

Royal Dragon

Royal Dragon

Dragoneer: Book 1

Ash Roberts

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Copyright © 2020 by Ash Roberts

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or used in any manner without written permission of the copyright owner except for the use of quotations in a book review.

Dedication

*To my wife, who believes in me more than I tend to believe in
myself*

Acknowledgements

It takes a village to write a book. I couldn't have done it without the help and support of my village.

Monica, who is much smarter than me and taught me much of what I know about the craft, Chrishaun, Heather A and Heather D for letting me bounce ideas off of them, Ripley for phenomenal editing, Anna, who provided me with the kernel of the idea for this book, Riley for babysitting while I wrote, Inara for believing in me, and my mother for always encouraging me, ever since the first time I wrote a story in the fourth grade.

Chapter One

I woke from a nap I hadn't intended to take to find the sun high in the sky. I was supposed to be meeting someone in the castle right now. I shouldn't have gone out at all, but Elves are made of nature, and it calls to us. At least, that's the excuse I would give if I got in trouble. But I wouldn't because I was the Princess.

On the west side of the property, a large meadow separated my home from the city below. A hill gave a magnificent view of stone buildings and thatched roofs and farmland beyond it. It was as close to seeing the world from the sky as I wanted to get.

I was nearly back to the castle when, a shadow sped across the ground, crossing mine. Large. Winged. *Dragon*. My heart raced, and an uncontrollable panic rose inside of me. *It's just flying over. It won't come back.* But even as I thought it, the rider circled back, the huge Orange beast he controlled barrelling down on me. I ducked inside the nearest doorway, gasping for breath. Hidden in the cool darkness of its shaded overhang, my mind slipped back to the day of my fifth birthday.

My grandfather held estates in the south, close to the front of our war with the Orc's kingdom of Glamhoth. My mother didn't approve, but because it was my birthday, Grandfather let me ride with him as he made his rounds that day. On our way back, the horse suddenly snorted and balked. Grandfather spurred the animal on, but it almost bucked us off.

While the mare settled back on all four hooves, I saw them. "Ooh, dragons," I squealed, pointing at the two winged-creatures low over the horizon.

Grandfather tensed behind me. He yanked at the reins. "Move, you drafted animal, or I'll feed you to those beasts myself." He regained control of the horse and we galloped back to his house. I bounced in the saddle and grabbed tightly at the arm he held around me.

"To arms," he shouted as we rode. "Orcs attack on dragons. To arms!"

Farmhands streamed from the fields to the guardhouses where soldiers handed out swords, staves, and other weapons. Closer to the house, tradespeople assembled any tools at hand for defence, while children stacked buckets by the well.

At the stables. Grandfather jumped off his mount before we even stopped. He pulled me down and carried me inside as easily as I did one of my dolls. We cut through the kitchens where the cooks were stripping the room of its knives and cleavers, sticking them into belts and holsters.

In the sitting room, The Royal Guard surrounded my parents, swords pointing outward. They saw us and parted, making way. "Kalia!" Mother cried, grabbing me, a terrified look in her eyes.

"Get to the kitchens," Grandfather commanded. "You can hide in the root cellar. You will be safe there." He pushed through the guard and took down the polished broadsword that hung above the mantle.

"Dad, no," Mother said. "Come with us."

He held the weapon up, checking that the blade had remained true after sitting idle so long. "This is my land, and I will defend it," he said. "And defend you." Without another word, he was gone.

The guards ushered us into the kitchen and pulled open the cellar's hatch. Mother carried me towards it, but I squirmed out of her grasp. "My dolly," I cried. Guards reached for me, but I scrambled between their legs. My young mind understood there was danger. That was exactly why I had to save it.

I'd left it on the parapet, the low stone wall surrounding the second floor. It was the best vantage point of Grandfather's property.

As I stood at that wall, I saw my grandfather down below in the courtyard, raising his sword to an Orc mounted on a huge green dragon.

He swung at the beast, but it caught the sword in its talons. Another great claw flipped him into the air, his body crashing into the stone rampart. He did not move.

"No," I cried. Hands grabbed at me, and I struggled, biting and kicking like my life depended on it.

"Hush, child." The Captain of the Royal Guard held me tighter.

I stopped struggling and fell limp in his arms. Tears fell freely as he took me back to my parents.

"Lord Hollysword is dead," he told them somberly.

I don't remember much more from that day. We spent hours in that cellar. Only the occasional crashing noise made it through the thick door. When it finally opened, the Captain looked down at us, a tall Dark Elf in Dragoneer garb standing at his side.

"The fight is over," The Captain told us. "Thanks to this man and his dragon."

The Dark Elf wore dark orange leather and a bloody bandage over his right hand. Father thanked him for his bravery and gave him money for a healer. But I knew he had to be bad to ride a dragon. A dragon killed my Grandfather right before my eyes. I did not trust this man or the enormous Orange beast that paced outside our door. Dragons were killers. They were evil.

And now, back in the here and now, a dragon was invading my home once again. Was it an attack or some kind of pretense at help? Either way, I had to pull it together. I had to warn my parents, or at least the guards. I needed to move, but I stood there in my shadowed doorway, shaking for some moments before I found the courage to continue into the castle.

I hurried to the wing where Father conducted business. I wasn't exactly forbidden from being there. He just didn't like "silly little girls running about." But I was neither silly nor running, I was on a mission.

"If you don't send more resources," a deep and scratchy voice said, "we won't be able to cover the front. Fawla won't be the only province to fall." Voices like that came from long years of yelling from dragon.

The dragon wasn't an attacker. Inside, my father held court with one of the Dragoners of Darneta. They were our army who rode dragons into battle during times of war. I knew I shouldn't eavesdrop just outside the door, but if I was to be a competent wife to the next king of Darneta someday, I needed to be informed. And the heavy oak door was slightly open anyway. It was an easy enough mistake. The thing weighed more than I did.

I leaned closer. I could justify it all I wanted, but truly I was curious about the Dragoner. I couldn't understand how any man could spend his life around those terrible beasts. I wanted to catch a peak at someone that crazy.

Father sat on his throne wearing the thick fur robes he reserved for formal occasions. And the man pacing before him was someone I instantly recognized. He was the same Draogoner from that horrible day ten years ago. In place of the hand that been bandaged the last time I saw him, a metal hook protruded from a harness around a rounded stump. This must be Authand, the famous Dragoner Colonel.

He turned, glancing my direction, and I ducked back behind the door, holding my breath. Thankfully, he must not have seen me because he resumed his ranting about feed for his dragons.

"You will have to make do," Father told him. When I peeked again, I could see him gripping the armrests of his chair. "The Goblins have been destroying our crops. The people will revolt if I send food to dragons before Elves."

"The people will die if the dragons aren't up to fighting strength," the rider thundered back. "There is more to Darneta than your cushy seat here in Kastea. You need to stop thinking of popularity and start thinking of survival. If you don't, well, the other kingdoms have need of Dragoners as well." I couldn't believe Father let him talk like that.

Each kingdom had its own corp of Dragoneers. It had never occurred to me that a fleet might emigrate to another kingdom if they weren't treated well. The idea felt almost treasonous. I would have had Authand thrown in the dungeons if he'd said such a thing to me.

But Father stayed calm. He was angry; that was for sure. A wave of color flashed across his face and ears before disappearing. He took a breath and set his expression into a deep frown. Was Father just going to take the rebuke? A king shouldn't accept criticism from commoners like this Authand. I put my hand on the door. If Father wouldn't handle the matter, I would.

"What are you doing?" Mother demanded from behind me. "Etlin is waiting for you in the gardens." I would swear she was part air elemental the way she could sneak up on people. She always told me ladies glide when they walk, not run from spot to spot like I did.

I turned away from the gaping door casually. "I was on my way when I heard a noise. I think there is something wrong with Father."

She shook her head. "More like you were nosing into private business." Her frown softened into a smile. "So, what did you learn?"

I crossed my arms. "A Dark Elf is being belligerent towards Father. I don't understand how someone like that could be in charge of our military."

"They are still Elves," she reprimanded my prejudice. "Never judge a person by their appearance. It is their character that counts. And you are one to talk about belligerence. Now go. Ladies do not keep their suitors waiting." She gave me a gentle push.

"But Father-"

"Your father can handle his own affairs without you. Just like you should be attending to your own affairs right now." She held the same graceful poise as a moment ago, but her features looked harder now. It was an expression of patience wearing. I'd seen that look many times growing up, and it wouldn't go well if I didn't comply with her demands.

I started jogging to the courtyard.

"Ladies walk," she called after me.

I slowed down but still couldn't manage the gentle footfalls of my mother. She was a true lady, and I was something else entirely. But she still loved me fiercely, and I her.

Etlin slouched on the wide stones surrounding the fountain, one hand drawing slow circles in the still water. I was half an hour late for our meeting, at least. He straightened and stood at my noisy entrance. A few short steps closed the gap between us. I was still upset at Authand and my mother, but I melted a little at the sight of him in his starched breaches and silk shirt. I smiled as he kissed my nose.

I tried to give a girlish giggle, but, as usual, my body refused to behave with the grace and poise I had supposedly been born to. Instead, it came out as a snort.

Etlin laughed.

My ears turned red, but I laughed with him.

His arms slid down my arms, taking my hands in his.

I could have stayed there, looking into his eyes forever. Or better yet, we could have snuck off into the shadows and really kissed. But, of course, that wouldn't have been appropriate behavior for a princess.

"Guess who I saw?" I asked him, trying to return my attention to the problem of dragons at the castle.

"Hopefully somebody important, considering how late you were." He grinned.

I stuck out my tongue at him. It wasn't very regal, but I didn't care. "A Dragoner Colonel. He was meeting with Father."

"He probably arrived early for the hatching," Etlin speculated. "The other races should be here soon. Makes sense that he would want to arrive beforehand to greet them."

"The cooks have been preparing food for days. Some of it smells really bad." I made a face as I recalled the thick smell of blood from the cow they'd drained for the Nightbloods. The Wolf-shifters would eat the meat, so nothing would go to waste. The Humans and Elementals ate ordinary enough food, but what Orcs ate was completely disgusting. It was bad enough that Orcs were allowed in

the castle at all. But there was an official truce now, because the Goblins were the enemy of us all. If we didn't stand together, they would outnumber and obliterate us. Still, the Orcs' food should have been illegal. Bile rose in my throat, just thinking about it.

This brought a fresh bout of laughter from him. "I'm sure they cringe at our diet as well. But I wouldn't mind if they didn't come. Then we could keep all of the eggs for ourselves."

My stomach revolted at the idea. "They can keep the eggs," I said. "Don't we have enough dragons?"

"Come now, you can't mean that. They're our primary means of fighting the Goblins. You can't be afraid of dragons forever."

"They killed my grandfather. I watched it happen. I'm not afraid. I just won't forgive." Of course, it was a lie. I'd been terrified by the mere shadow of a dragon earlier. It had made me feel like that helpless five-year-old all over again.

Etlin stood up straight. "A dragon is a weapon, just like a sword. One cannot blame the weapon for the wielder's actions. Beside, that war is over. They're our allies now."

I hated it when Etlin got all manly and lordly on me. As if I needed a lecture on dragons and swords and wars. He was so nice to look at and kiss, though. But I was completely not in the mood anymore.

"Maybe you should leave," I said letting go of his hand.

"But—I—We," he stammered, surprised I would turn him away after he'd given me such a fine argument against my silly girlish ways.

"Go, really," I said, dismissing him. "We'll talk later."

Chapter Two

The hatchery lay just a mile east of the capital. Previous times the dragons had chosen Darneta for laying their broods, the other noble children liked to come down here to gawk at the infant dragons and the young Dragoneers chosen to care for them. I always had an excuse. I was ill, I'd injured myself, I was needed at the castle.

But while my parents had humored me when I was younger, I was fifteen now. By this time next year, I'd be making preparations for my marriage to Etlin.

So, I couldn't avoid the duties of state any longer. Instead, I was stuck in an underground cavern staring at a dragon egg. And if that wasn't bad enough, there were dozens more where that had come from. They were tucked behind a large wooden door waiting for their turn on the raised dais in the center of the cave, with several rows of stone benches forming a U around it. At least the royal box was toward the back, even if its elevation made me feel more exposed.

Steam rose from nearby pools, making the air humid. No natural light penetrated the underground space, so lanterns were suspended from the ceiling, casting a flickering yellow glow on everything.

"When is it going to do something?" I asked, fidgeting in my seat. "We've been here an hour already." Pretending to be bored wasn't as easy as I'd hoped, when all I really wanted to do was flee.

"You are witnessing the miracle of life, young lady." Mother patted my hand firmly enough to express her disapproval. "A new soul being born into the world. It cannot be rushed."

How could she forget that one of those 'miracles of life' had ended her father's? How could she be so forgiving?

"But I don't want to be here," I moaned. "I want to go home and witness the miracle of a soft bed."

Mother glared at me, and I knew I had crossed a line. She gave me her disappointed nod, the kind that meant her reprimand would come later, in private, where I couldn't make a scene. Father, however, had no such qualms. He turned in his chair and leaned in close to my face. I pulled back, but he grabbed my wrists—right there in front of the guards and servants, and even the commoners closest to our box.

"You are the princess of Darneta, the greatest of the Seven Kingdoms," he said. "You have a duty to your people to be present for important events. You don't have to like it. Now, sit and watch these eggs until something happens. And when they hatch, you will cheer and look happy."

He turned back around in his seat, facing the dais with its egg. Mother passed me a cloth, and I dabbed my eyes, careful not to smear the little bit of makeup I'd been allowed to wear. I glanced around. The guards stood stoic as ever, but the servants were doing their best not to look in my direction. A few rows ahead of us, I caught Etlin's eyes. He looked away quickly, pretending to be intensely interested in the egg as it sat on the heated rocks.

I took a breath, looking at it myself. I could do this. After all, it was just an egg. An egg couldn't kill. That came later. When it hatched. But for now, it was just an egg, like the chicken eggs I ate for breakfast, only larger.

I studied it. It stood three feet high and could have been a rock if not for the perfect ovoid shape of it. Once, dragons had hatched in the wild, and the mother's had arranged their eggs to look like natural formations to protect from predators. I couldn't image what predators a dragon could have.

The egg wobbled.

I sucked in my breath. It wouldn't be just an egg much longer.

It wobbled again, and a crack formed near the top.

I tried not to panic, gripping my seat with both hands to keep myself from jumping up and running out.

Silence fell over the crowd as we watched the egg fracture.

The potential Dragoneers scrambled for position, the older teens pushing to get in front while some of the younger contestants sought shelter behind their larger competitors. Save for the Dwarves, who abhorred the very thought of flight, every kingdom race was represented on the hatching floor. A Wolf-shifter and a Nightblood shoved each other, nearly breaking into a fight.

Then, a tapping sound froze everyone, and a blue beak thrust through a crack in the shell. Tiny silver talons poked out next, pushing the opening wider. Finally, the egg split open in fractured pieces, and an infant dragon spilled from it.

It pushed up on its wing claws and craned its head, looking around and screeching like one of Father's racing hawks, except louder. It stood about five feet tall, and light filtered through the translucent wings to cast a blue pall over the nearby contestants. As it swung its head this way and that, crying for its mother, I got a good look at its odd-shaped skull.

"What's wrong with it?" I blurted.

The entire audience turned at my outburst and stared. I felt my ears growing red. But there was something obviously wrong with the dragon. Usually, the monsters had large, pointy, Elf-like ears. They didn't have stubby little flaps.

The dignitaries and hopefuls weren't the only one whose attention I had caught.

The baby dragon turned its head and looked at me, its eyes seeming to pierce my soul and examine the very heart of me.

"*She*". I heard a voice whisper behind me.

I whirled around but there was no one there. Slowly, I turned back to the dragon.

"*She*", the voice said again. "*I'm a girl, like you. Don't worry; my features will grow in time to look more like yours*".

I jumped up, sending my chair flying. I scrambled backwards, away from the dragon.

It hissed and stumbled towards the stands, barreling through the contestants on the hatching floor.

The spectators backed away, crowding the sides of the viewing area.

It – "*I keep telling you, I'm a she*" – screeched again and started climbing up the rock wall that separated the arena from the royal viewing box.

I cowered in the corner as the dragon approached. The little blue creature wasn't as tall as a grown man, but all I could see, in my mind's eye, was the huge green dragon that had killed my Grandfather.

"Get that beast under control," my father shouted.

Guards closed in around my parents with spears pointed at the evil thing.

"No, protect my daughter." He shooed them away. "It's after the Princess. Save her." He pulled his own sword out. It was only a ceremonial piece with a gem-encrusted hilt and polished blade, but I appreciated the gesture.

A guard stepped towards the dragon; it eyed him with tilted head as if trying to decide if he were friend or foe. Three more guards converged around me.

The dragon saw this and leapt into the air. I thought it was going to fly away, but instead the creature tumbled back to the ground right on top of me.

My breath left me as its head pushed into my chest. I couldn't move. This was it. Hopefully Grandfather would meet me on the other side to lead me to the Fields of Arman. Maybe there was a special section for those who had been killed by dragons.

But instead of chomping down on my head or impaling me with its sharp claws, the dragon turned towards the guards, rose to its hind legs and flapped its wings.

I sucked in a breath as its weight lifted off my chest.

A guard thrust his sword, and the dragon backed from it, pinning me once again.

"Get off of me," I gasped, bringing my arms up to my head. To the guards, I pleaded. "Help me."

The dragon hissed and snapped at the men as they pressed closer. From under the beast, I could see their expressions as my father's soldiers debated whether they could kill it.

"Stop!" shouted a voice, echoing through the chamber. "Get away from that dragon," Colonel Authand commanded. He hadn't been present at the beginning of the hatching, but he was here now. His Orange dragon, too large to fit into the hatching cavern, peeked its head through a door and trumpeted in displeasure.

Why was he protecting a dragon that was attacking me? A growl of frustration rose up in my throat. "*Wait, had I just growled?*"

"*I'm not attacking you.*" The whispery voice in my head said. "*I'm keeping you safe from these assassins*".

The Colonel closed the distance to the seating area and leapt over the wall. He reached the guards surrounding us and yanked the first one away by his sword arm. The guard twisted and swung at Authand, but despite his disability the Colonel dodged the blow with ease.

"Back off," he said, and the other guards obeyed. "She is only protecting her rider."

"*Exactly. You are my rider and it is my duty to save you from these scoundrels.*"

That was when I realized the voice I'd been hearing was the dragon hatchling. But its mouth didn't move when it spoke to me. It was speaking directly into my mind.

Chapter Three

"But I can't be a rider," I protested. "I'm the Princess."

Authand moved towards me and the guards gave him even more space. I could feel the dragon relax as it slid off of me gently. Relief washed over me. But the feeling was odd, alien, like it wasn't my own emotion but something coming from outside of me. I looked at the dragon and cocked my head in a silent question. It actually nodded, and I added that to the long list of really weird things that were happening today.

Father and Mother came forward, cautiously, keeping well out of the reach of the dragon. Mother looked worried. Father looked angry and perplexed.

"Dragons don't care about rank or society," Authand explained. "They choose their riders based on the qualities of a good companion and rider. Sometimes, they even see traits in us that we, ourselves, cannot."

"That's right, "the voice in my head said. "And you are the bravest and most loyal in all of Darneta".

A large Orange dragon snout poked through the doorway and snorted.

The Colonel shook his head. "Or sometimes, the dragon is just young and foolish and exercises poor judgement."

I bristled at the comment, but I had to agree. This stupid animal had made a terrible mistake. I could not possibly be a good companion or rider to something I despised.

Authand rubbed the dragon on her shoulder, and conflicting emotions filled me. She seemed to be enjoying it, and that made me happy for some reason. But part of me wanted to push him away and

do it myself. Which was crazy. How could I want to touch a dragon, let alone rub its shoulder?

The dragon's spiked tail stopped switching back and forth. The Colonel patted her twice and took a step towards me. He took my hand in his. It was dry and rough, scratching my delicate skin. He spoke barely above a whisper, words meant for me and no other. "Princess Kalia, I know this may not be what you wanted, but this is a baby who needs you now. You have a duty to it, and your nation, to help her grow into an adult."

I pulled away from him. He had no business telling me what I had to do. "But I can't." My eyes pleaded with his.

He shook his head. "You will learn." He gave a small smile and guided my hand to the dragon's back. Loud enough for the crowd to hear, he said, "Now, the first step is to get your dragon out of the seating area and into the back. Korth will meet you there to get you started, and we can give the other eggs a chance to hatch."

He pushed again, and I took a step forward. I had been so caught up in the events of the past few minutes that I had forgotten that everybody, literally every important person in Darneta, and more than a few from the other kingdoms, had watched this drama unfold. I'd made enough of a scene for one day and decided that the back portion of this cavern would be more comfortable than the looks I was getting.

As I passed my parents, I glanced at them. Father scowled.

I wanted to tell him this was his fault. If he hadn't insisted I attend the hatching, none of this would have happened.

Mother bit her lip. I caught her eyes, glistening with tears. The action of looking at me seemed to burst the dam of her composure and she started crying.

Father took her in his arms to console her. He looked up as Authand led us out of the royal box. Mother's tears hadn't softened him; if anything, he was angrier now.

Fine, let him be angry. I wasn't exactly happy about it either.

"Do you want me to eat him?"

"Shush, you. There will be no eating of anybody," I said aloud. The crowd pressed away from us even more.

I stopped at the wall. I couldn't climb over it in my dress without being immodest. The Colonel nodded me forward, but I stood motionless. He cocked his head towards the dragon door and seemed to realize my plight. He stepped behind me and scooped me up.

I let out a shriek at being airborne but was back down on the other side a moment later. The crowd seemed to find it funny. Great, even more to be embarrassed about.

"If they tease you, I will eat them".

"I said no eating people." The tittering and murmuring ceased.

Authand gestured me forward and we started towards the rear chamber again. He leaned in close and whispered, "You know, you can communicate silently with her. It would be better to do so than to keep publicly reporting her infant whims about eating people."

"How do I do that?"

"Think of her and just say the words in your mind," he said.

I took in the sight of this creature who had adopted me as her mother and thought at it, *Can you hear me?*

"Yes, Kalia. I can hear you. And please don't call me 'it'. That hurts my feelings".

"Sorry". I looked down.

"Practice this, both of you," Authand said. "In time, you will learn to pay attention to only the thoughts directed at you, instead of hearing all of them."

I cringed at the word "*all*." In spite of everything that had been going on, my thoughts had gone to Etlin when the Colonel had swooped me up in his arms. I had wished it had been Etlin's arms instead.

"Have you had a mating flight with him yet?"

Authand snorted. Wait. Could he hear her too? Could he hear me? Did being stuck with a dragon mean I had to give up any semblance of privacy? "What is your name?" I asked her, forgetting to say it with my mind.

"I am Farean. We are going to be great friends."

I doubted that, but kept my mouth shut as we reached the rear doors. They were bigger than normal ones, but not quite as large as the ones leading to the throne room. Authand pulled them open effortlessly, and Farean and I were able to pass through side by side.

We entered a cavern that dwarfed the hatching chamber. Fires dotted the floor clustered around caches of eggs. Acrid smoke cloaked the ceiling and stained the walls. I pulled out Mother's cloth to dab the beads of sweat forming at my brow.

The enormous Orange dragon from the door earlier met us. I tried to back away, but with Authand behind me, I had nowhere to go. "This is Korth," I was introduced, as if he were a lord or something. "He will help you get settled." Authand stepped past us and rubbed the behemoth's muzzle. The man's gaze seemed almost that of a lover's. A small smile flickered across his lips before his features returned to the gruff expression he usually wore. He shouted over to where some Elves and smaller dragons were huddled, "Bring out the next egg. C'mon. Let's get this show moving before they all hatch in here."

The group burst into a frenzy of activity as two green dragons lifted the egg from a nest and lowered it onto a cart. The Elves pushed it to the door and out to the hatching grounds. I watched as they arrayed themselves in a circle and hoisted the egg. The five holding it up seemed to struggle as the sixth pulled the cart out. They lowered it onto the hot rocks and the taller one leaned in and whispered to the egg. That done, they hurried back inside.

"Those are second year trainees. Next year, you might help with the hatching if eggs are laid in Darneta again," Authand said.

"Over my dead body." I glanced at the dragon hatchling beside me and gulped. To get the image of it eating me out of my mind, I focused on a tall boy as he broke away from the group. Authand waved him towards us. "This is Lewon, the head of his class."

"What did he say to the egg?" I asked as he approached.

"He gave it permission to hatch. It's not a science, as Farean just proved, but they generally wait until we tell them it's show time."

Lewon closed the gap between us and held out his hand in the typical manner of the outer provinces. I raised the back of my hand to his, hinting at the proper etiquette for being introduced to a lady. He looked at it like he wasn't sure what he was supposed to do. My ears turned red and I lowered my hand.

"*I bet you wouldn't mind a mating flight with him*". My ear tips grew warmer, and Lewon broke out laughing. Great, I had a faulty dragon that anybody could listen in on.

"*Just the other dragons. I can't help what they share with their riders.*"

"*Well, just shut up and stop embarrassing me*". I stomped off like a child, but it followed me as I headed away from the others.

"*She*." Her 'voice' was filled with annoyance. "*How would you like it if I called you an it?*" She turned her head towards Korth and nodded before returning her attention back on me. "*He says we must go down to the pool, so you can wash me*".

"What?" I said, forgetting to think my words to her. "Do I look like a servant to you? I'm not "*touching*" you with a ten-foot pole." The Elves and dragons paused their work of loading an egg as my voice echoed through the underground cavern.

There were entirely too many dragons near me. Arenaline coursing through my body made me jittery, every nerve screaming for me to run. I glanced around. If an adult dragon couldn't come through the door to the hatching floor, there must be another exit.

Korth directed the events of the backroom as a young red dragon entered with the Nightblood candidate I'd seen earlier, and the second years brought out another egg.

Behind the Orange beast, a tunnel large enough for even his bulk retreated into darkness. Flickering dots of light from torches on the walls receded into the distance.

I headed in that direction.

Farean followed me. "*Where are you going? The pool is the other way*". To add to her mental plea, she trumpeted and floundered around the

dirt floor, kicking up a cloud of dust and getting everyone's attention again.

I picked up my pace, now as close to a run as my dress would allow.

Farean bounced awkwardly as she tried to gallop to keep up.

Authand intercepted me before I could reach the tunnel, grabbing my arm and nearly yanking it out of its socket. "You're supposed to stay with your dragon here at the hatchery until she is old enough to fly, and then you leave for the training grounds."

I'd had enough of people grabbing me and pushing me around for one day. I pulled loose from his grip; more out of surprise on his part than strength on mine. "I am not sleeping on a dirt floor in what amounts to a stable. There's been a huge mistake. I'm not fit to take care of Farean. I'm going home where there are no dragons."

I pushed past him and on to the tunnel.

Lewon started after me, but Authand stopped him. "Wait," he said. "She won't get far."

"I'll show him", I thought as I plunged into the darkness.

Chapter Four

The tunnel wasn't too bad. The torches provided enough light to see by as it sloped up towards the surface. Compared to the heat of the hatching cavern, though, it was downright damp and chilly.

Heavy footsteps followed me into the darkness. I kept up my pace, hoping to put some distance between me and my pursuer.

"Wait for me," Farean whined.

I used it as encouragement to keep going.

At last, daylight shone at the mouth of the tunnel. I stepped into the open air. Dark clouds covered the sun, and cold wind gusted around me. I considered finding my parent's carriage and taking it back, but I was in enough trouble and didn't want to add to it. Instead, I hurried down the path.

Farean followed me through the woods and into the capital. Elves dove out of our way and ducked behind carts and barrels as we walked through the streets. I wished I could do the same, but there was no losing her. For her part, she ignored them. Her head swiveled as she walked, like a newborn baby on its first trip outside, which technically she was. Her tail swung back and forth, occasionally knocking over barrels of salted fish or grain. I felt a raindrop and quickened my pace.

I was huffing by the time I reached the castle. The guard at the door eyed me, no doubt wondering what I was doing home without my parents and in such a state.

I made it back to my room and had to light a candle. The sky had grown so dark that I might have mistaken it for twilight. I had the presence of mind to close my shutters before collapsing on my bed,

the oak frame creaking as it distributed my weight across the four posters supporting a silk canopy.

I heard shouts from the floor below, but I couldn't concentrate on them. I felt icky and needed a bath, but all I could think about was sleep. I kicked off my destroyed sandals but otherwise crawled under the wool blankets fully dressed.

I woke to Farean's whining echoing in my head. "*Kalia, I can't reach you. Kalia, why did you leave me? Kalia, come here, pleaseeeeeease.*"

I squeezed my eyes together harder, as if that would keep her voice out of my brain. I brought a pillow over my head, but the psychic connection would not be silenced. And outside, I could still hear the rainstorm that had descended over the city, raging and matching my mood.

A knock on my door brought me out from under my pillow. "Enter," I called, not caring how I looked.

A maid, the same one from yesterday, shuffled in, her head down. "Princess, there is a dragon in the main hall. It says that it's with you?"

"Do I look like I have a dragon?" I snapped. "Tell it to leave. It is not welcome here. And draw me a bath."

She didn't move. "The dragon won't leave. The porter said it came in with you, making it your responsibility. Please, my lady. Your parents aren't here, and it is scaring everybody."

"It's scaring me as well." I sighed. "Fine. I will send it away. But prepare that bath, I wasn't kidding about that."

"*Kalia, Kalia. Where are you? I neeeeeed you*".

I took the steps two at a time. "Oh, shut up. I'm coming." I passed a different maid, and she stopped at my outburst. "Not you. Go do something." She shook her head and continued up the stairs. Great, now I had the servants thinking I was crazy. I wished I was crazy; it would be preferable to owning a dragon that would eat me at the first opportunity, like the bears that the Orcs trained but were always attacking their masters.

I found Farean in the great hall with a few servants, their backs pressed against the far wall. As I stepped into the room, happiness washed over me.

"Kalia. You came back". "Oh, Kalia. I knew you'd come back".

I hesitantly reached out to her. My hand shook as it inched closer to her muzzle. *"Please don't bite me. Please don't bite me."*

"I would never do that". She pushed her nose towards my hand. It made contact, and I jumped back. I nervously glanced around the room, but the servants had vanished. I reached out again. I touched her snout lightly and, sensing no attack, allowed the full weight to rest on her. Farean rewarded me with another push of contentment.

My stomach rumbled. Except it wasn't mine. I looked at her.

"What's wrong with me?" She thought at me. *"My middle feels weird."*

The stomach rumbling sensation came again. The good feeling from our contact evaporated. "You're hungry, Stupid. Don't you know what that is?"

Farean shook her head. I kept forgetting she was only a couple of hours old.

I grabbed a passing servant. "We need some food. What do you eat, Farean?"

It better not be princess.

"Meat." She blasted the word into my brain. I didn't know that you could squeal telepathically, but I couldn't describe it any other way.

"Get her some meat," I told the servant. "Surely we have roast leftover from yesterday."

He scurried off to the kitchens. I wasn't sure how the cooks would react to the request, but they needed to hurry. My stomach was twisting in knots, like I'd never eaten before. Then again, I guess that was literally true for Farean.

The servant came back carrying a banquet platter piled high with cuts of mutton and beef. He stopped at the doorway. The platter wavered as his whole body quaked, threatening to overturn the meal.

"Come on." I waved him closer.

His eyes flicked between the food he was carrying and the dragon whipping her spiked tail against the wall. I gestured at him again, but he came no closer.

I marched over to him and grabbed the tray, taking a moment to glare in displeasure. "Father will hear about this." My voice came out low and guttural as if I were using the dragon's voice box instead of my own.

The servant hurried off, no doubt to change his underclothes, and I returned my attention to my giant, terrifying pet.

I lowered the platter in front of her. "How do we do this? Do I feed you? Can you use a fork?" I really hoped I didn't have to place chunks of meat in her mouth. Some of our dinner guests, even the nobles, used their hands to eat, but I hated handling the mutton. The greasy feel of it made me queasy.

"Just leave it where I can reach it."

I backed away and she came up to the plate. Opening her jaw, a serpentine tongue uncoiled and wrapped around the roast. Then it all disappeared back into her maw and swallowed the food whole. She went back for another chunk and repeated the process. Forget handling the meat; I might get sick just watching her eat.

After finishing the mutton, she licked at the juices on the silver platter, holding it down with one talon as it clanked against the stone floor. Satisfied, Farean settled into lethargy.

I got up and decided to check on my bath. I'd barely taken two steps when Farean reached out with a front claw and grabbed me. Shrieking, I fought against her grip as she brought me back in close to her body. "*Kalia, sleep with meeeee.*"

Still fighting her grasp, I replied, "No, I have my own bed to sleep in." I didn't want to mention the bath, guilt creeping in as I recalled the instruction to clean her that had sent me running away from the hatchery.

She didn't respond. I craned my head to see her double lids closed and her body heaving in long breaths. Her claw loosened, but not enough for me to escape.

I pushed a final time against the talon holding me down before giving up. I tried to make myself comfortable. I had no idea how long dragons slept, but it looked like I was going to be there for a while.

I must have dozed off. One moment Farean's snores filled the silence of the room. The next, the room echoed with noise—most of it coming from my father.

"What is this beast doing in the castle? Get it out of here. Kalia, what is the meaning of this? Why are you sleeping on the floor?" He wasn't alone. He had his usual entourage of servants and guards, but mother was nowhere to be seen.

A member of Father's personal guard, apparently too dumb to have learned from last time, stepped forward and poked the dragon with the butt end of his spear.

Farean lifted her head and yawned, showing rows of teeth, causing the soldier to take a step back. She finally released me, and I dropped to the floor with a gentle thump. I arched my back and twisted, trying to wake up my sore muscled and numb limbs.

Father watched me complete my stretches in silence. I faced him, unsure of what to say. He eyed my wrinkled and muddy gown and shook his head. "It's a good thing your mother wasn't feeling well and went upstairs. She would have a fit if she saw you like this."

I smoothed out the bodice as best I could and returned his stare.

"Why is there a dragon in the castle?" he asked again.

"Because she followed me home," I said, crossing my arms.

The smack caught me unprepared. I hadn't realized he could still move that fast. The sound echoed in the empty room as my cheek burned.

Farean roared, her hot breath blowing against me as she lunged forward, but father didn't move or retreat. Even if she was a dragon, she was only an infant, and he was a grown man and King of the realm.

"I need some time alone with my daughter." He said to those who accompanied him, and they filtered out of the room, leaving only the three of us. "Do you want to try that again without the smart talk?"

I rubbed my jaw and kept quiet.

"I don't know what you are playing at, but you need to get rid of that thing. Nobility can't be Dragoners. It's ridiculous. So, you have a choice to make." He crossed his arms. "You can have a dragon, or you can be my daughter. You choose."

"Choose?" I asked, incredulous. "This wasn't my decision. I don't want to be a Dragoner. I didn't want to go to the hatching in the first place. But you made me go and then sat there and lectured me on duty. Well, guess what. Now I'm stuck with this duty whether you want me to have it or not. The dragon stays."

"It can't stay here," he bellowed, waving his arms about as if swatting at invisible flies. "I have a kingdom to rule. This is not a barn or a hatchery, where animals can roam around at will." Veins on his neck bulged and he huffed to catch his breath after expelling so much hot air. Farean trumpeted again, adding to the cacophony that assaulted my ears.

"She won't leave without me," I yelled back, standing on my toes and trying to get in his face. It wasn't effective. I only came up to his chest. "*Damn Mother and her short genes.*"

"Then you will have to leave, too." He deflated a little as he said it, but the anger still flickered in his eyes.

I froze in place. "*Was he kicking me out of my home?*" Because it was raining outside. The thunder and lightning had died down a little, but I could still hear the heavy drops pounding out a rhythm on our tiled roof. Surely, he wouldn't send me out in it. If mother had been there, she would have stood up for me. She wouldn't let him treat me that way.

"You can't kick me out," I said, almost a plea. "It's raining outside. Mother will never forgive you."

"Your mother lost her father to a dragon," he said, looking past me to Farean. "She and I already discussed this on the way home in

the carriage. She cannot live with such a beast. But you have a place at the hatchery. Authand is expecting your return." He didn't say anything else. He just turned away and left me standing there.

I blinked to keep the tears from falling, but they came regardless. A fat one rolled down my cheek and onto the silk of my sleeve. It didn't matter. My clothes were about to get a whole lot wetter.

Chapter Five

Authand was expecting me. What had he said? "*She won't get far.*" Well, I was about to show him. And my parents. They had shamed me into duty, and now they were throwing me out? I would show them too.

I headed for the door and stumbled out into the rainy night, Farean cavorting after me.

