks in. He's naked as the day he was born. All huge man and hard muscle. I don't look down. At least, I try really hard not to take him all in. I catch the smell of smoke and ash and hints of him, too.

"I'm sorry," I choke out.

"What happened? We had a plan. You were supposed to freak out *before* anyone shifted." He doesn't look angry, he looks frustrated.

I suck!

"I...I don't know. I wasn't afraid before. Not at all. Then Hulk shifted, and I panicked, and, like an idiot, I ran. I..." It's how I was raised. What I was taught to do.

Run. Hide.

It's my programming.

"You can't do that, Kim. Not ever. You never run from a dragon. It's the first rule."

"Technically, the first rule is to remain calm," I mutter. "The second rule —"

"Same fucking thing. You could have died out there." Now he looks angry, but his expression quickly changes to one of concern.

"I didn't die because you protected me," I tell him. "Hulk came after me, didn't he?"

"Of course he did. Fuck!" He paces away, and I look at his ass.

Stop looking!

Stop!

I quickly avert my eyes. How can I check him out at a time like this? How can I check him out, full stop?

Eyes up!

Up!

"You running is like dangling a strip of bloody meat in front of a fucking lion, Kim," he says as he turns back toward me. "Once we're in dragon form, you have to hold it together. You have to!"

"Hulk came after me, and you stopped him," I say like an idiot because

I'm somehow fixated on that fact.

I felt safe. I felt connected to Blaze and safe. I'm not sure if I can trust my instincts. I probably can't, but that's how I felt at that moment. Like I was okay. Like he had my back. That's why, for a moment, I wanted to stop running.

"That's not the point."

"It kind of is," I reply. "For me, it is."

"I wanted to kill Hulk. I would have if the others hadn't stopped me. Fuck!" he growls and scrubs a hand over his face.

"Oh! Shit, sorry. Is he okay?" I wince. I didn't think about that part.

"No! I burned him pretty badly, but it could have been a whole lot worse. He'll heal up pretty quickly, but it could have turned out badly...really fucking badly." He runs a hand through his hair. "You needed to stick to the plan, Kim."

"I can't *make* myself panic. It doesn't work like that. I'm not a very good actor. I played the tree almost every year in our school production. I literally had to stand there and do nothing. That's how shitty I am at acting." I lift my eyes in thought. "The one year I played a chicken. Point being, I can't fake it."

"If you don't panic before a shift, then you don't run after one. If you run, someone might die."

"Because you'll protect me," I tell him. Why do I keep bringing it up? I don't know the answer, only that it means something to me.

"Is that what you're calling it? Protection?" His eyes narrow.

I nod. "Yes. What else could it have been? That's the only explanation." Blaze's dragon might be mean, but I don't think he'd hurt me. I think the opposite is true.

"I've got another one for you. He kept on saying 'mine' over and over."

"See? He sees me as his rider, someone he needs to protect."

"He was possessive, alright." Blaze's jaw is tight, and his beautiful green eyes are blazing. "He sees you as his, but what I can't seem to fathom is in which capacity."

"What do you mean?" I frown.

"As his rider? Maybe. As *his* to kill? It's also a distinct possibility." He nods slowly.

Holy shit. I never thought of that. My blood runs cold.

"I can't tell you which it is because I don't know." He shrugs. "Since he

likes to kill humans, I'm going with the latter."

"I felt safe," I say in a small voice. I can't trust myself or my instincts when it comes to men, especially good-looking, charming men I'm attracted to. And if I'm honest with myself, I'm attracted to Blaze big time. The fact that I'm eyeballing him in a situation like this tells me everything I need to know.

"You were not fucking safe. Not for one damned second. That shitshow can't happen again. Do you want to go home?"

No, I don't!

Where did that come from? I have to leave.

"Yes, of course I do," I say after a pause that is too long.

"Are you sure?" His eyes narrow.

"Yes," I say immediately and with a whole lot more behind it because it's true.

"Then *that* can't happen again." He points at the door. "Especially now that he is here."

"Who is *he* exactly?"

Blaze sighs. "Overlord Knox is who. It's a complete fuck up." He paces again.

Eyes up, Kim!

"You still haven't told me who—"

There is a knock at the door.

"Yes," Blaze snaps, yelling at whoever is behind the wooden panel.

Devil puts his head around the jamb. He doesn't blink when he sees that Blaze is still naked.

"We have been called to a meeting in the common room."

"When?" Blaze asks.

"Now."

"Fuck!" Blaze pushes out, shaking his head. His whole body bristles with tension. "Is it the Overlord?"

"It is, indeed." Devil scrunches his face up in obvious confusion. "What's up with that? Why is someone from HQ here? Especially someone with as much clout as Overlord Knox."

"No fucking clue," Blaze says, squeezing the back of his neck.

"We'd better go," Devil says. "I don't think that Knox will want to be kept waiting."

Blaze nods, looking deep in thought. He turns to me. "You ready?"

I nod.

“I’d put pants on if I were you,” Devil tells Blaze.

Blaze makes a noise of agreement, then gives his head a shake, looking down, making me look down, too.

Oh, gosh!

Oh!

I avert my gaze toward Devil, my cheeks heating. I shouldn’t be looking, but I can’t seem to help it. Thankfully, he’s going to get dressed.

“I’ll see you there.” Devil gives me a nod and is gone.

Blaze is already in the bedroom when I turn back. He emerges less than a minute later, still pulling a shirt over his head. “Ready?”

I nod. “What is an Overlord?”

“Let’s walk and talk.” Blaze gestures to the door. “Knox was one of the best frontline dragons we have ever had,” Blaze says as we go outside. “He won numerous awards and was made leader – or Overlord – of our whole squadron. He served on the frontline until he had a terrible run-in with four or five Reds that left him badly injured. He should have died from his injuries. The Overlord lost his rider and his ability to shift.”

My eyes go wide. “He can’t shift into his dragon form?” I sound shocked because I am. “I didn’t know something like that could happen.”

“It’s rare, but it can happen. It must be like torture for one of us. I can’t even imagine it.”

“Me, neither.”

“Knox served the longest of all the Overlords in history and has therefore retained the title even though he no longer serves in that capacity. He now holds some big position at HQ. The question of the hour is, what the hell is he doing here?”

We arrive at the main building. I see Natasha go inside. She is on her own. I catch the way she looks at Blaze just before she enters the building. There’s fear in her eyes.

I did that.

I stop walking for a second. I feel like an idiot. I caused Hulk to get injured. It wasn’t Blaze’s fault.

“I’m sure we’ll find out soon enough. All I know is that he didn’t look happy. He dismissed us and then told Shadow that the two of them needed to talk.”

“Crap,” I mutter, pulling in a deep breath as we go inside.

Everyone is already assembled. Although there are chairs, they're all standing. All eyes turn to us. It feels like they're mainly looking at me.

"Ahhhh, finally," a guy in full leathers says. He must be the Overlord. He's more mature-looking, tall, and muscular and is completely bald, with a terrible scar across his head. No wonder he nearly died. It looks awful. I can't imagine how much something like that must have hurt. No wonder Blaze said that he should have died from his injuries.

Shadow is frowning heavily.

"Since we are all in attendance, we can begin. Trainee Rider Kimberly Ashton," he says, looking at me, "why did you run from a dragon?"

"I...um...I..."

"Spit it out," he says; his voice is calm and yet clipped.

"I got scared. I'm not cut out to be a dragon rider." I'm going to say it like it is.

"You are one, whether you want to be one or not. Your government gave you to us. Do you know the meaning of the word 'tribute'?"

I nod. "I do."

"What does it mean?"

"A tribute is a gift."

"A gift or a payment. Yes, that is correct." He nods. "You were gifted to us to do with as we please. I must insist that you follow the training as stipulated. You mind-bonded a dragon, is that correct?"

I nod. "It is, but—"

"There are no buts. We don't have the time or the resources for buts. You are a rider, and therefore you *will* ride."

"We were told that we would be given a choice. That once we made Sky's Edge, we could go home," I calmly state, even though I am feeling anything but calm.

"Things change, young lady. You will learn to ride your dragon. You will work the frontlines to keep the Reds in line. Do you understand?"

"No, I—"

"Enough!" he snarls, making me take a step back. "I'm not sure why you think...any of you think you have a choice." He looks from one human to the next. "You don't! You clearly have completely lost control over your pupils and dragons alike, Shadow. It's greatly concerning."

Shadow looks down at her booted feet for a moment before lifting her gaze. Her eyes are stormy. She doesn't look happy, and I don't blame her.

Who is this asshole?

“There have been questions raised at board level concerning the lack of frontline riders coming through the academy in recent years. Numbers are way down.”

“Mind-bonds are harder and harder to come by,” Shadow explains.

“Did I ask for your input?” Knox narrows his eyes.

Shadow’s nostrils flare as she pulls in a breath. “No, Overlord Knox,” she finally says when it becomes apparent that he wants an actual answer.

“Exactly. No, I did not. But since you gave it, I will give my response. If mind-bonds are so hard to come by, why are we letting them slip through our fingers?”

“We are exploring every possible—”

“Exploring? What is that? We are not exploring anything. Each and every bonded pair will go through training. Riders ride. They do not run.” He glares at me. “Not ever.”

“It’s not like I wanted to run,” I say.

“Why did you, then? You broke a rule. You broke the most important rule of them all, and mayhem ensued. You could have been killed, Trainee Rider. We would have lost a team if that had happened.” It’s clear he doesn’t give a shit about us. Or the fact that some of us don’t want to be here. “We could have lost one of our dragons.” He glares at Blaze. “We’re lucky it wasn’t worse.”

Octane is standing next to Shadow; he is glaring at Blaze with narrowed eyes. The side of one of his arms is badly burned.

Crap!

I did that.

I caused this.

“There needs to be a punishment as a deterrent,” the Overlord goes on to say. “Twenty lashes for the human for breaking the rules.”

My mouth falls open. Lashes? As in...? Is he ordering for me to be beaten?

“Fuck that!” Blaze snarls.

“No!” Shadow yells. “We no longer give humans lashes. In fact, the whole practice of corporal punishment was abolished years ago...and with good reason.”

“We’re in difficult times, Academy Leader. Difficult times call for extreme measures. The reason we did away with corporal punishment for

humans was because it took too long for them to heal. You are lucky, Trainee Rider,” he looks my way, “because I need you strong and healthy, which means that your dragon will have to take your lashes for you.”

Murmurs go up around the group.

“That isn’t fair,” Shadow retorts.

Dagger cusses.

“What does that mean?” Kerry asks Atlas in a whisper.

“Do you want the human to take the punishment?” Overlord Knox asks Shadow. “Because that can be arranged.”

“I don’t want anyone to receive lashes. Surely there must be another way?” Shadow looks stricken.

“You’ve been babying your team, Academy Leader. It stops now. I have decided to extend my stay. You are under evaluation. The rest of you need to step in line. You injured a fellow dragon, Blaze. You will receive a further twenty lashes for—”

“No!” I shout. “That isn’t right. All of this happened because of me. I’m the one to blame.”

Blaze grabs my elbow and squeezes lightly. “No. Leave it be,” he says under his breath.

“Listen to your dragon, Trainee. You’d do well to take his advice,” the Overlord barks at me. “Otherwise, you will be forced to continue your training injured.” He clasps his hands behind his back. “Furthermore, I want to see all of you in your uniforms whenever there is flight training.”

“I allow early trainees to wear comfortable clothing while they learn to mount and ride their dragons for the first time. Full leathers can be very hot and somewhat restrictive.”

“It comes down to discipline, Academy Leader. Since it is sorely lacking, I am going to insist that everyone wears their full leathers when training with their dragons. You will need to get used to the inconvenience and learn to function optimally whilst in them. Is everyone clear on what is expected of them?”

No one says anything.

“Answer me!” the Overlord snaps.

We all mumble in the affirmative.

“You will all work on fitness and strength for the rest of the day. You will receive your lashes at the end of the day,” he says to Blaze. “I want everyone present, including the injured male and Fang. It is unacceptable that you

don't know where he is," Knox throws the last at Shadow.

I notice for the first time that although Luke is here, Fang is, indeed, missing.

"He will be there," Shadow says.

"I don't want any more disappointments," the Overlord says. "You all know what is expected of you. You are all dismissed."

I am reeling as we file out. "Is he for real?" I say under my breath. "I can't believe that just happened."

"I'm sorry about that," Dagger says, looking from me to Blaze and back. "No one blames you for being afraid or for what happened today," he tells me.

"It was a shitshow," a deep voice says from behind us. I turn and see Octane. "I'm not saying I fully agree with the type of punishment, but I, for one, am glad that there will be some sort of recourse."

"Blaze is being punished for protecting his rider. That isn't right, Octane," Dagger says.

"We can't be blamed for the actions of our dragons," Devil remarks.

"Blaze's dragon is fucking insane. He shifted and completely lost control...yet again. You are an accident waiting to happen," Octane tells Blaze before turning and walking away.

"Don't listen to him," Dagger says, putting his arm around Hunter, who gives me a pitying smile. "We'd better get changed and start training. I have a feeling that lashes are going to be handed out like candy in the coming weeks."

Hunter groans. "Do we have to? Does he really expect us to train the whole afternoon? In this heat, too."

"You heard the Overlord," Dagger says. "He means business."

She grumbles something as they walk away.

Everyone is heading back to their bungalow, the crowd scattering.

"Is he really going to insist that you be lashed? As in, hit with a whip?" I still can't quite believe it.

"Yep, forty lashes is quite a severe punishment. The maximum allowed is fifty; any more, and I won't heal by the next day."

"It's insane. It's freaking barbaric."

"It won't be so bad. I will be healed up by morning," Blaze says, shrugging. I get the distinct impression that he is playing it down. "No one could have predicted what happened. You heard Dagger; it wasn't your

fault.”

I also heard Octane’s opinion and that of the Overlord, and they clearly both disagree. They blame us. Overlord Knox blames *me*.

“It was my fault, though.” My heart sinks. I feel terrible. I’m not sure how to fix this. “I will stand my ground tomorrow. Not only that, I will mount your dragon. I will have to be brave.”

“You will do nothing of the sort. Nothing has changed. Not where our plans are concerned. I don’t want you anywhere near my dragon. Octane is right. I’m an accident waiting to happen. My dragon is dangerous.”

“You’ll keep getting lashes if I refuse.”

“I don’t care. I can take it. No running once we’re in dragon form. By then, it’s too late.”

I don’t like it. I don’t like any of it, but I nod anyway. What choice do I have?

B laze

“Five more,” I tell Kim, who nods. She’s lying on the bench, looking up at me.

“I’m ready.” She licks her lips.

I lift the barbell from the holder. Since Kim is a beginner, we’ve started her on smaller weights. We’ve spent the afternoon focusing on training. We haven’t said any more about my impending punishment or how we are going to tackle things going forward. I meant what I said wholeheartedly. I can’t trust my dragon. I don’t want Kim near him, and if that means having to endure punishment after punishment until they let Kim leave, then so be it.

I am strongly considering resigning as a potential frontline dragon. It’s what I’ve always wanted to be, what I’ve worked so hard for, but maybe Octane is right. Maybe I am a liability, an accident waiting to happen. I’m fucking dangerous in my dragon form. I know they won’t accept my resignation while I have a rider, so I won’t even try, but once Kim leaves, I’m going to do the right thing and resign. Maybe my dad will let me join him in the family business. My heart sinks just thinking about it, but I need to do what is right.

“I’m ready,” Kim says again, bringing me out of my own depressing thoughts.

I hand Kim the barbell, and she starts lifting the bar before slowly coming

back down to just above her chest like I taught her. “One...two...” she pushes out a breath, “three... four...five.” All the way to ten and I take the barbell, putting it back in the holder.

“Good. That was really good,” I tell her.

Kim sits up. She’s in a pair of shorts and a tight-fitting T-shirt that shows off her curves.

I’m just handing her a towel when the bell tolls.

Fuck!

“What is that?” Kim asks, wiping her forehead. Her hair is sticking to her face and neck. She’s put in some serious effort.

I look at my watch. “We’re being summoned.”

“You’re going to be whipped. Is that what that is?” Her voice is a little shrill. “I still can’t believe that this is actually happening.”

The bell tolls again, ringing slowly four times. “I’m afraid that it is.”

Kim’s eyes fill with tears, but she blinks them away. “He’s going to have you whipped like an animal.”

The humans should not have to witness this. They’re timid and not used to the violence.

“I need to quickly change, and then we’d better get going,” I tell her. I have a feeling that if we’re late, I’ll be punished some more. Knox doesn’t mess around.

Kim nods. “I’ll wait out here.” She wipes her face with the towel.

I disappear into the changing rooms and don my leathers. Meting out punishments are considered as an official duty. Overlord Knox will expect me to be in full uniform.

Kim is pacing when I return. “And you’re sure there’s nothing we can do to stop this?”

“There is nothing we can do.”

“Maybe if I talk with him—”

“It’ll just piss him off. He’s made up his mind.”

We walk in silence. Everyone is already gathered in the dusty clearing in front of the main buildings. Overlord Knox is in full uniform, which tells me that he is going to be the one responsible for my lashes. He looks at his watch and narrows his eyes.

We’re well within the fifteen-minute timeframe.

Hulk is sitting. His chest is bandaged. His skin is pale. I feel guilt well up inside me.

I go over to him. "I'm sorry. I—"

He waves a hand. "I went after your rider. That makes us even, and for the record, I think this is a farce." He clenches his jaw.

"Let's begin," Overlord Knox says.

I turn toward him. "I would like to request that the humans be permitted to leave. They don't need to witness this."

"On the contrary, I think they do," Knox says. "Your rider, in particular, since twenty of these lashes are actually hers. And since the other twenty are all due to her as well, I want her here, front and center."

Kim bites down on her lip. She looks stricken, so I grab her hand and squeeze.

"I want each and every one of you to observe what the consequences of insubordination are," Knox goes on, his eyes roving across the crowd.

The Overlord picks up a leather whip. It has a bone handle carved with an intricate design with several long, leather tassels that come off the top. It doesn't look like much but it is designed to flay the back. To cut, to cause maximum pain.

I hate that Kim is going to be made to watch this.

The Overlord flicks the whip, and a loud, bone-jarring crack sounds.

"Keep her safe," I tell Devil, who nods once. Then I peel off my leather tank and kneel in the dirt before the Overlord.

"Stop this!" Kim yells. "Don't do it! Please!"

"Trainee Rider Kimberly Ashton broke one of our most important rules and ran from a dragon, putting her back to him. Blaze will stand in for her. The punishment is twenty lashes." He picks up a thick piece of leather. "Are you ready to accept your rider's punishment?"

"Yes," I say simply.

Knox hands me the piece of leather; it's to bite down on. I think of refusing but change my mind. I need to try to hold it together. The worse I react, the worse it will be for everyone watching, especially Kim.

"Let us begin." Overlord Knox's cold voice cuts through the air. Without hesitation, he steps back and delivers a brutal whip to my bare back. It feels like someone is pouring scorching gasoline over my skin. White-hot pain sears through every nerve as the first cut is opened.

Again and again, Knox's whip lashes across my body, each strike accompanied by a number as he keeps track of the lashes. I grit my teeth, feeling sweat drip down my face.

Amidst the agony, I hear Kim's screams. She's struggling against Devil's hold, tears streaming down her face. All of the human females are crying; the horror is evident on their faces.

"You can't do this!" Kim pleads, her voice breaking. "Someone stop him! Stop this!"

My mind tries to escape to a different place, trying to block out the physical torment and compartmentalize it because I know Kim will feel it, too, through our bond. The emotional pain is just as real.

Even through my haze of agony, I can feel her fear, her frustration, and her boiling anger. There is no shielding this level of emotion; it's impossible.

I grunt, biting harder on the leather as the whip bites in again and again.

I never expected Knox to go easy on me, but the full force of his blows exceeds even my worst fears. Each strike opens up new wounds, the metallic smell of blood filling the air.

I refuse to give in. I refuse to cry out. This is just another test of my strength and resilience. I can do it. I must.

Kim

My throat is raw from screaming, but I can't stop. The Overlord counts each lash with sick satisfaction, his voice like nails on a chalkboard. Blaze's back is a sea of red, shredded flesh that makes my stomach turn. Knox's face is splattered with blood, a gruesome reminder of the violence we are witnessing.

I try to intervene, but Devil holds me back in a vise-like grip. I struggle against him, my body trembling with rage and fear. How can everyone just stand by and watch this brutality unfold?

Exhausted and defeated, I lean against Devil as he supports my weight. My muscles ache from the strain of trying to break free.

When Knox reaches twenty, he stops, wiping the sweat from his brow. He is breathing heavily. "Blaze, you acted with excessive force when in your dragon form. You could have killed Hulk, and, as it stands, he will be out of action for two days, further delaying his training. For this transgression, you

will receive a further twenty lashes. Are you ready to take your punishment?”

“No! Please no!” I shout. “You can’t do this.”

My blood goes cold when I see Blaze nod once. Why is he agreeing? Blaze has the leather strip clamped tightly between his teeth. His eyes are tightly shut. His face is pale and covered in sweat. Blood drips down his back and onto the red dirt around him in spatters.

He grunts when the whip comes down on him, opening yet another slash of red across his back. More blood beads from the fresh wound.

I’ve seen some terrible things in my life; this is up there with the worst of them.

The whip comes down over and over again. His grunts get louder and louder.

Then his eyes fly open, and a guttural cry escapes him as the whip strikes his back, opening up yet another deep gash that spills crimson.

I bury my face in Devil’s chest as I sob. The cries grow worse. Each loud crack jars my bones, my head, my heart, my soul.

It’s my fault. It’s all my fault, and I fucking hate it.

The cruel instrument cracks down relentlessly until Overlord Knox finally yells, “Twenty!”

I look up and see Blaze fall to the ground. His back is an open, bloody mess, with wounds crisscrossing over the entire surface.

I’m so angry, I’m shaking. I hate this feeling of helplessness. The last time I felt like this was when I still lived at home. I vowed never again when I closed the door the day I left. This can’t happen ever again. I won’t let it.

K im

My legs are still shaking as we walk into the bungalow. I need to be strong for Blaze.

“Put him on the bed,” I tell Devil and Goliath, who are supporting Blaze, one on each side with Blaze’s arms slung around them. I can’t believe he’s still on his feet, let alone conscious.

“No!” Blaze grunts. “I’ll bleed over everything. The shower.” His face contorts in pain.

“Who gives a shit about the sheets?” I say, sounding far less together.

“The shower...please,” Blaze insists.

“The hot water will hurt like a bitch,” Devil warns.

“It’s fine. I need to wash,” Blaze says. “I can take it from here.”

“You sure?” Goliath asks, frowning.

Blaze grins; it looks somewhat like a grimace. “Unless you want to shower with me?” He grunts. “It’ll be a tight fit for the both of us, but I’m game if you are.”

Goliath chuckles. “I’ll pass on the shower.”

“We’ll take you to the bathroom,” Devil says. “Don’t be so damned stubborn. First, you didn’t want us to help you to your bungalow, and now you don’t want help to the bathroom. We’re helping you whether you like it or not.”

Dagger and Hunter arrive right behind us. Hunter puts a large square bag on the table. “A first-aid kit. You’ll find antibacterial cream and bandages. Everything you need to patch him up,” she tells me.

“He needs a doctor,” I say, my voice hitching.

“That was brutal,” Hunter whispers. Her eyes are bloodshot. I can see that she’s been crying. We all have.

I nod. “It’s...it’s fucking horrendous. I can’t believe he’s allowed to behave like that and get away with it.” My eyes sting all over again.

“Overlord Knox is known for getting results. He’s known for ruling with an iron fist,” Dagger says.

“I wish he’d go back to HQ.” I chew on my lip.

“That isn’t going to happen anytime soon,” Dagger tells me. “Blaze doesn’t need a doctor. He will be healed up by morning. You need to get him over the line by keeping him as comfortable as possible. There are painkillers in here.” He taps the bag. “He’ll need two every hour. We metabolize the medication quicker than you humans. Dress his wounds. Sing him a fucking lullaby if you have to. Anything to keep him happy.”

I nod. “I will.” My lip starts to wobble. He’s all cut up because of me. I can’t help but think the same thing over and over. I can’t get it to stop.

“Do you need any help? We could stay and...help clean up.” Hunter looks down at the floor, which is spattered with blood in a trail leading to the bathroom. The bathroom will look like a slaughterhouse by the time Blaze is done.

I wipe a falling tear from my cheek.

“Oh, hon’, he’ll be okay. Shifters are strong and resilient,” Hunter says. “How can we help you guys?”

“Blaze will want some peace and quiet,” Dagger says. “I will organize for dinner to be brought over. Perhaps some soup for Blaze. Make sure he eats. He has to keep his strength up. You will need to be strong tomorrow in training. You can’t panic, Kim. You need to stand your ground. You will need, at the very least, to learn how to mount your dragon. This can’t happen again.” His words mirror my thoughts.

“Blaze doesn’t want me attempting to mount his dragon. He doesn’t want to shift in my presence.”

“That’s fucking insane,” Dagger growls.

“He’s worried about what his dragon might do to me. He doesn’t trust his beast.”

“That’s understandable,” Dagger says, nodding. “Especially after what happened.”

What is he talking about? It sounds like a specific incident. Perhaps what happened today? Must be it.

“You do know that it’s extremely rare for a dragon to harm a human once they are mind-bonded?” he says.

“I thought that there was always risk in the early days,” I say.

“There is, but you can’t let those fears control you. Blaze was protecting you today.”

Protecting what is his, but in what capacity? As his rider or as his prey?

No! I’ve let my fears control me too many times. I’m sick of running. I don’t want to run anymore. I want to stand and fight.

I nod. “You’re right.” I’m going to have to find a way to convince Blaze. “All I know is that this can’t happen again,” I whisper.

Dagger nods, his eyes still on mine. “It’s up to you, Kim.”

Goliath and Devil walk out of the bathroom. “He’s in the shower.” Goliath points at the door. “He’s going to need your help from here. It was an effort, but he let me undress him. I draw the line at drying him off with a towel. I figure you owe him that much.” There is no malice in his words, but they still hurt me.

I did this.

“He’ll fight you and tell you that he can cope on his own, but he can’t,” Devil says. “Look after him,” he pleads.

“I will.” I nod. “I swear.”

“You know where we are if you need us,” Hunter says.

I nod yet again.

Dagger gives me a tight smile. I watch as they leave.

“Did you talk to her?” Devil asks Dagger just as they close the door.

“Yes. She’ll do it,” Dagger says.

I’m assuming that I’m the “she” in question and that the “it” part of the equation is my mounting Blaze’s dragon tomorrow.

I’m not going to think about that now. For now, we need to get through the next few hours.

“Are you okay?” I yell into the bathroom. It’s such a stupid question. I’m not surprised when I don’t get an answer.

The door to the bathroom is open, and if I listen carefully, I can make out the splatter of the water against the tiles. I go into the bathroom, and even

though the shower door is covered in condensation, I can see enough to tell that Blaze is slumped against the wall. His forehead is against the tiles. I walk toward him. I've seen him naked, so I'm hoping that it's not a big deal. Especially since he needs me right now.

I did this.

There is blood all over the floor leading to the shower. The water going down the drain is red. The air is filled with the scent of iron.

"Blaze. Can I come in?" I tentatively ask.

He tries to stand tall, but his back must pull because he groans softly as he turns off the taps. "I need a minute." His voice is tense.

"You need painkillers." I suddenly remember and run back out. I'm an idiot. I grab two with a glass of water. Then I go back to the bathroom. "Here." I open the shower door.

Blaze turns. His face is pale and gaunt. In short, he looks terrible, like he might just pass out at any second. There is so much blood. It's all over the shower. On the walls, the glass, the floor.

His wounds are still leaking blood, but not as badly as before.

