



THE FIRST
DRAGON
BRIDE

THE DRAGON OVERLORDS

RILEY STORM

The First Dragon Bride

The Dragon Overlords (Book One)

Riley Storm

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All sexual activities depicted occur between consenting characters 18 years or older who are not blood related.

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Chapter One

Ajax

“Everyone ready?” I asked, staring out the truck window to the underground parking lot as I waited for Zoran and Kane to give their final affirmatives.

The end of the war was finally at hand.

“Let’s do this,” Zoran growled.

Kane grunted, a mixture of acknowledgment and impatience.

There was no sense in waiting for any longer. Our footfalls echoed through the underground parking as we moved casually toward the bank of elevators. The longer we could keep security off our backs, the better, so we tried to act like we belonged.

As far as any of you watching can tell, we’re just three regular human men. Nothing to see here.

Of course, we weren’t human at all. Dragon blood surged through our veins, the strength and speed lurking below the surface, hidden from plain sight. Until we hit someone.

Punching the elevator button, we waited, facing the doors. It wasn’t the response of human security we feared. It was having to potentially hurt them in order to stop them. These were civilians. Not part of the military that had fled as we overran the humans’ cities in the early days of the war.

I would not condone wholesale slaughter of human noncombatants, no matter *what* they did. Including the imprisonment of Vicek, the son of our Sovereign and the heir to the dragon kingdom.

“Put them down, but gently,” I repeated to the others unnecessarily.

I had chosen my team carefully. Neither Zoran nor Kane relished killing, even if they were just as good at it as I was. There would be injuries to the guards but minimal death.

The rightmost elevator chimed, the *ding* going off in time with the arrow above to indicate its arrival. The doors rumbled open, Kane and Zoran entering first. I stepped forward to follow.

“Hey, hold the door!”

My teeth pulled back in a silent snarl. Where on earth had *she* come from? There had been no sound of a vehicle arriving. No footsteps on the concrete parking garage floor. How had she gotten so close?

“Sorry,” I growled, turning around and punching a button that would send us not up, but down to the “basement” with a secret laboratory we knew was hidden there. “But this one’s full.”

A laboratory where it was assumed the humans were experimenting on Vicek’s DNA, trying to figure out a way to develop weapons that could puncture our scales and hurt us. A laboratory I intended to destroy on our way out.

“There’s room,” the female protested as she hurried closer.

I lifted my head, letting my eyes bore into her, intending to send her scurrying back until the doors closed.

My eyes locked onto her and — Twin circles of honeyed amber slammed into me like a fist. I staggered back, supported by Kane and a startled Zoran as I struggled to regain control of my body. Fire raged deep within me, threatening to burst into reality as it burned brighter with every passing nanosecond.

The woman had come to a halt as well, her mouth dropped open in a perfect little “O,” her lips full and red. I wanted to surge through the door and do whatever it took to make that face last. I wanted to hear the moans that went with it, the scream of pleasure as I fucked her into the ground, taking her taut runner’s body and making it shake with every rough thrust of my cock. My fingers curled into a fist as if her hair was threaded between them, ready to pull her head back, taking control as I buried every last inch inside her pussy until it trembled and exploded, gushing over me with the force of—

“Get off me,” Zoran snarled as the door shut, leaving me with little more than the image of the raven-haired beauty with a streak of purple in her locks.

“What the fuck was that all about?” Kane asked as I leaned heavily against the elevator wall, breathing deep.

“I don’t know.”

The elevator slowed.

“Well, pull yourself together,” Zoran barked. “We’re here.”

The door opened to reveal a basement hallway. The floor was scuffed and marked, the lights spread farther apart. All designed to give the impression it was nothing more than a regular basement.

But around the corner and behind a door marked “Authorized Personnel Only,” we found what we knew was hiding. A security door, complete with keycode panel and retina scanner. Certainly *not* typical basement protocol.

We didn’t have authorization. But we didn’t need it. The concrete wall cracked as we punched it and slowly began to fall away. In minutes, the door was free enough the three of us could yank it out. It fell forward into the storage room.

Beyond was a much larger, sterile hallway with all the markings of a laboratory. And half a dozen guards with guns, alerted by the pounding on the door. The weapons came up.

“Freeze!”

“Bad choice of words,” Zoran muttered, sweeping a hand out toward the guards.

Ice flowed forward, coating the guns, the floor, and the guards, pinning them and their hands in place, preventing them from firing. He left their faces clear, to ensure they could breathe and would not die.

We jogged past them, heading toward the doorway marked ‘Stairs’. Destroying the lab was a secondary priority. Getting Vicek was what mattered most. His imprisonment by the humans was what had started the war in the first place, forcing

us out of our hidden home in the ocean. Somewhere I longed to return.

The stairs led down. Another security door, one that looked like it received much less use.

More security guards. Kane swept them aside with a blast of lightning from his fingertips, zapping their nervous systems and sending them to the floor as they twitched uncontrollably.

“Vicek!” I shouted as we flung open the thick steel door at the far end of the hallway, revealing a giant hole where they had somehow managed to stuff a dragon.

“Hello, Ajax,” the huge, orange, scaled beast rumbled, the human words twisting its snout in weird ways. “It’s good to see you.”

“Come on, let’s go. We’re leaving,” I said, gesturing out the door.

“Of course.” But he hesitated.

“What is it?” I asked, staring up at the dragon’s huge yellow eyes and vertical pupils. “The sooner the better.”

The dragon head turned on its long neck, looking behind him. “There is a ... complication. Does your escape route have room for five?”

“Five?” I asked. “What are you ...”

A tall blonde woman in a lab coat edged out from where she’d hid behind Vicek.

I groaned. “You can’t be serious?”

“Laura is coming with me, Ajax.” There was no room for argument in his voice.

“Fine,” I growled, mentally readjusting everything about our escape. “But you get to tell your mom why you brought a human back to the Dragon Isles. And I hope you have a good enough reason.”

“I do,” Vicek said as he shifted back into his human form, the huge steel rings that had kept his dragon mostly immobile

and pinned down clanging to the floor, far too large to hold him now. "It's the best reason."

"We'll see about that," I grunted, turning for the door. "What *is* your insane explanation for why she's coming with us?"

"Love."

Chapter Two

Katie

One Week Later.

Ceasefire declared with Dragons.

The headline was everywhere as I went to work. Radio. Internet. Even the sidewalk stalls had it plastered in print. It wasn't surprising. After months of open warfare that had seen many of our cities and towns reduced to ash, along with the soldiers tasked to defend it, a ceasefire was a big deal. The dragons had been unstoppable. Which meant they must also be the ones who had finally agreed to a ceasefire.

Wonder what that's going to cost us, I thought cynically as I entered the building that housed my lab, pulling out my badge to swipe myself through security. As I walked in the revolving glass door, however, the security guards, all *four* of them, twice as many as normal, shifted and came to a more alert standing position. Tiny alarm bells went off in my head as I noticed the movement. Given I was the *only* person currently coming through the doors, it meant one of two things.

Either something had happened in the lab *again* and security had been beefed up and placed on high alert in response for a second time in a week, or—

“Mrs. Beckinson.”

Or option B, they were there for me.

Shit. They *were* there for me. Had they finally looked at the security camera footage and discovered I had come across the men during the break-in the week before? That I could have sounded the alarm right away? As far as anyone had said, nothing had been stolen, but I doubted the higher-ups, especially Ms. McCruten, were happy about it.

And if they knew I could perhaps have prevented it ...

“It's *Miss* Beckinson,” I corrected, ignoring the stab of pain at the reminder of my failed marriage. But still, protocol had to

be observed. “And what can I do for you big, burly, mean-looking gentlemen today?”

“Please hand over all personal effects, including any concealed weapons, and come with us, ma’am,” the same guard said, my attempt at humor falling flat at his feet like a deflated beachball.

“I don’t carry any weapons,” I said, indicating the jumpsuit I had on that had no pockets or anything else convenient for storing things like guns or knives.

The guard looked at my bag.

“Fine. Go through it,” I said, shoving it at him.

Just tell them they somehow stunned you. You don’t remember.

That was the cover story I’d come up with myself. It was the only thing that made any sense. It wasn’t like anyone would believe me if I told the truth. Nobody would buy the idea I’d all but had an orgasm in the parking garage while a giant with orange fiery eyes stared me down as his long hair moved in a nonexistent breeze.

I barely believed it, and it happened to me! My knees hadn’t stopped shaking for an hour, and my body had screamed for sex for the rest of the day, to the point I’d run to the ladies’ room *more* than once to shove a hand down my pants and rub my clit like a hormone-infused teenage maniac until I made myself come in short, panting breaths.

No, much better to say they hit me with some sort of temporary stun gun.

“Come with us, please,” the security guard said.

“For what? There are no weapons in there,” I huffed, getting angry. “I’m going to be late for work if you keep this up.”

“Ms. McCruten wants to see you in her office,” the security guard said. “Now, let’s go.”

That wasn’t good. No meeting with Elizabeth McCruten was a good thing. Not unless you had a breakthrough or something else fantastic to report while there.

I had no such thing. Despite my best efforts at trying to figure out how to break down the bond of the dragon scale, we were no closer to success than when our lab had first received the samples months ago, prior to the start of the war.

“Ma’am.” The security guard was waiting.

“Fine, fine,” I said, following them to the elevator, where we were then whisked upward to the top floor fast enough my ears popped.

The guards followed me out of the elevator, two in front, two behind, forming a cordon to ensure I didn’t go anywhere.

“You know, I’m perfectly capable of getting to Ms. McCruten’s office on my own. It might surprise you to learn I’ve actually been here before. Several times. This is way overkill to make sure I don’t get lost.”

The guards didn’t reply.

I was starting to get an upset stomach as worry gnawed at me. Did it have to do with the ceasefire? Was the company shutting the research down? They had better not be. We hadn’t figured the key out just yet, but we were getting close; I knew it! It wouldn’t be long before my team and I could unlock a way to hurt those murdering bastards.

There was no way Elizabeth McC “Rotten,” as everyone called her, would just turn a blind eye to all the death and destruction caused by the dragons ... was there? We needed to be ready in case they came back. And how would we ever retake the northeastern seaboard? It was now firmly under dragon rule. If we didn’t develop weapons that could hurt them, it would remain that way.

We reached the office door, and one of the guards rapped softly.

“Come.” The voice on the other side was cold. Sterile.

Steeling myself, holding my spine erect, I followed the guards in, trying to act like they were an honor guard. Not jailers.

“Miss Beckinson.”

I swallowed nervously in the presence of Ms. McCrutten. She was an intimidating woman. Somewhere in her fifties, she wore a custom-made blazer-blouse-skirt power suit that emphasized her physical size. At somewhere over six feet tall, she was a giant who stared down at the guards. When it came to looking at me, I must have been an insect, my short five-foot-five frame barely registering.

“Sit,” she snapped without further preamble from where she stood beside the window, her arms crossed as she stared down at the streets far below us.

I sat promptly and waited to be chewed out for whatever it was she was pissed at me for. It wasn’t going to be pretty. I knew that much.

“You’re aware of the ceasefire.” It wasn’t a question. “I assume you have *not* heard the full details?”

“Full details?” I echoed.

McCrutten shook her head, pushing off the wall next to the window and facing me across her desk. “I thought not. But, of course, there were details. It was not a white truce. We surrendered, Miss Beckinson. We were losing. Because we had no weapons that could fight back.”

“I’m sorry,” I said automatically, looking up, trying to not let myself be too intimidated. “We’re getting close, Ms. McCrutten. I promise. It won’t be long before we have something and can hit back against those murdering bastards!”

Her hand sliced through the air sharply. “Enough.”

My jaw clacked shut.

“The details are the important part of the agreement.”

“What details am I missing?” I asked, stomach sinking. Whatever it was, it wasn’t going to be good for me. I could feel it.

“The one where the dragons require us to turn over eight women to them.”

I gasped. “Human sacrifices? Why? How did they choose?”

“They didn’t. They left it up to us to choose.”

“So, we have to send eight women to die just to keep the peace?” I hated the sound of that. But at the same time, what were eight lives against thousands a day? Millions had died so far, I was sure.

“No, not to die,” McCrutten said. “They want them as mates.”

I laughed. I couldn’t help myself. “After all they’ve done to this country, all the people they’ve killed, they just expect women to volunteer to be their mates? Who would be stupid enough to do that? How does that even work with a dragon?”

“We don’t know,” McCrutten admitted. “But the terms were agreed to.”

“Morons.” I shook my head. “Well, my team will push ourselves even harder. Once we figure out how to hurt them, we can get those women back. Along with our cities.”

McCrutten said nothing as I ranted. She just stared at me until I stopped talking. Waiting.

“What am I missing?” I asked cautiously.

“You are going to be one of those eight women,” she said without hesitation.

“Like hell I am.” My hands clenched into fists.

Behind me, I heard the rustle of movement as the security guards fanned out. I glanced over the back of my chair at them, then back at Ms. McCrutten.

“You aren’t giving me a choice,” I said icily as comprehension dawned. “Are you?”

“You will go there, and you will make this ceasefire stick,” she said coldly. “Whatever it takes.”

“And if I don’t?” I crossed my arms defiantly.

McCrutten smiled. Ice formed in my stomach.

“Come now, Katie. You’ll be among dragons, in their homeland. Do you really want to be there when word gets out

about what you've been working on here? What it is you *really* do for Rutt-Tayo Labs? The experiments you've been conducting? Where that experiment, ahem, *material* came from?"

I glared, my face hot with fury. "You can't actually expect me to do this!" I shouted. "One of those giant orange and black scaled beasts leveled my hometown, turning it to ash and killing everyone in it, including my parents, my brother, his wife, their kids, aunts, uncles, cousins. Almost everyone! And you want me to go hop into bed with one?"

"*Almost* everyone," McCrutten said, her tone far too quiet and cold for someone blatantly threatening murder in the face of my outburst. "Let's make sure it stays that way, shall we? For your dear sister's sake, of course. If sleeping with one of them is what it takes, I expect you to do so *vigorously* and figure out what it takes to make a dragon happy. Super-sized dragon bed and all."

I lunged for her as she threatened what little family I had left, but the security guards were faster, grabbing my shoulders and slamming me back down into the chair, keeping their hands pressing into me.

"The helicopter is waiting for you on the roof," McCrutten said, dismissing me with a wave. "Security will escort you there."

I jerked my shoulders free of security and stormed for the door. We both knew what she was really doing. She was conveniently silencing me. Making sure I never said a word to anyone about the experiments and research we'd been working on. McCrutten wanted to bury all trace of the work her company had been doing.

Including me.

Chapter Three

Ajax

“You must be joking,” I said, spreading my wings wide to catch the air as I touched down lightly atop the Sovereign’s Palace at the heart of the Dragon Isles.

“And greetings to you as well, nephew,” the Sovereign Of All Dragonkind said as I shifted back into my human form.

I bowed politely, as was customary, even if we were related. Technically, she was my great-aunt, but distinctions like that didn’t much matter in the dragon world.

“I’m serious,” I said, straightening. “It was bad enough Vicek made us bring the human woman, Laura, with him when we broke him out. Now, you want to bring more humans here? Don’t tell me you actually believe him when he says he loves her?”

“Okay, then, I won’t tell you that,” she said.

“You called a truce with the humans and gave them *no* terms?”

“A ceasefire,” she said sternly, “is *not* the same as a truce. And I did that, yes. Though there were terms.”

“This was a *just* war,” I said, wondering why I was arguing for a return to fighting. Just a week ago, I’d been eager to rescue Vicek and end it, to return to the Isles and never have to interact with humans again.

Perhaps it was how the war had ended. The lack of formal surrender on the humans’ part. They were getting off too easy. That must be it.

“And now, it’s over,” she said, turning to walk with me as we headed toward the stairs in the center of the flat palace rooftop, designed that way for dragons to come and go with ease.

“They are getting off way too easy,” I growled, venting. “They need to be made to pay for what they did. Not having

any reparations is stupid.”

I stiffened, wincing at my choice of words. If anything had been stupid, it was them. The sovereign might be my aunt, but —

“I will remind you *I* am the leader of our kind,” she said with a coldness of tone that cut through whatever hot anger I still harbored. “*Not* you. Is that understood?”

“Yes, my sovereign,” I said, dropping to one knee apologetically. “Please forgive me for my outburst.”

“You are forgiven, of course,” she said, patting my shoulder. “Now, get up.”

I did, still feeling stupid from my outburst. I knew better.

“What terms did you give them?” I asked.

“The humans will send us women,” the sovereign said bluntly. “As mates.”

A snarl bubbled up in my chest. I turned away, needing a moment to recover.

“Humans? Here? Wasn’t the one Vicek brought back bad enough?” I said, fighting to keep any anger out of my voice. I was already treading on thin ice. There was only so much that being blood relation to the sovereign would allow me to get away with before she was forced to act like my ruler and not my aunt.

“Yes, here. Eight of them, to be specific. To start.”

I stared, aghast. “But why, Sovereign? I don’t understand. The War Party would not want this. My own Isolationists will scream. Even the Integrationists will be uncomfortable. They wanted us to go there and mix with humans. Not bring them here. The Isles are our sanctuary.”

“Because we must.”

Although I tried to stifle my revulsion, I was failing. “This can never happen,” I rumbled. “The bloodlines must be kept pure. They cannot be mixed with dragon DNA.”

“I agree,” a third voice said as another dragon swooped in for a landing, shifting out of his natural form to better converse with us as we headed into the hallways of the palace below.

I glared at Cyrus as he joined on the other side of the sovereign. As tall as I was, perhaps a little more, he had shaven the sides of his head, his brown hair held back with a single tie instead of falling free as was customary. He thought it made him look stronger.

I thought it made him look like a douchebag.

“Hello, auntie,” he said with a sweetness that made me want to vomit. He glanced at me, looking slightly down his crooked nose as he did. “Cousin.”

“Cousin,” I said, forcing my voice thick with icing and pleasantries as I stared at his hatchet face in disgust. “So *good* to see you again.”

“As much as it pains me to reiterate, I am forced to agree with Ajax,” Cyrus said, radiating irritation that backed up his point. “Humans are not welcome here.”

It didn’t surprise me Cyrus agreed with me. Our reasons, however, were very, very different. I was an Isolationist. I wanted us to retreat to our homes, hide behind our magic, and never be bothered by humans.

Cyrus was a staunch War Party supporter. He wanted to resume the fighting and killing until our rule extended from the eastern coast to the western and across all humanity. Cyrus wouldn’t be happy until humans were dead, or in chains, and that was simply something I could not condone.

“Why have you brought us both here?” I asked, curious about the sovereign’s motives. She *knew* our positions on the matter. She didn’t need to hear us repeat them in person.

“Because you both are wrong,” the sovereign said, turning to face us, her back to the stairs that would lead us into the palace. “Humans and dragons *can* be mated. It has happened before as well.”

Both Cyrus and I narrowed our eyes at the last sentence.

“As well?” I echoed. Did she mean Vicek and his human? There was no way ...

She was unwilling to elaborate further, it seemed, as no response came.

“I don’t like it.”

“Me neither,” Cyrus said.

“Humans don’t belong here. This is our home, hidden among the ocean, peaceful and calm. If the location is leaked or if we bring humans here, they *will* find us, eventually. Then we risk losing everything. There are many humans who wouldn’t hesitate to nuke us.”

“All the more reason for us to continue the war!” Cyrus jumped in eagerly. “Destroy them and their ability to ever launch those missiles. Bring it all down until they’re in shambles.”

“Our magic will protect us and keep us hidden as it always has,” the sovereign said with a calm sternness.

“They will find us and nuke us because they know how inferior they are,” Cyrus growled.

“I don’t like this,” I echoed reluctantly.

“That is fine. It is your choice. I will remind you both, however, that the final decision is mine, and I expect you to obey.”

“Yes, Sovereign,” we said in unison, bowing our heads.

“Good.”

“Why summon us here, then?” Cyrus asked, giving voice to my thoughts. “I should be back at the front. Just in case the humans violate the treaty.”

“No,” the sovereign said. “The Peace Gala is in two weeks. You will both be staying here until then, at least.”

“The *what?*” I groaned.

The sovereign laughed. “Oh, come on. You know how the power players in our government are. Everything must be

feted with a ball or a ceremony of some sort. You think this is any different? You'll both be there. It's where Vicek will introduce his mate."

"Mate?" Cyrus said. "I wasn't aware he had one. What changed?"

"He does," the sovereign said, glancing at me to explain it to my cousin.

I sighed. "We brought her home with us when we broke him out of prison. He insisted, wouldn't leave without her."

There was a long silence.

"He brought a human home? The *heir* to our kingdom and people brought a *human mate* home?" Cyrus sneered dismissively. "You have got to be joking. This is a sick joke. Your son is in love *with a human*?"

"Yes," the sovereign said imperially, drawing herself up to her full height at the casual disdain thrown her son's way. "And one of you two will follow in his footsteps."

Cyrus threw his head back and laughed, ponytail bouncing wildly. "Absolutely not, auntie. You cannot force me to do that."

He turned and walked away, sprouting giant wings from his shoulders as he took his true form and flung himself into the sky without a backward look.

"You had to know he would react like that," I said quietly.

"I did."

I glanced at the sovereign, noting the twinkle in her eye.

"Which is why I waited until after to mention Lyra will be stepping down from the Council at the Peace Gala."

Frowning, I faced my aunt once more. "What does that have to do with anything?"

She sighed. "Nephew, fewer and fewer dragon women are born every year. Which means fewer *dragons* are born every year. We are slowly going extinct, and if we don't reverse the

trend, there will be *no* new dragons born at all within a few centuries. We must look to the humans to find new mates.”

I cringed. “Are you saying what I think you are?”

“Yes, Ajax. You will take a human woman from one of the eight being sent to us as your mate. If the bond is true, then I will appoint you to fill the open spot on the council.”

“If you do that, the Isolationists will have enough votes to pull our people back from the human world. To live here, free of them,” I pointed out.

The Council was currently deadlocked, with each of the three parties having eight votes. But Lyra was a member of the Integrationist Party. My ascension to the Council would change that.

“I *can* count,” the sovereign said a bit cheekily, her lips turning up to indicate she was being lighthearted. “But if I’m right, you will have helped prove we must have *some* human women living among us.”

A human woman. As a mate.

The idea was repulsive on so many levels. They were so weak, so inferior. How was I supposed to love someone like that?

“I’m not sure I can do it,” I said, even as a pair of amber eyes stared out of the depths of my mind, a memory I couldn’t escape.

“You must try,” the sovereign said. “For the good of our people.”

“And if I don’t?”

She shrugged. “I will probably be forced to appoint your cousin instead. Giving the War Party control.”

I frowned, unhappy at that thought, knowing full well Cyrus would immediately resume the war.

“The choice is yours, Ajax,” the sovereign said, heading down into the palace. “What will you do?”

Chapter Four

Katie

I came awake with a start.

The first thing my brain registered was the press of the walls around me. Stone on all four sides, solid and unmoving. I was stuck in some sort of tube.

“Hello?” I called, the confines too tight for me to even bring my hands up from my sides. “Is anyone there?”

Where the hell was I? I frowned, panic bubbling up. How had I gotten there? I couldn’t remember anything! The last memory I had ...

Back at Rutt-Tayo Labs. On the roof, the security guards removing everything from me, cell phone, purse, ID badge. Everything but my clothes. Then I had walked toward a helicopter and ...

It was blank after that.

“*HELLO?*” I screamed, thrashing in panic but receiving little more than superficial scrapes from the rock.

I was well and thoroughly trapped.

Calm. Stay calm.

Taking a deep breath, I let it out slow and easy, grabbing at the tattered corners of my brain and reeling them in. Losing control wouldn’t help me figure out how to get out—

The wall in front of me abruptly peeled back like a strip of wet fabric lifted from the skin. I stumbled forward into a dimly lit cavern.

To see I was no longer alone.

Others were doing the same thing, emerging from cocoons in the rock. I knew my face had to echo the looks of bewilderment directed my way.

“Does anyone remember how we got here?” I asked to a chorus of negatives.

“Where *are* we?” another woman asked, her breathing ragged and on the edge.

“Easy,” I said, waving my palms at her, encouraging her to take deep breaths.

“We’re underground. That much is obvious,” someone else said. Another woman.

Frowning, I surveyed the room. One. Two. Three ...

There were eight of us in total. All women.

“The dragons,” I said, understanding dawning. “We’ve all been sent to mate with the dragons.”

A rustle of panic swept through the group, but it was followed swiftly by a slight relaxing. We didn’t know where we were, but we knew why we were brought there. That was one question answered, at least.

Nothing immediate happened after that, so we found a place to sit and wait, naturally settling into pairs or small groups. I found myself staring up at the light embedded into the ceiling. The lightbulb didn’t emit much brightness, but it worked.

“What are you looking at?” someone asked as they sat beside me.

“They’re using electricity,” I said with a shrug, my shoulders scraping gently over the rough cave wall I was leaning back against. “I didn’t figure them to be technology users.”

“Oh.” There was a long pause. “I’m Elanya, by the way.”

“Katie,” I replied. “How did you get here?”

She looked away. Like she was hiding something. “I was working with the Red Cross on the outskirts of New York.”

I whistled. “New York? That’s way behind the lines. What were you doing there?”

“Helping the people trapped there,” Elanya said. “Trying to get them out, but mostly just ensuring they stayed alive.”

“And now, you’re here.”

“Yeah.”

“Why?” I asked, curious as to why she didn’t seem overly distraught.

Elanya shrugged. “It’s a long story. But if me being a dragon’s prize means the suffering I saw will end for millions, then ... maybe it’s worth it?”

Visions of a rural city burning in flames appeared in my mind, its occupants reduced to ash, fire so intense stone turned to glass.

“Yeah,” I said, trying to shake off the memory. “I understand.”

There was a rumble on the far side of the room, and a portion of the wall slid open, revealing a doorway to an even bigger room. No, not a room. The others waited for me to be the first through.

“Wow,” I murmured in awe, stunned by the size of the cavern into which we were being admitted.

The ceiling was so far overhead I couldn’t see it. That wasn’t to say there was darkness. Torches and firelight burned everywhere, illuminating the massive oval-shaped cavern and its edges, while more lights burned higher up, casting shadows onto a multitude of ledges.

Ledges that held dragons.

A whimper of fear ran through the group behind me. Not that I could blame them. Never had I seen so many dragons in one place. Even during the attacks on Boston and New York, there had rarely been more than a dozen or so in sight at any given time.

But my eyes counted upwards of twenty-five arrayed on ledges of varying height above us, mostly hidden, their outlines and eyes the only things visible in the fire light.

Fearful mutterings grew in strength from the women. My own terror urged me to join, to give voice to the chills in my stomach, the trembling in my knees, the clamminess of my hands. My eyes darted from platform to platform. Which one

would be the first to swoop down and eat us. Or bathe us in fire. Or crush us between their talons. Or—

“Silence,” a voice boomed from farther above, echoing too wildly to be clear which dragon had spoken.

“Why?”

The question was out of my mouth before I even realized I was speaking. I cringed, wincing and waiting for the torrent of flames. I just hoped it was fast enough I didn't feel the pain of being burned alive.

“Because,” the same voice said, “the selection process is about to begin.”

Was that a hint of humor I heard in its voice? Then the words slammed into me. The selection process?

The cavern floor began to tremble, and a bone-deep vibration ran up through my legs as a giant section of cavern wall across from us slid easily into the ground, revealing darkness beyond.

In that darkness, a shadow moved.

Talon scraped on rock as something *huge* moved within. A moment later, two yellow-orange eyes appeared, towering above us several stories in the air. The dragon moved into the room, walking on all four legs, wings tucked against its scaled back, the ruby-red shield-sized armor plates glittering in the light as it emerged fully.

We backed away hurriedly, but at some point, the door behind us had shut, trapping us in the cavern with the beast.

A chuckle rumbled deep in its chest, a terrifying sound. A single claw scraped the ground under the titanic beast as it regarded us slowly. Then the dragon abruptly shrank. In the blink of an eye, it was gone, replaced by a giant of a man. A *human* man.

“*What?*” I heard myself gasp as he walked forward.

On two legs. With eyes the color of ice and hair flowing freely down his back. It was an impressive mane that brushed against impossibly wide shoulders bristling with muscle.

Just like the men outside the elevator. The one who had eye-fucked the shit out of my body in seconds. Could he have ...

“You,” the dragon-man said, pointing at one of the other women as his eyes landed on her with staggering intensity.

The woman, a short, thick woman with curly hair and glasses shuffled forward after a moment, allowing herself to be meekly led from the cavern.

I stared after her, stunned by the revelation. Dragons could *shift* forms. They could appear as humans.

How long had they been among us, walking unseen, unknown? The threat dragons posed to humanity had just skyrocketed because they could blend in among us. We would never know ...

I stared up into the cavern at the other dragons. Trying to see past my blinding hatred and the faces of my dead family. Was that how they'd hit us so hard? Because they could approach our lines and then shift and attack? I needed to memorize this, every bit of it, so that I could report back at some point. Someone, somewhere, would be able to make good use of this information.

Another dragon appeared in the giant opening. More scales of red. Another human chosen. A blue dragon followed. Then another crimson scaled one. Each time, they left with a human. Some seemed reluctant to choose one of us. But in the end, they did. Other times, I could see both parties rocked by a meeting of eyes.

And then it was my turn. Every other woman had been taken except for me. Was there something wrong with me? Did they know me and what I'd done? Had Ms. McCruten informed them after all? I braced myself for that gust of fire or ice or blast of lightning to strike me down from the ledges above. If they knew who I was, they wouldn't want to keep me alive, that was for sure.

Then, in the darkness beyond, another shadow stirred. Stirred, but did not come forth.

Chapter Five

Katie

Time dragged on eternally. All I could hear was the deep breathing of the huge creature. Deep and raspy, its lungs likely the size of a car, if it was anything in proportion to that of humans.

In. Out.

In. Out.

I was rooted to the spot, unable to convince my legs to move. Why was it taking so long? The other dragons had come out much faster, hadn't they? What was wrong with him?

Yellow eyes appeared deep in the darkness. An abrupt inhalation, followed by a slow exhale that brought with it the rotten smell of fire and brimstone.

The fear that the dragons knew who I was returned. The delay, the slow build of my terror as my guts turned to ice, was all a part of their plan to torture me before killing me. It had to be. What other reason was there for the delay?

“You are weak.”

I clamped down hard on the yelp of surprise that the sudden noise tried to produce.

“I can smell it,” the dragon continued disdainfully. “Your weakness, your fear. It fills this room. For one of you to mate with a dragon would be an insult. We are stronger than you. Better than you. Your frail body would never hold up to the rigors of being with a dragon.”

Was he talking about sex? Was sleeping with a dragon some sort of brutal sport? I swallowed, my throat parched.

“I can handle it,” I heard myself say as the picture of the man from the elevator returned to me.

He could fuck me all day. Take my body and use it in whatever way he wanted. I would let *him*. Maybe I could get

them to bring him here. Perhaps he would be interested in choosing me.

The dragon in the darkness snorted. One of its wings flapped, the *whooshing* sound sending air blasting toward me. I wavered, nearly taking a step back, mostly because my knees were wobbly already, not because of the strength of the gust.

“You can barely stand.” The dragon shifted slightly, and when he spoke again, his voice was directed upward. “If I must go through with this farce, bring others. I will try to choose from them. But not her.”

The shadow turned, eyes disappearing as the dragon started to retreat into the darkness beyond the opening.

My brain was too stunned to react.

I had been sent there against my will. Forced by my boss, threatened into silence, then made to stand and wait, one by one, as every other woman was chosen before me. Now, when it was my ‘turn’, the smelly beast was saying *no*? I wouldn’t be chosen because I was too *weak*?

Heat rushed through me, brushing aside the warm tingly pleasantness of arousal, replacing it with a raging fire of fury that burned my skin from my face to my legs.

I stepped forward.

“Hey!” I shouted at the departing beast. “Hey, you!”

The eyes returned with a swiftness that brought me to a halt. Had I just killed myself by speaking out of turn?

Nothing more happened, however, as the dragon waited expectantly.

“You don’t even know me! All you’ve done is sniff at me like a mangy dog and then judged me from that alone!”

Was I really *trying* to sell myself to the dragon? It certainly seemed that way. Disbelief ran rampant, but I kept asking myself what else I was supposed to do? If I couldn’t make it work, if the truce somehow failed because I was rejected, not only was I likely to die, but McCrutten would go after the few people I had left, including my sister. She had thankfully been

out of town when it was leveled by the same murdering brutes I was currently throwing myself at.

What a choice. Hope I was returned to humanity and could somehow escape the reaches of McCrutten while also saving my sister ... or stay with the dragons who had murdered my family and destroyed my hometown.

Maybe if I stay, I can find a way to escape.

It wasn't much of a choice, but at the moment, I saw no other options before me.

The dragon laughed at me. "You have more spine than I initially gave you credit for, human. But not enough."

The spike of hope that had blossomed in me came hurtling downward like a falling arrow.

"No human can have the strength to mate with a dragon," it growled before readying to depart again and leave me standing in the middle of the cavern.

"Ajax."

The voice cracked out from one of the ledges above, and the dragon froze. The growl that came from his chest was one of the most terrifying things I'd ever heard. It reverberated through my entire body, hitting some basic instinct within me deeply enough that I was halfway to the far wall before I realized I had moved. My *only* concern at that moment was to run as fast as I could in the opposite direction. Before something out of a nightmare killed me.

Words were exchanged in a language I couldn't follow, one I hadn't heard before. The male snarled harshly, while the other voice, one I *thought* was female but wasn't sure, held a regal imperial tone that clearly left 'my' dragon further incensed.

Thanks, lady.

The dragon across from me snapped something harsh and sibilant. The reply from above, while in unknown words, was *very* clearly not just a command but a verbal beatdown of an order. Whatever he had said, the one above was *pissed*.

I tried to shrink away even more. Were the two dragons about to throw down? There was no way I would survive in proximity to a dragon fight.

A long silence echoed through the chamber.

“Very well,” the male voice said stiffly. “Come with me, human woman. We shall see how long you can survive life among dragons.”

Then he was moving away, claws scratching on rock floor, leaving me to run after him.

Chapter Six

Ajax

Fire raged inside me. Literally.

The bestial nature of my dragon was furious. The moment it had laid eyes on that woman, the one with the eyes of golden honey, it had gone berserk. I could barely restrain it. Even now, it was lunging at my mind, trying to exert control. To slow down. To go to her.

To take her.

I snarled loudly, fire on the tip of my tongue, ready to explode outward as I vented my rage at the situation. It was impossible. There was no way it could be her, but the reaction inside me couldn't be denied.

It was a trap. It had to be. Somehow, for some reason, the humans had managed to plant her in the group of women sent to the Dragon Isles.

“Hey, you!”

I ignored her cry, which just sent the monster in me into even more rage. Grimacing in pain as it warred against the ironclad strength of my willpower, I forced myself to shift into human form. Controlling the beast would be easier this way.

Damn you.

I purposefully kept that condemnation silent. The chewing out I'd already received from the sovereign—in front of the assembled Council, no less!—was bad enough. I didn't need any further reprimands if word got back to her.

“Will you *slow down*?” the woman shouted, breathing hard as she ran to catch up.

I kept walking, still seething internally at the final command the sovereign had given me. I was no child who needed to be *told* to obey!

Behind me, the woman cried out in surprise and fell to the ground, hands and knees slapping against the rock.

“I can’t see a thing in here,” she said. “Try to be a little kind and at least help me up and make sure I don’t fall into a pit or something?”

“Humans,” I growled, flicking my hand back toward her, a ball of soft firelight appearing out of mid-air, bobbing slightly until it settled. “There.”

The light was barely enough to cast a shadow on the floor, but I wasn’t about to coddle her. Not if she expected to make it in dragon society. The dark held no issues with us.

“Thanks, I guess,” the woman said, gathering herself and coming after me again.

I walked slower ... barely. Why did my aunt have to insist on this? Humans were so *irritating*.

“So, my name is Katie. It’s nice to meet you. Really. Ajax, or whoever you are, it’s really been such a pleasure. I’m learning so much about you and your culture. Fascinating stuff really, so interesting. It’s really quite different than living in a human city. All this gorgeous *rock* and impenetrable darkness. Really sets the mood, you know? Why, I remember this time when—”

I tuned her out, letting her go on with her ramble. Maybe talking aimlessly like that would wear her out. Talk herself out of a voice, if I were lucky.

“—and then my sister, Julie, she’s really funny. If you liked anybody, you’d probably like her. Well, she was talking to the waiter, and the waiter was just—”

“Will you ever shut up?” I snapped, already tired of her rant.

“Depends,” she said, the cheerfulness disappearing so fast I abruptly realized it had been fake all along. “Are you ever going to stop complaining?”

The sharpness of her retort caught me off guard. I didn’t expect such boldness from someone like her. Someone *human*.

“I am not complaining,” I growled, setting off again, faster that time. The tunnel was long, meant for flight, not walking.

We had a way to go before reaching the surface. “I haven’t said anything.”

“Riiiggghht,” she drawled, dripping sarcasm with every letter. “Of course not. How silly of me. I must have confused your emotions.”

“I’m angry and irritated,” I explained. “Not complaining. There’s a difference.”

“Perhaps,” she said. “That depends on why you’re angry, though. And if you’re angry or if you’re pouting.”

“Dragons do not *pout*,” I said heatedly, angry at myself for letting her get under my scales so easily.

“Bullshit,” she said deadpan. “You’re so busy being petulant you haven’t even bothered to tell me your name or where we’re going or a single damn thing about you. You never even asked me for my name.”

“Katie Beckinson,” I said immediately. “You’re thirty-four years old. Born in Platterville. You like to run.”

The silence was deafening.

“H-how did you know that?” she asked.

“Your work sent us a dossier after you volunteered to come here. I read some of it. You work in administration somewhere in downtown Chicago.”

In fact, I knew exactly where she worked. I had been to the building, to its basement, where the heir to the dragon kingdom had been trapped and tortured for months below her feet.

She followed me in silence.

“What else did the dossier have on me?” she asked tentatively.

