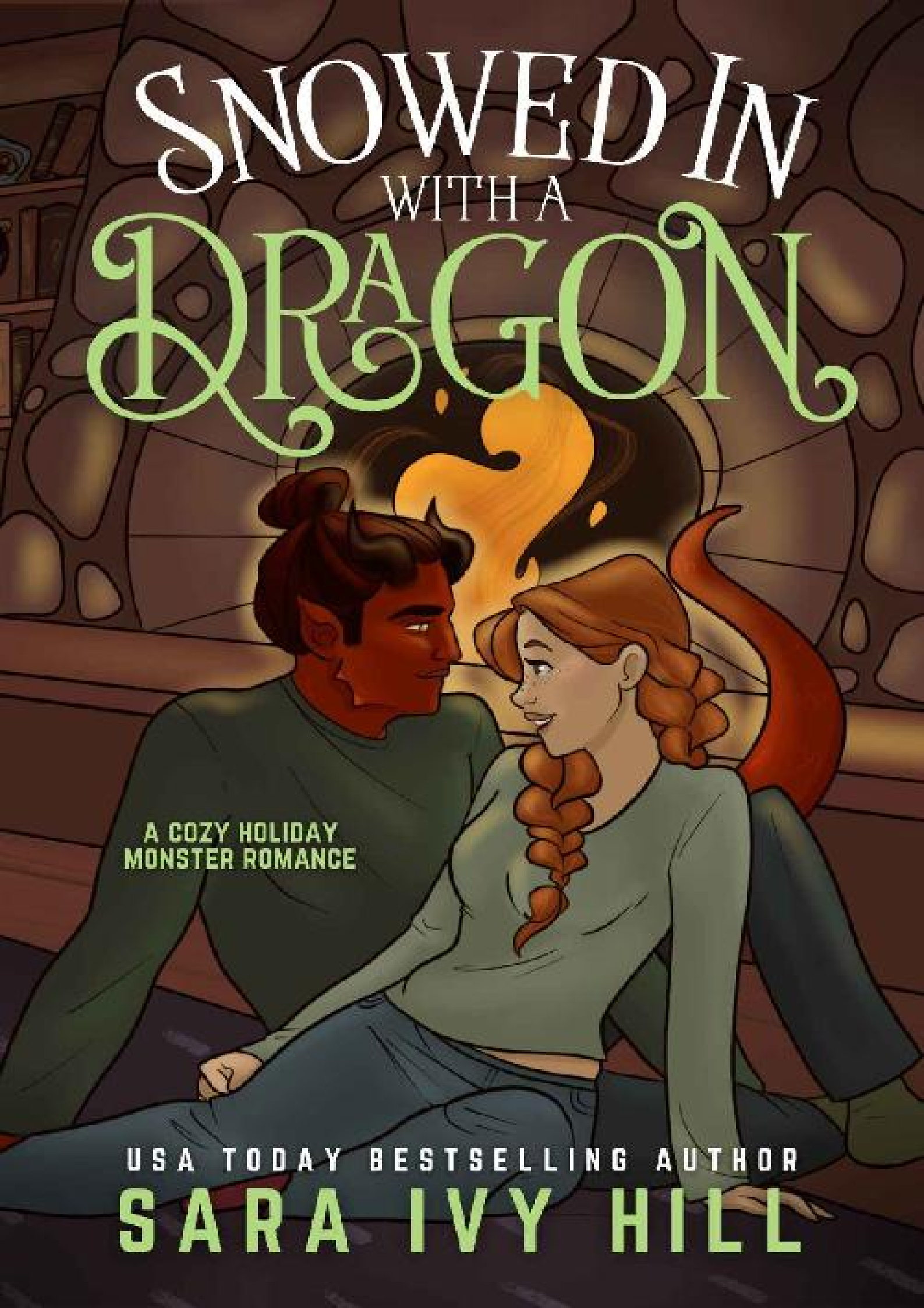


SNOWED IN WITH A DRAGON



A COZY HOLIDAY
MONSTER ROMANCE

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
SARA IVY HILL

Snowed In with a Dragon

A Cozy Holiday Monster Romance

Sara Ivy Hill

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Cover illustration by Kit Fox <https://linktr.ee/kitfoxart>

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DEPICTED IN SCENES

Cheating (not by main characters), Fireplay

REFERENCED

Stalking

TROPES

Snowed In, Monster's First Kiss, Inhuman Anatomy, Monster Mating Ritual, Fated Mates, Handlebar Horns, The Perfect Gift, Holiday Getaway, Stalking but it's Sweet, Playing with Fire, Tail Antics



1

Christmas Eve

Ivy paused on the sidewalk to adjust her grip on the two bags of baked goods her boss had given to her when they closed early for the winter holidays. Two pies, three loaves of olive-and-rosemary bread, a dozen-and-a-half bagels, and some gorgeous mini fruitcakes that hadn't sold well, along with a jar of house-made fig jam and another of hazelnut butter weighed them down. Perfect provisions to take up to the rental cabin for lazy, no-cook breakfasts and Christmas treats.

This year, instead of facing the decision about where to celebrate the holiday—with his noisy, argumentative family or her small, somber one—Ivy and her boyfriend were avoiding the question and retreating to the mountains, just the two of them, for a long weekend of hot-tubbing and hiding out. Waking up to birdsong, fresh snow, and bagels for three days in a row? *Bliss*.

Ivy closed her eyes for an extra-long moment as she trudged up the familiar route toward home, enjoying the vision. She and James needed this time together to reconnect after a hectic autumn. His work schedule as an admissions officer at Otherworld Academy was nearly opposite hers. He held evening information nights and weekend orientations, while she worked bakers' hours, leaving before he woke and often falling asleep, exhausted from a day rolling dough and pinching pie crust, before he returned home.

They only had Saturday nights and Sunday mornings free to spend together, and lately not even those. This semester, James had a special project, some collaboration within the admissions department that made him short-tempered and distant when he was home and kept him at work even later than usual. Sometimes he even slept at the office.

He'd promised the project would end before their winter vacation, though, so she'd been patient and tried to stay out of his way. His career was on an upward trajectory, and he needed to focus. Ivy felt lucky that she already had her dream job.

She reached the last block, the part where the hill was steepest, and paused again to catch her breath. Despite the freezing temperatures, a bead of sweat rolled down her back underneath her quilted jacket. She tugged off her wool hat, exposing her red, braided pigtails, and shoved it into the pocket of her coat before resuming the trek.

"You don't *really* want to go home yet, do you?" a voice came from the opposite corner of the intersection.

Ivy instantly flushed at the familiar drawl. It was Tairon, of course. A muscular dragon with broad shoulders and horns, he sat astride his shiny, black motorcycle like he was the king of 39th and Rosewood. He had green tattoos vining between the red scales on his forearms and a rakish, toothy grin that made all the other bakery girls giggle when he stopped in to buy his daily bagel.

Over the past few years, he and Ivy had struck up the friendly kind of relationship that occurs between a counter clerk and a regular...meaning he flirted shamelessly with her, teasing her when she had a smudge of flour on her nose and dropping compliments if she wore her hair a different way. He'd even slipped small gifts into her tip jar along with his change sometimes: a blue jay feather or pretty river rock or, once, a note asking her out.

She'd taken him aside the next day and explained that, while flattered, she had a boyfriend. He'd been good-natured about the rejection, backing off just the right amount so it was clear he wasn't offended or put off at all. He was toeing the line. Behaving, even if a powerful current of naughtiness ran underneath. She had a feeling he was like that all the time, though, and never took his flirtation personally.

He jerked his head toward the bike between his muscled thighs and swung a human-sized helmet in an arc, holding it out to her. "Come for a ride with me. You know you want to." His flat, flexible tail swept over the seat behind him like he was cleaning it off for her, though the supple black leather was spotless.

Why did she have the sudden impulse to drop her bags right there on the slushy sidewalk and straddle the bike behind him, wrap her arms around his leather-jacketed torso, and squeal into the frigid wind when he sped through town? He was too young for her, maybe five years younger than her thirty-two. Too tall and handsome and monstrous to be truly interested in

regular old human like her. And *EEK*, James. That was the real reason a ride with Tairon was off limits.

She forced a smile. “I can’t, sorry. I have to get home. My fiancé is expecting me.”

Tairon stiffened, his yellow gaze flicking to her hand, and, laden down as she was, Ivy didn’t have time to hide her empty left ring finger. It was a fib, but only a small one. James had his grandmother’s ring stashed in his sock drawer, and she was sure he was going to propose at the cabin.

Tairon didn’t call her on it, just nodded and stowed the human helmet, but she felt his eyes on her sweaty back all the way up the rest of the hill.

She should have offered him the bagels from her bag. They were everything-flavor bagels, his usual order. It would have been neighborly to offer. He definitely lived or worked around here, because she often spotted him prowling the streets on his bike, and he’d stopped by the bakery every damn morning for the last three years. It was a good bakery, but it didn’t cater to monsters and wasn’t the kind you went too far out of your way for even if you were human.

The front door of the house swung shut too quickly, banging Ivy in the butt on the way in. She heard James groan in the bedroom, a long-suffering sound. He must be packing for the trip. Packing was the worst, especially winter gear, and they’d both procrastinated the task until the last minute.

She’d need a whole suitcase just for coats and boots and gloves for playing in the snow. And then another one for hot-

tub bikinis, because she planned to spend the entire weekend in it. Actually, the cabin was so private, swimsuits weren't required. She grinned to herself as she hefted the bags onto the kitchen counter.

James groaned again, this time more pained. He sounded like he might be sick.

“Honey? Are you okay?”

A loud thump came, and her concern grew. She hurried down the short hall to the bedroom and pushed open the door to offer him help. She stopped short in the doorway when she spotted him inside.

James was stuffing his suitcase all right...if by suitcase you meant the Jansen's twenty-year-old babysitter, Chelsea, who was, now that Ivy thought about it, an intern in the admissions department. She had her feet in the air while James went at it, hips twisting and pale buttocks clenching.

Ivy cleared her throat. “Is this the special project you've been working on?”

James rolled off the girl like his dick had touched a hot oven and clutched his chest. “Shit, Ivy, you scared me. I thought you were the mail carrier.”

“You're the only one delivering a package. I'm just your live-in girlfriend.” She should be screaming. Ranting. Something. But she only felt numb. Stupid and numb and dumpy in her novelty Christmas sweater that had a row of snowy trees knitted across her tits.

Chelsea pushed up on her elbows to grab the sheet and glared at James, her blonde hair mussed and lavender lace bra askew. Even with her lower lip pouted out, she was pretty. “Girlfriend? You told me you took care of her!”

“I was going to this afternoon. She’s early,” he flared defensively. “Tell her, Ivy. You weren’t due for two more hours.”

He really wanted her to defend him? Ivy laughed out loud.

That just pissed him off. “You should have called to warn me you were on your way home, Ive. Now what am I supposed to do? You’ve put me in a very difficult position!” He ran a hand through his short, sandy hair. “Give me an hour? So I can finish up here? Then we can talk everything through.”

Ivy spluttered. “You want to finish fucking her?”

“Well, yeah.” He shrugged. “Get a coffee or something? Bring one back for me.”

“And me, if you don’t mind,” Chelsea said. “Almond milk latte with vanilla syrup.”

Ivy pretended she hadn’t spoken. “We’re doing this right now.”

“Fine.” He sighed and pulled on his boxers, motioning for Chelsea to stay behind in the bedroom as he retreated with Ivy to the dining nook, his face and chest still flushed. His dick was probably still hard, too. Gross. He waited until Ivy stiffly took a seat across from him before he started in. “About the house...”

“Aren’t you going to apologize?” she blurted disbelievingly. “Tell me we’re going to work it out? Suggest counseling?”

“Ive, come on. It’s over. Our relationship has been in rigor mortis for months. I was going to tell you,” he added, with a furtive glance at the now-closed bedroom door.

“When?!”

