

Bonded to the Dragon Lord

A Monstrously Claimed Novel

R.S. Thorne

Content Warning

This is a high-heat, monster romance intended for adult readers.

It contains:

- possessive dragon males
- explicit, primal sex scenes
- public claiming
- mating bonds
- ritualistic heat
- themes of obsession, power, and surrender

This story features graphic depictions of intimacy, domination, and supernatural bonding. If you're not here to be impaled by a monster, you're in the wrong book.

Dedication

For the reader who doesn't want soft hands or sweet nothings—

You want claws. You want fire.

You want to be chosen like a war, and worshiped like a ruin.

This one's for you.

Before You Begin

They say the bond makes you whole.

They're wrong.

The bond doesn't fix you. It doesn't save you. It ruins you.

It peels back every shield you've built to survive. It finds the hunger you swore you'd never speak aloud. And then it answers it—with claws, with fire, with him.

You don't get to choose the bond. But if you're lucky... It chooses someone who's willing to burn with you.

Not to protect you. But to worship the wreckage.

So if you're here for softness— If you're here for a kiss on the forehead and a slow fade to black— Turn back now.

Because this bond comes with fire. And once you touch it, you don't walk away untouched.

Table of Contents

[Chapter 1: The Sacrifice](#)

[Chapter 2: The Beast in the Dark](#)

[Chapter 3: The Ritual Begins](#)

[Chapter 4: The Awakening](#)

[Chapter 5: The Fracture Begins](#)

[Chapter 6: The Pull of Power](#)

[Chapter 7: The Devoted](#)

[Chapter 8: The Arrival](#)

[Epilogue: The Stillness After the Fire](#)

[Bonus Scene: After the Fire](#)

[About the Author](#)

Chapter 1: The Sacrifice

They bound my wrists in silk, but there was nothing soft about what they meant to do to me.

The procession was silent.

No cheers. No mourning.

Just the slow, deliberate crunch of boots on frostbitten stone as the villagers led me up the winding trail toward the Dragon's altar. I walked barefoot, shivering, every breath frosting in the sharp mountain air—but no one looked back. Not even my sister. Not even the priestess who'd kissed my forehead and whispered, "You were born for this."

Born to die? Or born to be taken?

They never said which.

I could still hear the drums echoing in my skull.

The ritual fires. The chanting. The way the village elder avoided my eyes as he spoke the old words. Words of offering. Words of surrender.

The Dragon Lord was a god to them. A punishment and a promise.

We gave him one girl every generation. One untouched offering, left chained beneath the fire-washed sky.

He never returned them.

The mouth of the cave loomed ahead like a wound carved into the mountainside—black and wide and fanged with jagged stone. Heat rolled from it, unnatural and pulsing, making the snow melt in wide arcs around its entrance. I felt it in my bones, in my teeth. It didn't just warm me. It *watched* me.

My knees nearly buckled.

But the guards shoved me forward.

At the final step, they said nothing.

They only uncoiled the crimson silks, twisted and runed with binding magic, and wrapped them tighter around my wrists. I didn't struggle. What was the point?

There were worse ways to die than in the arms of a dragon.

Or so I told myself.

A final voice broke the silence—deep, trembling, low as thunder across a lake.

The priestess.

"By fire and fate, we offer the chosen," she intoned. "Let the bond be forged. Let the beast take what he is owed."

The guards pushed me to my knees.
The heat from the cave licked my skin like the first breath of a fever.
The world tilted. I felt my pulse in my throat, behind my eyes, between my thighs.

And then—nothing.

They were gone.
The wind howled.

And I was alone.

I rose slowly.
The silk bindings glowed faintly in the dark, giving off little pulses of red light. My breath was ragged. My palms were slick.

I stepped forward.

One step. Two.

The cave swallowed the light behind me.

That's when I heard it.

Not the wind. Not a growl.

Breathing.

Not mine.

Deep. Measured. Just ahead.

He was already awake.

I pressed deeper into the cave, each step echoing louder than the last. The stone beneath my feet was warm now. Not just warm—*alive*. It pulsed faintly, like the mountain had a heartbeat, and I was trespassing against it. The deeper I went, the more the air thickened, weighted with heat and the scent of something ancient: scorched spice, smoke, and an undertone of something primal. Something male.

I shouldn't have felt it in my chest.
I shouldn't have felt it lower.

The air wasn't just hot—it was *intimate*. Like fingers trailing over bare skin. Like a mouth pressed too close to your throat.

I paused, pressing my bound hands to my chest, trying to steady my breath. The glow from the silks was fading now, but something brighter flickered up ahead. Not fire. Not exactly. It shimmered. Shifted. Living light, casting the stone walls in deep reds and flickering golds.

The breathing was louder now.
And slower.

Whoever—or whatever—was in here wasn't asleep.
He was *waiting*.

I should have been terrified. I *was*. But there was something else underneath the fear, something hotter and more dangerous. My blood moved differently in my veins now, heavy and fast, as if my body already knew something my mind hadn't caught up to yet.

I stepped closer.

The walls curved into a chamber, and I froze. My lips parted, but no sound came out.

He was there.

Not curled like a beast, not sprawled in slumber, but standing. Watching me. Eyes glowing like embers. Horned, broad, coiled in muscle and scaled flesh and shadows. No chains. No restraints. He hadn't been trapped. He was never *caged*.

He'd let me come to him.

The Dragon Lord didn't move, but I felt him *surge* toward me all the same. Not physically, but like some ancient part of him reached across the space and *touched* me, tasting my presence in the air. My breath caught.

His eyes narrowed.

Smoke curled from his nostrils.

I opened my mouth to speak—to say what, I didn't know—but the moment I made a sound, his head tilted and he took one step forward.

One step.

And I *felt it* in my knees.

He was taller than any man, his body half-cloaked in shadows and flame, with horns that arched like a crown and wings that shifted subtly at his back. His chest rose, and I could see the faint, glowing pattern of heat lines beneath his scaled skin—markings, runes, or veins that pulsed with fire.

He was beautiful. Terrible. And impossibly still.

His voice, when it came, rumbled straight through me.

“You’re early.”

I blinked. “W-what?”

His nostrils flared. Another step. “I wasn’t ready.”

My body backed up before I realized I was moving. My spine hit the wall. Heat radiated from it. From *him*. From the bond burning low in my belly like a fuse.

“You’re not afraid.” His voice was slower this time. Curious. “Not really.”

“I am,” I whispered.

His eyes flared brighter. “You *should* be.”

I swallowed. The silk bindings around my wrists pulsed—once, twice—then went still.

“What do you want from me?” I asked.

Another step. He was close now. Too close. Not touching, but surrounding. Towering.

His head dipped low, and I felt the breath from his nostrils fan against my cheek.

“I haven’t decided.”

I should’ve run. I should’ve screamed.

Instead, I stared up at the creature who would decide my fate—dragon, god, monster—and whispered, “Then why do I feel like I already belong to you?”

Something shifted in him.

He inhaled deeply—*me*, I realized—and his hand, clawed but elegant, lifted like he meant to touch me.

But he stopped himself.

A low growl built in his throat, and his jaw clenched.

“Leave,” he said roughly.

I blinked again. “What?”

His eyes burned brighter. “Now. Before I lose the last part of me that’s trying to be merciful.”

I didn’t move.

He roared.

The cave shook.

Not metaphorically. Not poetically.

Stone cracked behind me. Sparks flared from the walls. The heat exploded outward like the breath of a volcano.

I turned and ran.

But even as I stumbled into the night, gasping, heart slamming against my ribs...

I already knew I wouldn't stay away.

He didn't touch me.

But I could still *feel* him.

And worse—I *wanted* to.

I didn't stop running until the cold bit through my skin again.

The wind outside the cave slapped me like a punishment, stinging my cheeks and arms with icy fingers. I should've felt relief. I'd escaped the dragon's den. I'd made it back to the mortal world. I should've collapsed in gratitude, wept, screamed, something.

But I couldn't stop trembling.

Not from cold.

From something much worse.

My body didn't want to be free of him.

It wanted more.

I sank to my knees at the base of the trail, wrapped my arms around myself, and tried to breathe. The stars above the mountain were sharp and merciless, glittering like they were laughing at me.

The silk bindings on my wrists still glowed faintly, pulsing in time with my heartbeat.

I couldn't get the scent out of my lungs. Smoke. Spice. Him. Every time I blinked, I saw his eyes. Not cold. Not cruel.

Hungry.

He hadn't touched me. Not really. But I'd felt the promise in the space between us—like a wire pulled tight. The way his voice rumbled through my ribs. The way my knees had nearly buckled when he stepped forward. The way I'd *wanted* to lean into him.

I pressed my forehead to the frozen ground and tried to shake the thoughts away.

But something inside me was already unraveling.

And something deeper was taking root.

No one had ever looked at me like that. Like I wasn't just flesh, but fate. Not just a girl. A *claim*.

That word. *Claim*. It shouldn't have turned me inside out, but it did.

I touched the silk bindings at my wrists. They weren't just ceremonial. They were *resonating*. Alive with magic. Dragon magic.

My stomach twisted. My thighs pressed together.

I cursed myself and stood on unsteady legs.

The village. I could go back. Tell them I'd escaped. That the Dragon Lord had spared me—or rejected me. Maybe they'd take me in. Maybe they'd celebrate my return. Or exile me. Or worse.

But I couldn't move toward it.

Because every step down the trail felt wrong. Like my body was rejecting the distance. Like part of me was still in that cave—kneeling on warm stone, trembling under the weight of his gaze.

I shouldn't want that.

I shouldn't ache from the *absence* of him.

I turned.

The mouth of the cave still burned like a promise.

I hated myself for thinking it.

But I had never felt more alive than when I stood in front of him.

The cold stole my breath again, and I backed away—just a few more steps, just to think. Just to *breathe* without feeling him in every cell of my skin.

Then I heard it.

Wings.

Distant, at first.

Then closer.

Louder.

Rushing wind, like a storm cutting through the clouds—followed by a thud that made the ground tremble.

I froze.

Behind me, the shadows bent.

And a voice—lower, hungrier, more *possessive* than before—broke the silence.

“You disobeyed me.”

I turned slowly.

He wasn’t cloaked in shadows now.

He stood in the clearing, illuminated by moonlight, firelight, and something *other*. Naked from the waist up, skin etched in glowing marks that pulsed with restrained power, eyes fixed on mine like a predator stalking its prey.

His wings arched wide, silhouetted in flame.

“I told you to leave,” he growled, stepping forward, “but you ran too far.”

I backed away.

He didn’t chase me.

He *stalked*.

“You smelled like mine,” he said, voice dragging across my nerves like velvet and smoke. “Then you fled like prey.”

“I—I was afraid.”

“Good.”

He stopped only feet away.

His heat swallowed the cold between us.

“But now,” he murmured, “you reek of *need*.”

I tried to lie. “I don’t—”

His eyes narrowed. His nostrils flared. He stepped in close.

“You dreamt of me.”

I opened my mouth. Nothing came out.

“You woke wet and shaking,” he said, voice like a curse. “Didn’t you?”

My skin went hot and cold all at once.

He smiled—slow, wicked, satisfied.

“I told you to leave before I stopped being merciful.”

His hand lifted.

Not to hurt.

To touch.

I didn’t flinch.

Because gods help me—I wanted him to.

His fingers hovered a breath from my skin.

Not touching.

Not yet.

But I felt them all the same.

Heat radiated from him in waves—searing, primal, *alive*. My lungs stuttered. The cave had felt like a furnace, but out here, beneath the open sky, with nothing between us but breath and trembling restraint, he burned hotter than ever.

His eyes dropped to my wrists.

The silk glowed again.

“You wear my bond,” he murmured, voice low and reverent. “And you ran.”

I opened my mouth to apologize, to explain, to say *anything*, but he silenced me with a glance. Not cruel. Not angry.

Hungry.

His hand closed around my wrist.

I gasped.

The heat of his palm against my skin was instant and overwhelming, like molten metal pressing against flesh—but it didn't burn. It *thrummed*, the way my pulse did in my throat. In my chest. Between my thighs.

The silk bindings pulsed again. Once. Twice.

Then dissolved into embers.

He didn't flinch. His gaze locked on mine.

"You accepted the bond the moment you stepped into my fire," he said. "You felt it."

I shook my head. "I don't understand—"

"You will."

His thumb dragged slowly across my inner wrist. My knees buckled, just slightly, and his other hand came up—gripping my waist, steadying me, pinning me without pressure.

His touch wasn't rough.
It was *deliberate*.

Exploratory. Possessive. Worshipful.

"I can feel it in your scent," he said softly, head dipping toward my throat. "You're burning."

He inhaled again—*me*, like I was something forbidden and sacred and already his.

I should've pulled away.

But I tilted my head instead, baring my throat without meaning to.

A growl rumbled through his chest.

"You're afraid of me," he said. "And yet..."

His lips grazed my skin.

I shuddered.

"...you're aching."

His words hit me like a touch between my thighs.

My legs nearly gave out.

I hated him for knowing. For being right. For awakening something so deep inside me I hadn't known it was there. I wanted to curse him. Slap him. Scream at him.

Instead I whispered, "Why me?"

His eyes met mine again—molten, bright, unbearable.

"Because you're mine."

Then he kissed me.

Not gently.

Not like a man.

Like a *force*.

Like fire consuming dry leaves.

His mouth claimed mine in a single, burning sweep—one hand gripping my waist, the other fisting in my hair, pulling me against the full, towering heat of him. His lips were hot and rough and *real*, his tongue demanding entrance, tasting me like a man starved.

And I opened for him. Moaned into him.

Clung to him like he was the only solid thing left in the world.

Because he *was*.

The kiss deepened. His claws—blunt, not piercing—slid beneath the fabric of my shift, dragging along the small of my back. My nipples peaked instantly. My core throbbed with brutal, helpless need.

He tasted like fire and spice and sin.

When he finally broke the kiss, I gasped for breath—but he didn't let me go.

"You want to know what it means to be bonded to a dragon," he said, voice molten against my ear.

My body trembled.

"I'll show you."

But not yet. He stepped back.

My knees nearly buckled from the loss of contact.

“Go back to the cave,” he said, wings unfurling behind him like storm clouds. “Wait for me. I’ll come to you when I’m done holding back.”

I stared at him, dazed. Drunk on him.

He lifted into the air without waiting for a response.

And I watched him vanish into the night—flames trailing from his wings, his scent clinging to my skin, my lips swollen and my thighs slick with want.

I should have been afraid.

Instead, I was counting the seconds until he returned.

The cave swallowed me like a secret.

I stepped inside on shaky legs, the stone still warm beneath my feet, the air heavy with him—his scent, his power, the ghost of his mouth still burning against mine. I pressed my fingers to my lips, half expecting to feel a scorch mark.

He’d kissed me like he meant to brand me.

And gods help me, part of me wished he had.

The silence in the cave was different now. Not empty. Not cold.

It thrummed.

The walls pulsed faintly, as if responding to my presence. As if his magic clung to every surface, wrapping me in unseen fire.

I reached the inner chamber and sank to my knees, the heat beneath me familiar now. Welcoming.

The bindings on my wrists were gone, but their pulse remained in my blood—hot, thick, echoing with a hunger that hadn’t existed before he touched me. Before he claimed me.

I shouldn’t feel this way. I *knew* that.

But I couldn’t stop.

My skin felt too tight. My breath came shallow. Every shift of fabric against my body lit sparks along my nerves. My nipples ached against the thin cloth of my shift. My thighs pressed together, but it didn’t help.

I was wet. *Soaked*. From one kiss.

No one had ever touched me before. Not like that. Not even close.

And now—
Now I was ruined.

My mind kept looping, replaying his voice, his hands, the way he'd looked at me like a dragon guarding gold.

No. Not gold.

His.

I curled on the stone floor, biting my lip to suppress the sounds trying to claw their way out of my throat. Moans. Whimpers. Begging.

I hated how badly I wanted him to come back.

No—*needed* him to.

Something was happening to me. Twisting. Blooming. A bond, he said. Dragon magic. It made no sense, and yet I felt it, deep and certain. A thread between us, growing tighter by the second.

I could feel him out there.

Not exactly where, not exactly what he was doing, but the **presence** of him. Like he'd left part of himself in my blood.

My fingers slid down my thigh before I realized what I was doing.

I stopped. Shuddered. Then moved them higher.

Just a touch.

Just to—

I gasped.

Gods, I was already on edge. One brush against my soaked folds and I almost sobbed.

My knees drew up.

The shift rode high.

And I gave in.

I closed my eyes and imagined his hands instead of mine—those massive, clawed hands parting my thighs, cupping my core, spreading my slick folds and murmuring filth into my ear. Telling me how good I smelled, how sweet I tasted, how tight I'd feel wrapped around—

I moaned aloud.

My fingers worked faster, circling, slipping, trembling.

The cave seemed to breathe with me.

I was close. So close.

His voice rang in my head: *You reek of need.*

Yes. Yes I did. And I didn't care.

I imagined his mouth on mine again, his body pinning me to this stone, his cock dragging over every trembling inch of me—

The orgasm hit like a punch.

I arched. Gasped. Bit my lip so hard I tasted blood.

And still I kept going, riding it out with ragged breath and desperate fingers, until my thighs shook and my vision blurred.

When I collapsed back onto the stone, the heat felt almost cool by comparison.

But I wasn't sated.

Not even close.

I stared up at the cave ceiling, panting, skin glowing with sweat and firelight, heart pounding.

This wasn't a crush.

This wasn't lust.

This was something else.

Something deeper.

Something *bonded*.

And when he came back...

I didn't know if I'd survive it.

But I knew I'd let him do anything.

I was still sprawled on the warm stone floor when I felt the air shift.

No footsteps. No warning.

Just heat—real and heavy—pressing against the air like a rising tide.

He was back.

I sat up too fast, my legs trembling, my breath catching in my throat. The cave didn't roar this time. It *purred*, like the mountain itself was pleased by his return.

Then he stepped from the shadows.

No longer cloaked in flame and distance. He was here. Solid. Towering. And so devastatingly male it made my breath falter.

Bare from the waist up again, his markings glowed brighter this time, as if the fire beneath his skin had climbed higher in his veins. His eyes landed on me immediately—and they darkened.

He knew.

He could *smell* it.

My arousal.

My need.

My shame.

I didn't move. I couldn't. Not with the way he looked at me—like I'd already parted my thighs for him, like he could still hear the sounds I made alone in the dark. And maybe he could.

"You touched yourself."

It wasn't a question.

Heat scorched my cheeks. I swallowed hard, trying to form words, but there was nothing in my throat except the echo of my own moans.

His eyes dropped to my thighs, where the shift still rode high. My skin still glistened. My breath still came in ragged waves.

He inhaled slowly.

And the sound he made—guttural, ragged, *devastated*—sent a jolt of need straight through me.

He took one step forward. Then another.

And I didn't back away.

He crouched before me, his hand lifting to my cheek, clawed fingers cradling my face with a gentleness that undid me.

“You don’t understand what you’ve awakened,” he said, voice low, tight, trembling. “The bond was already hot, but now—”

His jaw clenched.

“Now I can’t hold it back.”

I trembled beneath his touch.

“I didn’t mean to—”

“Yes, you did,” he growled. “You wanted me. You *want* me.”

His hand slid down, fingers grazing my throat, my collarbone, the swell of my breast beneath the thin cloth. My nipple peaked beneath the fabric, and he growled again—quieter this time. Almost reverent.

“You burned yourself into me,” he whispered. “Every breath you take makes me harder. Every moan—mine.”

My thighs pressed together. He noticed. His hand slid lower.

“I told you to wait,” he said.

“I did,” I whispered. “Until I couldn’t.”

His mouth brushed my jaw.

“You won’t have to wait again.”

His hand cupped the back of my neck, tilting my head just enough to meet his eyes.

“I’m going to touch you now,” he said. “And you’re going to beg me not to stop.”

I didn’t breathe.

Didn’t blink.

Didn’t deny it.

He smiled then—a wicked, hungry smile—and dipped his head to my throat.

His tongue tasted the skin there. Slowly. Possessively.

I moaned.

And he rumbled against my pulse, his voice dark and molten.

“This time,” he said, “you come with my name on your tongue.”

Then his hand slipped beneath my shift.

And the dragon began to claim what was his.

Chapter 2: The Beast in the Dark

I didn't sleep.

Couldn't.

Not with the ache still pulsing between my thighs, not with his scent in my hair, not with the memory of his mouth against my throat and his hand beneath my shift playing on an endless loop behind my eyes.

But it wasn't just the heat keeping me awake.

It was the change.

Something had shifted inside me. A thread pulled tight. A drumbeat just beneath my skin.

I didn't feel like the same girl who was dragged up the mountain in silk bindings and left to die.

I felt... charged. Brighter. Hungrier.

Worse—I *liked it*.

The cave had become a second skin. The warmth wasn't oppressive anymore—it was comforting. Alive. It felt like being wrapped in breath. In him.

And I couldn't stop thinking about his voice.