Now, why was she so nervous asking that question? Was there something she didn’t want me to know?

“Some other background stuff. List of some family members, a couple of pictures of you, things like that. Why?”

“Curiosity,” she said. “I didn’t know they’d sent one.”

I grunted. “Some of you came with dossiers, others didn’t. It doesn’t really matter, does it?”

“I guess. I’m surprised you remember all that.”

“I like to know who’s being let into our lands,” I said.

“And who you’re going to mate with,” she added bitterly.

I laughed. “There will be *no* mating going on,” I assured her. “Not between a dragon and a human.”

My head pounded as my dragon roared in frustration, flashing image after image in front of my eyes. Katie before me. Katie naked. Katie on her knees in front of me. Katie on her back. Katie bent over.

Katie.

Katie.

Katie.

“*ENOUGH!*” I roared, shaking my head furiously to dispel the barrage of sexual images sending blood surging to my cock, making it twitch and long to be buried inside her, fucking her, *taking* her, making her mine.

“I’m sorry,” Katie whimpered. “I didn’t mean to upset you.”

Shit.

I took a deep breath, my shoulders and chest shuddering as I trembled with barely restrained anger. Anger that wasn’t meant for her but for the demon beast inside me straining to emerge.

“That was ... uncalled for on my part,” I said while exhaling slowly.

Silence lingered.

“Dragons aren’t very fond of apologizing, are they?”

Despite everything, my lips pulled themselves up into something resembling a smile. All that outburst, and she still had the nerve to give me a tart reply. Interesting.

“Come. The surface awaits,” I said, starting forward again.

“Were you serious?” she asked, still a few steps behind me.
“About us not mating?”

“I’m sorry if you thought differently when you volunteered to be here,” I told her. “But I’m just doing this to humor my aunt. Nothing more. A week or so, and then I’ll tell her it was a bust, and you can go back to your old life.”

Katie coughed. There might have been another noise mixed in, but I couldn’t be sure. Not that I cared anyway.

“Where are we going, then? Once we reach the surface, I mean.”

She sounded nervous. I didn’t care.

My dragon hated me for it.

“My home.”

Chapter Seven

Katie

“Finally,” I said, relief flowing through me as light abruptly appeared ahead of us.

Honest to goodness light, too, not the pale flickering ball of fire that hung between the dragon-man and me. The light allowed me to properly see my steps without having to stare at the ground. I was forced to squint at first, unused to such brightness after what felt like an eternity of hiking through the underground tunnel.

“Humans and their weak eyesight,” Ajax grumped from ahead of me.

I could see his outline now, tall, broad shouldered, long flowing black hair, just like all the other dragon-men who had come forth to take the women. He seemed no different in that regard, just in his personality. None of them had gushed with kindness or enthusiasm, but they also hadn’t rejected anyone outright.

Only I was lucky enough to experience that.

“You’re clearly part human because you can change into one,” I pointed out to the towering pile of petulance. “So, maybe you could do me and everyone else a favor and stop being such a bigot about it?”

Ajax threw back his head and laughed, a throaty sound that would have been pleasant to hear if it wasn’t dripping scorn.

“I may *look* like you,” he said, “but I most certainly am nothing like you.”

“You don’t look like me,” I muttered. “I mean, sure, you’ve got the long hair going for you, but you’re a foot taller, shoulders as wide as my wingspan, and probably a beard as well, something I do not have. No, you look like—”

He turned to glance back at me, and I stumbled again, nearly face planting in shock as I finally caught my first true glimpse of Ajax.

“*You*,” I breathed, staring into a face I had seen before. “Y-you’re ...”

“Yes, it’s me,” he growled. “Can we move past this?”

My knees trembled as we locked eyes. There was no fire in his that time. Instead, they were a bright icy blue. So unlike the rings of fire I had seen the first time, and yet they burned all the same.

“Impossible,” I breathed, unable to walk or move. That moment outside the elevator back in Chicago had been in my head all week. I’d seen many attractive men over the years. I’d had some even make eyes at me before.

None, not *one*, had produced the raw carnal *lust* that he did. Even now, his face partially shadowed by the depths of the tunnel, I could throw myself on top of him. My body ached for it, heat flooding between my legs as my pussy prepared itself to be fucked.

Skinned knees would be a small price to pay to be mounted by someone like *him*. All he would have to do was reach out and touch me. Order me to the ground to serve him on my knees or on all fours, and I would gladly submit to his demands. I would be his, and I would *love it*.

My mouth watered as I took in the rock-hard physique barely restrained by the sharply cut black shirt he wore, the lines crisp and clean, shaped in a weird pattern, with flared shoulders and textured arms. Whatever it was, it looked *good* on him. His muscles filled out the fabric, stretching it taut, hiding little.

“How is this possible?” I managed to get out, my eyes running down his jean-clad lower half, noting the bulge in his crotch. Was he just packing an absolute monster rod, or was he aroused as well?

I had never stopped to consider whether he’d had the same reaction as me. That perhaps he’d jerked off to me multiple times.

Heat gushed from my legs and across my face as sudden shame flowed through me. He was a man I’d seen for all of ten

seconds until now, and yet, the memory of him had sent me to play DJ with myself in the work bathrooms several times a day for a week. I hadn't been able to get him out of my head.

Now I was supposed to be his *mate*?

Some coincidences were too big to trust, and this felt like one of them.

A cold front swept through me as I waited for the other half of the trap to close shut. What else had been in that dossier my work had sent? Did it include my true work? Had he been lying about me supposedly working in administration?

Suddenly, I didn't want to proceed the rest of the way to the surface. Maybe that was where he would throw me over a cliff. Dragons were murderers, I knew that much. I had the proof laid out before me in rows of graves for my family and the rest of my hometown.

"At least you're as attractive as I remember," Ajax grunted at last before he started walking again.

I swooned, heat replacing cold yet again as the baser parts of my mind swept aside any coherent thought and rationale. He thought I was *pretty*!

Part of me knew it was pathetic to care so much about what one person thought of me.

The rest of my mind, body, and soul didn't give a flying fuck. It was in heaven hearing those words come out of his mouth.

"Thank you for the compliment," I heard a voice that sounded suspiciously like my own whisper. When had I given myself permission to talk?

"Well," he said with a shrug of his shoulders, "there has to be *some* upside to putting up with your chatter."

I glared at his fast retreating back before hurrying after him. Chasing him. Why was I chasing a man who clearly hated humans so much?

By the time I caught up with him, he had walked out onto a ledge in full sunlight.

“You know,” I said as I left the tunnel behind, “you’re really a fucking ... *wow*.”

The sight stole my breath away.

“Beautiful, isn’t it?” Ajax said reverently.

It was. We had emerged high up on the side of a mountain. Below us was a sweeping vista of green and tan, backstopped by the blue of the sky and the ocean in the distance. Sea breeze wafted through the air, filling my nose as I breathed deeply.

Trees swayed gently in the wind, while overhead, a plethora of birds swooped and dove or soared gently on the thermal plumes.

And beyond them ... *dragons*. I stiffened as fear gripped my spinal system.

But these dragons didn’t swoop down and vomit torrents of fire. They didn’t snatch up screaming soldiers and bite them in half. No walls of ice swept across the land, freezing everything in their path, and nobody was reduced to atoms by blasts of lightning appearing out of clear skies.

All these dragons were doing was flying lazily, wings spread to catch the sun’s rays, revealing a dazzling rainbow of scales. Reds, blues, white, green, purple, gold, and more. There were so *many*. I had never seen such numbers before.

It was rare that so many murderers gathered in one place.

Clamping down on the awe, I tore my gaze away from it, forcibly reminding myself that those *things* had murdered everyone I knew in cold blood. There was no way I could allow myself to find anything they did *beautiful*.

“Come,” Ajax said, pointing to a walking path that led down the mountain in a series of switchbacks. “We still have ground to cover if you’re going to learn your way around today.”

“What? Why do I have to learn it today?” I asked, confused. “What’s the rush?”

“Because,” Ajax said as I caught up to him, “I can’t always be with you. You don’t want to get lost. Trust me on that.”

I didn't trust him as far as I could throw his dragon.

"Why not?"

"Because," he said with the first ominous hint of his true nature, "not all dragons in the Isles are beholden by orders to not harm you. Some simply don't care and will do whatever they feel is necessary to ensure humans don't infect this place."

"We're not a fucking parasite," I snapped. "We have brains and can use them. I happen to be pretty proud of all mine has accomplished. Thank you very much."

Ajax leveled his cold, hard gaze at me, any heat I might have imagined before gone from that gaze. "Your brain will do no good if one of my kind decides they want you dead."

I still didn't have a good response to that by the time we reached his house. Did I really have to fear murder just walking down the streets?

"This is my house," he said, showing me to a large stone structure jutting out from the side of a hill.

There was no lock on the door, I noticed. Was he the trusting type, or was crime not an issue among dragons? Given I lived there now—and apparently already had people nearby who wanted me dead—it seemed like a pertinent question. But the view inside the door was what prompted me to speak first.

"Well, this is so stereotypically male it hurts," I muttered, staring at the empty walls and bare minimum of furniture adorning the first few rooms I could see into.

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?" Ajax growled defensively, looking around. "I like my house."

"Spoken like a true male," I said, barely stifling a chuckle.

"Explain."

"It means it's drab and bland in here," I said. "There's no *life* to the place."

"You mean there's no clutter," he countered.

"This is a house. Not a home."

“I like it this way. It looks good.”

“It looks cold and uninviting,” I said, kicking off my shoes and wandering deeper inside.

“Make yourself at home,” he muttered.

“House,” I said under my breath.

“Whatever,” he said with a snort. “This is where you’ll be staying.”

I stopped my exploration as a chill ran down my spine. Right. I was staying there. Supposedly as his mate. Did that mean he expected me to stay in his bed? Because if so ...

“This will be your room,” he said, heading down a hall and pushing open a door, gesturing for me to go in.

I looked inside, mentally sighing in relief as I took in what was clearly an unused guestroom.

“Thank you,” I said with a smile as I peeked into the closet and opened the door to reveal a luxurious bathroom. “This will be great.”

“Uh, you’re welcome,” Ajax said as if surprised by my reaction.

I paused at the doorway to the bathroom, staring longingly at the shower, wishing I could just stand under it and wash myself away. Maybe I could wake up from this dream—or rather nightmare—that way.

“If you want to take a shower, go right ahead. There are towels in there.”

I shook my head. “No, thank you.”

“Why not?” he pushed, his thick eyebrows knitting together. “I can see you staring at it. Your desire is all but palpable. I promise you’ll be left alone, if that’s your worry.”

“It’s not that,” I said, tugging at the collar of my shirt. “But I’d just be putting the same clothes back on. Kind of defeats the purpose.”

Ajax shrugged. “You didn’t bring any other clothes?”

I stared at him. Of course I hadn't. The security guards weren't very inclined to let me bring *anything* with me. Least of all a suitcase of clothes.

"Does it look like I have a bag with me?" I asked. How on earth did he *think* I ended up there?

"Come," he said, spinning abruptly and heading back to the door.

"What? We just got here!" I protested, eager to sit down and relax. Perhaps eat some food. "Where are we going?"

Ajax pulled open the front door and smiled back at me. "Shopping."

I brightened. Then sagged. "I don't have any money."

He laughed. "It wouldn't be any good here anyway. I will buy it for you."

A dragon-sponsored shopping trip? I wasn't even sure what sort of shopping dragons would have.

Regardless, it promised to be interesting. My ex-husband had never taken me on a shopping spree. Tim had been beyond stingy with money.

Enough. There's no need to compare the two. Ajax hates you. Just like you and Tim hated each other. Besides, Ajax said it himself, you aren't mating at all. You're going back to Chicago in a week.

Maybe. But that was in a week.

Today, I would spend some dragon money.

Chapter Eight

Katie

“I’m not sure what I was expecting when you said let’s go shopping, but I can honestly say it wasn’t *this*.”

I stared down the gaily colored avenue, my surprise complete and total. Stone buildings lined the stretch of road. Most were no more than two stories tall, and each one decorated in a wild array of colors and patterns. No two buildings were alike. Flags flew from the corners of every roof, and banners and signs fluttered in the breeze.

“What are the flags for?” I asked, pointing at one that had a purple background with bright yellow slashes in a pattern that meant nothing to me but surely did to the dragons.

“Helps with that,” Ajax said, lifting a long thick arm to point up as a dragon swooped in for a landing on one of the buildings.

“Ah. So that’s why every building has a flat roof.” Another mystery explained. In hindsight, it made perfect sense, but my mind was still adjusting to the different ways the dragon’s society worked.

Ajax grunted, then pointed to a building a few hundred feet ahead of us, with highlighter green tapestries hanging from its roof. “We’ll start there.”

I followed him to the storefront, marveling at how familiar it was to visiting a human store, right down to the “Open” sign in the window.

“So much technology,” I said, pointing at the lit sign, which glowed red.

“Did you think we were savages or something?” Ajax asked.

I bit back a hot reply about the war and killing of civilians. His question wasn’t angry. It was curious. There was no need to escalate things. Especially now that I knew I wasn’t fully

safe. Rather, I was under his protection. I would have to be careful about what I said and did if I wanted to survive.

“Truthfully, I didn’t think about it at all,” I explained. “Until two hours ago, I didn’t even know you could be anything but dragons. I suppose I just figured you all lived on the sides of mountains or in them, even. You know, like the dragons in stories and such. Sleeping away centuries on piles of gold, killing knights who come to rescue the damsels you have trapped in your towers. I don’t know. Stuff like that.”

“Is this where you get upset I don’t have a pile of gold for you to spend or a tower for you to be locked away in until a knight in shining armor somehow kills me to free you?” he teased.

I shrugged. “If I’m going to be mated to you, it wouldn’t be the worst thing if you were rich.”

Ajax rolled his eyes and pulled open the door, gesturing for me to go inside. “Come on, stinky. Let’s get you some new clothes.”

I was already mid-stride into the store when his words hit home. “Excuse me?” I asked, aghast.

He just winked and slipped past me, his thick chest passing just inches under my nose. I inhaled deeply, taking in the scent of fresh birchwood and a hint of orange citrus, a refreshing, invigorating combo that beckoned me forward with its crooked finger, inviting me to linger in its presence.

Eyes half-closed, I trailed Ajax into the store. Why did he have to smell so damn good? It should be against the law or something. I wasn’t supposed to want to throw myself at him, sink my fingers into his muscles while I kissed his skin, tasting him and drinking deep his scent. But my body wanted me to do it anyway. In fact, it wanted more than that. The soft gentle throbbing between my legs was a very clear signal of just what it wanted.

“No,” I hissed at myself.

“Hmm?” Ajax turned his head to glance at me as we walked down the middle of the store.

“Nothing,” I said far too quickly, looking in the complete opposite direction.

Damn, damn, damn. I needed to get a grip. I’d been fine with being celibate ever since Tim and I split up. Days had turned to weeks, and weeks had become months. When the urge struck, I had a small treasure trove of vibrators and thick objects to choose from in my bedside drawer. I didn’t need men.

At least, I hadn’t. Not until Ajax eye-fucked me half to oblivion in front of the elevator. Something had awoken in me then, an almost feral need to be touched that I’d forgotten about in the months since my divorce.

Be honest. Even when married, Tim never played your body like a fiddle with nothing but a look. This ... this is something else, something new.

Something dangerous. I would have to be very careful around Ajax.

“It’s the electricity that surprises me the most, I think,” I said, desperate for a change of subject. “That speaks to a generator of some sort. Which I didn’t think you would use. Then again, I also never expected to go to a dragon clothing store.”

“We’re cultured,” Ajax said just a bit defensively.

“Yes, but this is *human* technology,” I countered. “Weak, inferior *human* technology.”

I dropped my voice as low as I could, growling.

“Is that supposed to be me?”

“I know. I didn’t get the whine quite right. I’m sorry.”

His jaw dropped open.

I barely noticed because I was too busy trying to keep mine *shut*. Was I *flirting* with the monster? It had only been an hour and some with him in his human form. Had I already forgotten what he *truly* was? Too busy distracted by steel-corded biceps and a bulge in his pants that begged to be set free? I was better than that, smarter than that. I shouldn’t let a six-pack and pecs

that would make Terry Crews jealous turn me into a slobbering sex fiend.

But it was happening anyway against my will.

Ajax must not have appreciated the attempt because he turned away after a moment and busied himself with some racks of clothes.

“Here, how about these?” he asked, thrusting a pair of brightly colored long garments at me. “They won’t turn you into a dragon magically, but at least you’ll blend in a little bit. Perhaps escape immediate detection, just in case.”

I looked at the crimson and cobalt pieces of cloth, trying to figure out what he wanted me to do with them. “What are these ... giant scarves?”

“No, they’re proper dragon styling.” He dragged me over to a mannequin. “Like this.”

“They’re togas,” I said. “But with a lot of color. And gems. But still a toga. Or a sari, maybe. Something sort of in between?”

“We call them *glanis*,” Ajax said. “Go, try them on.”

He pointed at a pair of changing rooms in the back of the store. I glanced at the mannequin once more, trying to see if there was any trick to putting them on. There didn’t seem to be, but ... maybe I would figure it out in there.

“All right,” I said with a shrug and headed off. He was paying after all, and if putting one of them on allowed me to shower ... I could do it.

“I’ll find some other stuff for you,” Ajax said.

I paused, halfway to the dressing room. “Hey, what about all this?” I asked, pointing at racks of t-shirts, long-sleeves, halter tops, and several types of pants, all laid out in their own section. “This will work.”

“Those are *human*-style clothes,” he said.

“I can tell. Why do you have them? Can I have some?”

“Those are for when we need to go among your kind,” he explained. “You would stand out like a sore thumb here among dragons. You need to adapt.”

I frowned. “Why do you hate everything about humans so much?”

Ajax just grunted and looked away.

I eyed the more familiar clothing. “Let’s make a compromise,” I said.

“Are you trying to negotiate?”

“Yes, and you’re going to agree to it,” I said. “Because I’m going to try on some of these dragon fashions, and if they fit, I’ll even wear it.”

“And in exchange?” he asked warily, sensing the trap but not sure what it was.

“You answer my question. Why do you hate humans and everything about us. Fair?”

“Why would I agree to that? You’re the one who wants new clothes,” he pointed out. “I’m doing this for you. If I hated you, I would have just made you stay in what you’re wearing.”

“I guess I’ll just keep on stinking, then,” I said with a shrug. “We’ll see how long you can go with a smelly, nasty, *weak, inferior* human at your side all the time.”

Ajax groaned, and I knew I had him.

“Fine. Just go change already,” he said, pointing and mumbling under his breath. “Stubborn woman.”

“I heard that,” I called over my shoulder.

In the changing room, I stripped down to my underwear, tossing the long-sleeve shirt and black pants aside. Truthfully, I was glad to put on something else. I was dressed for late winter in Chicago. Not for tropical warmth.

I picked the crimson glani first. It was nice, lightweight cloth, wrapped in two layers to prevent it from being see-through, which I appreciated. There was a hole that had to be for my head, which made orienting it much easier, until it

draped over my shoulders. From there, one piece fell forward across my chest, while the other draped over my back, hanging to just above my knees. There were other pieces I realized I had to loop over my head. One went snugly around my waist, while the other secured the two pieces of fabric over my chest, so I wasn't giving anyone a free show.

"I think I have this on right," I called over the door, "but if I don't, no laughing at me, okay?"

"No promises," Ajax said.

That was probably about as good as I would get, so I opened the door and stepped out.

"Well?" I asked when he didn't immediately say anything. I did a little twirl while I looked at myself in the mirror. "Did I do it right?"

Metal screeched, and clothing fell to the floor as Ajax stumbled to the side. A deep growl filled the store, sending vibrations up my legs and puckering my skin with tiny goosebumps all over.

"You okay?" I asked as he bent over, breathing deeply.

"Just. Fine," he managed to get out, standing up, letting go of the mangled clothing rack he'd crushed in one hand.

"Uh, Ajax?" I said, taking a step back.

"What?" His voice was deep and brassy. Almost inhuman.

"Your eyes. They're, um, they're glowing with fire," I said as he locked his gaze on me, literal flames dancing in his pupils, the blue completely replaced with red-orange fire.

Was that smoke coming out of his nose?

He gathered himself, and the flames went out.

"Is it that bad?" I asked. "Seeing a human in your clothing style?"

"No," he grunted. "It's fine."

I eyed him up and down, noting the stiffness of his posture, the way his skin almost strained, as if he were fighting against

something. Why had he insisted I dress that way if it was going to anger him so much?

“I’ll take it off,” I said, heading back for the changeroom.

“No,” Ajax said immediately.

I glanced at him.

“No. Leave it on.” He breathed out from between his lips, slowly. “It’s best if you get used to wearing this kind of clothing.”

“Okay,” I said with a shrug. “It’s definitely more comfortable in this weather.”

“Yeah.” He shook his head.

“Your turn,” I said.

“My turn what?”

“Look at you,” I said. “You see a human dressing like one of you, and you’re so angry you look ready to go ballistic. Why do you hate us so much? What did we do to you?”

Surprise flickered through those dark, mysterious eyes. “Uh, angry. Right.”

It was my turn to frown. Was he always that dense about his own feelings? Could it be he had no actual idea what he looked like from the outside?

“I wouldn’t say I hate humans,” he said as I gathered up my clothes and the blue glani.

“That’s a joke, right?” I pressed in disbelief.

“I simply have no use for you,” he said, ignoring my jab. “You live short lifespans. You’re rash, weak, and generally little more than a pain in the ass.”

“That last part sounds like a certain dragon I know,” I muttered.

“I didn’t want us to go to war,” he said, continuing as if I hadn’t said anything. “But we were provoked. You kidnapped one of our kind. That wasn’t something we could stand by and ignore. So, we went to war to get him back.”

That was all old news to me. I knew the reasons the war had started. We all did.

“Now that it’s over, though, and Vicek has been freed, I would much rather we simply returned to our former isolationist stance. I see little need for us to expand our territory. Ruling your captured cities like some sort of overlord has no appeal for me.”

“But not for all of you,” I pointed out. “Many have taken to living there already.”

“Humans are not alone in having differing factions,” he said.

“I have so many questions.” There was so much more to dragons than I ever thought. Than *anyone* ever thought. “Why am I here? Why are any of us humans here if most of you want nothing to do with us? Why not take a dragon woman as a mate if they’re so superior to us?”

It was the question I wanted to ask from the start, the most important one, I was sure.

“Come on,” Ajax said instead, ending the discussion. “We need to get you some more clothes before the stores close. Then we’ll get you some food. You must be starving.”

The rumble from my stomach at the mention of food could have rivaled his growl when I emerged from the changing room.

I made a mental note to revisit the topic, however, because I was positive there was something important he wasn’t telling me. For all his posturing about hating humans, he’d still agreed to try to take one as a mate. Which begged the question: *Why?*

Chapter Nine

Katie

I was trapped again. Buried in a cocoon, unable to escape. I needed out!

Coming awake, I thrashed my way free of the covers with violent kicks until I lay flat on the bed, breathing heavily, sweat plastering my hair to my forehead and my back to the sheet.

“It’s okay,” I whispered, trying to calm my heart before it exploded.

It was just a dream. Nothing but a dream, a nightmare, where I’d once again awoken in that rocky cocoon in the cavern. Only that time, I wasn’t freed. The dragons were waiting outside, laughing at my stupidity as the rock slowly tightened around me until I couldn’t breathe and my bones began to creak. And still, the dragons had laughed.

Early morning light streamed in through the window, landing on the foot of the bed, brightening the room with its golden rays. Was every day in this place like that? Every morning full and cheery, and every afternoon filled with brilliant warmth? The lull of the sea in the background as it crashed against the shore, even if it was far away? It was almost idyllic.

I peeled myself off the bed, shuddering at the sticky sensation as the sheet separated from my skin, and went to the window, staring out into the distance. The bedroom Ajax had assigned me was on the south wall of his house, looking out over a slight ravine to the right. I stared at it, the depths of the low area still shrouded in darkness, while the tops of the rocky hills and peaks glittered with light.

“Paradise,” I murmured.

In the distance, a dragon called out and dove from the sky, plummeting downward with astounding speed. At the last second, it spread its wings wide, pivoting around them, so its

claws could snatch a bleating animal from the ground below before soaring up into the sky once more.

I staggered back from the window, appalled by the sight. How many humans had seen that play out, the very last thing to ever fill their eyes before death came to them? What had the people of my hometown thought as the dragon swooped low and spewed fiery death left and right?

No, it wasn't paradise. It was hell. I had to remember that. Ajax was a beast, a brutal murderer wrapped up in a yummy-looking shell that made him appear human. But he wasn't. Not at all, and I better not forget that, lest I end up like the sheep or whatever it was.

I knew dragons didn't have to eat that way. Ajax had cooked a huge meal last night. Steaks on the grill, perfectly cooked crab, baked potatoes, and the biggest surprise of all: a kale salad. True, he'd refused to eat with me, sending me to another room to have mine, but he most certainly didn't go eat raw mutton, that was for sure.

Despite what I just saw, the thought of food made my mouth water.

Showering quickly, I donned the blue glani, drawing tight the bands around my chest and waist. It still exposed some skin along the sides of my stomach and arms, and a *lot* of leg when I sat down, but there was no denying the light, airy comfort of the garment.

The scent of food hit me the second I opened the door, forcing me to suck back the drool filling my mouth. I walked into the kitchen, and a pancake nearly hit the ceiling as Ajax glanced over at me. However, my attention was immediately drawn to the heaping piles of food—the stacks of pancakes, bacon piled high on a plate, a salad-sized bowl of eggs, hash browns fried to a crispy golden brown, and sausage links still crackling slightly on the pan, fresh from the oven.

“Holy shit,” I murmured, grabbing the only plate I could see, eager to get started. “Ajax, this looks delicious! A ridiculous amount, but good lord, it smells so *good*. I knew you could cook, but damn.”

Ajax, having recovered from the surprise of my entrance, took the plate from my hands and set it aside. He picked up another plate, one with a smattering of each ingredient on it, and handed it to me. "Here you go."

I eyed the single spoonful of eggs, the lone pancake, two pieces of bacon and a few forkfuls of hash browns. "What's this?"

"Your breakfast?" he said slowly as if the answer should have been obvious.

I laughed, looking at the huge mounds of food all around. "Ha, ha. Very funny. This is all for you?"

He frowned, nodding slow. "Yes."

"Right. Well, you're just going to have to suffer and go hungry, then, I guess. What with, you know, missing another few pieces of bacon. Some more eggs. Another pancake. Some more hash browns, too. Goodness, I don't know how you'll ever survive, given you only have ninety percent of the food left still."

The big dragon-man glared at me.

"I can see you wasting away already," I said, holding the plate in one hand, so I could clasp the other over my heart. "Just tell me how to call the doctor. I'll make sure he comes over with fifty CCs of maple syrup *stat*. That should do it."

Ajax sighed loudly. "I hate humans."

But he didn't try to take any of the food back. And one corner of his mouth may have twitched slightly at my maple syrup joke. Might have, I wasn't sure.

I sat down at the table without invitation. Ajax raised an eyebrow, but I just grabbed the fork and knife he'd set out and started cutting up my pancake.

"If this is going to be my life," I said, "being 'mated' to you, then I'm going to eat in the same room as you. Get used to it."

I was slowly learning that being bold and simply doing what I wanted was the best way to get Ajax to agree. He seemed to

respect that sort of strength. Which was way better than I was doing with accepting my entire situation.

A dragon's mate? It was ludicrous. But what other choice did I have?

That was the question that loomed large over my head nonstop. I *had* to make it work. Ms. McCrutten was hell-bent on burying the dragon experiment project now that the war was over. She wouldn't hesitate to follow through with her threats on Julie's life. My sister was all I had left. I couldn't lose her, too.

It still appalled me that McCrutten was willing to go to such lengths. Lying in bed the night before, I'd thought it over some more, trying to understand her motivations. It was likely, I realized eventually, that once the truce was formalized, the dragons would demand repercussions for whoever had been in charge of the heir. With me out of the way, McCrutten could blame it all on me, call me a rogue employee and more, all while keeping her name out of the fire.

I didn't like it, but it was too late to change it now. Which meant I could either confess everything to Ajax ... or try to make the best of my current situation. One would lead to the death of myself *and* Julie. The other simply required I set aside all manner of principals and ethics I had left and make a deal with the people who had murdered my family and destroyed my hometown.

What a choice.

"You're stubborn," Ajax said as he brought the piles of food to the table, arranging them around him in a semi-circle.

"And you just gave in," I teased. "To a human. A weak, inferior human."

He sighed, shaking his head and beginning to eat. I watched in a mixture of awe and disgust as he shoveled food down his throat.

"You're a goddamn duck," I muttered, shaking my head. "Do you even chew?"

“Sometimes,” he said between giant bites. It wasn’t that he was eating *fast*; it was just that each bite was half a meal’s worth of food for me.

By the time I finished cleaning my plate, he was three-quarters done.

“What the heck are you fueling up for?” I asked, shaking my head in disbelief as he downed two pancakes in a single bite, folding them up and packing them in ... somewhere. “Big day today?”

Ajax paused to have a swig of water. “As a matter of fact, we do, yes.”

“Oh.” I didn’t expect that answer. “Why? What are we doing today?”

“Today, we’re going to meet the sovereign.”

The food I’d just finished eating threatened to come back up. “The ... sovereign?” I asked in a teeny-tiny voice. “As in, the ruler of all your people?”

“Yes,” he confirmed bluntly, polishing off four, or maybe five, pieces of bacon all at once.

“Oh,” I said, sitting back, fighting the nausea as he finished eating, clearing each and every plate in turn.

Once he was done, he piled them up high, including mine, and put them in the sink.

“Aren’t you going to wash those?” I asked, crossing my arms. If he thought *I* was going to do the dishes, he had another thing coming.

“No, Martha will do them,” he said with a wave of his hand.

“Martha?”

“She’s a cleaner. Has about half a dozen of houses in the area she goes by every day. Cleans, tidies, does laundry.”

“You have a maid,” I said bluntly.

“A cleaner,” he reiterated.

“If she washes your dishes and folds your underwear, she’s a maid.”

Ajax shrugged. “Feel free to call her that to her face. If you dare. Now, come on, let’s go.”

But instead of heading for the front door, he went for the stairs.

“Isn’t that the way out?” I asked, pointing in confusion.

“We’re going up. To the roof,” he said, beckoning me to follow with a wave of his hand.

“Why?” I asked uneasily.

“Because it’s too far to walk to the sovereign’s palace. So, we’re going to fly.”

Eeep.

Chapter Ten

Katie

I hurried after Ajax.

“You know, um, humans, we can’t fly, right?” I asked as we stepped onto the roof, the wind tugging at my glani, the bold blue fabric catching the sun’s warm light.

“You can’t?”

I glared at him. “Ha, ha, very funny.”

“That’s not going to be an issue,” he explained. “I can easily carry you there.”

I sputtered. “C-carry me?”

“Yes. Dragon riding. It’s really not that uncommon. We even do it among ourselves sometimes, if someone is injured or sick.”

“You can get sick?”

“Of course. Especially the elderly.”

“I see. I didn’t realize you could be hurt.”

It was a well-known fact that the war had gone so poorly for humans because we possessed no weapons that could seem to puncture their scales. The wings were a different matter, but they were still incredibly tough. Not to mention unbelievably aerobic. Hitting a moving dragon with a strong enough weapon wasn’t an easy task. Not before it spewed fire hot enough to melt steel.

“Everything can be hurt,” he said, refusing to go into more detail. “Now, stand back a bit.”

Chewing on his words, I retreated to the stairwell to wait while he resumed his dragon form. I never actually saw his monstrous side the day before because he’d refused to come out of the darkness.

There was a blur of movement, and Ajax shifted.

I stared at the beast in front of me, shaking.

“Climb up my wing and sit at the base of my neck. You should have more than enough to hold onto there,” the dragon rumbled. “It will be fine, stop shaking.”

“*MURDERER!*” I shrieked, thrusting a finger at the scaled monster.

The dragon recoiled. “What are you talking about?”

I was shaking. Dragons came in many colors and hues. Reds were the most common, or at least they’d been the most prominent on the frontlines of the war. Blues, golds, whites, purples, they existed, too. But only a handful of times had a dragon been seen with scales like Ajax.

It wasn’t a pattern I’d seen in person. But I *had* seen it before. A beast with orange and black scales. Swooping down on a helpless rural town. Incinerating it and everyone who lived in it. Leaving no survivors and little to identify those who had been there.

And now, he was standing in front of me. I had just broken my fast with him. Laughed with him. Been *eye-fucked* by him on multiple occasions.

I felt sick to my stomach, taking a knee on the stairs.

Could McCrutten have known what she was doing, sending me here? Was it all some sort of elaborate setup? Could my old boss be in league with the dragons somehow?

“You,” I hissed.

“Of course it’s me,” Ajax said. “What’s gotten into you? You knew I was a dragon. This is no surprise to you.”

“Murderer,” I repeated.

“*Enough,*” the dragon snarled.

I retreated down several stairs with a squeak and visions of flame bursting from his mouth. Flame that would cook me in a nanosecond, turning skin, organs, even bone to nothing but ash.

“Calling me that once can be excused with shock. But twice, you better have an explanation and some proof,” he continued. “Why are you calling me that?”

“Proof?” I spat as heat filled my stomach, and my head. “You want proof? There are videos. Videos of what you did.”

“Videos of *what?*” he snapped impatiently, giant teeth momentarily visible.

“You damn well know what I’m talking about,” I shot back. “The town you glassed. Buildings you torched. People you incinerated. Innocent people whose lives you snuffed out for no other reason than because you could. An entire town, gone. Not a single soul survived, just as you wanted, I’m sure. Including my parents. My brother and his wife. Their kids. My cousins. Aunts. Uncles. The neighbors and their cute dog. *You took everyone from me!*”

I wasn’t about to tell him my sister had survived. If I did, he’d probably go back to finish the job. I couldn’t lose anyone else.

Ajax stared at me, his dragon mouth hanging open.

“What? Does it all blend together?” I snarled, back on the top step now, my safety a thing of the past. I wasn’t making it off the island alive anyway, so I may as well give him a piece of my mind before he offed me as well. “Too many towns and people you casually murdered for no reason?”

“*ENOUGH.*”

The bellow hit me with enough force to send me back down a step. Ajax’s fury was palpable as he loomed over me, smoke pouring from his nose, the scent of sulfur ripe in the air.

“How *dare* you accuse me of such an atrocity,” he snarled.

“I saw you do it!” I all but shrieked. “There are videos of it, recorded live to the internet before you killed them. You admitted yourself you’re a human-hating, scaled scumbag! It was you!”

“No, it wasn’t.”

“I saw it,” I repeated.

“How do you figure?” His voice was calming slightly.

“Your scales,” I said, glaring, wanting him to stay angry. “I’ve seen all kinds of other patterns and colors. But orange and black. You’re the only one with that coloring, and it was an orange and black dragon who killed everyone. You do the math.”

The dragon’s flanks swelled, and I looked up at the sky, ready for my time to end. But the dragon only sighed.

“First, let’s make one thing clear, Katie. I have killed humans. Yes. I admit it. *But*,” he continued, cutting me off, “only those who lifted weapons against me. The military. I have not committed mass murder on innocent civilians. I own what I have done, but you will cease calling me such things.”

“And second?” I said, not agreeing to anything, but nonetheless curious as to what he had to say.

“Second ...”—another big sigh—“Second, I am not the only dragon with this coloring. There are others. They just aren’t as common. But even then, I doubt any of us did what you said. It was probably propaganda on the part of your government. Such wanton murder was not called for.”

“Explain that to my family,” I snarled. “Oh, wait, you can’t. Because they’re *ash*.”

“*I did not kill your family*,” Ajax roared, his head darting down to the roof level, his eye an arm’s lengths away, big, yellow, and wide.

“Why should I believe you?”

The problem was, I did believe him. His denial had an air to it, not just of authenticity, but of righteous anger at being accused of something so heinous. It was an attitude that was almost impossible to fake.

“Because, Katie Beckinson, I have been honest with you so far, and I have no reason to stop. Now, climb on. We cannot be late to meet the sovereign. That is ... improper.”

“Someone killed my family,” I repeated. “One of your people.”

“Then climb on my back, and maybe I’ll help you look for them,” he said, sighing. “But we have to go. Otherwise, I’ll leave you here. Alone.”

“And?”

Somehow, he made his dragon shrug. “Not every dragon who comes around will be as nice as I am.”

Chapter Eleven

Ajax

Her mouth fell open.

“*You’re nice?*” she managed to get out around her astonishment.

“Oh, just get on,” I growled, some of my irritation slipping through the mask I was trying to keep in place.

While she grappled with the idea of riding a dragon, I retreated somewhere back into my mind, replaying the things Katie had said. Not just what she’d said, but *how* she’d said them. Again and again, I arrived at the same conclusion: She vehemently believed what she was saying.

I didn’t doubt her family was dead. She wasn’t faking that, and I mourned for her the loss of so many people of her blood. But there was no way she was correct in her story of *how*.

The orange and black pattern of scaling was unique among our kind, just as I’d told her. What I *hadn’t* told her was that it was the coloring of those born into the royal bloodline. So, if she was somehow telling the truth, that meant one of *my* family had killed *all* of hers.

And I just couldn’t believe any of us were capable of such blatant cold-blooded murder. It wasn’t our way.

But she said there was proof. That bothered me deeply. How was it we had never heard of it? The humans would have been screaming about it, but word had never reached us. Why?

I was jerked back as Katie started climbing my wing, muttering something about her being an idiot, how she couldn’t believe she was letting herself believe me, and more. I barely heard it over the roar building in my ears as her hands touched my scaled spine and she slid into place with what seemed like practiced ease, her legs to either side of my neck, forcing her to lean forward and rest her upper body on me.

My dragon went *berserk*.

I tightened my mental controls as fresh fire gathered in the back of my throat. The heat burned its way through my body, lighting up every nerve bundle and muscle fiber. A nearly unstoppable desire to shift back to my human form and take Katie to the floor swelled within me. If I were back on two feet, my cock would be as hard as steel for her.