He shrugged, looking suddenly haggard. “On the trip. I thought we could work out the details of the split on neutral ground. The cabin has two bedrooms. That’s why I booked it.”

“Do you still want to go?” Ivy’s mind whirled, recasting the romantic holiday getaway in the new light. No Christmas proposal was forthcoming, that much was clear. Instead of tippy hot-tubbing, they’d be sleeping apart. Having tense discussions about who gets to keep the sofa.

Her feelings finally kicked in, and she regretted it. Her stomach turned at the thought of spending three days cooped up with James as he sulked and cast blame and checked his phone for messages from his new girlfriend. “You know what? Don’t answer that. I’m going to the cabin alone. While I’m gone, pack your shit and get out.”

James grimaced. “I would, but...I don’t think you can afford the lease on this place by yourself. It’s probably better if you find somewhere else. Take the cabin booking, of course,” he added hurriedly. “Use the time away to look at your budget. Schedule some apartment showings. Figure out how to land on your feet.”

His pragmatic suggestions made her want to scream. He wasn't sorry. He wasn't a wreck. He'd already made sense of his future, and it didn't include her. The fact that her entire *life* had been smashed to crumbs in the last fifteen minutes was none of his concern.

That was James, though. Unflappably patient. He'd always wait for things to go on sale rather than use credit. This was obviously the "right" time for their breakup, according to his schedule. He'd planned it. Booked a two-bedroom cabin weeks ago, reserved the perfect time and place to dump her.

"How long has this been going on?" she demanded. He stayed silent. "How long?!"

"Since May," Chelsea called through the bedroom door. James had the decency to wince.

"I thought it would be easier to split up when the rental agreement on the house renewed at the New Year," he explained. "Then it'd be no fuss to take your name off it."

She stared at him in disbelief. He'd cheated and lied for over six months to avoid a minor hassle with the lease paperwork and planned to break up with her over *Christmas*, all because it was more convenient for him. Without a word, she pushed back from the table and stalked to the laundry room, unable to stomach the humiliating thought of returning to the bedroom, where Chelsea was still camped out on her pillow.

She crammed the contents of the dryer into a backpack, retrieved her toiletries from the bathroom, and then grabbed one of the bakery bags to take with her. The one that remained,

she dumped into the sink and ran water over. She'd be damned if she was going to leave it for James and Chelsea to share over their lattes-with-vanilla-orgasms.



2

Looping her bags over one arm, Ivy slung her purse over the other shoulder and grabbed a bottle of tequila from the bar cart by the door. If there was ever an excuse for day drinking, this was it.

She realized she'd forgotten her jacket when she was halfway down the hill. Oh well, at least her ugly Christmas sweater was thick and warm. She slugged some of the tequila, letting the burn in her throat warm her and give her an excuse for her watery eyes.

When her vision cleared, she noticed Tairon was still sitting there on the corner, watching her, looking...sympathetic?

"You *knew*." Her voice cracked.

He gave a single nod. "I saw them drive up together. Not for the first time."

"So the ride you offered—that was...pity?" Of course, he hadn't been flirting. He was just sorry for the sad sack who lived up the hill. Could this day get any worse? More tequila.

This could only be solved by more tequila. She gulped as much as she could get down, and her nose started running.

His breath caught. “No. That’s not it. Listen—where are you going? Let me take you.”

“The car rental center,” she snuffled into her sleeve. “Don’t worry about it. It’s only a few blocks.”

His mouth quirked up as he eyed the tequila bottle she was strangling by the neck. “I don’t think driving is a good idea right now. I can give you a ride to wherever you’re going.”

Ivy didn’t have the strength to protest or even worry that she was putting him out. Exhaustion slumped her shoulders, and she let him stow her belongings in all kinds of secret compartments on his motorcycle. He pried the liquor bottle out of her chilled fingers and tucked it away, too, before sliding his leather jacket off. She couldn’t help admiring how his biceps flexed, stretching his rolled T-shirt sleeves as he wrapped it around her shoulders.

“I can’t take your coat,” she protested, starting to shrug it off, but he held it firmly around her until she slipped her arms into the sleeves. They came down below her fingertips, enveloping her in his body heat.

“I insist. You’re cold, and I’m a dragon. We can adjust our internal heat, no problem.” His yellow eyes seemed to glow momentarily in the winter gloom, reminding her that, despite his chivalrous manners, he was far from human. It was easy to forget when monsters had integrated so fully into human

society since the Breach opened five years ago. Tairon barely even spoke with an accent.

His scent wafted up from his jacket, warm leather and toasted caraway seeds and a hint of bitter chocolate, along with awareness that she'd never been close enough to him to smell him before. There had always been a counter between them, ensuring a polite distance. It was a good thing, too, because he smelled delicious, like all the things she liked best. The sudden urge to lick him was so strong that she doubted she could have controlled herself, even at work.

He reached down toward her hips, palm up and fingers slightly curled, and instinctively, she arched her body toward him, totally shameless. He huffed a laugh into the frosty air, gripped the bottom edges of the jacket, and zipped her up. "I'll take that as a compliment."

"Oh god," she moaned, completely mortified. "I thought you were going to—you know what? Never mind what I thought. Let's blame the tequila." It hadn't been long enough for the alcohol to hit her bloodstream, and she knew it. He had to know it, too.

He hummed from somewhere in his chest, proffering the extra helmet again.

"So convenient." Maybe the tequila had taken effect, after all. That could explain the little jealous worm at the bottom of her stomach.

"What is?"

She turned the helmet over in her hands. “That you have this handy. You must take human girls out on rides all the time.”

His eyes narrowed, and the scales on his biceps raised slightly, stretching the edges of his T-shirt sleeves, making him look even more dragonish than usual. “It’s brand new. I got it after you said you’d never been on a motorcycle before. I offered you a ride, remember?”

A vague memory flickered in the back of her mind, a laughing conversation at the bakery one beautiful, sunny morning. Their teasing banter had been studded with a few nuggets of personal truth, like chocolate chips in a cookie, unexpectedly rich and rewarding. He’d never visited Silver Falls State Park. She said it was gorgeous in the fall when the leaves started to turn. He offered to take her on the back of his bike to see it. She revealed that she’d never ridden a motorcycle before.

When she rang him up, they’d lingered an extra second to make eye contact, acknowledging the exchange. “That was over a year ago!”

“I’ve been waiting for you to accept the invite.”

“Oh.” He’d been carrying around the helmet this whole time? Even if he was just saying that, it made her feel good. She bit her lip, a smile stretching her cheeks as she slid the helmet on and took the seat behind him. She left some space for the curve of his tail, but he twitched it to the left, wrapping its flat heft around the small of her back to pull her

comfortingly close. It felt like the hug she desperately needed and made her eyes water.

“Where to, Beautiful?” he tossed back over his shoulder.

She gave him the cabin coordinates, and the bike roared to life underneath them, launching forward as a few tiny snowflakes dusted the dark folds of the jacket’s leather sleeves.

It’d be a white Christmas.

How perfect this weekend could have been, she reflected as they zoomed through town. Too bad it had all gone to shit. Then she remembered that it never could have been a happy holiday. James had booked the cabin because it had two bedrooms. He’d known when they planned the getaway that it wouldn’t be kisses under the mistletoe. When he’d stowed his grandmother’s ring in his sock drawer, he planned to give it to Chelsea, not her.

What a giddy fool she’d been. He’d let her prattle about the hot tub, buy edible massage oil and a new board game to bring. Let her build a whole fantasy that their relationship was getting “back on track.” But it hadn’t really been on track, not for a long time. There was no track to get back on. No resuscitating something already in rigor mortis, as he’d put it.

The bike hit the curving highway that wound through the foothills, and the cold wind sluiced over her, creeping down the gap between her helmet and the collar of the jacket. It made her skin tighten into goosebumps, sharp points of awareness as she saw the last six months for what they were—

an inevitable end, even if it had been stretched out by James's cold planning.

Rather than feeling sad, she was strangely comforted by the realization. She didn't have to cry all Christmas or try to come up with ways to win James back. She could stuff her face with carbs and hang out in the hot tub and enjoy this long-overdue motorcycle ride without a speck of guilt. Her only regret was that she hadn't accepted Tairon's invitation earlier. Even in the frigid weather, it was exhilarating. She was glad she'd said yes to his offer.

It was a little ironic that, while James had been patiently waiting for her to realize their relationship was over, Tairon had been patiently waiting for her to wear his spare helmet. Carrying it around with him everywhere, hoping.

Had he really been hanging onto it for almost eighteen months? As if in answer, his back radiated extra heat, and she gave in, pressing the side of the helmet against his spine and her palms against his torso until she could feel the texture of his scales through the thin fabric of his shirt. Was it her imagination, or did his tail squeeze her a tiny bit closer?



3

When Ivy and Tairon reached the cabin, a tiny A-frame tucked among the pines, a few inches of snow blanketed its pointed roof and flocked the tree branches. Tairon dismounted to help carry the bags to the porch and waited, arms laden, for her to enter the rental code in the electronic lock.

“Let me give you my number, and I’ll make sure you have a lift back to town,” he said, once it clicked open. He followed her inside, setting the bags down on the wide, planked floor by the fireplace. She got out her phone, and he rattled off his digits. “You’ll be okay here alone?”

She gave a jerky nod as she input his contact information, then shrugged off the leather jacket and handed it back to him, instantly missing its sweet-smelling cocoon of warmth. She shivered despite her thick sweater. “You’ll be okay to ride back in this weather?”

He glanced out the large front window at the charcoal-gray sky and the thickening swirl of fat flakes. “Yeah. Roads are

still clear.”

“Stay anyway,” she said impulsively, blushing as red as his scales. When he didn’t immediately respond, she fumbled for an explanation. “I don’t mean...it has two bedrooms...in case it snows more...oh, you probably have Christmas plans already, never mind. Forget I said anything.”

He shook his head. “I don’t.”

“Don’t what?” she asked, feeling silly for suggesting it. He was practically a stranger. He might have a girlfriend, for all she knew. Or a wife! “Don’t want to stay?”

“Have plans.” For a brief moment, his gaze dipped down to her mouth, and his expression held such pure hunger, it made her breath catch and her nipples tighten. He wrenched his eyes back to meet hers and cleared his throat. “For the holiday. I’m free.”

He *was* attracted to her. Ivy bit her lip to avoid appearing overeager, but she couldn’t think of a better way to move on with her life than a weekend fling with a hot guy who she actually trusted and liked. One who *wanted* her. “Then stay. We’ll have fun. There’s a hot tub.”

“I don’t have a swimsuit.”

She grinned at him. “Neither do I. Let’s try it out.” Feeling bold, she tugged off her bulky sweater and tossed it on top of her bags.

“*Gods*,” he swore, his voice thick and smoky. This time he let his appreciative gaze wander all over her, taking in the red

tank top she'd worn as an undershirt, her lacy white bra peeking out at the neckline, her favorite faded jeans that molded perfectly to her butt and thighs. His fingers twitched, curling by his sides, as he stared. "I don't want to scare you off, but I've dreamed about a moment like this for a long time. Since the first time I met you, if I'm being honest."

"How's it measuring up?" she asked, fingers teasing under the hem of her tank top, gauging the tension in his posture before she pulled it up over her head.

"Worth the wait," he breathed, looking at her newly exposed, soft belly like she was a perfect pie he'd just pulled out of the oven. "Don't move. I'm going to find towels."

She disobeyed, shucking her jeans while he rummaged in the bathroom's linen closet, enjoying his disbelief when he returned with two fluffy towels clamped under his arm and saw her in her panties. She looped her thumbs under the straps of her bra, stretching them, enjoying his intake of breath before she pulled them down over her shoulders to free her breasts.

She was being audacious, stripping down in the middle of this unfamiliar kitchen in front of this monster who was barely an acquaintance, but she felt audacious. Like she deserved the frank wonder in Tairon's face as he drank in the sight of her small, freckled chest and puckered, rosy-brown nipples. He devoured her with his eyes, following the line of her figure as it flared out to wide hips and thick thighs, lingering on her

matching undies, a mere scrap of white lace that revealed more than it covered.