We became thoroughly soaked before I discovered an overhang large enough to keep me from getting any wetter. I shivered against the buffeting winds while Farean hopped from puddle to puddle in the street, flapping her gossamer wings in a feeble attempt to fly. Despite myself, I smiled. At least one of us was having fun.

A covered pedicab approached, forcing Farean to climb onto a nearby portico. The drenched Elf carrier gently lowered the handles to the ground and opened an umbrella before opening the door.

Etlin stepped out and huddled under the oiled cloth as the rain poured off onto the servant. Foolishly, I tried to hide; cowering into the shadows, but Etlin saw me and dashed over, the servant hurrying to keep the cloth in place. Under the protection of the overhang, Etlin waved the poor man off, and he promptly ducked into the servants' entrance.

"What are you doing out here?" Etlin pulled off his jacket and wrapped it around me. It was a formal affair with little lining for warmth, the one he'd worn to the hatching, which felt like a lifetime ago. I continued to shiver but appreciated the gesture, none the less. "You're a princess, for Farr's sake. Not some peasant drowning in the streets." I was getting tired of people reminding me that I was a princess. As if that had anything to do with what I'd been stuck with.

Being a princess hadn't stopped my father tossing me out like rubbish. His precious decorum would allow me to catch my death mere feet from the hearth where he was undoubtedly bundled near.

"My father kicked me out," I told Etlin, expecting sympathy, or better yet, outrage.

He shook his head, looking down as if ashamed to look me in the eye. "Go inside, Kalia. The door is right there," he pointed across the courtyard. "Go inside and forget about all this dragon nonsense."

I stared at the castle's entrance. A mere twenty feet separated me from what my life had been a few short hours ago. I could do it. I could walk through that door and forget today had ever happened. I could go back to pleasing my parents and Etlin by being the perfect girl they expected me to be.

"*You would leave me alone?*" A voice asked, Farean's snout peeking over Etlin's head, her dragon eyes wide and terrified. It wasn't the question that broke my heart. Or the look. It was the feeling. I could feel just what she felt, and it was so much more pain and fear than what I'd experienced when my father had shown me the door. I was nearly a grown woman, trained to command others and make my own choices. Farean was a child who knew nothing of the world. I couldn't abandon her, even as much as she terrified me.

"No," I shook my head at Etlin. "I can't leave Farean."

"Yes, you can, Kal." He used my pet name, trying to manipulate me, to soften me, but it only hardened my resolve. "You have to. For us."

"What do you mean, 'for us'? How does any of this affect us? You love me, and I love you. Our marriage has been arranged for years."

"I do love you, Kal. You know that," he glanced away from me, frowning. "But this changes everything, don't you see? Dragoners live a rough life. They're constantly at risk and on the move, called to wherever the next battle is. That's what having a dragon means. That's not the kind of life I want."

"So, you didn't love me, then?" I said, lifting my chin and staring him down. "You loved the life you would have as the king."

"Kal, that's not fair."

"Not *'fair'*?" I yelled at him. "Don't tell me about 'not fair.' I did exactly what everyone told me to, playing the dutiful daughter, and fiancé, and princess, and this is what it got me. My parents throw me out and you—what? Break up with me?"

"No," he shook his head, rain dripping from his dark bangs. "My parents want me to break it off with you, but I came here to help you see that you don't have to do this. You can go back to what you were. We can go back."

"But your parents love me—" I stammered, shocked and hurt to my core. "*Oh no, that's right. They loved Princess Kalia, not Dragoneer Kalia.*" "*Had my entire life been a lie? Did no one really care about me—not for what I did, or my title, but for who I was inside?*"

"*I like your insides.*" Farean said. She was still looming behind Etlin, her wings folded over her head against the rain.

I gulped. "*Not helping.*"

"They do love you," Etlin said, but it wasn't very convincing. "As do I. But if you choose this life, you're not choosing us." He glanced away.

Up to that moment, I had honestly believed in the power of love to overcome anything. "*Gods, I was such a fool.*"

"Well, okay then," I said, and Etlin's eyes snapped back to mine, full of hope. "I guess that's it." I pushed past him, crossing to stand next to Farean. "I suppose I'll see you around."

Colonel Authand, Father, Etlin—I'd been told what to do for the last time. This was my life. I would play by my rules, not theirs.

Etlin stood in stunned silence as the rain plastered his hair to his forehead and his clothes to his skin. He stared at me and my dragon, processing this surprise—my sudden change from someone who patiently and quietly did what whatever was proper and expected, to someone who could and would defy everyone around them.

I almost see the pieces fall into place in his mind, preparing the speech he would give his parents, announcing that he'd taken out the

trash like a good soon. The story would grow as he told our friends of the monster I'd become.

Etlin opened his mouth and closed it again. I watched him stand in the downpour. I wanted to apologize, but part of me insisted I hold my ground. I'd say I was sorry, but only if he did first.

"I can't believe you'd choose this animal over your own kind," he said, gesturing at Farean.

I pulled off his useless jacket and threw it at him. "If you are an example of 'my kind, I want no part of it."

"Fine!" he said. Clenching his jaw in fury, he crossed to the servant's entrance and yanked the door open. "We are leaving," he called to his servant. "Now!"

I got a glimpse of the shocked servants sharing mead over a blazing fire. Were they already gossiping about me and my sudden descent into madness? I had no doubt I would be the talk of the city come morning. The Princess and the dragon. It sounded like a morality tale mothers would warn their daughters with.

Etlin's servant gulped the last swig from his mug and rushed out, trying to get the umbrella over Etlin, but there was no point now. He was soaked.

"Stop it," Etlin commanded. "Just get me home."

The servant nodded and opened the door to the carriage. Etlin placed a foot on the threshold and stopped, turning back to me. "Goodbye, Kalia. I don't imagine we will meet again." He took his seat with an audible squish, and the door snapped close behind him. The servant took one last wary look at Farean beside me before grabbing the poles of the cab and heading for the gates.

Farean leapt forward, chasing after the cab like a chicken after a lizard. I wasn't sure if it was pure instinct, or if she was trying to terrorize the poor man, but the driver ran faster than any I'd ever seen pulling a heavy cart. Thankfully, when he turned the corner out of sight, my dragon lost interest like any toddler would, and came wandering back.

"*My dragon.*" Those were strange words. But I had chosen her. Well, first she had chosen me. But I'd come around eventually.

The rain had mostly stopped, but everything was wet and dripping. I slid down the wall and sat on the wet cobbled ground. It was starting to hit me just how much I'd lost. For all my bravado and anger, I didn't know what to do. I was just a lonely girl abandoned by everyone and charged with the task of caring for something—no someone—that I knew nothing about.

How would I feed her? How would I feed myself? And we couldn't sleep in the courtyard like beggars. I slapped my hands against the wet brick, sending a wave of hot pain shooting from my palms up my arms. "Oww."

Farean turned her attention from the fascinating dripping of a water spout. "*That*" "*hurt*".

"I wasn't trying to hurt you. I'm sorry. I'm just—I don't know what to do. I'm supposed to take care of us both now, and I don't even know how to take care of me."

"*I'll take care of you*". She climbed up the stairs to my side, and gently butted her head against mine, rubbing me with her skull. "*See? Good rubs.*"

"*That's very nice,*" I remembered to mind-speak to her. And it was. But it still didn't solve our problem. "*You have to understand, Farean. I don't know how to be a Dragoner. I don't even know how to live outside a castle without servants.*" "*You'd be better off if we could somehow break our bond and find you someone else.*"

She stopped rubbing me, staring at me with her huge birdlike eyes. I didn't know if dragons could cry, but she looked like she was about to. "*You told the sad man and the angry boy you wouldn't leave me. You are a good Dragoner for me. The best for me. It's why I want you.*"

Well, at least someone wanted me, even if it was a dragon.

I reached out and scratched the protective ridge over her eye, somehow knowing she'd love it. "We'll figure it out," I told her, as she rumbled a dragon purr. "Together, we'll figure this out."

Conflicting emotions boiled inside me, and I couldn't tell where mine ended and hers began. So, I just stood there petting her as I tried to figure out a path forward that wouldn't be disastrous for both of us.

I caught motion in my peripheral vision; Farean and I swiveled our heads towards it in unison.

A dark, hooded, figure approached us.

Instinctively, I moved in front of Farean to protect her, though I had no idea how or with what.

"Stay back," I warned, "or I'll—" I'll draw a blank on what to threaten you with, apparently.

Small, calloused hands reached up and pulled the hood back just enough to reveal the slender, familiar, face of my chamber maid.

"What are you doing out here?" I demanded. "I thought you were some kind of attacker."

She laughed. "Attacker? At the castle? Princess Kalia, you know that to get to this courtyard, you have to pass three different sets of guards."

Farean leaned her long sinuous neck over my shoulder to peer at the maid, her snout close enough to sniff at the young girl's pores. To her credit, the maid took only one step back.

"You remember Farean, I'm sure," I said.

My maid nodded mutely.

A sudden gust of wind knocked over a nearby barrel, sending it rolling, and Farean was off, chasing after it. She definitely liked to chase things.

With the dragon some distance away, my maid found her voice again. Well, it looks like you were able to get cleaned up after all."

I glared at her and she returned an awkward smile. I wanted to be angry with her but the ridiculousness of the situation caught up to me and I started to laugh.

"Yeah, I guess I did. Apparently, dragons aren't allowed in the castle."

"That's a dumb rule." She smiled. It faded as the realization set in about what that meant for my future. "What will you do now? Will you go back to the hatching grounds and live with the other Dragoneers?" Was she worried about me, or her position as my maid? Father would probably just assign her somewhere else. She was good help, and he wouldn't waste that just because he'd banished his only daughter.

"I can't go back there." I shook my head. "Between the way Farean chose me and the way I behaved afterward, I don't dare show myself. But where else can I keep a dragon? I have no idea."

"My father is the royal swineherd," she offered. "The barns are plenty big enough. Farean can stay there until you find somewhere more suitable."

"She wouldn't stay there without me," I pointed out.

"Well, dad has an empty room now that I live in the maids' quarters."

Was she making fun of me, or trying to help? Because I'm not sure what would be funnier to a servant than her mistress living as a swineherd while she remained in the comfort of the castle. Still, I was pretty short on options and didn't want to offend her. She was the only person who had treated me decently since this whole dragon thing had happened.

"Okay. I'll figure out a way to repay you and your family. Thank you—" "*Oh crap. I don't remember her name.*"

"It's Lunara, your majesty. I have been cleaning your quarters for over a year now."

"I know. I'm sorry." Had it been that long? All the maids tended to run together in my mind. They all wore the same uniform and all sort of looked the same. Still, I should know her name.

Lunara sighed. "It's okay. I rather expect it at this point."

I started to protest, but she turned and disappeared back into the castle.

"Come here, you," I called to Farean.

She bounded over to me and attempted to push her muzzle into my hand. I backed away in fear, automatically, but she just kept coming until she got what she wanted. After a lifetime of avoiding dragons, it was going to take some getting used to being around one this much. But Farean was oblivious to my fear and prejudice. Either that or she was good at ignoring it.

"Hey, can that giant nose of yours smell pigs?" I asked, and she raised her snout into the wind, her lips curving up in a dragon grin.

Chapter Six

Farean's cries, both audible and mental, woke me up before dawn.

I rubbed the sleep from my eyes and wondered what time it was. I got up from my bed, if you could call it that. Pushing open a window overseeing Farean's barn, I noticed that the sun wasn't even up yet.

The early spring air cut through the thin nightgown Lunara had left behind when she'd moved to the castle. I turned to retrieve the matching robe, but Farean let out another distressed *Ka—li—a*, stretching my name into three long syllables. I hoped this was some sort of phase. The first few weeks after the hatching had been tough for me emotionally, but after a week straight of being forced out of bed in the middle of the night, two, sometimes three or even four times, I knew I wouldn't last much longer before I snapped.

Obviously, the decision to leave the hatching grounds had been a mistake. But I couldn't go back now. Too much time had passed. They might not even be there anymore. After the hatching was over, the Dragoneers went somewhere else to train, and I didn't know where that might be. Father would know, of course, but he'd made his opinion on the matter clear.

I made my way through the dark house, careful not to wake Lunara's father. Arriving at the stable, I lifted the heavy bar on the door and discovered Farean rolled over onto her side with a front claw pulling at her skull. Her two rear legs were trying to join the fight too.

"What are you doing?" I asked, inching closer to my thrashing dragon.

"*It hurts*," was all she would answer.

"Hold still, I need to check your ear."

She kept pulling at it, and I had to yank her front leg away to get it free. In the passing month, Farean's features had morphed to look more like mine. Dark blue scales had become pale and almost translucent. Her ears had lengthened and formed into a point. The process hadn't been easy. Every growth spurt caused odd pains and scales to bind if she moved wrong. I'd taken to grooming her twice per day and still had these late night and early morning wakeups to look forward to.

I found the problem. At the juncture between the ear and skull, one of her scales had pulled up and folded against her hide, twisting the sensitive part of the ear flesh.

I gently lifted the scale and let it fall into place. The task complete, Farean's cries immediately ceased. Since I was already up, I took the time to check for loose or damaged scales. "This was a lot easier when you were smaller."

"You couldn't ride me when I was smaller." She had me there. In the past week, Farean had taken to the skies. At first, it was only short flutters through the air, like one of the chickens when the dragon spooked them. From there, she had worked her way up in skill and strength to the point where I'd risked a short flight with her two days ago.

We made it mere feet off the ground before I lost my tenuous grip on her neck ridge and fell into the pig's mud. Theron, Lunara's father laughed at me as I spit the foul-smelling earth from my mouth.

"From now, I'm staying on the ground," I told him. "If Elves were meant to fly, we'd have wings."

In response, he had tossed a bucket of icy water over me.

"What was that for?" I sputtered, wiping brown streaks from my face.

"I'm not letting you inside like that." He picked up a second bucket and dumped it over my head.

I stormed off; trying to squeeze the dirty water from the rough hemp clothing I'd been reduced to wearing.

The next morning, a rawhide seat bound with rope greeted me at the breakfast, thrown over my chair. "What's this?"

"Something to make sure you don't fall off next time," Theron said. "I've seen dragons overhead wearing similar. Theirs are undoubtedly better made. But this will get you started." He didn't look up from his breakfast, not wanting to draw attention to his kindness.

I spooned some of the meal into a bowl and sat across from him. How I missed hot breakfasts of steaming eggs topped with salty bacon, tarts, and pastries piled high plate. Instead, the tepid corn gruel crunched like sand in my mouth. And yet, this man with little money or food, had spent part of his hard work day making me a dragon saddle. Not only that, he'd been feeding, housing, and clothing me for a month, which was more than my father or Etlin had been willing to do, two men who supposedly loved me.

"Theron, thank you," I said, a lump in my throat that wasn't corn gruel. "But I'm not sure I should fly without training. It's dangerous."

He put down his spoon. "You are a Dragoneer now, Your Majesty. Dragoneers fly."

I took a bite of thick porridge and swallowed it down, along with the lump. I didn't want to cry in front of Theron. "I'm not a Dragoneer. I mean, I don't feel like one. More like a swineherd who just happens to have a dragon."

"Fate chooses us, your majesty. I've found that fighting it brings nothing but unhappiness. And you are no swineherd, I assure you. The pigs don't like you. You smell too much like dragon." He returned to his gruel.

I stirred my spoon around in my bowl, his words no easier to digest than the food. He finished his breakfast and got up, putting his dish in the wash basin. On his way out to the pigs, he paused at the door. "Besides, you'll have to fly to reach anyone with answers." With that, he plunged into the daylight, leaving me to my cold gruel and conflicting thoughts.

Unable to stomach any more of either, I grabbed the makeshift saddle and found Farean sunning herself in the dirt. I dropped it next to her snout, rousing her from her slumber. "You want to try this again?"

It took me a bit to figure out the proper knots, but I soon found myself tied to a dragon's back. I could barely move in the rigging, but at least I wouldn't fall off this time. Farean reared up onto her hind legs and shook her back. I lost my grip and dangled backwards in my saddle, but I didn't fall. "Stop that. Are you trying to throw me?"

"It feels weird. I don't like it." She pouted but returned to four legs.

"Well, get used to it, I'm not getting thrown off again like yesterday." She seemed to accept this and lumbered out to the street where she could get a better running start. Farean galloped down the lane and leapt into the air. With a powerful downbeat of her wings, we were airborne. She kept low at first, in case the rigging didn't hold. After completing a low circle around the farm, she pushed us higher and higher.

Wind whipped at my face and hair, sending it in all directions. Brushing it when I landed would be a chore. But if this was what flying felt like, it was a small price to pay.

Then I swallowed a bug.

I opened my mouth to whoop as we performed acrobatic loops over the city and a fat horsefly went straight inside. I felt the insect impact the back of my throat, and I started coughing. But instead of dislodging the loathsome creature, the hacking pushed it further down until I had no other choice but to swallow. I continued coughing and pounded on my chest, hoping to spit it back up.

"What's wrong?" Farean turned her head my direction, but her body followed and she banked hard right, sending me sideways and both of us heading head-first towards the ground.

"Pull—" *cough* "—up, pull up."

She returned her attention to the task at hand and we leveled out.

"Pay attention to where you're going," I scolded her. "You don't need to look at me when we mind speak."

The beating of her wings slowed, and we dipped in the sky. I started to say something, but she maintained the new altitude. "*I felt you coughing and got worried*".

I pushed an image of hugging her, safely on the ground, and I could feel her body vibrate in the guttural growl she gave when content.

"I just swallowed a bug," I admitted, glad no one could see my ears turn red. Not that anyone could have told with all the windburn I was getting. Note to self, get some kind of hat or mask for flying.

"*Lucky*." Farean flew faster, gaining confidence. "*Bugs are tasty*."

I laughed. There hadn't been much opportunity for mirth in the past month and it felt good to let it out. "I'll try to save it for you next time." The thought of trying to save bugs in my mouth for my dragon made me laugh even harder, doubling me over the saddle snorting and heaving for breath.

Farean just shook her head and made another pass over the city.

When I finally regained control, the sun was getting low, and I directed her to land, skimming just over the chicken pen just to see their reaction.

The rest of the week had been like that as we learned how to fly and navigate the air. And fortunately, I hadn't eaten any more bugs.

As beautiful as that day was, it left me with a horrible, aching sadness. Farean was made to fly. She was born to be a dragon and spend her life doing dragonish things. It came naturally to her. But I was holding her back. Not just her flying with my awkward guesses at how to ride, but with all of it. Her cries in the night kept me reeling. I never knew what to do and lived in constant fear that something would happen to her and it would be my fault. I hadn't been trained as a hatchling candidate or a Dragoner. I'd been raised to follow my duty and rule a country. This morning, it had been as simple as popping her scale back into place, but as she grew bigger, it would only get more complicated to care for her. And as much as I'd grown attached to her—really attached—I couldn't bear the thought that Farean would live as a lesser dragon because of me.

Chapter Seven

I was beginning to forget my old life in the castle as a princess. Even the fact that I thought of it as "my old life" was strange. It seemed almost like a dream and flying on Farean had always been my reality. But then Lunara brought my old life to the forefront again, delivering a letter from Colonel Authand, now at the training grounds to the West.

Princess Kalia,

As a result of your alternate lodging arrangements, you missed the call to come to Tulta with the others. Raising a dragon hatchling for the first month on your own isn't optimum, but given your unusual circumstances, I allowed it. Training a flying dragon, however, is another matter. Collect your belongings and meet Lewon at the castle for further instructions. You will follow him back to training camp tomorrow at first light.

Colonel Authand

Looking up from the missive, I asked Lunara, "I don't suppose you want to go, do you?" She shook her head; I couldn't blame her. I'd never seen the training grounds. Until a month ago, I'd barely been outside the castle walls. I had just started to get used to my life as an exiled princess. Theron made me help on the farm, but he still treated me like royalty. Lunara had become something of a friend, something I'd never really had before. And now, here was the Colonel ordering me around like a servant. He could have at least said, "Please, collect your belongings." Or, "You can follow him back if you want." That would have been polite.

"Tell them I'm not going." I crumpled the letter into a ball and shoved it into a pocket. I crossed my arms and waited for Lunara to scurry off with the news.

She didn't move other than to match my pose. "The Dragoners don't make requests. You need to go. Lewon is already at the castle waiting for you."

"But your father needs my help here." I glanced at Theron. We were in his open-air workshop, and he was busy repairing a trough that had sprung a leak.

He looked up from his work. "I have to fix most of what you 'help' me with. If you stay, I going to start charging you rent." Having said his piece, he returned to the wood.

I pursed my lips and shook my head. "Well, then. I guess I'm going." I thought about what happened the last time I'd been at the castle—the confrontation with my father and then Etlin. I did not want to go back there. At all. But I felt stronger now somehow—I had changed since then—maybe even because of their rejection. Though I hoped I wouldn't see either of them, or my mother, I wasn't afraid to anymore. But I certainly wasn't taking Farean. "Stay here," I told her. "I'll be back tonight, and we will leave to meet other dragons tomorrow."

"Okay". She rolled over in the dried mud of the pen she had co-opted from the pigs.

I sighed; if we were going anywhere, I'd have to bathe her in the pond. I wasn't about to introduce myself to other Dragoners on a muddy beast.

"But bring me something to eat. All this pork is getting boring".

"Don't be rude," I scolded her, glancing at Theron, who, of course, couldn't hear her. "We're guests here."

"Sorry." Her voice sounded more petulant than remorseful.

That was something I'd have to work with her. *"Oh, gods. When had I become my mother?"*

I turned my attention back to Lunara, who waited with her arms still crossed.

"Don't worry too much," she said. "She's still young. Besides, I lived here for fourteen years, and pork for dinner every night does get old."

"She still needs to learn some manners. Wait! You could hear our conversation?"

Lunara lowered her head, but otherwise gave no indication of hearing me. She turned to leave the workshop, and I followed after her. "How did you know what Farean said?"

"It's a gift." She kept her voice low, as if sharing a secret that she didn't want others to hear, even though we were the only ones around. "I've always been able to hear them. I wanted to be a Dragoneer, but father insisted I become one of the court maids instead."

It suddenly struck me that you didn't have to be a princess to get stuck in society's expectations for you. I grabbed Lunara's hand, and we both looked down, shocked. But I didn't let go. "I'll see what I can do about getting you to the next hatching. Maybe you can be one of my mother's ladies in waiting and 'accidently' bond with a dragon like I did."

She looked up into my face, "I couldn't impose like that."

"Come on. I'm going to need a friendly face at this training camp."

She smiled and dropped my hand. We walked the rest of the way to the castle in silence as we dealt with our own thoughts about the future.

Thankfully, Mother and Father were away for the day on diplomatic business. The guards at the gate and doors let us pass without comment, though I could see them eyeing each other as I passed. Was I still the gossip of the castle after all this time? Funny, because I barely thought of the people here anymore.

Lewon lounged in the receiving room with his boot-clad feet propped up on an antique bench. When we entered, he stood and held out his hand. Remembering the embarrassment from last time, I shook it. "So, we meet again," I said. "You must be one of the

Colonel's favorites to get to come retrieve me." I had meant it to be funny, or sarcastic, but I instead it just came out mean.

He recoiled at the remark, plastering a fake smile on his face as he said, "Most of us don't get to do whatever we want without consequence."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean it like that." I tried to backtrack. "It's just—you witnessed my meltdown at the hatching, and I'm not proud of it. It's something I'd like to forget."

Lunara arched an eyebrow at me, fidgeting with desire to ask about that. I thought the castle gossip vine would have delivered that story to her weeks ago, but apparently not. Most likely, Father had forbidden those in our party from speaking of it. *"Did he know where I'd been for the past month? Did he even care?"*

Lewon just kept smiling, but it seemed a little more genuine now. I liked how his smirk brought out his dimples. He had nice hazel eyes and dirty blonde hair. He broke eye contact and looked downward towards the floor. At least, I hoped it was the floor. He just as well could have been checking out my chest. "You can try to forget," he said. "But none of the other Dragoners are likely to let you. I mean, I saw it, but" *everyone* heard about it. It's literally been used in training as a precautionary tale."

My ears reddened. Great. If I did go to this training camp, I would be surrounded by peers who had already judged me.

"Have you found a place in the city to stay tonight?" I tried to change the subject.

"Not yet, Your Majesty. I wanted to make sure I didn't miss you when you arrived. But I'll probably stay at the Tooth and Nail. I know the owner."

I'd heard rumors about the place. It was owned by a Nightblood and didn't have the best reputation.

But I didn't say that. I was trying to make a good second impression. "Please, call me Kalia," I said instead, batting my lashes. I was terrible at flirting, and I hadn't really meant to. But Etlin had left me weeks ago, and I'd had no contact with boys my age since. "Have

you had anything to eat since you arrived? Flying always makes me so hungry."

"No, I haven't," he said, giving me a real, genuine grin finally. "And flying makes everyone hungry. It's the exhilaration and the energy it requires to sync perfectly with your dragon."

"Exactly!" I smiled back. Now we were getting somewhere, and it was so nice to talk to someone who understood what it meant to ride a dragon. I turned to Lunara. "Please, take Lewon to the kitchen and get him something to eat. And grab something non-porky for Farean, if you can. Mutton perhaps? I need to get a few things from my room, and then I'll be heading back to—where I've been staying." I hoped Lunara would forgive me for not wanting to say, "the swine farm." "How about if I meet by the gates in the morning," I suggested to Lewon. That way he wouldn't see where I'd been living and gain one more story of my spiral into peasantry to tell the other Dragoneers.

"Um, okay." Lewon said, looking worried. "But if you don't show up, it will be my hide. My instructions were not to let you out of my sight once I found you."

"I will be there with my dragon," I promised.

"Follow me, sir." Lunara curtsied to him and pointed in the direction of the kitchen. He followed eagerly, and as they crossed the threshold, I heard my former maid ask, "So what did the princess do at the hatching?"

I shook my head and moved in the other direction. It felt both strange and familiar to be in my old home, like I was a ghost visiting a past life. Even the servants I passed ignored me, as if I were a phantom or a shadow. They probably didn't want any liability or blame for me being there when my parents were away. But they couldn't exactly kick me out either. At the top of the stairs, I detoured to the baths. There was no way I could pass up this chance to revel in hot water and the scented soaps that my mother always bought. I turned on the water, and then went to my room. It was just as I'd left it, complete with the covers thrown back from when I'd

been summoned downstairs to tend to Farean. Mother hadn't even let the maids in? That seemed odd.

I sat on the bed, trying to decide what I needed to pack. I absentmindedly ran my hand over the soft fleece of the bedcovers. The sensation was a stark contrast from the rough wool I'd been sleeping under. "*Blanket*", I thought. "*Definitely packing this blanket*".

Chapter Eight

Lunara found me dozing in the bath. "I finished packing for you," she said as she set a towel on the tub's edge.

"You didn't have to do that, I was going to finish."

She shook her head. "I did if you wanted to get back before dark."

"Well, thank you. I was in here a little longer than I meant to be." I held up my pruned fingers.

"I know." She smiled. "The baths are of my favorite parts of working in the castle. I'll meet you in your room," she said, leaving to give me some privacy as I dried off.

Back in my chamber, she had laid out a few clean dresses next to a large sack bag. I had never seen it before. When I traveled in the past, I'd used expensive and heavy cedar trunks to cart around our mountains of clothes. She must have gotten the bag from one of the other servants. She was such a good maid. I'd have to put in a good word for her with Father—I stopped in my tracks, marveling at how easily and quickly I'd fallen back into the thought patterns of an over-privileged princess. I wasn't technically a noble anymore. Lunara wasn't my servant; she was my friend. And Father couldn't care less about my recommendations. Being at the castle again was playing strange tricks on my mind. I needed to get out of there.

As Lunara helped me lace up my corset, she said, "You are going to need pants for riding Farean. And for every day. I don't think Dragoneers wear dresses much."

"I don't own any pants," I groaned. "All a princess is supposed to wear are dresses. And gods forbid I ever get them dirty."

She started to speak but I held up a hand, placing it on her shoulder. "I appreciate being able to wear your clothes at your father's, but you are three inches taller than me and bigger in the chest." I looked down my dress. It felt odd to be wearing one again, but at least it fit without stepping on the hem or using a belt to keep it from sliding off. "I'm sorry, but your clothes look ridiculous on me."

"Yes, they do." She grinned. Then her face grew serious "Your parents just arrived home. Wouldn't you like to talk to them before you leave?"

"Um, no!" I snapped, panicking and drawing the thin rope that closed the bag, ready to take it and run. "Do they know I'm here?"

"Not yet," Lunara said. "But they will soon enough."

"I'm not sure they want to talk to me." I frowned. She grabbed my bag and led me down to my parents' sitting room. As I entered, Father looked up from the scroll he was reading. His eyes burned with anger but he said nothing. Instead, he brought his gaze back down to what he was reading, as if ignoring me would make me cease to exist and ruin his perfect family.

Mother saw me and rushed to her feet. "Oh, Kalia, we've missed you so much." She wrapped her arms around me in a bear hug that threatened to cut off my ability to breathe. I hugged her back, lowering my head to her shoulder. I willed myself not to cry, only partially succeeding.

I looked up briefly to where my father continued ignoring me. "One of you has at least," I murmured.

She pulled back slightly and studied my face. "What was that?"

"Nothing," I lied. I didn't see the point in starting an argument. "I just miss you so much."

"Then come home, silly." She rocked us side to side as she spoke, providing a cadence to the singsong quality of her statement.

"Father won't let me." Why did my mouth refuse to cooperate on Mission: Don't Start an Argument?

"Of course, he will." She turned us to the side and craned her head towards Father's chair. "Won't you, dear?" In answer, he shook the slack from the scroll and continued reading. She seemed to take this as an affirmation. "All you have to do is get rid of that pesky dragon and everything will go back to normal."

I pulled away from her. "I'm trying to. But I resent the idea that I am only worth your love if I'm capable of getting rid something. Something that only happened because FATHER made me go somewhere I didn't want to. This is really his fault."

From behind the parchment, my father growled. I took a step back from Mother, crossing my arms over my chest. "Sometimes things happen and we have to deal with them. You taught me that lesson. Why does it apply to me and not to you?"

"Don't you take that tone of voice with me, young lady." Her eyes narrowed. She leaned forward with her hands on her hips. "I will not be sassed by my daughter."

My arms exploded into the air. "Well, it's a good thing that Farean keeps me from being your daughter anymore." I stomped to the door and slammed it closed in the most unladylike fashion I could muster. I couldn't believe they were being this way. Well, if they didn't want me, I could live without all of their stupid rules anyway.

Lunara stood in the hallway with my pack. She studied her shoes intently. "I-"

"Hold that thought." I held a finger up. I marched back to the door and pushed it open. Mother hadn't moved since my outburst and Father looked up from the scroll again. "And another thing. You should promote Lunara. She's a great maid. Plus, she took care of me when you wouldn't." I started pulling the door back closed but paused. "Not that you care about that." I slammed the door for the second time in as many minutes.

Lunara's ears were completely red. "You shouldn't have done that, your majesty."

I shook my head. "It's the least I could do for all you've done for me." I looked down. "I just hope I didn't get you fired instead."

"I really do appreciate everything you and your father have done for me, and I promise to do what I can to get you an in with the dragons."

I didn't think I was going to get any more conversation from her, so I changed the subject. "Alright, let me take my bag so you can get back to work, I'm sure you're behind from having to come fetch me."

She gripped the strap and then let go over it. She slid it off her shoulder and handed the pack to me. The weight surprised me, and I almost dropped it. I recovered and slid it onto my back. My knees protested the addition but I locked them into place. Lunara carried it so effortlessly; I was embarrassed that I was so weak compared to her.

She smiled and gave me a warm hug, whispering "Thank you," in my ear. I wasn't sure what for, though. It was she who had helped me.

I stood in the corridor for a moment, processing the realization that I was leaving my home for good. This time I wasn't being thrown out. I was choosing to leave. Suddenly, the doorknob across the hall rattled, and I barreled toward the back servants' stairs, taking them two at a time, my gear on my back threatening to tumble over me.

At the bottom, I glanced over my shoulder to check if I'd been followed. And I walked right into Lewon.

"Oomph." Off balance and propelled by the heavy carpet bag, I didn't just walk into him; we collided with a solid smack. My body literally plastered itself against his, and then seemed to cling there for a moment before it decided to bounce off, hurling me backwards. Instinctively, he put his arms out and around me to catch me. Which worked. It worked very well indeed. I was captured by muscled biceps and pinned against a well-defined chest. Unlike Etlin, Lewon was obviously accustomed to hard labor. I caught my breath, looking up at his stubbled chin. His silk shirt fell slightly open at the neck

right where my face was, and he smelled—he smelled like oiled leather and the earthy scent of dragons.

"I—my parents—I have to get out of here," I stammered.

Slowly and almost reluctantly, he removed his arms from around me, a strange look on his face. "You've had a bath. And you have a dress on that actually fits." This time I was sure he was checking out my chest. "You clean up nice." He smiled, his dimples winking at me. "I almost didn't recognize you."

"Yeah, well, I am a princess," I said. "We're raised to clean up nice."

"Of course, Your Majesty," he said, his back gone stiff and his smile gone.

"Oh, for Farr's sake. Will you knock it off? I have a dragon just like you, remember? Everybody has made it obvious that I can't be nobility and a Dragoneer. This is my new life now. I'm not above anybody else."

"Fair enough," he said. "I'll try to remember that." He didn't relax.

"Sorry for being curt. You surprised me. Guests usually aren't allowed in this part of the castle."

"I was exploring the castle when I heard shouting."

I grimaced. Somebody overhearing family business ranked as one of the few things could possibly get my parents madder than they already were. "No, it's fine. I was just heading back to Farean."

"I'll walk with you as into town," Lewon said. "If your mystery lair lies in the same direction, that is." "*My mystery lair?*" Oh, I really couldn't let him know it was a pig farm now.

"They are in the same direction," I said, feeling glad they were. "But what about your dragon?"

"Calen will find me when he's ready," Lewon laughed. "He got a whiff of a female dragon in heat just outside the city limits. He couldn't get back there fast enough after he dropped me at the castle."

I did not know how to respond to that. Farean was my companion, my dragon, but I hadn't even thought about her mating

someday. And how did that work when you had a telepathic and emotional link with the creature mating? Or in reverse? What about me when I'd been pressed up against Lewon. Had Farean felt that? "*Oh my god, this is not good.*"

"So, can I accompany you?" Lewon asked, a glint in his eyes as they stared into mine.

"Yes, of course, it's a date." I clapped my hands over my mouth, realizing what I'd just said. I pretended to wipe my mouth and let my hands fall back to my side. "Not a date. Just an evening stroll."

I was blushing. I could feel the heat on my face. I could feel the heat other places as well. What had gotten into me?

"You're cute when you blush," Lewon said, reaching out to brush a tendril of my hair away from my pink cheek.

My eyes grew wide. I couldn't breathe or move a muscle. Lewon's look was difficult to read. His body arched over mine, as if trying to protect me from the rest of the world. His eyes glinted with something wild yet determined, and his mouth curved into a sexy but still boyish smile. For a moment, I couldn't tell if he was happy or frustrated with me. I took comfort in thinking maybe he was just as confused as I was.

I exhaled slowly, and I counted backwards, using all the tricks my etiquette tutor had taught me for calming down in a tense situation.

It must have worked, because he blinked and moved a step back from me.

"Shall we go?" I asked, gesturing towards the servants' back exit.

"Of course. Here, let me take that." He reached for my bag, but I pulled away.

"I can do it. I want to learn to carry my own weight."

"Good," he said, giving me a friendly smile. "Because as a Dragoner, sometimes you have to carry your weight and your dragon's. Not literally, of course. That would crush you. But you know what I mean."

And I really did. Caring for Farean was a burden, hard labor, and a challenge all rolled into one—but I was determined to do what was best for her. No matter what.

Chapter Nine

During our evening stroll, Lewon told me about his life growing up on the outer edge of Darneta, almost to the back woods of Fawla. I just listened. I couldn't really compare my life to his. What would I say? That I had lived a sheltered life in a castle and caught Farean's attention by acting like a brat? He already knew that.

The road to the Tooth led to the outskirts of town, almost to the farmland. My pig farm home was just a bit beyond it.

"So, what are you doing living all the way out here?" Lewon asked. "Surely your father could provide better facilities for his daughter and her dragon."

"My father wants nothing to do with me or my dragon," I said. "He kicked me out of the castle onto the street because I wouldn't give her up."

Lewon stopped in his tracks. "How dare he?"

"He's the King and a very stubborn man. That's how. Please, let's just drop it. I really don't want to talk about that."