This time, you come with my name on your tongue.

But he hadn't told me his name.

Not yet.

He'd kissed me, touched me, *claimed me*, but kept that one part hidden. Like it was a weapon. Or a promise. Or maybe both.

And now he was gone again.

I sat up from the stone slab I'd curled on, rubbing my hands over my bare arms. My shift clung to my damp skin, still rumpled from how he'd touched me. My thighs still stuck together.

I'd never known need like this.

I'd never known *anything* like this.

The village had prepared me to be sacrificed. To be devoured. They never said I'd burn from the inside out. That I'd wake up panting for a monster's return. That I'd miss the weight of his gaze like an ache in my chest.

They didn't understand. They couldn't.

But I was starting to.

This wasn't a death sentence.

It was a beginning.

And I wanted more.

I stood, walking barefoot across the warm stone, deeper into the cave than I'd dared before. The walls shimmered faintly with veins of glowing crystal—fiery red, soft gold, threads of sapphire. Beautiful. Otherworldly.

I pressed my palm against one.

It was warm.

And it pulsed beneath my hand.

Magic.

His.

I was surrounded by it. Saturated in it.

My breath caught.

Was this the bond?

Was I changing?

Was I... becoming something new?

I didn't know.

But I knew I didn't want to go back.

I didn't want to be the girl who was offered up like a lamb. I didn't want to beg for scraps of affection or live in quiet fear of the gods.

I wanted to burn.

I wanted to be wanted.

And I wanted *him*.

Even if it destroyed me.

Especially if it did.

Footsteps echoed behind me.

Not soft. Not hesitant.

Heavy.

Commanding.

I turned.

And there he was.

Not in shadow this time.

Full and illuminated.

His wings tucked tight to his back, his chest bare, his arms massive and covered in gleaming ink-dark scales that rippled with heat.

His eyes met mine.

And the bond *snapped tight*.

He inhaled sharply.

"You've changed," he said.

I swallowed. "You did it to me."

"No." He stepped closer, eyes locked on my throat, my chest, the faint shimmer of sweat on my skin. "You did it to yourself. You woke something ancient when you let yourself want me."

He paused just feet away. The heat was unbearable. My knees softened.

His voice dropped lower.

"I can smell the shift. Taste it. You're not fully human anymore."

I froze.

"What?"

His head tilted, eyes glowing brighter now. "You accepted the bond. Let it take root. And now it's blooming."

I didn't know what to say.

I didn't know what to feel.

But I knew this—

I wanted him to *finish* what he started.

"Touch me," I whispered.

His jaw tightened.

"Do you know what that means?"

"Yes."

His eyes searched mine. His hands fisted at his sides.

And then—

He stepped forward.

He stood in front of me like a wall of heat and danger—every inch of him restrained, barely, by something I couldn't see. His chest rose and fell in slow, shallow breaths. His claws twitched at his sides. His eyes burned with a need so deep it felt like standing at the edge of a volcano.

But he didn't move.

I was the one who reached out.

My fingers brushed his chest, just above the ridge where skin turned to scaled flesh. Warm. Silken. Solid. The moment I touched him, his breath hitched—and something rippled beneath my skin, like a second heartbeat.

"You feel it," I said softly.

His eyes snapped to mine. "You shouldn't."

"Why not?"

“Because once it takes hold... there’s no going back.”

“I don’t want to go back.”

He growled low in his throat. Not in anger. Not even in warning. It sounded like pain.

I stepped closer. The heat pouring off him was overwhelming, but I welcomed it. My body felt like it belonged in his flame, like it had been carved for this—made to stand against something impossible.

“Tell me your name,” I whispered.

His gaze locked on mine. Something in it cracked.

“If I do,” he said, “I’ll never let you go.”

I didn’t look away. “Good.”

His hand came up—slow, reverent, shaking with restraint. He cupped the side of my face, his thumb brushing along my cheekbone. I leaned into it like I was starving.

“I haven’t spoken my name aloud in a century,” he said. “Not since the last one. Not since I... lost her.”

My chest tightened. “Another girl?”

“She wasn’t like you.” His voice was flat now. Hard. “She begged to bond. Begged to be marked. And when I gave her what she wanted... she went mad. She tore the mark from her skin. Threw herself from the mountain.”

I froze.

His hand didn’t leave my cheek. But his eyes turned distant.

“I burned half the valley,” he said. “I couldn’t control it. The bond shattered inside me. That was the last time I let anyone close.”

I swallowed hard. “And now?”

He looked at me like he couldn’t decide whether to worship me or destroy me.

“Now,” he said, “you’re inside me already. And it terrifies me.”

I pressed my palm flat to his chest, over the place where I imagined his heart lived—buried under fire and bone and grief.

“I’m not her.”

“No,” he murmured. “You’re worse. Because I think if I lose you, I won’t just burn a valley.”

I leaned in, lips brushing the corner of his mouth.

“Then don’t lose me.”

His control snapped.

He grabbed me—hard, but not cruel—his hands gripping my hips, pulling me flush against him. I gasped at the feel of him, thick and impossibly hot even through the fabric between us. His mouth crashed down on mine, not gentle this time, not exploratory. *Claiming*.

I moaned into him, my arms wrapping around his shoulders, my legs threatening to give way beneath the weight of my own desire.

He broke the kiss only long enough to speak.

“My name is Kael.”

And I *felt* it.

The moment the name passed his lips, the bond cinched tight like a noose—like a collar.

I cried out as the magic rushed through me, crackling across my skin like fire dancing on nerves. My core clenched. My vision blurred.

Kael growled against my throat.

“You said you wanted me to touch you,” he whispered. “Now you’ll feel what that really means.”

His hand slid beneath my shift.

And I welcomed the flame.

Kael’s hand was fire.

Not metaphorically—*literally*. His fingers trailed up the inside of my thigh, and the magic that lived beneath his skin pulsed into me with every stroke. My nerves lit up in waves. My back arched.

I gasped his name—*Kael*—and he shuddered like I’d dragged my tongue over every inch of him.

“Say it again,” he growled, voice raw.

I did.

And his fingers found the heat between my legs.

He didn't hesitate.

He parted me with a slow, deliberate slide of his hand, the pads of his fingers slick with my need. He groaned deep in his throat like I was the most sacred thing he'd ever touched.

"You're drenched."

The shame I might've felt dissolved under the weight of his hunger.

"I—"

He didn't let me finish.

He pushed two thick fingers inside me, and I cried out, clutching at his shoulders as my legs gave way. He caught me easily, lifting me into his arms like I weighed nothing, carrying me deeper into the cave—his cave.

He laid me on a bed of furs I hadn't seen before, warm and soft beneath my back, then knelt between my thighs, dragging my shift up and over my head in a single fluid motion.

He stared at me—naked, trembling, spread for him—and for a moment, he didn't move.

"You don't understand what you are," he said.

"Then show me."

His eyes darkened.

"Mine," he growled.

And then he leaned in and pressed his mouth between my thighs.

I choked on a sob.

His tongue was impossibly hot, lapping at me with the same deliberate hunger he'd shown in every movement. He knew exactly how to touch me—exactly where to press, to suck, to devour. I fisted the furs beneath me, my hips bucking helplessly, but he pinned me in place with his massive hands, holding me still as he feasted on me like a man starved.

Every time I said his name—*Kael*—he moaned into me.

And every time he moaned, I felt the bond *deepen*. Tighten. Spread.

My body wasn't my own anymore.

It belonged to the bond.

It belonged to him.

Pressure coiled tight and low, fast and brutal. I tried to warn him. Tried to tell him I was close.

He already knew.

He flattened his tongue against my clit and sucked—hard—and I shattered.

I screamed his name.

Magic tore through me like a wave, dragging me under, flooding every inch of my skin with raw, euphoric heat. My thighs trembled. My body convulsed. I felt like I was coming apart, cell by cell, breath by breath.

Kael didn't stop.

He didn't let me go.

He licked me through the aftershocks, soft and slow now, like a man savoring his prize.

Only when my body finally slumped back against the furs did he lift his head. His mouth was wet. His eyes were glowing.

And there was something *reverent* in the way he looked at me.

"You marked me," he said softly.

"What?"

He reached up and touched the center of his chest.

A glowing sigil had bloomed there—one I didn't recognize, but felt *deeply*. It pulsed in time with my heartbeat.

"You said my name while you came," he murmured. "You tied me to you. Permanently."

My lips parted, but no words came out.

"You don't just belong to me now," he said. "I belong to *you*."

And that terrified him more than anything else.

I stared at him, my chest still heaving, the aftershocks still rippling through my thighs, but all I could think about was that mark.

That sigil.

Glowing. Alive.

Mine.

Kael was still kneeling between my legs, but everything about him had changed. His body was taut, his jaw locked, his wings flexed and tense behind him like they were bracing for a strike. He wasn't looking at my body anymore—he was looking through it. At the mark. At *what it meant*.

"You shouldn't have done that," he said, voice low and hoarse.

My pulse skipped. "You told me to say your name."

"I didn't think you would. Not then. Not—" He shook his head, fists clenched at his sides. "Not with that much *conviction*."

I pushed myself upright, the furs soft beneath my hands. "What does it mean, Kael?"

"You anchored the bond," he said. "It was forming before, slow and uncertain. But that moment—it sealed. You didn't just take me. You *claimed* me."

I swallowed. "You said that was what you wanted."

"I did." His voice cracked slightly. "But that was before I remembered what it *costs*."

He stood and turned away, his wings folding tight, the muscles in his back like sculpted stone. The mark still glowed on his chest, casting faint light that danced across the walls of the cave.

"I wasn't supposed to bond again," he said, quieter now. "Not truly. Not after the last time. Not after what I became."

I stood too, wrapping the shift around me out of instinct more than modesty, my skin still humming from everything he'd done to me—*with me*.

"You're not him anymore," I said.

He laughed once, bitter and sharp. "No. I'm worse."

I crossed the distance between us, slow but steady, until I was close enough to reach out. I touched his back. His skin was hot beneath my fingers, the scales at his spine rippling beneath the contact.

"You didn't hurt me."

"Not yet."

"I'm not afraid of you."

He turned, sudden and sharp, and his eyes flared. "Then you should be."

I didn't flinch. "Why? Because you want me? Because you *feel* something?"

He stared at me. “Because if I lose you... I’ll lose what’s left of myself.”

My breath caught.

Not because of fear.

Because of the *truth* in his voice. The raw vulnerability buried beneath the fire and strength. The Dragon Lord, feared by all, was afraid of breaking.

Of bonding.

Of *loving*.

And for the first time, I saw the cracks in his armor not as flaws—but as proof that something real still lived beneath the heat.

“I’m not leaving,” I said. “I’m not her. And I don’t want to be free of you.”

He looked at me like I was undoing him with every word.

“You don’t understand what this bond *does* to people,” he said. “You’re already changing. You think the ache is lust—but it’s more than that. You’re becoming something *else*.”

“Then let me,” I said. “Let me change.”

He reached out and cupped my cheek again. “You don’t even know what you’re agreeing to.”

“I don’t care. I know I want *you*.”

A long silence stretched between us.

Then, finally, he exhaled.

And in that breath, I felt the last of his walls begin to fall.

“You’re not going to survive me,” he said softly.

I smiled.

“Then don’t let me survive you either.”

We stayed like that—his hand on my cheek, my body still flushed from his touch, my heart hammering out a rhythm that no longer felt entirely mine. The air between us pulsed. Warm. Intimate. Alive.

But then—
Something changed.

Subtle at first.
A tremor in the cave floor.
A breath of wind that wasn't wind at all.
Kael stiffened.

He turned his head slightly, nostrils flaring.

"What is it?" I asked.

He didn't answer. Not right away.

His hand dropped from my face, his entire body shifting—tense, alert, controlled only by instinct and old violence. The glow beneath his skin brightened, his markings sharpening into hard, angular lines I hadn't seen before.

"There's magic in the air," he said. "Not mine."

I blinked, backing up half a step. "Someone's here?"

"Not close," he said, though his voice had lost all softness. "But watching. Scrying. Testing my wards."

My skin prickled.

"From where?"

"I don't know." He looked toward the entrance of the cave, his jaw flexing. "But it means they know you're alive. And still with me."

My breath hitched. "They... who?"

He didn't answer.

Instead, he walked to the mouth of the cave, wings twitching at his back like they wanted to unfurl and launch him skyward.

I followed him to the entrance, the warmth of the cave retreating behind us as the bitter wind bit at my skin. The mountain stretched before us—frozen peaks, endless snowfields, distant clouds like bruises across the sky. And beyond that... I had no idea.

"I thought no one came up here," I said.

"They don't." His voice was low. "Not physically. But that doesn't mean they can't see."

He extended his hand, fingers clawed and glowing.

A pulse of magic surged out from his palm—hot, red, aggressive—and spread across the mouth of the cave like a dome of fire and smoke.

Wards.

Barriers.

Reinforcement.

But if he was reinforcing them...

That meant someone was trying to break through.

Kael's face darkened as he lowered his hand. "I should've been more careful."

"I was supposed to be dead," I said. "Maybe they're just confused."

He shook his head. "No. They're looking for me. Or you. Or both."

I swallowed. "You said there were others like you."

"There were."

His voice held a note I hadn't heard before.

Not anger.

Regret.

"Most are dead," he said. "But not all. Some disappeared. Some became... something else. And some—" His jaw clenched. "Some think the bond is a weapon. A way to harness power. They seek it out. Steal it. Corrupt it."

My blood turned cold.

"You think one of them found us?"

"I think they're trying."

He turned back to me.

"This isn't just about us anymore."

A thousand questions pressed at my lips. Who were they? What did they want? What would they do if they knew Kael had bonded again? If they knew I was still alive?

But only one question mattered right now.

“What happens if they break through?”

Kael’s expression was grim.

“I’ll kill them.”

I believed him.

But deep down, I also knew something else—something neither of us wanted to say.

The bond had made us stronger.

More powerful.

But also *visible*.

Traceable.

We’d set off a flare in the dark.

And something was starting to answer.

Kael stood at the mouth of the cave, his body braced against the wind, wings arched just enough to shield me. The magic ward he’d cast still glowed faintly—a dome of red heat flickering against the gathering cold.

But the look in his eyes had changed.

It wasn’t fear.

It was something colder.

Older.

“This mountain used to be a sanctuary,” he said. “A place the others couldn’t reach. But the bond... it’s a beacon. Now they know.”

I wrapped my arms around myself. “You said others wanted to use it. What does that mean?”

He didn’t turn. “The bond between dragon and human wasn’t always sacred. Once, it was a currency. A tool. Bonded mates are more than lovers—they’re amplifiers. Together, they create magic older than language. The kind that can shape kingdoms. Destroy them.”

I stared at him, the words heavy with implication.

“That’s why they want it,” he continued. “Not for love. For power.”

I thought of the mark on his chest—the one that glowed when I cried out his name. I thought of the magic that surged when he touched me, of the way I’d *felt* him inside me in more than just the physical sense.

And I understood.

We weren't just bonded. We were dangerous.

"Could they... take it from us?" I asked.

His eyes finally met mine. "Yes."

"How?"

"If they sever the bond before it's fully rooted—while it's still growing—they can leech the power from it. Use it. Bend it."

My throat tightened. "What happens to us?"

His voice was like stone. "You would die. I would break."

The wind screamed outside the cave.

Neither of us moved.

"But it's not rooted yet," I said. "Is it?"

Kael stepped toward me, slow and deliberate, until we stood inches apart. His eyes searched mine, and I saw the truth in them—raw, brutal, and terrifying.

"No," he said. "Not yet."

"What makes it permanent?"

His jaw clenched. "The claiming. Not just in flesh. In blood. In magic. It's a ritual older than time. If we finish it—truly finish it—it can't be broken."

"And if we don't?"

"Then you're a candle in the wind," he said. "And I've already lost one."

I lifted my chin. "Then finish it."

Kael went still.

The wind howled behind him. The firelight flickered across his skin.

"You don't know what that means."

"I know enough. I know I don't want to be a weapon. I don't want to be stolen. And I sure as hell don't want to die."

His hand came up to cradle my cheek. “If we do this, you’ll never be able to walk away from me. Not even in death. Your soul will burn with mine.”

“I’m not walking away,” I whispered. “I’m walking toward you.”

His expression shattered.

In that moment, I saw not a god. Not a monster. Not a beast.

But a man.

Alone.

Wounded.

Burning.

His mouth came down on mine—this time slow, reverent, almost trembling—and when he kissed me, it wasn’t possession.

It was *promise*.

When he pulled away, his voice was low and dark and final.

“Then we complete the bond. Tonight.”

My pulse thundered.

Outside the cave, the wind kept screaming.

But inside?

Inside, the fire was about to consume us both.

Chapter 3: The Ritual Begins

Kael didn’t speak as he led me deeper into the mountain.

He didn’t need to.

The air around us had changed—heavier, hotter, laced with something ancient and electric. Magic. It clung to the stone walls like a second skin, humming in a language older than thought.

He held my hand, his claws retracted, the strength in his grip just barely contained. Like the only thing keeping him from devouring me was the feel of my palm in his.

I followed without question.

I wasn't afraid.

Not anymore.

The path curved downward, narrowing, until we reached a chamber carved from obsidian and glowing crystal. A circular dais rose in the center, etched with runes that shimmered faintly—red, gold, silver. I didn't recognize the symbols, but they pulsed in rhythm with my heartbeat.

At the edge of the dais, Kael stopped.

"This is where we seal it," he said.

His voice was reverent. Grave. Almost *worshipful*.

I stepped closer, my pulse fluttering.

"What do I need to do?"

He turned to me slowly, his eyes glowing like embers in the half-light.

"You must offer yourself freely. Not just in body, but in bond. You must *want* it. You must *choose* me."

"I do."

"Not just now," he said. "Not just because you're wet and trembling. You must choose me with your whole being. Your mind. Your soul. Your future."

I stepped forward and touched his chest, right over the sigil he bore—the one I put there.

"I already have."

His breath caught.

The magic in the runes surged.

"You'll be changed," he warned. "Not just claimed. You'll feel my hunger as your own. You'll dream what I dream. You'll carry my heat. You'll bear my mark, inside and out."

I smiled.

"I want it."

Kael's control snapped like glass.

In one motion, he lifted me into his arms and carried me to the center of the dais. The stone beneath us pulsed with heat, not burning, but *thrumming*. Alive. Hungry.

He laid me down gently, reverently, like a sacrifice on an altar—but this time, I *offered* myself.

He stood over me, shedding his final barrier—his pants dropped away, revealing the full, massive length of him, thick and veined, already leaking at the tip.

I gasped. Not from fear.

From *need*.

He lowered himself to one knee between my thighs.

“This is the ritual,” he said, voice low and raw. “This is the bond. When I enter you, it will begin. But the moment you say my name as you come—*truly come*—you’ll bind me to you. Forever. Nothing will break it.”

I reached for him.

He slid his hands up my thighs, parting them.

He looked at me—one final, silent question.

I nodded.

“Kael,” I whispered. “Take me.”

He growled—*not* softly.

And then he entered me.

Kael thrust into me in one slow, devastating stroke.

My body bowed beneath him, not in pain—but in sheer, overwhelming *shock*. He filled me completely, impossibly, like he was made for the sole purpose of stretching me open and burning me from the inside out.

I gasped his name, not as a ritual—just as a reflex.

But he didn’t move.

Not yet.

He held himself there, deep inside me, his arms braced on either side of my head, his body trembling with the effort it took not to lose control. His eyes burned down into mine, and for a long, breathless moment, the only thing between us was the sound of our heartbeats—his, mine, the bond’s.

“You feel it,” he whispered.

“Yes.” My voice was shaky. “I feel *everything*.”

The runes on the dais flared, casting ribbons of gold and red across the walls, illuminating the chamber in a pulse that matched the rhythm of his hips—*once he started to move*.

He didn’t start slow.

He started *deliberate*.

Each thrust ground against something deep and electric inside me, like he knew the shape of me before I was born. Like he’d waited for me through centuries of stone and smoke and silence, and now that he had me beneath him, he was going to make sure I never forgot who I belonged to.

“You were *made* for this,” he growled into my neck. “Made to take me. Made to carry my fire.”

His hips snapped forward, harder, deeper.

I cried out, clutching at his back, dragging my nails along his skin. He didn’t flinch. He purred—a deep, animalistic sound that rumbled straight through my bones.

“You’ll be marked,” he said. “From the inside out. No other creature will be able to touch you. No male will smell you without *knowing*.”

“Good,” I gasped. “I don’t want anyone else.”

“You’re *mine*,” he growled.

And then he shifted.

Not fully. Just enough.

His skin shimmered with glowing sigils. His eyes went gold, not orange. His fangs lengthened slightly—just enough to nick the edge of my shoulder when he leaned in and *bit*.

Not to harm.

To claim.

Pleasure detonated inside me like a star going nova.

I screamed, arching up into him, legs wrapped around his waist, body trembling uncontrollably as his rhythm slammed into me faster, harder, riding the wave of my surrender.