He growled, something like pain crossing his expression as he reached down to adjust himself. She gasped when she saw the thickness trapped in his pants, dizzy need overwhelming her last shred of inhibition. She closed the distance between them, slid her palm down his flat stomach to squeeze his erection through the leather. It was...ridged. And not at all a familiar shape. It pulsed against her palm, and she could have sworn her pussy pulsed in time with it.

Smug, she teased, "Oops, did I do that?"

He nodded solemnly and, with his free hand, tugged gently on the end of one of her braids, leaning down to rasp in her ear. "I've been hard since the moment you parked that sweet ass behind me on my bike. Tell me I can touch you, Ivy."

"You can touch me," she echoed right away, adding, "Please?"

Faster than she could process what was happening, he'd dipped his shoulder, hoisted her over it, and, laughing at her squeals, carried her out the cabin's back door to the hot tub on the deck. The cabin's owner had turned it on in advance of their arrival, and steam rose from the water's surface to meet the snowflakes that were still tumbling down. Ivy hardly had time to register their cold kisses brushing her shoulders before Tairon had deposited her into the deliciously warm water.

He shrugged apologetically, though there was no remorse in his devilish expression. "I had to, or we weren't going to make

it out of the cabin.”



4

It was Ivy's turn to enjoy the show as Tairon peeled his shirt over his head, unveiling his broad torso, rippling with muscle, the red mosaic of his scales disappearing into his pants. He paused with his hand on his belt buckle. "How much do you know of my kind? Have you ever been with a dragon?"

She bit her lip, body humming in anticipation, and shook her head *no*.

"I don't want to scare you. We're...different than human males."

"I hope so," she said fervently, and he gave a loud laugh. She added, "I'm not scared. I confess I have done some, uh, research on the topic." She blushed, remembering the interspecies porn she'd found with a male dragon lead, how long and tireless his tongue had been. How he'd made his human co-star pant and hiss when his fat, curved cock slid inside her. Obviously, Tairon wouldn't be so well-endowed as a porn star, but it was sure to be an *interesting* experience, if they took it that far.

Tairon arched a brow at her admission, looking intrigued. “Is that so? Did you get a dragon endorsement at Otherworld Academy?”

“No, I didn’t get in when I applied.” She made a face, remembering the sting of rejection. That was how she’d met James. He’d been the one to deliver the bad news, and then he’d asked her out for coffee. A consolation prize, he’d called it. She shrugged away the memory. “I already had my culinary degree before the Breach opened, so it wasn’t a big deal. I was just curious after”— she put aside the twinge of disloyalty she felt admitting this, given all that James had perpetrated—“after I met you at the bakery. I watched some videos and, uh, thought about you.”

“*Ivy.*” He dropped his hands from his belt and in two long strides was at the edge of the hot tub. He slid clawed fingers into her hair, his hand so large that his thumb could still brush over her lips. He bent over her, but rather than press his mouth to hers, he licked up the side of her jaw with his long, hot tongue, pausing at her earlobe. She whimpered, pressing her knees together under the water against the intense, electrifying hum of her clit, greedy at the thought of that tongue moving elsewhere.

“*Gods,*” he swore again. “You taste so sweet. I’m going to do such filthy things to you with this tongue. I have a thousand fantasies to play out now that I have my hands on you.” She gave a hysterical giggle, and he pulled back. “Maybe I shouldn’t have said that. I’m moving too fast; I know I am. You’re going to run away screaming any second now.”

He looked tense. Wary. Like he was genuinely worried she was going to bolt.

“You keep saying that, but only someone who spent a year and a half waiting for me to RSVP for a motorcycle ride would think that this is moving fast,” she teased, her heart galloping at his words even as she tried to lighten the mood again. “You haven’t even kissed me.”

Tension eased in his frame. “But I did get you naked and wet,” he purred, all his flirty swagger returned.

“Pretty sure I got myself like that.” She smirked at him as she slithered out of her now-soaked underwear and dropped them over the edge of the hot tub, where they landed with a splat on the snowy patio.

“Give me a little credit!” He whipped the tip of his tail into the water, splashing her, and Ivy laughed, turning her head to the side to avoid getting any in her eyes. With two fingers, he adjusted her chin so she was looking at him again. After a long moment of eye contact, during which his irises glowed briefly, he said, “I haven’t kissed you because dragons don’t kiss, Ivy. We *lick*.”

Holy. Shit.

“Get in,” she demanded, slapping the flat of her hand on the surface of the heated water that had *nothing* on the heat coursing through her. “You and your tongue. Right now.”

“So greedy. I think I like this side of you.” He deftly unbuckled his belt, dragging the pliable leather pants down his

narrow hips, exposing more rows of scales that darkened in color from the bright red near his navel to a rich burgundy in the crease of his thigh. He wasn't wearing underwear, and she couldn't pull her eyes away as his cock bounced free.

She'd been wrong. It was a different color than the dragon's she'd seen in the videos, but definitely just as large. It had the same pronounced upward curve, and the same enticingly ridged spine of cartilage ran up the underside of his shaft like a mini mountain range. Her core clenched as she imagined how the head would nudge up against her G-spot once it was inside her, how the ridges would feel at her entrance when he dragged his cock in and out of her.

"That smile says you're definitely not scared." Tairon sounded smug as kicked his pants all the way to the floor and stepped into the water with lithe grace for someone his size, settling into the seat next to hers.

She was momentarily disappointed to lose sight of his extraordinary appendage, but the next thing she knew, he'd pulled her onto his lap, adjusting her until her back was pressed against his muscled chest, and she could *feel* it instead. His legs pushed hers apart, and his curved cock hooked between her thighs, perfectly hugging her seam. It was hotter even than the water, and she let out a breathy moan at the warm pressure.

"This okay?" he hummed in her ear, his tail banding around her waist like it had on the back of his bike. *Yes, yes, more than okay.* In answer, she moved his hands to her breasts. He

took the hint, cupping and squeezing their sensitive flesh, pushing them together and thumbing her nipples as she arched into his touch and ground her ass back against his taut abs.

A string of dragonish language left his lips, half the words spit like curses, half tender murmurs, the contrast as deliciously jarring as the cold, snowy air meeting the steaming water. As her soft haunches against his hard, scaled muscle. As his stiff, textured cock against her slick, giving flesh.

It all felt so unreal. Only a couple hours ago, her whole life had sifted through her fingers, and now she was naked in a hot tub with a gorgeous dragon guy who sweet-talked her like she was his whole world. It couldn't *possibly* be true, but she was going to enjoy the feeling while it lasted—as a Christmas present to herself, if nothing else.

Tairon hadn't lied about his kind's preferences. Rather than kisses, he showered her shoulders, neck, and jawline with heated swipes of his tongue. Not just tasting, but *savoring*. His tail held her firmly while his hands kneaded and discovered the rest of her body, reverently mapping her swells and curves, lingering in unexpected places like the plush, corrugated stretchmarks on her hips and the ticklish bumps of her ribs.

He didn't explore her like a human man would, and she found that that was maybe the best part. It was new. Just for her. She relaxed into his touch, letting the water support her and his tail anchor her, allowed her rational thoughts to float away as she enjoyed the unpredictable sensations.

“Good?” he asked her at some point, dragging her back to reality. Her head swam, murky with all of the endorphins swirling in her bloodstream from his treatment.

“Uh huh.” She wished she had more words. She should be asking him what he liked, or complimenting him, but she was so overwhelmed that her vocabulary had vanished, leaving her only with animal cries—whines and whimpers and groans.

Still pinning her tight to him with his tail, he pressed the heel of one hand against her mound, sending a rush of pleasure deep into her core as he bucked underneath her. He slid his full length through her folds so his cockhead bumped against her clit. She gasped, and he did it again, first teasing her opening without pushing inside before gliding further to stroke against her sensitive bundle of nerves. Again. And again.

He set a rhythm, each nudge building on the last until at last it pushed her over the edge. She climaxed faster than she ever had in her life, shaking in his arms, vision spotting as her pussy walls spasmed against nothing.

He was still holding her when she was able to see again, feathering gentle strokes over her hair and down her arms. She grabbed one of his hands and squeezed as she mustered up some adequate words of praise.

“Wow.”

Okay, one word of praise. She kissed the center of his palm to make up for it, and then, thinking more on it, licked him in the same spot.

He chuckled at her incoherence. “You liked it?”

“I—” *Loved* it? Had her mind blown by it? Could get addicted to it? Even orgasm-drunk, she couldn’t say that kind of stuff on what was essentially a first date, though. Now she understood why he’d been worried about scaring her off. So just she rested her head back on his shoulder and said, “Yeah.”

He licked the top of her ear, raising goosebumps all down the right side of her body. “I liked it, too. It was...” he trailed off, so she supplied the end of the sentence.

“Worth the wait?” Ivy swished her arms lazily in the water, enjoying the floaty aftershocks bubbling through her.

“*Everything,*” he said fervently.



5

Tairon's cock bumped her clit again, reminding her that, even though he'd just melted her brains, she hadn't returned the favor yet.

She patted his tail so he'd loosen his boa-constrictor hold on her waist, and flipped around so she was straddling his lap, his curved length now nestled in the crack of her ass. Face-to-face with him, she let her hands wander over his stomach, noticing how his scales changed from flat and pliable on his abs and pecs to hard and armored on his arms and shoulders.

The cold air seared her heated skin as her hands broke the surface of the water, but she hardly noticed. His eyes glowed and his fingers tightened on her thighs as she reached the underside of his chin, testing the knobs of bone that punctuated his jaw and stuttered across his brow. He had soft places, too, like his full mouth and his yellow, liquid gaze as she stared up at him, taking it all in.

"I must look strange to you," he murmured, bending his neck toward her so she could reach all the way to the tip of one of

his short, twisting horns. The end looked sharp, but in actuality was blunted, the surface worn smooth like a piece of sea glass, and she ran the pad of her thumb over it, enjoying the texture.

“No. Not strange. Your face is so familiar to me that this feels...I don't know. Almost like *déjà vu*. Like I've done it a hundred times before.” Her fingers followed the horn back down to the ridge of his nose, bumping over his tempting lips, and he made an inarticulate sound in the back of his throat. “I know you don't kiss, but would...”

The rest of her sentence was stolen when he captured her mouth with his. His lips were as soft as she'd imagined they'd be, hot velvet pressure that made her moan. Like his other touches, it was like nothing else. He kissed all parts of her mouth, both corners and the dip below her nose, the little ledge above her chin. Everything in between, too, all punctuated with the lightest flicks of his tongue, like he couldn't help it. Her eyes pricked with unshed tears, it was so strange and perfect.

“*Gods*, your mouth,” he breathed, pulling back only the barest distance to make room for the words. “I understand why you humans do this now.”

Then his tongue, forked and muscular, invaded, slicking against hers in the hottest, filthiest kiss she'd experienced in her life. He filled and fucked her mouth with it, its length and strength overwhelming everything she knew about kissing. She couldn't help grinding back against his cock as he gave

and took, promised and delivered, and her sleepy, sated clit buzzed back to life.

“Inside me,” she gasped against his mouth when he paused for breath. “Please.”

He wrapped his arms around her, crushing her to his chest. “I wish,” he rumbled in her ear. “I didn’t bring condoms, though. I didn’t expect this to happen, and you smell—”

“I smell?!” she squeaked, interrupting him. How mortifying! She never should have worn that stupid, acrylic Christmas sweater to work. She’d been sweating in it all morning.

“You smell *fertile*,” he finished, chuffing a laugh into her hair. “Trust me, it’s a nice smell. As much as I’d like to seed you—*gods*, I can’t believe I can finally say those words out loud to you—making a baby is definitely moving too fast. Not even you can argue with that.”

“I have an IUD,” she offered. “And I’m—*damn* it. I was going to say I’m clean, but James has been sleeping around, so I don’t even know. Ugh, I’m sorry.”

“For what?”