"To throw you and your dragon on the street—it's unthinkable." Lewon said, not dropping it at all. "Dragons are the most precious resource in all of Darneta. Nay, in the entire world. Colonel Authand will hear about this."

It was getting dark, just that time before the sun completely sets when everything looks shadowy and weird. The brush rustled in the woods at the side of the road, but there was no wind. I figured it was probably squirrels and just kept going. A branch snapped. A large one. Too big to be broken by a small animal. I stopped.

Lewon took a few more steps before realizing I wasn't moving and halted as well. "What's wrong?"

"There's something in the woods. I think it's following us."

"It's probably just an ani—" A Goblin leapt from a nearby tree, pinning me to the ground. I shrieked and clawed at him, but he was heavy, his maw coming towards my face as if to take a bite. I heard a thump and metal sliding against metal. The Goblin's weight shifted, and he slumped next to me.

Lewon stood over me with a dagger in his left hand, dripping blood. "Are you okay?"

I nodded, fighting to get control of my breathing, which was coming in terrified gasps. Still, I managed to sit up.

He seemed to take my affirmation at face value and stepped to the edge of the woods to wipe his dagger in the grass before sliding it back in a hidden sheath in his right sleeve.

My heart pounded, and I was still hyperventilating. As I tried to calm down, I realized how ridiculous I must seem to him. I was still prone on the ground freaking out, while he casually cleaned his weapon after killing in a single motion. If I joined the Dragoners, would it affect me like that? Would I kill that easily? Would it become my first instinct?

Lewon held out his hand and I took it. He pulled me up and set me back on my feet, his arms briefly circling around my waist. Then, he turned his attention to the dead Goblin.

The danger had passed, and I was on my feet, but my heart beat faster and faster. Why couldn't I catch my breath? I didn't normally react to danger this way. What was wrong with me? Was I having an attack of the heart, like the one that killed my grandmother before I was born?

Lewon looked up from where he crouched, rifling through the dead Goblin's belongings.

I staggered and fell to my knees. I could hear Farean screaming in my head, but that was ridiculous. We hadn't even made it to the inn yet, and the farm was two miles beyond that.

Lewon rushed to my side, grabbing my shoulders and pulling me up. "You need to calm down."

"I—I can't." The world spun around me. How could I be moving if he was holding me upright?

"No, you need to calm down. Tell Farean you are okay. She is freaking out and overloading your system with adrenaline. If both of you don't pull it together, your heart will stop."

Nothing like telling me that I was about to die to get me settled. "I can't," I panted. "She's not here."

"Do it," he shouted, shaking me roughly.

The pounding continued. This was it; my heart was going to explode in my chest.

If I'd been in a better state of mind, I would have seen it coming. Maybe I could have even blocked it. But Lewon slapped me hard enough to see stars. "Tell her" he screamed.

"Farean," I said aloud and in my mind too. "I'm okay. We're okay."

Immediately, my heart slowed. The edge of my panic blunted, and my breathing slowed. I became aware of the fact that I was sitting on the ground in my dress, with Lewon's arms wrapped around me and a dead Goblin laid out next to me. For some reason, that fact didn't seem to bother me as much as it had a minute ago. I didn't want to pull away from Lewon's embrace. It felt so good. But I wanted him to know I was okay. "I'm sorry," I said. "I don't know what happened. I've never been attacked before, but I didn't think I would freak out like that."

"It wasn't you." He looked down into my face, his mouth very close to mine. "It was your bond with Farean. She felt the attack and got scared. Don't be surprised if she shows up any minute. Actually, we should both have our dragons with us." His eyes looked off in the distance for a moment, his lips moving slightly as he had a conversation I couldn't hear. Did I move my lips like that when I mind-spoke with Farean?

"How can you talk to your dragon from so far?" I asked, pulling out of his arms. "And Farean isn't coming; she doesn't know where we are."

I'm coming, Kalia.

Well, that made me feel silly. And it quickly morphed into anger. "Will you tell me what's going on?" I pushed against Lewon's chest.

We untangled from each other and both stood up.

"You really don't know anything about dragons, do you?" He asked.

"That's not fair," I said. "Everything I know, I've had to teach myself. Or Farean has taught me." I glared at him, but he was right. This time, what I didn't know had almost killed me. Next time, it might harm or kill Farean. That thought was unbearable. It would be like rending myself in two if she died. Where was she? What if she got netted by Goblins on the way to me? There could be more in the woods.

Then, I heard the "fwap" of beating dragon wings and saw Farean clear the tree line. She landed by the dead Goblin and sliced into the body with her talons, stabbing with a fury I'd not seen in her before. I reached out to her. *"It's dead. It can't hurt us anymore."* She took one more jab at the skull, with enough force to crack it open, before turning her attention to me.

"Are you okay? What happened? I felt you and got scared. I'll kill anyone that hurts you. Are you okay?"

The questions kept coming until I placed my arms around her neck, sending her every reassuring thought I could muster. "I'm fine. It was over before it began, thanks to Lewon."

Farean swiveled her head, noticing the man next to me for the first time. *"He smells like dragon. Where is his dragon?"*

I started to explain where Calen was when the beat of wings announced his arrival.

Lewon's green landed a few feet from us, and the two dragons squared off, appraising each other. I felt my panic returning. A green

just like this had killed my grandfather in front of my eyes. And now it looked like he wanted to kill Farean.

Farean hissed, feeding off my fear. She extended her neck and arched her wings, trying to make herself appear as large as possible. The older dragon still had the size advantage and batted her with the bony edge of his wing.

I felt the hit as if it were to my own face. It didn't particularly hurt, more like a scolding than an attack. Farean snorted. "*Don't patronize me. If you are going to attack, do so properly*".

"No, wait!" I ran to intercept them, throwing myself between the two creatures. Farean's nose pushed against my back. I reached behind me to shove her away. Of course, my measly human efforts had no effect on a beast so much larger than myself. "What are you doing? He's twice your size and trained. You wouldn't stand a chance."

"*I could take him*". She huffed.

Calen's eyes bored into me.

Farean wrapped a claw around me and drew me back from the green dragon. "*He's trying to decide whether you're worth the trouble to kill so he can get to me.*"

Calen suddenly tilted his head towards Lewon and dropped his shoulders. He glowered at us, but didn't advance otherwise.

"No one is attacking anyone," Lewon said, taking a step towards us. He looked at his dragon. "They are our allies."

Lewon turned towards Farean and me, his hands out in a gesture of peace. "We all have a lot of residual tension right now from the attack. It's messing with our emotions. Let's all calm down. Farean, I know you can't back down without losing face. Neither can Calen. So, on the count of three, everyone will back down together. Nobody loses." He swiveled his head between my dragon and his. He raised his hands up above his shoulders. "Okay? One. Two. Three. Now." He dropped his hands and the two beasts returned to their normal postures.

"How did you do that? Farean wouldn't listen to me." *"I couldn't control her. I had always been able to control her before, but not this time"*. She wasn't a baby anymore. She was developing a mind of her own.

He shrugged. "Dragons are pack animals, always sorting each other for dominance. When you put a bunch of them together, you have to learn how to defuse situations before they turn into attacks. But don't worry. You'll learn it quick enough."

My eyes settled on the body in the path. He followed my gaze. "These woods aren't safe anymore. You'll need something to defend yourself with."

Lewon crouched over the Goblin and searched through its clothing. He found a crooked dagger in a thigh sheath and pulled them both off. "It's Goblin steel, worthless in most situations, but it's better than nothing. At the training grounds, we can get you outfitted with quality gear."

I examined the blade and sheath. I looked at my waist, trying to figure out a way to attach it. I certainly wasn't going to reach inside my skirt for a weapon.

Lewon realized my dilemma and removed the belt from the Goblin's body. I shrank back from the grimy leather. He stared at me, but I wouldn't touch it.

"Fine," he said and removed his own belt. He strung the sheath through the braided cords and handed it to me, then wrapped the Goblin belt around his own waist. I tied the belt over my skirts as he nodded. "Keep that handy. Even when you get home. You never know when another greyskin will show up."

I pursed my lips at the slur. I knew what it meant, but nobody had ever been crude enough to use it in front of me.

If Lewon saw my discomfort at his words, he didn't show it. Instead, he turned to his dragon. "Get rid of the body." The green picked up what was left of the Goblin after Farean's evisceration and went airborne. With a flick of his wrist, the dragon tossed it into the woods for scavengers to take care of and landed, this time well clear of Farean.

Lewon looked at the sun. "Since the dragons are here, we might as well fly. It will be safer."

I looked at Farean's back. "I don't have my harness with me."

He chewed on his lower lip. "Okay, we'll walk. But I'm not leaving your side until you are safely home. I was charged to bring you back to Tulta and that's what I intend to do. Besides, I can't afford to lose someone as important as you."

I looked down, unable to meet his eye. He meant because I was a princess, of course. That had to be. He couldn't mean that I was important to him personally, could he?

After a long dusty, mostly silent walk, with our dragons flying overhead to scan the woods around us, we were finally at Theron's. Lewon walked in with me and met Theron, them shaking hands like old friends. Lewon explained about the attack on the road, and Theron offered him and Calen a place in one of the barns for the night. After we'd all had some food and drink, Lewon headed for the door.

I followed him out, to make sure Farean was settled, but then I could hear her snoring from her stable. I was surprised when Lewon paused on the porch and took my hands in his. "You've certainly made my day interesting. I'm going to enjoy flying with you tomorrow." He smiled, looking down at me.

I leaned forward, willing him to close the gap between us. He saw the motion and pulled back. "Get some sleep. We'll leave just after dawn." He drew my hand to his mouth and kissed it, confusing me even more, before loping into the dark towards the barn.

I stood for a few moments, under the moonlight, only to see Farean lumbering towards me.

"*I got a quick nap.*" She said, coming up and rubbing my face with her muzzle". *Now, I will stand watch*".

"Don't be silly. You need more sleep. You have the hard part tomorrow."

"*Fine*". She coiled her body in front of the door, resting her head on her front legs. "*I will sleep here then. Nothing will get past me*".

I smiled and patted her head. "Goodnight." I closed the door behind me and leaned against it, trying to keep my thoughts still until I heard her snoring again.

There it was—halfway between a growl and a purr—the most endearing sound I'd ever heard.

I pressed my back against the hard door, fighting tears. This day had reminded me of the other side of having a dragon—the dangerous and wild side that had killed my grandfather. That had been easy to forget while Farean was smaller and cuter, and we lived on a pig farm.

I had often wondered why my grandfather had run out to confront a huge beast wielding only a sword. I had never asked my mother or father. I knew, even as a small child, it was not a question I was allowed to voice. But, in my own mind, I'd often thought it had been foolish of him. Everyone knew a man couldn't defeat a dragon. Only a dragon could match a dragon.

And today, my little dragon had faced off against a full-grown green, and all that terror had come rushing back. That was when I realized I was being as foolish as my grandpa. I had vastly overestimated my ability to handle a dragon.

Lewon's words came rushing back to me—*You really don't know anything about dragons, do you?" "*

He was right. I hadn't known my fear would scare Farean so much, or that her response could actually kill me. I hadn't known I could call her from far away, or that she could hone in on my location. And I had absolutely no idea how dragons related to other dragons, or how Dragoners related to one another. Which had all lead me to make a decision on our silent march home, though I had fought not to think of it until now. My heart ached, but I also knew it was the right thing to do for Farean. Because I loved her.

I ran my hand over the rough grain of the door separating us and swallowed my sobs.

I wouldn't be getting much in the way of sleep tonight.

Chapter Ten

They're here. Kalia, wake up. They're here".

I opened my eyes, squinting into the rising sun streaming through my window. A cool breeze carried the scent of the caked mud and excrement from the stable. I wasn't going to miss that part of my morning wakeup routine. Rubbing my eyes, I searched for the clothes I'd dropped on the floor the night before. My hair was a mess, but it would get much worse than that flying, so instead of fixing it, I stumbled out to the kitchen. Lewon sat at the table chatting with Theron. I ignored them and went for the pot of brewed stimpleaf. I chugged the beverage and let out the most unladylike belch. For dignity's sake, they pretended not to hear me.

Lewon stood. "Are you ready to go?"

"Almost." I hugged Theron. "Thank you for everything. I couldn't have made it through this month without you."

He wrapped his arms around me. "You would have been fine. You're more resilient than you think."

I sniffed, fighting to keep the tears from falling. "Once I'm on better terms with my father, I'll—"

"I already have everything I could want from your father. Just don't be a stranger. Visit me when you're at the capital."

I nodded, backing away from him. "I will."

Outside, Farean paced in front of the house, turning at every sound coming from the woods. "*Can we go now? Goblins could attack any moment*".

I laughed.

Lewon leaned in and whispered, "Don't tell her we'll be traveling closer to the Goblin encampments." The laugh died on my lips. I didn't like the idea of heading towards danger, but I at least I'd be surrounded by dozens of dragons and trained Dragoners.

I lashed my bag to Farean's forepaw and assembled my makeshift harness. Lewon arched an eyebrow at it but said nothing. Calen snorted and shook his head. I ignored them. If they wanted me to have a proper harness, they should have brought one. Tightening the last knot securing me to Farean's back, I leaned in close. *"Let's show them what we can do"*.

Without warning, she reared and leapt into the sky, beating her wings as we flew higher and higher. Looking back, I saw Lewon finish fastening his harness and take off after us. Aided by Calen's larger size, they caught up quickly. Farean flapped harder, taking us closer to the clouds. Calen banked and then rose above us. He coasted overhead, pushing us lower. "Save your energy," Lewon shouted. "We have a lot of flying to do today."

I stuck out my tongue, but we descended to a more comfortable altitude. We flew in silence with Lewon and his dragon a few feet to our left. Remembering the bug incident from the week before, I fished out my scarf from a pocket on my gingham dress and wrapped it around my face. The wind still stung my eyes and made them water. I was about to add goggles to my mental list of things I needed, and then remembered I wouldn't be needing them.

"What are Goggles?" Farean asked. *"Do I need them?"*

"Not Goggles. Goggles." I corrected her, thankful for the laugh to cover my sudden sadness. *"And no, you don't need them. That's what your second eyelids are for."*

We fell behind the other dragon. At first, it was barely noticeable, but as the day progressed, Lewon got further and further ahead of us, until I could barely see the spade-shaped flutter of Calen's tail.

Lewon noticed this as well, and they began to descend, waving us down as they went.

Farean landed next to them in a clearing by a stream. After extracting myself from the harness, she lumbered over and started lapping up water.

"We will rest for an hour and then start again." Lewon pulled a drinking flask out of his coat and filled it upstream from the dragons. "We made good time. We should only need to stop three or four more times before we make it to the training grounds." He pulled some strips of jerky out of another pocket and offered me one.

Taking it, I glanced at our companions as the green found a spot free of shadows and spread out in it, soaking up the sun like a giant cat. "What about them?" I held up my jerky.

Lewon shook his head. "If they eat, they'll get tired and not fly as well. Under extreme conditions, a dragon can go three days without any food and still fly." He looked in my eyes, and then away, a little smile on his face.

I nodded, unsure what to say. I felt like I was being flirted with, but it was awkward. Lewon didn't seem awed by my status, but then I had no idea what my status was anymore. How did Dragoners flirt? I'd never really been courted or wooed. I'd been matched with Elin when I was still a toddler. Both of us always assumed we'd be together, and it had been comfortable and settled. And boring. How many girlfriends had Lewon had? Maybe he had one now. The thought was disturbing. How could I find out? I couldn't just ask.

Farean found her own sunny spot and rolled onto her side, exposing her belly to the rays. I climbed up to her forepaw and rested against her. Together we dozed in the light as if we hadn't a care in the world. Too soon, Lewon motioned for us to get ready. Up in the sky, we continued east, the wind reducing conversation to only the most necessary orders.

"*What do you think of Lewon?*" I asked Farean.

"*I don't trust him or his big green dragon.*" "*The man smells off.*" Her tail flicked against the wind. Calen turned his head towards us briefly, but then returned his attention to flying. Had he heard that?

"Really?" I asked her. *"I thought he smelled good."* *"Besides, he's been nicer to me than anyone outside of Theron's family since you hatched."*

She swooped to catch a swallow too slow to avoid us. We flew with the poor creature in her talons for a few seconds before she released it. *"I'm just practicing"*. I felt her annoyance through our bond. *"And if you don't want my opinion, don't ask for it"*.

"That was a good catch", I admitted. But I'd hurt her feelings and now she wanted to pretend I wasn't tied to her back hundreds of feet in the air.

She still wasn't speaking to me the next time we landed. I unhooked myself from the harness and we headed in opposite directions.

"What's wrong?" Lewon fell in lockstep with me as we headed away from the river we were still following.

"Just a difference of opinion." I wasn't about to tell him that we had argued about him. "But now she's angry and not speaking to me."

He laughed. "There isn't a creature in the world as stubborn as a dragon. Give her time, she'll come around. But while we're on the ground and she won't be distracting you, I could teach you some woodcraft. That is unless you already know it."

"No, it never came up while my mother was making sure I knew how to walk around with a board on my head." I mimed holding a flat object above me while keeping my head perfectly still, pacing a few steps. He laughed, and I pretended to drop my board and fell to the leafy ground after it. I grinned from below him and he plopped down beside me. "Apparently, it's a vital skill in the court."

I tried to pay attention as he instructed me in the best way to start a fire, but mostly I daydreamed about whether I could convince my parents to enter into talks with his. Or, well, whoever his guardian was. Hopefully, it was somebody at least moderately important that could offer something to the King in return for my hand. It was silly girl stuff. I knew that. But I was still a girl.

I decided that the Authand must be his guardian. That would be perfect. As leader of the Dragoneers, Authand could just about name his terms. I'd seen him threaten to quit the service of the Elves if Father didn't supply more food for the dragons. I had to be worth more than some food. Authand would have my father in a corner and my marriage to Lewon would be secured.

I was so caught up in my ruminations that I didn't hear him call my name. He clapped his hands next to my ear, breaking me free of my reverie. "Have you been paying attention at all?" He stood and held out a hand.

"Huh?" I shook my head to clear the cobwebs. "Of course. I just got a little distracted towards the end." I took the hand, expecting him to pull me up, but he just stood there with his arm extended. Well, Father would at least insist that Lewon take lessons with my grace tutor. I pulled myself up, using his otherwise useless arm as support.

He turned his back on me, heading to the waiting dragons. "Get in your harness. We should have left a while ago."

I raced to catch up on him, taking care to avoid the exposed tree roots that threatened to trip me on the ill-defined path. The gurgling water of the nearby stream reminded me that I hadn't been able to relieve myself for hours. "How long till we get there?"

"Still half a day's flight. Why?"

I couldn't bring myself to say it. I subconsciously looked down at my lap. He caught the motion and smirked. "You'll have to go in the woods."

"What? No, I can't." My hands dropped to cover myself, although I was no more exposed than I had been a minute ago.

"Suit yourself," he shrugged, leaving me wondering why he was suddenly so rude. If that wasn't bad enough, he and Calen took off, leaving me to finish tying myself in so Farean and I had to try to catch up. At our next landing, I was so annoyed, I stayed tied to Farean's back the entire hour on the ground.

We continued east, as the sun sank towards the horizon, turning the sky a mixture of reds and oranges. Behind us, the sky dipped into violet and the dragon moon glowed silver as it began its nightly chase of the ball of fire. The sun disappeared below the horizon and dots of fire became visible on the ground below, signaling inhabitants who eschewed the safety of greater numbers in towns and villages. Ahead of us, a ring of fires marked our destination, as the watch lit the night against the Goblins that hunted here.

We landed in a field where Colonel Authand was waiting. He held out his good hand to steady me as I climbed off Farean. "Welcome, Princess Kalia." He bowed, still clutching my hand.

"No time. Bathroom." I ran off in a random direction, hoping one would be clearly labelled. Near the wall to my left, a lonely wooden stall bore the glyph for privacy. I gulped, as I headed towards it. A pit toilet was little better than going in the woods, but I was out of time and options.

When I came back out, the Colonel and Lewon were nowhere to be seen and neither were the dragons. "*Farean?*" I called, beginning to panic.

"*Finally, not pork!*" She squealed in my head. Well, at least she was being taken care of. I wasn't sure where I was supposed to go, but a red-haired girl approached me, holding out a hand. I was getting used to the manners of commoners and shook it. "I'm Kalia," I added.

"I know," she said. "I'm Esgeril. Colonel Authand asked me to show you to the girls' dorm. You're to report to him in the morning."

She started walking and I followed, trying to examine the buildings in the dim light. The complex was huge, putting the castle to shame, but most of the space was empty, segregated into large grassy lots like the one we were crossing. Low stone buildings dotted the landscape and the lake I'd spied from the air seemed to make up the Western border.

We approached a complex made up of stables for the dragons. The scent of straw and sweat permeated the building, which alternated between covered and open-air pavilions. To either side sat

two story buildings with rows of empty windows. Esgeril led me to the closest one. "All of the female Dragoneers stay here," she explained. "The guys are on the other side. And there's a watch tower over the stables," she pointed to a spindle in the center of the compound, "to make sure we don't mix. Violators get latrine duty."

I made a face. "At least that was one thing I won't have to worry about. Princesses don't sneak in the middle of the night."

She chuckled as she led me up to an empty room. "This one is yours. I'm down the hall on the right." She pointed to a door by the stairs. She promised to lead me to the Colonel's office in the morning and, with that, I was alone for the first time since I'd stormed out of the hatching grounds a lifetime ago. I found my belongings sitting on a small table by a cot. It was bare and uncomfortable compared to my quarters in the castle, but a month of sleeping in Lunara's bed made it more than tolerable.

Chapter Eleven

"This place is so fun. There are so many dragons here". Farean's voice woke me up, insanely early, as usual. My window showed a view of inky purple over the lake, only the brightest morning stars still visible.

"I knew you would like it. But let me sleep. I don't need to be up until dawn". I rolled over and pulled my head under the straw stuffed pillow. I could feel her excitement and even caught the odd scent as she introduced herself to the rousing dragons. I pushed the sensations away and focused on returning to sleep, but a knock ended that futile hope. Still dressed in yesterday's clothes, I opened the door to find Esgeril waiting for me, her long braided hair still damp. With squinted eyes, I told her, "I thought you said morning. This is still night."

She laughed. "We count dawn by the tower. The sun hit it half an hour ago."

"Fine, I'll get ready." I grunted and shut the door in her face. I spied a bowl of water that had been set out for me the night before and did my best to wash the travel grime from my face and hands. I had no way of cleaning my hair, so I tied it up into a bun before changing into fresh clothes. Opening the door, I found Esgeril waiting in the same spot I'd left her. Girls in various stages of getting dressed chatted in the halls but when I stepped out, they all fell silent. I felt every pair of eyes on me as we left. I hoped they didn't think they were intimidating me. Being stared at had pretty much been my life-long job description.

Overhead, dragons flew in formations. "Why are they different?"

"Huh?" Esgeril stopped.

I pointed up. "The formations. Each color group is flying differently from the rest. Wouldn't it look better if they all flew the same way?"

She shook her head. "Formations are designed to take advantage of each dragon's strength. Oranges are the biggest and strongest. And the most stubborn, just like their riders. Blues like your Farean are the fastest. They can be quick to temper as well." I recalled how willing Farean had been to eat half the nobility of Darneta at the hatching and nodded.

Esgeril continued. "Greens are the most agile, sometimes of morals as well as body. They are the best at getting in and out of a tight spot without getting caught." She paused a second and her chest swelled. "But Reds are the most steadfast creatures in all the land. Only they can fly steady enough for an archer."

"You have a Red dragon, I'm guessing?"

"Yeah. Baran. He's the best dragon ever. Every Dragoner is going to say that, but in my case, it's true. He understands me better than anyone."

The Colonel's office was small compared to the dragon sized buildings of the rest of the camp. However, it did have an entire wall missing, covered over with a huge sheet of canvas. Esgeril saw me staring at it as we approached. "It rolls up to allow Korth to join in meetings." I tried to imagine a dragon sitting in on one of my father's conferences, stuffed into one of the hard wooden chairs and sipping tea from Mother's delicate, human-made china.

I giggled and Esgeril shot me a puzzled look. I shook my head and the door to the office opened at our arrival. An aide looked at us and said, "Ah, Princess Kalia. Please, come in. The Colonel is expecting you." He turned his attention to Esgeril. "You can go to breakfast now. Somebody else will retrieve her when they are done."

Esgeril gave the aide a nod and left. I followed him inside. He pointed to a bench in the antechamber and knocked on the door to the Colonel's office. I sat as he went inside and spoke to the Elf in

charge. A moment later, he returned and waved me in. I stepped inside the office, and he shut the door behind me.

"You're late." The Colonel didn't wait for me to sit.

I settled into the small wooden stool on the opposite side of his desk. "I'm sorry, sir. I didn't know you used the tower to tell time here." I looked down, folding my hands in my lap as I balanced on the tripod structure.

"No, I mean you're two days late." He shook his head. "The other new Dragoneers arrived from the hatchery two days ago. That makes you two days behind learning the basics. You'll have to make it up on your own time. Meanwhile, you will have chores like anybody else. Don't expect any special treatment here. The King's daughter isn't any different from a shopkeeper's son as far as Dragoneers are concerned."

"With all due respect, sir." I straightened and looked him in the eye. "I don't plan to be here long. I came to find a new rider for Farean. Once that is settled, I'll head back to the capital. I don't know if I'll be welcome at the castle, but I've made some friends there and can find work."

"What are you talking about?" He tilted his head, giving me a look as if I'd said something preposterous; like Goblins were my friends. Well, I had a dragon in my head and we made peace with my grandfather's killers. Maybe that idea wasn't too far out either.

"I'm talking about the fact that I know nothing about dragons, and Farean deserves better than that. She needs a rider that can turn her into the greatest blue the Dragoneers have ever seen. Surely, there was someone at the hatching that wasn't chosen but who has been trained up for this. Of course, I'd like to meet them first, to see if they're a good fit. Farean can't just go to anyone."

His face contorted into a frown and then a grimace as I finished my speech. Then for moment, we just sat, staring at each other.

"What you are asking is impossible," he said.

"Impossible? You mean there is nobody else available without a dragon? I might know someone already," I said, thinking of my maid.

"I mean that the bond between you and your dragon is unbreakable. You cannot leave her because you're scared, or you want a more manageable pet. Frankly, even suggesting such a thing is the most sickening thing I've ever heard, and I was reading a report on Goblin atrocities before you arrived." He reached for a scroll on his desk and flung it at me.

I ducked, but the wooden spindle struck my arm. "Oww." I rubbed the red mark. I stood up, knocking over the stool. I bent to pick it up but stopped, kicking it away from me instead. "Why are you so angry with me?" I demanded, glaring at him.

"Angry?" He laughed. "This isn't angry? This barely rates as annoyed on my scale. This has nothing to do with you, Princess." He spat the word, making it sound more like a slur than a title worthy of respect. "This is about your dragon. You are a pathetic excuse for an Elf and Farean is stuck with you. Those are the facts. Every Dragoner who has ever flown knows they aren't worthy of their mount. It humbles the most confident man and makes him feel the fool to be owned by a beast so grand. I dare say it even makes a Princess doubt her useless, pompous upbringing. But that doesn't mean you can quit. Quite the opposite."

"I'm not trying to be falsely humble here, I assure you," I argued. "Look at me. Do you really think I have any business caring for one of our most precious military assets? I don't know what I'm doing."

"No, you don't. And that's mostly your fault. You ran off like a spoiled little girl instead of staying at the hatching grounds where others were available to mentor you." He struck the desk with his hook. That section of the wood was filled with pock marks from similar attacks. He used the wedged in claw to pull himself up, returning the advantage of height to him. "I'm not saying you aren't a terrible choice for a Dragoner. You are. But if you leave that dragon, you will break her heart. And I don't mean in a figurative, lovesick teenager way. The dragon bond is the strongest magic left in the world. If Farean believes, for one second, that you've truly rejected her, her giant reptilian heart will stop beating."

"No—I would never want that. Isn't there another way?" I croaked, feeling my own heart in my throat.

"There is not. And, so help me, if you do anything to mistreat that dragon, you'll be spending a lifetime in the Dragon Caves. And don't think your father could overrule Dragoner justice. The caves are prison to criminal Dragoners and dragons from all seven kingdoms. Now get out of here before I decide to send you there just for being an idiot."

I stood, openmouthed, trying to process what he'd told me. Authand picked up the ink blotter and threw it at my feet. I jumped, but the blue ink still splattered on the pigskin boots that Theron had given me. He looked for something else to throw, and I got the picture, racing for the door. I didn't acknowledge the aide, even as he held the outer door for me so I could escape his boss.

Lewon sat on a rock wall a few feet from the office, whittling a stick with the dagger he'd used to kill the Goblin a few days ago. He saw me and stood. I cut away from him, wanting nothing more than to go back to my quarters and cry in privacy.

He sidestepped and cut me off, so I ran straight into his body. Again. We were beginning to make a habit of that. Lewon wrapped his arms around me, gripping me tightly so that I couldn't escape.

"Leave me alone." I choked back a sob.

"Hey, don't worry about him. He's like that with everybody."

"I doubt that," I said, struggling against Lewon's hold. My eyes were already wet and full of unshed tears, but I couldn't hold them back much longer.

"No, really. Did you see all the marks on his desk? He doesn't need to stand up that way. He does it for affect to scare the newbies.

I sniffed. "Are you sure?"

"Yeah." He grinned at me, his dimples showing, and my heart lifted a little. Maybe this wouldn't be so bad—getting trained by Lewon. Deciding to give up Farean had been the hardest decision I had ever made. Harder than leaving home or breaking up with Etlin. And now the Colonel was saying I couldn't—that it was impossible.

Wasn't that a good thing? I had built myself up for the inevitable heartbreak of it for so long; I didn't even know how to feel anymore. Fear? Hope? Relief?

Lewon felt me relax and loosened his arms some, adding, "But he's still going to give you extra duty for missing an entire month at the hatching grounds and two days of training. Make no mistake. When the Colonel says something, he means it. You're going to be so sore."

"Great!" How much extra work would make up for saying "the most sickening" thing the Colonel had ever heard?

"Hey, don't worry," Lewon said. "When you're not in classes or doing extra chores, I could help train you to get you caught up."

"Yeah, okay." I nodded. "Let's do it."

"You mean right now?" he laughed, surprised at my sudden determination. "How about this? We have free time after dinner. There's a beach on the north shore of the lake. Meet me there an hour after we eat, and I'll get you up to speed."

I smiled. Alone on a beach as the sun was setting? That was the best news I'd heard all month. "But dinner is so far away," I moaned. "I haven't even eaten breakfast yet."

"Well, let's take care of that," he said, guiding me to the mess hall. When we arrived, he waved me inside. "I've already eaten and need to get back to my classes. See you after lunch." I started inside. "Oh, and Kalia?"

I stopped. "Yes?"

"Get yourself a proper set of clothes. You won't be able to fight in a dress. And you looked pretty ridiculous flying in it yesterday. Let's just say there was a reason I wouldn't let you fly ahead of me." He grinned and left. I stood at the door, red from the tips of my ears down to my toes. I entered the mess, taking a moment for my eyes to adjust to the dim light. Outside, three bells tolled, their tone rising then falling. The Dragoners around the room stopped talking at once, creating an odd quiet punctuated only by the chime.

Then, they rose and made for the exits. Several pushed past me, as if I wasn't there. After being knocked repeatedly, I gave up expecting common decency from them and pressed myself against the wall.

Seconds later, the room was empty save for a servant who pushed a cart, piling the abandoned plates and bowls as she passed each table. I made my way towards a door marked "Enter" in hopes of finding my breakfast.

"What are you still doing here, girl?" The servant pushed the cart in front of me, blocking my progress. "Capture the flag is about to start."

"I don't care about a game. I'm hungry."

"Breakfast is over. Now go." She turned her back to me and resumed her task. I sighed and left. If I couldn't get a meal, I might as well find out about this game everyone was so eager for.

Out on the parade field, dragons and their riders assembled according to their colors. I finally found Esgeril among a group of other Red riders. Her fiery hair amidst a sea of red dragon hides hadn't exactly made her conspicuous.

The dragons eyed me. I came a little too close to one, and it emitted a low growl. I shrank away from it. "What's going on?"

Esgeril saw me and pulled me away from the throng. "What are you doing here? You and Farean should be with the Blues. Find the other Blue riders and talk to Selkerdrim. He'll explain the rules to you. Now go. The others think you're here spying for your team." She gave me a small push and disappeared back into the crowd.

The Blues were easy to find. Each of the four Colors occupied a different quadrant of the field and kept well apart from each other. Farean was already there, pacing back and forth, bragging about her one short visit to the castle while the others ignored her and went about their business.

She saw me and perked up. "*Kalia. You're here! Are we going to play too?*"

"It looks that way. But I need to find Selkerdrim."

"Someone looking for me?" The crowd parted, revealing a tall boy wearing a number three pinned to his shirt. Tufts of dark brown hair stuck out from under a leather helmet. Selkerdrim flashed a smile as he approached. He looked near my age, and held himself in a manner that commanded respect. I felt a little self-conscious standing near him. He had the bearing Father had tried to teach me, but I had been as bad at it as Mother's lady-like grace.

"Oh, you." His smile faded. He pointed to a group in mismatched gear looking a little lost. "Go over with the other first years. I'll be there in a minute. I don't want to have to explain the rules more than once." Most of the other first year Dragoners were my age, but there were a few older. They all quieted when I approached. "Hi." I waved.

In return, they just stared. It was a tad rude, but I understood that commoners had little chance to learn proper manners.

Two riders broke into a fight, grappling each other to the ground. I stopped, unsure if I should break it up or if I even could. Before I could make up my mind, one of the boys pinned the other to the ground. He stood above him for a second, then reached down and pulled him back to his feet.

Selkerdrim approached our group with a golden banner tucked under his arm. "This is our flag." He unrolled it to reveal a vividly embroidered blue dragon spanning the length. "The object of Capture the Flag is to protect our flag and capture one belonging to the enemy. If another dragon catches you, they get ten points. Catch a flag and bring it back here for fifty points. The first team to a hundred wins. You lot will guard the flag. When the horn blows, follow me. Saddle up."

The others climbed on top of their beasts and hooked into their harnesses. Mine was still in my room. Of course, Selkerdrim noticed me just standing there. "You don't get a special invitation. I expect my orders to be followed."

"I didn't bring my harness." I explained. "No one told me—"

"You're absolutely useless." From his dragon, Selkerdrim towered over me. "Look, the game is about to start. When it does, run to the

trees and hide. You can't play without a harness." The horn blew. Selkerdrim's dragon lifted off into the sky, soon followed by the other Blue dragons. The Reds, Greens, and Oranges rose in their respective sections of the field. Soon, Farean and I were the only ones left.

I sighed. "Well, let's go have a seat and wait for this to be over."

We sat under the shade of an oak and watched the other dragons and riders flit across the sky. Authand and another instructor, "*Aran's rider*", Farean provided somewhat helpfully, announced the game.

The Orange dragons seemed to focus on defense. They made no attempt to hide their flag, but a wall of the giant beasts surrounded it. The younger ones, nearly double the size of an adult Blue, worked on points.

A Green, undoubtedly thinking itself sneaky, dove from an impossibly high height towards the Orange flag. Its speed increased as it got closer to the ground. Wings tucked in, the approach was almost silent. If I had been facing the other direction, I would have never known it was coming. I held my breath. Would the green dragon be able to stop in time?

I couldn't hear the approaching dragon, but apparently other dragons could. Just as the Green was about to break through the circle, one of the Oranges flicked its tail at the speeding intruder. The strike was quick and precise. Neither dragon nor rider even looked, but the blow found its mark. The Green was thrown off course, tumbling twice before righting itself mere feet from the ground.

"Ten points for Orange." Authand's voice boomed through a speaking horn.

If the gambit had succeeded, Green would have won the game. For now, they maintained the lead, but the Blues weren't far behind. "Ten points for Green," Authand reported on some unseen part of the field. That put them up to ninety. The match was pretty much a wrap at this point. One more play, and it would be theirs. At only sixty points, the Blues didn't have much chance.

Cheering erupted from Elves with dragon roars joining the chorus. "*Kalia, look*", Farean practically shouted through our mental connection. "*Selkerdrim has the Red flag. We're going to win.*"

But it wasn't a forgone conclusion just yet. A dozen Reds, three Greens, and even a small Orange chased close behind. Perhaps Selkerdrim's only chance lie in the fact that the other teams were more interested in fighting each other for position than in actually catching up to him. The Blue and his rider came in over the lake, wind buffeting them and slowing their superior speed. The Greens rode the currents in loops and twirls, taking every advantage to close the gap. The Reds sliced through the wind as if it weren't there. Even the Orange dragon barreled through, using mass and sheer force of will to beat the maelstrom.