The bond *flared*.

The entire chamber lit like a forge—fire spiraling up the walls, magic crackling across the stone. Runes burst like shooting stars. The heat didn't come from Kael alone anymore.

It came from *me*.

My body responded in kind—slicker, tighter, my inner walls pulsing with every thrust like I was drawing him in, milking him, *consuming* him.

And through it all, he whispered my name.

Not like a vow.

Like a *prayer*.

"You are everything," he said. "You are fire, and sky, and *mine*."

My orgasm built again, sharper this time, deeper—somewhere below bone and breath. It wasn't just physical. It was *cosmic*. I felt it clawing its way up my spine, into my chest, into my throat.

"Say it," Kael growled, fucking me harder now, faster, as his markings flared like molten gold. "Say my name. Finish it."

"I—I—"

My voice broke. The pleasure was too much. Too bright. Too *big*.

He didn't stop. He *couldn't*. His thrusts turned savage, punishing, reverent. He angled his hips just so—and the pressure hit me directly in that place that made my vision white out.

"Say *it!*" he roared.

And I did.

"*Kael!*"

The orgasm that tore through me wasn't natural. It wasn't *human*. It felt like dying and being born all at once—light and heat and magic and ecstasy tearing me open from the inside out.

I screamed. Cried. Shook so violently I thought the stone might split beneath me.

Kael growled—*then roared*—and came inside me with a heat so intense it felt like lava flooding my womb. Magic burst from us both, a shockwave of golden flame that knocked loose pieces of crystal from the walls and sent the runes spiraling into the air like sparks.

He collapsed over me, still sheathed deep inside, chest heaving, skin glowing.

And the bond sealed.

I felt it lock into place like chains made of light—*his soul, inside mine*.

Permanent.

Unbreakable.

And somehow...

Perfect.

Silence settled over the chamber, thick and charged and sacred.

Kael lay over me, his arms braced on either side of my head, the muscles in his body still trembling with the aftermath of the bond. His breath rasped against my throat, warm and uneven, and I could feel his heart pounding in perfect rhythm with mine—as if we no longer beat to separate drums.

Because we didn't.

I was *his* now.

Not just claimed.

Not just marked.

Bonded.

The word felt too small for what had just happened. For what had *become* of me.

I stared up at the glowing ceiling—runes still fading back into crystal, embers flickering like dying stars. My skin prickled with residual magic. The air smelled of smoke and sex and sacred fire. The place we'd just made love in didn't feel like a cave anymore.

It felt like a temple.

And I was no longer the sacrifice.

I was the altar.

Kael finally moved, drawing back just enough to look down at me. His eyes weren't the same. Still gold, still glowing—but softer now. And far, far more *afraid*.

"Are you hurt?" he asked, voice hoarse.

"No."

He brushed his thumb along my cheek. "Are you still *you*?"

I blinked. "... I don't know."

Because something was different. I could feel it under my skin. In my bones. Like a second pulse, deeper and slower, threading through every cell in my body. My senses were sharper—sounds, smells, even light. The world felt *closer*. Alive.

"I feel... brighter," I said quietly.

He exhaled, some guarded part of him relaxing.

"That's the bond taking hold. Your body is learning mine. Adjusting. You're stronger now."

"Will I change?"

"Yes." He didn't lie. "A little. Not all at once. You won't grow wings or breathe fire. But you'll be *more*. Harder to hurt. Faster to heal. You'll feel things... deeper. Especially desire."

He was right.

My body was still slick from him, still twitching from aftershocks, and already I could feel *want* stirring again. Not just lust. Not just need. *Hunger*.

For *him*.

He rolled to his side, pulling me into the curve of his body, still deep inside me, as if he couldn't bear to separate. I didn't want him to.

But beneath the comfort, the heat, the sweetness of being wrapped in him, I felt it.

A twinge.

A flicker.

A prickle at the edge of my awareness.

I stiffened slightly. "Kael."

"I feel it too," he murmured.

He didn't move. Didn't snarl. Just listened—his body perfectly still, his eyes distant.

"It's far," he said. "But watching. Again."

Another scrying.

Another presence.

Drawn by the bond.

Kael sat up slowly, sliding from me with a final stroke that made me shiver. He reached for the heavy cloak draped at the edge of the dais and pulled it over me, then began to dress in silence.

The air felt colder now.

Charged.

I sat up, clutching the cloak tighter. "Whoever it is... they felt it, didn't they?"

"Yes."

His voice was low. Dangerous.

"They felt the moment I marked you. They know the bond has been sealed."

"Can they use that?"

"Not now," he said. "Not unless they take you from me. And that won't happen."

I searched his face.

"What if they try?"

He turned his head slightly, just enough to meet my eyes.

"Then I become what they fear."

I shivered.

Not from cold.

But because I believed him.

The bond had made us stronger. But it had also painted a target on our backs.

And now... they were coming.

Kael stood at the edge of the dais, bare-chested and brimming with heat, his back to me as he stared into the darkness that curled beyond the chamber walls. The firelight flickered along his spine, casting shadows between the lines of muscle and the faint, still-glowing runes that trailed down from his shoulder blades.

He looked like a god preparing for war.

I sat wrapped in his cloak, still flushed from what we'd done, still aching in ways I didn't know how to name. But now that the high of the ritual was fading, a deeper awareness was taking its place—one I couldn't ignore.

Something *inside* me had changed.

It wasn't just lust, though that lingered. It wasn't just strength, though I felt it. It was more than that. A sense of awareness. Of connection. My skin still hummed, and my blood felt like it moved slower and deeper, like molten gold through ancient pipes.

But it wasn't just about *me*.

It was about *us*.

"I can still feel you," I whispered.

Kael didn't turn. "Good."

"It's more than just... being close. It's like I can feel what you feel."

His shoulders rose and fell with a breath.

"That's part of the bond. It gets stronger over time. When we're together—especially when we've just been joined—it's almost... impossible not to bleed into each other."

"Bleed?" I echoed.

He finally looked at me. His eyes still glowed, but softer now. Sadder.

"If I'm wounded, you'll know. If you're scared, I'll feel it." He stepped closer. "That's the gift. And the curse."

I swallowed hard. "What happens if one of us dies?"

He didn't answer immediately.

And that silence was an answer all its own.

"You said you lost someone before," I said softly. "That she tore the bond out."

His jaw clenched. "She was afraid. Of what it meant. Of how strong it became. She didn't want to belong to anyone."

I pulled the cloak tighter around me.

"I'm not her."

"I know."

But the way he said it told me the wound was still raw beneath his skin.

He turned back toward the wall and reached out one hand. The runes along the edge of the stone flared beneath his palm, responding to his touch.

“Ward this room,” he said, half to himself. “Seal the fire lines. Ground the bond.”

“Ground it?”

He nodded. “If they try to manipulate the energy, they won’t be able to trace it as easily if it’s anchored into the mountain.”

He swept his hand across the stone in a slow, practiced motion, and more runes lit beneath his skin—magic pouring from him in steady waves.

I rose, barefoot and unsteady, but driven by something I couldn’t ignore.

“Let me help.”

He turned, startled. “You don’t know how.”

“I feel it,” I said. “I can feel the lines in the rock. I can feel the way the power moves. I don’t know how to explain it, but... I *can*.”

Kael studied me for a long, tense moment.

Then nodded.

He stepped aside and gestured to the wall.

“Try.”

I pressed my hand to the stone.

It was warm. Not from heat, but from life. The moment my palm touched it, I felt the flow of Kael’s magic—threading through the mountain like veins of flame, pulsing with intention.

And then, somehow, I felt *mine*.

My own magic.

It was smaller. Softer. But real.

I reached for it instinctively, like it had always been there, just waiting for me to notice.

The moment I focused, the rune beneath my hand flared—soft violet, not gold. The magic surged through my arm, and Kael sucked in a breath beside me.

“That’s...” He stepped closer, eyes fixed on the light. “That’s *not* dragon magic.”

I pulled my hand back. The rune faded, but not entirely.

“What does it mean?”

“I don’t know,” he said slowly. “But it’s yours.”

And just as he said it—
The ward trembled.

The rune nearest to Kael *shattered*.

We both turned sharply.

Across the chamber, where the protective barrier should’ve been strongest, the wall *cracked*.

Smoke seeped in from a split in the stone.

Not natural smoke.

Magic.

Dark. Oily. Threaded with silver and blue.

Kael snarled, his wings flaring.

“They’re here.”

The crack widened.

A low hiss curled from the smoke, slithering along the chamber floor like a living thing, coiling around Kael’s ankles, testing the air.

He moved fast—faster than I’d ever seen him. One hand shot out, magic flaring across his palm as he slammed it against the nearest rune cluster. Heat exploded through the chamber, forcing the smoke back an inch, but not sealing it.

The ward was *failing*.

Not just weakened—*infiltrated*.

Kael turned to me, eyes burning gold. “Get back. Don’t touch it.”

But I was already moving closer.

The smoke wasn’t just magic.

It was *presence*.

It carried weight. Hunger. Intelligence.

It slid along the walls, flickering like shadow, and from it—slowly, deliberately—*something stepped through*.

Not a man.

Not a beast.

Something in between.

It was tall—taller than Kael—with skin like onyx and runes etched directly into its flesh, glowing faintly blue. Its face was smooth, almost beautiful, except for the hollow absence of eyes. Where they should have been, there were only two slits of blue fire, flickering without heat.

I felt it the moment it looked at me.

Like being touched *from the inside*.

I staggered.

Kael roared.

The creature didn't flinch. It didn't even blink.

It raised one hand—long, clawed fingers tipped in polished obsidian—and pointed directly at me.

"You sealed it," it said.

Its voice was wrong. Not a voice at all, but a *vibration*. It resonated in the stone, in my ribs, like something that had existed long before breath.

Kael stepped between us.

"You have no claim here."

The creature tilted its head. "You think the mountain protects you? The bond is sealed, dragon. That makes her *valuable*."

"She's *mine*."

The thing smiled.

The runes along its arms pulsed brighter.

Kael moved instantly—his body shifting, halfway to dragon, scales racing across his arms, fangs bared. He launched a bolt of fire from his palm, striking the intruder full in the chest.

It staggered.

But it didn't fall.

The smoke coiled tighter.

And I felt it.

Pain.

Not from Kael.

From *me*.

Like a hook yanking at my belly, at the core of the bond.

The creature wasn't attacking *him*.

It was *draining me*.

I cried out, falling to my knees as the air thickened. The bond inside me sparked and trembled, pulled taut like a wire about to snap.

Kael turned, rage erupting from him like a furnace. "You're hurting her."

"You opened the door," the creature said. "The moment you tied your soul to hers."

"I'll rip you apart."

Kael surged forward, claws flashing.

The creature didn't try to block.

It vanished in smoke—and reformed behind me.

I didn't scream.

I *reached*.

Not for Kael.

For *me*.

For the magic I'd felt earlier. That thread of violet still burning in my blood.

I slammed my hand to the floor, right over a rune cluster.

It exploded in light—*my* light.

The creature reeled.

Kael was on it in seconds, grabbing it by the throat and slamming it into the stone. Magic cracked through the floor like lightning. The creature twisted, snarling, trying to vanish again, but this time Kael held it fast, claws sinking into its shoulders.

“You touched her,” he snarled. “Now you bleed.”

Flames erupted from his mouth—not fire like before, but something darker. *Older*.

Dragonfire laced with *bond magic*.

It seared through the intruder’s body. It shrieked—then scattered into smoke, torn apart mid-escape, leaving nothing behind but a scorched mark on the floor.

Kael dropped to his knees beside me, pulling me into his arms.

The air was thick with soot and silence.

I trembled against him.

“They know,” I whispered.

“Yes.”

“They’ll come again.”

“They will.”

I looked up at him. “Then we don’t wait.”

His eyes met mine—dark, furious, lit with something deeper than rage.

“Then we hunt.”

Kael didn’t release me.

He held me against his chest long after the smoke had faded, long after the scorched mark on the floor had gone cold. His arms were tense, iron-strong, but his hands trembled. Just slightly.

And beneath his skin, I felt it.

Fury.

Not the kind that burned hot and quick.
The kind that smoldered.

The kind that waited.

"We'll leave the mountain," I said quietly.

"No." His voice was low. Absolute. "We defend it. This is our stronghold. They'll expect us to run."

He was right. But I could feel the bond tightening between us, growing sharper now, more reactive. The intrusion had left a mark—not just on the stone, but on us. It had pulled at something deeper than the physical. My core still ached from it.

From *him*.

And yet... I wasn't broken.

I felt stronger.

Alive.

I looked down at my hands. My skin shimmered faintly, almost like a soft dusting of starlight. Traces of violet still lingered under the surface, threads of magic coiled like sleeping serpents in my blood.

Kael noticed.

"You accessed it," he said. "Your magic."

"It's mine?"

"It's *ours*," he said. "You were always meant to carry it. The bond only woke it up."

He rose, lifting me with him, then set me gently on my feet. My legs were steadier now. My spine straighter. Even the cold didn't bite the way it had before.

I wasn't the same girl who'd walked up that mountain.

Not anymore.

"What was that thing?" I asked. "It wasn't fully... real."

"Shadowborn," Kael said. "Constructed from the bond remnants of others like me. Dead dragons. Corrupted magic. They were created for one purpose: to find unsealed bonds. And twist them."

"But the bond is sealed now."

"Which makes you *more* valuable."

He stepped toward the stone wall, his palm glowing with heat as he touched one of the damaged wards. It flickered, then pulsed faintly, stabilizing under his hand.

“They can’t take it,” I said.

“No,” he agreed. “But they can try to corrupt *you*.”

I stepped closer to him. “Let them come.”

He looked at me then—really looked—and something shifted behind his eyes.

Not just desire.

Not just possessiveness.

Pride.

“You were never meant to just survive this,” he said. “You were meant to *rise*.”

A pulse of magic flared between us—fast, bright, intimate.

It wasn’t just the bond anymore.

It was *alignment*.

“What now?” I asked.

Kael’s voice was like thunder wrapped in velvet.

“Now we prepare. We reinforce the mountain. We wake the old wards. And we call the others.”

“What others?”

“The uncorrupted.” He turned back to the wall, his hand tracing a rune I hadn’t seen before.

“The few of us who haven’t turned. Who still remember what the bond *really* is.”

“You think they’ll come?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “But if they feel what we did tonight, they’ll *know* I’ve returned. And they’ll know what that means.”

The rune flared to life—a sigil in the shape of a dragon’s eye, ringed with fire.

A beacon.

I watched as the light spiraled upward through the ceiling, into the stone, into the sky.

A signal.

A warning.

An invitation.

I turned to Kael, breath caught in my throat.

“What if they come not to help... but to *claim* me too?”

Kael’s gaze darkened. His wings twitched. Heat shimmered beneath his skin.

“Then they die.”

We stood in silence for a moment, the bond between us alive and sharp and electric.

I could feel it now—truly feel it.

The bond hadn’t made me lesser.

It hadn’t chained me.

It had *freed* me.

And I wasn’t just his.

I was *ours*.

Chapter 4: The Awakening

The mountain was quiet.

Too quiet.

After everything—the sealing of the bond, the attack, the beacon sent pulsing through the rock like a flare—the silence felt wrong. Heavy. As if the entire range held its breath, waiting to see what we would become.

Kael stood at the edge of the ledge outside the cave, overlooking the mist-laced valley far below. Wind ruffled his hair, tugged at the edges of his cloak. He hadn’t spoken much since the fight.

Something was brewing in him.

Something old.

I stood a few paces behind him, watching the runes flare faintly along his spine. They responded to his mood. I was learning that now. When he was calm, they shimmered softly. When he was close to snapping...

They *burned*.

I stepped closer. "You haven't slept."

"I don't need to."

"You haven't eaten either."

He turned his head just slightly, enough that I could see the line of his jaw. "Neither have you."

I walked to his side and looked out over the valley. The horizon pulsed faintly with light—the sun rising beneath a low layer of clouds. Everything looked peaceful.

But I knew it wasn't.

"I saw something in the bond while I slept," I said.

His eyes shifted. "What?"

"You. With someone else. A woman. She was screaming."

Kael stiffened.

"I didn't mean to see it," I added. "It wasn't a dream. It was... *yours*."

He was silent.

The wind howled around us.

"I let her bond to me too early," he said finally. "Before she was ready. Before I knew how strong it could become."

"What happened?"

"She loved the *idea* of power. Not what came with it. When the bond started changing her—when it started unlocking things she didn't understand—she panicked. Thought I was corrupting her. Controlling her." His voice dropped to a growl. "She tried to break it."

My breath caught. "But you can't—"

"No. You can't." He turned fully now, eyes dark and distant. "She found a sorcerer. A man who promised he could sever the connection. He lied. The spell shattered part of her soul. The rest of it bled into *me*. I carry it still. Her death. Her pain. Her hatred."

I stepped forward, laying my hand gently against his chest.

He didn't flinch.

"I'm not her," I said.

"I know," he whispered. "That's what terrifies me."

We stood like that for a moment—silent, still, the bond between us heavy with unspoken fear.

Then—

A sharp *crack* echoed through the air.

I gasped.

Pain bloomed in my head like a spike of lightning.

Kael caught me as I fell forward, clutching my temples.

"*What is it?*" he demanded.

"Something's... pulling at me—"

The magic in my blood surged. My skin shimmered violently, violet light pulsing beneath my skin like lightning trapped beneath ice. My spine arched. My breath caught.

And then I screamed.

Not in pain.

In *power*.

A blast of violet energy shot from my hands, crackling across the stone floor and erupting into the air like a flare. It soared upward, cutting through the sky with a scream of energy, visible for miles.

I collapsed to my knees.

Kael dropped beside me, pulling me into his arms.

"What happened?" I gasped.

His face was grim.

"They found you."

"No. That wasn't them. That was *me*."

I looked down at my hands—still glowing, still trembling.

"I didn't mean to. I couldn't control it."

Kael's grip tightened around me. "Then we train. Immediately. We teach you how to wield it before someone tries to force it out of you."

"But what if I hurt you?"

He leaned in, his forehead pressing to mine.

"I *want* you to be dangerous."

Before I could speak again, the air around us shifted—warmer, heavier.

Kael looked up.

Far on the ridge of a distant peak, silhouetted against the rising sun, a figure stood. Not a shadow this time.

A man.

Broad-shouldered. Horned. Watching.

Waiting.

Kael bared his teeth. "His name is Morian. He was bonded once. He wants you now."

I stared at the shape on the horizon. I didn't know how I knew...

But I *felt* it.

He'd felt the flare of our bond.

He'd *tasted* my magic.

And now he wanted it for himself.

The wind howled harder now, as if the mountain itself had sensed the name Kael spoke.

Morian.

It lingered like poison in the air—sharp, metallic, old. I didn't know who he was, not truly. But the moment Kael said it, the bond inside me *reacted*. Tightened. Ached.

My magic pulsed like it recognized the threat.

"He was bonded before?" I asked, still watching the distant figure on the ridge.

Kael didn't look away. "Yes. Long ago. His mate was powerful—maybe more than you. But the bond broke. No one knows how."

“What happened to her?”

“She disappeared. Some say she was consumed. Others say he sacrificed her when the bond made her stronger than him.”

I shivered.

Kael turned to me then, his hand sliding around my waist.

“I won’t let that happen to you,” he said. “But I also won’t let you be helpless. If he’s here—he’s *hunting*.”

I nodded. “Then teach me.”

He didn’t hesitate.

He led me back into the cave—past the dais, down into a lower chamber I hadn’t seen before. It was carved from dark stone veined with glowing red lines, and at its center stood a massive basin filled with molten crystal. A forge, maybe. Or something older.

“This is where dragons once trained their mates,” Kael said. “Before the world forgot what we were.”

The magic in the room buzzed. The air was warm, dense, humming with potential. I felt it prickling against my skin.

“What do I do?”

Kael stepped behind me. His body pressed flush to mine—heat, muscle, *control*. He slid his hands down my arms, guiding them outward, palms open.

“Don’t reach for the magic,” he whispered in my ear. “*Let it reach for you.*”

I exhaled.

The bond between us pulsed again—low, steady, grounding.

“Feel the blood in your veins,” he murmured. “That’s where it lives. Not in your mind. Not in your hands. In your *desire*. In your *will*.”

I closed my eyes.

At first, there was only silence. Then warmth. A flicker. A coil of energy stirring beneath the surface of my skin.

I didn’t force it.

I invited it.

And it came.

Fast.

Violet light exploded from my fingers, wild and bright and beautiful—flaring across the stone, arching over the basin in a lightning-curve of raw power.

I gasped.

Kael held me tighter. “Don’t fight it.”

“I’m not.”

“Good,” he growled. “Now aim.”

Before I could ask *where*, a shimmer appeared on the far wall—Kael’s magic.

A shape.

A memory.

The Shadowborn.

Smoke, blue fire, flickering runes etched into nothing.

My lips curled.

I raised my hands and *let go*.