“This won’t exactly be the hot holiday hookup I was offering. I don’t blame you if you want to head back to town. But if you decide to stay, I’ll do my best to make it worth your while.” She lifted her hands out of the water to wiggle ten pruney fingers where he could see them.

“Any time with you is worth my while.” He tapped his way up her spine, counting her vertebrae all the way up to her

hairline. Then, like he was choosing his words very carefully, he said, “Maybe I don’t want a hookup, anyway.”

How could he say that? His cock was still prodding her ass, swollen and unfulfilled. “I don’t know. Feels like you do,” she teased.

He cradled the back of her head, pulling her even closer so her nose was buried in the hollow of his throat, and she felt his tongue flick over her forehead and trace along her part line. A dragonish version of a kiss on the head. It was so weird and so nice, and it made her smile into his skin.

“Let me rephrase. I don’t want *just* a hookup. I’ve waited...a long time for this. My species, we...there are things you should know before...” he trailed off, sounding reluctant to continue. “Sorry. I’m trying not to scare you again.”

“Just tell me.”

“How can I put this in human terms? We dragons *fixate* on our partners. So casual sex is not something we do.”

“Oh! So if we hook up, you’ll be...what? Obsessed with me? In puppy love? Follow me around everywhere like a stalker?” She giggled.

“Ahhh...” He drew out the embarrassed sound, and his hand left her back as he reached up to rub his horns. She could hear the grimace in his voice. “It’s a little late for that, I’m afraid.”

She sat up, frowning. “What do you mean?”

“I’m saying...it wasn’t a coincidence I was on your corner this afternoon.” He exhaled, his breath frosting in the air to

mingle with the steam rising from the water. The sky above was completely dark now, light from the cabin windows striping the patio snow in shades of gold. A few stray snowflakes still tumbled down, glittering in the edges of the light.

“But I see you there all the time,” she protested, not wanting to fully process what he was saying. He just looked at her, so she tried again. “You live in the neighborhood.”

“No, I don’t,” he said patiently.

“Yes, you do. I’ve seen you around for years.” Realization stretched and grew inside her, fragile and tremulous like a soap bubble. “Wait. All this time...you’ve been...*watching me?*”

“I tried to stay out of your way,” he ground out, scrubbing his tattooed forearms self-consciously. “It’s hard to keep our distance once...”

“You fixate,” she blurted out, finishing the sentence he seemed unwilling to. “Oh my god. I had no idea.”

“Yeah,” he said unhappily. “I’m sorry.”

Her mind whirred, running over all their interactions with a new perspective. The daily ones over the counter at work. Glimpses of his bike parked on the street almost as regularly. Steering carts around each other at the grocery store as they exchanged awkward smiles. She’d thought they were meaningless little coincidences, not...*important*. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

His mouth twisted. “What could I say? ‘Hi, don’t mind me, I’m Tairon, your new dragon stalker?’ I tried to keep our interactions somewhere you felt safe—”

“The bakery,” she butted in, nodding.

“Yeah. Until you got to know me. I thought it wouldn’t be so off-putting when I broke the news if you already knew me and were sure I wasn’t a creep. I was going to tell you everything that time when I asked you out. But then I found out you had a boyfriend, so...” he shrugged. “I figured it’d be unwelcome information and backed off as much as I could.”

“It worked.”

“Good. I couldn’t help hanging around, but at least I didn’t bother...”

“No, not the backing-off. The getting-to-know-me-first. I’m officially not creeped out. I’m”—she felt herself go a little giddy, like she’d had another swig from the tequila bottle—“flattered, I guess.”

“You are? Gods, Ivy, what a relief. Of all the possible reactions, this is the one I didn’t expect. Of course, I thought I’d be telling you over coffee, not while you were sitting naked on my cock.”

“It’s a point in your favor, really,” she deadpanned.



6

Ivy bounced a little in Tairon's lap, and he cursed, lifting her up a little so there were a few inches of space between them. He slid his tail under her bottom so she was suspended in the water, her tits exposed to his enthusiastic gaze.

"Now you understand why it's not just a hookup for me," he said, tracing a looping path between, under, and around her breasts before unraveling the end of one of her soggy braids. He combed through the damp strands with his claws while she floated there in front of him. "I want more than a weekend."

"You can't know that," she chided. "Watching me is one thing, but once you get your dick wet, fantasy will collide with reality, and one weekend might be plenty."

"That's not exactly how it works." He moved to the other braid, avoiding eye contact.

"Your fixation won't go away once you and I...?"

"No."

"How do you cure it, then?"

Her braids freed, he smoothed his thumb along her hairline where the humidity had undoubtedly tightened her baby hairs into ringlets. “Already trying to get rid of me?” he teased lightly.

Ivy looped her hands around the back of his neck and laced her fingers together. “I didn’t say that. I just thought you’d want—I don’t know. To be free of it. If there’s a way to cure it, I’ll help. It doesn’t mean we have to stop being friends.”

“Friends,” he grumbled good-naturedly. “What kind of friends?”

His tail relaxed, and she sank back down into his lap. Ivy wriggled so his cock settled between her folds, enjoying his groan. “The fun kind, obviously. What do we need to do to... break the spell or whatever you want to call it?”

“We’ll talk more about it tomorrow. Right now, I’d rather”—he scooped her up out of the water and perched her on the edge of the hot tub with her feet still dangling in the water—“do something else.”

Ivy’s entire body broke out in goosebumps from the sudden change in temperature, and her ass burned where it came in direct contact with the thin veil of slushy snow. Tairon tugged her knees apart and hesitated between her thighs.

“I thought it was your turn,” she protested weakly, making an attempt at fairness even though she was dying to feel his tongue’s main attraction after the preview of that kiss. Even if they couldn’t fuck this weekend, she wanted a taste of him, too.

“This *is* my turn,” he said gruffly. Who was she to argue with that? When she gave him a nod of encouragement, he licked from her knee all the way to her pouting pussy, already swollen and spoiled from his earlier treatment, in one sweeping slide. She shivered, and he glanced up. “Too cold?”

“Not yet,” she assured him. Her core was still heated from their soak and, with her lower legs in the warm water, the chill hadn’t penetrated much below her skin’s surface. Still, he grabbed one of the towels he’d set on the corner of the hot tub and draped it over her shoulders before settling back between her legs.

He combed his fingers through the red curls there. “Like little flames.” And then he ducked down, pulling one of her legs over his shoulder, and *that tongue* parted her lips. Its forked tip twisted around her clit in a swift, scalding tease before he latched on in earnest, sucking like he had something to prove.

It felt like he was sucking the blood from her veins and the marrow from her bones and the sense from her head, the way her body utterly attuned to his attentions. Pleasure steamrolled through her, flattening her with its power. She wanted to cry when he pulled back.

But he only stopped long enough to bite off two of his claws, and then he was back at it, this time with two clever fingers nudged into her entrance, stretching her slightly as they scissored and searched for the spot that’d make her scream.

He found it.

Ivy's eyes rolled back in her head, and she forgot to hold onto the towel. Thirty seconds later, she was gripping his horns for dear life, shaking and shouting as he mercilessly yanked a second orgasm out of her.

“What was *that*?” she asked when she'd regained her breath. “Are you trying to kill me?”

“Just being a fun friend.” He winked one gleaming eye at her before he stood up from the hot tub, water cascading down his scales. “Sorry for the rush. I didn't want you to freeze in this weather. Come on.”

This time he wrapped both of the towels around her and, heedless of the water that he was dripping on the floor, carried her into the house and through the kitchen to the overstuffed sofa in the living area. He deposited her on it, disappeared into the bathroom, and reappeared a minute later wearing a terrycloth robe, another in his hands. “Look what I found! Here, put it on while I light the fire.”

“Thanks,” she said, pulling it on while she watched him crouch easily in front of the fireplace opposite the sofa and arrange a couple of logs and kindling in it. Her only warning was a sharp purr before a lick of flame shot out of his mouth, igniting the kindling. An echo of warm air filled with his toasted-caraway-seed scent reached her a second later.

“Oh wow!” she blurted, as the fire, which had pretty much incinerated the kindling and already had the mossy fir logs snapping and popping, grew.

She knew about dragonish fire-breathing abilities, and of course she'd seen it in videos online and in movies, but it was a whole different experience watching it happen right in front of her. Fire breathing was one of the monstrous abilities that was heavily regulated by the government, so it's not like dragons just walked down the street doing it.

Tairon grinned at her over his shoulder before pivoting fully. "First time seeing it in person?" She nodded, and his grin grew wider and more rakish. "I have all kinds of dragon tricks to show you."

She curled her feet under her and sat forward eagerly, tucking her fingers into the cuffs of the cozy robe. "Like what? Tell me all your secrets."

He pushed up from the floor and came to join her on the sofa, sliding his tail between her and the cushions so it rested comfortably inside the dip of her lower back. "Hm. How about this? I'll reveal one new thing every day. My very transparent ploy so you'll keep me around longer. Today you get my flames. Tomorrow, you get—"

"Your dick?" The words slipped out before she could stop them. Heat slammed into her cheeks, and she could feel her ears burning as red as her hair. "I mean, I know we can't—but I could use my—ack!" Mortified, she covered her face with her terrycloth sleeves.

He was laughing, shoulders shaking and bumping against hers. "If that's what you really want for Christmas, it's yours. I have something else for you, too, though," he added.

She dropped her hands to look at him. “What is it?”

“Something I’ve wanted to give you for a while. A dragon thing. I know it won’t mean the same to you as it does to our kind, but I hope you’ll grasp the intent behind it and accept it for what it is.” His tone was so soft and serious, it marshmallowed her insides, made them light and sticky with curiosity and affection. He was so damn *sweet*.

“I’m sure I’ll love it.” If she didn’t, she would pretend her darnedest, even if it was something awful, like a pod of monster goo or a very badly sung original composition. Whether he knew it or not, she owed him that kindness, because just this one day with Tairon had been a huge, healing gift to her. She felt cared for. *Wanted*. Things she hadn’t felt for a long time. “I don’t have anything for you. I’m sorry.”

He grabbed her hand and brought it to his mouth, *that tongue* sliding up between her first two fingers in the exact same way it’d slid up her inner thigh. Even in this benign location, it was almost unbearably erotic, and her whole body reacted, twisting and squirming. “You *are* the gift. Never doubt it. I know this is all a lot to process, and I don’t want to—”

“Scare me off,” she butted in, unable to help it. James had always hated her impulse to complete other people’s sentences. He had some ugly clinical term for it. But to Ivy, it was a sign of closeness. It meant she wanted to crawl inside someone’s brain and live in their thoughts because they were already living in hers. “Don’t worry, you won’t. I’m sticking around long enough to learn all your tricks.”

Tairon's mouth quirked up, and she couldn't tell if his eyes glowed or if they just caught a reflection of the roaring fire. "My ploy is working, then."

She nodded and laced her fingers through his. Yawning, she rested her head on his shoulder, exhaustion settling into her bones. The hot tub soak—and its two scorching orgasms—had relieved all the tension and worry from earlier in the day. She didn't know what the new year or the rest of her life would bring. But she looked forward to tomorrow, and that was enough for now.



7

Ivy woke up alone in a bed she didn't recognize. The slanted wooden ceiling above her came into focus.

The cabin. Christmas. *Tairon*.

She sat up, her head reeling from the sudden change in blood pressure. She still had the robe on, but she noticed her bags were on the chair by the bedroom window. He must have carried them up here last night sometime after she crashed out. He must have carried *her* up here, too, she realized, after she fell asleep on his shoulder.

Like she'd summoned him, his handsome, horned face appeared in the doorway, along with the rest of him, filling the frame. He lifted the mugs he held in each hand. "I thought I heard you awake in here. I found tea in the cupboard. Want some?"