Enough, I tried to tell the beast, but it swiped my command aside with a flick of its mental tail, curling around itself to glare at me. It wanted her. No, not wanted, *needed* her. It was the elevator situation all over again. My body was taut as a board, unwilling to budge as she shifted her position, each touch of her knees or her arms sending my dragon into a frenzy. I'd never felt such raw *lust* for a woman before, let alone a human.

I had to force myself to clamp down on the frantic demands of my beastly side. Not just because she was human, and therefore inferior and unworthy, but also because the timing was horrific.

Katie had just confessed to how her family was murdered by a dragon who looked like me. Turning that around to try to hit on her was *immeasurably* improper. I would be nothing but proper with her.

“Ready?” I grunted, hoping she would mistake my tone for anger and not the painful repression of insatiable sexual demand for her body.

“No,” she said unsteadily.

“Perfect.” I spread my wings, legs coiling underneath me. “Time to go, then.”

Muscles exploded into action with a twitch, launching us into the air, at the same time my wings swept downward, propelling us even higher into the air. The muscles above my shoulders flexed again, and again. The ground swiftly fell away below us as we rose into the air, gaining height and speed all at once.

The screech of surprise from Katie swiftly faded as she took in the sight of the Dragon Isles below us, the large main island

and a half-dozen smaller ones clustered off its western coast.

“Oh, *wow*,” she gushed a few moments later, the trials of our rooftop argument forgotten as she learned what it was like to soar through the skies like a dragon, free and unencumbered, unlike a plane or a helicopter.

“Quite the view, isn’t it?” I asked, the sun glittering off cresting wavetops as they fell over to crash against the shore.

“You could say that,” she said, subdued.

I smiled to myself, her reaction making me pleased in some inexplicable way.

“Is that where we’re headed?” she asked.

My dragon twitched as she leaned forward to point, pressing her body fully into my scales. For a moment, all I could do was picture her doing the same thing to me in bed. Without any clothes. Her small breasts pressed firmly to my chest, her hard nipples dragging across my skin, while the heat pouring from between her legs called to my rigid cock like a siren, luring me into its embrace.

Only I would take control of her. Of her body, her mind, of her *pleasure*, and I would give the latter to her in waves, endless as the surf, until she could handle no more.

Mine, the dragon inside me snarled, insane with its possessiveness.

“Ajax? Can you hear me?”

I shook my head, yanking it around to get an eyeful of Katie while also taking in the direction she was pointing.

An eyeful of bare leg up to her thigh greeted me, including the barest hint of underwear. It was black.

We nearly plunged from the sky as I stared, muscle memory forgotten from the glimpse of such delicious amounts of flesh. Flesh I longed to cover with kisses, explore with my hands, and tease with my lips.

“Yes,” I said thickly, angling us down toward the sovereign’s palace, an edifice that curled up against the largest

and most northern of the three mountain peaks.

The broad, flat roof provided an easy landing for us. I touched down with almost no bump at all, taking extra time to come in easily thanks to a silly desire to provide the smoothest trip possible for Katie. Why I should care what a human thought of my flying skills, I wasn't sure. But at that moment, it mattered a lot.

Enough of this. You're going to see the sovereign. Act like it.

"Is there anything I should know about meeting this sovereign of yours?" Katie asked, keeping her voice low as we entered the palace and headed for the throne room.

"Be polite and respectful. She's the ruler of all dragonkind."

"Your ruler is a she?" Katie smiled. "Good."

I rolled my eyes but kept any comments to myself. If she thought there would be any "female to female" bonding that might happen because of the sovereign's sex, she was in for a rude awakening.

"Let me do the talking," I added as we approached a door guarded by two dragon shifters.

They were unarmed, but the smartly cut skin-tight black uniforms they wore only seemed to heighten the aura of danger swirling around them. Not that dragons needed to carry weapons. Ours were built in.

"Sure, whatever," Katie said.

I glanced at her with a frown.

She threw up both arms. "If the sovereign wants to meet me, then why am I going to stay silent? That makes no sense."

"Just do it," I said gruffly, nodding at the guards as they silently opened the door for us.

We entered the room. To my surprise, the sovereign was not atop her throne but was rather carrying on a conversation nearby with others. In fact, there was a largish gathering of the family nearby. I saw several uncles, an aunt, two cousins, and

some others that, while not of my blood, were close enough to almost be considered family.

“Ajax,” the sovereign said, detaching herself from the cluster of people and coming over to meet us.

I came to a halt and stood rigidly. Then I extended my right arm out with the elbow bent across me, my hand in a fist in front of my left shoulder. It was the proper salute of a dragon, designed to mimic one of our wings.

“Sovereign,” I said respectfully. “Sorry we’re late.”

“Nonsense, you’re on time,” she said, waving away my excuse.

Next, she turned her gaze to Katie, looking at the woman and evaluating her.

“She looks in good health,” the ruler of all dragons said, directing her words to me. “How has she been adjusting to living among us?”

“About as can be expected,” I replied, choosing my words carefully.

“Very good, very good. Do you expect to mate soon?”

I coughed into a fist, the question completely blindsiding me. “I, uh, we shall see how things progress, Sovereign. You know my feelings on the matter.”

“Yes, I do believe you made them clear in the caverns yesterday,” she said with a half-smile.

“Of course,” I said stiffly.

“You understand why she is here, nephew. Is she up to the task?”

“*She* is standing right here, Sovereign, and *she* can answer any questions you might have about herself, if you would ask,” Katie said, her voice respectful but emphatic.

Appalled, I glanced at the sovereign in panic, getting ready to apologize for the human’s impertinent outburst. But a glance from my aunt quelled that.

“Is that so?” she asked, directing the question toward Katie, along with a hard stare.

The human didn’t back down. “I realize that, as a human and not a dragon, I don’t measure up to your standards. But that doesn’t mean I’m incapable of thinking and communicating.”

Silence filled the room as everyone waited to hear the sovereign’s response. Would she tear a strip off the human? Or burn her to ash with a flick of her fingers? Perhaps I was the one who would bear the punishment ...

“Ha!” The laughter startled everyone. “You, Ajax, have your hands full with this one. Good luck with that.”

A polite chuckle ran through the room.

“As you say, Sovereign,” I said with a respectful bow of my head. That much, at least, we agreed on.

“Very well. That is all. Continue to show her around.” She looked at Katie. “Get used to life here. That will be important.”

Something passed between the two of them, but it was too fast for me to figure out.

“Of course,” Katie said, giving a slight human curtsy. “Thank you for seeing us, Sovereign.”

I marveled at Katie. Although she disobeyed me by speaking up and addressing the sovereign’s lack of respect for her, she somehow managed to win something for herself. She was still no dragon, but her backbone had elicited something akin to respect from the ruler of all dragons.

“Wait,” I said, not sure why I was going out on a limb for a human. “Sovereign, there is something else. Something we must discuss that has recently been brought to my attention.”

Katie’s head whipped around, locking on to me like one of the human’s missile systems, her body going stiff with shock.

“Yes, nephew,” the sovereign said, granting me permission to speak. “What is it?”

“It’s something Katie has brought to light,” I said. “And it’s best discussed in private.”

The sovereign’s eyebrows arched.

“Very well,” she said. “Follow me.”

We left the throne room, heading for her office. Katie’s eyes never left me.

I just hoped she wasn’t lying to me.

Chapter Twelve

Ajax

Closing the door to the sovereign's office, I committed myself to the course of action in front of me, although I still had no idea why. There was something about how Katie had stood up for herself that made me want to trust her.

No, it made my *dragon* trust her. The beast had growled angrily enough in my mind until I finally relented.

"Now," the sovereign said, sitting down at her desk while we stood waiting, tucking her silver glani in tight and leaning forward. "What is it you couldn't tell me out there, nephew?"

Grimacing, I gestured for Katie to sit in one of the chairs while I eased myself into the other, taking a moment to formulate the words necessary to bring up such a sensitive topic.

"Something has been brought to my attention, Sovereign," I said. "That, if true, is beyond disturbing, and I believe warrants full investigation."

The ruler of all dragonkind sat back slightly. Her eyebrows didn't go up. She was far too composed to let her surprise show that easily. But she was smart enough to realize the implications of what I was starting to get at.

"Go on," she said calmly.

"Today, on our way to the palace, Katie saw my dragon in the light for the first time. In particular, she saw the pattern of my scales."

"Your coloring?"

I nodded, glancing at Katie. She sat stiffly, her eyes darting back and forth between the two of us, but so far, she was letting me do all the talking without interrupting. That was good. Because what I would tell the sovereign next was best said by another dragon.

“She claims a dragon with orange and black coloring committed a war crime in her hometown,” I said, finally spitting it out.

“One of the royal bloodline?” the sovereign asked in disbelief.

Katie inhaled harshly. “*That’s* what the coloring means?” she asked the room. “That’s why I haven’t seen any other dragons with orange and black scales? They’re all related to *you?*”

“Yes,” the sovereign said coldly, her pale green eyes landing harshly. “Which means you had better have a *very* good reason for accusing one of us of a war crime.”

“Does seventeen piles of ash, all of whom used to be my family, and an entire town on top of that count? Every building burned so hot the stone turned to glass? How’s *that* for a good reason?” Katie bit off.

“Easy,” I said, waving her back.

The sovereign turned her gaze to me now. “Explain.”

I sighed. “She says a dragon with our coloring leveled her hometown. At first, she accused me of it, without realizing there were other dragons with the same coloring. Apparently, whoever it was killed everyone. No soldiers. Just civilians. Including all her family. Hundreds dead, and the town absolutely gutted.”

“Not gutted. Destroyed. Not killed. Murdered.” Katie’s voice was as cold as the sovereign’s. “There’s a difference. It was done on purpose. This was no accident.”

“And you believe her?” the sovereign asked me bluntly.

I glanced at my ruler and then at the human who just entered into my life the day before. A part of me screamed she was lying, that she was just trying to accuse us of being monsters so we might send her back.

My dragon snarled viciously, an agitated presence in my mind and only becoming moreso every time I thought about dismissing the claim, about calling her a liar. It believed her.

Something in the way Katie pressed her claim had won it over, and that bestial trust was chipping away at my own resistance.

“I think,” I said carefully, “that it should be investigated. She was quite ... emphatic about what happened. Her reaction being fake is not impossible, but it felt genuine. And if she *is* telling the truth, then whoever did commit such an attack must be dealt with!”

My voice had risen unbidden as I considered the wanton death and destruction a dragon could wreak on a defenseless human village. It sickened me even to consider that one of my blood could do such a thing, but I knew there were those among us who didn't have such ethics. I just hadn't believed any would be related to me.

“This is quite the accusation,” the sovereign said. “Are you sure you wish to back her?”

I glanced at Katie again, seeing the pain in the corner of her eyes and recalling the look of horror on her face when I had first shifted. Then there was the anger and hatred and *pain* she'd demonstrated when calling me a murderer. If she were acting, it was the best job I had ever seen. Some things just couldn't be faked.

“Yes,” I found myself saying. “I do. She claims to have evidence to prove her claim.”

“Then show it,” the sovereign said, extending a hand.

“I can't,” Katie said tightly, glancing over at me.

The sovereign did not look impressed. “And why not?”

“Because I don't have it here. I came with nothing. It's back home.”

I stifled a groan, suddenly realizing what that meant.

“So you wish to go get it, then?” the sovereign asked.

“Um. Yes? I guess?” Katie said, suddenly unsure.

“We will go get it,” I said, committing myself to another trip among the humans. *Not* something I looked forward to.

The sovereign looked back and forth between us. Then she flicked a finger past Katie and toward the door. “Wait outside.”

Once Katie was gone, the sovereign fixed me with a long stare, followed by a short sigh.

“You put me in a difficult position, Ajax,” she said. “Have you forgotten about the upcoming empty Council position?”

“No, of course not, Sovereign,” I said, frowning. “Though I fail to see what that has to do with this. I respect you and obey, but I will not apologize for being unable to produce a mate bond in less than twenty-four hours. She is a human. I am not. I do not expect it to happen at all.”

A smile creased her normally stern face. “That is not what I was referring to, nephew. No, I refer to the act of appointing you to fill the vacant position at all and how that will become untenable.”

I shook my head. “Clearly, I have much to learn about politics, aunt, because I do not follow.”

“Think about it, Ajax,” she said gently. “Your human is accusing one of us, one of the royal bloodline, of not just murder but mass murder of innocents. Humans or not, that is a crime that must be punished. Thankfully, there were few incidents during the war of dragons getting ... overzealous, but all have been *harshly* dealt with. But none approached the scale of what is being laid out here.”

“Yes, I understand,” I said.

“No, you don’t.” She smiled gently. “If her claim is proven true, do you really think I will be able to appoint someone of the blood to the Council? After what has just come to light? I will have to make concessions, Ajax. Including when it comes to appointing someone to the Council. I will have to be seen as giving no favor to any of the blood. Including you. Which means the seat will likely go to someone in the Integrationist Party.”

I clenched my jaw, one hand curling into a fist as the full implications of the situation settled over me.

“So, what you’re saying is, if I pursue this war crime and it turns out one of us *did* do it, I will not be appointed to the Council.” I shook my head. “I hate politics.”

“Don’t we all, nephew.”

Getting a seat on the Council was crucial to the Isolationist Party. It would allow us to break the deadlock and force dragons to return to the Isles. To live a life apart from humans, just as it should be. We would find another solution to the dwindling population of dragon females. There had to be one.

“What should I do?” I asked. “If a dragon, *any dragon*, did what she is saying, they must be found and punished. I don’t know if I can let that pass.”

The sovereign smiled. “That is your decision, Ajax. I give you my permission to take your human and travel back among them. Visit her hometown, see if it lives up to her claims. Seek out the proof and bring it back here. But understand the outcome if it turns out to be true. That is all.”

She stood, indicating our meeting was over and leaving me to figure out a path forward.

Damn.

Chapter Thirteen

Katie

I paced the hallway outside the sovereign's office impatiently. What were they talking about in there that I wasn't allowed to be privy to? It was *my* hometown that had been destroyed, *my* family that was dead.

Even just thinking it hit me like a gut punch, putting a pause to my relentless pacing up and down the hallway. They were gone. All of them. It had been two months since Julie had shown up at my apartment door, a pale ghost of the vibrant, bubbly sister I'd grown up with. She had all but collapsed into my arms, unable to keep her composure.

That was when she'd told me. The words spilling out in ones and twos until my shocked brain was finally able to put it all together. At which point I had blacked out all memories for the next few hours. When they'd started to come back, I'd drowned them in alcohol, trying to forget.

A week later, we'd held a mass funeral for the entire town. There were no bodies, of course, and so no coffins. Only endless rows of urns. Each held by a sobbing family member or friend. Julie and I had seventeen all on our own. We weren't the only ones, either.

The grief came swarming back, and my legs gave me just enough time to sit down before they stopped working, shaking too hard to support me. I carefully draped myself with the fabric of the glani, ensuring I wasn't giving anyone passing by a show, and then buried my face in my hands, trying to not cry. There would be time for that later. For now, I had other things to think about.

Like the fact that Ajax hadn't only believed me, he'd been willing to go to his sovereign and argue in my favor. It couldn't be an easy thing, either, considering it had to be a member of his own family who'd done it.

I didn't like to contemplate what that said about Ajax. I much preferred the image in my head of all dragons being

merciless, killing assholes. The other side, of mercy and general goodness that was showing through the grumpy exterior, was not something I had expected or was even prepared for.

The door opened abruptly, interrupting my thoughts. I got to my feet as fast as I could without accidentally stepping on the long, flowing garment.

“Come,” he said without preamble, leading us back down the hallway before turning away from the throne room.

“Thank you,” I said softly, glancing up at him. Did he know how much saying those words to a dragon cost me?

“I haven’t done anything yet,” he said, distant and gruff, obviously lost in thought.

“You believed me. I told you what happened. I accused one of you, one of your *family*, of being a murderer, Ajax. It would have been easy for you to brush my claims aside. To ignore them, to say I’m a liar. Nobody would have come after you for it. Instead, you took me at face value. Me, an inferior, weak human.”

“Don’t remind me,” he said, not slowing.

I reached out without thinking and grabbed his arm, pulling him to a stop and forcing him to turn and look at me. His muscles were steel cable under the skin, impossibly dense and firm. But despite my light touch, he didn’t shrug me off.

“I misjudged you,” I said quietly. “Thank you for believing me.”

He shrugged, but not hard enough to dislodge my hand.

“You earned that belief,” he said with a flick of his head, sending his mane of hair flying.

“I did? How?”

“By showing strength in addressing our sovereign and demanding she treat you as a person. Most would have cowered before the leader of all dragonkind. You didn’t. A showing like that deserves a response. Which is why I brought it to her concern.” He worked his jaw slightly, deciding on

whether to keep going. In the end, he did. “Perhaps we both misjudged each other.”

I almost made a quip about how it would be easy for him to misjudge a weak, inferior human, but the timing wasn't right for jokes.

“Can I ask what you two were talking about in there without me?”

“Dragon politics,” he said, patting my hand on his arm. “Nothing personal.”

“Oh,” I said, barely hearing what he said. Each touch of his hand on mine sent lances of shock into my system, making it impossible to focus. My body tingled from head to toe, wrapped up with a sudden electricity that resulted in a powerful shiver ripping down my spine.

Ajax dropped my hand, the contact broken. “Are you okay?” he asked, concern filling his eyes.

“Yeah,” I said, trying to shake off the final sparks exploding in the depths of my mind. “Yeah, I'm fine.”

What the *fuck* had that been all about? Some sort of dragon power I wasn't aware of, perhaps? The instantaneous nature of ... whatever that had been was certainly unexpected. I would have to be careful about physical contact with Ajax. Was it some sort of mind control power dragons had over humans?

“Very well,” Ajax said with a shrug.

“Thank you, again, for believing me.”

He grunted. “As long as you have this proof. If you turn out to be lying, there will be consequences, Katie. The sovereign does not take kindly to her family being insulted. You should know that before we go.”

“I'm not making it up,” I said darkly.

“Okay.”

I forced a smile, trying to brighten the mood. I didn't want to get caught up in another downward spiral of emotion and

survivor's guilt. "Besides, if I'm in danger, that's what you're for, right? You'll protect me, won't you?"

I meant it as a throwaway joke, nothing more.

But something passed between his eyes. Something golden and bestial. A shadow of his dragon, perhaps, I wasn't sure. All I knew was that it was *not* humorous. His entire neck and jaw went taut, and for a moment, he looked somewhere else.

"I'm sorry," I said, backpedaling. "It was just supposed to be funny. I didn't mean to piss you off."

Ajax growled and shook his head. "It's fine," he said, rolling his shoulders, forcing himself to relax.

He walked off, grumbling under his breath.

"I'm sorry if I got you in trouble," I called after him, feeling bad about the entire thing now. "I just don't like being treated as if I don't exist. I've been down that road before, and I refuse to do it again."

Ajax slowed, and I caught up, walking by his side as we headed for the stairwell that would lead us up to the roof.

"It's not that," he said, looking down at me. "It's—*Watch it.*"

Two dragons had just come around the corner of the stairs, more engrossed in their conversation than where they were going, and nearly run me over.

At Ajax's snarl, both of them backed up in surprise. They were wearing matching outfits of sharp cut shirts with angular shoulders, all in an olive-green and black patterning. I had no idea what the significance of the outfits were, but I recognized a uniform when I saw one.

The nearest to me had blond hair, bright and golden, even in the interior light. The azure coloring of his eyes and pale skin only emphasized the look of a hulking Nordic warrior in my mind. His companion, meanwhile, was the shortest dragon-man I could recall ever seeing, despite still being many inches taller than me. He wore his brown hair long like every dragon,

it seemed, and in a single pleated braid that was held together with brass clips every few inches.

Neither of them looked overly pleasant to be around, their expressions twisting into sneers.

I plastered myself to Ajax's side, partially from my own surprise at nearly being run over but also because of Ajax. The tone with which he'd addressed the other dragon-men was unlike anything I'd heard come from him before.

"Sorry, Ajax," the one on the right with blond hair said, sounding casually apologetic— until his eyes landed on me. Something changed in his demeanor then, and he pulled his lips back in a sneer, emphasizing the sharpness of his chin. "How cute. A human in the palace."

"Corver," Ajax said calmly, addressing the speaker.

"Yeah?"

"Go. Away."

The underlying threat in Ajax's voice raised several eyebrows, but the other dragons seemed uninclined to pursue the topic any further. They walked around us, though both directed glares at me that made my pulse race.

"Ignore them," Ajax grumbled, sensing my rising fear. "Just a pair of morons without a single brain between them."

Corver's shoulder twitched, but he didn't look back. Clearly, he'd heard the insult, and I had to wonder if it was necessary.

"Shall we?" Ajax said, gesturing to the stairs.

I also wondered if he realized he'd protected me automatically. Had it been a conscious thing or unconscious? I almost brought up my point from minutes earlier when I joked about just that thing but decided not to. He didn't need any further friction between him and the other dragons. My claims were enough.

"Where are we going now?" I asked as we ascended to the roof, emerging into daylight bright enough to force me to shield my eyes.

“To see your proof,” he said, already shifting into his dragon form. “We’re going to your hometown.”

Chapter Fourteen

Katie

“Do we have to?” I asked, trying to hide my discomfort at the idea.

Ajax nodded, the action looking decidedly odd on a dragon. It was his neck, I decided. It was far too long for such a motion. “Yes. I must see it for myself. Besides, there may be clues there that will help identify who it was.”

“There’s video proof,” I pointed out. “Wouldn’t that do it?”

“Possibly but unlikely, unless it’s high resolution,” he said with a sharp shake of his head. “Otherwise, the pattern of scales might not be distinguishable enough. Especially if it’s shaky.”

I grimaced. I’d watched the footage. It was neither the highest quality nor was it steady.

“I didn’t realize how hard it was to tell you all apart. For yourselves, of course. To us humans, it’s basically impossible unless you speak.”

“You get used to it in time.”

“If you say so.” I frowned. “Hey, how are we going to get there?”

“We’ll fly, of course.”

“The whole way?”

“It won’t be a problem, I assure you,” he said. “I have studied the maps. I know where your hometown is located.”

“But you want me to sit on your back the entire way? That’s a long flight,” I said, rubbing the inside of my legs where they’d chafed a little on the short flight from his house. “Or are you going to drug me like you did to me and all the other women to get us here?”

“You weren’t drugged,” he said, shifting his weight from his forelegs to his hind ones, crouching lower to the roof of the

palace. “It’s just dragon magic. The same magic will affect you on the way out. So, you won’t ride, no. I will carry you. In my claw.”

“Oh.” I hesitated again, acutely uncomfortable by the idea. “Speaking of those other women. They’re still alive, right? I haven’t seen or heard anything about them since they were selected in the cave yesterday. How do I know they haven’t become dragon snacks?”

“We don’t eat humans,” he growled.

“Oh. Right. Of course, you wouldn’t eat another intelligent species.”

“It’s not that,” he said. “You taste bad.”

I glared at him. “That had better be a joke. I don’t like your tone.”

“And I don’t like you insinuating that we would bring women here just to deep fry them and have with a beer.” He sounded truly indignant.

“All right. Fine. I’m sorry,” I said. “But how do you know they’re okay?”

“I don’t,” he said. “They aren’t my responsibility, you understand. You are.”

He fixed a giant dragon eye on me as he spoke, the yellow-orange oval locking on with unexpected intensity.

Something quivered in my stomach at how he pronounced I was his.

Enough of that. He’s a dragon. Don’t forget it.

“I’d still like to talk to them,” I said, trying to stand my ground. “To know they’re all right.”

Ajax seemed to consider that. “Your request is reasonable. When we return, I will look into setting up a meeting. Is that acceptable to you?”

I blinked. It was more than reasonable. “Yes,” I said. “That would be great, thanks.”

“Excellent. Now, in you get,” he said, standing up tall, spreading his wings and opening the talons of one foot.

“Does it really have to be this way?” I asked, uneasy at the sight. Those talons could snip through me like scissors would a tissue.

“Yes. The magic of this place will ensure you’re unable to remember anything. Including how to hold on tight. I don’t want you sliding off my back and hitting the ocean.”

“I don’t want that, either,” I said, approaching his awaiting foot. Paw. Hand. Whatever. The thing with three-foot long talons ready to wrap into a cage around me.

All I could picture was the paper cutter from the art room back in high school, the giant blade attached to a board. Lift it up, slide the paper through, and *shonk*. No more Katie Beckinson.

But it seemed I had no choice. If I wanted to bring my family’s killer to justice, I would have to trust Ajax.

The killer could still be Ajax, I reminded myself.

There was nothing to say it wasn’t him. Nothing except his word ... and the visceral reaction of horror and hatred he’d exuded when I’d told him about it. No, he didn’t do it. He *was* a killer. I could see that much in his eyes. But not in cold blood, not innocent civilians. My gut told me he had nothing to do with it. Then again, my gut had also said marrying Tim was a good idea.

“Okay. If this is some sort of trap, please just make it quick,” I muttered, climbing into the claws and letting them close around me.

“If I wanted you dead, I’ve had innumerable opportunities to do so before now,” he grunted before launching us into the sky.

“Maybe you’re a sadist,” I suggested, the ground dropping out from under us, everything shrinking with alarming speed as we soared over the treetops and buildings of the Dragon Isles.

Ajax grunted. “I never thought so before. But I *am* spending all my time with a human these days. So, maybe you’re onto something there.”

“Ha. Ha. Very funny,” I said as the land panned by, replaced by ocean after not too long. “Next thing you know, you’ll be telling me that ...”

I blinked.

“What the hell?” I yelped, stiffening in surprise as the shore approached. A shore full of human skyscrapers to the left, tapering off to suburbia to the right. “How long was I out?”

“Long enough,” Ajax said as we soared over what looked, to my untrained aerial eye, like Philadelphia.

Or the city that had once been Philly. It was dragon territory now. Wrapping my hands around Ajax’s claws, I craned my head between the opening to get a better look at the city. One of the first to come under attack, it had fallen in days, the defenders forced to fall back in a bid for time.

Now, it was infested with dragons who had made it home. I could see them everywhere. Roosting in the side of burned-out skyscrapers, giant holes carved in the buildings that had cost man so much blood and sweat to construct. They had made holes on tops of roofs of smaller buildings as well, where they now lounged in the sunlight.

As I watched, a monstrous blue dragon launched himself from his skyscraper home, a shower of broken glass and metal and other debris plunging into the streets far below to pile haphazardly with all the other debris.

Streets I knew were not as empty as they seemed. Hundreds of thousands of humans, if not millions, had been trapped behind the lines, stuck, unable to move, unable to escape. There were efforts to get them out, but the dragons had the aerial advantage, and they didn’t let many get away. Still, there were only so many dragons. Every day the news had played stories about new groups escaping from the occupied cities to rejoin loved ones.

I just wished my family could have been some of those lucky ones.

We flew on in silence, the city falling behind us, replaced by countryside for a bit. Before I knew it, we were angling north and starting to descend.

A deep rumble from Ajax's belly filled my ears.

"Don't go getting any ideas," I yelped. "I am not a snack."

"That wasn't hunger," he said, and I gasped at the barely restrained anger hiding in his words.

"I believe you," I whispered as we landed gently, his claws opening to release me on the outskirts of Platterville. The town where I grew up.

A town that no longer existed.

Ajax shifted back into his human form. Both of us stood there, taking in the devastation. A shudder ran down my spine.

A huge hand landed on my shoulder, gripping it firmly. "I'm sorry," Ajax said. "I am sorry I doubted you."

The ground in front of us was glass, the stony gravel road having been liquefied at such an extreme temperature. By dragon fire. Two charred stumps off to the right were all that remained of the pillars that had held up the "Welcome to Platterville" sign. It had once read "Population 700." Now, not a soul remained.

"It was one hundred percent dragon fire," Ajax raged, storming forward.

I followed, slowly at first but eventually hurrying to catch up.

"You do not have to come with me," he said as I reached his side. "But I must survey the area. See if any scales fell off, or if there is anything else that will help me identify who did this."

"I know. But I don't want to be alone right now," I said, chewing uneasily on my bottom lip.

The giant dragon-man paused, looking down at me with crinkled brows. “And you come to me for comfort?”

“I seem to be lacking in options,” I said, trying to be witty in the face of the pain consuming my insides like a black hole. “So, I guess you’ll have to do.”

Ajax considered that, then shrugged and resumed his survey of the devastated town, with me at his side. I followed him, but I wasn’t paying attention. Partially because I didn’t want to.

And partially because I couldn’t get my mind off the fact that my first instinct had been to turn to Ajax for comfort. Not because he was the only person around.

But because I *wanted* to ...

Chapter Fifteen

Katie

Mercifully, Ajax didn't spend long walking the glassed streets of Platterville. It became very evident to him there were no clues to be had, no traces of dragon "essence" or whatever he was looking for that might lead him to the culprit. Even if there had been, the destruction had taken place months earlier. It was long gone by then.

"I had to check," he said as we took to the air once more, that time with me astride his back.

"I understand," I told him as we headed east once more.

Despite that, we made the trip in silence until we landed in the parking lot of a Best Buy that looked to still be operational. Given the number of people still trapped behind lines, it wasn't surprising that, in some places, life continued as normal. People went to work and went home at the end of the day. The internet was still up. The utilities still existed. It was an odd dichotomy, but it seemed to be working, even if the streets were mostly deserted.

We made our way to the laptop area. Most of their stock was gone. Probably looted, I assumed. Though I doubted they were getting any new shipments in, either. What would happen when they ran out of product?

"Okay, let me log in to my email," I said, typing away at one of the few demo models still working.

Footsteps nearby sounded as one of the employees, perhaps the *only* employee, came to see if we needed help. He was of middling height, with frizzy brown hair and a wispy goatee that didn't suit his face at all.

"No," Ajax said, standing tall and looming over the man in a blue shirt, his muscles only emphasizing the gauntness of the employee. "We're fine. She is just accessing her email on this laptop."

The sentence should have been normal. But they were words Ajax wasn't used to saying, and so, they came out stiff and awkward.

"Of course," the employee said, glancing at me as if to confirm that everything was, indeed, okay.

"We're going to need to take this laptop with us," I said. "And a charger, of course. Probably best to get a carrying case and a backpack. Given our ... mode of transportation."

The employee glanced between the two of us again, then nodded before scurrying off to procure what we needed.

"There," I said as my email popped up with the link to the videos. "You watch. I don't need to see that again."

I stepped back from the display, arms crossed over my midsection as Ajax hit play. The flicker of motion on the screen vied for my attention. But, resolute in my determination to *not* relive the destruction again, I wandered off down one of the aisles.

"Ma'am."

Stiffening in surprise at the hissed whisper from the end of the aisle, I glanced back at Ajax. He was still laser-focused on the laptop.

"Yes?" I whispered back as the store employee appeared, crouched low to stay hidden.

"Here," he said, holding out his hand.

"What's this for?" I walked over, plucking the key from his palm.

"There's a car out back," he said, running a hand over his head, brushing aside the sweat pouring from his temples. "Take it and follow the directions taped to the dashboard. It'll take you to the train station. Someone will help you from there."

"What? Why?"

The employee glanced past me. "He's a dragon, isn't he?"

My jaw dropped open. "How did you ...?"

“He’s not the first to take a human woman as a . . . prisoner.”

The tone the employee used made it *quite* clear what he meant by the word prisoner.

“He’s not?” Apparently, the secret about dragons being able to appear human was getting out, behind the lines, at least.

“No. Most claim they’re well treated. I’m sure it’s just Stockholm Syndrome or something, but some . . . some need help. So, take it, and get out of here. They’ll help you disappear. He’ll never find you again.”

I licked my lips nervously, eyes darting between the key, then to Ajax. There it was. My chance to get away from the dragons. To be free.

“Thank you,” I said, darting for the back exit without giving it any more thought while, behind me, Ajax continued to watch the videos.

The door led into the warehouse area, and I hurried across the concrete floor, wishing I was wearing something *other* than a glani. It certainly wasn’t ideal for a frenzied escape, that was for sure.

Outside the loading dock, I located the car the employee was referring to. A beat-up old red hatchback, it started on the first try. True to his word, there were directions taped to the dash on where to go. Just how established was the underground escape system? How many people had used it?

I drove hurriedly through the empty streets, trying to ignore the implications of its necessity. Perhaps the dragons weren’t as well behaved as Ajax believed them to be. Just another reason to get as far away from them as possible, even if I no longer thought Ajax was the one who’d committed the atrocities.

The train station loomed up in front of me, and I pulled to a halt, parking the car next to the curb. Getting out, I looked around. The employee had said a contact was waiting for me. Maybe I had to go inside first.

Halfway across the street, a shadow swooped down over me. I screamed as Ajax landed on the asphalt, his monstrous

dragon form blocking my path forward, wings out wide.

“Katie,” he said, his voice a half-growl.

“Ajax,” I said stiffly, eyes darting left and right, seeking any means of escape.

If there were others around before, they would be long gone now. Nobody was stupid enough to tangle with a dragon. I was on my own.

“Have I been that bad to you?” he asked, casually shifting back to his human form and walking toward me.

I watched him come. All six foot six of him, his muscles bunching and relaxing with each swing of his arms, each step of his tree-trunk like legs. His jaw was stiff, already covered in a five o'clock stubble. Blue eyes watched me with vibrant intensity. The wind picked up, blowing his thick hair back behind his shoulders, and I swallowed awkwardly.

“I thought we were working to find out who destroyed your hometown,” he said. “Why are you running from me now?”

He walked right up to me and placed his hands on my shoulders. I shuddered under his touch. His hands were so *warm*, the heat sinking into my skin and spreading, enveloping me like a cocoon as I relaxed into him.

Into a man I'd been desperately trying to escape just minutes before.

“I don't know,” I whispered. “I just ... It's scary, Ajax. I'm not used to living under threat of being incinerated just because I do something wrong. You yourself said there are plenty of dragons who would love to do that to me. Why would I want to stay in such a place?”

“You don't have to worry,” he growled, lowering his face to my level. “I will protect you.”

The statement hit me like a runaway freight train, tugging at something inside me, some tiny piece of my soul that longed to feel safe, to know someone like Ajax was on my side. Someone who could destroy anything or anyone that threatened me.

“How can I be sure?” I whispered, knees shaking. “Just yesterday you wanted nothing to do with me. Said I was weak. Useless. That humans are beneath you.”

Ajax looked like he’d bitten into something sour, his face all screwed up as my comments hit home.

“You are strong,” he said. “For a human. I’m learning there’s more strength in you than it seemed.”

“Are you saying you’re okay with me being around?” I asked, surprised at the turn of events.

“Maybe,” he said. “As well, if you leave, it’s likely the sovereign will be less inclined to pursue the killer.”

“She’ll just let them go?” I asked.

“Politics,” he said unhappily. “It will be far easier for her if this disappears, especially because it appears one of my blood *did* do it.”

“You know who it was?” I asked, looking up in surprise.

“No,” he said, shaking his head. “The videos are too grainy to make out details. Not to mention shaky. But the destruction and the videos, we have enough proof to go forward with the investigation. Find out who it could have been and then punish them.”

He squeezed my shoulders as he spoke, his determination translating through the strong grip of his fingers. “Trust me.”

“Okay,” I said quietly, hoping against hope I didn’t just seal my doom by allowing myself to be led back into the fire. “I trust you. Just don’t break that trust, okay?”

“I will never lie to you,” he promised solemnly.

Only time would tell.

Chapter Sixteen

Ajax

“You have the proof?”

I nodded through the stiffness brought on by the fury burning bright. A blazing torch that hadn't diminished during the long flight back to the Dragon Isles. I was glad to be back among the beaches and trees and mountains of my home. It was so different than the burned-out cities of the human's eastern seaboard that were now ours.

But despite the natural serenity of the land around me, my brain and stomach had churned relentlessly because of what I'd seen. What the sovereign was about to see as I handed her the laptop, screen open, video ready to run. To show her that one of her own, one of our kin, had committed the acts Katie had accused them of.

The ruler of all dragonkind pulled the laptop across her desk. We were in her office, the door shut, and guards outside to ensure no one came close. It was a most delicate issue, and not one we wanted running amok through the grapevine.

“Were there any issues in getting it?” she asked as the video began to play, the shocked sounds of the former residents of Platterville filling the room, talking about the destruction they were seeing.

I glanced at Katie. A hint of blush colored her cheeks, but otherwise, she stood her ground.

“No,” I said, deciding to omit the attempted escape. “There were no issues getting access to the videos.”

That was the truth, after all. What Katie had done *after* showing them to me was unrelated in my mind. Nobody needed to know about it. We'd discussed it in further depth during the trip back before the magic had taken her and put her to sleep. There was an ... understanding ... between us now.

I just hoped it would last. There was something about the human I couldn't ignore. Something that was causing me to

act all sorts of irrational. When I'd noticed she was gone from the electronics store, my very first instinct had been to shift and burn the entire city down until she was returned to me. Anyone who had stood in my way I would have reduced to ash in seconds.

She was *mine*.

Even now, my dragon roared its approval at the words and the implication behind them. Katie belonged to me, and if anyone touched her, or tried to take her from me, I would destroy them.

Tendons creaked and popped as my hands reflexively curled into fists so tight my knuckles showed white. I looked at them, focusing on each finger in turn, forcing it to relax. Everything was fine. We were back in the Isles, Katie was safe at my side, and everything was as it should be.

I glanced over at her again. Yes, she was as beautiful as could be in the bright blue glani, its lightweight cloth draped over her lithe form. Her arms clutched tightly to her sides, the pale white skin begging for my touch. The sharp relief of her jaw above her neck, the muscles starkly visible. The compressed line of her lips and the wrinkles around her eyes, they were all as they—

Blinking away the daze, I truly *focused* on Katie, realizing something was amiss. Her normally pale face had taken on an ashen hue, and she swayed slightly in place. Was she ill? A scream from the laptop caused her to flinch.

“Shit.”

“Excuse us, Sovereign,” I said, not waiting for permission before grabbing Katie by the arm and leading her from the office. “I’m sorry. I wasn’t thinking. There was no need for you to stay in there, to be subjected to that.”