The bolt of energy that shot from my palms wasn’t a thread or a flicker—it was a spear. A weapon. It hit the projection with enough force to shake the cave walls. The illusion shattered in a burst of light and sparks.

I staggered back, breath ragged.

Kael turned me to face him. His eyes burned—not with pride.

With *hunger*.

“You’ll be unstoppable,” he said.

I tried to speak, but his mouth was already on mine. Fierce. Devouring.

The magic still hummed in my blood, alive and writhing. I kissed him back like I needed it to stay grounded—because I did.

He pulled away just enough to look at me. His voice was rough.

“He’s coming for you. But he’s going to learn the truth.”

“What truth?”

Kael’s eyes flared gold.

“You don’t belong to anyone now.”

He cupped my face. Pressed his forehead to mine.

“You *are* the storm.”

Kael and I stood in the charged stillness of the training chamber, the air thick with magic, sweat, and something older than either of us—*destiny*.

But just beneath that heat, something colder crept in.

A memory.

Kael’s hand lingered at my cheek, but I felt him slipping away—not physically, but mentally. His jaw tightened, and his eyes lost focus, retreating inward.

“What is it?” I asked.

He hesitated.

And then, slowly, he spoke.

“Morian wasn’t always like this. Before the fall, he was revered. Powerful. Feared. But loyal to his mate.”

I listened, still riding the high of the training, heart slowing as the shadows thickened around his words.

“Her name was Lysia,” he continued. “She wasn’t just powerful. She was *radiant*. The first human to survive full soul-merging with a dragon. They called her ‘The Breaker of Flame.’ Together, they could destroy entire battalions. He worshipped her.”

“What happened?”

Kael’s throat bobbed. “She grew stronger than him.”

I frowned. “Isn’t that what’s happening now? With me?”

“No.” His gaze snapped to mine, intense. “Because I want you to rise. I *need* you to be strong. He didn’t. He feared what she became. Feared that if she ever left him, the bond would shatter and destroy him.”

“So what did he do?”

Kael’s voice turned to ash.

“He tried to tether her magic. Bind it inside her. She resisted. He... broke her mind to keep her obedient.”

I recoiled slightly, nausea curling in my gut.

“She fought back,” Kael said. “Shattered half a continent. But it was already too late. The bond collapsed. Her body died. Her magic scattered. And Morian—”

He paused, eyes burning now.

“He went mad.”

I could feel it—his fear—not just for the past, but for me. For what this could become.

“That’s why you hesitate,” I said. “Why you hold back.”

Kael said nothing.

But he didn’t need to.

His silence *screamed*.

“I’m not her either,” I said.

“I know,” he whispered. “But power makes people strange. And the bond... it’s already evolving. I can feel it.”

I stepped closer, placing a hand on his bare chest. “Then teach me everything. So I don’t become a weapon. I become your *equal*.”

His breath caught. “You’re already more than that.”

Then—

A gust of wind blew through the tunnel behind us.

A sound. Too soft. But wrong.

Kael went rigid. “Someone’s here.”

I turned, pulse spiking.

But the bond inside me flared *first*—warning me *before* my mind understood.

Then the runes along the chamber walls *shattered*.

And the shadows split open.

Figures stepped through—three of them. Armored. Horned. Not dragons—but *touched* by dragon blood. Twisted. Corrupted.

Their leader grinned, teeth too sharp. “The girl glows now.”

Kael didn’t wait.

His wings burst from his back, and the chamber filled with flame.

But this wasn’t his fight.

Not yet.

I stepped forward.

And raised my hand.

The violet magic surged like it had been waiting all along.

One of the invaders lunged—and I hit him with a bolt of raw power so violent, it *erased* him mid-step.

The other two stopped.

Kael stared.

“You’re not supposed to be able to do that yet,” he said quietly.

I didn’t look at him.

I looked at the others.

“Then maybe they should leave before I learn what else I can do.”

The second one moved—fast, too fast—and Kael intercepted, claws slashing, fire erupting in a circle around us. The third backed away, eyes narrowed.

“Tell Morian,” I said, my voice echoing through the chamber. “Next time, I don’t *miss*.”

The survivor vanished in a burst of smoke.

The silence that followed was absolute.

Kael turned to me, chest heaving.

And smiled.

Not with amusement.

With *dangerous pride*.

“You just declared war.”

I exhaled slowly, the magic fading back into my blood.

“Good,” I said. “Because I’m done waiting.”

Smoke still hung in the air, curling upward from the scorched rune stones like incense in a forgotten temple. Kael and I stood in the aftermath, the taste of magic still sharp on my tongue, my skin humming with the remnants of power I hadn’t known I could wield—until I had.

The enemy was gone, but the echo of the moment still thrummed between us.

Kael’s eyes were locked on me, burning gold, chest rising and falling like he was trying to slow his own fire—but he wasn’t just watching me.

He was *recalculating* me.

And I saw it. That glimmer of awe beneath his usual dominance.

“You erased him,” he said. “Completely.”

I swallowed, forcing my breath to slow. “He came to take me. I made sure he didn’t leave with anything.”

Kael took a step closer, the floor beneath him cracking slightly with the weight of his magic. He wasn’t restraining it now. He wasn’t pretending I needed protection.

He was *matching* me.

“You understand what that means, don’t you?” he said. “You’ve passed beyond awakening. That blast... that was mastery.”

I shook my head, though the trembling in my limbs was already fading. “I didn’t do it on purpose. It just happened.”

“Magic doesn’t act on impulse without direction,” he replied. “It was protecting the bond. And you were the one holding the blade.”

I sat down on the edge of the shattered basin, the stone still warm beneath me. My hands trembled as I looked down at them—at the soft violet glow still dancing beneath my skin like a heartbeat of its own.

"I thought I was afraid of the bond," I said. "But I think I was afraid of what it might *make* me."

"And now?"

I looked up. "Now I'm afraid of what I'll have to do *because of it*."

Kael crouched in front of me, his massive hands cupping my knees, grounding me.

"You've accepted it. That's more than most ever do." His voice softened. "But this isn't just about power anymore. It's about control. Discipline. And what you choose to do with it."

I nodded slowly. "Then teach me."

"I will," he said. "But you have to understand something first. You didn't just scare them."

"I know. I hurt them."

"No." His eyes sharpened. "You *embarrassed* them. You humiliated them. They'll tell Morian. And he'll send something worse next time."

I exhaled. "Then we hit back first."

Kael stood again, the full weight of his height casting shadows over me. His body still shimmered with the fire beneath his skin, runes flickering along his arms and neck like battle paint preparing to ignite.

"Then we need an army."

The words hit the chamber like a thrown blade.

My brows lifted. "I thought we were alone."

"We *were*." Kael turned toward the far tunnel—the one I hadn't explored. "But the old bloodlines aren't gone. Just hiding. There are other bonded pairs. Other dragons who've refused Morian's call. But they're scattered. Isolated. Half-mad with restraint."

He reached for the wall and placed his palm against a dormant seal—one that had gone untouched for decades. It flared at his touch, illuminating a hidden spiral carved deep into the mountain.

"What is this place?" I asked.

"A hall of memory. And a gateway." He turned back to me. "A way to summon the old kin—those who still honor the bond."

I rose, joining him.

"How do we find them?"

"We don't," he said. "We let them find *us*." He traced a glowing mark across the door. "They'll feel the flare of your power. They've been waiting for something to believe in again."

I stood beside him, uncertain, still reeling from everything I'd become—and everything I might still be turning into.

"Do you think they'll come?" I asked.

He looked at me then, and the weight in his gaze made my breath hitch.

"They will. Not because of me," he said. "But because of *you*. You're not just bonded now. You're bonded and awakened. You're the *center* of this storm."

And I knew he was right.

They hadn't come just for Kael. Or even for the bond.

They had come for what I represented.

Power.

Change.

Rebellion.

Kael activated the summoning glyph.

A tremor ran through the floor—deep, resonant, ancient.

Lights flared down the tunnel, runes reawakening as the signal rippled outward, calling to the wild ones, the broken ones, the monsters who still remembered what it meant to be loyal.

To be *dangerous*.

"They'll come," Kael said again.

"And what do we do when they arrive?"

Kael smiled, fangs sharp, voice low and lethal.

"We teach them how to burn the world down."

The glyph pulsed with light, a steady heartbeat echoing through the stone. Every wall seemed to respond—runes glowing awake after years of silence, as if the mountain itself were remembering what it once was: a throne, a sanctuary, a fortress.

Kael stood beside me like a sentinel carved from flame, his eyes fixed on the tunnel now lit with ancient magic. He said nothing, but I could feel it through the bond.

They were coming.

I didn't know what to expect. Warriors? Dragons in full monstrous form? Fragile, frayed creatures, hiding the remnants of what they'd once been?

I didn't have to wonder long.

The air shifted first.

Heavy.

Charged.

Then, a footstep. Not soft. Not hesitant.

Deliberate.

The first to enter the hall was a woman.

She was tall—taller than I was by a head, cloaked in obsidian robes threaded with gold veins, the hood shadowing her face. As she stepped into the rune light, her eyes caught the glow—and burned with silver flame. Not white. *Silver*.

Dragon-touched.

Her voice slid through the air like smoke. "So it's true. You've awakened her."

Kael's stance tightened beside me, but he didn't move. "You felt it?"

"We *all* did," she said, removing her hood.

Her face was inhumanly beautiful. High cheekbones. Iridescent scales coiled along her neck like a choker. Her pupils were slitted—like Kael's when he was halfway to shift.

But her smile didn't reach her eyes.

"Kael." She said his name like a challenge. "You broke your silence for *this*?"

He didn't blink. "I broke it because the world is breaking again."

The woman's gaze flicked to me. Appraising. Hungry.

"So this is the girl." She tilted her head. "Small. Soft. Mortal."

"Say her name," Kael growled.

"I'll say it when she earns it."

The heat flared in my chest, rising fast. My magic stirred like it was waking from a nap, slow and annoyed that anyone would question its presence.

I stepped forward.

The woman's brows rose slightly.

"You have power," she said, folding her arms. "But you haven't suffered yet. You haven't been tested."

"I just erased a half-dragon with one blow," I said.

"Any novice can kill," she said coolly. "True strength is when the world turns on you—and you don't *flinch*."

Kael's voice sharpened. "Lirien, enough."

"No," I said. "Let her test me."

Kael turned to me, shocked. "What?"

"If they're coming," I said, eyes locked on hers, "they have to follow me. Not just Kael. Me. And I'd rather bleed now than when it matters most."

A long pause.

Then Lirien smiled. And this time, it *did* reach her eyes.

"You've got fire."

She raised her hand.

Not as an attack—but as a *summon*.

A glowing sigil formed in the air between us.

"Step in," she said. "If you're worthy, it will reveal what lies inside you. Not your power—your *truth*."

I looked at Kael.

He nodded once, slow. "You don't have to do this to prove anything to me."

"I'm not doing it for you."

I stepped forward.

The sigil expanded, light stretching into a ring of fire. As I crossed the threshold, the warmth washed over me—not painful, but intense.

It pierced through my skin.

Through my mind.

I saw flashes—

My body bound in silk.
My first kiss with Kael.
My magic exploding into light.
The figure on the ridge—*Morian*.
But deeper—

A mirror.

It showed me *myself*.

Not as I was—but as I could be.

Eyes blazing violet. Wings flared with shadow and flame. Mouth open in a cry of rage and glory, standing in the middle of a battlefield ringed with ash and gold. Not just Kael's mate.

A queen.

The fire pulsed once.

Then the sigil vanished.

I staggered back, blinking.

Lirien said nothing.

She lowered her hand.

And slowly... bowed her head.

"Your name," she said, "is earned."

She turned to Kael. "You've chosen well."

Kael stepped to my side, pride crackling through the bond like lightning.

"How many will come?" I asked.

"More," Lirien said. "Now that I've seen you, I'll summon the others. But not all will bow so easily. Some will try to break you. Seduce you. *Claim* you."

"She's already claimed," Kael said.

"Then make them remember what that means."

By the time the sun vanished behind the cragged peaks, the mountain was no longer quiet.

They came in waves.

Some arrived in thunder—wings outstretched, heat trailing behind them in rippling currents. Others stepped from shadow, cloaked in silence, eyes burning with curiosity, suspicion, and something colder.

Desire.

Not for sex.

Not exactly.

But for *power*.

For me.

They came because they'd felt the bond explode like a beacon across the sky, felt the ripple of Kael's fire merging with something *new*. Something *female*. Something *dangerous*.

And now they wanted to see it for themselves.

Kael stood at my side on the upper ledge of the summit platform, his hand resting lightly at my back—not possessive, not controlling. Anchoring.

Below us, the chamber had filled with figures.

Dragon-kin.

Some fully scaled, half-shifted, hulking brutes with glowing runes embedded in their skin. Others wore mortal forms with only a hint of what boiled beneath—long black claws, slitted pupils, teeth too sharp for speech.

Lirien stood near the center, arms crossed, her silver eyes sweeping the arrivals with careful detachment. She had spoken for me. Not to declare loyalty—but to confirm *danger*.

"She is real," she'd said when the second pair of dragon-touched mates arrived. "She's not just Kael's mate. She's the *bond made flesh*."

They hadn't bowed.

Not yet.

But no one challenged me again either.

Not openly.

Still, I felt it—the hunger rippling beneath the surface. Not just from the dragons, but from their mates too. Some looked at me with wonder. Some with envy. A few with naked hostility.

“She shouldn’t exist,” one had muttered when she thought I couldn’t hear.

“She’s too new,” said another. “Too fragile.”

But none of them stepped forward.

Not until he arrived.

I didn’t see him enter. One moment the chamber buzzed with voices, and the next...

It went silent.

The crowd parted slowly, reluctantly.

And then *he* stepped through.

He looked almost human.

Broad shoulders, lean frame draped in crimson and black leathers etched with sigils that shimmered faintly in the torchlight. His hair was black, swept back from a face that was far too symmetrical—too perfect—to be real. His eyes glowed a soft, impossible blue.

But it wasn’t his beauty that struck me.

It was the bond.

The moment he entered, it *reacted*—tightening in my chest like a snare. My breath hitched. My magic *twitched*.

Kael’s hand snapped protectively across my waist.

“Morian,” he said coldly.

The man smiled.

“Kael,” he replied, as if greeting an old friend.

Then he turned to me.

And that smile sharpened.

“So,” he said softly, like a lover greeting a long-lost flame. “This is the flame that woke the mountain.”

Kael stepped in front of me. "You don't belong here."

"Neither did you, until recently." Morian's eyes didn't leave mine. "You called the old kin. I answered. Don't fault me for respecting the rules."

I stepped forward, around Kael, pulse steady.

"Respect," I said. "Is earned."

Morian's smile didn't falter. "Then let me earn it."

He gave a shallow bow, the gesture fluid and polished.

"I only came to see her. To see what kind of girl could call down lightning, shatter sigils, and hold a mountain full of monsters without flinching."

"I'm not a girl," I said evenly. "And I'm not yours."

His gaze sharpened.

"You sealed the bond," he murmured. "But do you know what comes next?"

My magic flared, unbidden.

"I don't need you to tell me."

"No," he said. "But you might need me to *survive* what you've started."

Kael snarled low in his throat.

"Careful," Morian said, still smiling. "I'm not here to take her. Not yet."

He turned toward the exit without another word, but as he passed, he paused beside me.

He leaned in close—too close.

"I saw what you did to my shadow construct," he whispered. "You erased it like it was nothing. That kind of power doesn't just *exist*. It awakens... for a reason."

His lips brushed the shell of my ear—not touching. Not quite.

"Let's see what yours *awakens* for."

And then he was gone.

The air remained poisoned by his presence.

Kael pulled me back against him, arms caging me as if to remind us both that I was still *his*.

“He wants to challenge the bond,” Kael growled. “He wants to *break* it.”

“He can try,” I whispered.

But even as I said it, I knew the truth.

Morian didn’t just want the bond.

He wanted me.

Not for love. Not for lust.

For *power*.

Chapter 5: The Fracture Begins

The dragonkin arrived in greater numbers with each passing hour.

By sunset, the summit platform buzzed with tension. More than two dozen had answered the call. Mated pairs. Scaled warriors. Lone dragons with half-mad eyes and barely restrained power in their veins. Not all of them spoke. Not all of them bowed.

But every single one of them *watched me*.

Kael stood beside me, arms folded, heat bleeding off him in waves. His wings were half-furled, a silent signal of readiness. Of dominance. But I felt the tension behind the control.

He was watching *them*.

And they were watching *us*.

Lirien stepped to the center of the circle carved into the stone, her silver eyes scanning the gathered crowd.

“We’ve summoned you because a threat is rising again,” she said, voice sharp and cold.

“Morian has reemerged—and he wants *her*.”

Dozens of eyes turned to me.

Some reverent.

Some curious.

And some burning with doubt.

“She bonded a dragon,” Lirien continued. “Awakened ancient power. Unsealed a lineage that’s been dormant for a thousand years. She’s not just Kael’s mate. She’s a *living anchor*. If she falls, we all do.”

A ripple passed through the crowd.

And then—

A voice cut the air.

“Or she burns us first.”

Silence.

A dragon stepped forward—tall, gray-scaled, half-shifted. His voice was low, sandpaper over stone. His eyes glowed dull red.

“She’s untested,” he continued. “Her power flares like wildfire. And Kael is blind to it. What happens when she turns it on *us*?”

Kael growled.

“She won’t,” he said.

But the dragon didn’t back down.

“I remember Lysia. I remember what happened the last time a bonded female outgrew her mate. She tore the bond apart. *Tore him apart*. And now you want us to trust this girl to lead us?”

He turned to the others.

“She’s dangerous.”

The words hit like a weapon.

And I knew in that moment—

This was it.

My moment.

I stepped forward.

Kael tensed, hand twitching toward his blade, but I shook my head once.

“I *am* dangerous,” I said, my voice steady. Loud. “You should be afraid of me.”

Gasps. Murmurs.

The gray-scaled male snarled, taking a step forward.

And I *let* the magic rise.

Not in defense.

In *command*.

My skin shimmered, violet fire curling over my arms. The runes in the stone beneath my feet flared to life with each word.

"But I'm not your enemy," I said. "Morian is. And he's counting on you to be so afraid of *me* that you forget who the real threat is."

I looked around the circle.

"I'm not just Kael's bonded. I'm the reason this mountain woke up. I'm the reason the old kin stirred. You didn't come for him. You came for the *fire* you felt in your veins."

Kael was silent behind me—but I felt the bond between us *tighten*. Pride. Pain. Desire.

I went on.

"You want to challenge me?" I said to the gray-scaled male. "Then challenge me."

I stepped into the center of the ring. Violet flame burst beneath my feet.

"Let me show you what happens when someone underestimates me."

He didn't move.

Couldn't.

The magic radiating off me now was no longer chaotic. It was *tuned*. Refined. Controlled.

"I'm not going to beg for loyalty," I said. "I'll earn it. Or I'll take it."

That broke the silence.

Half the dragons stepped back.

The other half stepped forward.

And bowed.

Even the gray-scaled male dropped his gaze.

When I turned back to Kael, his expression was unreadable.

But his eyes...

They burned.

Not with fear.

With *hunger*.

I didn't even make it to him before he was on me.

One second we were surrounded by dragonkin.

The next, I was pressed against a stone pillar deep inside the mountain—Kael's mouth hot and feral on mine, his hands already ripping at the fabric covering my body.

"You don't get to do that," he growled against my throat.

"Do what?"

"*Command them*. Without me."

"You told me to lead."

"I didn't think it would turn me on this much."

He dropped to his knees.

His mouth found me.

And I remembered exactly why I'd claimed *him*.

Kael's mouth was already on mine when my back hit the pillar, his hands rough and reverent all at once—like he didn't know whether to worship me or tear me open. His claws grazed my hips, not enough to draw blood, but enough to remind me: he was *still* a dragon.

And I was still his.

"You stood in front of all of them," he growled against my throat. "You challenged a half-shifted elder and *they bowed*."

"You said you wanted me strong."

"I didn't say I could *handle* it."

He yanked the fabric from my body like it was paper. My chest rose, bare to the mountain air, nipples hard from more than just cold. Kael's eyes locked on mine—glowing, starving.

The bond flared between us.

Hot.

Unstable.

His hand slid between my legs.

“You’re already wet,” he snarled. “Did standing in front of them like that make you feel powerful?”

“No,” I whispered. “*You* do.”

That did something to him.

His control cracked.

In a single motion, he dropped to his knees, claws gripping my thighs, and his mouth *devoured* me.

There was no tease this time. No worshipful circling.

He *took*.

Tongue driving in deep, licking, sucking, claiming every inch of me like it was the only thing keeping him sane. My back arched against the stone, fingers buried in his hair, hips grinding into his face as his growl vibrated through my entire core.

“Kael—”

He didn’t stop.

Not even when I cried out.

Not even when I came—sharp, violent, *his name* on my lips.

He drank me down like fire.

When he stood, his mouth was wet, his chest heaving, his cock *harder than steel*.