"You're crying again. I'm sorry you had to witness that," he pushes out.

I hadn't even realized I was crying.

"Please don't apologize. It's all my fault," I choke out. Then I wipe my eyes with the back of my hand, holding onto the pills. I need to be strong right now. "Take these." I hand him the medication. He takes the smallest of sips of water to wash them down before trying to hand me the glass.

"You should have some more," I urge because he's lost so much blood.

Blaze shakes his head. "I'm nauseous. I need to lie down. I'll be fine once I'm horizontal."

"Let's get you out of here." I put the glass down on the vanity and step into the stall with him. "I'll help you."

He shakes his head. "I'm wet. Not to mention, I'll get blood all over you."

"I don't care. Lean on me."

Thankfully, he does as I ask. We shuffle out of the shower and onto the bloody bathmat. I grab a towel and slowly start drying him off.

"I can do that." He's leaning heavily on the vanity. He looks like he might faint at any second.

"No, you can't." I start with his arms. Wow, even in this state, he's something to behold. Acres of bronzed skin and corded muscles. I

concentrate on the job at hand. He needs to get to bed before he passes out.

I go down on my haunches to dry his feet and his legs. Gliding the towel up and up and—

“I’ll take it from here,” he says, grabbing the towel and using it to cover his...very large erection.

I gasp softly and look up at him. Blaze is broken and bleeding...and apparently turned on.

He shrugs, giving me a sheepish look. “You’re a beautiful woman on your knees in front of me. Some things can’t be helped.”

“You’ve been beaten to within an inch of your life,” I say as I clamber back to my feet.

“I might be injured, but my cock is clearly just fine.” He throws me a half-smile.

I’m glad he can still joke at a time like this, and obviously, despite his injuries, he can’t be that bad, which helps me relax somewhat. I grab a fresh towel and go behind him. His back is worse up close. Some of those lashes have cut seriously deep. I feel fresh tears start to gather at the corners of my eyes. My throat tightens.

Maybe Blaze senses the change in me because he says, “I’m okay.”

“You are not! You don’t have any skin left in places.” My voice sounds shrill and full of emotion.

“I’ll be healed by the morning, and in a few days, you won’t even know it ever happened.”

“You will have scars.” I bite down on my lip as I keep working.

He shakes his head. “No, I won’t.”

“How is it that Overlord Knox has a scar if you guys don’t get them?”

“We get them.” He hisses when the towel touches a little too close to the wounds at the top of his back. “It takes a lot for us to scar.” His voice is clipped and full of tension. “The Overlord should have died from his wounds. His body put so much into keeping him alive that he ended up scarred in the end. If we carry our wounds for too long or if wounds are reopened several times over, then we end up scarring. Otherwise, we’re good.”

He grunts as I touch the towel to his back, avoiding the parts that are badly damaged but trying to soak up as much of the water and blood as I can.

“So, if that asshole Knox lashes you a couple more times, you’ll be scarred for life? Not to mention the pain you’ll have to endure.”

“It’s better than the alternative.” I notice that his knuckles are white as he

holds on to the towel rack. Any second now, he's going to rip it from the wall. I feel him tremble. Blaze can't stay on his feet for too much longer.

"I think we need to get you to bed."

"I'll wreck the sheets."

"You're going to bed," I tell him, hooking an arm around his waist.

"So bossy," he says as we start to walk. He's leaning on me heavily. I help him onto the bed, where he lies down on his stomach with a loud sigh.

"I need to dress your wounds. And bandage you up."

"Give me a minute," he says a few seconds before he passes out cold.

Crap!

What now?

I consider trying to wake him but decide against that course of action, so I very gently put a blanket over his ass and upper thighs.

Then I spend the next half hour trying my best to clean his wounds, which finally stop bleeding. Carefully, I spread antibacterial cream onto them even though, with such rapid healing, an infection is highly unlikely. It just feels like the right thing to do. I use two tubes of the stuff; that is how torn up his back is. I have to blink back more tears.

When we hit the one-hour mark, I contemplate waking him to give him more pain meds but figure that he must be fine if he hasn't so much as stirred, so I get to work cleaning up all the blood. I mop the floors and wipe down the surfaces, throwing anything that is beyond saving into the trash. After checking on Blaze, I jump in the shower, then get out and put on the dress I fished out of the trash weeks ago. The day before Ross died. It feels like a lifetime ago. So much has happened since. I almost don't feel like the same person anymore.

Then I pull a chair up next to the bed with the intention of reading a few more chapters while I wait for Blaze to wake up, but my mind keeps wandering, forcing me to turn back the pages and start again.

There is a knock on the door.

I go to see who it is and find an older lady holding a large tray of food.

"Hi." She smiles. "I'm June. I heard all about what happened." Her expression changes, and her eyes go glassy as they fill with unshed tears.

"Come in," I whisper. "Blaze is resting."

June places the tray on the countertop in the kitchenette. "There's chicken soup. I made it especially for him," she says under her breath. "Then there's fruit. I thought it would be easy for him to digest...poor thing." She shakes

her head. “This new Overlord person is a nasty piece of work.”

“Yes, I’m afraid he is.”

“How is Blaze doing?” Her gaze is filled with concern.

“He’s out cold, but seems to be doing okay, considering.”

“I’m glad to hear it and glad he has you to look after him.”

I don’t say anything because it’s my fault he’s lying in that bed in the first place. I give her what I know is a tight smile.

June looks down at the tray. “There is also spaghetti bolognese, roast chicken, and my meatloaf. I wasn’t sure what either of you would feel like, so I put a few things on here just to be sure. My husband, Carl, says I went overboard, but I disagree.” She laughs. I like her instantly. “I also included some cherry cobbler with whipped cream. You should stick that in the fridge.”

“I will. Thank you so much. I know that Blaze will be hungry when he wakes up.”

“Healing takes it out of them.” She sighs. “Blaze is such a sweetie. He has such a kind heart. I feel for him after what happened last year. He took the loss of his rider very hard, as I’m sure you can imagine.” She lifts her brows.

“Yes, for sure.” I nod a few times as well.

“I’ve never seen anyone more distraught. More wracked with guilt.”

I nod some more. I don’t know exactly what happened, so I can’t comment. I know that his dragon can be really mean. The word “monster” still comes to mind, especially after seeing Hulk all wrapped up in bandages today. I’ve never felt any of that aggression directed at me. Not once. So far, Blaze has been nothing but sweet and kind. He seems to care for me. He took twenty lashes for me today. If I’m honest with myself, all forty lashes were because of me. He never complained once, and never said anything negative or nasty.

“Okay, well, I’m going to leave you to it.” June touches the side of my arm, taking me out of my thoughts. “You give that dear boy my regards.”

“I will.” I smile at her.

June leaves, and after packing the food away, my gaze drifts to the top drawer of the oak desk nestled in the corner of the living room. With a heavy sigh, I resign myself to the fact that I won’t be able to focus on reading today – not with my mind consumed by thoughts of Blaze.

Instead, I decide to pass the time by doodling in my sketchpad. It’s

become a thing of mine lately. It's somehow cathartic to get lost in creating rough drawings. I retrieve the pad, along with a set of graphite pencils, and retreat back to the bedroom, making sure Blaze is still sleeping before settling in at the dressing table.

The warm glow of LED lights embedded in the mirror casts a soft radiance over my workspace. With each stroke of my pencil, I feel myself relax a little more. I check on Blaze intermittently, but my main focus is on the intricate lines and shapes forming beneath my hand. The rhythmic scratching of lead against paper soothes me and helps quiet my racing thoughts.

I'm not sure how long I work, only that I am almost done when he comes up behind me.

"That's amazing," Blaze says in a deep voice that startles me.

B laze

Kim slams the sketchpad shut. “Did your mother ever tell you not to sneak up on people?”

“I didn’t sneak up on you.”

“You did,” she throws back, her hand firmly on the sketchpad.

“I swear I didn’t sneak up on you. You were engrossed in what you were doing.” I break out in a huge grin. I can’t help it. Her cheeks have turned bright red.

“You should not sneak up on people or look over their shoulders. That’s my personal stuff.” She raises her voice just a touch.

“I noticed. It’s...um...” I clear my throat, “very detailed.”

“Get back in that bed right now.” She points. “You are not well. I need to bring you your pain meds and to check on your wounds. You should not be out of bed.”

“It’s been several hours since I fell asleep. I’m feeling much better.”

Kim stands. “You’d better turn around so that I can take a look.” Holy shit, but she’s mad and still clearly embarrassed.

I already know what she will see because I can feel how my wounds have knitted. I’m feeling a million times better already.

I do as she says, and she looks me over. “Your healing abilities are insane.” Her fingers lightly brush my back here and there. “The deeper cuts

are still healing, but the others have all closed.” She sighs, sounding like she’s in awe.

I turn back toward her, noting that her cheeks are still red. “Don’t let me bother you. You should get back to what it is you were doing.” I look around her at the dressing table.

She starts to shake her head.

“No, please. I insist you finish. I could even pose for you. I put on some boxers, but I could take them off?” I touch the edge of the fabric.

“No...um...no... That’s... It’s...” She’s fucking sexy when she’s flustered. What am I saying? She’s fucking sexy all of the damned time. “No! Don’t take them off,” she finally settles on. “I’m done with doodling. Forget you even saw that.” She gestures in the direction of the sketchpad on the table. “It’s silly.”

It isn’t silly, but I nod anyway. “Sure, of course. No problem.”

“Are you hungry? June brought a ton of food.” She looks toward the bedroom door.

“I’m ravenous. Please tell me she sent me some of her famous meatloaf?”

“I think you might be in luck. Now get back to bed.”

I nod and take a step in that direction, watching as she starts to head to the bedroom door.

Instead of going to bed, I pick up the sketchpad from the table. “There’s more than one.” My grin is back in full force. “They’re incredible,” I say, flipping through the pages. “You’re an amazing artist.”

Kim gasps. “Those are private!” she half-yells. “Don’t look at them.” She closes the distance between us, trying to grab it out of my hands.

“Since they’re all of me, I figure I have some sort of a right to look at them. I must say,” I hold the pad high so that she can’t snatch it out of my hands, “they’re all such a good likeness. You’re really talented.” I mean that. I’ve never known an actual artist before, and make no mistake, Kim is a real artist. These are incredible. “But they’re all of me. Every single one. Should I be concerned or flattered?”

“Neither. It’s not like I’ve seen many other people lately. That’s why they’re all of you.”

I smirk.

“Really! That’s all it is. I don’t have any other muses. Don’t go and get a big head over this. I was doodling.”

Doodling. Is that what she calls it? These could hang in any art gallery;

they're that damned good.

"This one is amazing." It's one of me in my dragon form. There is smoke coming out of my nostrils. I look angry, ready to pounce at any second. "I've never seen myself in dragon form before." I take in my scales and the curved lines of my wings. The detail is astounding.

"I'm not completely happy with that one. I've only seen you in your dragon form twice, and the first time, I didn't pay attention to you specifically. Your eyes are...they're wrong, somehow."

"I honestly think it's good." I flip to the next one. It's a close-up of my face. It's freaky how accurate it is. Almost like looking into a black-and-white mirror. "And you called *me* creepy for watching you sleep. This is a whole new level of creepy, Kim," I tease. There are at least ten sketches of me. From a close-up of my face to two of me completely naked. One is from behind, the other is a full frontal, and it's startlingly accurate. "I mean, especially considering that you haven't seen me naked all that much." I go to the sketch in question, the one she was working on when I interrupted her.

"I've seen you a few times. I saw you up close just a few short hours ago," she mumbles, looking everywhere but at my face. "It's been several times now. I was bored. I needed something to do." She shrugs. "That's all."

"So, you sketched my dick? You obviously took notes, or do you have a photographic memory? Back to the part about you being the creepy one in this relationship," I tease her some more, and she tries to grab the sketchbook out of my hands again but fails. "You even got my slight curve to the left."

"Give it back."

"No."

"Give it to me!" she insists.

I hook an arm around her and pull her against me. I picked up on her arousal earlier. The channels between us were still open, our shields down. I picked up on her arousal loud and clear. It's why I went hard despite my injuries. It wasn't that she was on her knees. It wasn't that her hands were on me. Or that her shirt was wet and clinging to her breasts. Sure, those things played a role. It was her arousal that had me turn hard as stone.

"I want to touch you," I tell her. "I shouldn't have even said that." I quickly add because I'm a fucking idiot.

She needs to push me away, and right now. Then again, Kim will be leaving soon; what harm can it do? Somehow, I fully expect her to turn me down flat, but she doesn't.

Instead, she reaches up onto her tippy toes and kisses me. Her lips are soft. Her fingers lace around my neck. She presses herself up against me.

I'm such an asshole.

I shouldn't have initiated this without talking to her first.

I pull away and groan. "As much as I want to touch you really fucking badly..." I suck in a breath. "We need to talk, Kim," I force the words out.

"No, we don't." She pushes her lips to mine and deepens the kiss. After a few hot and heavy seconds, she pulls away. "You said that a person should have good sex at least once in their life. I'm ready now."

I look into her big blue eyes. "I also told you that you had plenty of time —"

She shakes her head. "I've learned a few lessons since being on this island. The biggest one is that life is short. I haven't put myself out there very many times in my life, so please don't leave me hanging."

"It's the very last thing I want to do, but we need to have one quick conversation." I have to try, or it would make me the world's biggest prick. I should have told her sooner.

"No talking." She sounds a little panicked. Maybe she knows deep down inside that the sex won't end up happening if I say what I need to say. If I tell her what she needs to hear. If I come clean about the type of monster I really am.

Kim kisses me again, moaning into my mouth. The kiss is everything. Her hands dig into my shoulders. Her breasts press into my chest. She pulls back. "Sex! Now!"

A guy only has so much control. I tried to warn her. Now, instead of stopping like I should, I kiss her back, making a noise of agreement. We kiss, lost in each other. It's intense and all-consuming.

I cup her ass in my hands and squeeze, and she pulls back, panting. "To be clear, it would just be sex. You would have no hold over me." Her eyes are wary. "No say over me. I am in control of myself. I am my own person."

Such a strange line to draw in the sand.

"Yeah, of course," I tell her. Why would I want control over her?

Before I can think about it anymore, her mouth closes over mine. Her moan is louder this time.

"Okay...good," she mutters against my lips. "Make me feel good, please," she whispers.

I pull away, putting down her sketchpad. It's still open on the nude of me.

I notice that the tips of her fingers are blackened by the lead of the pencil. The truth is that I'm flattered. I'm flattered she drew me so many times. I'm flattered she wants me.

I'm afraid that it'll all go away. That this night won't happen...because I suddenly want her with a fierceness that scares me a little.

"On the bed," I tell her in a voice that is almost too deep to belong to a human. I know deep down that this is a bad idea, but the tightness of my balls and throbbing of my cock has any kind of logical thinking going out the window. I want this woman more and more with every passing second.

I want to kiss her mouth. Touch her skin. I want to be inside her...to hear my name on her lips. I want it all.

Kim crawls onto the bed, turning to look at me. My cock is barely contained in my cotton boxers.

She's wearing this little summer dress that has gathered up high on her thighs. The bed dips as I settle in next to her. I kiss her softly, moving to her neck, where I lick and suck. I tug her dress up over her hips and move down her body, kissing the tiny strip of exposed skin on her stomach above her pantyline. Then I kiss her inner thigh, first the one side and then the other.

"Blaze," she whispers. Then she yells as I close my mouth over her sex in the vicinity of her clit. I drag her underwear out of the way and lick on the bundle of nerves, zoning in on it. I love her salty, musky scent.

"Blaze," she groans deeply, her voice laced with shock. I can't wait to make Kim come hard.

K im

I'm panting.

I'm sweating.

I'm losing my ever-loving mind.

Blaze suckles on my clit, and my back bows off the bed, my eyes going wide and my mouth rounding into an "O."

Oh. My. God.

I grip his hair tighter, fisting it in both my hands. I'm humping his face.

I want more.

I want everything.

I want it now.

His fingers are inside me, and I tense for a moment, expecting it to be uncomfortable. I groan when I realize that it isn't. The opposite is true. I make a weird noise in the back of my throat as he slides his fingers in and out of me. In and out.

"Oh! Oh!"

I'm both wound up and Jell-O. The air sticks in my lungs and then I'm groaning or whimpering. His mouth. His hands. Him! Lord, oh lord. I'm dying, and I'm living. I'm feeling so much and all over, even though he is concentrating on my sex. I feel him in my veins, my blood, in every nerve-ending across my whole body.

Holy fucking shit!

Pleasure rushes through me, suffusing my veins as Blaze pumps his fingers in and out of me. His mouth is closed over my clit where he suckles with just the right pressure.

More.

More.

I clasp his hair tighter, my eyes going wider. The coiling inside of me becomes unbearable. My skin feels like it might burst open at any second.

I'm grunting and groaning like a wild animal. I'm holding onto him almost like I'm afraid he'll stop if I let go. I can't ease my grip; my body won't let me.

I'm panting, grinding, grunting, and groaning. I'm jerking my hips against his face; then I'm coming harder than I've ever come in my whole life. At first, I don't make a sound. I don't see or hear anything except for the beating of my own heart. It rings loud in my ears.

Then I'm groaning his name, low and deep. This keening noise finds its way out of me. I keep grinding against his face as if my life depends on it.

Everyone needs to have good sex at some point in their lives.

If nothing else. This is my once.

Sure, I'm being a little crazy and a lot reckless, but I don't care. Not right now. I'm starting to think that I might be able to trust this man. At least in the short term. He took a beating for me; surely, he wouldn't hurt me. Then I'm slowly coming down from an epic orgasm. An orgasm that has me vibrating with aftershocks.

I'm still panting. Still holding onto him.

Oh, shit!

I let go. His hair is a bit mussed, but he's smiling, so maybe it's okay. Maybe he didn't mind. Then he's crawling over me, kissing me. I taste myself on him.

"I want you," he says against my lips.

I make a noise of agreement because I can't speak.

He tugs on my dress, and I lift my arms. Blaze pulls it over my head. He kisses me again, unclasping my bra. I pull it off.

He glances down at me. "Beautiful," he whispers with reverence in his voice. He pulls down his boxers and kicks them off, then brushes his lips against mine.

"I don't have a condom." He kisses my ear. "Are you on something? We

don't have to do this. I can make you come again with my mouth. I—”

“It's fine, Blaze. I'm taking contraceptives. I won't get pregnant.”

He's frowning heavily. Almost looking angry, but I see it for what it is: arousal, and it's a turn-on. “You sure you don't mind—?”

“I'm very sure.”

He leans down and takes my nipple in his mouth. My back bows again, and I swear I feel it between my legs. How does he do that? Make me hot all over?

His mouth goes to my other breast as he slips my panties to the side and rubs on my clit. I groan like I'm dying. Just like that, I'm right back up there, like I never orgasmed at all.

“I want you inside me.” I've never been so brazen. Never! This isn't me at all. I didn't even think that I liked sex. I know it will be different with Blaze.

He settles himself between my legs and nudges inside me, just his tip. Blaze closes his eyes, and we both groan.

He's a beautiful man. His eyes, his jaw, his lips, all of him is absolutely gorgeous. Even his longer hair and the tattoos. They make him more attractive, somehow.

I run my hand up and down his arms, which are braced on either side of me. Blaze keeps his eyes on me as he pushes deeper into me.

I groan. He moans. Then his mouth crashes against mine as he pushes all the way in and to the hilt. I gasp. He's a big man. I've never felt so full and so needy, especially when he eases back and rubs on my clit softly with one finger, staying inside me while he does it.

Holy moly! Heavens alive.

“You feel so good,” he chokes out.

I'm panting and moaning and wriggling a little. I want him to move, but he doesn't. He rubs my clit a little longer. His touch is soft...almost too soft, making me want more. I gasp the word.

Blaze sends me a half-smile. “You're a greedy little thing,” he whispers.

“Oh! I didn't mean to be... I'm—”

“Don't apologize. I happen to love greedy...love your tight-as-fuck pussy.” Then he moves his hand and pushes into me with deliberate strokes that take my breath away. That take each and every single faculty away from me and all at once.

Holy shit!

I'm going to come. I can already feel it hovering. I can feel it in the tightening of my lower belly. In the warmth pooling there. I feel it in the throbbing of my clit.

I dig my fingers into his biceps. I whimper. I groan. I yell. I most certainly beg. His thrusts get harder and faster. His mouth finds mine. I dig my hands into his hair. I keep my legs wide as I thrust to meet him. My clit rubs against him with every hard thrust.

Holy fucking shit!

I'm going to come. It's going to happen sooner rather than later. I didn't think it could be like this.

Blaze groans, making these little grunts that only serve to turn me on even more. He lifts my legs up higher and pulls back a little, watching me. My channel flutters. My clit throbs. I can't take my eyes off him. The way his muscles pull and tighten. His abs, too. The intensity of his gaze. All of it.

The air seems to leave my lungs in a rush, and my jaw turns slack, and then I am coming hard. Blaze keeps driving into me as I yell his name. I'm loud. My body is on fire. I'm burning for him. I can't get enough.

I'm at my peak when Blaze growls my name, too. He sounds like he's in awe. His eyes turn hazy, and his back bows just a little as he jerks, making these noises that tell me he is in ecstasy.

That makes both of us.

I get a jolt of satisfaction knowing that I made him feel this way. I'm panting. Still feeling so much, still meeting him thrust for thrust, my breasts jerking hard.

We slow, and then Blaze slumps against me. He's breathing heavily, still taking most of his weight on his arms.

"Jesus," Blaze whispers. "Fuuuuck!" he groans. Then he kisses the side of my head, followed by my cheek, and lastly, my mouth. "You're amazing, Kim," he whispers against my lips. This time, I believe it, and it warms me up inside.

He's still almost completely hard. Still throbbing inside me when he pulls out. I whimper. I already want him inside me again. I might be addicted to this...to him.

He drops onto the bed next to me, breathing hard. I'm also still struggling to catch my breath. I can't believe that just happened. I guess I knew that sex could be good. I heard firsthand that it could be, but to experience it for myself is something else entirely.

“Are we going to do that again?” I blurt. My voice is a little husky from all the yelling and groaning. My cheeks heat.

Blaze chokes out a laugh. “I’ve created a monster.” He turns serious in the next beat. “I’m not at full strength yet.”

“Oh! Shit!” I gasp. “I forgot you were injured. I...um...sorry. I’m so sorry.”

I note that he is on his side...not his back, which is still healing. Of course it is since he was beaten bloody.

“You need to stop apologizing to me. It’s fine. I’m flattered.” He reaches forward and tucks a few strands of hair behind my ear. “I need to eat, and then maybe we could...” His eyes cloud in thought. “Actually, we really need to have that talk now.”

“I don’t want to talk. Let me get you some meatloaf. I’m sure you need another painkiller.” I sit up. “And I should check your back.”

Blaze sits up as well. “My back is fine. I’m well on the road to recovery. As shitty as it is to be lashed forty times, they’re mostly superficial injuries. There are no organs to heal or bones to knit. None of that.” He gives me a tight smile. “I’m good.”

“It’s just that this conversation you want to have sounds serious, and I’m tired of serious. I’m just plain tired. It feels nice to let everything go. To shut the world out for a short while.”

“I get that, but this can’t wait...not anymore. I should have told you about it long ago, but since you were leaving, I didn’t think it was necessary.” He looks down at the crumpled sheet beneath us and then back into my eyes. “You don’t hate me anymore, and I’m afraid that once you find out about this, you’ll hate me all over again. That you’ll hate me even more, but I’m being a coward by keeping this from you. It’s not right.” He slowly shakes his head, his eyes clouded.

Arghhhh!

I was right. It’s bad. I don’t want to know. Not now. Why now? Why can’t it wait a little longer?

But he’s right and so I eventually nod. “Okay. Tell me.” He’s right.

I watch his throat work. “You can’t be my rider...not ever. I won’t risk you.”

“You keep saying that, but I’m not convinced that your dragon is out to get me. I think he was being protective. I don’t think he would hurt me. I don’t think he sees me as prey.” There, I said it. I mean it, too.

Blaze's jaw tightens. He swipes a hand over his face. "I shouldn't have slept with you, Kim. It was wrong of me."

"Why? Do you think my judgment is clouded now that you've been inside me?"

"I don't think that at all. It was wrong because you have no idea of who I really am and what I am capable of."

"I've seen it with my own eyes," I throw back.

"I killed her, Kim. I killed my last rider. It was me."

My blood runs cold. Dread pools in my belly. I blink a few times, unable to say anything because my throat feels closed.

"It was me," Blaze says again. "It wasn't a Red. It wasn't an accident. It was me! I was in my dragon form. It was the second time I shifted with her... with Sasha. I was so fucking excited." His eyes are hazy. They're tormented. "After all the years of hard work. After trying to mind-bond with someone year after year, it finally happened for me. Finally! I had my Sky Warden. I was going to be a frontline dragon. I had someone to partner with...to keep me in line. To help me with my dragon. I shifted so that we could deepen the mind-bond in preparation for flight training, and my dragon decided he didn't want her. He'd mind-bonded the wrong human. Not only that, he hated her. Called her wicked. He incinerated her within seconds of my shifting into my dragon form. I *am* a monster. He *is* a monster. When you spoke earlier of giving Knox what he wanted, of attempting to mount and ride my dragon..." He shakes his head. "You can't! I've decided to resign from my position. I need to do the right thing."

"That's why Octane hates you," I whisper.

He nods. "Sasha was his student at Sky's Edge. I've killed plenty of humans over the years. My kill rate is the highest of all hopeful dragons. The highest, Kim. I'm one of the very few dragons to kill their riders. In fifty-nine years, it's happened three times. Three." He holds up three of his fingers. "I am one of those three. I'm the reason Shadow warns newly bonded humans not to get too close. To be careful. To take every precaution. It's because of me." He hits his chest with his hand.

I realize that I've moved to the other side of the bed, as far away as I can get from him, and I'm shaking. I rub my hands together, trying to make it stop. It doesn't. It gets worse.

I never expected this.

Not in a million years.

“So now, at least you understand why you can never be my rider. Why you need to go back to the mainland. Why I’m the biggest asshole for taking you to bed before having this conversation.”

“It’s fine.” I’m shocked at how calm my voice is when I’m feeling anything but calm. “It was just sex. We’re not friends. We’re not anything.” I shrug.

A look of hurt flashes across his face for a moment before he schools his emotions. “Of course not.”

“When are you going to resign?”

“I will try to tender my resignation in the morning, but I need to warn you that I doubt it would be accepted. Not now that I have a mind-bond. They will expect us to forge on and to somehow make this work.”

“But you’ll try?”

“Yes, I realize now that it was stupid of me to stay in the program. Octane is right to be pissed off with me. You and I need to stick to the plan. I’ll refuse to shift. If need be, you need to run. Run hard and fast. Make sure you do so before any of us shift.”

“You’ll end up getting lashes, though.” I don’t care what he did; watching a man getting whipped bloody like that is cruel and disgusting.

Blaze nods once. “Yes, I will, but I assure you that I deserve each and every bite of the whip. I can take it. I deserve it,” he insists.

I feel a pang, and my chest tightens. In this moment, I am reminded of my mother.

I shouldn’t have dropped the plate. It’s my fault. I didn’t clean the house properly. I deserved it. It was me.

No!

I pull in a breath. I put my hand to my chest and realize that I’m naked. Shit! I get up and grab my dress from the floor, pulling it over my head.

“Say something,” he says, sounding lost.

“There’s nothing to say. I knew what your dragon was capable of. Although hearing this was jarring, I’m not surprised at all.” Why do I have to force the words out? They’re all true.

Maybe it’s the hurt in his eyes or the slump of his shoulders, but I feel sorry for him. I’m tempted to say something to make him feel better, but, in the end, I suck the words back.

“I just...I need to get home, that’s all.”