She nodded, feeling a little self-conscious of her sleep-mussed hair. She probably still had pillowcase creases in her cheek, and he looked freshly showered. His long, red-and-gold

hair was pulled up in a knot at the back of his head, though he wore the same clothes as yesterday—the snug leather pants and dark-blue T-shirt that left little to the imagination. He set one steaming cup on the nightstand next to her before taking a seat at the foot of the bed. The mattress creaked under his weight as he shifted to face her. “Merry Christmas. How are you feeling?”

“Hungry,” she admitted, sipping her tea. It was plain black tea, unsweetened. Perfect. They’d been so hungry for each other that they’d skipped dinner last night. Her stomach twisted and snarled when she remembered the bag of baked goods downstairs. “Let me get dressed, and I’ll toast us some bagels. I brought your favorite kind.”

He choked on his swallow of tea, nearly spitting it back in his cup. He inhaled deeply when he’d recovered. “About that. I have a confession...a secret I’ve been keeping.”

“Another one?” She gave a sharp, wary laugh.

He ducked his head sheepishly. “I know my record’s not very good on transparency, but that’s why I need to tell you now. I can’t eat wheat. None of us can. Dragons, I mean. We’re gluten intolerant.”

“But you’ve been—” She shook her head, suddenly very aware that Tairon, while kind and thoughtful and clearly well-meaning, was a complete stranger to her. She didn’t even know his *biology*, let alone his personality. “Every day, you get a bagel. Same flavor for *years*.”

“Every day, I get to see *you*,” he corrected. “The bagel is just...an excuse. I order the everything-flavor ones because it’s what you recommended the first time I came in. Do you remember?”

She shook her head, sipping her tea to avoid making eye contact, still processing the fact that, out of all the bagels she’d baked and sold him, over a thousand by her count, he hadn’t eaten even one.

He sighed. “You wouldn’t. It was a big day for me, but it was just a regular morning for you. I’d caught your scent on the street when I rode by—”

“What do I smell like to you?” she asked. Judging by his smile, he didn’t seem to mind the interruption.

“Like apples and butter and brown sugar. Delicious. And when you’re turned on...the apples ripen.” Now it was her turn to choke on her tea, and he chuckled quietly before going on. “I immediately pulled over and followed you into the bakery. You had your hair in two braided buns like dragon horns, and the freckles on your nose were little bright sparks that lit up my whole insides. I was at a complete loss for words when I got up to the counter. Couldn’t even focus on the menu to order. You were so kind, though, and recommended the everything bagels because they’d just come out of the oven, so I got one. When I came in the next day, you recognized me and asked, ‘You want an everything?’ and—” he broke off, shooting her a look that she already understood.

“You’re not scaring me.”

He gave her a crooked grin and exhaled before going on. “And I desperately wanted everything from you. So I said yes. And the next morning, the same thing. It’s been like my secret message to you all along. Every day, I want everything.”

She smiled into her mug. “So you just...throw them away?”

“What, the bagels?” He chuckled again. “No. I usually give them to the guy who runs the news stand on the corner. He’s a big fan of your baking.”

She raised her mouth from the rim of her mug to make a face at him. “I thought *you* were a big fan of my baking.”

“Oh, I am. The things you make are beautiful, Ivy, and they smell so good. I just can’t eat them. We dragons produce our flames in our gut, and the gluten tangles up the ignition system, so to speak. I’m sorry to miss out.” He sounded so genuinely remorseful that she reached out to squeeze his hand.

“It’s okay, really. This whole thing is requiring me to rewrite a lot of memories, and I haven’t quite wrapped my head around all of it. I’m not sure what I’m going to feed you for Christmas dinner tonight. Everything I brought has gluten. I’d meant to stop at for groceries on the way out of town, but yesterday was so weird that I forgot. And all the stores are probably closed today.” Her heart sank as she realized they’d probably need to cut the weekend short.

“Leave it to me,” he said firmly, pushing up from the bed to stand beside her. He squeezed her shoulder and then slid his free hand under her pillow-snarled curls to support the back of her head as she looked up at him, his thumb rubbing a few

gentle circles in the sensitive spot behind her ear. “You have breakfast. Relax in the hot tub. Sort out whatever you need to sort out while I run into town and pick up food. My hive always cooks a big feast for Christmas, and they said it’s fine to come grab some to go.”

“But the roads—” she began worriedly, glancing out the window at the fresh-fallen inches.

He made the purr sound, and a bright flame licked his lips. “I can thaw them if necessary. Don’t worry about me. You have enough on your mind. I want to take away every worry that I can.”

“In that case,” she said, standing up and pushing out her bottom lip in an affected pout, “I’m worried I won’t get to kiss you for hours.”

“Ivy, Beautiful, give me that sugar,” he murmured, drawing her closer until his mouth found hers. A gentle brush of skin-on-skin at first, but then his forked tongue tested the corners of her lips and took over, stroking over the seam and then dipping between them to flutter against her tongue.

Her nipples tightened behind the velvety fabric of her robe and sent a direct signal to her clit, which definitely remembered exactly how that tongue felt. She moaned into his mouth, and he pushed his mug into her empty hand so he could cup her face and deepen the kiss.

Balancing two mugs of hot tea, her calves backed up against the bed frame, Ivy was helpless to do anything but submit to the sensation of his mouth on hers, his scented breath mingling

with the flavor of the tea as he sucked and savored her. When he finally pulled back, they both were panting.

“You better go before we melt all the snow and ruin our white Christmas,” she joked.



8

Tairon stole one more sly lick before they bid a temporary goodbye, and Ivy watched his bike roar off into the sparkling morning.

She parked herself at the kitchen table, munching a toasted bagel with hazelnut butter and fig jam. No property managers would be answering their phones over the holiday, but she could at least submit some rental applications to get the ball rolling on finding a new place. With sticky fingers, she scrolled the reviews of apartment complexes on her phone, checking out pictures of the kitchens on their web sites.

Her heart sank when she saw the price tags, though. Even the least-expensive one-bedroom places would stretch her budget past the breaking point. She searched for studios instead and quickly realized that the only places she could afford were ones with kitchenettes. Could she live without an oven?

Not happily. She reluctantly submitted several applications and then browsed listings for roommate shares. A few possibilities popped up, mostly in large houses that catered to

Otherworld Academy students. Not ideal, but the kitchens were bigger than the efficiency apartments. She sent some emails for those, too.

She put her phone aside, feeling discouraged. Even at the lower rents, she'd have to work on her budget. Cut back on her data limit, maybe do without streaming services. Pick up a weekend shift.

A vision of her new life came into focus, of spending long hours at work and then coming home to a lonely, cramped room without the ability to work on recipes or watch the latest season of *The Great British Bake-Off* to relax. Anger at James bubbled and rose like double-yeasted dough. He'd really ruined everything. It was so unfair that he got to cheat and then—

She stopped herself. Took a deep breath and tried to let go of the resentment. She didn't want to be *that* person, nor did she want things to go back to the way they were with him. Already, she had hints of how amazing her life could be. She'd had more fun in the last twenty-four hours than in the last twenty-four months put together! What did she have to mourn, anyway? A relationship with a man who didn't want her? A comfortable routine that prioritized his needs over hers?

Change was scary, but it didn't have to be bad, Ivy reminded herself. She'd get through the uncomfortable transition period somehow. She'd decorate whatever tiny apartment she rented and make it a cozy nest to incubate her dreams of owning her own bakery someday. She'd scrape together money for a

countertop oven and bake her little heart out. And maybe her new fun friend would visit and keep her company on lonely nights. She had a feeling *he'd* never leave her on read.

The thought of booty-calling Tairon made her smile, and a weight lifted from her shoulders. She was not going to spend this weekend moping around and feeling sorry for herself, damn it! So she spent the next few hours doing anything but think about the future.

She called her parents to wish them a Merry Christmas and broke the news about the breakup with James. They were surprisingly blasé about it.

“I never liked him much, anyway,” her father said gruffly. When she asked why not, he explained, “He’s always suspiciously lukewarm, like leftovers that have been sitting out too long. You don’t want to waste them, but you know they’re going to spoil any minute, so you don’t dare eat them either. So you end up just waiting for them to go bad so you can throw them out.”

Ivy couldn’t have put it better. “He’s officially gone rotten. Feel free to return any Christmas gifts you bought him.”

“That seems prudent,” her mother agreed.

Freed from obligations, Ivy then hot-tubbed until she got too warm, took advantage of the fancy massaging showerhead in the cabin’s bathroom (twice), put together a cozy outfit from the random assortment of clothes she’d packed from the dryer, and then curled up on the sofa with a fleece blanket and one of the paperback novels that lined the shelves by the stone

fireplace. It was a historical romance about a grumpy duke and a sunshiney shepherdess getting snowed in at a Scottish castle, and she was here for it.



9

Ivy looked up from the book in the late afternoon when, just as it was getting dark, Tairon walked in with an insulated carrier in one hand and a bulging tote bag in the other.

“Hungry?” he asked as he hung up his jacket. He’d changed in town; now he wore dark jeans and a button-up. Looking far too handsome, he rolled up his shirt sleeves to expose his tattooed forearms, unpacked the food onto the counter, and started popping open lids. Ivy put aside the book and rose to join him in the kitchen to inspect what he’d brought. There had to be twenty dishes, each one emitting its own delicious bouquet of herbs and spices that filled the cabin with mouthwatering fragrance. There was a bottle of champagne, too, and a deep-dish apple cobbler with a toasted oat crumble on top.

“This all looks amazing! Did you leave any for the rest of them?”

He beamed. “They wanted to send more, but I convinced them that two people can only eat so much. There’s no way we’re going to get through all of it as it is.”

“Challenge accepted,” she said, already getting out dishes and silverware. “How was the drive?”

“Easy. Only had to melt the ice a couple places before I got to the highway, and after that it was plowed. Did you get your stuff done?”

She nodded as, elbow-to-elbow, they filled their plates to overflowing with roast turkey and a dozen rich side dishes. “As much as I could on a holiday, anyway.”

It was unlikely that she’d hear back on any rental possibilities for a few days, and the realization that she’d have to return to the shared house with James hit her. Even if she found a place with immediate availability, they still needed to have all the awkward discussions about dividing their joint possessions. She still had to do all the work of packing up her belongings and arranging the move. And she had to do it while living with the man who’d rejected her and cheated on her. *Ugh.*

She plopped down in the dining chair that Tairon pulled out for her, and all the discouragement she’d managed to shake earlier came back in full force. She stabbed at her food, moving it around the plate but not eating it.

“You okay?” he asked, fork poised over his own meal. “If this isn’t to your taste, don’t feel obligated to—”

She sighed. “It’s perfect. I shouldn’t let this bother me, but I’m dreading the end of the weekend and having to go back to the house with James. I don’t really want to spend any more time with him, but we need to have a lot of conversations. I just—don’t wanna.”

Tairon growled under his breath. “Can’t say I’m a huge fan of his, either. Come stay with me instead.” She laughed, thinking he was being flippant, but he shook his head. “I mean it. You know dragons nest communally? My hive is the old public school on Blair that’s been converted into lofts. We have plenty of space. You could have your own room and everything. And there’s a gym and an indoor pool and a huge commercial kitchen with all the bells and whistles that everyone can use. You’re welcome to stay there as long as you want.”

A commercial kitchen? It sounded too good to be true. She stared at him, trying to work out whether it was a serious offer, as they ate. “How much is the rent?”

He snorted, and a tiny puff of smoke exited his nostrils. “I’m insulted you would ask.”

“Oh, come on. I am not going to mooch off you. You don’t even know—” She broke off when he gave her a very odd, intense look. “What?”

“I know you,” he said in a low voice. He hooked his tail around the bottom rung of her chair and dragged her closer. “Not to brag, but I’m something of an Ivy expert. Ask me anything, and I’ll prove it.”

Giggling, she moved her plate to her new spot at the table.
“What’s my favorite color?”

“Green. Dark green.” He answered quickly and confidently, and damn it, he was right. He extended his arm toward her, brushing his fingers over the dark-green, tattooed foliage that twined through his scales. They were ivy leaves, she realized. His tattoos were *ivy*. She raised her eyes to meet his, and he answered the question in her mind even though she hadn’t asked. “I got them the week I met you.”