She didn’t try to shake me off as we found a bench down the hallway for her to sit on. If anything, her fingers were clutching at me, begging me to not let go.

“Can I get you anything?” I asked. “Glass of water perhaps?”

“No,” she said, gently waving that off. “It’s okay. *I’m* okay now.”

“If you’re sure.” I didn’t believe her for an instant. She was trying to be strong. I wished she didn’t have to be. I should have known better than to keep her in the room. Forcing someone to listen to the deaths of people she may have known was cruel beyond thinking.

And I had done it to her. I snarled at my dragon, angry at it for being so obsessed with everything *Katie* that we had failed to notice she was in distress.

“I am,” she said. “It’s just ... I miss them. You know? It was a few months ago, but it feels so fresh. And then, hearing the screams, it was too much.”

“Yes,” I said heavily. “I understand.”

She glanced at me, her expression sharpening. “You’re not just saying that, are you?”

I stiffened. How did she ...?

“It was in your voice,” she said, twisting slightly to face me, one hand resting on my upper leg as if to reassure me. “You know something about this sort of thing, don’t you, Ajax?”

I felt myself nod against my will. It wasn’t something I wanted to talk about, not a memory I wanted to revisit. In fact, it wasn’t something I talked about with *anyone*. So, why was I opening up to a human I barely knew?

“To a degree,” I said, disregarding every internal order I was trying to give myself. What *was it* about *Katie* that she could just reach into my life and pry out details I never shared?

“Tell me?” she asked, her golden-brown eyes almost, but not quite, begging me.

“I lost my mother,” I confessed quietly. “It was ... not pleasant.”

“I’m sorry,” she said sympathetically. “How did it happen?”

I looked away.

“You don’t have to tell me,” she said, giving my leg a squeeze. “It’s okay. I shouldn’t have brought it up.”

Her touch drove me insane. I wanted to either fling her hand free of my leg and storm off or grab her wrist and move it over my cock. The dueling desires courtesy of my dragon fighting hard against my ironclad willpower, a strength that had never before caved before the baser desires of my beast.

“My father wasn’t a good man,” I said, taking the middle road and doing neither of the options.

“Oh,” Katie said in a tiny voice. She still didn’t remove her hand. Did she understand the effect it had on me? Did she even notice what she was doing?

“We dragons aren’t perfect, either,” I said with a half-smile. “There are bad people among us as well.”

Her eyes darted back toward the sovereign’s office. Instantly, my smile disappeared. *Idiot!* Of course, there were bad dragons. The proof had quite literally been screaming at us just moments before. Katie had suffered through it. She knew better than anyone the truth of my statement.

“Go on,” she said, leaning slightly closer to me. “Please.”

“Not much to tell,” I said heavily. “He hit her. Yelled. Beat us when we were younger. Then it was just her. I don’t know if he did anything else. Then one day, it was different. There were screams. Lots of screams. Then silence.”

Katie gasped softly, holding her other hand to her mouth, eyes wide and laser-focused on me. I barely registered the look, most of my attention was on the past, on my own memories.

“I found him standing over her body in the kitchen,” I said, sparing Katie the gory details. She didn’t need to know about the blood pooling on the floor or the arterial spray still dripping from the ceiling and cupboards.

“Oh my god,” she whispered. “Ajax. I’m so sorry, I had no idea. I didn’t realize. I shouldn’t have asked.”

“It’s okay,” I said with a numb shrug, feeling all the sixteen and a half years I was at the time. “That was the past. It’s over now. It’s behind me.”

She nodded. “Can I ... can I ask what happened to your father?”

“My brother was there, too. He came in a few seconds later.” I didn’t feel the need to elaborate any further than that.

“I’m sorry,” she said.

And suddenly, she was there, pressing against me, her arms around my torso, head resting on my chest. Absolute astonishment at her closeness froze my brain for a split second. However, it was long enough for my dragon to slip through my stiff mental fingers and force my body to respond.

I wrapped her up in a giant hug, resting my head on top of hers, feeling her warmth, her touch, her *presence*. She was right there, right next to me, and joyous delight howled in my mind as my dragon crowed its victory. *That* was how things should be, it decreed, making it *very* clear that any attempts to deny it that in the future would be most unpleasant for me.

The visceral strength of its reaction was shocking and bore more thought. It had been some time since I’d been with a woman, true, but while there *was* a blatant sexual tension, that wasn’t why my dragon was going insane. It wasn’t a simple “need to fuck.” It was something more. Something *deeper*.

And it terrified me because I had never experienced it with anyone before. Let alone a human. I didn’t dare let the word even enter my head, but I could hear my dragon trying to shove it through. But for now, my walls were still strong enough to keep it out.

“Well, isn’t this cute,” a dry, raspy tenor said, interrupting the moment.

I glanced up as two dragons sauntered past, the speaker coming to a halt. He had shaven the sides of his head, leaving himself only a strip down the center. It did nothing to hide the fact he already had a rather thin, almost hatchet-shaped face.

Although it did make sure the outer douchebag style mirrored his inner personality.

“Hello, Cyrus,” I replied. “What are you doing here?”

“None of your business, cousin,” he spat, his eyes taking in Katie and her position in my arms with obvious disdain. “A *human*? And you? Precious.”

“Go away, Cyrus,” I said, disentangling myself from Katie over my dragon’s objection.

“I will,” he said with a laugh as the dragon shifter with him grinned broadly. “But I’m hungry.”

“What the fuck does that have to do with anything?” I snarled. Beside me, Katie tensed.

“She doesn’t belong here. This is dragon territory. Have your woman run along to the kitchen and get me something.”

“*Excuse me?*” Katie snarled with unusual frostiness. “Who the *fuck* do you think you are?”

“Your *better*,” Cyrus drawled. “Now, go be a good woman, make yourself useful.”

“Cyrus,” I said, standing tall.

“Yes, cousin?”

“Get the fuck out of my sight. *Now*,” I added, letting my eyes glow with fire, a warning he was pushing too far.

Working his jaw, he clearly weighed the pros and cons of throwing down. Finally, he decided it wasn’t worth it.

“Whatever,” he said with a laugh, acting like leaving was his own idea. “She would probably screw it up anyway. Come on, let’s go.”

I glared at their backs as they retreated down the hallway.

“Sorry about that,” I grunted, sitting down.

“It’s fine,” she said through clenched teeth.

I tucked a finger under her jaw, tilting her head up to force her to look at me. She shivered at my touch but didn’t withdraw.

“No, it’s not,” I said. “I can see it’s not. There was something else there. Something more than anger.”

She clamped her jaw shut.

“I let you in,” I said softly. “You can do the same with me. I won’t hurt you.”

Another shiver ran through her, and for a moment, I thought she would clam up on me. Then her posture changed, and she met my eyes.

Something passed between us at that moment.

Chapter Seventeen

Katie

Bricks came tumbling down as some sort of barrier evaporated with my decision to tell Ajax about my past. I saw it in his eyes and felt it shoot through my body like lightning, a sudden inhalation of my skin as everything opened. An easing of tensions, a softening of entrenched thoughts, I wasn't sure *what*, but it was evident he was experiencing it, too.

"I was married," I said.

"Was?"

"Yes." I shrugged. "We're divorced now. The papers were only finalized a few months ago, just before the start of the war, in fact."

"I didn't know," he said.

"It wasn't in my dossier?" I teased.

He chuckled, a wry grin breaking up the serious look etched on his face. He shook his head. "No, it wasn't."

"That figures. If I'm being sent here as a potential mate, my work would want to make me seem as available as possible. No one wants a still grieving divorcée."

"I don't give a shit," Ajax muttered. "Besides, you don't seem to be grieving at all to me. Not over that, at least."

"Because I'm not," I said firmly, wanting to make it very clear for a reason I couldn't quite figure out.

"So, what happened?"

I leaned back against the wall. "Nothing unusual, I guess. I met him when I was in my mid-twenties. I was in my 'nature' era. Some might have called me a hippy, I guess. I lived out of a van, drove around, staying in different places randomly, a wanderer. I picked up work where and when I could, doing a lot of it digitally. I met him at a remote campsite. He was hiking a trail with a friend."

“Sounds romantic.”

“Actually, it was terrifying,” I clarified with a hiccup-laugh. “I was on my own. Sitting at a fire, *knowing* I was miles and miles away from anyone else, when suddenly *boom*, two dudes who haven’t shaved in weeks—this was one of those hardcore months-long trail things he was doing—appear out of the shadows. They didn’t even call out or warn me. Just sort of stepped into the firelight.”

Ajax nodded slowly. “That would be disconcerting, I’m sure.”

“Very. But as it turned out, it seemed to be the perfect fortune at the time. We hit it off. Exchanged numbers. A few weeks later, he moved into the van with me. A few months later, we moved to Chicago and got an apartment. He was my Mr. Right who came along at the weirdest of times. Just like all the tales suggest will happen if you stop looking.”

“But obviously not.”

I shrugged. “At first, he was great. Back in Chicago, I went back to school, got my PhD in biochemical-engineering, and then we got married that summer to celebrate. Everything was grand. Our families got along well. It truly seemed like the perfect union.”

“What happened? Something changed?”

“He did,” I said bitterly, trying to shunt aside the stink of failure that always followed any discussion about my failed marriage.

“How?”

“He wanted something I wasn’t ready for,” I explained, shockingly comfortable with divulging all my painful secrets with Ajax. “My career was my focus. I had gone back to school for a reason, of course. I was ready to make my mark.”

“And he didn’t want that?”

“No,” I said softly. “He wanted a woman with a baby on her hip and a sandwich in her hand. For him.”

Ajax grunted. “Not polite of him. Did this not come up before getting married? You must have discussed your desire to not want kids.”

“It did,” I said. “But I *do* want kids. I really do. But, and I try to not toot my own horn too much, but darn it, Ajax, I’m *smart*, and I know it. I have a brain, and I wanted to use it. I was good at what I did, and I’m confident enough to say that. And that was the final straw.”

“Mmm,” he said, gesturing for me to keep going.

“I got a promotion at work, heading up an entire project myself.” I didn’t explain what that was. “Which meant more time at work. He wanted me there less.”

“Let me guess, so you could spend more time ‘in the kitchen’,” Ajax finished, his teeth bared back in a snarl.

There was no need for me to answer that.

“Well, now, I understand why you got so upset at Cyrus’s comments,” he said, shaking his head. “I’m sorry you had to put up with that.”

I smiled. “Oh, there are more than enough human men to ensure I hear it often. Don’t worry about that. Pigs are everywhere. I’m just not used to having to deal with ones who could kill me with a snap of their fingers for speaking up for myself.”

Fire flashed in Ajax’s eyes. “I would never let that happen,” he snarled, the muscles in his neck bunching. “Ever.”

A shiver prickled its way down my spine at his ferocious claim of protection.

“I don’t want you to get hurt because of me,” I said. “I just had to make it clear that attitude isn’t one I’ll stand for. Not in anyone.”

“As you shouldn’t,” he agreed. “If you want to be in the kitchen with a baby and a sandwich, that is, of course, fine. As long as *you* decide it.”

“Thank you,” I said wryly. “Though time may be running out on that part of my life.”

“Perhaps,” he said. “But then again, it might not be.”

Tension snared us, rendering us immobile as we looked into the other’s eyes, separated by mere inches on the little bench, well within the other’s bubble of personal space. I could see his eyes, the widening of his pupils, the tiny parting of his lips as he drew a breath in.

That was it. I could feel it. It was a “moment.” There was no breeze in the hallway, but something had us swaying toward the other person, a magnetic attraction we’d been denying since he saw me in the cavern.

But I couldn’t forget that first time meeting, him in the elevator, me in the parking lot, my body losing itself with a need to let him in.

A need that was rising higher once again. I guarded against it now, not wanting to be taken unawares like that first time, but with each passing minute, with each detail I learned about Ajax, each breath of his scent and touch of his muscled arms, I was losing the battle.

But he was a *dragon*. I had to remember that as my blood burned, filling my cheeks and stoking the fires between my legs in anticipation of his touch ... or more.

Ajax leaned a little closer. My head fell back slightly. I drew in a shaky breath, trying to still the tremors in my hands. It wasn’t a good idea. I should stop it. Right then, before things went any further.

My lips were dry. I wet them quickly, Ajax’s eyes darting to my mouth, his pupils widening slightly. A roar in my ears drowned out almost everything around us as my heartrate soared into the stratosphere.

Almost everything.

“Ten bucks says he’s going to kiss her.” The loud, obnoxious voice came from down the hall.

The moment was broken just like that. I pulled back with a shake of my head to clear the cobwebs. What was I thinking? Ajax was a *dragon*. There was no way I could let him kiss me!

“Guess not,” Cyrus said with a lazy laugh. “Maybe even Ajax has the good sense to not fuck a woman who thinks she’s too good for her own place.”

Before I could open my mouth, Ajax erupted from the bench next to me, heading right for the two other dragon shifters.

Chapter Eighteen

Ajax

“Uh-oh,” Cyrus said, his eyes dancing with laughter. “Look at this, I think we’ve gone and made him mad.”

I was halfway to them when a slim, pale hand stopped me cold. Katie slipped in front of me, her glani sweeping wide in a giant swirl of bright blue fabric. But it was the touch of her dainty fingers in the center of my chest that caught my attention and kept it, bringing my surging footsteps to an immediate halt.

“Don’t,” she whispered quietly, eyes of hardened gold staring up at me. “They aren’t worth it. Their opinions don’t mean shit.”

I desperately wanted to brush her aside, tell her to retreat down the hallway to safety while I taught Cyrus and his brown-nosing friend a lesson in manners they wouldn’t soon forget. Strain as I might, however, I couldn’t bring myself to budge that tiny hand. The power it held over me was impossible. Why was I listening to her instead of my instincts? Those men *needed* to be reminded to show respect. Could they not see the strength the tiny human possessed? The brain that sat between her ears? How could they be so blind? It was obvious for all to witness!

My dragon was thrashing about in my skull, a dull ache forming at my temples as I was forced to rein it in to comply with Katie’s wishes. If she didn’t want me to knock some heads together to assuage her honor, then I would just have to sit there and let the buffoons continue to make a mockery of the decorum of the sovereign’s palace.

“Very well,” I growled, staring over her head at the two of them. “If you’re unbothered by their rudeness, then I suppose I can be the bigger man and let it go.”

This time, I added, letting that promise carry over in the look I gave Cyrus; a warning he was lucky that time, but in the future, he might not be. The other dragon shifter sneered in

disdain, feeling supremely confident in the advantage he had in numbers.

“Brought low by a human whore,” my cousin said, shaking his head slowly as he looked at his companion. “I never thought I’d see the day a human pussy would look so similar to my cousin. I guess she must be a feisty little cocksucker for him to obey like a little puppy dog. Probably tastes pretty good, too.”

I glanced down at Katie as the pressure on my chest vanished, her upper lip pulling back in a snarl.

“On second thought,” she said with a shrug, moving out of the way.

I was gone in a flash, snatching up Cyrus’s bootlicker pal before the other dragon realized I was on the move and bodily slamming him into my cousin. The impact sent my cousin sailing backward, his face wide with shock. A moment later, I tossed his stunned friend after him. The other shifter—I had no idea his name, nor did I care—landed on top of Cyrus as he tried to get up, the crown of his head catching my cousin in the jaw, snapping his head back with a spine-shivering *crack*.

“It would have cost you nothing to simply go on your way and keep your comments to yourself, *cousin*,” I spat as I stalked after them. “Your ego would have remained intact, as would your teeth.”

“Fuck you,” Cyrus said, spitting out a mouthful of blood and shattered teeth as he climbed to his feet. “I’m going to—”

My roundhouse kick took him in the side, tossing him into the wall. Stone crunched under the impact, leaving a roughly circular dent. I was on Cyrus in a flash, grabbing him by the collar and hoisting him off his feet.

“You’re an idiot, Cyrus,” I said calmly. “Your problem is, you always think you’re better than everyone else, and you can’t recover when they show you that you aren’t.”

His friend groaned behind me. Without looking, I pivoted, yanking Cyrus along and using him like a blocker as I slammed him into his friend, driving the other dragon into the

far wall. The other dragon's head slammed against the stone, and he blinked woozily, his eyes unable to focus.

“Get the fuck out of my sight, and tell all your piece of shit friends, like Corver and his buddies, to find someone else to piss off. Got it?”

“Fuck y—”

I slammed my other fist into Cyrus's nose, breaking it. Before I could get any of his blood on me, I dropped him directly onto his friend, a direct ass-to-face impact that left the other shifter helplessly pinned by Cyrus's butt cheeks for precious seconds.

Snickering, I backed off, giving them a few feet of space to gather themselves.

“You had better go now. Wash that blood off,” I said, gesturing down the hallway.

Cyrus glared, but he knew when he was beaten. He hauled his friend up, who looked at me with hatred.

“Clean your nose before you go anywhere,” I warned him. “It's got a bit of brown on it. Wouldn't want anyone getting the wrong idea.”

They both stormed off, leaving my dragon and me crowing with victory. The sheer joy of seeing them flee with their tails between their legs was a drug all of its own making. Blood rushed through me as victory-fueled adrenaline filled my nerves, making me hyperaware of everything around me.

Including Katie.

She approached slowly, watching them go as they reached a junction of hallways and disappeared.

“That was impressive,” she said. “The way you handled them, I mean. I've never seen anyone move so fast before. You just—”

The snarl that tore from my throat filled the hallway, bouncing off the stone floors and walls, echoing as I lost control to my dragon. I surged forward, snatching Katie from

the floor and pinning her to the wall before lowering my mouth to hers and kissing her hard.

Chapter Nineteen

Katie

The heat of his lips sucked the oxygen from my lungs, and the press of his body against mine drew the blood away from my brain. It was the only explanation for why I acted without thinking, my legs wrapping around his, my arms descending over his head. I didn't try to get away, *I pulled him closer.*

Our tongues danced together as his lips parted mine, his hands on my hips, holding me up with ease, cold stone against my back, and burning hot skin pressing, finding every inch of me the flimsy glani left exposed.

I moaned into his mouth as he grabbed my ass with one hand, squeezing firmly, a possessive motion that spoke to a secret part of me, one I rarely shared with anyone, let alone on a first kiss. But Ajax found it in me, and he stoked the fires of *possession*, of the oft buried desire I had to be taken, to be someone else's. My groin flooded with need at the idea of being under his command. Submitting to his authority, completely and totally.

Ajax did it with one kiss. He stole that information, parsing it from the tiniest of moans and the wilting of my resistance as his lips puckered flesh from my lips to my collarbone, driving me further into submission. I was his, putty in his hands that he could mold in any way he wanted. Whatever he said, I would have done it, right then.

The last thing I was ready for was him pulling away in alarm.

"I'm sorry," he said, setting me down with a gentleness reserved for infants or extremely fragile glass. "I shouldn't have done that."

Then he was walking away, running one hand through his unruly mane of hair, trying to straighten out the tangled mess I'd made of it as I'd pulled his face to mine.

“Ajax,” I said, going after him as the shock of the moment wore off.

“My dragon got the better of me,” he rumbled, refusing to look back at me. “That wasn’t me. I should have kept control of it.”

It wasn’t him? I frowned, still trailing after him so I wasn’t left behind but no longer hurrying to try to stop him to talk about what just happened. What did he mean by “It was my dragon”? Was there another personality inside him? Did Ajax the person not like kissing me? There was no *way* it had been a bad kiss. The dying embers of arousal between my legs spoke to it having been *very* “not bad.”

But maybe Ajax had never wanted to do it all along?

I touched my lips, where moments before his mouth had been. The slight tingle from his stubble still pricked around my mouth and neck. It wasn’t possible to have faked all that. I had *felt* it.

So, why was he trying to act like it was all a big mistake?

Before I knew it, we were on the roof. Nearby, a huge, scarlet-scaled beast swooped in, hind claws touching down. Before the front legs had even grazed the flat stone landing pad, the creature was shifting. A human woman replaced it, walking forward and passing us to head into the palace. She nodded perfunctorily at Ajax, but her gaze swept over me as if I wasn’t even there.

“What the hell did I do to *her*?” I muttered. “I don’t recall ever meeting a female dragon.”

“Nothing,” Ajax rumbled, the first words he’d spoken in minutes. “But the dragon women aren’t overly thrilled about human women coming to live among us.”

“If they’re going to treat us like that, you can expect the feeling to be mutual.”

Ajax was silent.

“Where to now?” I asked.

He shrugged, looking anywhere but at me. “Would you prefer to go flying?” he asked. “Instead of straight home?”

“Yes,” I said instantly, excited for the chance to soar through the skies once more.

Flight was something humans had achieved, but flying in a plane or a helicopter was *nothing* like being on the back of a dragon, feeling its powerful muscles sweep down, keeping you aloft. It had to be even more thrilling to *be* a dragon. A creature born to ride the thermals and see the world from above. For a moment, I wished I could be a dragon shifter, too. Experience the best of both worlds.

“Let’s go see the outer isles,” Ajax suggested as I climbed his wing, sliding into position at the base of his neck, my legs spread wide around the scales.

It wasn’t that dissimilar from riding a horse in that sense. Although it was a smoother ride. And also, if I fell, it was a *much* longer way down.

“Okay,” I said, just glad he was talking to me again. The worst outcome from our abbreviated kiss would have been an awkward wall between us, where every interaction was uncomfortable and akin to pulling teeth.

He spread his wings and launched us into the sky as I clung to his neck, the ridged line of scaly plates that ran down his spine providing a slight handhold. Soon, however, we were soaring freely, and I sat upright, not needing to hold on.

The trees and hills gave way to sandy coastal beach, followed by the blue waters of the Atlantic Ocean. I had no idea *where* we were, other than somewhere off the eastern seaboard of the United States. The dragons were fanatical about keeping their home hidden from humanity, and I couldn’t blame them. The military hadn’t used its biggest weapons because of the numbers of civilians intermingling with the dragons.

But if they found the homeland? I had no doubt they would turn it into a nuclear wasteland in seconds. Sturdy as dragons were, I doubted they could withstand that sort of attack.

“How far can you go?” I called, leaning forward onto his neck at the same time. “What’s the safe zone, I mean, before you’ll be discovered?”

“Far enough,” he said as the southernmost of the chain of small isles approached. There were perhaps ten or twenty miles separating it from the main island. Too far for a bridge, but plenty close enough for creatures capable of flight.

“So beautiful from up here,” I said, more to myself than him.

“Yes, it is,” he rumbled in agreement, banking right slightly around the southern tip of the smaller island, letting me glance down at it, taking in the rocky dune-like terrain. There wasn’t much to recommend on this island. But there were residences visible all along the beach just the same. Which made sense. Dragons didn’t need roads to access their houses. They could put them *anywhere*.

The rest of the island swept by. I leaned in, resting myself against his neck as we flew on to the next. I closed my eyes, enjoying the feel of the wind whipping at my hair, tugging strands free of the single braid I’d put it in to keep it as tidy as possible during flight.

Sunlight warmed his scales and my back, making me drowsy, so I leaned backward instead, spreading my arms wide to catch the sun’s rays and warm my front. My eyes were closed as I enjoyed the moment.

A shadow moved in front of the sun.

“Silly cloud,” I grumped, opening my eyes. They continued to open wider. “*AJAX, LOOK OUT!*”

He banked instantly to the left, the motion snapping me back, arching my spine against the broad flat back of his dragon.

An instant later, something flashed through the space we’d just occupied, the wind of its passing nearly blowing me clear off Ajax’s neck.

Chapter Twenty

Ajax

The flickering of sunlight in my eye on the cloudless day had already triggered my mind out of its autopilot flight. When Katie screamed her warning, I was already moving to one side. Her panic meant I dropped wing and banked *hard*, sliding out of the way as another dragon went screeching through the space I'd just occupied.

“*Hold on!*” I shouted, whipping us around in a hard turn, grimacing at the G-forces I knew would be pressing her into my spine.

A second dragon darted past, its claws extended and aiming for my wing.

“They’re trying to kill us!” Katie shrieked, her legs squeezing tightly around my neck as she held on for dear life.

Until a few seconds ago, I'd been doing my best to ignore the pressure of her body against mine, her warmth on my scales driving my dragon up a wall. The only thing that kept the building need to take her at bay was the freedom of flight. It was the perfect distraction.

Now, as I beat my wings, driving fast for more altitude, I welcomed the grip of her legs around the base of my neck. Because it meant she was still there.

“I need you to tell me if you can see them!” I shouted, trying to look around for them but also needing to keep an eye up front. With an unsecured passenger on my back, I was hindered, fighting with one arm behind my back, so to speak.

The two attackers had picked the perfect time to strike. Out over the ocean, between isles, they could take us down, and nobody would be around to stop them or take note of who it was. Unless I could get us over land. But we were miles away from the nearest isle. The odds didn't look good.

“One coming up on our rear!”

I risked a glance back as the scarlet-scaled dragon closed, its wings beating frantically. The smaller dragon had the benefit of being faster without a passenger. But I had the high ground.

“Hold tight,” I said, judging the distance as he closed rapidly. “With your legs especially.”

The instant I felt her legs clamp down, I spread my wings wide, hauling back on my upper body. The broad leathery membranes caught the air and stopped our forward progress outright.

There was a moment of weightlessness, and then we dropped like a stone—

Right onto the back of the hurriedly approaching dragon. Scarlet and crimson glittered in the sky as my claws dug deep into its back, ripping scales and blood free from its unprepared back.

I missed the tendon joining the wing to his body, however, meaning he could still fly away, blood trailing down his flanks as he did.

“*Go left!*” Katie shouted suddenly.

I banked left as hard as I could, tilting over and to the side. Too slow. The dragon plunging down on us from above twisted mid-attack, managing to rake two of his claws down my flank. Orange and black scales ripped free. I roared in pain, but our course was taking us out of range.

Inhaling sharply, I sent a blast of furious flames after the second dragon, his scales a darker, more rust color. I didn’t recognize either of them, but I could hazard a guess at who had sent them after me.

“What now?” Katie called as I swooped away from the two attackers, driving us steadily toward the nearer of the two outlying isles. Getting back to the mainland was out of the question. We wouldn’t make it. I had to get us over land, where I could either find witnesses or find enough time to drop Katie off to help level the playing field.

Of course, if I did *that*, there was every chance one of the attackers would go after her.

Damn. Now that I thought about it, that was more than likely their goal all along. They knew I wouldn't pursue them, that they would get away with their cowardly attack. Which meant Katie had to be the object of their raid. Not killing me.

Bastards.

I flew on as hard and fast as I could, but the other dragons were smaller and fresher, and they were catching up. They must have come straight for me without taking the slow, meandering flightpath Katie and I had chosen. Escape wasn't an option, and increasingly, it was looking like we weren't going to reach land either.

Which meant I had to fight.

"This is going to get ugly," I told her. "Please don't judge me for what you're about to see."

"What do you mean?" she asked, pressed flat to my neck.

I revised my impression of her up another level as I noted the lack of tremble in her voice. She was scared—there was no way she couldn't be—but she wasn't letting it control her. There was a strength to her I didn't expect on first sight.

"They aren't going to give up," I explained to her. "Whoever sent them must have given them direct orders to kill you."

"Me? They seem intent on killing *you!*" she shouted.

"My death wouldn't serve any purpose," I said. "Dragons fight all the time. It's not that uncommon. But killing me, as a member of the royal family, would be big news. The death of a human? Almost everyone would write that off as an unfortunate accident but hardly concerning."

"*I'm concerned,*" she said.

I laughed, despite the gravity of the situation. Her attitude gave me hope, if I could get us out of trouble, she would adapt just fine. I feared being under attack by dragons might bring about a panic, given what had happened to her family.

Unfortunately, I doubted she would look at me the same after what would happen next. I hated the necessity of it, but I

didn't see any other option. The attacking dragons weren't giving me one.

I watched them come. They approached from behind and to either side of me, forcing me to pick one or the other. Regardless of which one I banked and went after, the one I *didn't* choose would be able to swoop down on me and attack from behind.

So, I did something else. I picked neither. Once more, I spread my wings, snapping them out wide, rigid against the air. The two red dragons had a split-second to glance between them in shock as I dropped right between them. Then *I* was the one in pursuit. Giant orange-black wings flexed hard, and I swooped forward. I wouldn't catch up with them, but that wasn't the point.

Inhaling sharply, I breathed out a cone of fire at the leftmost dragon. I didn't wait to stick around and see the damage. I was immediately banking even *farther* left, out of the way of the right-hand dragon who'd banked himself up and *over* in a loop, aiming to come down directly on my back.

He passed through the space I'd just been. The motion of his loop dropped him slightly behind me, and with a fierce snarl, I snapped my tail out, slamming it into his snout.

Spinning mid-air, being careful to not whip Katie free, I lunged forward, my jaws clamping down hard on the dragon's neck. I ripped free a giant chunk of scales and flesh underneath, spitting it to the side as the wounded dragon roared in agony. It folded its wings in and dropped from the sky to get away.

I didn't let it. Angling forward, I stooped, following him down as air whipped past. Katie screamed, but she didn't let go.

My greater weight saw us catch up, and my claws raked across the smaller rust-colored dragon. That time, I caught the tendon, slicing clean through it.

Bleating in panic, the dragon spiraled down out of the sky, hitting the seas far below hard enough to make the impact as

harsh as hitting concrete.

I snapped my wings out wide as we continued to fall and angled us slowly up, catching the air and then lifting us high with a swooping motion.

“Can you see the other?” I roared as the rust-scaled dragon sank beneath the waves, either dead or unconscious and unable to keep itself afloat.

Scanning the sky, I searched for any sign of the other dragon. It had to be around somewhere. My fire attack might have hurt it, but there was no way I’d killed it.

“No!” Katie shouted, her body gripping and moving as she looked around.

The only warning was a last-second *whoosh* of air, and then pain exploded down my spine. Katie screamed. The world spun.

Through the haze of agony, I somehow managed to put myself in pursuit of the other dragon as it swooped past. My wings still functioned, but each beat of the membranes sent fresh lightning stabbing into my brain. I was hurt—fairly badly.

“There’s so much blood,” Katie babbled.

“Is any of it yours?” I said, my snout clenched against the pain, mangling the words.

“What? No, it missed me,” she said. “Barely.”

Rage burned through the pain as I realized just how close I’d come to losing Katie. My wings beat faster. The other dragon did its best to escape, but I bore down on it like the inevitable hand of fate. My fire attack had crisped part of its wing, slowing it just enough that I could reel him in.

He knew it. I knew it. It was just a matter of time.

Instead of succumbing to the inevitable, the scarlet dragon came around in a sharp turn, heading straight for me. I could only respect his willingness to try to best me in battle, instead of waiting for me to catch up and kill him.

But I was done playing fair. I signaled my intent to close with him, to battle it out in the skies to see who was more dominant.

“Close your eyes,” I rumbled at Katie.

Then, at the last minute, I opened my snout and poured a stream of fire right into the dragon’s face.

Scales cracked and fell away, flesh charred and crinkled into ash, peeling back to reveal the skull underneath as the very dead dragon dropped out of the sky, its wings no longer working. I circled for a minute, watching it slip under the waves and disappear into the depths of the ocean.

Then I banked away, wings beating hard as I set a course not for the nearest isle, as originally planned, but for home. I was hurt, and I would need time to recover. But my priority was to get us back among others. To somewhere Katie would be okay.

“Um, Ajax?” she called sometime later.

“Yes?” I rumbled. “What is it?”

“Can I open my eyes yet?”

I laughed, despite everything. “Yes. You can. It’s over now. We’re going home.”

“Okay.” There was a long pause. “There’s still a lot of blood back here,” she said uncomfortably. “You’re going to be able to make it, right? It’s a mess.”

“Yes,” I said. “And don’t worry about it. I will be fine. I’ve suffered worse. Once I’m clean, you’ll see it isn’t that bad.”

“I was talking about my glani,” she said over the wind. “It’s ruined. There’s no way I’m getting it clean.”

“We’ll get you some more tomorrow, along with our other plans.”

“Other plans?”

I grinned to myself. “Yes, I’m not the only one who’s going to need to rest up tonight. You’ve got a big day ahead of you tomorrow.”

“I do? What are we doing?”

But I only laughed. “You’ll have to wait and find out!”

Chapter Twenty-One

Katie

I didn't see Ajax after we made it back to his house.

We landed on the roof as expected, and I carefully slid off his neck, doing my best to avoid putting pressure on any of the cuts he'd sustained during our aerial battle. I wanted to ask him what to do next, or how to handle things, but he didn't stick around to discuss. Instead, he took flight, telling me he would be back in the morning and to not worry about him.

Then he left me on the roof. Alone. Unsure about everything.

Which was why, when I woke up the next morning and heard him moving around in the kitchen, I purposefully took my sweet time, with an extra-long shower that should have drained the houses hot water supply. It didn't, which was another mystery, but not one I cared enough about to solve. Not yet, at least.

By the time I emerged, the house smelled of bacon and other deliciousness, the sweet aromas invading my room and turning my stomach into an angry lion with its growls. My resistance to leaving the room was fading swiftly, and I doubted it was all by accident either.

"This one's for you," he said the instant I walked into the kitchen, gesturing at a plate piled high with goodies designed to appease.

"Thank you." I bit back my giant smile. Clearly, he'd learned from his mistake yesterday and was making sure I had no reason to complain about the volume of food.

"It seems like the absolute least I could do," he said, shifting his weight from one foot to the other.

I arched an eyebrow at his obvious discomfort. "Are you hurting that badly?"

He was wearing a long-sleeve shirt. The royal-blue fabric looked good stretched tight across his shoulders and chest, but

it also served to hide any of the injuries he'd received. Assuming they even transferred to his human form. Yet another thing I didn't know about dragons.

"Stiff," he admitted. "A little sore, mainly down the spine. But nothing to worry about."

"Good."

Ajax sighed, stuffing a sausage link into his mouth and making it disappear in several swift bites.

"What I was referring to was how I left you yesterday," he said, breaking the silence and addressing his sudden departure.

I continued to eat. There was nothing in that wording that required a response. It would be good for him to know and understand I wasn't just angry, either.

"You deserve better than that," he said. "And I intend to *be* better than that. I wanted to, in fact."

"Then where did you go?" I growled, taking out my frustration on a piece of bacon, my molars shredding it into pieces. "Why did you abandon me?"

He reared back in his chair, blue eyes wide in the morning light. "Is that what you think I did?"

"Well, let's see. We got attacked by some of your kin. Mid-air. I nearly died half a dozen times from the attacks and nearly falling off your back. Then, with you leaking blood, we got back here. Without an explanation, any reasoning, *nothing*, you then flew away. Leaving me here to try to recover on my own. To handle my own emotions, the adrenaline comedown, all of it *without* you. So, yeah, I'd say my use of the word 'abandon' is allowed in this situation."

Even I didn't realize how angry, hurt, and, most importantly, *scared* I'd been. Was. My fork rattled against the plate from the tremble in my hand.

Ajax was up from his chair in a heartbeat, scooping me out of mine and holding me to him.

"I'm sorry," he said into my ear. "I didn't even think of it that way."

“I know.”

“It’s all so new to me,” he rumbled. “I’m not used to dealing with humans. I didn’t consider what it must have been like from your point of view. You were so strong yesterday. You kept your wits about you without flinching. I just assumed you were okay. I’m so sorry, Katie. I’ll never leave you again.”

I shivered as tingles spread all over my body at his pronouncement. Not just what he was saying, but the force behind it had come from somewhere else. Somewhere deep within him.

“Don’t make promises you can’t keep,” I whispered. I couldn’t handle being let down again.

“I’m not,” he said, his voice as hard as stone. “I shouldn’t have gone anywhere yesterday. It was a mistake, and not one I will repeat.”

“Why did you leave me?”

The tremor that ran through his body was palpable. “I didn’t leave you. That wasn’t the purpose, at least, I mean. I had to report to the sovereign. To let her know what was going on.”

“Why?”

“Because what if they were going after the other humans, too? I had to warn them,” he said gruffly.

I leaned my head back from where it was on his chest. He was staring straight ahead. Grabbing his chin, I forced him to look at me. His jaw was set, but it was in the corners of his eyes that I looked and read the emotions warring within him. He’d tried to do the right thing. But now he was flaying himself for leaving me.

“As hurt as you were, you made yourself fly on to the palace, so word could be spread to protect the *other* women here as well?”

He shrugged. “I value life, Katie. And I definitely do *not* approve of my people trying to murder yours. If I can prevent that, I will.”

I nodded, and in that instant, I decided to not tell him about my night. The crying in the shower, the screaming his name in vain. The nightmares. Ajax would beat himself up enough without my adding to that. Considering *why* he'd done what he did, I couldn't blame him.

"Hopefully, there isn't one," I said, stroking his jaw, feeling the stubble on the back of my palm. "But if there *is* a next time, take me with you, okay?"

"I promise. I will," he said.

"Good."

"Is there anything else I can do?" he asked. "To make up for last night? For yesterday as a whole, I suppose."

I grinned. "You could feed me some more of that bacon."

He laughed. I bounced in his arms as he did, but I didn't care. Things were okay between us now. That was what was important to me at that moment.

Ajax sat, with me in his lap, and proceeded to feed me bacon strip by strip. It was hardly economic—or even romantic. But he did it anyway.

"Okay, let's just eat, yours is getting cold," I said after a few minutes. "Besides, you never told me what we're doing today."

"And I'm only going to show you," he said, moving around to his side of the table and digging in, revealing his ravenous appetite one more.

"Tease," I said with a mock glare over my plate.

He winked back at me. Throat abruptly dry, I reached for the glass of water in front of me. The flagrant sexuality in his eyes promised a check I wasn't sure would ever be cashed. But it had an absurd amount written on it, and my body reacted to it without warning.

"You okay?" he mumbled around a spoonful of eggs as I fidgeted in the chair.

“Oh, yeah, just fine,” I said, forcing a smile, wishing my throat wasn’t the *only* dry thing of mine.

The rest of breakfast finished without any more maddeningly tempting sexual tension, and we soon set out. Not to the roof as I’d expected, but through the front door and toward the merchant district, as I’d learned it was called.