“Hopefully, they accept my resignation, but if they don’t right now, they

will soon. They have to.”

I nod. “Let me get you some dinner.” I owe him that much since he took the lashes for me.

I turn and walk away because I don’t want to hear any more. I can’t look into his eyes and see how broken he is. Most of all, I don’t want him to see the pain in my eyes. Pain that should not be there. There’s pain, but there’s also anger. It’s anger at myself. I told Blaze once that I have high self-preservation. It turns out that I don’t.

No self-preservation at all.

I’m no judge of character.

I’m just like her, just like my mother and I can’t have that. I can’t! I won’t!

B laze

Shadow falls back in her office chair, looking defeated. I hate to see her this way. She's a fair and capable leader. "There is absolutely no way that Knox will accept your resignation. Surely you must know that?" she speaks under her breath, glancing at the wall to the right, so I assume that he is in the office over there right now. "For the record, I am against this as well." She touches the pages on her desk.

"I don't want it to happen again," I tell her.

"It won't. Your dragon had every reason to kill your previous rider."

"That's not true. Nothing was ever proven," I throw back.

"Stop being so damned hard on yourself!" Shadow practically yells but is still talking under her breath. "You have the ability to look into the heart of a human, even the ones you're not mind-bonded to. Your dragon has a short fuse. The two don't go so well together, but you were ultimately justified, possibly for every one of your kills."

"No way! I killed that male for being a bully. What the fuck, Shadow? My dragon's too damned sensitive. That's no reason for a person to die."

"Halbert Gryn was in your dragon's personal space. That's ultimately what got him killed."

I sit up in my chair. "My dragon is a fickle bastard, too quick with the flames. I can't do it. I can't risk shifting. I'd never forgive myself if I hurt

Kim. I need HQ to allow me to resign from my position. I refuse to shift.”

“Knox will order for you to be lashed again. Do you really want to do that to your human? She was distraught.”

“That was then, and this is now.” I doubt that Kim would mind nearly as much. Not after my revelation. I saw the anger...the disgust in her eyes almost floored me. I think it hurt me more than the damned lashes, and that’s saying something.

We’ve barely said two words to one another since I told her. Last night was...it was special; it meant something to me. I think it might have meant something to her, too, but that was before she realized that her earlier reservations about me were all true. And best it stays that way.

I’m a fucking monster.

“You’ve worked hard for years. I think it’s a waste to throw it all away like this. I can discuss your resignation with the Overlord, but I have a feeling it would just piss him off. That it would make him harder on you...on her, too. I urge you to give it a chance. You might just surprise yourself.”

“Give it a chance?” I growl. “That’s bullshit, Shadow. If my dragon decides he doesn’t like the female, he will end her with no hesitation. It’s not worth the risk.” I stand, my chair scraping on the tiles.

“Am I tendering your resignation to HQ?” Her eyes are locked with mine.

“Yes.” I’ve decided. I have to try.

Shadow shakes her head, opening her laptop. “It’s your funeral, Blaze.”

“I’d rather it be my funeral any day, Shadow, than see Kim lost.”

“You will be excused from practice today until I hear back from HQ.”

My mouth quirks up at the corner for half a second. “Doesn’t Knox make these kinds of decisions?”

“Yes, but he doesn’t have to know until he finds you missing at the training grounds. I will tender your request for a resignation as soon as he leaves his office.” She glances to the right again.

I heave a sigh. “Thank you.”

“It would be following protocol.” She shrugs.

Protocol, my ass. Shadow is doing me a favor. She’s giving me an inch of breathing room, which is welcome.

“Thank you,” I say again as I leave her office, closing the door behind me.

I go back to the bungalow, hearing the shower as I enter. The sketchpad is on the desk in the living room, which is odd since she was using it in the

bedroom last night. I go over and open the pad. Most of the sketches are gone. I flip through a few pages, and they're...gone. Torn out, from the looks of the ragged edges I run my fingers over. The only one remaining is of my dragon. He looks pissed. He looks mean and seriously fucking dangerous, which means she captured him just right.

I see a whole pile of torn-up bits in the trashcan next to the desk. I take a handful, and sure enough, Kim has torn up every last sketch of me.

Why?

Okay, I know why, and I get it. I do! But why?

She shouldn't have.

It's not that she tore up drawings of me; it's because those great artistic renditions are gone. They're just...they're gone, and it leaves me feeling bereft. I let the pieces of paper flutter into the trashcan. Perhaps it is for the best. No, it *is* for the best.

Kim *The next day...*

“You ready?” Blaze asks me.

I nod, feeling somber. “So, you were right?” I ask.

“I’m afraid so. Knox declined my application outright the second it landed on his desk, which was after they got back from training yesterday,” Blaze says as we walk from the bungalow toward where the others are assembled.

“Pity,” I say.

“It is.”

“How do you wear these things day after day?” I tug on the edge of my leathers. I’m wearing them from head to toe.

“You get used to them. Yours are new, which means they’re still quite tough. The hide will soften over time and mold to your body.”

“I can’t imagine getting used to them.”

“If you were staying, you would.” Blaze touches the side of my arm, and I want to both jerk away and move into his touch.

I do neither. Instead, I stop and turn my gaze on him.

He lets me go, and his whole demeanor softens. “You know the plan, right?”

“Yes, yes.” I roll my eyes. “You keep asking me the same question. I know!”

“No, seriously; we can’t have a repeat of last time.”

“There won’t be,” I snap back at him. “You’ll refuse to shift, and we’ll leave. The end!”

“Perfect.” He nods, looking satisfied, and we start to walk again.

Only it’s not perfect since he’ll end up broken and bloody by the end of the day. I’m not sure I can watch him being beaten for a second time, let alone a third and a fourth time. I’ve watched too many beatings in my life. Too many to count. I don’t care how much he thinks he deserves it. No one deserves that. To be degraded and demeaned. To be hurt like that.

“You’re sure this is the only way?” I can’t help but ask.

He stops dead. “Abso-fucking-lutely. I killed my last rider. I’m a killer, Kim. A cold-blooded, hardcore—”

“Okay. Fine! You made your point.” I swallow thickly. “That’s enough. You’ll refuse, and Knox will beat you for however long it takes for him to let me leave.”

“Yes.”

“Alright,” I say.

“You’re sure you mean it?”

“I’m sure.” I nod.

His eyes narrow for a moment, and then he seems to relax. We walk over to the others. Everyone is assembled, including Dagger, Hunter, Goliath, and Devil. As well as the other mind-bonded couples. Luke is on his own. There is still no sign of Fang. The big brooding shifter, Octane, is also present. He stands off a little to the side of everyone. I notice the looks he gives Blaze, like he hates him.

For whatever reason, I feel a little protective of Blaze, which is stupid since Octane is justified in feeling the way he does.

“Glad you could make it,” Hulk says to us. “Knox was fuming yesterday. Both you two and Fang were missing from training. He spat bricks for a while before we started.”

“I thought he was going to self-combust,” Kerry says. “He had actual smoke coming out of his nostrils.”

“That’s because he was close to shifting,” Atlas says. “But since he can’t...there was all that smoke.” He shrugs.

“That bad, huh?” Blaze remarks.

“Worse,” Kerry says. “I hid behind Atlas until he calmed himself down. Then I mounted and took my first flight.” She grins. “Low and slow, but I

loved it.” She claps her hands. “We’ll go higher today, right?” she asks Atlas.

“Take it easy. You’re still learning the ropes. We don’t want any accidents.”

Kerry rolls her eyes. “Fine.”

“Maybe we can get airborne, too,” Hulk says, looking at Natasha.

“We’ll see,” she says, making a face. “I have to say that the saddles are pretty comfortable, and I felt quite secure when strapped in like that,” she tells me. “It wasn’t as bad as I thought it would be.”

“So maybe just a little flight?” Hulk says in a coaxing voice. “You might like it.”

“Two minutes,” she puts up two fingers, “and you have to stay low, like almost on the ground low.”

“You’ll need to instruct my dragon,” Hulk says.

“He doesn’t really listen to me much, now, does he?” Natasha smiles.

“You need to be firm but respectful,” Kerry says. “And then hope for the best.” She laughs.

Unlike with me, it’s clear that none of them have to worry about dying. They’re so carefree about all of it.

“You’ll get the hang of it. It’s about having an influence over our beasts but also partnering with them,” Hulk says. “So far, you’re doing great.”

Natasha beams, and I feel a little jealous. Yeah, I’m not going to dwell on that.

“How is it going with you guys?” Hulk asks Dagger and Hunter.

Hunter sighs. “Most humans, even those who are ancestors of the Sky Wardens, can’t mind-bond a dragon to save their life. I have the opposite problem. I can’t help but mind-bond with every unbonded dragon within a mile of me. I even had those stupid Reds in my head the other night when they came for Skylar. It’s awful.”

“I think it’s pretty funny how you can’t keep us out.” Goliath sniggers but turns serious. “The Reds are a different ballgame.”

“It’s funny for you but not for me. Trust me when I tell you that it isn’t enjoyable to be inside the heads of a couple of willful dragons. At least I didn’t pass out, but I did get an immediate headache, which makes it impossible to put up the mental walls it takes to keep you all out. It’s dangerous for me to be around a whole lot of dragons at once. If there are too many, I could die. There is most definitely a downside to being a Seren.”

“I know it’s tough, babe, but you’ll get there. In the meantime, we won’t

let you be around too many dragons at once.” Dagger hooks an arm around her shoulders. “We’ll keep working on it. One of these days, you’ll be able to block us all out, you’ll see. The fact that you didn’t pass out the other night is a sign that you’re already getting better at it.”

“I guess. Will I get to be a rider at that point?” Her eyes brighten.

Dagger shakes his head. “Then you’ll need to train on how to mind-bond with several dragons simultaneously without having side effects. Once you can keep dragons out or bond with them as and when needed, we’ll start training to fly.”

Hunter makes a noise of disgust. “I have to learn how to keep you out only to have to learn how to let you back in. That makes no sense.”

“Shielding is important in case you accidentally mind-bond a couple of Reds while we are going up against them. Putting up mental blocks is the most important skill you will need to learn. It takes time,” Dagger says. “So don’t be too hard on yourself.”

“Unfortunately, we don’t have too much of that particular commodity. Time is not on our side,” Overlord Knox says as he arrives with Shadow at his side.

“That’s our cue to leave,” Dagger says, his face clouding in annoyance.

“Good luck today,” Hunter tells us.

After a few more comments of encouragement, we watch as Dagger, Hunter, Devil, and Goliath walk away. They will train far away from the rest of us while Hunter learns to put up those mind-walls.

“Since your dragon is not in attendance, you are dismissed, Trainee Rider Luke,” the Overlord says. “You can focus on your fitness training today. Shadow will accompany you.”

Shadow nods. Her jaw is tight.

Luke frowns. “Is Fang still missing?”

“Do you think he’s been taken by the Reds?” Blaze asks.

Overlord Knox shakes his head. “The last information we have on him is that he left before sunrise yesterday morning in his vehicle, which was found parked at the airstrip.”

“Does that mean that he’s gone? If so, where to? How is that even possible?” Hulk asks, looking confused.

“We are still investigating his whereabouts at this stage,” Knox says. “Let’s concentrate on the job at hand – namely, your flight training – shall we?” He gestures toward the parked SUVs.

Blaze steps forward. “I don’t want to waste anyone’s time.”

My heart starts beating as Knox folds his arms, his eyes narrowing on Blaze, who continues, “I won’t be shifting today or any other day. I tendered my resignation, which was ignored, even though my reasons for resigning were sound.”

“I hope you put murdering, out-of-control bastard as the number one reason,” Octane says; his deep voice is low.

Blaze grates his teeth, his molars grinding together. “I did. Thank you for your suggestion.”

“Any time,” Octane deadpans, spitting on the ground at his feet.

“If the two of you are done?” Knox says.

“I’m not done.” Octane shakes his head. His freaky golden eyes bore into the Overlord. His whole disposition speaks of tension. “I’m not sure why you won’t accept his resignation. You should! Blaze is a liability. A killer. It’s only a matter of time before he kills again.” He looks across at me, his meaning clear.

Once again, I’m tempted to defend Blaze. I start to suck in a breath to tell this asshole where to get off...but I can’t. I don’t have a leg to stand on. In the time I’ve spent with him, I’ve grown to like Blaze, to trust him, to feel safe around him.

Mistake!

Mistake! Mistake!

It doesn’t feel like one, but it is. Even now, I want to tell him that I’m okay with him shifting. That I trust his dragon not to hurt me, but I can’t. That would be insane. It would be inviting trouble that I don’t want or need. It would be going against everything I have tried to do for myself over the last few years.

When no one says anything, Shadow steps forward. “I know that Sasha’s death hit you hard, Octane. You still felt like she was in your care at the time. You got her through the swim and over Sky’s Edge. Then she made the mind-bond attempt and should have been safe. It was—”

“Only to be killed by her own damned dragon. Her own fucking dragon. That’s unheard of. It’s—”

“She *wasn’t* the person you thought she was,” Shadow says in an even voice.

“No, don’t.” Blaze shakes his head. “It isn’t right to speak ill of the dead. Nothing was ever proven.”

“Your dragon looked into her heart, into her soul, and ended her. That’s all the proof I need,” Shadow says. “The human was guilty. Surely, you must know that, Blaze?”

“What are you talking about?” Octane snarls.

“Leave it alone,” Blaze insists.

“No! I’ve kept quiet all this time, but you don’t deserve this. You’re a good man, Blaze,” Shadow says, turning to Octane. “Your student was not the sweet young girl you thought she was.”

“That’s bullshit,” Octane growls.

“An arrest warrant was put out for her soon after she arrived on the island. She would have been arrested if she had returned.”

“What did she supposedly do?” Octane doesn’t look convinced at all.

“She robbed a store. It was an armed robbery. There is CCTV footage. I happened to have seen it, and it was her without a doubt,” Shadow says.

“So, she robbed a store; that’s no reason to kill someone.”

“She was aggressive. Threatened the kid behind the till who pissed himself,” Shadow says.

Octane rolls his eyes. “Most humans are soft – no offense to any of you.” He looks around. “Sasha was tough for a human; I’ll give her that. Again, no reason for being executed like that. Not by her own damned dragon. That’s fucking wrong.”

“Sasha’s parents were murdered when she was sixteen. Did you know that?” Shadow asks Octane.

“No...poor kid. If you’re trying to change my mind about him, it isn’t working,” he growls. “She was probably desperate for money or got caught up with the wrong people. Sasha would never have harmed anyone.”

“She was there the night her parents were killed. The assailants were masked. Two men. They shot both her parents in their bed while they slept and tied her up. Then they ransacked the place, taking everything of value. Once they had what they wanted, they left.”

“So, what of it? Again, all I feel is sorry for her,” Octane says.

“Sasha claims that she managed to get free two hours after the assailants left. She contacted the police using her cellphone, which miraculously wasn’t stolen like everything else. There were more things that didn’t add up. The head investigating officer is convinced that she did it, but he couldn’t pin it on her.”

Holy shit!

I look at Blaze, but his expression is unreadable.

Octane shakes his head, looking angry.

“There was a lack of rope burns on her wrists and ankles. Yet, she claims she was tied to a chair for hours. She cried a whole hell of a lot when the cops got there, but there were no tears. Sasha was described by the responding officers as being as cool as a cucumber during all of her questioning in the following days and weeks. She couldn’t give reasons why they kept her alive but killed her parents immediately. There was no forensic evidence to suggest that two men had been in that house. Not a piece of fiber, not a shoe print, no DNA of any kind. Her DNA was, of course, on everything, but she lived there, so it didn’t prove anything. There was no sign of any intruders, yet they’d supposedly been in that house for long enough to pull the place apart.” Shadow licks her lips. “Sasha received a really nice inheritance when she turned eighteen and blew through all of it by the time she was twenty-one. That’s when she took up armed robbery.” Shadow looks over at Blaze. “She did it. I know she did. Your dragon will have known, Blaze. He called her wicked. If she killed her parents in cold blood, then your dragon was more than justified in his actions.”

It’s like someone has picked up a drum and started beating on it from inside my chest.

“I still killed her in cold blood. I still kill humans far too easily. I *am* a liability.”

“There is no way that Sasha was a killer. Her parents...” Octane shakes his head. “No way. I don’t believe it. I knew her. I spent time with her.”

“Detective Bruce Mathews was the head investigating officer. He described Sasha as being manipulative. She was pretty and knew how to use her good looks. She was highly believable,” Shadow says. “I’m sorry, Octane, but you were fooled. Dragons don’t kill their riders for nothing. I don’t believe that Blaze’s dragon killed Sasha for no reason.”

“Nothing was ever proven,” Octane says, but his voice has changed. It isn’t as forceful.

“It doesn’t mean it didn’t happen.”

“I don’t believe it. Not for a second.” Octane turns and walks away.

I’m not sure what to believe. Or how to feel. I’m in a state of shock.

“That makes a whole lot of sense.” Hulk pats Blaze on the back.

Blaze’s jaw is set. His eyes are still unreadable, but his whole body bristles, so I’d say he’s tense.

“Your resignation has been declined. The reasons you stated are null and void. Thank you for clearing that up, Shadow,” Knox says, clasping his hands behind his back.

I can tell from Shadow’s expression that it was never her intention to disqualify Blaze’s resignation. She wanted Octane to know the truth. She wanted all of us to know. It had nothing to do with forcing Blaze to stay on as a potential frontline dragon.

“This doesn’t change anything,” Blaze says. “If we are forced to attend flight training today, I will refuse to shift.”

Knox glowers. “I had planned on leaving it there. On not bringing it up, but since you have, since you still refuse to train with us, I am going to award you ten lashes for trying to resign while having an established mind-bond. How disrespectful toward your human.”

“I don’t mind,” I pipe up. “It isn’t disrespectful at all since Blaze is resigning *for* me. I don’t want him to receive any lashes. I would like for our wishes to be honored. Let him resign and let me go back to the mainland,” I plead, looking over at Blaze. “Unless you’ve changed your mind? Unless you’re solely sticking to this decision for me?”

His gaze softens. “Bottom line is that I can’t trust my dragon, Kim. I won’t put you at risk. Also, I know you have a whole life to get back to. I don’t want to stand in your way.”

Stand in the way of what exactly? I don’t say anything. I don’t know what I want anymore.

“You can do this, Blaze!” Shadow insists. “You should try. I think your rider might be—”

“I can’t! I won’t risk her life. What part of that is so hard to understand?” His eyes move back to me. His gaze locks with mine, and I can barely breathe.

“Even now, you protect your rider. There is no way you would harm her,” Shadow says firmly.

Could it be true?

His last rider, this Sasha person, she killed her parents. Her own flesh and blood. And then there was Ross. What did Blaze’s dragon see? What did he know?

“I suggest that you listen to the Academy Leader. I will forego the punishment you so richly deserve if you—”

“It isn’t going to happen.” Blaze crosses his arms. “Not today, not

tomorrow, not ever. You can lash me until I drop down dead.”

Knox makes tutting noises. He rubs his boot in the sand and looks at Blaze. “Then you will be lashed at the end of duty when the bell tolls.”

“No!” I yell.

Blaze grabs my hand. His hold is gentle. His eyes, too.

“No,” I whisper.

“It’s okay.”

“It’s not okay,” I insist.

“Ten lashes for handing in that ridiculous resignation and another twenty for your refusal to take part in training today.”

“No!” I yell at the Overlord.

“I will add another ten, Trainee Rider; just you try me.” His dark eyes narrow.

“Let’s go,” Blaze says. His jade stare bores into me, pleading with me. “Please, Kim.”

I give in. I do it for Blaze. I do it so that we can talk. We need to talk. We need to figure this out.

I nod once, letting him lead me away.

“I will see you both later,” Knox says, and my blood freaking boils. It takes everything in me to keep walking.

Blaze

“I hate him,” Kim growls. She’s so fucking sexy when she’s mad.

I realize that I’m still holding her hand, but I don’t pull away, and neither does she. Her hand feels good in mine.

“I wanted to...to...throw something at him, but since there were no rocks lying around and since I don’t believe in violence, I didn’t do it.”

I chuckle.

“What?”

“You wouldn’t make a great rider if you don’t believe in violence.” I level her with a look.

“I would be okay with violence in order to protect others. I mean, that’s different, isn’t it?”

“Frontline riders protect people.” I nod.

“I’m starting to think that—”

“Don’t even say it, Kim.” We arrive at the bungalow. I hold the door open for her. I feel that her stance has changed since she found out about Sasha, but she’s wrong. My dragon is a killer.

I lock the door after we enter.

Kim turns immediately to face me. “Why didn’t you tell me about Sasha?”

“It might not be true. Maybe she didn’t do it,” I say.

“It’s pretty clear that she did. Shadow is convinced, too.”

“It was never proven,” I tell her. “I felt guilty about her death, so I looked her up. I had to know this person I had so callously killed. My own rider. I looked her up, and then I used the possibility that she might have been a killer to get myself back into the program, and it worked. I’m scum.”

“Bullshit! You are not scum. How can you even say that? She did it. I wish I trusted myself more. Trusted my instincts, but I struggle with that. Deep down inside, I felt safe with you. I even felt safe with him, your dragon.”

“He killed your boyfriend. He is a killer, Kim. You would be wrong to trust him.”

“I don’t think I’m wrong. Your dragon was protecting me from Ross.” Kim’s throat works. “He was protecting me then, just like you’re protecting me now. Somehow, I don’t think he’s the monster everyone thinks he is.”

“I kill humans.”

“You kill bad humans. Ross was bad...very bad.” She shakes her head.

“What do you mean?” My voice is laced with concern and with anger because I find myself wanting to hunt this asshole down all over again, even though he is already dead. “What did he do?” My voice is deep. I force myself to slow my breathing.

“I should have told you sooner. Ross was... I...I don’t even know how we went from hanging out – yes, we had sex – to being together. It suddenly happened. Almost overnight. From someone to lean on in times of uncertainty to being my boyfriend. When I look back, he was controlling and manipulative. The day before he died, I wanted to wear a dress. Just a regular summer dress, and he went ape shit. He accused me of acting like a slut. Of trying to get the attention of the other guys. He put his hand around my throat and threw me against the wall. He... I wasn’t badly injured or anything. Aside from a lump on my head, I was fine, but—”

I snarl because I am so fucking angry that I don’t know what to do with myself. My hands fist at my sides and I want to break things. I want to break him. Kim’s eyes go wide, and she sucks in a breath.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have done that. I’m not going to hurt you,” I assure her. “I swear, you’re safe.”

“I know you won’t hurt me. You’re nothing like him.” She chews on her lip for a few moments. “After he got abusive, he apologized. Told me he didn’t know what came over him. Said it would never happen again.” She

snorts. “Like I was ever going to believe him. It always happens again. It gets worse and worse. They become more and more controlling, more and more violent. I know the pattern all too well.”

“How do you know?” I ask in a soft voice.

“Because that’s how it is. I mean, everyone knows.” She shrugs.

I’m not sure that’s something that everyone knows, but I don’t say anything. Once again, I get the feeling that Kim is hiding something. Something dark. Something really fucking bad that might have happened to her. But I don’t push.

“Okay, then I don’t feel bad about killing Ross. In fact, I wish I could bring him back so that I can kill him all over again, slower this time.” My eyes go wide. “Does that scare you? I’m sorry if it does.”

“You can stop apologizing already. We both apologize too damned much.”

I laugh. “I guess we do.”

“I, for one, am going to trust myself a little more. I broke up with Ross. I wish I had done it much sooner, but I did it in the end. I saw him for what he was and was never going to stay with him. I was vulnerable when I came to the island, and he took advantage of that...of me. That’s what predators do. The chances of that happening to me again are zero. I *am* a good judge of character. I am going to trust myself more, and you need to do the same.” She goes up on her tippy toes and grips my shoulders. “I trust you, Blaze.”

I start to shake my head.

“Don’t do that! I know you, and I’m sorry that once I got to know you, I ever doubted you. I shouldn’t have.” She bites down on her lower lip. “I want you...right now.” She kisses me softly.

“I want you, too,” I say as I pull away. “So damned badly. But Kim... Fuck...um, I...I’m not so sure that’s a good idea.”

“I am! I’m very sure. I want you inside me.” She reaches up and deepens the kiss, moaning into my mouth.

I’m done for.

Fucking done!

Then we’re fumbling with our leathers. There’s a whole lot of laughing and even more pulling before they’re finally off, and then I’m kissing Kim for all I am worth.

I pick her up and put her on the bed, sliding down her gorgeous body. I open her legs and feast on her pussy. It doesn’t take long before she is crying

out, her hands pulling on my hair. Gripping me tighter. Before she's rocking against my face.

"I want you inside me," she yells again when I slide my finger into her slick channel, finding her dripping wet.

I lift my head and kiss her. Cupping one of her sweet tits in my hand, squeezing gently until she moans. She's utter perfection. My cock is straining for her, pre-cum beading from the tip.

I turn her onto her belly, and she lifts onto her knees, sticking her ass in the air. Her pink slit is glistening and ready.

"Please," she begs.

I get on my knees behind her, admiring her ass, which is tight and yet full. "You're so fucking beautiful," I tell her, lining up with her tight hole.

"Please, Blaze. Please."

I thrust into her, my hips hitting her ass in one swift movement that has me gritting my teeth.

Kim shouts my name, sounding in awe. "Oh...oooooh...feels good. Oh!" she moans, starting to rock back against me.

I grip her hips. It's like they were made especially for me. For my hands. Like her snug pussy was made for my cock. And I start thrusting, my knees digging into the mattress with each movement. My cock disappearing into her tight, wet heat.

Holy shit!

I keep pounding into her. It's the most amazing feeling in the world.

"Fuck," I groan, feeling her walls clench me. "Fuuuuuck." I squeeze my eyes shut.

Kim makes the most amazing noises. My balls are slapping that sweet spot of hers over and over again. I start to feel her tighten around me, and I pull out.

"No! What?" she cries, slumping onto the mattress.

I sit, leaning against the headboard, and pull her onto my lap. "I want to watch you come." My voice is a deep rasp of need.

"No...I um...I don't have much experience." Her eyes are hazy with need, her lips a little swollen from my kisses. In short, she's gorgeous.

"I'll help you. I want to watch you fuck me. To watch you take what you need from me."

Kim gives me a tight smile. "You have a dirty mouth." She leans in, cupping my jaw, kissing me. Her nipples abrade my chest. She pulls back. "I

think I like it.” Her voice is husky.

I groan when she takes my cock in her hand. I moan even louder as she slowly sinks down on me...taking all of me.

“You’ve got this. I’m all yours,” I groan.

Then she’s bouncing on my dick like a pro, making these noises that drive me fucking insane.

“Oh, Kim! Oh! Fuck!”

“That okay?” she whispers between pants.

“My balls are so tight, they feel like they’re in my throat. Okay? More than just okay.” I groan again, harder this time, gripping her hips a little tighter.

Her perfect little tits are bouncing. Her mouth is open. Her eyes are glazed as she rides me just right. I thrust into her from below. I love watching my cock slide in and out of her, wet with her juices.

“Just like that!” I groan low, trying hard not to come.

I put the tip of my thumb on her clit and watch her come apart. Her head falls back. Her eyes go wide and then squeeze shut. She rides me harder... faster.

I roar her name as I come.

Her fingers dig into my shoulders. Her cry of ecstasy is fucking music to my ears. Then her eyes lock with mine as she takes her pleasure from me and I from her.

I’ve never felt more connected to anyone in my life. I feel her bliss inside my mind. I feel our tether strengthen. I know she feels it, too. I can see it in the flare of her eyes.

I feel her tighten around me for a second time, her pussy spasms hard, milking me until my balls feel like they’ve turned inside out, until my eyes roll back. Until it almost hurts, it feels so damned good.

She finally slumps against my chest, breathing hard. “Blaze... Ooh... Oh my!” She keeps panting for a while.