“I should take you here,” he growled. “Where they can hear. Where they’ll *know*.”

“Then do it.”

He spun me around.

My palms hit the pillar.

I felt the head of his cock press against my entrance, thick and pulsing with magic.

Then—

He thrust in.

All the way.

One brutal, *perfect* stroke.

I screamed.

The bond lit up like wildfire—violet and gold, streaking across my vision, crackling along my skin. He didn't wait. Didn't pause.

He *fucked* me.

Hard.

Every thrust pounded into me like a promise and a punishment.

"You're mine," he snarled into my hair.

"Say it."

"I'm yours," I gasped.

He pulled out—then slammed back in, deeper, harder.

"I'm not going to last," he groaned. "Not with you like this. Not when you stand there like you *own* them."

"Then don't," I whispered. "*Give it to me.*"

He did.

With a roar that shook the pillar, Kael came inside me—hot, thick, *full*—and the bond *erupted*.

I came again, helpless, clenching around him as the magic between us surged like lightning caught in a bottle. My body shook, legs barely holding, but he held me upright, arms like steel.

Still buried in me.

Still hard.

Still *mine*.

We didn't speak.

We didn't need to.

The silence that followed was heavier than any speech.

The bond had tightened again—darker, deeper, more dangerous.

And something *else* stirred beneath it.

Not pain.

Not fear.

Instinct.

Kael didn't pull out.

Even as our breaths slowed.

Even as the last sparks of magic curled in the air around us like smoke after a storm.

Even as the stone beneath our feet cracked from the force of what we'd done.

He stayed inside me.

Thick. Heavy. Possessive.

His arms braced around my waist like a cage, like he needed to *hold* the bond inside me with his body.

"Don't move," he growled.

"I wasn't going to."

His chest rumbled behind me. Not with satisfaction. Not quite.

With something darker.

His lips pressed to the nape of my neck, warm and rough.

"It's not fading."

"What isn't?"

He pulled out—slowly, reluctantly—and I gasped as the heat of his release spilled down my thigh. But even with him gone, the *sensation* didn't leave.

The bond was still *pulsing*.

Still *burning*.

I staggered slightly, dizzy from the afterglow—and something else.

Something wrong.

Kael turned me around and caught my chin in his hand.

“Look at me.”

I met his eyes.

And his pupils dilated.

“Your magic’s still active,” he said. “You’re still glowing.”

I looked down.

He was right.

My skin was laced with violet sigils, crawling over my ribs, my thighs, my arms like ink that moved with every breath. They weren’t Kael’s markings.

They were mine.

“I didn’t do anything,” I whispered.

“Yes,” he said. “You did.”

He stepped back slightly, eyes scanning me like I was a new weapon—and he wasn’t sure if it was still in his hand or turning in his direction.

“Kael?”

He didn’t speak right away.

Then—

“You’re entering a new phase of the bond,” he said. “The original texts called it *phase convergence*. It happens when the power of a bonded pair begins to fuse.”

I swallowed. “And what happens when it’s complete?”

He looked at me.

“Your power stops being separate from mine. It becomes *amplified* by me. But more importantly—”

He stepped close again, lowering his voice.

“It starts to call to others.”

I blinked.

“What others?”

Before he could answer—

A *roar* tore through the mountain.

Not Kael.

Not anyone we’d seen.

It shook the air, the stone, the very walls of the chamber.

Kael’s face turned to stone.

He moved instantly—grabbing me, pulling me to his chest, wrapping his wings around us as if instinct alone knew we were exposed.

The stone door to the chamber blew inward.

Dust. Smoke. Magic.

And through it stepped another male.

Taller than Kael.

Muscle stacked over bone like armor, wings so dark they shimmered with blue-black oil slick light. His chest was bare. Scars raked across it in precise symmetrical lines, like old wounds turned into ritual.

His eyes?

Not glowing.

Black.

Bottomless.

He smelled of ozone and sex and *war*.

And he looked *directly at me*.

Not at Kael.

Me.

Then he smiled.

“Finally,” he said. “The bondbreaker lives.”

Kael stepped in front of me, eyes blazing. “This is sovereign ground.”

The male chuckled. “And I’m here to violate it.”

“Your kind isn’t welcome.”

The stranger tilted his head. “Neither is change. But she brings it.”

I pushed past Kael.

The room *tightened*.

The stranger’s gaze dropped to my thighs—to Kael’s seed still wet on my skin—and something behind his eyes *snapped*.

Not jealousy.

Recognition.

“She’s already been claimed,” Kael said coldly.

The male ignored him.

“You don’t know what she is,” he said. “You only know what you *want* her to be.”

“I know she’s mine.”

The male’s nostrils flared.

“You think claiming her will stop what’s coming? You think the bond was the end?”

His eyes landed on me again.

“It was just the beginning.”

Kael surged forward—but the stranger didn’t flinch.

And that’s when I realized—

He hadn’t come to fight.

He’d come to *test* something.

Me.

And I’d passed.

Because he was still standing. Still breathing. Still watching me.

And the bond between Kael and I?

It flared so hard I gasped—heat rolling through my belly, pulsing in my core.

The male smiled again.

Then turned and walked away.

But just before vanishing into the shadows, he said one last thing.

“See you soon... *Queenbreaker*.”

Then he was gone.

Kael turned to me.

“What the fuck does that mean?”

I didn’t know.

But deep inside, something stirred.

A hunger.

A memory I never lived.

And a word I hadn’t earned.

Yet.

Kael stood there, frozen. His body coiled like he was ready to launch after the stranger and rip him limb from limb—but he didn’t move.

He didn’t breathe.

He just stared at the empty space where the male had disappeared.

I moved toward him, slowly.

“Kael—”

He held up a hand.

I stopped.

Not in fear.

But because I saw it.

The rage.

Not hot. Not roaring.

Cold.

It rippled off him like pressure from a coming storm, coiling through the room, making the fire in the walls flicker low.

“Say it again,” he whispered.

I frowned. “Say what?”

“What he called you.”

I didn’t want to.

But I obeyed.

“Queenbreaker.”

His jaw clenched.

The runes along his arms flared gold, searing with sudden violence. His wings snapped out at his back, shaking loose a gust of wind that extinguished half the torches in the chamber.

“He’s testing us,” I said. “Trying to get in your head.”

Kael turned to me—and I saw it.

Not jealousy.

Not doubt.

Fear.

“You don’t understand,” he said. “That name—it’s not a title. It’s a *curse*.”

He stalked toward me, breathing hard.

“It’s what they called Lysia. Before the end. When she turned on her mate. When she... *unmade* him.”

I reached for him.

He stepped back.

"I would never hurt you," I said.

"You don't know that."

"*I do.*"

"No," he snapped, voice cracking. "You don't feel it. Not yet. The bond—it's not stable anymore. It's *feeding on your power*. Shifting. Growing. And now it's *calling* to things that should've stayed buried."

My pulse spiked.

"But you said we'd merge. That we'd share strength."

"I didn't say we'd survive it."

I stepped forward.

"You're scared."

He didn't deny it.

"You're afraid I'll outgrow you. That I'll become something you can't protect. That I won't *need* you."

He closed his eyes.

And I knew I was right.

I reached up, cupping his jaw.

"You're wrong."

Kael's eyes opened—gold and fire.

"I need you more now than I ever did. Not because I'm weak. But because you *started* this fire. And only you know how to keep it burning."

He grabbed me—fiercely.

Not in desperation.

In possession.

He lifted me off the ground, carried me to the nearest wall, and pressed me against it like he had to feel every inch of my skin or lose his mind.

His mouth crashed onto mine—bruising, breathless, *claiming*.

“I’m not afraid of your power,” he growled. “I’m afraid of what I’ll become to keep it.”

I kissed him harder.

“Then let me remind you,” I whispered, “what you already are.”

His hands tore at the new shift I’d thrown on after the last claiming.

Fabric shredded.

His fingers were inside me in seconds.

“I’m going to fuck it out of you,” he hissed. “The name. The prophecy. The *doubt*.”

“Then do it.”

He flipped me around.

Bent me over a stone table.

And shoved his cock inside me with the same force he used in battle—like this wasn’t just pleasure.

It was *punishment*.

And a prayer.

Every thrust shook the stone.

Every growl lit the torches again.

Every time he drove into me, the bond screamed *mine*.

“I’ll never lose you,” he growled. “I don’t care if the world burns.”

“Then burn it,” I moaned. “With me.”

He did.

He came with a roar that shattered the nearest rune.

And I followed—legs trembling, hands clutching stone, body so sensitive the magic flared again, *without my consent*.

The table cracked beneath us.

Kael pulled me upright, still inside me, his arms around me like steel.

He didn’t let go.

"I don't want to be your cage," he said against my neck.

"You're not."

"I just don't want to be the one who dims your flame."

I turned in his arms.

"You're the reason I *ignite*."

We stood in the wreckage of our bond, shaking, shining, unstoppable.

But somewhere behind us—beyond the torches and the dust—

A new presence stirred.

Watching.

Waiting.

We were still tangled—sweat-slicked, flushed, the table beneath us cracked in two, Kael's cock still buried deep inside me—when I felt it.

Someone was watching.

Kael felt it too.

His head snapped up, and his wings flared wide behind us, a growl already rumbling in his chest.

The bond between us was still glowing—raw and thick with energy. It hadn't faded. If anything, it had grown *louder* in the silence that followed our climax.

And someone else had *heard it*.

Footsteps echoed in the hall.

Deliberate.

Measured.

Kael didn't pull out. Didn't release me.

Didn't *hide* what we were.

He turned us both toward the sound, keeping me pressed to him—naked, wet, glowing.

And the male who appeared in the archway stopped dead.

He wasn't like the others.

Not armored. Not scaled.

Barefoot.

Bare-chested.

Unmarked.

But his eyes...

They were *silver*.

Not glowing.

Just impossibly still.

"I heard the storm," he said, voice calm. "So I came to see the fire."

Kael didn't speak.

Neither did I.

Because the male was looking at us like he'd stepped into a *religious vision*—and wasn't sure if he was supposed to kneel or *fuck it*.

He took a single step closer.

"I'm not here to challenge you," he said to Kael. "I've had enough of kings."

Then his gaze returned to me.

"I came for her."

Kael growled.

"I won't touch her," the male added. "Not unless she asks me to."

I shivered.

Not because I wanted him.

Because I felt the *bond* react.

And that scared me.

"What are you?" I asked.

The male smiled.

“A mirror,” he said. “To show you what you might become.”

Kael stepped forward, keeping me flush against him.

“Speak your name,” Kael growled.

The male bowed slightly. “Varian.”

Kael’s magic rippled. “I know that name.”

“I doubt it,” Varian said. “I’ve spent the last century beneath the ruins of a dead bond. I was bound to a seer. She died screaming.”

He looked at me again.

“She said someone like you was coming. Someone who’d burn *both sides* of the war to ash.”

Kael pulled out then—slow, deliberate—and stepped aside.

Letting me stand.

Still naked.

Still glowing.

Still *claimed*.

But no longer *shielded*.

“Leave us,” Kael said.

Varian didn’t move.

He bowed slightly. “When you’re ready for answers... come find me.”

Then he vanished back into the shadows.

The silence that followed was not peaceful.

It was *charged*.

Kael turned to me, jaw tight.

“You didn’t push him away.”

“I didn’t invite him in.”

“But the bond—”

“Isn’t a leash,” I said. “Not anymore.”

Kael’s expression darkened.

“I need to know,” he said slowly, “that you still want *me*.”

I walked to him.

Placed a hand on his chest.

“I don’t want anyone else.”

My hand slid lower.

Gripped him—already hard again.

“I want *this*.”

I dropped to my knees.

And I showed him.

Not with submission.

But with hunger.

My lips wrapped around his cock, tasting myself on him, dragging him deeper until his claws dug into the stone wall behind him.

Kael’s moan was low. Broken.

The bond flared again.

Brighter.

Hotter.

As I sucked him to the edge of madness.

Not because I had to.

Because *I needed to remind him—*

I wasn’t drifting.

I wasn’t outgrowing him.

I was growing *with* him.

And I'd never stop craving the fire that made me.

Kael didn't speak for a long time after I finished.

He just stood there, back against the stone wall, skin flushed and damp, cock still twitching from the force of what I'd done to him—on my knees, mouth wet, tongue worshiping him not in submission, but in power.

Not begging for approval.

Proving possession.

And it had worked.

For a moment.

But I felt it now—underneath his stillness.

The tension.

The hesitation.

The fear he wouldn't name.

I rose to my feet, slow, chest bare, hair clinging to my shoulders with sweat and steam.

"You're still quiet," I said softly.

Kael exhaled through his nose.

"I shouldn't be," he murmured. "After what you just did."

"But you are."

He looked at me.

And this time, I saw it.

Not just fear.

Guilt.

He pulled away from the wall and walked a few steps into the chamber, head lowered, hands flexing at his sides. Not angry. Not even aroused anymore.

Haunted.

"I've been hiding something from you."

The words didn't hit like a weapon.

They slid in like a knife.

"What is it?"

Kael turned back, the firelight tracing over the hard lines of his jaw, the tension in his shoulders, the flicker of gold in his eyes that was no longer just desire.

"I told you that when the bond completes convergence, it amplifies," he said. "Yours and mine. That's true."

I nodded.

"But what I didn't tell you is... it's not supposed to happen *this fast*."

I frowned. "What do you mean?"

He stepped closer again.

"When dragons bond, it takes time. Weeks. Months. Full merging—full convergence—was something that used to take years. It was rare. Sacred. And dangerous."

"Because it makes us more powerful?"

Kael shook his head. "Because it *unlocks things* that were never meant to be awakened."

I swallowed. "Like what?"

He reached for me, touching the glowing sigils still alive under my skin. His fingers brushed over my ribs, over my hip, and finally rested on my lower belly.

"You're evolving," he said. "Not just magically. Not just sexually. Physically. Spiritually. *Genetically*."

I stilled.

Kael's hand moved, his palm warm and reverent.

"You're not human anymore."

The silence hit like thunder.

"But I still feel human."

"You're not. Not entirely. And you never will be again."

The bond flared gently between us—still tethered, still hot, still alive—but now it pulsed with something else.

Something new.

Something *ancient*.

“And it’s not just that,” he said. “What’s happening to you—it’s never happened before. Not with this speed. Not with this power. There are no records of it. No legends. Not even myths.”

I frowned. “Then how do you know?”

Kael stepped closer, his voice dropping.

“Because it’s not just your magic that’s changing.”

His hand slid lower again—gently.

To the space just beneath my navel.

Where I suddenly felt something warm. Something *fluttering*.

I gasped.

“What is that?”

Kael’s eyes locked on mine.

“It’s the bond taking root. Not just between souls. But between *bloodlines*.”

My stomach twisted.

“You think I’m...”

“I don’t know,” he said. “But if you are, the world will never forgive us. A bonded offspring hasn’t been born in over a thousand years. The last time it happened, it triggered a war so brutal it tore apart half the realms.”

“Because of the power?”

“No,” he said. “Because no one could *control* it.”

The air around us cooled.

“What are you saying?”

“I’m saying this bond... might not just be rewriting us.”

He stepped closer, voice tight.

“It might be *rewriting the law*.”

I felt the weight of that. The pull of it. Not just between us—but around us. The others could sense it. *They’d felt it*.

And now I understood.

Why they bowed.

Why they stared.

Why Varian called me Queenbreaker.

Why Morian wanted me before the bond had time to fully root.

They *knew*.

Kael’s jaw flexed.

“If they find out—if the old orders realize the truth—”

“They’ll try to take me.”

He didn’t answer.

He didn’t have to.

Because we both knew the answer.

They already were.

Chapter 6: The Pull of Power

The mountain was no longer still.

After Varian’s appearance, after Kael’s confession, and after the raw, magic-laced sex that left cracks in the stone and a permanent tremor in the bond, something in the air had shifted.

The halls buzzed.

The other dragonkin felt it.

Some avoided me entirely now—eyes down, steps cautious, as if they sensed something inside me that hadn't been there before. Others... stared longer. Closer. With open interest. With *need*.

And I felt it too.

Every footstep on stone.

Every heartbeat nearby.

Every flicker of magic from anyone who dared look at me.

It was like my senses had bloomed outward.

And I couldn't shut them off.

Kael watched me from across the war chamber, his body tense, jaw locked, golden eyes tracking every movement. Lirien was there too, mapping the ridgelines with charcoal and fire-dusted stone, ignoring the tension in the air.

"Do they all feel it?" I asked her.

Lirien didn't look up. "Of course they do. You're bonded. Sealed. Claimed. And evolving."

"I feel like I'm vibrating."

She smirked. "You are."

I frowned. "That's not funny."

"It's not meant to be. It's meant to be *true*. You're calling to them now. Not because you want to—but because the bond doesn't *care* what you want."

I felt Kael move behind me before I heard him.

His warmth. His weight. His presence.

"She's not calling to anyone," he said flatly.

Lirien raised an eyebrow but didn't argue.

Kael's hand slid around my waist. Grounding.

Possessive.

But it didn't help.

Because even in his arms—I felt another pull.

From down the hall.

Like someone was waiting.

Watching.

Wanting.

I pulled away gently.

Kael stiffened.

"I need air," I said.

He didn't stop me.

But I felt him follow.

Not with footsteps.

With his *focus*.

I stepped into the hall, bare feet silent on polished black stone. The air outside the chamber was cooler. Dimmer. The runes lining the walls had dimmed to a low flicker, casting soft shadows that danced as I passed.

And then I saw him.

Varian.

Leaning against a column like he belonged there.

He didn't move.

Didn't speak.

Just watched me.

His eyes weren't hungry.

They were... curious.

And that made it worse.

"Why are you here?" I asked.

He tilted his head. "Because you walked away. And I wanted to see where you'd go."

"You're not supposed to follow me."

"I didn't."

I frowned. "What do you want?"

His voice dropped.

"You felt it, didn't you?"

I didn't answer.

"You felt *me*. Through the bond. Not like Kael. Not like lust. But like..." He stepped closer, slow. Careful. "Like recognition."

My breath caught.

Varian stopped inches away.

"I'm not here to take you," he said. "I couldn't, even if I tried."

"Then why—"

"I came to show you what happens *after*."

"After what?"

He reached out—not to touch, but to hover his hand just above my skin. My arm. My side. My waist.

"The bond will break you. Or change you. Or consume you. Maybe all three. I came to show you that not every path ends in surrender. That some of us..." His voice softened. "Some of us survive it."

I didn't realize my breathing had sped up until I felt the pull in my chest.

The bond.

Flaring again.

Not in defiance of Kael.

But in *proximity* to something new.

Something *old*.

Varian smiled slightly.

Then stepped back.

“I’m not your mate,” he said. “But I’m something else. Something Kael doesn’t understand yet.”

He turned.

Started down the hall.

But before he disappeared, he looked back over his shoulder.

“When the bond starts burning from the inside,” he said, “you’ll come looking for me.”

Then he vanished into the dark.

And I was left alone with the weight of what he didn’t say.

I didn’t make it three steps back toward the war chamber before Kael appeared.

Not walking.

Materializing.

He dropped from the shadows like wrath on wings, his feet hitting the stone with a crack that vibrated through the walls. His eyes weren’t gold.

They were glowing white-hot.

His hands fisted at his sides, claws extended.

Not because he meant to hurt me.

Because he was holding himself back.

“What did he say to you?”

His voice was rough. Shaking.

I didn’t flinch. “Not much.”

“Don’t lie to me.”

The bond snapped between us—hard. Like a chain yanked tight between two mountains. I felt the heat slam through my ribs, down my spine, into my sex like a wave.

It wasn’t just anger.

It was *instinct*.

"I didn't invite him," I said. "He was there."

Kael took a step forward. "And you stayed."

"I had to know what he wanted."

Another step. "And what did he want?"

"To warn me."

"About me?"

"No," I said, louder now. "About *the bond*. About what's coming."

Kael's nostrils flared. "He thinks he knows more than I do?"

"He might," I said, voice tight. "Because whatever's happening to me—it's not just mating heat. It's not just magic. Something *else* is waking up inside me."

Kael reached me in a blink.

He slammed me against the wall—not hard. Not to harm.

To *anchor*.

His chest heaved against mine, eyes wild, the bond between us now pulsing like a second heartbeat.

"I feel it too," he growled. "I feel you slipping."

"I'm not slipping."

"*You are*."

His forehead pressed to mine, and for a moment, everything stilled.

Then—he *kissed* me.

Not tender. Not rough.

Desperate.

His hands roamed my sides, my hips, up under the wrap I wore over my breasts. His claws tore through fabric like water. His mouth claimed me with heat so sharp it bordered on pain.

"I'll fuck it out of you if I have to," he hissed.

I gasped.

“Kael—”

“No more doubt. No more outsiders. I won’t share the bond with a *shadow*.”

He dropped to his knees.

And I knew what was coming.

But it wasn’t the same.

This wasn’t worship. Or even punishment.

It was *fear*.

Fear disguised as dominance.