“What are we doing?” I asked as he led me up to the first store, then paused outside.

“*I’m* doing nothing,” he said. “Except footing the bill.”

I frowned. “So, that means I’m the one doing something?”

He nodded. “You said my house wasn’t a home. Well ...” He flung open the doors to reveal a huge store stretching far back, filled with all sorts of home décor. “I’d appreciate it if you could fix that for me.”

I stared at him. “Are you letting me decorate your house?”

He nodded.

“And you’re paying?”

Another nod.

“You got hurt a lot worse than I thought yesterday.” But I was already wandering into the store, my eyes picking out various things that might work.

“What’s *that* supposed to mean?” he sputtered. “I thought this would be *fun!*”

“It’s going to be,” I said, eyeing a wood carving of the Dragon Isles from above, mounted in a frame on the wall. “For me, at least. Not so much for your wallet.”

“I figured that much,” he said.

“Maybe,” I teased, looking back at him with a smile, thrilled at the trust he extended to me to decorate his entire home. “But I don’t think you quite understand just how *much* your house needs in the way of accents and additional items.”

Some of the joy slipped from his face, but he rallied, throwing caution to the wind. “Whatever. I’m sure it will be

worth it in the end. You have good taste.”

“How do you know that?”

“I don’t,” he said, coming up to my side as I looked over a hutch that would nicely complement his dining room furniture. “I’m just crossing my fingers and hoping like hell you do.”

I laughed, leaning against him without thinking. “Don’t worry. It’s almost impossible for it to look any worse than it already does.”

He twisted his mouth to the side. “Ouch.”

“Here, sit,” I said, taking his wrist and dragging him over to a sofa set. “Tell me if it’s comfortable or not.”

“Why?” he asked, falling back into it, his eyes widening as he sank into the cushy padding. “Oh, that’s not bad. But, Katie, I already *have* a couch.”

“You have *a* couch,” I said, putting the emphasis on the proper word. “This is a *set*. See, couch, chair, and loveseat. They go to together. Plus, you’ll need some end tables as well. And some lamps to go on them ... hmm.”

“It’s comfy, at least,” he mumbled as I moved around, picking stuff out.

I was no interior decorator by trade, but I hadn’t been embellishing when I said it couldn’t get much worse. His house was *barren*.

“I hope you’re keeping track!” I called back.

“Someone is coming,” he moaned. “Tell them. I don’t want to know the damage. But we only have a couple of hours. You have somewhere to be for a late lunch.”

I paused from examining several runners that would be nice in his front entryway. “I do? What about you?”

He shook his head. “Nope, this is for you. But don’t ask any questions because I’m not telling.”

I stuck my tongue out. He laughed.

“Hi, I’m Arle,” an older looking man said, emerging from somewhere in the back. “Welcome to my store. How can I help you?”

He frowned as he looked me over. Perhaps realizing I was a human.

“She’s with me,” Ajax called. He was still sitting on the sofa, relaxing deep into it. “Whatever she wants, and have it delivered ASAP, please. Thank you, Arle!”

The dragon-man beamed as he glanced over. “Of *course*.”

I could practically see the dollar signs in his eyes. It would be a fun morning, that was for sure. But I couldn’t stop from thinking ahead.

Just what was Ajax planning for lunch?

Chapter Twenty-Two

Katie

“Are you ever going to tell me where we’re going?” I pleaded as we walked down another one of the broad stone promenades in the commercial district. As far as I could tell, they had neither names nor numbers. They were just sort of there.

“Of course,” he said, without elaborating.

I sighed. “Ajax ...”

“Just relax,” he said, flashing a smile as he glanced at me. “Here, just enjoy the walk and weather.”

He extended his arm to me, inviting me to take it. I eyed the crook of his elbow for a moment, deciding whether to take it.

Then another thought hit me. Ajax was offering me his arm *in public*. Where the other dragons would see us. Would see *me* with him. It was no small move, no automatic gesture. He was telling me, with his actions, that he was okay with it. With the others knowing a human on his arm wasn’t the end of the world. And that if *he* could accept it, then maybe they could, too. It didn’t mean much between him and me. Nothing would change if I took his arm. But between him and the others, word would get around.

“The weather really is wonderful,” I said, taking his arm, linking my hand through it, and resting it on his forearm.

He smiled down at me, his eyes making it clear he knew what he was doing. What his actions signaled to the other dragons.

“One of the many perks of living in the Isles,” he said.

We wandered down, the stores slowly giving way to restaurants, bakeries, and a grocery store or two. They were small. Nothing like the massive grocers back home, but they didn’t need to be.

“It’s got such a quaint feel to it,” I remarked as he steered me by the elbow toward a corner coffee shop and restaurant, the bright green banners and coloring of the wood beckoning us in. “Like I’m in an old town. I love it.”

“Good,” he said, pulling open the door and holding it open for me.

“Why, thank you,” I said, preceding him into the store. I was met with the scent of fresh baked bread mixed with a hint of honey and sweetness. “Now, what?”

“Now, you enjoy your lunch,” he said, pointing at a table where a woman was already sitting, sipping a mug of something warm. “I’ll be outside, but never far.”

“You’re leaving?” I asked, confused.

“Look closer,” he said, pointing at the woman.

She looked up, and a smile broke out across her face as she waved. I stared back in recognition. It was one of the other women from the cave. She gestured for me to take the chair across from her.

“I promised you a meeting,” Ajax said. “To prove they’re okay. I couldn’t get everyone here, but the two of you can talk, at least. Compare notes. Make sure everything is on the up and up.”

“Thank you,” I said graciously. “That was kind of you, Ajax.”

“Don’t worry about it,” he said, waving my appreciation off and shooing me into the store. “Get some food. Chat. I’ll be out here. Waiting for you. Take your time.”

“Okay.” I smiled and went over to the other woman.

She rose as I approached.

“Hi,” I said. “It’s good to see you, ummm ...”

“Ashlee,” she said, sticking out a hand.

“Ashlee, right,” I said, taking it. “Katie. I’m sorry I forgot, but ...”

“But we only introduced ourselves once for a few minutes with a lot of other things on our minds?” Ashlee finished, grinning. “Don’t worry about it. I had forgotten yours as well, so we’re even. I just wasn’t going to admit it.”

“I’ve been got,” I said with a laugh, sliding into the chair opposite Ashlee as a waiter, a young male, came up and took my order.

“The hot chocolate is delicious. Even in the heat,” Ashlee suggested.

I nodded and added a chocolate croissant I saw on a picture behind the counter. “That looks delicious.”

“Coming right up,” the waiter said, disappearing.

“Okay,” I said once he was gone, keeping my voice down so the other patrons couldn’t listen in. “Tell me everything.”

Ashlee exhaled. “Everything?”

“Yes. How’s it going with you and whoever? Are you guys getting along? What’s it like? What’s he like?”

“Draveth is nice,” she said after a moment. “Very nice. From the first moment, he’s been the perfect gentleman. He opens doors, says please and thank you. All the things I could ask for, really.”

“Sounds nice,” I said.

Ashlee’s eyebrows came down over her dark brown eyes. “Is yours not? Is he being an ass? I can tell Draveth. I’m sure he could do something about that.”

“I’m not so sure he could,” I muttered. “Ajax is related to the sovereign.”

“The who?”

It was my turn to frown. “You didn’t get taken to meet the sovereign? Their ruler?”

“No.” Ashlee leaned in. “You did?”

“Yes.” I chewed on my lip. Ajax had made it seem like it was something *all* the other women would do. But according

to Ashlee, I might have in fact been the *only* one who did. Was that because he was related to her?

“So, you met her? And your dragon is related to her? That’s cool,” Ashlee said.

I thought back to the aerial attack yesterday over the ocean. “It’s been interesting,” I said, choosing my words carefully. “But what about, you know, you and Draveth? Has he made a move or anything?”

“Not at all. It’s like he doesn’t even want to,” she said, shaking her head. “He’s very courteous and polite, but I don’t feel *wanted*.”

“No spark?”

“I don’t even think he’s *trying* to light the fire,” she said. “Which is okay. I’ll probably get sent home soon. I hope. I don’t know why they would keep me here, otherwise.”

“Yeah. I wonder why he’s not trying?”

“Probably forced into this.”

“Maybe,” I said. “But so was Ajax. By the sovereign, no less, if my guess is right.”

Ashlee’s eyes narrowed. “Are you saying there *is* a spark between you two?”

“I don’t know if I’d call it *that*,” I said slowly.

The other woman grinned. “But you wouldn’t not call it that, either. What happened? Tell me!”

I caved, eager to finally have someone to confide in. Usually, I went to Julie, but without cell phones or computers on the Isles, that was impossible.

So, I told Ashlee all about the kiss. I didn’t tell her about the run-in a week before the truce, but I did confess he was a rough, abrasive jerk at first. But that he was beginning to thaw.

“He gave you his arm in public?” Ashlee asked, astonished. “Draveth doesn’t want to go anywhere he’ll be seen with me. Just getting him to bring me here was a challenge.”

“Interesting,” I said. “I thought Ajax was the only one who wanted nothing to do with humans. But it seems he’s not alone in that sense. I wonder ...”

“What?”

“Well, *we* all were taken here against our will, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, what if we’re not the only ones experiencing that?” I asked her. “Maybe the *dragons* are all only doing this because they’ve been forced into it as well?”

“That makes no sense. Why would they want us here in the first place, then?” Ashlee pointed out. “They insisted on women being sent here as potential mates as part of the peace terms. Why do that if they don’t actually want us?”

“That,” I said thoughtfully, “is a very good question, and one I don’t have the answer to right now.”

My drink and food arrived, and I ate. Then we both got an actual lunch as well as we chatted away about everything and nothing. Once the plates were cleared, I leaned back.

“This has been nice. Thank you,” I said.

“I agree,” Ashlee said, also letting out a contented sigh. “It’s refreshing to know others are okay. And maybe even better than okay.”

“Stop,” I said with a laugh. “One kiss doesn’t mean a thing.”

She shook her head. “You’re lying to yourself. I can see you blushing. You feel something for him.”

“No, I don’t,” I said, but the answer was automatic. Expected because of how I was supposed to feel about dragons.

But I was learning there was a lot more to them than I’d thought. Just like Ajax was learning the same about humans. That we weren’t so weak and inferior.

“Liar,” Ashlee teased.

That time, I didn't contradict her. Maybe she was right. Maybe there was *something* there.

"Sorry to interrupt, ladies," Ajax said, appearing beside us with another dragon-man in tow, a slimmer man with cool gray-blue eyes and a triangular face that needed to smile more so it didn't look so severe. "But Drav and I are ready to escort you."

Ashlee and I exchanged looks. Her confusion mirrored how I felt.

"Escort us to *what*?"

"Dress shopping," Ajax said. "The Peace Gala is in two days. A formal ball at the sovereign's palace."

I swallowed nervously. A ball? That meant a dance. In front of all the other dragons. With Ajax.

"Oh," I said, suddenly terrified. Holding his arm in public was one thing. That would be something else entirely. Something far too similar to a date.

Ajax winked at me.

It didn't help the rising panic.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Katie

“Not even a peek?”

I laughed. “For the fifth time, absolutely *not*, Ajax. You’re just going to have to wait.”

He poked the dress bag I had slung over my shoulder. “I could just rip this apart, you know. It would be really easy. An accident. I don’t really know my own strength sometimes. I’m really quite clumsy with delicate things.”

“Don’t you dare,” I admonished, wagging a finger viciously in his direction. “You sprang this ‘Peace Gala’, or whatever the hell it’s being called, on me with just a few days warning. So, now you must suffer the punishment of not seeing what I’ll be wearing until we leave.”

“I’m pretty sure I paid for what you’re wearing,” he muttered under his breath.

“Well, if you didn’t, then I’d be wearing nothing,” I pointed out without really thinking about what I was saying.

“I wouldn’t see any problem with that,” he growled indelicately. “In fact, it might be an improvement over what’s in here for all I know.”

The air left my lungs in a rush. “I do not have *that* bad of taste,” I said, eternally grateful he’d not stopped after the first sentence instead giving me a way out.

Not that either of us was blind to the tension ratcheting up between us. It was impossible to miss. After all, he just said he wanted to see me naked. And then there was the *way* he said it, which left no question in my mind what he’d do if he *were* to get me like that.

Nor did it quell the rising desire to let him. The more I tried to not think about it, to keep myself calm, the more I thought about it. About him. His hands on my hips. His lips on my neck. His cock—

“Look at all that,” Ajax said. “Arle, on top of things as always.”

I looked at the giant pile of boxes sitting outside his house. “Did we order all that?” I asked, overwhelmed at the sheer number of things. “It looks like too much.”

“My wallet says *you* bought them all,” Ajax said, brushing past me to weave his way through the stacks. “Which means you have a lot of work to do.”

“*Me?*” I yelped, staring in distress. “What about you?”

He frowned back at me, his hand on the doorknob. “I don’t know where any of this goes. You’re the decorator. I would just mess it up. Make it look too male, most likely.”

Then he was gone, disappearing into the house. Not before I caught his face twitching wildly as he fought back a huge smile. He was having fun.

I rolled my eyes and went inside, dropping my dress off in my room. Although the idea of going to a ball made me want to pee myself a little bit, the dress Ashlee helped me pick out was super flattering. I couldn’t wait until Ajax saw me in it.

Stop it.

“Do you want some help bringing stuff inside?” he asked.

“That would be very appreciated,” I told him. “I don’t think I can manage the furniture. I’ll get the little stuff. You get the big ones.”

We went back outside and grabbed the first boxes we saw. Mine fit comfortably in my arms. Ajax casually picked up a crate in his, easily carrying the box inside, moving carefully through the doorway.

“Careful,” I said, watching his arms bulge as he set it down, the seams groaning under the stress. “Don’t want you ruining a shirt just because your biceps rip through it.”

“Good point,” he said.

Before stripping out of the shirt, tossing it in the general vicinity of his room. I assumed his plan was to pick it up later,

but I didn't really care. Not then, at least. I was too busy feasting on his body. The perfect cut of his abs, tapering down to a brilliant V-shape that disappeared below the waist of his pants, promising all sorts of treasure to the one who exploring.

I watched with more than mild interest as the muscles rippled with every movement he made. Including breathing. The rise and fall of his powerful pecs, the muscles settling into place with each exhale.

"Katie?" he asked, waving a hand in front of me, his voice lost and distant, like he was in another room.

I caught myself.

"That's not *quite* what I meant," I said, feeling a fraction of my brain return to my control.

The other ninety percent was still salivating over his body like some thirsty pervert. It was like I'd never seen abs on a man before—or muscles!

"I'm sure it's not," he said, shrugging, which did wonderful things to his anatomy.

Not that I was staring hard enough to be able to pick out *all* the wonderful things. I was definitely not that direct.

"There's the rest of the couch still," I said, my face heating up at a furious pace as the true hoarseness of my voice revealed my mental difficulties.

That was not good.

"Of course," Ajax said, bowing slightly at the waist. "Whatever you need."

He waltzed past me, turning side on to brush up against me as he did—despite the six feet of empty space between him and the wall behind him.

A cloud of birchwood and honey wafted up my nose as he went past, weakening my knees.

The bastard was doing it on purpose, and we both knew it. What was worse was it was *working*. I wanted nothing more than to throw myself at him, beg him to take me, do whatever

he wanted to me. Things like propriety and dignity no longer mattered. I was a raging ball of hormones that needed one thing and one thing only: to undo his belt and see the rest of him.

I turned in a rush, not sure what I was going to do but knowing I couldn't hold back for much longer.

"*Oh my god, Ajax!*" I yelped, rushing up to him as I saw his back for the first time.

It was a mass of red welts and bruises, giant angry scars tracing deep violet lines down his spine.

"What? Oh," he said as I pushed him back around to examine the injuries.

"You've been walking around all day like this?" I said, gasping in horror as I examined the numerous wounds.

"They're healing," he said. "It's really not that bad, I promise."

"Have you *seen* your back?" I said. "It is that bad. Although it's actually healing incredibly fast. Still, this must hurt like a bitch."

"There's some discomfort," he confirmed, his voice rumbling as I traced the lines of his injuries, the various scars and red patches.

"So much pain," I whispered. "I'm sorry."

"Why?" he asked, his voice deepening as my hands ran along his entire back.

"You must be hurting. There's no way this doesn't," I said. "You're just putting on a strong face. We should have stayed home today. Let you rest."

"Nonsense," he said, turning to me and cutting off my protests with a wave of his hand and a shake of his head.

"But—"

He took my hands in his, quieting me as his blue eyes met mine, appreciation glittering in their depths. "I'm touched you care so much," he said. "I truly am. But you have to believe

me when I say this isn't as bad as it might look. I really will be okay. *I promise.*"

I looked at his hands, so massive compared to mine, each one of his palms all but swallowing up both of mine. He really was a giant. So much taller than me. His arms were the size of my legs. His legs as thick around as my torso.

"Katie?"

"Yes?" I asked, looking up into his face, not sure if I was scared or excited by what I saw.

"You're shaking."

"So I am," I said, never looking away.

"Perhaps you should let me help you sit," he said, guiding me toward his old couch.

"Maybe."

He helped me down into a sitting position, crouching down in front of me.

"You're still trembling," he pointed out.

"Yes."

"Perhaps I can help you relax," he rumbled.

"How are you going to do that?" I squeaked as he eased my legs apart so he could lean in closer to me.

"Like this," he whispered and kissed me.

I arched back into the cushions with a soft moan, the heat in the center of my core rushing outward like a tsunami as he broke that touch barrier yet again. That time, in private. Where no one could interrupt us. The only ones who could stop it ... were ourselves.

His hand reached down my back and pulled my hips toward him in a sharp motion. I gasped. Taking my hands, Ajax slowly pinned the first one, then the other, above my head against the back of the couch. He held me there while he kissed my mouth, my jaw, my neck, teasing the area with soft kisses and gentle suction that sent shivers shooting down my

spine. He kissed my collarbone and ran his tongue up the other side of my neck, teasing my earlobe.

I moaned, melting like putty before his mouth.

The glani slid easily to the side as he exposed my breasts, taking one into his mouth, the warm, soft sensual glide of his tongue around and over my nipple making my entire body shudder. His hand massaged the other, gently pinching and twisting slightly. The sheer warmth of his touch was overwhelming, matching the heat forming between my legs.

“Is this how I’m supposed to relax?” I murmured as he came back to kiss me again. “Because I’m anything but.”

“No,” he growled, lowering his head and flicking his tongue across the other nipple. “But this will.”

He slid to his knees, tossing aside the long draping fabric of the glani and kissing just above my mound. I tensed at the direct contact so near my throbbing clit. Near. But not on. That was a trend Ajax continued. He kissed and dragged his tongue along the insides of my legs, teasing me, torturing me, and the entire time he grinned like a maniac, clearly enjoying himself.

Of course, so was I. By the time he finally pulled my underwear aside and kissed my clit, I was trembling with need, practically whining at him, begging him to *stop* teasing me. The sensitivity had been cranked, and that very first touch of his warm lips instantly brought me to the quivering edge of climax.

I whimpered, begging him with my eyes not to stop.

“Say plea—”

“*Please,*” I moaned before he could finish, somehow turned on even more by the way he took full control of me. He didn’t ask, didn’t push. He just *did*, and I couldn’t stop him.

His tongue flicked out, running over my lips and up across my clit, where it paused to draw circles.

In seconds, my hips were bucking as I pushed them into his face, eyes rolled back into my skull as the orgasm he’d wrought from me wrenched its way out from between my legs,

pummeling my brain with wave after wave of pleasure. My fingers dug deep into the cushions, holding on for dear life from the sheer intensity of it all.

When I finally collapsed into the cushions, pleasant glowing warmth wrapping me in its arms, I smiled at him. I would have laughed at the shit-eating grin he had on his face, the skin and stubble shiny and wet in the light, but I didn't have the energy. It had been too good.

He leaned his head against the inside of my left thigh, still smiling. "I think you were a bit more tense than either of us thought."

"Maybe," I agreed, brain still numb.

"Hopefully, you feel better," he said, moving the glani back into position to cover me.

"I do," I said, blinking rapidly as I yawned, suddenly tired as he made it clear nothing more was going to happen between us. "Are you ... sure?"

I flicked my gaze down to his crotch, making it clear I could see the huge bulge in his pants. There was no way he wasn't in need of his own release. I could give him that. I could ensure he was taken care of.

So, why wasn't he letting me?

"Not tonight," he said, leaning forward to kiss me on the forehead. "You look ready to pass out on me, and it's not even dinnertime. I think I pushed too far with this, but I couldn't help myself. I ..."

He trailed off with a shake of his head. "Sleep, Katie. It's been a lot for you to handle since coming here. If you still feel the same later ... we'll talk then. The last thing I want is for you to do something you'll regret later. That wouldn't sit well with me."

"Are you sure?" I yawned again.

"Yes," he said, scooping me up off the couch and carrying me to my room. "I'll keep bringing stuff in. Then we'll have some dinner."

“Okay.” I let him lay me on the bed, but once he left, I found sleep eluded me.

Instead, I wrestled with the question circling in my head. One I knew I was going to have to answer—soon.

Was I okay with falling for a dragon?

Because that was what I was doing, and if I wasn’t okay with it, I needed to put a stop to things. Before anyone got hurt. I heard the thudding of my heart in my chest.

It might already be too late for that.

So, what the hell was I supposed to do now?

Chapter Twenty-Four

Ajax

There was no way I was going to let the fruitlessness of the past few days dull my mood as I flew home. Electric energy gave me speed, my wings beating hard to get me home as fast as I could. Although I'd come up empty yet again in my questioning of suspects about the destruction of Katie's hometown, it couldn't dull my mood.

Claws scraped on stone as I landed on the roof, already letting the tingle that spread out from the very core of my being wrap me in its warm cocoon. An instant later, I was walking on two feet, an effortless transition I'd done thousands of times before. But that time was different. Not because of what I was doing.

But because of what awaited me. I snuck inside, showering and changing as quietly as possible into my outfit.

"I hope you're almost ready!" I called as I walked down the hallway.

Laughter sounded from Katie's room. I went to it, twisting the handle. It was locked.

"No peeking!" she called from inside as I rattled the knob.

"Today is the Peace Gala," I said. "Which means I get to see your dress."

She laughed again. "If you want it that badly, I guess you can wear it, then. I think you'd look good in that color."

"You know what I meant," I growled through the closed door, my mind once more wondering just what she'd bought to wear.

"You mean you want to see me in it?" she teased.

"Or out of it," I said, grinning at the sudden silence from within.

The past few days had kept me so busy that neither of us had really found the time to explore more. Things had

changed, and the flirtatious nature of our interactions had, if anything, increased, but nothing else had happened.

I expected that to change tonight and was surprised at how *eager* I was.

“Did you learn anything new today?” she asked through the door.

Clenching a fist, I leaned back against the wall. “No,” I said, wishing my answer was different. I wanted to find out who was responsible. Who had done such a monstrous thing. “It’s slow going. I have to establish everyone’s stories first, which means a lot of dancing around ‘why’ I’m asking them about their locations and missions.”

It also meant leaving Katie at home. I didn’t want to subject her to hearing about the fighting between our forces and the humans. It benefited nobody and would only be a constant reminder for her.

“What happens next?”

“Once I have all their stories lined up, I’ll go corroborate them with the various orders and logs from the regional commanders. If we’re lucky, something won’t add up, and we’ll have a suspect. Until then ... more of the same.”

“Well, don’t take too long,” she said, moving about inside the room as she walked around doing women only knew what. “I’m getting close to finishing putting everything where it belongs. After that, I’m going to get bored. Which means adding more stuff.”

“Which means more money,” I muttered. “Trust me, I know.”

I didn’t have to hear her laugh to picture the grin splitting her face in two. It was becoming a long-running joke between us that she was going to drive me into financial ruin. Which wasn’t even remotely true, but we enjoyed the back and forth. Besides, she was right. My house *did* feel far more like a home with her touches added to it.

Or was it because *she* was a part of it?

“Okay,” Katie said from the other side of the door. “I’m ready.”

I spun, staring at the door as she pulled it open.

“Wow.”

She stood there, framed by the light from behind, looking like something out of a fairy tale. Her long hair curled around a single bared shoulder in soft waves, the purple streak perfectly visible. Golden-brown eyes twinkled in delight at my reaction as they peered out from under a forest of thick lashes and makeup.

But it was her dress that took my breath away and turned me into a mute. It started in soft bunches of lilac around the tops of her arms and fell down, slowly transitioning into a deep violet before reaching the floor. A single black streak ran down the center, splitting the design in two, twisting back and forth like a DNA helix, revealing numerous cutouts that showed off some serious skin before whirling around the backside and emerging along her right leg again. There, it parted on either side of a thigh-high slit that revealed a perfectly toned leg ... and made it quite clear she wasn’t wearing any underwear. Only a single strip of fabric just above her knee held the two sides together and prevented her from flashing everyone.

“You like it?”

“Something like that,” I said, the words trailing off into a growl.

Mine.

That was the single essence of the noise, a claim that didn’t have to be voiced. Only felt.

Goosebumps puckered the exposed skin of her shoulders, and my eyes met hers. She knew what it meant. What *I* meant.

“I’ll take that as a yes,” she whispered as I stepped closer.

“Good,” I ground out, my dragon snarling and rasping in my chest, struggling to break free. It wanted to act on that claim, to demonstrate what it meant by *mine*.

“Don’t you dare smudge my makeup,” she said just a little tartly as I leaned even closer. “If I’m going to have to go hobnob with all your rich crusty family and friends, then I intend to do so while looking *fabulous*, you understand? Which means you and your filthy paws are *hands off*.”

The growl that followed her statement was not so impressed by the idea.

“I’m not so sure I can do that,” I said, watching her throat bob up and down as she swallowed, her mouth dropping open slightly at the boldness of my desire.

“Will it get us out of going?” she asked.

“No,” I said, sagging slightly.

“Didn’t think so,” she said with a smile. “So, be a good boy.”

“For now,” I said, eyeing her up and down with unrepentant lust. The things I would do to her if she let me ...

“All night, mister,” she said, wagging a finger.

“Once we leave, I make no promises,” I said. “Well, I make *some* promises. Just not any about behaving.”

“We’ll see,” she said, but I could smell her pheromones.

She wanted it as badly as I did. Her entire body would be ripe for the taking. All I would have to do is bend her over. The dress would easily fall to the side. Without any underwear, I could take her. I could make her mine right then. She wouldn’t even resist my commands.

I snarled, drawing a look from her, an arched eyebrow that dared me to explain myself.

“You’ve tempted the beast,” I explained, sucking in a deep breath. “It’s eager to be let out.”

“Oh, I have, have I?” she teased, giving me a wink. “Well, tell it to be a good boy for now, and maybe you can let him out to play ... *later*.”

She turned with exaggerated elegance, hips sashaying to either side as she walked down the hallway toward the stairs.

“Are you coming?” she purred, putting extra emphasis on the final word.

“Not before you do,” I said, suddenly back in control of myself.

It was my turn to walk past her as she struggled to formulate a reply.

On the roof, she waited for me as I shifted into dragon form. Hopefully, the flight to the palace would help burn off some of my extra energy. It wasn't a long trip, but anything was welcome at that point. I needed to be focused as much on the crowd there as I would be on Katie.

“Just remember,” I said as we winged through the air, her hair blowing out wildly behind her, much to her dismay, “there will be a lot of remarks made just loud enough for you to hear. You can't react to them.”

“I know, I know,” she said. “You prepared me for all the dirty looks and disdain. Literally, as well as figuratively. Actually, as I recall, when we first met, you talked about all that ‘humans are inferior and weak’ stuff.”

I grimaced. “Just don't act as you did with the sovereign the first time, okay? If you make a scene and draw attention to yourself, it'll make things far more difficult.”

“What are they going to do?” she asked. “Send some dragons to kill us when we fly home?”

“Maybe,” I said. “I never did find out who sent the first ones, after all. So, whoever it is, they're still out there.”

“You don't think it was Cyrus?” she asked.

“No,” I said, not wanting to deal with that back and forth again. “He's an asshole, but in the end, he's family. He wouldn't try to kill me. Just piss me off.”

“Maybe, but I doubt he'd have such qualms about me,” she said in a softer voice.

I didn't have much to say about that. She made a good point. Hopefully, it was a wrong one, but I couldn't be sure.

We flew the rest of the way in silence. Eventually, the lights of the palace came into view, and I began to descend, keeping careful watch of the skies. There were lots of other dragons in the vicinity, and I didn't want to crash into any of them.

Or expose Katie to any "accidents."

However, we landed without incident, and I took her arm, escorting her toward the stairs, where two guards maintained position on either side.

"Are you ready?" I asked as we approached.

"Yes," she said, her eyes locked forward. "I am."

"Good." I took a deep breath. "Me, too."

Down we went, into the palace, where all eyes would be on the eight human women and their escorts.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Katie

The second we walked in through the massive doors, eyes began turning toward us, landing on first Ajax, then me.

“Strength,” Ajax murmured under his breath.

My fingers dug into his forearm, using his muscles as a steadying, reassuring presence. I might be the odd one out in there, one of only several humans in the entire room, but that didn’t mean I was alone. I had Ajax. At all times, he promised, throughout the entire night.

A smile crept onto my face as we waded into the sea of giant dragon-people, all of whom towered above me, even the women and many of the young faces. I’d forced Ajax to swear he wouldn’t leave me alone, but that was *before* he’d seen me back at his house. I doubted I would have any troubles keeping his eyes locked on me all evening.

The dress fit like a glove, which was good because I *never* wore anything that daring in real life. But Ashlee had picked it out, and when she’d seen it on me, she’d made it very clear I was buying that dress and to hell with my personal preference.

“When he sees you in this, the drool will pour from his mouth like Niagara Falls!” she joked. “Trust me.”

I had, but it wasn’t until I opened the door to do the final reveal that it truly sank in. I *wanted* Ajax to drool over me. Not that he was any slouch in his slate gray suit, with his fiery red ruby cufflinks and matching suit buttons. The combination was unusual, but it worked for him.

“So, what’s the plan?” I asked, feeling like a peacock on parade as we moved through the room.

Dragon couples and solo attendees moved out of our way as we approached, putting the spotlight constantly on our presence. The room itself was thankfully dim, the lights turned down to put emphasis on the intimacy of the ballroom and its

spotlights, turning each one into a sort of gathering zone, where people cloistered to talk.

“A drink. Sample some food, and—”

Music struck up from the far side as a live band began to play.

“Dance,” he said with a grin.

“As long as you dance like humans do,” I said. “If you have some sort of ritualized formal dance with proper ‘steps’ and stuff, I’m out. I will *not* make a fool of myself in front of all these judgmental jerks.”

“You’ll be fine,” he assured me with a wink that decidedly did *not* put me at ease. “You can trust me, okay?”

I swallowed nervously. Trust was a lot to ask, especially in the middle of several hundred of his kin, many of whom, going by the looks on their faces, were not happy to see me. How many of them would enjoy seeing me dead? For all I knew, some of them were the ones behind the plan to throw me in the ocean the other day.

“Katie? Okay?”

“Okay,” I whispered, going out on a limb and doing as he asked. I would trust him, putting my own safety in his hands. He hadn’t led me astray yet, which had to count for something. “I’ll trust you.”

“Thank you,” he said, as if sensing I wasn’t just saying the words as empty platitude but meaning them as well. “I know that can’t be easy for you.”

“Before I met you, it wouldn’t have been possible,” I said, then laughed. “Even after I met you, it wasn’t possible.”

Ajax groaned at the reminder of his initial reaction to being assigned me by the sovereign. “How long are you going to hold that one over my head?”

“Until I can no longer lift my arms that high,” I informed him. “At which point, I expect you to kneel down so I can still reach.”

He snorted. “The only way I’ll do that is by kneeling how I did the other night. I didn’t hear you complaining then.”

My mouth dried up at the reminder of the couch and his tongue and the way he’d touched me. Tasted me.

“Thought so,” he said with a chuckle as I was rendered speechless. “Now, come on.”

We grabbed a drink, and the sweet liquor flowed down my throat, easing the stiffness in my bones. By the second drink, I was swaying slowly in time with the music.

“Care to dance?” he asked, sliding his arm free of my grip but leaving a hand extended in invitation.

“Already?” I asked, looking around nervously. Several couples and groups had moved into the center of the grandiose ballroom, but the dance area was still relatively empty.

“Everyone’s already staring at you and me,” he said. “We may as well just do whatever we want.”

“Does that include running and hiding?” I smiled hopefully.

“Trust me, I’m not exactly happy to be here, either,” he assured me. “This is a political function first and foremost. They don’t care about peace or play. This is all about *power* for the ones who organized it and seeing which of them can come out with more of it.”

“And why don’t you care about any of that?” I was genuinely curious because I would have expected any royal dragon to be keenly interested in such things.

“Because it’s a waste of time,” he growled, his face tightening considerably. “The bickering and infighting isn’t my style. Unfortunately, that doesn’t mean I can escape it entirely, either, but being part of the sovereign’s bloodline means I can generally ignore *most* of it. But I do have to participate sometimes in big events, such as this Peace Gala and the like.”

Something flickered in his eyes.

“Okay. But you promised me food as well.”

“A dance, then we’ll sample some food.”

“Lead on,” I said, allowing myself to be taken onto the dance floor just as one song ended and the next began.

The tempo swelled upwards in a surge, a fast-paced beat designed to increase the energy of the room.

“I love this one!” Ajax said, taking my hands and spinning me around fast enough I almost gave the entire crowd a free look at all the goods.

“The dress,” I got out, breathless as he used his hands and body language to move me left, right, around, and generally do whatever he wanted with me.

“Don’t worry,” he assured me, taking one hand high and twirling me around so the dress billowed out wide. “I’ve got you.”

We spun and parted, then came together. I just let my body flow with it, hoping I didn’t trip or step on the dress and rip it. Ajax was grinning like a kid, which only made me laugh in delight, throwing my head back as he guided me through yet another spin. I was starting to pick up the feel of things, and my movements grew more natural.

The music reached a crescendo pitch, and Ajax tugged me back toward him along one arm, forcing me to turn. He stepped forward, clasping both arms around me, my back to his front, and held me just as the music died.

I gasped, feeling the firm press of his cock through the flimsy material of the dress. He was swollen but not rigid, and the warmth of his breath down my neck raised every hair on my nape.

“That was fun,” he said into my ear. “Now, let’s go get some food, as promised.”

“Good. I think I’ve worked up an appetite,” I said.

We found some tables with a wide variety of food and drink. I sampled most everything, finding myself ravenous.

As the night wore on, I was able to sneak a few moments with some of the other human women, including Ashlee. Most

of them felt nothing like chemistry with their mates and were quite surprised when I said otherwise. Even the one who said she'd slept with her dragon-man already made it out like it had been more for sex than out of any real interest.

"Why me?" I asked them all the question, but none had an answer.

Was I just imagining it, perhaps?

"Katie."

There was no denying the thrill that shot down my spine when Ajax came up to me, my name tumbling from his lips and demanding my attention.

"Yes?" I turned to look at him as I spoke.

Any words died on my lips as I noticed the look on his face. He stepped closer to me, his entire body exuding that same point-blank energy.

"We're leaving," he said, making it very obvious *why* we were leaving.

"Okay," I whispered breathlessly, taking his hand and letting myself be led from the room.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Katie

“Are you sure we won’t be in any trouble for leaving early?” I asked, raising my voice to be heard above the wind rushing over Ajax’s wings.

“Not at all. We weren’t even the first to leave.”

“We weren’t? I didn’t notice others leaving.”

“You should have paid more attention,” he teased. “What were you looking at all evening?”

Despite the slightly cool breeze, my face burned. Then I slowly smiled. “Are you saying your focus was elsewhere tonight?”

The dragon’s long neck flexed, and Ajax looked back at me as we flew, one yellow eye glaring brilliantly in the moonlight.

“It’s a simple question,” I teased, patting the side of his neck, feeling the warmth of his scales under my fingertips.

“I’m observant,” he said. “I noticed many things while keeping my full attention right where it belonged. As I’ll continue doing when we land.”

My mouth clacked shut at the bold-faced statement. It wasn’t like I was under the impression we were going back to his house for a cup of tea and early bed. Nothing had been acknowledged outright, however, and his words were the closest either of us had come to saying it.

The darkened ground came toward us as we descended rapidly. A few lights flickered here and there, but the Dragon Isles had none of the ambient glow human cities did at night. They were *dark*. Although the moon reflecting off the ocean provided a sort of nightlight.

Claws scraped on stone, and I slid free of my perch.

Before I’d even cleared the edge of his wing, Ajax was shifting and coming for me in his human form. Arms wrapped around my waist, lifting me free from the ground as he

smothered my mouth with his. Both my legs came up, bending at the knee as he twirled me around, kissing me under the moonlight.

“Sorry the flight took us so long,” he said, setting me down and reaching up to brush my hair out of my face.

His fingers were warm and strong, but his touch was tender and sweet as he caressed me. However, the light in his eyes promised something more.

“You’re holding back,” I said, stroking his cheek, feeling his stubble prickle my skin.

“I want to make sure you’re ready,” he growled, stepping closer. “I want you, Katie, I want to touch you, spread your legs, and *take you*. But only if you’re ready. If it’s something you want.”

Taking one of my hands, he pressed it to his crotch, my palm rubbing against his rock-hard shaft. Fires burned in his eyes, literal flames dancing in the darkness of his pupil. A promise of ... what?

“Then take me,” I whispered, grabbing his hand and pushing it between my legs, letting him feel the matching heat there.

The rumble in his throat as he discovered the wetness that awaited him only furthered my desire, my need. I needed him *immediately*.

We barely made it down the stairs and inside before clothes started flying. The glani came off easily, slipping free of my shoulders and plunging to the floor. I tensed as his eyes drank deep at the sight of my naked body. In the back of my head, I’d been aware I wasn’t wearing anything else, so it should come as no surprise, but the suddenness of my nudity caught me off guard.

“Beautiful,” Ajax hissed, his eyes running over me, taking me in.

“I’m glad you think so,” I whispered, stepping free of the puddle of fabric on the floor, feeling self-conscious but also terribly turned on.