I hold on to her, trying to find my own breath.

Then she pulls back, looking me in the eye. She cups my cheeks with her hands. “I trust you.”

It’s probably the nicest thing anyone has said to me in the longest time.

I lean in and kiss her, putting my forehead to hers. I only wish I felt the same, but I don’t. I think her trust is misplaced. I wish to god it was true, but sometimes wishing something doesn’t make it so.

Instead of talking, I gently put Kim onto her back and start moving inside of her, slowly...so fucking slowly, until we are both losing our minds. Until we're shaking. Until we come apart all over again. It's never been like this for me before. I don't want her to leave Draig, but I know it is for the best.

Kim

Blaze walks out of the bathroom. He is dressed in his full uniform and looks so handsome that I struggle to take my eyes off him.

“Maybe you shouldn’t wear your leathers,” he says when he catches sight of me.

“I just spent ten minutes squeezing myself into these pants.” I look down.

He gives me a half smile that sets off a whole horde of butterflies inside my belly.

“I can help you out of them...again.” He leans in and brushes his lips over mine. I immediately think of all the things we have done over the last few hours. It’s the reason for the delicious ache between my legs. I didn’t think I could come so many times. The sex was more than just sex; it was intense. It was mind-blowing.

“Since they’re already on, I may as well stay in them,” I tell him.

He sighs. “I want to make a statement. They need to send you home, Kim. You’re not going to be my rider. If you wear your leathers, you’re sending a message to that bastard.”

I feel a pang at the thought of going home. “I don’t want you getting any more lashes than necessary. In my opinion, thirty is already thirty too many. We’re supposed to be in uniform, so I’m going to wear the damned leathers,” I say as I zip up the tank top. “What I would like to know is why do they

have to be so damned tight?”

“So that the enemy can’t grab onto your clothing during hand-to-hand combat. It’s why Shadow likes to keep her hair closely cropped. Humans are encouraged to cut their hair or to wear tight braids.”

I touch my hair. It’s grown out. My mom always cut it really short, and I continued to do the same once I left home. I’ve let it grow since coming to Draig. It’s the longest it’s ever been. Long enough to grab onto.

“What is it?” Blaze asks, his face morphing into a look of concern. “You have this strange look on your face.”

“Oh! Nothing.” I shake my head and push out a laugh. “I was wondering about your hair. All of you have long, thick hair, and yet, you leave it loose. Why is that?”

“We don’t have hair when in dragon form. Shadow is just extra careful. Do you prefer short hair on men?” He almost looks a little unsure. Like he cares what I think.

I go over to him, running my hands through the thick strands. “You have great hair.”

“You’re good at pulling on it when my tongue is buried inside your pussy.”

I gasp and then giggle. “That’s so rude.” I heat up from the inside.

“And true, but I like it. Means you’re enjoying yourself.” He bobs his brows and then closes his mouth over mine.

I don’t want to leave this bungalow. Why can’t we just lock the door and refuse to come out?

Blaze deepens the kiss, and it isn’t long before my hands are digging into his scalp, before I’m pulling him closer, whimpering against his mouth.

He stills and groans, pulling away. “As much as I’d like to keep doing this, we have to get going.”

“I don’t want to.” Just as I finish saying it, the bell starts to toll, and my heart sinks with every clang. “I have a great idea; let’s run away.”

Blaze laughs and shakes his head. “That’s a good one, Kim.”

Only I’m *not* joking. “I can’t watch him hurt you like that again.” My throat starts to clog just thinking about it.

Blaze cups my chin, letting his thumb trail down my jawline. “It’ll be okay. It isn’t that bad.” He shrugs. “It’s only thirty this time.”

“Only thirty.” I shake my head. “No, Blaze,” I say with an edge to my voice. “And it *is* that bad. Your back will be sliced open all over again.

You'll bleed."

He looks down for a moment, his jaw tightening.

"You still have scars from the last time." Granted, there are only a few – from the deeper cuts – and they're almost completely faded, but they are there, dammit. "He can't get away with this."

"He is my superior, and therefore, he is in charge. He made the decision with the full backing of our HQ."

"Screw your HQ," I growl.

"They make the rules...rules that are important for the safety of everyone on this island. More importantly, for everyone on the mainland. Overlord Knox has decided that I deserve the lashes. He wants us to honor our mind-bond, and I understand that. I need to accept my punishment. It hurts me more knowing how upset you are about it. Please try not to worry about me so much."

I sigh. "I'm afraid that I do. It's a different kind of torture watching you suffer like that. It's just plain wrong."

The bell starts to toll again.

Blaze's face tightens with worry. "We need to hurry."

I nod and slip my feet into my boots before lacing them up. Then we are running from the bungalow and to the large parking lot.

I do a double-take when I see who's there. "Is that—?"

"Yes, it's them," Blaze says. I can hear that he is smiling.

Overlord Knox looks at his watch. He looks annoyed. I ignore him, running to Skylar. I throw my arms around her, even though we aren't all that close. It's so good to see her. To see Fang, too. "You're back. How? What happened?"

Knox clears his throat, but I ignore him.

"Are you back to stay?" I ask.

Skylar nods. "We have news to share and—"

"Order!" Knox barks. "You arrive late and then proceed to disrupt our gathering," he says in a booming voice.

I go and stand next to Blaze. This man is one hell of a bully. I'm not sure how it is that he ran the frontline dragons so successfully for so many years or how he won so many accolades. His methods are flawed. Maybe he turned cruel and bitter after his career was cut short. After his ability to shift was taken from him. But right now, he's getting on my last nerve. I can't take bullies or individuals who wield their power over others.

“Fang, you went to the mainland without authorization,” Knox says. “I’m afraid that means you’re in big trouble.”

My mouth falls open. Is that what happened? Is that why Fang has been missing? Makes sense.

“Would I have received permission if I’d applied?” Fang asks.

“Of course not,” Knox spits. “What you did goes against every single rule in the book. You put human lives at risk. There is a reason we are not permitted to leave Draig. Not permitted to fly beyond the boundaries as set out. The boundary lines are clear. Our laws are clear, too.”

“I had to find my female. She needed me.” Fang glances at Skylar, whose face is filled with concern. The two of them lock gazes for a few moments.

Knox cocks his head and narrows his eyes. “There are channels to go through. Procedures that need to be adhered to.”

“You just told me that I would never have been granted permission,” Fang says.

“A group of humans would have been assembled and plans laid out. Proper procedures followed. There is a way in which we do things here on Draig.”

“It would have been too late,” Fang throws back.

“Too late for what?” Knox snarls.

“Too late for our unborn child.” Fang glances down at Skylar’s midsection for a moment before glaring at Knox.

Gasps go around the group. I am sure that one of them was mine. “You’re pregnant?” Hunter and I say at the same time.

Skylar nods, putting a hand to her stomach, even though it’s still flat. “It’s early days, but yes.” She smiles. “All thanks to Fang.”

I wonder what happened.

“That’s wonderful!” Hunter squeals.

“Congratulations.” I’m grinning.

“My father had arranged for me to have an abortion against my will.” She shakes her head. “Fang rescued me. He saved us.” She looks up at Fang with such love and adoration in her eyes.

I gasp.

There are mutters of outrage.

“They were going to kill your baby?” Hunter says. “I’m so glad you got there in time,” she tells Fang.

“Enough! This unborn child is beside the point,” Knox’s obnoxious voice

booms.

“Our child is not beside the point.” Fang’s whole demeanor has changed. “My unborn child would have been murdered. He’s mine to protect. They both are.”

“You broke the law. The reasons why do not concern me.”

“Well, they should,” Shadow says. “Do you have no heart?”

“Heart has no place in this war,” Knox says.

“Heart is everything,” I say. “Heart is what keeps you going when you’re too tired or afraid. Heart is—”

“Enough, Trainee Rider! That’s quite enough from you,” Knox says. “I need to carry out Blaze’s punishment of thirty lashes and then—”

“What?” Fang yells. “Is he for real?” he asks Shadow, who nods.

“I’m afraid so,” she says. “You’ve missed a few developments. As you know, according to HQ, there have not been enough successful mind-bonds in recent years. Hence, Overlord Knox has been sent here to investigate why that is and to rectify the situation. This course of action is part of his plan for making that happen.”

“That’s insane,” Fang growls.

“Say one more word, soldier, and you will be lashed before being taken into custody and put under lock and key,” Knox says.

“For saving his family? The woman he loves?” I shout, taking a step toward Knox. I’m shaking with anger at the injustice of what this man is doing. “You’re crazy. And as for giving grown men lashes until they bleed... What the hell is wrong with you?” One thing is for sure: it isn’t going to happen again. I won’t let it.

“Leave it alone, Kim,” Blaze says. His voice is soft and pleading rather than controlling, and my chest tightens with so many feelings for this man.

Feelings...it’s more than just feelings; I think I’m falling in love with him. The realization startles me.

I’m falling for Blaze.

“Get your rider under control,” Knox tells Blaze.

I’m not sure what comes over me. I get a rush of adrenaline as more anger surges. “I don’t need controlling. I am my own person. I have a mind and, more importantly, a voice, which I intend to use.” I take a step toward him, which puts me right in front of him. “You make grown men get on their knees so that you can beat them. In my book, that makes you a coward and a bully.”

Cheers go up behind me. I think it's Hulk and Goliath. Maybe even Devil, too.

"I agree!" Fang says, folding in arms. "I don't know what the hell has gone on in my absence, but this isn't above board."

"You don't get to have an opinion about what is above board and what isn't," Knox tells Fang.

"You've perhaps been too harsh," Shadow tells Knox, trying to be diplomatic.

"You are far too soft, Academy Leader. I'm going to request that you be stripped of your title and duties."

There are growls of outrage. Shadow visibly blanches.

"Just because Shadow doesn't agree with you does *not* make her a bad leader. It does not make her soft," I say in a clipped tone.

"Amen," Blaze mutters. I feel him behind me. He's close, almost right at my back.

"That is enough," Knox tells me. "Or I will be forced to lock you up, too."

"Why? For standing up against you? Fine, lock me up." I hold up an arm.

Knox takes me by the wrist. His grip is bruising. "That can certainly be arranged." His face twists into a cruel smile.

"Let me go!" I yell. Old memories come flooding to the surface. Memories of my father beating my mother. Of me trying to intervene. Trying to help her. Memories of being shoved out of the way so that he could continue his onslaught. Memories of being grabbed just like this so that he could lock me inside the closet. I used to have to sit there in the dark, listening to his sickening punches hit home. Having to listen to my mother's terrified screams. Of her begging him for forgiveness, for mercy for something she didn't do in the first place.

I make a noise of anguish. My first thought is that I need to get away so that I can run...but I'm done running.

I'm done!

"Let! Me! Go!" I try to yank my hand away, but his grip only tightens. "You're hurting me."

Blaze growls low, sounding like a rabid dog about to strike. I don't feel a single ounce of fear. Not for him or for the bully in front of me.

"There is a jail cell with your name on it, young lady. I will—"

I stomp on his foot. "Let me go!" I scream.

Knox's face contorts in rage. He twists my arm behind my back, and I cry out in pain.

"Let her go!" Blaze snarls, sounding more like an animal than a human. A very pissed-off animal. There is smoke. Lots of the stuff. It wafts all around us. Blaze's green eyes are narrowed on Knox. His leathers have pulled tight on his body. He looks taller, somehow, and so incredibly menacing it takes my breath away for a moment.

I don't feel fear.

"I'm okay," I whisper, trying not to cry. The pain running through my arm is horrendous. If Knox twists it anymore, it will break, I'm sure.

"Listen to your rider and stand down, soldier," Knox snarls. "I'm taking her to lock-up. You can get on your knees and await—"

He doesn't get to finish his sentence. Blaze shifts so quickly my brain can barely even register the leather as it rips from his huge body. A second later, he is a massive dragon.

Knox lets me go.

People scatter. Fang puts Skylar behind him. There are terrified screams.

Shit!

I'm starting to regret standing up against this asshole since he is probably going to die, and then Blaze will feel guilty. It is my only fear right now, but I refuse to apologize or backpedal on my decision. Standing up for what's right is the way to go in this situation.

"It's okay," I tell Blaze – the dragon – as his eyes lock with mine.

Their eyes I recognize, even if the pupils are slitted. I'm fine. I'm calm. I've got this.

I'm a rider.

I'm a Sky Warden.

This is my dragon.

It's Blaze.

Blaze looks up over me at Knox and his whole disposition changes. I watch him visibly bristle. I see the rage burn in his eyes. Blaze lifts his head and roars; a few flames shoot from his nostrils. There's more smoke. A whole lot more.

"No!" Knox says, with authority in his voice. "Don't. You stand down."

"Don't tell a dragon what to do," Shadow says in an even voice. "Don't give him your back, either."

"I know the rules," Knox spits, causing Blaze to rear up. His massive

claws are above me, pawing the air. I am sure that if I wasn't between him and Knox, the Overlord would be dead already.

I hold my ground, feeling it tremble as his front talons drop back down, tearing into the earth. Blaze is going to kill the Overlord. I need to try to stop him. For him, not for that sack of shit. I couldn't care less about Knox.

I reach out with my mind. It isn't difficult. We're already connected. Blaze's dragon locks eyes with me. He huffs out a breath, and smoke tendrils curl around me. I take a step toward him, getting right up close.

"Don't!" Shadow warns. "You're in his space," she whispers.

"Stand down, you bastard!" Knox spits, full of what I think is false bravado.

"I don't think that this is going to end well for you, Overlord," Shadow says. "I would apologize. Maybe even get down on your knees." She is still speaking slowly and carefully.

Blaze lunges at Knox and snaps his jaw shut with a clack. His meaning is clear.

"Help me! Please," Knox begs. "I'll leave. I'll go back to HQ, and I'll write a glowing report...just...just help me...please." He suddenly sounds like a frail old man.

I take another step toward my dragon. Toward Blaze. He's in there; I know he is.

"Are you crazy?" a deep voice says from somewhere behind me. "He's a killer."

I think it's Octane. I ignore him. I ignore the cries, the whimpers. I ignore them all.

I focus on Blaze. It's only him and me as I lift my hand, feeling his hot breath as he breathes out. His eyes are filled with curiosity. Knox is momentarily forgotten.

"That's it," I tell him. "Easy." I project calm with my mind. I hold on to the short time Blaze and I have been together. Onto how he made me feel, even when he was in his dragon form. Protected, safe, cared for. "You're okay," I tell him as I place my hand on the side of his face. "I'm okay, too." I have come to learn that is important to him.

His scales are soft around his mouth. Soft and sleek and the most beautiful blue I have ever seen.

Blaze's dragon leans in, and there are screams from behind me. I continue to ignore them.

Human.

Mine.'

“Yes,” I tell his dragon. “Yes,” I repeat as I smile. His dragon ever so gently rubs his great head against me, like a cat would do against its owner’s leg.

I stagger back because even a gentle touch from a dragon is like a big nudge. I laugh, petting his snout. “Good dragon. That’s a good, good dragon.”

“She’s petting him.” I think it’s Dagger, and he sounds incredulous.

“It’s working,” Shadow says.

“Get him to change back!” Knox yells. “Please.”

Blaze lifts his head, his eyes narrowing.

“Shut up, you idiot,” Shadow says in a calm, even voice.

“The threat is over,” I tell Blaze. “I’m fine.” I continue to stroke the soft scales on the side of his head.

Blaze purrs and leans into my hand.

“You should change back,” I offer him the choice. I don’t command it. We are a team. A partnership. At least, I hope we are. I’m not sure if Blaze will feel the same, even though I have proven that his dragon is not a threat to me.

I choke out a cry of happiness when he starts to shift. It takes a good couple of seconds this time. Then Blaze, the man, is standing before me. He puts his arms around me and hugs me tightly.

“I didn’t kill you,” he whispers into my hair. “I didn’t kill you.”

I pull back, looking him in the eyes. “Of course you didn’t.”

Then he crushes his lips to mine, and we kiss. I never want to let him go. Not ever. His arms feel like home. This feels like home.

Someone coughs. And another someone clears their throat. There’s a louder cough.

We both pull back. Oops! For a moment there, we forgot we had an audience. We all break out laughing. Everyone but Knox, that is. His expression is stony.

B laze

I didn't harm her.

I *am* protective of Kim. I see her as my human, my rider. Mine to protect at all costs. I almost can't believe it...but then I suppose I can. I knew it deep down inside, but I didn't want to risk her. Not for a second.

I look into Kim's beautiful blue eyes, and I grin from ear to ear. She smiles back at me. My arms are still around her, and I don't want to let go.

"There's something I need to tell you all," Fang says; his voice is somber. "Something that came to light while we were on the mainland. It's—"

"Stop right there," Knox says. "You must be detained for breaking the law, and you..." He looks my way. "Your dragon is a menace." He points at me. "He's dangerous!"

"All dragons are dangerous," Shadow says.

"His is downright feral!" he snarls.

"I thought you said that you would go back to HQ if I saved your ass," Kim says. "That you would write a glowing report and leave us the hell alone."

"I can't write a glowing report because his dragon is an accident waiting to happen. You are very much a liability." That finger points at me some more. "You are all the things you have been accused of and more. I want both you and Fang detained right away," he says in a booming voice. His face is

red. Even his bald skull has taken on the shade. “Then I will leave. I will write a glowing report about you, Academy Leader,” he looks at Shadow, “if you support me on this.”

Shadow shakes her head.

“No!” Kim yells, speaking for all of us.

I’m trying to stay calm. If I shift a second time, my dragon will more than likely kill this prick in two seconds flat. That could bring shit down on Shadow, on us all.

“Octane! Dagger! I want you to escort these two,” Knox points first at me and then at Fang, “to—”

Before he can say anything more, Octane steps forward. “No!” He folds his arms.

“What do you mean, *no*?” Knox growls.

“You heard him... No!” Shadow moves in to stand next to Octane.

“Absolutely not,” Dagger chimes in.

“You need to get into your vehicle and leave right now. Fang was rescuing his female and does not deserve to be detained. Blaze has a rider and is, therefore, no longer a liability. I’m not sure I believe he ever was one anymore. You saw what just happened. You were witness to the *Trainee Rider* saving your ass.” Octane says “Trainee Rider” with the nasal twang Knox uses when he says any designation.

“What is the meaning of this?” Spittle flies from Knox’s mouth. “I will write a report indica—”

“My suggestion is that you leave before you are reduced to a blackened spot on the ground,” Octane says, glancing my way.

Knox gasps, his eyes going wide. “Are you threatening me?”

“Yes,” I growl, stepping forward and putting Kim behind me. “This time, my dragon won’t hold back; of that, you can be sure. Turns out that he’s very protective of his rider.”

“Most definitely a threat!” Dagger adds. “I feel a shift coming on myself.”

“You *will* write the glowing report like you fucking promised, or I will personally hunt you down and end you myself,” Octane rasps. “I really think it’s time you left now. I feel my scales pushing up.”

Goliath and Devil also move in closer; their expressions are grave. Devil rolls his shoulders.

“On second thoughts,” Knox says, “I want nothing to do with this

department. It's a sinking ship. I want nothing to do with any of it. You'll destroy everything we've worked so hard for. *You* will be the reason we lose this war. The reason the mainland gets overtaken!" he shouts at Shadow. "Mark my words. It's bad, worse than you know." Then he turns and practically runs away. He climbs into one of the nearby vehicles and hightails it out of here, not even bothering to pack his things.

We watch him leave in a spray of dirt.

"Good riddance," Dagger says.

"What an asshole!" Hunter adds.

"Here." Octane hands me his shirt. "You might want to cover your dick."

I nod, taking the garment from him. "Thanks." I hold it in front of my junk.

"Oh, and," he makes a face, "I don't need that back." Octane looks down, and the side of his mouth twitches.

"Thanks for sticking up for me." I look at the female at my side. "For sticking up for us," I tell Octane.

"You should have told me about Sasha." Octane's jaw tightens. "The truth about her."

I shrug. "It was never proven—"

"Save it. She did it. I can't believe she hid her true self so solidly for all that time. It had to have been at least three months that I knew her." His eyes cloud. "I thought we were friends."

"Trust me when I tell you that people can hide their true identities for years and years," Kim says, her eyes hazy. She clears her throat when all of us look her way. "Thank you," she tells Octane. "Thank all of you." She looks around, being sure to lock eyes with Dagger, Shadow, and Fang. "That's what I call teamwork." She smiles.

"He was never like that when he served as Overlord," Shadow says.

"He's clearly become a bitter version of his previous self." Octane nods.

"Do you think he'll stick to his word?" Atlas asks. "Or is HQ going to be breathing down our necks before sun-up tomorrow?"

"I think he will," Shadow says, nodding.

"He will if he knows what's good for him," Octane growls.

"We've made an enemy, though." Shadow scrunches up her face. "An enemy with a whole lot of clout."

"What is it you wanted to tell us?" I ask Fang. "It sounded serious."

"It is. Tell everyone what your father said." He gives Skylar an

encouraging look.

She nods. “I need to give you some backstory for context, but I’ll keep it brief. My father is...” She clears her throat. “My father was one of the top fifty richest men in the world. I can’t remember which spot he most recently held. It’s not important.” She waves a hand. “What is important is how well connected and influential he is...was.”

“Is your father dead?” Hunter asks.

Skylar’s throat works, and she nods.

“Please tell me you didn’t kill him?” Shadow asks Fang, who winces. “Oh, crap!” She scrubs a hand over her face.

“It couldn’t be helped. He threatened Skylar and our child. He swore he would hunt her down until he found her. I believed him.” Fang pushes out a breath. “I couldn’t let that happen. Listen to the rest of the story, and you will have a better understanding.”

“Okay.” Shadow nods. “But it could mean trouble for us.”

“There is more than likely CCTV footage of me. There will be a manhunt, and it might get to HQ, but I’m hoping that it won’t happen.”

“You’re here now. There will be no record of you in the system,” Dagger says. “They’ll have a hard time tracing you back to Draig. I think we’ll be okay.”

“Let’s hope,” Fang says, sighing. “I swear, I never intended to kill him, but he left me no option. The man was a nasty piece of work.”

“I’m so sorry, Skylar,” Kim says, her eyes filling with tears. “Family are supposed to protect you and keep you safe.” She sounds broken. I take her hand and squeeze.

Skylar nods, wiping a tear away as it falls. Then she clears her throat and stands a little taller. “When I was called to be a Tribute, he swore he would get me out of it, but it ended up being more difficult than anticipated. He knew the president – I’ve met him and his wife. We’ve had dinner at the White House. It seems like he had to strike some sort of a deal because the secretary of defense couldn’t get me out. This is where it gets interesting.” She pulls in a breath. “My dad said that Trevor Carver was supposed to have contacts on the inside who were meant to extract me. These so-called contacts were supposed to grab me and bring me back. But they kept failing extraction after extraction.” She widens her eyes.

“Was he talking about the attempts the Reds made at kidnapping you?” Dagger sounds confused.

“No! Surely not!” Octane says, looking bewildered. “That would mean that the mainland was in contact with the Reds, working with them.”

“They tried to extract you when you were training that day. When those Reds attacked the two of you?” Hunter scrunches up her face. “And then when they took Jen...” She makes a sobbing noise.

“They more than likely thought it was you, Skylar,” Kim says. “You were right.” She tells Dagger.

Skylar nods. “Yep. That was an extraction attempt as well.”

“And then they tried to get you the night Dagger and I were staying with you.” Hunter sounds like she’s in shock.

“How can that be?” I say.

“That would mean that the mainland and the Reds are talking.” Octane looks deep in thought. “It has to mean that. There is no other explanation.”

“That *can’t* be.” Shadow shakes her head. “No! But then again, we were given the directive to send you back to the mainland. That directive came from the secretary of defense himself. It’s the only time a Tribute has been allowed to go home after arriving on the island. The only time in fifty-nine years.”

“My father said that he owed the president big time for that favor,” Skylar says. “For all intents and purposes, it sounds like the mainland *is* in contact with the Reds. That there are people here on Draig who know more than they’re letting on.”

“How do we find out what the hell is going on?” Atlas pipes up.

“We definitely have insiders passing them information,” Dagger says, rubbing his chin absently. “How would we go about finding these moles? Finding out more about what the fuck is going on?”

“That’s a really good question,” I say. “We need to set a trap. Come up with a plan to—”

“No, we don’t,” Kim says, her eyes going wide. “We need to go to the source.”

“The source?” Hunter is frowning.

“Yes, that’s a fucking great idea,” Octane says, smiling.

“What do you mean by the source?” Fang asks.

“We need to find a way to talk to a Red,” Kim says.

“We need to capture one,” Octane adds. “Our goal will be to keep them alive, to get them to shift, and then we question them. Get some much-needed answers about what the fuck is going on.”

“What if they don’t know anything?” Natasha asks, frowning.

“Then we capture another one...and another one, until we find out the truth,” Octane says; his jaw is tight, and his eyes are blazing. “We can’t tell HQ. No one else but us must know what we are up to. We can’t trust anyone else with this.”

“It just might work.” Shadow rubs her finger over her lower lip, back and forth, her eyes hazy.

“How?” Natasha asks. “We have four Trainee Riders.”

“Five with Hunter, our Seren,” Octane says.

“Okay, five...” Natasha sounds panicked. “The only one of us who has ever flown their dragon is Kerry, and she very nearly fell off today.”

“I did not!” Kerry snorts. Atlas gives his rider a look, and she sobers. “Okay, fine.” She rolls her eyes. “I had a wobbly moment.”

“From what I heard, you very almost fell. It was the strap that kept you from going splat.” Natasha looks concerned.

Kerry shrugs. “That’s why the strap is there.”

“The straps are for training purposes only,” Shadow says. “Once you are a proficient rider and have established a solid bond with your dragon, you won’t require the strap any longer. In fact, it will get in the way when fighting the Reds. You cannot graduate unless you are able to fly and conduct all of the maneuvers without your safety strap.”

“There are maneuvers?” Natasha looks like she might pass out at any second.

“No one is graduating anytime soon,” Octane says.

“That’s for sure.” Natasha nods.

“Why not?” Kerry asks.

“Your aim is to become proficient riders as quickly as possible,” Octane says.

“We know that,” Kerry says.

“Nope. I mean, really quickly, like over the next few weeks, so that we can carry out our covert operations while everyone thinks you’re still in training.”

“It can take a year or more for someone to learn how to ride a dragon.” Natasha sounds panicked.

“We don’t have that long. We have weeks.” He rubs his hands together. “We need to catch ourselves a Red.”

“By *we*, you mean *us*? Those of us who are mind-bonded,” Natasha says,

swallowing thickly. “Don’t get me wrong, I fully support this.” She looks over at Hulk and the male nods.

“Nope! I plan on playing a big role. We have a secret weapon,” Octane says.

“What is it?” Hunter frowns.

“You, our Seren.” Octane grins, and it’s freaky as hell. Even worse than when Dagger grins. “We’re going to bag us a Red. Who’s with me?”

“Us!” Kerry shouts.

“Yes.” Hunter puts a fist in the air.

“What do you say?” Fang asks Luke.

“I’d like to help,” Luke says, nodding.

“We’re in,” Natasha says, tugging on one of her braids. Her face looks pinched with fear. “I’m afraid, but I’ll do it. I’ll help.” She forces a smile.

Kim steps forward. I can see that she’s going to put her hand up, too. I get this tight feeling in my chest.

I pull back on her hand. “We’ll need to talk it through,” I say.

I hate it when her face falls. I fucking hate it, but I need to keep her safe. I’m still not entirely sure that I want her to be my rider. Riders die. I know she won’t die by my hand, but she could die, regardless. In fact, it’s almost a given with the way things are at the moment.

“We’ll let you know.” I put my arm around her and start walking away.

I can feel her looking up at me. I know she isn’t happy, but I keep walking, anyway.