“That’s awfully...*permanent*,” she breathed. He gave a slow nod, that wary look on his face again. The *I-don’t-want-to-scare-you-off* look. But he was trying to tell her something by showing her those tattoos. Something important. “You can’t cure your fixation with me, can you?”

Another nod.

“It’s not going away.”

“It’s a forever thing,” he agreed, voice rough.

“So you’re going to follow me around for the rest of my life?” she blurted out disbelievingly.

He lifted his chin, eyes glowing at her. “Yup. Pretty much. On your terms,” he added. “I can respect your boundaries. But I will need to be...near.”

“So you’re saying that it’d be pretty convenient if I lived in your building.”

“Even more convenient if we shared a bed.” He raised his brow and then calmly proceeded to eat his dinner as if he

hadn't just made her thighs clamp together against the naughty thrill that'd run through her at the suggestion.

"I don't know what to say." She stared at her plate and its gorgeous array of food that he'd brought back through the snow for her. That his people had made for them. What would it be like living with a bunch of *dragons*?!

"No pressure to answer now. Let's have dinner. Let your human brain catch up." He winked at her, and she couldn't help the giggle that erupted. "I'll answer any questions you have, or we can just enjoy the food. It's all going to work out, I promise."

"You don't know that," she protested. She paused. "Wait. *Do* you know that? Have other dragons fixated on humans?"

He nodded. "Several from my hive. We've heard of others as well."

"What happened with them?" She held her breath, and to her surprise, she was *hoping* that they'd all had happily-ever-afters.

"They worked out," he said simply, and her heart gave a lurching, sideways thump. "Each in their own way. I can introduce you to the couples I know, if you want."

"Do the humans live at your hive?" she asked. Her pulse had finally slowed enough that she could enjoy the food, so she dug in. It was truly delicious, restaurant-quality stuff, though she didn't recognize half the dishes.

Tairon nodded. “Some of them do. Others live with their mates in human housing for various reasons. All of them are together, though, barring a friend of mine who only fixated recently. They usually pair up pretty fast. A matter of weeks. Our case is...unique. It’s rare to fixate on someone who already has a committed partner.”

She winced. “Well, he wasn’t so committed, was he?”

“He’s a fucking idiot,” Tairon growled. “Didn’t deserve you. When I saw them together in the car, I wanted to kill him.”

“Why did you try and stop me from going home, then? Didn’t you want me to know, so I’d leave him?”

“Of course, but I didn’t want you to find out that way. I’m sorry he hurt you.”

Ivy set down her fork on her mostly clean plate, her stomach tight and pleasantly full. “You know what? I’m not sorry. My only regret is that I didn’t catch him sooner. But this was pretty much the best Christmas gift he could have given me. I feel really lucky to be here right now with you.”

“Does that mean you’ll come stay at the hive?” Tairon asked jokingly. She nodded, biting her lip when his eyes lit up and he practically bounced in his seat. “Yeah?!”

His enthusiasm was infectious, but she had to be clear about her plans. “I’m not saying I’ll move in permanently, but it takes a huge amount of stress off to know I have a place to stay while I figure everything out, and I can’t thank you enough for that.”

Over dessert, Ivy peppered Tairon with questions about his friends (“flaming idiots, mostly”), what he did for work (carpentry), and his biggest fear (drowning). Over champagne, she told him her dreams of owning her own bakery someday and maybe getting a cat.

“Cats are very dragonish,” he told her, after he’d washed their pie plates and popped the champagne, filling two flutes for them to sip by the crackling fire. “We twitch our tails when we’re annoyed, too. No whiskers, though.”

“Too bad, or I might keep you as a pet,” she cracked. He nudged the side of her head with his horns, purring, and she relented, unable to keep the smile off her face. “Okay, I admit it. I might keep you anyway.”



10

By the time Ivy and Tairon finished the bottle and had conversations on a dozen more topics, they were snuggled together on the sofa, and her cheeks hurt from smiling so much. Ivy'd only had two glasses, but the champagne bubbles were zipping through her veins like a street race, making her dizzy. Impulsively, she kissed Tairon on his handsome cheek. He returned it with a lick up her neck from her clavicle to her earlobe that gave her goosebumps down the whole left side of her body.

“I'd like to give you your present now, if you don't mind. Before we get too distracted,” he murmured in her ear, sending another rush of tight anticipation over her skin. He produced something wrapped in soft, dark-green paper and tied with red velvet ribbon. “It's a custom for dragon males to make something special for their—”

“Fixations?” she finished for him, giggling.

He took his time brushing a curl from her forehead and tucking it behind her ear while she clutched the gift in her lap,

enjoying being sandwiched between the warmth emanating from the fireplace and the warmth of his touch. “We say ‘alokoi’ in our language. It means ‘the one known to us.’ It’s a nicer way of saying fixation, I suppose. The gift is supposed to represent what we’ve learned about our alokoi by observing them and attuning to them. And then, if the alokoi accepts the gift, there are some ritual words to say.”

She jerked her head up. “Like...vows?”

His head gave the barest shake. “Not binding words. We call them ‘alokim.’ Roughly translates as ‘words of knowing.’ They just mean we got it right. If you don’t like it, that’s fine. I’ll just try again. No pressure.” He grinned crookedly down at her and pulled the end of the ribbon on the package so that the bow came apart.

Ivy gently pulled open the paper, bracing herself to react positively, no matter what was inside the package. She found herself holding a graceful, honey-colored wooden spoon. It had a tapered oval bowl, her favorite shape to stir up cookies or quick breads with. She looked closer and noticed the handle was carved with intricate, braided vines and ivy leaves, the details burned into the surface of the wood. At the very tip of the handle, a dark green stone glinted and glowed in the firelight.

It was stunning, strong, balanced, and fit her palm perfectly. There was no need to pretend—she loved it. If he’d shown her a king’s hoard and said she could only pick one treasure from it, this what she would have chosen. “You *made* this?”

He nodded, eyes glowing. “I wanted to give you something you could use every day, and I noticed you always worked with wooden spoons at the bakery.”

She nodded. Most of her colleagues used metal or plastic, but she’d always preferred to work with wooden tools, like her grandmother had taught her when she was a child.

“I carved it from applewood because it matches your scent. The handle design is for your name, of course, but also because you wear your hair in beautiful braids so often.”

“To keep it out of my dough,” she said, voice thick with emotion. He’d really noticed everything.

“Pretty and practical, like you,” he said, fondness saturating his tone. “The stone is an emerald, because you love the color green and your birthday is in May.” He reached down and flipped the spoon over in her hands to show her the other side. “Forgive my ego, but I put my scale pattern on the back of the bowl because I hope I’ll become one of your favorite things, too.”

The spoon still gripped in one fist, she flung her arms around his neck, squeezing him in a tight hug. “I think you already are,” she whispered hoarsely, sniffing against his shoulder.

“I did good?” he asked, and she could hear the smile in his voice.

“So good.” Better than good. It was hard to believe anyone could get it so right.

“Then I’ll say the alokim.”

He pulled back, and, gripping her shoulders gently, told her to close her eyes. When she did, she felt him lick her right eyelid in a strange, sensuous slide. “I see you.” He licked the left one. “I feel your flame.” He licked across her forehead. “You are known to me.”

Emotion rose in her at his simple declarations. She felt them all the way to her center. He *knew* her. Had spent years soaking up everything he could about her so he could give her what she needed, *when* she needed it. She kept her eyes closed. “What do I say back?”

His hands slid up to cup her cheeks and his thumbs brushed over her brows. “You don’t have to say anything, Beautiful. But when you do, I’ll be listening.”

She blinked her eyes open to smile at him. “Then I’ll just say thank you for now. I love what you made for me, and I appreciate all the hours of thought and attention that went into designing and carving it. Nobody’s ever spent that much time and energy on me.”

He growled and pulled her into a crushing embrace, speaking to the top of her head. “I hate them all for giving you less than you deserved. But a selfish part of me is glad because it means you ended up in my arms.”



11

Ivy carefully put aside the spoon and then pushed Tairon back in his seat, dropping to the floor to kneel between his thighs. “Now I want to unwrap my *other* gift.”

He laughed and groaned at the same time, his head falling back on the sofa as she unbuttoned his jeans and nudged him to lift his hips so she could pull them down enough to reach inside. When she wrapped her hand around the ridged, burgundy curve of his shaft, he squeezed his eyes shut.

“*Gods*, gods, gods,” he chanted to the ceiling. “Is this really happening?”

She freed the deep purple head from the confines of the dark denim. It was already smeared with moisture, and she thumbed the slick liquid, his quick inhale telling her she was doing something right. She explored, letting her fingers roam over the different shapes and textures without trying to map them to a human experience, much in the same way that he’d explored her body in the hot tub.

Using the rhythm of his breath and the sounds he made to guide her, she found what he liked best: a two-handed technique with light, feathering strokes over the head and pressure on sensitive dips between his ridges. She circled one of those spots with her thumb and forefinger, and he bucked his hips up into her other hand as she tightened her grip.

“I’m going to squeeze you right here when you’re inside me,” she promised, and the hoarse sound that tore out of him made her core ache and drip so much that she could feel her leggings getting damp between her thighs. He grabbed the back of her head, tilting it so he could push his thumb between her lips.

“You’re going to make me come with that mouth,” he panted, looking down at her with an expression that was half wonder and half heavy-lidded lust.

“Probably so,” she said gravely, purposely misunderstanding him. Maintaining the ring of pressure between his ridges, she bent her neck, angling his cock so she could lick up the cleft of his swollen head. He tasted like his toasted caraway scent, distilled—oily and peppery and citrusy all at once. She licked again. “You taste amazing, Tairon.”

She took him in her mouth, and a string of blissed-out nonsense left his lips, his fingers tightening in her hair. Tonguing his slit, she bobbed over the thick head, enjoying the way he stretched her lips and bumped against the top of her palate. She couldn’t get him very far into her throat due to the pronounced curve, but she used both hands on his shaft while

her mouth worked the upper half, and he writhed and panted and groaned like she was killing him.

She adjusted her pace, speeding and then slowing so she wouldn't push him over the edge.

"Come up here and sit on me," he begged, after some glorious minutes of this.

She popped off to make a face at him. "I would if I could."

"You can." He drew her up so she straddled his lap, hands sliding under her shirt to palm her braless breasts. He licked up her neck and then tugged her shirt over her head, groaning when the stretchy fabric complied with his demands, exposing her tits. Flinging her top somewhere behind the sofa, he pushed them together and dragged his tongue through her cleavage, making her squirm against his hard length.

"I wish," she groaned, almost willing to bend the rules at this point if she could have the satisfaction of feeling him slide all those ridges inside. She couldn't put Tairon at risk because of James's bad behavior, though.

"Don't take this the wrong way, but when's the last time you and he actually..." he trailed off, letting her fill in the blank.

"I don't remember," she answered truthfully. "A while."

He buried his face in her neck, his voice muffled, the heat of his breath on her skin making her rock on his lap. "I hope this isn't too weird but I, uh, know the exact date."

Her hips stilled. "You do?"

“September eighth. I didn’t watch you or anything creepy like that,” he rushed to add, pulling back to look her in the eye, sincerity written all over his face. “It’s not like that. I could… smell it on you when I saw you.”

“So every time he and I were together, you knew?” she asked, eyes widening. He nodded, looking slightly pained. “Oh my god, that must have been awful for you. I don’t know how you were so patient all this time.”

“Because you’re my alokoi. I would wait forever for you.” He wrapped his hand around the back of her neck, pulling her in for a series of hot licks and nips. “It’s been long enough since you were with him that I trust it’s safe for us to be together, Ivy. If you’re ready.”

Ready? She was already wriggling out of her leggings, getting one foot tangled in her panties in her haste to get them off. She wasn’t the one who’d been waiting years for this, but it sure felt like it.