It had been a long, *long* time since I'd felt like a piece of eye-candy, and even longer since I'd *enjoyed* being looked at that way. But now that I was ...

“Are you just going to stand there and look?” I teased, my own eyes drinking their fill of his deliciously chiseled upper body, the dim light only emphasizing the lines of muscle.

“I like to appreciate the beauty of such exquisite art,” he purred, licking his lips.

But he came at me, kissing me hard, longer, deeper. At some point, his pants came off. He lifted me onto the kitchen counter, spreading my legs apart as his hands ran up the inside of my thighs before ducking under and gripping my waist, pulling me to his greedy mouth.

I gasped as his tongue flicked out and over me, spreading my lips, tasting my juices. He only growled deeper, his fingers digging in a little harder. Controlling me. Making sure I stayed where he wanted. I shuddered as his tongue flicked over my clit. And again. He didn't neglect any part of me, the warm touch on my lips, between them, my clit, even dipping low, getting dangerously close to my asshole.

A shudder wracked me as he slid a finger inside, then a second. My hips ground against his mouth, my elbows propping me up on the counter as he pushed me closer to the edge. I wasn't unwilling, but Ajax was in charge, and he was the one dictating my body. I could only do as his mouth ordered.

“I'm going to come,” I told him, putting all my weight on one elbow and grabbing his head, pulling it in hard. “Don't you dare stop. Don't stop. Fuck. Oh my god. Oh, god. *Ohmygoddd.*”

The orgasm clamped my legs down on either side of his head, hips bucking hard and uncontrollably at the unexpected strength as pleasure pummeled my body and brain, turning them to mush.

Ajax continued to run his tongue over my clit, slowing his pace and lightening his touch as I jerked and spasmed.

When I finally fell back onto the counter, breathing hard, chest rising and falling, he stood up, licking his lips and smiling.

Then he stepped close, his eyes never leaving mine, and the tip of his cock pushed inside me with ease. I hissed in surprise, eyes locked on him as he slowly filled me. I was so wet, so there was no resistance. He slid right in, and I worked overtime to stretch to accommodate him.

“Oh, fuck,” I moaned as his hips touched mine. “That’s a big cock.”

It was such a bad line. I hadn’t meant it to be dirty talk. And we both knew it. Which was why we both burst out laughing.

“You’re also a very small woman,” he said at last, swiping an arm across his mouth before leaning over me and kissing me.

I pressed my mouth to his, grabbing his neck and holding him tightly as he moved gently against me, giving my insides time to fully adjust.

“Ajax,” I said, the cool granite countertops sending chills down my spine.

“Yes?”

“Take me,” I whispered, surrendering to him.

His growl was followed by the sudden withdrawal of his cock, only for it to come sliding back in. “You’re mine,” he snarled, wrapping his huge hands around my waist.

His biceps flexed, and he lifted me free of the counter, pulling my hips toward him. Holding me in mid-air, he started thrusting. His hips slammed into mine, shaking my body. His balls slapped against my ass.

“*So sexy,*” he snarled, his eyes watching my boobs bounce as he fucked me with abandon, shaking my entire body.

I came. Hard. Everything clamped down around him. I tried to twist away, thinking I needed a moment.

Corded cable-like muscles flexed, and Ajax didn't miss a beat, holding me where *he* wanted me, and continued to thrust deep. I screamed. It was too much. One orgasm rolled into the next. And then the next. I thrashed and writhed in his grip.

He never even budged, using his insane strength to take my body and make it do what he wanted. Which was to continue accepting his cock as deep as he could give it to me.

My spine arched, and I cried out as yet another climax was pulled from me.

“Okay, okay,” I gasped, sweat forming on my chest and stomach while the countertop kept my back cool and puckered.

Instead of stopping, Ajax hauled me up and carried me to the bedroom. There, he bent me over, his fingers spreading my ass as he guided his cock into my pussy from behind before gripping my waist.

The sheets came to me as I gathered them, desperate for something, *anything*, to hold on to. My breath came in short, sharp gasps. Drool ran down my face. I couldn't think. Couldn't process what was happening. What he was *doing* to me.

“You're mine,” he announced.

I couldn't form words.

“Say it,” he snarled, threading a hand through my hair and pulling just had enough to be pleasant. “Say you're mine.”

“I'm yours!” I cried as he somehow grew *bigger*.

“Yes, Katie!” he shouted and exploded inside me.

I moaned as he unleashed a torrent inside me, hot liquid spilling and splattering against me as he continued to thrust hard, not slowing until he was completely and utterly spent.

We collapsed onto the bed. I tried to make some sort of noise to indicate I was leaving a mess, but he waved it off.

“I don't care. I'll wash it tomorrow,” he gasped, his powerful chest gasping for air as he lay on his back, one arm

around me, keeping me close as we came down from the warm, happy high that followed.

He held me for some time, neither of us talking. Eventually, his breathing slowed, becoming more even. I smiled to myself, not upset at all that he'd passed out.

There was nothing to say. Not after what just happened. Something like that left things fairly clear.

But even as any questions pertaining to that were answered, the door was opened for others. Ones I'd been avoiding thinking about.

Ajax was no Tim. That was for certain. That didn't mean I was ready for there to be anything *more* with him. There was a certain, almost undeniable, chemistry between us. That was true. However, did that mean there was *more*? And if it did, did I want to be a party to that?

Feeling a mood-dampening chill come over me, I cautiously eased myself from the bed. Regardless of what had just happened, I definitely wasn't ready to start sleeping in another man's bed. It was the first time I'd even *been* with someone since things went south with Tim.

Sex was one thing. But waking up in his bed the next morning was another entirely, and not one I was ready for just yet. Maybe in time. Just not tonight. I paused at the doorway to look back at his sleeping, naked form. There was a peaceful look on his face, a nice change from the usual sternness that stiffened his features.

Could I? I asked myself. Could a human like me fall for a dragon like him? It was what everyone wanted us to do. To help bridge the gap between species.

But he was a dragon. I was a human. There was no way that could work. Was there?

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Ajax

“Are you sure you don’t want me to come with you?”

“I’m sure,” I said, reaching out and caressing the side of her face. “This will be easier if it’s just me.”

“All right.” Katie didn’t sound happy about it.

“It’s going to take time for my people to adjust to having humans among us,” I explained. “We can’t just change overnight any more than your people can accept us living among them. People are afraid of change. They have to be dragged to it kicking and screaming.”

“Yeah, that’s true,” she said, pulling the robe tighter about her body.

“Besides. You *have* to stay here.”

“I do? Why?” Katie’s face creased as she puzzled out my meaning. Then it flattened. “This better not be some sort of ‘I’m the woman, so I belong at home’ sexist thing I’m about to discover about you.”

“Not at all,” I said, lifting my hands in innocence. “But there will be people coming to the house. For you.”

“You’re not making any sense, Ajax.”

I winked. “I knew you couldn’t come with me, so I arranged for you to have a nice relaxing day here. Complete with pampering.”

“Pampering?” There was a note of intrigue in her voice.

“Yes,” I said, pretending to think hard. “There was a list of things. Nails. Hot stone massage. Facial. Hair. And more. I don’t know. I just ordered it all for you. Feel free to say no to any of it. Or all of it if you want. You don’t have—”

“Nope, no, no, you said you arranged it,” she cut in, pressing a finger to my lips. “I intend on taking you up on

your generosity. Although, Ajax, you don't *have* to spoil me like this."

"I know I don't," I told her with a smile. "Which is why I want to. Because I've learned you're the type who will never ask for it."

"Because I don't ask for it, you want to give it to me?"

"Exactly," I said, pointing a finger at her. "I'm glad you understand."

"I don't, actually, but I'll pretend like I do if that helps," she said with a laugh.

"Good. I arranged a password with them as well for when they come to the door, so you know its them."

I filled her in on the details, including the names of the dragons coming to spoil her, and then, with a quick kiss, I headed to the roof, eager to get on with my day. The sooner I was done, the sooner I could get back to Katie.

And maybe I would finally have some answers for her.

As I soared through the air, my path taking me not toward the palace, but west, toward a collection of buildings at the center of a large clearing that overlooked the ocean, I pondered just when I'd become so devoted to helping humans.

It had snuck up on me. That much was clear. True, I detested the atrocity that had been committed upon her hometown. It sickened me to my stomach to know one of my kind had done such a thing. Willingly, too.

But was I really willing to give up my seat on the Council to help her? It had been some time since I thought about that. I'd been so focused on Katie and the killings. I would be choosing her over my people.

The massacre can't go unanswered. Those people deserve justice.

I shook off the thoughts. Unless I discovered who had done it, there was little point worrying over it. Perhaps the perpetrator had erased all clues. If that were so, then nobody

would ever know. Would Katie be able to accept that conclusion?

It was with that thought in mind that I landed in a courtyard at the center of the half-dozen buildings and shifted into my human form. Although we had no real formalized military or unit structures, we *did* have administrators and leaders who, if necessary, could coordinate attacks.

In essence, everyone was a soldier if needed, but only some divided up the areas of responsibility.

Entering the main building, a long L-shaped structure two stories high, I made a beeline for the offices of the regional commanders. At least, that was what they were called now. Attacking the human coastline had required dividing up our forces into far more subsections than had ever been thought necessary, so the command structure had expanded. Bureaucracy at its finest.

“Come!”

The voice that rang out when I knocked on the door was sharp and clear. Twisting the handle, I entered the office of Regional Commander Delta, the dragon in charge of the territory that included Katie’s former hometown.

“Hello, Commander Yanni,” I said, glancing at the nametag on the desk. “I’m Ajax.”

“I’m aware of who you are,” the commander said, looking up from his desk. “What can I do for you?”

I noted the lack of niceties. If he knew who I was and who I was related to, why the rudeness? While I didn’t expect my position to result in people groveling everywhere I went, I *did* expect proper courtesy to be extended, including pleasantries such as saying *Hello* or any other form of greeting.

Which meant I was already on Yanni’s wrong side. Because I had no idea who he was, having never met the dragon before, I could only assume it was one thing. He was a member of the War Party and viewed Isolationists, such as myself, with something akin to disdain. Or worse.

“I require information,” I said calmly, not letting him get under my skin.

Yanni just stared at me, waiting.

“I require records for all royal personnel under your command in the past two and a half months. *All* personnel,” I said with a slight emphasis. “Including deployment locations, assigned missions, everything.”

“What is this in regard to?” he asked, crossing his arms.

“A possible crime,” I said coldly, growing tired of his attitude.

“I’m going to need more information before I authorize the release of so much data.”

I nearly exploded in the commander’s face, but the glint in his eyes told me that was exactly what he was waiting for me to do. For some reason, the asshole had it out for everyone who didn’t believe in what he did.

If the video proof didn’t point toward a member of my own bloodline having committed the attack, I would probably have put Commander Yanni to the top of my list. Still, he might know who had done it, which meant I couldn’t afford to tip him off as to what information I was looking for.

“Actually, you don’t,” I growled, pulling out a piece of paper and shoving it under his nose. “There’s my authorization. Now, get me the files, *Commander*.”

The muscles in Yanni’s neck bunched at my dismissive tone, but the paper was the authorization from the sovereign herself, giving me access to any and all information related to operation area Delta. Thankfully, it was vague, giving the commander no insight into what it was I was researching.

“Very well,” he said stiffly, standing up and marching around his desk. “Come with me.”

I suppressed the urge to toss Yanni through several of the walls, then reached onto his desk to pick up my authorization paper, which he’d purposefully left.

Asshole.

I made a note to dig into his known acquaintances. Even if Yanni hadn't done it, I harbored no doubts he would happily cover up any such crimes for the true perpetrator. If that were the case, I would make sure he went down with them.

"The records room," Yanni said, shoving open a door and gesturing for me to head on in. "There you go."

I waited until he'd taken two steps away from the door.

"Commander," I said with false cheer.

The dragon stopped in his tracks, turning around slowly. "Yes?"

I smiled broadly. "Your orders are to ensure I get the information I need. So, you will pull the files for the last two and a half months."

"I have better—"

"*No, you do not,*" I snarled, suddenly in Yanni's face. "You're just a prick trying to make my life difficult, and I've had enough of it. Pull the damn files, Commander, *now*. Or I'll make sure your obstruction is reported. To the highest levels."

I hated treading on my relationship to the sovereign, but Yanni's attitude was enough for me to make an exception.

"Fine," he said, recognizing the threat in my words and knowing if I *did* inform the sovereign about his attitude, he would never see a command position again.

Part of me was tempted to do just that anyway. We needed better people than him in charge.

It took him the better part of twenty minutes to pull the relevant files from several boxes. I stared at the stacks of paperwork. It would be hours before I went home.

"Thank you, Commander," I said sweetly, flashing him a fake as fuck smile. "That will be all. You're dismissed."

Yanni stormed out of the room, leaving me alone to pick through the pile of reports and corroborate them with the stories I'd gotten from various interviews with other members of my bloodline.

If any of them didn't match up, I would be one step closer to find my perpetrator.

And one step closer to giving the Integrationists a majority vote on the Council.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Katie

For the first time in nearly a year and a half, I woke up in the same bed as someone. Ajax's gentle snores twitched me awake with a sudden flutter of my heart.

Shit. I didn't *mean* to fall asleep in his arms the night before. My intentions were to slip out of the room, just as I had the first time we'd had sex. And the second. And then every night for the past week. But given sunlight was filling the room, I'd clearly screwed up and given in to the damnably tempting offer to fall asleep next to him. He was just too comfy to cuddle up next to.

Grimacing, I slowly rolled to one side, hoping to pull myself off his arm without waking him. If I could creep back to my room, then perhaps we could just pretend it never happened. That would certainly be easier than—

“Stay,” Ajax said, placing his hand on my shoulder.

I hesitated, unsure.

“Please.” He wasn't begging. Rather, he was simply asking, stating how he felt and making it clear what he wanted me to do. However, the pressure on my shoulder lessened slightly. It was an unspoken offer: that if I chose to go, he wouldn't try to stop me.

“Are you sure?” I asked, still facing away from him.

“Why would I ask if I wasn't?”

“Because you're being forced into this,” I pointed out.

“What do you mean?”

“Your sovereign didn't give you much of a choice with me. I seem to recall her having some choice words for you back in the cave when you tried to say no. You weren't overly fond of the idea at first. Don't try to change that now.”

“Ah.” He grunted. “I thought you meant currently.”

“There’s also the fact your kin have already tried to kill one of us for you associating with me. If they learn you’re screwing my brains out every night ...” I let that hang in mid-air.

“Things have changed, Katie,” he said, firmly gripping my hand and pulling me back toward him. “Between us. Don’t tell me you haven’t noticed it, haven’t felt it.”

“We’re having sex, yes,” I said.

“That’s not what I meant,” he said with a hint of irritation. “Don’t play dense. We both know you’re smarter than that.”

I sat up in the bed. “I don’t want you to get in trouble for this,” I said honestly. “And I don’t really feel like being the target of any more kill teams. You still don’t know who sent those two, do you?”

“No,” he said gruffly. “And I probably never will unless they do it again.”

“Exactly.”

“Is that why you were really leaving?” he challenged. “Because you’re afraid people will know what’s going on behind closed doors? Be honest. With both of us.”

I sighed, bringing my knees to my chest so I could rest my head on them. “I was leaving because I wasn’t sure we were ready for this. Either of us. I didn’t *mean* to fall asleep here last night. I just did.”

“Do you regret it?”

“Sort of,” I said. “This conversation is really awkward. I’d have been okay not having it.”

“But you don’t regret the actual falling asleep next to me part.”

“No. Yes? I don’t know. You’re far too comfortable,” I complained. “And your snoring woke me up. Though it really wasn’t that bad compared to what I’ve dealt with in the past.”

“We’ve been sleeping together every night for the past week,” he said. “And every night, you creep out of my bed and

back to your room. Even though I've never asked you to."

I chewed on my lower lip. "Are you saying you would be okay with me staying in your room?"

Ajax nodded. "I wouldn't have brought you into my room and bed if I wasn't comfortable with you being here. I know what I'm signing up for. What to expect."

"I see."

"Do you?" he asked. "Have you given it thought?"

"I ..." I shrugged helplessly. "Sure, I've thought about it. But there's more than just this. I ... come with baggage, Ajax."

"You mean your ex-husband."

Closing my eyes with a sigh, I nodded. "Yes. This is ... the thing is, there's not ... damn, this is awkward."

"You never dated or saw anyone since you split with him. Until me. So, you're afraid because you don't want to repeat the mistakes of the past."

"Or make brand new ones," I said. "You're a *dragon*, Ajax. I'm never going to fully understand you because of that, am I?"

He shook his head. "Probably not. Not completely. But you're already coming along more than most."

"Will it be enough to really fit in, though? That's the big question, isn't it? Can I, or any of the other human women, ever really be a part of your world?"

"I don't know," he said at last. "It's too new. This has never been tried before."

"Why *are* you trying this?" I asked him. "Why human women? I don't understand it. None of us did. It's the weirdest peace term ever. Especially because you were winning."

Ajax frowned, glancing away.

I opened my mouth to ask him why he wasn't willing to answer, but I was stopped by the sudden shattering of glass as

the window exploded.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Ajax

“Stay down!” I shouted, diving for the window before the glass had finished settling on the floor. “I’ll be right back.”

Then I was out the window, landing on both feet, looking around wildly for any sign of the person behind the attack. Closing my eyes, I took a deep breath and listened hard for any sounds in the trees surrounding my house on three sides.

There!

Footsteps. Moving too fast to be someone walking. Going on instinct, I took off after them, my arms churning, legs pounding the ground. Whoever had decided it was a good idea to toss a rock through my window was going to regret it.

They must have heard me coming after them because whoever it was sped up. I pursued them deep into the trees, away from the streets and other people. Whoever they were, they were good. And fast. In the air, I would have caught them in minutes. Down there, however, they had the advantage.

And I had Katie to worry about.

“Damn,” I snarled, pulling up after a few minutes of pursuit, not wanting to be pulled too far away from her. Not if the attack was only the first stage. Suddenly worried at having left her on her own, I raced back the way I’d come.

“It’s me!” I called as I went through the front door. “Everything okay?”

There weren’t any signs of forced entry, but I wasn’t about to let my guard down just yet.

“Katie?” I called when there was no immediate answer.

“Up here.”

I frowned at the dull tone. What was wrong? I inhaled deep through my nose, trying to detect any other scents, but there was only Katie.

I peeked through the bedroom door, wary of a surprise attack, but she was alone, sitting on the side of the bed, staring out the broken window.

“Are you okay?” I asked, going to her side, cautious of the broken glass. “Are you hurt at all?”

“No,” she said.

But she was lying. The lack of response to my presence was the only clue. She didn’t lean into me, didn’t rest her head on my shoulder.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, relieved she didn’t pull away but concerned about what had changed. Was she on edge about the window?

“This,” she said, handing me a piece of paper.

“What is it?” I unfolded the paper to see writing on it.

“It was wrapped around the rock they tossed inside.”

I looked at the note, reading it swiftly, then crumpling it up in one hand and tossing it aside.

“Ignore that,” I told her. “It’s just written by some hateful assholes who have nothing better to do with their time.”

She glanced up at me sharply. “Those ‘hateful assholes’ already tried to kill us once. Now they’re sending another message. It says so right there, Ajax. They want me dead or gone.”

“Of course they do. They can’t handle change.”

“Can you?” she asked.

I blinked. “When did this become about me?”

She crossed her arms. “If you ignore this, they’re going to try something again. You know that. Is my entire life here going to be spent looking over my shoulder, paranoid about the next attempt on my life?”

“I’ll protect you, Katie,” I growled protectively, taking her jaw and turning her head so I could look her in the eyes, let her

see the truth of it. “From anyone who comes. They’ll have to go through me.”

Part of her resistance caved. Not all, not by a longshot, but she did relax slightly.

“What if you aren’t around?” she asked softly. “You can’t always be there, Ajax. How are you going to make sure I’m safe? What about the other women? If you want more humans to live among you, how are we going to do so when so many of your people want us dead?”

I grimaced. “I don’t know,” I admitted. “Not yet at least, but we’ll figure it out. Blaze a trail for others to follow.”

It seemed natural to talk about the future like that. A future that involved Katie by my side every step. But even as I said it, doubt began to creep in. Not about Katie. But about us in a world designed for me.

Could we truly be the ones to show the rest of my kind that a human-dragon interaction could work? I wasn’t so sure. There were a lot of obstacles to overcome. Least of all the inborn hatred shared by so many of my kind.

“Word of this will spread, you know it will.” She sighed. “They know we’re sleeping together.”

“I know.” My teeth ground together. How had they found out? Someone was obviously spying on me. Or perhaps they were just making assumptions. In the end, it didn’t really matter because dragons already prejudiced against humans wouldn’t care. They would believe it because they *wanted* to believe it. Because it lined up with their beliefs.

“It’ll get worse, won’t it?”

“Maybe,” I said. “But at least we can delay having to deal with it.”

“What do you mean?”

“We’re leaving today, remember?” I said.

She shook her head. “No. I don’t.”

“Did nobody tell you when you came here?” I asked, shaking my head. “Tomorrow marks two weeks since you got here. Which means you’re due for a checkup.”

“Like with a doctor?”

“No, with your government. We’re going to a meeting with representatives. To ensure the eight of you are alive, unharmed, and whatnot.”

Katie stiffened. “We are?”

“Yes.” I frowned at her. “They really did do a terrible job of briefing you all, didn’t they?”

“Uh, yeah,” she said. “It was all pretty rushed. Must have slipped by.”

There was something else there. The way she’d reacted wasn’t with surprise. It felt more like alarm. Was she worried about what her people might think of her? That didn’t make sense. After all, she’d volunteered to come. Whatever it was, she didn’t want to talk about it, that much was clear.

“So, what do we do about all this?” Katie asked.

“I don’t know,” I admitted, squeezing her hand. “But we’ll figure it out together.”

Chapter Thirty

Katie

“I’ve never been to Baltimore before.” I said, looking down at the ruined half of the city as we soared overhead, one of a dozen dragons in the flight heading toward our rendezvous with the human government.

My government. I wondered what the meeting would be like. Most of the women I’d talked to had all come to the Dragon Isles against their will. Only three of the eight had volunteered. Was the truth going to come out now? Or was it all just some sort of farce put on by humans pretending to give a damn. It seemed far more likely we were just sacrificial animals, the unlucky eight chosen to keep the peace.

I knew I was. Elizabeth McCrutten had seen to that. It was why I hadn’t told Ajax the truth about how I’d ended up in the Dragon Isles. He had to know by then that there were some unusual circumstances to my arrival, that I wasn’t telling the whole story. But I doubted he’d guessed it hadn’t been by choice. Because I had no idea how he would react, I wasn’t going to tell him.

Whatever it took to keep Julie out of harm’s way. Julie *and* myself, come to think about it.

“The city was under siege when the ceasefire was declared,” Ajax said. “Your forces still occupied the west side. We’d pushed as far as the inner harbor, but then the fighting stopped.”

There was a fairly visible line that ran up almost the center of the city exactly, following a freeway by the looks of it, to mark what Ajax said. Dragons were perched on the tops of apartment buildings and towers, staring ominously across the invisible barrier separating them from the human troops.

Tanks and other weaponry were pointed back. The rooftops were lined with troop detachments, and in the distance, helicopters circled, armed to the teeth with missiles and other

weapons systems. I wondered if something had been developed to hurt the dragons yet.

To my surprise, I found I hoped not.

We flew past the split in forces, angling slightly south until we touched down in a parking lot outside of a large baseball stadium. The eastern section of the lot was bare of anything. That was where we touched down.

The far side was a bunker.

“I hope they’re not expecting trouble,” I said, staring at the massed concrete, which had what looked like the snout of several dozen tank barrels poking through at various places. Razor wire was draped liberally across the structure. Machine gun nests dotted the roof and surroundings. Several other large tank-looking things were nearby.

And every gun was trained on us.

“Just prepared for it,” Ajax said. “They don’t want to restart the fighting. Trust me on that.”

“All it would take is one itchy trigger finger,” I said, sitting just a little lower on his back, waiting while all the dragons in our flight landed. Seven others had humans on their backs. I waved at Ashlee, who raised her hand in acknowledgment.

“It’ll be fine,” Ajax said. “We’ll stay back here. This is up to you now.”

Half a dozen humans emerged from the bunker and started walking toward us.

“No way,” I breathed in shock as I stared at them.

“Is everything okay?” Ajax asked warily.

“Uh, just fine,” I said, sliding off his back.

Just what the hell was McCrutton doing *there*? How much pull did the woman have? I grimaced. So much for any thoughts of conveying the message that we were there against our will—at least by me.

The other women dismounted, and we all headed to the front of the formation, where the heir to the dragon kingdom,

Vicek, waited with the ninth human woman. The only one of us who, to my knowledge, had *wanted* to come be around dragons. The blonde woman, Laura, nodded politely at us as we bunched up in front of her.

“I’ll do the talking,” she said with a smile. “Don’t worry about it.”

I glanced at the other women, expecting some of them to voice their opinions. To say they wanted to go home. But none of them seemed interested in speaking up. Were things changing?

“If you want to go, now is your chance,” I whispered to Ashlee as we walked toward the waiting human representatives. “You have to speak up, tell them you weren’t brought here by choice.”

Ashlee nodded. “I know.”

I focused on her sharply. “But ...”

“But I’m not so sure I *want* to go back now,” Ashlee admitted. “It’s wild and makes no sense, I know, but there’s something there. Maybe I’m crazy, maybe I shouldn’t do this, but I don’t know. Do you get it?”

I glanced back at the line of dragons and at one orange and black one in particular.

“Yeah,” I said softly in understanding. “I do. You don’t want to leave any ‘what ifs’ out there.”

“Exactly,” she said, a hint of a smile on one half of her face. “I have to *know*.”

“Me, too.”

I glanced over at the speaker. “Elanya!” I said, recognizing the first woman I’d talked to after arriving on the island. “Hi.”

“Hey,” she said.

“I haven’t seen you since the selection cave. How have you been?”

Elanya licked her lips. “Alive,” she said, with a smile. “It’s been an adventure, that’s for sure.”

“Why weren’t you at the Peace Gala?” Ashlee asked. “We didn’t see you there.”

“Yeah,” I echoed, recalling my memories of that night. She’d been one of two women who wasn’t there.

“I was a bit busy,” she said. “Being kidnapped.”

“What?” Ashlee and I yelled at the same time.

“Yeah. It’s a long story. And not one to tell now,” she said, rubbing a hand over her stomach. “But if you think *your* time on the Isles has been wild, I think I can one-up you.”

“I don’t know,” I said. “Some of the anti-human dragons nearly killed me.”

Ashlee gasped. “What? You didn’t tell me that!”

“Didn’t want to worry you,” I said, glancing at Elanya. “Can you top that?”

She nodded, glancing down at her feet and rubbing her stomach. “Yeah, I think so.”

“How?”

Before she could elaborate, our little group came to a halt in front of the delegation of suits. Niceties were exchanged between Laura and the leader, a man I didn’t recognize, who claimed to be from some government agency I’d never heard of. I didn’t care. My attention was focused on McCrutten.

She saw me staring, and her lips curled up in a smile that didn’t reach her eyes. It was all business. I almost spoke up then and there, pointing the finger directly at the bitch. Accusing her of sending me to the dragons against my will.

But the woman seemed to sense that. She shook her head ever so slightly at me. A warning. A reminder of what would happen if I stood up for myself.

Julie.

I glanced at the military might behind the humans. All of it arrayed at us. Even if I didn’t tell the government rep but instead confessed everything to Ajax, it wouldn’t end well. The dragons wouldn’t take kindly to being duped. If none of

the *other* women had said anything yet either, then they must all have a reason for keeping silent.

Just like Ashlee.

Besides, I didn't want to be the one responsible for restarting the war. Too many more would die if that happened. The dragons behind me and those in the buildings along the truce line would all leap into action. The human military would be slaughtered.

Just like my family had been. More atrocities would be committed. More daughters and mothers would mourn the fallen.

All because of me.

No, I wouldn't be a party to that. I couldn't let myself.

The video of the destruction of my hometown played behind my eyes as I gazed at the unruined section of Baltimore. Envisioning just what would happen to everyone still living there with nowhere to go.

The screams ...

Not for the first time, guilt over my current emotional situation descended onto my shoulders. My family had been slaughtered by a dragon that looked a lot like the trio of orange and black winged creatures that had brought us there. Neither Ajax nor Vicek seemed like the type to commit such a crime, though I was less sure about Cyrus. Still, he seemed more capricious than outright cruel.

Regardless of my feelings about Ajax's cousin, it was my emotions about Ajax himself that weighed me down. How was it I could sleep at night, knowing what was brewing between myself and the dragon? The expectation that I was to mate with him, fall in love, with someone who was kin to the dragon that had destroyed an entire town? It weighed heavily at times.

Maybe I was just letting myself be distracted by how my body reacted to him.

“Does anyone else have anything to add?” Laura asked, turning sideways. “About living conditions, how you’re being treated, anything like that?”

Nobody immediately spoke up. I looked out at them, only to see that, one by one, the other women all stared at me. Waiting for me to speak for them.

I turned my attention back to Laura and the government reps. Including McCrutten, who again made that tiny shake of her head. Warning me.

“We’re all here, aren’t we?” I said with a shrug. “It’s different, of course. But I’ll be going back with them, not staying.”

The other’s muttered their agreement, and just like that, the meeting was over.

“Total waste of time,” I grumbled as we headed back for the lines.

“Perhaps,” Cyrus said cryptically from his position near the head of the formation. “Perhaps not.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I snarled, glaring at the dragon as I walked past him toward Ajax.

The dragon just bared his teeth in a menacing smile. “You learn the most *interesting* things at meetings like this.”

Then he spread his wings and took to the air, battering me with a strong gust of wind.

“Asshole,” I spat.

“Ignore him,” Ajax said as I climbed up his wing. “He’s just trying to get under your skin.”

“I know,” I said, settling in around his neck. “I know. But I can’t shake the feeling he’s up to something.”

“Whatever it is, I’ll keep you safe,” Ajax said. “I promise.”

“Thanks,” I said, bracing as we took off.

I just hoped that would be enough.

Chapter Thirty-One

Ajax

Katie began to stir from her seat on my back.

“I don’t think I’ll ever get used to that,” she called, shaking herself awake. “One moment, we’re flying over the ocean, the coast retreating behind us, gray skies overhead. The next, I’m waking up here, where it’s sunny and bright and warm. Just how far are we traveling?”

I grinned, my soul rejoicing at the sunshine and warmth. It was good to be *home*. “Now, that would be telling,” I told her. “And a good magician never reveals their tricks.”

“Magic isn’t real,” she scoffed, the response automatic and immediate. I could even picture her cute little face bunching up as she said it.

“Katie,” I half-purred, amused at her denial. “You realize you’re currently sitting on the back of a *dragon*, right? One who can assume the form of a human?”

“It’s not magic,” she said.

“What is it?” I pressed, curious about her explanation. I spread my wings wide and coasted under the warm sunlight, feeling the UV radiate through my scales, an invigorating bath that warmed my insides.

“Good genetics?”

I laughed. “Good genetics are what gave you that cute little butt of yours and that perfect pair of lips I love to kiss.”

“Flatterer,” she muttered, lying back along my spine as we soared through the thermals rising around the Isles, the warm air tickling my belly.

“I’ve been told it’ll get me everywhere.”

She slapped a hand against my side in time with a sharp bark of laughter. “And just where are you trying to get that you haven’t already gotten, hmm?”

The lush greenery of *home* passed by underneath. I exhaled slowly, relishing the return to where I belonged. That was why I was part of the Isolationist Party and not the Integrationists or the War Party. The feeling of *peace* spreading out from my core through my body. There was nothing like it, and it was only amplified after a visit to the megacities of humanity and its teeming masses.

“Maybe I’m just looking to stay where I’m at,” I told her, beating my wings several times to orient us on our heading. “Maybe I like it that way.”

“You just like my butt.”

“That, too,” I admitted. “It’s a nice butt. Perfect for squeezing. Spanking. Pretty much everything really.”

“It, um, maybe doesn’t mind being squeezed by you,” Katie mumbled.

“Is everything okay?” I asked, sensing a moment of hesitation in her reply.

“Yeah, yeah, it’s fine,” she said. “Just ... going home was a bit of a shock after spending time here. That’s all.”

Going home.

The wedge between us echoed with a ringing blow as those words hammered deep, driving home the point that she didn’t consider this place her home. She wasn’t prepared to stay.

And I wasn’t prepared to go.

“What’s that?” she asked, sitting up. “What are they doing?”

I glanced back, following her pointed finger down below. A crowd of people were gathered on the roof of the palace, our destination. They were milling about, blocking the landing area, but otherwise didn’t seem to be doing much.

“Not sure,” I said warily as I banked us around, circling the palace to slowly bleed off height instead of coming in for a sharp landing. There was no rush, no need for us to partake in such sharp maneuvers.

Besides, home or not, Katie loved to soar through the air, and that would prolong her time on my back. Perhaps bring her a bit closer to thinking of the Dragon Isles as somewhere she wanted to be.

With me.

“They’re shouting something,” Katie said, the noises now audible.

“Yes, they are.” I frowned, listening hard at the chants and calls from dozens of throats. “I think they’re protesting—”

“Peace,” Katie said dully as the first shouts of “Burn their cities” reached our ears. “They want to go back to war.”

“I’m sorry about this,” I said as I pumped my wings some more, delaying our descent. “You shouldn’t have to put up with this. They’re just a bunch of idiots.”

“You don’t have to apologize,” she said. “We have our fair share of idiots as well. Believe it or not, I saw on the news the day of the ceasefire there were some morons *protesting* it. As if we weren’t getting our asses kicked up and down the eastern seaboard, losing more and more territory to you every day. Like I said, idiots are everywhere.”

I grunted. She was right, of course. Besides, I needed to get into the palace.

“All right, just stay close by,” I said warily as the crowd parted when it became clear I was coming in to land no matter what. “It’s not going to be pretty.”

“I can handle words,” she said. “You just stop them from doing anything else.”

“That,” I snarled protectively, “I can do.”

I came in as close to the stairs as I could, buffeting the crowd back with several forceful pumps of my wings, and then shifted.

“Traitor!”

“Whore!”

“Dirty Blood!”

“Defiler!”

I shook the words off, gathering Katie under an arm and heading for the stairs as the crowd closed in around us. Although they were no bigger than me, Katie had to feel downright tiny surrounded by so many angry, shouting dragons. They leered at us, screaming violently as spittle flew. Eyes bulged and cheeks turned red as they hurled their vitriol in our direction, venting all their hate on us.

If Katie hadn't been in danger, I would have laughed at how apoplectic they were. Clearly, the crowd had been gathered long enough to work itself into a frenzy but not run out of energy.

But I didn't laugh because it once again reinforced just how different we were. How *hard* her life would be if she stayed there. If she stayed with me. I *wanted* it, but could we actually make it work?

“Why *do* so many of your people hate us?” Katie asked as we finally made it to the stairs. A quartet of palace guards waited there, blocking entry to the mob, long pikes held at attention. They stepped forward as we appeared out of the crowd, shouting the protestors back and enveloping us among them.

“Think about it,” I said as doors closed behind us, reducing the shouts to background noise. “We live here. The isles are wonderful, but they aren't huge. You live out *there*. Endless land and seas to roam over.”

“They want more *space*?” she asked.

“That's one group, yes. They think we should be free to go where we want. Fly where we want. They long to live among *real* mountains. Or in the jungle. Or the desert. They want the *choice*. Others have read the books about before we came here. When we lived *elsewhere* among humans. Ruling them.”

“They want to take control once more,” she said. “Doesn't sound so different from some humans, after all. We have plenty of people who want someone else's land. Who want to be able to be able to dictate to others. They start wars over it.”

“The third group thinks we’re superior,” I explained, choosing to not respond to her point. “That *we* are the apex species that should be dominant on Earth. Just as homo sapiens drove out homo erectus, homo draconis should do the same.”

“Homo draconis. There’s a new term. There are so *many* more of us than you, though,” she pointed out.

“Most of them don’t care,” I admitted heavily. “That’s why they want war. To get rid of you.”

“To kill us off, you mean,” she whispered, very obviously thinking about the death of her family.

I nodded. “Speaking of which, the reason we had to come here is to help *stop* that. Believe it or not, there are more of us who don’t want that than those who do. Even the War Party itself doesn’t want to eradicate humanity. They just want to rule it.”

“You’re not making it sound any better,” she said with a shake of her head.

“I know,” I said, feeling suddenly helpless as she pulled away from me. “Come on. Let’s go.”

The reports I needed had arrived, and it was time for me to review them and see if all the information I’d received so far corroborated them.

And if it didn’t, I might just have a lead to find her family’s killer.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Ajax

Sitting up, I swung my legs over the edge of the bed. The pile of reports was still on my desk, waiting for me. Although I'd started them the day before, it was a lot of cross-reference work to check out each person's story, and I hadn't even gotten halfway through before sleep claimed me.

But just me.

I glanced over my shoulder at the far side of the bed where a diminutive, little raven-haired beauty should be busily snoring away. Instead, there was nothing but empty space, the covers still mostly in place. Absently, I reached out a hand, resting it where she should be. Where she *belonged*.

Clenching a fist, I shook my head. Things were complicated between us, emotions running high. Upon our return from Baltimore and the palace, I'd promised to dig into the reports. It was important to both of us to find the killer. I wasn't sure what I would do when I *did* figure out who it was, but I knew I had to find out. If for no other reason than to stop it from happening again.

But there was also the Council to consider. Could I *prevent* even more death by being on the Council and returning the dragons to an isolationist stance? What would benefit us more in the long run—that or a public trial and punishment of her town's killer?

I growled, hating myself for thinking in such terms, but knowing full well I *had* to. What had happened to Katie's family was a tragedy, and it burned me that it had been one of *my* family to do it. But it had *already* happened. If, by not going public with my findings, I could stop another mass murder from happening, then wouldn't I be more responsible doing that?