I won’t put her at risk.

K im

At first, I'm fuming.

Then I'm worried. It gnaws at my belly with each step.

Does Blaze still want me to leave? I'm falling for him, but maybe it isn't like that for him. Maybe I read this all wrong.

Oh, my gosh! The feeling may not be mutual at all. I was the one who spooned him. I was the one who asked for sex – both times, if I think about it. I'm the one who kept saying I wasn't here to make friends. That I wasn't interested in being social or having a relationship.

Crap!

Maybe he doesn't see me as anything more than a friend...not even a friend. I don't know what I am to him. A booty call?

Crap! Crap!

I stop walking before we reach our bungalow.

Our.

I so badly want the bungalow to be ours, but maybe it isn't ours at all.

"I *can* be your rider," I tell him. "Your dragon *won't* hurt me. We've proven that."

"Let's get back. We can talk—"

"No!" I turn to face him. If he doesn't want me in his life, I need to know. "Talk to me now. Why can't we help the others? We should help the others. I

don't get it."

He gestures toward the bungalow before us. "Let's go inside."

Crap!

"It's bad, isn't it? Is it that you don't want the others to see when you let me down gently? You don't want me to stay, do you?" My voice is soft. "Just tell me, I can take it."

"Ummmm...I'm naked, with a shirt in front of my dick and my ass hanging out. Since I'm a shifter, I don't care too much, but I know that you humans can be a bit—"

"Oh! Okay. Shit!" I start walking. A few minutes later, we go inside.

"I'll just grab a pair of shorts." He points with his thumb to our bedroom.

Our. There's that word again. I hope we are an "our" and a "we" and all the other personal pronouns couples use. I pray that we are a couple.

I nod and wait for him to return. It doesn't take him long. When he comes back, all he is wearing is a pair of shorts. He's so damned sexy, I feel my throat close. That's the problem; it isn't that he's sexy as anything. He's sweet, too, and he makes me feel safe. Safe! What is that? I've never known the meaning of the word until I got to know him.

"Okay! Get it over with," I tell him, folding my arms.

He frowns. "Get what over with?"

"You're breaking up with me, aren't you?" I feel my cheeks suffuse with heat. "Not that we're together or anything, which is even sadder. You're breaking up with me before we're even an item."

"I'm not breaking up with you." He takes my hands, grinning. "Although, I'm glad you're upset about the prospect."

"You're glad?" I slap his arm. "How can you be glad?"

"Owww." He holds his bicep, which is as hard as freaking rock. "That hurt. I thought you didn't believe in violence."

"I don't." I shake my head. I pull in a deep breath. "I need to know where I stand. Where we stand. Is there even a 'we'?"

"Fuck yes!"

"Yes?" I can hardly believe it. I smile despite all the swirling emotions inside me.

"Yes, a hundred times over." He cups my face. "It's so yes that it hurts a little inside."

"It shouldn't hurt."

"It's a good hurt." He kisses me softly.

“That’s okay, then,” I whisper. “Why didn’t we put up our hand, then? I’m your rider.”

“You’re not just my rider, Kim. You’ve become my everything. My fucking everything.”

My heart hammers in my chest.

“Riders die. Especially now that things are so heated between us and the Reds. If anything happened to you... Fuck!” He puts his forehead against mine. His breath mingles with mine.

Safe.

I’m safe right now.

“I’m falling in love with you,” I tell him. It just comes out, and I don’t regret it.

“I’m all the way in love with you.” He kisses me. “I’m done for. Finished. I’m yours, Kim.”

I stiffen.

“What is it?”

“You don’t know everything about me, Blaze. I’m afraid if you did, you might not want me,” I whisper the last few words. It hurts to say them.

“What are you talking about? Of course I want you. I’ll want you, no matter what. That’s what loving someone means.”

“No, nope, you won’t! I’m flawed. I’ve been broken. I’ve been broken so many times there’s no putting me back together. I’m scarred, only you can’t see my scars. They’re on the inside.”

“I see them. I don’t know why they’re there, but I see them, and I love them just as I love you. I love you, Kim. So much. Know that. Know that whatever you tell me won’t change that.”

I’m not so sure.

A few tears slip down my cheeks. “No...” I shake my head. “I...I have nightmares. I get flashbacks, and I...I don’t want kids. I can’t have them.” I shake my head.

“Not that it matters to me, but is it physical? Is there a medical reason?”

“I don’t want them.” I shake my head. “It isn’t a medical condition. It’s me. I’m the problem.”

“Why? Tell me what happened. Open up to me. You can tell me anything. You know that, right? Especially since you know all of my rough edges. Every damned one of them. You still want me, don’t you?” There is so much hope in his eyes. So much expectation.

“Yes, of course I do.”

“Well, then. Please, Kim. Trust me with this. Trust me with your deepest, darkest secrets. Those corners of your soul that most people will never see or understand. I want to know you, to understand you better.”

I nod once. “My father...he...he’s an alcoholic. I already told you that.”

He nods.

“He was a functioning alcoholic for many years. An upstanding citizen. Principle at our high school. Loved and respected by all. What most people never knew is that he beat my mother many times from as early as I can remember. From when I was a little girl still in diapers.” I wipe the tears that have leaked from my eyes. “My mother taught me to run and to hide, when he got into one of his rages. When he’d been drinking and started accusing her of wearing revealing clothes or of overcooking the damned steak. She’d look at me and nod, and I’d know it was time. Sometimes, a hit or a slap would come from nowhere, and I’d run. He’d find any excuse. My mother tried so hard. She tried and tried and tried to be perfect for him. She tried so hard.”

“I’m so fucking sorry,” Blaze says.

“Don’t apologize for him. My mother did...over and over and over. It was always *her* fault. Her fault for not thinking ahead. Her fault for wearing the wrong thing, or cooking the wrong thing, or saying the wrong thing. It was always her. He’d beat her to a bloody pulp, and then he’d apologize. He’d give her gifts. He’d promise that it was never going to happen again, but it always did. A week later. A month later. Sometimes months. Those were the good times. Just when we started to breathe, he’d start up again.”

Blaze takes my hand, leads me to the sofa, and we sit.

“My mother didn’t fall down the stairs the day we lost my baby sister; he pushed her. She was eight months pregnant, and he pushed her down a flight of fucking stairs. Who does that?” I swipe at the tears. “After that, I started to get mad. I started to stand up to him. I stopped running and hiding. I would get between the two of them, and I paid for it.”

“You weren’t clumsy?” His voice is choked. He squeezes my hand.

“No, I wasn’t.”

“And you didn’t run track?”

I shake my head.

“All those broken bones?”

“Him. It was me trying to defend her. Me getting in the way or being

shoved out of the way. Until the day he found the drawing.”

Blaze doesn't say anything; he just watches me.

“I was sixteen or seventeen, and I liked this boy at high school. It was a harmless crush. He found a sketch – a close-up of the boy's face – and accused me of being a slut. He ripped up the drawing and threw away my art supplies. It was the first day he hurt me specifically. The first time that his aggression was aimed at me. Up until then, it had always been my mother. I was just in the way. It happened a few times after that. He found a new punching bag. I left the next year. I never picked up another pencil until... until you.”

“I'm...I'm so fucking sorry,” he says, his voice thick with emotion. “So, no one suspected? Surely someone must have known?”

“Nope. You'll be shocked how quickly people believe all the bullshit. My mother was often away visiting a 'sister' she doesn't have...but only until the bruises faded.” I swipe away another tear. “And I was super clumsy. Always falling over my own feet. I was also quite sickly growing up. I took a whole lot of sick days, and since my dad was the principle, no one ever questioned anything. I left when I turned eighteen. I got a job washing dishes. I also worked part-time cleaning rooms in a motel. I made enough to keep my head above water. To provide for myself. Once I got on my own two feet – it took a few months – I went back home.”

“You did?” He frowns.

“Yes, while my dad was at work. I begged her to pack and to come with me, but she refused to leave him. Can you believe that?”

Blaze nods. “It happens.”

“I tried to get her to listen to me. I went back every couple of weeks. I tried so hard, but she just wouldn't listen to reason.” I pull in a few fortifying breaths. “After everything he put her through. Everything he did to her...she wouldn't leave him. Not even when she had the opportunity. Then, he got sick and had to take early retirement. He has cirrhosis of the liver. Now, she takes care of him full-time. She told me that he was dying, that he only had a year or so to live, and begged me to visit with him for closure. It happened just before I got my Tribute letter. I was so happy when she called. I thought...finally...finally. Then she told me about his condition and begged me to visit.”

“You didn't.” Blaze shakes his head.

“No way. I don't need closure. I already have closure. I don't need to see

him. I hope that once he dies, my mom can finally live her life, but I somehow get the feeling that she won't. I swore I would never be like her." I make a sobbing noise and put my hand over my mouth. "I love my mom, but I can't bear the thought of being like that."

"You're not," he says simply. "You never will be. Look at how you stood up to Knox. How you stood up to your father. What I need to understand is why on earth would you think that this would put me off being with you? If anything, I'm even more in awe of you. Of your strength, your fortitude, and your grace."

"I can never have children." I shake my head vehemently. "I have his blood running through my veins. What if I'm like him? What if I hurt my —?"

"You won't be like him." He says it with such certainty.

"How can you be so sure?"

"I know it because I know you. I know the heart of you, Kim. You would make the most amazing mother. You're sweet, you're so fucking kind, you're fierce when it counts. You're a protector. You could never hurt anyone, least of all your own child."

"I worry. You hear of parents who shake their babies and of mothers who —"

"You're worried before even becoming a mother. You're worried about babies you haven't even had yet. That makes you more than worthy. That makes you a good mother already. I hope you see that. If you still decide you don't want kids, then I'm one hundred percent behind you. We won't have them." He shrugs like it's really simple.

"Don't you want to be a father? You would make a great father. You'd make beautiful babies. I would hate to take that away from you."

Blaze grins but then quickly sobers. "Do you know that I worry too?" He looks me in the eye. "I worry that any kid of mine would have an aggressive, difficult dragon to deal with. I know what it's like. I worry about passing on my bad genes just as much as you do."

"That's ridiculous," I practically growl. "Your dragon isn't bad at all. In fact..." I go over to the sketchpad, find the only drawing left inside it, and pull it out, crumpling it up.

"What are you doing? You're destroying the last of your art."

"I'm pissed at myself for ripping up the ones of you. I'm going to have to redo them all, and you're going to have to pose for me for each and every

one.”

“Nudes, I hope.” He bobs his brows, and I laugh.

“Most definitely, and then I’m going to redo the one of your dragon. I had him all wrong. This isn’t him at all. The dragon I drew is a monster. He isn’t a monster, Blaze.” I throw the ball of paper into the wastepaper bin.

Blaze chuckles. “Sometimes we don’t see ourselves in the correct light. It takes others to make us see ourselves for who we really are. I hope that makes sense.” He frowns.

I laugh. “It does, and you might be right. Now tell me why we can’t help the others capture a Red. It’s important, Blaze. There is something going on. Something big, and we need answers. Answers that are going to rip the lid off of this whole thing. I thought you wanted me to leave Draig, that you didn’t want to be with me, but that’s not it.”

“No, that’s not it at all.” He takes my hand. “The truth is that I’m afraid, Kim. It’ll be dangerous, and I don’t want to lose you. I’ve only just found you. It’s my job to keep you safe, to protect you. That means that we need to stay out of it. I’m still thinking of resigning as a frontline dragon. We can build a life together.”

“No, you’re not resigning! I’ve been governed by fear my whole life, and I’m beginning to think that you have been, too. All I’ve done is run and hide, and I’m not going to do it anymore.” I shake my head. “You’ve always wanted to be a frontline dragon, to make a difference, and now is your chance. This is it. We can do it together. We can fight our fears and do something important. You *will* protect me...I know you will. And I will protect you...always.”

“It would be dangerous, and you could die. I don’t care about myself.”

“You need to trust me, Blaze. Trust that I can do it. Trust yourself, too. We are a team. We can do it together. If you love me, you’ll lift me up, and you’ll believe in me.”

“I do.” He squeezes my hand. “I know you can do anything you set your mind to.”

“I believe in you, too. Together, we are unstoppable.”

“You’re right.” He pulls me against his chest, hugging me close. “We can do this. I’ll go and tell Octane.” He starts to get up, but I hold him tighter. “What are you doing?”

“I’m having my first riding lesson.” I straddle his lap. “We just told each other that we love each other for the first time. I want sex...now, please.”

He laughs. “You can have anything you want from me, especially my cock.” Blaze pulls down his boxers, and his erection slaps against his stomach.

“You’re already hard.” I laugh.

“I’m always hard when I’m around you.” He nuzzles my neck, making me giggle.

“You’d better start being the one to initiate sex. So far, it’s been me every time. You do realize that, right?”

“You might live to regret that statement.” He pulls my shirt over my head and undoes my bra. “You have perfect tits, Kim.” Then he leans in and suckles on one.

My back bows, and I groan. “Oh, and while I’m making demands, you’d better start spooning me back at night. I’m about to get a complex.”

“Oh, I’ll spoon you, alright.” Then our mouths meet in a searing kiss. My pants end up ripped in half by the time Blaze gets them off me.

Kim *Ten days later...*

A light breeze is blowing. Thankfully, I managed to get most of my hair into a tiny ponytail at the base of my neck, so it will be out of the way. For the first time in my life, I am tempted to grow it out. I'll braid it when need be. Today is one of those days. I roll my shoulders and try to clear my head.

"On your marks, get set..." Shadow presses the button as she says, "Go!"

I run for the saddle and hoist it up against my chest. It doesn't feel as heavy as it did when I first tried my hand at tacking up a little over a week ago.

Saddle firmly in hand, I sprint for my dragon. Blaze is on his belly, laying as low as he can, which isn't all that low, all things considered.

I'm not the only one running. Natasha, Luke, and Kerry are also running for their beasts. I slide the saddle onto my left forearm as I near Blaze. I dropped it the first few times I tried this, but it's amazing how quickly I've gotten the hang of it.

Then I start climbing the spikes down the side of his front leg, using my one free arm to help guide me. As I get to the top, I have to balance for a moment while I toss the saddle onto his broad back.

"Yes!" I yell as it lands in the perfect place, the straps of the cinch dropping down onto each side. This is another one of those pressure points that will potentially slip you up. The saddle can fall or land so wrong that you

need to fix it first before continuing. Fixing anything is a huge time-suck, and time is not on our side. Not when we're trying to get proficient as quickly as possible. Not when we could be running from the enemy.

Natasha groans, telling me that she has probably messed this part up.

Although I feel for her, I don't even try to look across, at her, or at the others; instead, I clamber down. Blaze lifts up off his belly enough for me to get under him. It takes me a few fumbled attempts to get the cinch done up tight enough.

Dammit! Why are my hands so slow and fumbly?

Blaze goes back down as I reach his leg, climbing back up – quicker this time since I have the use of both my arms without a saddle to weigh me down. As I get to the top, I leap for the saddle, sitting in one swift motion. I'm pretty good at this part. Three or four seconds later, my feet are in the stirrups with the lap strap in place.

'*Slow*,' my dragon tells me.

"Luke beat you out by five whole seconds," Shadow says, smiling.

I note that both Natasha and Kerry are still busy. Natasha is only climbing up her dragon's leg now.

"Done!" Kerry shouts as the buckle of her lap strap clicks into place.

"What was my time?" I'm almost too scared to ask.

'*Slow*,' Blaze repeats, talking straight into my head.

"I didn't ask you," I mutter.

He makes a chuffing noise.

Shadow smiles. "Twenty-eight seconds. It was pretty good this time around."

"Really? How can that be?" I ask, groaning. I was sure I was faster than that. "We'll never make ten seconds. How is that kind of a time even possible?"

Blaze is right. I'm slow!

"I assure you that it is quite possible." Shadow nods. "You will all need to practice this. Practice it over and over. You will find that there are certain parts that you stumble on. You need to practice doing up that cinch," she says to me. "Keep doing it and then undoing it. You need to practice it so many times that your fingers get blistered. Do it so many times that we can blindfold you, and you'll still be able to do it. You'll dream of doing that baby up before long. That's how it has to be with every aspect of tacking up. Break it down. Find your stumbling points and work harder on those."

Hulk paws the earth, looking agitated.

“I’ll get better,” Natasha tells him.

“Of course you will,” Shadow says. “For you, it’s the climb and the throwing of your saddle.”

“It’s not just that; it’s everything,” she groans. “I’m just plain slow, but I will keep practicing. I know you prefer flying, but this is important, too,” she tells her dragon.

‘Fly,’ Blaze projects into my mind, but I ignore him. If you’d told me a week ago that I would enjoy flying, I would have told you that you were nuts, but here we are. I’ve been on numerous flights over the last week, and it’s amazing. Blaze says that I’m a natural. I rest my hands on my lap as Blaze starts to get restless. He, too, paws at the ground.

‘Fly now!’

‘Easy,’ I try to project the thought into his head. It feels weird doing it. Blaze has assured me that it works. I don’t have to actually speak, not when he’s in dragon form. I can give him basic instructions. He can say a few words to me. We can feel each other’s emotions. He’s right; it’s not like I can look into Blaze, the man, and know everything about him. I can’t. It doesn’t work like that. The connection and our abilities will grow over time, but it will never be like that. We’ll be a more effective team since I should have more influence over him. I’ll read his dragon better and eventually be able to use his senses as my own. We’ll be that in tune with one another.

“You’ll get quicker,” Shadow tells Natasha, bringing me out of my thoughts. Then she looks at each of us in turn. “All of you will.”

Blaze starts flapping his wings.

“Hold on just a little longer,” I ask him, grabbing the horn. “Please,” I add.

I feel him steady...but only just.

Shadow looks at her watch. “Actually, we’ve been at it for over an hour. You may go for a flight but be back—”

Blaze doesn’t wait to hear the rest of what Shadow has to say; he leaps into the air, wings flapping.

My lap belt pulls tight, holding me in the saddle. I’m sure I would’ve fallen right off the back of my dragon, sustaining serious injuries if it weren’t for being strapped in. Holding onto the saddle horn helps, but I lose my right stirrup and have to find it again.

Damn!

I have a long way to go before I'll be ready to hunt down Reds, that's for sure. I think we all do, and it's only been a week.

I squeal in both exhilaration and fear as Blaze takes us a little higher. Until we're at least twenty feet above the treetops. I look up at the wispy clouds far above us and know that one day soon, we will soar all the way up there.

I hold on tight to the pommel, the wind rushing to meet me as he flies with purpose for about ten minutes before setting down in an open patch in the middle of the jungle. It takes me a few seconds to unfasten my belt and a few more to climb down his leg. I untack Blaze in half the time it did to tack him up, putting his saddle against a nearby tree when the first cracks signaling his shift sound.

I turn and watch him shift from beast to man. He takes his time, and I have to say that it doesn't get old.

"You didn't even wait to hear how long we have before we have to get back," I say as he stalks toward me, his muscles on full display. That's not the only thing on display. I wet my lips.

"Half an—" He looks up in thought for half a second before his sexy jade gaze locks with mine once again. "Half an hour, or at least, I think so. Dragons don't care much for time." He puts his arms around me and covers my mouth with his. Our kiss is hot and heavy right from the get-go.

I laugh, slightly breathless, as he pulls away. "No, really. How long do we have? I need to practice mounting you."

"You sure as hell do."

"Dragon you," I say as he cups my jaw and kisses me again.

"Sex! Now!" he demands.

"Heeeey, that's my line."

"Now I'm using it. I need to be inside you," he says in a low voice that has my panties almost dropping of their own accord.

"So demanding. You have a greedy cock; you know that, right?" I giggle.

"And you love it, just like I love that dirty mouth of yours." He is walking me backward into the deep jungle and out of sight of anyone overhead.

Birds are chirping. The foliage is green, and the sun is bright through the canopy, but I don't see or hear any of it. I only have eyes for him. My man.

"How quickly can you be out of those leathers?" he asks.

I wrap my hand around his cock and palm it from root to tip. His eyes close, and he groans deeply. "Quick. Undress for me," he growls. "I'm ready

to fuck you.”

If I wasn't wet before, I am now.

There is something I figured out quite quickly. Blaze is always a little primal right after a shift. I didn't think I would like it, much less be turned on by it, but I am.

His voice is deeper. His cock is somehow bigger. He loves harder, is more protective of me but also takes me harder. A little like an animal, but with so much love and devotion, I can feel it in every hard thrust.

I start pulling off my leathers. It's easier than before, but still a pain in the ass. Especially since my clit is throbbing. Especially now that I want him so badly. It takes a few tugs of each pant leg to get them off. Then I'm slipping out of my soaking panties.

“Are you going to put me on my knees again?” I ask, my voice husky. I enjoyed doggy style yesterday. On my hands and knees in the dirt. It felt wrong and yet so right in every way. If someone told me I'd enjoy being taken like an animal even a month ago, I would have laughed in their face.

“I'm going to bend you over that fallen tree over there and fuck you until you can't remember your own name.”

Holy shit, I feel wet drip down between my legs; I'm that desperate for him. I pull off my leather tank and unclasp my bra. Then I am standing naked before him. I have goosebumps all over my body, and it isn't because I'm cold.

His cock is hard as nails and standing fully to attention. He almost looks angry, but I know that he isn't. I trust him with everything. With my heart, my soul, my body, my life. All of it.

Blaze picks me up and carries me over to the fallen log. He does as he said he would and bends me over the smooth surface of the wood so that my ass is in the air. The bark is long since gone, so it's comfortable.

Then he gets down between my splayed thighs and licks at my sex until I'm crying out with every lap of his tongue and every thrust of his fingers.

Holy moly, but he knows what I like and how I like it. My eyes are wide, and my cries echo around us.

When I'm on the verge of coming, he stops, standing suddenly. Then, he aligns himself behind me. I can't wait until he's inside of me. I'm vibrating with need and urgency. I have to grit my teeth to stop myself from begging. My clit feels swollen and throbs in time with my heartbeat, which is fast. My belly is already pulled tight.

I gasp when he finally grips my hips and enters me in one hard shove. Blaze grunts roughly.

“Holy shit,” he growls. “You feel better than anything ever,” his deep voice rasps.

I yell something incoherent as he starts to move inside me. His cock is so deep that I feel full, stretched to capacity. I yell his name, pushing my ass into the air, opening my legs wider.

More.

More.

“So sexy,” he growls. He’s picking up the pace, pounding into me.

My breath is coming in short bursts, heat pooling in my lower belly. My breasts are jerking as I take my weight on my arms, bracing against the tree. I hear the wet noises my body is making as he slides in and out of me.

He’s growling, and it’s getting me closer and closer by the second. Each moan that escapes my lips only serves to spur him on. I feel my body squeeze around his girth. My clit throbs as his balls slam against the bundle of nerves each and every time. Then his finger is on me, too, pinching my clit between two fingers. I go off that very instant, my eyes going wide as I shout his name.

Blaze tenses up and then roars, his cock twitching as he spills his seed inside of me.

“Mine,” he snarls. “Miiiiine.” His voice is guttural.

My mind goes blank as I see all the stars and the planets. I think I see the Milky Way. In fact, I’m sure of it.

I never thought I could be owned.

Yet I am.

Owned and taken.

His. Just as he is mine. We belong to each other. I feel it in my soul.

I fall forward, my breasts mashing against the cold wood, my forehead resting on the fallen tree. Blaze falls with me, his chest warm against my back. Blaze is still moving, still rocking into me. That’s when he bites my neck; I feel his teeth sink into my flesh. It’s hard enough to draw blood and to leave a mark.

I cry out, not in pain but in pleasure, which surprises me.

“Fuck!” he growls as he pulls away, picking up the pace once again. “Fuuuuuck!” He growls my name as more heat fills me. He’s coming again. I feel cum drip down the sides of my inner thighs. His cock seems to swell

inside me.

Holy freaking hell!

I can barely breathe as I come again, too. This time, harder than before. My mouth is open, but not a sound leaves me as my pussy clenches around him, spasming so hard it almost hurts.

My neck stings just a little as the rest of me explodes in waves of ecstasy that leave me gasping for air. My entire being is consumed by the intensity of our connection as we orgasm. On and on, until I am sure that I will self-combust if it lasts for much longer, and then we are slowly coming down.

I am a wobbly, shaking mess by the time we are done.

“How was that better than before?” I pant out. “How? Each time is better.” I struggle to catch my breath.

Blaze leans against me for a few moments. Then he pulls out and picks me up, cradling me in his arms. He places a tender kiss on my mouth. I feel him shaking, too. Clearly, he’s not unaffected by what just happened.

What just happened?

That didn’t feel normal.

“I’m sorry.” He kisses my neck where it stings and then licks me there, once again reminding me that he isn’t fully human.

I love it.

“I’m sorry. I hurt you. I should’ve warned you. Shit! I’m so sorry.”

“I’m fine. It’s fine.” I look into his face and cup his jaw with my hand, feeling the slight stubble beneath my fingers.

“I don’t ever want to hurt you or to scare you.” His eyes are filled with concern and such tender love and affection.

“It’s us...it’s you. I feel safe...always. I swear.” I smile at him. “I know that it was just the intensity of the moment. It felt good...which is a bit strange, I guess.”

“I...um...you need to know...” He’s frowning, looking a little worried. “Biting is mating behavior, Kim. My dragon was still close to the surface, and I couldn’t quite keep a handle on...our...on my feelings for you.”

“Was that a weird kind of marriage proposal?” I tease.

“No.” He shakes his head, and my heart plummets.

Then he puts me down. “It was so much more,” he says. “Dragon shifters mate for life. If we marry, it will need to be forever. Unless you’re willing to give me forever, we—”

“I am.”

He smiles, then gets a look of confusion, then smiles again. “Are you sure? I mean, you can think about it. Hold up.” He gets on his knees before me.

“What are you doing?” I beam.

Blaze swallows thickly. “Kimberly Ashton, will you marry me? You would make me the happiest shifter in the world. I know this is a lot. I know you might need time. I’m willing to give you whatever you need as long as you know that...I’m yours. I love you so much.”

I laugh and cover my mouth with one hand. “Yes.” Tears start to fall. “Of course. I don’t have to think about a thing. It’s you. It will always be you.”

He jumps up to his feet and pulls me into a tight embrace. Then he kisses me softly. “I need to get you a ring. I’m sorry, I wasn’t prepared.”

“It’s not about any of that.”

“No, I want to get you something nice. Humans like diamonds...I think.” His eyes are bright...until they turn up to the canopy. Then, his whole stance changes. His body hardens, as does his gaze, which locks with mine. “Get dressed!” he barks at me in a tone I have never heard from him before. At least, not when directed at me.

“What is it?”

“Now!” he whispers under his breath.

I grab my panties and pull them on. I have only just done up my bra when someone says. “Well, well, what have we here?”

Blaze grabs me and shoves me behind him. Scales have popped out on his skin. My heart hammers inside my chest.

I peek around his big body. There are three of them. Male, naked, and they’re not from Draig.

B laze

Fuck!

Fuck!

Fuck!

What have I done?

We were warned to be careful. Warned to keep our eyes open. To stick together in groups. Not to go too far. Not to land during a flight.

Why? Because the Reds are still up to no damned good. Sure, there haven't been any sightings since they came for Skylar that night. The night I killed one of the fuckers. There haven't been any more major breaches since then, either. All has been quiet. Still! We were warned to remain on our guard, and I didn't listen.

I was thinking with my dick. I can't get enough of my female, and now I have put her in the direct line of fire.

Fuck!

I'm still a liability. Still an accident waiting to happen. I did this.

There are three of the bastards. From their closely cropped hair and the red markings within their tattoos, it looks like three Reds. If they were to shift, the red markings would carry through to their scales. One of them is glowering, one is smirking, and the third one looks unreadable. I'm outnumbered. It is distinctly possible that a dragon like mine could take two.