"Psst."

Whoever wanted me could wait. I leaned forward at the very edge of my stump to watch.

"Psst."

I turned and found Lewon ducked behind a tree. He waved for me to join him. I cast a glance back towards the action and moved his direction. "But I want to watch this," I complained.

"You want to watch the game, or do you want to win it?" He pointed. Just beyond where he stood in a small clearing, the green flag hung from a tree branch. And no one was guarding it.

"Why show me?" I asked confused. "Don't you want to win?"

Lewon shrugged. "Green wins this thing all the time. If you score the winning points, you'll be a hero. It will go a long way towards the Dragoners accepting you."

I considered it. Authand already hated me, and no one else was likely to cut me any slack. And it was only a silly game. Besides, I hadn't heard any rules against one team helping another. "Thank you," I whispered to Lewon, hurrying towards the flag before he changed his mind. When I got to it, I wrapped my fingers around the silk cloth and pulled. It spilled into my arms, and I raced back to Farean. "We don't have a harness, so we'll have to walk. But if we

hurry, we can beat Selkerdrim back to the field." I climbed on her back, thinking it would be faster. And if I did fall off it was only a few feet to the ground.

Farean lumbered through the trees out onto the edge of the field. As soon as we broke into the open, half the Green team was upon us like they'd been waiting there.

"Run," I shouted.

Farean moved as quickly as she could, but she was no land mammal. Ahead, Selkerdrim had broken free of his pursuers. He was going to beat me there after all.

I was so focused on those behind me; I didn't notice the shadow above me. Green talons thrust down, grabbing the flag in my arms. I gripped the fabric tighter, but the Green rose into the air, pulling me off Farean. I screamed and let go, bouncing off Farean's back and rolling to the ground.

"Ten points for Green," Authand announced. "Green wins the game!" The Green bearing the flag he'd stolen from me took a victory lap over the field. One by one, the other Greens joined him.

I slowly pushed myself up from the ground, just as Selkerdrim landed in the marked out square little more than twenty yards in front of me. He would have won the game for us if I hadn't botched it. Even from the distance, I could see his scowl as he dismounted.

"Why did you do that?" he yelled at me "I told you to stay under cover and keep out of trouble."

"I found their flag. There was nobody there. I thought I could win." I didn't want to reveal Lewon's role in my play and get him in trouble with his teammates.

"If there's nobody protecting a flag, it's a trap," Selkerdrim spat. "They were waiting for you to take it."

I hung my head. "I'm sorry."

"Get out of here before the other Blues descend," he barked. "This would have been our first win against Green in two years, and you ruined it." He stormed off, leaving me standing there like an

idiot. Which maybe I was. Had Lewon set me up? I didn't want to believe that, but it sure looked like he had.

"*I told you*", Farean huffed.

"He fooled you, too," I said before storming off.

Chapter Twelve

I took the long way back to the barracks and most of the other Dragoneers beat me there. A group of second year girls chatted in the courtyard overlooking the dragon stables. As I approached, their conversation stopped.

"Thanks for your play," a girl with a tattoo of a green dragon on her forearm said. "The Greens would have needed an entire minute to win without you." The others laughed at her taunt. First the possible betrayal by Lewon, and now this? My day just kept getting better and better. Still, it would only make things worse if I started a fight.

I smiled, calling forth every ounce of grace tutoring my mother had forced on me. "Maybe next time, I can score points for my own team."

They just stared at me. Obviously, I wasn't going to impress them with my grace. But there were other ways to win people.

"Anyone want to trade clothes?" I asked, pointing down at my now-dusty dress. "It seems I brought the wrong trunk and don't have any riding attire. So, I propose a swap. My dress for any of the outfits you have on right now. I assure you, my dresses are custom made with the most expensive fabrics and quite valuable."

"Why would we want a bunch of frilly stuff like that?" One of them asked. "We ain't got no use for it here." The other girls giggled.

"Don't you ever get dressed up?" I asked. "Perhaps there's a Dragoneer dance, or some rider you'd liked to impress." This conversation wasn't going at all how I had hoped it would.

"You don't impress a rider with a dress," another girl scoffed.

"And there ain't no dance 'cept the one in the sky," another girl said, and they all laughed like she'd told a lewd joke. "*Oh, wait a minute. Dragons mate in the sky.*"

One of the girls was a Dark Elf. I'd heard they had limited opportunities because of the prejudice against them, though there was also an old wives tale that if you touched one it was good luck. I turned to her. "How about you?" I squinted at the name sewn onto a patch over her right breast. "Lorra? If you don't want the dress to wear, you could get a pretty penny for it at the market, especially if you said it was from the banished Princess herself. I'm sure you could use the money."

She came towards me. Like the other riders, she was strongly built and broad, her muscles rippling under her midnight skin. Two of her friends approached too, flanking her. The one in Green, Florian, towered over the others, taller than most men, with the faintest hit of green to her completion. She had to be part orc. I'd heard such things happened in the provinces, but it was shocking to see.

Lorra inched closer. "What? Just because of the color of my skin, you think I'm poor? Not all stereotypes are true, Princess." She made my title sound like a slur. "But I guess one is. The royal family is stuck up and doesn't care about the common people. Like father, like daughter."

"Don't you talk about my father." I launched myself at her, but Florian grabbed me and lifted me cleanly off the ground. "Let me go." I squirmed against her grip, legs swinging uselessly in the air.

"With pleasure, Your Highness." With that final word, she launched me into the air.

I hit the ground hard and rolled twice before a rock jammed into my shoulder, stopping me abruptly. Pain throbbed, radiating down my arm. The girls continued to laugh while I lay there, trying to catch my breath.

I could feel Farean's growl in my soul. "*I'm okay*", I told her.

"*No, you're hurt. I will hurt them.*"

I fought the urge to shake my head. She couldn't see me anyway. *"Some battles I have to fight on my own"*.

"But-"

"No, trust me, dear". I stood slowly. My pink gown now bore a gash and the fabric around the split was red from my bleeding shoulder.

Just moving hurt, but I wouldn't give them the satisfaction of seeing it. I pushed through the crowd to the barracks door, yanking it open, which rewarded me with a fresh wave of pain. I clenched my teeth and let the door slam behind me. I braced against the wall for a moment before trudging up the stairs to my room. I fished out my makeshift harness, not bothering to change. The opposite stairwell led directly to the stables.

I found Farean resting on some sun-warmed rocks. *"I like this place, but you don't."* Her lips pulled back revealing her fanged teeth, an expression I'd come to learn was the dragon's version of a frown.

"I'm fine," I lied as I patted her snout. Her presence calmed me, and my shoulder hurt less already. I held up the harness. "We're going to go for a little flight. It seems I need to go shopping."

"Ooh, will you get me something?" She lowered her head to let me slide the neck rope over it and down onto her chest.

"Sure. I'll see if I can find you a nice harness. Something flashy to make the other dragons jealous." The image of a gem-encrusted breast plate flashed through my mind, and she nodded approvingly. I inspected my progress with the harness and pulled it off before rotating it and trying again. Hopefully, the new harness would be easier to put on.

Satisfied, at last, that I had it on her correctly, I climbed on and tied myself in. Then, we leapt into the air and flew out over the lake.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

I bit my lip. *"Hmm, it looks like there is some smoke on the horizon to the north. Maybe that's a village."*

She banked, and we started towards the grey wisps in the distance. I looked down as we flew over the camp. Below, Authand waved his hook in the air, shouting something that was lost on the wind. I

waved back as we sped away over the vast expanse of forest that covered so much of the realm outside the capital.

We settled into a languid pace, rising and falling as Farean caught thermal currents. I leaned into the ridge along her back, relaxing for the first time in days. There was nothing like a good fly to calm me. Farean loved to fly, and, despite my initial surprise at the revelation, I loved flying with her. Our happiness and contentment fed off each other until we were almost in a state of euphoria. I wished we could stay in the air forever, away from court politics and peasant bullies.

"*We have company*", Farean said.

"*Where?*" I twisted my head, looking for them.

"*Behind us. A couple miles back, but they're gaining on us*". The tiny red dot could have been anything, but I trusted Farean's judgement. Florian must have so little to do that she would chase after me just to continue bullying me.

"*Let's see if we can lose them in the forest*", I suggested. As soon as the words formed in my mind, she dove below the treetops. Branches whipped past us, as she twisted her body left and right, avoiding any collisions. We fell below the upper canopy and leveled out. There was no trail, and Farean had to constantly dodge the trunks jutting from the ground. But that would make it easier to lose our pursuers.

A crashing sound behind us announced they had dropped below the trees as well. I leaned forward and urged Farean to go faster. The forest blurred around us as she rose above one branch and below the next.

"Stop!" a feminine voice cried behind us, making me look back. It wasn't Florian at least, but I couldn't think of any good reason for someone to be following me through the woods. I couldn't see anyone, and Farean just kept going.

I turned forward again and saw a giant oak looming ahead of us.

"*Watch out!*" I cried, but Farean pumped her wings harder, ducking a smaller elm in our way. Moments from impact with the oak, she spread her wings and caught one of its branches with her rear legs.

Momentum carried us forward as her talons shredded the bark underneath. We rotated around the bough and she let go. She pumped her wings to steady herself out as we flew in a completely different direction than before.

I listened again, but the noise of those chasing us was receding.

"*That was amazing*," I praised Farean, "my chest heaving with exhilaration.

She replied in mumbled thanks, her attention elsewhere.

I followed the direction of her head as she glanced up to avoid yet another obstacle and then back to the ground where a small grey rabbit ran through the underbrush.

It ducked into some heather, but Farean skimmed her claw through the plant. The rabbit bolted from its hiding spot and back into sight. Farean plucked it from the ground and rose back up to the mid-story of the forest, making it more difficult for someone to spot us. Then she popped the rabbit into her mouth and swallowed it whole. I could feel her neck muscles work the meal down her gullet towards her stomach.

I assumed her little snack meant we weren't being chased anymore. She had heard them a mile away before. She would let me know if she heard them again.

Farean slowed her pace and turned towards a creek, landing on the mossy bank gently. As she lapped at the water, and I felt the coolness on my own throat, which was nice because I didn't really want to clamber out of my harness for a drink.

Farean finished drinking and we took off, staying beneath the tree cover, but that made it almost impossible to know which direction we were going. We'd long ago lost the smoke of the village or any other familiar landmark. I was afraid we were lost.

"*We are still heading north*," Farean said, matter-of-factly. "*I can sense directions. It's a dragon thing.*"

"*So, you're like a homing pigeon?*" I asked, laughing.

"*No*," she frowned inside my head. "*I'm the thing that eats homing pigeons.*"

"*Even so*", I thought at her. "*Let's go back above the trees and get our bearings.*"

She rose and swerved around another tree. Her pace was more languid now. Her snack affected her more than I would have liked. As we crested, I saw that we were indeed still headed towards the smoke, which was closer now. There was no trace of the dragon that had been after us, just a lone hawk circling overhead.

Clear of any threat, we rose higher and continued towards the gray column in the sky. The hawk above us screeched and dove at us. The sound was wrong, however, and I realized with a start it was the red dragon from before.

Farean dipped back below the trees, but it was too late. Silver talons grabbed her tail, yanking us upward.

Farean screamed in pain, and I joined her, crying out, as she thrashed and tried to free herself from the dragon's grip. Thankfully, it was a small beast, not much larger or older than Farean, who grabbed a tree limb and hung on for dear life.

The other dragon yanked, and we screamed once again as scales slaked off Farean's tail.

Without warning, the red let go, and we dropped, putting Farean's full weight on the branch. The tree stood no chance against the full weight of a quarter-ton animal. The wood cracked and splintered before falling. As we flailed about, Farean got her wing caught under her foreleg. I reached for the joint, but it was too far from the harness. I untied the first rope holding me in, but Farean's tumbling flipped us upside down.

She cried in earnest now. Even if I could get the wing free, she couldn't fly upside down. And I couldn't get out of the harness with only gravity between me and the ground. The fall alone could be lethal, and even if I survived it, Farean might come crashing down on top of me.

If that wasn't bad enough, the red came diving towards us, the way clear now that we'd bashed the forest apart.

As its shadow eclipsed us, all I could think was, "*I'm sorry Farean. I wish I'd been a better rider for you.*"

"*I will be with you forever, Kalia.*" She thought back. "*In death as in life*".

Chapter Thirteen

Just as my life flashed before my eyes, a young Elf leapt from the red dragon hovering over us. Rope uncoiled above her, and she landed with a thump onto Farean's belly.

It took every ounce of my willpower to turn and look at her, as Farean's panic pounded through my chest.

Esgeril hooked her legs around Farean's neck. She leaned down but pulled back just before the whole world shuddered and blurred before a crack announced another tree limb yielding to our weight.

Esgeril leaned down again, carefully, slowly, and pulled on Farean's forelimb.

Farean, panicked, instinctually fighting against her.

"Tell her to relax," Esgeril said to me.

"But we're going to die," I answered.

"Not if you do what I tell you. Now relax."

I took a deep breath and then another. "*Farean*", "*let her help you*". I sent to her, with calming vibes. "*It's our only hope.*"

And, little by little, Farean relaxed the tension in her leg.

Esgeril gave it another pull and freed Farean's wing. Before we had a chance to react, Esgeril gave a tug on her rope and rose from Farean. I looked up in time to see her dragon land on a branch clear of our destruction.

Still looking up, my body lurched as Farean rolled and spread her wings to slow our descent. She pumped furiously and when we reached the next branch, she was able to grab hold of it. We landed hard against it but didn't fall.

I held my breath as my heartbeat slowed. Exhaling, I looked down. There was nothing below us but ground. A scant twenty feet of air separated us from what would have been our last "landing." Farean trembled as that realization struck home for her as well.

Esgeril and her dragon swept past us and landed on the ground a few feet away.

Unwilling to give up the grip that had been so hard won, Farean climbed down the trunk backwards like a treed cat. The going was slow, but neither of us wanted to be airborne just yet.

Esgeril stood next to her red dragon, tapping her foot with arms crossed as we reached the ground.

Once down, Farean collapsed onto the leafy forest floor, pressing herself to it like it was her best friend. I couldn't blame her. I nearly tore the ropes off my harness in an attempt to dismount and kiss the ground myself.

The final rope untied, I slid off her back in a maneuver that would have left my mother cringing if she'd witnessed it. I faked a stumble and sat next to my dragon digging my fingers into the soil. I looked up and caught Esgeril shaking her head.

"Why were you chasing us?" I demanded, angry and full of needless adrenaline now that I wasn't going to die. "You nearly killed us?"

She flinched at my verbal assault, her eyes wide. "Nearly killed you? I saved your lives."

Behind us, the dragons growled. "*Let me deal with this,*" I told Farean. "And thank you for that," I shouted at Esgeril. "But we wouldn't have needed saving if you hadn't attacked us."

"If you hadn't run away, we wouldn't have had to chase you."

"I had quite enough teasing for one day, thank you very much. I didn't need you following me to town and harassing me more."

"Harass? What are you talking about? Colonel Authand sent me after you because you're not allowed to leave camp without permission."

"Well, I was going to town to get gear," I said, my anger waning a little. "Everybody keeps telling me as Dragoneer can't wear dresses, but that's all I have." I looked down at my sun dress, which was ripped in a dozen different spots now, not just the tear on the shoulder. Underneath, my skin was covered in scratches. Blood stained the torn fabric, but I couldn't find the source on my body.

Esgeril grinned at my sorry state. At first, she covered her mouth to hide the smile, but then her lips pursed, and her face contorted. Finally, she could hold it no longer and erupted into a full-on chuckle.

"What's so funny," I demanded.

She ignored me as she dropped to her knees and beat the ground with her fists.

"Stop it." I protested, but somehow found myself grinning too.

She tried to compose herself but broke into another fit of snorting laughter. Finally, she got it under control as she huffed for breath. "You were going the wrong direction," she said.

"How was I supposed to know that. I don't even know why I'm here. Everything I do is wrong."

Her smile waned. "You're new. And you don't know much. That's true. But you definitely belong here. That was some of the best flying I've ever seen."

"Really? It was mostly Farean. And I'm sure it wasn't anything special."

Esgeril put a hand on my shoulder. "Both of my parents are Dragoneers; dragons practically raised me. I've never seen anyone maneuver through the woods like that. You should try out for the Dragon Race."

The Dragon Race only happened once per century, and the winners' species had bragging rights until the next one. Some had wanted the upcoming event cancelled due to the Goblin wars. The Nightbloods, the current trophy holders, had been the most vocal in favor of that plan. But my father had brokered a deal. In two years, the winner would lead the combined dragon armies against the

Goblins. But the idea of me and Farean winning was ridiculous. This was probably just another cruel joke Dragoneers pulled on unwanted first-years.

"There's no way I could win," I told Esgeril. "I probably wouldn't even place in the qualifying Run. People have spent their entire lives training for the Race."

"They have." She nodded. "But half of them don't show the skill you just demonstrated without any training at all. But it doesn't matter to me if you enter." She shrugged. "If we don't get you back, you'll never be a Dragoneers anyway. If we hurry, there might still be time to go shopping today."

She pulled herself onto her dragon's back in a single motion and hooked herself into the harness. In a blink, they were airborne, rising up through the hole in the forest canopy we'd made.

Farean and I looked at each other. Neither of us was eager to fly again so soon, but we really didn't have a choice. I trembled slightly as I mounted her and retied the knots on my makeshift harness. Farean lifted off and we rose above the trees, taking a much more leisurely pace than Esgeril. They flew in meandering circles as they waited for us. Once we reached their altitude, they too off toward camp.

We followed, but Farean stayed well behind. She wasn't about to let another dragon get within talon's reach of her in the air again.

The sun reached its zenith as we approached the camp. My stomach rumbled, reminding me that I hadn't eaten since yesterday. After landing, I cast a glance towards the dining hall, but Esgeril shook her head and took off towards the Colonel's office. I could smell the scent of freshly baked bread wafting from the cafeteria, but I turned my back on it and followed after her.

Being a dragon unconcerned by human rules and protocols, Farean wandered towards where sides of beef were being handed out to dragons for their noon meal. I'd do anything to trade places with her right now.

The aide stood at the open door to the Colonel's office, and he waved us in. We were obviously expected, but not in a good way. I didn't even have a chance for my eyes to adjust to the dim indoors before Colonel shouted, "Get in here right now! You, too. Esgeril."

Her eyes grew large at being included, but she didn't hesitate to follow me into the dragon's den.

The Colonel thumped his hook against his desk, chips of wood flying in various directions. "Kalia, maybe you could do whatever you pleased at the castle, but in the Dragoneers, we have rules that must be followed. You can't run off without permission."

"I didn't know."

"That's right, you didn't. Because you haven't bothered to learn the first thing about your duties. Starting tomorrow, you have no free time. When others are off relaxing, you'll be reporting to Flatch for additional lessons. You will do this every day until you've caught up with the rest of your hatching group."

"Fine," I said. "But I need riding clothes. Apparently, my dresses aren't quite sturdy enough."

He looked over my tattered dress.

I'd forgotten how much skin was exposed. I hunched my shoulders forward to make myself smaller.

He shook his head. "No, they aren't. But you must understand that Goblins have been spotted in this area, and the rules are there for your safety. You might feel invincible in the air, but greyskin are stealthy in the wood. If you land your beast for a drink, you're likely to find a blade coming out your chest." He raised his hook and waved it in front of me. "I lost my hand to Goblin's defending your grandfather's land because I got too cocky. And you know what happened to him. Don't forget that. Never let your guard down."

I gulped. No, I wouldn't forget seeing my grandpa die. But I had forgotten the dangers that lurked, even after what had happened to Lewon and me on the way to Theron's farm. I guess I had been so pissed off about the scrape with Florian and her gang, that I'd lost my head.

"So, I have a quandary." The Colonel said. "You will be disciplined, but you also need riding gear before you can perform your punishment." He sat back down, a look of contemplation on his face. "You haven't had a good start with the other girls, have you?" He asked.

I shook my head, not meeting his gaze. I'd been taught grace and poise, but that didn't seem to matter for anything out here. Instead, it had brought me scorn and ridicule.

He mulled the dilemma over, scratching at his chin with the blunt edge of his hook. Then, he seemed to finally remember that Esgeril was in the room with us. "Esgeril, you will accompany her to get gear, helping her discern what she needs. And then you, Kalia," He turned back to me, "will spend tomorrow working in the stables for the stunt you pulled today."

Esgeril gave me a sympathetic glance. Stable duty was bad. I had helped Theron clean out the pig sties a few times, and they were small animals, but it had been back-breaking work. And of course, I'd cleaned up after Farean, but she was petite for a dragon. But Esgeril didn't argue about her duty, and neither did I. We both just nodded, and I gave out a soft, "Yes, sir."

The Colonel was already examining a scroll on his desk. Without looking up he barked, "Dismissed!"

We didn't need to be told twice and quickly fled the office.

"The town with shops is south of here," Esgeril said, heading for the stables. "We'd better head out before he changes his mind."

I was starving, but maybe there would a chance to eat in town. At the stable, I had to pull Farean away from her meal, hoping she hadn't eaten too much to affect her flying. She was grumpy about leaving again, and I couldn't blame her. I tied my rope harness together, and we were back in the air.

Riders can't really chat when they flew. The distance, wind, and velocity made it almost impossible to converse. That's why our mind-speak with our dragons was so useful. So, Esgeril and I rode in silence for an hour before smoke on the horizon announced the

presence of a settlement. My stomach gurgled anew, and Farean picked up her pace, feeling my hunger. We landed at a wide pavilion made of black rocks. After we dismounted, the two dragons quickly curled up upon the stones and I could feel Farean slip into a slumber. A path led into the village proper, and Esgeril and I started down it. I recited a list of what I thought I might need, and she nodded without speaking, picking up her pace. Despite her being a full head shorter than me, I had to jog to keep up.

Esgeril led me down the dirt street to the tradesmen's section of town. I slowed at each food stall until she had mercy on me. She reached into a pouch and handed me some bread and a pinch of stimleaf. "Rule number one of being a Dragoneer. Always pack a snack, because you never know when your next meal will be. Now hurry and eat this before we go inside."

I didn't have to be told twice and wolfed it down, hardly bothering to chew.

A bell on the door gave a quiet ring as we entered a small shop. A short woman dressed in a leather vest over a faded blue dress popped her head out from behind a curtain. She saw Esgeril and smiled. "Dear, how have you been? Look at you, you're getting so tall. I'm going to have to put a stack of rocks on your head." She brought Esgeril into a fierce hug, her head barely above that of the young Dragoneer.

"Aunt Tirada, this is Princess Kalia." Esgeril extracted herself from the older woman's grasp.

Tirada stopped breathing a moment. Her eyes widened before springing into action, dropping to a knee so fast that she nearly took her niece down with her.

I blushed for the millionth time today. "Please, stand up. Besides, I'm not even a princess anymore." I frowned.

She rose and wrapped her arms around me. "I'd heard rumors that there was an upheaval in the capital with dragons involved, but didn't know they involved you, my child."

I stiffened. "I'm not a child," my voice cracked.

She pulled away from me, staring into my eyes. "No, of course not. You are a beautiful young woman and now a Dragoner to boot. Once you adjust to the changes in your life, there will be nothing to stop you." She glanced over my torn dress. Not for the first time today, I wished I'd had a chance to change before we left. "Now I'm guessing you came for some proper riding gear?"

I nodded, and she whirled into motion. She plucked a tape measure from nowhere and took measurements which she chalked onto a slate she kept tucked in her apron pocket. Within a minute she had measured every inch of me as thoroughly as the Royal Taylor did in an hour.

"You're in luck," she said, smiling. "You're almost an exact match for riding gear I was already working on. I can adjust it and have it ready this afternoon. I'll just make a new set for the customer it was intended for."

"I couldn't —" I started, but she put a hand up and shushed me.

"Tut-tut," she said. "She won't be back until next week anyway. That gives me plenty of time. Do you need a harness?"

I looked at the rope marks on my arms and my ankles and nodded.

"Farean is about ten hands tall and maybe five wide," Esgeril said. "But she's only as old as Baran. My guess is she will be near twice that by the time she is full-grown."

Tirada nodded and disappeared into the back. She returned with a heavy looking saddle with straps longer than my arm that terminated in steel buckles. She handed it to me, and I nearly threw it in the air, surprised by how light it was. My hand slid over the saddle. Like the harness itself, it weighed next to nothing.

She noticed my puzzlement and explained, "Aluminte. It's difficult to get but extremely light."

My hand instinctively went for my purse. I had a fair amount, probably more than anyone else at the training camp. But it wouldn't last forever, and I didn't think I would ever see another dime from my parents.

"I might need something a little more basic," I admitted.

"No, you misunderstand," Tirada said. "This is a gift. And I'm so glad to see Esgeril has made a friend. She's been so withdrawn since her father died."

Esgeril glared at her aunt. "I have not. I've just been busy. Speaking of which, Kalia needs to see if that harness fits, and you have a suit of leathers to finish." She tugged at my arm and pulled me towards the door.

"I—well, thank you." I stammered. "Still, I must pay you something." But Esgeril had already pulled me out to the street.

"You can argue with her about payment when we come back for the riding leathers," she said. "But I can already tell you, you'll lose."

I followed her, shifting the saddle to a two-handed grip as I struggled to keep up with her half-run towards the dragon stones. She turned a corner, and I called, "Wait up."

Around the building, she stood waiting, impatiently tapping her foot.

"Hey, what's the rush?" I asked. "We can't leave until the leathers are done anyway, and your aunt was really nice."

"I know," she said, rolling her eyes. "My entire family is painfully nice."

"And that bothers you?" I asked, incredulous.

"Listen," she said, stopping and whirling toward me. "I love my family, okay, but they always look on the bright side. They always have a smile for everyone. Or a kind word or deed. And things aren't always rainbows and happiness. Sometimes things suck, and they just don't get that."

"Okay," I said, taken back by her vehemence. "So, you're sad, and they don't get that?" I took a stab at her problem with her overly-cheerful family.

"Exactly!" she threw up her arms in frustration. "My father died nine months ago, and I'm supposed to be over it? I'm supposed to put on a happy face and smile for the family, so they won't worry about me. I don't know how they can just move on like he never

existed. It's not right. Who will remember him if we don't? It's like they're erasing his existence with their smiles and pat phrases. And every time I see them, they expect me to erase him too." She stopped, tears glistening in her eyes, glancing around and realizing we were still on the street, though no one was really paying attention to us.

"I saw my grandpa die when I was five." I said, feeling her pain. "No one can ever erase that. How did your father die?"

"It was a Goblin ambush," Esgeril said. "My parents were riding on a routine patrol when a net caught mom's dragon and dad caught a spear trying to cut them loose." I could see her knuckles turning white as she pressed her fingers into her palms. "The day he died, I vowed I'd become a Dragoner and avenge his death." She took off, headed around another corner and I followed, our dragons coming into view as we rounded it.

Farean picked up her head, cocking it slightly. "*Baran says they will kill every Goblin in the kingdoms*". "*Is that our job now?*"

"Goblins killed Esgeril's father," I explained.

Farean's eyes narrowed. "*Then we will help them*".

I couldn't imagine ever killing someone, even as hideous a creature as a Goblin. I mean, I knew it would be part of my job as a Dragoner. But I had once thought just like Esgeril about dragons—that they were hideous beasts—that they should all die because of what one had done to my grandfather. And now I had a dragon as a best friend and companion. Was it possible we had misjudged Goblins in the same manner?

It was a startling thought, but one I couldn't easily dismiss.

Chapter Fourteen

I put my new harness on Farean's back and Esgeril showed me how to connect the straps. The front went on the opposite side of her forelegs than I had put the ropes. The saddle felt firmer and much more secure. The scalloped underside of the buckles fit against the scales of her belly as if they had been molded to them.

Esgeril directed Farean to fly and do some loops to see how she could move in it. I stepped forward, but she put a hand on my shoulder. "You don't have your gear yet. There's nothing for the straps to connect to. And riding without a harness usually ends poorly."

I thought back to my first ride when I had slid from Farean's back before she was more than a few feet in the air. I nodded. "*Go on*," I told Farean. "*Fly without me. I'll be down here admiring your grace.*"

Exhilarated by my flattery, she leapt into the air. Baran followed Farean into the sky and they swooped around each other, diving at each other in mock attacks and generally frolicking in the sun.

"Baran is a male?" I asked blushing, but the answer was obvious by what her dragon displayed when he flew overhead. "I thought dragons only bonded with riders of the same gender."

"Sometimes they don't." Esgeril didn't add anything more to that.

We watched them in silence for some time before I heard Farean whine. "*Annw, I don't want to*". Baran landed on the rocks and Farean followed him to the ground. I removed the harness and placed it with Esgeril's in a large metal box near the edge of the pavilion.

We were halfway back to Tirada's shop before I broke the silence. "If you don't mind telling me, I was wondering what happened to your father's dragon after he died."

She slowed almost to a stop. "The bond between a Dragoner and dragon is very strong. Unbreakable. I've known Dragoners who lost their dragon and have barely been able to function after that. Some don't. The Dragoners have a home in the mountains where those who can't take it are sent, broken husks of Elves and other races so catatonic that the healers have to feed and bathe them."

I shuddered at the thought. "But what if the dragon survives their rider?" I couldn't imagine similar homes for dragons.

"A dragon that's lost their rider is dangerous. They lose their minds. They have to be put down or they will attack anyone, even friends."

"Is that what happened to..."

"To Niden? No. Dad died in battle. If a rider-less dragon in peace is dangerous, one in battle is even more so. Niden took down an entire company of Goblins before being brought down by their archers. It allowed mom and Susa to escape." Her voice caught again, and this time tears openly rolled down her cheeks. I thought she was done speaking, but she resumed. "Then those beasts, those abominations, they ate him. Goblins eat dragon meat, and they ate dad's dragon in front of his corpse."

I had no words to comfort her. In fact, I was kind of feeling traumatized and in need of comfort myself. Fortunately, we had arrived at Tirada's shop, and I could turn my mind to other matters.

As we entered, Tiranda was pushing a wooden mannequin out to the floor. On it were the new riding leathers, the same Aluminte buckles shining around the waist, waiting to accept the straps from Farean's harness. The breastplate was dyed blue nearly equal in color to her scales, although, looking closer, I noticed the royal gold and black woven into the stitching. The design reversed for the pants with black suede inlaid with blue.

I sucked in my breath. "It's beautiful. But how did you make it so quickly?"

Tirada shook her head. "Like I told you. This was nearly finished already. It needed only some minor modifications. And a happy

accident that both your dragon and the originally client's are Blue. I sent your measurements to a tailor and had some more day-to-day clothes sent over." She pointed to a bundle tied in sackcloth on a wooden chair. "There's only a couple sets, but it should get you through until you can get back to order a new wardrobe when you have more time."

I looked down at my feet, still clad in the leather boots Theron had given me. "That may be a while." I said, thinking about Authand and how little he trusted me.

"Well, we hope to see you again soon." Tiranda smiled. "If you want to change out of that dress, you can use my workroom behind the curtain," she said, pointing.

"I can help if you want," Esgeril said shyly. "Riding leathers can be a little confusing the first time."

"Thank you," I said, grabbing the bundle of clothes while Esgeril wheeled the mannequin through the curtain. The area dwarfed the front of the shop and light streamed through large windows on either side positioned high on the walls to capture the most daylight. The space was tidy, with even the sheets of leather meticulously stacked with edges aligned. Father always said that an organized workspace was a sign of a master craftsman.

I quickly shed my tattered dress. I gave my chest wrap a cursory inspection, but it seemed to have made it through my adventures unscathed. Tiranda had given me two functional sets of clothing in brown, similar to the ones that Esgeril wore under her riding garb. The shirt gave me no problem, but the breeches only reached mid-thigh before getting stuck.

I lowered them, but Esgeril put her hand on my arm. "You forgot to undo the clasp." Her hand moved to a wooden toggle between my legs, accidentally brushing the inside of my thigh. The touch made me shudder. It was involuntary, embarrassing, and Esgeril definitely noticed, immediately jerking her hand away.

"The only trousers I've ever worn were much too big on me, and I could just slide them up. I never wore pants before I was thrown

out," I said sheepishly. "Mother said it wasn't ladylike." I studied the toggle intently, and then fumbled with pushing it through the hole.

"And you've never opened the fly of somebody cute, hidden from sight in some dark corner of the castle?" She grinned lecherously at me.

"What? No! I had a boyfriend. We were engaged, but all we ever did was kiss. There was always some servant around to keep an eye on us." I didn't like thinking of Etlin. I'd been avoiding thinking of him for weeks. And now I was beginning to realize our relationship hadn't been the romantic, passionate courtship I'd imagined it to be. There was so much I didn't know about boys. And despite the fact that it looked like Lewon had set me up this morning, I still felt drawn to him. I gave a sidelong glance at Esgeril, daring to ask, "Do you think that's something Lewon would expect me to do?"

Her expression darkened at his name. "He comes from the west." She shrugged. "They favor fast, hot courtships there. Why? Do you fancy him?"

"Yeah," I admitted. "I wouldn't mind his parents, err, his guardian, arranging a match with mine."

She snorted in laughter, not even bothering to cover her mouth. "Arranging a match?" she choked out. "That's rich. Dragoners don't arrange marriage. We rarely bother with marrying at all."

The color drained from my face. "Not even your parents?"

The mention of her recently deceased father sobered her quickly. "They loved each other very much. More than the couples in your fancy court, I'd bet. But when ma had me, dad simply moved in with her, and they informed their commander they would need to ride in the same company."

It didn't seem right to me, but the look on Esgeril's face made me drop the subject. She scowled to herself while I examined my reflection in the polished metal mirror in the corner. The garments fit well, much better than I would have expected from a provincial tailor. I was beginning to rethink my belief that the capital had all the

best tradespeople. I picked up the leathers and held them up to Esgeril.

Wordlessly, she took them from me and directed my limbs into the appropriate holes, like her personal puppet. I felt badly that I'd upset her asking about her parents. But I couldn't take it back.

I fastened the buckles and examined myself again. They fit like a second skin, tight enough to keep from binding but loose enough to allow free movement. As I admired myself, Esgeril stormed out, pushing past the curtain.

I followed her out to the main part of the shop, but she was already out the door, standing on the curb, her shoulders hunched.

Tiranda followed my gaze and shook her head. "She just needs some space. Just be there for her as a friend. That is the best thing for her. If you can do that, I will consider myself the better end of the bargain for your leathers."

"You don't have to buy my friendship," I protested. "I need a friend as much as she does. And I have to pay you something. At least let me cover the cost of materials."

"Not today, young lady. I insist." Her face hardened, and I withered under her glare. She giggled at my expression, her face softening. "Esgeril is my only remaining family. I would give anything to see her happy again. And her father's death isn't the only thing she's dealing with. Now go, before she takes off and you get lost in town." She pushed me in the direction of the door just as Esgeril stepped off the curb, heading back toward our dragons without me.

I looked back, breathed, "thank you," and left, chasing Esgeril down the street.

We reached the dragons in silence. I was getting a little tired of the cold-shoulder treatment but remembered Tirada's advice to just be present. Esgeril waited in silence for me to strap myself into my new harness on Farean's back. It took a couple of tries, but she didn't say anything or offer advice from her position on Baran's back. Then, we lifted off and rode back to camp, arriving as the sun approached the horizon.

After we landed, I removed the harness and set it in a box in the stable with Farean's name on it. Tomorrow, I'd be cleaning the stable, polishing and oiling other rider's saddles, and who knew what other back-breaking work. And I wasn't looking forward to it.

I looked up to find that Esgeril was already gone.

Somehow, I'd managed to make my first female Dragoner friend and lose her, all in the same day. So much for Tirada's vote of confidence in me. Mother always said I asked too many questions—that I was too curious. But I didn't know how to be any other way.

I made my way back to my room, catching glares and stares from Florian and her friends. I dropped to my straw mattress, not bothering to change.

It wasn't until I was about to fall asleep that I remembered the after-dinner training meeting at the lake Lewon had promised me.

Had he waited there for me, wondering why I hadn't come? Or had his invitation been just another joke to humiliate the princess Dragoner?

I had no idea. And honestly, at that point, I was too tired to care.

Chapter Fifteen

I stood before the entrance to the dragon stables in the early morning light. I was beginning to understand why Father chewed stimleaf every morning. Thinking of him brought a twinge, as always. But if this was to be my lot in life, I was determined to make the most of it.

Metal clanged behind me. "You'll need these," Esgeril said. She held a bucket in one hand and a rake in the other. "These should be inside, but I overheard Florian last night. Don't expect to find any supplies."