My fingers tapped away impatiently on my leg as I sat on the side of the bed, unsure of how I should be proceeding, of what I should be doing. I felt dirty even thinking about not

following through on my word. I couldn't lie to Katie. But, on the other hand, the Council.

"Figure it out first, then worry about what to do," I growled to the empty air, pushing off the bed and sliding into the chair of the desk, resuming the work where I'd left off.

Discovering who had perpetrated such a crime was the first step. If they'd covered their footsteps too well, then nothing would matter in the end, anyway, because I wouldn't be able to prove it. Then I could show Katie I'd tried and get appointed to the Council anyway. Hopefully, she would be okay with that.

Decision made, I buried myself nose-first into the pages and pages of reports.

"Here."

I jerked as a plate with food appeared in my peripheral vision. "Sorry," I said, shaking my head as Katie set it down next to me. "I didn't hear you come in."

She smiled gently, setting cutlery down as well. "I figured. You didn't hear me calling you that breakfast was ready or to say good morning. You've been busy, so I just went ahead and got it for you."

"You made breakfast?" I shook my head. "Of course you did. It's sitting in front of me. Thank you, Katie. That was very kind of you."

"You're welcome," she said, shrugging. "You're doing important work. It's not like you to miss a meal, so I figured I would help."

"And you were also hungry," I said with what I hoped was a knowing grin.

"And I was hungry," she agreed, her cheeks bunching as she smiled.

"Did you sleep okay?" I asked, noting what looked like slight bags under her warm honey-brown eyes.

"It took me a bit to fall asleep," she admitted. "But once I got there, I was out."

“Good, good,” I said, nodding, my stomach tightening slightly.

Why was it so awkward? Surely, just because we didn’t sleep together the night before, our dynamic didn’t change *that* much? Did it?

“Katie ...”

“Have you found anything?” she asked hurriedly, stopping me from saying anything more.

I held back a wince. She obviously didn’t want to talk about it. We were going to have to confront the situation at some point, but if she wasn’t ready just yet, then far be it from me to force her. Eventually, though, there would be no other path.

“Maybe,” I said, picking up the fork and using it to slice through the stack of fluffy pancakes with ease. “These are dispatch orders from one of the regional commanders. I’ve been going through them to track the movements of dragons of the royal bloodline. They get their own section in the orders. We often served as sort of ‘floaters’, lending help and support where needed to secure areas, push through a difficult resistance, things like that. This one, in particular, sends three dragons from one zone to another.”

“What’s so special about that?” she asked as I shoved half a pancake into my mouth, chewing swiftly.

“Well, here’s the arriving zone commander’s log,” I said, indicating another piece of paper. “*It* only shows the arrival of two dragons. Not the third.”

“So, this third dragon was AWOL?” she asked.

“Theoretically.” I frowned. “Except here’s the *dispatch* orders for that same zone commander from a week later. All three dragons are on it.”

“So, maybe someone screwed up the arrival paperwork?” she suggested.

“Could be,” I said. “It could be. Besides, the dates are wrong. It’s two weeks earlier than the attack on your

hometown. So, even *if* they were AWOL, they weren't off attacking."

"Unless they were attacking elsewhere," she said.

"Maybe." I sorted through the papers while I mowed down the pancakes. "Mmm, these are good. Thank you again."

She smiled, patting me on the shoulders with both hands. "You're welcome. You've made breakfast every day so far. I don't mind helping. I like to cook when it's not just for myself."

"If everything you make is as good as these, I have no problem with it," I told her, eyes skimming the next piece of paper. "Huh, that's weird."

"What is it?"

"The same thing happened here. Only two dragons on the arrival log. Same dragon missing." I reached forward, shuffling for some more papers. "And it happens again at their next duty station. And the next."

"So, they're always missing?"

"Not always. It started a month before the attack on your hometown." I pushed the food aside, pulling out more papers and logs. "And it stops a month after," I said, pointing to where three dragons were listed on the arrival log.

"I wonder why?"

I shook my head. "No idea. But it does cross over during the destruction of your hometown."

"Who was the dragon?"

"Cyrus," I said with a sigh, naming my cousin.

"Well, he's certainly got the asshole part down," she said around a mouthful of bacon from my plate.

I eyed her chewing mouth, then turned my full attention to the plate. It was piled high, nearly overflowing, but I quickly made it all disappear, my stomach thanking me heartily.

“Thank you again for that,” I said, setting it aside with a satisfied sigh.

“You’re welcome.” She stood up, hands on her hips. “So, what do we do about Cyrus?”

“Now, we view that footage again and compare it to pictures of Cyrus,” I said. “We see if we can make out any patterns on his scales that match, or we rule it out, and I start over again.”

“And if it is him?” she asked tightly.

“Then we deal with it,” I said, unwilling to commit to having Cyrus arrested and tried.

Not because he was family. But because of what it would mean for the Council.

But I couldn’t tell Katie that.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Ajax

“There,” I said, hitting pause on the video. “You see that.”

“No,” Katie said, peering over my shoulder.

I traced a line on the screen. “Along the left side of his spine. That pattern of markers. It matches.”

“Are you sure?” she hissed.

“I am,” I said, confident. “It’s him. It’s Cyrus. We got him, Katie.”

“*Cyrus*,” she hiss-snarled, her nails digging into my shoulders. “He killed them. Killed them all. My family. The other townspeople. Just murdered them like they were nothing.”

The emotions were bubbling up inside her. I could hear them, see it on her face as lines appeared around her eyes and her mouth compressed into a flat line.

Without a word, I stood up and wrapped my arms around her, pulling her in tight. She allowed me but never relaxed into the hug, never let the tension flow. I started stroking her hair, not speaking, waiting for her to process the grief and anger all over again now that she had a face to put on the atrocity.

“Breathe,” I urged, listening to the harsh, grating sound of her breath through clenched teeth. “I’m right here, Katie.”

Slowly, muscle by muscle, the tension faded from her. Her breathing came easier, and with each deeply drawn breath, she relaxed some more.

“I hate him,” she announced. “What do we do now?”

“Now we go to the sovereign,” I said, grabbing the laptop. “We show her what I just saw, and we go from there.”

“Okay.” Her eyes were dark and hooded, her lips flat.

I hated seeing her like that. The pain where a smile should be, dullness in her eyes where I’d seen laughter live. It boiled

my own blood to see what reliving the event did to her. If I'd known Katie when it had happened, I wasn't sure what I would've done to seek vengeance.

My dragon longed for her, longed to reach out and tell her it would be okay. To protect her. But there was no protecting her from the past, from what had already happened. I could only help her deal with it and move on. She was incredibly strong-willed, but there was a grief in her soul that she was only just now beginning to understand, and I wasn't sure how much I could do to help her.

"Let's go," she said.

I led the way through the palace to the sovereign's office. My knuckles hit the door, sharp and hard.

"Ajax," I called in response to the query from the other side.

We were admitted in by one of her aides, who, at a glance from the ruler of all dragonkind, hastily departed the room.

"I trust this is important?" she said.

"It is, my sovereign," I said. "As you're aware, I've been looking into the records of all our kin who spent time in the conquered lands, tracing their whereabouts and actions during the course of our war with the humans."

"Go on," she said.

"After extensive review, I—"

"Cyrus murdered my family and slaughtered hundreds of innocent civilians," Katie snapped, interrupting me. "Your nephew *killed* them all without a care, then turned the village to glass. What are you going to do about it?"

My jaw dropped, eyes darting from Katie to the sovereign, whose face had gone flat. Bracing myself for the worst, I opened my mouth.

"Silence," the sovereign said so coldly the hairs on my arm stood on end, my mouth closing immediately.

There were a very few people I didn't dare cross. The sovereign of all dragonkind topped that list, and for good

reason.

Even Katie seemed to think better of a second outburst, but none of the white-hot anger left her eyes.

“Explain yourself,” the sovereign said.

I glanced at Katie, also curious.

“You were taking too long,” she said to me with a shrug. “I figured I would get more to the point. You, sovereign, are a ruler, a leader. You don’t need to be coddled and have news broken to you gently.”

“I’ll thank you to not tell me what I am or what I need *ever again*,” the cold-faced dragon woman said, her eyes boring into Katie’s.

The two exchanged looks for several seconds, but it was Katie who backed down, looking away. She’d overstepped, and she knew it.

“Are her claims true?”

I stiffened to attention as her focus turned my way.

“As you know, the videos are grainy,” I said. “But when compared with a picture of Cyrus, we were able to identify enough similarities for me to be confident.”

“Completely so? Without any room for error?” she pushed, her eyes boring into mine, a clear reminder of what would happen if we publicly went after Cyrus.

“No,” I said slowly. “Not one hundred percent. The videos were taken too far away for that.”

“You know what will happen if you go forward with this,” the sovereign reminded me while Katie stood silently at my side. “What it will mean. You remember that.”

“I do,” I said.

“Are you prepared to push forward, then?”

She was putting the decision squarely on *my* shoulders. I hesitated.

“What are you waiting for?” Katie asked, staring at me, astonished. “You said it was him when you saw the video. Why are you backing down now?”

“I’m not backing down,” I said stiffly. “But the sovereign is also right. If we go after Cyrus, if he’s proven to be the one who did this, then a position that has just opened in our government will go to someone else.”

“So?” Katie asked, confused.

I sighed. “If it goes to *me*, which will be what happens if nobody is persecuted for the events in your hometown, then I’ll be the deciding vote that brings the dragons back to the isles. We will turn our backs on humanity, and there will be *no more* tragedies. If it goes to someone else, they will likely resume the war. Which will mean *more* death. Me being on the Council could *save* more lives.”

“And let the killer of my family go unpunished,” she said numbly.

My teeth ground together. “I want both,” I told her. “But we can’t have both.”

“No, you cannot,” the sovereign said. “That is the unfortunate reality of the politics at stake. You must make the decision.”

I glanced at Katie. She was pleading at me, her eyes wide and insistent. The features of her parents mixed into one. The sole living survivor of her family. How could I force her to live without justice? There would be some *other* way for me to stop the war. There had to be. I wasn’t sure what it was, but I intended to find it.

My eyes landed on the sovereign, decision made.

“Punish him,” I snarled, fire coiling in my stomach. “That isn’t the way war should be waged. Innocents should never be slaughtered as they run, screaming. I’m sure if we dig deeper, we’ll find more evidence of other atrocities he committed as well. There are numerous occasions where he went missing. If we dig, we’ll find it. I’m confident. Everyone else must see it that way.”

“They won’t,” the sovereign said calmly. “You know that.”

“I know,” I said.

“They will deem you a danger to all the skeletons they have in their closets, and they will keep you out of government. You will lose that chance.”

“Then I’ll find another way,” I said, standing firm. “This is the right thing to do.”

Chapter Thirty-Four

Ajax

“You should stay out here,” I told Katie as we neared Cyrus’s office. “I’m not sure he’s going to react overly well once he finds out.”

“No.”

I eyed her, seeing the steely determination ringing her yellow-brown eyes and the firm set of her jaw.

“Katie,” I said, pausing, facing her, looking down into her beautiful face. “This is going to be dangerous. I know you’re brave, but sometimes—”

“I’m going to see the look on that bastard’s face when we tell him we know the truth about him,” she said, locking eyes with me. “When he finds out he’s going to *pay* for the murder of my family and everyone else. I need to see this done, Ajax, and I need *you* to understand that. To support me.”

“I’ll always support you,” I said. “*Always*. But it’s also my job to protect you.”

“Don’t deny me this,” she whispered.

I hesitated.

“Please.”

“Fine,” I said, caving. “But you stay *behind* me. I’m not compromising on that one, Katie. I stay between you and him. I’m going to trust you to not break that.”

“You can trust me,” she whispered. “I won’t fail you.”

“Okay.” I bent over, kissing her forehead. “Let’s go, then.”

As we approached his door, I glanced at the guards who’d followed us. “Two of you on either side. Me, two of you, then Katie. Two stay outside, just in case. Sort out who is who.”

There was a quick muttering by the guards as the seniormost of them gave orders, then they said they were ready.

“All right,” I said, squeezing Katie’s hand. “Here we go. Let’s get this bastard.”

The door exploded as I delivered a size fourteen boot kick straight to the latch. Wood snapped and splinters flew everywhere as the door slammed open hard enough to embed the knob in the backside wall.

Cyrus was on his feet as I stormed inside.

“Sit down!” I barked, kicking the desk hard enough to send it screeching across the floor to pin my cousin to the wall. It wouldn’t keep him there, but it did buy a second for the guards to come in after me.

“What the hell is the meaning of this?” Cyrus snarled, his thin, hatchet-face twisting into an ugly snarl, orange light appearing in his eyes.

“You’re under arrest,” I spat. “For the wanton murder of innocent human civilians.”

Two thick black eyebrows shot up. “What are you talking about?”

“You killed my family,” Katie said from behind me. “That town you glassed? That was my hometown, you bastard. Now you’re going to pay for it.”

Cyrus leaned slightly to the side to look at her. Then he ran a hand over the top of his head, following the path of his hair back to the braid he kept it in. Finally, his eyes returned to me.

“Now, that’s rich,” he all but purred. “You believe her?”

“I’ve seen the videos,” I said, wondering what the sudden change in his mood was about. “So has the sovereign. It’s over, Cyrus. You’re coming with us.”

The desk ground against the floor as he slowly pushed it away from the wall, freeing himself. I readied myself for an attack, but his movements weren’t aggressive.

“I’m not so sure I will be,” he said.

“You’re outnumbered five to one,” I pointed out. “What do you think you’re going to accomplish?”

“I’m going to open your eyes to the truth,” he said, mouth curving upward. “And it’s going to be oh, so delicious to watch you realize how fully you’ve been played.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” I asked as Katie shifted her weight behind me.

“I’m talking about your human *whore*,” he spat. “And how she’s been lying to you all this time. Using you, Ajax. And you’ve fallen for it. Hook, line, and sinker, just like the gullible fool you are. A pretty face and perky ass, and you get so distracted you can’t think with anything other than your cock.”

I snarled, taking a step forward. “Don’t talk about Katie that way, *cousin*.”

He laughed in my face. “Look at you. So eager, so desperate to protect her. Yet you don’t know the first thing about her.”

“What are you talking about? I know plenty about her, Cyrus. I know she’s worth five of you.”

My cousin threw his head back and laughed. “This is too good. Too good, indeed. Tell me, *cousin*, do you know what she did before she came here? Before she seduced you?”

“Huh?”

Katie was very silent behind me.

“Go on,” Cyrus said, sitting back into his chair. He crossed his arms and put his legs up on the desk. “Ask her. See what she says about her job before now. Then maybe you won’t be so quick to protect her. After what she’s done to our people.”

There was genuine malice in his tone and fury-eyed hatred on his face, despite the relaxed pose. Whatever Cyrus was hinting at, he believed it completely.

“Katie?” I asked. “What is he talking about?”

“Go on,” Cyrus urged jovially, thoroughly enjoying himself. “Tell him, *human*. Tell him exactly what it is you were doing before the ceasefire.”

“Watch him,” I ordered the guards before turning my back on him to look at Katie, eager to set his distraction aside.

But the instant I laid eyes on her, I knew something was very, very wrong. She refused to meet my gaze, her weight shifting from side to side as she chewed on her lower lip.

“Katie,” I said softly. “What’s going on? What aren’t you telling me?”

Chapter Thirty-Five

Katie

My insides were ice, the room shrinking around me by the second as pressure settled around my shoulders and onto my chest, making it difficult to breathe. Panic set in, sending my heartrate rocketing.

“Katie?” Ajax pressed, doubt clouding his face at my reluctance.

“This is delicious,” Cyrus cackled from behind his desk.

“Fuck you,” I spat, wishing I could throttle the asshole.

Even if I could, though, it wouldn’t make a difference with Ajax. I would have to tell him the truth.

“Katie.” Ajax’s voice was hard.

I sighed. “The truth is ... complicated.”

“No, it’s not,” Cyrus snarled, slamming his hands down on the desk. “You’re just trying to pretend it is because you l-l-love him, and you’re terrified he’s going to reject you once you tell him the truth. Well, guess what, bitch? He should! Because this is all your fault.”

“*Enough.*”

I looked away, Ajax shouting us both down with one word. Why had Cyrus chosen that word to describe my feelings for the big dragon? I didn’t love him ... right? Turmoil swirled in my stomach.

“You,” Ajax said, pointing at me. “Speak. Now. What did you do before you came here?”

The crumbling of whatever had been between us was happening in real time as I watched. Ajax was pulling away, hardening himself. Yet I couldn’t see any way out of the implosion, either. I had to tell him.

“You remember that first time we met?” I whispered, staring at him, pleading with him to understand. “In the parking

garage?”

He nodded sharply. How could either of us forget that unexpected and intense meeting of souls? It had changed everything.

“I was going to work,” I said softly. “In the lab below the building.”

Recognition flickered in Ajax’s eyes, the blue circles going flat and hard. “The lab we broke Vicek out of?” he asked.

“Yes,” I whispered, unable to meet his gaze, looking away in shame. “I ... I was the lead scientist there.”

“The lead scientist,” Ajax repeated, shaking his head. “Are you saying you were the one responsible for experimenting on Vicek?”

I sagged. “We were at *war*, Ajax.”

He shook his head. “Vicek was captured and imprisoned *before* the war started. It was what started the war in the first place. If you were the one in charge, you would have known all this.”

“We didn’t know *anything*,” I protested. “That was the whole point. To humans, dragons were nothing but myth until, *wham*, my company captured one in the ocean. How were we supposed to know you had a whole world out here?”

“And after you realized he was an intelligent being?” Ajax pushed softly.

“The war had started by then,” I said. The excuse felt hollow and weak, even to me. “Then this asshole killed my family, and I had nothing left except to try to come up with something that might allow us to beat you.”

“When you didn’t, you came here, trying to get to know us better,” Cyrus rumbled. “To infiltrate us, to discover our weaknesses and use them against us. You came to *spy*, and you used your body to get what you wanted with Ajax here.”

“I notice you don’t deny killing my family,” I said coldly. “But no, I didn’t come here as a spy.”

“You hated us,” Ajax said stonily. “Why else would you volunteer to come be a dragon’s mate?”

I scoffed. “You’re joking, right?”

He glared at me.

“Ajax, *none* of us came here as volunteers.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, I walked into work the morning of the ceasefire, and my boss told me I was to have the ‘honor’ of volunteering to be a dragon’s mate. Why do you think I showed up without any luggage or anything from my prior life? Because I wasn’t allowed to. They shoved me on a helicopter, and I woke up in that damn cave.”

“Do you really expect us to believe that?” Cyrus snapped. “You were kidnapped by your own people and forced to come here? And you just conveniently *never* told anyone? Why would you not tell us and find a way to get sent back home? Because you were spying!”

“I wasn’t spying. They had—”

“No.”

Ajax’s whispered denial slid deep between my ribs and twisted, a gut-wrenching pain I didn’t expect.

“Please,” I begged. “You have to believe me. I’m not a spy.”

“How can I believe anything you say?” he whispered, looking down at me.

My heart groaned under the pain of betrayal on his face. Intense self-discipline kept his voice even and without emotion, but it was there. I could see it. We’d grown close enough over the past few weeks I knew what to look for. What I saw was agonizing.

“No,” I whimpered. “Ajax. I didn’t mean to hurt you.”

“You kept this all a secret,” he said, shaking his head. “You *knew* it was important, that it would factor into things, and yet you never told me. Never said a word about any of it. You let

me believe lies. That wasn't by accident, Katie. That was a conscious decision. You can't pretend it was anything but."

"But—"

"You told me I could trust you." His eyes tightened. "The worst of it is I believed you. I thought I *could* trust you, that ... that maybe ... maybe you were different."

"I didn't mean to," I said, fighting back tears. When had I come to care for him so much? The intensity of our connection had snuck up on me, and now my world was collapsing in front of my eyes, and there was nothing I could do about it.

Because it was my fault.

"That doesn't matter," Ajax said. "You *did* it."

"Of course she did," Cyrus said, standing up. "She's a human, cousin, and a spy. Who knows what information she's already fed back to her masters about us. We should—"

Crack.

Ajax's fist lashed out, catching Cyrus in the jaw, snapping his head back. The shifter's eyes unfocused and rolled back into his head as he flopped to the floor like a puppet with its strings cut.

"You two," Ajax ordered, gesturing at the guardsmen who'd accompanied us, "get him out of here. Put him in the dungeons until the sovereign can make a decision."

The guardsmen jumped to the task, hauling away Cyrus's body.

"And you two," Ajax said, refusing to meet my eyes. "Return her to her people. Unharméd. I never want to see her again."

Then he strode from the room, leaving me behind as my heart broke.

"Ajax!" I called, taking a step after him.

He twitched slightly but didn't stop as he left the room. The sight of his retreating back was swiftly blocked by the two remaining guards.

“Come with us, ma’am,” one of them said, disdain twisting his normally impassive features. “Please don’t make this more difficult than it has to be.”

Chapter Thirty-Six

Katie

Waking up in my own bed should have felt refreshing and comforting. Like coming home after a long vacation and still having an extra day off before needing to return to work. I wanted to sprawl out and be lazy. Only I couldn't because, without Ajax, everything was wrong. The bed was too empty. The sounds of my apartment too dull and quiet.

I missed him. Horribly.

I missed waking up to the call of the birds and the clean, refreshing air of the ocean breeze as it wafted through the windows, mixing with the hint of pine that seemed to be his natural smell. Something I would never experience again.

Strange how something so new and foreign could become like normal after such a brief time. I hadn't even been gone a month, yet my apartment of over a year was no longer home anymore.

Knock. Knock. Knock.

The sudden and unexpected burst of rapid-fire pounding on my door stole my breath as I sat upright with a jolt. I wasn't expecting visitors. Nobody even knew I was back!

Easing myself out of bed, I put on a robe and crept toward the door as it rattled in its frame under the insistent pounding. Cautiously, I eased up to the peephole and peered through it.

Two men in dark suits waited outside.

"Ms. Beckinson," one of them called. "We know you're in there. Open the door."

I stepped back, thinking furiously. Who the hell were these men, and why were they after me? I hadn't done anything. Were they government suits who had learned of my return and wanted to grill me about my time spent among the dragons? I relaxed slightly. That was probably it. Still, I wasn't sure.

Moving as silently as I could, I retreated to the bedroom, ignoring the repeated pounding on the door as I got my cell phone. After spending several weeks without the device, it was a strange weight to feel in my hands. That weight grew rapidly as I read the most recent message waiting for me on the screen.

Ms. Beckinson. I have learned of your return. It would be best for us to speak. I'll expect you in my office this morning. I have sent my assistants to ensure you don't encounter any difficulties in coming back to work.

I nearly threw the phone at the wall in frustration. Damn that woman. How could McCrutten be that quick on the uptake? Did she have my apartment being watched or something? It was infuriating. The last thing I needed was to deal with her threats. It wasn't my fault things had gone awry. Cyrus had dug into my background and learned the truth. How could she fault me for that?

She would, though, regardless of how much of a stretch it was. I knew that much. What would she want from me, though? I wasn't exactly a treasure trove of information, even if I *had* been inclined to give it up.

I glanced at the door. The silence since the last round of knocking was more ominous than the hammer blows of someone pounding to get in. What were they doing out there? Had McCrutten given them the okay to bust the door in? Someone else would hear and call the police. Which was what I should have been doing.

The door opened with a *click*, and the two men came through the door in smoothly practiced motions, guns leveled.

"Put the phone down, Miss Beckinson," the one on the right ordered, his pistol not wavering.

I stared at him. He was shorter than his partner, with a big barrel chest and thick biceps. The other was taller and slimmer, with dark eyes that glittered with the threat of violence. That one, I knew instantly, liked to hurt people.

Very cautiously, I set the phone on the floor, my eyes locked on the guns. The phone's plastic case rattled against the hardwood flooring, courtesy of my shaking fingers.

"Easy does it," the speaker ordered, his green eyes set deep into his face over a thick, bushy beard. "No sudden movements, no noise, okay? Our orders are to bring you in unharmed, so if you don't try any funny business, that's how we'll deliver you. Do you understand?"

I nodded. "Yes," I said, surprised at how even my voice was. Perhaps having survived a near-death attack by two dragon shifters meant I wasn't as prone to panicking when being threatened anymore. Not that I wanted to become some sort of expert on the subject.

"Good. Now you're going to get dressed and come with us. Got it?"

"Yeah."

I did as they ordered, and we left through the front door, me walking in front of them as calmly as I could. Nobody seemed to notice or care, and in moments, we were in the back of a large silver SUV driven by yet another of McCrutten's goons.

"Couldn't one of you have sat in the front?" I griped, squished beyond belief in the center seat as the two men flanked me.

"No," the smaller one said. "Now shut up."

I sat back in silence, and all too soon, we were pulling up to the very familiar-looking office building that housed Rutt-Tayo Labs. The men escorted me inside and up to McCrutten's office, where they waved me inside but did not follow. It was to be a one-on-one meeting, it seemed.

"Sit."

I had barely taken two steps inside when the half-barked command exploded out from McCrutten's mouth. She was sitting behind her giant desk, looking calmly at me as I paused to process her order, then followed the direction, taking a seat in one of the chairs opposite her.

“So, you’re back,” she said.

Despite the power imbalance, I decided to not answer the obvious.

“Why?”

I shrugged. “Apparently, your boys didn’t do a good enough job hiding who I was. One of the dragons found out I led the research program here. They weren’t big fans.”

“They just let you leave?”

“Basically. One of them was falling for me,” I explained. “He ordered the others to send me back. When I was being dropped off, one of the dragons who had brought me back, said I was to never return on penalty of death. I assume the one who cared for me was willing to let me live, so he didn’t have to deal with the guilt of having me killed.”

McCrudden’s forehead tightened slightly. I watched it like a hawk, working to keep my face immobile.

“You don’t sound ... upset by this,” she observed.

“They’re dragons,” I said, trying to sound as callous as possible. “My only regret is not getting more information from them. They were incredibly cautious about revealing anything that might help us.”

“An interesting choice of words,” McCrudden said, scrutinizing me even closer.

I sat still, staring into her eyes, trying my hardest to not let her show just how hard I was sweating.

“Look,” I said, forging ahead with the plan I’d hastily cobbled together on the way to the office building. “You sent me there to get rid of me. We both know that, so let’s not tiptoe around that fact. I assume it’s because you need to hide evidence of the program from certain peoples. I don’t know. It doesn’t matter. What *does* matter is those assholes are still the ones who killed my fucking family. And they deserve to *pay*. I don’t exactly *want* to work for you after what you did, but you represent the best chance I have for finding a way to take them down.”

I injected as much cold anger into my voice as I dared. The last thing I wanted was to overdo it.

“What, exactly, are you proposing?” McCrutten asked, sitting back in her chair, fingers tented in front of her.

“Let me continue my research,” I said. “Find a way to hurt them. They aren’t invulnerable. I’ve seen them get hurt. I’ve seen them die. Now I just need to make sure *we* can make them die.”

“How can I know I can trust you?”

“You can’t,” I said bluntly. “Not really. But if you can go to the government with a weapon that will allow them to hunt down and kill the dragons, I suspect they’ll forgive you for whatever illegalities you’re trying to hide. I’m not here because I want to be, but because your facilities are already set up and ready to go. All we need to do is make that breakthrough.”

The wheels were turning in McCrutten’s head. I could see her now, coming up with ways to benefit from my research before she removed me from the picture. Not that it mattered. As long as I got what I wanted first.

“You want nothing more than your job back?”

I nodded.

“Very well. Consider it restored,” she said with a shrug. “I must admit, Katie, I underestimated your hatred for the dragons.”

I let my lip curl up as I leaned forward slightly. “They killed my family. Now I’m going to find a way to kill them all.”

“Of course.” She didn’t care. “You may head down to the lab. By the time you get there, they will be notified, and your access will be restored. Happy hunting, Miss Beckinson.”

I smiled as coldly as I could manage, then got up and left the office. I breezed past the startled guards and into the elevator, punching the button to take me down to the basement levels. There was no time to waste.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Katie

True to her word, a security guard was waiting outside the first security door to escort me through to the lab.

“We’re already working on getting you a new pass and restoring your credentials to the system,” he said as we passed through into the lab.

I paused as several heads turned to see who it was. Their eyes went wide as they saw me. Part of me wondered what they’d been told about my absence. Another part didn’t care. Those people were no longer friends or colleagues. Just obstacles. I tuned them out while scanning the lab.

I tried to repress the shudder running down my spine as I stared at all the equipment in revulsion. Now that I’d met the dragons, gotten to know some of them as people—and one in particular—I hated the very sight of it all.

The war was *our* fault. Not theirs. My mind couldn’t get off the knowledge that it could just as easily have been Ajax who was imprisoned there. Imprisoned and practically tortured for months as we tried to find ways to remove his scales and gather more DNA to experiment on. I would always hate myself for that.

But perhaps there was a way I could at least partially make up for it.

Much of the lab equipment was set out in a pit in the center of the room. A ringed walkway surrounded the rectangular area, where larger machines and dedicated rooms all looked out into the central hub of activity. The offices were set against the back wall. I strode around the perimeter and stopped at mine. My name was still stenciled onto the brown wood.

“Is there anything else you need?” the security guard asked.

I shook my head, twisting the handle and pushing the door open. “No. I’ll be fine. Thank you.”

“I’ll be right outside if you need me,” the guard said.

I nodded stiffly and stepped inside, closing the door behind me and walking around my desk. It was familiar. Something I'd done for months prior to being shipped off to the Dragon Isles. Everything was just as I'd left it. Like my bed that morning, it should have been comforting to deal with such familiarity after experiencing the strange new world of dragons.

It wasn't. It was so very, very wrong.

Which is precisely why I'm here.

Sitting down in the chair, I turned my computer on. Either they'd never removed my login credentials, or they were already restored because there were no obstacles to getting access to the system. I looked at the logs, noting a marked downturn in reports since I'd been gone.

Why had McCruten kept the lab going at all once she got rid of me? Or was I just the fall person, the one designated to take the heat *if* the government came after her? I honestly wasn't sure.

"Katie!"

I looked up as the door opened, and Carl, the assistant lab director, came rushing in.

"You're back," he said with a grin, pausing next to my chair when I didn't immediately get up to embrace him.

"Yes." I looked at him, trying to understand how I'd once fit in so well with them. People who wanted to find ways to *hurt* others.

A thought occurred to me. Sheathing my anger for the moment, I forced myself up out of the chair and let Carl embrace me. I returned it, hoping I was doing a better job of acting than it felt.

"Why did you come back?" he asked, shaking his head. "They told us you got a better offer elsewhere, but that seemed so odd since you never even told anyone you were leaving."

Bless you and your chatterbox mouth, Carl.

“I was doing some deep research,” I said. “We had to make sure the cover was perfect.”

“Deep research?”

“Well, our prime specimen escaped,” I reminded him. “We needed a new way to get samples. My plan was one of the methods.”

“Did it work?” Carl asked, brightening.

I shook my head. “No. Did any of the others pan out while I was gone?”

“Others?”

“Do you have any new sources for DNA and such?” I asked, trying to not sound like I was pumping him for information.

“No,” he said, shaking his head. “We’re still working off the originals. Truthfully, I’ve been wondering how much longer we can keep it up.”

I nodded but wasn’t really listening. The relief rushing through me was too distracting. Carl’s confirmation that there hadn’t been any new captives or such since I’d left meant my plan could work. I could actually make a difference.

“Listen, Carl, we’ll talk soon,” I said, patting him on the shoulder. “But first, I have to fill in some reports about my time away. The boss wants them done ASAP. You know how she can be.”

Carl smiled in understanding. “Of course, of course. I’m sorry to interrupt. I just wasn’t expecting to see you again.”

“Sorry for the deception,” I said, matching his smile, though mine was firmly based in the *current* deception I was pulling off. Not anything from before.

Once Carl was gone, I sat at the computer and stared at the screen for several minutes. Then I began to type, creating a report on my time with the dragons, just as I’d told Carl. It was important I not draw any suspicion to myself. Not yet.

I worked all day, doing my best to pretend like everything was normal. I typed up my report and started reading through everything the others in the lab had done in my absence. I never left the office, except to use the washroom, and cited the extreme pressure from McCrutten as my need to stay busy.

Only once everyone else had gone did I enact my plan. I opened the database we used for our research, and with a cross of my fingers, I began to wipe it clean. All the records, all the files, *everything*. I deleted it all.

“Good riddance,” I whispered as the computer shredded the information.

Now nothing I’d done would ever be used against Ajax or any of his people. It was my way of thanking him for dealing with Cyrus, even after learning of what I’d done. Knowing the evil dragon was behind bars and would be properly punished for his crimes was enough for me. I—

“I’m disappointed, Miss Beckinson.”

I inhaled, standing up in shock as the door opened, and Elizabeth McCrutten walked in, escorted by a hatchet-faced giant of a man I’d hoped to never see again.

“I believe you and Cyrus have met before,” McCrutten chuckled evilly.

“Impossible,” I said. “You aren’t here. You *can’t* be.”

The dragon grinned. “Ah, little human. You have so little *faith* in me.”

“I-I don’t understand,” I stammered, backing up against the wall. “You should hate each other. You should be mortal enemies. She’s the one who imprisoned your cousin, Cyrus, and hired us to do research on his DNA to try to find ways to kill you. You were ready to kill me for doing that. Now, you’re allied?”

“Idiot,” McCrutten snapped. “It was never about the dragons. It was about the *money*. Think about how rich I could be if I held the sole means to defy the dragons. The entire country would bow before me. Cyrus promised to help make me rich without the need for killing his people.”

“How?” I whispered, stalling for time as my deletion program continued to run. The pair hadn’t come around my desk yet, so they couldn’t see what I was doing. If I could just waste enough of their time, it would be too late.

Of course, it sounded like it no longer mattered. McCrutten had something bigger planned. Whatever it was, I doubted it would actually benefit Cyrus in the long-term. Which probably meant he was also planning on double-crossing her at some point. They were the perfect pair for one another.

“Cyrus here has no use for money,” McCrutten said. “But when he restarts the war, just how much do you think people will pay for peace? How many other countries will pay to keep the dragons at bay? It should only take a few demonstrations of force to get them to pony up. Selling weapons is good money, but there’s so much overhead and other costs. These will simply be payments. Straight into my bank account.”

“He’s sure offering you a lot,” I remarked, looking all around the room, including at my computer screen. “What’s he getting out of it?”

Seventy-three percent

“As part of the peace process, I will get the government to agree to cede all land currently occupied by the dragons to them. Including any inhabitants.”

The blood in my veins froze at that implication. There were millions, perhaps even tens of millions of people, still stuck behind the lines. Making the dragons into the lords of all that land and all the citizens there would mean they had to live by dragon rules.

Cyrus would conduct a genocide.

“You can’t do that,” I said, my composure falling apart in sudden panic. “You can’t let him have all those people. He’s going to kill them. Murder them all like he did my family! You can’t—”

“I can, and I will,” McCrutten said with the utter tranquility of someone who knew they spoke the truth. “Though, there’s one more thing I agreed to give Cyrus. I had hopes perhaps

you were telling the truth. That maybe you did have the key to a weapon that could defeat them. But then you turned out to be a liar.”

Eighty-nine percent.

I looked at Cyrus. “It doesn’t bother you? That she would have betrayed you in an instant if it benefited her more?”

The dragon-man snorted. “It’s nothing less than I would expect from her.”

“He would do the same thing to me, given the chance,” McCrutten pointed out.

Cyrus didn’t disagree.

Ninety-four percent.

“Talk about a match made in heaven,” I muttered, looking at them. “You two are perfect for each other. Colossal assholes. I don’t know how you escaped from Ajax, but I’m sure when he finds you, he’ll rectify that mistake.”

Cyrus’s answering smile dropped the bottom out of my stomach. “Ajax won’t be a problem for much longer.”

“You can’t kill him.”

“I won’t have to,” he said. “I just need to discredit him and get him out of the way. And I have just the person to help me do that.”

Ninety-nine percent.

“You’ll be going with Cyrus,” McCrutten said, stepping aside to clear the path to the door as the dragon-man advanced on me. “That was the other part of our deal.”

I backed away against the wall, but there was nowhere to escape as Cyrus snatched my arm and dragged me from the room with a vicious grip around my wrist. I cried out, but there was no way to resist. As I passed my old boss, her smile grew even wider.

“And nice try with the computer. But I had everything backed up off-site. We haven’t lost a thing. Enjoy your time with the dragons.”

I stumbled along after Cyrus, the shock of my complete and utter failure numbing all response and emotion. I was little more than an automaton.

“You’re going to make a video,” Cyrus said as he stuffed me into the back of a pickup truck. “Where you say you and Ajax were working together to funnel information to the humans. You were part of a spy program working to discover the location of our homeland.”

“Nobody is going to believe that,” I said. “Ajax would never do that.”

“Of course they will. Half the population already thinks he’s a traitor for being seen with you. This will just confirm their thoughts. He won’t be a factor, even if I can’t convince the sovereign to lock him up. But I *will* get the seat on the Council she promised, and the war will resume. Your kind will learn to bow before your rightful overlords. That much I guarantee,” he sneered. “Now, shut up.”

I sat back into the seat, trying to figure out when it had all come undone.

I’m sorry, Ajax. I should have told you the truth from the start ...

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Ajax

I stared at the painting on the wall, trying to figure out what the brushstrokes were supposed to say. There was a message in them, a hidden clue to the artist's thoughts. To me, they looked like a mess of greens and pinks with a splash of brown in the center. How anyone was supposed to make sense of that was beyond me.

But it hadn't been beyond Katie.

I flopped back into the sectional, the thick padded cushions slowly conforming to my body. The damn thing was pure bliss. Far better than the sofa it had replaced. Yet another Katie purchase. More than one morning, I'd caught her sitting right there, staring at that painting, entranced by it. Now, she was gone, and with her had gone something from the house. Something intangible.

It isn't the things that make it a home. It's the person.

I groaned, rubbing my face. That line of thought was useless. She wasn't coming back. I couldn't *let* her come back, even if I wanted her to. Not after what she'd done. It would take Vicek forgiving her for there to be any hope of her safety among dragons.