I'd probably be badly injured, but I could do it. I'd be hard-pressed to take all three. Kim could be injured in the crossfire. I need to try to avoid that at all costs.

I have no idea what to say to them. We don't talk to Reds. Reds don't talk to us. They stay on their side, and we stay on ours. Any indiscretions surrounding this basic rule result in death.

"Let's kill them quickly. We need to focus on our mission," the glowering one says.

Kim gasps and grabs onto me more tightly from behind.

I am willing to die to save my female. I'm sure I could kill one. I could kill or maim the other and then hopefully injure the third enough for Kim to get away. I would probably die in the process, but so be it.

What was I thinking when I landed in the middle of fucking nowhere?

I wasn't. And now Kim might pay the price.

"We could kill the Draiger, but that one looks and smells like a human," one of the other two says. He's slightly stockier. "A female, at that." His nose flares as he sniffs. "From what we heard earlier, she likes fucking," he adds.

This is worse than I thought. Reds are half feral.

I growl low, sounding like a caged lion. It's a language they'll understand loud and clear. "The female is mine," I snarl for good measure.

"I'll be the voice of reason," the third male says, "since the two of you have lost your minds. We're not killing or fucking anyone," he says. "We're *not* animals."

I hope he's right. The Reds I've seen on the cameras of late have been coordinated and well-organized. Perhaps there is more humanity there, after all. I fucking hope so.

"What do you suggest we do with them?" the angry one says. "They've seen us. Our mission is compromised."

"We tie them up and then sit tight until dark. Then we do what we were sent to do," the more logical one says.

"Tie them up with what exactly, Damian?" the stocky one asks.

"Go back to Mistveil, and we will forget we ever saw you," I tell them.

Damian shakes his head. "Not happening."

"What is your name, female?" the stocky one asks.

"Leave her alone. I told you she's mine," I tell him. "I will kill you if you try anything."

"It's three against one." The smirk is back.

“I figure I could probably take you before the other two get me. So come and try me,” I warn.

“Relax!” Damian snorts. “We’re not going to touch your female.” He says it in a clipped tone, looking at the smirking asshole.

“Speak for yourself. I don’t have a female of my own,” the stocky one says.

“How is that different for us?” the violent one asks.

“You don’t seem to mind being alone.”

“Says who, asshole? I’m not interested in taking a female from her mate...that’s all,” the violent one growls. “I’m not that fucking desperate.”

“Are the two of you mated?” he asks me.

“Yes,” I snarl. Kim whimpers again, and the sound tears at my soul. I feel her fear through our bond.

My dragon doesn’t like it. He wants to kill these pricks, but we’re outnumbered. I have to keep him under control.

“Get a grip, Duke,” Damian says. “You can’t have her. Get that right out of your head.”

“When is the mainland sending us Tributes of our own?” Duke asks in a nasal voice that gets on my nerves. Then I actually think about what it is that he said.

What the actual fuck?

Tributes to Mistveil? It has to be some sort of a mistake.

“Shut up, idiot!” Damian snaps. “You’re going to fuck everything up.”

“I still vote to kill them,” the third one mutters, his eyes narrowed.

“I’m in charge, and that isn’t going to happen,” Damian says. He has close-cropped blond hair. “Can the two of you keep your mouths shut and tie them up already?”

The leader doesn’t seem to have as much control as I would like. If they shift, all bets are off. They’ll turn completely feral, and we’ll be done for.

“I’m still not sure how you want us to go about doing that,” Duke says. “Besides, tying up a shifter is just plain stupid. He can shift and then—”

“If he shifts, you have my full permission to kill him. In which case, you can have his female.” The asshole leader glares at me, his threat clear.

I growl low. I need to keep my cool. I can’t shift. If I get agitated enough, I won’t be able to help it.

“Deal!” Duke rubs his hands together, putting his beady eyes on Kim once again. I swear, if given half the chance, I will pluck them from his skull.

“I have to agree with Duke on one thing; we don’t have any rope,” the angry one says, narrowing his eyes. “Are you sure we can’t just kill them? Or even just him?” He says *him* with such hate, his eyes firmly on me.

“For fuck’s sake, no killing. Tear up those leather pants.” Damian points at Kim’s clothing, lying on the ground. “I want both their hands and legs tightly bound.”

“Leave us alone,” I say. I have to try one more time. “Go now, and there won’t be any repercussions.”

“That isn’t going to happen, Draig Dragon,” Damian says, sounding bored.

“My name is Blaze.” I try to find some common ground. Not because I want to but because I have to.

“I don’t care,” Damian says as the three males move in, surrounding us.

“What is your name, beautiful?” the stocky prick asks.

“Leave me alone,” Kim says. “I’m not interested in you. In any of you.” Her voice is shrill. I can feel her fear grow with every second.

I feel her jump as the angry male starts to rip her pants into long strips.

“Don’t try anything,” Damian says. “If you die, your female will be left mateless, and then all bets are off since that would make her fair game.” His eyes are hard.

“I like that idea,” Duke says, licking his lips. “I would be careful if I were you. Haze over here would like nothing better than to tear your throat out.”

“I would enjoy that.” Haze hands a couple of leather strips to Duke. “Tie up the female. I’ve got the Draiger.”

Dammit! The last thing I want is that asshole’s hands on Kim. I growl and show my teeth as they get close.

“No!” Damian says. “Help me hold the male,” he tells Duke. “You tie him up, Haze. Then you can tie her up.”

“Don’t try anything, human,” Haze tells Kim, narrowing cruel eyes on her.

“Don’t! Leave us alone!” she yells, but thankfully, she doesn’t try to stop them.

Neither do I, even though my dragon is pushing to do just that. Thing is, it’s not like the leather will hold me if I decide to shift. Right now, that’s not an option, so I let them yank my arms behind my back. I force myself to relax while they wrap the leather tightly around my wrists.

I see Duke’s eyes raking up and down Kim like he’s never seen a female

before. I don't get it. What's this about Tributes being sent to Mistveil? It sounds like they're most definitely in touch with someone from the mainland. The information Skylar and Fang brought back with them is sound. What the fuck is going on?

Duke takes the ties from Haze and starts toward Kim, a smirk on his face. "You're a pretty one."

I snarl.

"You do it, Haze," Damian says. "Stay away from her, Duke."

Haze grabs the ties out of Duke's hands, growling at him.

"What?" Duke says. He sniffs the air. "I can't help it if she smells good. Really good. Can we undress her? I don't like clothing." He sniffs some more.

Haze elbows the male in the face; there is a crack. Duke howls, holding his nose with both hands. Blood flows freely down his face. "What the fuck, asshole!?"

"Leave the female alone. She stinks of the Draiger. He's marked her with both seed and fang. That should be enough to deter any normal male. But you're not fucking normal, are you?"

"Listen to Haze and quit it!" Damian says. "Or this will be your last mission, and you know what that will mean."

Duke's whole demeanor changes. He looks like someone took away his candy. "Okay. Fine." He holds up both hands. "You're no fun," he mutters.

"This is not about fun. We have a job to do," Damian growls.

"Understood," Duke says. His nose has stopped bleeding, but blood is congealing all the way down his chin and onto his chest, which is spattered with it, too. He doesn't seem to care. "I'll stay in line. I swear it. It's just that I really want a female. I like the humans." His eyes crawl all over my female again, and I move to shield her with my body. The asshole looks like he's sporting a semi, which makes my blood fucking boil.

These Reds are worse than I ever thought possible.

"Good! Then we sit tight until it's time to carry out our mission," Damian says.

"What then?" the angry one asks, still looking pissed off. "What do we do with these two when we have to leave?"

"We'll figure it out," Damian says.

"Not much to figure out if you ask me." There is murder in his hard stare.

"For now," Damian starts to say, "you and I will flank these two. Duke,

you keep a lookout from over there.”

Duke nods. His eyes dart to Kim. I’m doing my best to shield her from his prying eyes. I wish to god she’d been in her leathers when we had been captured. Her underwear is little more than two scraps of white cotton. Normally, nudity is not such a big deal to a shifter. This male looks like he has something wrong with him. Like he’s never seen a half-naked female before.

“Don’t you have females on Mistveil?” I ask him.

What he says makes my blood run cold.

K im

They're very similar to the shifters here on Draig, only not. Not at all. They feel more savage, somehow. Seems like the stories I've heard since coming to Draig Island, are all true. Cold tendrils of fear prickle down my spine, spreading across my skin.

I'm infinitely thankful for the one who seems to be in charge. I think if it were up to the other two, we'd be in big trouble. I shudder to think about it.

I'm trying not to look at Duke.

Such a shitty name. A duke is nobility. There is nothing noble about this idiot. The way he leers at me makes me feel sick to my stomach. It makes my skin crawl.

"Don't you have females on Mistveil?" Blaze asks him, and it's a good question because he is acting like I am a novelty.

"One female to every hundred males, so not many...no!" Duke says.

"Stop talking, dickhead, and go and keep a lookout," Damian snarls. "What the fuck is wrong with you?"

"So, what if they know? Besides, I thought the Draigers knew everything about us," Duke says.

"They don't know shit!" Damian snarls, looking angry for the first time. "They think they know us so damned well, but they don't." He rolls his eyes and snort-laugh. "We'll have the last laugh. Draiger assholes think they rule

over us. That they keep us in line. You don't! You have no say over us at all. It's hilarious that you think you do."

"We don't answer to you. We answer to—" Duke starts to say, but Damian cuts him off.

"Enough! Go already. You don't get to talk. Here." He throws Kim's vest at her. "Put that on so that I don't have to look at his erection for the rest of the damned afternoon."

I grab the garment and do as he says, only too happy to cover up. A top is at least something.

"Tie her up," Damian instructs Haze. "Hands and feet. We don't want her running. It might encourage that asshole even more."

I sob. I don't want to be tied up. I can't stand Duke.

Haze pulls my hands behind my back. I try to keep my hands a little apart so that my bonds are not too tight. It doesn't work. Haze is too strong.

"I'm not going to hurt you. Not if you behave," he says as he starts on my feet. "But if either of you tries anything, you're dead," he whispers low. It's menacing and causes gooseflesh to rise all over my body.

Once he's done, he moves to the left of us, and Blaze and I scoot as close to one another as we can get.

This is terrible.

We lock eyes. I see concern shining in his. Blaze leans in and gently kisses me softly on my temple. "I'm sorry," he whispers.

"No talking!" Damian says in a curt tone.

We sit huddled together for a long time. Hours, I'm sure. So long that my ass starts to go numb. I also need to pee, but I'm too afraid to say anything. Too afraid to be separated from Blaze.

These guys are like freaking robots. They don't talk much to one another. They stand like sentinels guarding over us.

Then Duke turns, cups his hands over his mouth and makes a whistling noise that sounds very much like a bird I've heard before on the island.

Haze crouches next to me, his hands going around my throat. "Make a single sound, and you die," he whispers.

"Keep very quiet, both of you, or she dies," Damian murmurs. They speak so softly that I barely hear them.

Duke moves, standing tightly against a tree further under the canopy. He looks up. His eyes are wide.

I'm so terrified that I'm panting. I'm trying hard to keep my cool. Haze's

hands are not too tight, but I know that he can snap my neck like a twig using just his pinky finger.

What is going on?

Then I hear it, the flapping of wings. There is a low, rumbling purr followed by a now familiar chuffing noise and more flapping. There are dragons above us. I'm almost certain that it's the others searching for us since we've been missing for hours.

I look over at Blaze, who gives a shake of his head.

'No!'

'Don't!'

There is a screech in the distance. It isn't a screech of anger or fear. One of the dragons above us answers. They're sweeping the area, looking for us, and we can't make so much as a sound, or I am dead.

My eyes go to Blaze, but he doesn't react at all this time.

Haze's hands tighten just a little, not enough to hurt or to bruise, but his meaning is clear. It's just as much a warning to Blaze as it is to me. We stay that way for a long time. At least it feels long. In reality, it's probably eight or ten minutes. Just until the dragon noises die down, and then they are gone altogether. I strain my ears, but I don't hear anything. It leaves me feeling bereft.

Haze finally lets me go, and I sag against Blaze.

"They're looking for us," he says, looking up at our captors. "If they find us, the three of you are dead. Let us go! Be on your way, and you can live."

Damian chuckles. "Nice try, Draiger."

"It's Blaze."

"I told you, I don't care. Just like I don't care whether you live or die. We have business on your island. It was unfortunate that you chose this area to land in. We couldn't risk you seeing or hearing us and letting others know. Now we're stuck with each other. If you fully comply with everything we say, everyone should be alive at the end of this. No harm done."

I see such anger in Blaze's eyes. "Or you can let us go now. We go our separate—"

"You're just as bad as Duke. You don't fucking listen. Sit tight. Be quiet. Comply, or I'll give her to Duke and make you watch."

"Sounds good to me." Duke laughs.

What a disgusting pig.

I try hard not to react in any way, not outwardly at any rate. I know that

Duke would jump at the opportunity in a heartbeat, but I don't think that Damian would actually do something like that. Kill us, maybe, something so vile as what he just suggested...no...but perhaps that is just wishful thinking on my part. Still, my heart hammers in my chest, and my palms turn sweaty.

"You're one sick fuck," Damian tells Duke, who laughs even harder, his shoulders shaking.

"You would be sick too if you'd never had a female...not once in your life. I'm getting desperate, Damian," he says when he sobers.

"Sit tight, and you'll get your female," Damian promises.

It sounds like the Reds have only a handful of women on their island. What happened? Why?

My mind goes to Octavia and Jen. Both lost to the Reds.

Lost!

Not likely.

"Did you guys happen to see a helicopter? It will have been around two months ago?" I ask.

"A helicopter? One of your human flying devices?" Damian asks, looking confused.

"Yes, a woman stole a chopper and accidentally flew to Mistveil."

"Oh, really? Where on the island?" Duke looks really interested.

"I don't know. I take it she wasn't seen by any of you," I say.

"No way!" Duke laughs. "If she survived the landing, someone would have found her alright. Don't worry, they'll be taking real good care of her."

That's what I'm afraid of. If the Reds are anything like this jerk, I'm afraid for those ladies.

"And Jen? She's tall with dark hair. You guys took her recently. You kidnapped her right from our camp." My mouth is feeling dry, and it's not just thirst.

"The pretty one you wouldn't let me have," Duke mutters, glancing at Damian. "You wouldn't let me—"

"Can you shut the fuck up!" Damian snarls. "I swear I'm going to cut your tongue out soon. You'll still be able to work, but at least it will be quieter for the rest of us while it grows back. Move to the lookout point. Stop leering at that female. I'll take off your dick if you go near her," he growls.

Barbaric is too nice a word for these men. I bury my face in Blaze's chest.

"I won't let them hurt you," he murmurs.

"Quiet!" Damian barks. "Don't make promises you can't keep."

We sit like that until the sun goes down and the bugs come out. Buzzing and crawling and biting. I try to get my hands loose from the binds while keeping as still as possible. I try, and I try, and I try, but to no avail. It's pitch black under the canopy of trees out in the middle of nowhere. I can't see a darned thing. The only reassurance I have is Blaze's warm body beside me. I lean against him, and I pray. Then I pray some more, even though I've never been one for religion.

Then I doze off. I'm not sure how it happens with all of that adrenaline running through my system, only that it does.

Someone says something, and it rouses me.

"Yep, it's time." I recognize the voice as Damian's.

"What are we going to do with them? I haven't been able to come up with anything that doesn't involve killing the Draiger," Haze says in a deadpan voice.

"Can I take his female?" Duke asks, making me want to be sick in my mouth.

"Shut the fuck up, Duke," Damian says. "You are like a broken record. On and on and on about the same thing. It's annoying." He sighs. "We need to clip your wings, Draiger," he's talking to Blaze.

What does that even mean? I don't like it, though. Not one bit.

Someone grabs me from behind, and I am hoisted to my feet. I think Blaze is, too, but I can't be sure.

"Blaze!" I yell, trying to see in the dark, but I can't.

"I'm here. I'm—"

There is a loud slapping noise, and Blaze cries out. I am shoved to the side and land hard.

I hear what can only be fighting behind me.

"Blaze!" I yell again. I scoot backward until my back hits a tree. It's too dangerous close to all that fighting. I'm too afraid to move. I know it's stupid, but I'm trying even harder to see into the night, though I can't.

There's growling and hitting. Blaze roars in...in pain.

"Blaze!" I scream, knowing it isn't helping.

I try frantically to get the ties off. Then what? I don't know what. All I know is that I have to do something. The sounds of fighting are all around me. That and bones cracking, tree branches snapping. I think that they're shifting. Blaze screams. The scream turns into a roar of pain and outrage as his dragon emerges.

A monster. Yes! And I'm glad for it.

"Blaze!" I scream once more, not sure of what else to do. If only I could see something.

Then I'm being picked up. I fight whoever it is. I'm screaming and being jostled as the person runs. I'm being taken away from the fighting. Away from Blaze.

The person is breathing hard as they run.

I have a horrible feeling I know who has me. He runs fast, bounding over what I can only imagine are tree roots and fallen logs. It doesn't matter how hard I fight; I can't get out of his grip.

"No!" I growl. "Put me down!" I shout, yelling as loud as I can, hoping against hope that Blaze hears me.

In the distance, I still hear the sounds of dragons fighting. Of more tree branches breaking.

The person runs until I can't hear them anymore. I can't hear Blaze. I don't know where I am, and it's pitch black.

I've stopped fighting. I need to conserve energy. I hate to even think it, but I know I'll need it all too soon. I'll need it to fight this person off. I keep screaming on the off chance that Blaze can hear me. Shifters have better hearing than us, so it is possible.

"I just want to play," Duke says as he finally does as I ask and puts me down by tossing me onto the ground. My bound limbs protest as I land. My hip, too. Thankfully, the soil under me is soft and spongy, or it could have been worse. I think my wrists might be bleeding from tugging and fighting to get the binds off.

"Leave me alone." I kick out, and my foot thuds against something hard. His thigh, I think.

"I'm sorry, female, but I'm desperate." He grabs my ankle as I try to kick him again, holding me tightly. Then he puts his hand over my mouth so that I can hardly breathe, let alone scream, and starts undoing the ties around my ankles.

I fight with all I am worth, but I may as well be fighting against a raging storm.

B laze

I'm biding my time. I'm waiting for one of them to make a mistake. Or for one of them to leave.

I'm sure I can take two. I might get injured. I might even die, but at least Kim will be safe. Soon after the sun goes down, she finally falls into a restless sleep. The dragons fly over us yet again. I recognize Atlas's rumble. It's them, but I can't do or say anything. It's maddening.

Damian puts his finger over his lips, and Haze kneels next to Kim, ready to pounce.

My hands are tied in more ways than one. They're fucking tied. But if these assholes make even one mistake, they're done. I will end them.

I wait and I watch. I know that time is ticking. They will soon have to leave to go and do whatever it is that they came to Draig for. I'm worried about what they will do when that happens. They can't leave us because I'll shift and break my binds. I'll be able to alert others to their presence while they are still on Draig Island. It'll increase their risk exponentially.

They're going to have to injure me badly enough to keep me from shifting. They might even decide to kill me, after all, and then what will happen to Kim?

My stomach clenches with worry, but all I can do is sit and wait. The only noises are of the jungle at night.

“I’m sure we can head out by now,” Haze says. It’s dark but I can still make out their shapes enough to tell who is who. It helps to be a shifter and to have improved senses.

Fuck! The time has come for action, whether I like it or not. I wish to god I didn’t have to deal with three of them.

“Yep, it’s time.” Damian nods his head.

“What are we going to do with them? I haven’t been able to come up with anything that doesn’t involve killing the Draiger,” Haze says. I can feel his eyes on me. I know that he would like nothing more than to end me.

“Can I take his female?” Duke asks.

I want to kill him so badly that I vibrate with the need.

“Shut the fuck up, Duke,” Damian says. “You are like a broken record. On and on and on about the same thing. It’s annoying. We need to clip your wings, Draiger,” he says to me.

Injury it is, then. They will need to make it bad enough that I can’t shift. They’re going to break my arms so that I’ll have trouble getting into my dragon form. If I did manage it, I probably wouldn’t be able to fly.

Both Kim and I are grabbed and pulled up and onto our feet.

“Blaze!” Kim yells, sounding frightened.

“I’m here. I’m—” I start to say. I want to tell her that I’m okay, that she needs to get out of harm’s way, but I get slugged. A hard hit to my face.

It’s Damian who does it. Haze pushes my female, and she goes flying, but not far enough away for my liking. She could get hurt. These assholes clearly don’t give a shit.

‘Save.’

‘Protect.’

‘No!’ I try to tell my dragon. Shifters normally have more control over their beasts. Certainly over when they shift. I don’t always. Not in situations like these. I’ve come to realize that I’m particularly likely to shift when Kim is in trouble.

I take another jab to the ribs. I start to shift, but Haze kicks me on my right arm. There is a snap.

Fuck!

Broken bones are agonizing during a shift, sometimes making it impossible.

“Blaze!” Kim screams. It’s a sound full of terror. Not for herself, but for me.

It fuels me. It's the catalyst I need. Despite the fracture, I shift, the leather ties snapping and falling away. It fucking hurts when my broken bone reforms and reshapes. I scream, the sound becoming a roar as my dragon emerges.

My captors shift, too. They're quicker than I am, but I started shifting first, so we finish at around the same time. Since we're in a tight, confined space, branches snap, and trees are pushed over as our bodies grow into our massive dragon forms. I only pray that my female is getting to safety. That she is moving farther away from us. Otherwise, she could be trampled or worse.

Claws rake across my chest, and I roar again, blood squirting. My blood. "Blaze!" Kim screams as I go on the attack.

I can feel the searing pain of my broken right front leg, but I ignore it. It's a hindrance for sure, but I have to push through the agony. I'm lucky because in the thick jungle, it isn't too much of a handicap. All I know is that I have to protect Kim at all costs, and I'll be damned if I let anything happen to her. If it means ignoring pain, then so fucking be it. I can do it.

I let out a deafening roar, my eyes set on the enemy, charging with all the strength I have left. They try to dodge me, but even with my injury, I'm too quick, too fierce. I slash with my claws at Haze while cutting into Damian with my barbed tail. More blood flies, but this time, it isn't mine.

My dragon is a mean bastard. Quick and, in the heat of the battle, unperturbed by injury or pain. Adrenaline surges, fueling me.

'Save.'

'Protect!'

Kim screams my name, and then I hear receding footsteps. I look up in time to see Duke. He has Kim slung over his shoulder and is making a break for it.

No!

'Kill!'

'Kill now!'

I feel her anguish. Her cries go straight into my brain like barbed wire being raked across my skin. I start to go after them, but one of the two dragons recovers and smashes its great body into mine, sending me flying through several trees. My injured leg buckles under me, broken bones crunching. I hardly feel it as I leap back to my feet, seeing red. Bright fucking red.

'My female.'

'Mine!'

I roar, using my talons to rip through the dragon closest to me. My father always taught me to make the most of a situation, no matter how dire. I'm going to hold on to my rage and my pain and use it.

Also, three dragons were too many for me to take on, but two is doable. Duke messed up, and he will die for it. They all will.

'Die.'

'Kill.'

Bottom line, I need to end them before that fucker can hurt Kim. My dragon understands the urgency. I lean into it, focusing on the job at hand. Adrenaline pumping, claws digging into the earth as the second dragon is on me. I screech, flames erupting from my jaw, searing scales, and the flesh below.

The small part of me that is still human is worried about the consequence of using fire in the middle of the forest. My dragon doesn't give a shit. He doesn't care if it all burns down. I don't stop there. I go after the beast, slashing and ripping. I'm about to blast him again when the other one grips my good wing in its maw. There is crunching as his teeth tear through skin and bone.

White-hot pain sears through me, making my vision flicker for a split second. With my enemy at the angle he is in, his belly is fully exposed. I tear at it, slicing it open so that his entrails spill out in a howl of anguish.

He's as good as dead.

The other dragon is just trying to get to his feet when I end him with another blast of fire. There is a crackle. A couple of trees start to burn, and smoke fills the space. I need to shift back. The jungle is too dense to navigate in dragon form, but I'm broken.

Fuck!

I make an attempt...and then another. I can do it. I think of Kim. I hope that she fights that bastard. I feel frantic worry and raging anger. If I somehow manage a shift, my wing will heal itself. It's unlikely, but I have to try. I focus on thoughts of Kim. I roar, putting everything I have into the shift. This time, I get it right. I shriek as my bone snaps and crunches before reforming. I scream, even though I'm still only half-shifted, as my broken wing pulls back inside me. For a moment, it feels like I might turn back into a beast, but I redouble my efforts. I stagger, falling onto one knee, almost

passing out. It is only thoughts of Kim that keep me going.

As soon as I am done shifting, I suck in a deep breath, and then I run. I feel blood dripping. I'm not sure how much is mine. My arm dangles at my side. It's useless, but I don't need it.

I run in the direction I know he took her. I push myself to run faster. To run harder. I pray that I am not too late.

Please, Kim!

Please.

K im

I squirm. I kick my legs, trying to make it as difficult as possible for him.

“Hold still,” he growls. “I’m not going to hurt you.”

This asshole has all kinds of screws loose if he thinks for even one second that raping me won’t be hurting me.

I keep fighting. I won’t let him do that to me. I won’t.

His hand is firmly over my mouth, but I’m making as much noise as I can, even though it’s muffled. I’m praying that Blaze is okay. That they haven’t killed him.

I don’t feel our connection. I think I might be too far away. I pray that it’s that.

‘Please, Blaze!’

“Hold still!” He sounds frustrated.

Good!

“I can’t... Stop fighting me!” Duke growls. Then he lets me go, but my scream is cut off when he backhands me. I fall into the dirt, my head whipping to the side. I land on my arms, which are still tied behind my back. Pain hits. My ears are ringing. I try to scream, but it comes out as a moan. I can’t pass out. I need to fight. I need to fight. I’m pulling in lungfuls of air. The ringing in my ears seems to get worse. I feel tugging on my feet.

He’s undoing the ties. He wants to rape me.

Lord!

Lord!

“No!” I moan. “No, please!” I think I mumble, but I can’t be sure. My head hurts, and I taste blood.

“I’m sorry, female. Truly, I am. I can’t die never having had a female. I can’t.” He makes a sound of victory as he undoes my binds.

He leans forward, reaching for my underwear. What this bastard doesn’t realize is that I’ve been hit a few times in my life...more than a few. I have a quicker recovery time than most.

With my legs no longer tied, I’m able to pull back my knees and kick him hard in the face with both my heels. There is a satisfying crunch and his answering howl of pain. He falls back, landing hard on his ass as I scramble to my knees. It’s hard not having hands for balance. Thank god for all the fitness and strength training I have had of late, or I wouldn’t have gotten up at all. I’m just trying to get to my feet when he comes at me.

I get another kick in, but it gets him on the thigh again. Same as last time, he grunts, but it doesn’t deter him.

He pushes me down on my belly and gets on top of me. His weight is almost unbearable. His erection digs into my back. I scream; my throat feels hoarse.

No!

No!

No!

He is breathing in my ear, making me feel sick to my stomach.

Do something, Kim!

Do something.

He pulls his head back, his hand on my underwear again, pulling on it. It’s the gap I need. I bow my back and toss my head back as hard as I can. There is another cracking noise as the back of my head makes connection with his face. Duke screams. Good! I’m sure his nose is pulverized.

“Bitch—” he starts to say, but there is a sharp sound; this time, it reminds me of a branch breaking. It’s loud, and—

Duke drops down on top of me. He isn’t moving or breathing.

It’s a dead weight.

Is he dead?

I can hardly breathe he’s so heavy. It hurts, especially with my arms behind my back, pinned between our bodies. He’s a big, stocky guy.

“Who’s... Who...?” I’m trying to suck in air so that I can talk. I want to know who is behind me.