He spread my legs right there in the corridor, his mouth already on me, licking me open like I was the answer to a question he couldn’t speak.

“Say it,” he growled between strokes of his tongue.

“Say what?”

“That you’re mine.”

I moaned, back arching, thighs trembling.

“You’re mine,” he snapped. “Say it.”

“I’m yours,” I gasped.

He slid two fingers into me, curling hard, finding the spot that made me *scream*.

The bond *exploded*.

And for a split second—

I saw *Varian’s face*.

Kael felt it.

He *froze*.

His breath caught against my skin.

Then he stood, pulled me into his arms, and spun me—so fast the stone blurred.

My back hit a column.

His cock was already pressed to my entrance.

"You want me," he said. "Not him."

"Yes."

"You need me."

"Yes."

"You fucking *burn* for me."

"Kael—please—"

He shoved inside me—deep, full, brutal.

I *cried out*, nails digging into his shoulders.

He moved instantly—hard, unforgiving, each thrust a brand, a *claim*, a command that thundered through the bond and etched itself into my soul.

The magic flared violet and gold between us, and this time—

This time—

I didn't just come.

I *burned*.

Flames shot from my palms, scorching the wall behind him.

Kael's eyes went wide. His body stilled.

We were still connected.

Still joined.

Still *burning*.

And for the first time—

I saw fear in his eyes.

Not fear of losing me.

Fear of what he'd unleashed.

The air around us still shimmered with heat. The stone behind Kael's back was scorched black where my fire had licked across it—smooth rock blistered and split by the force of my climax.

Kael didn't move.

He was still buried inside me.

Still holding me.

But his breath came ragged now, like he was trying to catch it—like he didn't trust the air around us not to *ignite again*.

I was shaking.

Not from fear.

From power.

And for the first time, I wasn't sure if it was mine alone.

Or if the bond was becoming something *e/se*.

Something alive.

Kael eased out of me, slowly, carefully, as though pulling too fast might tear the world open again.

His hands were gentle now. Reverent. But not relaxed.

He stepped back.

Looked at his palms.

They were smoking.

He didn't speak.

I did.

"What did we just do?"

He didn't answer.

I moved toward him—barefoot, skin still aglow, the bond still *vibrating* in the base of my spine.

"Kael—talk to me."

He finally looked up.

And when he did, something in his face had changed.

"This isn't a bond anymore."

I stared. "What do you mean?"

He gestured to the wall. The ruined column. The mark I'd left with my magic.

"With normal convergence," he said, "the mate pair becomes stronger. Faster. More attuned."

I nodded. "We've done that."

"But this—" He stepped closer, voice low. "This is *reactive ignition*. You're not just absorbing my power. You're channeling it through your magic—and releasing it unconsciously through orgasm."

My stomach dropped.

"You're saying I'm using sex to... explode?"

He shook his head.

"I'm saying your climax is triggering magical overload—both *mine* and *yours*. We're not just bonded anymore. We're becoming a *conduit*."

My chest tightened. "For what?"

"I don't know." He looked at the scorched wall again. "But if we don't control it..."

"What?"

Kael turned back.

Eyes dark. Terrified. Awed.

"You could kill me."

I flinched.

"*You're Kael*. You don't die."

"No," he said. "But the last time a bond reached ignition, both mates vanished in the middle of a mating frenzy. Their bodies were found fused. Ash. Burnt stone. Nothing else."

I swallowed hard.

"I didn't mean to—"

"I know," he said. "But that's the point. You're not doing it *on purpose*."

A long silence stretched between us.

And then—

Kael stepped forward again, slower this time, his hands brushing the sides of my face.

"We need to ground it," he said. "Anchor the bond. Stabilize it."

"How?"

"There's a ritual," he said. "Old. Forgotten. It's not just about sex. It's about choice. A second binding. One made *afterpower* has been exchanged."

I frowned. "You mean like a... remarriage?"

"More like a reckoning," he said. "We meet in the fire. Naked. Equal. And we seal what we've become—or we *break apart trying*."

The words settled like heat in my blood.

"When?" I asked.

Kael's eyes flared gold again.

"Tonight."

But before I could speak again—
A voice rang out down the corridor.

"Too late."

We turned.

Varian stood at the end of the hall, arms folded, shirtless, his skin streaked with old runes and new blood.

He wasn't smiling now.

"There's no time for rituals," he said.

"Why not?" I asked.

"Because Morian knows what you are now," Varian said. "And he's coming."

Kael bared his teeth. "Let him come."

Varian shook his head.

“No. You don’t understand.”

He turned his eyes to me.

“He doesn’t want to kill her anymore.”

My breath caught.

“What does he want?”

“To *mate her*.”

Silence collapsed over the corridor like a cave-in.

Kael went still.

Varian’s words still rang in the air, louder than any roar, more dangerous than any sword.

“*Mate her*.”

My stomach flipped—not in fear, but in a cold, coiling sickness. Not because I believed Morian could succeed...

But because *somewhere in the bond*, it *flinched*.

Kael stepped forward so fast that even Varian tensed.

“No one touches her,” he growled. “He tries—I rip his heart out and feed it to his own flames.”

Varian didn’t blink. “He won’t try to *take* her.”

I looked between them, pulse racing. “Then what does he want?”

“A challenge ritual,” Varian said.

Kael’s jaw clenched. “That tradition is *extinct*.”

“Not to Morian. He still abides by the old accords.” Varian’s voice lowered. “He’s invoked them. And now you have two options.”

Kael didn’t speak.

Varian did.

“Submit. Or fight to the death.”

I exhaled sharply. “What’s a challenge ritual?”

Kael looked at me.

But his eyes were... distant.

Haunted.

"It's a blood rite," he said. "Used when two bonded monsters claim the same mate. A test. Of power. Of obsession. Of will. The female doesn't choose. The bond decides."

I froze. "Wait—I don't choose?"

"No," Varian said. "Because the ritual isn't about love. It's about *dominance*. About which bond is stronger. Wilder. More... *consuming*."

Kael turned on Varian. "How the fuck did he even invoke this? The council disbanded. The law hasn't been honored in centuries."

"Doesn't matter," Varian said. "He invoked it. You're bound to respond."

Kael snarled. "I won't play by his rules."

"Then you forfeit the bond."

The words hung like a blade between us.

I stepped between them.

"So if we ignore it, I lose the bond?"

"You don't lose it," Varian said. "It gets *redirected*. Morian becomes your bonded. By right of uncontested claim."

My magic spiked immediately—violent, instinctive.

Kael's did too.

The corridor trembled.

"No," Kael growled.

"Then you fight him."

"I'll destroy him."

"It's not that simple," Varian said. "He's not challenging you here. Not in your territory. He's called for the ritual to be done on neutral ground. In the Circle of Flame."

Kael went silent.

"*What is that?*" I asked.

Kael didn't answer.

Varian did.

"A battlefield soaked in old bondblood. A place where the laws still hold. Where the bond doesn't just flare—it *judges*."

I felt sick.

"And when?"

Varian looked at me.

"Sunset."

Kael's eyes blazed. "Then we go now."

But Varian raised a hand. "You can't go like this."

Kael turned, eyes narrowing.

"You're raw," Varian said. "Your bond is unstable. If you fight in this state, it'll tear both of you apart before Morian even lifts a claw."

"We can stabilize it," Kael growled. "The ritual."

"You won't have time."

Varian looked at me then.

"The only chance you have is if she chooses to anchor it *now*. Without fire. Without fanfare. *Without sex*."

Kael looked at me, eyes wide.

"That's never worked."

"It will," Varian said. "If she lets go."

Kael's voice cracked. "Let go of *what?*"

Varian stepped closer.

"She's still fighting it. Still trying to keep a piece of herself untouched. But the bond doesn't accept halves. It devours."

I met Kael's gaze.

I saw it all.

The fear. The fury. The love.

And I felt it.

The choice.

I could try to keep a piece of me walled off.

Or I could *surrender*.

Not my freedom.

Not my soul.

But the part of me that still believed I had to do this alone.

I stepped to Kael.

Took his hand.

Pressed it over my heart.

"I choose us."

And in that moment, the bond snapped tight.

Not with sex.

Not with pain.

But with a *peace* so intense it felt like flying.

Kael gasped.

His knees buckled.

And when he looked up at me, I saw it.

The fear was gone.

The fire was *focused*.

We were no longer just bonded.

We were *anchored*.

And that meant we could *burn anything*.

The Circle wasn't a battlefield.

It was a wound.

Carved into the earth long before either of us had names, the arena was forged from obsidian and bone, rimmed in fire that burned without fuel, without smoke—just raw, ancient magic that seethed and *watched*.

Dragons lined the cliffs above us, shadows with wings, some in full monstrous form, others draped in armor or bare skin, all silent.

Waiting.

The moment Kael and I stepped onto the stone, the flames flared.

Recognition.

The bond between us pulsed once, sharp and clean.

Anchored.

Ready.

But the pressure of the place sank into my skin, heavy and choking. This was no place for hesitation. This was where the rules of desire, power, and mating were stripped to their *purest law*:

Whoever burns brighter—wins.

Across the circle, Morian appeared.

He didn't walk in.

He *descended*.

Wings black as death, armored in molten gold, his eyes locked on me even before his feet touched the stone. He landed with the grace of a predator, the ground cracking under his boots.

And he smiled.

Not cruel.

Not arrogant.

Certain.

Kael stepped in front of me before I could blink.

I reached for his hand.

Held it.

The bond between us hummed like a live wire, steady now—no longer flickering or flaring without control. Still hot. Still dangerous.

But now it obeyed *us*.

Morian tilted his head.

“Did you anchor it?” he asked, voice rich, echoing through the circle.

Kael’s voice was ice. “We did.”

Pity flickered across Morian’s expression.

“Shame,” he said. “Now I’ll have to kill you.”

The flames around the circle surged higher.

Dragons above us roared once—short, sharp, ceremonial.

The ritual had begun.

A sigil etched into the stone blazed between the three of us.

It was a triangle.

Each point a claim.

Each side a tether.

This was not just a battle.

It was a *bond duel*.

I felt the magic connect all three of us.

Kael.

Morian.

Me.

But only one bond would survive.

Morian stepped forward, slow and deliberate.

His voice dropped into something velvet-dark.

“Let’s not pretend I’m here to hurt her,” he said. “You and I both know what I want.”

Kael’s growl started low.

“She’s mine.”

“She’s power,” Morian said. “She’s evolution. She’s what our kind should’ve become centuries ago. And you—”

He smiled coldly.

“You’re afraid of her.”

Kael moved.

Fast.

Wings bursting, claws flashing, heat slamming off him in waves as he lunged across the circle. Fire erupted beneath his feet—*golden*, bright, pure.

Morian met him head-on.

The impact shook the mountain.

I screamed.

Not in fear.

In *bond recoil*.

The magic yanked through my chest like a thread being pulled from both ends. I dropped to one knee, breath caught in my throat, violet sparks flaring from my fingers.

This wasn’t just a physical fight.

Their bondlines were pulling at *me*.

Trying to decide.

Kael roared and slashed, fire whipping around his fists.

Morian countered with shadows—thick tendrils of black smoke laced with blue light. They tangled in the air, claw to claw, wing to wing, power-for-power.

And all the while—

The bond *watched*.

I felt it judging.

Weighing.

Not their strength.

But their *claim*.

And in that moment, I understood.

This wasn't just about who wanted me more.

It was about *whose desire matched mine*.

And suddenly, the heat in my blood shifted.

Because I didn't want protection.

I wanted *fire*.

I stood.

The flames responded.

Flaring higher around the circle.

Kael faltered for just a blink—eyes flicking to me, wide, raw.

Morian saw it.

He struck.

Kael hit the ground hard, a burst of gold flashing from his chest as he skidded back, leaving a scorch trail behind him.

I cried out, magic leaping from my hands—but I didn't touch the ring.

Not yet.

Morian advanced.

But his eyes were on *me*.

“Feel that?” he said, low and dark. “That pull? That hunger? That’s what it feels like when your bond is *waiting to evolve again*.”

I didn’t move.

He took another step.

“You don’t belong to him. Not anymore. You belong to the fire.”

His hand extended.

“*Come with me*.”

The bondline between us pulsed—testing.

Kael groaned behind me, blood on his lips, but still alive.

Still mine.

And in that moment, my magic *answered*.

Violent. Final.

I stepped forward.

And chose.

The bond pulsed once more—deep, ancient, full of expectation.

Morian stood before me, arm extended, his voice velvet with false promise, shadow swirling like smoke around his fingers.

Behind me, Kael was on one knee, blood sliding from the corner of his mouth, eyes locked on mine with a mixture of pain and unwavering devotion. He wasn’t begging.

He wasn’t pleading.

He was *waiting*.

For me to choose.

For me to *ignite*.

And I did.

I stepped forward.

Not toward Morian.

Through the bond.

The sigils beneath my feet erupted with light—violet and gold laced with fire. The magic surged up my body like a second skin, wrapping me in heat, in hunger, in *truth*.

Morian's eyes widened.

"No—"

But it was already done.

I reached behind me, lifted my hand—

And Kael's name ripped from my lips like a war cry.

"*Kael!*"

The bond *detonated*.

Magic flared outward in a shockwave so powerful, the flames circling the arena *recoiled*. Dragons above us staggered. The runes cracked. The earth itself groaned as the triangle etched into the stone shattered—two lines severed.

Only one remained.

Ours.

Kael surged upward.

The light of the bond streaked toward him, wrapping around his body, sealing to his skin like golden fire. He met my gaze—and for a moment, there was nothing else.

No Morian.

No mountain.

Just *us*.

And then—

I ran to him.

Leapt.

He caught me in his arms, lips crushing mine, and as our bodies slammed together, the bond flared again—faster, hotter, *unstoppable*.

I yanked at his bloodstained shirt. He tore away what remained of mine. There was no time. No finesse. Just need.

Raw. Feral. Desperate.

Kael sank into me on the stone in the center of the shattered circle, and it wasn't claiming anymore.

It was *transcendence*.

His thrusts were brutal, perfect—each one syncing with the pulse of the bond, driving deeper, harder, until the magic between us spun out of control.

The flames around the arena erupted—

Every dragon watching saw us.

Saw me—

Naked.

Burning.

Riding my mate like I was made to.

And I was.

This wasn't dominance.

This was worship in its truest, most savage form.

Kael growled my name.

I screamed his.

And when we came—together—the Circle of Flame didn't just react.

It *collapsed*.

The ring of fire burst outward in a wave of light that knocked Morian to his knees. The arena cracked in half. The runes bled smoke.

The crowd above roared.

Not in rage.

In reverence.

The bond chose.

And we had *rewritten the law*.

Kael held me tight, still inside me, trembling.

The magic simmered down, slow and warm now, curling around us like a blanket.

When I looked up, Morian was gone.

Fled.

Broken.

Kael kissed my forehead.

“You burned for me.”

I smiled, body still humming, marked and filled.

“No,” I whispered.

“We burned *together*.”

Chapter 7: The Devoted

The smoke hadn't even cleared from the shattered Circle of Flame when the whispering began.

They didn't chant her name. Not out loud. Not yet.

But the word passed through the dragonkin like fire through dry brush.

“She chose.”

“She burned the ritual.”

“She is power.”

“She is the bond, not the bonded.”

And Kael felt every word like a blade.

We returned to the mountain's upper chamber in silence. The runes glowed faintly along the walls, still charged from the arena's eruption. I hadn't said much since the moment I collapsed into Kael's arms, soaked in sweat and fire and climax.

He hadn't let go of me since.

His grip wasn't bruising. But it was tight.

As if he thought the moment he loosened it, I'd be taken.

Worshiped.

Or worse—*believed.*

"You haven't said anything," I said quietly.

Kael's jaw tightened. "Because every word I want to say starts with fuck."

"Fuck who?"

He looked at me.

And I saw it.

Not rage.

Panic.

"Everyone," he growled. "Anyone who looks at you like you're theirs now. Like the Circle gave them permission to see you as something they can kneel to."

I blinked. "They bowed to the bond."

"They bowed to *you.*"

He turned, wings flaring, pacing the edge of the chamber like a caged storm.

"I know what this is," he said. "What comes next."

"Kael—"

"They'll form a faction. They always do. After power like that? After seeing what you did, what you *survived*? They'll call it reverence. Devotion. But it's obsession."

I crossed the room.

Laid a hand on his chest.

"Let them kneel," I said. "They can bow to the storm. But *you* are the one inside me."

His eyes blazed.

But before he could speak again—

A knock echoed at the chamber door.

Not a polite one.

Three sharp strikes. Then silence.

Kael stiffened.

“Who dares—”

I reached the door first.

Opened it.

And froze.

Six figures stood outside.

Each one bare-chested, scaled in various shades—bronze, obsidian, deep green. Not warriors.

Devotees.

Their arms were marked in ancient bond runes—some carved in blood, others scorched in by fire.

And at their front, a woman stepped forward.

Scaled. Tall. Beautiful. Eyes like liquid amber.

She didn’t bow.

But she knelt.

Right there.

In front of me.

Kael snarled behind me.

She looked up.

“Chosen Flame,” she said, voice calm. “We felt you ignite the ritual. We saw the bond bend to you. We come not to challenge—”

Kael’s footsteps boomed.

“Then you come to die.”

The woman held his gaze. Unflinching. “We come to *witness*. To serve. To *protect*.”

I stepped between them.

The bond between Kael and me flared hard—tightening, warning.

I pressed a hand to his chest.

“It’s alright.”

“No,” he said, low. “It’s not.”

“They’re not here to take me.”

He didn’t answer.

The woman rose slowly.

“The Old Fire predicted this,” she said. “That one day a female would break the ritual bond. That she would ignite the bond line, not receive it. That she would rewrite the structure.”

Kael’s chest rose. “She’s mine. She doesn’t belong to your prophecy.”

“*She belongs to no one*,” the woman said, eyes glittering. “That’s why we serve her. Not as a queen. Not as a goddess.”

She turned to me.

“But as a *flame*.”

And then—

They all knelt.

Six dragonkin.

On stone.

In silence.

Kael’s magic surged, barely restrained.

And I felt it.

This wasn’t admiration.

It was *worship*.

And worship—was its own kind of possession.

Kael didn't speak.

Not at first.

He didn't shout.

Didn't threaten.

He just looked at them—those six dragonkin kneeling before me, not out of duty or fear, but *worship*—and something inside him *snapped*.

It wasn't rage.

It was instinct.

He stepped behind me, and before I could speak, his arm wrapped around my waist—tight, sure, *absolute*.

"Come with me," he growled in my ear.

Not a request.

A command.

And I went.

Because the bond between us was crackling again—not with instability, but *intent*. He didn't need to look back at them. His body was saying what his voice hadn't:

Mine.

Kael dragged me down the corridor in silence, wings half-furled, his pace brutal and direct. We passed two guards—both flinched from the heat rolling off him. Neither dared speak.

He didn't stop until we reached the chamber deep beneath the summit—one carved by fire, untouched by any hand but his. The walls were black stone streaked with molten veins. The air was heavy, hot, thick with magic.

He slammed the door shut.

Locked it.

Pressed me to the wall.

His hands trembled—just enough for me to feel it. Not weakness.

Barely restrained madness.

“They *knelt* for you,” he said.

“I know.”

“They said you belonged to no one.”

“I don’t.”

His eyes flashed.

I touched his chest, breathing fast.

“But I *chose* you.”

The bond flared between us—wild and violent, like a storm clawing to be unleashed. Kael leaned in, pressing his mouth to my ear, his voice a snarl laced with *need*.

“Then prove it.”

Before I could answer, he spun me.

Bent me forward over the stone table.

Yanked the wrap from my hips with one hand, the other sliding between my legs, fingers finding me soaked and *ready*.

“You’re already wet,” he growled.

“They watched me burn,” I whispered. “But *you* lit the match.”

Kael pulled his cock free—already hard, already furious.

And drove into me in one savage thrust.

I *screamed*.

The table cracked.

The bond ignited again, gold and violet crashing through the chamber as Kael pounded into me—no slow buildup, no careful teasing.

Just pure, possessive *reminding*.

His hand wrapped around my throat, pulling me back as he thrust deeper.

“They knelt for a goddess,” he snarled, “but I fucked the flame.”

My orgasm slammed into me like a punch to the chest—fast, hard, violent. Magic spilled from me in arcs of heat, scoring the stone.

Kael didn't stop.

He fucked me through it, his own climax building, savage and sharp.

"You are *mine*," he growled, rutting into me, "not because I own you—but because *you let me earn it*."

"Kael—"

He grunted, slammed deep one final time, and came with a roar that echoed off the stone—heat pouring into me as the bond tightened again, not with chaos...

With *certainty*.

We collapsed against the table, his body draped over mine, breath ragged, heart pounding.

He kissed the nape of my neck.

Soft this time.

"I don't need the world to worship you," he whispered.

"I just need you to keep coming *back* to me."

And I would.

Because while the world burned outside—

This?

This was *home*.

Kael and I didn't speak for a while.