"Thank you," I tried to meet her gaze, but I guess what I had said the day before was still too raw, and she looked away. "Where are yours?" I asked.

"It's not my punishment." She jammed her fists in her pockets. Dragoneer pockets were designed for function, unlike the clothing I'd once owned. Half of my outfits didn't even have pockets. What need did I have to carry things? I had servants for that. But now I could carry supplies for a day or more in the pouches that adorned my clothing. Or, apparently the hands of somebody that was upset at me for reasons she wouldn't say.

"Just do yourself a favor," Esgeril said after a pause. "Don't say anything like that to the others. It won't—" The toe of her boot slid through the dirt between us. "It won't end well for you." With that cryptic message, she turned and left.

Has Baran told you what's going on? I asked Farean. *Because I'm lost.*

He says that it is beneath the affairs of dragons. I'm going back to sleep. Menoth is in heat, and I got no sleep last night due to the males boasting of how they would mate her.

I blushed at the image she sent over and my mind slipped to Lewon. Would he fight others for my hand? I imagine Etlin's father had argued with the other dukes over whose toddler would marry me one day.

None of this reminiscing about my life before the hatching would get me through my punishment more quickly. Clutching Esgeril's rake and bucket, I pushed open the door.

Mucking the pens at Theron's had prepared me somewhat for the smell, but dragons were much bigger creatures than pigs. Stalls lined all four walls for the distance of the building. It seemed smaller on the inside, until I realized the far wall was a divider for the other half. Just as the boys and girls at the camp were separated, so were our dragons. That meant that Esgeril had to walk the entire length of the massive building just to enter from the boy's side.

"It's about time you showed up." The laughter of several girls broke me from my thoughts. "Thinking you're just going to waltz in here after we're all done?" I didn't need to look up. I'd only heard Florian's voice once, but I wouldn't forget it. I had a feeling I'd be hearing a lot of it over the next three years. "Don't worry, we wouldn't dream of denying her highness what she deserves."

I looked over to the stall where they were sitting. Florian leaned against her Green dragon's hide which seemed to melt into the shadows behind her. The other girls from yesterday arranged themselves on pails nearby. Florian's dragon's stall was immaculate, but the others were untouched.

"I'm sorry about yesterday. I don't want any trouble," I said.

"Then you better get to work. We've got our stalls covered. You can take care of the rest. But you better hurry. Somebody told Authand that you were avoiding your punishment." On that cue, the girls scattered to their own stalls as the door opened behind me.

"Why aren't you cleaning?" The Colonel's voiced boomed behind me.

I whirled around with the rake still in my hand. Authand grabbed the implement from me before it hit his face and threw it at my feet. Even the dragons fell silent as they waited for his reaction.

"I'm sorry," I said in a small voice. Why was I always saying that here? It was like I could never get anything right.

He didn't move; he barely even breathed. When Father got like that, I knew what came next wouldn't be good.

"Why aren't you cleaning?" He repeated at last. "Why isn't anyone cleaning? Do you all want another day of punishment?" He said, louder. The words echoed off the stone walls. Florian and her friends scurried back to work, leaving me with an empty bucket and an angry Dragoneer.

"I just got here." I admitted after my ears stopped ringing.

"Another day's punishment for tardiness." Authand looked like he was going to say something else but left instead.

I leaned down to pick up the rake, but Florian stepped on the handle, pinning it to the floor. "You don't belong here," she said.

"Don't you think I know that?" I stood, facing her. She was nearly a head taller than me and I had to look up to meet her glare.

She crossed her arms over her chest. "What a waste of a dragon. They shouldn't let you nobles come to the hatchings. There's someone out there who has worked hard their entire life, heartbroken and stuck in their life because you took their chance to become a Dragoneer."

Florian turned her head back towards her companions who had mucked out their stalls into the central hallway. It was the space the dragons fed into when they entered through holes in the ceiling. "Come on, girls. We're done. The rest is for her highness." Without a word, they filed past me.

Over the next four hours, I carefully cleaned out each dragon's stall. As the day progressed, they woke and left. Their great wings spun over the muck pile, and I had to take several breaks to move it outside. Other riders entered to tend to their dragons, but they ignored me as I worked. Was this how the maids in the castle had felt

when I'd pretended they weren't even in the room with me unless I'd needed something? It was a horrible feeling and I vowed I would do better if I was ever allowed to return.

Chapter Sixteen

The next morning, I followed Esgeril to a small arena near the dragon pavilion for the first class of the day—Tactics. But the professor, a small woman with deep lines in her face, turned me away. "You are so far behind, dear, that you have no clue what is going on. Authand wants you to report to Flatch, instead."

The Dragoneers who had arrived before us stared at me as I left the room, murmuring between themselves, undoubtedly discussing how much of a fool I'd made of myself once again. I went back outside and realized that I did not know how to find Flatch or even who he was. I turned and steeled myself to go back in and ask in front of everyone, cementing my reputation as the camp idiot.

"Ho," a raspy voice called behind me. A whitehaired Elf stood hunched over where there had been no one a moment before. "Follow me." He turned sharply and strode across the grounds.

Figuring he couldn't possibly be a new rider, I chased after him. I was surprised by how quickly he moved and was huffing by the time we reached a small hut by the lake. He pointed at a small rock half buried in the sand, and I took the hint to sit.

"In the mornings, I will teach you theory and, in the afternoon, you will go with Lewon to train."

Had Lewon asked for that privilege or been assigned to me? Well, at least I'd get to ask him if he'd set me up in the Capture the Flag game.

"Did you say something? Speak up, girl. My hearing isn't what it used to be."

"I didn't say anything."

"Good. Best to keep your mouth shut and your ears open." He disappeared into the hut and came back with a wooden chair that he placed in front of my rock, finally introducing himself as Flatch. He then settled into his chair before launching into a history of the Dragoners. My mind wandered, and I paid more attention to the position of the sun than to the lecture. I tracked its progress to its zenith thinking of seeing Lewon again. Finally, the bells tolled, signaling lunch. I said a quick thanks to Flatch for the lesson I had ignored and rushed off to the dining hall.

After lunch, Farean and I flew to the spot by the lake where Lewon had said he would meet me. Calen splashed in the lake while Lewon whittled away at a stick with a mean looking knife.

"*Sticks are boring*". Farean commented, as we set down on the sandy beach. "*Except the big sticks Goblins make to puncture dragon hide*".

My poor little dragon baby was growing up and learning the dangers of the world. The thought made me sad.

I fumbled with my harness buckles, hoping Lewon wouldn't notice.

I climbed down and took the saddle off Farean, saying, "Well, go on, then. Have fun and see what Calen can teach you." She took a running jump into the shallows and landed with a splash that threatened to soak me despite my distance.

Lewon shoved his stick point down into the ground and folded his knife before acknowledging my presence. "You sure know how to get yourself in trouble. In just one day, you managed to find more trouble than most Dragoners find their entire first year."

"Maybe I had some help," I said angrily, eyeing him. "You pointed me to a flag with a Green ambush around it, promising I'd be the hero of the game. And somehow, it didn't work out that way."

"You think I set you up?" He asked, sounding hurt. "Do you really believe that of me after all we've been through together?" He was upset, that much was obvious. But was it because he'd been falsely accused, or caught in the act?

"I don't know," I said, moving toward him. "Yesterday I was humiliated, mocked by my peers, tossed by a giant, almost died crash-landing into a forest, didn't eat all day, and managed to piss off the one other person who's been remotely nice to me. It was a really bad day."

"Well, now you've managed to piss off both people who've been nice to you," he said, but he was grinning. "You seem to have a real knack for it."

"I know." I nodded, my blond curls falling in my face. "I'm very talented. Which is exactly why I need your help. Please teach me so I don't get into any more trouble."

He shook his head. "I'm going to teach you how to fight. How to defend yourself and how to attack. Not really skills that will get you in less trouble." He pulled a scabbard down from the tree branch he'd been sitting under and handed it to me. "This is a practice sword. Completely dull edge."

I held the short-sword. It was heavier than I expected. How did everyone carry these things around?

"*I don't see why you need that,*" Farean complained, pausing her splashing in the shallows. "*Surely a sword is no match for my talons*".

"Because you won't always be on dragon-back," Lewon answered as if he'd heard her. Maybe Calen had passed along what Farean had said. "Now hold up your sword," he instructed.

I raised it above my head with both hands, then saw him grasping his one handed in front of his chest. I quickly lowered mine, passing it from hand to hand as if checking for balance before settling it into my right hand and assuming a similar position.

He blinked. "You're right handed? That's going to make this more difficult. I've never met anyone before who didn't favor their left."

My face soured. "We spent nearly three full days together and you didn't realize I was a righty?" Righties like me were rare, sometimes considered abominations among the lower classes. If I had been a child in a trade, my right hand would have been tied behind my back until I'd learned to work with my left. But being a princess had

certain advantages, including the right to use whatever hand I preferred.

But Lewon hadn't even noticed until now. Which either meant he didn't care about the stigma, or he didn't care about me enough to notice.

I lunged at him with my sword.

He took a step to his right, dropping away from my thrust with ease.

I swung again, and he blocked. I made several more attempts, each more impotent than the last, until I stood bent over, huffing from the exertion.

"That wasn't bad for your first try," Lewon praised me. "Now that I've seen your natural stance and style, I know what I need to teach you."

"You made me mad on purpose?" I managed in between pants, as my glare softened.

"Of course. Righties tend to be sensitive about it. It was a sure way to get you riled up." He smiled.

I couldn't believe he'd baited me like that. And I'd fallen for it, hook, line, and sinker. I was going to have to be careful around this one. He already knew me too well for his own good. And for mine.

I turned just in time to see Farean, in flight, burst through the trees with Calen hot on her trail. I hadn't even noticed them leave the lake. Farean tucked her wings in and dove towards the water. My heart pounded as she approached it with rising speed. At the last moment, she unfurled her wings and glided over the lake, her wing tips making ripples in the still water.

Calen made for her, but Farean reached the warm sand and rode the updraft like an arrow shot from a bow. She curved up and behind him, tagging his rump with her snout before dropping down and landing on the sand without so much as a cloud. Calen landed next to her. "*He says I'm a natural*", Farean squealed in my head. "*I'll be flying with the year two's in weeks*".

"You however," Lewon said to me, "have a lot to learn. And I can't say that you have much affinity for a blade."

"Hmph. Don't forget I've never held a sword before today. At the castle, the servants even cut my meat. If I'm so bad, you better get to work training me."

"Then follow my lead. We will start with how to hold yourself." He stood with his legs spread, facing me. I tried to follow his example, but he frowned. "No, square your shoulders."

I twisted my body which elicited a head shake.

"No, no. Here's let me show you."

He closed the gap between us and put his hands on my shoulders, pushing them into the position he wanted. I felt warm at his touch and tried to think of something else before the blush appeared at my ears.

"How long have you been practicing this?" I nodded at the blade in my hand.

"Ever since Authand found me after the Goblins sacked my village. That day, I swore I would never be defenseless again."

It seemed everyone at camp had a story of tragedy dealing with the Goblin war. All this time, I'd blamed the dragon that killed my grandfather and not the Orc who rode it.

"And my job is to make sure you aren't defenseless either," Lewon said. "So, let's focus on defensive skills. I will attack, and I want you to defend yourself from me." He backed up a few steps and then came rushing at me.

I raised my sword, but he easily slipped past my guard and landed the broadside of his weapon on my shoulder.

"Ouch." I dropped my sword in surprise and rubbed where he'd hit me. I could already feel the welt forming under my tunic.

"Pick it up!" he barked. I bent down, and by the time I was standing he was on top of me. I raised my sword, but he was faster. He brought the pommel down on my head gently enough to allay any damage but still hard enough to hurt.

He backed off, and I returned to the stance he had demonstrated earlier. He moved again. This time I blocked his blow but fell backward from the impact. My head bounced against the hard ground and stars flashed before my eyes.

"Hold!" I cried. I tried to sit up, but red-hot throbbing stopped me.

He was beside me in a flash. "Are you okay?" His hands grabbed my shoulders as he pulled me up and inspected my scalp.

I blinked away the worst of the pain and panted. "I'll be okay; I just need to rest a minute."

He nodded but said nothing. He sat down beside me and stared at me. His gaze unsettled me. Perhaps my fall was more serious than I thought.

I felt a rush of air and Farean landed beside me, sending soothing thoughts to my aching head. The leaves on the ground fluttered in the air currents she created. A melon-sized black rock with red streaks poked from the ground where her talons had disturbed the grass. I grabbed the rock and pulled it from the dirt. "What's this?" I held it up, inspecting it. The red glittered in the filtered sunlight looking for the all world like blood flowing through its veins.

Lewon grabbed it out of my hands.

"Hey!" I shrieked. I tried to stand to take it back but was overcome by dizziness and sat back down.

He bent and gently placed it on the ground under a bush several feet away. He lowered it as gently as an egg before returning his attention to me.

"That is firerock. It is rare in this part of the world, but very dangerous. If you had dropped that, it would have killed us all." He stood and held out his hand. I grabbed hold of it and he pulled me to my feet. The world spun around me and I wobbled. "We're done for the day," he said. "Farean, get Kalia back to camp, and to a healer. A head knock can be serious. I'd escort you, but I need to take that chunk of firerock into town so that it can be disposed of properly."

He helped me onto Farean's back and fastened my buckles, his hands grazing my stomach and thighs.

I sucked my breath, relishing his touch. I thought about reaching out and touching him back—the damp hair curled at the back of his neck, or the sharp curve of his jawline. But I wasn't brave enough.

He finished his work and gave Farean a pat on the rump. "Fly as smooth as a red and get her back safely," he told her. She nodded at him and jumped into the sky.

Chapter Seventeen

The jolt of Farean launching into the sky sent me reeling. My hands slipped from her neck ridge, but the harness held. I regained my hold and drew myself in close to her body. The ground rushing below us made my head hurt even more, so I closed my eyes. The day was still early, but I was so tired. Farean knew the way. I could just take a nap while we flew.

"I'm worried for you. You don't feel right." Her words pulled me back to awareness.

"What do you mean? I'm just tired and my head hurts". I patted her side as her powerful shoulders flexed in time to her beating wings.

"No, something is wrong. I should heal you". No sooner had she finished thinking those words than she started descending below the treetops.

"Silly dragon. You can't heal me. Just take me to the healer for some herb beads." *"No, that's not right."*

"See, even your thoughts are all wrong." *"And I have something better than herbs. I have magic."*

"Since when do you have magic?" *"Is this a real conversation or is it a dream? It feels like dream."*

"Baran says magic flows through a dragon like blood. We are the channel, but our Dragonereers are the source. And you are awake, but you feel fuzzy."

"But I don't have magic". I protested. *"Hardly anybody has magic anymore."*

Farean landed on a bed of leaves with hardly a rustle. *"Magic is strong in you. I can feel it. Now, get off. I can't do anything from below you."*

I struggled with the buckles and slid to the ground. As soon as I was off, she turned and stood over me. The blur of motion made me dizzy, and I collapsed to my knees.

"*That's a good idea. Lie down,*" she ordered.

I crumpled the rest of the way in compliance and felt her breath on my scalp. I tensed, all my old childhood fears of dragon attacks rising to the surface of my thoughts.

"*Oh, don't be ridiculous.*" Hurt crept into her voice. "*I would never hurt you*".

I felt a talon touch against a tender spot on the back of my skull and winced, crying out as if she were stabbing into my flesh.

"*This is not good.*" "*A wound like this killed Vernis's rider.*" Her tone was now tinged with fear.

"Who?" I turned my head, forgetting to communicate mentally.

"*Shush*". "*I need to concentrate and draw out your dormant magic.*" Her hot breath blew against my head and I felt the lump tingle. She blew again, and the tingling intensified until it burned. I cried out, but Farean pressed against me, keeping me immobile.

A felt her breath a third time. I squirmed but she was much too strong for me. Then the burning stopped, replaced by a dull ache which also faded after a few minutes. Her weight shifted, and her breath tickled gently on my neck as she peered closely at the knot.

"*That's much better*". She lifted herself off me and sat on her haunches.

I reached a hand to the back of my head and the bruise from earlier was gone. It was still a little tender, but the swelling had subsided.

"*See, magic.*" She gave me that odd, slightly menacing look that dragons had when they attempted to mimic a smile.

I sat up, the dizziness gone. "Well, let's get back. If Lewon sent word about my concussion, the entire camp will be searching for us." I leapt onto her back, feeling more energy than I had since being exiled from the castle.

We broke through the treetops just in time to catch Lewon and Calen rising up from the camp. They spotted us and circled above until we approached for our landing. Lewon was on his feet and at my side as I slid from Farean's back.

"You got rid of the firerock already?" I asked him.

"You've been gone over an hour. What happened? Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. I had some, uh, private business to attend to." The lie came surprisingly easily, and I felt a little bad. But I wanted to know more about Farean's magical revelation before I told anyone.

"Go see the healer." Lewon gently pushed me towards the low building where the healer worked. "I will take care of your harness and Farean."

I shook my head, thankful it didn't hurt or make me dizzy. "No, I really am fine. The flight back did the trick."

He looked at me and sighed. "If you say so. But I'll make sure Esgeril checks on you later."

I ignored his comment while I unbuckled Farean's harness. If I could reveal Farean's secret to anyone it would be Esgeril. Through her family history, she would know if something like this had happened before. I turned my attention back to Lewon. "I really am okay, but do what you must."

He nodded and left without another word.

I went the opposite direction.

Florian and her crew sat outside the girl's barracks as usual. She tried to block my path as I approached, but I dug my heel into her foot. I wasn't strong enough to hurt her, but it surprised her enough to create the opening I needed to push past her into the building.

Shortly after I got back to my room, Esgeril knocked on the door. "How did it go? I want all the juicy details." She smiled and collapsed on the straw mattress by my window.

"Well, I have a lot to learn," I said. "Farean is a natural in the air. Good enough that I'm holding her back. But Lewon gave me some good bruises today."

She laughed. "I don't know why we need to learn how to wield the blade. They don't do any good from dragon-back. I'm glad Baran's red, so I can use the crossbow dad trained me on. Did you see the healer? She'll have an ointment to help with the bruising."

"Actually, I have a question for you. What you know about healing magic?"

"Healing magic?" She shook her head. "Don't waste your time worrying about that. Nobody has any magic worth talking about."

I frowned. "What about what Baran told Farean? About dragons channeling magic and focusing our powers?"

"I broke my arm the day after the hatching." She lifted her left arm and flexed it, then dropped it back to her side. "The cast came off just before we left for here. Maybe Dragoners heal a few days quicker than normal folks. Could be dragon magic, or just that we're mostly tough people."

I looked away, wondering what to say. How did you bring up magic when someone didn't believe in it?

"So, by the look on your face, I'd guess something happened?" she said. "Tell me."

"I hit my head my head pretty hard during training. Hard enough to worry Lewon, so he cut our session short. He's going to ask you to keep an eye on me later, just so you know. Anyway, on the way back to the healer, Farean got worried. Then she said that thing about magic that Baran told her and insisted she could heal me. Started spouting nonsense about a dragon king." I turned my head and parted my hair. "I couldn't see what was going on, but it burned and then it stopped throbbing and felt better." I turned back to an open-mouthed Esgeril. "She said I had strong magic. But I've never noticed anything like that before."

Esgeril sat there gaping at me, at a complete loss for words.

"Please don't tell anyone," I begged. "I'm enough of a freak here already."

Her expression softened. "You're not a freak. You just don't know anything." She broke into a smile. "At all. About anything. And I've never heard of dragon magic working like that. But I'll have a chat with Baran and see what he says, about both you and Farean. We could even look in the camp archives and see if they mention anything similar. But, yeah, I wouldn't bring up dragon magic with

anyone until we know more or could prove something. Maybe your injury wasn't as bad as you thought it was. You can't see the back of your own head, you know?"

"I know," I gave her a friendly shove, and she rolled backward and off the bed with wild exaggerated motions, as if I had the strength to bowl her over. "See, I know that much," I insisted. "Actually, I know plenty. Just not anything useful." I laughed, and she let out one of her signature snorts. "Now help me learn something useful so I can get out of my punishment sooner."

Chapter Eighteen

I brought my sword up to block the blow just inches from my head. The force knocked me backwards and I dropped to a knee. "Hold," I called. I huffed as I supported my weight on the pommel of the practice blade. After several months of training now, I was getting better, but Lewon still usually bested me.

"Goblins won't give you a chance to catch your breath," he said. He held out his hand, and I used it to pull myself up.

"I know, but you will." I smiled, sheathing my blade. I wandered over to a stream near where it fed into the lake and scooped some cool water in my hands, washing away the worst of the dirt and sweat that caked my face.

Looking up, I saw a glint of red, under the shade of a nearby tree. I'd only seen it once, but Lewon made enough of an impression about its danger that I'd always recognize firerock at a glance now.

"*Tell him*". Farean's voice distracted me as it echoed in my head as she glided lazily in the air currents above.

"What does she want you to tell me?" Lewon prodded.

I turned to see him wading waist high in the lake with a sharpened stick aimed at the surface. He kept his eyes glued on the fish darting between his legs, not bothering to look up when he asked the question.

"You know, that gets a bit old. What's the point of having secret telepathic conversations with my dragon if Calen just repeats them to you," I teased.

He laughed. "When dragons are involved, there is no privacy. So, you might as well tell me." He moved toward me in the water, his wet shirt and pants clinging to his body in a very distracting way.

He wasn't going to give up, it seemed. I wondered if that meant he had some inkling already. "Well," I said, hesitant but determined, "I noticed that a lot of the male and female Dragoners have paired off. Florian is already spreading rumors about us based on our training sessions. I was wondering if there was anyone you..." My voice trailed off as I got closer to asking the question.

He smiled. The same sly little grin that he had shown me so many times in the past few weeks. And that grin alone fueled my hope. But he didn't say anything. He just stared at me, wading closer to me on the shoreline and waiting for me to go on.

So, I did. "I'm only asking because. Well, because. I like you. And I can't ignore that anymore. I like you. It scares me. But I need to know if you feel the same way." I let out a long unsteady breath. There. I'd said it. The flag was in his possession now.

He walked right up and stood over me—still with that same cheeky grin and only the sound of water dripping off of him. His spear floated in the lake behind him, forgotten. The seconds ticked by as we stood like that, close but not touching, my head just below his chin line so I could see the pulse jumping in his neck. It seemed to be jumping very quickly. I knew mine sure was. I was hoping he would kiss me, but instead he raised his hand, brushing my sweaty hair from my cheek.

"Training's not the place for this," he said gently "It wouldn't be right. I'm your teacher."

I felt like the wind had been knocked out of me. I blinked, trying to understand.

"That's enough of a break. Back to training." He held out his hand. I felt like collapsing to the ground, screaming in frustration, and going off to hide all at once. Instead, I assumed the stance he had shown me. He attacked and I let my frustration fueled my moves. I deflected a series of thrusts, holding my own for much longer than I had previously.

Finally, he passed my guard and knocked me to the ground. I rolled and used the momentum to lift me back to my feet. This time I

went on the attack. Lewon blinked but raised his sword to block. He let me try several more times, but I never came close to landing a blow.

He switched back to offense, landing several more touches while I managed to stay on my feet. He feinted, and while I was distracted by his sword he swept my knees with his leg. I landed on my back and he pressed the blunted point of his weapon against my chest.

He withdrew the point, sheathing the sword and extending his hand instead. Kalia," he said my name softly, like a caress. "Get cleaned up and meet me at the stables an hour before the dinner bell."

I gulped twice before I was able to ask hopefully, "You mean for a date?"

Again, he only responded with a smile. That grin made my heart flutter and infuriated me at the same time. Why couldn't he just give me a straight answer for once?

He walked past me, water cascading off his body, and went to put our practice equipment away.

I clambered onto Farean's back, but then remember something. "I'm still under my punishment," I reminded him. "I can't leave the camp."

He dismissed my concern with a wave of his hand, not bothering to look up from his work. "I already cleared it with Authand. Don't worry."

He had cleared it with Authand? That meant he'd planned something for us before I'd even broached the question. My heart leapt just as Farean leapt into the sky.

"I told you to ask him," she said. "*You humans make mating way too complicated.*"

She wasn't wrong.

Back at the stables, I made record time removing her saddle, giving it only the most cursory of cleanings before putting it away. I found Esgeril in the central Pavilion. "Come on, I need your help." I

grabbed her arm without stopping and pulled her to her feet, nearly over balancing her.

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing, for a change. But I do have a date." I doubled our pace until we were just short of a run. "And I have no clue what to wear. Help me go through my trunk from home. I'm finally going to have a chance to wear a dress again."

I barely noticed Esgeril shut the door behind her when we entered my room. I ran straight for the trunk, tossing the lid open with enough force to rock it. I started pulling garments out.

"Do you think I should go with the blue dress to match Farean's scales or the green to match Calen?" I held the two up, so she could compare.

"Neither." Esgeril shook her head. "Goblins have been spotted in the woods, and Colonel Authand has grounded everyone. No one is allowed leave camp."

"No, that can't be right. Lewon said he'd cleared it."

"I don't know what "*Lewon*" told you, but the Colonel was adamant. You can't leave."

I crossed the small room with two quick steps and stood over her. "Are you making this up? Why are you ruining this? Are you jealous?" I demanded.

"Jealous?" She scoffed, placing her hands on her hips and staring defiantly at me. "Why would I make up a lie? It's easy enough to check. Just go ask the Colonel."

"I don't have time for that. And you know the Colonel hates me. He'd probably ground me no matter what, just on principle." I turned away from her, almost in tears. "Why can't you just be happy for me? Finally, somebody accepts me for who I really am, and I get to do something for myself. Since the hatching, every decision has been about Farean."

"Oh, poor you," she said sarcastically. "Poor pretty princess born with a golden spoon in her mouth. Now you finally find out what it means to live for someone other than yourself, and you run into the

arms of the first boy who smirks at you. Your independence is just something you pretend to have until someone comes along to take care of you."

That struck a little too close to home. I narrowed my eyes as I exhaled out my nose. I leaned forward, close enough that my breath toyed with a stray lock that lay across her forehead. "Get out of my room," I hissed.

Esgeril held her ground as we glared at each other. She sidestepped around me and grabbed the door knob. Opening it, she spoke in a low voice. "Lewon is up to something. You can't trust him. Don't say that I didn't warn you." Then she was gone, leaving me to my own thoughts.

"*Kalia*", "*what's wrong?*" Farean called from the stables, sensing my distress.

"Be quiet. I'm fine." I waved her off even though she couldn't see me.

I looked down at the two dresses and grabbed the green one. Etlin had always said green suited me.

Thinking of him didn't bring the twinge of pain it once had. In fact, it had been weeks since he'd even crossed my mind. I'd been so devastated when he left me. Was Esgeril right about my independence? Was it just something I put on like a pretty dress to attract someone new to take care of me? No, that wasn't fair. I had grown leaps and bounds since I'd come to camp. I did everything for myself and I was a good Dragoneer. Being independent didn't mean you couldn't have friends or boyfriends. You could still want and have those relationships. You just didn't need them desperately or lose yourself in them. But would I lose myself in Lewon? Well, there was only one way to find out.

Chapter Nineteen

I brushed my hands through my pony tail as I walked to the stables. I had hoped Esgeril would braid my hair for me, but I would have to make do with what I had done looking into the barrack's washroom mirror. If I missed even one strand, it whipped painfully in my face when I flew. It was probably why many of the female riders cut their hair short like boys.

At this late hour, the stables were deserted. The other Dragoners had finished their classes for the day and mealtime for the dragons started earlier than ours. A few slumbered in their berths. Farean shouldn't be eating; she knew we would be flying tonight, but she was absent. I opened my storage locker retrieve Farean's harness from its storage trunk before calling her back.

"You won't need that." I jumped at the sound of Lewon's voice. I turned around, my heart pounding in my chest.

"I thought we were flying somewhere," I said, trying not to show my disappointment. Was this all just a set-up again?

He saw my discomfort and shook his head. "Farean gets a break tonight. We'll ride together on Calen. You'll just have to hook onto me." He gave a little half turn and pointed to a D-ring at the small of his back that I hadn't noticed before.

I followed him to Calen's stable and stood back as Lewon harnessed his dragon and climbed onto its back. Once secure, he held out his hand to me.

I hesitated. I'd been training for three months, but I'd never touched a dragon who wasn't Farean, let alone ridden one.

Lewon shook his arm, breaking me from my thoughts.

I grabbed his hand and climbed on. The buckles snapped into place easily, pulling me very snugly into Lewon's back. Calen took two steps, and we were airborne.

One of the first things I noticed was that we were not flying in the direction of the village where Esgeril's aunt owned her shop. I considered bringing that up, but it was hard to talk on a dragon. And I didn't want him to think I didn't trust him.

The wind buffeted me, pushing me back and forth. A gust knocked my grip loose and my buckles tensed against Lewon's back pulling him askew as well.

I grabbed at his shoulders, making it more difficult for him to hold onto the harness.

He grasped Calen's neck ridge and pulled himself forward in the saddle.

I pried my fingers around the saddle's edge and pulled myself back as well.

"Hold on," he shouted over his shoulder.

"I'm trying."

"No." The wind made it difficult to hear, but there was no mistaking his growl of frustration. "Hold on to *me*". I don't want you pulling me back again."

"Oh." The sound was lost in the wind as I tried to decide where to put my hands.

Still holding on to the dragon's neck with one arm, Lewon reached around and yanked my hands to his chest. I took the hint and wrapped my arms around his body. Calen rode an air current higher, and I instinctively pressed myself closer to Lewon. He was so warm. And I could feel the beating of his heart, his chest expanding and contracting with each breath. The heat he radiated was helping protect me against the chill of the air flowing past. This was much more intimate than I'd ever been with Etlin. I felt flush and was grateful for the fact that Lewon couldn't see my reaction, or my face.

I recalled my conversation with Esgeril on how casually Dragonееrs viewed romantic relationships, especially those from the

West like where Lewon was from. That was enough to jolt me back to reality, and I pulled away from him a little but kept my arms around his chest with the lightest of grips.

We rode in silence until white smoke appeared on the horizon. We made our way towards it, and an assortment of stone and wood buildings came into view surrounded by a crude stone wall. Judging by its size and location, I guessed this was Suzu, Darneta's second largest city.

We had traveled there once when I was a child. My father took a comprehensive yearlong tour of the kingdom every five years of his rule. It helped the outlands feel connected to their king and showed that he cared about their lives.

The dragon pavilion here was not so grand as it had been at Esgeril's village. Further from the training grounds, I guessed it didn't receive as much dragon traffic as the smaller town. We landed and deposited our harnesses in a locker before I excused myself in search of a mirror to fix my hair before anyone noticed how messy it had come.

When I returned from the pavilion's washroom, I found Lewon leaning against a pillar at the exit. He saw me and straightened, holding his left arm out. I took it awkwardly. Esgeril had taken to my righthandedness gracefully and stood on the other side to accommodate me. Why was I comparing Lewon to her? I took Lewon's arm with more vigor than I intended, forcing the strange thoughts away. He couldn't help it if he was used to most people being left-handed.

Lewon led me to a dim public house with sparse candles providing the only illumination. Despite the crude outward appearance, the owner was well dressed and led us to our table without a word. I perused the menu, which further showed the establishment to be more upscale than the average tavern, and ordered.

Lewon spoke after the owner was out of earshot. "I know this isn't as posh as the capital or the castle, but I figured you would enjoy a change from the camp's cafeteria."

Without the stress of training or traveling across Goblin-infested roads, we fell into an easy conversation. I thought I had gotten to know Lewon pretty well, but I hadn't even scratched the surface. I barely noticed my meal, tasty but forgettable, as the conversation progressed. I wished we could stay there forever.

But then two pale-skinned men sidled up to our booth and slid onto the benches next to us. I was so startled, I didn't know what to say. The tavern wasn't full. There were other places to sit. And I hadn't seen many, but their black hair and red eyes told me they were Nightbloods. The one next to me opened his mouth to speak, providing further proof with a flash of his teeth, sharpened to fanged points.

"Where's our money, Lewon?" he said, staring at me hungrily. "Roland doesn't like it when his runecube players don't pay."

"Runecubes?" I squeaked. "Those are illegal."

The Nightblood elbowed me. "Still, you're boyfriend here has a weakness for them. He owes the boss a stoneweight." He grinned, showing his fangs again.

It would take a Dragoner four years to earn that much.

"Lewon, how could you lose so much money?" I asked.

"Because Roland cheats." He banged his fist on the table.

With a Nightblood's fabled reflexes, the one next to me grabbed Lewon's hand. "Careful, boy. Roland has been patient with you till now, but he won't wait any longer. Don't make this harder on yourself."

"I have his money, Bior," Lewon said.

"You do?" The Nightblood and I said in unison.

"Yes. Well, the next best thing." He pointed at me. "Boys, meet Princess Kalia of Darneta."

Both the Nightbloods stared at me as I stared at Lewon. This couldn't be happening. He wouldn't do this. Who would do this?

"I don't have any more money than he does," I told the Nightblood called Bior.

In response, he reached out and grabbed my wrist, holding it tightly enough to elicit a yelp. "No, but your father does."

Realization of what he planned hit me, and I fought against his grasp.

"Are we good, Bior?" Lewon asked, without looking at me.

Bior stood, pulling me with him. "Yes, this will be sufficient to relieve your debts. Should Roland expect you at the runecube table next weekend?"

Lewon pushed his way past Bior's companion. "Of course. It will be nice to see Roland owing me money for a change."

"Lewon," I hissed. "Don't do this."

"It's not personal, Kalia." Lewon said, though I noticed wouldn't look me in the eye. "It's just business."

And then he turned and left the restaurant without looking back.

Chapter Twenty

The unnamed Nightblood took my left arm and the two leeches dragged me towards the exit. I tried to search for the proprietor, but he was conspicuously absent.

Outside, a light mist coated everything, and a wolf cowered under a nearby tree, wrapped in silver chains. It wasn't just any wolf, judging by the size. A wolf that big had to be a wolf-shifter.

The Nightbloods led me to the animal and pushed me over its back. They untied the end of the chain from the tree and wrapped it around my wrists. Bior prodded the poor creature and it walked into the woods on some unseen trail, the Nightbloods flanking us on each side.

With each step the wolf-shifter took, the chains tugged at my wrists. Within a mile, the skin had been rubbed raw and my blood matted the animal's fur. But I barely felt the pain. It was nothing compared to how badly my heart hurt. I had trusted Lewon. I had actually thought he liked me. How could I have been such a fool again? First there had been Etlin, who had at least dumped me, instead of selling me to pay his debts. And now this. Did I have absolutely no sense of who people really were? Was I that blind and naive? Maybe Esgeril was right, and I was just a person who wanted someone else to take care of me. Well, there was no one to take care of me now. I was going to have to get out of this on my own. Which wouldn't be easy chained to the back of a wolf with only a view of the ground.

"You should let me go know." I said with more bravery than I felt, craning my neck to see Bior. "It will go poorly for you otherwise,"

"Oh, yeah? Why is that?" Bior laughed. "Your father won't risk you getting hurt. He will pay the ransom."

I wasn't as sure of that as he was, but admitting it wouldn't help my cause. I knew Farean could hear me from a distance. When the Goblins had ambushed Lewon and I on the road back to the swine farm, she'd flown to my rescue. But that had only been a few miles distance. Suzu was at least twenty miles from camp. Maybe more. "*Farean, I need you.*" I called earnestly in my head. "*I'm in trouble. Come help me.*" Farean was the one creature in this world I knew I could trust without fail. Not because I needed her, but because we needed each other. We had that unbreakable bond the Dragoners were always going on about.

"You do know I'm a Dragoner, right?" I told my captors. "My dragon will find me."

"Oh, good," Bior said cheerily. The other one wasn't much of a talker, it seemed. "Roland always has use for more dragons."

"She wouldn't follow him, because I won't."

"Roland will have no reason to keep you after the ransom is paid. He'll find your dragon a rider more amenable to our cause."

"That's not possible," I reminded him "A dragon is bonded for life."

"Is that what the Dragoners told you?" He gave a full belly laugh. "You're more naive than I thought, if you believe that."

"What are you talking about?" I cried. "Can the dragon bond be broken?"

"There is a witch, Ascatie," Bior said. "She lives in the North where wild dragons still roam. It is said she can perform the rite. This is what will be done to you and your dragon if you call it here to rescue you."

"No," I whispered. Meanwhile I was frantically telling Farean in my head. "*Farean,*" "*listen to me.*" "*Don't come. It isn't safe for you. Stay away. That's an order.*"

I felt—something—this time. A sensation just on the cusp of my awareness. Anger. No, fear and rage. Farean was getting closer. She was coming after me.