I hear the very definite sound of someone shifting into their dragon form. I know it isn’t Blaze because I can’t feel him. Not even a whisper of him.

“Who’s there?” I croak. “Who are you?” It comes out quietly because I am being squashed by this asshole, who I’m pretty sure is dead. He’s that heavy and still not breathing or moving or anything. I try to get out from under him, but it doesn’t work. I’m growing more and more afraid with every passing second. Who is behind me? Is it Damian or Haze? Someone else?

It can’t be anyone I know, or they would have said something. I groan with relief when Duke is shoved off of me. I suck in lungfuls of precious air as I attempt to roll over onto my back. It’s so damned dark, but this part of the jungle isn’t as thick, so I can see an enormous dark shape looming over me.

“Who are you? What do you want?”

The beast can’t talk to me.

Is it Damian? Shit.

Where is Blaze?

Before I can do or say anything, it picks me up in its talons, breaking through the canopy with a crash.

I scream as we become airborne. Up...and up and up. The creature flies fast. The wind whips through my hair, and goosebumps break out all over my body. I’m crapping myself.

Who the hell is this? Have I gone from the frying pan into the fire? Now that we’re above the thick foliage of the jungle, I can see a lot more because of the half-moon and the stars. I look around, but there is only compact forest. In the far distance is a scattering of twinkling lights, but we are swiftly moving away from them.

No!

I look at the beast carrying me. I’m pretty sure that there isn’t a strap around its body, which means that it doesn’t have a rider. Is this a Red?

Please, no!

Where is Blaze? Is he hurt? Is he dead? I sob, holding back tears. I can’t think like that. I need to keep my focus. I hang limp in the creature’s talons, trying hard to relax. To keep my cool. To preserve the little bit of energy I have left. I’m going to need it for when it comes time to fight. This isn’t over yet.

We fly for another five or ten minutes before coming down in a break in the trees in the middle of nowhere.

The beast puts me down. I stagger forward and fall onto my knees hard. It hurts so freaking badly, pain radiating through my legs. I flop onto the ground like a dead fish, immediately rolling and trying to get to my feet.

I keep my eyes on the dragon. I see dark markings on its scales. Markings I haven't seen before on any of the Draig Dragons. I'm pretty sure that they will be red in the light of day.

The Red Dragon starts to shift; its beady eyes are firmly on me.

Blaze

“Kim!” I shout. “Kim!” I keep shouting her name as I run, holding my broken arm against my body. If that prick touches so much as a hair on her head, I will hurt him. I will take my time doing it, too.

I'll break both of his legs and slowly peel the skin from his body. Then I'll wait for him to heal and start all over again. I'll take out his eyes. I'll remove his balls. I will cut off every finger. I'll wait for all of them to regenerate and then cut them off again...and again.

A monster. The world hasn't seen anything yet. I've been tame compared to what I will become.

There is a loud crash to my right. I think I can make out the flapping of wings, but I'm not sure. Did that bastard shift? Is he taking her somewhere? I pray that it's not the case because I am sure that I will not be able to shift back into my dragon form. Even if I did, I would not be able to fly.

I run as fast as my legs will take me. Since I was going in the wrong direction, it takes me a few minutes to get to where the noise came from.

That's when I see it: a body lying on the ground. It looks too big to be Kim, but looks can be deceiving.

“Kim!” I shout. I drop to my knees beside the body, which I instantly recognize as Duke. His neck is at an odd angle. I am both glad that he is dead and upset that it wasn't me who did the killing.

I throw my head back, looking up at the night sky, to where a hole has

been torn through the canopy, and scream, “Kim!”

A dragon has taken her, but who? One of ours? One of theirs? Did Haze recover enough to have flown here? To have taken Kim?

I’m pretty sure that Damian is the one I gutted. One of them is dead, and the other is surely too maimed to fly. Although I am certain I left him for dead, his burns too severe to recover from. We can regenerate from many things, but we’re not infallible.

Who has her?

“Kim!” I roar, my heart fucking breaking.

There is only one thing I can think of doing. I need to go back to where they were holding us. Perhaps Kim doubled back, and we missed each other. I doubt it very much, but it’s the only thing I can think of.

I start running, tripping over a root and righting myself. I keep shouting Kim’s name. I pick up the pace, breathing heavily by the time I get back.

There is so much smoke that it clogs my throat. One of the trees has continued to burn, but the flames are almost out. It’s too wet in the jungle for a serious wildfire. The result is a ton of smoke but not a lot of anything else.

I scream her name, not seeing her. Both dragons are still down where I left them. Neither seems to be breathing.

Good!

The need to kill is riding me hard when a beast crashes through the canopy, landing on the far side, away from the worst of the smoke.

“Blaze!” a woman yells.

“Kerry! Atlas, is that you?”

I get a rumble in response.

Thank the lord!

I go over there.

“Atlas spotted the smoke. He heard you screaming.” Kerry climbs down Atlas’s leg. “We’ve been searching for you for hours.”

There is the cracking sound of a shift as Atlas changes.

“I can tell that lot went down.” She covers her mouth, coughing. “What happened?” Her eyes are on the dead dragons.

“Yes, what the fuck happened?” Atlas growls as he finishes his shift.

Kerry coughs again.

“We got ambushed. Three Reds held us hostage. They had some or other mission planned on the island. They tied us up. They planned on incapacitating me...or killing me. Who the fuck knows? They tried, and I

fought back. Kim got carried off by one. I killed these two.” I gesture with my head to where the bodies are lying. “The one who took Kim is dead too; I don’t know how it happened, but his neck was too badly broken to come back from. His head was almost on backward.”

“I love the image I’m getting in my mind’s eye.” Kerry fake-gags.

“I’m sure that Kim isn’t strong enough to have done it. She’s missing.” My throat clogs. “Someone took her. It looks like a dragon, more than likely a Red. I’m injured. I can’t shift.” I’m talking fast, but I’m frantic with worry. “I want you back up there.” I point at the sky. “Look for a dragon...a Red. Then I want you to return to camp. Maybe one of the others picked her up. Maybe they’ve taken her back to camp.”

“Do you think so?” Kerry asks.

“I don’t know what I think. I need you out there and looking for her.”

“What are you going to do?” Atlas asks me.

“I don’t know.” My mind is racing. “I’m too injured to shift. I’ll search for her on foot. Maybe I missed something. Fuck!” I growl. “What if she comes back?” That seems highly unlikely. “Do you have a better idea? Either of you?”

Atlas shakes his head.

“No! I’m sorry, Blaze.” I can see from the slump in both of their shoulders that they think she is lost. My Kim could be lost. My eyes sting. My stomach clenches. Everything balks at the idea.

“I’m going to shift, and we’ll look for her,” Atlas says. He doesn’t wait for a reply. The sound of cracking fills my ears.

“I’ll tell the others,” Kerry says. “We’ll do our best to find her. If she’s back at camp, we’ll come back for you.”

“Don’t worry about me. Just find her!” There is anguish in my voice.

Kerry nods. She spends the next half a minute tacking up, and then they take to the sky. “Don’t lose hope,” Kerry shouts from her place in the saddle just before Atlas takes off.

I’m trying. I’m trying so fucking hard. I won’t give up. I look around the clearing to see if there is anything I missed. After a few minutes, I start back toward where Duke is lying dead. I take a more direct route. Hopefully, there will be a clue on my way or when I get there. I have to find her, and she has to be okay. I’m not sure what I will do otherwise.

K im

I'm still on my knees as the creature starts to shift. A massive black shape grows smaller as he folds in on himself. Wings pull back, as does the tail.

I contemplate trying to get to my feet and running, but as we've been taught, it's never a good idea to give a dragon your back, even a shifting one. Besides, whoever this bastard is, dragon or man, will be on me soon after I make a run for it. I'm fast, but I'm not fast enough to outrun a shifter in the dead of the night without a flashlight and my hands tied behind my back. I'll fall on my face and possibly injure myself. Nope, I have to face him. It's the only way.

Besides, there is a part of me that wants to see who this is. Damian? Haze? Someone else?

"Are you okay?"

I'm shocked when I hear a woman's voice, and come to think of it, I see long hair. I can just make out her frame, and it isn't big and muscular like a man. Don't get me wrong, shifter women are bigger than human women, but they're still nothing like the men.

"Um...oh... Sorry, I wasn't expecting you to be a woman. I'm shocked," I tell her. "And yes...I'm a little bruised and a whole lot battered, but I'm okay. Nothing is broken." I stagger to my feet. "Thank you...I think. Unless you plan on killing me."

She chuckles. “Not at all. Turn around.”

I don’t trust her even though she saved me. I know nothing about her.

She chuckles again. “I want to untie your hands, human. My name is Trinity. I am not going to hurt you. If that was the plan, I would have done it already.”

She has a really nice voice, and so far, all she has done is help me. I nod once and then turn. “I’m Kim. My...my fiancé and I were in the wrong place at the wrong time and got captured by those goons. Do you know them? Did you know *him*?” I feel ill just thinking of Duke.

Trinity is working on my binds. “They did a good job tying you up,” she says. “No, I don’t know them. I was following them when they came across you. I’m not going to get into too much detail. It’s not important for our conversation.” She pulls in a deep breath as she finishes; my hands are suddenly free. The leather strip falls to the ground.

I groan, rubbing my wrists, wincing when I catch the raw parts. Then I roll my shoulders. It feels good to be able to move freely.

“I want you to know that our males are not all like that. They are mostly good. That bastard who was going to do that to you... I’m sorry. We’re not all bad on Mistveil, I swear.”

“Thank you for killing him.” I’m not going to mince my words. I’m glad Duke is dead.

“It was my pleasure, and I mean that. You should know that you are strong and brave for a human. You gave him a hard time and definitely broke his nose and busted his lip. All very deserved.”

“Is what he said about there not being many women on Mistveil true?”

“It’s true. It is not unusual for many males to share one female. It goes against our culture, but desperate times call for desperate measures. Females are revered and treated like royalty on our island. Of course, if a female chooses to be with only one male, she is not forced to take more.”

“What about you?” I ask.

“No! I am not interested in being shared around. It’s not for me. Unfortunately, that means that there are many males who are completely without a female.”

“No wonder the Red Dragons are so feral and out of control. It is making more sense to me.”

Trinity laughs. “You think the Reds are out of control?” She snorts but doesn’t elaborate.

“Do you know if the man I was with is safe?” My heart starts pounding.

“The Draiger?”

“Yes.” I nod.

“I’m sorry, I’m not sure. I went after you when they started fighting. I had a feeling that you might need my help, and I was right. After that, my only concern was to get you to safety, and now I am not sure what to do with you.”

“Please, can you take me back?”

“I’m sorry, human, but—”

“Kim, you can call me Kim.”

“Alright, Kim. I can’t take you back. I risked my life rescuing you and bringing you here. I was lucky not to have been seen. If one of the Draig Dragons finds me, I’m dead. There will be no questions asked. The problem I face is that I can’t exactly leave you here in the middle of nowhere, but neither can I risk shifting again and alerting those looking for you of my location. I also can’t take you with me because Mistveil is not the ideal place for a human female.” She shakes her head. I can make out her outline enough to see that much.

“What, then? Are you just going to leave me here? Did you have something else in mind?”

She sighs. “I have nothing else in mind. I think I need to leave you. You are a resourceful female.” She doesn’t sound happy about it. “My only issue is that I would hate to have rescued you only for you to be eaten by a wild animal.”

“I could get bitten by a snake or freaking die of dehydration. I’m not equipped for surviving in the jungle.”

“I know.” She sighs. “You humans are timid and a little useless, if you don’t mind me saying.”

“I don’t mind because it’s true, but how do you know? Have you met a human before?”

“I have...recently.” She nods.

I gasp. “Is her name Jen, by any chance? I think that Jen is short for Jennifer.”

“It is indeed, and yes, I met her.”

Holy moly!

This woman has met Jen. Jen is alive!

Getting information is like trying to get water from stone. “Please, can

you tell me more? Is she okay?"

"She's staying at the palace."

"Wait a minute...palace?" I frown. "You guys have a palace on Mistveil?"

Trinity laughs. "Yes, where else would the king live? Jen is staying in the palace. I'm not sure what they are going to do with her. There has been talk of an auction."

"You can't be serious?"

"I am quite serious. She is safe and unharmed. She will be treated like she is made from spun gold, so you do not need to worry."

I do worry, just like worry for Blaze gnaws at my gut. "Please, Trinity... you can't leave me here. I beg you to take me back. Those others searching for us...they're my friends; they won't hurt you. Not if I tell them not to, and I swear I will. You saved my life, and if it comes down to it, I'll save yours. I love Blaze. I need to know he's okay. I need to be reunited with him. Please. What if he's injured?" Suddenly, the tears come. I can't help it. Up until now, I've been freaking amazing at holding it together. But a person can only hold it together for so long.

"Dammit, Kim. I hate tears," Trinity says. "You humans are good at those, too. Waterworks at the drop of a hat."

"Please. I have to find him. I swear that I will protect you."

"You are just a small human. You can't protect me."

"I have a voice. If I tell the others not to harm you, they won't. If I tell them to let you go, they will. You saved my life today, and if you take me back, you might be saving Blaze's life, too. If nothing else, you can leave me there. I am sure that the others will return at some point."

"That's what I am worried about. I also fear that those two Reds are still alive."

"No way. Blaze is an excellent fighter. His dragon is strong. I'm sure he got at least one, if not both, of those Reds. He might be hurt, though." The tears start to come again. I can't help it.

"I can't have my people finding out that I was ever here," Trinity says. "I can't risk them seeing me."

"Please, you can drop me and run. You don't even have to shift," I plead. "They won't know it's you; besides, Blaze will have killed them."

"It's not like I have much of a choice. I can't leave you out here like I planned. I shouldn't have stayed to talk with you," she groans. "I like you,

human. I'm too damned nice for my own good. I would hate to hear that you were lost because of me."

"I would hate that, too," I say in a broken voice. "My biggest concern is for Blaze. I need to see him. I need to know that he is okay."

"Do you promise to keep me safe if the need arises?"

"Absolutely. I would do everything in my power, including standing between you and them – whoever they might be."

She nods. "And do you promise to make sure that I will be allowed to leave?"

"Of course. Drop me off, and you can leave right away. No one will stop you. I will make sure of it. I swear it. Here..." I hold out my pinky.

"What are you doing?"

"It's a human thing; it's called a pinky swear. You need to grip my pinky with yours, and I will tell you that I swear. Then it is done. It will be cast in stone. I can no longer go back on my word."

I'm pretty sure that if I could see her right now, she'd be giving me a strange look. The thing is that I'm desperate. I feel that she is so close to agreeing. Maybe this stupid little gesture will sway her. Having said that, I mean it wholeheartedly. I need to get to Blaze right now. I need her help to do it.

I continue to hold out my pinky. I'm half expecting her to tell me it's stupid or that she's changed her mind, but she doesn't. Trinity finally sighs and grips my pinky with hers. "I hope I don't end up regretting this."

"You won't!" I say. "Trinity, I pinky swear that you will be allowed to leave and that I will do everything in my power to keep you safe...just please take me back."

"Okay." She sighs and lets me go and then takes a step back before shifting.

B laze

I search the area where Duke took Kim. The male is still lying there, just like before. Nothing has been moved. I don't find anything more to go on. Only that I am still certain that she was taken by a dragon.

The canopy has been ripped open, and I see claw marks on the ground where the beast took off. My only hope is that it was one of ours. That they're already back at camp and that someone is on their way here to fetch me. I need to get back to where we were held. It makes logical sense that anyone coming this way would go there. The trees are still smoldering, sending smoke signals to anyone in the area.

I jog back, still nursing my arm. At least the bones pulled straight when I shifted into my human form. It was part of the agony. It's throbbing. Thankfully, the claw marks across my chest have stopped bleeding. I don't think that there is much else wrong with me, which is good. Except bones can take a few days to heal, which sucks. I won't be able to shift during that time. I would not be able to go after Kim if it comes to that. I'm hoping it won't.

It doesn't take me long to reach the area. I start pacing as soon as I get there. I can't relax. Not for a second. Not with worry tearing through me.

'Kim.'

'Where are you?'

I reach out to her with my mind and get...nothing.

Fuck!

I pace some more, up and down. Up and down. My mind is racing. I'm trying to figure out what to do next. Doing nothing seems wrong. This right here feels like I'm doing nothing. Sweet fuck all. Yet running into the jungle half-cocked won't work either, so I force myself to stay right where I am.

I do another ten minutes of pacing when I hear the flapping of wings. I stand still, looking up.

Please!

Please!

I make a sobbing noise when I feel her. When my mind touches that thread that connects us. "Kim," I whisper.

A dragon appears. It's holding her in its talons.

"What the—?" I growl.

The beast is clearly a Red. I can tell by the marks on its scales. I'm instantly on high alert.

"It's fine," Kim yells as the dragon lowers into the space we made earlier during the fight. Trees are overturned, and branches are broken. There is an open section in the canopy where the smoke is still billowing through, even though the fire looks out to me.

"I'm okay," she adds.

The dragon drops her gently on her feet. I want to snarl at the beast, but I hold myself in check. Kim isn't worried in the least. I would feel her fear. She's fine. This beast seems to have brought her back to me. I need to trust Kim's judgment.

I'm confused, shocked, and elated. I run to Kim and put my good arm around her.

She throws herself at me. I grunt when she knocks my arm.

"Oh! Shit! Sorry." She's sobbing. Hot, salty tears are streaming down her cheeks. She turns and waves at the Red. "Thank you, Trinity." She wipes at her tears as the dragon starts to lift.

It makes a soft rumbling noise.

"Goodbye," Kim says, still waving. "Thank you so much." She keeps crying. She's also smiling. The most beautiful thing I have ever seen in my whole entire life. I am mesmerized. I can't take my eyes off her.

As soon as the beast disappears, Kim turns and buries her face in my neck, careful not to hurt my arm. "I wasn't sure I would ever see you again." Her voice is small and broken.

“You’re safe,” I murmur, clutching her tightly with my one good arm. “You’re here. You’re here.” I bury my face in her hair and breathe her in. I almost can’t believe it. I thought I had lost her.

“I’m fine.” She pulls back. Her face is wet, her lashes, too. “What about you? What’s wrong with your arm?” She pulls back, looking down. “Do you have any other injuries? I can’t see a damned thing.”

“My arm is broken, but otherwise, I’m fine, aside from a few cuts and bruises.”

She gasps. “It’s broken?”

“Yes, but don’t worry about me.” My jaw tightens. “What happened? Did he hurt you?” I’m snarling a little and have to force myself to calm down. “Please tell me you’re okay. Please.” A tear tracks down my cheek. I’ve never cried in my life. I’m not ashamed to do it now. Not one fucking bit.

“I swear I’m fine. I fought him. I got a few good hits in, and then my friend Trinity killed him for me. He didn’t get to do anything. I’m...I’m fine.” She shudders.

“Thank god! I would never have forgiven myself if anything had happened to you.” I hug her again; my throat has fully clogged. My eyes are stinging. I bury my face back in her hair again.

“It’s not your fault.”

“It is! You’re mine to protect, and I screwed up. Never again!” I vow.

“Don’t you dare tell me that I can’t be a rider again. I am your rider. We’re doing this.”

I kiss her softly. “I wouldn’t dare. Who is this Trinity? Is that the Red who just dropped you off?” My voice hardens. I guess old habits die hard. Reds are our enemy. At least, they normally are.

“Yes, she’s very nice. She helped me, Blaze.”

“There are no such things as nice Reds,” I say, and yet, if I hadn’t just witnessed what I did with my own eyes, I would never have believed it. The Red helped Kim.

“You’re wrong. Trinity is sweet. I really like her. There was nothing crazy or feral about her. She shifted a couple of times and was just as gentle with me in her dragon form.”

“How can that be?” I speak more to myself.

“I don’t know. I’m just telling you what I just experienced. She was here, following the three guys. She wouldn’t tell me too much about it. I get the feeling she didn’t like what they were up to. I really think she’s a good Red.

Maybe they aren't all bad." She shrugs.

I'm just so happy to have her back that I hug her again. "I love you so damned much. We're going to get you that ring. And then I can't wait to put it on your finger. To make it official. To make you my wife...my mate... you're already my everything."

"That sounds good." We kiss. It's soft and tender. "I can't wait either," she says against my lips. "I was so afraid."

"I'm sure. That motherfucker—"

"I was afraid when we were captured and afraid when Duke took me, but I'm not talking about that. I'm talking about afterward. I knew you were fighting them. That it was two against one. When I didn't know the outcome...I was so afraid. I thought I'd lost you." Kim cups my jaw in both her hands and then kisses me. "I love you so much." Then she lets me go. "I guess we have to sit and wait for help to come. How is your arm feeling?"

"It's a little uncomfortable." I play down the throbbing. Sure, I'm in a bit of pain, but I can handle it.

"I can hear from your voice that it isn't true. You're in pain, and we don't have painkillers. Hey! Wait a minute. Maybe I can try to do that thing to you. You know, like you did to me. The healing by hands thing."

"Absolutely." I nod. "We can try." I smile. "Don't be disappointed if it doesn't work, though. It works better when a dragon does it to a human. It can take a bond years to strengthen enough for the reverse to be true."

"You keep telling me that I'm a natural; maybe I'm a natural at this, too." She smiles.

"It's worth a try," I tell her.

"Maybe we should sit down first. It'll make it easier."

We head to one of the fallen logs. I use my good arm to help steer her through all the debris. Kim sits on the side of my broken arm.

"How does it work? What do I need to do?" she asks, taking my arm onto her lap.

"Gently put your hands around where the break is."

"Here?" she says, doing as I say and circling my lower bicep.

"A little higher," I say.

She slides her hands higher up my arm. "Here?" She gasps. "It's warm. I think it might be inflamed."

"More than likely."

"This has to be hurting you, Blaze."

“It’s a little sore, but I’m fine, I swear,” I insist. I don’t want her to feel bad if this doesn’t work, and in all likelihood, it won’t. We haven’t been bonded for all that long.

“What next?” she asks.

“Think about the bones knitting. Think about blood flowing to the area. And about the swelling going down. See these things in your mind’s eye.”

“Bones knitting.” She closes her eyes. “Bones knitting,” she repeats. “No pain. No inflammation. Bones knitting.”

Her hands start to get warm, and she lets go. “What was that?” she gasps. “I think I was doing it. That was it, right?”

“Yep, I think so.” I laugh.

“Okay, okay.” She rubs her hands together. “Let’s try again.” She rolls her shoulders for good measure. “I can do this.”

“You can do anything you put your mind to. That’s something I’m coming to realize about you, Kim. Another thing I love about you.” I get this warm fuzzy feeling inside me, and my chest tightens with so much emotion.

“You’re sweet,” she says.

I brush a quick kiss against her lips. I don’t think I’m going to be able to let her out of sight for a while.

Then Kim puts her hands on me, and the heat comes quicker this time. There is light from the moon since the canopy has been opened. Her eyes flutter closed. She is in deep concentration, even biting on her bottom lip, which I don’t think she realizes she’s doing. My arm gets warmer and warmer. After a time, her hands start to shake a little.

“It’s fine,” I say in a soft voice. “You don’t need to do any more.” It’s been such a long day. Kim has been through so much.

She ignores me...of course she does. I bite back a smile. This is my woman.

A minute later, she lets go, her shoulders slumping. “I hope it helped. My hands got so warm. Did you feel it?”

“I did, and I have to say,” I look down at my arm, “it isn’t hurting.”

“You’re lying to me.” She sounds shocked.

“No, I’m not. Not at all.” I hold my arm out. “I couldn’t do this before.” I gingerly open and close my hand. “I couldn’t do that either.” There is a slight twinge, but...fuck...I’m a million times better than before. “You did it. You actually did it.”

“No!” She sounds shocked, and I don’t blame her.

“I don’t think it’s completely healed...but maybe it’s healed enough to shift. I think I should try. Do you think you would be okay to ride me without a saddle? I’d go really slowly.”

She frowns. “Not if shifting is going to hurt you. I’m sure someone will come and fetch us soon.”

“I’m fine. I can do this. You healed me. You actually did it.” I kiss her again, harder this time.

She giggles. “Let’s do it, then, but don’t shift if it’s too painful or—”

“I’m fine. I really think I got this.”

“Okay, then.” She nods.

I move a little way away from her, and I shift. I fucking shift. My woman healed me enough to make a shift possible. I’m in awe of her. In absolute awe. To think that she’s worried about not being a good mom. She’s everything that’s positive in this world. Everything that’s good.

I rumble deep down in my throat and go down on my belly so that she can climb aboard.

My dragon is with me one hundred percent when it comes to her. He is being careful. Protective and caring.

‘Mine.’

I carefully flap my great wings and then slowly lift up into the sky. I have precious cargo on board.

Kim

I hold on tight with my legs, gripping onto the spike behind me. The sun has just started to rise. The horizon is a riot of beautiful colors, from crimson to orange to the most beautiful yellows and even purples. It's breathtaking.

Thankfully, Blaze flies really slowly and carefully.

He seems fine. Shit! I still can't believe that I healed him. Me! With my mind. I'm not sure how it happened exactly, only that it did. It almost makes me feel like things have somehow come full circle. So much has happened since he healed my ankle. I feel like I'm a different person. I mean, I'm flying a dragon. My dragon. It's surreal.

I smile to myself like a colossal idiot. It's just that I've never been so happy. So, fulfilled. Even after everything that's happened, I'm happy.

We're still a little way from camp when I spot a dragon in the distance.

'Friends,' Blaze projects into my mind as soon as he feels my concern.

Thank goodness. I don't think I could take much more. Not today. They get close, and I see a rider on top of the dragon. She waves.

It's Kerry. I wave back. They were on their way back to us. Blaze makes a rumbling noise, and Atlas does the same back.

"You're okay?" Kerry shouts; she's beaming.

"I am." I smile back at her.

"Blaze, too. I thought he was injured." She frowns. Atlas banks, and we

start flying in the same direction.

I'm too tired to say much of anything, so I simply say, "He's okay. We're okay."

"I'm so glad. We were so worried about you. We searched for hours. On the plus side, we all got in some serious flying time." She squirms in her seat. "My ass hurts." She looks down at Atlas. "Yes, yes. I know you were the one doing all the flying." She laughs. "They're so temperamental." She widens her eyes.

Atlas wobbles, tilting his wings up and down, unbalancing Kerry slightly. She squeals and grabs the horn.

"See what I mean?" she says to me. "I'm only kidding." She reaches down and pets his scales. Atlas makes a chuffing noise.

We fly in silence for a minute or two.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Kerry asks me. "You must have been really afraid." Her eyes are huge.

"If you don't mind, I'm too tired to talk about it right now."

"Of course." Kerry nods. "I'm here if you need me."

I smile. "Thanks."

It's quiet again for a time, then we land on the open patch of sand right in the middle of camp. I'm infinitely grateful. I don't think I could've made the walk all the way here from the normal flight training grounds.

Blaze crouches down, and I slowly make my way down. I'm starting to feel my injuries. My wrists sting. My right knee is a bit puffy and is throbbing just a little. My whole body feels drained and, quite frankly, a little sore. I think I'm going to be stiff in the morning.

I chuckle because it is already morning.

"What's so funny?" Blaze asks me.

"You made it back," Hunter yells.

"We were so fucking worried," Dagger adds. Within a few seconds, Skylar and Fang join us.

Shadow, too. "You scared the crap out of me," she growls. Then she jogs over to us, and, in an uncharacteristic display of affection, she hugs first me and then Blaze. "Don't do that again!" she yells at Blaze and then hugs him a second time. "I swear you took ten years off my life."

A loud shriek draws everyone's attention to the sky above. It's pale blue, promising a beautiful day.

"What...?" I whisper as I catch sight of them.