Not out loud.

Our bodies said everything.

His heat. My tremble. The bond thrumming between us in the aftermath—no longer chaotic, but taut, glowing like a live wire wrapped around both our hearts.

Still inside me.

Still *his*.

When he finally pulled out, I hissed from the sensitivity. My thighs were sticky with heat and slick, my breath shallow, my skin glowing faintly with residue magic.

Kael kissed the back of my neck. "You feel it, don't you?"

I nodded, breathless. "It's thicker. Not just between us."

He stepped back slowly, helping me stand.

"No," he said. "It's outside us now."

And he was right.

The air tasted different. Sweet. Charged.

The bond had spilled past our bodies, seeping into the mountain like a fog.

And someone had *touched it*.

We barely finished dressing before the knock came.

Sharp. Urgent.

Kael answered it with a growl already in his throat.

Lirien stood in the doorway, jaw tight, eyes burning silver.

"You need to see this," she said.

The inner war chamber was full.

Not with dragonkin.

With *followers*.

The same six who'd knelt... and half a dozen more. Some we'd never seen before.

They stood in a ring.

Silent.

Waiting.

At the center of them all, a figure stood—taller than the rest, cloaked in violet silk, her hands glowing with a magic that looked disturbingly familiar.

I froze.

Kael stepped forward.

But Lirien grabbed his arm. “Look.”

The cloaked woman raised her hand.

Magic flared from her palm.

My magic.

Violet, threaded with gold. Wild and sharp and *wrong*.

She spoke a word in the old tongue.

And my flame—*my exact signature*—erupted from her skin in a perfect, deadly arc, slicing the air and carving a smoking line across the floor.

I staggered back.

“That’s not possible,” I whispered. “The bond doesn’t split.”

Lirien’s voice was low. Cold. “It doesn’t. Unless you *leaked it*.”

I turned to her.

“When you anchored in the Circle,” she said, “you burned too hot. Too *wide*. You didn’t just tether to Kael.”

I stared back into the chamber.

“You *infected* the mountain.”

Kael snarled.

He shoved forward, grabbing the cloaked woman by the throat before anyone could move.

The others didn’t stop him.

They *bowed*.

“Where did you get that magic?” he growled.

She gasped, but smiled.

“From *her*.” Her gaze turned to me, reverent. “She is the flame. We only carry her spark.”

Kael dropped her with a shove.

"You *stole* from her."

"She gave it," the woman said. "When she burned the Circle. When she took control of the bondline. It poured through the stone and into *us*."

"She didn't mean to."

"She didn't have to," the woman whispered. "She's awakened something older. Something *prophetic*. We are not here to worship."

She dropped to her knees again.

"We are here to *follow*."

The others followed suit.

Twelve dragonkin.

Kneeling.

Not to challenge.

But to *channel*.

And that's when I realized—

They didn't want the bond.

They wanted *my fire*.

And someone among them had *taken more than just a spark*.

Someone had *harnessed it*.

Without permission.

The kneeling figures didn't flinch when Kael's fire flared.

They didn't recoil when my magic cracked across the chamber floor in warning.

They stayed down.

Head bowed. Hands open. Expressions serene.

And that was what terrified me most.

They weren't trying to manipulate us.

They believed they were *serving*.

Kael's voice was a razor. "Who took it?"

No one moved.

No one spoke.

He stepped forward—slow, deliberate, dangerous.

"Who stole from her?"

Still, silence.

Until Lirien's voice cut through the tension like a blade.

"They didn't steal it," she said. "They *copied* it."

I turned to her, stunned. "That's not possible."

"No," she agreed. "Not with ordinary magic. But this isn't ordinary anymore."

She gestured to the kneeling twelve.

"When you released the bond into the Circle, you didn't just mark Kael. You marked *everything that saw you*. Heard you. *Felt you*."

I shook my head, breath shallow. "But they shouldn't be able to use it."

"They can't," Kael said. "Not without destroying themselves."

Lirien's expression darkened. "And yet—they are."

She turned to the cloaked woman Kael had choked earlier.

"Show us."

The woman hesitated.

Then obeyed.

She stood, slowly, reverently, and reached for the high collar of her violet robes. Pulled it down.

Bared her chest.

What I saw made my stomach *drop*.

Etched into her skin were *my runes*.

Not similar.

Identical.

Down to the way they curved, the glowing marks that only Kael and I shared—burned into her flesh.

Not by accident.

But by *intention*.

A mockery.

A forgery.

Kael's fire burst from his shoulders. His wings snapped open, claws flexed, every muscle coiled and *ready to kill*.

But it was my magic that moved first.

I stepped forward, flame igniting along my arms in a spiral—wrapping my wrists, sliding up my throat like a crown made of fire.

The air in the chamber *tightened*.

"*Who did this to you?*" I asked.

The woman didn't blink.

"You did."

I stopped.

"What?"

"When you burned the ritual," she said. "When you sealed the bond in front of the Circle. I saw it in my sleep. The runes appeared. I *felt* them carve into my skin."

"You're lying," Kael growled.

"She's not," Lirien said, voice cold. "This is mimicry. Not spellwork. The flame marked her. It's... imprinting."

Kael stepped in front of me.

"Then we remove it."

"No," I said.

He turned.

“She’s not a threat,” I said. “Not yet.”

“She’s *walking in your skin*.”

I moved past him and touched the woman’s chest—fingers brushing the copied runes.

My magic recoiled.

Flickered.

Dimmed.

Not from danger.

From *confusion*.

Like it was recognizing itself... and rejecting the echo.

“She’s not like me,” I said softly. “She’s hollow.”

Kael stepped beside me.

“Then what is she?”

I looked at the other eleven.

All of them glowing faintly. All of them watching me like I was a deity wearing mortal skin.

And I realized—

This wasn’t a cult.

It was a *mirror*.

Not of who I was.

But of what I could become.

If I let the flame *consume* instead of connect.

“They’re siphoning,” I whispered.

“Explain,” Kael said.

“They think they’re devoted,” I said. “But the bond isn’t something you borrow. It’s not faith. It’s *fire*. And fire spreads when it’s not contained.”

Lirien stepped forward.

"If you don't contain it soon, this mountain will be filled with *copies*. Shadows. Mimics. Each more unstable than the last."

Kael growled. "Then we destroy them."

"No," I said. "We find the source."

He blinked. "What?"

"This isn't just ritual bleed. Someone's *guiding* it. Feeding them. Giving them pieces of the bond to keep them loyal."

Kael's jaw clenched. "Then they've declared war."

I looked at the woman again.

Then back to Kael.

"No," I said. "They've declared a *religion*."

The word hung in the air like smoke:

"Religion."

Kael didn't say anything. He didn't have to. The bond between us twisted—tight, sparking with volatile heat not from desire, but from *disgust*.

"They're not building a kingdom," he said finally. "They're building a cult."

I looked around the chamber.

Twelve dragonkin still knelt in perfect silence, the copied runes glowing faintly across their skin like branded lies. No one moved. No one breathed too loudly. They weren't afraid.

They were *devoted*.

And devotion, in its purest form, was **danger**.

I turned to Lirien. "You said this wasn't natural. That it's being *fed*."

She nodded grimly. "Something's amplifying the bleed. Mimicry like this doesn't sustain on its own. It needs a conduit."

"A siphon," Kael growled. "Someone close. Someone who's been near the bond, long enough to understand it... and twist it."

The realization hit me like ice in the chest.

“Someone *in the inner circle*.”

Lirien didn’t flinch. “I already suspected.”

Kael’s wings flared. “Who?”

Lirien hesitated.

Then: “Vrax.”

I blinked. “The old healer?”

Kael’s voice sharpened. “He’s been with us since before the bond sealed.”

“He was there in the chamber,” Lirien said. “During your first flare. During your anchor. And at the Circle. He claimed he was drawing protective sigils—but the ground where he stood was marked with the *same imitation glyphs* now carved into her skin.”

She pointed to the kneeling woman.

Kael’s eyes lit gold. “Where is he now?”

“Gone,” Lirien said. “Disappeared two hours ago. No note. No scent. Left behind his robes and an empty satchel.”

Kael slammed his fist into the stone wall.

The crack echoed like a war drum.

“He’s not just mimicking,” I said quietly. “He’s harvesting.”

Kael looked at me.

“Every time the bond flared. Every time we came. Every time we fused magic with sex, power, or choice—*he was near*. Watching. Recording. Leeching.”

Lirien nodded once. “And now he’s vanished. But not alone.”

I turned sharply. “What?”

She looked grim. “One of the younger males. Jorek. He left with Vrax. Devoted. Quiet. But I saw the glow in his eyes before he vanished.”

“They’re trying to create a copy,” I whispered.

Kael’s voice dropped to a snarl. “Of you.”

“No,” I said, pulse spiking. “*Of us*.”

He fell silent.

Because it made sense.

Vrax didn't just want to worship.

He wanted to **replicate the bond**.

To recreate the fire that shattered the Circle.

And if he couldn't steal the flame directly...

He'd *build* it.

Even if it meant forging a false mate bond.

Even if it meant sacrificing dragons to a magic they couldn't survive.

Kael turned to me, and his face was all fire and steel.

"We end this now."

"How?"

"We hunt him. We find him. And we destroy whatever mockery he's trying to make."

Lirien added, "If he succeeds—even once—the mountain won't be yours anymore. It'll be *hers*."

She gestured again to the kneeling woman.

Still glowing.

Still smiling.

Still carrying my mark like a crown.

Kael took my hand.

"Then we find him before she finishes becoming *you*."

The mountain had always felt alive.

Now, it felt like it was **watching** us.

Kael and I moved fast—through spiraling halls and forgotten stone veins, down into the old caverns where the original bond sanctums were once carved by fire and sealed in blood.

Only a few still existed.

Fewer were still sacred.

But one had been *opened*.

We followed the pull of the bond—twisted, stretched, vibrating with something that wasn't quite wrong... but wasn't **us**.

"Can you feel it?" Kael asked, jaw clenched.

I nodded. "Like a fever dream. It's trying to imitate the pattern. Copy the rhythm."

"Badly."

The air thickened the deeper we went. Not hot. Not electric. But *stale*. Like the magic had gone sour. The clean burn of desire had been replaced with something cloying—needy, ravenous.

Imitation without intimacy.

We found the entrance by accident.

A crack in the wall sealed with flame-scored symbols—designed to reject anyone whose bond wasn't lit.

But mine flared the moment I touched it.

And the wall *opened*.

The room beyond wasn't large.

It was carved from black stone veined with gold and pulsing runes that *mimicked* the ones etched into our skin—but lacked harmony.

They didn't sing.

They *hissed*.

And at the center of the room, beneath a shallow pool of glowing liquid, lay **two bodies**.

One was Jorek—his skin marked with deep, raw bond glyphs not etched, but *forced*, his chest heaving, pupils blown wide with pain and drugged devotion.

The other was a girl.

Young.

Unfamiliar.

And glowing.

Vrax stood between them.

Hands raised. Chanting.

Wearing Kael's markings like a second skin—drawn in chalk, wrong and out of order.

I stepped forward.

Kael did not wait.

He crossed the chamber in one blink, grabbing Vrax by the throat and slamming him into the stone with a force that made the runes shatter.

"What. The. Fuck. Are. You. Doing."

Vrax smiled—mad and trembling.

"You won't share her," he rasped. "So I'll make another."

I stepped to the pool. The girl's body was shuddering, her back arching as the magic tried to *force* a bond she hadn't earned.

"She's not ready," I whispered.

"She doesn't need to be," Vrax spat, blood dripping from his lips. "She's *obedient*. She won't fight it. She'll accept her role. Her fire."

"That's not fire," I said.

"It's worship," he said. "It's *purity*. It's what you squandered when you spread your flame across the mountain."

Kael's eyes blazed.

"You call this devotion?" he growled.

"You think she's yours?" Vrax choked. "She belongs to the flame now. She doesn't even *need* you anymore—"

Kael's fist silenced him.

I knelt beside the girl.

The bond mimicked in her skin tried to reach for me.
Tried to *latch*.

I burned it away.

A soft scream left her lips—but it passed.
She went still.

Kael turned from the crumpled body of Vrax, blood on his knuckles.

I looked up at him.

“They weren’t just worshiping,” I said.

“They were *building*.”

Kael’s face darkened.

“And now?”

I stood, eyes locked on the girl’s hollow, unconscious body.

“Now we bury it.”

Chapter 8: The Arrival

They came at dawn.

Not with weapons.

Not with wings spread in challenge.

But with **petals**.

Dragonkin from distant ridgelines, clans we hadn’t heard from in centuries—some armored, some bare-skinned and tattooed in glowing glyphs—descended in silence, scattering crimson blossoms across the mountain path as they came.

Worshippers.

More than a dozen at first.

Then fifty.

By the time we stood at the overlook, there were easily a hundred forming a crescent around the summit steps—kneeling, chanting, murmuring words in the **Old Fire Tongue** that hadn’t been spoken since before Kael was born.

And they weren’t chanting *Kael’s* name.

They were chanting **mine**.

Kael stood beside me, arms crossed, wings half-drawn, silent.

He didn’t look angry.

He looked... *done*.

As if something inside him had shifted from fire to frost.

"They've come to see you," he said flatly.

"They've come to see us," I answered.

He didn't turn his head.

"No," he said. "They haven't."

Lirien appeared behind us, sword strapped across her back, expression grim.

"This isn't worship anymore," she said. "It's coronation."

I frowned. "What are they doing?"

"They're invoking a Rite of Ascension," she said. "Old magic. Forbidden, mostly. It only works when they believe the one they're crowning is *no longer mortal*."

"They're trying to make her a queen," Kael said, finally turning. "A god. A *symbol*."

I felt the heat in my stomach coil.

Tight. Wrong.

"I didn't ask for this."

"You didn't have to," Lirien said. "You burned the Circle. You bled the mountain. They saw you survive a bond eruption that would've killed a thousand dragons. You became legend in front of their eyes."

Kael said nothing.

And that silence was **worse** than shouting.

I stepped toward him. "Say what you're thinking."

He met my eyes.

And for the first time, *he looked tired*.

"I'm not enough for them," he said.

"You're everything—"

"I'm not enough *for you*."

That hit harder than anything Morian had ever said. Harder than any rival's blade.

I moved closer. Reached for him.

He didn't pull away.

But he didn't lean in.

"They're not here to kill me," he whispered. "They're here to invite you to rise above me."

I shook my head. "They don't understand the bond."

"They don't *need to*. They only need to believe they can make you into something more than me. *Without me*."

The crowd below began to hum.

Low.

Resonant.

It wasn't magic.

It was belief.

And that was far more dangerous.

Kael stepped back.

One step.

Then two.

"Kael—don't—"

"I can't stop you from becoming what they want."

"I don't want to be worshiped," I snapped. "I want to be *yours*."

But even as I said it, the bond *wavered*.

Not broke.

Not cracked.

But it *shook*.

He felt it.

So did I.

Because even if my words were true, my magic... *was listening* to them.

To the crowd.

To the voices calling me divine.

Kael looked like something inside him was splintering.

And when he finally spoke, his voice was low.

“I’ve fought rivals. I’ve burned kingdoms.”

His hand curled into a fist.

“But I don’t know how to fight *faith*.”

He turned.

And walked away.

I didn’t chase him.

Not because I didn’t want to.

But because I couldn’t move.

The moment Kael disappeared down the stone corridor, the wind shifted—heavy with scent and magic and **expectation**.

The crowd below stirred.

Then parted.

And someone walked through them.

Not kneeling.

Not chanting.

But radiating silence so complete the mountain itself seemed to hush.

He was tall. Dragonborn. Unmarked by clan, shirtless, gold-skinned, eyes molten white. No weapons. No armor. Just power.

Not raw.

Not feral.

Refined.

He stepped onto the summit steps without permission.

Lirien drew her blade instantly.

He didn't flinch.

He looked only at me.

"I am Dareth of the First Brood," he said, voice like carved stone. "Chosen by no one. Bound by nothing."

Lirien took a step forward, sword raised. "Turn around or lose your tongue."

But I raised my hand.

"Let him speak."

Dareth bowed his head slightly. Not submissive. *Respectful.*

"I've come," he said, "to offer you what he never could."

The words rang in the bondspace like a bell struck off-key.

I said nothing.

He continued.

"You bear a flame that should've been impossible. You anchored a bond that cracked the Circle. You melted the rules. And now your mate—your alpha—turns away from it."

"He's protecting it," I snapped.

"No," Dareth said. "He's *protecting himself*. From you. From the truth."

"And what truth is that?"

"That your fire can't be carried by one male alone."

The silence turned razor sharp.

Dareth took another step.

"You are not meant to be claimed. You are meant to be *crowned*. Not in worship. Not in shadow. But in bond. In blood. In **fury**."

He reached for something at his side.

A box.

Small. Carved in obsidian. Cracked with glowing gold lines.

He held it out to me.

“This is a relic of the pre-bond era,” he said. “Before monogamy. Before claiming. Before submission. When power didn’t choose one—*it chose many.*”

I didn’t take it.

But my fingers twitched.

“You’re offering me... what? A throne?”

“I’m offering you **freedom.**”

“And a bond?”

“No chains. No dominance. No hierarchy. Only fire.”

Behind me, Lirien muttered, “This is heresy.”

Dareth ignored her.

“You are not Kael’s. You are not Morian’s. You are not *theirs*. You are the bond itself.”

My throat tightened.

I could feel it again.

The *waver*.

Not because I believed him.

But because the bond could feel me *doubting*.

And doubt was **lethal** to magic this powerful.

“You expect me to leave Kael?”

“No,” Dareth said calmly. “I expect you to realize he’s already left *you.*”

That hit harder than I wanted to admit.

The bond didn’t break.

But it dimmed.

And in that dimness—

The crowd behind him bowed.

One by one.

In absolute silence.

Dareth opened the box.

Inside was a single band.

Black gold.

Laced with molten runes I didn't recognize.

He held it out.

"Take this," he said, "and I will bond to you. Not as mate. But as *equal*. Your flame will never flicker again."

The wind howled.

The crowd held its breath.

And far below—

I felt Kael's magic suddenly **surge**.

Like a storm turning.

Like a soul *screaming*.

I didn't move.

Not because I was tempted.

But because the air around me had gone *still*—the kind of stillness that only exists in the breath before a firestorm.

Dareth stood before me, crown offered, power humming at his fingertips, the worshipers behind him whispering words they thought I couldn't hear:

"Ascend."

"Burn brighter."

“She will choose us.”

“She was never his.”

And for one trembling moment...

The bond between Kael and me *flickered*.

But then—

It exploded.

A column of golden fire tore through the summit like a war cry. The stone floor cracked. The wind screamed. The petals scattered into ash.

And Kael emerged from the blaze.

Shirtless. Wild-eyed. Wings massive and fully extended. Runes glowing across his chest like lit sigils of a god who had *lost everything*—and was ready to kill for it.

He didn’t speak.

He didn’t roar.

He **walked**.

Straight through Dareth’s magic.

The box in Dareth’s hand shattered. The molten runes fizzled to nothing.

Kael’s voice, when it finally came, was a **snarl dipped in heartbreak**.

“You want to bond with her?” he said. “*You think you could survive her?*”

Dareth flinched.

Kael stalked closer.

“She doesn’t need freedom,” he growled. “She needs **fire**. And no one burns with her like *I* do.”

Dareth tried to speak—

Kael hit him.

One punch.

Clean.

Brutal.

Dareth collapsed to the stone, blood spraying from his mouth, the worshipers gasping in a unified, stunned breath.

Kael turned to me.

Chest heaving.

Voice hoarse.

“I didn’t walk away because I doubted you.”

I couldn’t breathe.

“I walked away because I thought... I thought I’d already lost you.”

“You didn’t,” I whispered.

“You *will*,” he said, stepping closer, “if I don’t remind you right now who you are. Who *we* are.”

The bond between us surged again—**unstable**, but not wild. Flaring from pain. From want. From the fear of letting go.

He reached for me.

And I didn’t step back.

Not even when he grabbed me by the waist and spun me around in front of all of them—the worshipers, the rivals, the doubters.

Not even when he shoved me against the summit column.

Not even when he **tore away** my clothes like he had every right.

Because he did.

And when he **slammed** into me—

Hard.

Bare.

Home.

—I screamed his name so loud, the mountain itself shook.

Kael fucked me like the bond was on fire.

Like every stroke was a war drum.

Like every thrust was a threat to anyone who dared believe I'd ever need more than *him*.

And I didn't hold back.

I gave him everything.

Bent over stone, skin lit with magic, my cries echoing like a sacred spell.

His cock drove into me over and over, claiming me in front of every kneeling fool who'd dared dream of touching me.

And when I came—

I ignited.

Violet flames arced from my fingertips. Runes exploded across my thighs. Kael groaned, grabbing my hips like he'd *die* if I pulled away.

He came with a roar of **mine**.

Not a plea.

A prophecy.

And when he pulled me back into his arms, sweat-slick and glowing, I whispered into his ear:

"I'll never rise without you."