In a panic, I squirmed against my bonds, grinding my injured wrists into the wolf's shoulder.

It growled, low in its throat, the vibration breaking the still of the night.

"Quiet, Meril," Bior hissed at it. "Roland won't release your pups if you get us caught."

Meril whimpered and then became quiet. She picked up her pace, no doubt eager to be relieved of her load and returned to her family. The two Nightbloods kept up easily, appearing for all the world as if the wolf's trot was slowing them down. Maybe my parents would pay the ransom that Roland would demand. I had no idea.

But I had to keep Farean away. Or at least warn her what to expect and not to come flying into a trap. "*Farean*", I called again. "*They know you're coming. It's a trap.*" "*Be on guard. Think before you act.*" I kept trying to contact her as we crossed mile after nameless mile.

The Nightbloods seemed agitated by our slow progress and conferred between themselves as the moons rose in the sky. "This is taking too long," Bior told his companion. "The wolf is weary, and the girl is heavy. I can move faster on my own and will go on ahead to tell Roland we have a prize." He tugged at the chain for good measure, and Meril and I both cried out in pain. Then, faster than I could blink, he disappeared into the night. The other Nightblood led the way in silence. He had not said a word since he'd sat down next to that traitorous Lewon, hours before.

The dragon moon set and then Kingsmoon, leaving just the red blood moon illuminating the path. I wasn't superstitious but, given how the night was going, I shivered at the ill omen a lone blood moon conveyed.

Despite the pain in my arms and back, my exhaustion eventually overtook me. I woke to see dawn peaking over the horizon as my Nightblood captor unwound my chains and pulled me from the back

of Meril. A small stone home sat alone in the woods, the dawn-facing windows shut tight. No smoke rose from the chimney. At first, I thought that meant the building was unoccupied, but then I realized that Nightbloods needed no fire for warmth or food.

Bior opened the door at our arrival and waved us in, the silent Nightblood dragging me by my arm and Meril by her chains. The door shut loudly behind us, and I turned to see him turn several large bolts as big around as my arm. A third Nightblood, portly by their standards, sat at an oak table counting stacks of money.

"Did my father pay the ransom?" I asked hopefully. Meanwhile, Bior stuffed Meril into a cage that looked much too small for her. The other one pushed me roughly into a chair and wrapped me in a rope almost faster than I could see.

"Why, my dear," replied the Nightblood who must be Roland, "this is just what my runecube clubs brought in last night. It's not a tenth of what I will demand from your father." The Nightblood Change made it difficult to tell, but his head seemed not quite right and his skin had a greyer tone than the alabaster of his companions.

"You're a Goblin," I gasped in realization.

"I'm a Nightblood!" He brought his fist down on the table, cracking the wood in half. The gold and silver coins scattered across the room. A silver piece rolled into Meril's cage. She jumped when it touched her, sending her into the bars, cowering and cringing away from it.

"Never mention what a Nightblood was before," Roland said, coming around the table and grabbing me by the chin with his cold hand. "It is the rudest possible insult to our kind, and I've killed others for much less." He let go of my chin but kept his face close to mine. "Just be thankful you are worth so much, or you'd already be dead." His breath smelled of blood, warm and metallic. "Bior, pick up this mess." He waved his hand at the money on the floor. "The sun is up, and I must go and rest."

He left through a door in the back, though I got no details of the room or space beyond. It was too dark.

Bior and the other Nightblood, whose name I still didn't know, stooped down and started picking up the money. The nameless one reached for the coin in Meril's cage, and she snapped at him, earning her cage an angry kick. The Nightblood's strength sent it rolling. She shrieked as she tumbled with it, and then lay there whimpering, but not moving, when it stopped.

These Nightbloods had no mercy. What would they do to Farean if she came? What would they do to me if she didn't?

Bior and his companion finished putting the scattered money back on the table. When they were done, the silent one cocked his head and went to the small window. He peered through it and grabbed a crossbow and some bolts hanging from a hook on the wall. He went back to the window, crouching down.

Bior followed suit, grabbing another weapon from the wall. He took a position at a slit on the other side of the door.

"Who is out there?" I asked them. Was it my father's men or my dragon? *"Farean, if you're here, it's a trap. The house is full of Nightbloods, and they have crossbows. Be careful."*

"Be quiet!" Bior barked.

I obeyed, straining to sense Farean's presence or her thoughts, but I got nothing.

Bior's companion took aim with his bow and fired.

"Careful," Bior warned him. "We don't know how many there. Conserve our ammunition. Wait until you can see them clearly."

"I thaw moothement," the other Nightblood lisped.

That was why he hadn't spoken. I had heard of such things before, stories the maids told each other at night. In the human kingdom of Facal, they cut out the tongues of their remedial criminals, those who had committed an offense not quite worthy of the death penalty. And when Nightbloods Changed, their bodies gained the ability to regenerate, even parts that had previously been removed. It was said the blood they drank did that. But that regeneration could take some time. This Nightblood must be so young his tongue hadn't yet completely grown back.

Bior focused on the slit before him, attempting to find what had roused the other's attention. I couldn't see what they were seeing, but they both suddenly started shooting frantically, barely taking the time to aim before firing.

I heard a sound, maybe a growl or the beating of wings.

Bior dropped his crossbow and retreated to the room where Roland had retired.

The other Nightblood kept firing.

Mortar dust and crumbled stone started raining down from the ceiling, and I ducked under Roland's money table for protection.

A hole opened up in the roof as more stone and debris came crashing down.

Farean snaked her head through the hole and grabbed the lispig Nightblood in her jaws, shaking him back and forth before releasing him into the far wall.

He slumped to the floor and didn't move.

"I'm here", Farean said. "And that man tasted nasty."

Chapter Twenty-One

"Farean!" I cried, scanning as much of her as I could through the hole in the ceiling. I didn't see any bolts sticking out of her hide. She was safe. I was safe.

"Of course, you're safe." Farean said, so confident in herself. I would never let anyone harm you. Oh, and I brought the boss man."

Colonel Authand entered the home through the door, rather than the dragon-sized hole in roof. He looked me over with a faint nod of his head, assessing the battle damage nonchalantly as if he'd done it a thousand times before. Which he probably had.

He seemed content that I was safe and rushed for the rear door, his short sword drawn in front of him. He threw it open, revealing a dark room with an open door on its back wall, open to the dim woods beyond. He searched the now empty room and came back into the main one just as two other Dragoneers came in the front door.

"The outside is secure, sir," one of them said. Three vertical bars under his Dragon pin indicated he was in his third and final year of training. His sandy brown hair was trimmed close to his head, and his demeanor seemed closer to that of my father's guards than what I was used to in the Dragoneers.

"Well, they escaped out the back," Authand said. "Search again; they must have a secret passage somewhere. Farean, have a fly around and see if you notice anything from the air."

"Yes, sir." My dragon said like an obedient soldier, as she flapped her wings and took off from the roof, sending dust billowing down into the room.

When the air had cleared, Authand sheathed his sword and pulled a small dagger from his belt. The other two Dragoners back outside and headed in different directions. Authand cut through the ropes that bound me. I rubbed my bleeding wrists, wincing at the raw flesh.

I knelt next to Meril's cage. "We need to let her out. She is a prisoner here too."

"She's a Wolf-shifter, girl. And a badly treated one at that. Be careful she doesn't bite the hand that feeds her."

I ignored his warning, and opened the door to her cage, but Meril cringed at the back. I crawled halfway in. "It's okay, we're going to help you." I took another crawling move forward, and she snapped at me. I jumped back.

"*If you bite her, I'll bite you*," I heard Farean say. But she wasn't talking to me. She was talking to Meril, who cocked her head and looked up through the hole in the roof, trembling.

I use the distraction to lunge forward and pull the chain off her. Her demeanor changed immediately. She took a step towards me, but it did not seem threatening. I backed out of the cage, and she followed me into the room. Once clear, she began to shift.

Her snout pulled into her face and her legs straightened and lengthened. Fur dissolved into golden brown skin. Within moments, she returned to the form of a woman around thirty and attempted to cover her nakedness with her arms.

Authand went into the back room and returned with breaches and a coat that were both several sizes too large for her. He tossed them to her and turned away. She slipped into the pants, but they were so large that she could not keep them up. I gave her a length of the rope that had bound me, and she cinched it around her waist, then slid on the coat.

She looked lost in it, but she tapped on the Colonel's shoulder. "Thank you," she said when he turned. She eyed the corpse of the lispig Nightblood lying against the wall and turned her attention to me. "And thank you. They've kept me in wolf form for months,

doing their bidding. But I must find them. They still have my pups hidden somewhere. I have to find them."

Authand nodded. "The other two Dragoneers will stay behind and help you."

She shook her head. "I appreciate the offer, but I can cover more ground on my own. And the Nightbloods will stay hidden as long as they can see or smell dragons."

"Well, if there is anything we can do," Authand said, "you can find us at Tulta to the East."

"I will remember both of you," she said, bowing and turning toward the door, her nose sniffing the air. And then she was gone, springing into the woods like she was still in wolf form.

"*I didn't find the other stinky men*", Farean said, sticking her huge head in the doorway.

"*It's okay*," I told her. "*You saved my life today. I'm so proud of you.*"

"And she should have never had to," Authand said, turning to me angrily. "What were you thinking, leaving camp again without permission while you were still under punishment from the last time. Get on your dragon right now, a dragon you most certainly don't deserve, and go straight back to camp, or I'll sever the two of you myself."

So, it could be done. Not that I ever wanted it to be. But why had everyone lied to me about everything?

"What are you waiting for?" Authand barked.

"I don't have her harness," I sputtered.

He marched outside, and I followed. He reached into a bag strapped to his dragon Korth's back and retrieved Farean's harness. "Lewon could not find your leathers," he said, handing it to me.

"Lewon?" I asked, my voice rising. "Lewon knows exactly where my leathers are. They're with his at the Pavilion in Suzu. Right where he left me." My fists clenched, and Farean butted me with her snout, letting out a low growl.

"Don't try to blame this on him. He's been at the camp since you disappeared," Authand said, reaching into a pouch on Korth's side

and pulling out a pair of leathers I recognized as Esgeril's. They wouldn't fit, but they'd be close enough to get me home.

I put them on, Farean fawning over me and making it harder. Her thoughts were an incoherent jumble. Most strongly, she seemed happy that I was safe, angry that I'd been captured, and sad that I'd abandoned her. This last one shocked me. *"I didn't abandon you."* I assured her. *"I thought I was going on a date. But it was a trap. Lewon lied and turned me over to the stinky men. And now he's back at camp pretending he had nothing to do with it."*

"Bad Lewon," she said. *"I warned you he doesn't smell right."*

"I know. I should have listened to you. I'm sorry." I stroked her snout with one hand, using her for balance as I pulled the leggings on, awkwardly, over my dress, then attached myself to the harness. If it was my word against Lewon's concerning what had happened, who would people believe? It looked like Authand already believed Lewon. That wasn't a good sign.

Even now, Authand was standing next to Korth, his arms crossed and his foot tapping impatiently. "You will follow me back," he said. "If you deviate from our flight path at all, Korth will force you to the ground and you will walk back to the camp. Is that clear?"

I nodded and gulped.

He mounted Korth, and I mounted Farean, hooking in and following them into the sky. There was no conversation on the flight back.

The sun reached its zenith as we landed. My stomach gurgled as the sounds and smells of the noon meal wafted from the mess hall. I hadn't eaten for a long time and looked longingly in that direction; but Authand pointed at me with his hook and said, "My office. Now."

I made my best time ever removing Farean's harness and trotted after him. Walking was awkward with my gown bunched up under the leggings. Every time I fell behind, he stopped and glared until I caught up. At his office, the aide held the door open. As soon as I passed through, he left, closing the door behind us.

I'd been warned to avoid Authand's wrath, but I seemed incapable of doing so. In fact, I appeared to be a wrath-magnet. The Colonel waited until I entered his office and then slammed the door with enough force to shake the room.

"What were you thinking?" He thundered, pacing the room in front of me. "I've seen a lot of new Dragoneers make very stupid and dangerous mistakes, but this has got to take the cake. What did you do to attract the attention of someone as dangerous as Roland? You're not playing runecubes, are you?"

"No," I blurted. Without meaning to, I spread my arms wide, nearly sending my hand into his chest. "It was Lewon. He tricked me."

"He tricked you into running off by yourself?"

"He took me to Suzu for dinner. He said we had your permission."

"Do you think I'm stupid?" That terrible claw thunked into the desk as he passed it. "Nobody had permission to leave until we were forced to go off on a wild dragon-chase looking for you. Lewon led the search until we found Farean flying by herself. Do you have any idea how dangerous these woods are for a lost young dragon right now?"

"But—I—" I wanted to protest that Lewon had lied to him—that he'd sold me off without a thought for my well-being. But the words just wouldn't come. I'd struggled all night with the fact that I'd poured my heart out to Lewon, and he used that very fact in a plan to barter me for his illegal debts. Then he'd pretended to look for me—to be the caring hero who'd lost the girl he was falling for. That was a level of deviousness that both scared and startled me. Lewon would not go down without a fight. If I accused him, I might very well lose that battle. Badly. I was not anyone's favorite at training camp, and he clearly was. Obviously, I would have to play this differently, like one of my father's diplomatic negotiations. I was the little kingdom with no army. That meant I had to bide my time and find something to bargain with.

So, I hung my head as Authand continued his tirade, but I was no longer listening. I was pondering a plan—a way to get my revenge on Lewon that he would never see coming. I would show Authand, and Florian, and Esgeril, and all the other Dragonееers what I was really made of. I was tired of having one foot in princess world, and one in Dragonееer world. If I wanted this life, I was going to have to grab it for myself. No one was going to hand it to me.

"This is your last chance, Kalia." Authand said, winding down. "If you're caught leaving this camp again without permission, it will be the Dragon Caves for you."

I gulped. The threat had more weight now. I'd only known it was a prison before. But from my classes I'd learned the guards were only there to prevent the criminals from escaping. There were no guards or rules inside the Caves.

"You should also be aware that Roland never releases his hostages," Authand added. "He collects the ransom and kills them. And us rescuing you is going to be very bad for his reputation. His spies will be on the lookout for you. If you're ever allowed to leave camp grounds again, which I highly doubt, your life will be in constant danger. You will never be safe again because of your foolishness last night. Now, leave my sight."

I didn't make him repeat himself. The anteroom was still empty of the Colonel's aide and I let myself out. I made my way towards the cafeteria. Service would have ended by now, but there might still be some food out.

As I walked down the path, I saw Lewon in the distance, standing outside with Florian and her usual crew, waiting for me, their eyes full of hate and malice.

Chapter Twenty-Two

I stopped in my tracks, evaluating the situation.

If I turned and ran, they'd come after my like Nightbloods after a bleeding man.

If I went forward, I'd have to say or do something to get past them.

Either option was bad, but I stepped forward, facing them head-on.

I saw the surprise in their eyes when I kept coming. Good. Let them be the ones surprised for a change.

As I got close to the group, they parted, glaring at me. Lewon was there, right on the path. I had to brush his arm to get past and as I did I said, "Can't get rid of me that easily."

He took a step back, bumping into Florian behind him. I could see it in his eyes. He'd never expected me to make it back alive. And on the off chance I did, he'd counted on me crying and accusing him. If I'd made a fool of myself, no one would have believed a word I said, and he'd have looked that much better for it.

"And Roland still wants his debt paid," I whispered so no one else could hear. "He'll be coming for you." I had no idea if that were true, but I hoped it was.

"What's all the whispering about?" Someone near the rear of the pack demanded. "We all want to know what you did this time, Princess." He wasn't using my title to be polite.

"I'll tell you what she did," Lewon said, smirking at me. "During our sword practice, she told me she loved me. Completely out of the

blue. Like I would have anything to do with a court leech who's lived her entire life off of the sweat of others. Begged me to run away with her. And when I rejected her she ran off by herself, crying like a baby, and the Colonel had to go chasing after her."

The others laughed, and Lewon grinned a sick twisted smile.

"It's true," I said, smiling back. "I thought I loved him, but then I realized how small his dragon is. And you know what they say about a man's dragon matching the size of his..."

Several people laughed despite themselves, and Lewon whirled toward them, glaring.

Meanwhile, I slipped past and into the cafeteria, but I'd lost my appetite.

I waited a few minutes, watching the crowd outside the door disperse, then made my way to the barracks as the sky darkened and thunder rolled in the distance. Maybe Lewon would get stuck by lightning. "*Hey, a girl could hope.*"

As I walked down the hall toward my room, I saw Esgeril coming out of hers. "Esgeril, I—"

"I told you not to go." Anger rippled through her body, causing her to shake. "I warned you and look what happened."

"Hey." In the past twenty-four hours, I had been tricked, sold, bound, rescued, scolded, threatened, and verbally attacked. I refused to be pushed around any further. "You know what? I thought you were my friend. But you're just like everyone else here." I stepped around her and stomped to my room, slamming the door behind me.

Chapter Twenty-Four

For weeks after the Lewon incident, I kept my head down and did my work. I attended all my classes, accepted my accumulated punishments, followed every rule, and tried as hard as I could to stay out of Authand's office. That didn't mean anyone liked me for it. They didn't. If anything, it made Lewon, Florian, and their gang more vicious. They wanted me to mess up. They always had. Even Esgeril stayed clear of me, and I didn't blame her. Association with me would have just put her in the line of fire.

The only friend I had left was Farean. Stretching the limits of our bond had brought us closer together. I trusted her in ways I hadn't realized were possible. She no longer had to seek out my touch. I freely gave it. I might never forgive the Orcs or the dragon that killed my grandfather. But I no longer blamed Farean for an event that happened before she hatched.

I was determined to keep my nose clean and become the best damn Dragoneer anyone had ever seen. I'd qualify for the Dragon Run and earn the respect I was due that way.

The Dragon Moon had eclipsed the Kingsmoon once more. My room in the girls' barracks was positioned so they both shone in my window. On those nights, I couldn't get any sleep due to their glare. It was hard to believe I'd been training for half a year, but the monotony was getting to me, and I felt so restless. Technically, going for a walk after curfew was against the rules. But I yearned for time to myself. So, I waited a few hours for the rest of the camp to settle into slumber and slipped my boots onto my feet.

Glancing out the door, the coast was clear, and I tiptoed down the hall. I continued to the stairwell. Two steps down, I heard a door open.

"Who's there?" Florian's groggy voice called out. I didn't wait for her discover me. I took the stairs three at a time down to the ground floor and slipped quietly out the door. I dove into a shrub and lay on the damp earth with juniper scratching at my neck.

I waited there, catching my breath, but no one came after me. Florian must have just gone back to bed, thankfully.

A candle illuminated the heads of Florian and a third year who proctored our hall. "I heard somebody in the stairs. They must be out here," Florian explained. "I bet it was that 'I'm better than everyone' princess."

The proctor shook her head in the dim flame. "Well, there's nobody out here now. Go back to bed. I'll stand a watch to catch them when they try to sneak back in."

"What if it was a boy sneaking back out after invading our barracks?" Florian stomped her foot, her slipper landing inches from my hand. I jerked it back instinctively, and the juniper shook.

They noticed the motion and turned towards the shrub. I stayed as still as possible and the proctor turned back to Florian, apparently convinced it had been an animal. "I thought you said it was Kalia. Don't waste my time making up stories. Go to bed, Florian, before I make you stand the watch by yourself."

She mumbled something inaudible and shuffled back inside. The proctor held the candle up and peered into the darkness before returning inside. I waited several more minutes before crawling back out into the open.

I didn't want to risk being seen again, so I made my way to the boathouse. The sentries on night duty rarely ever looked in the direction of the lake, because Goblins despised water and did everything they could to avoid it. Any eyes searching for threats tonight would be pointed the other direction. There was already a canoe missing, which was odd. Maybe some other cadet had the

same idea as me for an evening of alone time. Well, if they had, it wasn't like they'd be in a position to report me.

I slid a canoe into the water and paddled to the beach where Lewon and I had trained. I hadn't been back since that night. Thoughts of sharpening the practice sword and using it against him came to me, but I shook my head to clear my mind and set off into the woods.

I heard the crack of a branch in the trees. But it was probably just a squirrel. Since Farean had hatched, all my senses had become keener. I wanted to ask Esgeril if that was normal or another one of my freak abilities. But we had to be on speaking terms for that.

But squirrels didn't talk and I could hear voices as well. They were low and still far off, but I wasn't alone out here. I recalled Authand's warning about Roland. Was he that thirsty for revenge that he'd risk coming to the camp? I inched closer; I needed to know what I was up against.

"Does he think I'd really double cross him like that?" Lewon said in an agitated whisper. "She called her dragon. How was I supposed to know she could do that? We were over ten leagues away. I can only reach Calen from three."

"You cost Roland his prize. And he always collects. If not the girl, then you," Bior said.

"But no one would pay a ransom for me."

"Roland will think of a use for you." From my vantage point, I could see Bior's fangs gleam in the moonlight.

If Bior was here, there would be other Nightbloods about.

That was the last thought I had before the flash of pain at the back of my head and everything went dark.

I woke slowly. My head throbbed and acrid smoke wafted in my face carried by a light breeze. I opened my eyes to find myself loosely tied to a huge boulder.

As my vision adjusted to the dim light of the fire, I saw Roland sitting in an ornate wooden chair. It seemed out of place surrounded by the crude treatments of a military unit in the field behind him, but

Roland did have certain flair. He stared at me, obviously aware I had returned to consciousness.

"So, the Princess is the first to wake," he said, holding out his hand to Bior who stood to his right. "Bior, you owe me ten gold coins. I told you she was the tough one. The boy is still drooling in his sleep."

"*The boy? What boy?*" I rolled my aching head gently to the right, following Bior's glaring glance, and found myself face-to-face with Lewon. We were tied to the same tree. His shoulder was touching mine, and his once handsome face was a dark swollen bruise. Slowly, my foggy brain put two-and-two together. They hadn't just taken me from training camp. They'd taken Lewon, too.

"I hit him much harder than Pani hit her," Bior said, handing a fistful of coins to his boss.

"Well, wake him up then," Roland commanded. "Douse him with a bucket of water or something. I don't want to have to explain all my delectable plans for them twice."

So, Bior fetched a bucket of water and poured it over Lewon's head. Of course, it hit me too, waking me up even more.

Lewon coughed like he was drowning, his head lolling back and forth, his eyes rolling open and squinting against the glare of the firelight.

"I would have come willingly, Roland," he sputtered. "You didn't have to have your lapdog punch me in the face."

"Not if you'd known what I have planned," Roland said. "I wouldn't normally lower myself to such rough conditions as this, but you are worth it. Thanks to your betrayal," Roland pointed a long finger at me, "she escaped."

"I told Bior, I had no part of that." Lewon spat. "It's not my fault you're incompetent."

Bior bared his fangs. "Let me drain him, boss."

Roland waved him off. "As much as I'd like to be rid of the troublemaker, we need him alive for now. His fate will be that of the girl's. No one has escaped me before. It's bad for business. Instead of

ransom, I have a more permanent solution for the two of you. I think I will turn you over to my brother."

I blinked, not understanding, my headache making it even harder to think. A Goblin with graying hair came forward, out of the shadows. I did not know their military insignia well, but he seemed to be some sort of high ranking official. As he stepped nearer to Roland and into the firelight, I could see the family resemblance.

"This is my younger brother, Ariz, low general of the Goblin armies." Roland turned to Aziz. "My brother, I have brought you two dragons tonight."

With Ariz standing next to him, Roland seemed almost humble. He kept his eyes down respectfully, as one might do in the presence of a noble. Roland bowed to no king, but next to his sibling, he acted like a servant. Ariz, for his part stood with the relaxed confidence of someone who had spent a lifetime leading others. His face conveyed no love for his brother. To him, Roland was just another underling.

"I imagine you expect extra payment for it," the Goblin general hissed.

"Consider her a gift," Roland said. "

"We're not family!" Ariz snapped. "You forsook your family to become this abomination." His hand swept over Roland's form.

"Father didn't exactly give me a choice, did he?" Roland protested. "If my maker hadn't found me, I would be dead."

"That would have been better," Aziz said, cold-heartedly. "Collect your money and leave us."

Roland nodded. "The witch will be here within the hour." He got up, glancing at Bior who had stood silently beside his boss throughout the entire exchange. Then, they both melted into the shadows of the forest, taking Roland's odd chair with them.

Ariz approached the stone Lewon and I were bound to and examined me. "You are very valuable, Princess," he said, his breath wafting across my face. "And your beasts will provide much nourishment to my soldiers. But never fear. I will return you to your father. Well, part of you, at least."

I shivered at his threat. Then I remembered my years of training in Kastea. Squaring my shoulders as much as the rope allowed, I looked him in the eye. "I'm afraid you've wasted your time. Our dragons aren't with us. Farean and Calen are still safe back at camp."

Ariz laughed, a hoarse, guttural sound that reminded me of a dying animal. "They will come," he said. "You are too precious to them, because of that slavery you have been forced into by your false god. We seek merely to free you. The world will thank us one day for ridding you of those vile creatures."

"If you live off the meat of gross animals," I said. "It's a surprise you didn't succumb to cannibalism ages ago."

Lewon snorted out a laugh.

Ariz maintained a calm facade, but his eyes burned with rage. "I hear the witch's spell is painful." The corners of his lips twitched, like he was trying to smile but couldn't remember how. "I wish I could watch, but a General's work is never done."

After he walked away into the darkness, I craned my head towards Lewon. "What's he talking about?"

The color was gone from his face. "There are stories. Oh, gods, I thought they were just stories. There are witches to the north. Outcasts from the seven kingdoms who live among the feral dragons in the mountains. They're said to train in the old magics. Perversions of the things we used to be able to do. They say they have a spell to break the bond between dragon and rider."

"But Authand said..." The rest of my protest died on my lips. It was hard to imagine six months ago that I'd wanted the very thing Lewon was talking about. Now, the thought repulsed me.

"He probably doesn't believe the stories. They're things whispered in the dark, designed to scare children. Besides, if it is true, it doesn't end well for the dragon. It's like they're dead inside. And the rider doesn't fare much better."

I shivered. "Why would Ariz bother with it then? Why not just kill us?"

Lewon shook his head. "I think he thinks he is saving us from the dragons, like they control us instead of the other way round."

"Farean, can you hear me? Don't come for me. It's too dangerous. Just get Authand." Through our connection, I got nothing but a faint sensation of rushing wind. She must be sleeping. She hadn't heard me, but it also meant that she was safe.

Beside me, lines creased Lewon's forehead. "Calen's not answering me. We should still be in range. I don't think they took us that far."

A Goblin soldier approached us carrying an earthen cup. He pressed it to my lips. He was a full head shorter than me and had to raise it over his head to reach. "Drink."

The thin, grey liquid bubbled as if boiling, but gave off no heat. It smelled like a wine that had gone rancid in the skin. I pursed my lips against it, knowing that whatever it was, it was nothing good.

Lewon kicked at him. Our feet had been tied, but apparently he'd worked his foot out of his boot. "Get that away from us, greyskin."

The kick jostled the soldier, but he didn't spill the drink. He pulled a dagger from his belt and pressed it against my right wrist, threatening to sever my hand. He probably assumed it was my lesser one. "The General wantsss you alive, but you don't have to be in one piece."

I gulped and opened my mouth. He forced the liquid down; it tasted worse than it smelled. "What was that?"

"It will confuse your dragons and make them easier to capture."

I whimpered. Already, my mind felt fuzzy. Farean was rousing, but her thoughts didn't make sense. "Why am I the only one who has to drink it?"

Lewon shot me a dirty look. Calling attention to a potential advantage wasn't the best plan.

The soldier laughed, a wet, raspy sound. I'd cover my ears if I could move. "You both received a dose before you woke. His dragon is already here. Yours just needed more encouragement."

A second soldier approached. "The witch is here. The General wants the boy."

With the dagger still in his hand, the first one cut the knot holding the ropes. I was still secured to the tree, but Lewon lunged forward.

The second soldier wrapped the loose end of the rope around Lewon's neck. His eyes bulged as it dug into his skin and cut off his air supply. The Goblin wrapped more rope around his wrists before letting the loop around his neck slacken. Lewon gasped in deep lungfuls of air before the soldier kicked him. "It's time for you to meet your dragon for the last time.

They left me alone with my thoughts, which I directed at Farean through our now fuzzy connection. "*Please don't come. Just get Authand. It's too dangerous for you.*" No coherent response came back, just a vague feeling of confusion and rage.

The Goblins lit a fire in a nearby clearing that dwarfed the one I was in. On one side of it, they secured Lewon to another tree. Directly across the bonfire, Calen was laying on his side with his legs bound together. Braided vines wrapped around his neck. They were attached to a similar loop being secured around Lewon's neck.

Ariz was nowhere in sight, but a woman shrouded in dark robes directed the effort. I couldn't tell her race. The firelight cast weird shadows over her features, and a hood covered most of her head. This must be the witch who would sunder the bond between Farean and me, if she came here. This was the person who would rob me of the one thing I'd come to value more than my own life.

The leaves rustled around me as if there was a wind, but I felt none. A sentry near the clearing let out a yell and then was gone. The scream alerted the others, and a company of Goblins stationed in the darkness came forward. A flash of blue shot out from the trees and grabbed another before disappearing again into the night sky.

Archers shot bolts and arrows into the dark. One must have found its mark, because I heard Farean scream, both aloud and in my head. She dropped her captive. He landed not twenty feet from me with a crunch and didn't move.

I felt a hand on my shoulder and jumped as much as my bindings would allow. Meril crossed into my field of vision. "You saved me, and through that, my pups. I have come to repay that debt."

I nodded but said nothing. She pulled at the ropes, but the knots were too tight. She shook her head and took a step back. Her hand folded before my eyes, her finger shortening and growing fur. The transformation looked extremely painful, but she stood there with only a grimace.

She exhaled slowly. Sweat dotted her forehead and her skin was almost as pale as Roland's had been. She flicked her wrist and a long serrated claw unfolded from her body. She returned her attention to me and used it on the rope, slicing it like it was nothing. Then she used her normal human hand to pull the ruins of the rope away from me.

Meril cocked her head at some sound that even my own keen hearing couldn't discern. A girl about five years old stumbled into the clearing wearing nothing but a tattered blouse that reached her knees. Behind him came a boy of the same age. Instead of clothing, brown fur covered all of his body save his face.

"Tem, Bere, I told you to wait for me in the den," Meril scolded with a growl in the back of her throat.

"We were bored," the girl whined.

"I told Tem to stay, but she wouldn't listen," the boy added.

Meril was about to say something, but suddenly pounced at the boy instead. She transformed into a wolf mid leap. Bere's eyes widened and dropped to the ground as his body changed shape as well. Meril's fangs dug into the arm of a Goblin who'd snuck behind the boy with a raised knife. The Goblin screamed as she mauled him, slicing gashes across his neck he would not survive.

But the noise had alerted the troops and a contingent from the ones surrounding Farean broke off in our direction.

"Save your dragon," Meril growled. Her words came through slurred by the shape of her wolf mouth. "I can't fight them alone."

I looked back at Farean again. She was surrounded by Goblins. Arrows hampered her wing and taking to the air seemed unlikely at this point. Farther off, the witch hurried to complete the preparations to rip the dragon bond from Lewon. I wouldn't be able to free him in time to be any help.

I spied a rack of swords near the line of tents. I grabbed one and charged for the nearest beast. The blade's balance was different from the one I was used to, and my first couple of thrusts were awkward and missed their mark.

Two turned from Farean, aiming their bows at me. I thrust at the one on the right, slicing through the bow string and pulling the weapon from her hands while she fell back. I flung it towards her companion as he was notching his arrow. He flinched as the ruined bow clattered against his body.

I used the distraction to attack. His leather armor held against my swing, but it knocked him to the ground. He dropped the bow and pulled out a dagger. While my sword had more reach, he undoubtedly had more training.

Farean shrieked and I took my eye off my opponent to see an arrow lodged between her scales near the wing joint. Then the Goblin was upon me. I attempted to block, but steel bit into my unprotected forearm, carving a deep gash. I dropped the sword as blood welled to the surface.

I went for the sword on the ground, but he was faster and kicked it away. He lunged again. I tried to roll but he leapt on top of me, pinning me to the mud. My mind flashed through defenses Lewon had taught me, but before I could implement one, the Goblin screamed and dropped his weapon, falling on top of me.

I grunted, pushing his writhing body to the side, only to reveal Tem with his bloody boot in her mouth. Gouges ran the length of his calf with bits of leather stuck in the wounds. She spit out the boot and ran off towards another unsuspecting Goblin, her tail wagging behind her.

I reached for my sword, but when I turned back around, the Goblin was gone. I looked up to see him dangling from Farean's jaws. A sickening crunch filled the air as she severed his body in half.

She also had the she-Goblin pinned under her paw, which she lifted, eyeing the thing like a giant cat with a mouse. She lifted her foot, and the Goblin crab-walked backwards. Farean reared and landed with a thud pushing her claw through the Goblin's chest.

I struggled to keep the contents of my stomach intact. A tortured yelp from Lewon brought my attention back to his situation. The witch had finished the preparations and was now working on channeling magic into the cable physically linking him to his dragon. Green sparks danced along its length.

I glanced over at the witch. Her eyes were rolled back into her head. Unless she could magically sense me, she wouldn't be able to stop me.

I kept my head on a swivel as I made my way over to Lewon. Unless they had fled, Ariz and the first two soldiers we'd seen were still somewhere nearby.

As I approached, however, rage filled me. Lewon had gotten me kidnapped, not just once, but twice. He'd led me on and ruined my relationship with Esgeril. Friendship, I corrected myself, coming to a stop just a few feet from where Lewon was bound. What I'd lost with Esgeril was a friendship, not a romance. Although, if I was being honest with myself, if she'd been a boy, I might never have fallen for Lewon's lies.

"Help me," he croaked, returning me to the present.

"Why should I?" I shot back. "All of this is your fault."

"I know. I'm sorry." His breath came in short, jagged bursts. "None of this was supposed to happen. Roland was just going to rough you up a little, just for show, until your father delivered the ransom. Nobody was supposed to get hurt."

I stomped my foot. "You're just sorry because Roland thinks you double crossed him."

"No, I am. Besides you need me. Do you think you can defeat a Goblin general on your own?"

He had a point, but then again, Meril was still here. As if on cue, she trotted up to us. Blood matted her fur, but it didn't appear to be hers. Behind her, Tem and Bere fought over a severed Goblin leg.

"My debt is repaid," she said. "Now I must take my pups back to safety."

I bowed before her. "Thank you. It is now I, who am in your debt." And then she and her pups still disappeared into the woods faster than my eyes could follow.

I turned back to Lewon. "Okay, I guess I'm stuck with you." I sawed through his bindings with my sword until he was free. He yanked the braided vines off his head, which set off a burst in the bonfire.

That got the witch's attention. She yelled as if the pain Lewon had been feeling had rebounded back on her. She looked around and saw that the Goblins who had been hired to guard her were gone. She clapped her hands and transformed into an eagle, flying away.

Lewon crossed the clearing to where Calen still lay bound. Grabbing a dagger from one of the fallen Goblins, he made quick work of freeing his dragon. He fashioned a crude harness not unlike the one I'd first worn with Farean, and climbed onto Calen's back.

"What are you doing? Ariz is still out there," I said.

"That's your problem," he sneered. "I need to get back before Authand notices I'm missing."

"If you leave me here, I'll tell Authand that you're working with Roland."

He shook his head. "If you make it back, you'd do best to keep your mouth shut. What's Authand going to do if he finds out you were sneaking out after curfew?"

"So were you."

"I'll be getting back a bit later than expected, but my alibi is already secure." With that, they lifted off and disappeared into the night.

I shook my head. As much as I hated to admit it, he was probably right. I'd broken curfew and if the Goblins were really this close to Tulta, they might have captured me without Lewon's help. I crossed the muddy ground to Farean's side as she licked the blood from her foot. My stomach somersaulted again before I looked away.

"*The tree*". I could sense her pointing in my mind and looked in that direction

His lieutenant leapt from the tree onto her back, plunging another dagger in the gap between her scales. She screamed and reared, but he kept his hold on the blade buried between her shoulders. I climbed up her leg and faced him. He looked from me to the dagger as if trying to decide to continue with Ariz's order or defend himself.

I took a step forward and he yanked the blade from Farean's hide. He stood, bringing it into a guard position. The other soldier dropped to Farean's back as well, leaving Ariz alone in the tree.

The second soldier dropped to a knee and slid his own dagger into a fresh wound. Farean snapped and thrashed, sending the lieutenant and me to our knees as we struggled to keep from being thrown.