Another pang of loneliness swept through me, echoing among the empty hallways of my house. I nearly turned my head to look down the hallway, as if that would magically conjure up a woman I had no right to care so deeply for.

Perhaps even love.

My dragon twitched and roared as the thought finally slipped through my mental barrier. I'd tried so hard to keep it at bay. The word and its implications were dangerous. I couldn't possibly love a human. It went against everything.

But I *could* love Katie.

I could love her laugh and her smile and the press of her body against my side. The enthusiasm of her hugs, and the coy

glimmer in her eyes every time she caught me staring at her ass. The taste of her skin under my tongue, the cry of her pleasure as we shared our bodies with one another.

All *that* I could love. Did it really matter if she couldn't shift? She would still soar through the skies with me, resting comfortably across my back. It was almost *more* intimate than flying next to someone. She *trusted* me.

And she had betrayed me.

I buried my face in my hands as the familiar arguments came boiling back. She had *lied* to me about the very nature of her feelings and actions. How could I ever trust her, knowing what she'd done during the war and then kept it secret from me?

The scuffle of claws on my roof had me on my feet in an instant, alert and wary. I wasn't expecting any visitors. Creeping forward to the staircase, I positioned myself out of sight of whoever was up there. If they meant me harm, I intended to have the jump on them.

Whoever it was, they weren't trying to be stealthy. The door creaked loudly as they pulled it open, and footsteps sounded lightly down the stairs. Unless I was mistaken, that was because of the size of the individual, not any attempt to move silently.

"Oh, stop hiding. I'm not here to attack you."

I came out of my crouch and to attention. "My Sovereign," I said, bowing deeply. "I wasn't expecting you."

"Naturally," the leader of all dragons said, turning with near ethereal grace. The long platinum blonde hair that was her trademark flowed out like a fan as she faced me, settling back into place perfectly. "Given I intended to pay you a surprise visit, I would have been very impressed if you *had* expected me."

"I—yes, of course," I said, shaking my head. Her green eyes shone brilliantly at my stumbling. "You're having fun with this."

“Of course I am. Having fun is better than, oh, I don’t know, spending all day moping around my house, staring morosely at paintings while bashing myself over the head with a metaphorical hammer. Don’t you think?”

My eyes narrowed. Had she been spying on me? “My, what a *suspiciously specific* example you gave there, Auntie.”

She smiled broadly. “I know you well, nephew. Well enough to know this,” she waved her hand at my house and the *stuff* that filled it, “is not your doing. You could just as easily do without. Which means someone else put it here. And since that someone else is no longer here, it was fairly easy to deduce what you’ve been doing.”

“I’m glad I’m so readable,” I said dryly, shaking my head. “Can I get you a drink?”

“Water would be lovely, thank you.”

I busied myself with two glasses, waiting for her to get to the point. There was a reason behind her visit. Just like there was a reason she was taking her time getting to it.

“Thank you,” she said, taking a sip after I handed her the glass. “You haven’t thrown anything out, by the looks of it.”

“Not yet,” I admitted.

She snorted.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means you’re not going to throw it out. You *like* it.”

I sighed. “It makes it feel like a home. Not just a house.”

“You miss her.”

“How did you get that, from what I said?”

“You always miss the things you love when you don’t have them,” she said, watching me over the lip of her glass.

“I don’t ...”

The slight lift of her eyebrows indicated disagreement. “Yes, you do, nephew. I’ve seen you around her. The way you look at her. The way she looks at *you*. It’s the same look Vicek

gives Laura when he thinks I'm not looking. She doesn't bother to hide them, which makes her smarter than the both of you."

I frowned. "That doesn't mean I love her."

It was the first time I'd used the word out loud. Just *saying* it evoked a visceral response from my dragon. He and I had been at odds ever since I banished Katie from the Dragon Isles.

"Of course you do. You're just a male. It takes you a longer time to discover these facts. It's okay. That's why I'm here. To make you see reason."

"See reason?" I shook my head. "Auntie, she was the lead researcher conducting experiments on Vicek. Your *son*. The literal heir to our kingdom. She *lied* about that fact, hid it from me, from us, the entire time she was here. How can we ever let her back? How can I trust someone like that?"

"Vicek says she was actually very nice. As does Laura, she backs it up. Don't forget, *Laura* was one of the scientists there, too." The sovereign frowned. "If only Vicek had brought her to the Peace Gala like he was supposed to. Then the two of them would have seen one another, and things would have come into the open sooner."

"I hadn't considered that about Laura," I admitted.

"Sometimes, people are just doing their jobs," she said. "That doesn't mean they hate us. Did you ever ask her why she went from that job to volunteering to be mated to a dragon?"

I looked down. "She said something about her not being a volunteer. That almost none of the women were."

"That checks with what I've heard from others," the sovereign said. "Yet, for some reason, none of them have spoken up about it. None have told us they were forced into coming here against their will. Rather strange, don't you think?"

"What reason do they have to tell us that? It's not like they trust us or care."

“Maybe. Maybe not. You would think *one* of them would say something,” she pointed out.

“Unless they have a reason not to,” I said slowly. “Like say, they used to conduct experiments on our people.”

“Or maybe they were threatened into silence about it,” my aunt suggested somewhat emphatically.

“No, Katie would have told me,” I said. “But it doesn’t matter now.”

“It might, actually,” my aunt said, reaching into a pocket of her pants and pulling out a folded piece of paper. “You should read this.”

“I don’t need a note from her,” I said somewhat firmly. “She’s gone, and that’s that.”

“It’s not *from* her. It’s from Cyrus. He escaped from the palace.”

“He *what?*” I roared.

“I’ve kept that information strictly need to know,” she said. “I have men hunting for him. But this morning I received this.”

I fumed at the knowledge that my murdering bastard of a cousin was free. After what he’d done, he deserved to rot until his trial. Hastily, I unfolded the letter and read the contents.

My red-hot anger vanished, replaced by an icy fear gripping my stomach and squeezing tight.

“He has Katie,” my aunt said, summarizing the letter. “And he’s going to use her to clear his name. When he’s done, you know he’ll kill her.”

I clamped down on my emotions and the insane bellowing of my dragon as it raged, out of its mind with anger.

“So?” I said stiffly, looking away.

Slap.

My head rocked backward as my aunt smacked me. It wasn’t overly hard, but still hard enough to shock me and

throw me off balance as I took a half-step backward to recover.

“Stop being an idiot, nephew. You love her. Admit it to yourself. Stop listening to *this*,” she said, stabbing a finger none too gently between my eyes, “and start listening to *this*.”

Her finger tapped lightly on my heart.

I frowned.

“Go get her. Before it’s too late.”

My dragon roared in agreement.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

Ajax

Finding Cyrus wasn't hard. The man *wanted* me to come after him. At least, that was what I assumed, considering he sent the letter on paper marked with identifying letterhead, providing me with an easy way to track him.

It all pointed to a trap.

My cousin was a callous, murderous bastard of a dragon, but unfortunately, he wasn't an idiot, either. I doubted he could have caused as much trouble as he had if he were less intelligent. Therefore, I had to assume the letterhead wasn't an accident. Perhaps he wanted me to *think* it was, but as I winged my way through the air and across the ocean toward the dragon-occupied territories on the coast, I was coming up with ways to thwart whatever trap he was setting for me.

In the end, I decided the straightforward approach was the one I preferred. He had Katie. I wouldn't let her stay in his grips one moment longer than necessary. Anyone who got in my way would learn the error of that.

Reaching the shore, I called up the map in my head. The letterhead was from a news station in Atlantic City. He must have commandeered it to create a video of Katie "confessing her sins." I was sure he would distribute the video among the dragons, though I wasn't sure how, considering we didn't really use TVs or phones. Either way, I had to stop him.

The skies were clear as I neared the coast, but I kept watch with a wary eye above me as well. I didn't know how many lackeys he brought with him, but I knew he wouldn't be alone. I would have to fight more of my kin. Probably even be forced to—

Two dragons launched themselves from the burned-out Hard Rock Hotel just to the east of my target. They'd concealed themselves within the building, and now, they came at me in a rush just as I was preparing to land on the parking garage next door to the broadcasting studio.

Tucking my wings in, I dropped fast behind another giant casino-hotel and momentarily out of sight of my pursuers. My wings snapped out wide, and I banked hard, whipping around the corner of the building close enough that my wingtips nearly shattered glass.

I came screaming around the hotel, having done a full loop of the building and attacked *up* into the belly of the closest dragon, who was giant and gold. Flames burst from my snout, blackening the vulnerable belly scales and causing some of them to peel free. The huge dragon roared in anger and pain, but I was moving too fast to cause any lasting damage.

They both came after me, but they were moving too slow. I reversed my banking, making a figure eight as I flew around the coastal side of the Hard Rock and then turned north again, nearly plowing into the secondary tower attached to it. Turning almost entirely on my side, I slipped between the two buildings.

Fire lashed out from behind me, shattering windows and scorching my left flank as the second dragon came hard on my tail. The crimson-scaled dragon screamed its challenge at me as I finished my loop of the hotel, wings beating hard to gain me some air.

Out of nowhere, the gold dragon slammed into my side, claws plunging deep, ripping through scales. I spun away, cursing as I leaked blood across the rooftops. He'd somehow anticipated my course and been waiting for me. I would have to be better than that.

The red dragon came on, death in its yellow-orange eyes.

I wouldn't beat those two in the air. They had the jump on me. I needed to find territory that worked more to my choosing. My eyes returned to the multi-story parking garage that had been my initial point of landing.

Angling toward it, I folded my wings in and dropped down, heading to the building. At the last moment, I angled one wing out to adjust course, then both flicked out wide, catching air and slowing me down.

Then I brought them back in and, with perfect accuracy, slid down the ramp and out of sight. I was already shifting as I went, my feet planting themselves on concrete as I slid to a stop. My wings, now sprouting from my shoulders, spread wide to keep me balanced as I gathered myself.

Concrete exploded to the left of me as the red dragon slammed into the roof and through it, using the structure to stop its progress. I winced, knowing the impact couldn't have been pleasant, but as the upper level filled with dust and flying bits of concrete, I couldn't help but admit to the efficiency of the move.

I turned to run, heading lower into the structure, but the gold dragon came barging through the exposed sides as concrete collapsed in its path.

Fire roared at me from both sides, but I was already moving, leaping and rolling out of the way, dropping over the railing to a lower level. There was a gap no more than three feet wide between the ramps leading from level to level, and I fell through it like a chute, only stopping myself on the third floor.

I took my time there, moving silently as I crept between cars, waiting for the others to come looking for me. It was also time I could spend letting my side heal. Although the wound wasn't fatal, the huge gash along the left side of my ribcage certainly wasn't pleasant, either.

"Come out, come out, wherever you are."

The words echoed through the garage over the rushing wind coming in off the ocean and swirling through the structure. They were hunting me now in their human forms.

A grin spread over my face at the overconfidence.

They *thought* they were hunting me. The truth was, they'd already sprung their trap. Now they had to come for me, and that meant I could engage them on my terms.

"Where the fuck did he go?" one of them snarled minutes later as they made their way down to my level, having scoured the rest of the garage for me. "Did he run away?"

“No, he’s still in here,” the other said, his voice deeper and calmer than his partner’s. “I can feel it.”

I wasn’t sure, but I was fairly certain the voice belonged to the gold. I rose out of my crouch, peering through the tinted windows of the hatchback, trying to get a look at my pursuers.

They had split up, one of them coming my way, the other heading the opposite direction. The one coming for me was young and had still yet to grow into his full adult muscle. He lacked any facial hair, and his face had a flushed, youthful glow. There was more excitement than awareness of the seriousness of the situation. That was the red.

I grimaced, wishing I could take the gold on first. He would be the more dangerous one, and I would have preferred to take him by surprise. I could only work with what I was given, however, so I slowly crouched down and waited as the youthful shifter drew closer to me.

Two steps before he would have seen me, I tossed a pebble under the car so it skittered across the pavement on an angle that led it behind the shifter. As I hoped, his youthful nerves reacted immediately, spinning him around at the slight noise.

He realized his mistake almost immediately, but it was too late. I hit him from behind, lifting him off his feet as my shoulder took him in the hips. His body bent backward over my shoulder as I drove upward, leaving the ground with a mighty heave. We went *up*, until his body slammed into the concrete roof and scraped along it with a sickening wet *crunch-shlick*.

The impact spun me away from him as we came back down. The windshield of a car across the aisle caught my back, collapsing inward under my weight. From across the lot, I could hear the gold shouting for his partner, but I was already moving.

“Stay down,” I snarled at the kid as he screamed in pain.

It wasn’t necessary, I realized, as he rolled over onto his back, revealing the damage to his face. I nearly retched at the sight. Something on the ceiling had caught his eye socket and

ripped down toward his mouth, taking half the skin of his face with it, leaving it dangling by a lip down onto his chin. I lifted him up by his shirt and slammed a fist into the unravaged side of his jaw, knocking him out. It was a mercy for both of us.

The gold was nearly upon me by then, and when he saw his partner's ruined face, he whirled on me, fury twisting his expression.

"No," I said coldly, stopping whatever tirade he was about to spew. "You *took* her. *You* started this. Not me. This is your fault. Leave now if you don't want to end up like him. Or worse."

The gold just roared and came at me.

Chapter Forty

Katie

“You can’t actually expect this to work,” I said, struggling again to free myself from the rope binding me to the chair.

“Of course it will work,” Cyrus said with a laugh as he wheeled me in front of the big desk usually reserved for the news anchors. “Everyone will see this.”

“*Humans* will see it,” I reminded him. “What on Earth makes you think the dragons will give a shit? Besides, all you’re going to show them is you dragons threatening a human. I don’t know if they’re going to take that too well.”

Cyrus sneered. “And what are they going to do about it?”

I stayed silent. It was a good point. Our military hadn’t shown any signs of being able to stop the dragons, only delay them slightly while civilians were evacuated.

“Remember, read off the prompter. Don’t deviate from the script.” He left the broadcast studio, retreating into the command room behind the heavily tinted walls. I could still see him, outlined vaguely by the huge bank of windows along the wall behind him, but only just.

“I’m not reading anything,” I shot back, wriggling fiercely but unable to free myself.

“You are if you want to live.” His voice came through the overhead speaker.

The threat should have sent chills through my veins, but it didn’t. I’d concluded hours ago that Cyrus had no intentions of letting me go. Even if his wild scheme to prove to his people Ajax was not fit for the Council position succeeded, I knew he intended to kill me. He would never let me live. Not after what I’d done in the lab to one of his kind.

“That’s the thing about people like you,” I said, shaking my head. “You play your hand too freely. You’re going to kill me no matter what. Why should I bother helping you before—”

The wall behind Cyrus exploded inward under the impact of a huge golden dragon. It shattered windows, destroyed beams and sprayed debris everywhere. Cyrus leaped clear of the dragon before it stopped moving, though he needn't have bothered.

It didn't have a head. The bloody stump of its neck flopped over, still pumping blood, which pooled across the floor.

A human figure appeared in the opening, supported by giant wings sprouting from its shoulders. Yellow-orange eyes glittered with fire, visible even through the tinted window.

“WHERE IS SHE?”

I sat up straight. I knew that voice, knew who it belonged to.

Fire blasted out from the figure's hand, sweeping across the chairs and equipment scattered by the dead gold dragon. Flames flickered and caught.

“Ajax!” I screamed. “I'm in here!”

The wings retracted as the figure stepped down onto the floor, folding tight across his back, too large to fully unfold inside the building.

“Katie!” he roared, striding toward me. “I'm coming.”

A fierce bellow was all the warning Ajax had before Cyrus came barreling out of the dark, striking him in the side. The two went down in a pile, the entire floor shaking as they exchanged blows. I struggled to peer over the desk, to see where they'd gone, but they were out of sight.

“Damn. Come on,” I snapped at myself, struggling even more fiercely against my bonds. I needed to get free. Tied to the chair, I was an impediment to our escape. If I could just cut myself loose, I could run for the gaping hole in the wall. Then Ajax could fly us out of there.

More roaring preceded a figure flying out of the hole into mid-air, tumbling uncontrollably.

“Ajax!” I screamed as Cyrus loomed large in the window.

“*Read the teleprompter, or I’ll kill him,*” he snarled, slapping a hand on the control panel.

A red light flicked on above the window between the studio and booth. We were live.

“Screw you, Cyrus,” I snapped. “There’s no way I’ll read whatever it is you want me to. Even if you have me tied up and are threatening to kill me. Ajax will save me.”

To my utter surprise, the dragon threw his head back and laughed. “That will do just fine, in fact. Thank you for being so naïve.”

I stared at him in shock. What was he talking about? How did my spilling the truth help *him* of all people?

Ajax came hurtling through the opening, moving too fast for Cyrus to move out of the way. They came through the window and into the broadcast studio, slamming into the desk. It moved, crashing into my knees and sending the wheeled chair I was tied to careening backward. I screamed.

“Hold on, Katie,” Ajax shouted as he pummeled Cyrus repeatedly, his eyes glowing golden. “I’m coming for you.”

“Like hell you are,” Cyrus barked, managing to get his feet under him and kicking.

Ajax disappeared through the ceiling into the floor above. Cyrus stood, casually brushing some dirt off himself, then moved to stand where my chair had been.

“Hello, world,” he said calmly. “My name is Cyrus. I am, as you may have guessed, a dragon. The reason I’m here today is to show you the future that awaits us both if we continue down this path of ‘peace’. A path where human women and dragon men unite in an abomination they call *love*. The one called Ajax is the first to be guilty of this. He will do anything, even betray his own people, to save this woman. A woman who came to us as a spy to try to learn how to harm us. She worked for the company who captured one of our own. Who used his DNA to experiment on! Yet Ajax will claim he loves her and her actions don’t matter. Is this the future you want to see?”

“Yes.”

My head came up as Ajax dropped through the hole in the ceiling, his wings spreading out for balance.

“That is the future I want,” the other dragon snarled, speaking loud enough to be picked up. “A future where we can forgive. And move on. Where our species do not have to be at war. A future where people like *you* are not welcome.”

Cyrus looked at the cameras and smiled. “You see? He admits he wants to steal your women. That he has no problem with it. That he prefers them over dragon women.”

“You’ve lost your mind,” I spat. “You’re just trying to rekindle the war so you have an excuse to kill more humans like you did—*Ack!*”

I threw myself backward over the chair as Cyrus came at me with death in his eyes, narrowly avoiding the swipe of his hands.

But Ajax was there, grabbing him and hurling him through the cameras and into the control booth beyond. The red light blinked out. We were off air. I wanted to breathe a sigh of relief, but the sounds of battling from somewhere out of sight kept me too tense.

“It doesn’t matter now,” Cyrus cackled as the floor shook from a heavy blow. “You’ll never sit on the Council if you kill me. You know that!”

“Screw the Council!” Ajax roared, followed by the meaty sound of flesh-on-flesh contact. “None of that matters. Not now. Not without her!”

I shivered. Ajax was willing to give it all up for me?

“Why can’t you just see they are inferior, cousin? They deserve to die. All of them. This world belongs to *us!* What can you possibly see in her?”

“You said it yourself,” Ajax shouted above the sounds of combat. “Love!”

I flinched as the air in the room jumped a solid ten degrees in an instant. Then twenty. Thirty. Sweat broke out across my skin. The air grew harder to breathe as oxygen was consumed

faster than it could rush in. My chest was rising and falling rapidly, but I was growing lightheaded. The temperature kept going up, turning the room into a sauna and then some. From somewhere beyond my view, a bright light glowed and flickered.

Then the light went out, and the heat dissipated. Air rushed back in, puckering my skin.

A split second later, someone vaulted the desk, landing in a crouch at my side.

“Katie. Are you okay?” Ajax was already ripping apart the ropes holding me down.

“I’m fine,” I said, sagging in relief. “I’m okay, I promise. Are you?”

He nodded.

“And Cyrus?”

“No longer an issue.” He refused to elaborate, but I could put two and two together. The heat, the flickering light.

Ajax tried to shield my eyes as he escorted me from the broadcast studio, but it was rather hard to avoid seeing the charred and blackened area. There were no signs of Cyrus, but the floor was coated in a fine layer of ash. I did the math.

“Can we go?” I asked.

“Of course,” he said, scooping me into his arms and holding tight as we leaped from the building, his wings spreading from his back, carrying us into the sky and down to the parking garage where he could shift. “It’s time to go home.”

Chapter Forty-One

Katie

It was dark by the time we landed on the roof of his house. He was finished shifting almost before my feet had landed on the stone. In an instant, I was in his arms.

“Oh, Ajax,” I whispered, clinging to him, never wanting to let go. “I’m so sorry for lying to you. I should have told you from the start. I just ... by the time I was ready to, things were so complicated. I didn’t want to ruin what we had. So, I hid the truth, hoping it would never come up.”

“Hush,” my gentle giant of a dragon shifter whispered, brushing the side of my cheek, stilling the unshed tears in my eyes, driving them back. “It’s okay.”

“No, it’s not,” I said. “I need to tell you this. To get it off my chest.”

“Okay,” he said, pressing his forehead to mine. “Then tell me. But I’m not letting you go. Now that I have you back, I never intend to let go. You’re mine, Katie Beckinson, and you’re going to have to accept that.”

“I do,” I whispered with a shiver at the eternity in his words. “I want to be yours. But I need you to hear it from me that I was mistaken about you and most of your people. That I feel guilty over what I did. I tried to destroy it, you know.”

“What do you mean?”

“When you sent me back, my old boss approached me, and I pretended to hate you all so she would bring me back to work. Then I tried to delete all the data from our experiments.”

“You did? Katie, that’s ... wow.”

“It didn’t work,” I said, patting him on the chest, feeling his muscles underneath, my fingers digging in just a bit deeper as I did. “They had backups. They expected my treachery.”

“They?”

I nodded. “My boss was working with Cyrus. To split things up. He wanted to resume the war. And he made deals with her so she could gain power. Perhaps become president, I don’t know. But she stood to benefit hugely from it. I’m sure both of them were going to betray the other the second they could.”

“Agreed,” Ajax rumbled. “Cyrus was farther gone than I thought. The war awoke something in him. He went mad with bloodlust. Even at the end there, the broadcast, it didn’t make much sense.”

“Not unless he was trying to rile everybody up. Get your people going with the whole dragon-human love story angle. Then kill me live on air to have the humans up in arms.”

“Do you believe that?”

I shrugged. “It’s basically what he was saying. I don’t know how he thought it would work, but that’s what he was doing.”

“Not that,” Ajax said a bit stiffly, swallowing audibly, his fingers digging a bit deeper into my skin as he held tight. “The other thing.”

“What other thing?”

“The part about humans and dragons being in love. Do you believe that?”

I looked up at him, catching his gaze, refusing to let it go. “What are you trying to say, Ajax?”

His chest rose and fell once, twice, three times before he responded.

“I’m trying to tell you I love you.”

I smiled up at him, watching his face, seeing the unease and the nerves on features that were always so strong and even. His eyes were ever so slightly crinkled at the corners, his lips flattened almost into a line, while his jaw was clamped tight.

“You do?”

He nodded, some of the tension leaving. “Yes. I love you with every fiber of my being. Both halves of me want the whole of you. Right here. Right now and for forever. I want

you to be *mine*, and I want to be *yours*. Nobody else. Never anyone else. You are my mate. Forever.”

My mouth was dry. My stomach was doing backflips. My heart was sprinting the hundred-meter dash. Thunder roared in my ears as blood raced through my body, turning nerves on end, hair straight up, and shortening my breath.

“You really mean that, don’t you?” I somehow got out.

“With everything that makes me who I am,” he growled. “My soul laid bare before you.”

“I accept,” I told him, tilting my head to the other side, watching the golden glow of fire replace the normally still blue seas in his eyes. “I accept your love, Ajax of the dragons, and in return, I give you my body, my being, my *soul*. For yours to keep, to care for, and to love. Because I love you. I *love* you. Fully. Entirely.”

There was no more to say after that. Clothes flew, bodies touched, and the stone grew warm below us as Ajax gently poured fire into it, heating it. By the time he laid me down, the rock was embracing me, relaxing my muscles as Ajax spread my legs.

My soul wasn’t the only thing laid bare to him, and I watched, seeing the desire in his eyes as he ran a hand up the inside of my thigh, teasing my clit, torturing me with his soft touch. He rubbed me gently until the heat he was stoking from my pussy was enough to overwhelm that of the rock.

Then he licked his hand and rubbed it over his cock, turning the tip to a perfect glistening glow in the moonlight, seconds before he rubbed the slick skin over my folds. Again, he teased me, that time with every movement of his hips as he pushed the smooth skin of his head against my clit and back. It was torturous, and yet I couldn’t escape.

Not because of his body on top of mine. Not because of his hands holding my wrists out wide on the stone. Not because of his lips on mine or running down my neck and across every inch of exposed flesh he could find. None of that kept me there.

I stayed because I *wanted* to. I longed to give myself to him. And when he finally took me, sliding his cock into me, my cries flew out into the night. I wrapped my legs around his waist. My arms around his neck. I held on tight, pulling him deeper, begging for it, begging for *him*.

Words meant little. Body language was king. He grabbed my hands. Pushed me down by my wrists. Pulled me tight by my ribs. Held me tight at the waist. A kiss here. A touch there. All the while, his cock pumping into me and out, filling me deep and then withdrawing. I whimpered every time, my eyes open and wide, begging him to come back. To give it to me.

He always did. An unspoken promise to always be there. To provide for every need I had.

“I love you,” I said, the only words I could remember.

Ajax echoed them. His eyes glowed with fire. His skin burned to the touch. But I didn’t flee.

Wings sprouted across his back, wrapping us in their cocoon, protecting me. Sheltering me. Holding me close. I arched back, my body slick with sweat as he slid ever slightly deeper. I jerked, and my walls clamped down around him. With eyes wide, I held the sides of his head, staring into him, letting him watch as I reached the ultimate pleasure.

A deep, guttural roar filled our winged shelter. It wasn’t human. It was his dragon bellowing its claim to any and all.

Ajax’s hips ground harder against me. Faster. My body began to shake, my tiny breasts bouncing wildly. He took it all in with an animalistic fury that only drove him wilder. I clung to him for all I could. His cock was thick and hard, and I cried out each time he shoved it deep.

My pussy soon tingled again. I was near the edge. Running at full blast, I couldn’t stop. Wouldn’t stop.

“Fill me,” I whispered in his ears seconds before my eyes rolled back into my head.

Ajax’s mouth opened wide as he groaned loudly. His cock swelled more, and I came hard around it at the same time he poured himself deep inside me. Thrust after thrust filled me

with warmth as I took his seed, welcomed it into my body, basking in the heat even as my mind tore itself apart with my own orgasm.

Nerves fired. Muscles twitched, and Ajax ever so gently pulled me to him.

“Forever mine,” he whispered in my ear.

“Forever yours.”

Forever together.

Chapter Forty-Two

Katie

“So, what happens now?” I asked, leaning my head on Ajax’s shoulder, basking in his presence as we stared out over the Dragon Isles from the palace balcony.

“What do you mean?” he rumbled. “In regard to what? Cyrus is dead. He’s not going to be any danger anymore.”

“Not what I was talking about,” I said. “Your Council. The ceasefire.”

Us.

I kept quiet on that last part, mainly because of who was standing on the other side of Ajax.

“You wish to know if we will be returning to war,” the Sovereign of All Dragonkind said, correctly interpreting my thoughts.

“Yes. With so many of the women returning home ...”

Several were staying, but it had been decided those who did not feel a connection like Ajax and I did would be allowed to return to humanity. What *hadn’t* been talked about was how that would impact the ceasefire.

“Others will come instead,” the sovereign replied.

“So, you aren’t going back to war?” I asked nervously.

“Not for the moment,” she said. “The Council cannot vote without its full membership.”

“That will change when you fill the empty seat left by Lyra,” Ajax pointed out. “You’ll have to do that sooner rather than later.”

“True. But for now, I can stall. Thanks to Cyrus’s actions, the War Party is not in favor currently, which means I can avoid appointing anyone from their ranks. There are many members of my bloodline I would prefer to appoint, but that, too, is currently not well looked upon. I will continue to play

all sides off one another for as long as I can. Hopefully, the thirst for war will fade. With Vicek returned to us, I don't see the need to resume fighting."

"But you aren't going to cede any land back either." I didn't make it a question.

"No," she said sternly. "A lesson had to be taught. We will continue to control the land we have taken and govern it according to our laws. The humans may not like it, but it will be a constant reminder about the consequences of their actions."

I wanted to argue, to say the lessons *had* been learned in all the deaths that had come about from the war, but I knew a losing argument when I heard one. There was still a great deal of simmering resentment toward humanity for our kidnapping and subsequent treatment of Vicek. Although the heir to the dragon kingdom had forgiven me publicly at a reception the day before, I was still a long way from being universally loved.

Not that I felt the need to be. There was only one person whose love I needed, and he stood right next to me.

"At least Julie is safe," I said instead, clinging to Ajax a little tighter. "Thanks to you."

After my rescue from Cyrus's clutches, I had confessed everything to Ajax. Including the threats McCrutten had made toward my remaining family, including my sister. A few days later, several dragons Ajax trusted implicitly had paid a visit to the offices. I wasn't sure exactly what had transpired because he refused to tell me, but the news was still going on about how the entire war had been caused by one Elizabeth McCrutten.

I doubted she would see the light of day as a free woman ever again. Given the other option I suspected she was presented with by the team of dragons, prison was the smart choice.

"Yes," Ajax agreed. "And in a couple more days, you'll be able to verify that yourself."

Stiffening, I twisted to look into his face, seeing the hints of a grin spread across his rough features. “What are you talking about? I thought you already did that?”

“I did,” he said. “But I thought you might want to see her yourself. Say hello. Perhaps even introduce me.”

“You’re bringing her *here*?” I yelped in a mixture of shock and excitement.

“One of my men is, yes,” he said, that lopsided happy grin taking full control of his face, reaching up and touching his eyes, making them glow an extra bright blue in the sunlight. “I take it that was an okay idea?”

“Yes!” I cried, flinging my arms around him, throwing propriety in front of the sovereign right out the window. “Thank you, Ajax. That was so kind of you.”

“I love you, you know,” he said, bending slightly to kiss the top of my head. “Don’t say it, Auntie.”

The sovereign giggled, a very nonregal sound. “If a wise aunt doesn’t get to say ‘I told you so’ every so often to her favorite nephew, what point is there in being a wise auntie?”

“Perhaps,” he muttered, shaking his head.

His aunt patted him on the shoulder. “I’m glad you’re both happy,” she said, nodding at me, then departing back into the palace, leaving us alone.

“I can’t believe you’re bringing Julie here,” I said. “She’s going to love it.”

“Good.” Ajax hesitated.

“What is it?” I asked, looking up, seeing a hint of nerves in his eyes as he stared out into the distance. “Something wrong?”

“Not at all,” he said. “Just something ... *missing*.”

“What’s missing?”

Ajax worked his jaw, then stepped away from me, creating some space.

“Is everything okay? Did I do something?” I asked, my nerves jumping slightly at the intentional gap.

“No. But I was hoping you *could* do something for me,” he said. “Two somethings, actually. One now. One when your sister arrives.”

“What’s that?” I frowned.

“We’re mated,” he stated.

“I know,” I said, feeling the tug toward him even as I agreed.

“That’s a dragon thing. A bonding between partners that happens when one dragon chooses another.”

“You already explained all that to me,” I said, my stomach tightening in on itself. Why was he being so cryptic.

“There’s one thing I sort of left out.”

“Which is what?”

“When two dragons find their mates, they ... *mark* one another.”

I cocked my head. “What do you mean? I’m assuming you don’t mean a hickey.”

Ajax shook his head, and his body shifted slightly, growing a little. His arms sprouted scales, and his fingers became claws. Moving very delicately with one hand, he stuck a claw under one orange and black scale and pried it loose. Then he returned to his human form, holding the scale. It was half the size of my palm.

“What are you going to do with that?” I asked nervously.

“If you accept me,” he said solemnly, “I will place it on your skin, and it will become a part of you. *I* will become a part of you. We will be bonded. Connected on a deeper level than you can imagine.”

“Where?” I asked.

“It is traditional to place it on the breastbone,” he said, placing a finger high on my chest between my breasts. “It will

meld itself to you, move with you.”

I stared at the orange-black piece of his body, then into his eyes. They looked back at me and *into* me.

“Okay,” I said quietly.

Gently, using his other hand, Ajax pulled down on the collar of my shirt, exposing my skin. Then he placed the scale on me.

I hissed. Not in pain but in surprise at the coolness of it. There was a constricting feeling in my skin around the area, and a stiffness with each breath, but it quickly faded.

“Is that it? I don’t—”

A *presence* exploded in my mind. Warm and comforting like the embrace of a loved one, it filled me with a glow I couldn’t trace, couldn’t locate, yet at the same time knew it was there.

“Wow,” Ajax murmured, his eyes wide. “Can you feel that, too?”

I nodded.

He laughed, and the presence inside me bubbled with joy.

“I can *feel* you,” I whispered, astonished. “When you laughed, I *felt* it.”

“Just like I can feel your amazement,” he said with a shake of his head. “So, *this* is what it’s like.”

Ajax radiated his happiness, and I giggled at how it warmed my soul. It was as he’d said, unlike anything I’d experienced before. A closeness to him that drove away any hesitations, any doubts I may have harbored deep down inside.

Because I could quite literally *feel* his love beating inside me.

I frowned. “There was something else you wanted. When my sister arrives?”

“Moving on from this already?” he asked distractedly, staring at me giddily.

“No,” I said with a shake of my head. “This will take some time to get used to. But I can’t help but wonder what *else* you want?”

“That’s one’s a lot simpler,” he said. “I just want you to introduce me to your sister.”

“Of course I’ll do that. Did you think for some reason I would hide you or what you are?”

“No, no, nothing like that,” he said with a smile, waving aside my concerns. “No, I was hoping perhaps you might change *how* you introduce me.”

“What do you mean?”

He shoved a hand into his pocket and pulled out a burnished orange ring that had to be made from a dragon scale, and knelt to one knee, looking up at me. “I was hoping you might introduce me as your fiancé.”

Chapter Forty-Three

Katie

“Are you sure about this?”

I glanced over at Julie as I waited behind the closed doors, soft music playing in the distance.

“About marrying Ajax?” I asked, closing my eyes and looking inside myself, finding that bright, glowing ball of excitement and nerves that seemed to come from somewhere *else*.

Considering it was Ajax I could sense, it *did* come from somewhere else. He was nervous, just like me, but underneath that was the giddy excitement about getting married soon. Not just to anyone but to *me*.

“Yes, that, but also marrying a dragon,” she said, picking at my dress, pulling the train out just right, then adjusting it by half an inch and moving on.

“Surer than anything I’ve ever done,” I said, watching her fuss over me.

“Okay. Just making sure. Because you can still back out, you know.”

“No, I can’t,” I said, tapping my chest and the dragon scale embedded in my skin. “Bit late for that, don’t you think?”

A wave of confidence and anticipation washed through me. Ajax must be starting down the aisle, toward the altar.

“Yeah, I guess,” Julie said, standing up at last.

An inch shorter than me, she had the same black hair, though her eyes were a darker brown, deep and full, without the honeyed amber that speckled in my gaze. She had a strong chin and thin nose, but when we smiled, there was no debating the fact we were sisters.

“I know you think it’s weird,” I said, gripping my flowers in one hand so I could rest the other on her shoulder. “But it’s just *different*. Not weird. It all makes sense to me.”

“It’s just so *fast*,” Julie said, shaking her head. “I’ve been here a week. You’ve known him for so little time.”

“When you know, you know,” I told her. “And I *know*. I spent a year and a half engaged to Tim. We were together for multiple years before that and look how *it* turned out.”

“I guess.”

“Ajax is my person, sis,” I told her as the music swelled. “And that’s your cue.”

“I just need to look out for you. Make sure you’re happy. That’s my job, you know,” she said, adjusting her hair slightly.

“I am happy. Beyond happy, really. It’s impossible to properly describe unless you experience it yourself. But the dragons aren’t like humans. They aren’t out to deceive, to use me. Ajax *wants* me. His dragon wants me, too. And I can feel them. I know their wants and desires.”

“It sounds like you’re in a throuple, not a couple,” Julie remarked dryly.

“In some ways, I guess,” I said. “But not the one that matters.”

“Whatever you say, sis. You always were the more free-spirited of us.” She sobered suddenly. “I just wish Mom and Dad could be here.”

“Me, too,” I said softly. “But you’re here.”

“As if I’d let my sister marry the second ‘man of her dreams’ without me,” Julie said, sticking out her tongue.

I shook my head. “I cannot *wait* until you get hitched. My maid of honor speech is going to be *epic*.”

“You wouldn’t.”

My smile broadened. “Time for you to get out there, sis.”

“Katie ...” she said warningly.

“*Walk*,” I commanded, winking.

“See you in a moment,” she said, slipping out the door and heading down the aisle toward the altar.

I approached the doors next, biting my lip. The first time I'd done that, I'd been a ball of nerves and doubt and fear. Excited, too, of course, but it had been overshadowed by everything else.

Now, I had nothing but the warm, glowing ball in my chest.

The doors opened, and I stepped forward.

Ajax laid his eyes on me.

I had just enough time to see them widen and then the world exploded. His awe and excitement swept through me like a giant wave, urging me forward. It swept me down the aisle and into his waiting arms. Building and building, it carried us together into our future.

A future we would share *together*.

"Hello, husband," I whispered when it was all said and done.

"Hello, wife," he replied.

My skin tingled, and my heart raced. The butterflies in my stomach danced.

All was right in the world.

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About the Author

Riley Storm

Riley is one of those early morning people you love to hate, because she swears she doesn't need caffeine, even though the coffee-maker is connected to her smartphone. She lives in a three-story townhouse by the good graces of a tabby cat who rules the house, the couch, the table, well, basically everywhere. When she's not groveling for forgiveness for neglecting to pet her kitty enough, Riley is strapped into her writing chair coming up with crazy worlds where she can make her own decisions of when feeding time is and how much coffee can be drunk without her friends—of which she has three—holding yet another intervention that they threaten to post on the internet.

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