He kissed my throat.

"You *are* risen. And you're already mine."

Below us, Dareth was unconscious.

The worshipers had fallen silent.

And above us—

The bond shimmered in the air like a crown made of light and **loyalty**.

The worshipers didn't speak.

Not a breath, not a whisper.

Even the wind held still.

Kael and I stood at the summit—sweat-drenched, skin glowing, magic still crackling across the stone like heat lightning in the dark.

I could still feel him inside me.

Still pulsing.

Still tethered.

And for once, the bond didn't feel wild or unstable or on the edge of erupting.

It felt **satisfied**.

Anchored.

The crowd hadn't left.

But their posture had changed.

No longer kneeling in devotion.

No longer humming rituals.

They looked at us the way soldiers look at surviving kings.

Not because they wanted to follow.

But because they had **witnessed** something undeniable.

And couldn't unsee it.

Dareth lay on the ground, breathing shallow, the blood drying on his face like ash.

No one moved to help him.

Because they knew:

He'd tried to bond with something *sacred*.

And failed.

Kael stood beside me, quiet.

His hand gripped mine—not in possession.

In **grounding**.

"I didn't want to claim you like that," he said under his breath.

"You didn't claim me," I whispered back. "We reminded them. All of them. That this bond isn't a crown."

I turned to the crowd.

"It's a *war*."

Lirien stepped forward, sword still strapped to her back, eyes scanning the silence like a strategist counting heartbeats.

"It's over," she said.

"No," I corrected. "It's *settled*."

Kael glanced sideways at me, mouth twitching. "You're starting to sound like a queen."

I shook my head.

"I'm not their queen."

I turned to him.

"I'm your *mate*."

He exhaled slowly.

Let his forehead rest against mine.

And for the first time since we burned the Circle, his voice softened.

"Then let them worship."

Let them.

Because what they worshiped wasn't me alone.

It was what we were **together**.

The worshipers began to rise—slowly, reverently, their bodies bowed not in manipulation or fantasy...

...but in **acceptance**.

And then—

They began to leave.

One by one.

No declarations. No demands.

Just silence.

Because they had seen something that made legends look small.

They had seen the bond made *real*.

Not forged.

Not claimed.

Chosen.

As the summit cleared, Lirien gave us a long look.

"I'll have the ritual space sealed," she said. "No more relics. No more imitations."

I nodded.

She hesitated. "They'll write songs about this."

"Let them," Kael said. "We'll be too busy **fucking** to hear them."

Lirien actually *snorted*.

Then turned, and disappeared into the stone halls.

Kael pulled me back to him.

Held me against his chest.

We stood in the quiet for a long time.

No battle.

No rivals.

Just the hum of the bond.

Clean.

Fused.

And infinite.

We didn't go back to the war chambers.

We didn't return to the summit.

We went down.

Deep into the heart of the mountain where the stone still whispered of the Circle's collapse, where the air held the memory of fire and the walls pulsed faintly with the imprint of our bond.

Kael didn't speak as we descended.

He didn't have to.

The silence between us was thick with everything we hadn't said, everything we'd survived, everything we still needed to *feel* to finally know we were whole.

We reached the chamber where it all began.

Where the first flare had scorched the runes.

Where he'd taken me against stone and I'd marked him with more than claws.

Where the bond had *chosen*.

He turned to me—eyes dark with reverence.

Not lust.

Not rage.

Something purer.

Something more **dangerous**.

"I've claimed you a hundred times," he said. "But not like this."

I nodded.

"Not like *always*."

He reached for me.

Undressed me slowly.

Not tearing.

Peeling.

Like he was unwrapping the last gift of a war finally won.

I did the same for him, fingertips tracing every scar, every line of muscle, every glowing rune we'd etched into each other through pain and pleasure and battle.

When we were bare, he didn't push me down.

He lay beneath me.

Hands open.

Chest exposed.

And let me *take him*.

I sank onto him slowly, and we both gasped—because there was no rush, no fear, no need to prove anything.

Only this.

Only *us*.

I moved above him, slow and deep, grinding into every stroke, letting our bodies speak the words that language had always failed.

Kael's hands slid up my thighs, gripped my waist.

Not to control.

To **ground**.

"You're everything," he whispered.

"You're mine," I breathed.

We moved like that for what felt like forever.

No climax.

No end.

Just rhythm.

Bond.

Heat.

But when it finally broke—

When I clenched around him and the magic inside me detonated for the last time—

We didn't burn the mountain.

We *sealed it*.

Violet fire rolled across the walls like a tide.

Golden light blazed from Kael's chest into mine.

And the bond didn't flare or erupt or tremble.

It **roared**.

We came together in silence—bodies locked, sweat-slick and glowing, eyes wide open.

Watching.

Feeling.

Knowing.

The mountain quieted.

The air cooled.

And when I collapsed against his chest, he wrapped his arms around me like a home I'd finally stopped fighting to reach.

He kissed my temple.

And whispered the last words of the book into my skin:

"The bond never ends. It only burns louder."

Epilogue: The Stillness After the Fire

Three months later, the mountain finally slept.

Not dead.

Just... *quiet*.

The runes along the inner walls pulsed in soft gold now, no longer flaring with every ripple of bond magic. The stone halls held a hush that hadn't existed since the Circle burned, and the air tasted clean—not of ash or war or the blood of rivals, but of *peace*.

Even the worshipers had learned silence.

They still came—some to kneel, some to leave tokens, most just to *see*—but they no longer chanted. No longer demanded. No longer tried to name me something I wasn't.

Because the mountain had already named me.

Not goddess.

Not queen.

Just... *his*.

Kael.

Mate.

Bonded.

Chosen.

The fire that had once scorched every room we touched now curled warm around my ribs like a second skin. No longer unstable. No longer pulsing with violence. It breathed with me.

We breathed *together*.

Kael stood at the edge of the ridge, wings half-unfurled, shirtless as always. The wind moved around him like it knew his name. His eyes were on the clouds. His heartbeat was on *me*.

I didn't need magic to feel him anymore.

I just *knew*.

"Another one came today," I said, joining him at the ledge.

Kael didn't look at me. "Devoted?"

I shook my head. "Alone. No tattoos. Just curious."

He grunted. "They're always curious before they kneel."

"He didn't kneel."

That got a flicker from him.

I stepped closer. "He asked for a story. One of ours. Said he'd heard I could burn a man apart just by touching him."

Kael's smile twitched. "True."

I ignored that.

"I told him I didn't need to burn anyone. That the bond only burns *when it's not returned*."

Kael's eyes finally turned to me.

Soft. Gold. Certain.

"And did he return it?" he asked.

"No," I said. "He bowed and left."

Kael stepped forward, pulled me into him, hands warm on my hips.

"And are you disappointed?"

I shook my head. "I'm *home*. Why would I want someone to take me away from that?"

He kissed my forehead.

His voice was quieter now. "Sometimes I still wake up expecting to see you gone."

"I won't go."

"You did once."

I looked up at him. "And I came back. Every time. And I *chose* you. In the Circle. In front of the crown. In front of gods and worshipers and your worst fears."

He nodded once.

Pressed his forehead to mine.

"And I'll keep choosing you," I said, softer. "In fire. In quiet. In every life."

A pause.

Then a voice behind us:

"Good."

We both turned.

Varian stood in the shadow of the entrance, cloaked in dust and travel, eyes still silver, face unreadable.

Kael stiffened. "You've got some fucking nerve."

"I've got a message," Varian said.

I stepped forward. "From who?"

“From me.”

He reached into his pocket and tossed something at my feet.

It landed with a soft chime.

A ring.

Dareth’s ring.

Melted.

“I found him,” Varian said. “He won’t try again.”

Kael didn’t relax. “And what do you want in return?”

Varian’s eyes met mine.

“Nothing.”

He turned to leave.

But stopped at the threshold.

“I watched you in the Circle. I watched you choose him.”

Kael’s wings shifted, ready to strike.

But Varian just smiled.

“And I agreed.”

Then he vanished into the dark.

Kael stepped behind me, arms sliding around my waist, chin on my shoulder.

“You still think we’ll ever get a quiet life?”

I leaned into him.

“*This* is quiet,” I said. “For us.”

And it was.

The mountain breathed easy.

The bond held strong.

The fire... simmered.

And somewhere inside all of that—

We were *still burning*.

The ritual chamber hadn't changed.

Three months. A hundred fires. Two near-revolts. And still, the stone walls stood exactly as they had the night we sealed the bond.

Cracked.

Scorched.

Holy.

We didn't speak as we entered. We didn't need to.

Kael walked ahead, torchlight catching the gold marks still faintly etched into the stone floor—some from magic, some from claw, most from memory.

I followed barefoot, fingertips trailing the wall, where our first storm of power had left runes even *time* seemed afraid to erase.

And in the center of the chamber, waiting for us, was the altar.

No one had touched it since.

Not even Lirien.

Because it wasn't a place of ceremony anymore.

It was **ours**.

Kael turned to me, torch lowered, the fire casting his face in warm shadow.

"One year," he said quietly.

"Since what?"

He didn't smile.

"Since you set me on fire from the inside."

I stepped closer.

Wrapped my arms around his neck.

“One year since you let me.”

He leaned in, nose brushing mine, voice barely breath.

“One year since we stopped pretending we could survive *without* each other.”

I kissed him.

Slow.

Deep.

Tasting salt, ash, and something quieter—something that had taken root in all the places fire couldn’t reach.

And then I stepped back.

Climbed onto the altar.

Lay down.

Naked.

Not vulnerable.

Willing.

Kael followed with reverence in his movements. No rush. No savagery. Just need.

He didn’t throw me down.

He *knelt*.

Worshiped me with his mouth first.

Licked a line from my ankle to my thigh, then up between my legs until I was shaking.

Only when I whispered his name—

“Kael...”

—did he rise.

He entered me with one slow, devastating stroke.

And I *exhaled* into the quiet.

Because this wasn’t claiming.

This wasn't proving.

It was **remembrance**.

Of who we were.

What we survived.

What we built from ruin and obsession and impossible, uncontainable *want*.

He moved inside me like a memory.

Every thrust a mark.

Every kiss a signature.

Every groan a vow that even now, even with the mountain asleep and the world watching, we were still **burning**.

I came first.

Quiet.

Shuddering.

Magic didn't flare.

It *glowed*.

Kael followed, arms tight around me, breath caught in my throat, his seed spilling deep in a way that felt less like release and more like **completion**.

We stayed there a long time.

Sweat-slick and tangled on the altar.

Not to relive the past.

To seal it.

Finally, Kael rolled to the side.

Propped up on one elbow.

Then pulled a dagger from his boot.

He reached for my hand.

Carved something into the stone beside us with the tip.

Not a name.

Not a crown.

Just three words:

“Still burning. Always.”

I smiled.

Took the blade from him.

And added one more:

Us.

Bonus Scene: After the Fire

The mountain was quiet.

Not dead.

But still.

Kael had gone hunting—just for a day, just for air—and I’d let him, not because I needed the space but because **he** did. Even bonded, even sealed, even chosen, he still needed to walk alone sometimes. To remember he wasn’t a god. That I didn’t expect him to be.

I stayed behind.

In the high chamber.

Alone.

Naked.

The night air slid in through the archways, cool and soft, wrapping around my skin like breath. My runes glowed faintly, as they always did now—not from magic I summoned, but from the power that never really slept beneath my skin.

I was no longer feared.

No longer worshiped.

Just... *understood*.

And maybe that was the scariest kind of power.

I lit no torches.

Didn't call the flame.

Just moved through the room in silence until I reached the far side—the shelf of stone that once held weapons, now repurposed as a place to sit. To think.

To feel.

I settled on the cool surface, drew my legs up, let the shadows embrace me.

That's when I felt it.

A presence.

Not Kael.

Not worshipers.

But someone else.

Old.

Sharp.

Familiar.

The air behind me shifted. I didn't move.

"You came back," I said quietly.

Varian's voice was low. "You always knew I would."

I looked over my shoulder.

He stood at the edge of the dark, cloaked in ash and wind, eyes reflecting starlight.

He hadn't changed.

But I had.

"I heard about Dareth," I said.

Varian stepped into the moonlight.

"I warned him."

I nodded.

"You didn't stop him."

"I didn't have to."

I turned back around, resting my chin on my knees.

"You missed it, you know," I said.

"Missed what?"

"The moment I stopped needing to be worshiped."

"I never worshiped you," Varian said.

"I know."

"That's why I'm still here."

Silence stretched between us—long and full.

Then he asked, "Does he know?"

"That you're here?" I smiled faintly. "He knows everything."

"Does he know you still think of me?"

I didn't answer right away.

Then:

"Yes."

Varian exhaled slowly.

"I don't want to take you from him."

"You couldn't."

"I know," he said. "But I do want something."

I looked up.

"What?"

“To see it. Once. What he sees when he looks at you. What the bond feels like. Just for a moment. Just once.”

My throat tightened.

“Why?”

“Because I’ve wanted you every day since the Circle.”

“And you never tried to take me.”

He shook his head.

“Because it wouldn’t have mattered. You weren’t meant for me.”

He stepped forward, slowly, as if waiting for the bond to stop him.

It didn’t.

“You’re not here to hurt him,” I said.

“No.”

“You’re not here to test me.”

“No.”

“Then what are you here for?”

He stood just in front of me now. Close. But not touching.

“To kneel,” he said softly, “one last time.”

Varian dropped to his knees.

Not in devotion.

In *silence*.

Not begging.

Just... *there*.

Present.

Open.

He didn't bow his head. Didn't stretch his hands. Just knelt at my feet and looked at me like I wasn't a goddess, or a flame, or a throne.

Just a woman.

The one he almost could've had.

The one who burned for someone else.

"I don't want your power," he said quietly. "Or your bond. I just want to feel it. Once. So I know it's real."

"It is."

"I know. But I want to *understand*."

I slid off the stone ledge and knelt before him. Runes on runes, firelight laced across our skin like memory. I reached out—

And touched his chest.

Not with magic.

Just my palm.

Warm. Steady. Human.

His breath caught.

The moment my skin met his, the bond *reacted*.

Not fully. Not intimately. But it *flared* between us for just a beat. It let him *taste* it.

The echo.

The gravity.

The **cost** of love forged in fire and sex and soul.

Varian shuddered.

"I feel it," he whispered.

"You feel *him*," I said. "This is Kael's magic. His fire. His claim."

His hand rose—not to stop me, not to touch me, but to rest just over mine.

“I feel you, too.”

I nodded. “Because I let you.”

He closed his eyes.

And in that second—

We weren’t enemies.

We weren’t rivals.

We were just two people on opposite sides of something too big to carry alone.

And then—

The fire behind us shifted.

Not flickered.

Flared.

I turned.

Kael stood in the archway.

Wings spread.

Eyes lit.

Silent.

But the bond didn’t burn.

It tightened.

His gaze didn’t go to Varian’s hand.

It went to *mine*.

Still on Varian’s chest.

I stood slowly.

Kael stepped inside.

Didn’t snarl.

Didn't shout.

He moved straight to me and pulled me into him, kissing me full and deep—slow but fierce, his tongue tracing mine like a brand, his magic slipping into my mouth and curling down my spine.

I melted.

Not from fear.

From *home*.

When he finally pulled back, he looked over my shoulder at Varian—still kneeling, still silent.

And Kael... nodded.

Just once.

"Get up," he said.

Varian did.

Kael's voice was low. Not angry. *Commanding*.

"You want to understand what she is?"

Varian swallowed. "Yes."

"Then you'll watch."

Kael didn't wait for permission.

Not from me.

Not from Varian.

Not from the bond.

He kissed me again—this time with teeth.

With need.

With the kind of possession that didn't ask if I wanted to be taken. It knew I already had been.

My knees hit the stone. His hands were already on my thighs, spreading me wide, pulling me into his lap like he couldn't bear another second of distance. My back arched, chest bared, runes blazing like lit veins beneath my skin.

"Strip," he growled.

I did.

Slow.

Not for seduction.

For *power*.

Kael sat back and let me bare myself in front of both of them—Varian still standing a few feet away, watching, breathing ragged, but not moving. He understood this was no longer a conversation.

It was a **lesson**.

Kael tugged me into his lap, cock already hard, already leaking against my slick heat.

“You want him to understand the bond?” he said, voice low in my ear. “Then let him see what it *does to you*.”

I sank onto him slowly.

One inch. Two.
All the way down.

And I *shook*.

Because it wasn't just physical anymore.
It hadn't been for a long time.

Kael inside me was like fire returning to the hearth.
Like a storm curling back into the sky.

Complete.

And the bond lit up like a sun behind my eyes.

I moaned.

Loud.

Unfiltered.

Kael thrust once, sharp, his hands gripping my hips, guiding me as I started to move—riding him slow and deep, grinding my clit against his body, gasping as magic sparked from my skin.

Varian stepped forward.

But Kael raised a hand.

“No closer.”

Varian stopped.

His jaw clenched.

But he stayed.

Watched.

Every bounce of my hips.

Every thrust of Kael's cock into me, wet and loud and *right*.

Every spark of violet fire that danced between us—our magic humming in time with our bodies, not separate anymore, but fused. Bonded. *True*.

I came once, fast and harsh, clawing at Kael's shoulders, crying out his name like a rite.

He didn't stop.

He flipped me onto my back without breaking rhythm, legs wide, cock pistoning into me harder now, deeper, every slam of his hips timed to the flare of the bond.

I reached for him, and he caught both wrists in one hand, pinning them above my head.

"Open your eyes," he said.

I did.

And saw Varian.

Frozen.

Breathing hard.

Jaw tight.

Not aroused.

Wrecked.

Because now he understood.

What it meant to belong to someone completely.

What it meant to be *chosen*.

What it meant to be the fire and the fuel and the fucking *answer* to another being's hunger.

Kael growled low in my throat. "Look at him while I fill you."

I did.

And when he came—

Hot and deep and endless—

I stared into Varian's eyes.

And smiled.

Because he didn't look angry.

Or jealous.

Or broken.

He looked *changed*.

We lay tangled on the stone—me panting, glowing, leaking Kael's heat between my thighs, his arms caging me, his chest heaving with the aftershocks of the bond's final detonation.

And Varian still stood there.

Not aroused.

Not begging.

Just *watching*.

His expression wasn't full of regret or hunger.

It was reverence.

Not for me.

For *us*.

Kael looked at him.

Then at me.

Then back at him.

And said the last thing I ever expected:

"Come here."

Varian didn't speak.

Didn't hesitate.

He stepped forward.

Not like a rival.

Like someone who'd just seen a god bleed, and realized it wasn't blood—it was *light*.

Kael didn't get up.

He sat back against the stone, pulled me with him, bare and stretched across his lap like a throne he never had to fight for again.

He held me with one arm.

Extended the other toward Varian.

Not to offer her.

Not to share.

To **teach**.

Varian knelt again. Closer this time. Close enough to touch.

"I don't need to take her," he said quietly. "I never did."

Kael nodded. "Now you know why you couldn't."

"She wasn't mine to claim."

"No," Kael said. "But she's always been yours to *witness*."

I reached out then.

Took Varian's hand.

Guided it to my chest.

Laid it flat over my heart, skin still glowing, pulse still thudding hard beneath his palm.

His breath caught.

Kael moved behind me, resting his chin on my shoulder, his hand still wrapped around my waist.

"This is what the bond is," I whispered.

"It's not about fucking," Kael said.

"It's not even about fate," I added.

Varian nodded once. Slowly.

"It's about *fire you choose to stay inside*. Even when it hurts. Even when it scorches. Even when it leaves you kneeling with nothing left to ask for."

Kael kissed the side of my neck. "Especially then."

Varian leaned forward, just enough to press his forehead to mine.

He didn't kiss me.

He didn't ask.

He just *closed his eyes* and let the echo of our bond move through him for the last time.

When he pulled away, he looked at Kael—not as an enemy.

But as a brother in the fire.

"I understand now," he said.

Kael nodded once. "Good."

Varian stood.

And walked into the dark.

Without looking back.

I leaned into Kael's chest, and for the first time in months, the bond didn't flare, or ignite, or sizzle with tension.

It *settled*.

Rooted.

Still.

Kael kissed my hair.

"Is it over?" I asked.

"No," he whispered. "It's just *perfect* now."

And he was right.

Because there were no more threats.

No more rivals.

No more altars.

Only us.

Only the flame.

Only the kind of love that burns once in a lifetime—and *never goes out*.

About the Author

R.S. Thorne writes dangerously addictive monster romance with claws, heat, and just enough plot to break your heart before she makes it beg.

Her stories are built for readers who crave fated mates, primal obsession, magic-drenched intimacy, and endings that hit like prophecy. If a scene doesn't hurt a little—or wreck your soul completely—she's not interested.

To claim your bonus content, sneak peeks, and monster-sized heat, you can:

- Visit her website: rsthorne.com
- Check out her other books at her official [Author Profile](#) on Amazon

Come for the monsters. Stay for the bond. Burn for the rest.