He rose to his feet, but I stayed low. He advanced while I faked a struggle to regain my balance. He took slow, shuffling steps across Farean's back, but I held my position. He came within striking distance and shifted his grip on the hilt. I pushed up and knocked him clear off Farean's back.

She dove at the body and came up again with the Goblins leg in her mouth, her teeth streaked with red. The other Goblin's eyes went wide, and I rushed him. He knelt for the dagger, but I reached him first. My momentum pushed us both off Farean's back.

I landed on top and punched him in the face. His head bounced against a rock, and I hit him again. Eyes rolled back in their sockets, but still I continued until he laid there unmoving and my hands throbbed from the impact.

I remembered Ariz and looked up but the coward was gone. I scanned the tree line in search of him, but Farean's plaintive cries

brought my attention back to her. I scrambled up her side and pulled the blade from where it had been buried.

It hurts, she whimpered as I withdrew it. Along with the two gouges on her back, her wings were torn and bleeding. A scale was missing from her leg. I took in the damage she had taken while defending me. All thoughts of leaving vanished and anger grew in my breast, that she'd been hurt for my sake.

I went through and removed the bolts and arrows that had lodged between scales. Her wings were in even worse shape than I had previously believed. Farean would not fly again tonight, if she ever reached the air again. I placed my body against hers, my hands warm where they touched her. I looked again, and they glowed with soft light. I pressed them against a hole in her wing.

The wound glowed with the same light from my hands. They grew warm, even painful, but I continued until I saw the edges knit themselves back together. My body grew warm and steadily weaker as the life energy was sucked from me.

I pulled away and the hole was gone, replaced by translucent blue skin that covered her wings. I did this on the next wound, and the one after, taking my time on each one. "Is that better?" The glow faded from my hands, and I rubbed her neck ridge.

My stomach hurts." She rubbed at her belly with a hind leg for effect. I rushed over to feel for myself, although I had no clue what I was actually looking for. *I think I ate something rotten*.

I swatted her rump for the bad joke but laughed in spite of myself. I looked at the sky. The Kingsmoon was in danger of setting now. Soon the sun would poke above the horizon and reveal our absence to the other Dragonears.

Now that Farean had healed enough to fly, I needed to figure out how to secure myself. I had my half of the harness, but that didn't do much good when Farean's half lay safely tucked in its storage box back at camp. The remainder of the ropes wouldn't provide enough cordage. I scanned the meager tents and found a likely target. Taking care to not run afoul of the stakes, I picked my way across the camp

to it. Pulling my Goblin blade in front of me, I pulled the flap aside and looked in.

No foes waited inside, but it wasn't empty. As I'd suspected, their supplies lay stacked in packs. I tried hefting one, barely clearing the ground. While the elves towered over the vile creatures, they had the superior strength. I lowered the pack again and instead sifted through the contents. Mostly the packs contained rations of vile meats wrapped in oilcloth, but in a side pouch, I found a length of sturdy looking rope.

I ran back to Farean and coiled it around her chest, securing it with the knots I'd been learning at the camp. I tied loops at the ends and triple knotted them to be sure. Climbing to my spot on her back, I clipped into these loops and gave them a tentative pull. I tracked the Kingsmoon once more; no more than an hour remained until dawn and even less by the tower's standards.

"Go," I urged her, and she leapt into the air. Up in the sky, the first strands of pink light of predawn glowed over the horizon. I urged her faster, but the sky lightened faster than we could fly.

A mile from camp, Farean dove back into the trees. It was darker there, and I could barely make out the ends of her wings, but she deftly swerved through the dense foliage until she cleared it at the lake.

The tower would read dawn in minutes now. We flew low to avoid detection, the pale blue of her scales being masked by the dark water. I could feel the cool air steaming from the surface, and I pulled my feet up unconsciously to keep them from getting wet.

We cleared the lake and continued just above the ground, eddies of dust swirling around us with each powerful flap. She didn't begin slowing until almost upon the stable wall. The opening wouldn't allow her full wingspan and she tucked them in. We cleared the opening by inches and inside the room that no longer seemed so cavernous, she spread out again and beat in reverse to slow down while grabbing at the ground.

Her momentum stopped, and I lurched forward but my knots held. The morning horn sounded; I couldn't make it back to the barracks now. Instead, I untied the rope and shoved it in my pack before crawling into the crook over her foreleg. Her breathing labored but slowed as I pressed against her. My own breath was ragged as well. What would they do when they found me here? There was nothing I could do and leaving would only make my discovery more suspicious.

Farean began snoring. The exertions and battles of the day were over, and dragons need their rest. Her sleep affected me as well. I struggled for several minutes, but the siren song of slumber soon overtook me.

Chapter Twenty Five

Farean and I flew above the treetops as she practiced her maneuvers. She swooped low above the trees and I caught my ankle on an errant branch. "Hey, careful." She ignored me as she rose again and then I hit another branch.

I opened my eyes. Authand looked down at me as he tapped the side of his steel claw against his leather breeches. I blinked a couple times and suppressed a yawn. Judging by the shadows, I couldn't have slept more than an hour.

"Didn't we just have this conversation? I haven't even had a meal yet since I warned you what would happen if you left camp without permission again.

All traces of sleep left my brain and I stood before him. "I didn't leave camp. I slept in the stables."

He took a deep breath and held it for a moment before exhaling slowly. "Then why are you in your harness?"

"I wasn't going to sleep in the dirt in my nightgown." The words left my lips before I had even realized that I had the lie ready-made. I looked at my hands; they were caked in dirt with a red smudge giving away my fight with the Goblins. I rubbed it against my thigh.

His eyes followed the motion but he just chuckled.

"Now I know that the others have been giving you a hard time here, but I can't have you violating curfew and coming to the stables at all hours of the night either." He paced the small space, waking Farean. She lifted her head and looked from him to me, not willing to ask her question with so many telepathic ears present.

I wasn't sure how much I could say to her either so I simply sent her a feeling of warmth and contentment and hoped she got the message. *Can you sleep with me more often?* The question, benign as it was, held volumes of conversation.

"The Colonel was just saying that I couldn't before you woke." I shook my head. I took a step closer to her and hugged her as she nuzzled against my chest.

"I understand the appeal. I often wish that Korth and I were still out in the field where we were rarely more than a few feet from one another. But we have rules for a reason. This is your last chance to start following them. ALL of them."

"Yes, sir." Calling the instructors sir instead of their given name still required conscious thought, but I thought the moment warranted it.

"For your punishment, you must skip breakfast and take Farean down to the lake to clean her. She must have been rolling in some clay mud. It almost looks as if someone bled out all over her."

"Yes, sir," I repeated. I knew better than to argue or question the boon I'd been given. Instead, I grabbed the bag that had given me away and rushed through the still open door for the barracks. "Meet me at the lake in ten minutes," I called over my shoulder.

I turned back to the path just in time to bowl Esgeril over. She let out a little shriek as she tumbled and fell. I reached out a hand to help her up, but she recoiled away from me.

"I'm sorry." I couldn't meet her eyes. Instead, I found myself inspecting the Aluminte rings on the front of my harness.

"You are sorry," she muttered. "You have got to be the sorriest excuse for a Dragoner I have ever seen." She got up and pushed passed me, knocking me on the shoulder as she went by, despite the fact that there was plenty of room on the path for both of us. Maybe I deserved it for running her down.

I kicked at a stray rock, watching it bounce down the cobblestone path before it came to a stop between the rough stones. She'd warned me about Lewon, and I hadn't listened. She'd tried to be a

friend, and I'd rejected her. But to say I was a bad Dragoneer after all the effort I'd put in? That really hurt.

I didn't see her taking on a company of Goblins and an evil witch. I almost wished Lewon and I had gotten caught returning, so I didn't have to lie about that feat. I was no longer the soft and frivolous girl who'd run away at the hatching. Now the night dress scrunched under my harness barely contained the muscles I'd built in my shoulders from the physical activity around camp.

I might even take Florian in a fair fight, not that I expected her capable of such a thing. Lewon's lessons had included hand to hand combat. He'd gotten angry because I always lost those sessions, but in fact, I let him win towards the end, relishing being pinned to the ground underneath him. What an idiot I'd been to let those feelings grow for someone so unworthy of them.

All I felt now was contempt for Lewon. But he'd earned it. Had I been a fool to go back for him and risk Farean and myself? Probably. But I'd do it again, even knowing he wouldn't do the same for me. I was learning I couldn't let what other people did change who I was. Besides, his dragon hadn't deserved to be severed, even if Lewon had.

After I changed and had breakfast, I scrubbed Farean until her scales shone, while she regaled me with stories of our victory as if I hadn't been there. And I had to remind her that it was our little secret. It took all morning, but I lifted each scale to clean the grime underneath and polished the tops. I squinted, looking at her as she reflected the brilliance of the sun.

Between my lack of sleep and the effort I'd put into cleaning, curling up against Farean where she dozed in the sand seemed tempting. But the lunch bell rang, and my stomach reminded me I'd been missing too many meals lately.

The hall went silent as I entered, and I felt hundreds of eyes on me as I made my way to the line. The silence was short lived, however, and soon the buzz of voices resumed. As I passed the

tables, I discovered much of it was gossip about me, meant for me to overhear. I simply ignored it and took my food to an empty table.

A group of third year girls sat at the table beside me. They watched me sit and, as if a single entity with ten legs and ten arms, stood and moved to a table farther away.

Empty tables now surrounded me. That was fine by me. Alone, I couldn't hear the barbs being spoken a little too loudly. The room suddenly fell silent, and I looked up to see Colonel Authand standing at the front.

"I have put a signup sheet outside," he announced. "Anyone wishing to compete for a slot at the Darnetan Dragon Run must submit their name by the end of the day. Your instructors will consider your progress in all areas and five of you will be chosen to represent the training grounds."

The hall broke into loud murmuring. If I'd had anyone to talk to, I would have joined in. This could be my chance to prove my worth and be taken seriously. I shoveled my lunch down and got up to dump my trash.

On the way out the door, I noticed Authand staring at me from the teacher's table. Were his eyes daring me to sign-up, or daring me not too?

As promised, a sheet had been nailed to the wooden announcement board. The top simply read "Tryouts" with several rows of blank lines. A charcoal stick sat on the lip. Well, it wasn't like I could become any more of a laughing stock than I already was. What did I have to lose?

I took a breath and scribbled my name before I had a chance to back down. By being first, at least I'd shown I wasn't afraid of my peers, or their opinions of me.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Authand and the other instructors spent a week fielding questions from curious Dragoneers before posting a leaderboard outside the mess hall. I was listed as number twenty out of twenty-one student candidates. Not a great start, but at least I wasn't dead last. Lewon first and Florian was right behind him. But I couldn't let that bother me.

The second week, I had moved up to tenth place. My instructors were beginning to recognize my progress. I even made it into the advanced class that Selkerdrim taught as a teacher's assistant. "I want the glove from the top of the flag pole," Selkerdrim shouted through the amplifying horn he'd borrowed from the professor. I followed her pointer to the Darnetan flag flapping in the wind. Above it sat the familiar dragon filial. But a leather glove covered its left wing.

Farean growled. I could feel her neck muscles clenching. Despite multiple attempts, we still hadn't managed to grab anything while midair. Attempts usually ended in an emergency landing so Farean could heal a broken wrist. I knew that each healing provided a full renewal so that injuries became good as new. But it still throbbed when I thought about it.

I exhaled slowly. "We can do this. I've got a feeling." She said nothing but rose up for the approach. She felt at the flagpole, the sun at our backs to reduce glare. The metal post approached more quickly than I would have liked. I squinted at the glove, willing it to leap into my hand. Fifty feet to go.

Farean folded her wing in, sending us into a tilting swirl. Twenty feet to go. I extended my arm, lining it up with my target, following it as our angle changed. Ten feet. I leaned forward. I knew in my gut

that I could make it. Five feet. I knew better, but in my mind, I could smell the leather.

CRACK

Pigeons roosting on the stable roof flew off in protest as my scream echoed off every building in the camp. Farean dropped to the ground. The jolt sent a fresh wave of pain through my dangling wrist.

Selkerdrim saw my arm and turned green. "Oh gods. Let me get the healer."

"No, wait." I gritted my teeth through the pain. "Help me down." I'd gotten quite good at extricating myself from the harness with only one hand, but one buckle required putting some pressure on my right arm to reach.

I slid down Farean's back while Selkerdrim supported me. I whimpered as I held the broken joint out to my dragon. She grasped the offending limb with her claw. Tears welled in my eyes, and I fought to contain them. I'd failed the challenge yet again and while being evaluated to boot. At the very least, I would keep some dignity in being seen to withstand the pain even though I wanted little more to curl up into a ball and cry.

Soft light pulsed under the tiny scales about her limb, radiating towards the point of our contact. I took short, panting breaths as heat spread over my arm, seeping deep under the skin. This part never got any easier but I knew in. Few moments it would pass in a few moments. I could feel the bones knit together.

The glow subsided and Farean released me. I flexed my fingers slowly. The pain was gone, except for the hallow memory of it which never seemed to quite fade.

Selkerdrim stared at me, his mouth opening and closing several times before he found his tongue. "How did you do that? Nobody can do that. No elf has had magic that strong since the days of Vernis. Does this hurt?" He grabbed my hand and squeezed where the freshly healed tissue.

The name he mentioned tickled something in the back of my mind, a familiarity I couldn't quite place. I wanted to ask him who

that was, but the query was quickly submerged under a sea of his own questions.

"Don't tell anyone," I told her. "Only you and Esgeril know." Speaking her name still hurt. I wondered if she would betray my trust now that we were no longer friends.

"I." His next words were overpowered by the sound of the horn blowing. We turned at the sound. The next emergency drill shouldn't happen for weeks yet. We headed towards the sound, soon joined by other elves streaming out of the buildings. A few dragon heads poked over the crowd, also curious about the unexpected drill.

We all turned at the sound. We'd just had an emergency drill two days before. It was unlikely to be one again so soon. I moved, heading towards the sound, soon joined by other Elves streaming out of the buildings. A few dragon heads poked from the stables, alert and curious.

Authand marched to the front of the parade field, pulling his harness over his tunic as he went. The buckles gleamed like new, but there were reddish stains on his riding leathers under the right breast plate, an eternal reminder of the day he'd bloodily lost his hand.

The aide, whose name nobody seemed to know, handed him a speaking horn. The Colonel closed the articulating hook around the handle and brought it to his face. "We are under attack from Goblins. This is not a drill. Selkerdrim, take Rilith and fly as fast as you can to the main Dragoneer barracks in Verlo to get help."

Verlo was almost a full day's flight away. Depending on the size of the Goblin force, we might be able to hold them off for two days without outside help. These facts came to me easily and instantly, a result of overhearing basic military tactics while playing under my father's war table as a child.

"Recruits, to arms and defend your home!" Authand called a rallying cry.

Dragoneers jostled each other, some running to the barracks for their harnesses, others, who already had them on, to the stables.

I was about to run for Farean when Authand grabbed me. "Not you, Kalia. Go to my quarters. There is a hatch under my desk that will lead you to a cave. I will send Farean to meet you. You'll be safe there, no matter what happens to the camp."

"But I want to help." I shook him off. "I can't just cower and hide while others are fighting."

"You can, and you will," he thundered, shaking his hook in my face. "I will not put the princess of this kingdom in danger."

"But—"

"Go. That's an order, dammit." Something crashed against the gate, and the wood started to buckle. "Reinforce the gate!" Authand ordered. "I need dragons in the air now!" He ran to where Elves and dragons were barricading the entrance.

"*Go to the cave.*" Farean pleaded. "*I can keep you safe there*". I turned to find her pacing the ground behind me. I hadn't even heard her land.

"Not you, too. We should be up there." I pointed to the sky where a dozen dragons carried rocks, logs, and anything they could find to drop on the invaders beyond the wall. "We have as much right to fight as anyone here."

Just as I said it, a boulder the size of a cow came sailing over the wall. I stood, motionless, as it hit Selkerdrim's dragon Rilith square in the head. Selkerdrim, who had been mounting the dragon, screamed as they both tumbled to the ground. Rilith landed with a sickening thud in the grass before us. Neither rider nor dragon moved. I ran towards them, and Selkerdrim stirred. Blood trickled from his brow where his head had bounced against Rilith's bony neck ridge.

I slowed as I approached. Rilith's neck lay at an odd angle, his head caved in on one side. The Blue dragon was no longer breathing.

"Selkerdrim, I—" I reached out, trying to help her up.

"Get away from him!" he screamed. He had his buckles undone in a flash and pulled a knife from his belt as he dropped to the ground. "I won't let you hurt him." Tears flowed down his cheeks as he waved the knife from side to side.

Farean bellowed behind me. I turned but saw nothing wrong. Around the camp the other dragons joined in her baleful cry.

"He's dead, Selkerdrim," I said softly. "And you're hurt. We need to get you to the healer." I took a step forward.

"He's not dead," he insisted, his eyes lost and confused. "He's just sleeping. Stay away from us."

I looked around. Everyone was too busy to even notice that Rilith had fallen. I couldn't see Authand, but he needed to send somebody else to fetch Dragoneers reinforcements. But if I waded into the battle to try and find him, he'd be pissed. And if no one flew to get reinforcements, we'd all be dead.

"We'll go," I told Farean. I closed the few feet between us, mounted her, and buckled myself in.

"But"—

"Now!" I commanded. "*You want safe? How much safer can we be than flying to the other side of the country?*"

She considered my argument for a moment, then launched us into the air.

Within seconds, another boulder missile was hurtling toward us.

"Down." I directed.

Farean tucked her wings and rolled away from the projectile.

I felt the air ruffle as it passed inches from us.

Farean started flapping again, gaining altitude.

We passed over Authand.

Seeing us overhead, he shouted. "What are you doing? Get down here, you idiot girl!"

I pointed down at Selkerdrim still defending his dead dragon and turned away from him.

Farean lurched, catching a smaller boulder aimed at us in her talons. She labored under its weight, getting closer to the wall before tossing it back down on the Goblins. They scattered like cockroaches, but quickly returned to loading their trebuchets.

I saw Esgeril crouched behind a merlon at the top of the wall, firing her crossbow with deadly accuracy. She saved her shots for

those closest to overcoming the defenses. Even so, she'd already emptied half of her quiver in the few short minutes since the battle began.

The curve in the wall blocked her view of most of the action to her left. We had few enough archers, and that left an unguarded gap. I wondered that nobody had ever noticed it before; it seemed obvious enough from the air. But what my fellow Dragoners hadn't seen, the Goblins had. Already, a ladder leaned against that section of wall with one of their fighters approaching the battlement.

I shouted to Esgeril, but the din of the fighting drowned out my voice. Farean banked hard and flew straight at the vile creature. I tensed as we sped towards the wall, but Farean was an expert flyer. I trusted her with my life.

Mere feet separated the Goblin from Esgeril, but her attention still lay on the ground below, trusting the archers to her left to protect her blind side. The Goblin drew its dagger as it closed the gap.

We weren't going to make it in time.

Farean pushed harder. Instead of pulling up and grabbing with her feet as I'd expected, she dove.

Her jaws crunched down and she grabbed the Goblin by its arm. Farean shook her head as her prey struggled to get loose. We barely cleared Esgeril, who finally turned as our shadow darkened the sky above her. She looked around, saw the glistening dagger the Goblin had dropped on the wall, and mouthed what looked like a "thank you," as we flew away.

The Goblin struggled, grabbing at Farean's eye ridge with his free arm, trying to gouge her eyeball.

She chomped down harder, and I heard bones snap as the Goblin screamed.

"Bleh. It tastes terrible", she said. "What should I do with it?"

"Fly back over the wall and drop it like you did the stone", I suggested.

In a flash, she banked, sending us back over the heads of the attacking Goblin forces.

She opened her mouth and the Goblin screamed one last time, plummeting to the earth and splatting as a red stain below us, sending the trebuchet operators running for cover once again.

They didn't have a chance to get another shot off at us before Farean veered east, heading for Verlo.

We soon put the camp and the fighting behind us, but this was not the way I'd wanted to earn my freedom. Still, I leaned back and allowed the wind to blow my hair behind me. I let go entirely, trusting the harness to hold me and relished the feeling of flying alone in the sky with Farean. There was nothing like it.

Farean beat her wings harder and we rose higher. The trees blurred together into one green mass.

"What are you doing?" I asked. "This is too high."

"Vernis says the air moves faster the higher we go. We can get help sooner."

There was that name again. But I didn't know any Dragoneer with a dragon named Vernis. *"Who is Vernis?"*

"The dragon king."

"Dragons don't have a king", I said. "Do you?"

Farean caught a gust of wind that threw us forward, making me grab the harness. The ground streaked below us. I held on as tight as I could, but conversation stopped while I fought to keep my balance in the tempest. Above me the clouds seemed just out of reach. Holding on with my right arm, I extended my left, stretching my fingers to gain that extra half inch, but I wasn't any closer to the fluffy cotton than before.

Without warning, we fell, my stomach flying upward into my chest. The sensation lasted only a second and then Farean climbed back to our previous altitude. She was riding the currents and wind streams, pushing our speed to the upper limits. I felt her suppressed panic, as well as my own, as she struggled to keep flying as the wind tossed us about. But she was doing it. I don't know how, but she was. Finally, we descended and the battering winds abated a little.

"Did your Vernis warn you about that?" I grumbled.

Farean continued to ignore my questions about her mysterious king, so I let it go.

The air calmed, and we slowed. I tried to match the landscape below to the maps I'd studied at the castle when my father wasn't shoohing me away. If I was right about our location, we were a little off course.

Farean corrected to the south, sensing my thoughts.

There was another problem, though. We weren't going to make it before sun set. My limited navigation skills would do us no good in the dark, and I hadn't yet taken the class that taught Dragoners navigation by the stars.

Sensing my worry, Farean picked up the pace. She inched closer to the faster air above us, but the turbulence exhausted her. I could feel her muscles straining, her wings aching. She continued like that for an hour, alternating higher and lower, elevations, supplementing the slower air speeds with more effort. With each cycle, I could feel her fatigue, her wings taking longer and longer to recover from the buffeting winds.

It seeped into me like a winter's chill. My eyelids drooped. "*We need a plan.*" I told her. "*If you keep up like this, we'll crash and nobody will help the training camp.*"

"*I don't like the crashing part, but why must we help? None of them like us.*"

"*Duty isn't about people liking you, it's about doing what is right.*" My father's words flowed from my lips. And dammit, he was right. "*We are Dragoners.*" I told Farean proudly. "*More than that, I am a princess to these people. And you are the royal dragon. We have to do our best to protect them. It's what rulers do.*"

"*The dragon king is my ruler*", she insisted. "*But maybe if we save them, they'll like us.*" She sounded hopeful and I realized, for the first time, that the rejection by the other Dragoners had really been getting to her. How had I not seen that, or felt it.

"*You were having a hard enough time without worrying about me*", she said. "*Good dragons don't worry their riders unless they have to.*" "*But now maybe*

worry. I don't know if we can make it. I'm tired and my wings ache. Can't we land for just a little bit?

Without realizing it, we'd left the forests behind. Fields full of haystacks sprawled below, dotting the landscape with fluffy golden circles. Maybe a quick nap in one would help. Farean started coasting. *"Yes, sleep would be just the thing".*

But I knew we couldn't, as tempting as it was. If we stopped, we'd never be able to find the training camp in the dark.

"I have an idea," I said to Farean. *"Keep flying."*

One of the things Flatch had taught me was that aching muscles were caused when muscle fibers tore from overuse. If our healing magic could knit broken bones and dispel bruises, then restoring muscles shouldn't be that hard.

I reached out to Farean's shoulders where her great muscles flexed with each beat. Taking a deep breath, the magic pulsed through my hands and into her body. Unlike the other times we had healed each other, there was no obvious damage to see repaired. I just kept pushing the healing light into her until my own arms began to tremble.

"Enough. You'll hurt yourself."

"Was it enough though?" I slowly pushed myself upright. *"I can give you more."* My arms quivered in protest at the mere suggestion of it but I didn't care.

"I'm good. But you aren't. Remember, we both need to make it there. I won't do any good delivering them a dead Dragoner." As if to prove her point, she gained speed, flying faster than we ever had before.

I let her fly; only occasionally pointing out landmarks to keep our course. Slowly, I regained my energy while Farean lost hers to exertion. We landed once for water, but otherwise stayed aloft the entire trip. I healed her weary muscles twice more, and each time it took more out of me. Finally, as the sun dipped towards the horizon behind us, we saw the high walls of Verlo in the distance. As we slowed for landing, I lost my grip. I had nothing left and just dangled limply from the harness.

My mind barely registered as hands loosened my harness buckles and lifted me off Farean's back.

"I—" My mind was having trouble coming up with words, or even coherent thoughts. "I need to see General Lutania." The Dragoners transferred me to a stretcher and as they carried me from my dragon, I looked back to her entire body trembling as they brought her a side of beef to eat.

I think I must have passed out, because the next thing I knew a scratchy voice said, "Princess Kalia, I'm right here. But you're half dead, poor girl. Get the healers for her. She's in no condition to tell me anything."

A hand appeared in front of my face, holding a sweet-smelling herb to my mouth.

I pushed it away. My news couldn't wait. I needed to tell him now.

But the hand was stronger than mine. He pressed the herb between my lips and someone commanded, "Eat it!"

I swallowed, and the little willpower I had to stay awake seeped from me.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

"*Kalia, you're awake*!" Farean screeched in my head like a toddler reunited with her favorite toy.

I opened my eyes to a dimly lit room with stone walls that gleamed from years of being scrubbed. The air smelled like the astringent healers used to keep their work spaces clean.

As the fog in my head cleared, I suddenly remembered my purpose and sat up. The room swirled for a minute before steadying. "I need to speak to General Lutania, immediately," I said to no one.

"Kalia," a voice said from behind me. More slowly this time, I turned to find the General herself sitting in a chair in the corner, her ankle propped up on her opposite knee like a man.

"How long have I been asleep?" I demanded. The windowless room gave me no cues

"Only an hour," she said. "I've been here the entire time. I assumed you'd want to speak to me as soon as you woke. No one rides themselves and their dragon into the ground like that for less than something dire. But I'm curious why you look like the one that had carried her."

I bit my lip and studied the wooden floorboards. I didn't want to reveal my secret. I was considered enough of a freak already.

"I've been around Dragoneers a long time," she said, seeing my hesitancy. "I suspect I already know. You're not the only Dragoneer to have such a trait. And you're wise, I believe, to keep to yourself as much as possible.

"*So, I wasn't the only Dragoneer to be able to heal with magic?*" Well, that was both a relief and raised a lot of questions.

Here," she handed me a small pouch exuding a familiar smell. "This herb will help restore you when you've overextended yourself. It's like stimleaf but much more powerful. Don't use it unless you must. For some people, it can be addictive."

I took the pouch and stuffed it in an inner pocket, thanking her. But there were more important things at hand. "Sir," I said, "Tulta is under attack by Goblins." Then, I quickly detailed what I knew about their numbers and weapons. I finished by relaying my assessment of their ability to break our gate and wall defenses within two days' time.

"This is grave news, indeed." She stood and made for the door. "Stay here, while I mobilize the Dragoners."

Soon after he left, the great bell clanged. Habit ingrained in me from months of drilling brought me to my feet. The room wobbled, and I put a hand on the cot to steady myself. I swallowed a pinch of the herb that Lutania had given me. It took a couple more attempts to cross the room, but I was a little less dizzy each time.

I moved to the door and down a hall to an arched exit. Torches lit the area outside. I made it to the parade field just as the General concluded her announcement. Dragoners raced past me, hurrying to prepare for their cross-country journey. The General spotted me and intercepted me on my way to Farean. "Go back to bed. I commend you on doing whatever it took to get the news to us, but such acts come at a cost. You've done your part. Now rest."

I shook my head. "I have to go back and help. Those are my friends dying out there. Well, at least one is a friend. I think."

She put his hand on my shoulder. "Princess, your father has ordered us to keep you out of danger."

"This again? First Authand and now the General."

"Sir, my father kicked me out of my home and left me to lodge with a swineherd," I said bitterly. "He does not care about my well-being." Months had passed since that day, but bile still rose in my throat recalling it.

"You mean a swineherd that worked for him?" The General asked, a glint in her eye. "With a chambermaid daughter who just happened to find you in the rain and offer her help."

My mouth opened. I hadn't told anyone about that. "You mean my father arranged that?" I asked, angrily. Somehow that knowledge made the whole thing worse. Why throw me out and publicly humiliate me, only to help me behind the scenes? I'll tell you why. He still wanted power over me, to keep me from becoming a true Dragoneer.

"Listen, I'm going," I told her. "Throw me in the Caves after this is over if you have to, but for now I have a duty to uphold."

He looked away before removing his hand. "I can't allow you to go."

"But—"

He held up a hand. "I can't allow you. But I'm obviously much too busy to actively stop you. Just try not to get yourself killed."

I nodded. "Thank you."

Before I even called, Farean was landing by my side.

I climbed onto her, fastening the harness as we lifted from the ground. She wheeled up to the faster higher winds immediately this time, the moons in the sky providing enough illumination to navigate by.

"*Vernis showed me the way home*". Farean said.

"*Well, lead the way then*," I said, knowing better than to question her imaginary king.

The return trip was better than our earlier flight. We had a tailwind this time, and Farean was getting better at utilizing the higher winds. The ride was smooth enough that I was able to nap a bit on her back. We didn't stop once, and I only had to heal her twice. After the second time though, I took a bite of the herb the General had given me, feeling the energy surge down my throat and into my limbs. We didn't see or hear the General's Dragoneers behind us the entire trip, but I knew they were coming.

At last, toward dawn, we came in over the lake to give ourselves an entrance clear of Goblins and their flinging boulders. As we approached, I saw twelve of dragons stretched out around the pavilions with healers working over them to tend broken wings and other injuries. A dozen downed dragons and riders was a heavy battle toll.

As Farean's talons hit the ground, we narrowly missed being hit by another Goblin missile.

I dismounted and sought out Authand while Farean lapped water from the lake. Portions of the wall had crumbled, but it still repelled our invaders. I doubted the General's Dragoners would reach us for another six hours. And the wall might not hold that long.

I found Authand in his office with most of the other instructors. Florian and a second year I didn't recognize stood guard at the door.

"What are you doing back?" She taunted. "Did it get too scary out there, and you came running back to safety?"

"That doesn't even make sense," I responded. "If I was looking for safety, why would I return to a battle? This has got to be the least safe place in all of Darneta right now." I took a step forward, but Florian pulled her short sword and blocked my path. Belatedly, the other girl, Zimaelan according to the name badge on her leathers, pulled hers as well.

"The Colonel said no one was allowed in. And I'm certainly not going to let a coward like you waste his time."

I pulled my own sword from its sheath. "That's the last time you insult me. Get out of my way, or I will remove you myself." I couldn't take the both of them, but I was hoping Zimaelan would bail. Or maybe even help me.

Florian snarled and tightened her grip, her face contorting in a way that confirmed the orc heritage I had long suspected. We eyed each other, waiting to see if the other would make the first move.

"Kalia? What are you doing here? Get your butt in here." Both of our heads snapped at the sound of Authand's voice. "What in the

ancestors' name are you both doing with your swords out? Put them away. And Kalia, why aren't you inside already?"

I sheathed my sword as I pushed past Florian who also hurried to comply. I barely made it through the doorway before Authand slammed it behind me.

"What are you doing back? Not that I don't remember you disobeyed a direct order. I do. But since you did, I was hoping you'd accomplish something worthwhile for my troubles. Instead, you're back here with no help to show for it," He punched the wall with his hook. It embedded a full three inches into the wood. He pulled but the harness that attached the device to his arm came loose instead, leaving the straps dangling next to my head.

I flinched away from it. The contraption seemed even more intimidating when it was disembodied from him.

He moved me aside with his stump and pulled at it with his good hand. "Well?" He wrestled with his hook. "Answer me, dammit."

"I did accomplish something," I said. "I made it there just before dark. The General and the others should be here in about six hours."

"Dragon dung!" The hook came free from the wall. He held it under his arm and cleaned the debris from it before reattaching it. "No one can fly that fast without killing their dragon. And Korth says Farean is currently down by the lake alive and well. Don't lie to me, girl. If we're all going to die here, I need to know it."

"Maybe she's just faster than your fat old dragon." Outside Korth roared. *I'd like to see you do half of what I can*," Farean shot back at an insult I couldn't hear.

Authand's eyes narrowed. His stare seemed to crawl inside my brain and claw at the soft tissue. I'd be seeing those eyes in my nightmares. "You're telling me you flew all night and beat an experienced Dragoon force, with some of the fastest dragons in the seven kingdoms, back here by six hours?"

"I—Yes," I said lamely. Now I was caught between explaining my magic or digging myself into a deeper hole.

Thankfully, I was saved from having to make that decision by Lewon bursting through the door. "Calen said you called for me, sir?"

He stopped short when he saw me standing there. It was always awkward between us now. But then he turned to Authand, waiting for orders.

Authand looked at me, calculating, weighing my worth and the possibility that what I was claiming was the truth.

"Kalia claims she and Farean made it to Verlo and returned in one night, and that reinforcements are on their way."

"That's not possible," Lewon said. "No one is that fast."

"That's what I said," Authand agreed.

"What could it possibly gain me to lie about this?" I asked earnestly, eyeing Lewon, reminding him with my eyes that we'd both seen how Farean could fly when we'd escaped Roland. And maybe it would occur to him that I could heal her fatigue.

"Well, it's highly unlikely," Lewon said, caving a little. "But technically possible."

"I can't stake the camp's survival on an unlikely possibility," Authand said. "But it really doesn't matter. We don't have six hours. The wall will fall before then. We need to evacuate the injured through the tunnel. I will not leave Dragons here to be Goblin meat."

Lewon shook his head. "The entire camp is surrounded, except on the lakeside, sir. We come out of those tunnels, and the greyskins will be waiting for us."

"We need a distraction," I said.

"Farean seems pretty good at catching those rocks." Authand pointed out the window to where my dragon had taken to the sky without me. As we watched, she caught another of the airborne boulders and dropped it back over the wall. "You and she could concentrate a barrage surrounding the tunnel exit. It might scare them off long enough for an escape effort."

I swallowed. The Colonel must be very desperate to defy the order from my father to keep me out of harm's way. Then again, the

General had ignored it too. Desperate times called for desperate measures.

"We can do it, sir," I said. "We won't let you down."

"Calen and I will help," Lewon said. I suspected he was offering so he could keep an eye on me, rather than out of any altruistic feelings, but I'd take it.

Farean and I waited for Lewon to be ready before taking to the air. We would have to time our efforts precisely once we reached the tunnel exit leading into the forest, but Calen and Farean could mind-speak to one another, so that would help. The thought crossed my mind to "miss" one of the rocks that would be lobbed at them. But Father taught me to never stoop to the level of my enemies.

Once in the air, Farean quickly caught a rock. The Goblins seemed to have caught on to our tactics, however, and followed with a volley of arrows. Farean dropped the rock to maneuver around the onslaught, and it fell into the camp, sending those below running. It had almost hit Florian, and I had no doubt she'd think it had been intentional.

Farean pulled out of her spin beyond the range of the archers. She'd managed to protect her wings and underbelly, but a few arrows had lodged between her scales.

I reached down, pulling them out and sent a quick shot of healing energy through her.

We circled above the camp assessing the situation.

Lewon and Calen weren't having any more luck catching rocks than we were. The Goblins were now ignoring us and focusing on bringing down the last vestiges of the crumbling wall. Our original plan wasn't going to work.

"We have to change the plan". I told Farean. *"Rocks aren't going to work, but we have to pull the Goblins away from the tunnel."*

"Capture the flag". Farean said, sending images of the game flashing in my head.

"Oh, you're brilliant, I praised her." Let's go." "And be sure to tell Calen what we're up to."

Selkerdrim hadn't let us onto the playing field since we lost the game that first day, but that hadn't kept Farean and I from practicing by ourselves.

We flew up high, above any possible attack, then wide around the battle. I heard Florian's shrill voice as we retreated. The words were lost to the wind, but I guessed her message. She thought I was running away from the battle. Which I was, sort of. But only for a moment.

Once Farean and I were well away from the action, we dove beneath the trees and made for the rear flank nearest the tunnel exit. Capture the flag was a game of stealth. And if we'd been allowed to play, the Blues would have discovered that Farean could navigate the forest without disturbing a single twig. But the game was more than stealth. It was also about cunning strategy. Lewon had taught us that the hard way, showing us his team flag, supposedly unguarded and easy pickings. He's lured us to an ambush we'd never seen coming. And that's exactly what we hoped to do to the Goblins.