Two dragons are approaching. One is much bigger than the other. It's black, with glinting golden scales scattered across the deep ebony.

"What the hell is Octane doing?" Shadow snarls. "He isn't permitted to shift."

That's when I notice that he doesn't have a rider. He hasn't mind-bonded anyone, so he can't have a rider. That's dangerous. Why has he shifted? What is he doing?

"Let's get indoors," Blaze says, gripping my arm. "It isn't safe out here."

"Wait!" I yell. "That's a Red," I add. "The dragon with Octane is a Red. Look at the scales." I strain my eyes...I'm sure I'm right.

"I know. I saw," Blaze says. "All the more reason to get inside. This is a dangerous situation," he shouts. "Please, Kim."

I can't go. My eyes are glued to the scene above. No one else leaves. Not one person. Dagger pushes Hunter behind him. Fang does the same with Skylar, but they stand their ground. I can't take my eyes off of them. Octane is herding the Red toward us. He's using his sharp hind claws to do it. The Red tries to dart away but he won't let it. It's much smaller. So much smaller. Dread is pooling in my belly.

"That's a female," Dagger says. "That Red is a female."

No!

It can't be.

It's too much of a coincidence, though. It has to be her.

"How do you know it's a female?" Hunter asks.

"Do you see those spikes on the side of her head? Well, they're a bit smaller and curl more inward than a male's do," Dagger points out. "She's smaller than a male. I've never seen a female Red Dragon before." He sounds in awe.

"Oh...I see." Hunter makes a noise of agreement. "I think I see the difference now."

"Please, Kim. It isn't safe." Blaze tries to take my hand, but I won't let him.

"That's Trinity," I say.

"It might not be her," he tells me, trying once again to take my hand.

"It's her! It has to be her. I'm not going anywhere." I shake my head.

"Who is Trinity, and how do you know this Red?" Shadow asks me, frowning.

I watch in horror as Octane continues to force the dragon that is Trinity

closer and closer to our camp. He is forcing her down. He wants her to land and is being hardcore about it with his roars and shrieks.

“How do you know her?” Shadow asks again.

“Ummm...she helped me. She killed a Red and saved me,” I tell her.

“What? Are you saying that the Red killed one of her own kind to save you? A human. Forgive me, but that doesn’t sound right.” Shadow shakes her head.

I push out a breath. “It is what happened! Trinity helped me. She saved me.”

They’re close. Octane screeches. He shoves at Trinity, his claws digging in, but not quite piercing skin and scale.

“Stop!” I yell, even though I know it won’t help.

Trinity bellows. It’s a heart-wrenching sound that cuts me deep.

I sob, putting a hand in front of my mouth.

Blaze puts his arm around me. “I’m sorry,” he says. “We’ll fix it. We’ll explain what happened. They’ll let her go.”

“They have to.” I look up and into his eyes. “Please, they have to, Blaze.”

“Are you going to tell us what happened?” Shadow says. “How is it that she saved you, and, moreover, how is it that you know her name?”

Trinity lands in a puff of dust. So does Octane. He roars at her, getting right in her face.

“What is he doing?” I scream.

“Please calm down, my love. Please. I swear we’ll fix this,” Blaze begs me. I feel his desperation tugging on my bond. I hope he feels mine.

“Everyone is to remain calm and to stand your ground,” Shadow warns. “Be ready to intervene,” she tells us. “Octane is trying to get the female to shift. He is the most controlled unbonded dragon I know,” she says. “I’m still going to kill him for this,” she adds more to herself.

It doesn’t take long for Trinity to give in and shift. Within a few seconds, a woman stands before us. Since it was pitch black before, I’m only really seeing her now for the first time. She’s tall, but not as tall as Shadow. Her hair is long and black. I can’t tell her eye color because she’s a little too far away.

Octane shifts, too. I wait until he is done, and then I rush forward. “Trinity!” I yell.

I hear Blaze call my name. He follows right behind me, but he doesn’t try to stop me, which I am grateful for.

“Kim,” Trinity says. Now that I am closer, I see that her eyes are a beautiful chestnut. They’re filled with fear. “You promised,” she says.

“I’m sorry. This is a mistake.” My voice is shrill.

“You know this Red?” Octane says.

I look at him and nod. “You have to let her go. I know her. She’s good. She helped me escape from the Red males who held us hostage. Please, Octane. She brought me back to Blaze. She didn’t have to, but she did because I asked her to. I begged her. I promised her that she wouldn’t be hurt. That she wouldn’t be detained. I promised, Octane. She trusted me. She helped me, and look where it landed her. You have to let her go home right now,” I beg him. My voice is high-pitched. I talk quickly.

“It’s not my fault you made promises you can’t keep,” Octane tells me. “We had a plan. Capture a Red and garner the information we need. Here is our Red.” He points at Trinity.

“Not her. She’s my friend. What are you not understanding? I promised. A promise means everything to me.”

“I told you that you made a promise you should never have made. It’s not my promise to keep, Kim. My promise is to my people. To Draig. I swore an oath to protect them at any cost. This female is the answer,” Octane says.

“No!” I yell. “I won’t let you,” I tell him.

“You won’t let me?” He shakes his head, narrowing his golden eyes on me. “Sorry, human. That might work on Blaze, but it sure as shit won’t work on me.”

“You can’t keep her,” Shadow says, and my shoulders sag with relief.

Oh, thank god.

“Why not?” Octane growls. “It’s a perfectly good Red.” He gestures to her.

“Not it!” I growl. “She! What the hell is wrong with you?”

Octane ignores me. “Why can’t I keep her?”

“She’s with child,” Shadow says.

What?

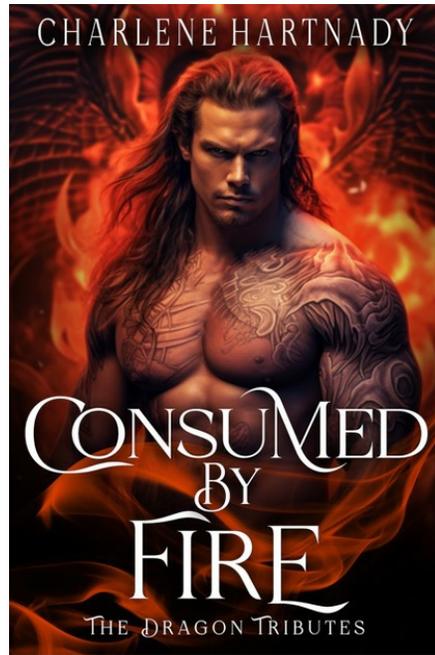
My mouth falls open. I let my eyes trace down her naked form, really looking at her body for the first time. Her breasts are heavy, tipped with dark nipples, and her belly— Oh, lord, no! Her belly is lightly curved. So lightly curved that you might miss it if you weren’t looking for it.

“Trinity?” I say, almost in question.

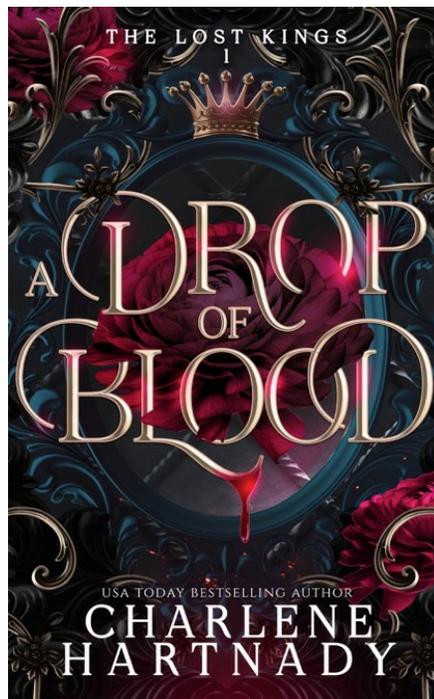
Trinity puts her hands on her belly in a protective fashion. “Please,” she

whispers.

***Consumed by Fire* is on pre-order now.**



EXCERPT OF A DROP OF BLOOD



Chapter 1

Thesha

We watch him approach. A shadowy figure in the murky light. Clods of thick mud fly up from the hooves of his galloping horse. The animal is breathing hard, its flanks white with glistening sweat. Hooves thud against

the loose, wet ground, nostrils flaring. The poor beast is moving fast, considering that it's not very tall and clearly fatigued.

"They're coming," Ethan says, his voice low. We are a group eighteen strong. Ethan and I are at the front. A horse snorts, and another stomps its hoof. We're all on edge, both animal and human alike.

I don't answer him because it's a given that they're coming. The bloodfae are predictable. Those bastards make this trip several times a moon cycle. Always on the same days, but never from the same place. They hunt across the whole kingdom, leaving none of the settlements in peace. I hate all of the seven kinds of fae, but these are the worst. Bloodsuckers, the lot of them, and for what? Power? Pleasure? Food? Hah, they don't need our blood to survive. Is there more to it? I don't care either way. No human life is worth whatever they derive from our veins.

I let my eyes wander across the once grassy plains of Babel as Basil continues toward us. We are central, and the openness of the plains allows for relatively swift riding so that we can intercept them. Perfect for an ambush. Except this will be our third time taking this approach. I'm skeptical that a third will be as effective, if at all. Those damn fae are a lot of things, but stupid isn't one of them.

Ethan shifts in his saddle, the leather creaking as he does.

I don't look at him; my eyes are on our scout. Everyone's attention is on our scout.

"Basil had better have good news." He sounds ready for battle. From the chatter that builds behind us, I would say that he is not alone. There is a possibility that they are coming from the wrong direction. The region that was once desert is too open for an ambush. If they're coming from there, we'll need to abandon our efforts and try another day.

Basil is crouched low over his saddle, allowing his horse to move more freely. Poor sod's thighs must be burning. His coat is billowing behind him. He slows a little as he nears us. His eyes are wide, and his hands are white-knuckled on the reins.

My horse nickers in greeting. She tosses her head, anticipating what is to come. I hold tightly onto the plaited leather of my reins as she prances.

"Easy, Star." I put a hand on her generous black coat. Her mane is thick and shaggy. Our horses might be much smaller than the steeds we once rode, but they are strong and sure-footed. I could ask for no more trustworthy a companion and friend.

Ethan snorts. “I still don’t know why you named that beast Star.” He looks upward. “It’s not like we’ve seen one of them in a very long time.”

Always the pessimist about things that truly count. I can still remember what the night sky looked like. Just like I can still remember how the sun’s rays felt on my back. I ignore Ethan. He has grown tedious of late. His sheer arrogance and closed-mindedness are wearing on me.

Basil skids to a halt before us. Both he and his horse are breathing hard. So hard that he can’t speak for a few long moments.

“They’re coming,” he finally pushes out. His mouth is open wide, sucking in air.

I hand him a skin of water, feeling the urgency rise inside me. I shove down my impatience, keeping in mind how hard Basil has ridden. Sweat clings to his brow, and his pale complexion has taken on a gray hue.

“Which direction?” Ethan asks, impatience laced in his voice.

Basil sucks in a few more lungfuls of air. “East...through the Forest of Tul.” He drinks greedily from my skin for a few moments before the need for air forces him to stop. He gulps in big, heaving breaths.

I think about what he just said. That means we can ambush them if we have sufficient time. My gut churns, and bile rises in my throat.

“How close?” Ethan snaps.

Basil is about to drink from the skin again when Ethan leans forward and knocks it from his hand.

“How close?” he grits out. His eyes have narrowed.

I jump from Star and retrieve the now almost empty skin. I glare at Ethan, who takes no notice of me. Clean water is impossible to find, and making water drinkable is an arduous task.

“They will reach the end of the forest soon enough.” The whites of Basil’s eyes look huge. “Not more than an hour. You will need to leave soon if you wish to surprise them.” His chest heaves.

“I still think that this is risky,” I say. “They will be expecting us this time.” I have a gut feeling about this, but Ethan won’t hear of it. I seal the waterskin and mount my horse, tying the skin to my saddle pack.

“Nonsense,” Ethan growls. “We ambushed them at the Blackwater ponds the first time. That’s half a day’s ride east.” He points in the general direction.

I want to correct him. They’re the Whitewater ponds. Just because the water no longer runs clean doesn’t mean the name has changed. I hold my

tongue.

“A few moons ago, it was at the Deadman’s Valley,” he goes on. “They will not be expecting us in the Forest of Tul.” He shakes his head. There are murmurs of agreement among the men. His brows lift. “You were at the meeting this morning; it has already been decided, Thesha. We ride now, and there is no time to argue.” He starts to turn his horse in the direction Basil just rode from.

“It’s a mistake. They *will* be expecting us this time. They’re not stupid. I think that we got lucky in the Deadman’s Valley. They are ready for us this time.” I give it a last-ditch attempt. I can feel it in my gut, and my instincts very rarely steer me wrong.

“Did you see more fae than normal?” Ethan asks Basil.

“Only one more, since there are two wagons this time,” Basil replies. “So, only ten of them. We can handle one extra fae.” He shrugs, looking at me like I’ve lost my mind. “Think of how many slaves we can free, Thesha. We can’t let them take our people.”

“I hear you, but I don’t like it. What good will it do if we are captured? There will be no one left to stand against these vermin.” I shake my head, feeling my long braid against my back. Kakara’s cat, it must have come loose during the ride here. “I think it’s folly. It might be a trap.”

“It’s not a trap,” Ethan grumbles, sounding frustrated. “Are you on your moon’s blood?”

There are sniggers from all around us. I feel my cheeks heat, but it is from anger rather than embarrassment. He likes to use the fact that I am a woman against me.

“Perhaps you should go back to camp,” Ethan sneers. “The bloodfae are driven mad by the scent of fresh—”

“You can stop right there, Ethan. We are wasting time. I vote against this ambush. They will be prepared this time. Mark my words.”

“You’re wrong.” He smirks at me.

“I don’t think it’s a trap,” Jack says from behind Ethan.

“Nope, not a trap,” Basil agrees, shaking his head. “I didn’t see anything out of the ordinary.”

“I think you’re all wrong.” I look Ethan in the eye.

“Do you want to bet?” His eyes narrow and drift down to my breasts. I’m wearing leather armor, so I know he can’t see my shape. My breasts are mashed beneath the thick hide. My skin crawls, nonetheless. He has made no

secret of his wish to bed me. Ethan can try all he likes; it will never happen.

Our leader is good-looking and very charming when he wants to be, but I can tell that he has no idea how to please a woman. He's far too selfish.

"I'm sure we could come up with a wager that would leave us both winners," Ethan smirks over his shoulder, and some of the men openly laugh.

I snort, unable to help myself. "It would seem that your idea of winning and my idea of winning are very different indeed."

Ethan's face turns red with anger. Someone coughs behind us, trying to hold back a laugh.

"We ride, Thesha, and either you are with us, or you can escort Basil back to camp. Maybe you should go and work in the healer's tent. It's that, or I hear that Franny is looking for another cook. Maybe that's more your speed, especially if you've lost your nerve for battle." Ethan kicks his horse so sharply that the poor beast grunts before taking off at a sharp clip.

The rest of the men go after him, and Star prances beneath me, snorting and flicking her head. Thomas looks back at me over his shoulder. I catch a look of pity in his eye. Well, he can save it. I don't need his pity.

Ethan can be such a prick. I push out a heavy sigh and touch my feet to my girl's flanks. She leaps forward, eager to join the rest of the horses. I have a horrible feeling they are going to need my help. It looks like Ethan's arrogance is contagious. It's a dangerous trait, particularly dangerous when it comes to our dealings with the bloodfae. They're the most ruthless of all of the fae species. A shiver runs through me as I put my leg more firmly on Star, urging her to go faster.

Chapter 2

Xander

I spit blood from my mouth. My tongue feels thick, and another gush of warmth fills my cheek with the taste of copper. Hades be damned, but my tongue is still bleeding from when I clamped down on it with my teeth earlier. One of my eyes is swollen tightly shut, and breathing hurts to the point where I know I broke at least one, if not two, ribs.

I look down and note that my arm has stopped bleeding. That's something. Not much, but I'll take it. I shift in my seat, trying to get more

comfortable in the tightly packed wagon, and am rewarded with an elbow to my side. I grunt, thankful it was to my good side, although “good” is pushing it.

The wagon lurches and rocks, bumping along the forest path. It feels overgrown. I feel every jolt and bump like a knife to the chest. We’ve been on the road for several hours. It will be nightfall soon.

Nightfall.

Funny how we used to call it sunset. It can’t be called sunset anymore because there is no sun to set. We live mostly in the dark. A sad and sorry existence with four or five hours of murky light a day. No one has seen the sun in years.

Not since that day.

Of course, the various species of fae are in their impenetrable domes where they have plenty of sun. And there’s the pesky reality that the domes are only around their royal courts and surrounding lands. To make matters worse, humans can’t enter their territory unaccompanied by fae. Word has it that they’re protected by a magical barrier. At least, those are the rumors that I have heard. I’m not sure if they’re even true.

I used to farm wheat, potatoes, and carrots, and we even had an apple grove that gave us the biggest, sweetest fruit in the whole of the Nezcara Valley. Despite the taste of blood and the pain I am in, my mouth starts to water at the thought of an apple. Of all the things we took for granted. The sun, clouds, stars, the moon; such beauty. Of course, my mind wanders to Lily. My beautiful wife and our daughter, Sumara. Both lost to the death plague that hit soon after the sun left us. My heart still aches. I put a hand to my chest, the pain of my broken ribs momentarily forgotten.

It is said that the gods cursed the Sun Realm when the kings left us. Their wrath brought the plague and chased the sun. Since then, their backs have been turned from us. I believe it to be true. It certainly feels like we have been shunned by the gods.

Longing fills me. Like everyone else on this godsforsaken planet, I wish to see the sun again. To feel it on my face. I can still recall the warmth, the likes of which cannot be manufactured. Not fur and not even fire can recreate the feeling of the sun’s rays. Not that we are lucky enough to have fire very often these days because we don’t. It’s almost impossible to get the wood dry enough for proper kindling. Once or twice a week is a luxury.

The one ray of light in being captured by the fae scum is that I might

actually get to eat a proper meal again. It has been said that even the slaves eat better than the frees. My mouth waters at the thought of red meat.

I can't complain. At least I still have a thriving coop of chickens, so I still get eggs and meat. Then again, I hope I still have chickens after the raid.

My farm still yields small quantities of potatoes and kohlrabi and high quantities of cabbage. It's tough to exist day after day on the same thing. Food is food, and with so many starving, I have never been one to take sustenance for granted.

The wagon lurches to a sudden stop that has me grunting. White-hot pain sears through my chest.

The fae are speaking among themselves. They're too far away to make out what they are saying. One of the front riders lopes his horse to the men riding at the rear of our procession. There are eight fae on horseback and one driving each of the wagons pulling prisoners.

A teenage girl shoves her face up against the bars. Her cheeks are streaked with dirt, and her hair is greasy and lackluster. "I need to piss. Hey! Hey, mister...I need to piss real bad," she shouts.

"Hold it," someone whispers.

"I can't," she mutters. "Please!" she yells.

"Piss in your smock," one of the women whispers.

I have to agree. It is reckless to draw attention to yourself. Instead of trying to intervene, I keep my head down. My tongue is throbbing with every beat of my heart. I don't think I could form words even if I tried. At least my mouth has finally stopped bleeding. I would prefer it if it didn't start up again so soon. On the plus side, my eye isn't swollen completely shut anymore, just most of the way there. Lucky me!

"Hey, fae-sir. Fae-sir, please. I don't want to piss my smock," she yells, holding the bars of the cage we've been stuffed into like animals.

It would be better if she did piss her smock. I see one of the guards turn to the girl. His eyes narrow. "Quieten down," he tells her in a gruff voice.

"Please," she begs again pitifully.

Two of the fae talk to one another. Again, it isn't loud enough to catch what they are saying.

The larger of the two fae climbs off his horse. He unhooks a bunch of keys from his belt. "Do not do anything stupid, girl." He glares at us before turning his narrowed eyes on her. "You will need to be quick," he says. "Hurry up and don't try anything, or there will be consequences."

I note that four of the fae have moved in behind the wagon, ready to pick off anyone who tries running. It would be foolish to dare go against them with these odds. Although there are twelve of us shoved inside this cage, it isn't nearly enough to defeat ten well-armed fae. Not even close. We would be beaten some more and shoved back inside this cage to rot.

Chances are good that I'm destined for the fighting rings. It'll be that or the mines. I'm not sure which is worse, but what I do know without a shadow of a doubt is that I'll need my strength either way. My days are numbered, and so I must try to escape if the opportunity arises. A man needs to know when to fight and when to stand down. Right now, I need to bide my time and look for such a prospect. This is not the right time. I sigh because sometimes doing nothing is the most difficult of all the things to do.

The fae male opening the lock has overgrown hair that falls into his face. His pointy ears are visible through the curls. His eyes are a vivid green. Too vivid to be human. It's another giveaway.

The lock clicks open.

The young girl jumps out, staggering and falling onto one knee. She jumps up and runs for a rocky outcrop.

"Stay close," the guard tells her. "If you run, you will be sorry. If you dawdle, I will make a meal out of you as punishment." His eyes drift to her neck, and he chuckles cruelly. He is taller than most humans, with broad shoulders. Almost all of the fae are big like him, the females of the species, too.

"I won't dawdle," she yells as she ducks behind the rocks. There is very little undergrowth left. It's mostly a desolate, muddy wasteland, just like the rest of the Sun Realm. Most of the trees are long since dead, with only a handful that still have a smattering of leaves. Even those sparse leaves are more yellow than green. Everything is dying or dead. We will follow soon enough.

The fae walks back to his horse but doesn't remount. He and one of the mounted fae start up a conversation. He leaves the gate to the cage unlocked. I make a quick assessment of the individuals in the cage. There are seven men, most of us injured. There are three women and two young girls, one of whom is pissing behind the boulders. It's not enough. We would be cut down in an instant. I know this, and yet I burn to take action. I remind myself that to delay is sometimes the best path to follow. Still, it sticks in my craw.

Suddenly, I hear a whistling noise, followed by a thud. For a moment,

everything seems normal...and then the fae on the horse starts to fall. As he tumbles, I notice that he has a feathered arrow protruding from his chest. Before he hits the ground, all hell breaks loose. More arrows fly. A horse falls beneath another of the fae, arrows in its side.

The green-eyed fucker starts running toward us just as swords start to clang together. With no thought to my broken ribs or to any of my other ailments, I shove my way to the front of the cage and kick the metal door as hard as I can. The upper corner of the cage catches the fae square in his face with a crunch. Blood sprays from his nose and mouth, but he doesn't fall, even though he staggers back a couple of steps. Unfortunately, he finds his footing. Fucking typical of these bloodsuckers. They're strong and wily.

I jump out of the wagon, ducking when the fae swings wildly in my direction with a meaty fist. I knee him in the groin. He howls, not in pain but in outrage, his eyes narrowing on me.

Some of the prisoners jump from the wagon and limp for cover. Most stay cowed inside the cage. By Jessop's tit, they should take their chance and run. They won't get another too soon, if ever, and of that fact, I am sure.

He swings at me again, and I duck under his armpit and lock an arm around his neck. Then I twist and throw him to the ground. I follow him down, putting a knee on his chest, and start pounding on him with my fists. I aim for his face. I get in three solid blows before he wraps a hand around my neck and squeezes. I'm reminded once again how strong these fiends are. Strong, resilient, and fucking tough to kill.

I pull his head up and slam the back of his skull on the ground a few times, dazing him into letting me go. I know it won't last long; he'll recover within a few blinks of an eye.

I noticed earlier that he has a knife and a short sword in leather sheaths on his belt. The knife will work better in such close contact, so I pull that just as the fae's eyes focus on me once again. I plunge the knife into his chest and then lean into it, twisting the blade. His expression goes blank as I pierce his heart.

I remove the blade, pulling the sword from the scabbard. For a moment, I marvel at how good the hilt feels in my hand. How right it feels, even though this is the first time I have ever felt the weight of a sword in my hand. Perhaps it is because I am used to holding the handle of a pitchfork or a rake.

Not so different, perhaps.

A scream draws my attention, reminding me that I need to stay focused if

I want to win back my freedom. Using a swift motion, I cleave the fae's head from his shoulders in one easy slice. It rolls a few feet before stopping facedown. The only way to know for sure that you've killed a fae is to remove their heart or their head.

When I look up, I see a woman on horseback riding hard toward us. She is holding a bow and arrow; the reins are hanging free on the animal's neck. She looses a shaft into a nearby fae, who is drinking from a human. Bloodfae can harness their magic through the taking of blood. This one should have kept his focus.

***A Drop of Blood* is out now!**

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Charlene Hartnady is a USA Today Bestselling author. She loves to write about all things paranormal, including vampires, elves and shifters of all kinds. She lives on a couple of acres in the country with her husband and three sons. They have an array of pets including horses and a gecko named Pickle.

She is lucky enough to be able to write full time, so most days you can find her at her computer writing like mad. Charlene believes that it is the small things that truly matter, like that feeling you get when you start a new book, or when you look at a particularly beautiful sunset.

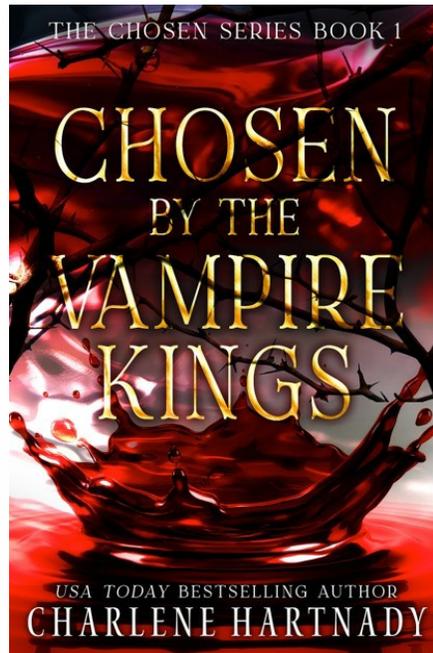
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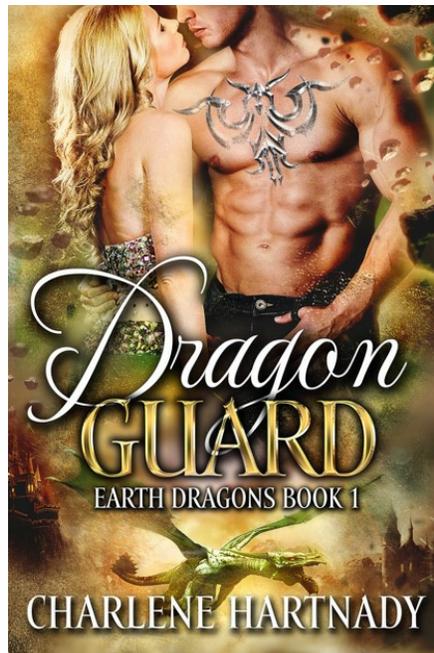
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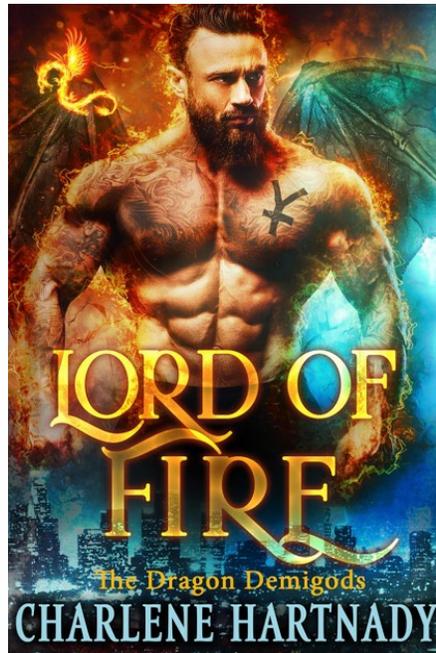
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