“How much do you like these?” he asked gruffly, watching her struggle with an amused quirk to his mouth. Her noise of frustration must have clued him in that she couldn’t care less at that exact moment, because he reached down and ripped through the elastic, freeing her so she could clamber back onto his lap.

Straddling him, she yanked on his shirt, and he tore it open, popping buttons in every direction. Then he pulled her close. Her nipples scudded over the rough texture of his scales, sending sparks through her. He grabbed her ass with both

hands, lifting her to line up the head of his cock with her opening.

Their eyes met, his glowing gold as the flames in the fireplace, and anticipation curled tight in her belly until it resembled pure, voracious hunger. “What are you waiting for?” she panted, tilting her hips back to better the angle. “Please, I need you.”

“That’s what I was waiting for, Beautiful,” he murmured. “Your pretty words to let me know I can finally have what’s mine.”

He relaxed his grip on her a little at a time, letting gravity impale her on his cock. The indulgent stretch of his thick head entering her sent a wash of tingles up her spine. It felt even better than she’d imagined, and the muscles in her thighs started to shake as he coaxed himself deeper inside her. Her progress stopped at the first of his ridges and, as she’d promised, she squeezed her internal muscles around the sensitive ring of tissue above it.

His groan and reflexive thrust was worth it when another ridge pushed inside her. She squeezed him again. His tail thumped hard on the sofa cushion beside them. “Gods, I’m not going to last if you keep doing that. Be good, and you’ll get what you want.”

Being on the naughty list was feeling pretty wonderful, though. She bit her lip, and with the right movement, captured a third ridge. *Squeeze*. His tail swung up and smacked her on

the ass. The hot, stinging slap made her squeal and clench again.

“Bad girl,” he growled in her ear. Wrapping his arms around her waist, he applied steady downward pressure, and the rest of his deliciously textured cock slid inside her, burying him to the hilt. The curve forced the head directly against her g-spot, and she lost her breath when the pressure notched in just the right spot, like it was made to fit her. At the same time, his ridges massaged and stretched her inner walls with every movement, even the tiny movement of air flowing in and out of his lungs.

The sensation was so overwhelming and intense that all she could do was let go and enjoy it. Burying her face in his gorgeous, muscular chest, she whimpered and whined as he rolled his hips, driving his length in and out of her, rubbing his abdominal scales against her clit with every plunge. She was so wet now that his ridges *purred* through her opening, and the relentless glide of the head against her most sensitive spot built her pleasure so quickly that her brain couldn't keep up.

“You feel so good,” Tairon grunted. “So perfect, fuck, I can't—I'm not—I'm—”

“Gonna come,” she gasped, but it was too late. She was already shaking and squeezing and cursing and begging, and he was throbbing and laughing and holding her tight, so tight, anchoring her so she didn't fall off the sofa as he filled her up with hot, filthy pulses.

She collapsed against him, boneless and incapable of any words or rational thought. After a few more thrusts and shudders and murmured praise for what a good girl she was, what a bad girl, what a sweet girl, *his*, Tairon twisted his body so they both tipped sideways onto the sofa, her on top. His arms, legs, and tail tangled around her, securing her limbs so his cock stayed buried inside her until they both caught their breath.

“That was—” she began, when she could speak again.

“*Everything*,” he finished.



12

Late March

Ivy bounced on her toes, stealing glances out the front window of the bakery as she counted out the register and wiped down the counter. Tairon was due any minute, and she couldn't wait to show him what she'd been working on in secret.

In the three months since she and Tairon spent Christmas in the cabin, so much had changed. She'd officially moved into the hive, for one. Tairon and a couple of his friends had helped her pack her things and vacate the place she'd shared with James in record time. Maybe it was the three dragons standing behind her when she offered her proposal for splitting their joint belongings, or maybe it was Chelsea scowling at him from the kitchen table with his grandmother's diamond on her finger, but James had agreed easily to everything she asked for.

"No hard feelings, right, Ive?" he'd said, offering his hand to shake. "We had something good while it lasted."

She shook it, because really, she didn't have hard feelings. He was right. Once upon a time, they'd had something. It just wasn't *everything*. Now that she knew what that felt like, she couldn't regret the past. Not when it'd brought her to her happily-ever-after.

After a few weeks of maintaining a separate loft apartment at the hive but spending every night in her dragon lover's bed

with his tail curled possessively around her ankle, Ivy'd given up the farce and moved permanently into Tairon's apartment. His utter delight at sharing a space with her was adorable, and for the first week they lived together, he had followed her around constantly, literally taking notes. It was cute...until she caught him in the bathroom measuring her floss and writing down the amount she'd used.

“What are you doing?” she'd yelled.

He cleared his throat, looking appropriately embarrassed as he put the unused spool back in the medicine cabinet. “I didn't get to observe certain, uh, *habits* before, so I'm playing catch-up. I can't explain why, but it satisfies something in me to know these details. Every new thing I learn about you makes you a little more mine, somehow. Is it too weird for you? I can stop if it's scaring you off.”

“Your instincts aren't weird,” she said instantly, crossing the tiled floor to give him a reassuring hug and peck on the cheek. “And it doesn't scare me. I'm just feeling a tiny bit...I don't know, *scrutinized*. I like that you pay attention to me and care about my preferences so much, but maybe we can draw the line at the bathroom door?”

He gave a relieved laugh, pulling her into his chest. “Totally reasonable. Thanks for being so understanding of my dragonishness.”

“I love your dragonishness,” she said quietly.

She really did. In fact, she probably enjoyed learning all his quirks as much as he enjoyed learning hers. For example, he

called closets “hoard rooms,” which made her giggle every time she put laundry away, thinking of it as her hoard of socks and clean undies. He lit a candle with a puff of his breath before he ate, saying short prayers to his gods, even for snacks. Yes, the man prayed over his corn chips! And his fascination with tasting every part of her every day, even between her toes? She was definitely not going to interfere with his dragonishness.

That was the first time he’d told her he loved her, right there in front of the bathroom sink. Then he’d scooped her up and carried her to the nest in his bedroom to demonstrate yet another thing his long, forked tongue could do. She hadn’t quite caught up to him emotionally at that point, so she hadn’t said it back, but *now*?

Now she was definitely, completely, one hundred percent there. She loved him. Loved living with him, knowing him, fucking him, belonging to him—she loved it all. She’d even let him measure her floss if that’s what he needed. Her love for him was boundless and boundaryless, and she couldn’t wait to tell him when he picked her up from work.

The familiar sound of his bike’s engine caught her ear, and she hurried to finish the last few tasks before she was done for the day. Then she grabbed the surprise and set it on one of the tables just as Tairon’s figure appeared outside the bakery’s plate glass window. She opened the door for him, and he swept her up in a huge hug, like they’d been apart days or weeks and not merely hours.

“Ready to go?” he asked, lacing his fingers with hers.

“Almost. I want to show you something first. I’ve been working on a new recipe. Come here and see.” Ivy tugged him over to the table and bit her lip, waiting for his reaction to what she’d made.

“Everything bagels, huh?” He grinned at her. “Brings back the memories, that’s for sure.”

She nudged the plate toward him, the delicious scent of sesame, caraway, onion flakes, and poppyseeds on the still-warm bagels wafting up from it. “They’re gluten-free. I think I got them perfect, Tairon. Nobody would ever guess they weren’t conventional flour. It only took me like forty batches to figure it out.” She giggled, giddy with success.

He raised one brow as he picked up a bagel from the plate. “I didn’t know you were working on this.”

“I wanted to surprise you.” She held her breath, watching his face as he took his first bite. His lids fell shut, and he groaned, the deep rasp sending a flutter of anticipatory pleasure straight to her core. “You like it? I added caraway seeds to the everything seasoning to match your scent and baked them off in the wood-fired oven using apple logs, so they’re kind of like our love story in one breath. One that you actually get to eat instead of giving to the news-stand guy.”

“So fucking good,” he said, following his first taste with another bite. “I could eat these every day.”

“I’ll make you more,” she said, smiling. “A lot more, actually. I’m hoping to expand the bakery’s gluten-free offerings to draw in more dragon customers. My boss is totally supportive and is giving me shares in the business in exchange for recipe development, can you believe it?!”

“Really?!” Tairon’s face lit up, and he picked her up and spun her around until her feet flew off the floor. “Congratulations, another step toward your dream! Amazing. I’m so proud of you!” He kissed her, tasting of everything, before sitting down at the table, keeping her in his lap. He grabbed a second bagel. “I better eat this now. Once we get back to the hive, these things are going to vanish as soon as you walk in the door.”

“Eat all of them if you want. I made them for you. I used my alokoi gift to mix up the dough,” she added, touching the treasure in her apron pocket. He squeezed her, murmuring his enjoyment as he ate. It was so gratifying to feed him, especially after all he’d done to nourish her spirit over the last few months. It was time to tell him the depth of her feelings.

Ivy slid off his lap to stand between his knees. “It adds a little something extra when baking is done with love, don’t you think? And I have so much love for you, Tairon. Enough to make a whole bakery full of bagels.”

He tipped his face up, eyes glowing, fingers digging into her hips. “You love me?”

“Close your eyes,” she said, as she reached to cradle his face in her hands. He did as she asked, and she brushed a soft kiss

on his left lid. "I see you, Tairon." His right lid. "I love you."
The center of his forehead. "You are everything to me."

He pulled her closer in to his body, trapping her between his knees. Eyes still shut, he murmured, "Have I showed you a new dragon trick yet today?"

Ivy grabbed his horns, steering his face closer for a kiss. "No?"

"So negligent of me." He nipped the side of her breast through her shirt, and her whole body jolted to attention.

Knowing the sort of tricks he usually had in mind, she squealed and twisted away, protesting breathlessly, "Not here!"

"Definitely not," he agreed, rising from the chair. He grabbed the box of bagels and led her out, impatiently pressing against her back so she could feel the thick curve in his pants while she locked the bakery door.

Though the bright yellow daffodils in the planters that flanked the entrance looked like sunshine, a distinct chill in the air and a blanket of low clouds overhead said winter wasn't quite over. A few stray snowflakes fluttered down onto the shoulders of Tairon's leather jacket. When Ivy brushed them away, and they were instantly replaced.

"Weather report predicted a storm tonight. Big one," he said as he stowed the bagels in his bike's saddlebags and passed her a helmet. "Might get snowed in. You'll be stuck with me and my dragon tricks all day tomorrow."

“Oh no. How terrible, all alone with a monster. Please, don’t eat me!” Ivy grinned at him.

“Definitely gonna eat you. Get on the bike, Beautiful,” he growled, adjusting himself in his pants. She swung her leg over the seat behind him, wrapping her arms around his waist and pressing as close to his warmth as she could.

As they made the short ride across town, the scattered flakes turned to flurries that swirled around them, reminding her of the first time they rode his bike together. But this time, instead of leaving her life behind, she was riding straight toward it.



13

Tairon didn't let her feet touch the ground when they reached the hive and parked in the underground garage. Pausing only to drop off her everything-but-gluten bagels in the communal kitchen, Tairon carried her upstairs and deposited her in their nest.

"Wait here," he demanded, eyes glowing and tail whipping behind him, looking like dragon out of a legend. "Don't move," he added as he flicked off the lights and ducked out.

She obeyed, waiting in the dark until her eyes adjusted and then watching the fat snowflakes spiral down in the twilight outside the expansive windows. Heat built between her legs and prickled over her chest as she anticipated what he might have in mind. Was it a new tongue trick? She hoped it was a new tongue trick. He seemed to have an endless supply of them.

But when Tairon reappeared, he had a whole armful of seemingly unrelated objects: a fire extinguisher, a folded gray

blanket, a bucket of ice with a bottle of clear liquor in it. Ivy sat up. “Should I grab glasses?”

“No.” He kneeled at the edge of the nest, straddling her legs so she couldn’t rise, and pushed her back with his free hand. “We’re not drinking it.”

She eyed the fire extinguisher that he was cradling like a baby. “What exactly *are* we doing with it?”

“Do you trust me to keep you safe?”