"Calen and Lewon are ready", Farean said. "They've found a clearing that will work, and Calen has shown me where it is."

"Then let's go," I told her.

She flew forward and we came upon the Goblins rear line near the tunnel exit. It was hidden, so they didn't know it was there. And thankfully, they'd left gaps between each soldier, so we took advantage of that.

Farean picked off the first before we'd even been spotted, heaving him in the air to land with a discernable crunch.

The second Goblin saw us at the last second. She twisted just out of Farean's reach and pulled her sword. I pulled out my own as we pivoted around a branch. We came at her again upside down. The Goblin's thrust was awkward, our orientation seeming to throw her off. I had no such problems, this being one of the few things I'd practiced that I was actually good at.

I parried her thrust and used her momentum against her. Her blade came free of her hands and slammed into her face. Blood

gushed from her nose. A cry escaped her lips but fell short. I looked behind to see Farean's tail tinged in blood and the warrior slumping to the ground.

The next few gave us little problem. With the rear guards dispatched, our task became more difficult as the Goblin soldiers came at us in clustered groups, turning away from the camp wall and pushing toward us for their turn in the fray. Which was exactly what we'd hoped for.

"Pull back," I told Farean. *"It's time to offer them our flag."*

Farean flew away into the forest, just beyond sight of the encroaching Goblins, and I grabbed one of the arrows I'd pulled from between her scales earlier.

"*Couldn't you just pretend?*" I begged her, looking at the sharp tip of the arrow.

"*They'll suspect a trap if they don't smell my blood,*" she said. "*Now do it!*" "*You know you can heal me afterwards.*"

I raised my fist, clutching the arrow, and plunged it into the joint where her right wing met her body.

She cried out, and flapped the wing, quivering with pain.

"*I'm sorry. I'm so sorry,*" I told her as her injured wing dropped limply to her side.

Three Goblins came charging at us, their dark eyes taking in the scene—a dragon who had just killed numerous of their brethren, suddenly at their mercy with a grounding injury. I saw them all raise their snouts in unison, sniffing at my dragon's lifeblood.

Farean whirled, running awkwardly, dragging her wing behind her. I looked back to see her whacking Goblins aside with her tail, but they were gaining on us and there were more coming. I could see the bloodlust and hunger in their eyes. There was nothing a Goblin loved more than an injured, helpless, dragon.

Farean crashed through the underbrush, galloping between trees and through bushes. And I held on to her for dear life, but I was doing more than that. I had my hands on her wing joint, sending healing energy into her as fast and hard as I could.

And then the forest opened up into a large clearing, full of tall yellow grasses and blue meadow flowers, like a place you'd expect to find a unicorn, not stop to face your inevitable death.

Farean ran-wobbled to the far end of the clearing and turned to face the Goblin onslaught.

Goblins filled the meadow, charging at us in a huge mob.

And then the air was full of dragons, dropping from the trees like rabid stones. Every uninured Dragon and rider that wasn't helping with the evacuation had fled the camp and come here to our ambush.

Calen and Lewon took out a Goblin just as he raised an ax to us.

No one else even got close.

"*Pull out the arrow*," Farean said, and I looked down to see that her joint wound was already healing, forming scar tissue that had almost pushed the arrow out.

I grabbed it and tugged it the rest of the way, happy to hear her sigh with relief.

The pretty yellow meadow grass and blue flowers were now strewn with Goblin blood and corpses.

"The Goblins just breached the camp wall," Lewon said, landing next to us. "But Florian's Masta reports that the evacuees are out of the tunnel and all headed to safety thanks to your quick thinking and Farean's acting skills. Good plan," he said, giving me a nod of grudging respect.

"Actually, it was your plan," I pointed out. "I just used it better."

Chapter Twenty-Eight

We were all congratulating ourselves on a clean victory, when I noticed a dragon silhouette in the sky flying towards us. The Colonel was easily recognizable on his huge dragon, but Korth wasn't flying well at all. He's been hit by multiple arrows, and there were visible tears in his wings.

The Orange dragon howled and pitched to the right. Broken harness straps dangled uselessly, and Authand held on for dear life with his one hand. Then Korth pitched the other way suddenly, and Authand lost his grip.

The Colonel tumbled free of his dragon.

Korth snatched at his rider, trying to catch him, but with his wing askew he missed. Korth shrieked with fury and tried again but couldn't keep up with Authand's free fall.

"Farean," I shouted and pointed. Without looking, she took off towards the Colonel. Her wings pounded against the air, pushing us even faster than when we had ridden the great air current. The wind hurt my face but still we pushed onward, the gap between us and him closing with each beat.

Her claws glanced off his armor before she snagged his arm. His momentum fought against ours and I could hear the pop of his shoulder coming free of its socket from my perch. His scream was echoed by Korth who coasted into the meadow, joining the other Dragoneers.

There must have been one lone Goblin left in the woods—an archer who hadn't fallen for our trap or run for the camp wall. Unfortunately, he was also a very good shot.

Slowed from the Colonel's added weight, Farean couldn't dodge his arrow, and it struck her just below her heart.

"*Farean!*" I cried out, clutching at my chest, feeling the sharp pain as if the arrow had pierced me.

She glided out of the archer's range, taking us over the lake where no Goblins dared go.

Below us, the Colonel swung in the wind, moaning on the edge of consciousness. Somewhere behind us in the clearing, Korth hissed and screeched for his injured rider. I calculated the distance. We were losing too much altitude to make it back there.

"*He's too heavy,*" Farean complained, pain tinging her voice. "*I'm going to drop him.*"

"*No, you're not*", I said, but I could feel her straining not to lose her grip. Boy, wouldn't we be the talk of the Dragoners for years to come if we dropped the Colonel on his head from three hundred feet up. We'd never live that down.

I had to do something, so I unhooked my harness. My hands shook as they manipulated the oiled buckles. Thoughts of falling from Farean's back filled my head, but I pushed them aside.

I loosened the final buckle. For the first time in months of flying, nothing held me to Farean's back. I inched towards her chest, making sure of each handhold before letting go of the other. My feet found her foreleg. I balanced myself on her extended limb while I crouched to grab at her with my arms.

She hit a pocket of air and dropped suddenly, pitching me forward. Thankfully, my waving arms caught the same leg I had been standing on. I struggled to regain my perch, one flailing foot knocking the Colonel in the head.

The impact jostled him to semi-consciousness. His eyes went wide when he looked up and saw me dangling above him on Farean's leg, both of us hundreds of feet in the air.

"Uh, hi," I said.

"Kalia, what are you doing?" he said, his words slurred a little. "Get back in your harness."

"Grab my hand," I said, reaching out for him. I knew it was his good arm that had been dislocated when Farean caught him. He was going to have to reach up with his hook and that might get painful for me.

"I can't do that," he said, realizing the same thing.

"If you don't, Farean is going to drop you," I said. I could see her talons slipping loose. He must have been able to feel it.

"She can drop me over the lake," he said. "From this height, there is a good probability I would live."

"I need more than a good probability," I said, shaking my open hand at him. "My hand will heal."

"Okay," he nodded. "On the count of three."

"One," I said. "Two. Three."

I reached down, and he thrust up, his hook catching over most of my fingers, but the point dug into my pinky and tore through it.

I didn't scream or make a noise. If Farean could fly with an arrow in her chest, I could handle a little hook in the pinky.

I yanked the Colonel up with all my strength, pain shooting through my hand, arm and shoulder. But he was up, wobbling on her leg joint next to me.

I yanked my hand back, pulling his hook from my flesh, and we both scrambled into the one-person harness. It was awkward and tight, but he got us both tied in.

"*Help me now*", Farean said, her voice sounding weird and weak.

I took a deep breath. I'd wanted to keep my power a secret, but my dragon needed me. I closed my eyes and called the power forth. I heard Authand gasp when my hands began to glow. With my pulsing hands on Farean's back ridge, I send my energy in looking for the arrow in her chest. I should be able to push it out, just like I had the one I'd jammed into her wing joint. But this one was much deeper, and it was bleeding so much more.

Blood dripping from the wound whipped upwards on the wind, splattering my face.

But I could feel the broken shaft pushing away from her and poking above her scales. I paused my healing long enough to lean over her neck and feel for it with my fingers.

The arrow head came loose from the wound and I grabbed it, tossing it away. Farean took a few tentative flaps, but we continued to lose altitude.

"She can't carry two riders," Authand said. "Most dragons can't."

"The shore is not too far," I told him. "She can make it."

"*I can make it*", Farean agreed.

"I'm not crash-landing on your little dragon," The Colonel said stubbornly, untying the harness ropes.

"What are you—" he was jumping before I could finish my sentence, his splash dousing me as he hit the lake with a smack.

Well, he'd only had to drop a few feet, and if anyone could swim to shore with a dislocated shoulder, the Colonel could.

I looked back to make sure he was okay, and he waved his hook at me.

"*Farean, make sure Korth knows where his rider is.*" I suggested.

"*I already have*", she said, "*he's leading a rescue team to the beach.*"

My foot dragged in the water as Farean skimmed over the surface.

"*Up*", I encouraged her, now that we'd gotten rid of all the extra weight.

She pulled up and flew to the lakeshore easily, landing in the soft sand.

"*I could have made it with him*", she said indignantly. "*He didn't need to jump.*"

"*I know*", I said, rubbing her between the ears like she loved.

Suddenly, the concussion of an explosion cracked the sky, coming from the direction of the camp. The ground rumbled and shook under our feet.

"*What was that?*" I asked, as Farean leapt into the sky.

We flew cautiously toward the direction of that awful sound, Farean staying high enough that nothing could hit us. As we flew over the camp, I saw the smoking crater where a section of the north

wall had once been. The Goblins were already inside, but they must have found a stash of firerock and were going to use it to level the camp and everything in it.

The sky above us darkened, and I looked up to see a swarm of red dragons descending through the clouds toward the camp, their archers spitting arrows. The Dragoneers had arrived. But the Goblins still had the firerock. I didn't want to imagine what one of those stones could do to a dragon. Still, two could play at that game. I had a piece of the explosive rock myself. I'd gotten so distracted that day with Lewon that I'd never reported its existence.

Taking advantage of the momentary distraction, Farean and I flew towards our salvation. We skimmed the surface of the water to the beach. I started unfastening the buckles in preparation of landing while keeping an eye out.

Unfortunately, A Goblin lookout spotted us. I could see him waving his arms and shouting at his compatriots.

"Farean, if we fly over, can you grab it?"

"Vernis says that if my talons scratch it, it will ignite."

"Damn," I said, stealing Authand's favorite epithet. Most of the Goblin archers were engaged with the Dragoneers. Even if they saw us, they wouldn't be able to maintain continuous fire towards the beach. We twisted away and circled back. "Well, it's about time I caught that glove."

We feinted a few times to get a good feel for the rhythm of their shooting. There was a ten second gap between the end of one volley and the beginning of the next. Ten seconds wasn't much. Farean would have to be traveling at full speed while I tried to pry a rock out of the dirt from her back. To make matters worse, in order to get into position, she would have to rotate at the last minute, leaving me completely exposed to errant arrows.

I waited for another volley to pass. How many arrows had they brought with them. Surely, they'd have to run out soon.

The archers took their usual pause, and we dove from our position in the trees. We sped for the red veined rock glittering in the filtered

sunlight, each powerful beat of Farean's wings propelling us towards the ground. I breathed deeply, forcing myself to relax.

Three seconds until the next arrow volley.

Two seconds.

Farean flipped upside.

One second.

I extended my arms over my head towards the ground. Or was it under my head?

My fingers touched the rock. For a breath, I thought I'd missed it, but it came free of the ground and into my hands as Farean completed her rotation.

Another beat of her wings pushed us away.

An arrow brushed past my face, just kissing my skin.

I put my hand to the wound and nearly dropped the stone. I tucked the head-sized rock under my arm and then felt for the cut again, my fingers coming away wet with blood. But it was only a small wound. We'd been damn lucky.

Farean rose back above the trees, well beyond the range of the archers. The battle had become a stalemate. Dragonback archers were keeping the Goblins from their war machine, but likewise, they were keeping us from getting close enough to do real damage.

I searched for Lewon and Calen in the crowd of Dragoners, but I didn't see them anywhere. Perhaps they were with the Colonel and the injured wherever they were hiding. When I asked Farean if she could locate Calen, she shook her head and flashed me a jumbled image of Lewon and Calen fighting alongside Goblins.

"What was that?" I asked her, confused.

"Don't know", she said. *"I lost him."*

Could Dragons block one another? And if so, what were Lewon and Calen up to? Lewon was a jerk who had sold me to a gangster to pay his debts, but he wouldn't side with the enemy over his own kind, would he? Goblins had massacred his village. He'd told me that. Of course, it could have been a lie.

I pushed those thoughts aside and looked for the General instead. She was easy to find on the back of her great mountain of a dragon. I'd heard rumors, but they hadn't done the huge creature justice. Flarnor made Korth look like a baby. If the Orange dragon flew in front of the sun, I was sure it would plunge the day into darkness. How did something that big even get off the ground?

"Sheer force of will," The General shouted as they closed the distance between us. "I trust this isn't a social call."

I shook my head and held up the firerock.

She recoiled from it before regaining his composure. "Aren't you the resourceful one?" They flew even closer, and using dragon-thought to keep from being overheard, we formulated a plan.

The General and her dragon broke away, and two greens came up to escort us. They were larger than Calen, but not half as large as Flarnor or even Korth. We had to be a sight, with our mismatched dragons, but no other Blue in the fleet was as agile as Farean.

The Red-mounted archers focused on the Goblin rangers. Meanwhile, the more massive Oranges, replete with their bronze belly armor, created a barrier the Goblin arrows simply bounced off of. The other Blues and Greens harried the ground forces from the flanks.

With all the attention on the archers, the Goblin's trebuchet's platoon was left unmolested. Realizing this, they resumed their work loading firerock into the bucket. Aimed at either the Dragoneers or the camp, the damage would be devastating.

And it was my job to keep that from happening. I looked from left to right, nodding to each rider in turn. We dove towards our target. The two Greens crisscrossed in front of me, providing cover for me while simultaneously making themselves harder to hit.

I led from the rear of the formation, guiding Farean with nudges from my feet. These directions were passed to the other two via the dragons' psychic communication. Together, we moved as if a single organism.

The trebuchet team noticed us and doubled their efforts to prepare the machine. The gap between us continued to close. I needed to get within fifty feet to accurately hit either the weapon or its ammunition. Closer than that, though, and we would be caught in the explosion.

The Greens parted, leaving us unprotected but clear to take the shot. The Goblin Corporal looked up, her mouth open. The ruse had worked; they hadn't noticed Farean or my deadly cargo at all.

Our escort gone, we banked, allowing me an unencumbered view of the target. I could make out the individual fibers of the ropes holding it together. I shook my head. That level of detail shouldn't be visible from this distance. I set the mystery aside for now. If I missed now, there would be no second chance.

I aimed for the heart of the machine, where I had the least chance of missing it entirely. With my newly enhanced vision, I couldn't tell, but we seemed to be closer than I had wanted. There was nothing to be done for it now, and I lobbed the firerock at the trebuchet. No sooner than it cleared my hands and Farean banked and beat furiously away.

I heard the explosion behind us and turned to look just as the shockwave hit us. The force completely overpowered Farean and we went tumbling head over tail. The turbulence passed but not before forcing us into an oak. I felt the crack of her wing bone though our bond before I heard the snap with my ears.

Even though it wasn't mine, the pain dulled my senses. I knew I needed to get out there and heal the break, but an aching pain in my chest seeped my energy and sapped my will. I looked down, expecting to be injured but my harness was intact. Something was wrong, but I couldn't figure out what because I was suddenly overwhelmed with exhaustion.

Four green claws descended in front of us, the owner of each pair picking a side. The dragon on the right grabbed gingerly at the broken wing, taking care to support it in front of the break. The dragon on the left hooked on to the other side a moment later.

Farean seemed to be as affected by the explosion as I and hung limply in their embrace.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

The dragons lowered us to the ground with practiced ease. Hands unbuckled my harness and pulled me up from my prone position over Farean's neck ridge. They lifted me off her back and walked me around to her broken wing.

In an instant, the fog and fatigue lifted. My dragon was hurt. I needed to do something.

The healer, Tulowa pushed his way through the crowd and ordered the bystanders to help straighten Farean's wing. As they worked, he shook his head and muttered, "It's a bad break. She may not fly again."

I couldn't accept that. Farean would never accept that. She was born to fly. And I certainly wouldn't accept that prognosis if there was something I could do that would guarantee her recovery.

I pulled free of the Green riders holding me up, the same Dragoneers who had escorted me on the attack against the trebuchet. I ran to Farean's side. The healer shouted, and his helpers grabbed at me.

"Leave her be!" Authand shouted, the crowd parting for him. "That's her dragon." His dislocated arm hung in a sling but, otherwise, he seemed to be no worse for our rescue.

"She has no medical training," Tulowa said. He crossed his arms and squared off against the Colonel. "Her proximity will only make things worse."

"Or it could comfort her dragon." Authand nodded at the men trying to straighten her wing as Farean writhed in agony.

"Fine." Tulowa nodded at his helpers, and they let me go.

I called forth the magic even as I ran to her. Golden sparks flew from the ends of my fingertips into the leathery skin that covered her wing. Then I was by her side, kneeling at the break and making physical contact. The crowd grew quiet as they watched me heal my dragon. I could feel the bone knit back together under my hands. Satisfied the wing was repaired, I sat back and panted.

"That should do it, dear. Give it a try."

She made a halfhearted motion with it but otherwise continued to languish on the ground. I scratched at the persistent itch I'd had since the explosion while I tried to get her to respond.

I examined her body but didn't see anything wrong until I noticed a patch of red seeping from beneath her.

"Help me roll her over," I shouted over my shoulder. I didn't wait but started pushing at her side. "Turn on your side," I begged her.

Tulowa's assistants stood beside me, two on each side, and helped. Even the doctor himself joined the effort.

Farean's feeble attempts slowed and more of the Dragoncers joined us. Authand pressed his back against her side and pushed. Esgeril forced herself through the crowd and slid between the medic and me, placing her small hand over mine. She gave me a brief smile before turning to the attention at hand.

Slowly, we rolled Farean over to her side. Splinters from the trebuchet laced her stomach and chest, but that wasn't the problem. A section of the mast, too large to be considered a splinter, protruded from her chest. As thick as my arm, it had driven through her scales and dangerously close to her heart.

I grabbed it with both hands and yanked. It didn't give. I put my hands higher on it for leverage, ready to try again.

Tulowa grabbed my hands and shook his head. "If you remove it, she will bleed out."

"I can heal her." I said.

"Maybe," he said. "But if the beam has pierced her heart, she will be dead before your magic even starts."

Tears welled in my eyes. "But she'll die if I don't." I choked back a sob. "What can I do?"

Esgeril spoke in her, sweet, lilting southlands accent. "What if we pull it out slowly? She could she heal Farean's body right behind us."

I looked to the doctor. He scratched at his chin before speaking. "That could work. But you'll have to be fast."

The magic surged back to my hands. "Then what are we waiting for?" Sparks danced from my fingertips above Farean's hide. I pressed against her flesh. The faint heart beat shocked me. Where was the strong thrumming that soothed me to sleep on so many nights?

Tulowa gripped the shaft near where it entered her. The largest of his assistants grabbed hold of the remainder. A hand touched my shoulder. I spared a glance to see Esgeril standing behind me, offering support.

As they pulled, I willed the magic deep into her body. They pulled slowly, inch by inch, but I still wasn't healing her fast enough. Blood seeped and then gushed out of her body. I pressed harder. The wound and my hands grew hot.

The broken trebuchet piece came free. I stuck my hand in the opening it produced, begging the blood to stop pouring out of her. Unbidden, I thought of Theron and how I'd run and hid in my room when he slaughtered his pigs. He wouldn't recognize that sheltered and afraid girl kneeling here covered in dragon's blood.

The magic burned through me. Burning flesh filled my nostrils and I realized with a start that it was my own. The blood seemed to be slowing, but I couldn't hear Farean anymore. After nearly a year of her taking up residence in my head, she was gone.

"*Come on, don't give up.*" Tears streaked the dirt and blood that plastered my face. Behind me, Esgeril gripped my shoulder tighter. The voices of the Elves and dragons around us muffled into nothingness. My vision narrowed. Nothing existed but the blue dragon before me, my hands deep in her body and Esgeril's on mine.

The magic flagged, but I willed it forward. Esgeril supported my weight now to keep me from collapsing. While there was still life in my body, I would move it into Farean's.

Her breathing became shallow. So shallow, in fact, that I couldn't even see her chest move. Her heart was so faint that I couldn't feel the beating either.

"It's over." A voice said.

I shook my head. What was over?

Tulowa's hands shook me and pulled me from Farean.

"She's dead," he said. "You did all you could. But the wound was too great."

"No!" I screamed. I tried to break free from his grip, but he held me tight. I pounded my fists against his chest. "She's not dead. I can still heal her."

"No, you can't." His voice grew gruff. "Stop being hysterical and face the facts." He dug his fingers into my shoulder. Wincing, I dropped to the ground.

A knife appeared before me, gripped by Esgeril's thin, delicate hand and pointed at his abdomen. "You take your hands off her right now, or I will gut you in front of everybody."

He removed his grip, and backed away from the knife, nearly tripping over a tuft of grass in the haste of his escape.

Esgeril swung the knife from side to side. "Nobody comes near her, you hear me? You let her be. She's as much a Dragoner as anyone here. She's earned the right to grieve as she needs." Nobody approached, but they didn't leave either.

I scampered back to Farean's side, and tried to call forth the magic again, but it wouldn't come. "No. You can't be dead!" I beat against her side with my fists. I closed my eyes and begged all the gods for her to come back. She just lay there. "Vernis," I whispered. "I don't know who you are, but I know you've been helping us. Help us now." I didn't know how Vernis spoke to Farean, but he wasn't saying anything to me.

I pressed my hands against the wound again. "Come on, you stupid magic. Don't fail me when I really need you." I felt a slight tingling in my palms and opened my eyes to see them glowing. Barely noticeable, but there. I urged the golden healing light into her body. The crowd murmured behind me, but nobody dared approach Esgeril's knife.

I gave Farean what feeble magic I could. Salty tears ran down my face and onto my blood-soaked hands. The color glowing through me changed hue. It was still golden, but richer, more alive somehow. "Come on, Farean. Wake up. I need you. I didn't want you at first, but now I can't live without you."

The glowing surged. The light burned my eyes. I tried to look away, but it was everywhere. Every nerve in my body screamed and pain overtook me. An invisible force pushed me from her. My head hit the dirt, the pain and light continuing to wash over me until that was all that existed.

A dragon roared.

I recognized the sound.

Farean roared, her voice strong and powerful.

Joy filled my heart, threatening to burst it.

Then everything went dark.

Chapter Thirty

I opened my eyes to find myself in yet another healer's whitewashed stone room. By the light, it appeared to be late morning. Bandages covered my hands, and I felt like a dragon had sat on me. I pushed up to sit but found more pain instead. A moan escaped my lips.

Fabric rustled behind me and Esgeril's face filled my field of vision. "You're awake," she said. "I'll go tell the doctor." She scurried to the flap at the far end but stopped. She returned and put her hand over mine. Or at least over the bandages.

She planted a kiss on my lips and bounded away. "You're awake," she repeated, her voice noticeably higher, before disappearing outside. "*Okay, that was weird.*"

"*Farean?*" I reached out with my mind.

No response came.

A wave of incredible grief hit me. After everything I'd done, I'd failed. She was gone, and I'd forever be alone. "*I'm sorry, Farean.*" I exhaled, "feeling my throat fill with tears.

"*Hey, I was sleeping.*". Her rumbling voice filled my head with more than just a touch of irritation.

"*But you were dead.*".

"*Yes. And you saved me.*" She said, as if explaining something to a small child. "*That's what we do. We save each other.*" This time her words came with warmth. I sent her an image of me hugging her tightly, nuzzling against her snout. She returned with an image of me kissing Esgeril instead.

I blushed, even though nobody else could know what she'd thought to me. "*I thought you were asleep.*"

"Aye, she should be. Let yer beast rest." Tulowa said as he entered the room, followed by Esgeril, Authand, and General. He turned to his entourage, "Since I can't keep you all out of here while I see my patient, you will stand back and not interfere. I assume I have your permission to go near her?" He glowered at Esgeril.

She nodded sheepishly while the other two looked on the exchange with bemused expressions.

"I'm supposed to let you rest now"," I told Farean. *"But I'll see you when they let me out of here."* Warmth and happiness filled my heart at the thought.

Tulowa came to my side and unwrapped the gauze that covered my hands, then examined them. He applied a cream after that, and I flinched as the ointment stung the sensitive flesh.

"That's a good sign. They should heal nicely." He nodded to himself and applied new bandages. He listened to my heart and lungs and all the other pointless tests that healers subject their patients to. "You're on bed rest for a sevenday and may have a miserable couple days, but you'll fully recover."

I thanked him, and he said goodbye, giving Esgeril one final glare before leaving.

The others were silent at first. I understood that. What do you say to the person who brought somebody back from the dead? Authand was the first to speak.

"You've gotten yourself in a fair amount of trouble, Princess Kalia. You disobeyed direct orders from both myself and General Lutania and put yourself in mortal danger. And you didn't tell anybody that you are a nestorphen."

"A what?" I interrupted.

He frowned at me. "A nestorphen. Someone with healing magic. It manifests in less than one in a thousand of us and almost never outside of Dragoner families. If we had known, we would have approached your training differently. Not that anyone could have taught you the stunt you pulled." He shook his head. "Continuing the

list of your infractions, you interrupt your leaders, and you destroyed half my camp." He raised his arms with an exasperated sigh.

"On the flip side, Lutania said, "you brought help faster than anyone else could have and almost singlehandedly defeated an entire legion of Goblin soldiers. I'd say that being restricted to quarters for a sevenday is sufficient punishment."

Behind them, Esgeril giggled.

Authand turned and stared at her. "Now, I know we make certain allowances for Dragoneers in relationships, but if you pull a knife on a commanding officer again, it will be the Caves for you. Understand?"

She swallowed and nodded before squeaking out an affirmative. "Yes, sir."

Authand's words didn't make any sense. Who was Esgeril seeing? It must have happened while we weren't speaking, but I hadn't noticed her with anyone. The thought that she was dating someone bothered me more than I thought it should. I pushed the question aside for now. I had a sea of others to ask.

"Sir?" I brought everyone's attention back to me. "Will I still be considered for the Dragon Run?"

Authand deflated a little. "I didn't want to tell you this. I thought you would fail on your own merits, but that seems unlikely now." He bit his lip. I'd never seen him at a loss for words before. "Your father forbids you from competing in the Run."

I wanted to scream. I wasn't sure who I was more angry—him or Father. Probably both. I'd never be taken seriously as a Dragoneer if I continued to get special treatment.

There was a commotion behind the door, and it swung open. I caught a brief glimpse as Dragoneers in brown and my father's guards in green stared each other down. Father's frame then blocked the view as he entered, my mother gliding in behind him.

Lutania gave them a quick bow at the waist before exiting into the hallway where I could hear him scolding his Dragoneers, "Stand

down, you morons. When I said let no one in, that did not include the king." The door closed behind him.

Seeing me, Mother's composure fled, and she ran to my side, giving me a gentle hug.

It was nice to feel her arms around me again, but I pulled away, unsure of how I felt about my parents anymore. Why were they here? They had abandoned me. What did they want now? To continue controlling me while holding me at arm's length?

"You sent me away," I said looking my father in the eyes. "But you won't let me live the life you've sent me to fully. Instead, you block me at every turn, and make me look like a coward to my peers. Is that what you want?"

He returned my glare; his features hardening into a look that almost always preceded a lecture. But then he sighed. "You're right, Kalia. I handled this entire situation badly. Please forgive me."

I couldn't speak. In sixteen summers, I'd never heard him apologize to anyone. I glanced at my mother, and she nodded at me, tears glistening at the corners of her eyes. "I'm sorry too," she said, softly.

I was still speechless, so I just nodded and looked down at my bandaged hands. Was this real? Where they truly going to let me live a Dragoner's life? Or was this all just for show and politics?

My father turned to Authand. "Has she qualified for a position in the race?" He asked.

"She lost marks for her lack of discipline," he said, and my father nodded knowingly. "But," Authand went on, "she exhibited some of the best defensive and offensive flying I've ever seen yesterday. She's the only reason this place is still standing. If anyone has earned a spot, it's her." Having said his piece, he stepped back.

Father turned back at me. "Well, in that case, I don't think that I can, in good conscious, keep you from competing."

"Thank you, your highness," I said, the formal honorific slipping out. It just didn't feel right to call him daddy anymore. I wasn't a

child. And "father" made me feel inferior. But he was royalty, and so was I. Didn't that put us on equal footing?

"You are welcome," he nodded at me. "I look forward to cheering you on from the stands. Now, I am sorry we can't stay longer, but I must get back Kastea. Duty calls. It always calls." He moved toward the door.

Mother wrapped her arms around me once more, and this time I accepted her embrace. "I know you have duties now," she said, "But you are welcome to join us at the castle any time you are in town."

I nodded, not trusting myself to speak.

Once they left, Authand glanced between Esgeril and me. "I'm sure you two have a lot to talk about. But remember," he looked pointedly at Esgeril, "bed rest for a sevenday. No funny business."

Esgeril blushed from the ears down to her toes at his statement.

Then Authand followed my parents out the door, leaving the two of us alone for the first time since I had woken.

"What's going on? What is everyone hinting about?" I asked a still blushing Esgeril.

She sat at the edge of my bed and placed her hand on mine. "Remember when you asked about me having a male dragon?"

I remembered how upset she had gotten at the question, and how she'd refused to discuss it. "You said that it happened sometimes."

"It does. In Dragoner circles, it's usually seen as a sign. Not many bond with a dragon of the opposite sex, but when it happens..." Her voice trailed off and she examined the stonework in the room.

"Yes?"

"When it happens," she drew circles on the floor with her foot, "it is usually a sign that the rider is gay."

I stared at Esgeril, thinking about our friendship and all we'd been through together. And finally, the kiss she'd given me when I'd first woken. The kiss I had thoroughly enjoyed.

"I'm gay, Kalia," she said, taking my silence for confusion. "I like women. But I was afraid to tell you. I know it's not viewed the same in the central district as it is in the provinces."

I opened my mouth to speak, but she held out her hand. "No, I need to finish. To finally say it out loud. I couldn't tell you because I wasn't sure how you'd react and..." This time I let her finish. "I love you."

Chapter Thirty-One

Shortly after my bedrest was over, I found myself on another stone bench. All Dragoneer ceremonies and events seemed to feature them. For everything that had changed in my life over the past year, here I was sitting on another stupid stone bench.

At least I wanted to be at this ceremony. The Battle of Tulta had proven my worth. I wouldn't say I single-handedly defeated the Goblin invaders there. But Farean would. In fact, she said it pretty much every chance she got.

"Because it's true," she said proudly. "Where was everyone else while we were saving their hides? That's right, hiding in the woods while we risked our lives".

I rolled my eyes, hoping everyone was too busy with the ceremony to listen in on her boasting. Never let it be said that dragons weren't the vainest creatures in all the kingdoms.

Farean started to protest, but I blocked her out. Colonel Authand had finished introducing my father.

"Today we celebrate those who helped defeat the Goblins at Tulta," the king began his speech, "and honor those who lost their lives there. Or worse." His eyes darted to where Selkerdrim sat by himself. After the ceremony he would be escorted to a special facility at Envinyata. His body remained, but his spirit had departed.

I forced my attention back to Father as he read off the list of names. So many killed. So many broken. I made a silent vow to do whatever it took to prevent such a tragedy from happening again.

"Of course, we will", Farean agreed.

With each name, the crowd grew more somber. Dragoneers made up the majority of those assembled, with dragons gathered in the

grass beyond the amphitheater. The rest of the audience consisted of nobles and other dignitaries.

"Fortunately, as in most battles, while much was lost, much was gained," Father continued. "Many of the Dragoner recruits proved themselves that day. Even with their dragons grounded, they demonstrated the merit of a ranged weapon. The wall held as long as it did thanks to the efforts of the Red riders.

The red dragons trumpeted in the field as their riders cheered. I risked a glance at Esgeril. Surrounded by those in her corps, she seemed genuinely happy. And I sincerely hoped she was, despite my rejection of her romantic interest in me. It wasn't that I didn't like her. It was just that I'd truly taken her evaluation of me to heart. Maybe once, I had been a girl who put on independence until someone came along to take care of me. But now, I wanted to be a woman who took care of herself and her dragon. Maybe someday I'd have a relationship that was equal parts give and take, but first I had to learn how to just be me.

"When the Greens took to the skies," my father was still talking, "their agile maneuvering kept them out of harm's way while distracting the Goblins from the final counter attack." The Green's cheers at this praise were more muted. They had taken the brunt of the casualties on the day. I guess the most agile group of dragons wasn't fast enough.

It put my teeth on edge to see Lewon sit there with his peers. Somehow he'd managed once again avoid any responsibility for the devastation he'd caused. Somebody in the camp was covering for him. I would make it my life's mission to find out who and bring Lewon's deeds to light.

"Once the siege weapons were destroyed, the heavy Orange dragons made quick work of the remaining forces." True to form, those dragons and their riders provided the most noise, stomping and beating against each other causing a ruckus so loud I thought the entire building would come down.

"Finally, the Blue dragons out-raced the retreat, while the others rushed healers and supplies to the wounded." Farean and I hadn't been part of either effort, recovering as we were from her injuries in the battle, but you would have never known any of that from how she took part in the Blues' cheer.

"Aside from the efforts of the whole, there are certain individuals that need to be especially recognized." I sat up straighter, and Farean stopped in the continuing Blue cheer.

"She may have been slow to accept her role and we were definitely slow to accept her into your ranks, perhaps me most of all. But at the Battle of Tulta, Princess Kalia and Farean proved beyond argument that they have the skills, the wits, and the grit to be called Dragoneers. If not for them, vital help would have taken much longer to arrive, and only they were able to stay aflight in the face of the Goblin siege and discover a way to destroy their advantage. If not for their brave actions, Tulta would have ended much differently."

More cheering.

"Not as much as there should be". Farean whined.

"Enjoy the praise and admiration of those who recognize our worth. Don't worry about the others. Most of them have been poisoned by Lewon's lies. They will understand eventually."

"They should understand now. We saved them."

"I know," I said, apparently aloud, because Esgeril turned and stared at me.

"You should just mate her and be done with it." Farean said, catching my response to that stare. *"That's the dragon way".*

"I'm not a dragon. And it's not that simple."

She let out a little huff. *"That's not what your heart says. You desire her".*

"Maybe, but I can't be distracted by that right now." I turned my attention back to the speech, but Father wasn't talking. Instead, he was glaring at me with an outstretched hand. All eyes were on me.

I looked around, unsure of what had happened while Farean and I were arguing.

Esgeril caught my eye and gave a nod towards the podium.

I stood and scurried to the front as everyone watched.

I found myself next to Father, unsure what to do.

"I was slow to accept my daughter as a Dragoner," he addressed the crowd. "As I'm sure you all were. A thousand years of tradition broken by a young girl. But she has demonstrated skills and abilities that prove she is more suited for a life guarding our skies with you than a life in the castle walls. And for her actions that day, it is my great honor to, by the recommendation of General Lutanía and unanimous vote of the Council of Elders, issue the Golden Leaf to Princess Kalia of Kastea."

I gasped. Murmurs went through the crowd. The Golden Leaf was the highest honor in all Darneta. Nobody had even received it since Father had been king. He smiled at me, gesturing me forward. I took a small step and gulped. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a pin. The golden leaf glittered in the morning sun as he worked the point through the leather of my harness. After fastening the clasp, he stepped back, clapped his hands together, and applause erupted from the stands.

I had finally made my father proud and been accepted by my peers.

But that isn't what made me truly happy on that day.

It was the glow of unconditional love and oneness radiating into me through my connection with Farean.

The thing that made me happy was a dragon.

The End

Feral Dragon

Sign up to my newsletter for a free book

To say that Authand yearned for adventure would be a lie. Life on his father's farm was hard - always too much to do and never quite enough to eat - but it was his and that suited him just fine.

But sometimes life doesn't give us what we want. While hunting, Authand finds something unthinkable, a lone dragon egg. Imprinting on a dragon hatchling means his life will be anything but ordinary. Especially when his father, the gentlest man he'd ever known, reacts violently.

Armed with nothing more than his wits - and a dragon - Authand must find his way to the famed Dragoneers for a place to call home in a world that has little love for a Black man or a feral dragon



Sign up now

<http://bit.ly/feraldragon>