“Of course.” She did. She’d realized over the last few months that, though she hadn’t had the instant recognition of her mate that he had, she’d known from the beginning that he was good to his core. And he’d proven his trustworthiness every day since.

“Good girl. You’re going to like this trick, I promise.” His wide, dragonish grin did something to her, melting her insides like candle wax.

“Is it a tongue trick?” she asked hopefully.

“Maaaaybe.” He dragged out the word, made it full of mischief, telling her that it was definitely a tongue trick. She squirmed in the soft bedding, pressing her thighs together as he set aside the fire extinguisher and ice bucket and deftly spread the blanket out beside her. In one effortless motion, he scooped her up and deposited her in the center of it.

She looked around, bemused. “Are we really getting that messy?”

“Not messy,” he nearly purred. “*Hot*. It’s fireproof.”

“Oh. *Oh.*” Her adrenaline spiked. He’d used his flames to grill burgers and light candles plenty of times since she moved in with him, but this was the first time he was going to use his flames on *her*.

“Any point you want to stop, I’ll stop,” he said, shedding his shirt before prowling forward so his body covered hers. He licked up the side of her neck to her ear, his voice dropping to a whisper that made every hair on her body stand on end. “I have excellent control. You have nothing to fear, love.”

She slid her hands over his bare arms and shoulders, stroking over his hot, scaled skin. “I’m not afraid.” Her voice came out quavering and breathless, undermining her words, and he huffed a laugh.

He sat back, methodically unbuttoning her blouse and pushing it open to reveal her freckled chest and practical, gray bra. From the look on his face, it might as well have been fancy lingerie. He reverently traced the upper contours where the fabric met her skin, dipping his fingers into her cleavage along the way, before removing it and setting it aside. He did the same with her jeans and panties and then plucked the flat liquor bottle out of the ice bucket.

“This is gonna be cold,” he warned, seconds before he wedged the narrow side against her pussy so it was directly pressed against her most sensitive parts, the bottle’s neck sticking up obscenely between her legs.

Her back arched involuntarily at the unexpected change in temperature, all her breath disappearing from her lungs as her

thighs clamped around the bottle. It was freezing, hard against her heated flesh, and unbearably erotic.

Tairon's hands spanned her waist, thumbs moving in soothing circles over her stomach as he chuckled under his breath. "Poor thing. Need me to warm you up now?"

"Uh huh," she gasped out, trying to release the bottle. He wrapped his tail around her ankles, pinning her legs firmly together, and bent over her to lick around the curved sides of the bottle where it met her tender skin. His clever tongue delved between the two, the difference in the temperature and texture providing a delicious contrast as its forked tip tugged at her clit. After the cold press of the glass, his touch felt like fire even though it was just his body heat.

He tortured her like this until the bottle warmed. When she was able to relax enough that her back hit the blanket, he tugged the bottle from between her legs and plunged it back into the bucket of ice. She groaned in spite of herself—he wasn't done with her by a long shot. She was already sweating, and he'd barely done anything.

"I'm not going to make it to the end of this," she said, laughing.

He crawled up her body to lick across the seam of her mouth. Then he licked her forehead and both eyelids before returning to her mouth, kissing her with little slips of his tongue and nips of his teeth until her laughter turned into moans and she could feel her pulse pounding in her lips. He raised his head to speak in an uncharacteristically stern voice.

“There is no end to this. This is forever. And now I’m going to show you what it means to be mated to a dragon.”

“We’re mated? That sounds...*official*.”

He ran his nose down her neck. “We’ve been mated since I caught your scent. Our fates twined together even before that. Remember when you applied to Otherworld Academy? They knew from your blood test that you had a fated mate. That’s why the admissions department turned you away from the regular program.”

“They knew?” She gasped, jerking under him. “*James* knew? Why didn’t he say anything? Why did he *ask me out*?”

Tairon’s lip curled. “Because he wanted a short-term relationship? Because you were cute and vulnerable?” He shook his head. “I can’t pretend to understand why he did what he did, but keeping the test results secret is Academy policy. The test doesn’t show who your mate is, only that your blood is marked. Imagine if they told you that you had a mate, but he or she was still on the other side of the Breach? It’d be disappointing and confusing if you were constantly searching but couldn’t find them.”

The thought of never meeting Tairon chilled her. She shuddered, wrapping her legs around his. He nosed the side of her neck, warming her again. But the more she thought about it, the angrier she got.

“I can’t believe he knew I was fated to be with someone else and didn’t say a word. He *knew* we’d never work out, and he let me fall in love with him. He should have told me. You *both*

should have told me, damn it. Think of all that time you wasted waiting for me.”

“You loved him. You weren’t ready to hear it.” He brushed a kiss in the center of her forehead. “It wasn’t a waste of time to wait for you. And you didn’t waste time, either. You’ve been doing amazing things. If you still want to attend the Academy, fated mates are automatically admitted to a special accelerated program. The degree they grant will allow you to cross the Breach and meet my family, if you want to.”

She touched his face gently, running her fingertips over the unique surfaces of his dragonish features. “Of course I want to meet them, if you think they won’t mind that I’m human.”

“They’ll love you. You’d get to see me in my feral form, too,” he said, a teasing note in his voice as he pretended to nip her fingers. “Are you sure you want *that*? Extra horns, extra teeth, wings, extra other parts...”

“You have wings in the other realm?!” Her hands went automatically to his bare back, feeling for where they’d be.

Tairon chuckled. “I told you, I have lots of dragon tricks. Speaking of...I still haven’t shown you today’s trick.”

“You haven’t? The bottle thing with the tongue wasn’t...?”

“Nope.” He reached behind him and grabbed the bottle of alcohol, a wicked look on his face. Wetting his finger with some of the clear liquid, he drew a cool line down her torso from the notch of her throat to her navel. Then he released a

tiny lick of flame, igniting the line he'd drawn with flickering blue fire, turning it from cool to warm—very warm!

Ivy squeaked in surprise, but just as quickly, he licked up her body, hot path over hot path, putting it out with his mouth. It all happened so fast, she didn't have time to be afraid of getting burned, but the burst of adrenaline tangled up with her desire and made her feel like she was dizzy-drunk. All she could say was, "Wow."

"Gods, you're beautiful when you're painted with my flames," he breathed against her skin before raising up again, eyes wandering over her.

Her muscles tightened in anticipation of where he'd draw the next line, but he surprised her again, pouring a small amount onto her directly from the bottle instead of just wetting his finger. The ice-cold alcohol hit her sternum and dripped slowly down her sides.

It ignited with his next exhale, lighting her up in a jagged design like blue lightning. This time it burned hotter, a tiny reservoir of alcohol between her breasts heating to almost unbearable levels before he extinguished it with his tongue. He lingered there, soothing the redness that remained until her heartrate returned to near normal. The greedy, buzzing pulse between her legs didn't, though.

"Tairon," she murmured, shamelessly pressing her hips up against him, her cheeks as hot as though he'd burned them. "I need you."

He grabbed her wrist, dipping the tips of her fingers into the neck of the icy bottle before blowing a lick of dragon fire over them. They both admired her flaming manicure for a split-second before he sucked each of her fingers into his mouth in turn. She whimpered as his tongue found the tender spaces between her fingers and then trailed to the ticklish center of her palm. She felt it deep in her core.

“I can’t take it. I can’t,” she whimpered, writhing with need beneath him.

“You *are* taking it, Beautiful. Look at you. You’re perfect,” he whispered, and proceeded to prove it by lighting up every finger on her other hand, her toes, the long sweep of her inner thigh, the curves of her breasts, and the quivering swell of her belly.

Every new stroke of his tongue extinguished the flames on her skin but stoked the ones inside, until she’d given up on controlling her reactions to the rapid changes in temperature. She lost her self-consciousness about the slickness building between her legs. She gave up any pretense of control or sense of time and just let each new sensation build on the previous one like layers in a cake, rich and sweet and satisfying.

By the time he put the bottle on ice and slid his curved ridges inside her, she was whining and begging for him, hungry to have him. “You’re all I want,” she gasped, reveling in the generous stretch that sent waves of curling pleasure all the way to the tips of her fingers. “All I need.”

“That’s my girl,” he purred in his dragonish way. “That’s my alokoi. My mate.”



Author Note

Thanks for reading *Snowed In with a Dragon*! I hope you enjoyed Ivy and Tairon's sweet, stalkerish love story as much as I enjoyed writing it. This project was pure indulgence for me. I didn't even have on my writing schedule, but once their story popped into my head, it wouldn't leave me alone.

I'm planning more monster stories set in this world. If you want to be the first to know when a new one comes out, sign up for my newsletter! (It'll give you the password to my NSFW character art vault!) The signup form is quick and easy: <https://sendfox.com/saraivyhill>

XO, **Sara**



Books by the Author

If you like sweet, obsessed aliens with unique anatomy (and a huge helping of size difference) who find enthusiastic human fated mates, you'll enjoy my Salt Planet Giants series!

THE MOUNTAIN'S MATE (Salt Planet Giants Book 1)

He'll move mountains for his mate...

When Patrek, a giant Skarr alien, hires a human for a covert mission, he doesn't expect a female to take the gig. Nor does he expect his long-dormant mating instinct to ignite for someone so tiny! When the heist goes awry and they're forced to hide out together until the heat dies down, the close quarters reveal that, though they're vastly mismatched in size, their hearts are a perfect fit.

To escape with his freedom, Patrek must flee the city. But leaving her behind will break him. Can he convince her to join him in the mountains and take a monster as her mate?

The Mountain's Mate is a steamy, fated-mates alien romance with a huge helping of size-difference!

Find it here: <https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0BDYSM46F>

***THE BALLAST'S BRIDE* (Salt Planet Giants Book 2)**

He'll cross oceans for his mate...

Skarr giant Hinrivik has been in love with the human he guards for years. But when her marriage is arranged—and he's assigned to deliver her to her groom across the sea—he loses hope that she'll ever return his feelings.

When they cross the ocean, she'll step off the ship into her new life as someone else's wife. Can Hinrivik convince her to consider him, a wildly mismatched monster, as her mate? He'll have to do it before they reach the other shore...because breaking her marriage contract could easily start a war.

The Ballast's Bride is a sweet and steamy size-difference alien romance about a gentle giant bodyguard and the tiny human woman who ignites his instincts.

Find it here: <https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0BJC816N3>

***THE RUIN'S REVENGE* (Salt Planet Giants Book 3)**

He'll ruin realms for her...

Skarr giant Alrek was one of the lucky ones. He had a mate—the very last female of their kind. Now the widowed chief of a dying clan, he has only two hopes for the future: saving as many other species as possible from the same extinction...and exacting revenge on the invasive humans who caused it.

But then *she* walks into his territory. Tiny. Sweet-smelling. Infuriatingly human.

At first, he just wants her off his land, so he escorts her home. But the more time he spends with the fascinating farmer, the less he can imagine his life without her in it. Can he reconcile his painful past and embrace a former enemy? Or will his need for revenge ruin any chance for love to grow again?

The Ruin's Revenge is a sweet and steamy size-difference alien romance about a grumpy giant and the tiny, sunshiney human woman who reignites his instincts.

Find it here: <https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0CL13QDX7>

BOUND BY THE ALIEN KING (A Salt Planet Novella)

On the other side of the Salten Sea, humans and Nightborn don't mingle—not until an ancient treaty requires the alien king to take a human wife. Too bad he's fallen for another female...a broken one who washed up in his territory and threatens to destroy the tenuous peace between their species.

Find it here: <https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0BJ23HW1H>

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The Warrior Kings of Alioth Series

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About the Author

Sara Ivy Hill is truly hopeless about staying up past midnight to read by moons-light. She's fascinated by the possibilities of the universe and is certain it's bigger and more magical than anyone on our little planet can imagine. She writes steamy alien and monster romance because love is limitless.

Despite her best efforts, she is only able to breathe figurative fire. She blames gluten. You can discover Sara's books and connect with her here: <https://linktr.ee/saraivyhill>